

# **Do Cleavages Explain Electoral Responses to Economic Crisis in Europe?**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

The Rokkan-Lipset thesis highlights the importance of social cleavages based on divisions in society such ethnicity, social class, religion and cultural identities as the basis of the party systems and ultimately electoral behaviour in the advanced industrial democracies. This paper examines the relevance of the cleavages model in comparison with the spatial and valence models of electoral choice, for explaining mass political reactions to the 'Great Recession' in Europe which started in late 2007. It models electoral support for incumbents and attitudes to the performance of incumbent governments using data from the European Social Surveys of 2006, prior to the recession and again in 2010 more than two years into the crisis. The results show that the cleavage model still has relevance for understanding mass political responses to the crisis, but that it plays a relatively minor role compared with the two rival models. It appears that the crisis did not reinforce social cleavages in Europe but tended to transform social divisions into ideological and performance related divisions in mass political behaviour.

## **Do Cleavages Explain Electoral Responses to Economic Crisis in Europe?**

### **Introduction**

One of the most striking developments in global political economy over the last ten years has been the return of deep and protracted economic recession comparable to that of the Great Depression of the 1930s. The long period of economic growth and prosperity known as the 'Great Moderation' lasted in Europe from the immediate post-war period up to the first decade of the new century, albeit subject to some minor fluctuations in economic activity. This experience convinced many people that depression economics had been consigned to the history books. Then starting in late 2007 the long period of prosperity gave way to a nearly catastrophic financial meltdown followed by a deep and protracted recession which is still affecting many European economies, not to mention countries in Asia. In particular, the crisis of the Eurozone is in large part the product of the 'Great Recession' and it had a severe impact on many EU member states and continues to cast a shadow across the future of the European project.

Ironically, these developments provide a unique test-bed for examining long-standing debates about the emergence of democracy, and how structural divisions in society are represented in the political process and in electoral politics. In particular the Rokkan-Lipset (1967) thesis about the importance of social cleavages in influencing political institutions and behaviour has attracted a lot of attention. The thesis relates to a variety of topics concerning the emergence of mass politics, the formation and development of party systems, electoral representation and political support in the advanced industrial democracies (Lipset, 1963; Lipjhart, 1977; Rogowski, 1981; Kitschelt, 1994).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how relevant the Rokkan-Lipset thesis is for understanding mass political reactions to the economic crisis in Europe. More generally the paper examines the role of traditional political sociology of the type exemplified by their

work for explaining electoral change in Europe. The paper begins by reviewing the cleavages analysis which is at the core of the Rokkan-Lipset thesis, and examines some of the criticisms which have been made of their model. It then goes on to set out two alternative approaches, or rival models, of electoral choice which provide different accounts of these developments to that of the cleavage model. These are the spatial and valence models of electoral choice. The three alternative models are then tested using data from European social surveys which predate and postdate the Great Recession. In this way the relevance of these alternative accounts of electoral representation can be examined, set against a rapidly changing economic environment in Europe.

The data used for this exercise comes from the European Social Survey which consists of a set of biannual surveys of public opinion conducted primarily in European democracies over the period from 2002 to 2012<sup>1</sup>. These surveys contain many questions relating to political parties and political participation. The analysis aims to investigate how well the rival models account for electoral choice in Europe, both in the pre-recession era and subsequently, as the effects of the economic crisis took hold. This is done by comparing vote models using data from the 2006 survey which pre-dates the crisis, with data from the 2010 survey conducted some two years into the recession. The data is derived from surveys from twenty-one countries conducted in both years<sup>2</sup>. In addition to examining how voting support was influenced by the recession, we go on to probe more closely its effects on public evaluations of governments in these countries.

By way of an ‘executive summary’ of the findings, the analysis shows that the cleavage model plays a role in explaining levels of electoral support for governing parties in Europe over this period, as well as evaluations of governments. But it is a relatively minor part of the picture with the valence model providing a better explanation for political support. In addition the spatial model makes a useful contribution to understanding these phenomena.

It is clear that the traditional political sociological approach to the analysis of mass politics is still relevant, but it needs to be supplemented by alternative accounts if we are to make sense of public reactions to economic crisis on this scale.

### **The Cleavage Model of Electoral Choice**

Lipset and Rokkan worked in the context of a rich historical tradition of political sociology going back to Marx and Weber (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Rokkan, 1970). Their aim was to map out the pattern of cleavages in Europe and examine how they interacted with the formation and development of political parties and also how they influenced electoral behaviour. They used the term cleavage to refer to conflicting groups which bring individuals together and differentiate them from other members of society. They argued that members of these groups are politicized by their experiences and form attachments to political parties whose role is to represent their interests in the political process. The groups are based on such social cleavages as religion, social class, ethnicity and cultural identity.

Lipset and Rokkan sought to identify these social cleavages and to examine their relationship with electoral behaviour and governance more generally. These groups often represent minorities such as ethnic groups, but they can also represent majorities of the electorate in some countries such as the working class. The essence of this approach was to suggest that cleavages provide a social base for the formation of political organisations particularly parties, and this in turn structures electoral choice and ultimately determines the political make up of governments and the policies they produce.

The political sociologist, Peter Pulzer exemplified this approach in a famous quote about Britain in which he wrote: '*[i]n British party politics, class is everything, all else is embellishment and detail*' (1967, p. 98). His research, together with the pioneering work by Butler and Stokes (1969) showed that, among those who thought in class terms, most working-class people identified with the Labour party and most middle-class people thought

of themselves as Conservatives. There were always exceptions but, by and large, working-class individuals voted Labour and the middle-class voted Conservative. Since minor parties such as the Liberals played small roles in electoral politics, they were largely ignored in this analysis.

This approach to understanding parties and elections did not go unchallenged at the time, however. Fairly early on, research showed that political divisions within Europe were not on the whole characterised by enduring and stable relationships between parties and voting behaviour based on social cleavages. Rather they were more like a shifting set of political allegiances linked to changing policy programmes by parties which in turn led to varying levels of electoral support (Zuckerman and Lichbach, 1977; Daalder, 1983; Preworski and Sprague, 1986). As Zuckerman put it, the links between social groups and political organisations were '*more like a kaleidoscope than a rocklike strata*' (1982, 136). Thus research showed that there was no strong and direct relationship between any of the social cleavages and patterns of political support. Instead there appeared to be relatively weak associations between social and political divisions and voting behaviour in national elections. It appeared that the social characteristics of voters such as their class, ethnicity and religion explained only a very modest amount of variation in their voting behaviour.

At the same time, party organisational theorists were trying to understand the developing of political parties over time and this gave rise to the 'catch-all' party thesis. This is the idea that parties increasingly seek to appeal to as broad an electorate as possible because this is the way to be electorally successful (Kirchheimer, 1966; Krouwel, 2003). Parties which appealed to narrow sectional interests still existed in the classification schemes and represented agrarian, religious or ethnic divisions in society. But such parties were never as successful as their broadly based counterparts who sought to appeal to the widest possible electorate.

## **Rivals to the Cleavage Model**

If social cleavages have limited explanatory power when it comes to explaining electoral choices what then does explain it? There are two alternative models of electoral behaviour which have dominated much of the research into electoral choice in recent years. The first is the spatial model of party competition, pioneered by Anthony Downs (1957) and Duncan Black (1958). The spatial model is based on the proposition that voters will choose a party which is in close agreement with their own views on issues which divide both the political parties and the electorate (see, e.g., Adams, Merrill and Grofman, 2005; Merrill and Grofman, 1999). The model commonly assumes that voters are widely distributed along a 'left-right' ideological scale which bundles together a broad set of issues.

These issues are commonly centred on questions of taxation, redistribution and public spending. Typically parties on the left favour high levels of taxation and public spending, and parties on the right favour the opposite. According to this model the voter will decide where they are located along this scale and then vote for the party closest to them. Parties are strategic actors in the model and will manoeuvre in this ideological space in order to capture as many voters as possible. This line of reasoning supports the 'median' voter theorem which suggests that in two party systems both parties will try to 'capture the middle ground' by locating themselves at the median of the left-right dimension (Downs, 1957).

This model is not restricted to assuming a single left-right scale, and can be generalised to examine other ideological divisions such as the materialist-post-materialist dimension in society identified in the work of Inglehart (1997), and which is orthogonal to the left-right dimension. But if the dimensions underlying the model become too numerous then formal theories suggest that no stable equilibrium outcome is possible, and voters and parties will continually wander round in the complex issue space all fruitlessly seeking to establish a stable majority (Plott, 1967, Schofield, 1978).

Spatial theory inherited the assumption that voters have exogenously determined issue preferences from neo-classical economic theory. In fact experimental evidence shows that this assumption is a poor representation of reality (Sanders et al. 2008), but it nonetheless anchors the theory as individuals attempt to 'maximise utility' by supporting a party closest to them on the 'left-right' ideological dimension. Although spatial models have been imaginatively elaborated in various ways, they retain the core assumption that salient *position* issues drive the choices of utility-maximising voters.

The second major rival to the cleavage model of electoral choice is the valence model, introduced originally by Donald Stokes in the first systematic critique of the spatial model (Stokes, 1963, 1992). In the valence model voters will support a party which they perceive as being able to deliver the best performance on issues they care about, and over which there is a broad consensus in society about what should be done (Clarke et al., 2004, 2009; Clarke, Kornberg and Scotto, 2009). The classic valence issue is the economy, both because it is very salient for most people, and also because there is an overwhelming consensus that prosperity is preferred to poverty, growth to stagnation, employment to joblessness and sound money to rising prices. This approach argues that voters in general will support a party which can deliver 'good times' and abandon one which appears unable to do this. The model represents a generalisation of a great deal of theoretical and empirical work on economic voting which has been produced over the years (see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007; Powell and Whitten, 1993; Whiteley et al., 2013).

The valence model is not only about the economy, however, since the ability of a party to provide efficient public services such as education and health care, and also to protect voters from security threats arising from crime and terrorism also determine its electoral success. In addition to valence issues, two key variables drive voters' assessments in the valence model. Firstly, partisanship or the psychological attachment that some voters



have towards a political party, is conceptualized as a 'running tally' or cumulative evaluation of a party's performance over time with more recent performances weighted more heavily than earlier ones (see Fiorina, 1981). This means that partisanship is a dynamic phenomenon and a successful party will acquire additional identifiers over time, while an unsuccessful party will lose them if it fails to perform in line with expectations.

The second factor in the valence model is party leader images. Since leaders are key political decision-makers voter perceptions of their actual or anticipated performance is an important indicator of the ability of a party to deliver on the issues which count. The more highly a voter thinks of a particular leader the more likely they are to support that leader's party. In this account voters are using leaders as 'fast and frugal' heuristics or easily applied rules of thumb to evaluate political parties (Gigerenzer, 2008; Gigerenzer, Hertwig and Pachur, 2011). Such heuristics are particularly important in a world characterised by significant complexity and uncertainty where the stakes are high.

A comparison of the cleavage, spatial and valence models reveals that the latter is the most radical departure from the cleavage model of electoral choice. As the earlier discussion indicates, the cleavage model implies that different social groups will seek benefits for themselves by supporting parties who will represent their interests in the political process. In essence this is a 'clientelistic' model of political representation, in which politicians act as advocates for the groups they represent. In contrast, the valence model focuses on benefits that the great majority of all voters seek, and which are not confined to specific social groups. Clearly, the valence model is much more consistent with the 'catch all' party, than the cleavage model.

The spatial model is in an intermediate position between the cleavage model and the valence model. It implies that parties will manoeuvre in the policy space in order to capture as many voters as possible, but there are limitations on how successful this can be imposed

on them by the divisions of opinions in society. If a party moves too far away from its traditional policy positions, it runs the risk of losing votes to rival parties which will seek to outflank it in the policy space. In a multiparty system it is necessary for parties to differentiate themselves from each other, and one way of doing this is to try to build broad support among as many groups as possible. Party strategies in this model may be based on social cleavages but they are not restricted to these and if a party wants to build a broad base then it needs to gain support from voters with similar ideological beliefs and political values, not just similar demographic characteristics.

In light of this review of the models of electoral choice, we examine how we can test these alternative perspectives in the context of the period of the Great Recession in Europe which started in 2008.

### **Model Specifications and Measurement Issues**

We begin by specifying a model of electoral choice which captures the cleavages, spatial and valence models in a cross section of 21 countries surveyed in the 2006 and again in 2010 European Social Surveys. Models with the same specifications of variables are estimated in 2006, some two years before the crisis broke, and again in 2010 some two years afterwards, in order to determine which of the rival accounts gives the best explanation of electoral choice. There is a multiplicity of parties in these different countries and frequent national elections, and so it is necessary to define a dependent variable which works across all of them and avoids the problems of estimating support for particular parties in different countries at different points of time.

With this in mind we define a binary variable, scoring one if a respondent voted for an incumbent party of government in the previous national election and zero if they did not. The latter category includes respondents who voted for opposition parties or minor parties not represented in the legislature, or who did not vote at all, and so it can be modelled with a

binary logistic regression analysis (see Long and Freese, 2006). This circumvents the problems of modelling electoral support for many parties in different countries and focuses on support and opposition to incumbent parties.

The details of the variables used to capture the three models are described in outline here. To consider the cleavage model first, this is measured by a series of indicators of the respondent's membership of various social groups, including groups based on class, religion, ethnic minority status and other variables. The social class variable is measured using three different indicators. Firstly, occupational status is identified using the International Standard Classifications of Occupations (isco-88) which is published by the International Labour Organisation<sup>3</sup>. This classifies occupations into a large number of categories and it is recoded into a six point occupational status scale, which varies from unskilled workers in the lowest category up to professionals and senior managers in the highest. Income is another important indicator of social class, and this is measured in relation to income deciles in the various countries, from the poorest to the richest ten per cent. The third indicator of social class is educational attainment which is measured by the number of years a respondent spent in full-time education.

Other important cleavage variables relate specifically to various demographic minority groups. These are members of ethnic minority groups, residents who are not citizens of a country, retired people, unemployed individuals and the sick and disabled. In addition we take into account religiosity by looking at members of two minority religious groups: Muslims and Jews. Alongside these various social groups, the models all include controls for age and gender.

The valence model is captured using four different policy-related variables as well as measures of leadership evaluations and partisanship. With regard to the former, respondents were asked to indicate how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with policy performance in

their country in relation to the economy, the educational system, and health care. These variables are all measured using eleven point scales, varying from zero (very dissatisfied) to ten (very satisfied). In addition a measure of the respondent's satisfaction with the state of democracy in their country was also included in the modelling, again using an eleven point scale. This was designed to capture a broader evaluation of the performance of the political system as a whole, not just in relation to specific policies.

Leadership evaluations are measured in the European Social Survey with a question about trusting politicians. It is not feasible to ask specific questions in a comparative survey covering many countries about particular leaders, and so a general indicator of the extent to which respondents trust politicians is a good proxy measure of such evaluations. It is measured using an eleven point scale varying from zero (no trust at all) to ten (complete trust). Finally, the third component of the valence model is partisanship, and this is captured with a question which asks if respondents feel close to a political party. This is a very broad measure of the respondent's identification with parties, and takes the form of a dummy variable with yes scoring one and no scoring zero.

The spatial model is captured using five different variables. Firstly, there is a left-right ideological scale which respondents are asked to locate themselves along, and is designed to capture directly the core variable in the spatial model. Secondly, there are two different indicators of attitudes to immigration, one measuring the extent to which respondents are willing to accept immigrants from outside of Europe, and the other the extent to which they are willing to accept ethnic minorities as immigrants. Immigration is a controversial issue in Europe, and divides respondents across the continent. In addition to immigration there is a measure designed to capture public attitudes to the environment and another to gay rights, again both controversial issues. In the former case individuals are asked if they think that science will solve environmental problems in the future giving an

indication of how optimistic they are about this issue. As regards gay rights they are asked if they think that gays and lesbians should be allowed to live their lives freely. This is a measure of tolerance towards minorities which again is quite divisive in Europe.

## **Results**

In the 21 countries surveyed in both 2006 and again in 2010, approximately 31 per cent of respondents voted for governing parties in the most recent national elections in the 2006 survey. The rest voted for opposition or non-Parliamentary parties or did not vote at all. Table 1 examines the extent to which the cleavages, valence and spatial models explain voting for incumbents in the period before the effects of the Great Recession started to be felt. The table includes a measure of fit, the pseudo R-square statistic, and also the Aikaike Information Criterion. The latter can be used to compare the different models with the lowest value indicating the best fit. This statistic trades off the complexity of the model against the goodness of fit, so the most parsimonious best fitting model will be optimal (Burham and Anderson, 2002).

■ Table 1 about here –

Table 1 show that the fits are relatively modest for the models but the best fitting one is the valence model with an Aikaike criterion of 46875.5, significantly lower than its rivals. The second best fitting model is the cleavages model, closely followed by the spatial model. The composite model combines all the variables and not surprisingly this provides the best fit and it also shows that each of the models makes a contribution to explaining the vote for incumbent parties. The coefficients are odd ratios and so values exceeding 1.0 indicate a positive effect of a predictor variable on support for incumbents, and values less than 1.0 indicate a negative effect.

To interpret the effects in the composite model we can see that partisanship and the leadership variable both had positive effects on voting for incumbents in 2006. Thus

individuals who trust politicians and feel close to a political party were more likely to vote for incumbents than for other parties or not to vote at all. Similarly, satisfaction with the economy and with the state of democracy both encouraged voters to support incumbents, which is consistent with the valence model. The other policy measures did not have a significant impact on support for incumbents once the other variables in the model are taken into account. In the case of the spatial model it is clear that support for left-wing parties encouraged individuals to vote for incumbents.

The latter finding was largely due to the fact that left-wing coalitions or single party left-wing governments were in office in many of these countries at the time. For example, in 2006 Britain had a Labour government, Germany had a grand coalition of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats, and socialist governments were in power in Spain, Sweden and Portugal. As regards other spatial variables, attitudes to immigration had no influence on voting for incumbents, but optimism about the environment appeared to promote support for these parties.

As regards the cleavages model, occupational status had a weak effect on voting for incumbents and income had a rather stronger effect, with low occupational status and below average incomes engendering support for incumbent parties. Ethnicity had no influence on such support but disability, unemployment and Muslim religious affiliation discouraged support for incumbents. This was particularly true of residents of these countries who were not citizens. They were strongly inclined to support other parties or to not vote at all. Finally age had a positive impact of voting for incumbents, but as the quadratic specification shows, the effect weakened as respondents grew older. In conjunction with the age effect, retired people, most with state pensions, were more likely to support incumbent parties than respondents in general. Finally, gender appeared to have no effect, once the other variables were taken into account.

Overall, these findings suggest that marginalised groups such as the disabled and the unemployed were likely to oppose governing parties at that time or more likely to not vote at all. In addition high social status tended to reduce support for incumbent parties, which is unsurprising if many of them were on the left of the political spectrum. The valence model worked just as expected with satisfaction with the economy and the overall state of democracy encouraging individuals to support incumbents. Finally, ideology had an effect but attitudes to immigration did not appear to influence the vote, even though it was a controversial issue in Europe at that time.

■ Table 2 about here –

Table 2 contains the same models as in Table 1 but this time it is estimated using data from the 2010 European Social Survey, some two and half years into the Great Recession. There are many similarities with Table 1, but there are also so important differences. The first point to make is that just as in 2006, the valence model did best in terms of overall fit. This was followed by the cleavages and spatial models respectively as in Table 1. So the arrival of recession did not affect the importance of each of these models. Again if we focus on the composite model, then in the valence model partisanship, leadership evaluations and satisfaction with the economy all have comparable effects to those in Table 1. In addition satisfaction with education also figured in the valence model, but that aside, it was not much different from the 2006 version of the model.

The really striking changes in the 2006 and 2010 models occurred in relation to the spatial model. We saw earlier that in 2006 leftist sympathisers tended to vote for incumbents, whereas in 2010 it was rightist sympathisers that did so, reflecting the fact that a number of leftist parties lost office as a consequence of the recession. Examples of this include Germany where the Social Democrats lost office in 2009, Britain, where Labour lost the 2010

general election, Hungary where a Centre-Right party won an overall majority in 2010 and in Finland when the Social Democrats left the Coalition government in 2006.

These changes of governments reflected shifts in the ideological views of Europeans over time which swung to the right after the recession hit European economies. This can be seen with data from the ESS cumulative file which contains information on all six rounds of surveys conducted from 2002 up to 2012. This shows that the mean score on the left-right ideology scale was 5.07 in 2002, but by 2012 it was 5.20. This is a significant shift to the right by the electorates of these European democracies, and Table 2 shows how it affected support for incumbent parties.

The evidence relating to changing electoral support in Europe is illuminating and shows how a shift in ideology occurred over this period which affected the balance of support for left parties over time. However, more generally support for incumbent parties declined, whether they came from the left or from the right of the political spectrum. Between 2008 and 2012 there were 34 national legislative elections in the 27 member states of the European Union. In no less than 20 of these elections, incumbent parties or ruling coalition governments were defeated, and political leaders were replaced (Whiteley et al. 2013: 256). Although incumbents were re-elected in the remaining cases, the composition of ruling coalition governments often changed, and quite frequently they lost votes in these elections. It appears that the economic crisis has made life difficult for all incumbents in these advanced democracies, although it appears that left parties suffered most.

Given this, it is interesting to examine more closely how Europeans reacted to their own governments following the impact of the Great Recession. In the ESS surveys there was a question which asked respondents to indicate whether they were satisfied or dissatisfied with the performance of their own governments (0 – extremely dissatisfied; 10 – extremely



satisfied). This gives a more direct picture of how Europeans reacted to the Great Recession and this is explored in the next section.

### **Changes in Government Satisfaction in Europe**

We next consider how the recession influenced satisfaction with incumbent governments in Europe in these countries. These relate to the classic argument that a good performance increases support for incumbents and a bad performance reduces it (see for example, Key, 1968; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Norpoth, Lewis-Beck and Lafay, 1991; van Der Brug, van Der Eijk and Franklin, 2007; Duch and Stevenson, 2008). A key issue which has not been fully researched in this literature is to determine how toxic recessionary economics is for the reputations of governments in contemporary democracies. There is abundant anecdotal evidence to suggest that it is very damaging for incumbents. For example, Nicholas Sarkozy failed in his bid to be re-elected President of France in 2012, and ruling coalition governments were thrown out of office in the Netherlands in 2010 and in Denmark in 2011. As the earlier discussion pointed out Labour was soundly defeated in the 2010 British general election.

But, there are also counter examples. In Germany, the CDU/CSU coalition fared very well in the 2009 German Bundestag elections and party leader, Angela Merkel remained Chancellor, even though the Social Democrats lost office. In the United States, Barack Obama won a second term in the White House in the 2012 presidential election. However, he was fortunate enough to be elected for the first time in 2008 after the recession had clearly started. This meant that his Republican predecessor George Bush took much of the blame for the financial crisis.

The question about satisfaction with government performance provides a general indicator of what Europeans thought about the performance of their governments over time. Figure 1 compares pooled responses to this question in 2006 and again in 2010 in these

countries. There is a clear shift towards discontent on the part of voters with the performance of their governments in these years, with an average score of 4.46 in 2006 turning into an average score of 4.05 in 2010 on the eleven point scale, a statistically significant change. In addition some 45 per cent of respondents gave their government a score of less than 5 on the scale in 2006, but by 2010 this had grown to 53 per cent.

■ Figure 1 about here --

Figure 2 examines satisfaction scores which appear in Figure 1 by country, and there are some really significant changes which occurred in some countries over time. Southern and Eastern European countries such as Spain, Portugal, Slovakia and Slovenia were particularly badly affected by the crisis and they recorded steep reductions in satisfaction with their governments. But some northern European countries such as Denmark, Ireland and Finland were also affected, though to a lesser extent. Not all countries experienced declining levels of satisfaction though, with governments improving their positions in Hungary, Norway and Sweden. Clearly, there are interesting patterns of response to the economic crisis in Europe over this period.

■ Figure 2 about here --

As the earlier discussion indicated, the central theme of the literature on the political economy of party support is that a successful economic performance by governments brings electoral rewards to incumbent parties, whereas unsuccessful economic performance has the opposite effect. This is a theme that has long been salient in research on the political cultural bases of public support for democracy (e.g., Almond and Verba, 1963; Lipset, 1963; Easton, 1965). A key idea in these early studies which reappears in more recent research is that strong economic performance can help to reinforce and consolidate democracy in regimes making the transition from authoritarianism to democracy, and weak performance can undermine democratic consolidation (Rose and Mishler, 1996; Diamond, 1999; Fails and

Pierce, 2010). As one researcher argued, stable democracies depend on citizens regarding democracy as 'the only game in town' (di Palma, 1990) and they are inclined to do this if democratic consolidation is accompanied by economic prosperity.

Another important line of research examined the effects of political institutions and political participation on satisfaction with democracy (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Mishler and Rose, 2001; Wells and Kriekhaus, 2006). Recent studies have shown that institutional arrangements tend to influence democratic norms rather than the reverse process of democratic norms sustaining institutions (Fails and Pierce, 2010). But the absence of deep, protracted recessions in the period since the end of World War II up to 2007 made research on the impact of severe economic crises on public satisfaction with democracy difficult. Depression-era economic conditions cannot be recreated in a laboratory.

■ Figure 3 about here --

As Figure 3 shows, in 2006 the aggregate relationship between satisfaction with government and satisfaction with the economy in the twenty-one countries was very strong ( $r = 0.89$ ). It was equally strong in 2010 ( $r = 0.84$ ), and this is one of the key drivers of the valence model. Given this, it seems likely that variables which influence voting behaviour such as leadership evaluations, partisanship and other issue measures are also likely to play an important role in driving satisfaction with government performance. A strong performance on the valence issues will improve satisfaction with the government and a poor performance will have the opposite effect. Positive scores on the economy are particularly important as Figure 3 shows, but a good performance on health care, crime and other valence issues counts as well. Partisanship is likely to have a direct effect on satisfaction with government performance, but also an indirect effect via the process of perceptual screening. This is the idea that government partisans are likely to focus on good news and ignore bad

news about the parties they support and this affects the way that they evaluate governments (Campbell et al. 1960).

The spatial model should also influence satisfaction with government via the effects of ideology. Individuals with left-of-centre ideological beliefs are apt to be more critical of the status quo and by implication of governments of all types, than those with right-of-centre beliefs. This is an effect which is likely to be reinforced by the economic crisis as it supports narratives about the crisis of capitalism. Historically, critiques of capitalism have been at the centre of leftist ideologies and the crisis, which involved traumatic shocks to the interlocking financial systems of the major mature democracies, invites a radicalisation of these views, thereby strengthening the link between ideology and satisfaction with government.

As regards the spatial model there is also the argument that the effect of position issues on government performance judgments should be influential, since people should have confidence in governments if policies are delivered that are closely aligned with their preferences on divisive issues. If, for example, government is delivering the balance of taxation and public spending which an individual prefers, that should produce high levels of satisfaction with that government for that individual. However, the effects of the spatial issues should be weaker than the effect of valence issues since the effective delivery of controversially policies will alienate opponents at the same time that it strengthens supporters. One type of reaction will serve to cancel out the other when looked at across the electorate as a whole. Moreover, a wealth of empirical evidence from previous research indicates that spatial issues have a weaker effect in voting models than valence issues (Clarke et al. 2004, 2009).

With respect to the cleavages model, we might expect to see different effects depending on which cleavages we are examining. With respect to social class, as measured by occupational status, income and educational attainment, then we might expect to see more

affluent and economically secure individuals having higher levels of satisfaction with government than their less secure counterparts. This is because affluence serves to insulate them from the crisis to some extent. On the other hand ethnic minorities, the unemployed and non-citizens are likely to be more affected by recessionary economies than the population in general and so their levels of satisfaction with government should decline. Note that this is partly a valence type interpretation of performance, but it is seeing this through the lens of social and economic status. In other words high status ameliorates the malign effects of recession and low status reinforces them.

■ Table 3 about here –

Table 3 looks at the relationship between the variables in the three models and satisfaction with the performance of the government in 2006, using an OLS regression analysis. Overall, the key difference with the vote models is that the valence model is clearly very dominant in explain public reactions to the crisis. With an R-Square of 0.52 and an AIC which is very much lower than the spatial and cleavage models, it shows that in ‘normal’ times valence considerations dominate voter’s satisfaction with the government of the day. Having made that point, it is also clear that the spatial and cleavage models both make a contribution to understanding variations in government satisfaction, as can be seen in the fourth column in Table 3.

The Table shows that partisanship, leader evaluations and all of the valence variables have a positive impact on satisfaction with government in ‘normal’ times, whereas the impact of the spatial and cleavages models is much more mixed. In the case of the former, the left-right ideological scale appears to have little or no influence on satisfaction with government, whereas positive attitudes to immigration and the environment boost government satisfaction. However, positive attitudes to gay right reduced satisfaction levels with government. So the effects are mixed in the spatial model.

In contrast the cleavage model has some effects, but many cleavages have no influence on government satisfaction, once the other variables are taken into account. Religiosity, disability, unemployment and retirement status have no significant impact on government satisfaction. In contrast occupational status has a positive impact but income and educational status negative impacts. So again these effects are quite mixed. Finally, ethnic minorities appear to have greater confidence in government in this model than ethnic majorities.

■ Table 4 about here –

Table 4 repeats the same modelling exercise for the 2010 survey and in this case there is a marked change in the results compared with Table 3. Table 4 captures the determinants of government satisfaction in ‘abnormal’ times and it shows that while the valence model is still dominant a couple of the valence variables are no longer significant. The economy, education and democracy continue to have a big impact on satisfaction with government whereas partisanship and evaluations of health care no longer have effects. The biggest change is the importance of the left-right ideological scale in explaining government satisfaction. It appears that respondents on the right of the political spectrum are more likely to be satisfied with government than those on the left in the revised model. This is partly a matter of the crisis igniting and reinforcing ideological divisions in society, in response to the ‘crisis of capitalism’ but it is also a response to the loss of support by many left wing governments as a consequence of the recession. In the revised model attitudes to immigration were not significant predictors, probably because their impact was absorbed by the emergence of the left-right scale as an important predictor. However, attitudes to the environment and to gay rights continued to be significant predictors with the same signs as in 2006.

Another very interesting change in the models in Table 4 compared with Table 3 is that the cleavage model has significantly less explanatory power than it did in 2006. In the post-recession model it was the least effective model in terms of explanatory power. The implication is that the economic crisis shifted the impact of social divisions between individuals towards ideological and valence concerns. Given that the original theoretical basis of the cleavage model is the idea that social divisions cause differences in political responses to governments, one might expect recession to exacerbate these. But it appears that the arrival of the economic crisis shifted attention away from social groups to ideological divisions.

### **Conclusions**

The political economy of government accountability in a recession appears to have much in common with that in 'normal' times. In both settings governments are held account for their performance both in terms of public attitudes to incumbent governments and in voter responses in the ballot box. The great recession produced a lot of electoral change in Europe, and made life difficult for incumbent parties of all types, but particularly for those on the left of the political spectrum. Not surprisingly, the crisis served to polarize attitudes in Europe and to reinforce ideological divisions in electoral choice. The traditional cleavage model played a role in all of this, but it was a relatively minor role, particularly in relation to evaluations of government performance. This suggests that the traditional political sociology of electoral support cannot explain these developments without taking into account the political economy of support if the effects of recession are to be properly understood.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>.

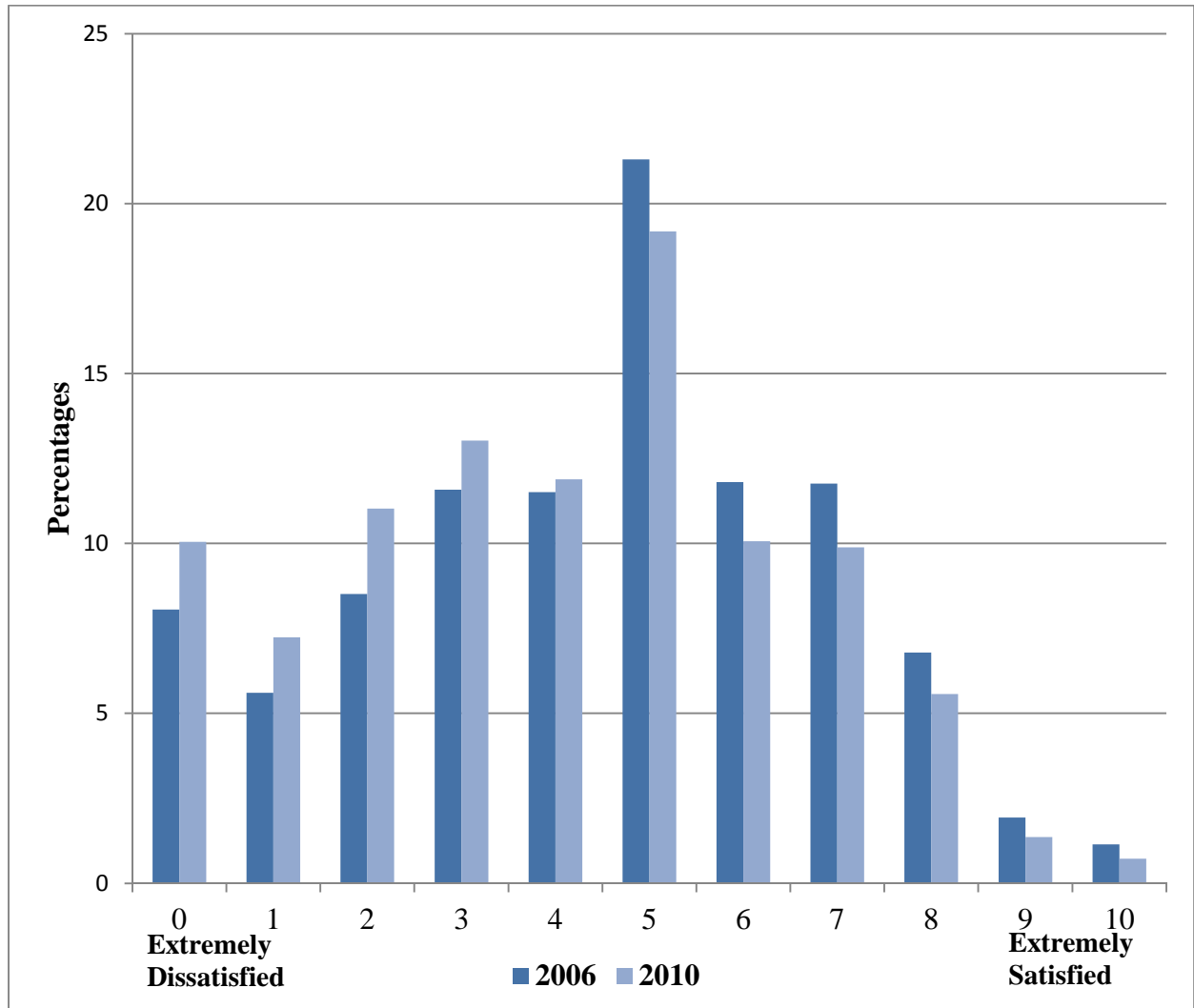
<sup>2</sup> The countries are Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Cyprus, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Slovenia, Slovakia, Ukraine.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/isco88/>. Accessed August 15<sup>th</sup> 2015.

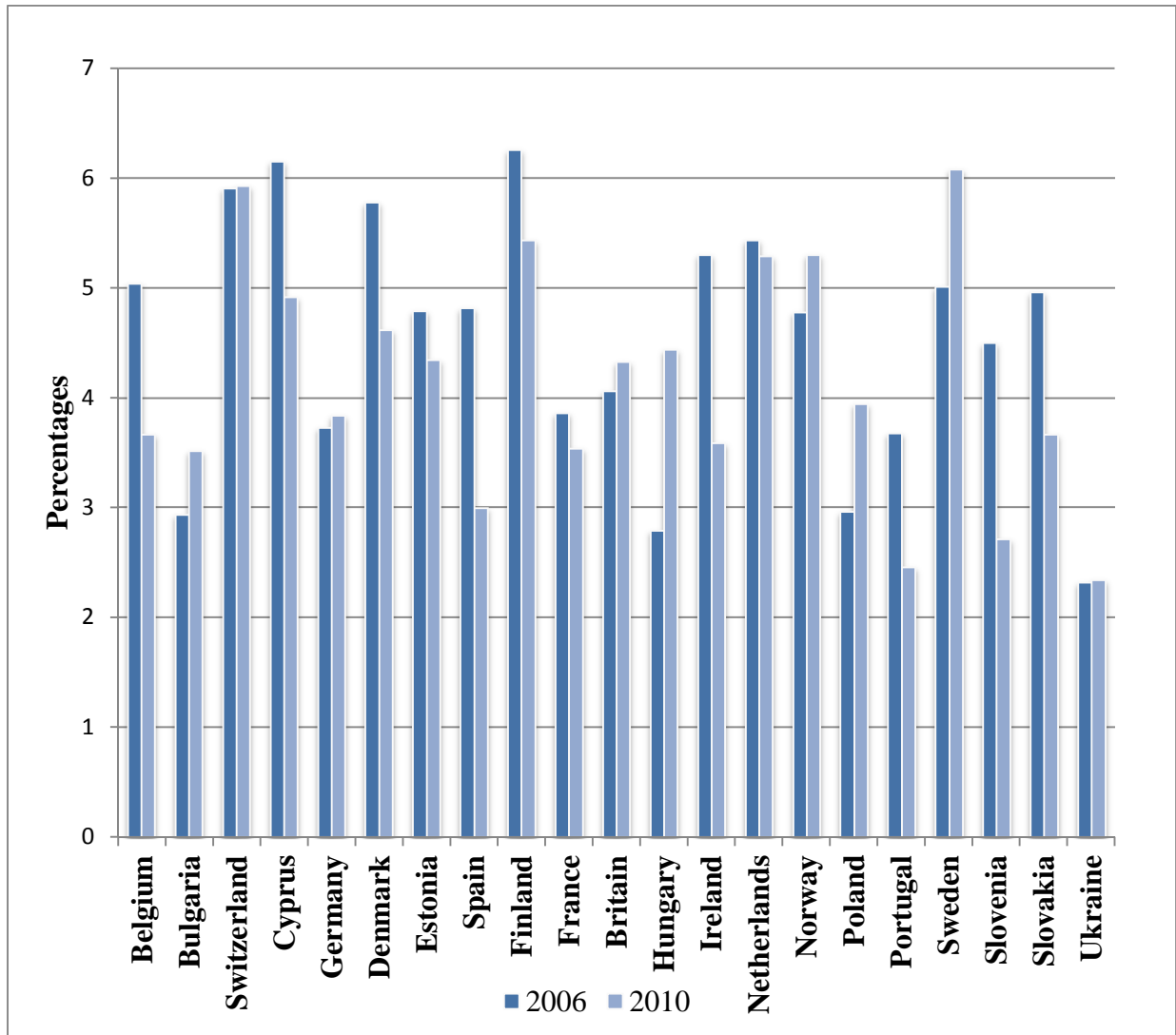


**Figure 1 Satisfaction with Government in 21 European Countries in 2006 and 2010**

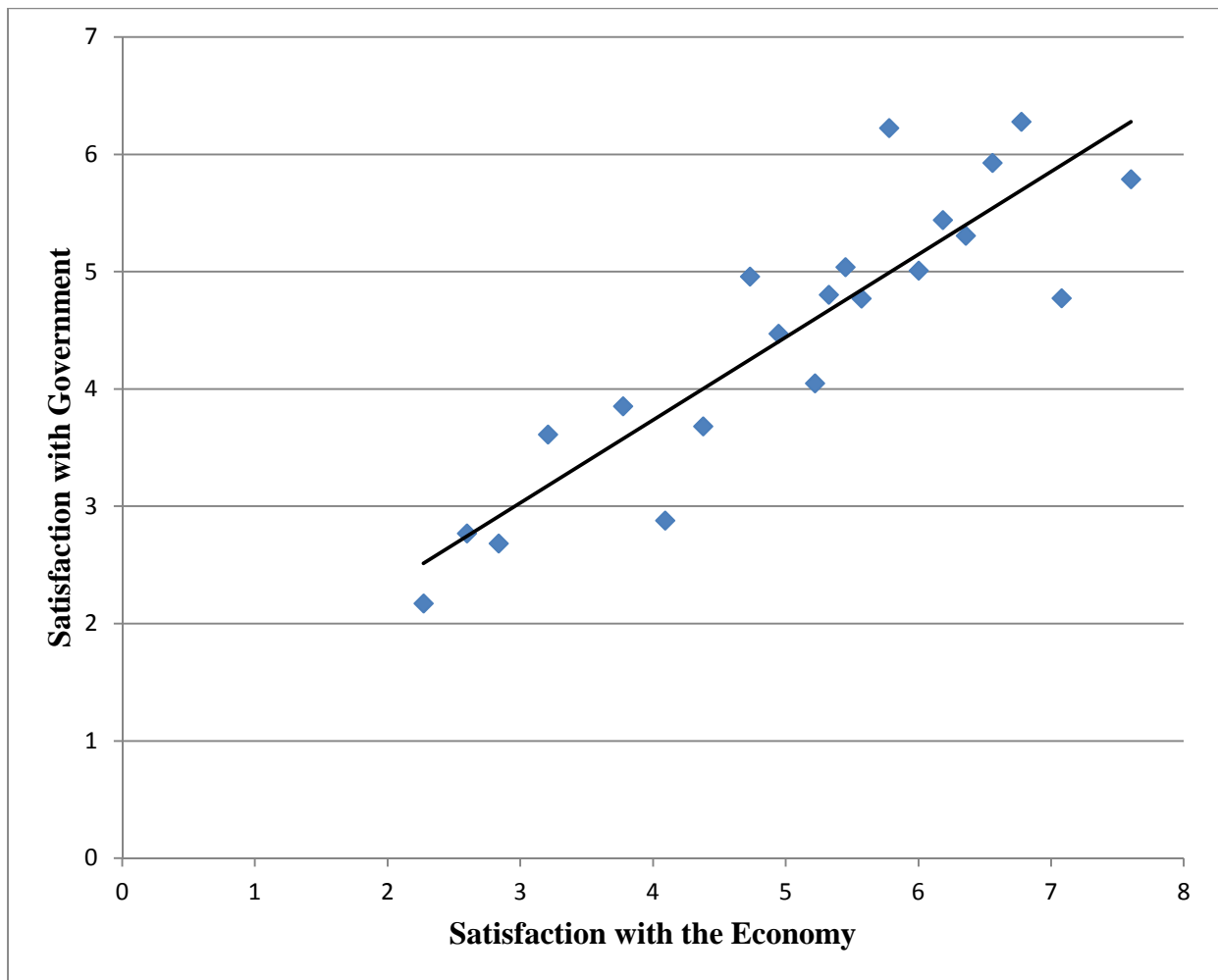
(Means = 4.46 in 2006 and 4.05 in 2010)



**Figure 2 Changes in Satisfaction in 21 European Countries 2006 to 2010**



**Figure 3 Satisfaction with Government and with the Economy in 21 European Countries in 2006**



**(Correlation = 0.89)**

**Table 1 Logistic Models of Electoral Support for Governing Parties in 21 European Countries in 2006**

(Odds Ratios)

<b>Predictors</b>	<b>Cleavages Model</b>	<b>Valence Model</b>	<b>Spatial Model</b>	<b>Composite Model</b>
Partisanship	---	1.75***	---	1.71***
Leader Evaluations	---	1.05***	---	1.06***
Satisfaction with Economy	---	1.00	---	1.02***
Satisfaction with Education	---	1.00	---	1.00
Satisfaction with Health care	---	0.97***	---	0.98
Satisfaction with Democracy	---	1.06***	---	1.08***
Left-Right Ideology	---	---	0.92***	0.89***
Attitudes to non-European Immigration	---	---	0.99	1.03
Attitudes to ethnic minority immigration	---	---	1.03	1.03
Attitudes to the Environment	---	---	1.05***	1.03***
Attitudes to Gay Rights	---	---	0.98**	0.92***
Occupational Status	0.99	---	---	0.98*
Income	1.02***	---	---	0.98**
Educational Attainment	1.11***	---	---	1.08***
Ethnic Minority	0.97	---	---	0.96
Muslim	0.70***	---	---	0.61***
Jew	0.85	---	---	1.02
Disabled	0.84***	---	---	0.85**
Retired	1.15***	---	---	1.17**
Unemployed	0.84***	---	---	0.89**
Not a Citizen	0.09***	---	---	0.09***
Age	1.10***	1.10***	1.09***	1.10***
Age Squared	0.99***	0.99***	0.99***	0.99***
Male	1.06***	1.02	1.06***	1.01
<b>Pseudo R-Square</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>0.08</b>
<b>Akaike Information Criterion</b>	<b>47254.4</b>	<b>46875.5</b>	<b>47742.3</b>	<b>45714.2</b>

(p < 0.10=\*; p < 0.05=\*\*; p < 0.01=\*\*\*)

**Table 2 Logistic Models of Electoral Support for Governing Parties in 21 European Countries in 2010**

(Odds Ratios)

Predictors	Cleavages Model	Valence Model	Spatial Model	Composite Model
Partisanship	---	1.69***	---	1.57***
Leader Evaluations	---	1.03***	---	1.04***
Satisfaction with Economy	---	1.03***	---	1.02***
Satisfaction with Education	---	1.02***	---	1.02***
Satisfaction with Health care	---	0.98***	---	0.99
Satisfaction with Democracy	---	1.10***	---	1.09***
Left-Right Ideology	---	---	1.19***	1.15***
Attitudes to non-European Immigration	---	---	0.91***	0.94***
Attitudes to ethnic minority immigration	---	---	1.06***	1.08***
Attitudes to Environment	---	---	1.02**	1.04***
Attitudes to Gay Rights	---	---	1.17***	1.08***
Occupational Status	1.05***	---	---	1.02***
Income	1.06***	---	---	1.03**
Educational Attainment	1.21***	---	---	1.19***
Ethnic Minority	0.68***	---	---	0.72***
Muslim	0.74***	---	---	0.75***
Jew	1.23	---	---	1.30
Disabled	0.85***	---	---	0.87*
Retired	0.88***	---	---	0.96
Unemployed	0.88***	---	---	1.02
Not a Citizen	0.07***	---	---	0.06***
Age	1.06***	1.08***	1.07***	1.07***
Age Squared	0.99***	0.99***	0.99***	0.99***
Male	1.04	0.98	1.04*	0.97
<b>Pseudo R-Square</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>0.06</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>0.10</b>
<b>Akaike Information Criterion</b>	<b>44816.3</b>	<b>44408.0</b>	<b>44861.1</b>	<b>42761.8</b>

(p < 0.10=\*; p < 0.05=\*\*; p < 0.01=\*\*\*)

**Table 3 Regression Models of Satisfaction with Government in 21 European Countries in 2006**

<b>Predictors</b>	<b>Cleavages Model</b>	<b>Valence Model</b>	<b>Spatial Model</b>	<b>Composite Model</b>
Partisanship	---	0.02	---	0.06***
Leader Evaluations	---	0.24***	---	0.24***
Satisfaction with Economy	---	0.30***	---	0.32***
Satisfaction with Education	---	0.04***	---	0.04***
Satisfaction with Health care	---	0.05***	---	0.06***
Satisfaction with Democracy	---	1.10***	---	0.28***
Left-Right Ideology	---	---	0.09***	-0.01
Attitudes to non-European Immigration	---	---	-0.20***	0.04**
Attitudes to ethnic minority immigration	---	---	-0.01	0.06***
Attitudes to Environment	---	---	0.06***	0.05***
Attitudes to Gay Rights	---	---	0.11***	-0.07***
Occupational Status	0.08***	---	---	0.02***
Income	0.18***	---	---	-0.09**
Educational Attainment	-0.00	---	---	-0.10***
Ethnic Minority	-0.10*	---	---	0.09**
Muslim	0.68***	---	---	0.10
Jew	-0.70**	---	---	-0.14
Disabled	-0.30***	---	---	-0.02
Retired	-0.17***	---	---	0.03
Unemployed	-0.38***	---	---	-0.07
Not a Citizen	0.68***	---	---	0.15***
Age	-0.06***	-0.01	-0.04***	0.01***
Age Squared	0.001***	0.000	0.000***	-0.001***
Male	0.08***	-0.05***	0.15***	-0.05***
<b>R-Square</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>0.52</b>	<b>0.02</b>	<b>0.53</b>
<b>Akaike Information Criterion</b>	<b>182887.0</b>	<b>155429.8</b>	<b>183937.3</b>	<b>154770.2</b>

(p < 0.10=\*; p < 0.05=\*\*; p < 0.01=\*\*\*)

**Table 4 Regression Models of Satisfaction with Government in 21 European Countries in 2010**

<b>Predictors</b>	<b>Cleavages Model</b>	<b>Valence Model</b>	<b>Spatial Model</b>	<b>Composite Model</b>
Partisanship	---	0.02	---	0.02
Leader Evaluations	---	0.27***	---	0.26***
Satisfaction with Economy	---	0.28***	---	0.28***
Satisfaction with Education	---	0.03***	---	0.03***
Satisfaction with Health care	---	-0.01*	---	-0.00
Satisfaction with Democracy	---	0.30***	---	0.29***
Left-Right Ideology	---	---	0.24***	0.11***
Attitudes to non-European Immigration	---	---	-0.18***	0.01
Attitudes to ethnic minority immigration	---	---	-0.11***	0.01
Attitudes to Environment	---	---	0.07*****	0.08***
Attitudes to Gay Rights	---	---	0.20***	-0.05***
Occupational Status	0.09***	---	---	0.00
Income	0.08***	---	---	-0.01
Educational Attainment	0.07***	---	---	-0.01
Ethnic Minority	-0.12*	---	---	0.07
Muslim	0.48***	---	---	0.06
Jew	0.43	---	---	0.65*
Disabled	-0.24***	---	---	-0.13*
Retired	-0.32***	---	---	0.06*
Unemployed	-0.56***	---	---	0.05
Not a Citizen	0.88***	---	---	0.06
Age	-0.06***	-0.00	-0.05***	-0.00
Age Squared	0.001**	0.000	0.001***	0.000
Male	0.12	-0.03	0.13***	-0.05***
<b>R-Square</b>	<b>0.03</b>	<b>0.52</b>	<b>0.07</b>	<b>0.53</b>
<b>Akaike Information Criterion</b>	<b>178606.6</b>	<b>151543.3</b>	<b>177183.8</b>	<b>150693.4</b>

(p < 0.10=\*; p < 0.05=\*\*; p < 0.01=\*\*\*)

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