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A micro perspective on political competition: Electoral availability in the European electorates

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This paper is part of a special issue of *Acta Politica* entitled 'Information and Electoral Competition' edited by Sylvia Kritzing, Susan Banducci, and Heiko Giebler.

Abstract: This article develops an empirical measure of electoral availability, i.e., the micro perspective of political competition. As existing research conceptualizes political competition mainly as a macro- or party-level phenomenon, the micro perspective remains underdeveloped and, therefore, an important dimension of political competition, the availability of votes, is ignored. We introduce and discuss an individualized measure of electoral competition that is based on propensities to vote as indicators of the availability of voters to different political parties. The theoretical and empirical advantages of this measure are discussed: it is not restricted to parties' positions but is based on multidimensional party evaluations; it does not only focus on actual behavior but instead on the potential behavior of voters; the proposed measure takes all (relevant) parties into account instead of only including the two largest parties; as a continuous index it avoids arbitrary cut-off points; and the resulting individual-level results are easily summable to obtain party- and country-level values. Finally, correlations with individual, party and party system characteristics are discussed.

Keywords: electoral availability; political competition; competitiveness; European electorates

Introduction

Political competition is one of the constitutive elements of modern democracy. Meaningful representation and effective accountability can only be ensured if elections are competitive (cf. Bartolini, 1999). Dahl (1971) called this contestation

and conceived it as one necessary condition of a polyarchy. It basically refers to competition for political power by means of free and fair elections. Although there is no doubt about the necessity of competition per se, it is no easy task to theoretically determine an optimal level of competitiveness. Empirically, the existing level of competitiveness in contemporary democracies is a matter of debate. Surprisingly, both the party polarization in the US and the (alleged) indistinguishability of the major parties in Western Europe are perceived as indications of strong competitiveness. This reveals a lack of conceptual clarity in the meaning of the terms competition and competitiveness. This paper will contribute to the debate on how to measure competition adequately by focusing on the normatively most important actor in democracies: the citizen.

The empirical literature on electoral competition can be roughly divided into two main groups. The first focuses on party positions and refers to the different schools of the spatial approach of party competition. Here, parties are said to be competing if they are located close to each other in the political space and/or emphasize the same issues. The second approach takes election results into account and regards an election as competitive if the difference between the winner and the loser is small. Conceptualized this way, it is mostly used as the independent variable to explain, among others, budgetary policies (Rogers and Rogers, 2000; Costa-i-Font *et al.*, 2003), turnout, the representativeness of an election, and campaigning efforts (“marginality hypothesis,” see, e.g., Kuklinski, 1977; Griffin, 2006; Bowler and Donovan, 2011)¹.

Although both fields of research imply a certain behavior on the part of individual actors, past analyses, definitions, and conceptualizations have conceived political competition mainly as a macro- or party-level phenomenon. The micro perspective on political competition, i.e., the availability dimension (Bartolini, 1999, 2000), is clearly underdeveloped. Therefore, in this paper we will try to answer two questions. Firstly, how can we adequately measure the individual dimension of competition? For this purpose, we will briefly discuss the literature on competition with the focus on voter’s availability. Until now, there are only a few conceptualizations and even fewer empirical attempts to measure competition on the individual, i.e., citizen level. In a next step, we will introduce propensities to vote, providing the basis for a measure of the availability of a voter to different parties. On this basis, we introduce an individualized measure of electoral competition and discuss its strengths and advantages.

The second question raised in this paper concerns the distribution of the availability measure and its relation to country specifics, party characteristics, and individual attributes. Using the 2009 European Election Survey, we will ask: Who is available, to whom, and when? Thereby, we will get an idea of whose votes’ are available, of the characteristics of parties that have more loyal supporters, and of the contextual circumstances associated with more available electorates. The paper ends with an outlook on research questions that could be analyzed better based on such a micro-level index of competitiveness.

Political Competition, Competitiveness, and Availability

Political competition addresses the risk that rulers can be voted out of office or, more generally, lose their power (cf. Huntington's (1991) idea of alternation in government or turnover as a test for democracies). In representative democracies, thus, elections are the points in time when parties and candidates compete for votes, or, more specifically, for the votes that are "out of competition" (Marsh, 2006, p. 78). Bartolini (1999, p. 438) defines competition as "a social relationship characterized by a system of interaction among consciously rival autonomous actors." According to Sartori (1976), it is a macro feature relating mainly to institutions which, in turn, set the 'possibility space' for specific levels of competitiveness at a certain point in time. This competitiveness is then a feature of the intermediate level of political parties (and, less common, other organizations). Marsh, Bartolini, and Sartori refer (in these quotes) to different levels to which competition is somehow conceptually connected. Consequently, political competition should be empirically analyzed on three levels: Besides looking at macro entities like political institutions, comparing, for example, electoral systems and debating whether majoritarian or proportional systems foster higher competitiveness, and at the meso level where research mostly concentrates on political parties² (see below), one can focus on the individual citizens. Up to now, research has mainly looked at the first and especially the second level and largely disregarded the micro level.

Research on the macro and on the party level can be analytically divided into two different strands: party-program approaches (mostly) based on spatial theory on the one hand and the closeness approach on the other hand. The latter looks at election results and regards (ex post facto) an election as competitive if the margin of victory is small. It mainly takes into account the difference in votes or seats between the winner and the first loser. The operationalization of competitiveness is rather straightforward: 100 minus vote or seat share difference (Jones, 2013). Thus, competition is seen as synonymous to a close race. Originally applied to elections in single-member districts, this concept has been extended to proportional representation systems (Blais and Lago, 2009; Grofman and Selb, 2009). Blais and Lago understand competitiveness as the "uncertainty in the outcome of an election" and suggest measuring it by "the minimal number of additional votes required for any party to win one additional seat" (2009, p. 94). Others propose to focus on the (effective) number of parties in a party system (Ashworth *et al*, 2008), although it remains unclear whether the number of parties is rather a measure of or an explanatory variable for competitiveness. Another related argument aims at net volatility: if the vote or seat shares change to a sufficient degree between two elections, the system is regarded as competitive (e.g., Mainwaring and Zoco, 2007; Immergut and Abou-Chadi, 2014). According to the spatial approach, parties are

said to be competing if they are located close to each other in an n -dimensional political space. This tradition goes back to, at least, Black's Median Voter Theorem and Downs' (1957) economic theory of voter and party behavior (see for a recent application, e.g., Akkermann, 2012). The main idea is that proximate parties are competing directly for the voters who are located between them. Therefore, they have to recalibrate their positions vis-à-vis their competitor without scaring away their loyal supporters. The level of competition is closely connected to the proximity of parties and, indirectly, to the viable options for the voters. In a comprehensive review of the empirical literature on strategic party positioning, Adams (2012) showed that parties' behavior is indeed influenced by spatial considerations that can be best explained by referring to the rational-choice approach to competition. Yet, voters do not seem to react (or even realize) switches in party positions accordingly. One of Adams' conclusions is therefore that more research needs to be done regarding voters' perceptions of party competition. In any case, concerning the parties' positions as well as the closeness of elections approach, these conceptions of competitiveness refer (sometimes implicitly, sometimes more explicitly) to a micro logic of individual behavior. According to Adams (2012), future research should aim at clarifying this nexus. And here the idea of measuring individual availability comes in.

Two broader conceptualizations conceive political competition multi-dimensionally and on different levels of analysis. Strøm (1989) suggests distinguishing between three dimensions. The first, *conflict of interest*, refers to inter-party relationships and the tone of the political debate; it is closely connected to the party systems' ideological polarization. Thus, it can be subsumed under the headline of the spatial theory of party competition. *Contestability*, secondly, refers to the extent to which a new competitor is able to challenge the existing political actors, hence, to overcome "legal or institutional barriers to entry," and, thereby, refers to the electoral system and party finance regulations. Here, the argument is related to the closeness of the election approach, although mediated by the effects of the electoral system. The third dimension, *performance sensitivity*, belongs to the same category as the second. Here, "party competition is purely behaviorally and not institutionally defined" (Strøm, 1989, p. 280). It relates to the uncertainty of electoral outcomes, the support of the government, and consequently to the undecidedness of the electorate.

In a similar vein, Bartolini (1999, 2000) differentiates four dimensions of political competition: contestability, decidability, vulnerability, and availability. His dimension of *contestability* means much the same as in Strøm's concept. *Decidability* resembles Strøm's conflict of interest and, thus, belongs to the spatial school. Similar to Strøm's performance sensitivity, the facet of *vulnerability* refers to the ability of voters to punish governments by ousting them from office. The fourth dimension is directly linked to the individual voter. *Availability* refers to the existence of potential vote switchers, which points to a certain amount of non-

aligned voters. It relates to the openness of the demand side to more than one party: “The availability of voters to switch their party/candidate allegiance is crucial because competition theory (...) assumes that a quota of voters, in large masses or in critical minorities, determines through their ‘potential’ defection the anticipated reactions of the elite and therefore their responsiveness to public opinion orientation” (Bartolini, 1999, p. 461). It is important to stress that the level of competition is contingent on *potential* vote switching, not on *actual* voting shifts. Aggregate volatility – used as one important indicator of electoral risk by, e.g., Kayser and Lindstaedt (2015) – underestimates in nearly every case the amount of individual voting shifts, which, in turn, builds only a subset of the available electorate (Bartolini, 1999, p. 467). This is why volatility is a poor measure of competitiveness. It does not measure the willingness of voters to switch parties. Even if all voters stick to their previous decision, they might have been available to other parties and, therefore, there might have been a highly competitive situation. On the other hand, if we observe high levels of volatility, there had to be availability in the first place because non-available voters do not change their preferred parties simply because by definition no other parties come into question. Therefore, volatility is not only an unreliable but even an invalid measure of the individual-level component of competition.

This line of reasoning has been taken up by van der Eijk and Oppenhuis (1991, pp. 56–57): “The concept of electoral competition is, in its essence, dispositional in character. Consequently, the phenomenon of competition cannot be directly observed. Actual behavior (i.e., party choice) cannot reveal its existence.” What is needed, thus, is a measure of potential behavior. Van der Eijk and Oppenhuis suggested using propensities to vote (PTVs) to quantify vote potentials. PTVs were introduced into electoral research in order to grasp the conceptual complexity inherent in the process of preference formation and decision making, especially in multi-party systems. Van der Eijk and Niemöller (1983) suggested to analyze voting behavior with a measure of overall inclination toward parties that would depict the electoral utility of or preferences for parties in a given party system.³ Van der Eijk and colleagues (van der Eijk, 2002; van der Eijk *et al*, 2006; van der Brug *et al*, 2007) suggest to understand the electoral process as consisting of two steps. In accordance with a broader rational-choice approach, the first stage can be called preference formation. On the basis of party and individual characteristics, voters are thought to determine party utilities (Tillie, 1995).⁴ The result of this first step is, then, a preference order reflecting the electoral utilities. Usually, the final party choice is thought to be made by the decision rule of simple utility maximizing, i.e., by choosing the party with the highest utility (see Figure 1).

In their empirical analysis of “European parties’ performance in electoral competition,” van der Eijk and Oppenhuis (1991) divided the electorate of each country into three groups. The first group comprises voters beyond competition. Only one party is likely to obtain their votes (reflected by PTV scores between 8

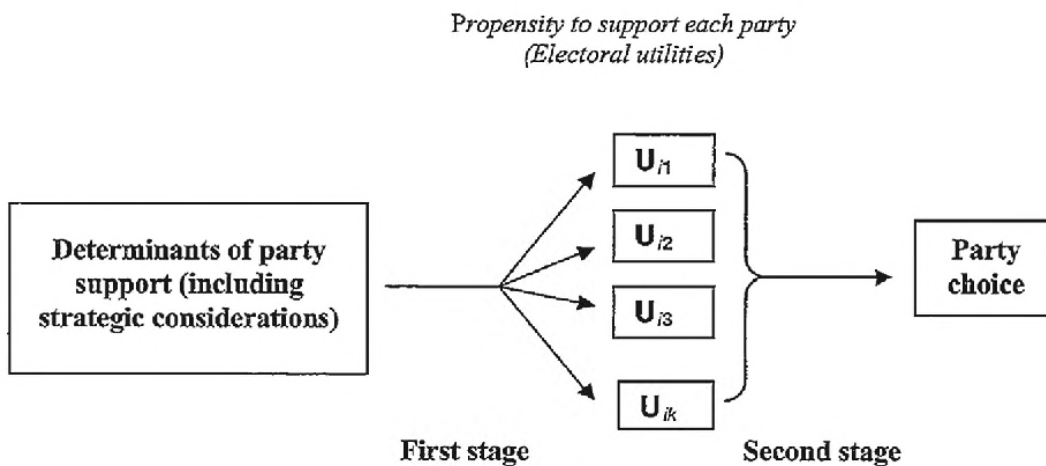


Figure 1: The two-stage model of electoral choice.

Source: van der Brug *et al* (2007, p. 11).

and 10 on a 10-point scale) and they indicated that it is rather unlikely that they will vote for any other party (scores 5 or lower). The exact opposite applies to the second group. Those voters are subject to intense electoral competition which is reflected by the fact that they awarded a high score to at least 2 (possibly even more) parties. The remaining citizens form the third group between the two extreme cases. Building on the work of van der Eijk and Oppenhuis (1991), Kroh *et al* (2007) distinguished between voters who are subject to intense competition and those beyond competition, too. Their main interest was the respective probability to switch votes.⁵ They agree with van der Eijk and Oppenhuis in arguing that competition is stronger between parties if the voters' preferences for those parties are at a similar level. These preferences are determined on the basis of PTVs, too.⁶ They call voters "likely switchers (...)" who have tied first preferences or whose second preference is only one point less than their first" (ibid.: 212). Similarly, Marsh (2006) uses PTVs to study the "stability and change in the structure of electoral competition." He differentiates voters into two groups: "in competition" and "out of competition," the latter referring to voters with a clear preference for one party. Operationally, those are citizens for which the gap between their most and their next most preferred party is more than two points on a 10-point scale. If the difference is below three points and they give a high PTV (points 8–10) for at least one party, voters are categorized as "in competition."

Building on this literature, the overall party preferences of a voter – the PTVs – are taken as the starting point for developing a continuous measure of the availability⁷ of voters, as it mirrors how competition is perceived individually: A number of parties come into question, but which one should one vote for? Understood in this way, availability implies that more than one party is considered. If all but one party are perceived to be ineligible, there is no competition for this

person's vote. She will just have to decide whether to vote for this party or not at all. Hence, a plurality of possible choices reflects the openness of the voter to different party offers and is understood as availability.

One advantage of conceptualizing availability using the PTV approach is that it refers not only to positional arguments – parties close to each other compete – as in the spatial school of party competition. Instead, all factors influencing party preferences are considered using this overall evaluation measure. If voter A prefers a certain party because it is the most proximate party on some relevant policy dimension, voter B may make up her mind on the basis of the past performance of the government party, and voter C may simply decide on the basis of party-leader evaluations – in each case, the preference is included and depicted in the voting propensities, independent of the causes of these preferences.

Therefore, the condition of an empirical theory of electoral availability, as stated by Bartolini (1999, p. 465), is met: “Both instrumental and expressive considerations should be included as influencing party preference.” This availability approach to competitiveness combines the ‘spatial’ with the ‘closeness’ research strand. Insofar as spatial considerations influence PTVs, the inclination to vote for them will be similar for parties that are close to each other in the policy space and the voter will be more or less equally available to those parties. This reflects the idea of the economic theory of competition on the party level: If many parties hold similar positions, competition is more intense because they compete for voters who are (more or less) equally inclined to vote for them, i.e., who are equally available. However, the proposed measure goes beyond spatial proximities. Party choice depends on more than the proximity of the voter to the party: besides long-term alignments and the evaluations of political leaders, valence perspectives of perceived competencies and past performances play a role, too. Previous studies showed that these elements are contained by propensities to vote (van der Eijk *et al*, 2006; van der Brug *et al*, 2007). Therefore, a measure of individual-level competitiveness based on PTVs is more comprehensive than an approach focusing exclusively on party positions. At the same time, such a measure includes the closeness approach. As the step from the electoral utilities to party choice is one of utility maximizing, as van der Eijk *et al* (2006) has shown, two parties with similar shares of top positions in the choice set will end up with similar vote shares, too. Equal shares of voters perceiving the parties as eligible should reflect a close race. The following chapter will introduce an empirical index of the availability of the single vote(r), understood as an individual-level phenomenon measured via inclinations toward parties.

Operationalization of Availability

As explained above, competition on the individual level equals the fact that more than one party comes into consideration. A plurality of possible choices and

indecision about which party to vote for can be understood as availability. As a consequence, if a plurality of parties gains high and/or similar PTVs from a voter, he or she is subject to competition, because this situation implicates a higher chance that more than one party could gain his or her vote in future elections. The availability will be operationalized on the basis of the following assumptions (for simplicity, all PTVs are recoded to 0–1, with 0 = “no inclination whatsoever” and 1 = “very likely to give this party the vote”):

- If two parties are rated similar, the voter’s availability is higher (PTV₁ = 1 and PTV₂ = 0.9 means higher availability compared to PTV₁ = 1 and PTV₂ = 0.7).
- Ties yield always the highest possible value on this index (because minor changes are sufficient to change the support structure dramatically).
- As a voter has (in most cases) only one vote, the differences of all parties to the *most preferred party* should be considered.
- The higher the level of the respective PTVs, the higher the individual’s availability (PTV₁ = 1 and PTV₂ = 0.9 compared to PTV₁ = 0.5 and PTV₂ = 0.4).

Fortunately, there is a simple transformation of PTVs and their differences which fulfills those conditions. If we consider two PTVs with PTV₁ ≥ PTV₂ then

$$Availability_{1,2} = 1 - (\sqrt{PTV_1} - \sqrt{PTV_2}).$$

Under the same condition (PTV_{max} ≥ PTV_n), the measure for all parties of a given party system with *n* parties equals

$$Availability = \sum_2^n 1 - (\sqrt{PTV_{max}} - \sqrt{PTV_n}).$$

Consider as an example the following four voters with the respective voting propensities for three parties (Table 1).

Voter A is completely undecided and available to all three hypothetical parties as he has an equally strong inclination to all of them. Voter B, in contrast, has made up her mind. She will vote for Party 1 and no other party comes into question.

Table 1: Examples of PTVs and Availability Scores

Voter	PTV party 1	PTV party 2	PTV party 3	Availability
A	1	1	1	2.0
B	1	0	0	0.0
C	1	1	0.4	1.6
D	0.8	0.8	0.4	1.7

Consequently, voter A has an availability score of 2.0 and voter B a score of zero. Voter C is undecided between parties 1 and 2 and rather skeptical about party 3. Parties 1 and 2 got the maximum voting propensity, leading to an availability score of 1.6: the intuitive interpretation might be that he thinks about voting for about one and a half other parties than his most preferred party. Voter D resembles voter C but she is not as enthusiastic about these parties as voter C. As the difference between the most preferred parties and party 3 is smaller, this leads to a slightly higher availability score of 1.7. The range of this measure is between zero (a voter is well beyond competition and not available on the electoral market) and $n - 1$ for a voter who answers that all parties running for election have a high chance of winning her or his vote and who is, therefore, very much available for all parties of the respective party system.⁸

The index proposed here has several advantages compared to other measures of competition and to similar measures of availability. It is theoretically rooted in Bartolini's multidimensional and multilevel concept of competition and focuses on the normatively most important actor in democracies: the citizen. It does not take just one element of party preferences as decisive, as do spatial and other issue approaches (be it proximity or directional, saliency or issue-ownership models) that view party preferences as being determined by relative issue importance and relative issue position. Rather, the measure uses utilities that result from multidimensional evaluations of parties. At the same time, it does not only take actual behavior into account. Instead of such an ex post perspective, the availability measure is built on potential behavior. Therefore, the suggested measure includes the advantage of considering multiple sources of party support (as does the closeness approach of an election's competitiveness) and the advantage of focusing on potential instead of actual behavior (as does the spatial approach of party competition). Furthermore, the proposed availability measure is a continuous measure, not a categorical or binary variable. As a result, it avoids arbitrary thresholds and prevents information losses. Additionally, all (relevant) parties are taken into account when calculating the index, not only the two most preferred parties. This reflects the intuition that voters who are undecided between four parties make a difference for party competition compared to voters who are undecided between only two parties. The availability index can be measured over the whole electoral cycle, not only at election day (as the closeness and the volatility measure). This represents the fact that competition does not stop after the election. Lastly, by focusing on the micro level, it is possible to aggregate to higher levels (like parties and countries). Whenever competition is measured on the party or country level, disaggregation to lower levels (i.e., the citizen level) is hardly possible. But we can (and will in the next section) aggregate to the party level by taking the average availability of the party's voters and thereby be able to discuss which party is especially vulnerable and which party has loyal supporters and is, therefore, more secure from losing in an upcoming election. On the country level,

we can compare the average availability of different countries with different political institutions or the same country at two points in time to see whether the electorate has become more available and de-aligned. First steps of such an endeavor will be presented in the next section.

Empirical Distribution of Electoral Availability in the EU-27

To present the empirical properties of our index, we will use data from the 2009 European Election study van Egmond *et al* (2013). As argued above, one advantage of conceptualizing and measuring levels of competitiveness on the individual level is that it is possible to aggregate to higher levels. If one starts at the macro or at the party level, disaggregation to individual micro foundations cannot be done so easily. By summing up the availability scores of voters for a certain party, however, one gets the reliability or stability of the party's electorate. Tillie (1995) presented a way to build a measure of competitiveness based on PTVs on the level of interparty competition and showed how to aggregate these measures to the national level. By starting measuring on the individual level, one is able to aggregate to both, the party or the national level of an election's competitiveness. Consequently, we will present not only the availability score for the individuals, but also for the parties and countries.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the availability of votes for respondents from the 27 member countries of the European Union in 2009. There is a large amount of variation between the voters in Europe: For about 9 per cent of the voters, it is beyond dispute who to vote for – they are not available to any other than their most

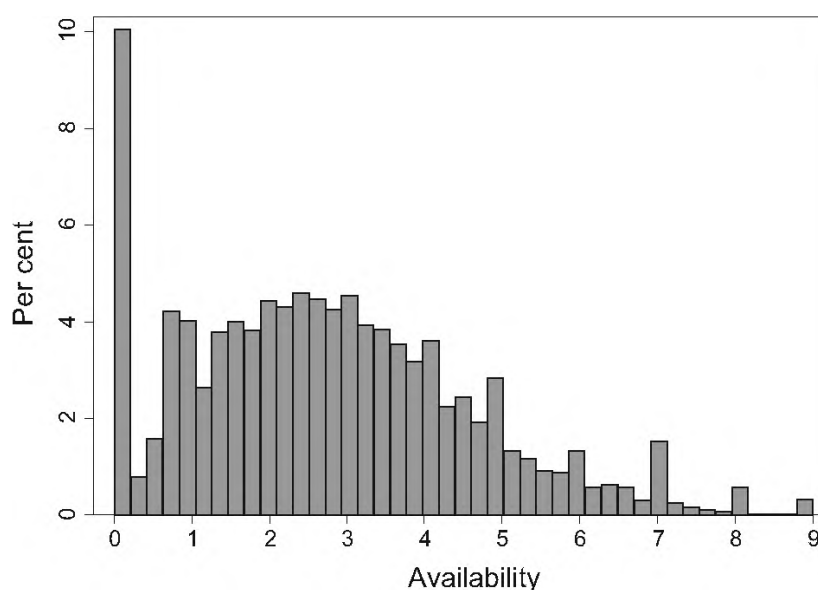


Figure 2: Distribution of the availability measure.

and strongly preferred party. For the remaining about 90 per cent the choice is less clear. The overall mean of the availability measure is about 2.7 and the median about 2.6.

As a second step, we will present the conditional distribution of voter's availability. On the individual level, we are interested in the relationship between availability and (a) partisanship, (b) the citizen's political position, (c) the probability to turn out at the next election, and (d) intended vote switching. It is worth mentioning, however, that we are not proposing a uniform causal connection between availability and the other variables. Whereas party identification and a rather extreme political positioning most probably make a person less available on the electoral market and are, therefore, explanatory factors for the availability score, an individual's availability in turn should have an impact on the probability of vote switching and turning out on election day. Therefore, availability can be conceived as a dependent variable influenced by, among others, political attitudes and social-psychological predispositions and as an independent variable influencing political behavior. Obviously, this relates not only to individual-level factors but to aspects of parties and party systems as well. On the country level, a clear causal path might not be identifiable. On the one hand, the number and polarization of parties might influence availability. On the other hand, the party system is largely a result of voting decisions. If voters are not open to alternative parties, new challengers will find it hard to establish themselves in the electoral arena and there will be less party system fragmentation. The causal arrow between party system characteristics and availability should therefore run in both directions. Clarifying the specific causal status of availability would go beyond the scope of this paper. Our aim here is more modest: to show how the proposed measure correlates with important political macro, meso, and micro characteristics.

Specifically, we assume that citizens who identify with a certain party (as do 50 per cent of the respondents in the EES dataset) are less available on the electoral market (see Bartolini, 1999, p. 466). As partisanship is supposed to be a long-term stable and strong affinity toward one party, a partisan should not be thinking about voting for another party. Secondly, voters right in the middle of the ideological spectrum (who are thus closer to or with a higher probability the median voter) should show higher availability scores as they have a broader choice menu than voters who locate themselves at the poles of the political spectrum. We used the absolute distance of ego's self-placement to the midpoint of the left–right scale as a measure of extremity. Furthermore, as we know that one determinant of non-voting is the individual's indifference between several parties (see, e.g., Thurner and Eymann, 2000), we assume that citizens who tend not to turn out on election day (33.5 per cent indicated they do not plan to take part in the next national election) are supposed to be less sure who they want to vote for and have a higher availability. The same is true for floating voters: a higher availability score should lead to a higher probability to vote for different parties in different elections

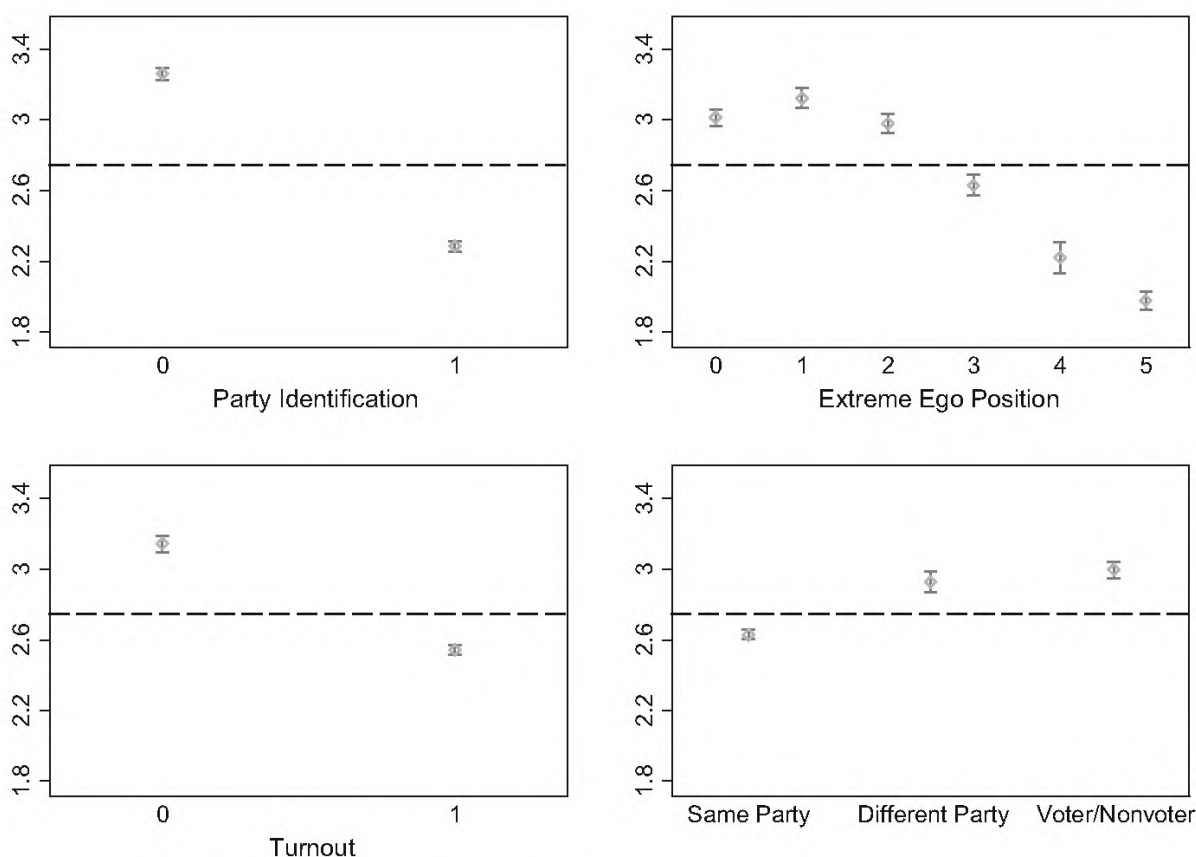


Figure 3: Individual differences in electoral availability

(9.2 per cent indicated different party choices for the last and the next national election). When several parties seem attractive to the voter, s/he will vote for one party in one election and for another in the following one. Equally, s/he might be more inclined to switch between voting and non-voting (as do 22.6 per cent in the sample). As Figure 3 shows, all these four bivariate hypotheses are supported by the data (the dashed horizontal line indicates the mean availability in the complete sample). Partisans' availability score is one whole point lower than that nonpartisans and voters show to be about 0.6 points more available – both differences are highly significant ($p < 0.001$; cluster-corrected standard errors, clustered by country; socio-demographic weights applied). The availability scores of citizens who place themselves in the center of the political sphere (distance to the midpoint of the 11-point left–right scale < 3) are significantly above average and higher than those of citizens farther to the right or left (> 3 points from the midpoint). Voters who supported the same party in the last national election as they intend to support in the next national election exhibit a lower electoral availability than vote switchers, irrespective of whether those switch between parties or between voting and non-voting.

Different parties have voters of different loyalty. While some parties' voters are beyond competition and show a very low availability score, other parties have to

compete for their voters more intensively. As the left panel of Figure 4 shows, the average availability of the party voters (measured via national vote intention) ranges from 0.62 for the *Nationalist Party* in Malta to 4.58 for the *Democrats 66* in the Netherlands.⁹ Whereas the voters of the Maltese *National Party* can be characterized as extraordinary loyal, the Party *Democrats 66* is in a highly competitive situation. The mean value for all parties is 2.41 and the median 2.49.

The spatial approach to electoral competition predicts that party competition should be most intense in the center where the median voter is located. Looking at the average availability of the voters of a party dependent on the respective party's position, we hypothesize that voters of parties in the center are more available to other parties, too. As the right-hand panel of Figure 4 shows, this relationship holds with the EES data: the voters of parties in the center (measured via the perceived average distance to the midpoint of the left–right scale) are more likely subject to competition than voters of extreme parties ($r = -0.35$; $p < 0.01$, cluster-corrected standard errors, clustered by country).

On the country or party system level, we will analyze the correlation of the country mean of availability and two indicators: the number of parties and the polarization of the party system (see, e.g., Kroh *et al*, 2007). As a matter of course, the values of the availability measure depend somewhat on the number of parties. Obviously, more choice options (and therefore most often more differentiated

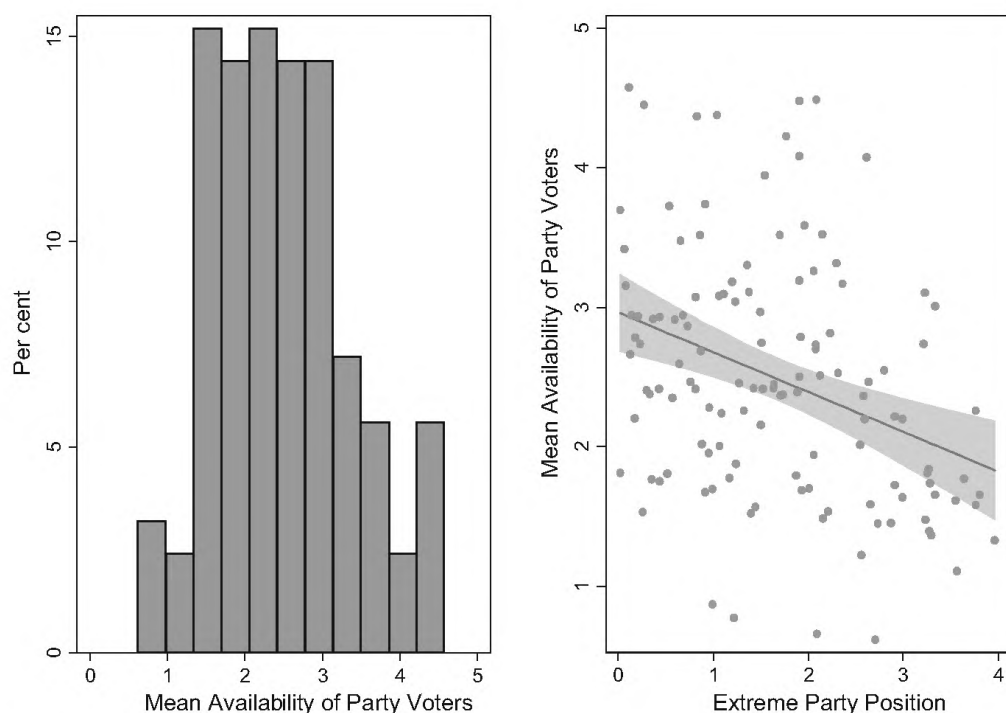


Figure 4: Average availability score of party voters by party.

options) provide the opportunity for more than one party to come into question, thereby leading to higher levels of availability. This corresponds with a finding on the meaningfulness of elections (Weßels and Schmitt, 2008): A larger number of electoral choice options leads on average to a wider policy range of political offers and, therefore, to a higher chance for a voter to find a proximate party. Insofar as proximity corresponds to vote propensity, more choice options should lead to more available voters. Secondly, polarization should be negatively related to availability. When parties are dispersed across the political spectrum, is it less likely that different parties can attract the same voters at the same time. Conversely, when parties are located close to each other, their support base might overlap and each vote will be available to more than one party.

Figure 5 shows the mean availability per country. In general, we find a lot of variation between the European countries. In Malta with its two-party system, the average availability is about one. The average Maltese citizen considers only two parties as possible choices. In the Netherlands, on the other extreme, the mean availability score reaches 4.5, implying an electorate very open to the parties' mobilization and campaigning attempts.

A closer look at the distribution shows that this is not simply a random pattern. Figure 6 shows the very strong and significant relationship between the availability scores and the number of parties ($r = 0.89$, $p < 0.001$; left panel) on the one hand and the party systems' polarization (right panel; $r = -0.37$; $p < 0.10$) on the other

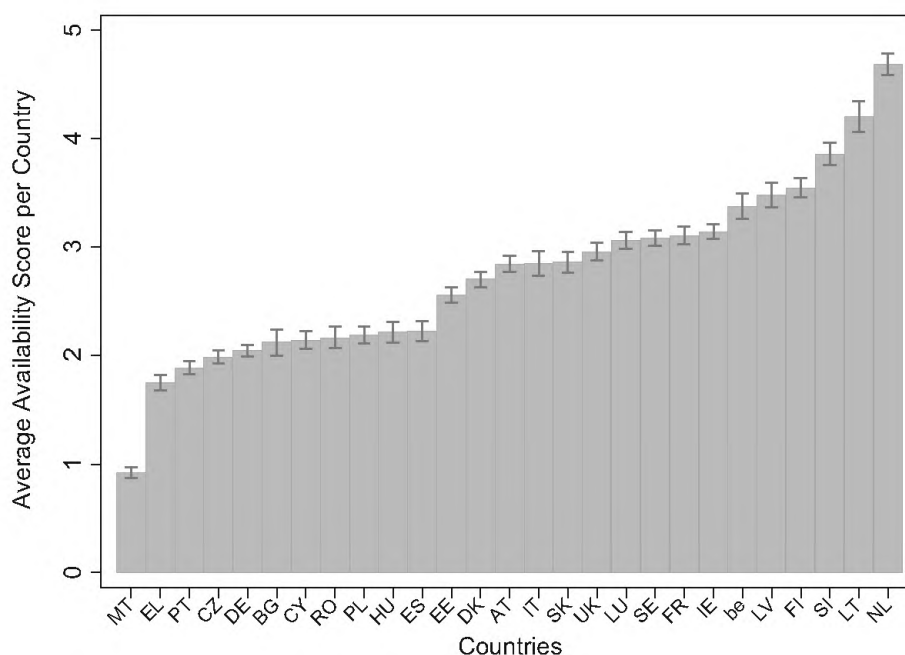


Figure 5: Average availability score per country.

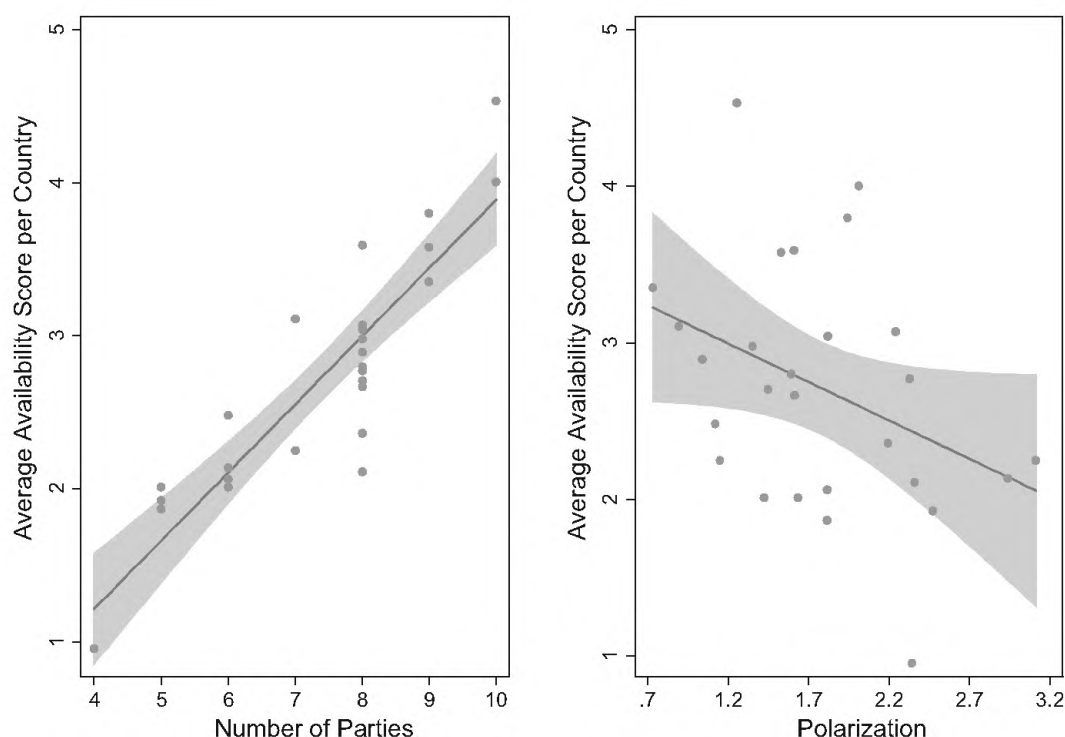


Figure 6: Availability and the number of parties and polarization.

Table 2: Electoral availability and individual, party, and party system characteristics

	<i>Assumed correlation with availability</i>	<i>Empirical results</i>
Party systems level		
Number of parties	+	+0.89***
Polarization	-	-0.37*
Party level		
Centrist position	+	+0.16***
Individual level		
Party identification	-	-0.98***
Turnout	-	-0.60***
Switching (Ref = same party)	+	+0.30*** (different party) + 0.36 (voter/non-voter)
Centrist position	+	+0.21***

Notes: * $p > 0.10$; ** $p > 0.05$; *** $p > 0.01$ (two-tailed test).

hand. This correlation stays significant even after controlling for the number of parties. Availability is lower in more polarized countries and higher in countries with a higher number of parties. Table 2 gives a summary of the theoretically assumed and empirical relationships of availability and the seven measures on the individual, party, and party system levels.

Conclusion and Outlook

By competing for political power, parties produce socially desirable ends like accountability and responsiveness (cf. Bartolini 1999, p. 442). Related to this, voters strengthen democracy by remaining open to a plurality of political parties because meaningful party competition can only emerge if a certain amount of voters is available on the electoral market. In this paper, we discussed the levels of conceptualizations of political competition and pointed to the lack of an individual-level definition and measurement of competitiveness. The section “Political Competition, Competitiveness, and Availability” introduced such an individual-level measure – availability – by focusing on the inclination of voters to different parties. This measure can serve as a micro foundation of both dominant ‘schools’ of empirical research on electoral competition – party positions and issue stances on the one hand and closeness of electoral results and volatility on the other hand. Building on the theoretical work of Bartolini (1999, 2000) and the empirical work especially of van der Eijk and Oppenhuis (1991) and Kroh *et al* (2007), propensities to vote (PTVs) were used to construct an index of the availability of votes. The main advantages of this measure are as follows: it is not restricted to parties’ positions but is based instead on multidimensional party evaluations; it does not only focus on actual behavior but theoretically more appropriately on the potential behavior of voters that has to be taken into account by parties; as competition does not only take place between the largest and the second largest party, the proposed measure considers the voter’s evaluation of all (relevant) parties and is not restricted to the two largest parties only; as a continuous index it avoids arbitrary cut-off points; and the resulting individual-level results are easily summable to obtain party- and country-level values. This index showed variance between citizens, parties, and countries. On the individual-level vote switching, the absence of a party identification, more centrist positions in the political space and not turning out at an election are positively correlated with higher levels of availability. Regarding the parties’ positions, it was shown that extreme parties have electorates that are less available to other parties. On the party system level, the numbers of parties and polarization have been found to covary significantly with an aggregated index of availability. For some of the variables, the causal link between availability and the respective variable seem rather obvious, but a complete causal model was beyond the scope of this article.

One of the several further questions that could be approached using electoral availability as a micro measure of competitiveness relates to the institutional environment of the voters: our availability measure focuses on preference formation and the final choice. As the literature on electoral systems suggests, the effects of vote distributions on the opportunities for parties to gain political power correlate with the electoral system’s proportionality. Whereas a minor shift

in proportional representation systems results in a minor shift of seat share, the same amount of vote shift may result in a major change of legislative seats or none at all under single-member plurality systems. Thus, the effects of electoral availability do not have to be the same under different institutional designs. Additionally, we should ask where differences in the levels of electoral availability come from. Similarly, we need to clarify the differences between voters under identical electoral and party systems: Which voting decision is safe, whose vote is still available for two (or more) parties – and why? Lastly, are there party-specific patterns and how can they be explained? Why do have some parties exceptionally ‘loyal’ supporters and which parties have to live with a more volatile voting basis? On the basis of a theoretically grounded empirical measure of electoral availability, we will be able to ask and more reliably answer a whole range of questions about one of the most important parts of modern democracy.

About the Author

Aiko Wagner received his PhD degree in Political Science from Humboldt- University Berlin. Since 2009, he is working as a Research Fellow of the Research Unit ‘Democracy and Democratization’ at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center. He is part of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES). His main research interests include political attitudes and behavior, representation, electoral systems, political parties, and quantitative methods.

Notes

- 1 For an analysis of the perception of competitiveness, see Huckfeldt *et al* (2007) who find that only sophisticated voters assess the degree of closeness correctly.
- 2 Especially in parliamentary systems with only a single chain of delegation (Strøm, 2000), parties are the main actors of political supply. In presidential systems, individual political entrepreneurs are sometimes more important. The following argument refers mostly to parliaments and to a lesser degree to the presidential arena.
- 3 As a survey item, a 10- or 11-point scale is found to measure this electoral attractiveness of each party appropriately (Tillie, 1995). The question reads normally as follows: “How probable is it that you will ever give your vote to the following parties? Please use the numbers on this scale to indicate your views, where ‘1’ means ‘not at all probable’ and ‘11’ means ‘very probable’”.
- 4 Already the Downsian argument that a voter will give her vote to the party she likes most includes the possibility that the voter could prefer more than one party to some degree (van der Brug *et al*, 2007, p. 11). Analyses of the complete choice set may therefore be a better application of the Downsian approach.
- 5 Actually, most individual-level analyses of vote switching imply such a perspective on availability.

- 6 Whereas vote choices are discrete and ipsative—if one votes for party A, one cannot vote for Party B or C—, PTVs are not. They depict two characteristics of preferences that may be gradual and non-ipsative. Van der Eijk and Marsh (2007) show that PTVs are unequal to like-dislike scores or feeling thermometers. For a discussion of advantages of the PTV measures and empirical analyses using them, see (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; van der Eijk, 2002; van der Eijk *et al*, 2006; van der Brug *et al*, 2007; Lachat, 2009; Blais and St-Vincent, 2011).
- 7 In the following, the term “availability” is used synonymously to “micro-level measure of competition”.
- 8 A way to standardize this measure for availability is to divide it by $n - 1$. Therefore, the effect of the number of choice options (i.e., parties) is subtracted out of the measure. I thank one anonymous reviewer for this suggestion. Theoretically, though, more choice options provide the opportunity for more parties coming into question, thereby leading to higher levels of availability. It is worth noting, however, that the shape of the distribution of the measure, the correlations between availability and individual- and party-level characteristics presented later in this paper, and those between availability and party system polarization stay substantively the same (results not presented here).
- 9 Parties with less than 30 voters in the survey have been excluded in this step due to reliability reasons.

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