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Competing for the Centre Ground: the Ideological Bias on Turnout

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Per al meu pare, la meua mare, l'Albert i la Gemma.

I per a la Marina.

The term 'centre' is applied to the geometrical spot at which the moderates of opposed tendencies meet: moderates of the Right and moderates of the Left. Every Centre is divided against itself and remains separated by two halves, Left-Centre and Right-Centre [...] The dream of the Centre is to achieve a synthesis of contradictory aspirations [...] This is equivalent to saying that the centre does not exist in politics.

Maurice Duverger

Political Parties: Their Organization, and Their Activity in the Modern State, 1959.

A center 'tendency' always exists.

Giovanni Sartori

Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis, 1976.

The idea that politics should be centrist and that parties should seek to capture the middle ground is widely used in popular discourse [...] but if the parties are located at the median none of the voters, including the median voter herself, will be able to distinguish between them and accordingly will abstain.

Paul Whiteley

Democratic Politics and Party Competition, 2006.

Acknowledgments

I have always sought for the middle ground (James Madison)

El 18 de novembre de l'any passat vaig córrer la meva primera—i fins ara única—marató a la ciutat de València. Ben escortat pel meu germà Albert, ens ho vam plantejar com tot un repte personal. A partir del quilòmetre trenta, amb les forces encara intactes, però incapaços de parlar, vaig pensar que una bona forma de fer passables els últims quilòmetres era pensar en allò que feia (i encara faig) en el dia a dia. La tesi doctoral. La cerca de paral·lelismes entre aquella cursa de 42,195 quilòmetres amb la *cursa de llarga durada* de fer un doctorat em va tenir ocupat durant una bona estona. Digueu-ne curiós mecanisme de distracció.

Ser agosarat és, probablement, el primer pas que comparteixen. Aquest treball que teniu a les mans no hauria començat sense un punt d'atreviment, mesclat amb certa bogeria i una bona dosi de voluntat de superar un repte. Des d'un bon principi, als meus tutors, Clara Riba i Javier Astudillo, els dec posar seny (i rauxa quan calia), orientar-me, explicar-me les coses tantes vegades com calia i no tenir mai un no com a resposta. Ells van agafar un projecte amb el qual ni jo mateix creia: el van exprimir i li'n van donar la forma que ha acabat en el producte que teniu a les mans. Guardaré amb molt bon record les (interminables) sessions de correcció, l'ampli coneixement de la història i de la política d'en Javier, les xerrades sobre política que hem mantingut, els colors que empra per subratllar les contradiccions o els subapartats de la meva feina, les contínues correccions de la Clara a la meva incapacitat per escriure correctament les fórmules matemàtiques simples o complexes... i un llarg etcètera. Quan érem a les beceroles, en Javier em va dir un dia que m'acceptava com a estudiant de doctorat amb una finalitat

egoista: aprendre. Encara que sigui amb un petit gra de sorra, espero haver-hi contribuït. Moltes gràcies a tots dos.

Si parlo de l'inici de tot plegat, he de mencionar Nacho Lago, per la seva energia, vitalitat i saber fer. Des del màster als seminaris, d'ell n'hem après tots molt. És de justícia esmentar aquí també en Francesc Pallarès. Malgrat les nostres diferències inicials, crec sincerament que, sense el seu concurs i acció, avui no hauria arribat aquí. Gràcies també a Mariano Torcal i Javier Arregui per la seva ajuda. Finalment, l'etapa inicial (i iniciàtica) va coincidir amb l'època en la qual compartia despatx amb l'Aina Gallego i la Maria José Hierro, dues persones amb qui he coincidit i coincidiré moltes altres vegades. Acostumo a dir que tardaré molt de temps a tornar a conviure amb dues persones tan brillants. A elles els dec la claredat (*no vagis per aquí que prendràs mal*), la sinceritat (*això jo no ho veig clar*) i, per sobre de tot, la sensació que encara hi havia molta feina a fer.

En el seu llibre *De què parlo quan parlo de córrer*, Murakami comenta que córrer és una activitat solitària, però precisament per això és molt millor fer-la acompanyat. I, quan cal, viatjar i fer una cursa fora et permet veure cultures diferents i aïllar la ment. Aquesta tesi no hauria estat possible sense les "escapades" que he realitzat en els darrers tres anys. Una per any. La primera em va portar a *Nuffield College*, a Oxford. M'hi va acollir Raymond Duch, de qui vaig aprendre un munt en les seves classes i sessions, i em va rebre una gens menyspreable representació de cervells brillants i ments esbojarrades. Encara ric quan penso en la preocupació que tenia abans d'incorporar-me a tan digne i prestigiosa institució (tenia pànic!). I ric de nou quan penso en com de bé m'hi vaig adaptar. La bombolla *oxfordiana* és tan acollidora que sembla que estiguis en una altra dimensió: una formada per una diversió intel·lectual i personal constant. La meva visita a Oxford ha tingut unes implicacions importants en la meua vida com a acadèmic i persona, probablement més del que jo pugui arribar a reconèixer. Allà hi vaig explorar coses que no hauria pensat mai que faria: des d'assistir a les especials *High Table* a vestir-me de poni (sí, de poni) i participar en la clàssica *pantomime* de nadal. Ara bé, allò més important que en vaig extreure és la comunitat humana que hi vaig conèixer. A tot arreu on vaig anar. Des dels

partits de futbol amb els *Lions* a les visites a d'altres *colleges*. Amb molts d'ells encara comparteixo amistat i freqüents trobades en el punt del món que més ens ve de gust. Memorables són les nostres converses sobre fets internacionals i històrics, que em van fer (re)descobrir el valor de la tertúlia tranquil·la. Des d'un relat de la Guerra dels Balcans en primera persona als perquè de la societat americana. Regades, com no, amb un bon grapat d'*ales*. En fi, no acabaria mai. Per això, gràcies Dingeman, Florian, Mathieu, Nemanja, Eric, Nehal, Dave i Silvana. Gràcies també a la Heike, de qui vaig aprendre un munt i va provocar una incursió plegada en el món de la publicació, a en Sergi, l'Anja i en Francesc, un bon mataroní i un amfitrió com cal. *Cheers mates!*

Persistint en la meva obsessió pel Regne Unit, la segona estada la vaig realitzar a Manchester. Una ciutat grisa i plujosa, però que pot ser encantadora i acollidora. O, si defalleixes i et lleves un dia sense pensar-ho, la Marta i la Virginia són allà per ajudar-te. Dues persones *collonudes!* De Manchester m'agradaria destacar les estimulants discussions amb la Jane Green, la meva tutora. Va saber anar més enllà d'allò que feia i va discutir-me (i ben fet que va fer!) tot allò que assumia o que passava per alt. Mai no pots adormir-te!

Finalment, fa uns mesos he fet una visita al CEACS de la Fundació Juan March. En la recta final de la meva tesi, vaig tenir l'oportunitat de concentrar-me i de donar l'empenta definitiva. Vull agrair a en Pacho, en Lluís, en Dídac i l'Alfonso el seu suport. Durant l'estada, vaig assistir a dos dels cursos més interessants que he fet recentment, dirigits per Jonathan Rodden (a Madrid) i per Paul Thurner (a Viena).

De nou: el producte que teniu a les mans no seria el mateix sense les meves visites exteriors. La meva hiperactivitat quan *jugo a casa* és tot sovint un potent mecanisme de distracció. Per aquest motiu, sense les escapades, no hauria arribat a la meta. En tot cas, el viatge és també un procés mental. Gràcies a ells, he après, n'he après i he conegut. Què més es pot demanar? Que aquestes línies serveixin, si algun doctorand despistat les llegeix, per prendre una decisió. *Volta al món i torna al Born.*

Córrer és trobar dificultats en el camí. Pedres a la sabata, barreres que

semblen molt altes o problemes d'autoestima que tot sovint superem pensant que el dia de demà serà millor que el dia d'avui. Fer una tesi és una cursa de llarga durada, en la qual hi ha pujades, baixades i la tempesta pot aparèixer quan menys t'ho esperes. No enganyaré ningú: la principal dificultat de la meva *eina* i la meva *feina* ha estat l'absència de finançament en el transcurs dels tres anys anteriors (bé, i dels d'abans...). El meu sistema nerviós i la irascibilitat de certs períodes en donen fe sobrada; lamento haver causat algun problema en aquells que tinc més propers. En sóc ben conscient.

Dic sovint amb un punt d'orgull que (si tot va bé) acabaré la tesi alhora que aquells que tenen beca. A casa m'han ensenyat sempre a ser positiu. L'absència de beca m'ha obert les portes a un munt d'oportunitats laborals que han acabat repercutint positivament en (gairebé) tots els aspectes. Durant els tres anys que ha durat la tesi, he fet incursions al món privat, sigui en consultores (gràcies equip d'*Actíva!*) o d'altres aspectes relacionats fins i tot amb el món del periodisme. Com acostumo a dir, he testat el món *real*, cosa poc freqüent en el món acadèmic. Si mai marxo de la bombolla universitària, em veig plenament capacitat per viure allà fora. No hi fa pas fred: al contrari! També he fet *viatges* al món públic, he fet de docent en tres universitats catalanes (UPF, UAB, UdG) i he participat en una infinitat de projectes (i "projectets") que m'han donat una visió àmplia de les ciències polítiques, apassionant camp d'estudi que tot sovint estreny en excés el seu focus d'atenció analítica. En especial m'agradaria recordar l'equip de la UAB (en Jordi Muñoz, en Robert Liñeira, l'Eva Anduiza i, ara recentment, la Roser Rifà) i el de la UdG, encapçalat per l'Agustí i en Lluís. Gràcies també a en Xavier Fernández per les seves classes de LaTeX per correu electrònic: sort n'he tingut d'ell!

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L'àmbit acadèmic és un món més *normal* del que pensava al principi,

més acollidor del que sembla i estimulant fins a límits insaciables. Un agraïment profund a tots aquells que, d'alguna manera o altra, han sigut participants de la tesi que teniu a les mans. Als participants dels seminaris de la Pompeu i d'arreu del món, de les conferències, dels congressos i als passavolants de llocs diversos que, directament i indirectament, t'han portat idees encoratjadores.

Els grans reptes personals sempre van acompanyats d'una infinitat de cares i noms sense la presència dels quals el trajecte no s'entendria. Des dels meus inicis al doctorat, he tingut el plaer de compartir aquest camí amb molta gent. Alguns han passat i han marxat. Alguns ja hi eren. D'altres han vingut per quedar-s'hi.

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En els últims quilòmetres, quan ja només procures que la respiració no quedi descompassada, és inevitable pensar en la teva família i en tots aquells que, d'una manera o d'una altra, t'hi han acompanyat. Als amics de la carrera (en Joan, la Georgina, en David, l'Agustí, la Marta, en Pere, en Miquel...). Als amics de Mataró (els Joans, la Núria, en Ramon, l'Eloi...) o rodalies (la Clara, en Guillem, la Maria, la Lídia...). I una especial menció a l'Àngel i en Ferran,

amb qui m'uneix un vincle profund i amb qui espero poder compartir molt més ara que, amb una mica de sort, tot plegat es normalitzarà.

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Esmentava abans que aquest treball no hauria estat possible sense les meves escapades nord enllà. Era una veritat a mitges. Perquè també he fet el viatge contrari. Durant tota la tesi he anat, ara i adés, al sud, al País Valencià, allà on la calor no et deixa veure el sol. Espai que he acabat convertint amb la meva segona llar, gràcies especialment a Toni i Marisa. Moltes gràcies a la *família* del sud! L'Horta em va rebre amb els braços oberts i amb tot el reguitzell de productes necessaris: arròs al forn, festivals, música popular, literatura i, com no, una *família T* fantàstica. Besets a tots!

Finalment, l'arribada. Creues la línia de meta i allà t'hi espera un somriure, entre preocupat i expectant. Marina, has compartit el viatge amb mi, amb tot allò que comporta. No tindria massa sentit que afegís aquí quelcom que no t'hagi dit ja. Bé, sí, només una cosa: gràcies per *perdre't* en el moment més adequat.

Punt i final. O, més aviat, punt i a part. Un cop d'ull als darrers tres anys, als quaranta i escaig quilòmetres superats, fan que pensi que, tal volta, només hi ha un secret. I ja ho deia el *profeta*: persistir, persistir i persistir. Aquesta és la qüestió.

Toni Rodon i Casarramona
Mataró, el Maresme, Catalunya, Juny 2013

Abstract

This thesis is focused on studying centrist abstention, by analysing cross-country differences and also, centrist individuals' propensity to turn out. Despite the literature claiming that abstention is higher on the left, this dissertation proves that the centre abstains more, which constitutes a paradox and a neglected aspect until now. By studying centrist abstention in different European countries, I highlight another unattended perspective: some factors that induce abstention may have a heterogeneous effect depending on individuals' position on the ideological scale. After integrating two groups of factors that the literature has considered separately and can potentially explain this phenomenon, the first article shows that variation on centrist abstention rates across countries is explained, above all, by certain party configurations. In a second step, the analysis focuses on centrist self-placement, partially accepting the conventional idea that the centre is only a refuge for those with low political sophistication and putting emphasis on other hypotheses like the role of parties. The last part of the thesis concentrates precisely on the heterogeneous effect of alienation and indifference, two controversial party scenarios whose impact is still unknown. Overall, this thesis offers both a comprehensive study and a new approach to explain why centrist abstention is observed.

Resum

Aquesta Tesi Doctoral se centra en l'estudi de l'abstenció del centre. En concret, analitza les diferències en l'abstenció centrista entre països i la propensió d'alguns individus centristes a abstenir-se. Malgrat que la literatura ha defensat que l'abstenció és patrimoni de l'esquerra, la tesi que teniu a les mans mostra que el centre s'absté més, la qual cosa constitueix una paradoxa segons el model racional i un aspecte que no s'havia tingut en compte fins el dia d'avui. A partir d'aquest fet, es presta atenció a un enfocament poc desenvolupat i que pot explicar el fenomen aquí analitzat: alguns factors que augmenten la probabilitat d'abstenir-se poden tenir un efecte heterogeni, basat en la idea que el seu efecte depèn de la posició de la persona en l'eix ideològic. Després d'integrar dues explicacions que la literatura ha tractat de forma divergent, el primer article mostra que la variació en l'abstenció del centre entre països s'explica, en gran part, per diferents escenaris partidistes. En un segon nivell, l'anàlisi se centra en l'autoubicació centrista, rebutjant la idea que el centre constitueix únicament una posició refugi per aquells que tenen una sofisticació política baixa. La investigació mostra la importància dels partits en dirigir els individus cap a aquesta posició. L'última part de la tesi es focalitza en l'estudi de dos escenaris partidistes controvertits pel poc coneixement que en tenim fins ara: l'alienació i la indiferència. Especial atenció mereixen les explicacions d'aquests fenòmens i l'existència de possibles efectes heterogenis que certs factors poden tenir. Amb tot, aquesta tesi ofereix un estudi exhaustiu i un nou enfocament per explicar el per què de l'abstenció d'aquesta crucial posició ideològica.

Preface

The concept of the 'centre' is overwhelmingly present in the political discourse. It is massively employed in political debates, oftenly raised by (new) political movements and constantly emphasised as a not sufficient but necessary condition for parties that seek to win elections. As a political idea, it is appealing to think that between the extremes there is always a sensible centre. But clearly that is not always as evident as it is suggested—sometimes searching for the centre can lead you wildly astray.

This is what political science research has more or less experimented with when analysing the 'centre'. Despite the fact that the 'centre', or 'centrism', or the 'middle of the road' ideology had a chance in the 1950's to become one of the most analysed aspects (both theoretically and empirically) in our field, many questions, paradoxes and ideas have been left unattended. The literature has indeed focused on many aspects around the centre—for instance trying to analyse Downs' emphasis that parties need to converge to the centre in order to win elections—, but we still know very little about the centre position, its role in party competition or the characteristics of centrist individuals, to mention just a few examples. It seems that Duverger's emphasis that "the center does not exist in politics" in 1959 has had its consequences on academic research.

This thesis is a (small) step towards our understanding of the centre position. It offers a comprehensive study of one of the paradoxes raised by the seminal work of Downs in 1957: centrist abstention. If the centre is understood as the *kingmaker*, as the position that has the opportunity to decide the electoral outcome, then centrist abstention seems at odds with what one would a priori expect. If centrist abstention is generally higher than any other position, contradicting the idea that the left abstains

more, an empirical puzzle becomes very visible. Additionally, if there exist competing explanations of why centrist abstention varies and why some centrist individuals abstain, researchers may get insights and start thinking on how to integrate these group of factors into a single and coherent explanation. These three “ifs” have opened the way and raised the opportunity to investigate abstention at the centre ground.

The reader will find in this thesis three different items of research that approach the phenomenon of centrist abstention. The first block examines centrist abstention variation across countries by reviewing different groups of factors that can potentially explain this variation. Although the literature is diffuse and these ideas have been analysed separately, they provide interesting theoretical insights to be tested. This review serves as a justification for testing the plausible theoretical idea that some factors have heterogeneous effects, depending on an individual’s position on the ideological scale. The second work switches to the individual level and analyses why people locate themselves on the centre of the scale. Despite some common ideas defended by researchers and the public in general (such as the ‘centre’ is a way to avoid an ideological compromise or a place for those that do not care about politics), I show that this aspect is, as often happens, more complex than what the simplest view suggests. Hence, different competing explanations are tested with some hypotheses receiving their first real examination. Finally, the third block addresses two party-scenarios—alienation and indifference—that can explain why some centrist individuals abstain and others participate. Despite these concepts being announced at the *origins* of modern political science, many important and crucial doubts remain.

The introduction of this thesis develops all these ideas, explaining the relevance of my work and the rationale behind my research. A final chapter addresses how the work presented here has contributed to increasing knowledge in the field and opens up avenues for further investigation. Overall, this thesis offers a modest study of the ‘centre’, contributing to a specific question which has been on the table for more than sixty years. By doing so, I hope to raise awareness of the need to further research this

'pivotal' position. In other words, in certain political contexts, being on the 'middle of the road' is a sensible political option. In its most exalted form the idea can be traced back to Aristotle's *via media*, the middle way, or if you like the Golden Mean — the idea that virtue is to be found between the extremes. Whether this is true or not in political terms, I hope that the 'virtue' about centrist abstention comes to the reader, as well as to other researchers enlightened by the many questions that arise when approaching the mysterious centre ground.

Massalfassar, l'Horta Nord, País Valencià, Juny 2013

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1

Introduction

1.1 General Introduction

Centrist abstention is a puzzle and a “black box” about which political science research knows very little about. Centrist abstention has generally not been on the research agenda, although there are strong theoretical and empirical reasons to study why this phenomenon occurs. This is not to say that abstention among certain ideological positions has not been analysed. In fact, this phenomenon, technically known as the ‘ideological bias’ on turnout, has been one of the most researched topics in abstention literature. However, the focus has been placed on another concept. Since the first works on this field were unveiled, a ‘conventional wisdom’ has been built and has claimed that the left is more likely to abstain and, consequentially, leftist parties have more problems to obtain an electoral majority. This long-standing assumption has often been revisited, with mixed theoretical and empirical results.

Still, the literature has focused its efforts on studying why the left abstains more in some contexts. These works have assumed a regularity that does not occur. Using data from different countries and elections, it is possible to portray robust evidence that show how misleading the main assumption of the ‘conventional wisdom’ is: normally, the left does not abstain more. The centre does. Therefore, this raises the necessity to reconsider how the ‘ideological bias’ has been tackled and what are the aggregate and individual determinants of this reality.

There are important reasons to apply the ‘ideological bias’ framework to the centre position. As previously mentioned, this literature has focused its efforts on identifying why leftist abstention varies across countries, a

regularity that also occurs with the percentage of abstention among centrist individuals. Thus, when looking at centrist abstention, we do not have a clear idea of why variation is observed. For instance, in the British general election of 1997, Tony Blair won the elections, ending Labour Party's failures to gain power during the previous 18 years. He did so after a long journey towards the centre [Shaw, 2012]. Despite this fact (or because of it) in this election 20.7% of centrist British citizens abstained. Similarly, the Spanish elections of 2008, in an especially competitive environment after four years of socialist government, resulted in a centrist abstention rate of 15.3%. In the 2007 French presidential elections the socialist Segolene Royal and the *gaulliste* Nicolas Sarkozy disputed the second round. Most of the campaign was about how to win the middle ground that had been left by Bayrou and his Democratic Movement. The elections resulted in a centrist abstention rate of 9.52%. In another context, the Dutch elections in 2002, celebrated amidst a very polarised environment, centrist abstention was approximately 4%¹. In some contexts centrist abstention is much higher than in others and, even if we control for each country's overall abstention rate, we have different potential explanations to explain this phenomenon. This leads me to ask: why does centrist abstention vary across countries? In fact, a similar question can be put forward if the focus is placed on the individual level. That is, why do some centrist individuals abstain and others participate? This dissertation focuses on filling this gap.

Even though the 'ideological bias' has been on the research agenda for many years, there are very few studies focusing on centrist abstention. This is so even though centrist location is generally the most populated ideological position and, as a matter of fact, it highlights a paradox embedded in the classical work of Downs [1957]. According to his seminal *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, parties compete for the centre ground in order to win elections, a rational strategy both in two-party and multi-party systems [Leppel, 2009]. If the *kingmaker* is given such a powerful role, and the

¹Sources are the British Election Panel Study 1997-2001, the CIS postelection survey (CIS-2757), *Le Panel Électoral Français 2007* and the first round of the European Social Survey. References are cited in the Appendix of the first chapter and are available online. Here it is important to mention that centrist abstention, as compared to leftist and rightist abstention, is in all these cases statistically significant.

marginal effect of the centrist votes are supposed to be higher than on the other ideological positions [Leppel, 2009], centrist abstention represents a curious 'anomaly'. This necessarily raises the question of why the centrist 'ideological bias' has been completely ignored by scholars. The answer lies in the influential approach put forward by DeNardo [1980] that have continued to be supported by journalistic pundits and political science research [Grofman et al., 1999].

The most significant implication of classical research on the field has been the link between the socio-structural composition of the electorate and turnout. The main idea has been that citizens with lower socioeconomic status have a higher propensity to vote for leftist parties. However, precisely because of their socioeconomic status they are also more likely to abstain. This idea has been prevalent since De Nardos' first and influential work [1980]. The second consequence of this conceptualisation—that the sociological composition matters and creates a bias on turnout—has been the lack of attention paid to another plausible theoretical source of the 'ideological bias'. Mainly, the role of parties in explaining variations in abstention patterns. The effect of parties' ideological locations on the probability of abstaining is one of the most appealing and, at the same time, under-studied aspects of abstaining literature. As Thurner and Eymann [2000, 51] pointed out, "the paradox of non-voting has been discovered in the context of the spatial theory of voting, but spatial aspects of abstention/participation have surprisingly been neglected in the enormous amount of theoretical and empirical literature on this subject".

These two groups of explanatory factors have previously been considered separately. I argue in this dissertation that in order to understand centrist abstention, it is necessary to adopt a comprehensive view and to integrate the socio-structural and the institutional and party explanations into a single theoretical and empirical framework. This is precisely what I develop in the following pages, arguing that both explanations have implications on the 'ideological bias' on turnout, which in turn challenges many assumptions put forward by the previous literature. Therefore, this thesis dissertation addresses these two approaches—the socio-structural and

the party-institutional one–, dedicating especial efforts to three aspects. First, research here especially focuses on the second group of factors, the impact of institutional and party characteristics on the probability to turnout, which have been far less studied both from an empirical and a theoretical perspective. Second, I do so by focusing attention on centrist abstention patterns, which have hitherto been ignored, despite the paucity of knowledge we possess about this phenomenon. Third, by conceptualising the ‘ideological bias’ as the difference in turnout rates across ideological positions, I also investigate the heterogeneous effects that some factors can have on different ideological positions. By doing so, what this thesis offers is a better understanding of the centrist ‘ideological bias’ or, to put it in other words, the main causes of why and when the centre abstains.

1.1.1 The new ‘ideological bias’ and its relevance

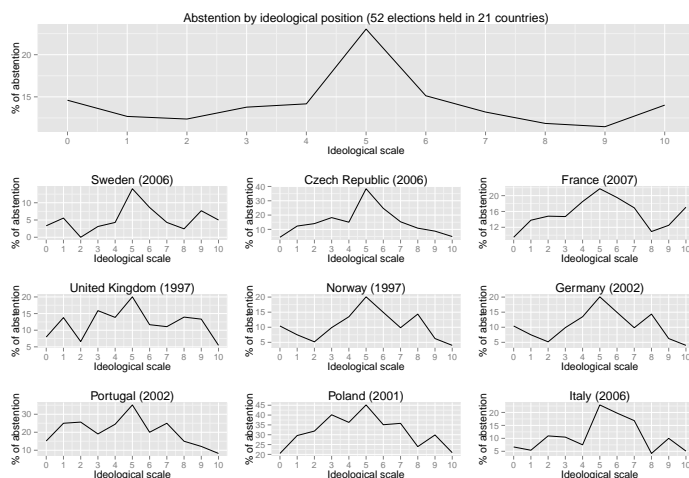
Traditionally, the ‘ideological bias’ on turnout has been considered to occur when a particular ideological segment abstains more than the rest. This definition implies that a higher or lower turnout among a particular ideological block is not random and therefore it is necessary to look for causes that explain it. Hence, when turnout covaries with an ideological position, it creates a bias, not only from a theoretical point of view, but also from a political one. This bias leads to the underrepresentation of a segment of the society which is also considered to have consequences on the final electoral results. In spite of this apparently clear definition, two important shortcomings will be highlighted in this introduction: First, from an empirical point of view, the literature has endeavoured to identify the causes or the consequences of leftist abstention. However, by doing so, this research has assumed that this position abstains more or that the bias comes from a particular set of factors. As I argue later, this strategy is not entirely accurate. Second, from a theoretical point of view, it has been assumed that factors driving abstention have a ‘global’ effect, that is, they have the same effect regardless of an individual’s position on the scale. Different theoretical arguments lead me to expect the opposite.

Thus, before looking at the determinants of this bias, this dissertation takes

a step back and departs from the initial question, without assuming any pattern. Simply, the question put forward is: which ideological position abstains more? Whereas the 'conventional wisdom' would have defended that the left does, a closer look at the data reveals a surprising pattern: the centre abstains more than the other ideological positions². Figure 1.1 shows abstention patterns across the ideological scale in eight different countries. Each graph reflects the percentage of abstention for each ideological position (from 0, which means 'extreme-left' to 10, meaning 'extreme-right'). The different figures show that those individuals locating themselves on the centre are more likely to abstain than those that locate on any other ideological position. Centrist abstention (position number 5) is higher and it is significantly so. The picture almost shows a perfect normal distribution. This fact is not an anecdote. Individual data is fairly consistent over time and across countries³. Moreover, the difference between centrist abstention and leftist/rightist abstention is generally statistically significant.

²Roughly all the data used in this dissertation sustains this argument. Figure 1.1 is constructed using the CSES dataset employed in the third article (it includes 52 elections held in 21 different countries between 1996 and 2009).

³I only plot nine different cases, as well as a graph that groups all the cases, in order to illustrate how the distribution between abstention and ideological self-placement looks like. However, this is a consistent pattern across the 52 cases contemplated in the CSES dataset. Only in six cases is centrist abstention not the highest.

Figure 1.1: Abstention by ideological position in eight different countries

Source: CSES. Modules 1-3.

This finding is a clear contradiction with what has been on the research agenda for many years. Despite the empirical facts shown here, the literature has dedicated its efforts to studying leftist bias (leftist abstention), which indicates that the research is far from arriving at a consensus concerning the establishment of the phenomena [Merton, 1987], especially on what concerns the connection between its theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidences. This new empirical evidence highlights the necessity to understand this *new* ‘ideological bias’.

Studying centrist abstention is relevant for five reasons: First, from a normative point of view, unequal turnout affects two democratic ideas: representativeness and responsiveness [Verba, 1987; Lijphart, 1997]. Unequal turnout implies that citizens’ political influence is not randomly distributed but systematically biased in favour of some citizens—those who vote—and against others—those who abstain. If some individuals vote less, governments and legislators have fewer incentives to consider their points of view [Mahler, 2008; Gallego, 2010]. In a similar vein, responsiveness is not exercised by a concrete part of the society. Voting is the most common form of political par-

ticipation and research around why people do not vote still presents many puzzles to be answered [Blais, 2007], among which is why some ideological positions are more likely to abstain [Lutz and Marsh, 2007].

Second, studying the centrist ‘ideological bias’ adds more complexity to the notion that there exists an ‘unequal influence’ exercised by some groups of voters. To the extent that the majority of European citizens define themselves as ‘centrist’ [Hazan, 1998], the fact that centrist abstention is higher implies that a great amount of ‘voices’ are not heard by the political system. One of the most employed ideas in party-competition literature is that parties converge to the centre to win elections and this process increases the congruence between citizens’ and legislators’ political positions. This has been considered as a central criterion for evaluating how well the representation process works [Black, 1948; Downs, 1957]. The quality of the democratic system is directly connected to the capacity of the system to absorb the views of the centrist or the median citizen [Powell, 2004; Kim, 2009; Kang and Powell, 2010]. Therefore, studying centrist abstention is relevant as it is a step towards understanding the behaviour of a key group of citizens with important implications for the quality of the democratic regimes.

Third, another issue to be considered is the impact of party strategies on the centrist ‘ideological bias’. Formal models have assumed that competing for the centre ground is a perfectly rational strategy, both in a bipartisan and multipartisan system [Leppel, 2009]. Although abstention is sometimes considered in their empirical models, few of them have contemplated that some ideological positions are more likely to abstain than others [Anderson and Glomm, 1992]. In this sense, previous research has demonstrated that the effects of converging towards the centre are relatively small [Ezrow, 2005; Immergut and Anderson, 2008; Karreth et al., 2012], a finding which is sometimes presented as a ‘paradox’. In any case however the impact of centrist abstention in party strategies is contemplated. Bearing in mind that the centre abstains more, understanding whether centrist abstention is a product of parties’ ideological positioning may provide a different perspective to this literature and a different answer to what parties need to

do in order to increase their electoral performance.

Fourth, this thesis is relevant because it contributes to our understanding of the centre position. Despite it being the most populated position on the ideological scale, we know very few things about why people locate themselves there because researchers have generally framed ideology as a dichotomy [Weber, 2012]. We simply do not know whether the centre has some special characteristics that differentiates it from the rest [Knutsen, 1998a] and therefore these features lead centrist individuals to have special abstention patterns. The centrist position is still a conundrum [Keman, 1994].

Finally, studying centrist abstention is also relevant from a theoretical point of view because there are alternative hypotheses to explain this phenomenon. The classical approach has analysed the impact of sociological factors in order to explain both differences across countries and why some citizens abstain more. On the other hand, partisan and institutional hypotheses outline different arguments that can potentially explain the 'ideological bias' on turnout. Hitherto no specific hypotheses have been established for the centrist 'ideological bias', but the literature provides us with some unconnected but useful alternative ideas to understand centrist abstention, both at the aggregate and at the individual level. These hypotheses still remain to be tested and, as a matter of fact, integrating them into a single and coherent framework can provide a new way to tackle the 'ideological bias'. The two groups of determinants that can explain centrist abstention are developed in the forthcoming subsections, where I critically assess both the classical interpretation and the 'role of parties' approach. This review serves as a backdrop in order to explain the integration of both explanations, which has been the basis for the analysis carried out in this dissertation. In sum, this integration allows for a more comprehensive view to understand why centrist abstention varies across contexts and why some centrist citizens abstain.

1.1.2 The traditional view

The sociological school has focused on the socio-structural determinants of abstention and how these factors create a bias on turnout. Recall that the

notion of the 'ideological bias' comes from the idea that low social status citizens tend to be leftist and therefore they are more likely to abstain. This is ultimately creating a bias on turnout, which operates against leftist parties. This traditional view has been analysed at the aggregate and at the individual level.

In the literature, the tendency has been to relate votes received by left-wing parties with abstention, either at the national or district level, meaning that the aggregate-level relationship has been predominant. The main strategy has consisted of investigating the correlation between the vote for leftist parties and turnout patterns, checking whether this relationship is 'causal' and whether this regularity produces a bias against leftist parties [Lutz and Marsh, 2007; O'Malley, 2008]. Under this framework, some researchers have even employed the counterfactual thinking and have studied how leftist parties' results would have changed, had there been an increase in turnout. Hitherto, within this literature, findings are not consistent. Whereas some studies have concluded that there is indeed a correlation between turnout and the left share of the vote [DeNardo, 1980; McCallister and Mughan, 1986; Tucker et al., 1986; Pacek and Radcliff, 1995; Aguilar and Pacek, 2000; Gomez et al., 2007], some others do not find any relationship or, to say the least, too weak a relationship to have any important effect [Nagel and McNulty, 1996; Grofman et al., 1999; Tóka, 2002; Citrin et al., 2003; Martinez and Gill, 2005; Lutz and Marsh, 2007].

Regardless of the different discrepancies found in the literature, by carrying out this strategy researchers have accepted different and strong assumptions, which can be put into question for four important reasons. Firstly, because the explanation that the left is systematically damaged (in any context and in any time) by turnout is excessively deterministic. The idea that low turnout is harmful to leftist parties masks the fact that other factors can also play a role [Grofman et al., 1999]. Secondly, this literature very often assumes that 'ideology' (in this case, the left) is the only factor driving political participation. Thirdly, in a similar vein, it ignores the fact that not everyone who votes for left-wing parties is leftist. Fourthly, also in a similar vein, this literature has dichotomised the ideological bias, ignoring again that the

majority of the population defines themselves as centrist.

However, the most important shortcoming is that the literature has generally avoided a crucial aspect that could explain abstention patterns across countries: the relationship between the left and different socioeconomic characteristics. Again, following the ‘conventional wisdom’ interpretation, the left is more likely to abstain because of the sociological characteristics shared by this ideological block. Consequently, this implies that where low social status citizens have a higher identification with the left-right axis—or where socio-economic characteristics have a significant impact on the left-right axis—the ‘ideological bias’ is present. In other words, the underlying idea of this literature is that the socio-economic cleavage configuration is crucial in identifying differences across countries on leftist abstention. To my knowledge, only Nieuwbeerta and Ultee [1999] have tried to analyse this argument from an aggregate point of view. This is surprising given the fact that this literature mainly operates at the aggregate level.

At the individual level, the notion of the ‘ideological bias’ has been framed as the interplay between different factors. More concretely, the following connection between different conceptual elements has been developed. The core of the concept has been based on the idea that citizens with a lower Socio-Economic Status (SES) are more likely to abstain. In parallel, it has been suggested that lower SES citizens are more likely to vote leftist parties. The interplay between these elements has led researchers to *logically* conclude that the left is more likely to abstain. However, research studying the ‘ideological bias’ has not taken a comprehensive view and has dealt with the different mechanisms in a partial way. On the one hand, the individual connection between low social status citizens and abstention has been researched extensively. The literature has proved that abstainers tend to be relatively poor, with less resources and low political sophistication than voters, and consequently more likely to abstain [Lijphart, 1997; Anduiza, 2002; Schlozman, 2002; Franklin, 2004; Blais, 2006; Gallego, 2010]. On the other hand, there are fewer works testing the connection between low social status citizens and the left [Knutzen, 1998b; Weber, 2012]. Finally, some of the literature has emphasised that low socio-economic status citizens do not

automatically vote for the left, a connection which has generally been taken for granted [Bennett and Resnick, 1990; Lubbers et al., 2002; Scheepers and Grotenhuis, 2005].

All in all, however, the socio-structural approach adopted up to now has assumed that, because individuals with fewer resources are more likely to abstain, as well as to vote for leftist parties, there is a leftist 'ideological bias'. Not only is this initial step consequentially misleading in light of the data seen in Figure 1.1, it is also controversial when scrutinising the grounds that this concept has been built upon: the interplay between the different factors that explain the 'ideological bias' presents many doubts. Furthermore, some researchers adopting the socio-structural approach have also taken into account other dimensions, mainly party identification (understood as a structural element that drives people's behaviour). More concretely, there is research that has analysed how the blurring of party identification may affect turnout patterns [Greene, 1999; Heath, 2007]. Again, this factor has not been generally integrated into the 'ideological bias' literature and therefore, we lack evidence of whether it has an impact on turnout differences across countries. Overall, the socio-structural approach has only focused on the left and there are no works dealing with centrist abstention.

1.1.3 The role of parties

The centrist 'ideological bias' has been largely ignored by the literature and therefore, this is the main shortcoming in the field. The socio-structural framework outlined above can be a preliminary way to approach centre abstention, even though the theoretical construction around this concept has been built to explain abstention on the left. However, the socio-structural interpretation of the bias is not the only unique or plausible explanation. The literature provides another approach that can potentially explain why centrist abstention differs across countries, as well as why some centrist individuals abstain: the role of parties.

This school of thought is more recent and, as mentioned previously, the argument operates both at the macro and at the micro level. It is an approach that has been fuelled by research showing that the impact of

socio-structural elements on voting has declined over time and that party strategies play a more important role [Evans and Tilley, 2011; Jansen et al., 2013]. Under this framework, the literature has tried to identify institutional or political configurations that can explain differences in turnout rates. Overall, four factors have generally been considered: First, one of the 'classical' elements of this school is the impact of polarisation on abstention. Generally studies have found that countries with a high party polarisation have significantly higher turnout rates than countries with low polarisation [Crepaz, 1990; Callander and Wilson, 2007; Dalton, 2008]. Another partisan element contemplated by the literature is partisan convergence (understood as parties' lack of ideological differences and not simply as the lack of polarisation). It has been considered that party convergence towards the centre increases abstention rates because it reduces the connection between lower social class and the left and therefore, this ideological position is more likely to abstain [Evans, 2000; Evans and Tilley, 2012; Jansen et al., 2013]. Third, the number of parties has also been taken into account. The common ground in the literature is that the emergence of multiple, ideologically distinct parties gives voters a wider range of choices and ultimately turnout increase. [Cox, 1999; Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998]. Finally, it has been shown that competitiveness also drives participation patterns, as uncertainty leads to a higher mobilization [Blais, 2006]. As I argue, with the notable exception of polarisation, none of these factors have considered that its impact is not homogeneous along the ideological scale, despite the fact that there are important theoretical reasons to expect that they do.

Thus, the impact of the institutional and party characteristics is not however free of controversy—apart from the fact that we do not know whether these factors create a bias on turnout—. Hitherto the different elements considered by this perspective—polarisation, convergence, the number of parties and competitiveness—have always assumed that an increase or decrease in one of these factors will affect all the ideological positions. The argument has been that abstention changes (or does not change) when any of these factors also changes. The literature has however, omitted to record that some ideological positions are more likely to change their behaviour than others.

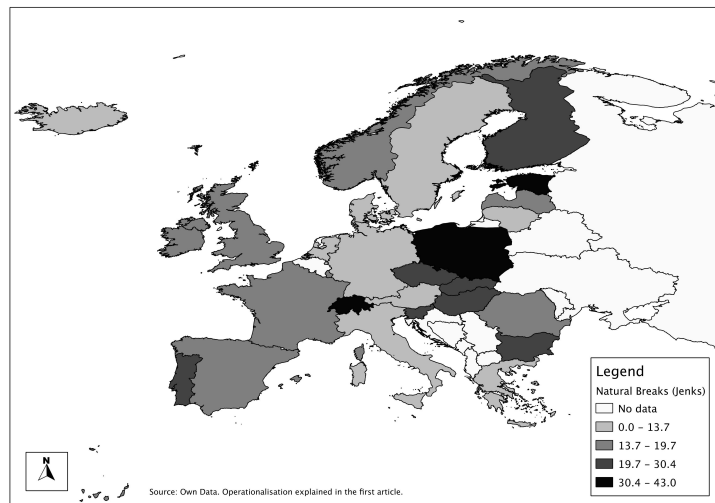
Finally, at the individual level, research has focused on the impact of parties' ideological locations on the probability to vote. This is similar to the previous one, but in this case the literature has mainly taken a formal approach. In a perspective that stems from Black [1948], Downs [1957] and Enelow and Hinich [1984b], researchers on formal theory have studied how equilibrium varies when citizens abstain because of indifference or alienation [Enelow and Hinich, 1984a]. That is, this literature studies variations on Nash equilibriums when some individuals abstain because of indifference or because of alienation. The formal literature is extensive on this field [Enelow and Hinich, 1984a] and fruitful for this dissertation, because several insights are taken: more concretely, this perspective suggests situations in which an 'ideological bias' can occur. For instance, following a classical Downsian suggestion, Anderson and Glomm [1992] create a formal model in which voters at the extremes of the ideological spectrum abstain because of alienation (therefore creating an 'ideological bias') and voters in the middle abstain because of indifference. Yet, the hypotheses on the formal approach still have to be adopted by survey research. There is also a lack of evidence about the effect of parties' ideological locations on the probability to turnout and, specifically, on the creation of an 'ideological bias'. Parties' locations on the ideological scale may induce voters to abstain because of indifference and/or alienation [Hinich, 1978; Plane and Gershtenson, 2004; Adams et al., 2006; Peress, 2010]. As formal research has concluded, parties' ideological position matter in order to understand turnout patterns [Melton, 2009]. However, there is scarce observational evidence of this fact, despite there being two classical factors already outlined by Downs [1957]. Again the literature presents three shortcomings: firstly, both factors have been defined inconsistently; secondly, the literature has analysed these factors on bipartisan contexts; thirdly, it has been assumed that all ideological positions are equally likely to be indifferent or alienated. Therefore, we still know very little about the real impact of these traditional spatial sources of abstention [Thurner and Eymann, 2000] and the chances that they create an 'ideological bias' on turnout.

1.1.4 The need for a comprehensive approach: the contribution of the dissertation

This dissertation represents the first attempt to explore centrist abstention and it does so by integrating into a simpler and more coherent framework what we know from the 'conventional wisdom' literature (which relates abstention with the left) and the 'role of parties' approach. As has been explained, important theoretical and empirical puzzles remain unsolved. Centrist abstention represents an unresolved conundrum for the abstention literature. Therefore, throughout this dissertation I shed light on this enigma and provide a theoretical framework, as well as an empirical validation, of the different ideas outlined that can contribute to a better understanding of the centrist 'ideological bias' on turnout.

Why does centrist abstention vary across countries? As I explained in the previous subsections, this previously unexplored question can be approached by employing two different perspectives: the socio-structural and the role of parties approach. Both of them have been studied in isolation and therefore, the first step is to integrate both approaches into a comprehensive explanation that leads us to understand why centrist abstention varies across contexts. To illustrate that a substantial variation exists I present the following Figure (1.2). The figure shows the percentage of centrist abstention in different countries⁴. For instance, whereas in the Czech Republic (2006) approximately 40% of centrist individuals abstained, the percentage is around 20% in the United Kingdom (1997) and Germany (2002).

⁴Figure 1.2 is based on a newly created dataset the details of which are explained in the first article of this dissertation. Sources are included in the Appendix of the same article (N=184)

Figure 1.2: Centrist abstention across Europe (%)

As can be seen, centrist abstention varies across contexts, an outcome that has also been set aside by the specialised literature. By integrating the socio-structural and the 'role of parties' approach the goal is not only to take into account two competing explanations, but also to question some crucial assumptions that have been outlined by these two approaches. Firstly, I am able to properly identify and operationalise the 'ideological bias' on turnout, differentiating the existing ideological blocks and their turnout patterns. Moreover, I challenge one of the most crucial assumptions: that socio-structural factors, as well as partisan scenarios, have a homogeneous impact on the differences on turnout rates across countries. Until now, the literature has assumed that any factor homogeneously affects turnout differences and has not explored that some factors may have a heterogeneous effect. There are theoretical reasons to expect this. For instance, an increase in polarisation may not have the same effect on the centre position as it does on the extremes [Downs, 1957]. Or the number of parties may also have a different influence depending on the type of parties entering the electoral race. If there are more rightist parties, the consequence on the right will be of a different nature than on the left. Additionally, the role of parties approach has not contemplated that competitiveness can make some ideological positions to participate more than others [Jackman, 1987; Geys, 2006]. Analysing this

heterogeneity is crucial as long as it can offer a different portrayal of how the 'ideological bias' is created and, particularly, why some factors affect centrist abstention, while having no effect on other positions.

The previous logic can also be applied at the individual level. Parties' locations on the ideological scale may induce voters to abstain because of indifference and/or alienation [Hinich, 1978; Plane and Gershtenson, 2004; Adams et al., 2006; Peress, 2010], but as stressed before we still know very little about the real impact of these traditional spatial sources of abstention [Thurner and Eymann, 2000] and the possibility of their explaining why centrist individuals abstain.

Additionally, the comprehensive view put forward here also needs to scrutinise the centre position, which as mentioned, has received very little attention. In other words, we have little knowledge of what drives individuals to locate themselves on the centre. This is crucial as long as, if true, some of the explanations can have implications on the way centrist abstention can be conceptualised. There is the idea [Converse, 1964; Lambert, 1983; Knutsen, 1998a; Torcal, 2011] that those individuals on the centre have less political knowledge and political sophistication than those located on any other position. These structural factors would determine centrist self-location and, since it would make these individuals 'special', abstention would be explained by the characteristics shared by this subpopulation. The problem for this 'conventional wisdom' regarding centrist self-location is twofold: this hypothesis has not been tested yet and there are competing hypotheses beyond the lack of political sophistication idea, which are substantially different.

1.1.5 The structure of the dissertation

This dissertation studies centrist abstention by integrating previous works into a coherent and comprehensive explanation. By departing from the literature that relates abstention with the left and by taking advantage of previously unconnected and diverse hypotheses, this thesis critically assesses how this relationship has been conceptualised and puts forward another more logical approach, both theoretically and empirically, in order to ex-

plain variation across countries (in this case, centrist abstention variation) as well as centrist abstention patterns. Consequently, the dissertation analyses the aggregate determinants of centrist turnout variation, capturing what the 'ideological bias' is and testing the possible existence of heterogeneous effects. In a second step, it moves to the individual level with the purpose of achieving two goals: firstly, I analyse why individuals locate themselves on the centre. This step is necessary in order to test the different competing explanations that have not been analysed yet. Secondly, results can have implications on centrist abstention patterns if some of the expectations are met. Then, in a final step, insights from the previous two works are used and applied to understand why some centrist individuals abstain and some others vote. The focus is placed here on two classical partisan factors, indifference and alienation, the effect of which is still unknown.

Throughout the dissertation, centrist abstention is analysed in Western and Eastern European countries. The reason for restricting the analysis to these countries is to ensure that the left-right dimension is comparable across contexts. This is easier to control by taking into account European countries as opposed to other contexts [Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976; Knutsen, 1997; Mair, 2007; McDonald et al., 2007; Weber, 2012]. Therefore, it not only makes theoretical but also practical sense to focus on European democracies. This thesis has been structured as a compendium of three articles around the centrist 'ideological bias' from different perspectives. Each paper has specific research questions in line with the research gap in the literature on the 'ideological bias'.

The first paper of this dissertation addresses the question of why centrist abstention is higher in some contexts. After critically reviewing how the 'ideological bias' has been studied by previous literature, the article moves on to studying whether centrist abstention variation across countries is explained by the 'classical' interpretation (socio-structural factors) or if it is driven by partisan or institutional elements. Thus, if the classical interpretation holds true, variation on centrist abstention rates will be caused by the relationship between an individual's positioning on the social class spectrum and a particular ideological location (left, centre or right).

Similarly, the classical approach would be accurate if the lack of party identification among a particular ideological segment leads them to abstain more [Nieuwbeerta and Ultee, 1999; Pacek and Radcliff, 2003; Lutz and Marsh, 2007]. Alternatively, the 'role of parties' idea ascertains that a higher or lower abstention rate among a particular ideology is the result of a concrete party configuration. Following this line of reasoning, this article tests whether party polarisation, parties' differential positioning (difference in utilities), electoral distance and the effective number of parties create an 'ideological bias' and, if so, whether the impact on the centre position is higher. Therefore, the consideration of both approaches in this article already suggests that the causal mechanisms explaining the 'ideological bias' can be, at least from a theoretical point of view, more sophisticated than what previous theory has assumed.

To test these arguments, I have built a new and original database to properly capture the logic behind the 'ideological bias' literature. Research on the field has adapted an aggregate perspective but, as has been argued, it has made some assumptions that do not resemble what the 'ideological bias' idea is capturing. This database draws on different cross-national and national surveys and its main added value is the operationalisation of the 'ideological bias' concept. By using past vote and ideological self-placement, I am able to properly identify the percentage of abstainers from each ideological position. The resulting dataset includes a total of 162 elections held in 27 European countries between 1964 and 2010. Moreover, it also uses other aggregate measures and contemplates the parties' ideological positions, as well as some other party-related and institutional variables. The adoption of a comparative perspective allows for comparing results with previous analyses. Moreover, it is fundamental to use a comparative method in order to provide enough variability to identify the causes of the 'ideological bias'. Since some arguments put forward by the previous literature are aggregate in nature, there is the need to test the different ideas employing this perspective. Taken together, there are strong arguments that support the decision to build a new dataset and to choose European countries in the research design.

This first paper provides evidence against the 'classical' interpretation of the 'ideological bias' and in favour of the 'role of parties' hypothesis. The contribution of the paper is that the relationship between lower social class individuals and a particular ideology does not lead to an 'ideological bias', neither on the left nor on the centre. On the contrary, two party configurations have an effect, especially on the centrist position: lack of differential utility provided by the main parties and a lack of polarisation explain why, after controlling for the overall abstention rate, centrist abstention is higher in some countries than others.

The second article of the dissertation moves to the individual level and studies the nature of centrist individuals. In this research, a question almost ignored by the literature is addressed: why do individuals locate themselves on the centre? This question may sound trivial but it is relevant because it can have important consequences in terms of how useful the left-right axis is [Laponce, 1970; Lambert, 1983; Kroh, 2007; Lachat, 2009], the impact of the different 'components' on the left-right self-placement [Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976; Knutsen, 1998a] and the role played by the centre position in party competition [Leppel, 2009]. The literature has put forward four hypotheses: the *genuine hypothesis* suggests that people on the centre are genuine centrists, with opinions between what left and right ideology. The *party component hypothesis* affirms that those on the centre are there as a consequence of their political preferences. The *cognitive don't knowers hypothesis* defends that the centre position is a refuge for those that do not have enough political information and do not know what the left and right mean. Instead of choosing the don't know/no answer option, they prefer locating themselves on the centre as it may be seen as a neutral and uncommitted policy position. Finally, the *evaluative don't knower hypothesis* argues that centrist self-placement is a product of people giving a higher saliency to post-materialist issues. In this case it is those that have high political sophistication but who consider that left and right are old concepts. Again, instead of not answering the question, they choose to locate themselves on the centre.

To the best of my knowledge, this has only been tested by Knutsen [1998a], to

whom we owed most of the hypotheses outlined above. Larcinese [2009] also has some evidence that those on the centre are less politically sophisticated and Torcal [2011] tested some ideas in the Spanish context. These studies are, however, inconsistent, performed in a restricted set of countries and with an empirical strategy that casts many doubts. Hence, many questions still remain unanswered. Furthermore, as I argue in the article, the literature has not come up with the idea that the *genuine hypothesis* can in fact be interpreted in two ways, something that has been ignored until now. On the one hand, centrist location may be a coherent strategy because the individual is centrist on different scales. On the other hand, centrist location may result after a balance-out strategy in different issues or items.

By using the fourth module of the European Social Survey—an appropriate dataset to capture and operationalise the different set of hypotheses—the second article puts all these hypotheses to the test. This is done bearing in mind what the implications are if some hypotheses hold true. If people with low political sophistication are more likely to be on the centre than any other ideological position, this would imply that centrist abstention is higher because, as shown by several studies, this characteristic makes people vote less [Blais, 2000; Mahler, 2008; Gallego, 2010]. On the other hand, if centrist self-location is *genuine*, a product of party choice or a result of a post-materialist orientation, it would not be possible to attribute centrist abstention to the low political information shared by the individuals on this ideological position. Overall, this article shows whether the centre is *special*, insofar as it is a group with different characteristics than the rest, or it is a position that shares to a large extent, the same features as the other ideological positions.

The main evidence of this second article highlights the fact that centrist self-location, as compared to other positions, is mainly a product of two factors: low political sophistication and party choice. Curiously enough, the *genuine hypotheses*, is confirmed in neither of the two versions: the empirical analysis does not provide a clear evidence that the centre is a product of either a *moderate* tendency or a balancing-out strategy. Furthermore, the analysis does not reveal that those on the centre exhibit a higher post-materialist

tendency. This paper has a clear message: it is essential to consider that the centre position is *special* in the sense that individuals self-located there have less political information or political sophistication than the rest. However, this is not the case everywhere and, although it is generally the main factor, it is not the unique interpretation, as party choice also explains centrist self-location. Therefore, the lack of political sophistication does not present an "ultimate way" in explaining centrist abstention. Parties' strategies also play a role.

Disentangling the role of parties in explaining centrist abstention is precisely the main goal of the last paper of my dissertation. In particular, I investigate two phenomena put forward by the spatial literature: alienation and indifference. Both factors were already implied by Downs [1957] and developed later by Enelow and Hinich [1984b]. Alienation has been defined as the distance between the individual's ideological position and parties' policy position. Indifference is framed as an individual's equidistant position in regards to parties' positioning. Thus, individuals abstain because of alienation when their nearest political option is too remote. They abstain because of indifference when they are in an equidistant position, in-between the two nearest political options. Despite the fact that they constitute 'classical' sources of abstention, there are still many doubts regarding their effect and in which circumstances they matter [Thurner and Eymann, 2000]. For instance, Downs [1957, 262] defended that those "who are indifferent about who wins have nothing to gain from voting, so they abstain. Hence when the cost of voting is zero, every citizen who is perfectly indifferent will abstain". Although this proposition was announced more than sixty years ago, it is still a mystery whether this is true or not.

The research that tests these ideas is divided into two parts: Firstly, the theoretical expectations of alienation and indifference are described. This is crucial because, although they are concepts that depart from the spatial analytical tradition, they have been inconsistently defined [Weisberg and Grofman, 1981; Southwell and Everest, 1998; Plane and Gershtenson, 2004; Adams et al., 2006; Weber, 2011]. Moreover, both concepts have been generally tested in bipartisan contexts [Johnston et al., 2007; Melton, 2009],

with few exceptions [Thurner and Eymann, 2000; Katz, 2007; Peress, 2010].

Secondly, the theoretical expectations are tested empirically. The article sticks to the original spatial definition and extends alienation and indifference theoretical expectations to multiparty contests. Overall, the analysis includes 52 elections contested in 21 countries between 1996 and 2009, by using the three modules of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). This project has carried out different surveys, which are especially suitable for comparative study and cross-level analysis. This research design is especially useful in explaining the effects of alienation and indifference and sheds light on the contradictory and mixed empirical evidences that has been obtained up to now. The main argument defended in this article is that some contextual scenarios change the circumstances under which alienation and indifference matter. More concretely, it is argued that polarisation and the effective number of parties make some individuals more likely to be indifferent or alienated and consequently to abstain because of one (or both) of these factors. Hence, an individual's proclivity to abstain because of alienation or indifferent is a function of different party scenarios. The idea is quite straightforward. Polarisation and the number of parties change the circumstances in which indifference-based abstention or alienation-based abstention occurs. For instance, in this paper, it is argued that, all things being equal, less polarisation or a higher number of parties will make centrist individuals more likely to abstain because of indifference but less likely to abstain because of alienation. In addition, alienation-based abstention among centrist voters is more likely to occur under a polarised scenario, but less likely when we look at leftist or rightist individuals. Therefore, the goal is to look at whether some partisan scenarios make centrist individuals more likely to abstain because of indifference or alienation, as compared to other ideological blocks.

Despite the theoretical importance of party context to the substantive relevance of indifference and alienation on voter abstention, this paper systematically reveals the limitations of the spatial theories of indifference on alienation. This article reveals three novel insights of importance to spatial models of voter abstention. First, the effects of alienation and indifference

are relatively low, and lower than claimed in single-country analyses to date. The effects are undoubtedly not negligible, but they are lower than the spatial theory would have predicted. Second, the effects of indifference and alienation, where relevant, are indeed conditioned by the polarisation of the party system and the number of parties. However, third, the analysis does not detect strong differences across ideological positions. Alienation-based abstention among centrist individuals decreases when polarisation and the effective number of parties increase. With regards to indifference-based abstention among centrist individuals, it increases when the number of parties does.

To sum up, this dissertation presents new and rich evidence that contribute to our understanding of the 'ideological bias' on turnout, especially on the centrist 'ideological bias'. Although this has been a classical and attractive field of research for many decades, it stills represents a promising and vibrant, though understudied, field, in which there exist many unanswered questions and gaps. For all these reasons, studying centrist abstention was both required and merited.

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2

Chapter 2

When the kingmaker stays at home: Revisiting the Ideological Bias on Turnout

This article explores the relationship between ideology and abstention and critically assesses the traditional approach of the so-called 'ideological bias' on turnout. After reviewing the theoretical underpinnings behind the 'conventional wisdom' that the left abstains more, I compile a new large dataset (184 country elections) that shows that centrist abstention is higher than leftist or rightist abstention. I then evaluate two approaches that can account for different abstention patterns across ideologies in different countries: Firstly, the traditional idea suggests that the 'ideological bias' is a product of the socio-economic environment. Secondly, party strategies can also have an influence on the observed differences across countries. Results show that the role of parties, especially polarisation and the difference in utilities, is an important determinant in explaining why centrist abstention differs across countries. Moreover, this article proves that some factors have a heterogeneous effect on turnout patterns across ideological positions, which critically challenges our conventional understanding of the 'ideological bias' on turnout and the impact of parties' election strategies when pursuing the key centre voter.

Voter Turnout, Polarisation, Ideology, Utility, Class voting.

2.1 Introduction

There is a vast body of literature analysing the relationship between the left and abstention. Whereas the ‘conventional wisdom’ is that abstention is harmful for left-leaning parties, recent research has highlighted that this claim is controversial and difficult to sustain. While the controversy persists, few authors have critically analysed the assumptions behind the so-called ‘ideological bias’ on turnout [Grofman et al., 1999].

After reviewing the previous research, this article identifies potential flaws in the ‘ideological bias’ literature, both theoretically and empirically. Moreover, a review of recent findings leads me to argue that the theoretical underpinnings behind the link between turnout and leftist success can be challenged. The connection between individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds and the left, as well as the counterfactual scenario contemplating what would happen under a higher turnout scenario, are two key elements that justify revisiting the traditional approach. I argue that the traditional operationalisation of the ‘ideological bias’ is controversial if what one intends to capture is the relationship between ideology and turnout patterns.

This paper puts forward another strategy to analyse the ‘ideological bias’ on turnout. It considers that, in order to correctly analyse the ‘ideological bias’, it is necessary to take into account three factors: First, abstention is not homogeneously distributed along the ideological axis. Some ideologies abstain more than others. Second, even when the latter is taken into account, a closer study of the ‘ideological bias’ highlights the fact that important differences across countries are reported. Third, factors leading to the creation of an ‘ideological bias’ may not equally affect the different ideological blocks, but rather have a heterogeneous impact. After arguing why this is important, I design a new dataset that compiles aggregate measures from different National or Cross-National Studies for 27 European Countries between 1964 and 2011. This data offers a more direct approach to the idea sustained by the ‘conventional wisdom’ because it allows me to correctly identify the percentage of abstainers on each ideological block (the left, the centre and the right).

A close look at the data tells a different story from the traditional perspective. Table 2.1 summarises this finding. It shows the aggregate reported abstention for those who considered themselves leftist (0-4 on the left-right axis), centrist (5) or rightist (6-10) in different countries (more details in the Data Analysis section). Some points are worth highlighting. Firstly, abstention among leftist voters is not the highest. In the elections and in the countries considered in the analysis (184 cases, that is, 184 elections), the average of the self-reported abstention is higher on the left only in approximately 15% of the cases. Secondly, the highest abstention rate is reported amongst those located on the centre. Centrist abstention is the highest. Thirdly, the difference between the abstention reported by centrist voters and the abstention reported by left-wing or right-wing voters is statistically significant in almost 80% of the cases. Fourthly, there are important differences across countries, especially regarding centrist abstention (standard deviation is three points higher than on the left or on the right)¹.

¹Abstention among those that do not place themselves on any position ('dk/na' option) has not been included, for two important reasons: first, because this article deals with the 'ideological bias' on turnout and therefore, those that do not place themselves on the ideological scale do not fall into the theoretical framework outlined here. Second, the 'dk/na' option has not been offered in a consistent way across surveys and over time, which causes a significant reduction in the number of cases.

Table 2.1: Mean self-reported abstention over ideological positions in 27 European countries in 184 elections

Countries	Period	Left	Centre	Right	Total
Austria	1995-2008	10.6	12.5	11.6	11.5
Bulgaria	1991-2009	12.9	24.8	18.6	18.7
Czech Republic	1996-2010	17.3	30.4	21.4	23.0
Denmark	1979-2007	5.6	7.8	5.3	6.2
Estonia	1992-2011	29.6	33.1	23.2	28.6
Finland	1975-2007	13.9	21.2	13.2	16.1
France	1978-2007	12.5	19.4	10.9	14.3
Germany	1976-2009	7.1	10.7	8.7	8.8
Greece	1989-2000	10.7	12.6	8.6	10.7
Hungary	1990-2010	15.8	24.3	19.1	19.7
Iceland	1983-2009	7.9	12.8	7.7	9.5
Ireland	1989-2007	16.1	16.4	10.5	14.3
Italy	1972-2008	6.8	8.2	7.9	7.6
Latvia	1993-2002	23.5	19.7	12.6	18.6
Lithuania	1992-2000	12.9	13.7	17.4	14.7
Luxembourg	1989-2004	14.2	14.8	10.8	13.2
Netherlands	1971-2010	7.8	13.1	9.1	9.9
Norway	1973-2009	9.9	16.2	10.2	12.1
Poland	1991-2007	31.5	43.0	25.5	33.3
Portugal	1987-2009	15.5	21.6	15.9	17.6
Romania	1992-2008	11.3	17.6	12.0	13.6
Slovakia	1998-2010	22.9	27.3	20.0	23.4
Slovenia	1992-2008	14.2	24.7	15.4	18.11
Spain	1982-2011	11.2	14.2	9.3	11.5
Sweden	1968-2010	6.4	11.6	5.9	7.9
Switzerland	1971-2003	28.3	37.1	26.2	30.5
United Kingdom	1964-2010	14.6	17.5	12.3	14.8

Sources included in the Appendix.

Not all the elections of the period indicated are included.

Thus, this paper asks a fundamental question about the ‘ideological bias’ on turnout: why does abstention on a particular ideological block vary across contexts? Is it possible to identify some factors that affect abstention in a different way depending on the ideological segment? These questions are not trivial as long as they jeopardise the classical ‘conventional wisdom’, which hitherto has assumed that aggregate turnout is homogeneously affected by a certain group of factors. However, when we consider that abstention by ideological position substantially varies across contexts, it is theoretically reasonable to expect that some factors may lead some

ideologies to abstain more in some contexts than others. In other words, the homogeneous impact on turnout assumed by previous studies may mask the fact that some particular factors are only affecting some ideological blocks, but not all of them. As is developed later, there are powerful theoretical ideas to expect so.

Therefore, this article fills the gap by exploring the classical interpretation of the 'ideological bias', as well as some anecdotal and unconnected hypotheses suggested by the literature on how partisan or institutional characteristics explain differences across countries. Some of them can essentially be applied to the centre position, whereas others are expected to have an impact on other ideological positions. Understanding what is behind the variation on turnout by ideological position is relevant as participation in elections is the most common way of political participation in democracies [Blais, 2007]. Low turnout is regarded as a "serious democratic problem" [Lijphart, 1981], especially if certain groups of voters are more likely to abstain than others. In other words, the existence of an 'ideological bias' is at odds with the widely accepted normative view that in a democracy each citizen should have equal influence.

By focusing on the different ideological labels, this article overcomes the tendency to consider the ideological divide as dichotomous (left and right). Since Duverger [1964, 215] famously dictated that "the center does not exist in politics", a great amount of analysis that includes ideology in their explanations have not considered this position. Hitherto, few systematic studies of the centre and its role in party competition have been undertaken [Daalder, 1984]. When considered, they tend to reject it or include it on the left or on the right category, depending on how the ideological scale has been operationalised. Specifying this position is important insofar as it is the most populated position and we have scarce knowledge of whether it behaves in a different way [Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009].

Findings in this article demonstrate little support for the classical interpretation of the ideological bias. Especially the relationship between lower socio-economic individuals and the left, and to a lesser extent the lack of partisan identification among a particular ideological position, do not substantially

explain differences on ideological turnout across contexts². More precisely, results show that the role of parties has an effect on the ‘ideological bias’, especially on the centre position. Centrist abstention is higher where parties’ differential utility is lower and where polarisation is also lower. Moreover, I prove that some factors have a heterogeneous impact on the ‘ideological bias’, such as polarisation or difference in utilities.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the arguments behind the ‘ideological bias’ framework and critically assesses the traditional approach. This review serves as a starting point for my alternative approach—the role of parties—and the different hypotheses to be tested. Section three sets out the research design, presents the dependent and the independent variables, and the dataset used. Section four presents the results. Section five concludes by discussing the limitations and implications of the study and suggesting avenues for further research.

2.2 The ‘conventional wisdom’: abstention and the left

The relationship between ideology and electoral participation has been explored intensively in political science. Several decades of research has typically claimed that left-of-centre parties are disproportionately affected by low levels of turnout, an idea that has become a ‘conventional wisdom’, both among researchers and journalists alike. The ‘ideological bias’ literature has generally assumed that leftist citizens are less likely to vote and therefore, right-wing parties have an *a priori* advantage over their competitors.

Departing from this widely held assumption, in the next subsection I discuss the causal arguments that underpin this ‘conventional wisdom’ and then explain why the operationalisation of the different components could be put into question. In the second subsection, I put forward another neglected approach and explain why the role of parties can be the origin of the ‘ideological bias’ observed in the data.

²By ‘ideological turnout’ I do not imply that abstention belongs to or is promoted by a particular ideology. It is only a way to define the ‘ideological bias’ on turnout, which occurs when a particular ideological block abstains (significantly) more than the other ideological positions. ‘Ideological bias’ and ideological turnout are used here interchangeably.

2.2.1 Socio-economic environment: the 'conventional wisdom'

Studies of political participation and representation often contend that politicians respond more to the preferences of voters than to those of abstainers. If participation is not homogeneously distributed across social groups, the representativeness of the electoral bodies is at odds with the ideal notion of democracy [Verba, 1987]. The common claim is that "unequal participation spells unequal influence", which raises significant questions about political equality and institutional representation [Lijphart, 1997; Verba, 2003, 1]. Unequal participation leads to biased representation and politicians might respond disproportionately to voters' preferences while ignoring the preferences of abstainers [Griffin and Newman, 2005]. Moreover, beyond the normative implications, unequal participation can also have substantial political consequences if turnout inequality benefits/affects a particular political party. When the supporters of a party are more likely to go to the polls, this party has to invest fewer resources in mobilisation strategies. Therefore, if there was a high participation—or if turnout drops from one election to the other—some parties would achieve better results. [Lijphart, 1997; Grofman et al., 1999].

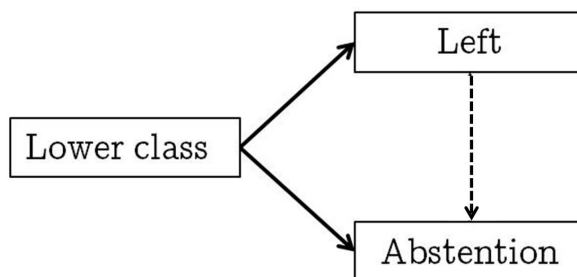
One of the most appealing and studied biases in the literature has been the 'ideological bias'³. Over recent decades, the 'ideological bias' notion has perpetuated the claim that low-propensity voters going to the polls are generally leftist, which critically harms the prospects of left-wing parties. The relationship between turnout and the left has been considered to be negative: leftist ideology is correlated with fewer chances to participate on the election day. Conversely, the more representative the voters are of the total population, and the less weighted is the tilt among voters towards those of rightist ideology, the better leftist parties will do and the worse represented some citizens will be [McCallister and Mughan, 1986; Aguilar and Pacek, 2000].

The central basis of this relationship is not as simple as it appears to be and, as the classical explanation has suggested, it is in fact based on the

³The literature has thoroughly proven that there are other factors that could potentially create a bias on turnout. For instance, the gender gap on turnout [Engeli et al., 2006] or the low participation among immigrant groups [Ramakrishnan and Espenshade, 2001].

interplay between three factors: the individual socio-economic characteristics, ideology and participation patterns. The underlying theoretical claim of the ‘ideological bias’ on turnout consists of the following propositions [O’Malley, 2008]: Firstly, citizens of lower socio-economic status are less likely to participate in elections. Secondly, at the same time, citizens with these socio-demographic characteristics tend to be more leftist and, as such, have a higher probability to vote for the leftist parties. Thirdly, lower turnout among this group provides the right-wing parties with an electoral advantage that is difficult to surpass by the left. Therefore, socio-economic status (SES) creates a ‘bias’ on turnout that only affects the left-wing parties because turnout will tend to negatively covary with the left. Figure 2.1 summarises this relationship.

Figure 2.1: Relationship between the left and abstention according to the ‘conventional wisdom’



Although these concepts are linked together, they have been analysed separately. The first ‘classical approach’ has focused on the first part of the causal chain, that is, whether lower SES individuals are less likely to participate [Campbell, 1960; Beeghley, 1986; Manza and Brooks, 1995; Aguilar and Pacek, 2000; Gallego, 2010; Ham and Smets, 2013]. Stemming from the classical resource model [Verba, 1987], all of them reach a similar conclusion: they show that low participation is indeed correlated with low socio-economic characteristics. Previous research provides robust empirical evidence for this connection. However, these works are far from being able to link this rather strong relationship with leftist voting patterns. In other words, the evidence that lower SES citizens vote less does not automatically imply that these citizens, had they participated in the elections, would have voted for left-wing parties [Pettersen and Rose, 2007; Rosema, 2007].

Consequently, to sustain this crucial causal chain, the idea is that higher abstention among lower SES voters will damage the left-wing electoral fortunes if (and only if) these citizens are more likely to be leftist. This connection had generally been proven to happen under the existence of conventional class voting patterns. Traditionally the literature argued that lower SES citizens were more likely to be leftist and that left parties emphasized class voting in order to capture support among this important segment of the population. Following this argument, we should expect that if the relationship between lower SES citizens and the left is not present, this bias should also not be reported. In other words, under this approach, it is consequentially logical to expect higher abstention rates among leftist individuals in those countries where the relationship between low SES citizens and the left is weaker.

This idea is not free of controversy. Some analyses demonstrate that the linkage between lower SES citizens and the left has substantially declined. Lower SES citizens sometimes support right-wing parties or have deviated from their traditional leftist option. Overall, the leftist vote towards a leftist party is less based on the class-voting argument and has stronger links with other structural or short-term factors [Mayer and Perrineau, 1992; Bartolini, 2007; Oesch, 2008; Evans and Tilley, 2012; Jansen et al., 2013]. For instance, in a cross-country analysis, Nieuwbeerta and Ultee [1999] demonstrated that class-based voting has significantly declined.

The second approach has tackled the two other components of the 'ideological bias' concept, particularly the left and abstention. This approach, generally aggregate, has linked results of leftist leaning parties with turnout. Scholars have examined whether turnout covaries with leftist electoral fortunes [Grofman et al., 1999]. For instance, from a cross-national perspective, Pacek and Radcliff [1995], Aguilar and Pacek [2000], and Bohrer and Radcliff [2000], as well as Tucker et al. [1986], Nagel and McNulty [1996], Citrin et al. [2003], and Martinez and Gill [2005] for the US, Mcallister and Mughan [1986] for the United Kingdom, Nagel [1988] for New Zealand and Pacek and Radcliff [2003] for the elections to the European Parliament (among other studies), conclude that higher levels of turnout would have led to better results for left-wing parties. However, several scholars disagreed with these

findings [DeNardo, 1980; Tucker et al., 1986; Grofman et al., 1999; Fisher, 2007; van der Eijk and Franklin, 2009].

Nevertheless, under this approach there is also a methodological caveat that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been explored yet. Typically the 'ideological bias' has correlated the vote share received by left-wing parties with the percentage of turnout in a given territorial unit (a district or a country). This operationalisation assumes two simplistic ideas: Firstly, it assumes that the ideological divide is dichotomous, with left and right defined as the unique ideological blocks, a warning previously identify by Inglehart and Klingemann [1976, 246] ("politics of a given society can be viewed in terms of some underlying continuum"). By following the classical way to define ideology, we ignore the fact that the centre location is the most important ideological position in quantitative terms [Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009]. Avoiding or encapsulating this position into another one oversimplifies too much the political reality. Secondly, by using the percentage of votes for left-wing parties as their dependent variable, the 'ideological bias' literature is assuming that all voters that opt for left-wing parties are leftist and all voters of right-wing parties are rightist. This is controversial because, as has been said before, centrist individuals form the majority almost everywhere. Moreover, there is a body of citizens that are not able to choose a position on the ideological scale.

The traditional operationalisation is not a problem as long as it is the only option available to researchers (as, most of the times, it is the case in elections results provided by districts). However, as I show in the next section, 'ideological bias' literature could have used other tools in order to capture the relationship between ideology and abstention.

In conclusion, the theoretical as well as the empirical underpinnings of the 'conventional wisdom' can be seriously considered, insofar as the elements that this concept puts together have not been integrated into a single model. One could argue that these shortcomings simply imply that the bias has disappeared, with the erosion of the class-based voting or the lack of strong evidence relating turnout and leftist results as the most important exponentials. However, as I have shown in Table 2.1, the bias has not faded away. There is still an ideological position that abstains more

than the rest: the centre. Centrist abstention is generally higher, although with important differences across countries. Moreover, leftist and rightist abstention, although smaller, also varies across contexts. Therefore, the 'ideological bias' on turnout is still a (statistically significant) reality.

Beyond the fact that the 'ideological bias' has not correctly tackled the three components explained before and that methodological shortcomings are present, all these studies present another commonality, which may have led to different results. These studies assume that factors leading to the creation of an 'ideological bias' homogeneously affect all the ideological positions. This is surprising as long as it is expected that some factors may have a heterogeneous effect on different ideological blocks. That is, a particular factor could affect one ideology, but not all of them.

The idea is quite straightforward. As previously mentioned, following the classical 'conventional wisdom' interpretation, I expect leftist 'ideological bias' to be higher in those contexts where the connection between lower SES individuals and the left is stronger. Moreover, a possible explanation for understanding the *new* 'ideological bias' (centrist abstention variation across countries) can also be found in previous research. The idea is that the characteristics shared by those who locate themselves on the left (less political information and sophistication) are now predominant on this position. That is, those who would have been on the left are nowadays centrist and this would explain the higher centrist abstention levels. Again, in those contexts where the connection between lower SES and the centre is stronger, a higher centrist abstention should be expected⁴.

To sum up, according to the classical interpretation of the 'ideological bias' on turnout, it is expected that higher abstention rates will be found where the relationship between being from a low social class and the left or the centre is stronger (there is no expectation for the right). Thus, this argument yields the following hypothesis:

H₁: The higher the relationship between lower SES and the left or the centre, the

⁴This idea is inspired by Knutsen's 1998 observation: centrist location might be a concealed form of *non-response*. It is also important to point out that this plausible hypothesis in an individual-level research does not affect the analysis reported below unless the centre as a form of *nonresponse* was stronger in some countries than in others, a hypothesis that it is difficult to hold.

higher the abstention at this ideological block.

Nevertheless, the 'classical' point of view offers another explanation, which is also based on a structural long-term factor and has not been contemplated until now: the role of party identification. It is well known that being identified with a party implies having more chances to participate. Conversely, those that have not developed any attachment towards a particular political formation are less likely to vote [Anduiza, 2002; Gallego, 2010]. Even though the erosion of party attachments has affected all voters, the decline of party identification has not been equally distributed across ideological positions. Data collected in this article shows that, on average, the percentage of non-partisan identifiers are higher on the centre (48.4%), than on the left (31.3%) or on the right (33.2%).

Hence, the second socio-estructural hypothesis would explain variation on turnout among a particular ideology as follows:

H₂: The lower the percentage of partisan identifiers among a particular position, the higher the abstention on this position.

The blurring of the social-class connection and the erosion of party identification have other important implications. As previous literature has shown, both factors have emphasised the impact of party strategies on the likelihood of participating [Aarts and Wessels, 2005]. The relationship between belonging to a particular segment of society and party choice has been declining, increasing the effect of the political institutional-context on the decision to participate. The decision whether to participate or not is more dependent upon what is at stake in a particular election, that is, on how party supply is structured [van der Eijk and Franklin, 2009]. Overall, one might expect an increasing relevance of the political context as this will be of great significance for the calculus of individual citizens in deciding whether they would vote and if so, for which party [Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002].

2.2.2 The role of parties

Although the literature has repeatedly emphasised the role of parties or institutional factors when explaining why turnout rates vary across contexts [Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998], few empirical works have analysed the impact

of partisan factors on the 'ideological bias' on turnout [Grofman et al., 1999; Lago and Montero, 2010]. Apart from the impact of different socio-economic factors, the literature has highlighted that a higher or lower abstention rate can also be attributable to differences in how parties are able to mobilise citizens in each context. More concretely, I argue that a group of factors can account for different ideological abstention levels across countries: competitiveness and the ideological choices offered by parties (equidistant ideological positions, polarisation and the number of parties).

Regarding competitiveness, and tracing its roots back to Downs [1957], the general expectation in the literature is that turnout is higher in elections that are expected to be close. The so-called 'competition effect' is expected to positively affect the incentives to vote and thus bring more voters to the polls⁵. According to Grofman and Griffin [1998] and Blais [2006], from a strict rational choice perspective turnout is lower in one-sided elections than in close ones, especially in PR systems [Franklin, 2004].

Regarding the empirical impact of competitiveness, Blais [2000] found that closeness increases turnout in 27 of the 32 studies that have tested the relationship. However, as Blais [2006, 9] recognises, "I have been struck, in my own research, by its smallness". That is, turnout has been reported to be only weakly affected by the closeness of an election [Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998].

The general theoretical assumption in this field might be underestimating the empirical impact of competition. The literature has assumed that when the electoral outcome is uncertain, party mobilisation will tend to be higher and *all* the electorate will feel more pivotal. However, we can hypothesise that competition increases the incentives to seek the centre, as this key position can be the turning point to decide an election. Recall that as long as the distribution is denser in the centre than in the left and right, by moving to the centre, and regardless of the party system, parties will benefit relative to their opponent [Leppel, 2009]. Therefore, there are reasons to expect that the impact of competition is not as ideologically homogeneous as it has been

⁵The individual mechanism behind this effect relies on the chances of being pivotal. According to the pivotal-voter explanation [Ledyard, 1984; Degan and Merlo, 2011], voters feel more 'pivotal' if elections are very close, as they feel their decision is expected to have a greater influence on the final outcome.

suggested, especially when one takes into account the Downsian idea that elections are won at the centre. If the effects of competitiveness are at best modest, it might be because we do not have to study its effects on all the electorate but on the centre. Yet, this plausible theoretical idea—which might explain why empirical evidence is still inconclusive—has not been tested. Based on this expectation, the next hypothesis can be formulated:

H₃: Centrist abstention is higher where elections are less competitive. Conversely, competitiveness has no effect on the other ideological positions

The second group of factors is related to the importance of the ideological ‘supply’ offered by parties. As pointed out, the decision as to whether to participate or not has become less anchored in structural factors and more on what parties are offering to the electorate [Franklin, 2004; van der Eijk and Franklin, 2009].

More concretely, this literature emphasises the role of the partisan ideological distribution. Rational choice literature has repeatedly explained that voters are assumed to vote for the party that is closest to them in the left-right dimension if the utility generated by this party is higher vis-à-vis the utility generated by the opponent [Hinich and Munger, 1997]. In other words, voters decide whether to participate according to their ‘relative’ distance to parties [Aldrich, 1993]. Therefore, in those contexts where there are hardly any ideological differences between political parties, it will be nigh on impossible for voters to decide whether they should participate. ‘Tweedledum-tweedledee’ politics depresses turnout⁶ and, conversely, participation is higher when parties offer meaningful ideological differences [Sanders, 2001].

Empirical studies, which are mainly case studies, have not reached a final conclusion as to what is the impact of equidistant political alternatives on the overall level of participation: whereas some studies conclude that its impact is rather small [Brody and Page, 1973; Thurner and Eymann, 2000; Plane and Gershtenson, 2004; Adams et al., 2006], others suggest that its effect has been underestimated [Melton, 2009].

⁶This process is labelled as *indifference* when studying its impact at the individual level. In this article, I use ‘equidistant utilities’ or ‘difference in utilities’, as both terms are closer to the dynamics of the aggregate analysis.

The general assumption in the field is that convergence affects *all* voters. The idea is that when party differentials blur, there are no incentives for some voters to choose between them. Normally the blurring of party differences occurs when parties converge towards the centre. Hitherto, this movement has been assumed to affect leftist voters, especially after the British experience [Heath et al., 2001]⁷. That is, convergence towards the centre deters some leftist voters from supporting parties that have initiated this process. Besides this hypothesis, we can also expect that the centrist position is more likely to be affected by convergence, as the latter normally occurs when parties move towards the centre [Green, 2013]. Thus, one would *a priori* expect that centrist abstention is higher than the rest in those contexts where those political alternatives that are close to the centre are equidistant. The possibility of leftist and/or centrist abstention due to convergence have not been explored (again, there is no expectation for the right). Thus:

H₄: The lower the ideological differences between parties, the higher the leftist or centrist abstention.

Convergence is not the only factor that has to be taken into account when dealing with the ideological 'supply' offered by parties. Polarisation may also play a role in understanding why some ideological segments abstain more than others. However, regarding polarisation effects, the literature offers two expectations. The first one is in line with the spatial logic. According to the proximity theory [Enelow and Hinich, 1984], when parties' platforms are too distant from a voter to justify the voting costs, an increase in abstention is expected. Therefore, when parties are polarised, the political alternatives for centrist citizens will appear very remote. In this sense, in those countries where polarisation is high, the percentage of abstention among centrist individuals is expected to be higher than among their ideological counterparts as political alternatives will be far from the centre's point⁸.

⁷Only recently Karreth et al. [2012] have examined the electoral consequences of moving towards the centre for social-democrats.

⁸Abstaining because of political alternatives being too distant is referred to as *alienation* when dealing with the individual underlying causal mechanisms [Hinich and Munger, 1997]. Here I prefer to use polarisation, as it better suits the terminology of the aggregate analysis.

However, this mechanism, based on the proximity logic, is not the only one that seems to take place under a polarised scenario. Aggregate research about abstention argues that when parties are polarised, ideological differences are expected to be greater, and voters will be able to identify the differences between parties' stances and thus turnout will increase. In this sense, a polarised political landscape is more likely to have a higher turnout than a political system in which the distance between parties is small [Brody and Page, 1973; Crepaz, 1990; Hinich and Munger, 1997; Dalton, 2008]. Therefore, these two theoretical alternatives naturally lead to the following set of alternative hypothesis:

H_{5a}: According to the spatial logic, the higher the polarisation of the party system, the higher the centrist abstention rate and the lower the abstention rate among the left and the right.

H_{5b}: According to the findings in the turnout literature, a higher polarisation of the party system leads to a lower abstention rate, regardless of the ideological position.

Finally, the 'ideological bias' on turnout may also vary because of the number of parties. However, there are conflicting results regarding the effect of an increase in the electoral supply. Jackman [1987] found that a multiparty system depresses turnout⁹, whereas Black [1991] found no link at all between the number of parties and turnout. Although I recognise these contradictory conclusions, I adhere to the most recent findings, provided by Blais [2006]. They show that an increase in the number of parties leads to an increase in abstention. Therefore, the 'ideological bias' on turnout may be a product of the varying number of political parties across countries. However, I again refine the expectation insofar as it is necessary to take into account which ideological position has more political parties. Until now, the literature has assumed that the number of parties affects all the ideological positions, regardless of the type of parties. This assumption can be misleading: for instance, a system with four parties as compared with a system with two parties can have different implications if these two 'extra' parties are both leftist or both rightist. Therefore, I expect the following:

⁹Jackman's argument was based on the idea that more parties imply post-electoral coalition negotiations and therefore voters do not have a clear idea of which government they are supporting with their vote.

H₆: The higher the number of parties, the higher the centrist abstention. Moreover, the higher the number of leftist/rightist parties, the higher the leftist/rightist abstention.

2.3 Data and Research Design

To study why leftist/centrist/rightist abstention rates vary across contexts (and particularly why centrist abstention—the highest—is higher or lower in some places) and therefore, which factor/s produce the ‘ideological bias’ on turnout, a new approach and a new dataset is needed. As argued before, the assumptions behind the aggregate design implemented by previous studies are both strong and inadequate, as there is a superior alternative. In the next subsection, I explain how the dataset for the empirical test of the presented hypotheses was constructed. I then explain how I measured the dependent variable and I finally discuss the operationalisation of independent variables for both the socio-structural hypotheses and the different party scenarios.

2.3.1 Measuring turnout patterns across ideological positions

To answer why some ideological positions abstain more in some contexts (and particularly why centrist abstention—the highest one—substantially varies across countries) requires reliable data on electoral turnout and ideological self-placement for a sufficient number of elections that cover a sufficient number of countries. For this reason I have designed an aggregate analysis in which I included different countries at different points in time. More concretely, I have created a new dataset built up with different national studies (mostly post-electoral surveys), as well as cross-national studies¹⁰. Designing the analysis in this fashion has enabled me to have enough variation—both cross-nationally and over time—, which is crucial for examining different contexts and a variety of party configurations. Furthermore, it is possible to operationalise the dependent variable in a way that correctly captures the notion of ‘ideological bias’.

To create my dependent variable, I employed both self-reported ideological positioning as well as recalled past participation. More concretely, I

¹⁰Elections covered and sources are included in the Appendix.

calculated in each election for each country the self-reported abstention rate among those that placed themselves on the left, the centre or the right of the left-right axis. This was done in two steps: I first operationalised in each survey the ideological scale into three categories: left, centre and right¹¹. I then tabulated this new variable against the recalled past participation in the previous general elections¹² and calculated the percentage of abstainers on each ideological position. Thus, I ended up with three dependent variables, each of them reporting the percentage of leftist, centrist or rightist abstainers¹³. For instance, in the British 2001 elections, 21.46% of leftist citizens declared having abstained in the previous elections, as 29.25% of centrist and 20.27% of rightist did¹⁴. These values were calculated across

¹¹The scale is not consistent across surveys. Some of them used the 1-10 scale, whereas others employed the 0-10 scale or even the 1-7 scale. In the first two cases the 'centre' category is considered to be number 5, with values on the left being grouped as the 'left' category and values on the right as the 'right' category. In the 1-7 scale number 4 is taken as the centrist point. Generally the wording of this question is fairly consistent across surveys. *In politics people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?*. The reason to conceptualise the centre as the centre of the scale—or number 5—is threefold: First, this position is the most populated position in 93% of the cases included in my dataset. Second, an alternative would be to use the mean, which relies upon the fact that it is highly dependent on the political context, making my analysis endogenous to the political situation. Finally, as proven by previous studies [Schuman and Presser, 1996], the centre of the left-right dimension has a distinct function in models of survey response, regardless of the non-existence of a clear midpoint. In other words, respondents are able to identify a midpoint even if the scale does not have one and those who locate themselves on this position have features in common. According to Kroh [2007], even though 0-10 produces the highest validity when using any measure of left-right positioning, the non-existence of a mid-point in the 1-10 scale is not causing the respondents' inability to reflect upon the left-right condition as a continuous dimension. In any case, several robustness checks have been performed in order to analyse whether the differences observed in the data are caused by different measurement instruments. None of them changed the results presented in this paper.

¹²Past participation refers to voting or abstaining in the parliamentary elections. However, following Cheibub and Vreeland [2010], some countries in Europe included in my dataset are mixed democracies (France, Portugal, Switzerland, Romania, Poland and Lithuania). The analysis has been re-run changing the values for these countries and taking into account presidential elections. Results are substantially the same. Generally, the wording of the question is fairly consistent across surveys. "Some people don't vote nowadays for one reason or another. Did you vote in the last [country] national election in [month/year]?"

¹³I did not include the 'dk/na' abstainers since this option is not included in all surveys and, when it is included, it is offered to respondents in very different ways.

¹⁴This operationalisation identifies one problem: generally people overestimate their participation patterns, declaring to have participated in the elections when they did not. Although there could be reasons to think that some ideologies could be more affected by this bias than others (for instance, because of who won the elections), the fact that I employed different surveys cancels this potential problem.

184 cases (country elections), which correspond to 27 different countries in different points in time.

2.3.2 Measuring explanatory variables

According to the classical socio-structural logic, the ‘ideological bias’ on turnout is a function of the relationship between lower social-class individuals and the left. Additionally, unequal party identification across ideological positions might also explain the ‘ideological bias’ variation.

In order to operationalise the relationship between social class and the ideological scale I followed a similar strategy to Nieuwbeerta and Ultee [1999]: I ran a multinomial logistic regression for each year and each election in which non-qualified manual-class (specified as a dummy variable) was regressed on the self-ideological placement¹⁵. I then calculated the marginal effects for manual class individuals to be on the left, on the centre and on the right. This value is considered as the strength of the relationship between lower SES class and the different ideological positions¹⁶. This operationalisation will assess H_1 : we should expect an increase in ideological abstention (especially leftist or centrist) where the relationship between lower SES citizens and a particular ideological position is stronger.

The role of (non-)party identification will be assessed by calculating the percentage of individuals that do not feel identified/close to any party by each ideological position. For instance, again with the British 2001 case, 12.12% of leftist citizens declared no party attachment, as 22.62% of centrist and 11.77% of rightist did. In line with the theoretical premise, I expect a positive impact: the ‘ideological bias’ should be higher where a particular ideological position has more citizens non-identified with a particular party (H_2).

¹⁵Again, the dependent variable identified those individual self-located on the left (1), on the centre (2) and on the right (3). The coding of the class variable follows the Goldthorpe class schema [Goldthorpe, 1980] commonly used in cross-national studies [Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992].

¹⁶Because the surveys employed included different questions, I could only include three control variables: age, gender and size of the municipality. Where the marginal effects were not significant (43% of the leftist, 58% of the centrist and 38% of the rightist coefficients were not significant), they are still included in the model but the marginal effect is set to zero.

The test of H_3 will be conducted by calculating the electoral distance (ED) between the first and the second party. Thus, the percentage of votes in the previous elections of the second party (r_2) is subtracted from the percentage of votes of the first party (r_1). As the distance between the first and the second party increases, competition decreases and a lower turnout is expected. If the idea that elections are won in the centre holds, less competitive scenarios should lead to lower centrist abstention rates. Hence, a positive coefficient in my model will mean that when the distance between the two main parties increases, centrist abstention also goes up¹⁷.

$$ED = r_1 - r_2 \quad (2.1)$$

Following the operationalisation put forward by Plane and Gershtenson [2004], the test of H_4 will be conducted calculating the ideological differential (difference in utilities) between the two parties that have a higher percentage of votes. Measuring differential utilities involves calculating the difference in utilities between the two main parties. Then, utilities are used to define differential utility as follows:

$$DU_{jl} = (x_j - x_l)^2, \quad (2.2)$$

where x_j is the position of party j ; x_l is the position of party l ; and DU_{jl} is the differential utility with respect to both party j and l . Thus, differences in distances are equal to differences in utilities. As the magnitude of the difference in the expected utilities associated with each party increases, the differential utility starts to be positive and different than zero. In other words, when DU increases, parties ideological differences also increase. Therefore, in line with the theoretical reasoning, a negative coefficient is expected (on leftist and centrist abstention), as a higher difference in ideological platforms should have a negative impact on the 'ideological bias'.

The next variable of interest is that of polarisation. Party polarisation is tackled using the so-called "weighted electoral polarisation index" first

¹⁷This measure is not entirely reliable because it takes into account a perfect two-party system. I also computed the distance between the first party and a possible alternative coalition between ideologically close parties. Results are still robust.

employed by Hazan [1998] and expressed as follows:

$$\sum_{i=1}^N p_i(x_i - \bar{x})^2, \quad (2.3)$$

where N is the number of parties in the system, p_i is the proportion of votes won by each party, x_i is the respective ideological position of each party and \bar{x} is the weighted system mean, that is, the sum of the product of each party's proportion of the vote and its position on the left-right scale. Contrary to other indicators (for instance, the standard deviation), this measure captures the ideological position of all the parties according to their electoral support (decreasing the risk of overweighting irrelevant parties)¹⁸.

For both differential utility and polarisation variables, parties' ideological positions are computed using the *Comparative Manifesto Project Data* (CMP). This project has estimated parties' policy positions assigning positions to parties along a variety of policy dimensions. It provides data on policy platforms from the late 1940s through the early 2010s [Laver and Budge, 1992]. I use the Left-Right Index (the so-called 'RILE' procedure). The original scale (-100/+100) has been converted to a 0-10 scale to ease interpretation¹⁹.

Finally, to test H_6 I computed the Effective Number of Parties (ENEP), following the well-known operationalisation method designed by Laasko and Taagepera [1979]. Additionally, I calculated the Effective Number of Leftist Parties (ENELP) and the Effective Number of Rightist Parties (ENRP)²⁰.

As for the control variables, one is of particular importance. One can certainly argue that, for instance, centrist individuals abstain more in some

¹⁸The literature on polarisation has employed several indicators [Pardos-Prado and Dinas, 2010]. Other measures—such as Ezrow [2008] and Dalton [2008] indicators—do not change the empirical findings reported below.

¹⁹This "objective" measure has been subjected to different critiques. One alternative to the CMP would have been the ideological position according to the experts [Laver and Budge, 1992], which showed the same results, even though the number of cases significantly decreases. I also computed, when possible, subjective ideological positioning. The results changed slightly because of the low number of cases that remained in the dataset.

²⁰To determine whether they are leftist or rightist, I used the CMP and the Chapel Hill expert survey. I excluded those parties that fall between -4.5 or 5.5.

countries because the overall abstention in a given country is also higher. If it were the case, abstention among centrist individuals would be higher, as would be the abstention among leftist or rightist citizens. To avoid this problem, I introduce the reported abstention among the whole electorate as a control variable. By using this variable, I am able to check the impact of the independent variables controlling for the turnout dynamics on the whole ideological spectrum.

Moreover, I include some other indicators that have proved to be relevant in previous research. The first control variable is a continuous variable from 0 to 1 measuring the proximity of presidential and legislative elections. This variable has been tested as relevant as it is a good proxy to distinguish the contamination effects at work in parliamentary and presidential systems²¹. The second is the percentage change over the previous year's value for per capita GDP²². Radcliff [1992, 445] suggests that macroeconomic performance in developing countries "is inversely related to turnout so that when things are bad, citizens tend to vote in great numbers". Finally, as recommended by Bohrer and Radcliff [2000, 1169], I also included a dummy that distinguishes Post-Communist countries, as their turnout patterns follow a different configuration than those in the West.

2.4 Data Analysis

In this section, I test the hypotheses derived from the theoretical model. Since the database is characterised by repeated observations (different years) on the same fixed political unit (country), I employ a Panel-Corrected Standard Errors (PCSE) method. This is a standard method of handling heteroskedasticity and performs particularly well for data sets like mine in which the number of country elections (187) is larger than the number of units (27 countries distributed over approximately 10-12 time-points). The model employed also controls for the unobserved characteristics within

²¹Data comes from the Democratic Electoral Systems Around the World, 1946-2000 [Golder, 2005]. Golder's data does not cover all the cases considered in my analysis. I have simply calculated the data for the missing years following the same formulae.

²²Data from The World Bank.

the same country (for the sake of simplicity, fixed effects are not shown)²³. This method allows for errors that may be correlated within group and not identically distributed across groups (avoiding heteroskedasticity) [Beck and Katz, 1995]. Since I only seek to explain cross-national differences in turnout rates, lagged dependent variables are not included in the models [Achen, 2000; Plümper et al., 2005]. There are several reasons that justify this decision: First, introducing the lagged dependent variable significantly reduces the number of cases. Second, the models failed to reject the null hypothesis that all years coefficients are jointly equal to zero, therefore no time fixed-effects are needed. Third, most of the variables do not demonstrate trending over-time. To check this, I ran the Hadri Lagrange Multiplier Test for panel models on all variables [Hadri, 2000]. In cases of significant non-stationarity (only in the case of non-partisan identification and the effective number of parties), I ran a robustness check with the first difference of the variable.

Unfortunately, the dataset includes some missing values due to the absence of a specific question in some surveys. Missing values are only present in the social class and party identification variable for approximately 30% of the cases. There are several strategies to deal with missing data of which multiple imputation is the most promising [Allison, 2001]. Thus, I imputed missing values following King et al. [2001] strategy: I first carried out a multiple imputation for missing items and then created different completed datasets with different imputations in place of the missing data points. This technique generates predictions for the distribution of each of the missing values based on linear estimates of the covariances of all observed data points in the data matrix²⁴.

Table 2.2 presents the results of the three models. The dependent variable of the first model is the percentage of leftist individuals by country-election that declared as abstaining in the previous national elections. The second model repeats the process but, in this case, the dependent variable uses the

²³The Hausman test is significant and indicates that the unique errors are correlated with the regressors. Therefore, fixed effects are employed. Hence, cross-sectional variation in turnout rates and unobservables are absorbed by the country dummies included in the model [Beck and Katz, 1995].

²⁴After imputation I obtained point estimates for the missing items by averaging across the separate imputed values. Amelia II for R library was used.

percentage of centrist individuals that declared as having abstained in the previous elections. Similarly, the third model includes the percentage of rightist abstainers.

Looking at the classical interpretation of the 'ideological bias', the non-partisan identifiers among the left variable, as well as on the centre, is significant. This implies that, after controlling for the overall abstention rate, leftist and centrist abstention are higher where the percentage of leftist and centrist non-identifiers are also higher. In other words, leftist or rightist positions abstain more where there are more leftist/centrist individuals without a party of reference. The relationship between the lower social class and any of the ideological positions is not significant. Interestingly, when I only include the SES variables (models not shown), the relationship between the lower social class and the left, as well as the centre, impacts significantly on the leftist or centrist 'ideological bias'. However, the effect vanishes after the party variables are included in the model²⁵.

The party-specific variables tell a different story. The differential utility between the main parties is significant on the left and on the centre, but the sign differs. The fourth variable of interest, polarisation, also has a statistically significant effect, but only on the centre and on the right and in opposite directions. As for the centre, it has a statistically negative effect. That is, after controlling for the overall abstention rate, when polarisation increases one point, centrist abstention decreases by 0.36%.

The so-called 'competition effect', by which the increase of the electoral distance between the main parties also increases abstention, has no impact on the 'ideological bias' on turnout. Thus, where the uncertainty about the electoral results is higher, centrist individuals are not more mobilised as compared to other ideological positions. It marginally affects leftist abstention, in the sense that where the electoral distance is higher, leftist abstention is lower. Finally, no effect is reported for the effective number of (leftist/rightist) parties.

As for the control variables, change in per capita GDP is not significant.

²⁵Some studies have found that as strength of party attachment declines, convergence is also expected to increase [Clarke et al., 2004; van der Eijk and Franklin, 2009]. However, in my model, there is no significant correlation between the lack of party identification on a given ideological position and the differential utility variable.

Recall that this finding does not indicate that the economy does not have any impact on cross-national turnout variations (as Radcliff [1992] convincingly proved). It indicates that the effect of the general state of the economy is not heterogeneous across ideological positions. Finally, as expected, when the general abstention rates increases, each 'ideological abstention' also increases. Results also indicate that centrist abstention tends to be higher in Eastern European countries and leftist and rightist abstention lower²⁶.

²⁶Two more variables that could cause differences in cross-national centrist abstention rates have also been tested: a dummy variable for Switzerland and the impact of the quality of democracy (using Polity IV index). The first one shows an statistically significant positive effect and the second is also significant and negative. Since the coefficients remain unaffected, I have excluded them from the model.

Table 2.2: Determinants of the variation of centrist abstention (PCSE model with fixed effects)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Leftist	Centrist	Rightist
	Abstention	Abstention	Abstention
SES model			
Relationship lower class & ideological position	-0.27 (3.53)	3.51 (5.82)	1.51 (3.82)
Non-partisans on each ideological position (%)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.03** (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)
Party strategies			
Difference in utilities	0.34*** (0.11)	-0.32** (0.16)	0.02 (0.14)
Polarisation	0.14 (0.14)	-0.36*** (0.13)	0.30** (0.12)
Electoral distance	-0.23* (0.12)	-0.05 (0.17)	0.22 (0.19)
ENLEP / ENEP / ENREP	0.21 (0.22)	-0.19 (0.19)	0.03 (0.35)
Control variables			
Proximity			
Semi-Presidential/Parliamentary elections	-0.94 (1.24)	1.83 (1.59)	0.95 (1.66)
Change in per capita GDP	0.05 (0.06)	0.01 (0.06)	-0.08 (0.08)
Overall abstention	0.92*** (0.04)	1.11*** (0.05)	0.94*** (0.06)
Eastern Europe	-3.27*** (0.95)	4.72*** (1.48)	-2.76*** (0.96)
Constant	-1.44* (0.74)	-0.96 (1.27)	-0.08 (1.13)
Model fit			
Country-elections/countries	184/27	184/27	184/27
R-squared	0.94	0.94	0.87
Prob > Chi2	0.000	0.000	0.000

Standard errors in parenthesis. Significance levels at *** $p \leq 0.01$, ** $p \leq 0.05$, * $p \leq 0.1$

Thus, findings prove that, once controlling for the overall abstention rate, the role of parties is important when trying to understand the 'ideological bias' on turnout. The classical explanation of the 'conventional wisdom'—the sociological approach—is therefore, not the only explanation at work and party-institutional characteristics also emerge as relevant in order to understand why ideological abstention patterns vary across contexts. To illustrate the effects of the different variables, I simulated probabilities in order to see how the dependent variable changes when a key independent variable is modified, holding the rest of the variables at their means.

Figure 2.3 displays the predicted probabilities of leftist/centrist/rightist abstention as a product of non-partisan identifiers, differential utilities and polarisation, the three significant variables which are generally significant across the different specifications. The point estimates of the predicted probabilities are indicated by the solid lines and the 95% confidence intervals are illustrated by the grey area.

The first column shows the predicted probabilities of leftist abstention as a product of the aforementioned factors. The first graph (top left) shows that when the percentage of non-partisan leftist individuals increases, leftist abstention goes up. The effect of the differential utilities on the left is also significant and positive. This indicates that as the main parties ideological differences increase, and hence the differential utility moves further away from zero, leftist abstention goes up. That is, leftist abstention is higher when the main parties show more ideological differences. Moving from a situation in which ideological differences between the main parties are in an equally distant position (zero utility) to a situation in which ideological differences are the largest, increases leftist abstention by 3 points. Therefore, leftist abstention is lower when the difference between the main parties is also lower. This result might sound counter-intuitive according to what the spatial model would predict [Downs, 1957], but it is in fact contingent upon what the data about differential utility tells us. As previously highlighted, differential utility between the main parties is generally reduced after a centripetal strategy (they converge towards the centre). Therefore, they end up in a 'similar' position on the left-right scale, but clustered around the centre. When this occurs, leftists can still vote for another party, for instance

an extreme left-wing party. This might be a good explanation of why this trend is observed (however, it is interesting that the same is not observed for right-wing individuals).

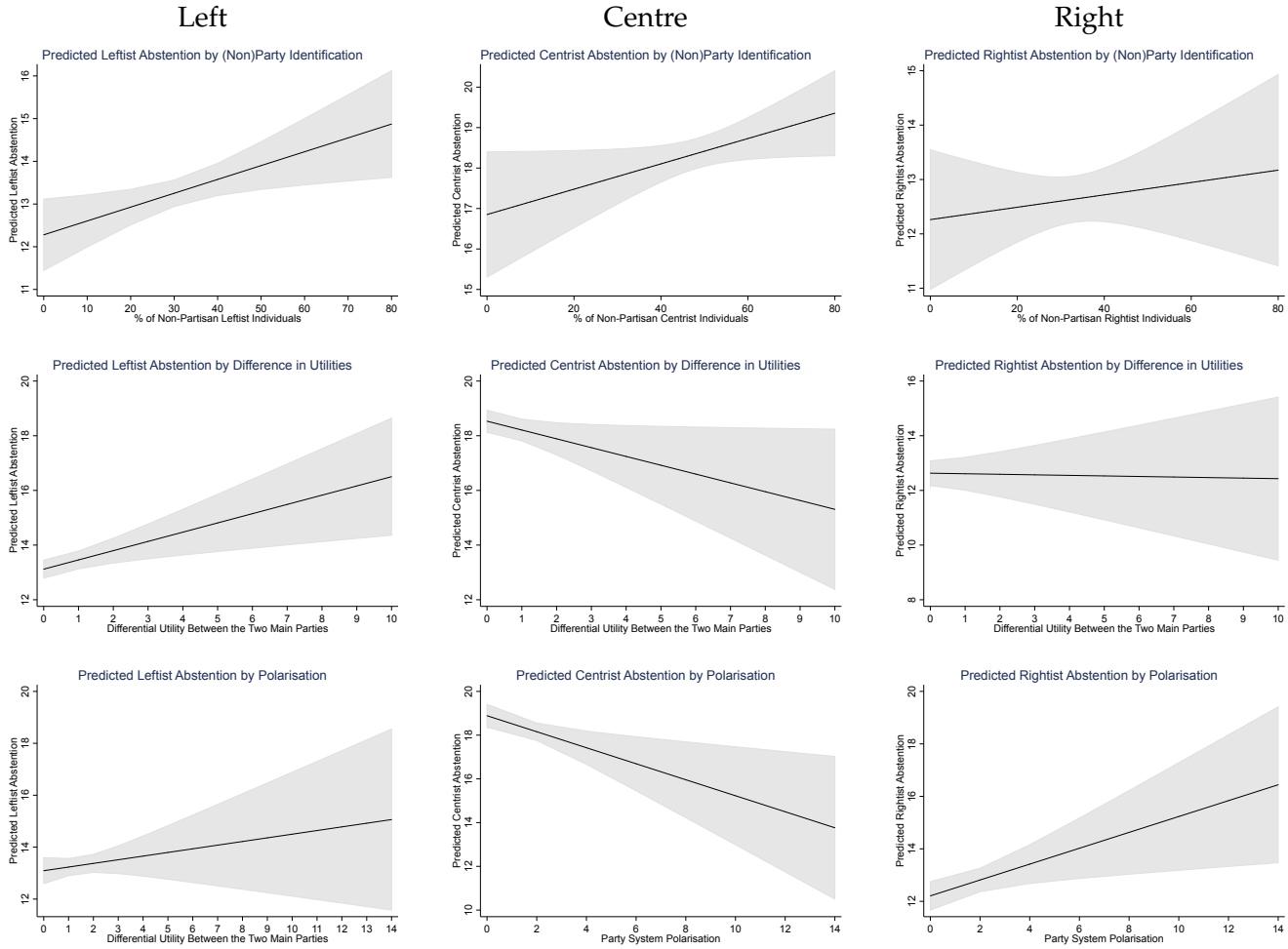
The second column displays the predicted probabilities of centrist abstention as a measure of the lack of party identification, difference in utilities and polarisation, which were significant variables in Model 2. As with leftist individuals, when the percentage of non-partisan identifiers among the centrist position increases, centrist abstention also goes up. On the other hand, the differential utilities variable behaves as expected. When parties are not in an equidistant scenario—hence ideological differences between them increase—centrist abstention tends to be lower. Conversely, when the differences in utilities move closer to zero (meaning that both parties are completely equidistant), centrist abstention goes up. Moving from an equally distant position to a differentiated situation depresses centrist abstention by three points (or, in other words, centrist participation increases by three points). The precision of the estimates is, in this case, lower than with other variables. It may reflect the fact that the variable is skewed as large differences between the main parties are rare. In this sense, the logarithm of the differential utilities should reflect this grouping. However, it shows a similar statistically significant pattern (although at the 90% level).

The graph on the bottom of the second column indicates that polarisation also has a negative effect on centrist abstention. My results are in line with the findings of the cross-national literature on turnout variations, whereby a polarised party system increases turnout [Crepaz, 1990]. Therefore, different centrist abstention levels are also due to the level of polarisation in the party system. Under a polarised scenario, overall abstention significantly decreases, but the effect on centrist abstention is stronger (thus accepting H_{5b}). Findings indicate that moving from a non-polarised scenario to the maximum level of polarisation decreases centrist abstention by 5 points. Thus, results do not hold for the alternative Downsean hypothesis regarding polarisation (H_{5a}): centrist abstention does not increase when parties are far from the centrist point. In light of the results reported by the difference in utilities and the party system polarisation, one might be inclined to think that polarisation and differential utility are two sides of the same coin, and

consequently generating collinearity in the models and a pattern affected after both factors have been balanced out. However, there are two strong reasons to reject this idea: First, polarisation measures takes into account all parties, whereas differential utility contemplates only the first two parties. Both concepts are somehow related, but they do not measure the same thing. Second, the correlation between both variables fails to reach statistical significance.

Finally, rightist abstention (third column) is only modified when party polarisation varies (the confidence intervals for non-partisan identification and differential utility indicate that the relationship for these variables is not statistically significant). More concretely, when polarisation goes up, predicted rightist abstention also increases (from the minimum to the maximum level of polarisation, rightist abstention increases 4 points).

Table 2.3: Predicted abstention by ideological position and contextual factors



2.5 Discussion and Conclusion

The question of who votes and who abstains lies at the heart of most of the analysis on party competition. Under this fruitful literature, the relationship between ideology and abstention patterns has received much scholarly interest over recent decades. Hitherto, the 'conventional wisdom' has assumed that abstention is particularly intense on the left. The attention, however, has focused almost exclusively on the relationship between this position—left—and its *a priori* lower probability to vote. In this article, I have argued that this relationship is built upon different and strong assumptions that questions the way the 'ideological bias' has been tackled. Moreover, when dealing with ideological abstention differences across countries, it is important to focus on what the data is showing, instead of what we *believe* is happening: leftist abstention indeed varies across contexts, as much as rightist and centrist abstention does. However, contrary to the 'conventional wisdom' expectations, the later is higher than the leftist or rightist abstention.

This fact brought me to coherently rephrase what the 'conventional wisdom' has tried to answer: Why does centrist abstention vary across contexts? Which factors are behind leftist/rightist abstention variation? The goal of this article has been to explain variation on turnout patterns on different ideological blocks. Even though these questions have been partially explored, the literature on cross-national abstention is very promising in order to identify factors that can explain these differences. Thus, the theoretical expectations of this paper have been built upon different hypotheses derived from two main factors that can explain why the 'ideological bias' is higher/lower in some contexts: the socio-economic environment and party-system characteristics. Both approaches have been integrated into a single and comprehensive explanation in order to explain variation in ideological abstention patterns and to account for the potential heterogeneity of some key independent variables.

Overall, the results partially sustain the classical socio-structural explanation. A stronger relationship between lower social class citizens and the left or the centre, in some contexts, does not explain turnout differences in these

ideological positions. However, the percentage of partisan identifiers among leftist and centrist individuals seems to appear as a positive factor in order to explain abstention variation. Where centrist and leftist individuals are less identified with a party, their abstention rate is also higher.

Nevertheless, two partisan factors have an effect on different centrist abstention rates: parties' ideological differences and polarisation. Where the main parties are ideologically different, centrist voters' likelihood to abstain decreases. In other words, when parties do not show ideological differences, centrist abstention is higher. Evidence also highlights that polarisation decreases centrist abstention. Although the latter results were obtained after an aggregate analysis, they highlight a contradiction with the classical Downsian model. As pointed out by Whiteley [2006], this model raises an unexplored paradox: If parties converge to the centre, there is an increase in the possibility of creating an equidistant scenario and thus, to increase the abstention rate among *kingmakers*. Conversely, if parties undertake a polarised strategy, parties will be increasingly far from the centre point and therefore centrist abstention is also expected to increase (as political alternatives are too far away). According to the results in this paper, the first situation (ideologically non-different parties) has an effect and increases centrist abstention, whereas the second one (polarisation) also has an effect, but a very different one (under the latter scenario centrist abstention decreases). Therefore, the spatial logic expectations seem to function better when parties are not polarised. These results are also in line with what Green [2007] or Pardos-Prado and Dinas [2010] found in terms of voting patterns.

However, future studies will need to further explore this logic on an individual-level basis. The individual-level relationship about the effects of polarisation and ideologically equidistant political alternatives and abstention is still obscure. Research here points to the study of alternative-specific scenarios and how individuals become more likely to be *indifferent* or *alienated* according to parties positioning [Thurner and Eymann, 2000]. Future studies will need to explore the real impact of these factors and whether different party scenarios affect different ideological positions in a systematic way. The empirical analysis also shows that other partisan

hypotheses, such as competitiveness or the number of parties, do not appear to have an impact on the 'ideological bias' on turnout.

This paper generates another fundamental finding: it shows that some variables have a heterogeneous effect on ideological abstention patterns. Until now, it has been assumed that some independent variables—i.e. polarisation—equally affect aggregate abstention rates. Models exploring the 'ideological bias' on turnout have generally regressed some factors on the *overall* abstention, irrespectively of citizens' position on the scale. This paper proves that this strategy is not very accurate, as some factors have a heterogeneous effect: they explain cross-country differences in some cases, but the sign is not consistent. Or they are significant for an ideological position but not for all of them. For example, results reported previously show that polarisation has a negative effect on centrist abstention, a positive effect on rightist abstention and it has a non-significant effect on leftist abstention. A similar logic applies to the differences in utilities. Therefore, the contradictory findings in the literature [Grofman et al., 1999] are most probably due to the lack of attention paid to the heterogenous effects of some dimensions. The literature has not distinguished abstention patterns on different ideological positions, assuming that all of them behave in the same way. According to the findings here, if we do not distinguish between ideological positions, it is not possible to capture what lies behind the 'ideological bias': the impact of some factors, either positive, negative or even neutral, will not be reported because of a cancelling-out effect. This paper proves that variations on turnout patterns across different ideological blocks must be distinguished if the heterogeneous effect is to be properly captured.

Finally, another theoretical challenge is raised up by the findings here. Politicians often claim that winning the centre is crucial for winning elections. Indeed, this is a common assumption made across the political science literature. Targeting the centre is seen as a perfectly rational strategy in both two-party and multi-party competition contexts [Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009; Leppel, 2009]. As a result, the centre is afforded a powerful role in balancing the electoral majority in favour of a particular party [Grofman, 2004]. Despite this theoretical role, this paper demonstrates that centrist

abstention is higher and that certain parties' strategies can lead to a higher abstention rate of this key position. This evidence provides insights about the kingmaker's role in party competition and it will hopefully encourage further research about the mysterious centre ground.

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2.6 Appendix

National surveys

Czech Republic:

Party Preferences Czech Republic 1996. Code: ZA3888. Available at the Gesis website.

Party Preferences Czech Republic 1998. Code: ZA3889. Available at the Gesis website.

Denmark:

European Voter. Code: ZA3911. Available at the Gesis website.

Estonia:

Values and Elections in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia 1992-1993. Code: ZA2465. Available at the Gesis website.

Choice '95 Parliamentary Election in Estonia 1995. Code: ZA2816. Available at the Gesis website.

Finland:

Finnish Voter Barometers 1973-1990: Combined Data (FSD2276).

Finnish Voter Barometers 1992-2005: Combined Data (FSD2274).

Access via Finish Social Sciences Data Archive website.

France:

Enquête post-électorale française, 1978: France de Gauche, vote à Droite - (1978) [fichier électronique], CEVIPOF [producteur],

Centre de Données Socio-politiques (CDSP) [diffuseur].

Enquête post-électorale française, 1988 - (1988) [fichier électronique], Centre d'Etude de la Vie Politique [producteur],

Centre de Données Socio-politiques (CDSP) [diffuseur]

Enquête post-électorale française, 1995 - (1995) [fichier

électronique], Centre d'Etude de la Vie Politique [producteur],

Centre de Données Socio-politiques (CDSP) [diffuseur]

Enquête post-électorale française, 1997 - (1997) [fichier électronique], Centre d'Etude de la Vie Politique [producteur], Centre de Données Socio-politiques (CDSP) [diffuseur]
Panel Electoral Français 2007 - (2007) [fichier électronique], CEVIPOF [producteur], Centre de Données Socio-politiques (CDSP) [diffuseur].
Access via Réseau Quetelet website.

Germany:

Election Study 1980 European Voter. Code: ZA1053. Available at the Gesis website.
European Voter. Code: ZA3911. Available at the Gesis website
Political Attitudes, Political Participation and Voter Conduct in united Germany 2002. Code: ZA3861. Available at the Gesis website.

Iceland:

Icelandic National Election Study (ICENES). Available at the University of Iceland website.

Ireland:

Irish National Electoral Study. Available at the Trinity College Dublin website.

Italy:

Italian National Election Studies. 1972, 1985, 1990, 1994, 1996, 2001, 2006 (Panel). Access via the ITANES website.

Latvia:

Values and Elections in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia 1992-1993. Code: ZA2465. Post-Election Survey in Latvia 1998 & 2002. Code: ZA4273. Available at the Gesis website.

Lithuania:

Values and Elections in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia 1992-1993.
Code: ZA2465. Available at the Gesis website.

Netherlands:

European Voter (Code: ZA3911. Available at the Gesis website.

Norway:

European Voter. Code: ZA3911. Available at the Gesis website.
Norwegian Election Study 2001. Acces via Norwegian Social
Science Data Services website.

Poland:

Polish National Election Study, 1997, 2001. Code: ZA4333, ZA4335.
Available at the Gesis website.

Slovenia:

Slovenian Public Opinion Survey 1996. Code: ZA4675. Available at
the Gesis website.

Switzerland:

Swiss national election studies, cumulated file 1971-2007 [Dataset].
Distributed by FORS, Lausanne, 2010. Access via the Swiss
Foundation for Research in Social Sciences website.

Slovakia:

Current Problems of Slovakia 1999. Code: ZA4065. Available at the
Gesis website.

Spain:

Post-election survey, 1982, 1986, 1989, 1993, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008,
2010. Available at the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas
website.

Sweden:

European Voter. Code: ZA3911. Available at the Gesis website.

United Kingdom:

European Voter (Code: ZA3911. Available at the Gesis website.
British Election Panel Study 1997-2001. Access via the Economic and Social Data Service website. British Election Study, 2005: Face-to-Face Survey. Access via the Economic and Social Data Service website.

Cross-national surveys

ESS: European Social Survey (<http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>)

CSES: The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (<http://www.cses.org/>)

EB: Eurobarometer (website).

CDCEE: Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe 1990-2001 (Code: ZA4054. Available at the Gesis website).

CNEP: Comparative National Elections Project (website).

Table 2.4: Elections considered by country and survey employed

Country	Year	Survey
Austria	1995/2002/2006/2008	EB/ESS/CSSES
Bulgaria	1991/1997/2001/2005/2009	CDCEE/CSSES/ESS
Czech Republic	1996/1998/2002/2006/2010	CSSES/Party preferences Czech republic 1996-1998/ESS/CSSES
Denmark	1979/1981/1984/1988/1990/1998/2001/2005/2007	European Voter/EB/ESS
Estonia	1992/1995/1999/2003/2007/2011	Values and Elections in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia/Choice ,95 Parliamentary Elections in Estonia/CDCEE/ESS/CSSES
Finland	1975/1979/1983/1987/1991/1995/2003/2007	Finish Voter Barometer 1973-1990/EB/ESS /CSSES
France	1978/1988/1993/1997/2002/2007	French Post-electoral Survey/ESS
Germany	1976/1980/1983/1987/1990/1994/1998/2002/2005/2009	European voter/German Election study 1980/Political Attitudes, Political Participation and Voter Conduct in united Germany 2002/ESS
Greece	1989/1990/1993/1996/2000	EB/ESS
Hungary	1990/1998/2002/2006/2010	CDCEE/ESS/CNEP
Iceland	1983/1987/1991/1995/1999/2003/2007/2009	Icelandic National Election Study
Ireland	1989/1992/2002/2007	EB/Ireland Panel Data 2002-2007
Italy	1972/1983/1987/1992/1994/1996/2001/2006/2008	Italian National Election Studies/EB
Latvia	1993/1995/1998/2002	Values and Elections in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia/CDCEE/Postelection study
Lithuania	1992/1996/2000	Values and Elections in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia/CSSES/CDCEE
Luxembourg	1989/1994/2004	EB/ESS
Netherlands	1971/1972/1977/1981/1982/1986/1989/1994/1998/2002/2003/2006/2010	European Voter/ESS/CSSES
Norway	1973/1977/1981/1985/1989/1993/1997/2001/2009	European Voter/Citizenship Survey/ESS
Poland	1991/1993/1997/2001/2005/2007	EB/Polish Election Study/ESS
Portugal	1987/1991/1995/2002/2005/2009	EB/ESS/CSSES
Romania	1992/1996/2004/2008	EB/CSSES/ESS
Slovakia	1998/2002/2006/2010	Current Problems of Slovakia 1999/ESS/CSSES/
Slovenia	1992/1996/2000/2004/2008	EB/CSSES/ESS
Spain	1982/1986/1989/1993/1996/2000/2004/2008/2011	CIS Post-election study
Sweden	1968/1973/1976/1979/1982/1985/1988/1991/1994/1998/2002/2006/2010	European Voter/ESS
Switzerland	1971/1975/1979/1987/1991/1995/1999/2003	Swiss Post-electoral Survey
United Kingdom	1964/1966/1974/1974/1979/1983/1987/1992/1997/2001/2005/2010	European Voter/British Election Study/CSSES

3

Chapter 3

Do All Roads Lead to the Centre? The Unresolved Dilemma of Centrist Self-Placement

Why do people locate themselves on the centre? Despite being the most numerous position of the left-right axis and its important role in party competition, centrist location is still a mystery. This paper groups together and investigates the hypotheses behind this crucial position and reveals the motives of centrist self-location in 21 European countries. The empirical analysis reveals two novel insights of importance to ideological self-placement: First, centrist self-placement is mainly a product of individuals' voting patterns and their lack of political sophistication. Second, there is an important variation when explaining centrist self-placement. Findings in this article have implications for our understanding of the left-right axis and its role in party competition.

Centre, Ideology, Political Interest, Postmaterialism, Moderation.

3.1 Introduction

In 1990, the Italian National Elections Survey asked those being surveyed, which ideological position would the respondents locate themselves. This question, generally common in almost all electoral surveys, was followed with another very uncommon question restricted to those that had located themselves on the centre of the scale. The wording was the following: "You placed yourself in the middle of the row of boxes. Why did you place yourself there?". 50.5% of the Italians answered, "I strongly support a central position", whereas 49.5% chose the option, "I don't really identify with the left/right distinction". This very uncommon question wanted to tackle the meaning of the centre position, the 'most obscure' of the ideological positions. In other words, it is fairly easy (or less difficult) to define what is to be leftist or rightist. However, what does to be *centrist* mean?

For a long time, the definition of left and right has puzzled political scientists and methodologists alike. The strong normative and historical connotations behind both ideological frames have triggered an enormous quantity of research and intellectual debate. However, less energy has been devoted to the study of the centre position. A decade ago Knutsen [1998a] put forward three hypotheses that could explain the reason behind centrist self-placement. In his work, Knutsen suggested that the centre could be a genuine-moderate position, a product of the lack of political sophistication or a consequence of the salience given to post-materialist issues. However, the limitation of the number of countries, the time span of the analysis and the methodological approach adopted in his work left many doubts regarding the *real* reason of the centrist location.

This paper takes insights from Knutsen's pioneering work and tries to fill the gap by tackling the following question: Why do people locate themselves on the centre position? By answering this question, I contribute to the debate over ideological self-placement by testing again Knutsen's hypotheses, as well as other hypotheses that the ideological self-placement literature has already contemplated in previous works. In other words, I integrate Knutsen's insights and other hypotheses that can potentially explain centrist self-placement. The empirical analysis takes a broader perspective than previous

works, contemplating 21 countries and thus several contextual scenarios.

3.2 The centrist conundrum

Since the French Revolution coined the terms in 1789, the language of 'left' and 'right' has been one of the -if not the- most popular concepts in any political action. From sociology to philosophy, very few concepts can claim to have such an overarching effect on the field, both academically and on the general public. In modern politics the left-right divide has served as a political schema that has allowed parties to communicate with voters and for the latter to orient themselves in a complex political world [Converse, 1964]. Although some time ago the debate seemed to be closed when several scholars agreed with Bell's thesis [Bell, 1962] that "the ideologies...today are exhausted" (see also Aron [1968]; Lipset [1960]), attempts to empirically validate this prediction have not been very successful. Over recent decades, empirical research has repeatedly confirmed that ideological concepts are still a useful tool both for citizens and for political parties.

There are several debates around the validity, persistence or meaning (to mention just a few) of the ideological labels left and right. However, one of these debates has been generally set aside: the nature of the centre location of the left-right axis. Although the importance of this position goes back to some fundamental works in political science [Downs, 1957], the ideological concept of the 'centre' has generally been ignored or given less importance than its left and right ideological counterparts. That is, despite its popularity in the political reality, the concept of the 'centre' has remained generally unexplored in the literature. This "curious" anomaly brought Daalder [1984, 92] to highlight that "there is practically no systematic treatment of the centre or of centre parties" and that there are still many doubts regarding the meaning people attach to the concept of the 'centre'¹. Almost thirty years after Daalder's work, the situation remains very similar.

This fact does not only stem from the idea that the 'centre' is sometimes

¹Although the number of published works is limited, researchers have indeed tackled the centre position [Daalder, 1984; Hazan, 1998; Keman, 1994]. However, these authors generally focused their attention to the notion of 'centrist parties' rather to the ideological centre.

considered a vague ideological conception [Duverger, 1964; Daalder, 1984; Sartori, 2008], but essential to the tendency to consider left-right as a dual reality, as a 'black-or-white' concept. Several scholars tend to think of left and right as a dichotomous concept with no point in-between². It seems that left and right constitute a duality without a clear position between these 'extremes' [Bobbio, 1997]. In 1964 this idea was what led Duverger to famously state, "In politics, the centre does not exist". Later, other authors insisted that the centre is a "non-ideological" concept with no concrete meaning. The idea is that the centre represents a way to obscure the real ideological labels, which are considered to be left and right [Adorno, 1950; McGuire, 1999].

However, against this 'conventional wisdom', everywhere the empirical evidence shows that an important part of society considers themselves as centrists. In fact, when we closely analyse the left-right scales—the empirical operationalisation of the left-right dimension [Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976; Kroh, 2007]—the centrist position emerges as the most populated in almost all European countries. That is, in most countries, an important part of the society decides to choose the centre position. Moreover, as shown by previous studies, over the last few years Europeans from different countries have moved towards the centre [Knutsen, 1998a; Eisinga R., 2007; Medina, 2010]. Individuals' self-placement on the ideological axis is much more centrist today than it used to be.

The following table illustrates this idea by showing the ideological distribution in different countries in Europe. For the sake of simplicity, the leftist categories (0-4) and the rightist categories (6-10) have been grouped together. Despite this grouping, the centre position (5) is still relevant and in some cases it is the most quantitatively numerous in comparison with the other

²The 1994 Italian National Study mentioned in the beginning of the article provides a clear example of this 'tendency' to dichotomise the political ideology. In this survey, after the vote intention question was asked, the following question was included: "If the party mentioned is on the centre: is it towards right or towards left?". 60.62% of the respondents answered: "Centre-centre". Later, the survey asked again the same question but in this occasion it referred to the individuals' self-location on the centre. The answer "centre-centre" was again the most numerous (64.14%). Certainly, these questions would not have been asked (and this is probably why it were not included), had the answer referred to a leftist or rightist party or position. That is, for some scholars a centrist answer may trigger the feeling that the respondent does not want to answer his/her true ideology.

ideological positions.

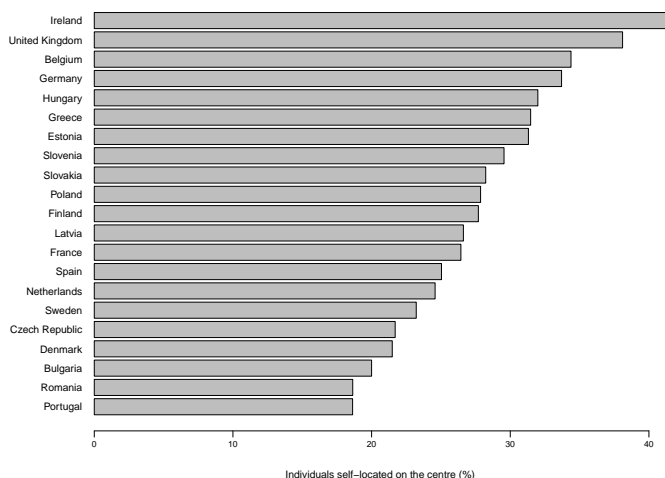
Table 3.1: Ideological distribution in different countries in Europe (%)

Country	Left	Centre	Right	dk/na	Country	Left	Centre	Right	dk/na
Belgium	31.36	34.38	29.66	4.60	Latvia	19.49	26.62	37.68	16.21
Bulgaria	25.38	20.00	26.73	27.89	Netherlands	31.10	24.58	40.27	4.05
Czech Republic	28.84	21.7	39.79	9.66	Poland	16.24	27.86	39.10	16.80
Denmark	33.74	21.49	40.81	3.98	Portugal	39.28	18.63	19.6	32.49
Estonia	20.41	31.31	26.61	21.67	Romania	17.71	18.64	32.53	31.13
Finland	22.23	27.70	45.1	4.97	Slovakia	34.53	28.23	22.93	14.31
France	35.89	26.44	31.69	5.98	Slovenia	29.94	29.55	19.98	20.53
Germany	38.68	33.70	19.81	7.82	Spain	36.22	25.04	19.02	19.72
Greece	25.58	31.47	25.77	17.18	Sweden	34.70	23.22	39.18	2.90
Hungary	17.10	31.99	30.83	20.08	United Kingdom	25.68	38.10	26.19	10.03
Ireland	22.00	41.67	28.23	8.11	TOTAL	27.80	27.60	30.11	14.49

European Social Survey. Module 4. Operationalisation: Left (0-4), Centre (5) and Right (6-10).

The following graph shows the percentage of people self-located on the centre ordered by country. Ireland is the country where the percentage is highest: approximately 42% of respondents self-located on position 5, i.e. the centre of the ideological scale. On the other extreme, Portugal is the country with fewer people self-located on the centre (about 19%). The average percentage of people self-located on this position is approximately 27.5%. Again, this graph stresses the idea that, despite the variation of the percentage of people located on the centre across countries, this position is, with some exceptions, the most populated ideological position, which makes it the *a priori* most coveted position by political parties [Downs, 1957].

Previous literature has extensively examined why individuals locate themselves on a particular location of the ideological scale. Ever since Inglehart and Klingemann's seminal work [1976], there has been an academic debate over which factors are behind an individual's self-placement on the left-right axis. The literature has mainly considered two factors: The first is the value or ideological component, which refers to the link between an individual's left-right self-placement and their attitude toward the major value conflicts in western democratic mass politics [Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976; Huber, 1989; Knutsen, 1995, 1997]. The second one is called the partisan component, which establishes that individuals' left-right self-placement is mainly

Figure 3.1: Centrist self-placement in different countries across Europe

a reflection of partisan loyalties [Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976; Fuchs and Klingemann, 1989; Huber, 1989; Knutsen, 1997]³.

Therefore, the so-called ‘component debate’ investigates which component has a greater impact on the nature of an individual’s self-location. It is a debate mainly related to the left-right ideology as a whole, and therefore also applicable to the centre position.

However, there are also other reasons that can be considered when explaining why individuals locate themselves on the centre. In fact, the literature has identified specific motives that can explain centrist self-location, some of which represent different arguments than the ones employed to explain self-placement on the other positions on the scale. This means that, if true, these arguments can eventually turn the centre position

³Originally, Inglehart et al. [1976] also contemplated the social component, which refers to the connection between citizens’ location in the social structure and their left-right orientation. Even though its importance has been underestimated [Freire, 2006a], research has shown that attitudes of an individual (first component), as well as his/her partisan preferences (second component), are correlated with the individual’s social position [Weber, 2012]. The lack of political interest is also strongly correlated with the social component. This is confirmed by different collinearity diagnostics when the social class dimension is introduced in the model (this dimension was operationalised in a variety of ways. Results available upon request). Apart from the collinearity problems, the literature on centrist self-placement does not mention the social component and it is difficult to think on theoretical reasons to expect that the social component has a greater impact on centrist self-placement than on the rest

into a 'different' ideological position. Generally, with the notable exception of Knutsen [1998a], previous research has not taken into account all of these hypotheses in a coherent and integrated way.

For this reason, in the next subsection, I review the different arguments concerning why individuals locate themselves on the centre of the scale. More concretely, I discuss the genuine hypothesis, the party-component hypothesis, the non-response hypothesis and the irrelevant hypothesis.

3.2.1 The genuine hypothesis

Traditionally, the *genuine hypothesis* has been regarded as the "most obvious way to interpret the centre position" [Knutsen, 1998a, 303]. According to this reasoning, the centre would be a genuine location as long as the individuals interpret this position as the mid-point between what left and right stand for. In line with the 'value component' explained earlier, left-right ideologies are considered to be ideological concepts with strong normative connotations and constitute an organization of beliefs and attitudes more or less institutionalized or shared with others [Rokeach, 1968]. The left and right axis make up a "super-issue" that summarises these beliefs and attitudes and orientates people within the complexity of the political world. Therefore, when deciding which position they want to locate on, individuals take into account the "core" features of ideology⁴. In this line of research, there is a vast amount of literature suggesting what left and right stand for.

In the attempt to identify the core elements of left and right, the literature has produced a high number of answers, probably as high as the number of articles published dealing with this issue. Downs [1957] influential work probably triggered the modern debate when he focused on the level of government intervention in the economy, which was a concept later aligned with the traditional left and right dimension. A few years earlier, however, Lipset and Linz [1954, 1135] had already set a precedent defining the ideological axis in terms of 'equality' (left) and 'hierarchical social order'

⁴Following Jost [2003] terminology, I consider that the left-right axis can have relatively stable, core dimensions and peripheral issues that vary in their ideological relevance across time and place. It is not the purpose of this paper to revisit which elements belong to the core and which to the periphery. I rather stick to the most common ways to define left and right according to the specialised literature. See also Knight [2006].

(right). Since then, left and right have been defined in terms of values [Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976]; 'equality' versus 'liberty' [Van Deth and Geurts, 1989; Bobbio, 1997; Jahn, 2011a]; 'new political issues' such as the environment or citizens' political participation [Powell, 2000]; and as a tension between cultural aspects and different meanings of egalitarianism [Elchardus and Spruyt, 2012]. These are only some examples that exemplify the never-ending debate over left and right definitions.

Regardless of the element that constitutes the 'core' meaning, the *genuine hypothesis* has traditionally suggested that individuals can end up on the centre via the confirmation of their 'moderate' ideological tendency. Essentially, this is how the centre is and has been understood: an individual can end up on the centre by showing a centrist tendency on all the meanings attributed to the left-right axis. In other words, he or she is centrist because he or she does not express 'radical' or 'polarised' opinions. For instance, taking Jost [2006] conclusions, left and right purport different attitudes toward inequality and also toward social change versus tradition. Consequently, centrist citizens on the left-right axis would be those that express a centrist orientation on both attitudes towards inequality and toward social change versus tradition. Therefore, according to this hypothesis, a centrist position would be a mere expression of 'centrism' or 'moderation' on different public values or attitudes.

However, there is also another mechanism that has been surprisingly unexplored until now. Within the *genuine hypothesis* framework, centrist self-placement can also be explained by another mechanism, substantially different than a mere expression of ideological 'moderation'. In this sense, I put forward another hypothesis that previous research has not contemplated: I argue that individuals can also reach the centrist location after 'balancing out' their position on different items that are connected with the left-right dimension. Therefore, centrist self-placement would not be a result of the coherent locations on different scales, but rather a strategy employed by individuals to reconcile their apparently incoherent positions on different scales. For instance, following Jost's conclusions, an individual might be conservative on the scale assessing social change versus tradition and might define himself/herself as liberal on the scale

measuring attitudes toward inequality. Consequently, on the first scale the individual would be on the right-hand side of the ideological scale and on the second scale they would be on the left-hand side. When faced with the left-right question, this person has to consider these “antagonistic”, and fairly polarised issues. In this case, he/she can ‘balance out’ both items and end up locating himself/herself on the centre position. Consequently, they will locate themselves on a place that is between what they stand for in both items. These individuals still preserve the ‘genuine’ meaning of those issues connected with left and right, but they end up on the centre due to their attempt to reconcile their opinions. To the best of my knowledge, this hypothesis has not been tested yet.

3.2.2 The party-component hypothesis

The *partisan-component hypothesis* refers to the existence of a party of reference that drives individuals to locate themselves on a particular position. This theory stresses that political behaviour is the primary component of left-right self-placement. It is well-established that individuals have rather low political information and they need cues in order to interpret and analyse political events [Lau and Redlawsk, 2001]. This process, referred to as *heuristics*, is based on the idea that political parties provide useful cues for individuals to develop and defend opinions. Therefore, parties can act as important heuristic actors for defining one’s ideology. According to this interpretation, people’s position on the left-right scale will not be a reflection of their social class or their values or attitudes. It will rather be a consequence of parties’ ideological distribution on the left-right scale [Adams et al., 2005]. Therefore, people will decide to locate on the centre of the scale if -and only if- they vote for a centrist party or a party located around the centre. An individual’s ideological position is thus a mere reflection of voting decisions. In other words, people do not want to locate themselves far away from their political option, a decision that will contradict their political action.

Recent literature has shown that this component generally outperforms the rest when deciding the individual’s ideological position [Huber, 1989; Knutsen, 1997, 1998c; Zechmeister, 2006; Medina, 2010]. These findings do not imply, however, that the debate is closed. The most important

shortcoming in the articles dealing with the partisan component is the assumption that parties matter, regardless of their ideological position. Generally, the study of the partisan component has divided those that located on the scale versus those that did not locate on the scale. This simplification actually goes against the idea of the partisan component, because party distribution along the axis may have a heterogeneous impact on different ideological positions. For instance, in any country where there is no party located somewhere close to the centre position, it is expected that the partisan component should be less relevant for those that locate themselves at the centre. Conversely, in those places where centrist individuals vote for a party that is located around the centre, the party component should have more weight in driving centrist self-location. Until now, however, we have no evidence of whether the party component is relevant in order to explain centrist self-location.

3.2.3 The cognitive don't knowers

According to the *cognitive don't knowers hypothesis*, the centre position of the left-right axis would be a form of *non-response position*. The idea behind this hypothesis is that citizens struggle to use ideology with both sophistication and coherence [Converse, 1964; Tedin, 1987; Converse, 2000]. As pointed out by Lambert [1983, 143] or Ogmundson [1979], the "central assumption [of the left-right scale] is that respondents sometimes use the midpoint of the scale when they are unsure of a scale's meaning or if they lack information about a party". Later, Converse and Pierce [1986, 128] further argued that the midpoint "is an obvious selection for a person who is neutral, uncommitted, and even thoroughly indifferent to or ignorant about this generic axis of dispute".

These ideas crystallised in Knutsen's hypotheses, who suggested that the centrist location could be "a concealed form of *nonresponse*" [Knutsen, 1998a, 303-304] and labelled them *cognitive don't knowers*, suggesting that the centrist position could be occupied by people who lack political knowledge and also possibly, the cognitive capacity to place themselves on the scale. The idea is that *cognitive don't knowers*, instead of answering "don't know or no answer", place themselves on the centre of the scale. They do so because of a

social pressure mechanism or because they feel ashamed to choose the dk/na option. Instead, they choose a *neutral* alternative, i.e., the centre position of the scale⁵.

3.2.4 The evaluative don't knowers

In his seminal work, Knutsen [1998a] considered that centrist self-placement may also be an expression of the irrelevance of left and right among the population. This hypothesis departs from the idea that left and right are old-fashioned concepts aligned with the traditional conflict lines of industrial society. In this sense, some individuals may consider that the left-right language is "outmoded and about to be overcome by a new political language" [Kitschelt and Hellemans, 1990, 214]. It is important to point out that this "new political language" can be understood in two different ways: Firstly, the fact that the left-right dimension may be considered irrelevant and outdated is linked to the idea that individuals give priority to other 'new' issues that are, according to them, not correlated with the left-right axis. Literature has traditionally considered issues such as environment protection or giving people more say in important political decisions. Secondly, people may develop 'new' values that make them more likely to prioritise issues not aligned with the left-right dimension [Inglehart, 1990]. These two approaches analyse the same phenomenon with two different perspectives, although both of them highlight the fact that some individuals have 'new' values and, as a consequence, give priority to non-traditional dimensions. Precisely because individuals have new values or give priority to other dimensions they think left and right are concepts linked to old politics. As a consequence, when facing the left-right self-location question they feel uncomfortable with the idea of locating themselves on any point of the scale [de Benoist, 1995; Jahn, 2011a].

According to this logic, individuals develop universalism motivations that are positively related to post-materialist orientations [Knutsen, 1989; Bilsky and Schwartz, 1994; Wilson, 2005]. When universalism is a dominant characteristic of people's beliefs and attitudes, the left-right axis could be seen as an old instrument employed in an outdated context. Again, when

⁵In a similar vein, see also Luskin [1987]; Palfrey and Poole [1987]

these individuals are asked to locate themselves on the scale, they consider that there is not position that represents their views, so they decide to place on the centre, which might be viewed as 'neutral' or 'uncommitted'.

As explained by Knutsen [1998a, 304], this hypothesis differs from the non-response hypothesis in a fundamental aspect: whereas for the *non-response hypothesis* the centre self-location is a product of the individual's lack of political information or sophistication, the *irrelevant category hypothesis* stresses that political information is a necessary condition to judge whether the left-right axis is considered irrelevant or valid. Knutsen also labels the *irrelevant hypothesis* as 'evaluative don't knowers': people who are well-informed about politics, and who know fairly well the conventional meaning of left and right, but consider these terms irrelevant for their own political thinking. In order to consider left and right as irrelevant, one must have a pre-existing idea of what these terms stand for. Therefore, although both hypotheses lead the individuals to locate themselves on the same ideological positions, the point of departure is significantly different.

Again, as in the case of the non-response hypothesis, individuals, rather than refusing to place themselves on the scale, will locate themselves on the centre, as they may consider this position as a sort of a neutral uncommitted point.

3.3 Research Design

To analyse why individuals locate themselves on the centre, I employ the fourth module of the *European Social Survey (ESS)*⁶. I include 21 countries in my analysis⁷. The fourth module of this European project is very appropriate to test the four hypotheses outlined in the previous section. The reason to use the ESS is threefold: First, all the countries included in the analysis are member states of the European Union. This allows us to control for the effect of European integration on the meaning of left and right [Aspinwall, 2002; Hooghe et al., 2002]. The left-right distinction, which, in Europe, plays a

⁶The module employed is freely available at www.europeansocialsurvey.org/.

⁷Israel, Switzerland, Cyprus, Croatia, Norway, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine are excluded because of the lack of data regarding party policy positions in the expert surveys employed to operationalise the party-component hypothesis.

similar role to party identification in the US, has been proved to be useful in European countries when studying vote choice or different attitudinal dimensions [Huber, 1989; Knutsen, 1997, 1998b; Linzer, 2011; Weber, 2012].

The second reason is that, unlike the majority of the surveys, ESS provides indicators for each of the hypotheses contemplated here. It includes different questions on several issues and allows the operationalisation of each of the concepts in a convincing way.

Finally, unlike some other ideological scales commonly employed [Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976, 247], the ESS ideological scale has a real midpoint. The ten-point self-placement scale (normally from 1 to 10), which is also commonly employed in other surveys, has no midpoint and therefore, the centre is not possible to identify in a direct way⁸. Because of the operationalisation of the ESS ideological scale, this methodological problem is avoided in the analysis performed here.

The dependent variable to be used here stems from the common left-right self-location question. The wording of the question in the ESS questionnaire is the following:

In politics people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?

The interviewer then shows a card in which there is a scale that ranges from 0 to 10. The option "don't know" or "no answer" was not mentioned when the card was shown. However, if the respondent asked for one of these two categories, the option was registered. This variable was recoded into four categories in order to identify whether the respondent located herself on the left (0-4), on the centre (5), on the right (6-10) or he/she did not answer. It is important to stress that previous studies tend to group the left and the right together in the same category. I opted for a different strategy, as the grouping-together operationalisation is risky because, if done, leftist and rightist effects can be 'balanced out' when compared to the centrist category. Therefore, the dependent variable has four categories. The model employed throughout the article is a multinomial logit.

⁸For a discussion of the implications to use different left-right scales, see Kroh [2007].

The *genuine hypothesis* stresses that centrist self-location is genuine as long as individuals locate themselves on this position taking into account the meaning of the left-right axis. However, this hypothesis establishes two ways to reach the centre position: being moderate on different issues or after a 'balancing-out' strategy.

To test both hypotheses I employ eight questions included in the ESS, which have been chosen with an important criteria: questions must tap into a public debate over different issues, as the left-right scale is mainly a concept related to how society should be or what the government should do. Moreover, to be methodologically precise, the answer of the scale must contain the same range as the left-right scale, that is, from 0 to 10. Otherwise differences can arise due to methodological issues and not due to attitudinal aspects.

The first six items come from the following question: *People have different views on what the responsibilities should or should not be. For each of the tasks I read out please tell me on a score 0-10 how much responsibility you think governments should have. 0 means it should not be governments' responsibility at all and 10 means it should be entirely governments' responsibility. The tasks are: ensure a job for everyone who wants one; ensure adequate health care for the sick; ensure a reasonable standard of living for the old; ensure a reasonable standard of living for the unemployed; ensure sufficient child care services for working parents; provide paid leave from work for people who temporarily have to care for sick family members.* The seventh item comes from the following question: *Many social benefits are paid by taxes. If the government had to choose between increasing taxes and spending more on social benefits and services, or decreasing taxes and spending less on social benefits and services, which should they do? Choose your answer from this card where 0 means decrease taxes and social spending a lot and 10 means increase taxes and social spending a lot.* Finally, the eighth item comes from a hot debate across Europe: immigration: *A lot of people who come to live in [country] receive more than they contribute or contribute more than they receive? Please use this card where 0 means they receive much more and 10 means they contribute much more.*

To capture the moderate tendency, I have calculated for each of the questions the quadratic distance between the centre of the scale (5) and the individual's self-position on each scale. Finally, I have averaged the eight values. Formally, it can be expressed as follows:

$$M_i = \frac{\sum_j (5 - P_{ij})^2}{8}, \quad (3.1)$$

where M_i is each individual's i 's moderate index; 5 is the centre of the scale in each item used to operationalise the moderate hypothesis; P_{ij} the position of i 's individual on the j scale; and 8 the number of items used for this index and necessary to calculate each individual's moderate value. If an individual locates himself/herself on the centre on each of the eight scales, his/her moderate value will be zero. Following the *genuine hypothesis*, an increase in the moderate scale should cause an increase in the probability to be located on the centre. The logic is apparent: being centrist on different scales should also imply being centrist on the ideological scale.

For the *balance out hypothesis*, I also employed an individual's position on each of the scales considered before. I then calculated the standard deviation of these positions. The standard deviation indicates whether the different positions on each scale are 'coherent' or if they are very different across scales. If the balance out hypothesis is true, we should expect a positive relationship: a higher discrepancy of locations across scales should imply a higher probability to be located on the centre position.

The *party-component hypothesis* suggests that the centre category is a 'mirror' of citizens' voting preferences. The logic is straightforward: according to this hypothesis, those individuals that voted for a party ideologically close to the centre should have located themselves on the centre position, whereas those individuals that did not vote for a party near the centre should have located themselves on another ideological position (for instance, if an individual voted for a leftist party, his/her ideological position should have been leftist). The ESS survey includes the past vote in each country. In order to identify whether a party is centrist or not, I have employed the party position according to experts. More concretely, I employed the Chapel Hill expert survey, which estimates party positioning on European integration, ideology and policy issues for national parties in a variety of European countries⁹. The Chapel Hill dataset classifies parties in a scale that ranges

⁹There is an alternative method to expert surveys: the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP). Although the estimates do not include all the countries considered here, results are substantially the same when parties position on the scale are calculated using this survey.

from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). I considered as being close to the centre those parties that receive any score from 4.1 to 5.9¹⁰. Then, I created a dummy variable that identifies those that voted for the closest party to the centre (1) with the rest (0).

The *cognitive don't knowers hypothesis* (or *non-response hypothesis*) pointed out that centrist self-placement is a consequence of the lack of political information. Unfortunately, the ESS does not include a battery of questions asking for political issues, which would have been preferable in order to construct a political sophistication index. Alternatively, I employed the political interest variable, already used by previous studies [Knutsen, 1998c,a; Medina, 2010]. In the ESS, this is an ordinal variable that ranges from "Very interested" (1) to "Not at all interested" (4). The latter category is taken as the reference point¹¹. In line with the theoretical arguments, we should expect a positive relationship: those less interested in politics should be more likely to locate themselves on the centre position of the scale.

Finally, the evaluative don't knowers hypothesis (or irrelevant hypothesis) defended that the centrist self-placement is a consequence of the emergence of the postmaterialist thinking. According to the literature, there are two ways to measure an individual's level of post-materialism: the first option is by analysing individual's priority towards certain issues considered as post-materialist. This is normally done by offering to respondents a list of national goals, from which they have to select the most important ones. Generally, those that prioritise giving people a greater say in important government decisions and protecting freedom of speech are considered post-

All the countries included in the analysis have a party located around the centre, although in some cases this 'centrist' party receives a very small percentage of votes. In some cases, these parties do not compete in all the districts, but on some regions (for instance, in Spain). When this is the case, the closest centrist party has been considered, even if it falls outside the 4.1-5.9 range. Results do not substantially change. Finally, this article avoids using the concept of a "centrist party", which is difficult to capture both substantively or empirically [Hazan, 1998].

¹⁰Dataset available at Hooghe's website. See Bakker [ming].

¹¹I have undertaken different robustness checks in order to see whether similar variables lead to same results. Alternatively, the variables "Politics too complicated to understand" or "Making up about political issues is [Very difficult-Very easy]" have been used leading to the same conclusions. Additionally, the ESS includes a supplementary questionnaire in which it is asked to interviewers different questions about the interview and the conditions in which took place. One of the questions tries to capture whether the interviewer felt that the respondent understood the questions. Unfortunately this variable has no variation, as only 2.46% of interviewers felt that the respondent followed the questionnaire with difficulties.

materialist [Inglehart, 1990], although environment or green issues have also been considered as such [Carter, 2006]. The second option tackles the concept as individual's underlying predispositions and values considered as materialist/post-materialist. According to this approach, mainly developed by the sociology literature [Seippel, 1999; Carter, 2006; Mónica, 2005; Green-Pedersen, 2007; Piurko et al., 2011], materialism is motivated by a person's need for short-term survival, security and economic success, whereas post-materialism has to do with the desire to address needs that transcend material concerns. The ESS does not include the first option. Fortunately, I am able to follow the second one as the ESS includes three materialist indicators in the Human Values part of the questionnaire¹². These items are the following: "It is important to be rich, to have money and expensive things"; "It is important to be successful and to achieve recognition"; "It is important that the government is strong and ensures safety". Therefore, these items allows for capturing an individual's materialist values. Positive numbers in this variable show the degree of the materialist orientation. Therefore, if the *irrelevant hypothesis* holds true, a negative sign is expected: a materialist tendency should make individuals less likely to be located on the centre position.

The following table (Table 3.2) includes the summary statistics associated with each of the variables used to test the main hypotheses. The table includes summary statistics for the entire sample and for those individuals self-located at the centre position.

¹²These items were not asked consecutively and they belong to a long battery of items tapping different value dimensions. The original question is: *Now I will briefly describe some people. Please listen to each description and tell me how much each person is or is not like you. Use this card for your answer.*

Table 3.2: Summary statistics of the main independent variables

Independent variables	Groups	Mean/Perc.	St.dv.	Min	Max
Genuine hypothesis (I)	All	-11.11	6.3	-25	0
	Centrist	-10.76	6.2	-25	0
Genuine hypothesis (II)	All	2.17	0.9	0	5.77
	Centrist	2.19	0.8	0	5.34
Party component hypothesis	All	20.38% voted centrist party; 79.62% did not			
	Centrist	22.52% voted centrist party; 77.48% did not			
Cognitive don't knowers (lack of political interest)	All	20.41% not interested at all; 9.92% very interested			
	Centrist	21.07% not interested at all; 6.16% very interested			
Evaluative component hypothesis	All	11.69	2.8	3	18
	Centrist	11.69	2.7	3	18

Source: ESS, Round 4.

3.4 Data Analysis

The empirical analysis is divided into two parts. In the first part, I perform an individual analysis in order to explore the impact of the different hypotheses put forward. In the second part, I analyse each of the hypotheses in each of the countries included in the analysis.

Since we are dealing with two-level data—individuals (level 1) and countries (level 2)—, as well as with a categorical dependent variable, the following analysis is based on a multilevel multinomial logistic model. This analysis tries to see the conditional impact of each of the five hypotheses detailed before.

A hierarchical structure analysis represents an advantage because it models within-country as well as between-country variability using a single analysis. This technique allows considering the existence of dependence between individuals within countries that is caused by the unobserved heterogeneity between countries: through multilevel model estimations, it is possible to correctly specify the unobserved heterogeneity of the data [Hox, 2002; Luke, 2004; Skrondal and Rabe-Hesketh, 2004]¹³.

¹³Since there are strong theoretical basis to expect differences between countries in the effect of any independent variable on centrist self-location, it is necessary to specify a multi-level model with random slopes [Luke, 2004]. However, no significant differences were found. On the other hand, the model includes a lot of cases so the likelihood of any variable becoming significant increases. To check for this potential problem, I have selected ten different random subsamples of 2,000 individuals each and replicated the multinomial logit.

In the model included below, taking into account between-country variation is important because the meaning of left and right can vary across countries. It has been suggested that because of their different contextual circumstances, the meaning of the left and right divide in eastern European countries is different than in the West [Evans and Whitefield, 1993; Thorisdottir et al., 2007; Tavits, 2009]. Consequently, I included a dummy variable identifying eastern European countries versus the rest.

Furthermore, previous research has shown that citizens' ideology in new democracies has a different meaning than in older democratic systems [Freire, 2006b; Hellwig, 2008]. Therefore, another country-level indicator captures the number of years since the restoration of democracy.

Finally, the model includes several individual-level indicators to control for possible spurious effects. Gender (1, male; 0, female); Years of education; Employment status (1, unemployed, 0, employed); Size of town (1, a big city; 5, farm or home in countryside); Marital status (1, married; 0, single).

Table 4.2 presents the results of the multilevel multinomial logistic model¹⁴.

The first group of coefficients shows the multinomial logit estimates for each variable on the probability that individuals locate themselves on the left relative to the centre. By analysing the coefficients for the left, the model indicates that an increase in the moderate index and in the 'balance-out' strategy is associated with a decrease in the relative log odds of being on the left, relative to the centre. Voting for a centrist party has no effect on this outcome, whereas having low political interest or scoring high in the materialism index decreases the probability of being on the left, relative to the centre.

The analysis of the coefficients for the right follows a different pattern. Interestingly enough, being moderate and 'balancing out' across items increases the probability of being on the right, relative to the centre. The same effect is reported for those having materialist attitudes. On the other hand, lacking political interest or voting for a party close to the centre position decreases the chances to be on the right, relative to the centre.

Results were virtually the same.

¹⁴The estimates have been calculated using Stata's programme *gllamm* (Generalized Linear Latent and Mixed Models) [Skrondal and Rabe-Hesketh, 2004].

Finally, the dk/na coefficients indicate several things: more moderate individuals, as well as those 'balancing out' different items, are less likely to choose the dk/na option relative to the centre. The same goes for centrist voters and for the materialism index. Conversely, individuals who lack political interest are more likely to choose the dk/na option relative to the centre.

The control variables indicate that age is positively associated with being rightist (and negatively associated with being leftist); education increases the chances to locate in any position on the scale (relative to choosing the 'dk/na' option); and unemployed people are more likely to be rightist than leftist. As for the contextual variables, results indicate that being in an eastern European country reduces the likelihood to be located on the left and increases the chances of being on the right. Moreover, results for old democracies indicate that consolidated political systems are more likely to have fewer leftist individuals.

Table 3.3: Multilevel multinomial logistic model on left-right self-placement (random slope model)

	Coefficients	Std. Error
(Centre reference category)		
<u>Left</u>		
Genuine hypothesis I (moderate index)	-0.02***	0.00
Genuine hypothesis II ('balance out'; std. deviation)	-0.10***	0.01
Party-component hypothesis (centrist voters)	0.04	0.03
Cognitive don't knowers (Lack of political interest)	-0.41***	0.01
Evaluative don't knowers (materialism index)	-0.04***	0.00
Gender	0.05**	0.03
Age	0.01***	0.00
Years of completed education	0.02***	0.00
Unemployed	-0.04**	0.01
Size of town	-0.08***	0.01
Married	-0.10***	0.03
Eastern Europe	-0.70***	0.05
Years of democracy	-0.02***	0.00
Constant	2.47***	0.14
<u>Right</u>		
Genuine hypothesis I (moderate index)	0.03***	0.00
Genuine hypothesis II ('balance out'; std. deviation)	0.11***	0.02
Party-component hypothesis (centrist voters)	-0.32***	0.03
Cognitive don't knowers (Lack of political interest)	-0.34***	0.01
Evaluative don't knowers (materialism index)	0.03***	0.01
Gender	0.09***	0.02
Age	0.01***	0.00
Years of completed education	0.02***	0.00
Unemployed	0.02*	0.01
Size of town	-0.04***	0.01
Married	0.04	0.02
Eastern Europe	0.25***	0.06
Years of democracy	-0.01	0.00
Constant	1.13	0.14
<u>Dk/Na</u>		
Genuine hypothesis I (moderate index)	-0.04***	0.00
Genuine hypothesis II ('balance out'; std. deviation)	-0.16***	0.02
Party-component hypothesis (centrist voters)	-0.92***	0.04
Cognitive don't knowers (Lack of political interest)	0.43***	0.02
Evaluative don't knowers (materialism index)	-0.02***	0.00
Gender	-0.13***	0.03
Age	-0.01***	0.00
Years of completed education	-0.06***	0.00
Unemployed	0.06	0.02
Size of town	-0.02*	0.01
Married	-0.02	0.03
Eastern Europe	-0.83***	0.06
Years of democracy	-0.05	0.00
Constant	1.42***	0.18
Model fit		
Log likelihood	-64,271.819	
Observations/groups	37,371/21	

¹ *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.001

The analysis reveals that, overall, those individuals that are genuine, carry out a 'balance-out' strategy and the more materialist are less likely to locate themselves on the left, but are more likely to be self-located on the right (relative to the centre). Moreover, those with less political interest seem to be more likely to locate themselves on the 'dk/na' option (relative to the centre) and less likely to be on the left or the right.

However, these findings reveal three important doubts. Firstly, the estimated probabilities of locating oneself on the left/right/dk-na, relative to the centre, provide some clues of why people locate themselves on the middle of the scale, but the impact of any of them is still unknown because of the difficulty to interpret logit coefficients directly. Secondly, the heterogeneous impact across countries is not clearly visualised: the previous model correctly captures between-country variability but it does not reveal whether some variables have a higher effect in some contexts than others. Finally, although some results show a positive pattern when compared to the reference category, it cannot be concluded that the analysed factor should be discarded to explain centrist self-location. For instance, results show that those individuals with lower political interest have higher chances to not answer the left-right question, as compared to locating themselves on the centre. Albeit, this does not imply that the lack of political interest has no effect on the centre; it is only showing that, when both are compared, one category is more likely to occur than the other.

Following this line of reasoning, in the second part of the empirical analysis, I followed another strategy: Instead of grouping together all the countries, I ran a multinomial model in each country and then calculated the average marginal probability effect of each of the key variables included in the model. The marginal effect measures the impact of a change in a key independent variable on the expected change in the dependent variable (here the ideological self-location). Therefore, the goal here is to analyse which factor has a greater impact when individuals decide their location on the scale. By performing the analysis separately in each country, the analysis will also reveal whether the impact of different variables differs across countries. This is not only a statistical expectation, but also a theoretical one: it is a conventional wisdom that left and right are not static concepts

and can mean different things across countries and over time [Fuchs and Klingemann, 1989; Linzer, 2011; Jahn, 2011a,b; Weber, 2012]. This implies that people from a given country can locate themselves on the centre for different reasons than citizens belonging to another country. Therefore, by dealing with the elections separately, it is possible to explore whether the different hypotheses hold under different contextual scenarios.

The marginal effects calculated after 21 different multinomial logistic regressions (one per each country) are plotted in Figure 3.2. The different figures show the average marginal effect of each of the variables on the probability of being located on the centre position, together with the 95% confidence intervals. With the exception of the party-component indicator, which is a dummy variable, the estimated marginal effects are calculated based on a change of one standard deviation above the mean, holding the rest of the variables at their mean. Each dot indicates therefore, how much the predicted probability of centrist self-location changes for a one standard deviation increase in each of the variables.

The first figure (top-left) shows the marginal effects of the moderate index built up in order to test the genuine hypothesis. The figure shows that the genuine hypothesis holds true only in France and Romania. In the other countries, the confidence intervals overlap with the 'zero' line, indicating that there is no effect. Therefore, only in two countries are more moderate individuals less likely to locate themselves on the centre position. Surprisingly, in two countries, the Czech Republic and Finland, more moderate individuals are less likely to be on the centre position.

The second figure (top-right) tests the 'balancing out' strategy. Results indicate that in Germany, the UK, Ireland, and Spain, those individuals that 'balance out' are more likely to locate themselves on the centre position. Again, in the Czech Republic and in Finland, results go in the other direction: those 'balancing out' different public items are less likely to be on the centre position.

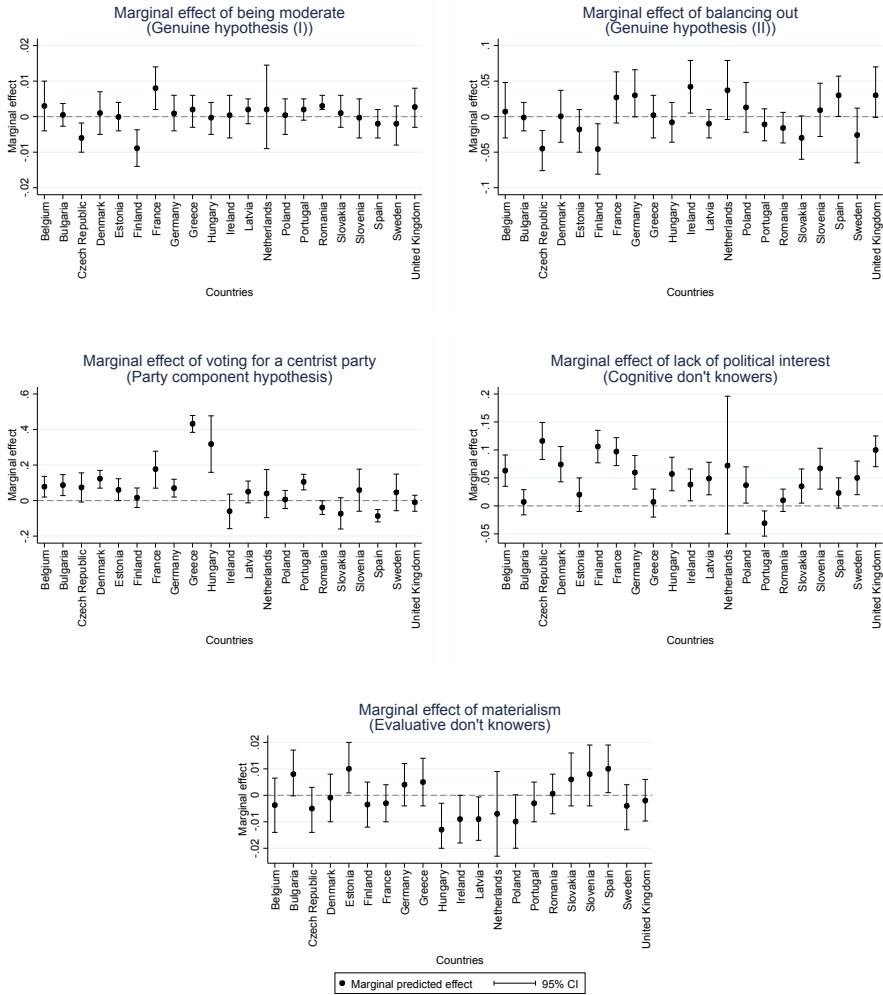
The predicted effect of voting for a party close to the centre position on the probability that centrist self-placement occurs, is generally positive and significant. More concretely, voting for a party close to the centre makes individuals more likely to locate themselves on the centre position in nine

countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary and Portugal. The effect is particularly important in Greece and Hungary. In these two countries, voting for a party around the centre leads to an increase of the estimated choice probability for centrist self-location by approximately 40 and 30 percentage points, respectively.

Similarly, those that have a lack of political interest are more likely to be on the centre in 14 countries: Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, United Kingdom, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden. The largest effect is found in the Czech Republic, where an increase in the lack of political interest by one standard deviation leads to an increase in the estimated choice probability for centrist self-placement by 10 percentage points.

Finally, the irrelevant hypothesis receives almost no support and it is only negative and significant in Hungary, Ireland and Latvia. That is, in these countries, those that express a higher materialist orientation are less likely to be on the centre. In two cases -Estonia and Spain- the effect is positive, indicating that materialist individuals are more likely to be on the centre.

Figure 3.2: Marginal effects of being moderate, ‘balancing-out’ strategy, party component, cognitive don’t knowers and evaluative don’t knowers on the probability of centrist self-location



In order to better visualise the results, the following table summarises whether the analysis reveals that the effect is positive, negative or it is non-significant. Just by ‘eyeballing’ the data, results indicate that there is no pattern to systematically consider the centre as an ideological position affected by a unique factor. Some factors seem to be more relevant than others, but this does not indicate that one factor is significant everywhere. That being said, the analysis reveals that the *cognitive don’t knowers* and the *party-component hypothesis* prevails, compared to the rest. The two versions of the *genuine hypothesis* are only significant in four cases and the *evaluative don’t knowers hypothesis* is only significant in two. Results indicate that centrist self-placement is mainly a product of lacking political interest and of voting for party close to the centre position.

Table 3.4: Summary of the findings in each country

Country	Genuine hypothesis (I)	Genuine hypothesis (II)	Centrist voters	Cognitive don’t knowers	Evaluative don’t knowers	Correct Predictions
Belgium	NS	NS	+	+	NS	42.8%
Bulgaria	NS	NS	+	NS	NS	45.1%
Czech Republic	-	-	NS	+	NS	50.0%
Germany	NS	NS	+	+	NS	50.0%
Denmark	NS	NS	+	+	NS	57.2%
Estonia	NS	-	NS	NS	+	43.4%
Spain	NS	+	-	NS	+	52.2%
Finland	-	-	NS	+	NS	50.7%
France	+	NS	+	+	NS	47.9%
Greece	NS	NS	+	NS	NS	48.2%
Hungary	NS	NS	+	+	-	40.3%
Ireland	NS	+	+	+	NS	46.7%
Latvia	NS	NS	NS	+	-	40.3%
Netherlands	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	48.3%
Poland	NS	NS	NS	+	NS	45.7%
Portugal	NS	NS	+	-	NS	46.8%
Romania	+	NS	-	NS	NS	43.8%
Sweden	NS	NS	NS	+	NS	51.3%
Slovenia	NS	NS	NS	+	NS	41.7%
Slovakia	NS	NS	NS	+	NS	41.5%
United Kingdom	NS	NS	NS	+	NS	47.5%

NS: Not Significant effect; + means positive effect, - means negative effect

3.5 Conclusion and implications

Why do people position themselves on the centre of the political spectrum? The first answer to this question is that it depends. It depends on the country

the individual lives in, it depends on whether the person rationalises his/her vote choice for a centrist party and it depends on his or her level of political sophistication. The results in this article show that it is the combination of these factors that normally explains centrist self-placement across Europe.

Therefore, following the *cognitive don't knowers hypothesis*, individuals who lack political sophistication, place themselves on the centre because they identify this position as neutral and uncommitted with any ideological position. The analysis undertaken in this paper reveals that this hypothesis is generally true, although it is only a part of the story. In addition, partisan cues are also important when deciding centrist self-location. Those individuals that voted for a centrist party (or a party around the centre) are also more likely to be on the centre. The interesting thing is that both factors are not exclusive: there are five cases in which both hypotheses are significant and one of them is significant in only eight cases .

The results in this article reveal some interesting patterns. What is surprising is that, in general, the genuine hypothesis received very little support. Being moderate in different public items or carrying out a 'balance out' strategy does not make individuals more likely to locate themselves on the centre. Therefore, the empirical analysis reveals an apparent paradox which future studies will have to further scrutinise: placing oneself on the centre does not indicate that the individual is 'ideologically centrist', at least in the way it has been defined here.

Throughout this article, I have stressed the importance of studying the centre position by overcoming the tendency to consider the ideological divide as dichotomous (left and right), highlighting an old remark from Inglehart and Klingemann [1976, 246]: "politics of a given society can be viewed in terms of some underlying continuum". Hitherto, some studies have raised some hypotheses and highlighted the necessity to focus on the centre position because individuals can locate on it for different reasons than on other ideological positions. More concretely, I have tested the two versions of the genuine hypothesis, the party-component hypothesis, the cognitive don't knowers hypothesis and the evaluative don't knowers hypothesis.

The findings in this article have achieved similar results to the ones obtained by Knutsen [1998a] or Torcal [2011] for the Spanish case. However, this

paper represents the first attempt to test all the hypotheses together (plus the 'balance out' hypothesis, which has never been tested) in a broader perspective. They also go in line with Weber [2012] recent findings: she proved that what explains left-right orientation is contingent on individual and contextual factors. This would explain why the motives behind centrist self-placement vary across countries and between individuals. However, it also raises an interesting issue: why does the lack of political sophistication in some countries, lead individuals to the centre, whereas in others it leads them to the dk/na option? Why is the genuine hypothesis significant in only a few cases?

Nevertheless, the findings in this article are also inconsistent with previous research about voting behaviour, which indicates that individuals make more sophisticated judgements when deciding their vote preference [Tomz, 2008]. How can ideological centrists individuals make sophisticated decisions if a very important proportion of them lack enough political sophistication? Even going beyond this question, once their characteristics are known, should parties still converge to the centre to win the elections?

The conclusions in this article represent a step forward towards our understanding of the centre position, although there are still some issues that future studies will have to deal with, both substantially and methodologically. The relationship between the party component and the centrist position is especially important, particularly when determining which one comes first. The endogenous nature of such a relationship should be tackled with experimental designs or panel data, with which the causal mechanism can be really isolated. At the same time, the different components included in the analysis might be multicollinear or endogenous. In such a situation, structural equation modelling will be more appropriate, although another important difficulty will emerge: the model will probably not be identified because it will be theoretically impossible to derive a unique estimate of each parameter.

In addition, some methodological issues must be considered: the operationalisation of the genuine hypothesis employed here mainly consider issues belonging to the economic dimension. Although several robustness checks indicate that there are no differences when items belonging to other dimensions are employed, future studies will need to scrutinise whether the

genuine or the balance out hypothesis are more likely to be validated when other dimensions are considered, especially when these dimensions are orthogonal. These studies will also need to take into account a longer battery of questions or even the items traditionally employed to operationalise the post-materialist dimension [Inglehart, 1990]. Moreover, further research will also need to scrutinise whether the social anchors have long-term effects on centrist self-placement and whether these effects are greater on this position than on other ideological positions. Finally, the empirical analysis developed before shows two interesting insights that future studies will need to deal with. Firstly, one of the main question marks is why the first part of the empirical analysis is not very supportive of the “cognitive don’t knowers” hypothesis, although when countries are analysed separately the lack of political interest emerges as an important factor to explain centrist self-location. Future studies will need to analyse in which conditions the lack of political sophistication increases the likelihood to be located on the centre or even whether different operationalisations (with and without the “dk/na” option) change the results obtained here. Secondly, substantially speaking, some results obtained here are surprising: for instance, in the Netherlands, none of the hypotheses holds true and in some other cases, the predicted impact is the opposite of the hypothesised effect. Has the theory on ideological self-placement forgotten any relevant factor? More generally, why in some countries the impact of a given component is greater than in other countries?

In any case, the centre is a crucial position to understand how parties behave [Enelow and Hinich, 1984; Adams et al., 2005] and therefore, investigating who comprise this position is also relevant. This research has shed some light on this ‘obscure’ position by testing different hypotheses that may have led to talk about ‘centrist exceptionalism’. The findings indicate that the centre is not only a space between left and right, where citizens with values or opinions in-between end up locating themselves, but above all, a position for those that lack political sophistication and for those that voted for parties close to the centre position. A conclusion that may have important implications for the way we have understood political competition.

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4

Chapter 4

Equidistant and Distant Political Alternatives: Explaining Abstention Because of Indifference and Alienation

This paper systematically reveals the limitations of spatial theories of indifference and alienation on vote outcomes in 21 countries and 52 elections (primary contribution), and the theoretical importance of party context to the substantive relevance of indifference and alienation on voter abstention. I reveal two novel insights of importance to spatial models of voter abstention. (1) The effects of indifference and alienation are relatively low, and lower than claimed in single-country analyses to date, and (2) The effects of indifference and alienation, where relevant, are strongly conditioned by the polarization of the party system and the effective number of parties. These empirical and theoretical insights have important implications for theories of spatial voting and abstention, which have hitherto assumed all effects to be equally distributed among electors, and which have overestimated their explanatory importance.

Indifference, Alienation, Polarisation, Effective Number of Parties, Spatial Models.

4.1 Introduction

Since Downs' seminal *Economic Theory of Democracy* [1957a], social scientists have sought to explain why people vote or abstain. Within the spatial approach, discussions of political competition inevitably use the concepts of indifference and alienation. In fact, the effect of parties' ideological locations on the probability of abstaining is one of the most appealing and important implications of spatial voting literature. In particular, parties' ideological positions can lead individuals to feel alienated or indifferent [Riker and Ordeshook, 1968]. If a party is not close enough to a citizen's ideological position, then this citizen can be described as alienated and is unlikely to vote. On the other hand, if the parties running for office are equidistant to an individual's position, this citizen may be indifferent—as parties will provide the same electoral utility—and correspondingly, may be unlikely to vote.

Despite these theoretical expectations, relatively little is known about the effect of these spatial factors on the probability of abstaining. Up to now, the effects of indifference and alienation have only been studied in some countries. Moreover, findings indicate that there are still many doubts regarding the effect and the circumstances under which alienation and indifference operate. For instance, Zipp [1985] found neither alienation nor indifference significantly affected the overall probability to participate. As opposed to these findings, Katz [2007] argued that both indifference and alienation contributed to increased abstention in the 2002 Brazilian election, with indifference accounting for slightly more than 50% of the rate of abstention. Other studies found as little as a 9-point drop in turnout among indifferent persons and a 14-point drop in turnout among alienated individuals [Johnston et al., 2007]. Recently, Peress [2010] found indifference to be more important than alienation. Lastly, there is variance in which one of these factors is contributing to a larger extent on the probability of abstaining.

This paper aims to contribute to this debate and again put to the test the spatial theories of indifference and alienation on vote outcomes in 21 countries and 52 elections. I argue that in order to study indifference and alienation it is crucial to consider two elements, generally ignored in

previous studies: Firstly, indifference and alienation are considered to be dependent on two contextual factors, namely the effective number of parties and the polarisation of the party system. Secondly, precisely because of these factors, this study does not consider that alienation and indifference effects are equally distributed among electors, a condition that has hitherto been assumed by previous studies. I highlight the importance of the spatial model for taking into account party distribution along the axis and the importance to stick to the original definition of alienation and indifference.

Findings presented in this paper reveal that the expectations are accomplished, but not consistently so. I demonstrate that the effects of indifference and alienation are positive, but they are relatively low, especially in the case of indifference. Moreover, I reveal that the effects of indifference and alienation, where relevant, are strongly conditioned by the polarization of the party system and the effective number of parties. Finally, I show that where the spatial sources of abstention are relevant, no large differences are reported for different ideological positions. In sum, I conclude that previous analysis has overestimated the explanatory importance of alienation and indifference-based abstention.

4.2 Alienation, indifference and the paradox of voting

The rational choice model that has come to dominate accounts of voter turnout characterises each citizen's decision calculus as a balance of three quantities expressed in the following formulation [Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Schwartz, 1987]:

$$pB > C \tag{4.1}$$

The first is B , the expected benefits a voter derives if his or her preferred party wins the elections. The rational voter, however, recognises that the opportunity to cast the decisive ballot is at best uncertain and assigns to it the probability weight p . On the other side of the ledger, the cost of voting C includes a myriad of inconveniences, ranging from transportation expenses to voter registration. Thus, the citizen will vote if $pB > C$.

One of the interpretations of the term B is the direct benefit the voter receives for casting a ballot¹. This benefit is conceptualised here as the utility each voter attains when voting for a particular party. The spatial approach has framed this utility calculus considering the distance between an individual's position on a given dimension and the position of the different political options. Under this approach, and holding p constant², an individual will vote for the party that is ideologically closer because this party affords him or her the greatest utility (individual benefits are maximised).

While the rational choice approach has devoted huge efforts either to explain voting patterns or to solve the paradox of voting [Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989; Adams et al., 2005], far less scrutiny has been devoted to the spatial sources of abstention, which are undoubtedly embedded in the spatial tradition starting from Downs [1957a].

In short, the spatial theory establishes that the decision to vote or abstain constitutes a two-stage process [Riker and Ordeshook, 1968]: First, voters evaluate the position of the different parties to choose which one to elect. In a second step, and on the basis of the spatial utility calculus, voters decide whether to vote for the party that gives them a higher utility or they abstain. It is generally considered that parties and voters are located on a given scale, which has been commonly conceptualised with the familiar left-right scale. This scale has worked as an encompassing 'evaluative criteria': both parties and respondents can take positions on this scale, and for the respondent his or her position is then taken to be the ideal point [Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976; Mair, 2007]³.

¹This is certainly not the only interpretation for B , which has also been conceptualised in several ways. For a summary of the different interpretations and the limits of the rational choice theory see Blais [2000].

²I am not trying to address here the paradox of voter turnout, which lies in the product term, pB . For many years, scholars have dedicated tremendous efforts to explain why people vote if the probability of casting a decisive ballot amid a large number of ballots is normally minuscule [Blais, 2000]. In this paper the debate is simplified and it will be assumed that people will vote only if the *direct* utility they get from voting justifies the costs, holding the term p constant.

³Throughout this paper I assume that the left-right scale is the only 'evaluative criteria'. I also assume that voters take their notion of party location at face value—that is, they evaluate the parties as if they will implement the policies they are perceived to advocate. By relaxing these assumptions, the *unified discounting model* approach would be adopted, which is not the purpose of this article. To analyse the implications under this model see Adams et al. [2005].

Therefore, under the spatial framework, citizens abstain when parties do not provide them with enough utility. Provided that the individuals' utility calculus is defined in terms of distance, abstention occurs in the literature as two different phenomena which take into account the distance between the voter and the party, as well as the relative distance between the voter vis-à-vis the two nearest alternatives. Despite the early insights provided by Downs [1957a], it was later that Hinich and Munger [1997] gave comprehensive and parsimonious definitions of both factors and the expected consequences.

*Alienation*⁴: If both (all) alternatives in the election are far from the voter's ideal point, that voter is less likely to vote. The greater the difference between the voter's point and the nearest alternative, the less likely the individual is to vote, compared either with other voters or other elections where perceptions of the difference are smaller. The most common way to implement this definition is by employing *quadratic proximity utility*, which has been the cornerstone of most empirical analysis of voting behaviour. More concretely, it is specified as the negative of the squared distance between the voter i and the party l [Merrill III and Grofman, 1999], as follows:

$$A_i = -U_{il} = (V_i - P_l)^2, \quad (4.2)$$

where A_i is voter's i 's alienation; V_i the voter i 's position on the left-right scale; P_l the position of the closest party as perceived by voter i ; and U_{il} is the voter i 's utility for party l . The sign of the voter's utility is reversed in order to capture the notion of alienation: alienation increases when the individual's utility decreases and thus he or she is less likely to participate.

⁴The conceptualisation of alienation here is different from that in the work of Almond and Verba [1963] and the subsequent literature. The type of alienation conceived by this literature is framed as the citizens' feeling that they cannot change government and actions of government have little effect on their lives. Almond and Verba's definition is hence similar to what political sociology has referred to as the lack of *political interest* or *political efficacy*, among other terms. For instance, see Gschwend [2004]; Adams et al. [2006]; Katz [2007]. On the contrary, the type of alienation conceptualised in this article is a product of ideological positions of the parties in a particular election. This means a citizen could be alienated—or indifferent—in one election and not alienated in the next, or vice versa, depending on his or her own ideological position and the parties' ideological distribution.

*Indifference*⁵: An indifferent citizen is one who does not view one party platform as significantly closer to his or her own preference than the other party platform. In spatial terms, both political alternatives are providing the same utility, so a voter does not have enough incentives to participate. A perfectly indifferent situation occurs when a citizen is located in a perfectly equidistant position with regards to the closest political alternatives. Thus, measuring indifference involves first calculating citizens' utility for each party. Citizen i 's indifference for party l and party r is equal to the negative of the differential utility for each political alternative, as defined by the following equation:

$$I_i = -DU_{ilr} = -|(V_i - P_l)^2 - (V_i - P_r)^2|, \quad (4.3)$$

where I_i is voter i 's indifference; V_i is the voter i 's position on the left-right scale; and P_l and P_r are the l and r parties' position on the left-right scale; DU_{ilr} is the voter i 's differential utility between the closest preferred party l and the second closest preferred party r .

In conclusion, taking both factors together, the probability that an individual does not vote under the *unified spatial framework* is equal to the spatial sources of abstention (alienation and indifference) and to non-policy motivations [Adams et al., 2005]. The equation of the logistic model that estimates the probability p_{ij} that voter i of country j does not vote as a function of alienation, indifference and a group of individual variables, $X_1, X_2 \dots X_k$, and a group of contextual country variables, $Z_1, Z_2 \dots Z_h$, is specified as follows:

$$\text{Ln} \left(\frac{p_{ij}}{1 - p_{ij}} \right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 A_{ij} + \beta_2 I_{ij} + \sum_{n=1}^k \gamma_n X_{nij} + \sum_{n=1}^h \delta_n Z_{nj} + \mu_{0j} + e_{ij}, \quad (4.4)$$

where A_{ij} and I_{ij} are the alienation and indifference values of voter i

⁵Although in a less systematic way, indifference has also been considered as an opinion towards the different political alternatives in the system. For instance, some surveys (such as the CSES survey) include a question asking whether the individual feels that who is in power makes a difference. Again, this research does not take into account the different sociological interpretations of what being indifferent is. Instead, I stick to the spatial notion of indifference: to be or not to be equidistant.

belonging to country j ; β_1 represents the effect of alienation and β_2 of indifference; the gammas and the deltas are the effects of the individual and contextual control variables; and μ_{0j} and e_{ij} are the country-specific and the voter-specific random terms, which represent the unmeasured components affecting probability of abstention.

Despite the early foundations of both concepts and the empirical and theoretical implications that these factors can bring about⁶, either on the political system [Enelow and Hinich, 1984; Erikson and Romero, 1990; Southwell and Everest, 1998; Weber, 2011] or on party competition dynamics [Hinich, 1978; Brody and Page, 1973; Hinich and Munger, 1997; Adams et al., 2006; Callander and Wilson, 2007] it is not clear what is the *real* effect of both alienation and indifference on the chances of casting a ballot.

Previous works provide different results, often contradictory between them. To the best of my knowledge, the first empirical study was carried out by Brody and Page [1973]. It investigated the impact of these factors in the 1968 American elections and concluded that both alienation and indifference "are more important causes of non-voting than much of the literature would lead us to expect". Subsequent work reached the same conclusion [Dutter, 1982]. However, Zipp [1985] and Weisberg and Grofman [1981], again dealing with the American context, found later contradictory results. Whereas Weisberg and Grofman found alienation to have an effect and indifference irrelevant, Zipp concluded that in some elections indifference significantly affected turnout, alienation was important in others, and in some cases both had an impact on the likelihood of participation. Analysing the 1976 American Elections, Guttman et al. [1994] concluded that abstention was primarily driven by alienation, whereas indifference did not play any role. Later, Plane and Gershtenson [2004] found both of these factors to be relevant, a finding that was later contested by Peress [2010], who found strong support for abstention due to indifference and moderate support for abstention due to alienation. The same conclusion was reached by Johnston et al. [2007] in his study of Canadian turnout patterns. Furthermore, Melton [2009] pointed out that the use of invalid measures in previous studies may explain

⁶The exception comes from Slutsky [1975], who argues that the alienation and indifference formulations of abstention in the spatial modelling literature are neither theoretically well-grounded nor logically consistent.

why the effects of indifference are generally underestimated, even though the same cannot be applied to alienation. However, even after applying a new methodological criterion, the impact of both factors was smaller than expected.

4.3 Taking context seriously

In this section I argue that one of the reasons behind the lack of coherent empirical results is that the partisan context has not been properly taken into account. If we pay full tribute to the spatial model, contextual factors are crucial because they might modify who abstains because of alienation and indifference. In other words, in order to understand spatial abstention it is important to go back to the fundamentals and understand that the chances of abstaining because of alienation and indifference are not randomly distributed, but rather depend on the party configuration and the ideological position of each citizen. Moreover, when analysed closely, the spatial model leads to theoretical controversies that have not been empirically addressed.

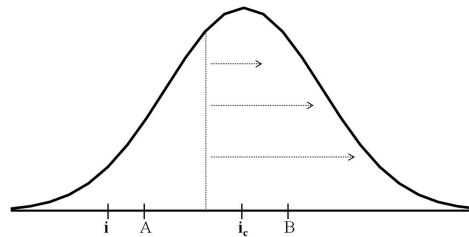
Fortunately, the spatial literature has not left this issue unattended. There are two factors that provide a convincing causal link and explain why some citizens abstain because of alienation or indifference: polarisation and the effective number of parties.

4.3.1 The spatial context

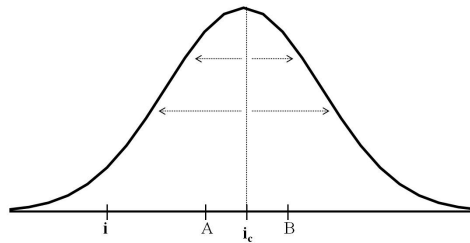
In order to explain the idea, a simple naïve model with two parties is illustrative (Figure 4.1). The figure on the left shows a non-convergent scenario with two parties, *A* and *B*. According to the spatial model, in this scenario voter *i* will vote for party *A*, whereas voter i_c —the median voter—will vote for party *B*. In fact, assuming universal turnout, any voter on the right of the dot vertical line—the medium position between party *A* and party *B*—will vote for party *B*. Given this situation, and according to the spatial reasoning, party *A* will lose the elections as it will be unable to attract a greater amount of voters than party *B*. In a subsequent scenario, party *A* will apply a winning strategy, converging towards the median in order to win the elections. In this second scenario, party *A* “will gain more votes in the centre than it loses at

the extremes because of abstention" [Downs, 1957b, 143] and will therefore be able to compete with party B .

Figure 4.1: Naïve Downsian model with two parties



(a) Non-convergence



(b) Convergence

As expressed by Downs, such a convergent movement will have its pitfalls. Party A will be closer to the centre but it will no longer be close to i . This voter will experience a lower utility than in the previous scenario, increasing his or her likelihood to abstain. In this scenario, and according to the spatial logic, voter i will abstain because of alienation. In other words, convergence triggers alienation-based abstention in the extremes.

In fact, applying a strict notion of the spatial model, abstention should be very high in the second scenario, if we were to believe the fundamentals of the spatial model. Voter i —as well as the rest of voters far away from party A and B —will abstain because of alienation, whereas centrist voters will do so because of indifference. In this convergent scenario, differences between parties in terms of the utility they provide to voter i_c can be very low—in the second scenario depicted above, they are non-existent. Therefore, since voter i_c is perfectly equidistant between two parties, he or she must abstain because of indifference. It is interesting because this simple spatial

idea has often been misinterpreted in the literature [Brody and Page, 1973; Aarts and Wessels, 2005; Katz, 2007]. For instance, even though from Down's work one may think that only the median voter abstains because of indifference, Whiteley [2006, 227] asserts that in a convergence scenario "none of the voters, including the median voter herself, will be able to distinguish between them and accordingly will abstain". It is important to point out that, in the spatial model, only i_c is equidistant and therefore is the only one that can abstain because of indifference.

As the previous examples have shown, party distribution—from now on, party polarisation—along the ideological axis is not just an important factor that might shape the occurrence of alienation-based or indifference-based abstention [Plane and Gershtenson, 2004]. It also highlights a paradox embedded in the rational choice approach: if parties converge to the centre to win the median voter, extremist individuals will abstain because of alienation and the crucial median voter will abstain because of indifference. When parties polarise to pick up abstainers on the extreme, the median voter might feel alienated and hence abstain⁷. This paradox, which would ultimately lead most of the electorate to abstain, has been generally ignored when studying the effect of both spatial sources of abstention.

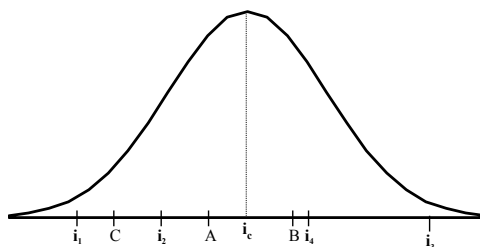
There is, however, another crucial aspect that substantially modifies the likelihood of abstaining because of alienation or indifference: the number of parties. The scenario depicted above—the two-party system—is not the most common across European party systems (it is in fact an exception rather than the rule), albeit it has been the most analysed when studying the spatial sources of abstention. With the exception of a few works [Aarts and Wessels, 2005; Melton, 2009; Peress, 2010], the number of political parties do not have a central role in previous arguments. This factor is crucial as an increase or decrease in the number of parties may have an effect on the spatial sources of abstention because they can stretch or reduce the distance between any

⁷It is true that one can think of a scenario in which parties can be polarised—far away from the centre—and in an equidistant position. In this case, alienation and indifference effects would be added together and therefore both would be at work when causing centrist abstention. However, this theoretically possible scenario is empirically rare and non-existent with the data employed in this article. This is confirmed in the empirical analysis developed later. An interaction between alienation and indifference among those located on the centre fails to reach statistical significance.

voter and a party.

The following figure helps to clarify this point. It shows a model with three parties, two of them (A and B) at the same situation than in Figure 4.2. As before, i_c will abstain because of indifference. Note that by just introducing a new party, C , indifference also affects i_2 , who is completely equidistant between A and C . On the other extreme, i_3 will most probably abstain because of alienation, as the closer political alternative, B , is far away. Finally, i_1 and i_4 have C and B , respectively, very close to his or her position. However, B is closer to i_4 than what C is to i_1 . It is therefore probable that abstention because of alienation is more likely among i_1 than i_4 . What is spatially impossible is that both i_1 and i_4 are indifferent, because they cannot fall into an equidistant situation.

Figure 4.2: Naïve Downsian model with multi-party competition



Therefore, when there are many parties, each party must separate itself from its competitors, causing all parties' ideological positions to diverge. This new choice set is likely to affect voters' closeness towards one of the political alternatives. At the same time, if there is a sufficient differentiation between parties, the differential utility that the voter will extract will also affect the likelihood of indifference-based abstention. Taking this into account, and contrary to what previous works have shown, the study of alienation or indifference-based abstention should consider parties' ideological distribution vis-à-vis citizens' ideological position: as compared to Figure 4.1(b), in this new scenario the centre is also equidistant. Moreover, in this new scenario alienation is likely to affect differently to distinct ideological positions.

Again, polarisation of parties is also important to consider, even if the number of parties is higher than two. When parties are far away from the

centre, centrist individuals are likely to abstain because of alienation. On the contrary, when parties converge to the centre, centrist individuals are likely to abstain because of indifference whereas fringe voters are likely to abstain because of alienation. The main difference is that in a multi-party scenario voters can be equidistant or alienated from several political alternatives.

4.4 Hypotheses

Are all ideological positions equally likely to abstain because of alienation and indifference? It is well-known that on some occasions, the spatial model of voting can fail to explain individual patterns [Grofman, 2004; Adams et al., 2005; Green, 2007]. Distance therefore fails to predict party choice or has a lower impact than what the theory would predict. Is it also the case of abstention? Do alienation and indifference always produce the outcome predicted by the theory? As highlighted before, previous literature has not accounted for the fact that some voters are more likely to abstain because of alienation or indifference (which can change the way we understand both factors) and that this depends on two partisan factors: polarisation and the effective number of parties.

In order to prove these ideas, I put to the test the basic spatial insights from the previous section formally developed in the following hypotheses. The first factor that is important to consider is polarisation. When polarisation is very low, political parties are clustered around the centre. In this scenario, alienation must have a negligible impact on the decision to abstain among those located in this position. On the contrary, if all the political alternatives were located at both extremes (high-polarised scenario), citizens in the extremes would no longer abstain because of alienation. However, in the same scenario, political supply will be far away from centrist individuals, who would abstain because of alienation.

As for indifference, a highly polarised scenario makes citizens in the extremes less likely to abstain because of this spatial factor. The reason is that each competitor separates itself from the other ideological alternative, making clearer the ideological differences. Finally, the effect of polarisation on indifference-based abstention among centrist voters is not apparent:

abstaining because of indifference has to do with being equidistant, and an increasingly polarised scenario cannot necessarily break an equidistant situation.

In summary, four hypotheses are put forward:

H_{1a}: The higher the polarisation, the higher the likelihood of alienation-based abstention on the centre and the lower on the left and on the right

H_{1b}: The higher the polarization, the lower the likelihood of indifference-based abstention on the left and on the right (no expectation regarding the centrist position).

As mentioned previously, the number of parties can also play a significant role in altering voters' utility. Voters' possibility of maximising electoral utility depends also on the number of available political options⁸. Thus far, literature has suggested that an increase in the number of parties is likely to affect voters' distance to any political alternative. Therefore, an increase in the number of parties diminishes the likelihood of abstaining because of alienation. On the contrary, an increase in the number of parties increases the likelihood of being equidistant and, consequently, of indifference-based abstention. In accordance with spatial logic, differential utility is likely to be lower when more political alternatives emerge.

However, these overly broad hypotheses suggested by the literature can be misleading. To be fair, it is necessary to take into account the 'type' of parties in the electoral race. It might possibly be that in a given country there are more parties competing than in another country but these parties are not necessarily distributed randomly along the axis. They can be located, for instance, on the same side of the ideological spectrum. Under such a circumstance, the effect of alienation or indifference-based abstention might not be the same for all the ideological positions if the 'extra' parties are skewed towards one of the extremes. It is a very strong assumption to maintain that an increase in the number of parties represents that these parties will be distributed randomly along the ideological dimension and will not be skewed towards a particular ideological position.

⁸It is important not to confuse polarisation and the number of parties competing in the system. Whereas the effective number of parties refers to the (viable) *number* of political offers, polarisation is the degree to which parties are located far away from the centre point. Both measures have different theoretical and empirical implications [Dalton, 2008].

The interesting thing is that an increase in the number of parties is expected to operate differently under the rationality of alienation or indifference. As for alienation, having more political parties on your ideological side implies that the distance from any of the political alternatives is less, therefore:

H_{2a}: The higher the number of leftist parties, the lower the likelihood of alienation-based abstention on the left (and the same stands for the right).

As for indifference, an increase in the number of parties makes citizens more likely to be equidistant between two political alternatives. Consequently, the following hypothesis is formulated.

H_{2b}: The higher the number of leftist parties, the higher the likelihood of indifference-based abstention on the left (and the same stands for the right).

Regarding the centre position, the same argument could be applied as an increase in the number of centrist parties makes indifference-based abstention more important among those located in the centre. However, there is no consensus as to what a *centre party* is [Hazan, 1998], making it difficult to operationalise. Hence,

H_{2c}: The higher the number of parties, the higher the likelihood of indifference-based abstention on the centre.

The following table summarises the different expectations to be tested:

Table 4.1: Hypothesis testing summary

	Alienation-based abstention			Indifference-based abstention		
	Left	Centre	Right	Left	Centre	Right
Polarisation	-	+	-	-	NE	-
ENEP	-	-	-	+	+	+

Note: Entries are the signs of the expected relationships when polarisation or ENEP increase. "+" means positive relationship, "-" negative relationship and "NE" stands for "No Expectation".

4.5 Research design

In order to test my hypotheses, the study relies on data from the three modules of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES)⁹. The three surveys have been merged into a single dataset and, after excluding those

⁹Freely available at www.cses.org

that did not report whether they voted or not in the previous elections and those that did not locate themselves or any of the parties on the left-right scale, 62,520 cases remain. Data is grouped in 52 country elections (see all the details in the Appendix). This dataset is well-suited for comparative analysis as there are enough cases per country, as well as a sufficient number of cases in the second-level analysis of 52 country elections, to carry out a multi-level model [Snijders and Bosker, 1999; Seligson, 2002]. Moreover, it includes left-right positioning for the most relevant parties, as well as a like-dislike thermometer scale for each party that allows for the identification of each individual's most preferred party. In addition, the wording of the questions has been practically identical over time, which makes them comparable.

The dependent variable to be used across all the different models is self-reported abstention (1, abstained; 0, voted). This measure might be problematic due to the over-reporting of voting. However, there is no other comparable measure to use and the possibility to check the validity of the answers is also not included in the surveys. In any case, over-reporting may underestimate the effects of both alienation and indifference, which represent a conservative test for the analysis undertaken below. This variable is coded 1 when the respondent declared to abstain in the previous elections and 0 when he or she declared to have cast a ballot.

The basis to operationalise alienation has been outlined in the equation 4.2, which is empirically calculated as the quadratic distance between the respondent's left-right positioning and the ideological position of his or her preferred party [Zipp, 1985; Thurner and Eymann, 2000; Johnston et al., 2007]. The preferred party position is used instead of the closest political alternative for an important reason: what alienation tries to capture is the distance between the individual position and the party position, understood as the party which would have been chosen by the individual had this party been closer to his or her position. Therefore, the distance that *matters*—especially in a multi-party setting—is the distance between the individual position and the preferred political option. Subjective party positioning of the preferred party is employed¹⁰.

¹⁰It is well known that individuals tend to locate parties that they do not like further away from their position (*projection effect*) and bring closer to their position those parties with which they sympathize (*assimilation effect*) [Adams et al., 2005, chap. 10]. In this sense,

In order to identify each individual's most preferred party, I used the like-dislike thermometer, which is included in the three surveys of the CSES. Using this variable I went through the following steps: Firstly, I identified the most preferred party for each individual included in the survey (unless all the parties receive a zero on the scale)¹¹. Secondly, parties' position on the ideological scale are based upon the "subjective" left-right positioning, which is the respondents' ideological positioning of each party. Finally, the distance between individuals' self-placement and the ideological position of the most preferred party is calculated following the alienation equation.

Operationalisation of indifference is based on the equation 4.3. Recall that indifference is calculated as the differential utility between the preferred party position and the second closest preferred party. The literature is ambiguous as to how the 'position' of the second closest party should be conceptualised: the second preferred party or the second closest party. Since both measures yield similar results, in order to be coherent with the previous measure, I opted for the second closest preferred party position. As before, parties' positions were calculated according to each individual ("subjective" parties' placement). It is important to clarify that the measure of indifference has been adapted in order to meet the criteria with which spatial indifference is defined here. Thus, those individuals that place themselves on any of the extremes of the scale cannot be indifferent, as they cannot be equidistant between two political alternatives. At the same time, in some political systems there can also be other citizens who cannot be spatially indifferent between parties, as they cannot fall in an equidistant situation. Therefore, the level of indifference for such cases has been considered as missing¹².

four aspects need to be pointed out. First, using the closest party position instead of the preferred party position does not substantially alter the conclusions of this article. Second, more than 50% of the sample located one of the parties in the same ideological position as the respondent's, most probably due to the so-called *assimilation effect*. Third, "objective" party placement has also been calculated (that is, the ideological position of each party equals the mean ideological position according to the overall population). Fourth, as a further check of robustness, parties' positions have been calculated on the basis of expert opinions (included in the CSES). In any of the later cases, results do not substantially change.

¹¹Generally speaking, all the parties receive rather low values on the scale. If I restrict the position beyond which a party is considered as 'preferred' (for instance, from 4 or 5 onwards) results still hold, although with an important loss of accuracy due to the high number of missing values.

¹²For instance, in Figure 4.2 individuals i_1 , i_3 and i_4 cannot be equidistant between two parties. Those citizens that locate any of the political alternatives in the same side of the

As for the other independent variables, I include a wide range of indicators (both individual and aggregate) that have been proved to be relevant in recent research in explaining abstention [Blais, 2000; Geys, 2006]: First, I include the individuals' left-right self-placement. The original 11-point scale ranges from extreme-left (0) to extreme-right (10). I also include an index taking into account each individual's level of political information. Moreover, other variables identify whether the respondent lives in a rural or urban area, as well as categorizing their income, education, gender and age. Operationalisation is detailed in the Appendix. Unfortunately, control variables include a fair amount of missing values, particularly for education and income. There are several strategies to deal with missing data of which multiple imputation is the most promising [Allison, 2001]. Since missing values are not concentrated into a particular case or multiple similar cases, imputation allows for keeping all the cases for alienation and indifference without biasing the final results [King et al., 2001].

Since several contextual factors are relevant when analysing the causes of abstention [Gallego, 2010], country-level variables also need to be factored into the model. The first variable tackles uncompetitive electoral races. It has been measured as the logarithm of the distance between the percentage of votes between the second and the first party. Therefore, in line with the literature, we expect that when the electoral distance between the main parties increases, abstention should also go up¹³. Second, a dummy variable identifies whether the elections belong to a parliamentary or semi-presidential regime. Third, I include each country-average district magnitude in order to control for the effect of a crucial element of the electoral systems [Cox, 1990]¹⁴. Finally, in order to control for the countries'

ideological space cannot fall into an equidistant position; approximately between 5 and 10% of the respondents in each country are in a similar situation. Most of these cases, which are excluded from the analysis, correspond to people located on number 1 or number 9 on the scale.

¹³Thus, the traditional concept of competitiveness has been reversed in order to get a more direct interpretation. When possible, competitiveness was also measured as the distance between the votes received by the governing coalition and the second alternative coalition. It yields the same results.

¹⁴The type of the electoral system (plurality rule, proportional...) was also included. However, since it is correlated with district magnitude, I chose to include only the latter. In any case, results do not change. Furthermore, two dummy variables were also included and proved to be significant: a dummy variable for Switzerland and another for Eastern

economic situation, which might have an effect on the overall level of turnout [Radcliff, 1992], the Gini index per country is also included.

The empirical analysis proceeds in two steps. First, and given the nested structure of the data (individuals, i.e., first-level units living in the same country, i.e., second-level units), multi-level modelling is employed (see equation 4.4). A hierarchical model is well suited for my analysis because it allows us to distinguish between the impact of the contextual explanatory variables on the intercept (β_0) and on the coefficient or slopes β_1 and β_2 [Snijders and Bosker, 1999; Seligson, 2002]. In this step the goal is to test the overall impact of alienation and indifference on the probability of turnout, as well as to see whether the impact differs across ideological positions.

The second step pretends to visualise patterns of association of alienation and indifference in different contextual circumstances. The aggregate nature of the argument and the measures used to test the different hypotheses make two-step hierarchical models particularly suited for a parsimonious analysis in which it is easy to visualise patterns of associations and contributions of individual cases to the overall model fit [Achen, 2005]. A slope per country-election of the effect of alienation and indifference on abstention is first estimated. This indicator, obtained by post-estimation after fitting a random slopes model, can be interpreted as the power of alienation and indifference in explaining abstention in each country. The process is undertaken for both alienation and indifference and it is repeated restricting the sample to those that locate themselves on the left (0-4), on the centre (5) and on the right (6-10)¹⁵. Recall that, as explained earlier in the theoretical part of the article, both context and the ideological position of individuals are important elements for the spatial factors of abstention.

Following the theory, random slopes of indifference and alienation are associated with two contextual factors. First, polarisation has been operationalised using Hazan's index of polarisation¹⁶.

European Countries. For the sake of simplicity, these variables are not included in the final model.

¹⁵It can be argued that values 4 and 6 of the scale are so close to the centre that they act as if they were centrists. The analysis has been repeated excluding these values with no changes in the final results.

¹⁶Hazan [1998] formula is the following:

Second, the Effective Number of Parties follows the widely-used indicator of Laasko and Taagepera [1979].

4.6 Data Analysis

In this section, I test the hypotheses derived from the theoretical model. Table 4.2 shows different hierarchical models in order to assess the impact of both alienation and indifference on the likelihood to participate. In terms of model fit, both the AIC and the BIC indexes are lower in the third model, which represents that this model fits the data better. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) is 0.136 in the first model and 0.099 in the third model (with individual and contextual controls), indicating that, in the null model, approximately 14% of the total variance is accounted for in the group-level variance¹⁷.

In the second (with individual controls) and the third models (with both individual and contextual controls) alienation and indifference are significant and behave as expected¹⁸. When indifference and alienation increase, citizens are more likely to abstain. In the case of alienation the coefficients show that when distance between a citizen and his or her preferred party increases one point, the chance of abstaining rises on average by 1.2%. Similarly, indifference also has a statistically significant

$$\sum_{i=1}^N p_i (x_i - \bar{x})^2, \quad (4.5)$$

where N is the number of parties in the system, p_i is the proportion of votes won by each party, x_i is the respective ideological position of each party and \bar{x} is the weighted system mean, that is, the sum of the product of each party's proportion of the vote and its position on the left-right scale. Parties' ideological positions have been calculated using the Comparative Manifesto Project data.

¹⁷ICC assesses how similar are two randomly chosen individuals from the same group in regard to variables of interest. For the hierarchical logit model it is calculated as follows: $\sigma^2 / (\sigma^2 + \pi/3)$, where σ^2 represents the group-level variance. Furthermore, the size of the design effect, which is a function of the intraclass correlation and the average cluster size, might also affect the size of the standard errors. I have followed Muthén and Satorra [1995] and calculated the design effect, which is approximately equal to $1 + (\text{averagecluster size} - 1) * ICC$. In my model it equals 2.89. This value is greater than 2, which is usually taken as a rule of thumb in order to know whether the clustering in the data needs to be taken into account during estimation.

¹⁸In order to have a more direct interpretation, results in Table 4.2 are interpreted as odds ratio.

positive effect on the likelihood to abstain, although its effects are smaller. As indifference increases by one point (so moving towards an equidistant scenario), the chance of abstaining increases by 0.8%. By just 'eyeballing' the graph it is clear that, as compared to the other variables, the effect of the spatial sources of abstention is much lower. Thus, when political sophistication increases by one point, the likelihood of abstaining decreases on average by 32%. The effect of income and education is also much higher, with those with a higher income and a higher education more likely to participate. As for the contextual variables, only district magnitude and the Gini index are significant. They show that in a country with a higher district magnitude, abstention is lower, and where the Gini index is higher (more inequality), abstention tends to be higher.

Model 4, 5 and 6 repeat the full model restricting the analysis to those that locate themselves on the left (0-4), on the centre (5) or on the right (6-10). This first attempt to see whether the likelihood of abstaining because of alienation and indifference depends on the ideological position of each individual shows two interesting patterns. First, the effect of alienation is similar on the left and on the right and it is barely significant on the centre. Second, indifference is also significant on the left and on the right and barely significant on the centre. When compared, the effect of alienation for leftist and rightist individuals is greater than the effect of indifference. Finally, in both cases, as compared to the full model, the effect of indifference and alienation is slightly lower.

As a preliminary conclusion from comparing these unified models, and after controlling for different individual and contextual factors, the spatial sources of abstention have a greater effect on the left and on the right than on the centre. In the centre position abstention seems to be less a product of spatial factors, and more a result of other non-ideological considerations.

Table 4.2: Hierarchical logit model prediction for abstention

	Model 1 Null model	Model 2 Individual controls	Model 3 Contextual controls	Model 4 Left	Model 5 Centre	Model 6 Right
First-level variables						
Alienation	-	0.012*** (0.00)	0.012*** (0.00)	0.012*** (0.00)	0.005* (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Indifference	-	0.008*** (0.00)	0.008*** (0.00)	0.007*** (0.00)	0.006* (0.00)	0.006*** (0.00)
Ideological Self-Placement	-	-0.008 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.00)	-	-	-
Political Information	-	-0.375*** (0.01)	-0.375*** (0.01)	-0.382*** (0.02)	-0.379*** (0.02)	-0.343*** (0.02)
Rural/Urban Residence	-	0.029*** (0.01)	0.029*** (0.01)	0.022 (0.02)	0.034* (0.02)	0.038** (0.02)
Income	-	-0.136*** (0.01)	-0.137*** (0.01)	-0.149*** (0.02)	-0.114*** (0.02)	-0.146*** (0.01)
Education	-	-0.132*** (0.01)	-0.131*** (0.01)	-0.128*** (0.01)	-0.122*** (0.01)	-0.120*** (0.01)
Gender (Male reference category)	-	0.076*** (0.02)	0.076*** (0.02)	0.064 (0.04)	0.075* (0.04)	0.106*** (0.04)
Age	-	-0.027*** (0.02)	-0.027*** (0.02)	-0.029*** (0.00)	-0.027*** (0.00)	-0.026*** (0.00)
Second-Level Variables						
(Log of) Uncompetitive elections	-	-	-0.082 (0.08)	-0.111 (0.08)	-0.048 (0.08)	-0.096 (0.07)
Parliamentary Systems	-	-	0.056 (0.37)	0.023 (0.44)	0.013 (0.42)	0.055 (0.36)
District Magnitude	-	-	-0.008*** (0.00)	-0.008** (0.00)	-0.007* (0.00)	-0.008*** (0.00)
Gini Index	-	-	0.098*** (0.02)	0.106*** (0.02)	0.087*** (0.02)	0.097*** (0.02)
Intercept	-	0.866*** (0.13)	-1.788*** (0.69)	-1.944** (0.79)	-1.332* (0.79)	-2.109*** (0.68)
Model fit						
Observations/Groups	85,947/52	62,520/52	62,520/52	21,432/52	15,449/52	25,639/52
Log Likelihood	-22,240.36	-38,771.847	-22,227.97	-6,987.40	-6,717.65	-8,462.5474
Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (countries)	0.136	0.152	0.099	0.113	0.115	0.09
AIC	77,547.69	44,502.74	44,485.95	14,002.82	13,463.3	16,953.09
BIC	77,566.42	44,602.21	44,621.6	14,114.43	13,570.34	17,067.22

Standard errors in parenthesis. Significance levels at *** $p \leq 0.01$, ** $p \leq 0.05$, * $p \leq 0.1$

Bearing in mind that coefficients might not have a straightforward interpretation, it is necessary to show the magnitude of the effect of both factors. In order to do so, I illustrate the simulated predicted probabilities of alienation and indifference¹⁹. Figure 4.3 displays four graphs showing the predicted probabilities of abstaining as the distance to the closest preferred party moves from their minimum to maximum value while holding all other variables at their means (one for the general population and the other three for the left, centre and right, respectively). Figures show little differences on the effect of alienation on the general population, on the left, and on the right. It is only in the case of the centre that a difference emerges: although the precision of the estimates is less accurate, the point of departure is greater than on the left and on the right.

Figure 4.3: Predicted abstention because of alienation by ideological position

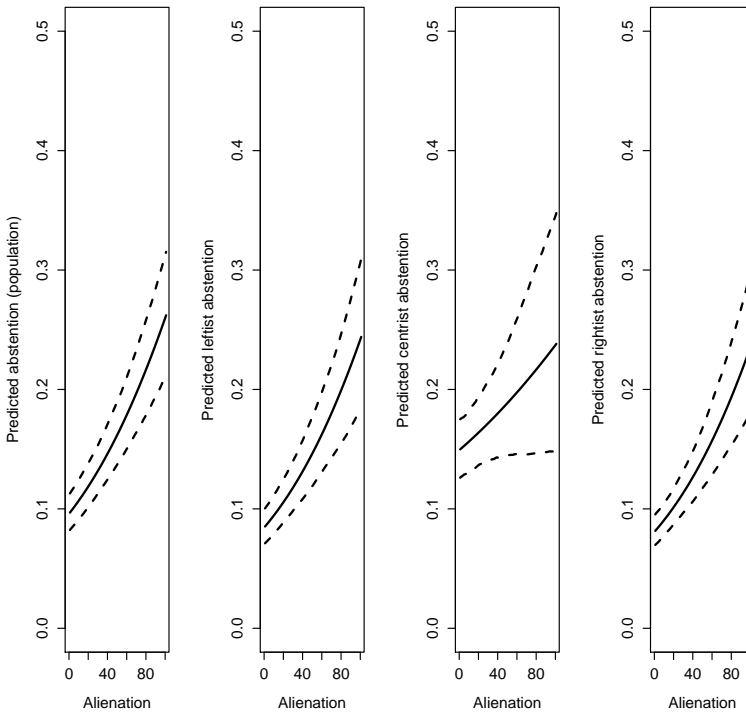
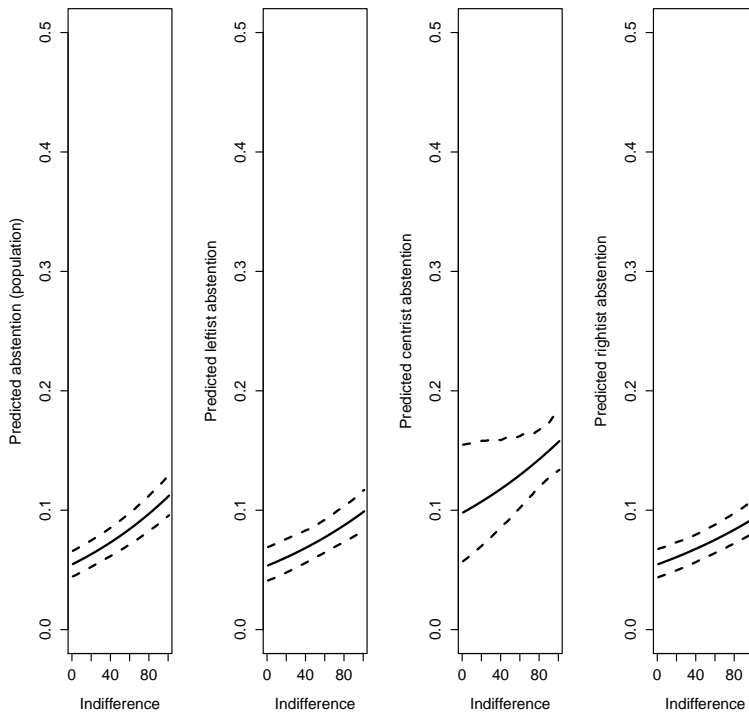


Figure 4.4 repeats the same process for the case of indifference. As compared

¹⁹Zelig package for R has been employed [King et al., 2000].

to alienation, in all of the variables presented below predicted abstention is lower. In this case, there are some differences across ideological groups. Predicted abstention because of indifference among left-leaning citizens is slightly higher than among right-leaning citizens. As for the centre, and despite the confidence intervals, the effect of indifference is higher, showing some evidence that the likelihood of abstaining because of indifference is higher among centrists.

Figure 4.4: Predicted abstention because of indifference by ideological position



Thus far, the empirical analysis shows that alienation and indifference affect the probability of turnout, as well as demonstrating that the effect of alienation is slightly greater than the effect of indifference. Moreover, data has shown that the impact of the spatial sources of abstention is generally low. In both cases, data has shown that the impact of the spatial sources of abstention is generally low. In both cases, going from the minimum to the maximum of alienation and of indifference increases the likelihood of

abstaining, but in a very modest way. It is true that the effect of alienation is slightly greater than the effect of indifference. At the same time, some ideological differences emerge regarding the occurrence of both factors. Alienation and indifference-based abstention among centrist individuals is more likely than among the other positions.

However, as previously explained, in order to understand the effect of alienation and indifference, we have to bear in mind that the chances of abstaining due to any of these two factors are not randomly distributed along the axis and depend on the individual's ideological position and the parties' position. A close look at the multi-level analysis reveals that the effect of alienation and indifference in each country's elections is not the same: standard deviation at the second level is equal to 0.60, ICC is 9.9% and the country-elections slopes have considerable variation. Therefore, there is still some contextual variation to explain. This point is important to the understanding of the arguments presented in this paper. As explained in the theoretical part, the likelihood of abstaining because of alienation and indifference depends upon two contextual factors, mainly the polarisation of party systems and the number of parties available in the political system. Both factors stretch or squeeze the space between individuals and any political parties, while at the same time modifying the likelihood of abstaining because of any of the spatial factors.

In order to analyse this argument, it is necessary to explain why the effect of the spatial factors varies in each country elections. Accordingly, in the next step I present a set of scatter-plots in order to visualise patterns of association of alienation and indifference with abstention in different contextual circumstances. The key variable of these models is the slope per country-elections obtained after estimating a hierarchical logit model with random slopes. This indicator, obtained by post-estimation, indicates the power of alienation and indifference in explaining abstention in each country-elections. This process has been repeated for both alienation and indifference, as well as restricting the sample to those located on the left, the centre or on the right. Once the slopes are obtained, data is plotted against the two contextual variables of interest: polarisation and the effective number of parties.

The first set of graphs (Figure 4.5) shows the relationship between alienation slope and the set of contextual factors described above. In line with the theory, I expect centrist citizens to be more prone to abstain because of alienation when polarisation increases, whereas alienation-based abstention should decrease among fringe citizens (H_{1a}). The top left graph proves that the effect of the first expectation goes in the opposite direction—when polarisation increases, alienation-based abstention decreases²⁰.

Therefore, when parties are far away from the centre, the likelihood to participate is higher than in a more convergent scenario. In other words, in a polarised scenario the distance between the centre and any of the political alternatives is less important when deciding whether to abstain or to vote. As for the other ideological positions, the hypothesis is confirmed for leftist individuals, but not for rightist. The graphs show that when parties are polarised, leftist alienation-based abstention goes down, whereas there is no effect among those located on the right.

Overall, these graphs show that the variation of the effect of alienation across countries is partly explained by the polarisation of parties, revealing a negative trend: when polarisation increases, alienation-based abstention decreases, both among centrist and leftist citizens.

The second column repeats the process for the effective number of parties. When the number of parties increases, the chances to have a close political alternative increases; therefore, alienation-based abstention should go down, especially when the increase in the electoral supply is focused on the respondent's ideological position (more leftist parties if the respondent is on the left and more rightist parties if the respondent is on the right). Data shows that this expectation is met for centrist and leftist individuals, but not for those located on the right. An increase in the number of parties depresses alienation-based abstention among the centrist and the leftist population. This relationship does not hold for rightist individuals.

²⁰Taking into account that there are only 52 cases, the relationship is strong. Pearson correlation coefficient: -0.6003, $p < 0.005$.

Figure 4.5: Bivariate relationships between alienation slopes and polarisation and the effective number of parties

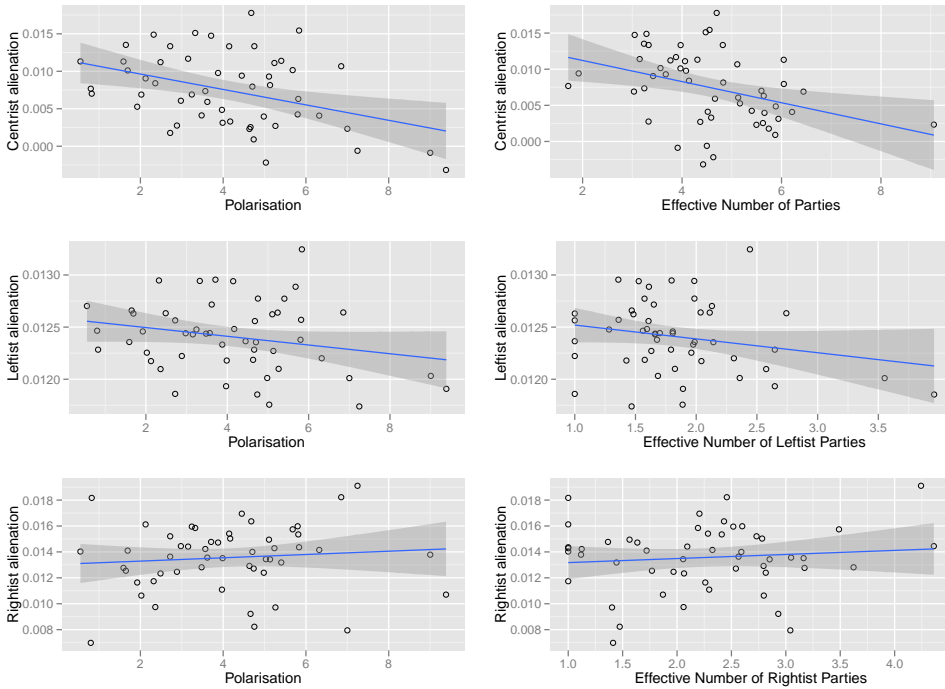
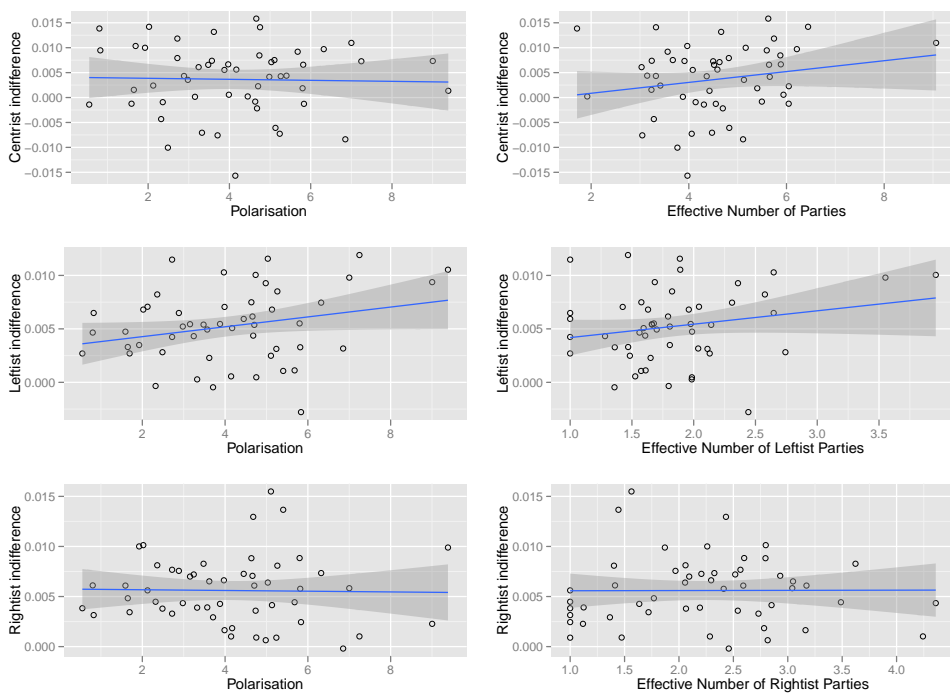


Figure 4.6 illustrates the bivariate relationships between indifference slopes and polarisation, as well as the effective number of parties. It is important to look at the relationship between polarisation and indifference-based abstention across ideological positions. The first expectation is that leftist and rightist citizens are less likely to abstain because of indifference in a polarised scenario (H_{1b}). As in the case of alienation, a polarised scenario has a different impact on indifference-based abstention among the left than among the right. Whereas it has no effect on the right, for leftist individuals polarisation increases indifference-based abstention. On the other hand, we had no expectation regarding the effect of polarisation on centrist indifference-based abstention. Curiously enough, the top left figure shows that as one moves along different levels of polarisation, centrist indifference-based abstention does not change, confirming the idea that polarisation has little to do with creating equidistant situations. This result also implies that a convergent situation, whereby most of the parties are clustered around

the centre, does not significantly increase the effect of indifference among centrist individuals.

Finally, $H_{2a}-H_{2c}$ hypothesised that indifference-based abstention should be altered when the number of parties changes (the reason is that the likelihood of being alienated or equidistant also increases). Again, this relationship appears as significant among centrist and leftist individuals, but not among rightist. Although hypotheses point to opposite directions, both are significant. When the number of parties increases, leftist and centrist alienation-based abstention decreases, whereas centrist and leftist indifference-based abstention increases²¹.

Figure 4.6: Bivariate relationships between indifference slopes and polarisation and the effective number of parties



²¹In the graph showing the relationship between centrist and leftist indifference and the effective number of parties there seems to be one (for the centre) or two (left) outliers. Even if these cases are dropped, the relationship still holds.

4.7 Conclusions and discussion

For a long time, the idea that alienation or indifference substantially increase turnout has been commonplace in the spatial modeling literature. While there can be no doubt that the literature has provided strong theoretical arguments about the effects of alienation and indifference, supporting empirical evidence has been less convincing. This paper proposed a theoretical argument, and supporting empirical evidence, to explain in which situations alienation and indifference-based abstention are more likely to occur. In regards to this, I argued in this paper that a fundamental point must be taken into consideration when studying alienation and indifference. First, the chances of abstaining because of them are not randomly distributed along the axis. Rather, two spatial factors related to party competition–polarisation and the effective number of parties–are crucial in order to understand the likelihood of alienation-based or indifference-based abstention.

Previous empirical research has hitherto performed a single-country analysis or taken into account two-party systems. In this article, I take a micro-macro perspective considering 21 countries and 52 elections. Data allows for a myriad of contextual circumstances, which is crucial in order to see the relationships between the context and how alienation and indifference operate.

The first conclusion of the empirical analysis provides clear evidence: the effect of alienation and indifference on the probability of abstaining is weak, especially in regards to the latter. This is not to say that the effect of the spatial sources of abstention is petty or even negligible. It is simply that individuals abstain for other reasons beyond these spatial factors [Adams et al., 2005] and, all else being equal, the effect of distance remains moderate or low. An increase of a 3% probability of abstaining is not negligible, but it is much lower than the effect of distance when voting for a particular party [Adams et al., 2005, 2006].

Moreover, the paper systematically reveals that, where relevant, alienation and indifference are strongly conditioned by the polarization of the party system and the effective number of parties. However, a number of caveats

apply to this finding: alienation-based abstention decreases among centrist and leftist individuals when polarisation and the effective number of parties increase. No effect is reported among rightist individuals. In addition, indifference-based abstention is modified by the effective number of parties, but only among leftist and centrist individuals. In this sense, results show that spatial calculus is more prone to affect centrist and leftist individuals than rightist ones, both in the case of alienation and indifference-based abstention. Hence, abstaining on the basis of spatial considerations is more probable among these positions. It is already known that, in a convergent scenario, when there are low differences between parties, voters turn to non-spatial considerations to justify their vote [Green and Hobolt, 2008]. However, we do not know whether this is more likely to occur among some individuals. It seems that, in the case of abstention, spatial considerations matter more for a segment of the electorate (leftist and centrist), whereas for others (rightist individuals) the probability to abstain given a change in the partisan context remains largely unaffected. Future studies will have to identify why spatial indifference (or alienation) does not always work and the impact of factors such as strategic voting or coalition strategies on the bad performance of indifference and alienation when explaining abstention [Green, 2013].

Additionally, the analysis reveals that polarisation changes alienation-based abstention among centrist individuals, but in the opposite direction. When polarisation increases, centrist alienation-based abstention goes down. Previous results have shown that polarisation changes the spatial logic from the proximity model to the directional model [Pardos-Prado and Dinas, 2010]. It might be an explanation for this result, although it still remains doubtful as to why this post-rationalisation strategy only occurs among centrist and leftist, and not among rightist citizens.

Overall, it seems that distance does not matter a great deal when deciding to abstain. Parties may not always have greater incentives to separate or to position themselves far away from voters, but in the light of recent evidence, these incentives should not be based on the idea that abstention will substantially increase. The spatial model—and, more concretely, what the spatial logic would predict—does not always hold true when explaining

abstention and why some individuals do not turn out to vote.

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4.8 Appendix

Table 4.3: Elections considered (country, year)

Countries	CSES 1	CSES 2	CSES 3
Austria	–	–	2008
Bulgary	–	2001	2007 & 2009
Czech Republic	1996	2002	2006
Denmark	1998	2001	2005 & 2009
Finland	–	2003	2007
France	–	2002	2007
Germany	1998	2002	2005 & 2009
Hungary	1998	2002	2005 & 2009
Iceland	1999	2003	2007 & 2009
Italy	–	2006	–
Ireland	–	2002	2007
Netherlands	1998	2002	2007 & 2009
Norway	1997	2001	2005
Poland	1997	2001	2005 & 2007
Portugal	1999	2002 & 2005	2009
Romania	1996	2004	2007 & 2009
Slovenia	1996	2004	–
Spain	1996 & 2000	2004	–
Sweden	1998	2002	2006
Switzerland	1999	2003	2007
United Kingdom	1997	2005	–

Table 4.4: Variables and operationalisation

Variables	Operationalisation
Dependent variable	
Whether or not respondent cast a ballot in preceding election	1, Abstain; 0, Voted
Independent variables	
Alienation	$A_i = -U_{il} = (V_i - P_l)^2$
Indifference	$I_i = -DU_{ilr} = - (V_i - P_l)^2 - (V_i - P_r)^2 $
In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?	0, extreme-left; 10, extreme-right
CSES studies include a series of political information items, designed to test the respondents' general knowledge. These items are of varying difficulty and responses are simply reported as correct or incorrect.	0, all answers are incorrect; 3, all answers are correct
Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular political party?	1, Yes; 0, No
Rural/Urban residence	1, Rural area or village; 4, Large town or city
Household income quintile appropriate to the respondent	1, Lowest quintile; 5, Highest quintile
Highest level of education of the respondent	1, None; 8, University undergraduate degree completed
Gender	1, Male; 0, Female
Age of respondent (in years)	
Second-level variables	
Polarisation	Hazan Index [1998]
Effective Number of Electoral Parties	Laakso and Taagepera Index [1979]
District Magnitude	Average district magnitude in the lower tier [2005]
Log of Uncompetitiveness	Log of the distance between the % of votes received by the second and the first party
Parliamentary systems	1, Parliamentary; 0, Semi-presidential

Table 4.5: Summary statistics of variables

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Dependent variables				
Wether R abstained or not	18.89% abstained, 81.11% voted			
Explanatory variable				
Alienation	4.79	10.75	0	100
Indifference	-14.11	20.37	-100	0
First-level variables				
Left-right self-placement	5.22	2.37	0	10
Political information	1.67	1.01	0	3
Rural-urban residence	2.43	1.17	1	4
Income	2.92	1.38	1	5
Education	4.88	1.73	1	8
Gender	47.69% male, 52.31% female			
Age	47.17	17.18	17	102
Second-level variables				
Polarisation	4.06	1.87	0.55	9.38
(Log of) Uncompetitiveness	1.78	1.09	-2.30	3.34
Parliamentary systems	49 parlamentarian, 3 semi-presidentialist			
District Magnitude	13.97	29.15	1	150
Gini index	29.18	4.23	21.5	38.1
Effective Number of Parties	4.57	1.19	1.71	9.06
Effective Number of Leftist Parties	1.86	0.58	1	3.96
Effective Number of Rightist Parties	2.23	0.82	1	4.36

5

Conclusions

5.1 General Conclusions

The main purpose of this dissertation has been to challenge the dominant approach on the ‘ideological bias’ literature and provide new theoretical and empirical evidences about centrist abstention, a phenomenon that has been almost entirely neglected by previous research. This *new* ‘ideological bias’ should be understood not as the difference in abstention rates across ideological positions, but as the existence of heterogeneous effects that lead to this bias. As I argued and proved at the beginning of this Doctoral dissertation, abstention among centrist individuals is generally higher than in any other position—an empirical reality that contradicts the ‘conventional wisdom’ approach—. However, there are a surprising lack of explanations as to why and when the centre abstains. Therefore, throughout this dissertation my goal has been to examine the reasons behind this *new* ‘ideological bias’ and consequently explore the mechanisms that lead abstention by ideological position to vary across contexts, as well as to investigate why some centrist individuals abstain and others participate.

Since the ‘ideological bias’ on turnout began to be analysed, two main streams have been predominant. The first is the socio-structural approach, based on the linkage between socio-economic characteristics and turnout patterns, which has claimed that the prevalence of structural factors has fostered the ‘ideological bias’ on turnout. Under this perspective, it has been assumed that it is those on the left who are more likely to abstain because those with lower socio-economic status are, in turn, more likely to be leftist. The second approach has scrutinised the role of parties on turnout patterns. Under this perspective, researchers have analysed the impact of different party strategies on the likelihood of participating/abstaining (such

as polarisation or competitiveness). Within the latter approach, previous works have not considered that these factors can have a heterogeneous impact across ideological positions—they can create an ‘ideological bias’. However, they emerge as reasonable explanations to understand why centrist abstention is higher in some cases or why some centrist individuals abstain. Moreover, within ‘the role of parties’ framework, we can find different explanations that approach the ‘ideological bias’ in a different way. On the one hand, the first group of partisan factors are related to the party ‘supply’, such as the effective number of parties, polarisation or competitiveness. These factors can modify the likelihood that some ideological positions abstain more than others. On the other hand, another group of factors refer to the ‘ideological supply’ offered by parties. More concretely, they explore how parties’ ideological positions can affect individuals’ likelihood to participate. Whereas the first factors focus mainly on the aggregate dynamics, the latter group of factors are explored under the spatial framework of alienation and indifference, two classical dimensions the impact of which is still largely unknown.

Throughout this dissertation, the notion of ‘ideological bias’ has been reconsidered and conceptually tackled in a coherent way, overcoming previous attempts by the literature that have taken for granted some crucial assumptions. After reviewing the theoretical underpinnings behind this concept, this dissertation has looked for a new conceptualisation of the relationship between ideology and turnout. Furthermore, throughout this dissertation, some previous factors have been reconsidered by putting into question their expected impact. As I have argued several times, the literature has assumed that certain factors have a homogeneous impact across ideological positions, even though there are powerful theoretical expectations to expect the opposite. This conceptual approach has been rigorously followed through three cohesive papers.

Why is the centrist abstention rate higher in some countries than others? Are we able to identify some factors that have an effect on the centre, *vis-à-vis* other ideological positions? In the first paper, these questions have been explored using a novel approach and a better operationalisation of the notion of the *new* ‘ideological bias’: by employing national and cross-national

surveys a large dataset has been compiled in order to capture the percentage of leftist, centrist and rightist abstainers in each country. In the first paper, it has been shown that two competing explanations have approached the 'ideological bias' on turnout: the compositional approach—based on the linkage between low SES citizens and the left, as well as on the role of party identification—and the role of parties approach, which encompasses the impact of polarisation, difference in utilities, competitiveness and the effective number of parties.

Results provide partial support for the 'classical' explanation: whereas the relationship between being from a lower social class and any of the ideological positions is not significant, the percentage of non-partisans does have an impact, but only on leftist and centrist abstention. Alternatively, party strategies seem to play a more important role. The following findings are reported: Firstly, when ideological differences between the main parties blur, leftist abstention goes down and centrist abstention goes up. Secondly, an increase in polarisation negatively affects centrist abstention (thus the centre participates more in a polarised environment) and positively affects rightist abstention. Thirdly, competitiveness and the effective number of (leftist/rightist) parties do not play a significant role in driving ideological turnout differences across countries. All in all, results confirm my expectations regarding the expected impact of different factors: hitherto, the literature about the 'ideological bias' has assumed that some scenarios have a homogeneous impact on turnout. For instance, they have assumed that polarisation affects *all* the ideological positions equally. My analysis has shown that the impact is rather heterogeneous: polarisation has a negative effect on centrist abstention and a positive on rightist abstention (while having no effect on the left). Some factors affect differently across ideological positions. Therefore, by taking the 'classical' aggregate approach (without distinguishing between ideological positions) we are not able to capture this heterogeneous response.

In the second paper, the focus of analysis switches to the individual level. As shown in the introduction of this dissertation, although it differs substantially across contexts, centrist abstention is generally higher. One of the explanations, strongly related to the socio-structural approach explained

in the first article, is that those on the centre abstain more because of its characteristics. In this sense, it has been suggested that centrist self-location is 'special' because it might be a concealed form of non-response [Knutsen, 1998]. Under this perspective, individuals locate themselves on the centre because of a lack of political sophistication and because they merely know what the left-right axis stands for. Therefore, if centrist individuals have less political information or less political interest than the overall population, their abstention will consequently also be higher, as citizens with less information are more likely to abstain in elections. The idea that centrists are people that do not care about politics, a very popular view among some researchers and the public in general, has not been properly tested yet. Moreover, it is not the only hypothesis for explaining centrist self-location. Beyond the lack of political sophistication idea, alternative explanations have been put forward: centrist self-positioning can be considered a *genuine* position, either a coherent one across political issues or reached after a balancing-out strategy; it can be a product of party choice; or a result of post-materialist values. The empirical analysis, performed in 21 different countries, shows that there is not a unique predictor of centrist self-placement. Overall, the lack of political interest hypothesis is significant in several countries, although the magnitude of the effect substantially varies. Alternatively, the party component hypothesis, which relates centrist positioning with voting choice, is also significant and positive in a great bunch of cases. Surprisingly, the genuine hypothesis (the centre as a moderate position) is significant in very few cases. The main conclusion of this paper is that there isn't a *unique* factor driving centrist self-location: generally, centrist self-placement is a product of, first, lack of political interest and, second, party choice.

Finally, in the third paper, I investigated the role played by indifference and alienation, two factors that could also potentially explain centrist abstention. As in the first article, I theoretically proved that these factors do not have a homogeneous effect on the likelihood to participate: some ideological positions are more likely to abstain because of indifference or alienation and this depends on two party strategies, polarisation and the effective number of parties. These two factors shrink or stretch the space between an individual's ideological position and party alternatives, therefore changing

the likelihood of being affected by one of these factors. Research on this article took a novel approach and examined whether some positions are more likely to abstain because of indifference and alienation and whether this is congruent with what the spatial theory would predict [Enelow and Hinich, 1984]. By doing so, I studied individuals' reactivity to indifference and alienation, two classical spatial factors the consequences of which are still largely unknown [Thurner and Eymann, 2000]. Moreover, I extend the previous findings on alienation and indifference to multi-party contexts, which is crucial in order to know how they work if one considers that both have been usually studied in bipartisan contexts. In general terms, apart from the fact that alienation has a stronger effect on the general likelihood to participate, the evidence suggests two things: Firstly, the effects of indifference and alienation are relatively low, and lower than claimed in single-country analyses to date. Secondly, where relevant, the effects of indifference and alienation on different ideological positions are conditioned by the polarisation of the party system and the effective number of parties. More concretely, the analysis shows that alienation-based abstention decreases among centrist and leftist individuals when polarisation and the effective number of (leftist) parties increase. In addition, indifference-based abstention is modified by the effective number of parties, but only among leftist and centrist individuals.

These three papers form the core of the dissertation. Each piece of research can be taken as part of a common research project, with centrist abstention as the common link. Previous to presenting a reflection about the shortcomings of the dissertation and future lines of research, a summary of the main contributions of each paper is presented in the following sections.

5.1.1 Re-addressing the 'ideological bias' hypothesis

One of the most appealing topics in the abstention literature has been the 'ideological bias' on turnout. According to the general idea, low turnout damages left-wing parties because leftist individuals are more likely to abstain. The first article of this dissertation critically assessed the theoretical underpinnings behind this 'conventional wisdom' and showed how some assumptions that built the argument are too strong to take them for granted.

In the paper, the new argument is that we need to move away from the 'classical' approach and consider the 'ideological bias' for what it actually tries to capture: abstention across ideological positions.

Therefore, the first novel contribution has been to conceptually capture the 'ideological bias' idea and operationalise it in a more correct way than previous studies. This has been done essentially by, first, classifying individuals according to their ideological position and, second, examining their voting/abstention patterns. For this purpose, a new large dataset was built. This strategy proved right in light of the results obtained by the empirical analysis. Just 'eyeballing' the descriptive data, one of the first (strong) ideas around the 'ideological bias' was reconsidered: leftist abstention is not generally higher. Centrist abstention is.

The article proceeds to analyse why turnout across ideological positions varies across countries, especially focusing on centrist variation. Results showed that some factors have a heterogeneous effect on different ideological positions. This finding may well explain why previous works have different conclusions regarding the impact of the 'conventional wisdom'. The analysis reports that there are factors that have a positive effect on centrist abstention, while having a negative effect on rightist abstention and no effect on leftist abstention. If the ideological positions are grouped together, the effects of these factors are cancelled out and no impact is reported. Hence, the reconsideration of the theoretical components of the 'ideological bias' proved a rational strategy: if ideological positions are grouped together, we are avoiding the (empirical) fact that some factors have a heterogeneous effect, which would not be properly captured.

The classical interpretation of the 'ideological bias'—again, operationalised here in a more theoretically coherent way—received partial support: the relationship between being from the lowest social class and any ideological position was not significant. Only another socio-structural explanation, the lack of party identification, emerged as a factor that increases leftist and centrist abstention (it was not significant for rightist abstention). Conversely, the role of parties' hypotheses demonstrated that the 'ideological bias' on turnout (especially the leftist and the centrist) is more a product of party strategies than of socio-structural determinants. When parties blur their

ideological differences, leftist abstention goes down, but centrist abstention goes up. Furthermore, when polarisation increases, centrist abstention decreases and rightist abstention increases. On the other hand, there was no evidence that competitiveness or the effective number of parties foster or depress the 'ideological bias'. Therefore, centrist abstention seems to be higher where the percentage of non-partisans on the centre is higher, as well as where parties' ideological differences and polarisation are lower. To sum up, this paper sheds light on how centrist abstention—or the 'ideological bias' in general—should be approached and opens the field to posterior research.

5.1.2 The centrist conundrum

A dissertation that endeavours to account for centrist abstention needs to have a clear idea of the nature of centrist individuals. This is not to say that the classical approach of the 'ideological bias'—the left abstains more—has a profound knowledge of which factors lead individuals to locate themselves on the left—it is clearly not the case. However, centrist self-location is much more complex than any other ideological position, insofar as there are multiple competing hypotheses to explain why individuals end up locating themselves on the centre. The second paper of this thesis is focused explicitly on the centrist enigma: which factors lead individuals to place themselves on the centre? By identifying the elements that drive centrist self-location, I am solving a conundrum and acquiring enough knowledge to understand who the key centrist individuals are.

Apart from the *non-response hypothesis*, the causal mechanisms of the other hypotheses at play are quite straightforward. The *genuine hypothesis* establishes that the centre position is genuine when individuals are coherent and place themselves on the centre on different issue dimensions (they are 'moderate' across issues). Beyond this idea put forward by Knutsen [1998], the second article tested another unexplored mechanism that can also be part of the genuine hypothesis: centre self-location can be the result of a 'balancing-out' strategy when individuals choose opposite extremes on different issues. The next unexplored mechanism—the *party component hypothesis*—tests the relationship between voting for a centrist party and centrist location. Finally, the *irrelevant hypothesis* considers that centrist self-

location is the consequence of having post-materialist values. Individuals giving higher salience to these issues might consider that the left-right scale represents *old politics*. Instead of not answering the question, they may prefer to choose an uncommitted position: the centre.

Results show that the centre is a product of a lack of political interest (first) and a result of having voted for a centrist party (second). Surprisingly, neither the *genuine hypothesis*, in any of the two forms, nor the *irrelevant hypothesis* robustly explain centrist self-location. This article is particularly interesting in that it meets three objectives at once: Firstly, it addresses and tackles a conventional idea by which the centre is “different”, especially because those that place themselves on this position have less political interest or sophistication in general. Secondly, the endogenous relationship between centrist self-location and party choice may indicate that the role of parties is important in order to understand how the centre behaves. Thirdly, findings indirectly reject the idea that the lack of political interest is the unique factor explaining centrist abstention. This is confirmed later in the third article, in which political sophistication seems to play a more important role on the left, rather than on the centre, when explaining abstention. Overall, these are findings that open up scope for future research around the centre’s reactivity to different party strategies.

5.1.3 Abstaining because of indifference and alienation

The third and the last paper of my dissertation focuses on the role played by two-party scenarios that can affect the centrist likelihood to participate/abstain: i.e. alienation and indifference. On the one hand, this article explores individuals’ reactivity to overly distant political alternatives (alienation) and to equally distant political options (indifference) and extends previous results to multi-partisan contexts. On the other hand, I have followed previous theoretical insights to account for the heterogeneous impact of contextual scenarios. This is crucial as long as context can cause some ideological positions to be more likely to abstain because of indifference or because of alienation. These quite straightforward ideas have not been tested yet.

The paper explores how alienation and indifference affect individuals’

likelihood to abstain and whether both factors are coherent with several contextual scenarios. In this article, I take a micro-macro perspective considering individuals clustered in 52 elections, which took place in 21 different countries between 1996 and 2009. Data allows for a myriad of contextual circumstances, which is crucial in order to see the relationship between the context and how alienation and indifference operate. Findings show that alienation has a greater effect than indifference (for a one point increase in distance, abstention increases by 3%). Most importantly, the paper systematically reveals that, where relevant, alienation and indifference are strongly conditioned by the polarisation of the party system and the effective number of parties. When attention is paid to the different ideological blocks, the findings report that alienation-based abstention decreases among centrist and leftist individuals when polarisation and the effective number of parties increase. No effect is reported among rightist individuals. In addition, indifference-based abstention is modified by the effective number of parties, but only among leftist and centrist individuals. Findings in this article are interesting in that they extend some patterns observed in the first article: centrists abstain because of alienation when polarisation is low or the effective number of parties increases. At the same time, centrist indifference-based abstention is only modified by the effective number of parties.

This article presents, therefore, at least four insights: First, centrist individuals are more likely to abstain because of alienation, something that occurs when polarisation and the effective number of parties are low. The first significant relationship—alienation-based abstention and polarisation—is counterintuitive under the spatial framework, but goes in line with what was found in the first paper: polarisation increases participation, including centrist participation, even though the *pure* spatial models would predict the opposite. Second, centrist indifference-based abstention increases when the number of parties also does. Third, results on the other ideological positions prove (again) that contextual factors have a heterogeneous effect across ideological positions. Finally, this paper suggests that the spatial factors of abstaining are not strong determinants of abstention, at least in their role in explaining voting behaviour.

In this sense, this article provides mixed evidence about the effect of both spatial factors. Although the relationship between leftist and centrist alienation-based abstention and polarisation and the effective number of parties is significant, the reported effect is rather weak. The relationship with the right is not significant across any contextual scenario. Moreover, in the case of polarisation it works in the opposite direction of what the spatial theory would predict.

To sum up, this dissertation offers a new perspective on the 'ideological bias' on turnout, one that has not been considered until now. By taking a different perspective than the traditional one, I have shown that the bias comes from another position than what the 'conventional wisdom' has defended. Moreover, throughout the dissertation, I have proved that the impact of party strategies, which in turn outperform the classical explanations, is heterogeneous across ideological positions. Therefore, by studying the 'centrist bias' this dissertation tries to make an interesting and valuable contribution to the literature on turnout and challenges some aspects that have been at the core of one of the most important subfields in the literature.

5.1.4 The limits of the dissertation and future lines of research

It is clear that all research is limited in some way by the theoretical assumptions that underpin it, as well as by its empirical challenges. As is often the case, the development of this thesis has left some questions still open and points to several future lines of research that may improve the arguments and the findings presented hitherto.

Some of the avenues for research are related to the need to reconsider the 'ideological bias' literature, in several aspects.

First, the classical explanation of the 'ideological bias' should be complemented. My analyses are in line with some previous works [Grofman et al., 1999; Lutz and Marsh, 2007] that show that the 'ideological bias' is not simply related to the socio-structural explanation. If researchers want to stick to the traditional definition and take for granted the assumptions which have been criticised here, at least they must consider that there is something else that creates an (leftist) 'ideological bias' beyond individuals' socio-economic

characteristics. Findings in this dissertation prove that the role of parties is important and in some contexts their role is much more important than the classical explanation. This warns researchers to revisit their traditional point of view by moving towards a more comprehensive view of the 'ideological bias', one which encompasses a broader set of factors.

Second, another popular approach when dealing with the impact of the 'ideological bias' has been to study what would happen if the turnout among leftist voters was at the same level as rightist turnout. What would happen if centrist turnout patterns were in line with the overall mean? Counterfactual scenarios should be explored taking into account ideological heterogeneity.

Third, the approach applied here can be extended to the median voter literature. During the development of the theoretical framework for this thesis, the main problem has been to appropriately define and measure the dependent variable. Centrist abstention has been largely ignored by the literature, which has mainly focused on analysing leftist abstention. However, the existence of different measurements of the left-right concept can be problematic. Furthermore, throughout this dissertation I have considered the 'centre' as the centre position on the left-right scale (normally the midpoint of the scale). This decision was taken in order to select an exogenous position, irrespective of parties' ideological positions. However, the centre position does not always coincide with the position of the median voter. Future works will need to pay more attention to median voter abstaining patterns and how these patterns change according to parties' ideological positioning.

Other further avenues for research are related to the necessity to continue studying why the centre abstains.

Firstly, some factors studied here need to be reconsidered. Findings in this dissertation prove that the centre abstains because of a combination of two factors: on the one hand, individuals at the centre are more likely to have less political sophistication than the average individual. On the other hand, micro and macro analyses concludes that three party scenarios, polarisation, ideological differences between parties and the effective number of parties, are significant factors that affect centrist abstention. However, the evidence is not strongly robust and consistent throughout the articles, especially

regarding the last two factors.

Secondly, other factors need to be researched more extensively. As the reader of this dissertation has realised, the efforts have been put into researching how certain party strategies affect centrist abstention. The initial argument was to explore how distance or equidistant situations affect centrist individuals. Some other factors not related to a change in ideological scenarios have also been introduced, such as competitiveness or district magnitude. Although they do not seem to have an important impact, future research may investigate whether this *new* 'ideological bias' (centrist abstention) is also affected by different institutional scenarios, as recent research has suggested [Gallego et al., 2012].

Thirdly, the analyses should be broadened to include differences on turnout rates across ideological positions. Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to answer why centrist abstention is higher in some contexts and why some centrist individuals abstain. However, it remains to be understood the contexts where there is an homogeneity of turnout rates across ideological positions. I have, however, provided some clues: political sophistication and some party scenarios are more likely to affect the centre than the rest, but future research can consider other hypotheses that primarily affect the right or the left (or both).

Another set of avenues for further research has to do with the consequences of centrist abstention. This dissertation has only focused on the causes, but it is clear that, since it has been ignored until now, centrist abstention opens up several scenarios regarding its effects. For instance, the standard Downsian model determines that parties need to converge towards the centre in order to win the elections [Downs, 1957]. Downsian models generally assume universal turnout. What is the rational strategy if the *real* scenario is contemplated and the centre abstains more than the rest? How would parties behave when skewed abstention is taken into account? What would the Nash equilibrium be?

Other avenues are related to the special relationship between some factors analysed here. More concretely, the potential endogeneity present in the relationship between the left-right positioning on abstention and with alienation and indifference. It is well-known that voters shorten the

perceived ideological distance between themselves and their favourite party and lengthen the distance to parties for which one does not intend to vote. In this line of reasoning, it may be possible that abstention modifies left-right positioning. For instance, some individuals may choose an uncommitted and neutral position (i.e. the centre) after deciding that they will abstain, otherwise they would locate themselves close to their preferred party. Regarding the second potential endogenous situation (left-right positioning versus alienation/indifference) the same argument can be applied. Therefore, the rationalisation of the spatial factors of indifference and alienation would be made before choosing one's left-right location, and not after this position is selected. In both cases, experimental designs can tease these factors out. In this field, only a few experiments have been carried out [Lacy and Paolino, 2010], which opens a wide range of potential investigations.

Last but not least, the study of alienation and indifference in the third article has left some doubts beyond the endogeneity problem detailed above. Three possible explanations (and avenues for further research) can be put forward:

First, although the theoretical expectations imply that some individuals are more likely to abstain because of indifference and alienation, the existence of some underlying factors can break these situations. For instance, those that consider participating as a civic duty—an unobservable underlying value—may still participate, although they can be equally distant between two parties or far away from any political alternative. Again, further observational or experimental design is needed in order to disentangle these alternative explanations.

Second, future works will need to check and find the correct way to operationalise alienation and indifference. As mentioned in the third article, I decided to adhere to the original Downsian definition, even though most of the literature has adopted a sociological approach [Melton, 2009]. However, the literature must conclude whether alienation and indifference effects are curvilinear, linear (both of them produce the same results in my analysis) or whether a different approach should be adopted by analysing, for instance, the existence of thresholds. That is, distance (in terms of absolute distance or equally distant) may not matter until a certain point, beyond which it starts

to be significant. Or even by considering alienation and indifference under the directional model. Additionally, there may exist a trade-off between alienation and indifference. Individuals can start analysing how equally distant they are until parties move further away.

Third, further statistical tools are needed. Recently, Maurer [2013] have adopted a novel approach in order to estimate alternative-specific coefficients under the conditional logit approach. The conditional logit estimation has not been very popular when studying abstention because of the difficulty of assigning an ideological distance to abstainers. If this is overcome (for instance, by using instruments or some assumptions of how abstainers behave), the Maurer et al. approach can be very useful in order to identify whether alienation and/or indifference weigh more when considering different parties.

Finally, there is in this dissertation a broader tension with regards to how well the spatial model functions. In my analysis, it seems that, at least for abstention, the spatial model works better for leftist individuals (first) and centrist individuals (second), and theoretical expectations are generally not met on the right. Even more recently, research has shown that the spatial model works less for centrist individuals [Adams, 2013], and the reason may be because valence considerations are given greater weight [Astudillo and Rodon, 2013]. In any case, research needs to move forward by taking into account integrated models that account for different explanations under diverse circumstances, and do so in a parsimonious way.

Overall, this thesis has gone one step further by raising a new general theory about a *new* ideological bias. Taken together, the three papers presented have sought to better specify the phenomenon and the determinants behind centrist abstention. As it is the case when something is *new*, many questions still remain unanswered, but what is certain is that this dissertation offers a new approach to a classical concept and makes special efforts to identify the underlying causal mechanisms. In this sense, this thesis has been a first attempt to fill a new gap in the 'ideological bias' literature, a traditional topic that still arouses a passionate debate among citizens and academics alike. In this sense, I hope this dissertation can be a promising path for improving this *new* view of the ideological bias and for understanding the, until now,

mysterious centre ground.

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Annex

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Conference attendance

XI Spanish Congress of Political Science. September 18th- 20th, 2013. Sevilla.

3rd Annual General Conference of the European Political Science Association. June 20th- 22th, 2013. Barcelona, Catalonia.

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IX Spanish Congress of Political Science. September 23rd- 25th, 2009. Málaga.

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