STABLE AND DIVERGENT POLICY POSITIONS
-a study of perceptual agreement among voters in Sweden, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands and Great Britain

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**Abstract**

In several industrialized democracies, voters with changing party preferences have substantially increased during the past three decades (Dalton 1984; Franklin, Mackie & Valen 1992; Green-Pedersen 2004; Narud 1999; Bartolini 1990). Instead of relying on social positions as a cue to which party to vote for modern voters are more inclined to vote according to their policy preferences (Brug 1999a; S. O. Holmberg, Henrik 2004b). According to the responsible party model the importance of stable and divergent policy positions among the political parties are emphasized as important requirements for effective representation (Adams 2001; APSA 1950; Esaiasson 1996; Thomassen 1999). Nevertheless, empirical studies have shown that voters in general have experienced a decreasing ideological polarization in many of the West European party systems during the past three decades as volatility is growing (Knutsen 1998; 1999; Oscarsson 1998; Brug 1999a). The purpose with this article is to shed some light on how voters’ perceptions of parties’ policy positions is affected by stability and divergency in the policy positions. The results showed that voters in general do not seem to be affected by more temporarily changes in a party’s policy position, only changes over a longer time perspective has a significant negative impact on voters’ perceptual agreement. Divergency was also of relatively great importance for explaining the variation in perceptual agreement; especially the divergency for single parties but also divergency within the party systems as such rendered a significant effect. The latter is an interesting finding as well, let be that the effect was relatively small, as it indicates that perceptual agreement in general is higher for all parties when the entire party system is divergent. Thereby, the agreement among voters on the position of a specific party is not only affected by the position of the party by it self but also the divergency as a characteristic for the whole party system, when controlling for single parties with extreme positions.

*Key words:* Voters, elections, representation, perceptual agreement, party dynamics.

**Introduction**

In several industrialized democracies, voters with changing party preferences have substantially increased during the past three decades. Weakening collective identities and decreasing party identifications have changed the relationship between parties and voters. Instead of relying on social positions as a cue to which party to vote for modern voters are
more inclined to vote according to their policy preferences (Brug 1999a; S. O. Holmberg, Henrik 2004b). This in turn has caused instability and uncertainty on the parliamentary arena since the voters tend to be more receptive to the parties vote-seeking strategies (Dalton 1984; Franklin, Mackie & Valen 1992; Green-Pedersen 2004; Narud 1999; Bartolini 1990). Various models of issue voting, building on a downsian tradition, has become increasingly useful in understanding mass-elite linkages as volatility grows and voters become more responsive to parties vote-seeking strategies (Brug 2004; Green-Pedersen 2004; Narud 1999).

According to the responsible party model, which often is used for theorising about the necessary conditions for citizens to select parties, the importance of stable and divergent policy positions among the political parties are emphasized as important requirements for effective representation (Adams 2001; APSA 1950; Esaiasson 1996; Thomassen 1999). Nevertheless, empirical studies have shown that voters in general have experienced a decreasing ideological polarization in many of the West European party systems during the past three decades as volatility is growing (Knutsen 1998; 1999; Oscarsson 1998; Brug 1999a). However, in order to maintain a meaningful mass-elite communication and policy representation, citizens need to have clear and correct perceptions of the main alternatives and what the ideological conflicts in the party system are all about (Berelson 1952). The purpose with this article is then to shed some light on how voters’ perceptions of parties’ policy positions is affected by the degree of stability and divergency policy positions.¹

**The importance of clear and common perceptions**

The responsible party model (RPM) emphasizes a row of conditions that has to be fulfilled in order to reach the normative ideals of political representation, where the public policies are reflecting the will of a majority of the voters. The model presumes a prospective mandate where parties, during the election campaign present stable and divergent policy programs so that voters are given meaningful electoral choices. In order to directly influence government policies the voters are supposed to make a comparative evaluation of the policy programmes among the competing parties, and vote for the party or candidate whose policy-program that are closest to his/her own preferences (Adams 2001; APSA 1950; Esaiasson & Holmberg 1996; Thomassen 1999). An underlying assumption that can be deduced from the responsible party model is that an electorate with clear and common perceptions² of the party space is an important prerequisite for successful political representation.
(Brug 1997; Converse 1975; Schmitt & Thomassen 1999). This since voters are assumed to implicitly use a spatial image in their perceptions of political actors, issues or ideologies (Adams 2001; Downs 1957).³

A number of empirical studies from the middle of 1950 and onwards have confirmed that the average level of knowledge about political issues and issue positions among citizens in several countries many times are modest (Bartels 1996; Berelson, Lazarsfeld & McPhee 1954; Carpini 1991; Carpini 1996; Converse 1970; S. O. Holmberg, Henrik 2004b; Petersson et al. 1998). On the other hand there are studies that have stressed that voters not necessarily need detailed information about parties or policies in order to make reasoned choices, as voters tend to make use of different kinds heuristics or cognitive cues (Bartels 1996; Feldman & Conover 1983; Fiske 1980; Kinder 1993; Lupia 1998; Popkin 1991; Zaller 1992). What kind of cues that voters will make use is of course an individual question but also depending on what cues that are accessible. Election campaigns are central in this context in improving or making cues available for voters (Popkin 1991). Since campaigns have a framing effect, they will also be important for unifying the electorate, as some issues or cleavages tends to be highlighted i.e. more salient during a campaign, something that makes it easier for voters to make their choices (Budge et al. 2001; Budge 1987; Klingemann 1994; Popkin 1991). However, cognitive cues are only effective when voters perceive them to be better indicators on the intention of parties or candidates than other available cues (Lupia 1998; Popkin 1991). Political representatives have an important task to fulfil in this context in providing voters with relevant information on about their policy-stands and thereby, making these cues available for the voters’. The importance of an effective communication between voters and their representatives cannot be overstated, since cues are only cost-reducing devices as reasoned choices based on cognitive cues do require some knowledge and information (Lupia 1998).

According to Downs there are three different factors that are influential when a voter is evaluating a party’s or a candidate’s policy position. 1) The position that emanates in the election manifesto, speeches or from other kind of performances. 2) Policy positions that have been maintained or declared in earlier elections. 3) expected future performance based on past and current information (Budge 1986). When direct information of a candidate or a party’s policy position is hard to obtain, voters will substitute for this lack of information by using information about ideology or the past position in an attempt to estimate current or future position (Downs 1957; Lupia 1998; Popkin 1991).⁵ Ideology is, thus, an important cognitive
cue that voters use for substituting detailed information about party policies. Ideology is in Downs’s theory manifested through a party’s left-right position. The advantage with an ideological position such as the left-right is that it summarises the positions on a large number of underlying issues (Brug 1997; 1999a; Downs 1957; S. Holmberg 2004; Fuchs & Klingemann 1989). The past record of a party or a candidate may also be an important cue for how reliable a specific party or a candidate actually is as a provider of information. In so doing, a voter can reduce the information costs by gathering out which of the speakers that are reliable and those who are not (Lupia 1998).

But how can vote-decisions based on ideology lead to meaningful representation? The answer to this question is that this is dependent on to what extent the perceived positions of the parties reflect their policies. To the extent that left-right perceptions of the voters accurately reflects policy positions of parties (van der Brug 1999a: 148). Earlier studies has shown that voters perceptions on an aggregated level to a large extent reflects the positions obtained from other more party related sources such as party manifestos, surveys among the member of the parliament and roll-calls (Brug 1998; Pennings 2001; Brug 2001). The fact that the average or the median perception among voters tends to reflect some kind of ‘true’ position is of course positive. Nevertheless, as the concept of representation implies that public policies should reflect the will of the majority of the people the perceptions should be accurate for as many voters as possible. The fact that the aggregated mean voter perception is accurate does not necessarily tell anything about perceptual accuracy for the majority of the individual voters since the error terms, from a statistical point of view, tends to cancel out. Convinced of the findings of van der Brug we will here turn towards and focus on the agreement among voters on parties policy positions. If the elections shall work as vehicle for preference aggregation, it is important that a party’s election platform is perceived in a similar manner for a majority of the voters if the mandate giving shall be meaningful. If the political mandates that the parties are applying for during the election campaigns becomes too relative not only the process of representation will be suffering, it may also be more difficult for citizens to hold politicians accountable for their policies. Political perceptions in general and perceptual agreement in particular are thus affecting the extent to which voters are meaningfully represented in a political system, and as such they are important determinants of the outcomes of electoral processes (Granberg 1988: 5).
Stable and divergent policy positions?

It has earlier been discussed that during the past three decades voters in several modern democracies have become more inclined to vote according to their policy preferences and that social class or party identification has become less important for voters’ party choice (Dalton 1984; Franklin, Mackie & Valen 1992; Green-Pedersen 2004; Narud 1999; Bartolini 1990). At the same time other studies have indicated that there has been a decreasing ideological divergency among the political parties, where more parties tend to shift their policy positions towards the ideological middle (Knutsen 1998; 1999; Oscarsson 1998; Brug 1999a). According to Downs’s theory of party competition, parties are supposed to adjust their ideological position over time in order to maximise the vote-share (Downs 1957). As the voters also seems to have become more responsive to the parties’ vote-seeking strategies, the dynamic in the party systems may also be expected to have increased.

To the left in figure 1, long-term stability in the parties’ left-right positions in Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden between 1970:s to 2000 is depicted. There is no clear-cut trend among these countries that the party dynamics actually has been increasing over the past thirty years. However, three out of five countries do actually indicate that this is the case and in Sweden there is a sharp trend towards more dynamic parties. In Norway, on the other hand, the result is heavily affected by the two outliers.

Figure 1. Stability and divergency among parties left-right positions in Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden between 1970:s to 2000.
Comment: for details about the measures see p. 10 and appendix 1. Data comes from the European voter and can be received from the Central Archive for Empirical Social Research (ZA) at the University of Cologne with the study number 3911. Complementary data for the elections after 1998 that is not included in the European Voter-database has in the case of the Netherlands in the elections of 2002 and 2003 been received from (Irwin 2005). Data for Norway in 2001 and Sweden 2002 has been received from: Swedish Social Science Data Archive (SSD), www.ssd.gu.se. Data for Germany in 2002 has been taken from the CSES-project and can be downloaded from: www.umich.edu/~cses.

However, there should be no doubt about that the divergency in terms of ideology in the party systems has decreased dramatically over the years, with Norway as the only exception. One explanation could be that the left-right dimension has been decreasing in importance during that last three decades. However, in a study of the European parliamentary elections from 1989 to 2004 the empirical results showed that the left-right dimension actually were increasing in importance and that it also was highly salient among the newer democracies from 1989 and onwards (Oscarsson 2005).

As earlier mentioned, the responsible party model states that the parties shall present stable and divergent policy positions, so that the voters’ will be able evaluate and compare their different political alternatives. This process includes both present and retrospective elements since voters are often are evaluating the political alternatives on the basis of their past performance, as they are using both ideology and history as informational shortcuts. The question is then how the voters are affected by the decreasing divergency and, to some extent, stability in the parties’ ideological positions? The overall objective in this study is then, set out from two of the main assumptions in the responsible party model, to examine how the perceptual agreement among voters on parties ideological left-right positions is affected by the degree of divergency and stability in parties policy positions.9

Research design

In order to investigate the effect of stable and divergent policy positions on the degree of agreement among voters’ perceptions we need valid information about the policy positions of the parties. Among the alternative sources of party-related data concerning parties’ policy positions we find party manifestos, surveys among the member of the parliament or expert surveys. A problem related with the two latter sources is that it is difficult get comparable data
over time but using party manifestos could be a fruitful path. However, the left-right structure is not time invariant and it differs between countries. In order to construct a left-right scale based on election manifestos one therefore needs a solid knowledge about the parties over time in all five countries, which is difficult to acquire as well. An inductive solution on the problem could be to look for relationships within the election manifestos by a principal component- or factor analysis. However, since the left-right dimension is a spatial concept, there will be proximity relationships between the election manifestos and the left-right position, where parties on the left-wing will emphasize leftist issues and the other way around. For this reason, factor analyses are prone to generate deceptive results (Brug 2001).

Another drawback related to the use of factor analysis on manifesto data is that the variables tend to outnumber the cases. Nevertheless, as earlier mentioned, van der Brug has showed that when the perceptions among voters in the Netherlands were confronted with some of these alternative measures. The results showed that voters’ perceptions of party positions in six different dimensions in general on an aggregated level were fairly accurate, even for the least informed group of voters (Brug 1998). Based on this result the interpolated median voter position will be used to describe the central tendencies of the voter distributions and consequently also as an indicator of the policy positions of the parties.10

In this article the left-right dimension will, for obvious reasons, be used of as an indicator on ideology. Of course, the ideal would have been the most important dimensions in each country since we know that the left-right dimension not is the only existing issue-dimension in most countries. Nevertheless, it is one of the few comparable measurements for belief systems available and it has also been considered as being one of the most universal and salient issue-dimensions within several political systems. (Jones 2004; Budge 1987; Klingemann, Hofferbert & Budge 1994; Thomassen 1999; Ware 1996). The bipolar left-right construction has shown remarkable resistance, reproducing itself in new polities and in new historical and social contexts over the centuries, constantly challenged and reshaped by new ideological dimensions.11 Among the countries covered in this analysis, (that are Great Britain, Norway, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands), the dimensionality varies between an average of 1,5 to 3,5 issue dimensions over the last decades. More important is, however, that the socio-economic left-right dimension is represented and highly salient in all these countries (Lijphart 1999; Fuchs & Klingemann 1989; Inglehart & Klingemann 1976).
The data

When studying the effects of stability in party positions on perceptions among voters time series data is needed. In Sweden for example, election studies has been carried out since 1956 but the question about left-right positions among parties is only included since 1979. In order to get enough cases to obtain efficient estimates time-series data from election studies in five different countries, Norway, Sweden, Germany, The Netherlands and Great Britain, has been pooled into one data-set with 30 parties covered in 43 elections.

The data has been taken from the database constructed by the European Voter Project. The database is the result of the establishment of the International Committee for Research into Elections and Representative Democracy (ICORE). The aim of ICORE was to promote cross-national research into electoral behaviour and representative democracy, where one of the first priorities was to make use of already existing data. In order to do this a European Elections Database was created, consisting of all the national election studies from most of the major European election studies, documented in English (Ekkehard Mochmann 1998). The data can be received from the Central Archive for Empirical Social Research (ZA) at the University of Cologne with the study number 3911. Complementary data for the elections after 1998 that is not included in the European Voter-database has in the case of the Netherlands in the elections of 2002 and 2003 been received from (Irwin 2005). Data for Norway in 2001 and Sweden 2002 has been received from: Swedish Social Science Data Archive (SSD), www.ssd.gu.se. Data for Germany in 2002 has been taken from the CSES-project and can be downloaded from: www.umich.edu/~cses. The data for the 1977 election in the Netherlands is extrapolated from the past and the previous parliamentary election studies and is taken from the Continuous Survey, wave 11, which can be found in (Eijk 1983: 412). The data on left-right positions is also missing for Germany in the elections of 1980 and 1994 and have therefore been extrapolated from the past and the previous parliamentary election studies.

Comparability between countries

A problem that often appears when going comparative is that it is seldom that the questions outlined in the election surveys are the same in the countries you want to compare. When it comes to the left-right dimension, this is a minor problem since the question usually goes as: where would you place party x on a left-right scale stretching from y-z. The advantage with
survey questions like this is that we do not have to consider what the left-right dimension actually means or what it contains in every single country, thus, it may be expected that left-right issues to some extent differs between countries depending on history, traditions, culture etc.

More problematic is, however, that the lengths of the rating scales that are being used are varying between seven to eleven degrees. In Norway a 7-point scale was used for the election studies from 1973 until 1977 when a 9-point scale was used instead. From 1985 until 1997 a 10-point scale was used but was replaced by an 11-point scale in 2001. The Netherlands has been using a 7-point scale from 1971 and onwards until it was replace by a 10-point scale in 1981. Great Britain is using a 7-point scale for all the elections and Sweden and Germany an 11-pont scale for every election study.

The problems in comparing results from a ten- and an eleven degree scale may seem as less serious. On the other hand one can suspect that the results from a scale based on seven degrees are not comparable with the results from a scale of ten- or eleven degrees. However, Granberg and Holmberg are dealing with exactly this problem in their study of voters in Sweden and USA. According to these authors a comparison between scales based on seven and eleven degrees can be done as the differences are reasonable. The authors refers to a study conducted by the Swedish institute SIFO, who have been made in the same way as the election surveys carried out by SCB, with the only difference that the last one is using an eleven degree scale while the former are using a seven degree scale. An analysis of the results from these two studies showed only a minor difference with a small variation. A similar result is presented by van der Eijk and Niemöller which are comparing data from the Dutch parliamentary elections over time where the left-right scales for the 1977 election is measured on a seven-point scale and 1981 election is conducted with a ten point scale. Even in this case, the variance between the two data sets is marginal (Eijk 1983; Granberg 1988). With these results in mind, the comparisons that this study rests upon should appear as both feasible and reliable.

However, the fact that scales with different length was used for measuring the left-right positions of the parties may involve that the homoskedasticity assumption does not hold anymore. A common way to avoid heteroscedaticity in the error terms in cross sectional data and to control for outliers is to include a dummy variable for each country. In this study this is
unfortunately not an option since one of the central independent variables are measured on an aggregated system level. The inclusion of country dummies would then involve too small N, time invariant variables and multicollinearity. Fortunately, both heteroscedasticity and other contemporaneously correlated errors in time-series cross-section analyses can be accounted for by using panel corrected standard errors (Beck 1995). According to Beck and Katz OLS with PCSE is more efficient than Panel Weighted Least Square when the time series are short, which they are in this study with ten time units as most, (fortunately, there is no strict lower limit for the time units in a TSCS-data even if ten is recommended (Beck 2001).

Another problem is that since it is expected that voters may use a party’s past record to substitute for the lack of knowledge about its current position, there will most likely be a dependency between the perceptions of a party’s past- and its current policy position. Both a Durbin Watson test and a Correlogram confirm this and indicate the presence of a first order autoregressive process. However, since the dependent variable in this study is the aggregated agreement among voters and that the respondents in all the election studies, more or less, are recruited independently it does not make any theoretical sense to include a lagged dependent variable in the model in order to avoid autocorrelation. The commonly used Least Square Dummy Variable (LSDV)-model with both a lagged dependent variable and a full set of country dummies, which not is an alternative anyway, will also provide biased estimates when used with short panels (Lindgren 2006). The autocorrelation has therefore been corrected for by a Prais Winsten transformation where the autoregressive terms has been excluded instead of included in the modelled as with the inclusion of a lagged dependent variable (Beck 1996). Instead of using the time-series to make the model dynamic it is here partly considered as stationary where the time aspect as such is of less interest.

Operationalizations

Perceptual agreement

The focus in this study is not on perceptions among individual voters on parties policy positions but on perceptions for the electorate as a whole. As earlier discussed, political representation can only be meaningful if the voters shares a clear and common view of the content or meaning of mandates that are given. One way to estimate the agreement among voters’ perceptions is to use a measure of dispersion. A problem then is that the left-right position of parties not are measured on continuous scales but on ordered rating scale.
However, the empirical distributions of observations in different categories of rating scales can always be decomposed into layers, represented by patterns consisting of 0’s and 1’s with associated weights. All patterns can then be described with a value for agreement that conforms to a number of properties, such as correspondence to perfect (dis)agreement, insensible for the length of rating scales and the location of empty categories. As the empirical distribution is decomposed into layers, the degree of agreement can be expressed as the weighted average of agreement in each of the constituent layers, distinguished by an index \(i\), where the proportions of cases contained in the layers are used as weights as:

\[ A = \sum_i w_i \times A_i \]

where \(i\) is an index for distinguishing the layers \((i = 1, \ldots, k)\), \(w_i\) is the proportion of cases of the empirical distribution that is contained in layer \(i\), and \(A_i\) is agreement in layer \(i\) (Eijk 2001). The coefficient is bound between -1 to 1 and it reaches it minimum of -1 when half the sample place the party on one extreme and the other half of the sample place it on the opposite extreme, which is the same as maximum disagreement. On the other hand, when all respondents place the party in the same category the coefficient attains +1, which is the same as maximum agreement. A uniform distribution yields an agreement value of 0 (Eijk 2001; Fennema 1998).

**Ideological short- and long term changes**

What do we generally mean when we are talking about stable party positions? A party that does not even make any slighter shifts in its policy positions will most likely be considered as both rigid, ignorant and aloof from the world. A such kind of party will probably not be successful for any longer period as a political party constantly has to adapt to an ever-changing environment with different issues on the agenda and new problems arising. To survive in a political system, parties have to change their ideological approaches and adjust their programs or election manifestos in accordance with the surrounding environment (Bäck & Håkansson 1994; Bäck & Möller 2001; Katz 1995; Mair 1997).

Another thing to consider is that since ideologies often are described as being both abstract and persistent over time, which implies that they only are changing slowly and gradually, it may in contrast to Downs be reasonable to make a separation between changes in a party’s
policy position and changes of its ideology. Peter Mair is here doing a distinction between a party’s ideological position and its political position. The main difference between the two of them can be said to be the time perspective and Mair claims that while the former is related to the left-right position, the latter has to do with a more abstract affiliation. A similar discussion is made by Gunnar Sjöblom, even though he is talking about party image, which is a somewhat broader concept than ideology alone (Sjöblom 1968). A short-term change in a party’s left-right position does not necessarily have to imply a change in a party’s ideology. Nevertheless, if the changes continue in a similar direction, then the ideology may change in a longer perspective (Mair 1997). The question is then whether the voters also make this extension? According to the spokesmen of the directional theory of party choice, voters are in general not able to perceive any slighter differences in the positions held by the parties along different issue dimensions (MacDonald 1991; Rabinowitz 1989). If this is right, it could also be expected that voters in general not either are capable of discerning any slighter shifts in a party’s policy position, at least not in shorter time-perspectives. Due to this reason two different stability measures has been constructed, one for short-term stability and one for changes over a longer time-period (for details, see appendix 1).

In order to obtain a valid long-term measure four different measures with twelve different variations has been constructed. The two most theoretically reasonable measures were then tested on Swedish election data. However, both the measures showed a significant and similar effect on perceptual agreement (-.29 and -.30) and were also highly correlated (.71, Pearson’s R). The analyses were also run separately with both the measures used but there were only small differences in the effect between the two variables. For this reason, the first measure was chosen for the analysis. The short-term and the long term measures were also highly correlated (.76 & .86) but the effect of short-term stability on perceptual agreement were somewhat lower (-.23) and may therefore be interesting to include in the analysis. Short term stability is simply measured as the absolute deviation for party j in country k between current, ti, and past position, ti, such as: \[ \Delta P_j = |P_{jt} - P_{t-i}| \], while the long term stability is therefore constructed as the average difference for party j in country k between the current position and the position held in the two previous elections: \[ \bar{\Delta}P_j = \frac{(P_{jt} - P_{t-1}) + (P_{jt} - P_{t-2})}{2} \].
Divergency

Divergency is, for obvious reasons, a feature connected to the system as such since we only can speak about divergency between parties. This entails that a single party sometimes might have limited opportunities to affect its perceived divergency since this is dependent on the surrounding parties. Nevertheless there are some possibilities available for single parties to affect the ‘divergency’ to its neighbours which simply is to move away from them. This opportunity might practically be reserved for parties with flank positions, which again leads us towards the directional theory of voting. As mentioned above, the theory assumes that voters in general are not able to perceive any slighter differences in the positions held by the parties along different issue dimensions. For this reason, voters have easier to perceive political messages that are manifest and more frequently occurring. Parties that are located more extremely on the flanks of an issue dimension is here advantageous in that they have the opportunity to more persistently and in a more credible manner, clearly can convey their messages (MacDonald 1991; Rabinowitz 1989; Westholm 1997). Clearly, the distance between a flank party’s policy position and the position of its neighbour might affect the voters’ perceptual agreement of the party. This entails that we to some extent also have the opportunity to investigate the presumptive effect of divergency among single parties and not only divergency as a common feature.

The relative distance for a party to its closest neighbours is operationalized as the mean absolute deviation:

\[
MAD = \frac{1}{n} \sum |x - \bar{x}|
\]

On a system level, divergency has been measured as the weighted average distance between the parties in a specific party system. The weights are based on the percentages of votes received by the parties in order to avoid that the average distance between the main alternatives is affected by the presence of small extremist parties. The measure can more formally be expressed as:

\[
D = \frac{1}{k-1} \sum_{q} (p_{qi} - p_{q_{i+1}}) \times (p_{qi} + p_{q_{i+1}}) + j \times (np - 1)
\]
where $p_{pi}$ is the left-right position of party $i$, based on the interpolated median, and $p_{vi}$ is the vote-share of party $i$. $np$ is the total number of parties.

**Alternative explanations to consider**

We now have five different factors to model, perceptual agreement as the dependent variable and the two divergency and the two stability measures as explanatory variables. However, before the analysis can be conducted some other variables have to be introduced in order to control for alternative explanations and in order to maximize the comparability between the countries. For the single parties we know that they are more or less attached to different dimensions (Budge 1994; Budge 1987). Since this article is focusing upon the left-right dimension it may be a good idea to also control for different party families so that parties or countries that are less attached to this dimension not is discriminated. This since perceptual agreement has been proven to vary considerably between different party families (S. O. Dahlberg, Henrik 2005; Oscarsson 2005). Also the age and the size of a party can be expected to influence the perceptions among voters. Reasonably it should be easier to apprehend or know something about the position of an old established party. The size may also be decisive in that voters may tend to vote for bigger parties in order to avoid wasting their vote, “one wants to vote for a winner!”(Holmberg & Oscarsson 2004). Or it could be that bigger parties tend to be more of a “catch-all” party with vague ideologies as one of their distinctive feature (Kirchheimer 1990). Also, if a party has been in government or been cooperating in a coalition might affect the agreement among voters on the party’s policy position. A single party government might increase the agreement since a governing party might have an advantage in media coverage and also, hopefully, in realizing its pledges into policies. To cooperate in a coalition, on the other hand, might have a decreasing effect on voters’ agreement since coalition bargaining might imply that some important programmatic stand points is downgraded while policy pledges of the cooperating parties are getting realized.

The differences or similarities between the countries included in this analysis is relative and in the eyes of the beholder. But what they have in common is that they are all old established democracies within the same cultural-historically sphere. The traditional party families are all represented in the party systems and the systems are also distinguished by the presence of a strong left-right dimension (Budge 1987; Fuchs & Klingemann 1989). On some of the central aspects in this study there is some main difference between the countries, which amongst
other is their different electoral systems. The electoral formula, the level of the legal threshold and the size of the constituency do all affect the degree of proportionality within a system (Lijphart 1994; Rae 1967; Taagepera & Shugart 1989). The *proportionality* therefore seems to make up the least common denominator in this context that makes it to a pleasant control-variable that varies over time and between countries. A continuous measure like this is preferable over a set of time-invariant dummy variables. A commonly used measure of proportionality is the degree of correspondence between vote-distribution and seat-allocation (Anckar 2002; Gallagher 1991; Lijphart 1994).

From other studies we also know that the number of parties may affect the degree of competition within a party system (Cox 1990; Merrill 2002) and thereby also the polarization, which in turn affects the levels of perceptual agreement among voters (S. Dahlberg 2005). Advocators of multiparty elections has long considered the amount of parties to be an indication on whether or not the elections are providing the voters with a meaningful set of choices (Dahl 2002; Schattschneider 1960). The breadths of alternatives are, thus, reckoned to increase the degrees of policy representation. The *number of parties* varies over time and between countries why it has to be controlled for in order to make correct conclusions about the presumptive effect of ‘stable and divergent policy positions’. Since all party systems not may be properly depicted by a single downsian unidimensional left-right division that structures the policy space, we also have to take account the degree of *dimensionality* within the respective polities. We know that the left-right dimension is present in all the countries but of course it is not the only dimension and the degree of unidimensionality in a system does affect the degree of party competition, which in turn affects perceptual agreement among voters on parties policy position (S. Dahlberg 2005).

**Analysis**

In table one, five different regression models are presented where the first and the second model represent the contextual- and the party specific control variables. The third model is, simply, a combined model containing both contextual and party related factors and in the forth model the main explanatory variables are introduced. In the fifth model the effect of the main variables, stability and divergency, on perceptual agreement are tested under control for the effect of the party- and the contextually control variables. By starting with the control
variables, the first model(s) can be used as a benchmark, against which the amount of explained variance derived from stability and divergency can be judged.

### Table 1. Determinants of Perceptual Agreement. OLS-regression, panel corrected standard errors (PCSE:s) and PW-corrected autocorrelation (AR1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptual agreement (e²)</th>
<th>Mod. 1 PCSE</th>
<th>Mod. 2 PCSE</th>
<th>Mod. 3 PCSE</th>
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<td>Short term stability (ln)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Long term stability (ln)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-1.017**</td>
<td>0.030***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System divergency (e²)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.009***</td>
<td>0.007***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party divergency</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
<td>0.021***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Contextual control variables

| Eff. # of parties (ln) | .110*** (.042) | -1.73*** (.046) | -0.032 (.065) |
| Disproportionality (ln) | .059*** (.018) | -2.39*** (.055) | 0.168*** (.058) |
| Dimensionality         | .115*** (.030) | -4.14*** (.078) | 0.273*** (.082) |

#### Party specific control variables

| Party family | -          | .007 (.029) | -0.08 (.031) | -0.010 (.016) |
| Age of party | -          | .000 (.001) | .001** (.000) | -0.000 (.000) |
| Party size (ln) | -          | -.013 (.010) | -.004 (.008) | -0.028*** (.008) |

| Coalition | 1.674** (.017) | 2.20*** (.053) | 0.708*** (.218) |
| Cons. | .686*** (.081) | .386*** (.075) | -          |
| P. | .702 | .632 | .674 | .691 | .501 |
| R² | .279 | .184 | .333 | .426 | .496 |

The effective number of parliamentary parties is calculated as the vote-shares using the index of Laakso & Taagepera, also known as Herfindahl’s index of concentration, $H = \frac{1}{1/N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} v_i^2$, where $v_i$ is the proportion of votes for party $i$ and where $1/H$ is the effective number of parties (Lijphart 1994). The degree of disproportionality has been calculated according to Gallagher’s least-square index, $LSq = \frac{1}{N-s} \sum_{i=1}^{N} \left( v_i - s_i \right)^2$, where $v_i$ is the vote-share for party $i$ and $s_i$ is the seat-share for the same party. The number of issue dimensions within a political system, *dimensionality*, is taken from (Lijphart 1999) and coded as a dummy due to collinearity, where dim<.25=0 and dim.>3=1. Party size is the percentages of popular votes received by a party. The classification of different party families has been made by the collaborators of the Comparative Manifesto Project (see Budge et al. 2001). The variable is coded as a dummy variable, where parties belonging to the (former) communist,- social-democratic,- liberal- and conservative party families have been coded one and all other as zero. Government and Coalition, is both coded as dummy-variables with the number of one when a party is in government or in a coalition. The age and size of a party is basically the amount of years since it first was represented in the national parliament and the size is the percentages of votes received in respective election. * $p \leq 0.10$; ** $p \leq 0.05$ level & *** $p \leq 0.01$ level (2-tailed).
Even though the control variables not are of primary interest it might be worth to take a closer look at the effects in the first three models. In the first model all three variables yields a significant effect on perceptual agreement, or more correctly the square of agreement. Both the degree of disproportionality and dimensionality have, as expected, a negative effect on perceptual agreement (-.059*** and -.115***). More interesting is the effect of the effective number of parliamentary parties (-.110***), when controlling for disproportionality and dimensionality. The negative sign is interesting and in contrast to the view that the ‘breadth of alternatives’ is a positive feature in the context of political representation. To obtain a high degree of policy representation the voters also need to have clear and common perceptions and according to these results the perceptual agreement decreases with the number of parties. Obviously, sometimes less is more. However, we know from other studies that the number of parties affects the degree of competition among the parties, which in turn is positive for the agreement among voters. It could thus be argued that the number of parties actually is promoting agreement among voters but that there also is an upper limit where the information cost exceeds the benefits. In order to control for any curve-linear relationships between the number of parties and perceptual agreement, two interaction-dummies were included in the analyses but none of the variables yielded a statistically significant effect. The first dummy were coded 1 if the number of parties were above or equal to the median and 0 otherwise. The second variable was coded in the opposite way. Altogether, the contextual factors account for approximately 28 percent of the explained variance in perceptual agreement.

According to the second model, none of the party related factors have any larger or significant effects on the square of agreement, which might appear a bit surprising and compared to the first model the amount of explained variance also decreases to 18 percent. In the third model were both the contextual- and the party related variables are included, the effect of the log of disproportionality, dimensionality and the log of the number of parties on the square of agreement have increased and they are all still insignificant. Among the party related variables it is only the age of a party that seems to exert some effect on voters perceptual agreement when controlling for the contextual variables (.001**). In combination, the contextual- and the party related control variables account for 33 percent of explained variance.

In the fourth model, only two of the variables are significantly divided from zero. The common divergency measure yields a positive and significant effect (.009***) while the long
term stability measure yield a significant and negative effect (-.017**). These four factors alone, let be that short term stability and party divergency is insignificant, explains about 43 percent of variance in agreement. This is an increase with ten percent compared to model three, something that indicates that stability and divergency in policy positions are important factors behind the agreement among voters.

In the fifth model, where all variables are included, it seems as short term stability is of minor importance as an explanatory factor behind the perceptual agreement among voters. In both models the effect has been small and insignificant (-.001). Instead, it is long-term stability that accounts for a larger amount of the variance in perceptual agreement (-.030***). This is a very interesting result in itself since it is an indication on that voters in general not are able to perceive any slighter or more rapid shifts in the policy positions of the parties. Only when the change remains for some time it seems to affect the agreement among voters, and then negatively. In this study the long-term stability is restricted to three elections and reasonably there should be a point in time when the ‘new’ position is getting consolidated. However, a time span of three elections is approximately stretching over a decennium, which in many ways can be reckoned as a rather long period. A plausible interpretation of these results is that the left-right position to some extent is broader, more abstract and more comprehensive than usually expected, as in Down’s theory for example. From that point of view the results are not that surprising. The left-right position of a party refers to and is closely connected to a more abstract ideological position, which is more resistant to short term changes than other more tangible or pure issue dimensions such as nuclear, abortion etc.

Also divergency, both for party systems as such as for single parties, do have a rather great effect on agreement (.007** and .021***). It is interesting that perceptual agreement among voters for the single parties seems to be affected by the degree of divergency in the party system as a whole and not only the degree divergency for that specific party. On the other hand it is as earlier mentioned difficult to speak about divergency for single parties since this attribute is dependent on the neighboring parties as well, since a position only can be divergent in relation to the neighboring parties. It is thereby affected not only by the behavior of a specific party but also the behavior of its neighbors. A complementary explanation behind this result might be that the degree of divergency also is a result of the degree of ideological competition among the parties. In that way the agreement in the perceptions among voters is affected both by divergency and the fact that the parties are competing more
intensely in terms of left and right, which also might have a facilitating effect on voters’ perceptions (S. Dahlberg 2005).

In general, the effects between the fourth and the fifth model are similar except for that the effect of party divergency now is significant. The effect of long term stability and party divergency has also increased a bit compared to the fourth model. Worth mentioning is that the explained variance has increased to 49.6 percentages, obviously it is stability and divergency that stands for most of the explanatory power among the variables included in the model.23

An interesting result is that the effect of the effective number of parliamentary parties decreases dramatically and becomes insignificant when the main variables are included in the model (-.032). The effect of the degree of disproportionality and dimensionality, on the other hand, remains roughly the same compared to the results in model one and model three (-.168*** and -.273***). The direction of the coefficients is also as expected, the more disproportional a political system is, the less is the agreement among the voters on the parties policy positions. The same counts for the amount of issue-dimensions, the more dimensions there are the less will the agreement be. However, it should be noticed that even though there are data over time there are still only five countries included in the analysis why any conclusions about the effect of the system related variables should be made parsimoniously. When it comes to the party related variables there are only one variable in the final model that is significant and that is the size of a party (-.028***).

A problem that often appears in social science is that variables seldom are measured on similar scales, something that makes the interpretations more difficult, not least when using the square or the natural logarithms of the variables. Most of all it makes it more difficult to compare the effects of different variables but also to get a substantial grip of what the effects actually are referring to, theoretically. There are different ways to mitigate this problem where a rather common practice is to standardize the variables but that is often a deceptive solution to this problem (Halleröd 1991). Another and more simple procedure is to compare the total effect in the dependent variable caused by a certain amount of change, let say ten percent, in the independent variables. The effects can then be interpreted as the average effect in perceptual agreement caused by a ten percentage change in the independent variable, under control for all other variables in the model. Table two shows the average effect of a ten
percentage change in the factors from the fifth model that had a significant impact on perceptual agreement.

Table 2. The average change in the squared perceptual agreement when the explanatory factors are changing by ten percentages, under control for all other variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>( \Delta PA^2 )</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>( \Delta PA^2 )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Long term stability</td>
<td>-.36**</td>
<td>Disproportionality</td>
<td>-.57***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System divergency</td>
<td>.03***</td>
<td>Dimensionality</td>
<td>-.27***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party divergency</td>
<td>.40***</td>
<td>Party size</td>
<td>-.59***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comment: The results are based on the b-values in model 5. Dimensionality indicates the average change in \( PA^2 \) when going from two or less issue dimensions to more than two dimensions.

The largest effect on perceptual agreement is to be found in the size of a party (-.59***). The greater the electoral support is for a party, the less is the agreement among the voters on its policy position. Against the background of Kirschheimer’s theory of the catch-all party the result is not that unexpected. According to Kirchheimer, the ‘catch-all’ parties are often located in the ideological middle and more disposed to downplay their ideological profiles since they are appealing to a bigger part of the electorate, (Kirchheimer 1990).24

When shifting attention to the main variables it is clear that long-term stability and the divergency for single parties exerts the greatest effect on agreement (-.36*** and .40***), thereafter comes the party system divergency (.03**). The results are well in line with the theoretical expectations derived from the responsible party model. Stable and divergent policy positions among the parties do have a rather big influence on voters’ perceptual agreement. Both the divergency among the single parties but also divergency for the whole party system has a positive effect on agreement even though the effect of system divergency is rather small compared to the effect of the other variables.

Since perceptual agreement is a measure of dispersion for ordinal scales, it can be illustrated as the distribution of voters’ placement of a party on a left-right scale such as in figure 2, which also can be used for interpretational purposes of the effects of the explanatory variables.
on perceptual agreement. In other words, when long-term stability is changed by ten percent the average change in the square of perceptual agreement, under control for all other variables, is -.36. This can be illustrated as the difference in perceptual agreement between CDU/CSU in 1976 (PA=.28) and the Swedish left party in the election of 1985 (PA=.64) in table 3.

**Figure 2.** Voters’ placements of CDU/CSU in 1976, the Swedish left party in 1985, the British conservatives 1970 and VVD in 1971 on the left-right scale (frequencies).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Long-term stability</th>
<th>Party divergency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CDU/CSU 1977</td>
<td>Con 1970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v 1985</td>
<td>VVD 1971</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Comment:* Long-term stability: Christlich Demokratischen Union/Christlich Soziale Union in Germany 1976 and the Swedish vänsterpartiet in 1985 The y-axis is frequencies of voters while the x-axis illustrates the individual placements of the parties on a 11-point left-right scale. N: CDU/CSU=1145 and v=2328. Party divergency: Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD) in the Netherlands in 1971 and the British conservative party in the election of 1970. The y-axis is frequencies of voters while the x-axis illustrates the individual placements of the parties on a 7-point left-right scale. N: Con=831 and VVD=1013.

Clearly the distributional pattern shows that the agreement was much higher among the Swedish voters for the left party in 1985 than it was for CDU/CSU in 1976. Similarly, the effect of a ten percentage change in party divergency on the square of perceptual agreement (.40) can be illustrated as the difference in perceptual agreement among voters between the British conservative party in 1970 (PA=.52) and the Dutch VVD in 1971 (PA=.12). Since the effect of system divergency is comparatively small it cannot be illustrated in the same way as the other two variables.

**Summary and conclusions**

Set out from two of the main assumptions in the responsible party model the aim with this article has been to evaluate the importance of stable and divergent party positions for
perceptual agreement among voters. Among the more interesting findings is that voters in
general do not seem to be affected by more temporarily changes in a party’s left-right
position, only changes over a longer time perspective has a significant negative impact on
voters’ perceptual agreement. Thereby it seems as that the perceptions of parties’ ideological
positions to some extent is less affected by their earlier behavior than one, according to
Downs’s theory, could have expected.

Divergency was also of relatively great importance for explaining the variation in perceptual
agreement, especially the divergency for single parties but also divergency within the party
systems as such rendered a significant effect. The latter is an interesting finding as well, let be
that the effect was relatively small. Thereby the agreement among voters on the position of a
specific party is not only affected by the position of the party by it self but also the divergency
as a characteristic for the whole party system, when controlling for single parties with extreme
positions. An interpretation of this result is voters in general become more motivated to seek
information about the parties’ policies when the party system is more divergent as this
reduces the information costs.

Generally according to the results in the final model (mod. 5 p. 13) speaking, the
communication between parties and voters seems to work best in a proportional
unidimensional system with few parties that hold divergent and stable policy positions. The
assumptions concerning the behaviour of the political parties made by the responsible party
model are supported by the results of this analysis. Obviously, it is of importance for the
perceptual agreement among voters that the parties’ are presenting stable and divergent policy
positions. Concerning the quality of ideology as a cognitive cue, a cautious interpretation
based on the results gives that the cue is both vital and adaptable to the surrounding political
process. Voters perceptual agreement seem to be most aware of decreasing distances between
the parties’ left-right positions and they also seem to be more affected by different
institutional contexts, rather than to different characteristics among the individual parties.
Something that indicates that the formula behind successful political communication largely
lie in the hands of the constitutional engineers.
Appendix 1

To measure short-term stability is fairly unproblematic since it, according to Downs, is a matter about the difference between current and past policy position derived from the policy platforms. However, since there are no definite way to measure the long-term stability in a party’s left-right position, one has to elaborate with a number of different methods in order to find a reliable and valid measure. In table 1, eight different stability measure are correlated with the aggregated perceptual agreement among Swedish voters from 1979 to 2002. The reason behind the selection of Sweden in this case is that the left-right dimension traditionally has been the strongest and most prominent conflict dimension in the Swedish electorate. The fact that the Swedish political system in many ways is the closest to a downsian one-dimensional multiparty system (S. O. Holmberg, Henrik 2004a; Oscarsson 1998), it can be expected that the Swedish voters are more sensitive to shifts in partiers left-right positions than they would have been in a multidimensional system with several competing conflict dimensions. By using a country with a low degree of dimensionality, we have the opportunity to reduced the influence of other factors that otherwise can undermine the perceptual agreement among voters in terms of left-right.

Different stability measures

There are at least three different sources that could be used to track both a short- and long-time policy change. A rather explicit way is cumulative measures based on a party’s current position(s) or the mean value based on changes in earlier positions. Each of these measures can then be elaborated and constructed in a row of different combinations. A third alternative is to use the average position among different party families.

A short-time cumulative stability measure can simply be constructed as the absolute difference between the party position, P at time t, and its earlier position, t-i, which can be expressed as: \( \Delta P = (p_n - p_{n-i}) \), where \( \Delta P \) is degree of stability.\(^{25}\)

A long-term cumulative measure is more difficult to construct. A measure over, lets say, three elections can however be calculated as the absolute difference between the position held
at \(t_1\) minus \(t_1\) added with the difference between the position held at \(t_2\) minus \(t_1\), formally expressed as: \(\Delta P = (p_{i_{t_1}} - p_{i_{t_1}}) + (p_{i_{t_2}} + p_{i_{t_2}})\).

To accumulate the positional shifts for a current period is, thus, not unproblematic. For example, if a party shifts on the scale from, let say 1 to 2 from one election to the other and then during the third election moves back again from position 2 to position 1. Totally, this is a shift of two steps. However, a party that first moves from 1 to 2 and then in the third election moves from position 2 to 3, is also only moving two steps in total. In this situation the second party is, with less doubt, to be considered as less stable in its policy position than the first party that move back to its original position. For this reason, it may be better to avoid cumulative measures as long as we only are calculating the absolute difference and not taking the direction in consideration.

In order to avoid this problem a measure based on average values might be preferable. A such measure could, for example, be constructed as the absolute difference between the current position, \(P_{ti}\), and the mean value based on the two previous elections, \(\Delta P = (p_{i_{t_1}} - p_{i_{t_1}}) + (p_{i_{t_2}} - p_{i_{t_2}})/n\)\(^{26}\). This measure can then be changed and combined in several ways. For example as the mean value of the absolute difference between current position and the position held in the third election before the current election, and the current position and the position held in the second election before the current. \(\Delta P = (p_{i_{t_1}} - p_{i_{t_3}}) + (p_{i_{t_2}} - p_{i_{t_2}})/n\).

As earlier mentioned there is, according to Mair, a conceptual difference between a positional left-right change and a ideological alteration. An alternative way to measure a change in ideology without using information about a party’s earlier positions is to use the average value for the party family as such. In this case based on the values for the \(x\) parties from the five countries included in the data. A such measure is the subtracted difference between the party position, \(P\) at time \(t\), and the mean value for the party family as a whole, \(\sigma\) at time \(t\), \(\Delta P = p_{t} - \left(\frac{1}{n} \sum p_{\text{family}}\right)\)\(^{27}\). This measure can, of course be based on different time units. Here the mean value for the party families are based on decades, \(t_d\), where stability measured for the elections during, lets say the 80’s, is compared with the mean value for the party families during that decade, totally three decades starting with the 1970’s. \(\Delta P = (p_{t_{d_1}} - \mu p_{t_{d_1}})\).
However, it can be problematic to compare ideologies between parties in different countries and it is also not very likely that voters in general make their evaluations based on information of the positions of, let be similar, parties in other countries. A measure like this might therefore be less valid. There are also theoretical reasons to avoid using the average value for a group of parties since voters, according to Downs, base their vote-decisions on information about current, the past and the expected position for specific parties (Downs 1957).

Conclusively, the most appropriate measure for long term changes seems to be a measure based on the average value based on a party’s current positions. The question left is then how it exactly should be constructed. As mentioned above, there are at least two different alternatives to use but how many time units should be used in order to capture the long term change? For practical reasons the time period cannot be set to more than three elections in total in order to keep an acceptable level of the number of cases. On the other hand, three elections will in most countries be sufficient to capture a time-period of at least ten years, which should be enough to capture a long term change in ideology. The first measure is based on the current minus the past position and the past and the third position while the second alternative is constructed as the average value of the current minus the third position and the current and the past position. The two measures can be illustrated as follow:

\[ \Delta P = (p_n - p_{t-1}) + (p_{t-1} - p_{t-2})/n \] \ and \ \[ \Delta P = (p_n - p_{t-3}) + (p_n - p_{t-2})/n \]

Table 1. Correlations between perceptual agreement, short-term stability and the two long-term stability measures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>agreement</th>
<th>STS</th>
<th>LTS1</th>
<th>LTS2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>agreement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STS</td>
<td>-.23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTS1</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTS2</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N:30 The data used for calculating voters’ perceptual agreement is the Swedish election studies from 1979 to 2002, collected by Statistiska centralbyråns, SCB, and administrated by Svensk samhällsvetenskaplig datatjänst, SSD. Data for the party positions that is used for
calculating the stability measures is based on election manifestos, collected by the Comparative Manifest Project, CMP, and can be found in (Budge et al. 2001).

As can be seen in table 1, all three stability measures are highly correlated and they all yield a similar result on perceptual agreement. Nevertheless, it seems as a positional change over a longer time period is more harmful for the perceptual agreement among voters than are a short term change. Since the two long term measures give similar results the conclusion is that it does not matter how they are measured as long as it is a measure on average change over time.

**Elaborating different weights**

Finally, it is not very likely that the voters weight all the three previous elections equally. Hence, it is reasonable to elaborate with some weights before creating the variable for the final analysis. In table 4, the stability variable chosen for the analysis has been weighted differently on explorative grounds.

**Table 2.** The stability measurement under different weights.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vol. 8</th>
<th>W1</th>
<th>W2</th>
<th>W3</th>
<th>W4</th>
<th>W5</th>
<th>W6</th>
<th>W7</th>
<th>W8</th>
<th>W9</th>
<th>W11</th>
<th>W12</th>
<th>W13</th>
<th>W14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson r</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>-.31</td>
<td>-.31</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>-.31</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>-.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The position held in the three former elections, from which the mean-value has been calculated, has in a chronological order been weighted as follows: W1-1*2*8; W2-1*4*8; W3-1*6*8; W4-1*8*8; W5-2*2*8; W6-2*4*8; W7-2*6*8; W8-2*8*8; W9-4*4*8; W10-4*6*8; W11-4*8*8; W12-1*4*6; W13-2*4*6; W14-4*4*6. N: 42.

The results show that the weights have some minor effect and that elections that are more recent tend to have a higher impact on how voters perceive a party’s past positions than do earlier elections. The fact that the weights only are ranging between -.29 to -.32, which only give a variation of .03, indicates that the variable actually is a robust measurement on left-right stability in itself and that it should not be necessary to use any weights at all.
Appendix 2


Norwegian Parties Covered 1973-2001: SV. Sosialistisk Venstreparti (Socialist Left Party); DNA. Det Norske Arbeiderparti (Norwegian Labour Party); V. Venstre (Liberal Party); Krf. Kristelig Folkeparti (Christian People’s Party); H. Høyre (Conservative Party); SP. Senterpartiet (Centre Party); FrP. Fremskrittspartiet (Progress Party).


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feltérképezése: Erosíti-e a pártrendszer egyszerusége a demokratikus legitimációt?) «,
in Parties and their voters in european parliamentary elections (Évi európai parlamenti választások), edited by Gabor & Batory Toka, Agnes?, Budapest: DKKMA.


1 This paper is partly based on an earlier draft labelled: *Is ideological stability promoting voters' perceptual agreement?* Which was presented at the VOD-seminar, Göteborg university, Sweden in March 29th 2005.

2 The concept of perception refers to the cognitions or beliefs that voters have of different political phenomena. An individual’s perceptions may be depicted as: “party A is opposed to death penalties” or that “party B is a left winged feminist party”. The main difference between attitudes and perceptions is that the former builds on evaluative judgements while the latter are not Granberg 1988: 4.

3 From a spatial perspective, Downs model assume that all issues, parties, candidates or voters can be located in an n-dimensional space, where smallest spatial distance is decisive for how voters choose to cast their ballots. Downs 1957; Adams 2001

4 Another reason behind the usage of the history of a party or a candidate is that it is easier to assess real world events than trying to forecast the future Popkin 1991

5 An objection that may be raised against treating ideology as a valuable information short-cut for parties policies is that all parties does not necessary have an ideology Bäck 1995. This is especially true for more recently arisen parties that gather around certain issues rather than ideological belief systems Mair 1997: 109-19; Detterberg 2001 It could be argued that even if a party is founded on a traditional ideological belief system or is organised around other values or issues, a party is anyhow often organized around a common set of ideas or values that constitutes the core of the party. Swedish election studies have also shown that the left-right dimension tend to reproduce itself so that it lasts over time and encompasses parties that usually does not fit in the ideological left-right dimension. Oscarsson 1998. This implies that newcomers that have survived the first critical years tend to consolidation into the party system and the left-right dimension. Nevertheless, there is a reciprocal relationship between parties left-right positions and how voters perceive them, as voters use their perception of parties left-right positions to assess party positions on concrete issues and the other way around; the behaviour of parties affect how they are perceived in terms of left-right Brug 1997: 40.

6 The mandate theory is only one theory of representative democracy and usually one is making a distinction between the prospective mandate theory and the retrospective sanction theory. For the individual voter, the vote-decision is based on both prospective and retrospective judgements Holmberg 1999.

7 The stability measure is constructed as the absolute difference between the two past and current policy position (see appendix 1 for details). The figure should therefore be read as that low values indicate stable policy positions. In the analysis two different stability measures is used but only long-term stability has a significant impact on perceptual agreement and that is why only one of the measures are included in table 1.

8 While doing the analysis we will also get the opportunity to indirectly investigate the quality of ideology as a cognitive cue. If ideology is supposed to be a qualitatively good substitute for more detailed information about a party’s policy stands it should also be affected by the behavior of the parties, such as the degree of stability or divergency in their left-right positions.
An argument why the interpolated median sometimes is a better indicator on a party’s position than the mean value can be illustrated by the case of Fremskrittspartiet, the progressive party, in Norway in the election of 1973. The party was founded the same year and the voters were obviously confused about the party’s left-right position. According to the election study the voters placed the party accordingly, from left to right: 169, 48, 20, 35, 19, 49 and 391. It is rare that voters actually are disagreeing (PA -.05) on a party’s position such as in the case with Fremskrittspartiet in 1973 (even if there were some agreement on that the party should be placed on an extreme position but not on which of the two extremes). However, a frequency like this yields a mean value of 4.91 with a standard deviation of 2.58 and a variance of 6.66 while the interpolated median value is thus 6.57. Considering that the mode is 7, the median position seems to be the most accurate estimate for a party’s left-right position after all.

The reproduction of the left-right dimension can be illustrated by the fact that religious, liberal economic and materialist values all contribute to rightist identification among citizens, while secular, economic leftist and post-materialist values contribute to leftist identification Knutsen 1995; Knutsen 1999; Oscarsson 1998.

13 To make sure that there are no stronger relationships between the scales that are used and the degrees of perceptual agreement a Pearson’s r correlation were run which yielded a coefficient of .22. Obviously there is a weak relationship between the variables but interestingly enough in the ‘wrong direction’ in sense that longer scales tend to coincide with higher degrees of perceptual agreement. Reasonably, shorter scales could be expected to give higher degrees of perceptual agreement since there are fewer options for the respondents and not the opposite. The conclusion is then that it should be fairly safe to draw conclusions based on the data in this study.

14 In contrast to simple heteroskedasticity, panel heteroskedasticity assumes that the error variance is constant within a unit i.e.country. This assumption is thus violated in the case of Norway and the Netherlands where different left-right scales have been used over the years. However, in this case I regard the variation between the countries to be more severe for the Gauss Markov assumptions than the within country variance. See Beck for a further discussion. Beck 2001

15 In order to maximize the comparability between the countries, control variables on system level has been included in the analysis instead of country specific dummy variables.

16 The only exception is Sweden where half of the respondents are a part of a rolling panel and are recruited an election before.

17 The autoregressiv correction is based on the assumption that the errors are commonly serially correlated instead of unit-specificly serially correlated, which according to Becks and Katz, is more reliable and efficient in TSCS-data. Beck 1995

18 In this context, I refer to ideology as Lyman, Tower and Sargent’s definition of ideology, which reads: “a value or belief system that is accepted as fact or truth by some group. It is composed of sets of attitudes toward s the various institutions and processes of society. It provides the believer with a picture of the world both as it is and as it should be, and in so doing, it organizes the tremendous complexity of the world into something fairly simple and understandable”; “[Ideologies] provide a cognitive structure through which to interpret and understand events” Budge 1994: 446.

19 See appendix 1. for the full description of the variables.

20 The difference between polarization and divergency is that the former is a measure of the absolute distance between the flank parties in a party system, i.e. the position of the most rightist minus the position of the most leftist party. This measure is a simple indicator on the degree of competition in a system in terms of left and right. If the left-right dimension is a salient and important dimension, parties with more ‘extreme’ position could be expected to be represented as well. Divergency on the other hand, is a measure of the average distance between the main parties in a party system.

21 Not only that the OLS-regression assumes linearity, the f-tests and t-tools assume constant error variance. Hence, these methods works best with symmetric, roughly normal data distributions. Thus it is often better to analyze transformed data values rather than raw data when variables are skewed. Different (log/power) transformations are often useful for correcting problems with skewed data, outliers, and unequal variation. There are different tools for at hand when transforming a variable where the most common procedures are: y=ex, √e ln(e) or lg(e), which transformation that is used is often of less importance since this rather is a matter of scale selection. The effect is then that the log function squeezes the large values in the data together and stretches the
small values apart while squaring a variable does the opposite (Sydsaeter 1995; Dowling 2001; Wonnacott 1990; Hamilton 1992).

22 In the section where the control variables were introduced it was discussed whether a party was in government or not could be considered as a factor that might affect perceptual agreement voters. Nevertheless, this variable was highly correlated with the coalition variable (.81 Pearson’s r), why one of them had to be excluded. Naturally, a party that is in a coalition is also in government but not necessarily the other way around. It may also be more reasonable to believe that it is the fact that a party is involved in a coalition rather than in a government position that might affect the perceptual agreement among voters. The regression was also run twice with each of the two variables included but there were no greater differences. R² shifted from .490 with the coalition variable included and .485 with the government variable included. The other variables included in the model were not affected at all.

23 In order to test for the saliency of the left-right dimension in respective election the regressions were conducted with a measure of left-right included taken from the Comparative Manifesto Project. The saliency of the left-right dimension did not affect the results to any higher extent besides for that the long-term stability measure in model four become significant on the 0.1 level. The results in the other models were not affected at all and the effect of saliency by itself was not significant in any of the models. The CMP data, which is as a thematic content analysis of election manifestos, is coded as that every sentence or quasi-sentence has been placed into one out of 56 coding categories. Thereafter the sentences are summarized and the frequencies count as the proportion of the total amount of coded sentences where the scores are obtained and put into the CMP-dataset. In order to create a measure for left-right saliency, all the left-right related categories were summarized for each country to a measure of the amount of left-right related sentences out of the total amount of sentences for all parties in respective election. What is problematic when creating a measure like this is to know what coding categories that should be included, what is a typical leftish issue in the Netherlands in 1972? In order to avoid time consuming issues like this I will rely on the categories already outlined by the CMP, which are stipulated on both theoretical grounds but also by factor analysis. The categories are as follows: Left issues: Decolonization, Anti-Military, Peace, Internationalism, Democracy, Regulate Capitalism, Economic Planning, Pro-Protectionism, Controlled Economy, Nationalization, Pro-Social Services, Pro-education & Pro-labor. Right issues: Pro-Military, Freedom, Human Rights, Constitutionalism, Effective Authority, Free Enterprise, Economic Incentives, Anti-Protectionism, Economic Orthodoxy, Anti-Social Services, National Way of Life, Traditional Morality, Law and Order & Social Harmony Budge et al. 2001.

24 According to the theory the catch-all party is also expected to be found in the ideological middle and with, except for its size, vague ideologies as a distinctive feature. A bivariate OLS-regression reveals a rather strong relationship between size and left-right placement (-.236). The smaller a party is, the more likely it is that it will be located further away on any of the left- or the right flanks.

25 The short-term measure has also been used with the alternative long-term measures (see below) as indicators on a party’s past position. The short-term measure was then constructed as the absolute difference between current position and the past long-term measures. However, the results were all similar why a simpler variant of a short-term stability measure were chosen over a more complicated construction in order to maximize the number of observations.
The number of time-unites to be included in the stability measures have been selected according to Fisher’s F-test. When there is not a significant difference between the original- and the alternative model where another time-united has been included by hand, the last significant model has been chosen.

The definition and the classification of the party families is taken from: Budge et al. 2001