SHOULD THE POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE OF VOTERS BE A MATTER OF CONCERN?

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ABSTRACT: *In multi-party systems there is virtually no published evidence of any influence of political sophistication on vote choice. The aim of this study is to find whether the political information prevents one to some extent from voting for extreme-right parties. By testing this theory using two mixed-effects models on a sample of 5542 respondents nested in 8 multi-party European countries, I have found no significant evidence of such a linear relationship. Very low levels of political information foster the vote for the extreme right, whereas political information in general has the opposite effect: the increase of political knowledge contributes to the increase of the citizen's willingness to vote for the extreme right. Furthermore, it appears that education also plays a role in the vote for extreme right-wing parties, and its influence on vote choice is mediated by the national average of formal education. Thus, as the national average increases, the influence of the individual education on one's propensity to vote for extremist parties decreases and becomes negative after passing a certain threshold. This paper calls for further research on the issue of education and the vote for extremist parties.*

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INTRODUCTION

Through its role of recruiting the government, the vote is one of the most basic forms of political participation and of citizen control over the government. Based on the assumption that citizens know best what their interests are, the vote has the main purpose of generating governments that pursue the well-being of society or, more specifically, of its different constituting parts. A very elementary question arises, though, and that is *what happens when citizens do not know either what their interests are, or how to pursue them through political action ?*

The idea of political information as a requirement for correct electoral decisions is not at all new. Alexis de Tocqueville, in the early nineteenth century, attributed the success of the American democracy to the keen interest of citizens in political matters (Tocqueville, 2006). Half a century later, John Stuart Mill was pointing out the dangers of having an uninformed electorate and proposing solutions that would minimize the influence of the uninformed on the electoral outcome. Nowadays, most democratic states still deny the right to vote to minors and to convicted felons on grounds related to the lack of analytic judgment (the former) and lack of devotion to the common good (the latter). While the reasons for not granting the right to vote to one group or another was never made clear, the underlying principle of competence seems to be recurrent in most of the restrictive electoral laws throughout history.

At first glance it may be obvious that the electorate needs to possess certain competences and has to be politically aware to some extent in order to make a meaningful electoral decision (in this case, the term refers to a decision that has the quality of maximizing the citizen's chances of having their interest represented in the governmental body). After all, in most human

activities, it is the person who knows the rules of the game who is most likely to be the winner. However, the citizens are not required to motivate their decisions at the voting booth; they merely have to cast a ballot – the consequences of their vote will not depend upon the cognitive process that preceded the vote. If a certain individual shares the same political interest as their spouse or neighbor, they are certainly equally competent electorally as long as they cast the same vote regardless of their different levels of understanding politics. Due to these types of situations the voting behavior literature was not able to find an unequivocal answer to the question of "does political information matter?".

The current paper is based on the conviction that the different levels of political knowledge that may characterize citizens do not mark a division of political stakes/ interest in the populace; political information is merely a distinction of ability to pursue certain political goals at best. The lack of political information may interfere with the individual's capacity to pursue their political interest, but, nevertheless, political knowledge cannot be considered anything more than a tool at the disposal of some citizens. Any association found between political information and vote choice can be considered evidence in support of the argument that the political information asymmetry distorts the selection of the government representatives.[1]

The general aim of my thesis is to investigate this relationship between the level of the political knowledge of citizens and their electoral behavior. It is obvious at this point that any correlation between vote choice and the level of political information leads to the misrepresentation of the citizens' interests (it is the equivalent of the theories of information asymmetry in economy): the more politically sophisticated one is, the more one is likely to

1 In this statement I am only referring to the unique variance of the political information, the fact that a large part of this variance overlaps with that of other variables is not a matter of concern in this paragraph.

pursue their interests through a meaningful electoral decision. This happens due to the fact that citizens who know how their political system functions and are aware of what the electoral alternatives consist of (what the candidates stand for, how believable their promises are, what political constraints do they face) are less likely to be deceived by demagogic politicians who don't necessarily have the intentions that they publicly avow. In more simple and general terms, whoever knows the rules of the game is more likely to win. As a result, any theory that would find a correlation between vote choice and political knowledge would, implicitly, be a theory about the misrepresentation of citizens' individual interests (Somin, 2006: 229-235). What this research aims at is discovering whether the citizens' level of political knowledge has an influence on vote choice, all other things being equal.

The specific purpose of the thesis is to portray the voters of the extreme right in terms of their level of political knowledge and to assess through this optic the possible dangers that the lack of political awareness may pose to political tolerance and on liberal democracy in general. Furthermore, this study aims at shedding some light on the issue of representation: is the success of the extreme-right solely a consequence of the existence of specific interests in society? And if so, does political tolerance (which is the cause why extreme-right movements are allowed to exist and flourish) have the seeds of self-destruction planted within it?

The interest in the particular aspect of the vote for extreme-right parties is directly linked to the idea already suggested by the title of the paper. What extreme-right parties all have in common is a low tolerance towards certain segments of the society, be they defined by race, religion or ethnicity (Ignazi, 1992; Emler & Frazer, 1999; Williams, 2006). This being the case, it can be argued that the electoral success of such parties is a matter of concern if not to the majority of us, at least to that part of the population that shares the differences that such

parties are not particularly tolerant of. Furthermore, any negative association between the level of political information and the vote for the extreme right would point to the conclusion that the electoral performance of these parties is not entirely determined by the heterogeneity of interests in the populace but also by the fact that certain voters are misled. While the presence of such parties on the political stage can be readily embraced by the most fervent of democrats on the grounds that it is a consequence of popular will; demonstrating that the election results are not entirely in tune with the popular will may cause certain degrees of discontent to any supporter of representative democracy.

I hypothesize that political sophistication decreases the likelihood of voting for parties on the extreme right of the left-right scale, due especially to the fact that such parties tend to rely rather on emotional electoral appeals than on thorough assessments of political states of affairs. The main strategy of radical right-wing parties is to adopt strong positions on salient issues; they tend to select certain elements of the status quo and use them as threats to mobilize their electorate through fear (Williams, 2006: 4). The uninformed electorate is assumed to be less able and/or unwilling to operate with complex political information thus, they are more likely to elect on grounds of personalistic or emotional appeals.

H1: High levels of political information tend to decrease the individual's propensity to vote for extreme right parties.

Another expectation that is tested in this paper is that the socio-economic variables are better predictors of extremism when the level of political information is low than they are for individuals with higher levels of political information. I base this expectation on the fact that more informed voters may be more likely to base their electoral decisions on grounds beyond

the rather objective motivations driven by the socio-economic status; they may be more able to relate their moral values and political views to the less obvious implications of the ideologies of the candidates. This leads to the second hypothesis of the paper:

> *H2*: *The relationship between the level of political information and the likelihood of voting for the far-right is heteroskedastic: the errors of the prediction will increase as the level of political knowledge rises.*

The first hypothesis was tested on the second module of the Comparative Study of Electoral System (CSES) database, using two multilevel models on a sample of 5542 respondents from eight European countries: Albania, The Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, The Netherlands, Romania and Switzerland. The results reveal rather complex but nevertheless interesting effects of political information and education on the individuals' propensity to vote for the extreme right. The results and their interpretation are discussed in detail in the "Models and Results" section of the paper.

The second hypothesis was tested using three different methods. Since there is no classical approach for the calculation of heteroskedasticity multiple tests were needed in order to assess the plausibility of the expected direction with an acceptable degree of confidence. The first test was based on approximating the size of the residuals for the last model employed for the testing of the first hypothesis and regressing the political information variable on the absolute values of the residuals. The second test required a retesting of the multilevel model using a political information variable divided into three parts: the original variable plus two dummies for the extreme values of the variable. Finally, the third test uses a Qualitative Comparative Analysis for the comparison of the consistency of high and low values of

political information as necessary conditions for the vote for the extreme right. All three tests point in the direction proposed in the hypothesis.

In the first part of the paper I clarify the key concepts of the thesis: mainly political information and extreme-right party. After reviewing some of the main factors that were found by scholars to be good predictors of extremism I summarized some of the arguments from the voting behavior literature that support the idea of the ignorance driven vote choice. The theoretical expectations are laid out before the empirical testing of the hypotheses. The results of the multilevel models employed for the testing of the first hypothesis and the conclusions drawn from the three separate tests used for the second hypothesis are discussed in detail at the end of the empirical part of the paper. After presenting the interpretation of the results, I presented briefly the possible shortcomings of my approach. Finally, I conclude by summarizing the argument and the findings and by giving directions for the further study of the topic.

CHAPTER 1: CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Political information means the possession of a minimal knowledge about the functioning of political institutions, about the ideology of the political parties involved in legislative deliberation and about the main political actors governing one's respective country (Somin, 2006, 257-260). The first part can be measured by testing people's ability to detect the institution that is responsible for different outcomes that were observed ("Who do you think is responsible of..." type of questions). The second part can be measured by using a variable that deducts the official position of main parties (biggest two or three parties) on the left-right scale from the positioning understood by the respondent; however, due to cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), the respondents will tend to evaluate their favorite party as being closer to their personal position, which would lead to the false labeling of the partisans as being uninformed or misinformed. The third part of the definition refers to the actual knowing about who are the official heads of main political institutions (questions of the type "who is the president of [country]"?). A politically uninformed citizen will be, then, a person that does not meet these criteria to a certain extent. Political sophistication will be used with the same meaning as political information. Due to scarcity of reliable data on the first two indicators of political knowledge mentioned above, we will only be able to measure the third one.

As Pierre Brechon and S. K. Mitra point out (1992), there is much scholarly disagreement on what the concept of "extreme right" involves. Historically, the extreme right was defined as being a reactionary movement that wishes to "restore a status quo ante" by means that often involve violence (Brechon & Mitra, 1992, 63). However, radical right extremism no longer entails a reactionary opposition to the political system, to the status quo; it rather seeks to

bring about “comprehensive ideological change” (p.64) without denying the legitimacy of the constitution or of the existing institutions. Other authors (Ignazi, 1992; Steiner & Crepaz, 2006; Falter and Schumann, 1998) offer much more practical clarifications of the concept. Thus, an extreme right party is either a party with fascist affiliations or one that expresses anti-system attitudes (Michelle, H. Williams, 2006, 12-13). Due to practical considerations, however, I will refer to the extreme-right parties in this paper as being political organizations that compete in elections (Sartori, 1976, 62-63) and are ideologically situated on the extreme right of the left-right continuum. While this approach to extreme right parties does not exclude or contradict any of the accounts previously mentioned, it has the advantage of being operationally clear and based on data readily available.

CHAPTER 2: EXPLANATIONS FOR THE ELECTORAL SUCCESS OF EXTREME RIGHT-WING PARTIES

While the literature on electoral success has notoriously concentrated on individual-level variables throughout most of the history of the voting behavior discipline, such variables received little attention in the studies that tried to explain the rebirth of extremism at the end of the twentieth century and the dawn of the twenty-first. Jackman and Volpert analyzed the success of extreme-right parties in 16 western democracies by looking at macro-level variables such as unemployment rates, effective number of political parties and electoral thresholds (Jackman & Volpert, 1996). Unemployment and the effective number of parties were found to be positively correlated with the support for extremist parties while the electoral threshold was negatively correlated with the electoral support. In the correction to Jackman & Volpert's article, in 2003, Matt Golder points out some important methodological shortcomings of the initial study, among them the inexact calculations of the effective number of parties, the incorrect inclusion of the United Kingdom and Ireland in the category of countries that held legislative elections in 1989 and, respectively, in 1990, and the omission of the Danish elections in 1971 (Golder, 2003: 531). After rerunning the models on Jackman and Volpert's data, Golder found that there is no evidence of there being any influence from the effective number of parties on the electoral success of the extreme right when controlling for the electoral threshold. The unemployment and the electoral thresholds, though, were still found to be significant predictors of the electoral success of extreme right parties and the author does not deny the importance of Jackman and Volpert's article for the study of radical parties.

Brechon and Mitra, who also studied the factors that contributed to the improvement of the performance of extreme right parties, looked both at societal phenomena and at political

decisions that may have fostered the shift in the French public opinion from a rather moderate to a more radical stance (Brechon & Mitra, 1992: 63-64). Moreover, they analyzed descriptively the effects of massive immigration and of Le Pen's personal appeal on the citizen support for the National Front. The vote, however, is an individual action performed by citizens; therefore, a study focusing solely on macro-level variables or on indicators constructed through aggregation of individual data (such as “public opinion” in Brechon and Mitra's article) cannot lead to reliable conclusions and may even run into ecological fallacies. This is not to deny the importance of macro-level determinants of vote choice or of electoral success, but with the exception of institutional deterrents such as electoral thresholds or the outlawing of certain political parties, systemic factors can only influence vote choice or electoral success by interacting with individual variables – the individual is the final decision maker when it comes to vote choice.

CHAPTER 3: DOES POLITICAL INFORMATION HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH VOTE CHOICE?

The normative theories of democracy have historically considered the less informed voters as being incapable of making valid, meaningful electoral decisions. In the late nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill was advocating for a voting system that would give higher weights to the vote of more educated citizens[2]; the vote of the uneducated electorate being considered not only meaningless but potentially dangerous for the society in general (Mill, 1890: 161-162). Later on, in the twentieth century, such theories were no longer popular due to the rising support for liberal democracy in Western Europe and in the United States. However, the political philosophers and the social scientists did not lose their concern and interest towards the political sophistication of citizens. Walter Lippman, thus, in his famous "Public Opinion" essay, claimed that it is not even possible for citizens to gather all the information that is required in order to make a well informed electoral decision (Lippman, 1920). Joseph Schumpeter continues Lippman's argument by claiming that regardless of how professional the citizens are in their field of expertise, whenever they analyze and discuss political issues their understanding of the matters in hand lower down to a rather primitive level (Schumpeter, 1992: 261-262). At the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, empirical evidence of the political ignorance of citizens started to appear (Berelson, 1952; Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964) and the fact that the great majority of people were not able to identify the main political issues and actors in their polity ceased to be a subject of debate. It became the accepted norm.[3]

2 While the author does not make it clear that it is in fact political knowledge and not education that may inform the citizens' electoral decisions, it is readily understandable from Mill's argument that what he is actually referring to is the political sophistication, the political knowledge of individuals.

3 The studies were conducted in the United States of America. However, similar studies were conducted in Europe as well. The results do not show significant differences from the American situation.

Much more recent scholarly work on the subject of political knowledge has concentrated on the possible effects of the political ignorance of citizens in terms of political participation and voting behavior. While the empirical study of these effects is still in a developmental stage, the normative debate on the issue of political knowledge has generated a plurality of theories over the last two decades of academic activity (Althaus, 2006:15-19). In the following paragraphs I will try to illustrate the main arguments of the normative debate and, eventually, I will present the results found by the empirical literature on political sophistication and vote choice.

Ilya Somin, in an article entitled "Knowledge About Ignorance: New Directions in the Study of Political Information", argues that citizens need to know about the workings of democratic institutions and about the activity of the most relevant actors that run them in order to know whom is to be held accountable of the state of affairs (Somin, 2006: 259-265). Otherwise, he argues, the voters will systematically consider that the incumbents are responsible of the changing environment, whereas the consequences of many policies can only be seen on the long run. Furthermore, the author considers that a minimal understanding of the ideologies of relevant political parties is also important due to the fact that it structures the electoral supply (the issue positions of the candidates) into coherent sets; thus reducing the unpredictability of the prospective policies of elected governments. Other authors contend that the lack of political knowledge (or the asymmetry between what citizens know about things political and what politicians do) gives politicians the possibility of justifying any abusive action on their behalf without ever being "punished" by the electorate (De Canio, 2006: 152-155). Jeffrey Friedman takes the argument even further and claims that mass political ignorance determines the lack of consistent and stable attitudes regarding political issues, thus rendering democratic governments incapable of achieving their most basic role – that of reflecting

popular will (Friedman, 1998: 400-409).

Such conclusions, however, are based on an atomistic view of society – they do not take into account any influences that the social environment may have on individual behavior. The answer to the question “what is the effect of the individual's level of political information on their voting behavior?”, at least on the aggregate level would be rather unambiguous if the voters would be autonomous individuals who make decisions in a vacuum, like the theories previously presented assume: the aggregated decision of a group of people who each have a minimal propensity to make a correct decision will have the accuracy of a professional expertise (Condorcet, 1992). Conversely, a group of people in which all the constituting parts have a minimal propensity to make a wrong decision will invariably make a wrong decision. Based on such assumptions, thus, concluding that citizens should aim at acquiring as much political knowledge as possible in order to have their interests properly represented in political institutions does not even require empirical research. Furthermore, theories based on similar assumptions may also alter the legitimacy of certain political parties on grounds related to the level of political sophistication of their voters. In conclusion, there are good reasons to treat the theories debated above cautiously and consider a more balanced perspective on how individuals make their electoral decisions.

What is fundamentally problematic with the aforementioned theories is that they ignore the citizens' ability to find cognitive shortcuts that would allow them to make political decisions less costly. As rational choice theory points out, gaining political knowledge to inform one's decision at the voting booth may often outweigh the benefits of doing so (Downs, 1957: 8-12) and individuals will systematically make uninformed (and possibly wrong even by the

decision-maker's standards)[4] decisions as long as the cost of correcting their behavior does not exceed the benefit brought about by the correction. Does this mean that the citizens' electoral decisions are meaningless or is it that the lack of political information can be compensated by less costly means of informing one's decision? As studies carried out in the decades following Downs' "Economic theory of Democracy" have shown, individuals often use heuristics in order to decrease the cost of making their electoral decisions (Popkin, 1993), and, as some claim (Popkin, 1993; Lupia, 2000) these heuristics can be effective enough to provide the citizens with the proper tools for making a meaningful electoral decision. Based on these theories we could expect to see little association or no relationship between the level of political sophistication and vote choice.

The empirical voting behavior literature that addresses the particular issue of the effects of political ignorance on voting for extremist parties is virtually nonexistent. The only studies that are related to this issue to some extent investigate the relationship between political information and vote choice in general. In this respect, Carpini & Keeter (1999) and Heath (2002) have found that more uninformed people tend to vote for the Democrats in the U.S. and, respectively, for the Labor party in England, which points to the fact that there may be a relationship between vote choice and political information – namely that uninformed voters tend to vote for left parties. As these authors claim, smaller scale researches have been conducted especially in the United States, and most of them found similar results. However, the accuracy of such studies can be doubted due to the weak control for socio-economic variables; there may be latent factors that make the observed correlation spurious thus biasing the result. Furthermore, larger scale studies need to be conducted in order to be able to

4 The correctness or wrongness of a decision is to be understood here in the language of the rational choice theory: a correct decision is a decision that is most likely to maximize one's chances of achieving one's goal. In this case, one way in which an individual may find that their decision was wrong would be by observing the performance of the party or candidate they voted for.

generalize any association between political information and vote choice that is not specific for any particular polity.

In terms of the vote for radical right-wing parties, as mentioned previously, no published research has linked political information to the vote for the extreme right. However, there are reasons to expect the less politically informed citizens and the less educated ones to have a higher propensity to vote for extremist parties. Nicholas Emler and Elizabeth Frazer point out that the level of education was invariably found by scholars to be negatively correlated with anti-minority attitudes and with nationalistic feelings (Emler & Frazer, 1999: 251-252), even though it can be argued that more educated people have more subtle ways of discriminating that cannot be observed through survey research (or, such results can also be attributed to the effect of social desirability – the more educated may be less willing to report extremist views). Furthermore, as found by the aforementioned authors, there is usually a very high correlation between the years of formal education and the level of political information; however, the relationship is of a very complex nature (there are latent factors that underlie the two variables, mediation effects coming from individual traits and also direct effects). Moreover, other authors have found that in terms of education it is not only the number of years of schooling that has an effect on the level of political information and on the extremist attitudes but also macro-level variables related to education such as school type, curricula, type of school organization – who has a say in school policies, for instance – etc. (Emler &Frazer, 1999: 245-248)

Given all these considerations it is evident that simply looking at the individual level of political information and at the years of formal education would not be enough for understanding the informational/educational determinants of extremism. While many of the

variables that the previous authors are not readily available for statistical research, we need to pay close attention at the ways in which the scarcity of data can be overcome with existent surveys. Furthermore, there are other important considerations for having a somewhat different approach in this respect. Such aspects will be debated and detailed under the following headings.

CHAPTER 4: INTRODUCTION TO THE EMPIRICAL STUDY. THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

Since the conclusions I want to draw from my research aim at contributing to a wider theory of voting behavior and political information that is rather universal in scope (which means that what I am trying to find is not that people from country x act in a certain way, but rather that people with situation x act in a certain way), a multi-level model across a large number of countries would be appropriate. The substantive reason for using such an approach, apart from what was already debated in the previous chapter, is that we do not have reasons to expect to see identical patterns in different settings, or, in this case, in different countries.

The most important methodological reason for using multilevel or mixed-effects models when there are individual level cases that are nested within second level groups (national level groups in this situation) is that the observations are not independent of each other. This means that most observations within a certain second level unit are more similar to each other than they are to the observations outside that particular second level unit. For instance, two respondents selected at random from Italy are most likely to be more similarly educated and more similarly wealthy than a random Italian compared to an Albanian selected at random. Furthermore, when using OLS regression models or other methods designed for single-level analyses, the errors of the predictions will most likely be clustered along the macro-level characteristics if the cases are grouped in higher level units (Luke, 2004: 9-20).

Firstly, I expect similar citizens from different countries to have different baseline propensities to vote for extremist parties due to issues such as national history, the existence or nonexistence of an anti-fascist or anti-nationalist discourse in the media, the exposure to multiculturalism, etc. There are many cultural aspects that could determine the existence of

different “starting points” in measuring the determinants of extremist votes in different countries, and this leads us to the conclusion that the intercept in our multilevel model should be allowed at first to vary randomly – this is the closest we can get to controlling for the great variety of unknown, latent cultural influences.

As a second step I will try to model some of the random variance of the intercept by adding macro-level predictors. The aggregate-level studies mentioned in the literature review chapter of this paper are a good start for such an endeavor; however, since our variable of interest is on the individual level, we are not particularly interested in the specific macro-level predictors of the intercept. Furthermore, the sample size on the macro level does not allow for the use of many country-level explanatory variables. The most efficient way to model the intercept, in this case, is to find a variable that captures as much as possible of the variances of the variables that were traditionally found to be good macro-level predictors of the electoral performance of the extreme right. What I considered that captures most of these aspects is the electoral performance of the extreme right prior to the elections on which the analysis is based – this variable, as found in the studies quoted in the previous chapter is successfully explained by variables such as level of unemployment, electoral thresholds and political regulations. Furthermore, this variable can also be expected to be a fairly accurate picture of the degree of extremism that characterizes each of the countries in the sample. Thus, the successfulness of the extreme right was taken into consideration for the modeling of the intercept in the second model.

The coefficient and the significance of the level of political information, as it happens in all regression-based models, will be affected by the control variables. However, the degree of control will certainly vary cross-nationally especially when it comes to the education

variable. It is to be expected that in a country where there is no political matter as part of the school curricula, education will collineate less with political information than in the case of a country where there is a higher level of "civicness" in the school curricula. Due to this issue, the coefficient of the education variable must be modeled on the national level as well.

The national level of education and of political information need to be included as macro-level predictors of the dependent variable for several reasons. *Firstly*, as predictors of the intercept, both the national level of education and the national level of political knowledge model differences between polities in terms of political discourse, of campaign content and, to some extent, of accountability. This statement is based on the assumption that the political competition (political discourse, campaign content) follows a market-type of law of supply and demand; as the level of education and of political sophistication of the populace grows, the political supply will change as well in order to meet the standards of the voters. Furthermore, in terms of accountability, we can expect a more educated and politically knowledgeable society to be more able and willing to scrutinize the performance of the political elite and penalize the political actors who underachieve. *Secondly*, as predictors of the slope of the individual level of education, the national level of education and of political sophistication have the role of controlling for the different valences of education in different countries. From this point of view, the use of the national average of the two variables is not only part of the effort to control for the effects of different educational systems on the individual's level of political information, but it also helps to contextualize the individual's traits nationally and cross-nationally.

Another expectation that is worth mentioning is that the predictive power of the socio-economic variables will not be homogeneous throughout the entire sample. Since the variable

of interest in this study is the level of political information I will only focus on the relationship between this variable and the size of the residuals: the more informed a voter is, the less likely it is that the socio-economic variables will determine their propensity to vote for an extremist party. As the level of political information increases, the voter will be able to judge the political agenda of the candidates on grounds that are not necessarily related to their social and economic status; they will be able to formulate complaints on more esoteric rational considerations and will be able to position themselves meaningfully on one side or another of the moderate/extreme political spectrum. Especially in the light of the post-materialist theory of social cleavages (Inglehart, 1981, 883-889), we can expect the more knowledgeable segment of society to be more likely to have political motivations that go beyond their social and economic status and to vote on the basis of certain moral or ideological principles.

Hypothesis1: High levels of political information tend to decrease the individual's propensity to vote for extreme right parties.

Hypothesis2: The relationship between the level of political information and the likelihood of voting for the far-right is heteroskedastic: the errors of the prediction will increase as the level of political knowledge rises.

CHAPTER 5: DATA, MODELS AND RESULTS

5.1.Testing the First Hypothesis

Benoit and Laver gathered data from expert surveys on the positioning of political parties in democracies and semi-democracies on multiple dimensions ranging from taxation and attitude towards communism to nationalism and immigration policies. Their database comprises 200 000 observations, with 15-160 experts interviewed per polity and contains data on roughly all the relevant or marginally relevant parties in the regions that the study is focused on[5]. For the purposes of this paper, the labeling of parties as extreme-right or non extreme-right was based on Benoit and Laver's database.

The module 2 of the Comparative Study of Electoral System is based on surveys (face-to-face, telephone, mail-back) done with random samples from electorally-democratic countries around the world in the immediate aftermath of parliamentary and presidential elections. The database contains variables regarding practical political information[6] (this part of the questionnaire varies between different polities, however, the political information items were designed in the pursuit of construct validity to allow for cross-national studies to be performed based on the data), variables on socio-economic status, on vote choice, etc[7]. I used this database for the individual level of this study.

At first, I selected the parties that received an average score in the highest ten percentiles on

5 There are certain polities in which less than 15 experts were interviewed. For the purpose of this study, an important example of such exceptions is Albania, where there were only three coders for the positioning of the political parties.

6 The actual questions used in each polity can be found on www.cses.org in appendix 2

7 The database contains information on the positioning of parties on the left-right scale as well but, unfortunately, the variable containing this information was only included in the questionnaire in a small number of countries

the 20 point left-right scale employed by Laver and Benoit in their expert surveys. However, due to the uncontested ambiguity of the left-right categorization of parties, we can expect the scores received by certain political parties in the sample to vary significantly as different expert coders may understand the left-right scale differently. In order to overcome this issue, we need to loosen the criterion based on which the parties are labeled as extremist or non-extremist by looking closer at the data and trying to understand the meaning of its (often) peculiar structure. Thus, in cases where the distribution of the scores received by a certain party was very platykurtic, bimodal or strongly polarized with distant poles or modes, the average does not yield much information on the positioning of the party. For such ambiguous cases the inclusion or exclusion from the list of far-right parties becomes more problematic and requires certain judgment calls. The strategy that I employed for the purposes of this paper was to add to the list of extreme right parties all the parties that had a cumulated relative frequency of far-right scores (top 10% of the 20-point scale) equal to or higher than the frequency of the scores in each of the lower 3 quartiles of the 20-point scale[8]. By using this technique five more parties were added to the list of seven parties selected in the first phase : The Republicans of Miroslav Sladek in The Czech Republic; The Great Romania Party in Romania; The List of Pim Fortuyn in The Netherlands, The Movement for Legality Party in Albania and The Swiss People's Party in Switzerland (see **Table 1** for more information on these five cases or the **Table 2** for details on the average scores of the parties considered non-problematic). While the extreme-right categorization of these five parties was not straightforward based on the average rankings, the data makes their extremist character evident.

8 Notice that the condition of AVG>=18 used for the first phase selection of the extremist parties is mathematically more strict than the set of conditions used for the second phase inclusion of parties – there can never be a case with an average higher than 18 that does not satisfy the aforementioned criteria.

Table 1. ***Parties selected on the basis of the frequency of scores in the highest decile***

Party	**Percent in 10th decile**	**Percent in 3rd quartile**	**Percent in 2nd quartile**	**Percent in 1st quartile**	**Mean**	**N of coders**
The Republicans of Miroslav Sladek (Czech Republic)	59.3	14.8	7.4	3.7	15.33	27
Great Romania Party (Romania)	35.3	11.8	11.8	35.3	11.53	17
Movement of Legality Party (Italy)	33.3	0	0	0	17.67	3
Schweizerische Volkpartei (Switzerland)	68.7	2.1	0	0	17.88	48
Lijst Pim Fortuyn (The Netherlands)	61.9	14.3	0	0	17.62	21

Table 2. ***Parties selected on the basis of their average left-right scale score***

Polities and election year	**Parties**	**Avg. Scores (1-20)**
Switzerland (2003)	Schweizer Demokraten	18.91
The Czech Republic (2002)	National Conservative League	20
Germany (2002)	German People's Union	19.4
	National Democratic Party	19.67
	The Republicans	18.84
Hungary (2002)	Hungarian Justice and Life Party	19.06
Italy (2006)	Movimento Sociale Fiamma Tricolore	19.02

After matching the information from the macro-level database with the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, the macro-level sample size was reduced to eight countries– Albania, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, The Netherlands, Romania and Switzerland. The other European countries in the CSES database either did not have an extreme-right party that participated in an electoral competition, they did not have parliamentary elections between the fall of 2001 and the summer of 2006, or they were not part of the sample.

The dependent variable in this study is the vote for far-right parties, which is a dichotomous variable with value 1 for those who declared they voted for one of the parties classified as extreme-right and 0 for those who voted for any other party. The differences between polities are very big in terms of the number of extreme right voters, the percentages range from 0.5% in Italy (Movimento Sociale Fiamma Tricolore) and 0.7% in Germany (German People's Union, National Democratic Party and the Republicans) to 17% in Romania (The Great Romania Party) and 23% in Switzerland (The Swiss People's Party). Per total only 4% of the whole sample declared they voted for one of the extremist parties, but this is partially an artifact of the different sample sizes that resulted from the list-wise deletion of cases with missing values.

At first I ran eight logistic regression models for each country in the sample previously mentioned. The vote for extreme right parties was the dependent variable; education, household income, political information, age and gender were the independent variables. The only significant results were education (B=-0.23), gender (B=0.692) and age (B=0.0135) for Switzerland. Age was also significant in Hungary (B=-0.028), but its effect seems to be opposite to the effect it has in Switzerland: the younger one is, the more they are likely to vote for the extreme right. Political information is insignificant in each country, but is close to

statistical significance in The Netherlands (p=0.084) where an increase in the level of political knowledge makes one more likely to vote for the far-right. These differences point to the need for multilevel modeling; the individual level variables fail to provide us with a cross-national understanding of the vote for extremist parties and they are evidence of macro-level influences on the relationships already found.

After country mean centering the education and political information variables and grand mean centering all the others I calculated a country mean of education and political knowledge and also a country mean of the multiplication of the individual level values for the two. The latter should be a fairly good replacement for the rather complex macro-level determinants of the power of education to induce political knowledge, since a large value for this variable means a systematic coincidence of high values for education and high levels of political knowledge. Thus, the infoXedu variable received values ranging from 5.62 in Hungary to a maximum of 17.00 in The Netherlands which can be interpreted as being evidence of a powerful effect of the formal education on political information in the Dutch educational system and a relatively low one in Hungary. The use of this variable does not deny the existence of very indirect paths through which the education may influence the level of political information – it may that the number of years of formal schooling has an effect on political information because different levels of education can determine exposures to different types of social networks or to differences in the level of access to political information, or different levels of understanding political issues – what this variable captures is the overall potential of the formal education from each country to induce political knowledge.

Model 1:

$$\text{Logit(farright)} = ß_0 + ß_1 \text{ Information} + ß_2 \text{ Education} + \beta_3 \text{ Income} + ß_5 \text{ Age} + ß_6 \text{ Male} + ß_7 \text{ Urban} + e$$

$$\beta_0 = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} \text{ Macro Education} + \gamma_{02} \text{ infoXedu} + \gamma_{03} \text{ Macro Info} + r_0$$

$$\beta_1 = \gamma_{10} + r_1$$

$$\beta_2 = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21} \text{ Macro Education} + \gamma_{22} \text{ Macro Info} + \gamma_{23} \text{ infoXedu} + r_2$$

$$\beta_4 = \gamma_{40} + r_4$$

Model 2:

$$\text{Logit(farright)} = ß_0 + ß_1 \text{ Information} + ß_2 \text{ Education} + \beta_3 \text{ Education*Information} + ß_4 \text{ Income} + ß_5 \text{ Age} + ß_6 \text{ Male} + ß_7 \text{ Urban} + e$$

$$\beta_0 = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} \text{ Percentage previously} + \gamma_{02} \text{ Macro Education} + \gamma_{03} \text{ Macro Info} + r_0$$

$$\beta_1 = \gamma_{10} + r_1$$

$$\beta_2 = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21} \text{ Macro Education} + \gamma_{22} \text{ Macro Info} + r_2$$

$$\beta_4 = \gamma_{40} + r_4$$

Like the previous models, the multilevel models were tested using R version 2.8.1. and the lme4 package available at http://cran.r-project.org. The intercept was allowed to vary in both **model 1** and **model 2** in order to increase the fit of the models; the macro-level variables that are responsible of this variation are not specified in the first model. We can expect, therefore, certain latent cultural influences to be behind the variations in the intercepts even though by choosing this strategy we will not be able to pinpoint which latent variable is responsible of the variance we observe.

The variation of the effect of education across the sample, however, can be modeled much more easily because we have fair reasons to expect such a variation to occur. Since the cases are nested within countries that have different education systems, we can expect people with similar levels of formal education to have been subjected to different types, methods and most of all information throughout their education processes. Probably the most evident example for this is the fact that in Eastern Europe students studied socialism in school before the revolutions of '89 and '90 and the teaching of political education or civic culture classes were ignored in virtually all these countries after the fall of communism. In Western Europe politics was less tabu in schools and civic culture was and still is part of the curricula in most of these countries. Furthermore, as explained in previous chapters, there is a multiplicity of factors beside the school curricula that has an influence on how the years of schooling affects the political attitudes of individuals – type of school organization, degree of mandatory involvement in community work, general attitude towards the debating of social issues in schools, etc. This means that we have reasons to expect different effects (if any) of education on vote choice from one country to another.

Due to the multiple changes in the political features of the education that respondents of different ages may have witnessed, constructing a macro-level variable based on all these features would have been a painstaking enterprise not worth being conducted (this would require scoring each of these features after each educational reform in each different country). The solution to this was the use of the infoXedu variable that was described under the previous heading of this paper. In the second model, however, instead of using the infoXedu variable I used the interaction between political information and education on the individual level. Notice that the difference between the two is that infoXedu has a unique value for each polity, while the interaction between education and information varies from one individual to

another. The purpose of doing so was to account for the respondent's personal informational gain from their formal schooling. This interaction avoids the noise contained in the infoXedu variable by focusing on individual characteristics of education and political information; the infoXedu variable can only perform well in countries where there was no change in the curricula (and in the general power of formal education to induce political knowledge) over the years, but it accumulates noise progressively as we depart from this ideal case. To illustrate this it is enough to consider the example of a 65 year old respondent from a certain country and that of a 20 year-old respondent from the same country – the infoXedu variable has the same value for the two, even though they were most likely politically socialized in different educational systems. The interaction included in the second model eliminates such inconveniences by scoring differently for the two hypothetical individuals mentioned above.

Finally, for the second model, I included a variable measuring the successfulness of far-right parties in the elections preceding the round when the interviews were conducted – for instance in Italy the value of this variable is based on the percentage of votes won by the extreme right in 2002 whereas the interviews were conducted in 2006. The aim of introducing such a variable is to account to a certain degree for the cultural differences mentioned in the previous paragraphs; the assumption is that the culturally embedded baseline propensity to vote for an extremist party is accurately approximated by the successfulness of the extreme right: the number of votes won by the far-right is a fairly accurate picture of the overall level of extremism of voters in a certain country. Furthermore, this variable also models some of the residuals that are due to the phenomenon of social desirability, because it is expected that respondents from countries with electorally weaker extremist parties will be more reluctant to admitting that they voted for the extreme-right than respondents from countries with stronger parties on the extreme right.

The inter-group variances of the intercepts in the first model are relatively high, as can be seen in the table below. The fixed effects presented below, show significant estimates worth considering. The most important result is that of the macro-level education on the slope of the individual level of education. As the national level average of formal education grows, the effect of the individual schooling on the propensity to vote for extreme-right parties decreases; it even changes its direction when the macro-level of education passes a certain threshold (as mentioned above, in Switzerland and, questionably, in The Netherlands, the individual level of education is inversely associated with the propensity to vote for extremist parties; at the same time, the two countries have the highest averages of formal education in the sample). This finding can be considered as being evidence against the autonomy of voting decisions and, arguably, it supports the hypothesis of heuristics-driven or proxy-driven electoral reasoning. Another plausible explanation would be that in a more educated polity one can expect the political debate to differ significantly from the deliberation in less educated polities, which may change the voting patterns of individuals. These statements are also supported by the estimates for the second model, where gender and age were the only variables found to have an effect on the likelihood of voting for the extremists and the national average of political information was found extremely significant. If we look at the structure of the second model (presented above) we can see that the meaning of the estimate for the macro-level of political information shows us that as the national average of political information grows the slope of education will decrease, which means that there is an interplay between the societal and the educational factor. As the country level of political information increases, the education of the individual becomes more and more likely to prevent one from voting for extreme right parties (see Model 2 in the table below). These results are also confirmed by the estimate of the interaction between the individual's

education and the country mean of political knowledge – the higher the value of the interaction, the lower the propensity to vote for an extremist party.

Gender remains the only predictor of extremism that is highly significant in both models. With a parameter estimate of .59 in all three models, men seem to be the primary voters of extreme-right parties. Age is also positively associated with the dependent variable; however, the estimate of 0.01 shows a seemingly weak increase with age in the likelihood to vote for extreme parties. If the age variable was coded on a 7 point scale or a 10 point scale instead of years of age, the strength of the effect may have been much more obvious though.

Table 3. ***Fixed effects and random effects for model 1 and model 2***

Variables	Fixed Effects (Model 1)	Random Effect variance (Model 1)	Fixed Effects (Model 2)	Random Effect variance (Model 2)
Intercept	-1.15	0.99	-4.01***	0.14
Political Information	0.15	0.04	0.01	0.01
Ballots won by far-right in previous election (%)	-	-	0.1***	-
Level of education (ind. level)	-0.37	0	0	0
Interaction between education and political information	-	-	-0.06	-
Household income	-0.02	0	-0.07	0
Gender (positive=male)	0.59***	-	0.57***	-
Age	0.01*	-	0.01*	-
Residence (urban/rural)	0.24	-	0.28	-
Country average of education	2.43**	-	1.59***	-
Country average of political knowledge	0.38	-	-1**	-
infoXedu [a]	-0.26	-	-	-
Cross-level interaction: ind. education and country mean of education	-0.35*	-	-0.3*	-
Cross-level interaction: ind. education and country mean of political information	0	-	0.21	-
Cross-level interaction: ind. level education and infoXedu (see below)	0.03	-	-	-
Model fit	Akaike Information Criterion = 1531 Deviance :1485 Log Likelihood:-742.4		Akaike Information Criterion = 1519; Deviance :1473 Log Likelihood:-736.7	

- *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p=0.000 Sample size: 5542 nested in 8 national-level groups
- [a] Country mean of the individual level interaction between political knowledge and education

5.2.Three tests of heteroskedasticity

There are no classic methods of testing the type of relationship described in the second hypothesis. However, one can imagine many ways in which we can shed some light on the assessment of the performance of the model on different parts of the distribution. Out of the many possible methods I picked three; all of which point in the expected direction:

- Regressing the political information variable on the absolute value of the residuals of the second model
- Testing the model with political information divided in two: one dummy variable with value 1 for the top quartile of the political information distribution and another dummy variable with value 1 for the top 3 quartiles of the political information variable (value 0 for the lower quartile)
- Testing the consistency of the low level of political information and the high level of political information as necessary conditions for the vote for extreme parties using crisp-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (see the third sub-heading of this section)

5.2.1.Test 1.

Model 3

Resid(Model 2)= β_0 + ß$_1$ Information

This third model required the creation of a variable containing the residuals of the prediction in the second model. As an intermediate step, I computed with SPSS an expected logit for the response variable using the second model estimates found in R. The coding of residuals based

on the cut-point can be seen in the set of conditions below **(Eq.1)**.

Binary logistic regression models have dichotomous dependent variables. In such cases, Ordinary Least Squares regression cannot be used due to the fact that there is not enough variation in the dependent variable. In order to overcome this issue, a link function is used for increasing the variance: instead of the 1/0 dichotomy, the dependent variable is assigned a value between $-\infty$ and $+\infty$ that represents the natural logarithm of the odds of value 1 over value 0 for the dependent variable for each of the respondents/cases observed. Therefore, what such models directly predict is not the ones and the zeros in the response variable for each individual from the sample, but rather the natural logarithm of the odds of 1 in the dependent variable over 0 based on the explanatory/control variables in the model. Eventually, this continuous variable that contains the expected logarithm of the odds can be reconverted into a dichotomous variable by setting a cut-point that separates the cases that are more likely to be a 0 than a 1 or vice-versa. By default, any statistical package will do this without showing any continuous variable with expected values in the output; moreover, each case is classified automatically into an “expected 0” or “expected 1” category, based on a cut-point set at the middle of a 0 – 1 scale: at 0.5. In logistic regression terms, this means a logit (logarithm of the odds) of -0.69.

The cut-point for a binary logistic regression is, thus, set by default at 0.5 (half way between 0 and 1; or Ln½=-0.69), any estimation that exceeds ½ (or a logit of Ln ½ =-0.69) will predict 1 for the dependent variable and every estimation below ½ or any logit lower than -0.69 will lead to predicting the value of the response variable as being 0. In a sample where there is a great difference between the size of the sample and the size of the subsample containing cases with value 1 for the dependent variable (the sample used here fits this

description well), most models will predict correctly the bulk of the zeros in the dependent variable but will perform much worse when predicting the one-values. Therefore, such models will systematically underestimate the likelihood of 1 over 0.

Since most of the cases that actually have 1 in the farright variable will be erroneously classified based on such unbalanced samples as the one used here, there will be too many errors and too few accurate predictions for the 1s in the sample. More importantly, due to the gross underestimation of the likelihood of 1, some of the estimations will be so far from the cut-point (explained in the previous paragraphs) that it will be hard to achieve model fit and good levels of significance when using the residuals as a variable in a regression model. This being the case, it is most likely that we will not be able to find a relationship between any explanatory variable and the residuals.

Regressing the residuals on the independent variable (political information) will result in a model with systematic (from underestimating the likelihood of 1 over 0) and very large errors based on which any assessment of the skedasticity of the initial model will be a bold judgment call.[9] In order to overcome this inconvenience I set the cut-point lower (at -2), so that the regression line would fit the model better. This happens due to the fact that the very large errors that were described previously got closer to the cut-point, which means that there are fewer and smaller outliers.

The reason why moving the threshold from -0.69 to -2 is not inappropriate is that my intention at this point was not to correctly predict electoral outcomes; my aim wasn't to determine whether one would or would not vote for a far-right party, but rather to contrast

9 The reason why I claim that it would be a judgment call is that I am not expecting to find significant results due to the high probability of having large outliers. With insignificant results the results are meaningless.

those who are more likely to vote for an extremist party with those who are less likely. In this respect, setting the cut-point at any arbitrary value does not bias the findings in any way, it only maximizes the chances of finding the existent patterns in the data.

Eq.1

If Estimated logit – cut-point >=0 and farright=1, Residual=0

If Estimated logit – cut-point <0 and farright=1, Residual=cut-point – estimated logit

If Estimated logit – cut-point <0 and farright=0, Residual=0

If Estimated logit – cut-point >=0 and farright=0, Residual=estimated logit – cut-point

The OLS regression results for this third model show a very small (B=0.056) but statistically very significant (p=0.009) and positive relationship between the level of political information and the size of the residuals of model 2, which corroborates the second hypothesis. The residuals are somewhat bigger as the level of political information grows – as one becomes more politically sophisticated, their propensity to vote for an extremist party becomes less rooted in their level of political information. Even more importantly, this finding points to the fact that the socio-economic variables used in the second model perform worse when it comes to predicting the likelihood of voting for an extremist parties as the level of political information grows. When researching the determinants of the vote for the extreme right, social scientists should probably look at different variables for modeling the vote of differently politically sophisticated voters; while socio-economic determinants perform fairly well as predictors of the far-right vote for the less politically knowledgeable citizens, one may need to look at other types of variables (attitudinal variables, for instance) when it comes to predicting the electoral preferences of more informed voters.

The method employed for this test has significant shortcomings and, therefore, the results found can be contested; the purpose of the second and the third test below is to support or contradict the results found up to this point in the analysis. *Firstly,* the calculation of residuals for binary logistic models can be considered counterintuitive due to the fact that the actual value of the dependent variable is either 1 or 0; therefore, the actual errors can only be 0 or 1. *Secondly*, due to the fact that the model on which the test is based (model 2) is a multilevel one, it includes random effects that cannot be incorporated successfully in the "expected values" variable without risking either TYPE 1 or TYPE 2 error. *Finally*, such an endeavor relies on methods that generate further errors, thus, we cannot actually tell the shape of the distribution of errors; what we can say at best by looking at the results is that the residuals of model 2 tend to be somewhat higher as the level of political information grows.

5.2.2. Test 2.

Model 4:

$$\text{Logit(farright)}=ß_0 + ß_1\ \text{Information} + ß_2\ \text{Education} + \beta_3\ \text{Education*Information} + ß_4\ \text{Income} + ß_5\ \text{Age} + ß_6\ \text{Male} + ß_7\ \text{Urban} + ß_8\ \text{Low Information} + ß_9\ \text{High Information} + e$$

$$\beta_0=\gamma_{00}+ \gamma_{01}\ \text{Percentage previously} +\gamma_{02}\ \text{Macro Education}+\gamma_{03}\ \text{Macro Info}+r_0$$

$$\beta_1=\gamma_{10}+ r_1$$

$$\beta_2=\gamma_{20}+\gamma_{21}\ \text{Macro Education}+\gamma_{22}\ \text{Macro Info}+r_2$$

$$\beta_4=\gamma_{40}+ r_4$$

For purposes of comparison, I will present the significant results for the fixed effects found in model 2 and model 4 in the following table (**Table 4.**)

Table 4. ***Significant fixed effects for model 2 and model 4.***

Variables	**Fixed effects model 2**	**Fixed effects model 4**
Intercept	-4.01***	-3.94***
Political information		0.53 .
Political Information low		-0.71 .
Ballots won by far-right in previous election (%)	0.1***	0.1***
Gender (male=1)	0.57***	0.57***
Age	0.01*	0.01*
Country level of political information	-1**	-1.24***
Country Level of education	1.59***	1.53***
Individual education * Country level of education	-0.3*	-0.29*

– *. p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p=0.000 Sample size: 5542 nested in 8 national-level groups*

Most of the estimates for Model 4 are identical or almost identical to those of Model 2 and so is the structure of the model. The sole difference between model 4 and model 2, which was presented in the previous section, is that in model 4 the political information variable was divided into 3 parts: the initial political information variable and two dummies that separate the extreme quartiles from the other three. In any type of models that assume linear relationships between variables or unit homogeneity (Ragin, 1987), this type of splitting of a variable would not be recommended due to issues of multicollinearity that may negatively affect the significance levels of the estimates. However, in this case, the opposite thing happened: not only that the significance level of both the low information variable and of the initial political information variable both passed the threshold of 0.1, but the direction of the relationship between the two variables and the dependent variable are opposite.

This outcome falsifies the assumption of linearity between political information and the

propensity to vote for the extreme right. According to the last model, while keeping all other effects constant, being very uninformed regarding political matters makes one more likely to vote for the extreme right. In general, however, an increase in the level of political knowledge would make one more likely to vote for the extreme right. The fact that the high information variable – which was coded like the other two, with high values corresponding to higher levels of political information, was insignificant even at this loose level of 0.1 shows us that it is the lower segment of the political information scale that is related (apparently in a nonlinear fashion) to the vote for the extreme right. These results also call for a qualitative analysis of the relationship between political sophistication and the vote for the extreme right, since the patterns observed reveal rather complex effects between the two variables.

This test, like the previous one, points in the expected direction but the results can be contested. While the direction of the estimates for the three components of political information show very peculiar, interesting and surprising features of the relationship between the political knowledge of individuals and their propensity to vote for extremist parties, it is impossible to tell in which way the three variables collineate. It may be that the high information variable did not reach significance due to its variance overlapping that of the other two variables; furthermore, we cannot make any solid assumptions on how the middle half of the political information variable (the two middle quartiles) affects the dependent variable in light of what the estimates show. All in all, a third test would shed more light on the second hypothesis.

5.2.3. Test 3.

What is QCA?

The Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is a method designed for the analysis of medium sized samples, where inferential statistics do not perform particularly well and conducting case studies for each observation would not be feasible. It was first presented by Charles Ragin in "The Comparative Method. Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies" as a solution for the frequent violation of the main assumptions underlying the regression-type methods. While the method is case-oriented and configurational by design, it can also perform well with large samples and linear conditions.

As opposed to regression-type methods, the independent variables (the term "condition" is used in QCA analyses) do not necessarily have cumulative effects on the dependent variable (outcome); which means that a certain condition may have opposite effects in conjunction with a different condition and the effects of different conditions do not necessarily add up for the occurrence of the outcome[10]. For example, having a geographically homogeneous electorate can be either beneficial or detrimental for a political party depending on the electoral system, on the electoral law, on the administrative structure of the territory of the country, etc. Similarly, on the individual level, being more politically informed may determine one to defect from the family party attachment if the respective party does not perform well or does not share their values; but it can also reinforce their party attachment if the party performs well and/or shares their political views and values. This type of

10 In regression-type models, each additional variable explains residual variances – it models what the observations which were not successfully explained by the other variables.

relationships is called multi-finality, since it refers to a situation when a certain condition may lead to opposite outcomes. Such relationships can be modeled with statistics using interactions, but the interpretation becomes rather difficult when it comes to using more than two variables in the interaction.

Another important feature of QCA is that it can model situations of equifinality. Equifinality refers to a situation when both the presence and the absence of a certain condition are parts of conjunctures that lead to the occurrence of an outcome. In other words when both the condition and its negation lead to the occurrence of the same outcome.

While statistical methods do not function in terms of necessity and sufficiency, the findings of model 4 (see table above) show that the effect of the level of political information on the vote for the far-right follows patterns of the QCA type. Having a very low level of political information tends to increase one's likelihood of voting for the extreme right – on this lower side of the scale, the increase of political knowledge prevents one from voting for the extreme right. However, the increase of political information in general seems to contribute positively to one's propensity to vote for the radicals. This means that both low and high levels of political information tend to contribute to the same outcome – equifinality.

Crisp-set QCA, which is used in this analysis, uses logical operators which refer to either the presence or the absence of a certain feature for a certain case – set membership. Value 1 means that a certain condition is satisfied by the case it refers to; value 0 means that the case does not satisfy that particular condition. For the purposes of this test, I used the variables created for model 4: one dummy variable for the low level of political information (0 = low, 1 = not low) and one dummy for the high level of political information (0 = not high; 1 = high);

the medium values being the conjuncture of 1 for low information and 0 for high information (*lowinfo * ~highinfo*).[11] The dependent variable (outcome) remained the farright variable used in all previous analyses.

In the light of what Model 4 shows, we can expect equifinality in the case of political information as a condition for the extreme-right vote. I ran, therefore, both the sufficiency and the necessity test in fsQCA with the three conditions (high information, medium information, low information) and the vote for far-right as outcome. The consistency of "low information" as a sufficient condition was the highest among all the three conditions for the occurrence of the outcome, followed by the "high information" condition and the medium one. As necessary conditions, the situation did not change: the high level of political information had a lower consistency level (0.234) than that of the low information variable (0.288). The results can be seen in the truth **Table 5** below.

Table 5. ***Consistency and coverage for information as a sufficient condition of extremism***

Low information	High information	Far-right	Consistency	Coverage
0	1	1	0.043[x]	0.956[x]
1	0	1	0.033[x]	0.966[x]
0	0	1	0.056[x]	0.943[x]

[X] The numbers were abbreviated to the third decimal

In general, such low consistency values for QCA analyses are not to be interpreted; however, since the purpose of this endeavor was to compare the performance of the "low level of political information" condition with that of the "high level of political information" the results are not to be dismissed. The results show us that the the prediction of extremism based

11 The multiplication refers to the logical AND, "~" stands for the negation of the condition

on the level of political information performs better for the lower values of political information than it does for the higher ones. Even though for the purposes of the QCA analysis I had to eliminate the control variables used in the previous models, the results point in the same direction: the errors of prediction are higher for higher values of political information than they are for the lower values. This test alone does not lead us to conclude that the models used for testing the first hypothesis has higher errors for higher values of political information, but it gives us further confirmatory information on the plausibility of such a claim.

CONCLUSIONS

The issue of political information as main component of electoral competence has generated many debates in the voting behavior literature. Few empirical studies have linked the political knowledge to vote choice so far, and this is an important gap in the study of voting behavior for several reasons. Most importantly, the differences in political information constitute a fictitious cleavage: they do not pertain to any division of interests that can be represented in government. Political knowledge can be seen as a tool that may favor the more informed citizens by providing them with an enhanced ability to select the candidates or parties that are most likely to successfully pursue their interests.

I argued in this paper that any correlation that may be found between political information and vote choice would contribute to a theory of the political misrepresentation of interests. The patterns of vote choice based on political information tend to distort representation. It can be argued, therefore, that the aim of this paper was to find whether the electoral success of extreme-right parties can be attributed to some extent to such distortions in the process of political representation.

The reason for studying the issue of the extreme-right parties is their intolerance towards certain segments of society, which may be a matter of concern to those directly affected by it or even to society in general. My initial expectation was that the less informed electorate is more likely to vote for the far-right especially due to the emotional type of electoral message that they tend to rely on. I argued in this paper that such emotional appeals may be less likely to attract the more informed electorate but are much more readily acceptable to the less knowledgeable segments of society.

In order to test this hypothesis I used a multilevel model on a sample of 5542 respondents from 8 European countries from the second module of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) database. For the assignment of parties to the extreme-right category I used Benoit and Laver's (Benoit & Laver, 2005) database that contains expert interviews on multiple dimensions of ideology for all the relevant parties in the countries studied in this paper.

Gender is the most important predictor of the vote for extremist parties, with men being roughly 50% more likely to vote for the extreme-right than women. Furthermore, since the intercept on the individual level in the first model was found to be very flexible with a variance around 1.00 we can also claim that people who are around the grand mean in terms of income, gender, age and residence (urban or rural) and those who are around the country mean in terms of education and political information are not similarly likely to vote for extremists when keeping macro-level variables equal. On average, the citizen of one country has a baseline propensity to vote for extreme right parties twice as big as the citizen of another country. However, if we control for the successfulness of the extremist parties, similar citizens from different countries are just as likely to vote for the extreme right – the random variation of the intercept becomes equal to 0. Political information, income and rural/urban residence do not appear to be related in any way to the dependent variable on the individual level. The macro-level of political information, as shown in table 3, has a powerful and significant effect on preventing one from voting for extremist parties. As argued previously in the paper, a plausible explanation to this is that the electoral communication functions similarly to market laws: the electoral supply adapts to the political demand of the electorate. Hence, the extremist messages can be discouraged from the public scene by an electorate that is more politically informed on average.

The fourth model, that was employed for the test of heteroskedasticity, shows confirmatory evidence for the main hypothesis as well. While no significant evidence was found for any correlation between political information and the likelihood of voting for the far-right on the upper part of the political information scale, having a particularly low level of political knowledge significantly increases one's propensity to vote for the extreme right. The finding is particularly interesting due to the fact that the high-level of political information and the low-level of political information seem to lead to the same outcome, even if the two variables did not both reach acceptable significance levels.

The expectation of heteroskedasticity was tested using three separate methods. My expectation was that the residuals of the second model (the final model employed for the test of the main hypothesis) are bound to increase as the level of political information grows. At first I regressed the political information variable of the absolute value of the residuals approximated from the model. Secondly, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, I divided the political information variable and ran the model again in order to see if the low information variable performs better than the high information one in terms of significance levels. Finally, I ran a QCA model with these two variables as conditions for the occurrence of the far-right vote (the outcome) and compared the consistency levels of the two conditions. All three tests pointed in the expected direction.

The most important finding of this study is the effect of the country mean of the level of education on the slope of the individual level of education in predicting the vote for extreme-right parties. As the mean of education grows, the slope of the individual schooling decreases. One way of interpreting this result would be that the “degree of educational misfit” is what is

actually correlated with the vote for extremist parties from the point of view of education (in less educated societies the more educated ones are more likely to vote for extremists; in more educated societies it is the less educated ones who are more likely to do so).

Limitations of the study

The biggest shortcoming of the study is the labeling of the political parties, which is based on secondary data that was gathered for different purposes than that of the present study. While my initial intention was to categorize the parties based on their positions on several issues (nationalism, attitudes toward immigrants, libertarianism/authoritarianism) and run different models for each of these dichotomies, the data available only allowed for the left-right type of extremism as dependent variable. The use of the nationalism variable, for instance, would have reduced the (already small enough) sample size on the national level to 4 cases, which would have made such a study impossible.

The size of the country level sample can be considered too small. In order to overcome the possible consequences of having only 8 countries in the sample, I tried to keep the number of variables on the aggregate level as small as possible without overlooking important macro-level effects. I did this by designing proxies for the variables that were mentioned by the scholarly literature as being good explanatory variables of extremism; thus, I reduced the number of macro-level variables to four, without tampering with the degrees of freedom or with the explanatory power of the models.

An alternative to the multilevel method would be introducing *n-1* dummy variables for a macro level sample of *n*; this would allow for the use of binary logistic regression on the

individual level without having to worry about the independence of observations or of errors. In order to deal with such possible criticism, I ran the same model using binary logistic regression and seven dummies instead of country grouping, the same variables reached significance and none of the estimates were higher or lower than those of the multilevel model by more than .02. I also ran the model as Generalized Linear Model using SPSS; the only notable difference between these results and those found with model 2 was that the national level of education dropped from a significance of .000 to the .01 level.

The political information variable, as mentioned before, was based solely on the adding of the values of three questionnaire items that varied from polity to polity. It could not be assessed whether the difficulty of the questions was comparable between countries. Furthermore, the answers to these questions could have been significantly influenced by events covered by the news in the days prior to the interviews; for instance, if the interviews in a certain polity were conducted immediately after an unpredictable event that involved the governor of the central bank[12], the political information variable could be artificially inflated – this could have had important consequences on the accuracy of the estimations. In addition, what we cannot evaluate with the available data is whether the use of the level of "practical political knowledge" variable is a reliable operationalization of the concept of political knowledge as defined in the "Conceptual Clarification" part of this paper. Moreover, the reliability of the political information variable created by the adding up of the three political information items in the CSES database had an overall reliability of 0.79 (Cronbach's Alpha), but the reliability for the individual countries in the sample ranged from 0.45 to 0.9; which shows that the variable was far from being equally reliable in all countries. This situation may have augmented the errors of prediction and may have also been among the causes of the very

12 One of the political information questions in Romania was "Could you name the Governor of the National Bank of Romania?"

insignificant estimates found in the first models for the level of political information on the individual level.

We can also expect that the lack of significance of the estimates for political information is due to the excessive control for education, which is very significantly correlated with political information even though the coefficient is extremely low (B=0.001). However, if we remove all the controls and we look at the raw effect of information on the propensity to vote for extremist parties, the parameter estimate remains insignificant; in fact, the only individual polity where it is significant at the 0.05 level is the Netherlands, where the estimate is -0.40.

Another important shortcoming of the study is the fact that some people tend to be reluctant when it comes to admitting that they voted for extremist parties. As long as we have no reasons to assume that the respondents who lie belong systematically to certain social or economic groups, and we do not have reasons to assume that they are more educated or less educated than the others; we can claim that the results are unbiased. However random this misreporting is, it certainly had an effect on the estimated standard errors, which, implicitly, decreased the significance levels reported above. Furthermore, since the extent of the misreporting of vote choice varied dramatically from one polity to another – in Romania, for instance, the percentage of respondents who declared they voted for the extreme right is 12% lower than the lower bound of the 95% confidence interval of a random sample the size of the one used in Romania – the self-selection bias may have caused the overrepresentation of some polities and the underrepresentation of others in the overall sample. The distortions introduced by the misrepresentation previously mentioned could have dragged the results towards the patterns that are mostly valid in those countries from the sample where there was

a high number of extreme-right voters that reported correctly their voting preferences[13].

Finally, the models do not include any attitudinal variables such as issue positions or valence issues; the first reason for not using such variables was the fact that they generally tend to collineate with political information and education, thus rendering the estimates insignificant. Secondly, the directionality of the relationship tends to be more ambiguous when it comes to attitudinal variables and vote choice; it is never clear if it is the attitudes that causes the vote choice or it is the electoral preference that draws the attitude of the individual towards the position of the preferred candidate (Festinger, 1957). Finally, due to the fact that people tend to have very volatile and inconsistent attitudes (Converse, 1964: 12-20) and they often respond "off the top of their heads" when asked by interviewers about their attitudes towards political issues (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005: 393-394) we can rarely rely on attitudinal variables as predictors of vote choice[14]. All in all, most of the shortcomings of the study are either related to the unavailability of the data or to difficulties common to voting behavior research in general.

Suggestions for Future Research

The current study, as mentioned previously, is a starting point for the study of the underrepresentation of the interests of individuals on grounds related to their level of political knowledge. The political representation of individuals and groups, however, does not only happen through elections; protests, petitions, strikes, nongovernmental organizations, etc. are all channels of representation for the interests of citizens. As the elections are just a small part of the very broad concept of political participation, we will only be able to answer to the key

13 Switzerland and the Netherlands

14 This may also be one of the reasons why very elegant approaches such as the proximity and the directional theories of voting behavior very rarely managed to explain the bulk of the variance of vote choice.

question that underlies the motivations of this research by looking at how the level of political information influences political participation in general. The uninformed electorate, and the less educated citizens, based on the results presented above, may practice different types of political participation than the more politically informed and may also have different rates of success based on the type and assertiveness of the methods they choose. Furthermore, we can expect the effects of political information on the type and successfulness of the citizens' political participation are expected to be mediated by aggregate level factors.

What needs to be settled through further research as well is whether it is the nationalistic appeals or the social justice ones that are the determinants of the vote for far-right parties in different countries. Due to the results of this study, I would expect social justice, the promise of protecting the national traditions and the fear of foreigners who take jobs from local communities (the type of appeals that are more likely to attract the votes of the less educated) to be the main reasons why people in more educated societies vote for extremist parties; whereas the prospect of a more hierarchical society that would be to the advantage of a modern bourgeoisie may be the main reason of voting for extreme parties in countries with lower levels of education. The use of the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) database for the country level variables would be a very good start for the deepening of the study on this topic.

In conclusion, the present study is a starting point for more detailed analyses of political representation and misrepresentation but also for more specific research endeavors on the topic of educational and informational factors underlying extremist attitudes. Both the non-linear character of the influence of political information on the vote for the extreme right and the peculiar effect of education on the likelihood of voting for the far-right represent valuable

findings for prospective studies.

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