

A Common Two-dimensional Structure? Comparing Demand-side Political Spaces of 8 European Democracies

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Extended abstract

Seminal contributions in cleavage theory have delineated a common two-dimensional political space in Western Europe, characterized by an economic left-right dimension (state vs. market) and a cultural dimension related to tolerance, hierarchy, and social norms (Hooghe et al., 2002; Kriesi et al., 2006; 2008). While party competition in Europe has congealed into this two-dimensional structure in nearly every country – suggesting the existence of a cross-national model of political dimensionality (see, for example, Marks et al., 2006; Wheatley & Mendez, 2021) – scholarly interest in comparing the dimensionality of voter attitudes has remained scant. Hence, in this paper, we focus on the demand side of electoral politics, assessing whether voters share a comparable common model of dimensionality, or whether political orientations are structured in distinct ways in different countries.

Our starting point is an extensive literature on a two-dimensional ‘basic structure’ of individual Western European political spaces. Despite new critical junctures related to globalization, societal denationalization and deindustrialization, this structure remains durably composed of economic and cultural conflicts, albeit re-articulated towards heuristics of integration and demarcation (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). On the economic dimension, the focal point has shifted from a state-market dichotomy to new debates over the scope and boundaries of social solidarity and welfare deservingness (Mau, 2003; van Oorschot, 2006). Simultaneously, the cultural dimension centers increasingly on conflicts over immigration, European integration, and welfare demarcation (Bornschieer, 2010a).

A host of studies by Kriesi et al. (2006; 2008) support this thesis of a common basic structure to characterize party competition at the supply side. Their underlying theoretical argument maintains that established parties have

organized the political potentials emerging from globalization along established channels of contestation – either by reconfiguring the programmatic content of the two existing political dimensions, or by packaging new issues into the current dimensional structure – without forming a distinctly new dimension. At the demand side, however, public opinion research shows that the structurization of voters’ political preferences is contingent on country-specific contextual factors, including welfare regimes (Andreß & Heien, 2001; Svallfors, 1997; Van Hootehem, 2022), mass secularization (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Pless et al., 2023), and cleavage structures (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Wheatley, 2015), as well as political factors, such as party competition (Delespaul et al., 2024; Druckman et al., 2013) and electoral rules (Riera & Cantú, 2022).

The current study thus questions whether and how the ideological structuring of national electorates differs from the European basic structure. To promote a more thorough understanding of the commonalities and divergences between European electorates, we employ nonlinear principal components analysis (NLPCA; Gifi, 1990) – a semi-supervised method for dimensionality reduction – to first estimate a European basic structure, and to subsequently chart the national political spaces of eight European democracies. One clear advantage of NLPCA is that it is capable of jointly analysing variables at different analysis levels (i.e. categorical, ordinal or numeric), exposing (possible) nonlinear relationships in the data. This stands in contrast to comparable studies (e.g. Wheatley, 2015; Wheatley & Mendez, 2021), which have assumed this structure to be linear. Our results show that such assumption is especially problematic for preferences related to the welfare state.

We focus our analysis on the political spaces of eight EU-countries (BE, DE, ES, HU, IT, PL, SE, and UK), using data from ESS round 8 (2016). All of these cases present contextual variations with regard to political institutions, party systems and historically embedded societal conditions. Despite these variations, we find that context-specific conditions are not necessarily reflected in the dimensionality itself – for example, by adding new dimensions –, but instead shape more distinct national conflicts along the pre-existing cultural and economic dimensions. To promote a deeper understanding of the structurization of political attitudes in Europe, this article thus develops the concept of a ‘basic structure’ further by highlighting the various heuristics by which cultural and economic dimensions (co-)exist in post-industrial democracies. These findings shed new light on particular patterns of clustering in the organization of political conflicts, which are germane to our understanding of significant cleavage variations in Europe.