



Europeans' left-right orientations: increasingly centrist and/or irrelevant?¹

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ABSTRACT:

Several studies reveal that there is little empirical support for the 'end of ideology' thesis. However, we know that there has been a drive towards the centre(-right) of the major centre-left parties, which have been converging with the neoliberal consensus, and that the clarity of policy alternatives offered by political parties do count for the way citizens think about (and make use of) the left-right divide. Moreover, there are several claims by politicians, political commentators and journalists that the left-right divide is no longer useful to understand politics of our times. The major research questions in the present paper are the following. First, are left-right orientations losing their relevance for individual electors in European countries? Second, are the electorates in European countries moving towards the centre? In both cases, the answers are basically negative: there is too much diversity to talk about general trends but in any case the empirical evidence points predominantly in the opposite direction. After the conclusion, the paper ends by suggesting some cues for future research about how to explain the differences found across countries.

KEYWORDS:

Left-Right; ideology; end of ideology thesis; public opinion; Europe.

Introduction

After the French Revolution, the idea of a left-right divide has gained great importance in mass politics; this explains why Laponce (1981: 56) views it as a type of 'political Esperanto' (see also Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990: 205). Since the 1950s, various authors have argued that we are witnessing 'the end of ideology' (Bell, Aron, Lipset, etc.; for a review, see Dalton, 2006 and Freire, 2006a), or, more recently, 'the end of history' (Fukuyama, 1989). However, it has been argued that these theses are themselves ideological (namely because they turn out to be apologies of the status quo) and, more importantly, have been at least partly falsified by the emergence of the 'new left' and 'new right' since the 1960s and, more recently, by the revival of fundamentalism and nationalism (Heywood, 2003: 319-23; Eatwell, 2003: 279-90).

Applying a more philosophical approach, Giddens argued that in recent times the major differences between left and right have been overcome (2000). On the other hand, Norberto Bobbio (1994: 95-101) has argued that social inequalities remain a very important political issue, although now more at a world level (separating the North and the South), thus providing a renewed base for the left-right factor to maintain its prominence. In fact, recent evidence from the UN Development Programme shows that even within many of the richest nations of the Global North social inequalities have been growing in recent decades (UNDP, 2005). Thus, even in the Global North, the potential for political polarization around socioeconomic issues is growing again.

At an empirical level, Peter Mair has demonstrated the decline of ideological polarization between the major political parties in the Western European democracies during the 1980s and the 1990s (Mair, 1998: 131-6). However, studies with a wider time perspective have shown that, in many countries, the decline in ideological polarization is not a linear phenomenon (Budge and Klingemann, 2001: 19-50; Gunther and Diamond, 2003: 187, 191-3). Moreover, if we have to recognize that in recent times the major centre-left parties in Western (and Eastern) countries have shown some movements towards the right, by converging to the so-called neo-liberal consensus (Glyn, 2001; Delwit, 2004; Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005), we have also to recognize that in many of the same countries both extreme-left and extreme-right parties have been gathering more electoral support (Ivaldi, 2004; Pina, 2005; March, 2008). Moreover, at least some traditional parties of the right have gained a more pronounced ideological profile both in the economic sphere,

in terms of social issues and in foreign policy (Gunther and Diamond, 2003: 187, 191-3). Some of the most obvious examples are the US Republican Party, under both Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush leadership, the Tories in the UK, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, and *Forza Italia* in Italy, under Silvio Berlusconi.

Finally, studies on electoral behaviour have shown that individuals' left-right self-placement is a major predictor of their voting choices, and that its importance has been increasing in many countries over recent decades (Franklin et al, 1992; Gunther and Montero, 2001; Eijk et al, 2005). Consequently, there is considerable evidence to suggest that there is little empirical support for the 'end of ideology' thesis; and that, particularly at the individual level, the left-right divide is still a very important informational economizing device enabling electors to cope with political complexities, both for Western and Eastern Europe (Markowski, 1997; Dalton, 2006).

Ever since Inglehart and Klingemann's seminal paper (1976), there has been a consensus that individuals' self-placement on the left-right axis has had three major components: social, value and partisan (Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976: 244; Huber, 1989; Knutsen, 1995b; 1997; Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990: 207; Freire, 2006a). Moreover, two recent comparative studies (Eijk et al, 2005; Freire, 2008), analysing six and thirteen West European countries, respectively, have shown that the clarity of policy alternatives offered by political parties to the electorates do have an impact on the nature and strength of left-right self-placement at the mass level (Freire, 2008; Eijk et al, 2005; Wessels and Schmitt, 2008).

As we said before, several studies reveal that there is little empirical support for the 'end of ideology' thesis. However, we know that there has been a drive towards the centre(-right) of the major centre-left parties, which have been converging with the neoliberal consensus, and that the clarity of policy alternatives offered by political parties do count for the way citizens think about (and make use of) the left-right divide. Moreover, there are several claims by politicians, political commentators and journalists that the left-right divide is no longer useful to understand politics of our times. Considering that, our major research questions in the present paper are the following. First, are left-right orientations losing their relevance for individual electors in the European countries? Second, are these electorates moving towards the centre?

To see if left-right orientations are indeed losing their relevance for individual electors in the European countries, we will proceed in the following way. One indicator of the irrelevance of left-right orientations for the mass publics would be a growing number of people not placing themselves in the left-right scale across time. There is a recent study (Freire, 2006b) that tested this hypothesis and showed that there is no general trend in terms of the number of people that place themselves on the left-right scale: in some countries there are more people that place themselves on the scale, especially in the new democracies; in other countries that number is stable; in additional countries that number is decreasing. The first two situations, that do not confirm the “irrelevance hypothesis,” outnumber the third one. Freire’s study covers the period between the 1970s and 2004. However, the countries included are limited in number: only eleven West European countries. Thus, our first task in the present paper will be to expand this study by including more countries, both from Western (fifteen countries) and Eastern Europe (five countries), in a total of twenty countries – see the section on “Data and Methods” for more details.

Another indicator that can be said to confirm the “irrelevance hypothesis” would be the changing social profile of those who are not able to place themselves on the scale. We know that people who are not able to place themselves on the left-right scale are also less educated, less interested in politics and less exposed to media information; additionally, women outnumber men in these situations (Fuch and Klingemann, 1990; Freire, 2006b). However, if this profile is changing across time (i.e., if these variables are losing their importance to explain the lack of left-right self-placement), then we would be able to confirm the “irrelevance hypothesis” because in that case we would have a growing number of individuals that are more educated, more interested in and more informed about politics but that no longer recognize themselves in the left-right divide. This is of course our second task.

As we said before, we also want to know if the electorates in the European countries are indeed moving towards the centre. A study by Knutsen (1998), which covered the period between 1973 and 1992 and included eight West European countries, did reveal a drive towards the centre in six countries (all except West Germany, which remained stable, and Denmark, which increased left-right polarization). However, this study is clearly outdated and includes only a very limited number of European countries. A more recent study by Freire (2006b), which covered the period between the 1970s and 2002 and included eleven West Euro-

pean countries, revealed that there is no general trend towards the centre neither across time (i.e., comparing the 1980s with the 1970s, or the 1990s with the 1970s) nor across countries. However, this study also needs to be expanded and updated. The present paper will try to expand the number of countries (to 20) and time span (used both by Knutsen and Freire), from the 1970s until 2004, to see if there is a drive towards the centre, our third task.

The main conclusions of the paper are the following. First, in a majority of cases and for most of the tests, the empirical evidence does not confirm the irrelevance hypothesis. Second, even if in some tests there is some evidence of irrelevance in a thin majority of cases (i.e., in the second test of the irrelevance hypothesis), many cases point in the opposite direction and, thus, we cannot conclude about any European trend. Third, in an overwhelmingly majority of cases electors' moves toward the centre of the left-right divide are clearly outnumbered by moves towards either the left or the right. Thus, the evidence points to a continued relevance of the left-right ideology for the European electors, especially in new democracies, but also in the long consolidated ones. However, there are some cases that show some irrelevance and some trend towards ideological centrism. Thus, variation across countries needs to be explained. Due to spatial limitations, we don't try to explain the differences we found between the countries. Nevertheless, after the conclusion, the paper ends by suggesting some cues for future research about how to explain those differences.

But why should we care about this topic? And what does this paper adds to the existent research about this topic? First of all, this topic is of major importance because left-right is a major divide in European politics since the French revolution, and it is a fundamental element to understand partisan and mass politics in Europe since them. Second, although there are other papers showing that there is little evidence for the "end of ideology" hypotheses, the existent studies are outdated and, additionally, consider only a very small subset of countries vis-à-vis the large set of West and East European countries we consider here. The same can be said the about the hypothesis concerning a move of European voters towards the centre. Thus, in the present paper we offer empirical tests for both the "end of ideology" hypothesis ("irrelevance"), as well as about the hypothesis concerning "Europeans' move towards the centre", in a scale (both in terms of time and space) considered never before.

Data, Methods, and Techniques

To test all our hypotheses we will use several mass surveys based on representative samples of the adult population in each country^{2, 3}. Due to survey data availability the countries considered are the following, and they are divided into four major groups. First, Western Europe I: Continental Europe and United Kingdom (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland, Italy and United Kingdom (only Great Britain)). Second, Western Europe II: Scandinavia (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden). Third, the new democracies of Southern Europe: Greece, Portugal and Spain. Fourth, Central and Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. The data concerning these countries is presented in four sets of nations which share several characteristics in common: age of the democratic regime (old democracies, in Western Europe; new democracies, in Central and Eastern Europe; middle aged democracies, in Southern Europe), level of social and economic development (much higher in Western Europe than in Southern Europe and Central and Eastern Europe, with the latter group usually behind the Southern countries), political culture (a social democratic tradition in Scandinavia, a more conservative or liberal tradition in both Continental Europe, UK/Great Britain, and, nowadays, also in Central and Eastern Europe; Southern Europe is more difficult to classify in these terms), and historical heritages (namely, a right-wing authoritarian legacy in Southern Europe and a left-wing communist, authoritarian legacy in Central and Eastern Europe).

As for the methodology, we will be using a comparative and longitudinal approach. Thus, to test both “the irrelevance hypothesis” and “the centrism hypothesis” we will be comparing the several West and East European countries mentioned above (and divided in five regional groups) both across space and across time (1970s-2004). As for the statistical techniques we will be employing, they are basically multiple regressions, both OLS (ordinary least squares) and logistic depending on the type of dependent variable we will be dealing in each situation.

To see if left-right orientations are indeed losing their relevance for individual electors in the European countries, i.e., to test the “irrelevance hypothesis” we will proceed in the following way. One indicator of the irrelevance of left-right orientations for the mass publics would be a growing number of people not placing themselves in the left-right scale across time. Thus, using the percentage of people in each country and in each decade that can place themselves in the left-right

scale we will try to compare trends across time and see if there are any declining trends or not. For the same purpose, we will use also multiple regressions by country with the percentage of people in each country and year that can place them in the left-right scale, as our dependent variable, and time (year), as our independent variable.

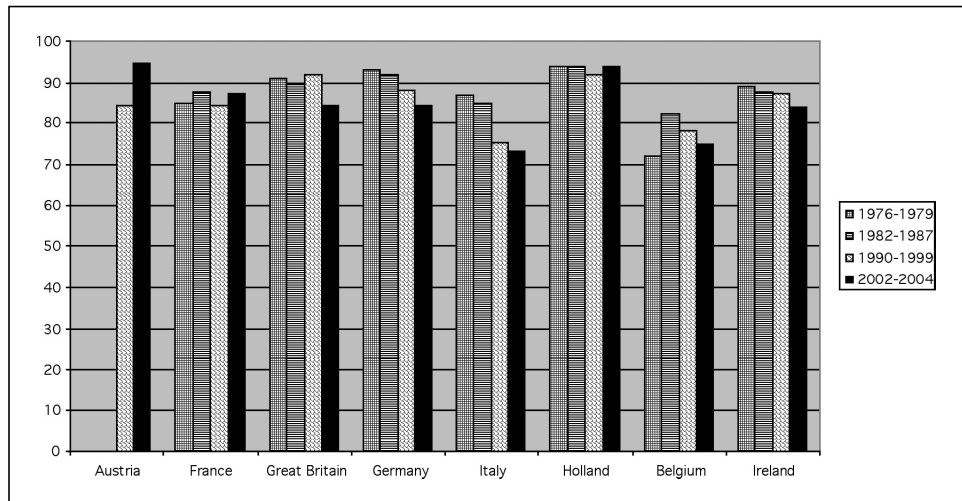
Another indicator that can be said to confirm the “irrelevance hypothesis” would be the changing social profile of those who are not able to place themselves on the scale. If we would find a growing number of individuals that are more educated, more interested in and more informed about politics but that no longer recognize themselves in the left-right divide then we can confirm the “irrelevance hypothesis”. To test this second hypothesis we will regress the capacity to place on the left-right scale (1, able to place on the scale, 0, otherwise), in each country and year, on education, income and political interest, and try to see if there are any trends across time.

To test the second set of hypothesis, i.e., the centrism hypothesis, we will compare the (average) percentage of persons in each country and decade, split in terms of location in the ideological spectrum (left, centre, and right), across time to see if there are any moves towards the centre and if they outnumber moves towards either to the left or to the right. Here we will be comparing only average percentages across time and using some rule of thumb for statistical significance.

Left-right orientations among Europeans: increasingly irrelevant?

As we said before, one indicator of the irrelevance of the left-right orientations for the mass publics would be a growing number of people not placing themselves in the left-right scale across time. Another indicator that can be said to confirm the “irrelevance hypothesis” would be the changing social profile of those who are not able to place themselves on the scale. We know that people who are not able to place themselves on the left-right scale are also less educated, less interested in politics and less exposed to media information. But if these variables are losing their importance to explain the lack of left-right self-placement, then we would be able to confirm the “irrelevance hypothesis” because in that case we would have a growing number of individuals that are more educated, more interested in and more informed about politics but that no longer recognize themselves in the left-right divide. I.e., they would be doing it not due to a lack of resources and/or interest but because a genuine option.

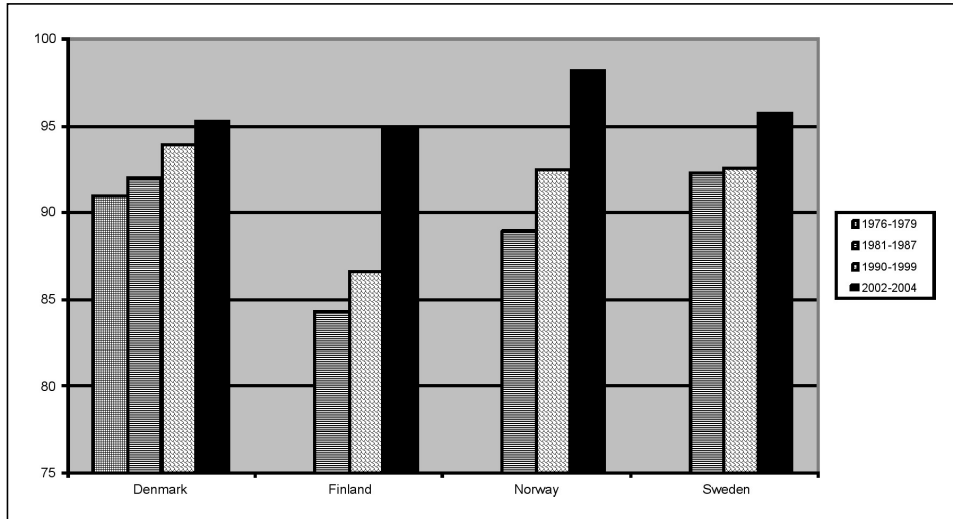
FIGURE 1. Left-right identities in Western Europe I (Continental Europe and Great Britain), 1976-2004 (averages percentages by decade)



Sources: data elaborated by the author from *Eurobarometer (EB) Community Studies – Cumulative File 1970-1992*; *European Election Study (EES) 1999 and 2004*; *Eurobarometer 44.1 (1994) and 57.1 (2002)*. Only for Austria: *World Values Survey (WVS) 1990*, *European Value Study (EVS) 1999* and *European Election Study 2004*.

Notes: 1) the detailed distributions of electors' left-right self-placement by country and year, which underlie the averages presented in the figure, can be furnished by the author upon request; 2) The Figure represents the total number (in percentage terms) of individuals in each country and set of years that are able to place themselves in the left-right scale. I.e., it refers to the number of individuals that place themselves in the left-right scale minus "don't knows", no answers" and "refusals"; 3) Germany: only West (FRG), except in 2004 (which includes East and West); 4) weighted data by socio-demographic weights.

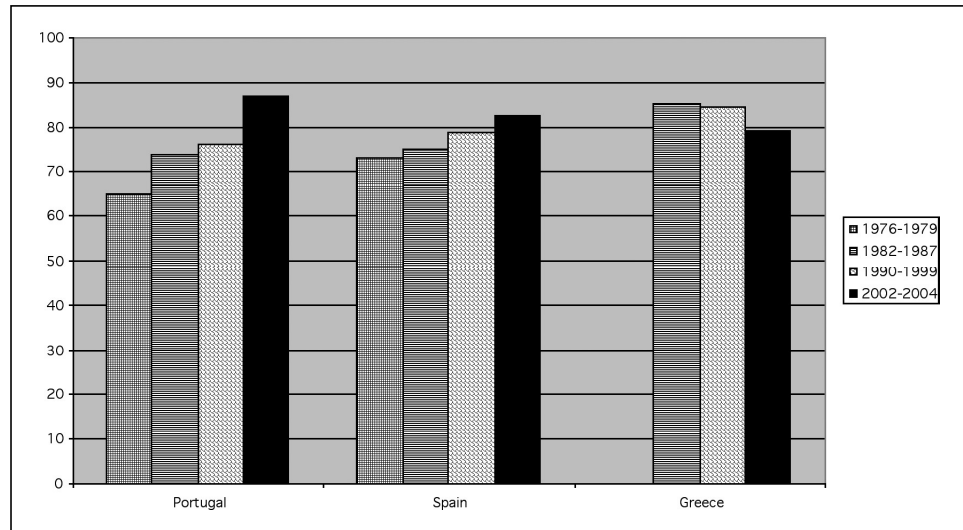
FIGURE 2. Left-right identities in Western Europe II (Scandinavia), 1976-2004 (averages percentages by decade)



Sources: data elaborated by the author from *Eurobarometer Community Studies – Cumulative File 1970-1992*; *European Election Study 1999* and 2004; Eurobarometer 44.1 (1994) and 57.1 (2002) – only for Denmark. For Finland, Norway and Sweden: *World Values Survey 1981* and 1990, *European Value Study 1999* (except for Norway in 1999; no data) and *European Election Study 2004* (only Finland). For Norway and Sweden in 2004: *European Social Survey (ESS) 2004*.

Notes: See notes 1), 2) and 4) in Figure 1.

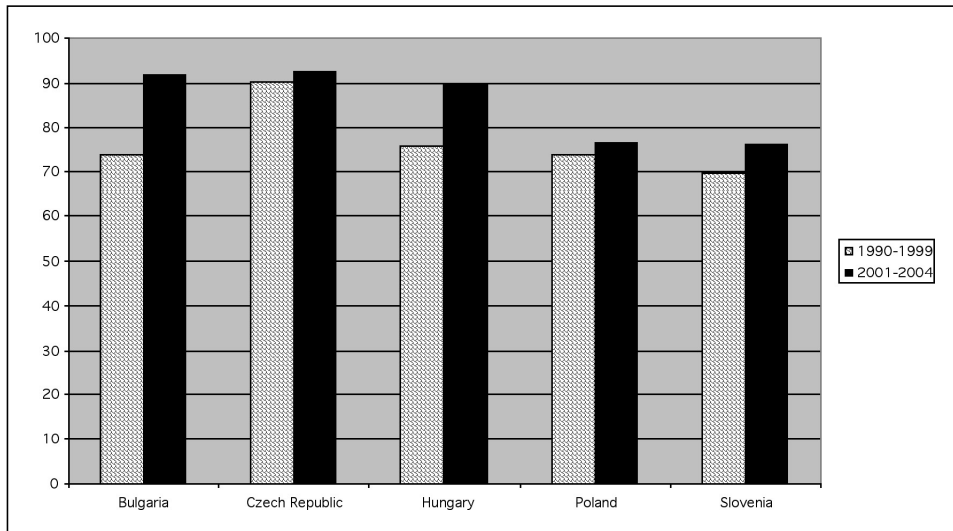
FIGURE 3. Left-right identities in Southern Europe, 1978-2004
(averages percentages by decade)



Sources: data elaborated by the author from *Eurobarometer Community Studies – Cumulative File 1970-1992*; *European Election Study 1999 and 2004*; Eurobarometer 44.1 (1994) and 57.1 (2002); Spain and Portugal, only 2000 and 2002, respectively; *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), Module 2*; only for Portugal in 1978-1984: Bacalhau, 1994: 58; Spain, 1982: Eurobarometer 18, in Barroso and Condomines, 1985: 43; Spain in 1978 and 1984, Barnes, McDonough and Pina, 1985: 701.

Notes: See notes 1), 2) and 4) in Figure 1.

FIGURE 4. Left-right identities in Central and Eastern Europe, 1990-2004
(averages percentages by decade)



Sources: data elaborated by the author from *World Values Survey* 1990, *Central and Eastern Barometer* (CEB) 1991 and 1992, *European Value Study* 1999, *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems* Module 2 (only Bulgaria and Poland, 2001, and Hungary, 2002), *European Election Study* 2004 (all except Bulgaria), *European Social Survey* 2004 (Bulgaria).

Notes: See notes 1), 2) and 4) in Figure 1.

Looking first at Figure 1, which shows the average number per decade of individuals that are able to place themselves in the left-right scale in each country,⁴ we can see that three countries show an upward trend between 1976 and 2004 (Austria, France, and Belgium), one country reveal a stable situation (the Netherlands) and the remaining four (UK/Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and Ireland) show a downward trend. We should note, however, that in some of these countries the trend is not linear. In Figure 2 we can see that in Scandinavia all four countries reveal an upward trend. In Southern Europe (Figure 3), both Portugal and Spain show an upward trend; Greece shows the opposite. Finally, in Central and Eastern Europe (Figure 4) we have three upward trends (Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovenia) and two stable situations (Czech Republic and Poland), although with a slight upward trend.

From the graphical representation of the data we conclude that, although there is no general trend across countries between 1976 and 2004, there are a larger number of countries where there is an upward trend (twelve) vis-à-vis the number of countries where there is a downward trend (five); the three remaining countries show a stable situation.

However, we know that the formation of ideological identities is a process that continues to evolve along the courses of socialization of individuals. Moreover, we know that the formation of these identities is strongly dependent upon the existence of an environment of effective partisan and ideological differentiation, associated with the existence of free political competition (Freire, 2006b). Even in competitive political environments, for the individuals to identify themselves with determined ideological areas and with determined parties, it is necessary that such political organizations and notions, as well as the image and content that define and/or are associated with them, consolidate their presence in the political arena (Converse, 1969; Barnes, McDonough and Pina, 1985; Niemi et. al., 1985; Gunther and Montero, 2001: 88 and 92-94; Barnes, 2002; Freire, 2006b). That is why we found that the levels of ideological and partisan identification in the new Southern European democracies (Greece, Portugal, and Spain) are lower than in the older polyarchies of Western Europe, specially in the first decades of democracy (Freire, 2006b).

Considering the knowledge we have about the impact of democratic socialization on the extent of left-right self-placement among the electorates of each country, we need to separate the new democracies from the old. Considering this split, we have twelve old democracies. Seven of them show an upward trend (58,3%) in terms of left-right self-placement, four show a down ward trend (33,3%), and in one nation the situation is stable (8,3%). As for the eight new or middle aged democracies, five show an upward trend (62,5%), two are stable (25,0%) and only one shows a downward trend, Greece (12,5%). Thus, there seems to be some connection between the age of the democratic regime and the trend in terms of the extent of left-right identities among the population, but in any case most of the situations show an upward trend.

TABLE 1. Trends in Left-Right Self-Placement in Western Europe I (Continental Europe and Great Britain), 1976-2004 (OLS linear regressions)

			Dependent variable: Left-Right Self-Placement	
Countries	Period	N	Regression Constant	Regression Coefficient
Austria	1990-2004	3	-598,515	0,344
Belgium	1976-2004	14	-570,177	0,326
France	1976-2004	14	72,143	0,007
Great Britain	1976-2004	14	374,383 *	-0,143
Germany	1976-2004	14	630,808 *	-0,272 *
Ireland	1976-2002	14	353,168	-0,134
Italy	1976-2004	14	1227,732 ***	-0,577 ***
Netherlands	1976-2004	14	180,609	-0,044

Sources: see Figure 1.

Notes: 1) *dependent variable* 2: left-right self-placement, by year and country; 2) *independent variable*: the year considered for each country; 3) *** p < 0,01; ** p < 0,05; * p < 0,1; 4) Germany: only West (FRG), except in 2004 (East and West); 5) weighted data.

TABLE 2. Trends in Left-Right Self-Placement in Western Europe II (Scandinavia), 1976-2004 (OLS linear regressions)

			Dependent variable: Left-Right Self-Placement	
Countries	Period	N	Regression Constant	Regression Coefficient
Denmark	1976-2004	14	-308,083 **	0,202 ***
Finland	1981-2004	4	-569,303	0,330
Norway	1981-2004	3	-709,744 *	0,403 *
Sweden	1981-2004	4	-328,973	0,212

Sources: see Figure 2.

Notes: 1) *dependent variable* 2: left-right self-placement, by year and country; 2) *independent variable*: the year considered for each country; 3) *** p < 0,01; ** p < 0,05; * p < 0,1; 4) weighted data.

TABLE 3. Trends in Left-Right Self-Placement in the New Southern Europe, 1976-2004 (OLS linear regressions)

			Dependent variable: Left-Right Self-Placement	
Countries	Period	N	Regression Constant	Regression Coefficient
Greece	1982-2004	10	294,712	-0,106
Portugal	1978-2004	11	-1380,044 ***	0,732 ***
Spain	1978-2004	11	-817,244 **	0,450 **

Sources: see Figure 3.

Notes: 1) *dependent variable* 2: left-right self-placement, by year and country; 2) *independent variable*: the year considered for each country; 3) *** p < 0,01; ** p < 0,05; * p < 0,1; 4) weighted data.

TABLE 4. Trends in Left-Right Self-Placement in Central and Eastern Europe, 1990-2004 (OLS linear regressions)

			Dependent variable: Left-Right Self-Placement	
Countries	Period	N	Regression Constant	Regression Coefficient
Bulgaria	1990-2001	5	-1364,232	0,723
Czech Republic	1990-2004	5	-273,838	0,183
Hungary	1990-2004	6	-2132,083	1,108 **
Poland	1990-2004	6	-768,221	0,422
Slovenia	1990-204	4	-1236,389	0,655

Sources: see Figure 4.

Notes: 1) *dependent variable* 2: left-right self-placement, by year and country; 2) *independent variable*: the year considered for each country; 3) *** p < 0,01; ** p < 0,05; * p < 0,1; 4) weighted data.

We now turn to a methodology identical to that used by Schmitt and Holmberg (1998: 101), as well as by Dalton (2000: 25-26), to assess the existence of trends in terms of ideological identities, 1976-2004 (see Tables 1 to 4). In other words, taking as the dependent variable the “percentage of individuals who position themselves on the left-right scale” in each country and year, and as independent variable the years for which data is available ordered in ascending chronological sequence, we used OLS linear regression to test for possible trends.

One problem that immediately arose is due to the small number of cases (especially in some countries: Austria, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the five new democracies from Central and Eastern Europe), the result of the scarcity and/or of the limited availability of the survey data. In the line of Dalton (2000: 25), and of Dalton and Wattenberg (2000: 62-63), we believe that taking into account the reduced number of cases in the temporal series used, the questions of statistical significance have to be made relative. Dalton and Wattenberg establish as a customary rule that an annual variation of 0.3 in a temporal series will be significant, even if the tests of significance do not reveal this due to the reduced number of cases, because variations of 6% between two samples of 1500 cases are always statistically relevant (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000: 62-63).

In Table 1, concerning Continental Europe and UK/Great Britain, only two regression coefficients are significant, and both are negative. However, using the rule of thumb proposed above we can conclude that there are three positive coefficients, but only two are relevant (equal or above 0,3); there are five negative coefficients, but only two are relevant (statistical significant or above 0,3). Thus, we have two downward trends, two upward trends, and four stable situations. In Table 2, concerning Scandinavia, all the four coefficients are positive but only three are either above 0,3 or statistically significant: three upward trends and a stable case. In Southern Europe, Table 3, we have two coefficients that are significant and above 0,3, and in the Greek case the coefficient is negative but below 0,3: two upward trends and a stable situation. Finally, in Central and Eastern Europe (Table 4), we have five positive coefficients and only one is below the 0,3 threshold: four upward trends and one stable situation.

Summing up, we can say that the data presented in Tables 1 to 4 do not support the irrelevance hypothesis, but quite the opposite: out of twenty cases, we have eleven upward trends (55,0%), two downward trends (10,0%), and seven stable situations (35,0%). Considering now the old and the new democracies as two separate groups, we have the following picture. For old democracies, out of twelve cases, five show an upward trend (41,6%), two show a downward trend (16,6%), and five are stable (41,6%). Thus, the large majority of cases show either an upward trend or a stable situation. In the eight new or middle aged democracies, six cases show an upward trend (75,0%) and two show a stable situation (25,0%). Thus, these more reliable data analyses reinforce our previous conclusion: there is a negative relation between the age of the democratic regime and the trend in terms of the extent of left-right identities among the population, but in any case most of the cases do show an upward trend (in the case of old democracies this situation is *ex-aequo* with the stable situations).

TABLE 5. The role of social and political competence in explaining the presence/absence of left-right self-placement, Europe I: Continental Europe and UK/GB, 1981-2004

	1981	1990	1999	2004
Austria				
Education		0,0419	0,1250*	0,0856*
Income		0,0455	0,0000	0,0776
Political Interest		0,8028***	0,3100	0,6155***
Pseudo R ²		0,121	0,078	0,077
Belgium	1981	1990	1999	2004
Education	0,0337	0,0733**	0,1353*	0,0689*
Income	0,1068**	0,0491*	-0,0000	0,0107
Political Interest	0,4204***	0,8263***	0,7565***	0,8436***
Pseudo R ²	0,072	0,160	0,170	0,111
France	1981	1990	1999	2004
Education	0,0161	0,0999**	0,0232	0,0368
Income	0,0909	0,0205	0,0669*	0,0651
Political Interest	0,7095***	1,0663***	1,0065***	0,6639***
Pseudo R ²	0,119	0,193	0,166	0,053
Germany	1981	1990	1999	2004
Education	0,1001*	0,0637*	0,0483	0,0433
Income	0,0887*	0,0045	0,1684***	0,0543
Political Interest	1,0887***	0,9944***	0,6516***	0,9646***
Pseudo R ²	0,193	0,152	0,104	0,121
Great Britain	1981	1990	1999	2004
Education	0,1702*	0,606	-0,0049	0,0080
Income	0,0116	0,1478***	0,0000	0,0809
Political Interest	0,9868***	0,8511***	0,5320**	0,6495***
Pseudo R ²	0,163	0,155	0,044	0,066
Ireland	1981	1990	1999	2004
Education	0,0135	0,1045	-0,0460	0,0393
Income	0,0954*	0,1736***	-0,0533	0,0604
Political Interest	1,0140***	1,0574***	0,7962***	0,8960***
Pseudo R ²	0,168	0,197	0,103	0,144
Italy	1981	1990	1999	2004
Education	0,0578*	-0,0038	0,0674*	
Income	0,0237	0,2804***	0,0612*	
Political Interest	1,0852***	0,8339***	0,9422***	
Pseudo R ²	0,202	0,150	0,159	
The Netherlands	1981	1990	1999	2004
Education	0,1478***	0,0418	0,0482	0,0791*
Income	0,0395	0,0954**	0,2592*	0,1309*
Political Interest	0,6411***	1,3755***	1,2473***	1,1138***
Pseudo R ²	0,128	0,258	0,193	0,158

Sources: WVS 81 and 90, EES 99, ESS 04.

Notes: see notes for Tables 5 to 8 in the text: endnote 6.

TABLE 6. The role of social and political competence in explaining the presence/absence of left-right self-placement, Europe II: Scandinavia, 1981-2004

	1981	1990	1999	2004
Denmark				
Education	0,0997**	0,084	-0,0036	0,0275
Income	0,0661*	0,099	-0,0000	0,1490**
Political Interest	0,9465***	1,2826***	1,5148***	1,3927***
Pseudo R ²	0,142	0,184	0,179	0,203
Finland	1981	1990	1999	2004
Education		-0,0913	0,0088	-0,0274
Income		0,0697	-0,0000*	0,1900**
Political Interest		0,9379***	0,8528***	1,3395***
Pseudo R ²		0,117	0,130	0,144
Norway	1981	1990	1999	2004
Education	0,1673***	0,1074*		0,0759
Income	0,1163**	0,0953		0,0439
Political Interest	1,3501***	1,3421***		1,2987***
Pseudo R ²	0,245	0,205		0,110
Sweden	1981	1990	1999	2004
Education	0,0429	-0,0098	-0,0640	0,1054*
Income	0,0266	-0,0058	0,0000	0,2898***
Political Interest	0,4927***	0,9336***	0,6241	0,8561***
Pseudo R ²	0,031	0,086	0,057	0,146

Sources: WVS 81 and 90, EVS 99, EES 99, ESS 04.

Notes: see notes for Tables 5 to 8 in the text: endnote 6.

TABLE 7. The role of social and political competence in explaining the presence/absence of left-right self-placement, Europe III: Southern Europe, 1985-2004

	1985	1990	1999	2004
Greece				
Education	-0,0863***	-0,0041	-0,0984	0,0108
Income	1617*	0,5077*	0,1016*	-0,0217
Political Interest	7498***	0,5872*	0,3029*	0,5527***
Pseudo R ²	0,085	0,142	0,022	0,057
Portugal	1985	1990	1999	2004
Education	0,0316	0,0576	0,1574*	0,0014
Income	0,2043***	0,0524	0,0435	0,2345***
Political Interest	0,8906***	1,0804***	0,8208***	0,8331***
Pseudo R ²	0,133	0,119	0,156	0,181
Spain	1981	1990	1999	2004
Education	0,0742***	0,0244	0,1148*	0,0632**
Income	0,0035	0,1692***	-0,0028	0,0731
Political Interest	0,8948***	1,0608***	0,7827***	0,7189***
Pseudo R ²	0,180	0,215	0,128	0,119

Sources: *Political Culture in Southern Europe – A Four nation Study* 1985 (PCSE 85), EB 33.0, WVS 81 and 90, EVS 99, ESS 04.

Notes: see notes for Tables 5 to 8 in the text: endnote 6.

TABLE 8. The role of social and political competence in explaining the Presence / absence of left-right self-placement, Europe IV: Central and Eastern Europe, 1990-2004

	1990	1999	2004
Bulgaria			
Education	0,1424***	0,2711***	
Income	0,0488	0,0759*	
Political Interest	0,6873***	1,0057***	
Pseudo R ²	0,169	0,312	
Czech Republic			
	1990	1999	2004
Education	0,1224	0,1037*	0,1438***
Income	0,0616	0,0887*	0,0012
Political Interest	0,1740	0,8869***	1,1764***
Pseudo R ²	0,013	0,135	0,140
Hungary			
	1990	1999	2004
Education	0,1461***		0,1201***
Income	0,0766*		0,1301*
Political Interest	0,7531***		0,7970***
Pseudo R ²	0,218		0,141
Poland			
	1990	1999	2004
Education	0,1195***	0,2450***	0,1610***
Income	-0,0066	0,0828*	0,1002
Political Interest	0,6079***	0,8546***	0,8449***
Pseudo R ²	0,114	0,224	0,179
Slovenia			
	1990	1999	2004
Education	0,0764**	0,2222***	0,0784***
Income	0,0921**	0,0897*	0,2658***
Political Interest	0,8985***	0,7151***	0,6993***
Pseudo R ²	0,226	0,183	0,171

Sources: WVS 90, EVS 99, ESS 04.

Notes: see notes for Tables 5 to 8 in the text: endnote 6.

Let us pass to the second test of the “irrelevance hypothesis.” From prior studies, we know that people who are not able to place themselves on the left-right scale are also less educated, less interested in politics and less exposed to media information. However, if these variables are losing their importance to explain the lack of left-right self-placement, then we would be able to confirm the “irrelevance hypothesis” because in that case we would have a growing number of individuals that are more educated, more interested in and more informed about politics but that no longer

recognize themselves in the left-right divide, i.e., not because of a lack of resources and/or interest but due to a genuine option. In Tables 5 to 8 we proceed with this second test of the “irrelevance hypothesis.”⁵ To do that we use several logistic regressions considering the presence (1) or absence (0) of left-right self-placement as our dependent variable. Due to data availability and the need to make comparisons across time (1970’s-2004) and across countries, our independent variables are only “education,” “income” (individual or household) and “interest in politics.”

The results of the second test concerning the “irrelevance hypothesis” points to an acceptance of the hypothesis; i.e., when we compare the last with the first survey used in each nation, in a majority of countries (eleven out of twenty: 55,0%) the percentage of variance (Pseudo R²: *Nagelkerke*) in the presence/absence of left-right self-placement that is explained by the level of education, income and political interest is diminishing. This evidence suggests that in these eleven countries there are in recent times more persons that do not identify themselves with the left-right divide not because of a lack of educational and financial resources and/or because of a lack of political interest but because they do not consider that political division pertinent nowadays. However, there is no general trend in this respect; in nine countries (45,0%) the opposite is true. Moreover, in either type of cases several situations show no linear trend. Thus, not only is there not any generalized trend towards the “irrelevance” of the left-right divide to the European electorates, showing that the evolution of this phenomenon is dependent on country specific factors, but the phenomenon is also dependent on time specific factors in each country.

Are Europeans moving towards the centre?

As we said before, in this section we want to know if the electorates in the East and West European countries are indeed moving towards the centre of the left-right divide. So as to analyse the evolution of the distribution of ideological alignment in Europe, 1976-2004, the positioning on the left-right scale of 10 points has been converted to a span of only 3 points in the following manner: 1 to 4 fi 1 (left), 5 to 6 fi 2 (center), 7 to 10 fi 3 (right).⁶ This is the solution which is generally used in the Eurobarometers and which is also best coordinated with the number of cases and the necessary intelligibility in the representation of data.

One way to verify the possible existence of a systematic and linear movement towards the ideological center is to compare the percentage of people located at the centre of the ideological spectrum during each decade. In Tables 9, 10, 11 and

12, we present the average percentages of people located in each of the three ideological categories (left, center and right), in each country and during each decade (1970's, 1980's, 1990's, and 2000's). For each country, we also present a variation, measured through the difference in average percentages, between the decades of the 1970's and the 1980's, between the 1970's and the 1990's, and between the 1970's and the 2000's. It should be noted that, by using average percentages per decade, we are purging the averages of some situational effects: those of shorter span. Using variations in averages per decade (Tables 9, 10, 11, and 12), we define a relevant change as being higher than 2.5% (i.e., higher than half of the usual error margin for a single survey). Please note also that we consider only the positive moves toward the centre (or the left or the right), not the negative moves (even if they are higher than 2,5%).

TABLE 9. Evolution of Left-Right Alignments in Western Europe I (Continental Europe and Great Britain), per Decade, 1976-2004

Country	Ideological Position	1976-1978 (A)	1982-1987 (B)	B-A	1991-1999 (C)	C-A	2002-2004 (D)	D-A (or D-C)
Austria	Left	-	-	-	15,6		29,9	14,3
	Center	-	-	-	54,3		50,6	-3,65
	Right	-	-	-	30,1		19,6	-10,5
Belgium	Left	20,7	24,8	4,1	26,9	6,2	33,6	12,9
	Center	37,1	41,4	4,3	44,4	7,4	46	9,0
	Right	42,2	33,9	-8,4	28,5	-13,7	20,5	-21,8
France	Left	41,2	36,3	-4,9	40,3	-0,9	39,9	-1,3
	Center	35,6	39,1	3,5	37,4	1,9	34,4	-1,1
	Right	23,3	24,7	1,4	22,3	-1,0	25,8	2,5
Great	Left	20,2	21,5	1,3	26,6	6,4	30,0	9,8
Britain	Center	43,8	46,1	2,3	47,6	3,8	48,6	4,8
	Right	36,1	32,5	-3,6	25,9	-10,2	21,6	-14,5
Germany	Left	23,3	31,2	7,9	31,9	8,6	32,2	8,9
	Center	40,2	39,3	-0,9	44,6	4,4	44,6	4,4
	Right	36,6	29,6	-7,1	23,5	-13,1	23,4	-13,3
Ireland	Left	16,1	14,5	-1,6	21,2	5,1	21,9	5,8
	Center	47,6	45,6	-2,0	46,6	-1,0	43,0	-4,6
	Right	36,3	39,9	3,6	32,2	-4,1	35,1	-1,2

Italy	Left	48,3	43,5	-4,8	36,1	-12,2	40,8	-7,5
	Center	38,5	40,4	1,9	37,4	-1,1	28,3	-10,3
	Right	13,2	16,1	2,9	26,6	13,4	31,0	17,8
Netherlands	Left	31,7	34,9	3,2	32,6	0,9	36,6	4,8
	Center	31,8	34,4	2,6	35,4	3,6	32,9	1,1
	Right	36,5	30,7	-5,8	32,0	-4,5	30,5	-6,0

Sources: see Figure 1; for all the countries, in 2002 the source is Eurobarometer 57.1.

Notes: 1) some percentages will not total 100 due to rounding off; 2) for each period, values represent the average percentages in each category of this time span; 3) detailed distributions can be furnished by the author upon request; 4) weighted data.

Considering Table 9, Continental Europe and UK/Great Britain, we can see ten relevant moves toward the centre (45,0%) out of a total of twenty-two observations. The number relevant moves toward the right (2 out of 22: 18,1%) is even smaller, but the number of relevant moves toward the left (13 out of 22: 59,0%) is much higher.

TABLE 10. Evolution of Left-Right Alignments in Western Europe II (Scandinavia), per Decade, 1976-2004

Country	Ideological Position	1976-1978 (A)	1981-1987 (B)	B-A	1991-1999 (C)	C-A (or C-B)	2002-2004 (D)	D-A (or D-B)
Denmark	Left	24,5	25,5	0,9	26,2	1,7	28,1	3,6
	Center	47,3	41,2	-6,1	36,2	-11,1	38,1	-15,5
	Right	28,3	33,4	5,1	37,7	9,4	40,2	11,9
Finland	Left	–	22,5	–	20,6	-1,9	24,1	1,6
	Center	–	40,1	–	37,3	-2,9	30,9	-9,2
	Right	–	37,5	–	42,2	4,7	45	7,5
Norway	Left	–	23,8	–	27,3	3,5	39,1	15,3
	Center	–	39,5	–	38,6	-0,9	34,1	-5,4
	Right	–	36,7	–	34,1	-2,6	26,8	-9,9
Sweden	Left	–	34,7	–	30,8	-4,0	32,7	-2,0
	Center	–	33,8	–	35,5	1,7	36,9	3,1
	Right	–	31,4	–	33,8	2,4	30,4	-1,0

Sources: see Figure 2.

Notes: 1) some percentages will not total 100 due to rounding off; 2) for each period, values represent the average percentages in each category of this time span; 3) detailed distributions can be furnished by the author upon request; 4) weighted data.

Considering Table 10, Scandinavia, we can see only one relevant move toward the centre (11,1%) out of a total of nine observations. The number of relevant moves toward the right (5 out of 9: 55,5%) and to the left (3 out of 9: 33,3%) are both much higher than toward the centre, specially in the former case.

TABLE 11. Evolution of Left-Right Alignments in Southern Europe, per Decade, 1976-2004

Country	Ideological Position	1976-1978 (A)	1982-1987 (B)	B-A	1991-1999 (C)	C-A (or C-B)	2002-2004 (D)	D-A (or D-B)
Portugal	Left	28,0	29,2	1,2	27,1	-0,9	28,9	0,9
	Center	51,1	39,7	-11,4	48,8	-2,3	37,9	-13,2
	Right	21,0	31,1	10,1	24,1	3,1	33,2	12,2
Spain	Left	42,5	47,6	5,1	45,4	2,9	52,2	9,7
	Center	42,6	33,3	-9,3	34,5	-8,1	33,7	-9,0
	Right	15,0	19,2	4,2	20,1	5,1	14,2	-0,9
Greece	Left	–	37,3	–	25,3	-12,0	22,5	-14,8
	Center	–	37,5	–	39,6	2,1	40,6	3,1
	Right	–	25,3	–	35,1	9,8	37,0	11,7

Sources: see Figure 3; and Spain 1979 (not 1978) and 1982 in Torcal and Medina, 2002: 64; for all the countries, except Portugal, in 2002 the source is Eurobarometer 57.1; Portugal 2002- *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems*, Module 2.

Notes: 1) some percentages will not total 100 due to rounding off; 2) for each period, values represent the average percentages in each category of this time span; 3) detailed distributions can be furnished by the author upon request; 4) weighted data.

In Southern Europe (Table 11), again we can see only one relevant move toward the centre (12,5%) out of a total of eight observations. And again, both the number of relevant moves toward the right (7 out of 8: 87,5%) and towards the left (3 out of 8: 37,5%) are much higher than toward the centre, especially in the former case.

Finally, in Central and Eastern Europe (Table 12), once more we observe only one relevant move toward the centre (20,0%) out of a total of five observations. And once more, both the number of relevant moves toward the right (5 out of 5: 100%) and towards the left (4 out of 5: 80,0%) are much higher than toward the centre, specially in the former case.

TABLE 12. Evolution of Left-Right Alignments in Central and Eastern Europe, per Decade, 1990-2004

Country	Ideological Position	1990-1999 (A)	2001-2004 (B)	B-A
Bulgaria	Left	30,5	15,9	-14,6
	Center	40,9	51,1	10,2
	Right	28,6	32,0	3,4
Czech Republic	Left	21,4	27,2	5,8
	Center	38,9	30,6	-8,3
	Right	39,7	42,3	2,6
Hungary	Left	22,3	35,3	13,0
	Center	63,2	34,2	-29,0
	Right	14,6	30,6	16,1
Poland	Left	23,4	31,2	7,8
	Center	48,2	37,3	-11,0
	Right	28,5	31,6	3,1
Slovenia	Left	23,9	29,9	6,0
	Center	60,5	45,3	-15,2
	Right	15,6	24,9	9,3

Sources: see Figure 4.

Notes: 1) some percentages will not total 100 due to rounding off; 2) for each period, values represent the average percentages in each category of this time span; 3) detailed distributions can be furnished by the author upon request; 4) weighted data.

Summing up, we can conclude that both in Scandinavia, the new democratic regimes of Southern Europe, and in Central and Eastern Europe, the relevant electors' movements towards the centre are rather small, namely they are rather smaller than the relevant movements toward either the right (always the largest group of movements) or the left. In Continental Europe and UK/Great Britain the relevant moves toward the centre are more important, but nevertheless the swings toward the left are even more important. Moreover, even in these cases the relevant movements toward the centre of the ideological spectrum are in minority vis-à-vis the non-relevant movements. Therefore, the results point to the opposite direction concerning the hypothesis of a growing centrism in Europe since the 1970's.

Concluding remarks

In the present paper we have two major objectives. First, to see if the left-right divide is becoming increasingly irrelevant for the mass publics in Europe: “the irrelevance hypothesis.” The evidence concerning this hypothesis is mixed. Firstly, we found that in a majority of countries there is no relevant decline in the number of persons that are able, or are willing, to place themselves in the left-right scale. Quite the contrary: in a majority of countries the trend points precisely in the opposite direction. True, this situation is even more pronounced in new democracies, showing that there is a negative relationship between the length of the democratic regime and the trend in terms of the number of people that place themselves in the scale. But, all in all, if we consider the situations of stability or growth in terms of the numbers of left-right identifiers, they clearly outnumber the situations of decline.

Second, we knew from previous studies that people who are not able or not willing to place themselves in the left-right scale are less educated, less affluent and less interested in politics. And we wanted to see if the impact of these characteristics is declining across time, from 1981/1985-2004. To put it differently, we wanted to see if there are a growing number of people not placing themselves in the left-right scale not because of a lack of resources but due to a genuine option. If this is true, then there is evidence supporting the “irrelevance hypothesis”. In a majority of countries, eleven out of twenty, the evidence confirms the “irrelevance hypothesis.” However, the number of cases where the opposite is true is also significant. Moreover, in many countries the evolution is not linear.

Our second objective was to see if, between the 1970’s and 2004, in the European countries under analysis there was a drive towards the centre. The evidence points precisely in the opposite direction: the relevant movements towards either the left or the right clearly outnumber the relevant movements toward the centre. Thus, there is no general and overwhelming drive towards the centre. Thus, there seems to be no match between the drive towards the centre of the major wing parties in many countries, especially the socialists and social democrats, and citizens’ left-right orientations. If this mismatch is not corrected, this situation can create problems of representation for the major parties. On the other hand, it can open opportunities for new parties to show up and be successful and/or to small old parties to grow.

These several pieces of evidence suggest that the left-right divide is still an important short-cut for European electors to arrive at political evaluations and decisions, and that, since there are no generalized trends, the variations across countries and across time should be explained by country specific or time specific political (and social) events. A major task for future research is thus to specify and test the social, political and perhaps even institutional conditions that can help explain those variations.

A first set of possible explanations deals with the age of the democratic regime and the necessary learning process associated with the formation of ideological and partisan identities at the mass level. Since ideological identities are formed through the experience of political competition (associated with democracy), we should expect to find that, at least in the first years of the new democratic regime, there is a growing number of persons that can identify themselves in terms of left and right. Moreover, in first years of the new democratic regime, education and political interest should weigh more for the presence (vs. absence) of left-right self-placement than in older democratic regimes where knowledge about left and right is more widespread (and thus easier to get and grasp) among the adult population. The age of the democratic regime can also be related with more volatility in terms of ideological self-placement (left, centre or right): since, in these new regimes, the parties keep coming and going, and those that remain keep changing their ideological profile (or at least adjusting it), we should also expect electors in these new democratic regimes to be more unstable/volatile in terms of their ideological location.

A second set of explanations is related with socioeconomic conditions. The debate about the end of ideology pointed to the growing affluence of western populations as a major factor reducing the level of ideological polarization. Thus, we should expect that (long) periods of economic decline are related with growing relevance of the ideological divide and growing left-right polarization (at both the mass and the party level). On the contrary, we should expect that long periods of economic growth are related with a declining salience of the left-right divide and with growing numbers of individuals that place themselves in the centre of the ideological spectrum.

Another set of explanations is related with the social and partisan anchoring of political conflict. In countries where political conflict is strongly anchored in social cleavages and/or strong partisan identities, we should expect not only that the (usually related) mass ideological identities are not only less prone to erosion but

also less prone to change in terms of direction (from left to the centre or to the right, etc.). Moreover, if political conflict is strongly anchored in social cleavages and partisan identities, then depolarisation is less likely. Thus, if partisan depolarization (especially among the major parties) is indeed followed by growing centrism on the part of electors, then we should expect these phenomena less likely to happen in countries where political conflicts are deeply anchored in society.

A fourth set of explanations is related with political supply, namely with changes at the party system level. We should bear in mind that these is a strong partisan component in terms of individual level left-right self-placement. Moreover, the partisan supply is expected to shape ideological identities at the mass level. Considering all these, we should expect the following. First, in countries where there are major changes in the party system, namely where there is a complete collapse of the old party system and the birth of a new one, like the phenomena we found in Italy in the 1990's, we should expect a also a collapse in the extent of mass ideological identities (the Italian example is illuminating in this respect – see Figure 1 above). Second, in countries that experience high electoral volatility, like for example the new democracies, we should also find more instability in terms of ideological self-placement. Third, if depolarization (at the party system level) do have an impact upon mass ideological identities, then in countries with higher levels of party depolarization we should also find, first, declining numbers of people recognizing / placing themselves in the left-right scale and, second, growing levels of ideological centrism.

A final set of explanations deals with the impact of institutions, and the political context, upon mass ideological identities and their change across time. Electoral (and other political) institutions are very difficult to change (for several reasons that we cannot develop here), and indeed major transformations in this respect are rather rare, both in Europe and elsewhere. Nevertheless, we know that Majoritarian institutions tend to impose some incentives upon political actors and political competition, namely a strong drive for centripetal competition, i.e., mainly focused on the centrist (or median) electorate. Thus, in countries where there was a change in the direction of Majoritarian institutions, followed by a centrist drive in party competition, then we should expect a growth of both the percentage of electors that place themselves on the centre and the percentage of people that find the left-right divide increasingly irrelevant. Moreover, the type of government might also be related with some weakening of ideological conflict: if you have inter-(ideological) blocs coalitions (like the “grand coalition” we have had in Germany,

2005-2009, or those that are usual in Finland and other countries) or minority governments supported by across the blocs legislative coalitions, or by no legislative coalition at all, then ideological differences between the parties will tend to blur (at least on electors' eyes). If these types of government do indeed tend to blur ideological distinctions, then in countries where one finds larger periods of time with coalitions across the blocs (formal or only legislative), or with minority government supported by across the blocs legislative coalitions or by no legislative coalition at all, then we should expect to find a growth of both the percentage of electors that place themselves on the centre and the percentage of people that find the left-right divide increasingly irrelevant. If multilevel government and divided government tend to produce some blurring of ideological distinctions, then we should find the same trends in countries with multilevel government, and/or with longer periods of membership in the European Union, as well as in (long) periods with different majorities in each one of the two chambers in bicameral parliaments (or with different majorities in the presidency and cabinet, in semi-presidential regimes). But of course, as we said, these are all hypotheses to be tested in future research.

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¹ This is a revised version of the following paper: André Freire (2007), "Left-right orientations among Europeans: Increasingly Centrist and/or Irrelevant?", presented at the INTUNE (*Integrated and United: A Quest for Citizenship in an 'ever closer Europe*, EU FP7 Research Project) Meeting, Barcelona, October 11-13, 2007.

² In the case of some surveys the respective population is aged 15 or older: the Eurobarometers, the Central and Eastern Barometers, and the European Social Survey. In these cases we excluded the individuals aged less than 18 years from the samples.

³ The exact wording of the questions, as well as the samples' characteristics, can be consulted in the codebooks that accompany the studies cited, and can be accessed either from the Inter University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), University of Michigan, USA. In some cases the information was only available in the books/articles cited as sources.

⁴ We present the average percentages, per decade, of individuals in the different European countries under analysis who were capable of (or willing to) place themselves on the left-right scale. In each country, the percentages' failure to achieve 100% corresponds to those individuals who did not respond to the question or who refused to respond.

⁵ For Tables 5 to 8, the respective notes are the following: 1) Logistic regression; 2) Pseudo R² – always *Nagelkerke*; 3) Dependent variable: "(1)" Presence: the respondent is able to place himself in the left-right scale; "(0)" Absence: the respondent is *not* able to place himself in the left-right scale: "don't know", "no answer" or "refusal"; 3) Independent variables coded from lower values (lower levels of education, income and political interest) to higher values (higher values of education, income and political interest).

⁶ Whenever relevant, to convert the left-right eleven-point scale (0-10) to something similar to ten-point scale (1-10), we used the formula presented by Knutsen (1998, pp. 65 and 93, note 8).