

# DO ALL ROADS LEAD TO THE CENTRE?

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

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### Abstract

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

*Keywords: centre, ideology, political parties, political sophistication, materialism*

## Introduction

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

The definition of left and right has puzzled political scientists and methodologists alike. The strong normative and historical connotations behind both ideological frames have triggered an enormous quantity of research and intellectual debate. Yet, less energy has been devoted to the study of the centre position. A decade ago Knutsen (1998a) put forward three hypotheses that could explain the reason behind centrist self-placement. In his work, Knutsen suggested that the centre could be a genuine-moderate position, a product of the lack of political sophistication or a consequence of the salience given to post-materialist issues. However, the limitation

of the number of countries, the time span of the analysis and the methodological approach adopted in his work left many doubts regarding the real reasons behind the centrist location.

This paper takes insights from Knutsen's pioneering work and tries to fill the gap by tackling the following question: Why do people locate themselves on the centre position? I contribute to the debate over ideological self-placement by testing again Knutsen's hypotheses and by suggesting two additional arguments: the center might also be a product of contradictory opinions (balance-out hypothesis) or a consequence of voting for a party close to the centre position (party-component hypothesis). In addition, this article takes a broader perspective than previous works have done. By contemplating 21 countries and thus several contextual scenarios, this paper sheds light on why individuals locate themselves on the key centre position.

### **The Centrist Conundrum**

Since the French Revolution coined the terms in 1789, the language of 'left' and 'right' has been one of the – if not the – most popular concepts in any political action. Very few concepts can claim to have such an overarching effect on the field, both academically and on the general public. The left-right divide has served as a political schema that has allowed parties to communicate with voters and for the latter to orient themselves in a complex political world (Converse, 1964).

There are several debates around the validity, persistence or meaning (to mention just a few) of the ideological labels left and right. However, one of these debates has been generally set aside: the nature of the centre location of the left-right axis. Although the importance of this position goes back to some fundamental works

in political science (Downs, 1957), the ideological concept of the centre has generally given less importance than its left and right ideological counterparts. That is, despite its popularity in the political reality, the centre position has remained generally unexplored in the literature. This curious anomaly brought Daalder (1984) to highlight that “there is practically no systematic treatment of the centre or of centre parties” (p.92)<sup>1</sup>. Almost thirty years after Daalder’s work, the situation remains very similar.

This fact does not only stem from the idea that the centre is sometimes considered a vague ideological conception (Duverger, 1964; Daalder, 1984), but is also essential to the tendency to consider left-right as a dual reality, as a black-or-white concept. Several scholars tend to think of left and right as a dichotomous concept with no point in-between. It seems that left and right constitute a duality without a clear position between these extremes. In 1954 this idea was what led Duverger (1954) to famously state, “in politics, the centre does not exist” (p. 215).

However, against this conventional wisdom, everywhere the empirical evidence shows that many people in society consider themselves as centrists. In fact, when we closely analyse the left-right scales -the empirical operationalisation of the left-right dimension (Inglehart & Klingemann, 1976)- the centrist position emerges as the most populated in almost all European countries. That is, in most countries, an important part of society decides to choose the centre position. Moreover, as shown by previous studies, over the last few years, Europeans from different countries have moved towards the centre (Knutsen, 1998a; Eisinga R., 2007).

The following table illustrates this idea by showing the ideological distribution in different countries in Europe. For the sake of simplicity, the leftist categories (0-4) and the rightist categories (6-10) have been grouped together. Despite this grouping,

the centre position (5) is still relevant and in some cases, it is the most quantitatively numerous in comparison with the other ideological positions. A close analysis reveals that Ireland is the country where the percentage of centrist individuals is highest: approximately 42% of respondents self-located on position 5, i.e. the centre of the ideological scale. On the other extreme, Portugal is the country with fewer people self-located on the centre (about 19%). The average percentage of people self-located on this position is approximately 27.5%. Despite the variation of the percentage of people located on the centre across countries, this position is, with some exceptions, the most populated ideological position, which makes it the *a priori* most coveted position by political parties (Downs, 1957).

Table 1

*Ideological distribution in different countries in Europe (%)*

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

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

Ever since Inglehart and Klingemann's seminal work (1976), there has been an academic debate over which factors are behind an individual's self-placement on the left-right axis. The literature has mainly considered two factors: The first is the value or ideological component, which refers to the link between an individual's left-right self-placement and their attitude toward the major value conflicts in western democratic mass politics. The second one is called the partisan component, which establishes that individuals' left-right self-placement is mainly a reflection of partisan loyalties (Inglehart & Klingemann, 1976; Fuchs & Klingemann, 1989; Huber, 1989; Knutsen, 1997)<sup>2</sup>.

Therefore, the so-called component debate investigates which component has a greater impact on the nature of an individual's self-location. However, there are also other reasons that can be considered when explaining why individuals locate themselves on the centre. In fact, the literature has identified specific motives that can explain centrist self-location, some of which represent different arguments to the ones employed to explain self-placement on the other positions on the scale. This means that, if true, these arguments can eventually turn the centre position into a 'different' ideological position.

### **The Genuine Hypothesis.**

Traditionally, the *genuine hypothesis* has been regarded as the "most obvious way to interpret the centre position" (Knutsen, 1998a, p.303). According to this reasoning, the centre would be a genuine location as long as the individuals interpret this position as the mid-point between what left and right stand for. Left-right ideologies are considered to be ideological concepts with strong normative connotations and the left and right axis makes up a 'super-issue' that summarises

these beliefs and attitudes and orientates people within the complexity of the political world. Therefore, when deciding which position they want to locate on, individuals take into account the core features of ideology (Jost, 2006).

Regardless of the element that constitutes the core meaning, the *genuine hypothesis* has traditionally suggested that individuals can end up on the centre via the confirmation of their moderate ideological tendency. Essentially, this is how the centre is and has been understood: he or she is centrist because he or she does not express radical or polarised opinions. Therefore, according to this hypothesis, a centrist position would be a mere expression of centrism or moderation on different public values or attitudes.

Nevertheless, there is also another related idea that has been surprisingly unexplored until now. I argue that individuals can also reach the centrist location after balancing out their position on different items that are connected with the left-right dimension. Therefore, centrist self-placement would not be a result of the coherent locations on different scales, but rather a strategy employed by individuals to reconcile their apparently incoherent positions on different scales. For instance, an individual might be conservative on the scale assessing social change versus tradition and might define himself/herself as liberal on the scale measuring attitudes toward inequality. When faced with the left-right question, this person has to consider these antagonistic, and fairly polarised issues. In this case, he/she can balance out both items and end up locating himself/herself on the centre position. These individuals still preserve the 'genuine' meaning of these issues, but they end up on the centre due to their attempt to reconcile their opinions. To the best of my knowledge, this hypothesis has not been tested yet.

### **The Party-Component Hypothesis**

The *party-component hypothesis* refers to the existence of a party of reference that drives individuals to locate themselves on a particular position. It is well established that individuals have rather low political information and they need cues in order to interpret and analyse political events (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). This process, referred to as heuristics, is based on the idea that political parties provide useful cues for individuals to develop and defend opinions. According to this interpretation, people's position on the left-right scale will be a consequence of parties' ideological distribution on the left-right scale. Therefore, people will decide to locate on the centre of the scale if -and only if- they vote for a centrist party or a party located around the centre. An individual's ideological position is thus a mere reflection of voting decisions. Recent literature has studied whether this component generally outperforms the rest (Huber, 1989; Knutsen, 1997; Knutsen, 1998b; Zechmeister, 2006), but findings are inconclusive.

### **The uninterested hypothesis**

According to the *uninterested hypothesis*, the centre position of the left-right axis would be a form of non-response position. The idea behind this hypothesis is that citizens struggle to use ideology with both sophistication and coherence (Converse, 1964; Ogmundson, 1979). As pointed out by Lambert (1983), the "central assumption [of the left-right scale] is that respondents sometimes use the midpoint of the scale when they are unsure of a scale's meaning or if they lack information about a party" (p.143).

These ideas crystallised in Knutsen's hypotheses, who suggested that the centrist location could be "a concealed form of nonresponse" (Knutsen, 1998a,



pp.303-304), suggesting that the centrist position could be occupied by people who lack political knowledge and also possibly, the cognitive capacity to place themselves on the scale (this is why Knutsen labeled them *cognitive don't knowers*). Because of a social pressure mechanism or because they feel ashamed to choose the dk/na option, they choose a neutral alternative, i.e., the centre position of the scale.

### **The Postmaterialist or irrelevant hypothesis**

In his seminal work, Knutsen (1998a) considered that left and right could be old-fashioned concepts aligned with the traditional conflict lines of industrial society. In this sense, some individuals may consider that the left-right language is “outmoded and about to be overcome by a new political language” (Kitschelt & Hellemans, 1990, p.214). Under this perspective, individuals may have new values or give priority to other postmaterialist dimensions and think left and right are concepts linked to old politics. According to this logic, individuals may develop universalist motivations that are positively related to post-materialist orientations (Wilson, 2005). When universalism is a dominant characteristic of people’s beliefs and attitudes, the left-right axis may be seen as an old instrument employed in an outdated context. As a consequence, when these individuals are asked to locate themselves on the scale, they feel uncomfortable with the idea of locating themselves on any point because they consider the scale is old-fashioned and that there is no position that represents their views (de Benoist, 1995; Jahn, 2011). They ultimately decide to place themselves on the centre, which might be viewed as neutral or uncommitted.

This hypothesis differs from the *uninterested hypothesis* in a fundamental aspect: whereas for the *postmaterialist hypothesis* the centre self-location is a product of the individual’s lack of political information or sophistication, the *irrelevant*

*hypothesis* stresses that political information is a necessary condition to judge whether the left-right axis is considered irrelevant or valid. Individuals may be well-informed about politics, and even know fairly well the conventional meaning of left and right, but consider these terms irrelevant for their own political thinking (this is why Knutsen also labelled them *evaluative don't knowers*). Again, as in the case of the uninterested hypothesis, individuals, rather than refusing to place themselves on the scale, will locate themselves on the centre, as they may consider this position as a sort of a neutral uncommitted point.

### **Research Design**

To analyse why individuals locate themselves on the centre, I employ the fourth module of the European Social Survey (ESS). I include 21 countries in my analysis<sup>3</sup>. The fourth module of this European project is very appropriate to test the four hypotheses outlined in the previous section. Firstly, all the countries included in the analysis are member states of the European Union. The left-right distinction, which, in Europe, plays a similar role to party identification in the US, has been proved to be useful in European countries when studying vote choice or different attitudinal dimensions (Huber, 1989; Knutsen, 1997; Knutsen, 1998a; Weber, 2012).

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

Finally, unlike some other ideological scales commonly employed, the ESS ideological scale has a real midpoint. The ten-point self-placement scale (normally

from 1 to 10), which is also commonly employed in other surveys, has no midpoint and therefore, the centre is not possible to identify in a direct way<sup>4</sup>.

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

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

The option 'don't know' or 'no answer' is not mentioned when the card is shown. However, if the respondent asked for one of these two categories, the option was registered. This variable was recoded into four categories in order to identify whether the respondent located himself/herself on the left (0-4), on the centre (5), on the right (6-10) or he/she did not answer. Therefore, the dependent variable has four categories. It is important to stress that the left and the right should not be grouped together in the same category. If done, leftist and rightist effects can be balanced out when compared to the centrist category.

The *genuine hypothesis* stresses two ways to reach the centre position: being moderate on different issues or after a balancing-out strategy<sup>5</sup>. To test both hypotheses I employ eight questions included in the ESS, which have been chosen with an important criteria: questions must tap into a public debate over different issues, as the left-right scale is mainly a concept related to how society should be or what the government should do. Moreover, to be methodologically precise, the answer of the scale contains the same range as the left-right scale, that is, from 0 to 10. Otherwise differences can arise due to methodological issues and not due to attitudinal aspects (items wording and questions can be found in the online appendix).

To capture the moderate tendency, I have calculated for each of the questions the quadratic distance between the centre of the scale (5) and the individual's self-

$$M_i = \frac{\sum_j -(5 - P_{ij})^2}{n}$$

position on each scale. Finally, I have averaged the eight values. Formally, it can be expressed as follows:

1)

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

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

The *party-component hypothesis* suggests that the centre category is a 'mirror' of citizens' voting preferences. The ESS survey includes the past vote in each country. In order to identify whether a party is close to the centre or not, I have employed the Chapel Hill expert survey (Bakker et al., 2012), which estimates party positioning on a scale that ranges from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right)<sup>6</sup>. I considered as being close to the centre those parties that receive any score from 4.1 to

5.9. Then, I created a dummy variable that identifies those that voted for the closest party to the centre (1) with the rest (0).

The *uninterested hypothesis* pointed out that centrist self-placement is a consequence of the lack of political information. Unfortunately, the ESS does not include a battery of questions asking for political issues, which would have been preferable in order to construct a political sophistication index. Alternatively, I employed the political interest variable, already used by previous studies (Knutsen, 1998a, 1998b). In the ESS, this is an ordinal variable that ranges from ‘Very interested’ (1) to ‘Not at all interested’ (4). The latter category is taken as the reference point<sup>7</sup>. In line with the theoretical arguments, we should expect a positive relationship: those less interested in politics should be more likely to locate themselves on the centre position of the scale.

Finally, the *postmaterialist or irrelevant hypothesis* defended that the centrist self-placement is a consequence of the emergence of the postmaterialist thinking. According to the literature, there are two ways to measure an individual’s level of post-materialism. The first option is by analysing an individual’s priority towards certain issues considered as post-materialist. Generally, those that prioritise giving people a greater say in important government decisions and protecting freedom of speech are considered post-materialist (Inglehart, 1990), although environmental or green issues have also been considered as such (Carter, 2006). The second option tackles the concept as an individual’s underlying predispositions and values considered as materialist/post-materialist. According to this approach, mainly developed by the sociology literature (Carter, 2006; Wilson, 2005; Piurko et al., 2011), materialism is motivated by a person’s need for short-term survival, security and economic success, whereas post-materialism has to do with the desire to address

needs that transcend material concerns. The ESS does not include the first option. Fortunately, I am able to follow the second one as the ESS includes three materialist indicators in the Human Values part of the questionnaire (see the online appendix). Positive numbers in this variable show the degree of the materialist orientation. Therefore, if the irrelevant hypothesis holds true, a negative sign is expected: a materialist tendency should make individuals less likely to be located on the centre position.

The following table (Table 2) includes the summary statistics associated with each of the variables used to test the main hypotheses. The table includes the summary statistics for the entire sample and for those individuals self-located at the centre position.

Table 2

*Summary statistics of the main independent variables*

Independent variables	Groups	Mean/Perc.	St.dv.	Min	Max
Genuine hypothesis (I)	All	-11.11	6.3	-25	0
	Centrist	-10.76	6.2	-25	0
Genuine hypothesis (II)	All	2.17	0.9	0	5.77
	Centrist	2.19	0.8	0	5.34
Party component hypothesis	All	20.38% voted closest party to the centre; 79.62% did not			
	Centrist	22.52% voted closest party to the centre; 77.48% did not			
Uninterested hypothesis	All	20.41% not interested at all; 9.92% very interested			
	Centrist	21.07% not interested at all; 6.16% very interested			
Postmaterialist hypothesis	All	11.69	2.8	3	18
	Centrist	11.69	2.7	3	18

Note: European Social Survey. Module 4.

## Data Analysis

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

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

A hierarchical structure analysis represents an advantage because it models within-country as well as between-country variability using a single analysis. This technique allows considering the existence of dependence between individuals within countries that is caused by the unobserved heterogeneity between countries: through multilevel model estimations, it is possible to correctly specify the unobserved heterogeneity of the data (Hox, 2002; Luke, 2004)<sup>8</sup>.

In the model included below, taking into account between-country variation is important because the meaning of left and right can vary across countries. It has been suggested that because of their different contextual circumstances, the meaning of the left and right divide in eastern European countries is different than in the West (Tavits, 2009). Consequently, I included a dummy variable identifying eastern European countries versus the rest. Furthermore, previous research has shown that citizens' ideology in new democracies has a different meaning than in older democratic systems (Freire, 2006). Therefore, another country-level indicator captures the number of years since the restoration of democracy.

Finally, the model includes several individual-level indicators to control for possible spurious effects. Gender (1, male; 0, female); Years of education;

Employment status (1, unemployed, 0, employed); Size of town (1, a big city; 5, farm or home in countryside); Marital status (1, married; 0, single). To visually compare the different coefficients, the variables of interest have been standardised. Results of the multilevel multinomial logistic model are included in the online appendix<sup>9</sup>.

Even though it is possible to have some indications of what the effect of each variable of interest is just by ‘eyeballing’ the coefficients, the direction and the magnitude of the effect of each indicator needs to be substantiated. As explained by Rabe-Hesketh, S. & Skrondal, A. (2008), multivariate multilevel models for multinomial variable are complex with respect to estimation and interpretation. In this sense, the following graph (Figure 1) displays the predicted probabilities of each variable when the individual is located one standard deviation below or above the mean.

The first visual note to be highlighted is that two variables have a positive and significant effect. These are the lack of political interest (*uninterested hypothesis*) and having voted for a party close to the centre position (*party-component hypothesis*). Thus, those individuals that are one standard deviation above the mean on the lack of political interest variable (and therefore they are less interested in politics), have a predicted probability to be on the centre that equals 0.33. Conversely, those individuals that are one standard deviation below the mean have a predicted probability to be on the centre that equals 0.24. The same is observed for those individuals that voted for a party that was close to the centre position: having behaved this way implies a significantly higher probability to be on the centre position. On the contrary, the *genuine hypothesis* I and II, as well as *postmaterialist hypothesis*, do not show statistically significant differences.



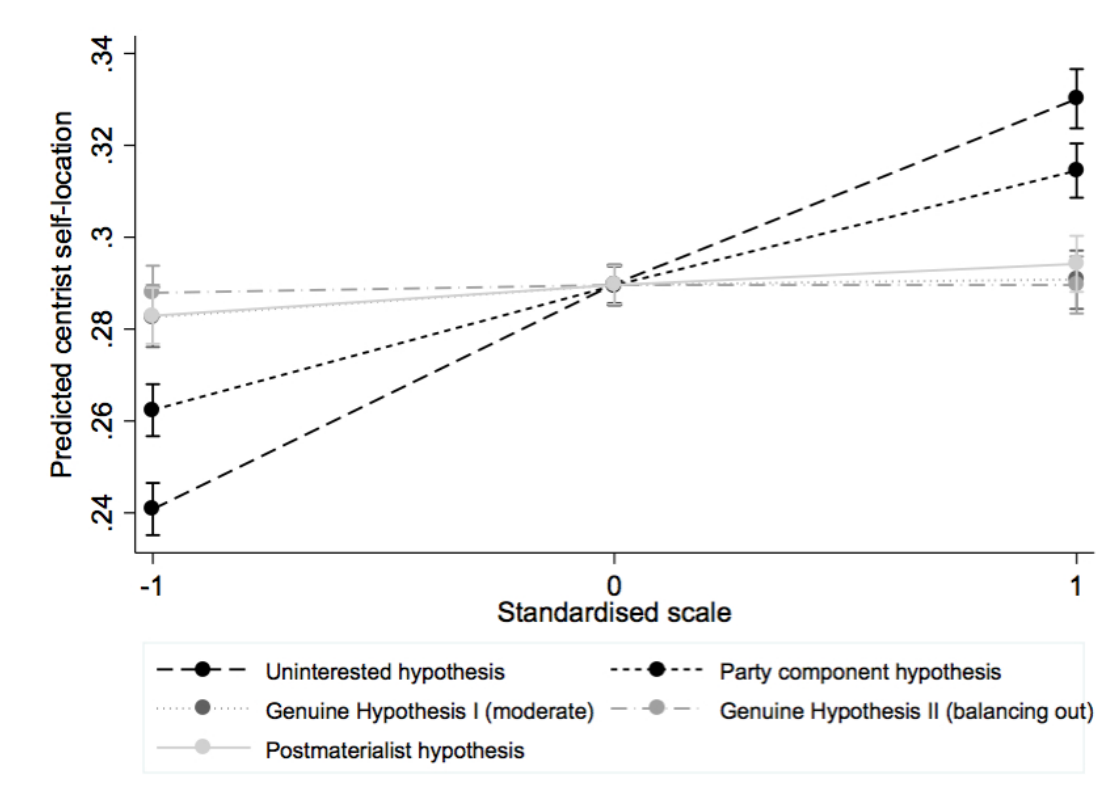


FIGURE 1. Predicted centrist abstention according to the uninterested, the party component, the moderate, the balancing out and the postmaterialist hypothesis

However, these findings do not allow for visualizing the heterogeneous impact across countries of the different variables of interest: they do not show whether some variables have a higher effect in some contexts than others. Following this line of reasoning, in the second part of the empirical analysis, I ran a multinomial model in each of the 21 countries and then calculated the predicted probabilities of each of the key variables included in the model. Thus, I calculated the predicted probability of centrist self-location when individuals score highly, in the moderate scale (genuine hypothesis I), score high in the balancing-out indicator (genuine hypothesis II), voted for a party close to the centre position (party-component hypothesis), lacks political interest (*uninterested hypothesis*) or shows a low materialist orientation (*postmaterialist hypothesis*). This is carried out in different steps, changing only one of the five variables of interest, while holding the rest at their means. Performing the analysis separately in each country, the analysis will also reveal whether the impact of different variables differs across countries. Therefore, by dealing with the elections separately, it is possible to explore whether the different hypotheses hold under different contextual scenarios.

The predicted probabilities calculated after 21 different multinomial logistic regressions (one per each country) are plotted in Figure 2. The different figures show the predicted probabilities of each of the variables on the probability of being located on the centre position, together with the 95% confidence intervals. Each dot indicates therefore, the predicted probability of centrist self-location for each of the five hypotheses analysed.

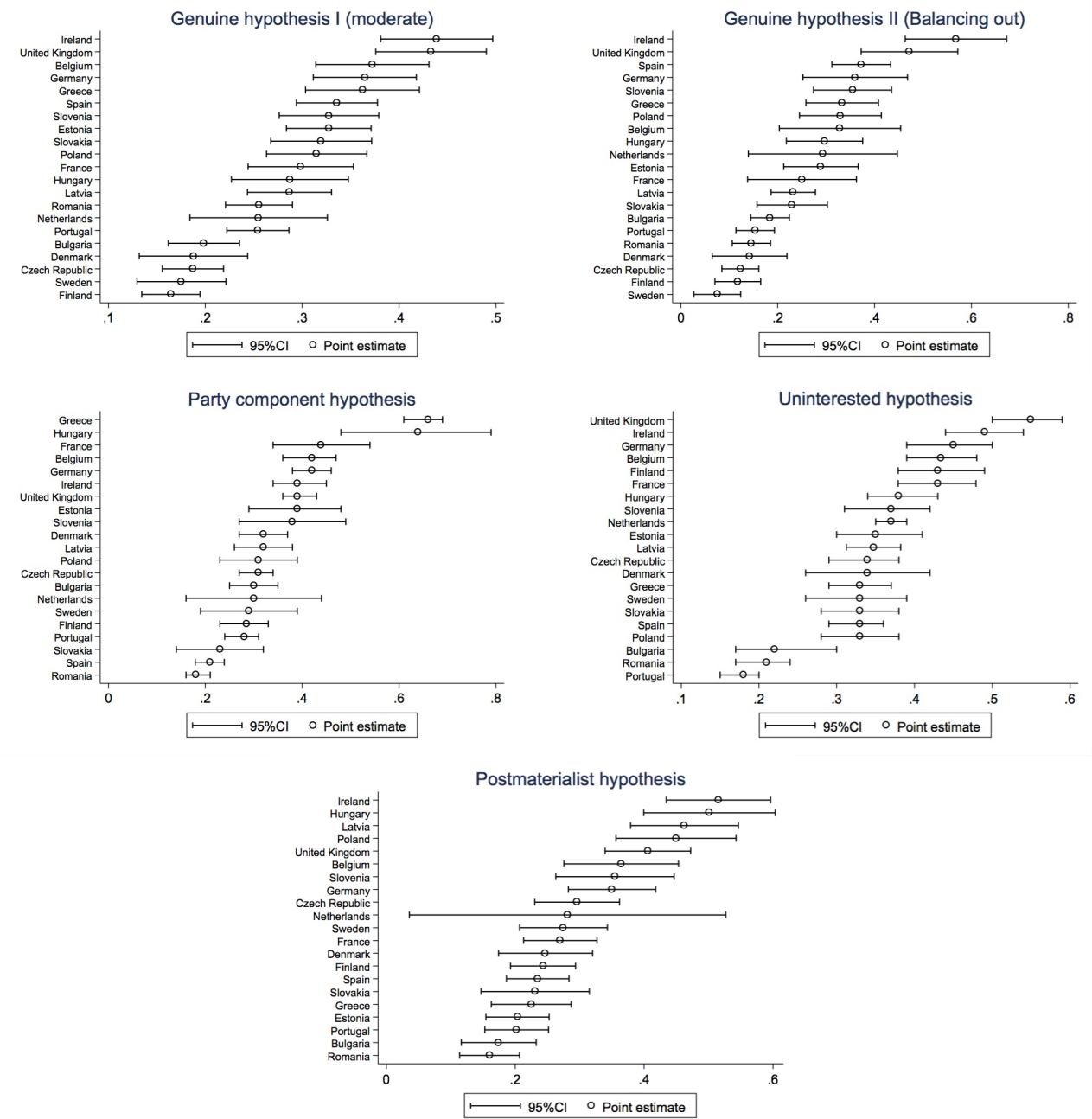


FIGURE 2. Predicted probabilities of being moderate, ‘balance out’ strategy, party component, uninterested and postmaterialist on the probability of centrist self-location

The first figure (top-left) shows the predicted probabilities of individuals that score highly (at the third quartile) of the moderate index built up in order to test the genuine hypothesis. The figure shows that in Ireland and the United Kingdom, those individuals that are classed as ‘moderate’ have a predicted probability to be on the centre higher than 0.4. On the opposite side, Finnish and Swedish citizens that are

classified as ‘moderate’ have a very low probability to self-locate themselves on the centre of the ideological scale.

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

The predicted effect of voting for a party close to the centre position on the probability that centrist self-placement occurs, is positive and comparatively high in Greece and in Hungary. In these two countries, results show that, in relative terms, voting for a party around the centre leads to an increase of the estimated choice probability for centrist self-location by approximately 40 and 30 percentage points, respectively. In addition, predicted probabilities for those that voted for a party close to the centre are also higher than 0.4 in France, Belgium and Hungary.

Similarly, those that have a lack of political interest have a comparatively high probability to be on the centre in six countries: United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, Belgium, Finland and France.

Finally, the irrelevant hypothesis indicates that it is in Ireland, Hungary, Latvia and Poland where individuals with a low materialist orientation are more likely to be on the centre position.

In order to better visualise the results, the following table summarises the main findings by indicating which factor generates a higher predicted probability to be self-located on the centre position. Results indicate that there is no clear pattern to systematically consider the centre as an ideological position affected by a unique factor. Some factors seem to be more relevant than others, but this does not indicate

that one factor is significant everywhere. That being said, the analysis reveals that the *uninterested* and the *party-component hypothesis* prevail, compared to the rest. Thus, in eight countries, the lack of political interest generates the highest predicted probability to be on the middle of the scale. On the other hand, voting for a party close to the centre position generates a high predicted probability (as compared to the other factors) in seven countries. When the different predicted probabilities generated by each indicator are compared within each country, results also show that the two versions of the *genuine hypothesis* are only comparatively high in three cases (Spain, Romania and Ireland) and the *postmaterialist hypothesis* is only comparatively high in two (Latvia and Poland). Results indicate however, that only in a few countries (Finland and Greece) is there a unique factor that is statistically different than others. In these two countries, people lacking political interest (in Finland) and people supporting a party close to the centre position (in Greece) have a significantly higher predicted probability to self-locate on the centre position<sup>10</sup>.

Table 3

*Summary of the findings in each country (%)*

Country	Highest predicted probability	Correct predictions
Belgium	Uninterested	42.8%
Bulgaria	Party component	45.1%
Czech Republic	Uninterested	50.0%
Denmark	Uninterested	57.2%
Estonia	Party component	43.4%
Finland	Uninterested	50.7%
France	Party component	47.9%
Germany	Uninterested	50.0%
Greece	Party component	48.2%
Hungary	Party component	40.3%
Ireland	Balancing out	46.7%
Latvia	Postmaterialist	40.3%
Netherlands	Uninterested	48.3%
Poland	Postmaterialist	45.7%
Portugal	Party component	46.8%

Romania	Moderate	43.8%
Slovenia	Party component	41.7%
Slovakia	Uninterested	41.5%
Sweden	Uninterested	51.3%
Spain	Balancing out	52.2%
United Kingdom	Uninterested	41.5%

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To sum up, findings in this article indicate that several roads lead to the centre position, with the lack of political interest and voting for a party close to the centre as the main factors. Not only within the same country different factors may matter, but also there is considerable variation across countries. For instance, whereas in Portugal the party component is the most important, in Sweden the uninterested hypothesis prevails. Therefore, the following question can be put forward: How can this variance be explained? Although this aspect deserves to be studied with further detail, some tentative explanations can be outlined. Results show that the uninterested hypothesis prevails in consolidated democracies (except for the Czech Republic and Latvia). Furthermore, the party component hypothesis has a higher effect on third-wave democracies (Southern and Eastern European democracies). Apart from these two explanations, it is also theoretically possible to associate differences on centrist self-location with systemic differences across countries. Although future studies will need to figure out cross-country variation on centrist self-location with bigger datasets, a bivariate analysis of the 21 cases contemplated in this article provides two revealing trends (see online appendix): Firstly, the time of elections seems to play a role for explaining the effect of the lack of political interest as a driving factor for centrist self-location. When there is an election close to the survey, respondents are less likely to be on the centre position because of a lack of political interest. Secondly, in those contexts where there are a higher number of parties, cross-country differences in

centrist self-location are less likely to be explained by a moderation strategy. Surprisingly, the fragmentation or the levels of polarization of the party system do not have any impact on why the effect of the party component varies across countries.

### Conclusions

Why do people position themselves on the centre of the ideological scale? The first answer to this question is that it depends. It depends on the country the individual lives in, it depends on whether the person rationalises his/her vote choice for a party around the centre and it depends on his or her level of political sophistication. The results in this article show that it is the combination of these factors that normally explains centrist self-placement across Europe.

Therefore, following the *uninterested hypothesis*, individuals who lack political sophistication, place themselves on the centre because they identify this position as neutral and uncommitted with any ideological position. Thus, the different results in the empirical analysis reveal that individuals lacking political interest are very likely to locate themselves on the centre, as well as on the dk/na position. As suggested, the centre may be often considered “a concealed form of *nonresponse*” (Knutsen, 1998a, pp. 303-304), although it is only a part of the story. In addition, partisan cues are also important when deciding centrist self-location. Those individuals that voted for a party around the centre are also more likely to be on the centre.

The results in this article reveal some interesting patterns. What is surprising is that, in general, the genuine hypothesis received very little support. Being moderate in different public items or carrying out a balance out strategy does not make individuals more likely to locate themselves on the centre. Therefore, the empirical analysis

reveals an apparent paradox which future studies will have to further scrutinise: placing oneself on the centre does not indicate that the individual is 'ideologically centrist', at least in the way it has been defined here.

Throughout this article, I have stressed the importance of studying the centre position by overcoming the tendency to consider the ideological divide as dichotomous (left and right), highlighting an old remark from Inglehart and Klingemann (1976): "politics of a given society can be viewed in terms of some underlying continuum" (p. 246). Hitherto, some studies have raised some hypotheses and highlighted the necessity to focus on the centre position because individuals can locate on it for different reasons than on other ideological positions.

The findings in this article have achieved similar results to the ones obtained by Knutsen (1998a). However, this paper represents the first attempt to test all the hypotheses together (plus the balance out hypothesis, which to my knowledge has never been tested) in a broader perspective. Results also go in line with Weber's (2012) recent findings: she proved that what explains left-right orientation is contingent on individual and contextual factors. This would explain why the motives behind centrist self-placement vary across countries and between individuals. However, it also raises an interesting issue: why does the lack of political sophistication in some countries, lead individuals to the centre, whereas in others it leads them to the dk/na option? Why is the genuine hypothesis significant in only a few cases? Nevertheless, the findings are also relevant for party competition literature: once centrist characteristics are known, should parties still converge to the centre to win the elections?

The conclusions in this article represent a step forward towards our understanding of the centre position, although there are still some issues that future



studies will have to deal with, both substantially and methodologically. The relationship between the party component and the centrist position is especially important, particularly when determining which one comes first. The endogenous nature of such a relationship should be tackled with experimental designs or panel data, with which the causal mechanism can be really isolated. At the same time, the different components included in the analysis might be multicolineal or endogenous. In such a situation, structural equation modelling will be more appropriate, although another important difficulty will emerge; the model will probably not be identified because it will be theoretically impossible to derive a unique estimate of each parameter. In addition, some methodological issues must be considered: the operationalisation of the genuine hypothesis employed here mainly considers issues belonging to the economic dimension. Although several robustness checks indicate that there are no differences when items belonging to other dimensions are employed, future studies will need to scrutinise whether the genuine or the balance out hypothesis are more likely to be validated when other dimensions are considered, especially when these dimensions are orthogonal. These studies will also need to take into account a longer battery of questions or even the items traditionally employed to operationalise the post-materialist dimension (Inglehart, 1990).

Finally, the empirical analysis developed before shows two interesting insights that future studies will need to deal with. Firstly, future studies will need to analyse under what conditions does the lack of political sophistication increase the likelihood of being located on the centre or even whether different operationalisations (with and without the dk/na option) change the results obtained here. Secondly, why in some countries is the impact of a given component greater than in other countries? This article has offered a first overarching explanation, but results here point to the need to

analyse the impact of party strategies on individuals' self-location on the left-right scale.

In any case, the centre is a crucial position to understand how parties behave (Downs 1957; Rodon, 2013) and therefore, investigating who comprises this position is also relevant. This research has shed some light on this 'obscure' position by testing different hypotheses that may have led to talk about 'centrist exceptionalism'. The findings indicate that the centre is not only a space between left and right, where citizens with values or opinions in-between end up locating themselves, but above all, a position for those that lack political sophistication and for those that voted for centrist parties: a conclusion that may have important implications for the way we have understood political competition.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the number of published works is limited, researchers have indeed tackled the centre position (Daalder, 1984, Hazan, 1998, Keman, 1994). However, these authors generally focused their attention on the notion of centrist parties rather than the ideological centre.

<sup>2</sup> Originally, Inglehart and Klingemann, (1976) also contemplated the social component, which refers to the connection between citizens' location in the social structure and their left-right orientation. Even though its importance has been underestimated (Freire, 2006), research has shown that attitudes of an individual (first component), as well as his/her partisan preferences (second component), are correlated with the individual's social position (Weber, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Israel, Switzerland, Cyprus, Croatia, Norway, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine are excluded because of the lack of data regarding party policy positions in the expert surveys employed to operationalise the *party-component hypothesis*.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the implications to use different left-right scales, see Kroh (2007).

<sup>5</sup> The wording of the items employed to operationalize the different hypotheses can be found in the online appendix.

<sup>6</sup> There is an alternative method to expert surveys - the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP). Although the CMP does not include all the countries considered here, employ it does not substantially change the results.

<sup>7</sup> I have undertaken different robustness checks in order to see whether similar variables lead to the same results. Alternatively, the variables 'Politics too



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complicated to understand’ or ‘Making up about political issues is [Very difficult-Very easy]’ have been used leading to the same conclusions.

<sup>8</sup> The inclusion of the country covariate explains 2.1% of the total residual variance and 25% proportion of the two-level variance. The Intra-class Correlation Coefficient (ICC) with and without country-level variables is 0.039 and 0.061, respectively, meaning that there is a small degree of homogeneity between individuals in the same cluster. Since there are theoretical bases to expect differences between countries in the effect of any independent variable on centrist self-location, a multi-level model with random slopes was also specified (Luke, 2004). However, no significant differences were found. On the other hand, the model includes a lot of cases so the likelihood of any variable becoming significant increases (Lin et al. 2013). To check for coefficients’ sensitivity to sample size, I have followed Lin et al. approach and first computed the coefficient and the p-values of interest after repeatedly drawing samples of increasing sizes and after drawing multiple samples from each sample size (Monte-Carlo simulations). Then, I have selected different random subsamples (between 500 and 2,000 individuals each) and replicated the multinomial logit. In any case results reported significant differences.

<sup>9</sup> The estimates have been calculated using Stata’s programme *gllamm* (Generalized Linear Latent and Mixed Models). Predicted probabilities have been calculated using *gllapred* command (Rabe-Hesketh, S. & Skrondal, A., 2008).

<sup>10</sup> The marginal effects have also been calculated in order to test which factors show a statistically significant impact on the probability that individuals self-locate on the centre. Moving one standard deviation above the mean or moving from the third quartile to the maximum value of the scale generate the same results. In addition, it is

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important to mention that only in the Netherlands and Slovenia some variables are strongly correlated. I have dropped them from the analysis and results do not change.