Chapter 9

Ideological Polarisation

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Election results are typically interpreted by commentators as signals of major societal trends. British voters in 2019 chose against the European Union. Italian voters in March 2018 woke up more nationalist and populist. The European elections of 2019 have further consolidated the idea that European citizens are growing increasingly Eurosceptic. These narratives, like many others, are based on the assumption that citizens' choices are a straightforward expression of clear and specific social needs, which the winning candidate has been able to capture and convert into a successful campaign. Yet, political scientists have warned for long that such an assumption is naive at best. As Key (1966, 2) suggested half a century ago, elections are like an echo chamber: 'As candidates and parties clamour for attention and vie for popular support, the people's verdict can be no more than a selective reflection from among the alternatives and outlooks presented to them'. Following this philosophy, many scholars have shown that the meaning of citizens' vote choices depends to a large extent on the configuration of the alternatives that are offered to them (see Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Dalton 2008; Van der Brug, Van der Eijk, and Franklin 2007; Wessels and Schmitt 2008). This configuration of supply in turn depends on how political competition is structured and thus also on, for example, whether parties aim to capture new voters or prioritise mobilising their existing sympathisers, whether they try to appeal to other parties' constituencies or dig their own niche, and so on. This can have tremendous consequences on how voters weigh their political considerations and ultimately converge to a choice. In short, the meaning of the vote is less self-evident than is often thought, and it depends not only on voters' attitudes and orientations but also on what the electoral 'supply' side allows to be expressed.

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Early explanations of voting behaviour developed by European scholars typically focussed on the sociological underpinnings of party loyalties (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). However, the explanatory power of these models started to decline in the 1970s as a consequence of the erosion of the dimension of political conflict based on social inequalities in many Western democracies (for a review of the empirical evidence, see Dalton 1987). Subsequent theories focussed on political phenomena through the lens of social modernisation (Thomassen 2005), especially among younger citizens, and highlighted individuals' ability to evaluate their electoral choice options independently from group allegiances (e.g. Dalton 1987; Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck 1984; Inglehart 1977). In this context, research emphasised the active role of parties in influencing electoral outcomes, either by taking specific policy positions (Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984) or by selectively emphasising issues (Adams, Merrill III, and Grofman 2005; Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). Parties' strategic choices can lead the system towards a centrifugal or a centripetal type of competition, which in turn is supposed to determine the level of ideological divergence perceived by the citizens at the time of a given election (Sartori 1976). Comparative evidence vindicated this view by showing that varying national trajectories of association between citizens' characteristics and their vote choices are better understood when characteristics of the political context are taken into account (Evans and De Graaf 2013; Thomassen 2005;). The take-home message of such a research enterprise is that *party competition matters*, and – as we shall see – it particularly matters whether competition is polarised or not.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate how different degrees of party polarisation correspond to different voting styles among the electorate. With 'styles' we refer to electoral decisions produced by specific sets of considerations, such as partisanship, ideological proximity and leader evaluations. In other words, our research question in this chapter is: does the process that results in party choice vary across contexts that are characterised by different degrees of ideological polarisation? When parties take ideologically more diverging stands, does this enhance or diminish the relevance of specific considerations regarding the vote, and if so, how? To address these questions, we first discuss the concept of ideological polarisation and how it applies to the specific domain of left-right ideology. We then theorise how left-right polarisation can be expected to enhance the importance of some considerations for voting behaviour and to diminish the importance of others. We build our theoretical expectations on previous research on party polarisation and voting behaviour, while extending these foundations in alternative and novel ways. We test our expectations on a sample of eighty elections conducted in eighteen different countries between 1971 and 2013.

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PARTY POLARISATION: CONCEPTS AND MEASUREMENT

In general terms, party polarisation pertains to the degree of disagreement of political parties on a given political dimension or policy space. In twoparty systems, this is easily assessed by looking at how different the preferences of the parties over a given policy are (in this regard, see the literature on polarisation in American politics, e.g. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). In multiparty systems, however, there may be parties that hold very different views from one another, while other parties may be very similar. In such a case, a definition of polarisation requires two distinct elements. The first is the spread or differentiation of the parties on a policy continuum, with a wider spread of parties' policy positions reflecting higher polarisation. The second element is the distribution of weights attached to the parties, reflecting their relative importance within the system. A polity in which only small parties hold extreme positions is not as polarised as one in which the main parties do so. Likewise, a polity with an empty centre, or more generally a lack of moderate options, is more polarised than one in which relevant parties occupy centrist positions. In general, the larger the weights of the parties at the extremes, as indicated by, for example, their share of the votes or their share of seats in parliament, the higher the polarisation. In sum, to define polarisation in multiparty systems requires that both *global divergence* between parties and their *local* convergence around the opposite poles of the policy spectrum is taken into account.

Our definition of polarisation assumes a spatial interpretation of politics, in which positions reflect preferences (Benoit and Laver 2012; Downs 1957;). Substantively, therefore, *polarisation* refers to the level of disagreement between the parties over policy. In the everyday use of the term, a discussion is said to be polarised when the participants hold very different views and the prospects of reaching a consensus are limited. Similarly, political parties are polarised when the policies they advocate are very different, up to the point of being mutually exclusive. While polarisation is a property of a party system (i.e. of the distribution of parties), it usually also reflects a particular style of competition between parties. Research on party politics has repeatedly shown that political actors and candidates position themselves according to strategic incentives in order to capture particular segments of the electorate or to consolidate their policy image in the eyes of their supporters (Adams, Merrill III, and Grofman 2005). Thus, a polarised party system is symptomatic of a type of competition in which parties emphasise their differences, rather than their similarities (Alvarez and Nagler 2004).

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While party polarisation can be observed on any possible issue dimension, scholars interested in studying the contextual effects of party competition on voting behaviour typically focus on ideological polarisation, where ideology is operationalised as the left-right continuum. This choice is motivated by theoretical and practical reasons. First, decades of research have left us with a picture of left-right as an overarching dimension that captures much of salient political conflict in most Western democracies (Benoit and Laver 2006; Bobbio 1996; Fuchs and Klingemann 1990; Laponce 1981). Its origins in the times of the French revolution and the subsequent accumulation of new layers of meaning over the centuries have contributed to a largely common understanding of 'left' and 'right' as indicators of different ideologies. Thus, if the aim is to assess the overall degree of party disagreement in a given context, left-right is certainly the most useful dimension to focus on. Second, because of its flexible nature, left-right can have different substantive meanings in different places without losing its ability to structure and encapsulate the political debate (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976).¹ In other words, it is irrelevant whether the substantive content of left-right is stable across contexts, as long as political differences are discussed in terms of 'left' and 'right'. This makes it an extremely convenient tool to measure polarisation across different contexts. Indeed, owing to the two reasons just mentioned, left-right has been included in many mass surveys as a means to observe citizens' ideological positions and their perceptions of the ideological location of political parties. This gives us enormous power to assess party polarisation comparatively across countries and over time.

The literature offers a multitude of alternatives to measure polarisation, which can be classified into three different groups (see, e.g. Rehm and Reilly 2010). Range-based measures look at the portion of the ideological space covered by the party system. For this reason, they capture the degree of ideological differentiation in the party system rather than polarisation in the sense discussed earlier, because it does not take into account the weight of the various parties and whether the ideological extremes are populated by small or by large parties. Since a party's power to affect policy is a function of its relative importance in the system, measured in terms of votes or seats, the overall chance to reach any agreement is smaller when two large parties hold extreme opposite views than when the large parties are centrist. Additionally, differentiation is not the same as polarisation in that it ignores the local convergence of parties around the extremes, or in other words, whether or not the centre is empty or occupied only by irrelevant parties. This point

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¹ The extent to which this common understanding of the terms left and right is shared among the general public varies between elections and between countries and is itself a characteristic of the context in which elections take place. The moderating effects thereof on the importance of individual-level determinants of electoral participation and vote choice are analysed in chapter 10.

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also relates to the probability of reaching an agreement within a polity, which is smaller when there are no moderate relevant choice options. In fact, range-based measures are usually coupled with other types of measures to have a more precise assessment of party polarisation (Sani and Sartori 1983; Wessels and Schmitt 2008). The other two types of measures of polarisation do take party size into account. Dispersion-based measures focus on each party's distance from the centre and compute polarisation using a formula that is akin to a weighted standard deviation. Owing to the inclusion of party size in the formula (using either parties' vote or seat shares), these measures take a higher value when large parties are clustered around the opposite extremes of the ideological spectrum, hence they are superior to range-based measures to assess polarisation. Indeed, these are by far the most common measures of party polarisation used in the literature (see Dalton 2008; Lachat 2008; Lupu 2015; Taylor and Herman 1971; Van der Eijk, Schmitt, and Binder 2005; Vegetti 2014). Finally, there are measures based on pairwise distances between parties, which in turn are based on the sum of the absolute distances between every pair of parties in the system, weighted by their relative importance (again, assessed by looking at vote or seat shares). While these measures appear sometimes in the literature (Gross and Sigelman 1984; Indridason 2011; Rehm and Reilly 2010), they produce estimates of polarisation that are nearly identical to dispersion-based measures (see Vegetti 2013).

We use here the polarisation index Van der Eijk, Schmitt, and Binder proposed in 2005. To observe party positions, we rely on the mean of the respondents' individual perceptions of the parties on the left–right dimension. We use the vote share parties obtained at the election, for which the index is calculated as a proxy for their importance in that context.² The index is defined as follows:

$$Pol = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} |C - x_i| w_i}{Pmax},$$

where *C* is the ideological centre of the party system, calculated as the weighted mean of each party *i*'s position *x*; *w* are the party importance weights; and *Pmax* is the theoretical maximum value of the index, operationalised as two equally large parties positioned at the opposite extremes of the left–right continuum. By normalising the index with *Pmax*, we constrain its range between 0 and 1. Figure 9.1 shows the values of polarisation in the

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² We normalise the vote shares in a way that the total share of the parties considered for the measure always sums to 1. We do so to control for the fact that, for many elections, we can include only relevant parties in the calculation of polarisation.

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Figure 9.1. Left-Right Party Polarisation (Calculated from Respondents' Perceptions of Party Positions) in Twenty European Countries, 1970-2015.

countries of our data.³ As the figure shows, there is substantial variation in ideological polarisation across electoral contexts. The index for this sample of elections ranges from about 0.2 to about 0.7, which covers about half of the full range of the scale (which, as a reminder, goes from a minimum of 0, when all parties occupy the same position, to a maximum of 1, when two equally sized groups of parties occupy the opposite extremes of the left right space). In the countries in which we have sufficient observations over time, we notice that trends vary substantially: in some cases, such as Poland and Portugal, party polarisation appears to decrease over time. In other cases,

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³ To produce figure 9.1, we computed polarisation for all elections in our data for which respondents' perceptions of party left-right positions are available, which is a total of 100 elections in twenty countries. However, the number of elections included in the regression analyses is reduced due to the absence of individual-level predictors included in our models in some of the studies. The exact number of elections and countries included in each regression model is reported in the tables along with the results. See Table A9.1 in the Online Appendix for a list of countries and election years for which polarisation has been calculated.

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such as Hungary and Switzerland, it seems to increase (see Schmitt and Freire 2012 for a comparative perspective on these trends).

POLARISATION AND ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION: THE LINK OF PARTISANSHIP

The relationship between party polarisation and electoral participation has been investigated in the literature from different angles. Most studies which formulate hypotheses about this relationship focus on the characteristics of the choice set provided to the voters. In this perspective, more polarisation simply implies a more diversified menu, on which more potential voters are likely to find something attractive, including those whose preferences are fairly extreme. According to Dalton, 'Polarization measures how parties are dispersed along an ideological continuum, indicating the range of ideological choices that parties represent' (Dalton 2008, 915). Consequently, a wider range of choice options (Wessels and Schmitt 2008) or higher polarisation among elites (Hetherington 2008) has sometimes been shown to increase voter turnout. However, this effect is not always observed. In the United States, where polarisation has been growing since the 1970s, Rogowski (2014) finds that greater divergence among candidates depresses turnout especially among citizens of low political sophistication. Furthermore, analyses of the European Voter dataset make Aarts and Wessels (2005, 75) conclude that 'the relationship between polarisation and turnout is as often positive (Netherlands, Britain, Denmark) as it is negative (Germany, Norway, Sweden)'. These contradictory results demonstrate that the effect of polarisation on turnout is not unambiguous but that it may work in interaction with individual-level or other election-specific characteristics.

One individual factor that seems particularly relevant in this context is partisanship. Party polarisation has been repeatedly shown to prompt partisan sentiments among the mass public (Berglund et al. 2005; Hetherington 2001; Lupu 2015; Schmitt 2009b; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995; Vegetti 2014). This relation can be explained from the greater intensity of political conflict in ideologically polarised elections, in which partisan communication and stronger emphasis on ideological differences make parties more relevant for the overall organisation of the political discourse. As Schmitt (2009b, 76) points out, 'The more ideological conflict there is between parties, the more politicised and mobilised a society will be and the more partisanship we expect to find'. Moreover, high polarisation clarifies party identities, creating sharper ideological stereotypes and therefore making it more likely for citizens to find party prototypes to identify with (Lupu 2015). Finally, when parties are more polarised, citizens are exposed to a larger amount of party-related

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Figure 9.2. Party Polarisation and Proportion of Partisans in Twelve Countries.

information, which allows even those who are less informed to assess parties' left-right positions correctly (Vegetti, Fazekas, and Méder 2017).

The association between polarisation and citizens' propensity to feel attached to a party is explored in figure 9.2. The figure plots the share of partisans in a given election against the degree of party polarisation in fourteen countries of our sample.⁴ The correlation is positive in most of the countries, with some exceptions. In Norway and Ireland, the correlation is negative. In Iceland and Poland, the correlation appears flat. The association between these two variables is relatively modest in most of the other cases, but this is not too surprising considering the noisy nature of the measures.⁵ All in all, figure 9.2 shows a fairly robust pattern, which resonates nicely with what has been found by previous studies.

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⁴ The total number of elections in our data for which both partisanship and the perceptions of party left-right positions have been observed is seventy-five, in sixteen countries. In the full sample, the correlation between party polarisation and the share of partisans is rather weak, but significant (r = 0.30, df = 72, p < 0.01). In figure 9.2, we include only countries for which we have data for both variables in at least three elections. This is done in order to have reasonable leverage in inspecting the relationship between polarisation and partisanship within countries. This choice leaves us with a final count of sixty-eight elections. The countries excluded are Austria, Estonia, Greece, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom.

⁵ It should be kept in mind that partisanship and left–right have been asked in somewhat different ways in the various studies in our data, which is likely to attenuate the relationships displayed in figure 9.2.

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Previous literature also shows that partisans are more likely to vote (Aarts and Wessels 2005, 79–81; Franklin 2002; Norris 2002, chapter 5) and that they are, in general, more engaged in politics than non-partisans. This 'iron triangle' – polarisation, partisanship and electoral participation – leads to different sets of expectations. On the one hand, the positive relationship between polarisation and turnout discussed earlier might simply be due to a sample composition effect: in elections characterised by higher party polarisation, the chance to find a partisan in the sample is higher, hence observed participation is higher. This may explain the positive associations between polarisation and turnout observed by previous studies conducted on aggregate data (e.g. Dalton 2008; Wessels and Schmitt 2008). The logical consequence would be, then, that the positive association between polarisation and electoral participation disappears once controlling for individual partisanship.

On the other hand, the effect of polarisation on mobilisation may be conditional on individual partisanship. Even in this case, we have two possibly contradicting expectations. Since partisans are, ceteris paribus, predisposed to participate, given their individual interest in politics, the degree of party polarisation could make no difference to them. In other words, there may be a ceiling effect by which the marginal effect of polarisation on participation is reduced for people who are already very likely to participate. If this holds true, the mobilising effect of polarisation (Schmitt 2009b) should affect only citizens who are not attached to any particular party, that is, the 'nonpartisans'. Because in this case polarisation is expected to mobilise the electorate as a whole and not only partisans, we call this the engagement effect of polarisation. However, as Rogowski (2014) argues, less politically sophisticated citizens may have less tolerance of political conflict, or in general may have less means to see beyond the conflictual behaviour of polarised elites and perceive what is really at stake in a given election. The same reasoning could be applied to partisanship. Heightened polarisation may have the effect of limiting the game of politics to the citizens who are willing to take a side, while at the same time alienating those who do not identify with any of the teams. Indeed, it has been shown that, when polarisation increases, partisans are more likely to conflate ideological similarity and competence considerations in their party evaluations, whereas this is not the case for non-partisans (Vegetti 2014). This implies that party influence on citizens' reasoning and opinion formation should be stronger in cases of higher polarisation (see also Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). This effect could also extend to parties' mobilising efforts, which would be both more intense (given the higher stakes) and more effective in times of high polarisation. This reasoning leads to the expectation that polarisation has a positive effect on electoral participation of partisans and a negative effect on electoral participation of non-partisans. Because polarisation is expected to mobilise partisans only and

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 Table 9.1. Hypothesised Direct and Conditional Effect of Polarisation on Electoral Participation

	Polarisation	Polarisation ×	Polarisation × Political
	Main Effect	Partisanship	Interest
Engagement effect	+	0/-	0/-
Entrenchment Effect	_	+	+

possibly to demobilise non-partisans, we call this the *entrenchment effect* of polarisation.

Another indicator which may moderate the effect of polarisation on electoral participation is citizens' political interest. The logic of the engagement and entrenchment effect is the same as for partisanship. Polarisation may stimulate participation among citizens who are not interested in politics and therefore not already very likely to participate, effectively engaging the 'man in the street' in the political game. Conversely, the expectation of an entrenchment effect follows directly from Rogowski's (2014) argument that people who are less politically sophisticated have lower tolerance of conflict - with interest in politics being a facet of political sophistication (Luskin 1990). In this view, we would find evidence of an entrenchment effect if polarisation had a negative effect on mobilisation for respondents of low political interest and a positive (or null) effect for respondents of high political interest. The expectations discussed in this section are summarised in table 9.1. The engagement and the entrenchment expectations contradict each other, as the first posits a positive impact of polarisation on electoral mobilisation for nonpartisans and a null effect (or even negative, in case of a 'ceiling' effect) for partisans, while the second posits a positive effect for partisans and a negative for non-partisans.

PARTY POLARISATION AND PARTY CHOICE

What are the implications of party polarisation for party choice? At every election, citizens make their decision using a variety of criteria. Early theories of electoral behaviour all proposed variations of a mechanism in which voting is the expression of individuals' group identity, whether rooted in sociostructural (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Lipset and Rokkan 1967) or genuinely political categories (Campbell et al. 1960). Rational choice models proposed a mechanism in which party choice, very much like consumption behaviour, is the product of people's considerations regarding which party will produce the highest policy reward if elected (Downs 1957; Riker and

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Ordeshook 1968). Later theories focussed on retrospective economic considerations (Fiorina 1981), party competence (Clarke et al. 2004) and leader evaluations (Aarts, Blais, and Schmitt 2013; Garzia 2014). In this bulk of literature, party polarisation has been shown to affect the process leading to vote choice through a *salience mechanism*. This is easiest illustrated with an example. If ideological polarisation is zero, then all the parties occupy the same ideological position and it is impossible for voters to discriminate between them on that criterion. Ideological considerations will thus not have any effect on the vote. The more polarisation grows, the more ideological considerations may become relevant for voters. In other words, party polarisation creates the space for ideology (or, in the case of polarisation over a given issue, for that specific issue) to become relevant for voters.

The salience effect of party polarisation is grounded in the assumption of rational voting. Individuals are assumed to hold a given set of preferences for policies and to vote for the party that offers the most similar, or proximate, position to such preferences. The use of the term 'proximate' reflects the most famous and widely used formalisation of this mechanism, introduced in political science by Downs (1957). According to the spatial theory of voting, peoples' preferences and parties' stands are formalised as positions on a policy dimension, and the utility that a citizen should expect from voting for a given party decreases as a function of their distance.⁶ While a voter's ideological position is assumed to be a synthetic description of his or her specific policy preferences (e.g. more or less state intervention in the economy), party positions are assumed to describe the set of policies they would implement if they were in office. Such positions are based on strategic considerations, driven by the goal to maximise the chances of exerting relevant political power. So, on the one hand, voters' positions are given, and the utility of a party to a voter is inversely related to the distance between the position of the party and the position of the voter. On the other hand, parties' positions change strategically following the votes (see also Enelow and Hinich 1984; Iversen 1994a). This is the basic logic of the Downsian intuition, which can be applied equally to multidimensional policy spaces (i.e. evaluations including more than one policy domain) and to more abstract, single-dimensional ideological spaces (as is the focus of this chapter).

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⁶ There is one particularly important criticism of this model (for a review of the critics, see Iversen 1994a, b), namely that political parties tend to adopt more extreme policy positions than their voters. As suggested by the directional model of Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1989) and as supported by some empirical research (see Rabinowitz, Macdonald, and Listhaug 1991), voters choose the party that offers the most intense version of their preferred political positions. However, much empirical evidence shows that spatial models based on proximity-based and directional utility produce virtually indistinguishable results (e.g. Fazekas and Méder 2013; Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). We focus here on the more common Downsian proximity-based model of utility.

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In this context, party system polarisation is generally understood as an indicator of the level of distinctiveness of the available policy options. Given that position-taking is an important part of the competition for the votes, parties should frame their messages more in ideological terms the more their ideological positions are different from one another. This is expected to have two effects on citizens. First, as parties focus more on ideology, political information in the system should be increasingly based on ideological outlooks. Second, polarisation makes it easier for voters to distinguish parties from each other on the basis of their ideologies. The combination of increased availability of ideological information and easier recognition of party differences should make voters more likely to focus on ideological considerations when they evaluate the options they are offered. Indeed, a salience effect of party polarisation has been empirically demonstrated for single issue considerations (Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Lachat 2011) and for more general ideological orientations (Ensley 2007; Hellwig 2011; Kroh 2009; Lachat 2008; Van der Eijk, Schmitt, and Binder 2005). To put it bluntly, the weight individuals put on ideology increases as the level of party polarisation increases (Weinschenk 2014).

The salience effect discussed so far is based on the assumption that the relevant aspect of polarisation is the degree of ideological differentiation between parties. However, greater ideological divergence between parties has also been shown to correlate with greater partisanship among the citizens, as discussed in the previous section. Differently from the spatial proximity mechanism discussed earlier, partisanship in general is not defined as a simple choice mechanism but rather as a 'filter' through which people understand the political events and evaluate political objects. The concept was introduced in the 1960s by the scholars at the University of Michigan and regarded as a very strong predictor, not only of vote choice but also of other election-specific evaluations, such as issues or candidates (Campbell et al. 1960). While in its first conceptualisation party identification was described as something like a collective identity, subsequent research has redefined this concept, especially in light of its not particularly great stability, as a readily updated sum of preferences (see Fiorina 1981). In general, the power of partisanship as a lens through which voters evaluate the political environment is widely accepted (for a review of the relevant literature, see Johnston 2006). However, little empirical research has been devoted to study partisan voting (for an exception, see Bartels 2000). This may be because the very definition of partisanship makes it unlikely that people who identify with a collective group represented by a political party will vote for another party. Yet, like any other form of collective identity, partisan group affiliations may be more or less salient depending on the environment (Hogg and Abrams 1998). And an environment that is said to make partisan identities salient

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Table 9.2. Hypothesised Conditional Effect of Polarisation on Vote Choice					
	Polarisation × Partisanshi	Polarisation × Ideological Distance			
Salience et	fect +	_			

is party polarisation (Hetherington 2001; Lupu 2015). This specific form of salience effect is different from the one posited before with respect to spatial voting. Here, what becomes salient is not one among different considerations in the calculus of voting but rather one among the many sources of individual identification. Yet, empirically this produces the same hypothesised outcome: an accentuated effect of an individual determinant of the vote in case of higher party polarisation. Both expectations are summarised in table 9.2. In our models of vote choice, we expect a positive interaction effect between polarisation and party identification and a negative interaction effect between polarisation and left–right distance.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSES

In this section we test our expectations on the empirical data. We specify two sets of models, one for electoral participation and one for vote choice. In our first set of models, we evaluate the impact of polarisation on electoral participation, both direct and conditional on party identification and political interest. Specifically, we run three models with individual participation as dependent variable (a dichotomous indicator of value 1 if the respondent reports to have voted at the election and 0 otherwise). The first model includes both individual and contextual predictors. At the individual level, we include as controls gender (a dichotomous variable of value 1 if the respondent is a female and 0 if the respondent is a male), age (coded in years), level of education (in three categories), interest in politics and a dichotomous predictor indicating whether the respondent is a partisan of a party. At the contextual level, we include one dichotomous variable indicating whether the country in which the election was held comes from the post-communist bloc in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and one dichotomous variable indicating whether voting is compulsory in the country.⁷ At the election level, we include the effective number of parties (Laakso and Taagepera 1979) and party polarisation. The second and the third model include the same predictors plus an

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⁷ In the pool of countries used for the analyses, compulsory voting occurs only in Greece, hence the effect of the variable is hardly generalisable. The indicator was nevertheless included in the model to account for the potential heterogeneity deriving from this institutional characteristic, which is not reflected in any other variable in the model.

	Dependent Variable: Electoral Participation			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	
Gender (female)	0.081***	0.081***	0.091***	
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.017)	
Age	0.019***	0.020***	0.019***	
-	(0.0005)	(0.0005)	(0.001)	
Education	0.345***	0.343***	0.346***	
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	
Political interest	2.356***	2.352***	2.272***	
	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.121)	
Partisanship	0.900***	0.928***	0.884***	
·	(0.018)	(0.050)	(0.018)	
CEE country	-1.261**	-1.306**	-1.197**	
	(0.448)	(0.457)	(0.460)	
Compulsory voting	-0.413	-0.386	-0.578	
. , c	(0.818)	(0.830)	(0.834)	
Effective N of parties	-0.135	-0.148	-0.078	
·	(0.090)	(0.091)	(0.090)	
Polarisation	1.792^{*}	1.605^{*}	2.230^{*}	
	(0.745)	(0.777)	(0.912)	
Partisanship × polarisation		0.436		
		(0.505)		
Political interest × polarisation			-1.217	
			(1.212)	
Constant	-0.702***	-0.698***	-0.687***	
	(0.196)	(0.201)	(0.208)	
Number of respondents	143,026	143,026	143,026	
Number of elections	72	72	72	
Number of countries	16	16	16	

Table 9.3.	Multilevel Logistic	Regression	Models for	Electoral	Participation
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Note: Multilevel models with random intercepts by country and election and random slopes by election for partisanship and political interest, each based on maximum number of available cases. Contextual factors centred around grand means. Standard errors in parentheses, levels of statistical significance are p < 0.05, p < 0.01, p < 0.001.

interaction effect of polarisation with, respectively, partisanship and political interest. We specify the multilevel structure of the model to be a three-level model, with individual observations nested within elections and within countries. In other words, we set the intercept to vary at the election and at the country level. Moreover, we set the slopes of partisanship and political interest to vary at the election level, as that is where we observe party polarisation. Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, we assume a binomial distribution with logit link function. Results are reported in table 9.3.

The coefficients of the individual-level predictors all go in the expected direction, providing a modest validation to our models. Being female, of older age, educated, interested in politics and partisan correlates positively

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with the probability of voting. The only statistically significant effect among the contextual predictors is the CEE country indicator, which shows that citizens in countries of the post-communist bloc are less likely to turn out (ceteris paribus). Interestingly, the negative (albeit not significant) coefficient for compulsory vote seems to suggest that mandatory voting in a country dampens participation. However, this is an artefact because, as discussed before, compulsory vote applies to only one country in our sample, Greece, where the rule is not enforced and, in general, turnout tends to be low.⁸ Looking at party polarisation, we note that the indicator has a positive and significant effect on the likelihood to vote, even when partisanship and political interest are included in the model. Moreover, we see in Models 2 and 3 that none of the interaction effects is significant. This supports the hypothesised *engagement effect* of party polarisation: *all* citizens are more likely to vote in ideologically polarised elections, regardless of whether they are attached to a political party or of their interest in politics (and therefore political sophistication).

Moving to the models of vote choice, we test whether party polarisation moderates the effect of partisanship and of left-right distance on vote choice. As discussed in chapter 2, these are generic choice models, that is, they do not predict the vote for a specific party but rather the vote for any party. Hence, for example, a negative coefficient for left-right distance means substantively that a larger perceived distance between a respondent and a party lowers the probability of voting for that party. To fit such models, the unit of analysis is the *individual*-party dyad, rather than the individual respondent. At this level, we include three predictors. The first is the sociostructural affinity between the respondent and the groups represented by the party in question.⁹ The second is partisanship, this time coded as a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent is a partisan of the party in question. The third predictor is the perceived left-right distance between the individual and the party. The latter two variables are also interacted with party polarisation. We expect that the higher ideological polarisation in a given election, the stronger the effect of left-right considerations on the vote, and thus that the interaction coefficient between polarisation and left-right distance should have the same sign as the main effect of left-right distance (i.e. negative). Regarding partisanship, we expect a similar salience effect of partisan group membership on the vote, hence the interaction effect with polarisation should be positive. The multilevel structure of this model contains, just as the model about electoral participation, three levels, with respondent-party dyads nested within elections and within countries. Moreover, we set the slopes of left-right distance and partisanship to vary at the election level. As with the previous model, the

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⁸ See data and country brief about Greece in the European Election Database, prepared and made available by the NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

⁹ See chapter 2 for the explanation of the synthetic variable that captures these affinities.

Table 9.4.	Multilevel	Logistic	Regression	Models	for	Vote Cho	ice

	Dependent Variable: Vote Choice			
	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	
Social background	5.055***	5.084***	5.040***	
	(0.041)	(0.042)	(0.042)	
Partisanship	3.641***	4.245***	3.626***	
	(0.014)	(0.139)	(0.015)	
Ideological distance	-3.958***	-3.841***	-3.981***	
-	(0.030)	(0.031)	(0.173)	
Party polarisation		-3.943	-2.022	
<i>.</i> .		(2.786)	(2.716)	
Polarisation × party identification		1.762		
		(1.445)		
Polarisation × ideological distance			-4.696**	
_			(1.786)	
Constant	-1.276***	-1.412***	-1.337***	
	(0.337)	(0.350)	(0.346)	
Number of observations	516,291	516,291	516,291	
Number of elections	77	77	77	
Number of countries	17	17	17	

Source:

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Note: Multilevel models with random intercepts by country and election and random slopes by election for partisanship and ideological distance, each based on maximum number of available cases. Contextual factors centred around grand means. Standard errors in parentheses, levels of statistical significance are p < 0.05, p < 0.01, p < 0.001.

dependent variable is dichotomous, hence we assume a binomial distribution with logit link function. The results are reported in table 9.4.¹⁰

The main effects of the choice-level indicators all go in the expected direction. Model 4 shows that the effect of the variable capturing sociostructural affinity between voter and party (see footnote 7) is positive, the effect of left–right distance is negative and the effect of partisanship is positive.¹¹ Look-

¹⁰ Unlike other chapters in this volume, we do not include leader sympathy in the models for vote choice. We chose to do so because, first, literature does not provide any theoretical insight to connect the degree of party polarisation with the importance of leader evaluations for vote choice, and second, because including this indicator as a mere control would reduce our sample to about 371,000 observations nested in sixty-one elections and fourteen countries – a substantial reduction of sample size. For the sake of description, we did try to fit such a model (not reported here) and found that party polarisation increases the effect of leader sympathy on the vote, although the interaction effect is not statistically significant with p < 0.05.

¹¹ The main effect of polarisation, which is included in Models 5 and 6, is not included on theoretical grounds. In other words, we have no reason to hypothesise any effect of this variable on its own. It has to be included in Models 5 and 6, however, to arrive at appropriate estimates of the interaction effects of polarisation with other variables (see Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006).

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ing at the conditional effects of polarisation, we note in Model 6 that this is statistically significant and in the expected direction in the case of left–right distance. In other words, as the distance between a voter and a party increases, the probability that the voter will choose that specific party decreases, and this effect increases in strength with increasing ideological polarisation between parties. This result supports our expectations, and it corroborates previous findings (e.g. Lachat 2008). Model 5 shows that a similar interaction involving party identification and party polarisation is not significant, however, although the coefficient of this interaction is in the expected direction.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this chapter was to investigate how party polarisation affects electoral participation and vote choice directly as well as indirectly. The latter involves its impact on the relevance of some of the ubiquitous factors that are used in the extant literature to explain these two aspects of voting behaviour. Regarding electoral participation, we derived from the literature two different sets of expectations that we referred to as engagement and entrenchment effects. According to the engagement effect, party polarisation has a positive effect on mobilisation for citizens who are not partisans and have low interest in politics. According to the entrenchment effect, party polarisation has a positive effect on electoral participation for partisans and people highly interested in politics and a negative effect on participation for others. Based on our results, we find support for the engagement effect: the main effect of polarisation of electoral participation is always positive and significant, while neither the interaction effect with partisanship nor the one with political interest reaches statistical significance. With respect to party choice, we focussed on ideological considerations, modelled in a spatial framework as the distance in a left-right dimension between citizens and parties, and on partisanship. We found strong evidence that greater party polarisation increases the impact of left-right distance on party choice, but no evidence that polarisation moderates the effect of partisanship. Thus, while polarised elections are characterised by somewhat greater shares of partisans among the population, their voting calculus does not seem to be affected by this aspect of the political context.

All in all, this chapter demonstrates that ideological party polarisation matters a lot for electoral participation (both in a direct and in an indirect way, by increasing the number of partisans in the system, who are in turn more likely to turn out) as well as for party choice (by accentuating the relative importance of left–right proximity on the vote). This underlines the danger of seemingly straightforward interpretations of what voters meant when their

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behavioural choices brought about electoral change, interpretations of the kind referred to at the beginning of this chapter. When comparing electoral outcomes as well as individual-level behaviour across countries or across times, differences in the context (such as the extent of party polarisation) must be taken into account in order to avoid such incorrect interpretations.

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