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AGE COHORTS AND THE FUNNEL OF CAUSALITY: HOW  
SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS INFLUENCE OUR VOTE

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**MAX WEBER PROGRAMME**

*Age Cohorts and the Funnel of Causality:  
How Social Characteristics Influence Our Vote*

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## **Abstract**

Voting behaviour criteria can be categorized according to their level of ideologization and their time depth. In modern politics we expect people to use short-term factors to make their final voting decisions, such as valence politics and issue voting. These seem to be more efficient when opposed to long term predictors, such as party identification and left-right ideology. Retrospective and prospective party performance evaluations become the most decisive criteria for voting choices and overshadow ideological and loyalty considerations.

However, the population is not homogenous in terms of political socialization experiences. Older generations still perceive party competition in terms of loyalty, while younger generations seem politically disillusioned. Social characteristics influence older voters' stable predispositions in a more consistent and decisive way, while they have a weaker influence on younger generations.

In this paper, I compare the impact of social characteristics on the major vote choice criteria, both short and long term. This is done using comparative data from the 2009 European Election Study on the so-called EU 15 countries. The electorate is divided into four cohorts in order to establish variations among generations. The findings show a clear distinction among generations in their vote choice criteria, as a result of their different political socialization experiences.

## **Keywords**

Age, vote, European Parliament.

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# 1 Introduction

For the act of voting for the individual has never been a straight-forward business: each political era has had its own complications. As the act of voting is repeated for elections at different levels - national, subnational and supranational - the European voter finds himself in confusion when confronted with the ballot box. This paper explores individual vote choices in contemporary West European politics. It attempts to evaluate the heterogeneity of the electorate and the qualitative difference between political generations in the way they arrive at their final vote decision. Age differences in vote choice represent a common feature in electoral politics. It is common knowledge that younger people are more radical and left wing than the older generations. They are expected to be more volatile and impressionable and more ready to follow new ideas. Older generations, on the other hand, are more concerned with real life issues, more settled in their political ways and thus have much more predictable behaviour. This behaviour has generally been observed in national elections. What happens, though, in a second-order election, such as for the EU parliament, where the need to vote usefully is less pressing?

In a second-order election, citizens feel less constrained by not having the responsibility to elect a national government. They allow themselves to vote with their hearts. The results of this freedom provide researchers with data for a more precise investigation of voter motivations. The electoral behaviour of different age groups can be distinguished by age effects and generational effects. Age effects capture political habits developed over years of political practice and the considerations of the age group at the time of election. Generational effects reflect the similarities of an age group due to their similar political and social situation at the same stage of their lives. The generational characteristics of an age group should follow them throughout their lives. The two types of effects are entangled when we look at electoral behaviour one snapshot in time. However, there are ways of distinguishing between the two using knowledge derived from previous research.

This paper attempts to pinpoint the heterogeneity of the West European electorate which results from age. The analysis in this paper is driven by two research questions. First, do voters of different ages use different criteria to arrive at their final vote choice? And second, to what extent does the influence of individual social characteristics vary among age groups in the way they shape these key vote choice criteria? The West European electorate has developed in a common historical environment and experienced similar major socio-economic changes. Thus, this paper tries to identify differences in the voting behaviour of various generations at one point in time. Starting from the traditional alignment thesis the paper offers an explanation of role of social characteristics in determining long term vote choice criteria: left-right ideology and party identification. The dealignment thesis, is then

used to show a change of the influence of the social characteristics over time. Combining this with the socialization theory that stands behind the idea of different political generations, the paper assigns expectations to the various age groups within the 2009 electorate. Using the methodology from the Funnel of Causality the results show that there is indeed a qualitative difference among generations in the role of social characteristics in their final vote choice.

## 2 Generations and their effects

The idea is not new that citizens of different ages engage in politics in different ways<sup>1</sup>. It is more difficult to disentangle the significance for electoral behaviour of the three types of effects explaining the impact of age differences: life cycle, generation and period effects. Life cycle effects deal with changes in political choices as the individual ages. Attached to ageing are the special considerations and needs of the cohort at the time of an election that change depending on the individual's stage in life and the years of political practice that have shaped his habitual choices (Franklin, 2004; Butler and Stokes, 1974). Generation effects capture the influence of social, cultural and historical factors on the political behaviour patterns of a generation. These effects account for the differences in electoral behaviour among generations when compared at the same stage in their life cycles<sup>2</sup>. Period effects express the influence of major events that influence the population as a whole at the same point in time, such as a severe financial crisis.

Viewing the electorate in one snapshot in time, several generations are identifiable. Each generation brings a different set of attitudes and values that define their outlooks and opinions in the political sphere (Jennings and Markus, 1984, 1016). The same electorate at any given point in time can be divided into age cohorts clearly defined by the major events shaping their generational awareness. At the same time, the very same cohorts differ from one another in terms of their position in their life cycle, which determines their considerations and political habits at the time of the election. Period effects should be treated as a constant for a snapshot analysis, as they pose their limitations on the whole of the electorate. However, age groups might not have a homogenous reaction to major events. For example, a severe financial crisis has a stronger impact on the economically active cohorts, and thus becomes more relevant to their vote choice.

Age related effects on vote choice persist over a long period of time, but should also be apparent in one single election. Belonging to a specific age

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<sup>1</sup>For more detailed studies, see Jennings and Niemi 1980, Jennings and Markus 1984, Niemi and Jennings 1991, and Miller 1992.

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion on generational versus ageing effects, see Franklin 2004; Dalton 2004; Hooghe and Wilkenfeld 2008; and Van der Brug et. al. 2009.



cohort can influence vote choice but not always in a direct way. Individuals belonging to different age cohorts might vote for the same parties, but the motivations behind the vote choice might differ. The role of social characteristics in shaping attitudes towards key vote choice criteria such as ideology, party identification, issue preferences and performance judgements can vary depending on age. Similarly, age can influence the importance of these vote choice criteria for the individual and their relative weight in the final vote choice. How does age trigger these variations in the formation of choice?

There are three mechanisms at work that can account for indirect effects on vote choice: socialization, habit and life stage considerations. The socialization mechanism functions as a part of the generation effect, which theorizes the importance of a socio-cultural and historical environment common to all the members of one generation. The concept of generation contains a shared socialization process and a full set of common experiences (Lyons and Alexander, 2000). The events that take place around the time the individual comes of age and expresses his first electoral choices are crucial to the shaping of his political behaviour in the future. American studies show that the generation which came of age during the Great Depression used social class as a vote choice criterion to a much greater extent than the generations before or after, due to the high importance of social class during their young adulthood (Campbell et al., 1960). Similarly, the baby boomer generation socializing in the 1960s and 1970s were less attached to social class, showed lower partizanship and higher levels of electoral volatility Jennings and Markus, 1984, 1014.

In the light of these findings, the West European electorate is clearly divided into those who were socialized before the 1970s, experiencing a society with clearly defined political division lines, and those socialized after the 1970s, who were politicized in a much more de-aligned environment, at least in the traditional sense. The traditional division lines made individual voting behaviour highly stable. Social characteristics such as social class, religion, region and ethnicity could predict the vote choice of the individual. Each individual belonged to a social group clearly defined by a social cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) and could convert this identification into a strong partisan alignment (Crewe and Denver, 1985; Mughan, 1981)<sup>3</sup>. By

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<sup>3</sup>Class seemed to be the strongest social characteristic that determined voting behaviour in Western Europe. Lower income groups traditionally voted mainly for the Left while higher income groups opted primarily for parties of the Right (Lipset, 1960, 223-224). The likelihood of following the predicted class voting pattern increased with the level of class identification of the individual. Thus manual workers were more likely to vote for Left parties than non-manual workers (Alford, 1963). Cleavage theory (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) also identifies religion and region as two of the key social cleavages in West European party systems. Religion in itself and the values that are attached to it provide the most uniform divisions in Western Europe. They can even predict electoral behaviour in a more consistent and structured way than social class divides (Rose and Urwin, 1969). Region and language divisions appear in some West European countries, making them

the 1970s the ability of social cleavages to structure individual voting behaviour had dropped remarkably in Western Europe (Franklin, 1992, 385) and individual voting behaviour became largely unpredictable from social characteristics due to the erosion of social groups and individual emancipation (Knutson, 2001; Achterberg, 2006). Social classes changed structurally and the concept of common interest disappeared. Simultaneously, Western European society and politics underwent a significant de-confessionalization process, weakening natural support for confessional parties (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). This de-alignment created new dynamics in voting behaviour.

Generations of European citizens coming of age before the great societal changes of the 1970s experienced a rather stable political environment. Their political socialization took place within well-defined division lines that produced strong identities. This socialization process allowed a smooth transformation of their social characteristics into vote choice criteria, such as ideology and party identification, and through them issue positions and performance evaluations. This transformation of social characteristics into vote choice criteria loses its strength for the following generations.

In a gradually more de-aligned European society individual, emancipation disconnected membership to social group from electoral behaviour (Evans, 1999) leading to a ‘particularization of voting’ (Franklin, 1992, 411-13). Important events that influenced the socialization experience after the 1970s posed new challenges to the individual and disconnected social characteristics from vote choice criteria even more: The fall of the Berlin wall, European Integration, globalization, Islamist terrorist attacks and wars on Afghanistan and Iraq. These historical events shaped the political stance of generations of European voters and changed the importance they give to various vote choice criteria. Younger generations being socialized in ideologically disillusioned times are less likely to use ideology and party identification to make their vote decision. The expansion and domination of the mass media and the internet offered easier access to information, focused more on leaders’ images and socialized a generation in a less participatory form of democracy. These characteristics of socialization increase the importance of issue-specific performance evaluations and leader personalities as vote choice criteria.

As individuals grow older, they become more set in their political ways. Viewing the political scene as full of potential and choices in the early stages of one’s political life is transformed by the force of habit in more mature years. Butler and Stokes demonstrated that it takes three consecutive elections in the course of thirteen years to crystalize individual views on politics. After this pivotal point, the chance of a person voting for a specific party increases, while the chance of him voting for any other party decreases significantly

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more fragmented and creating individual political identities, which are at times to some extent combined with the religious dividing lines, as in the case of Belgium.

(Butler and Stokes, 1974). In the years of early adulthood the individual is more perceptive to external cues and the special circumstances around an election. They tend to be influenced by measures of electoral competitiveness, closeness of the race, the margin of victory, party polarization and party cohesiveness to a greater extent than older voters (Franklin, 2004). Combining younger voters' higher impressionability with their weaker attachments to the social groups they belong to suggests that they are much less influenced by their social characteristics in their first acts of voting. Their social background becomes more important as citizens grow older and increase their association and attachment to their kin social groups (Strate et al., 1989). Similarly, younger voters, not yet having long-term convictions and attachments, tend to use rather short term criteria to make their final vote choice. Thus one would expect performance evaluation and issue preferences to dominate over party identification and ideological convictions as criteria for younger voters.

The life cycle argument uses the variation in considerations and responsibilities among age groups to explain variations in their political behaviour. When it comes to vote choice, the individual's social circumstances moderate the influence of social characteristics and have an impact on the relative importance of vote choice criteria. Younger voters are more volatile and focus their attention on private matters. They are still in a process of inventing themselves, still in education, finding partners and establishing a career. This practical and psychological transformation into adulthood keeps them volatile and flexible, minimizing the ties between their social characteristics and their vote choice. They dedicate less time to public matters (Strate et al., 1989) and thus they resort to using criteria that are more relevant to the election at hand and are less costly and time consuming, such as performance evaluations and issue voting. More mature adults and middle aged citizens have left parental the home, bought a house, are highly engaged in family and career demands and have settled down in a community. They have deeper roots and are less mobile, allowing their social characteristics to have a greater impact on their political choices. They are the ones who are more influenced by economic changes and thus are expected to rank performance criteria much higher for making their vote choice. Simultaneously, they are the ones with the strongest community ties and association patterns, which reproduce loyalties and thus party identification. Finally, in old age citizens once again become more private due to health restrictions, declining family income, retirement and a slow disengagement with social life. These characteristics makes them less vulnerable to economic changes and special electoral circumstances. Being more fixed in their circumstances and more isolated, older citizens use rather long-term vote choice criteria, such as ideology and party identification, and their behaviour is more dependent on their social characteristics.

### 3 The role of social characteristics

Age has a significant impact on voting behaviour. It becomes apparent through the mechanisms discussed in the previous section moderating the impact of social characteristics on vote choice. What is the role of social characteristics and how do they influence the way individuals vote? The starting point to answer this question is the “funnel of causality”, Shanks and Miller’s model of voting behaviour, which explores the links connecting stable social characteristics to vote choice criteria (Shanks and Miller, 1990). This “funnel of causality” heuristic (which first appeared in the American Voter (Campbell et al., 1960)) presents vote predictors as a sequence of blocks according to their degree of stability in an individual’s life. The model is based on the assumption that some characteristics are more stable than others, that stable variables should cause less stable variables, and that causality, even though potentially obscure, should mainly go in one direction (Shanks and Miller, 1990).

An adaptation to a more European context by Bartle elaborated on the mechanisms by which social characteristics influence stable predispositions (Bartle, 1998). Bartle assumes that each block of variables is influenced by all of the preceding ones. Starting with fixed personal characteristics that originate at a point long before the person reaches voting age (age, ethnicity, gender and parental social class), he then creates a sequence of variable blocks. The second block, directly influenced by the fixed social characteristics, are the acquired social characteristics (such as region and education). Life style characteristics are put in the third block, which is directly influenced by the two preceding ones, without excluding the possibility of reciprocal effects but accepting that the reverse effect is weaker. Lifestyle includes variables that are more choice related, such as housing tenure, ownership of various commodities and type of employment. The fourth block of variables contains voters’ identities as belonging to a specific social class. All the above should lead to the formation of stable predispositions, such as party identification and left-right ideology.

Can this model work for an analysis of an electorate as complex and varied as the West-European? Lachat and Dolezal (Lachat and Dolezal, 2008, 239) confirm that there is a process of uniformization of West European electorates. They demonstrate that differences which are quite important in the early 1970s disappeared, giving space in the 1990s onwards to striking similarities structured around two dimensions: economic and cultural. Issues that polarize the European electorate include cultural liberalism, the economy, immigration and EU integration. Individual preferences on these issues are still rooted in social characteristics such as religion and class, but more importantly, in education levels and employment sector (Lachat and Dolezal, 2008, 243-248).

To apply the funnel of causality to Western Europe one has to determine

the directions of the causal mechanisms between the various blocks: Does social class cause education or education cause social class? Bartle's approach uses education as an acquired social characteristic that comes before social class in the chain of causation. Kriesi et. al. (Kriesi Hanspeter, 2008) suggest that education, and through that employment, structure a new division of winners and losers of globalization, shaping the new social classes in the globalized era. Is partizanship connected to identity or is it understood in terms of evaluation? Rosema shows that the institutional environment of multiparty systems in Western Europe attaches partizanship to evaluations (Rosema, 2006). These questions have to be kept in mind when adapting the "funnel of causality" in the case of the European electorate. At the end of the funnel's sequence is the end product "vote". We distinguish between four major vote criteria that shape vote choice and are shaped by social characteristics.

## 4 Competing vote choice criteria

The most influential individual voting behaviour criteria can be distinguished using time depth and level of cognition. In other words vote choice can be seen as a function of long and short term factors that can be either cognitive or emotive in nature. The typology of these criteria in Table 1 attempts to disentangle the differences in theory, application and effectiveness of the four criteria when used by different age groups in the same electorate.

The first distinction is time depth, which can be found on the horizontal axis of Table 1. We can observe the existence of long-term factors that follow the individual throughout his political life and are considered to be more stable. To a large extent shaped by the individual's social characteristics, these long-term vote criteria are: ideological voting and party loyalty. On the vertical axis of table 1 we see a further distinction: level of cognition. Ideology can be described as a fairly cognitive process leading to vote choice, while party loyalty has more emotive roots. In the short term category, the leading theory is rational choice. At each given election time the voter will pick the party that maximizes his utility. Under the cognitive category we can find issue voting, which explains that individuals interested in specific issues structure their vote choice around their opinion on specific issues. They choose to vote for the party they feel closest to them on that particular issue (Carmines and Stimson, 1980). More emotively driven individuals follow their evaluations on party performance. This voting model can be identified as valence/performance voting. The valence model does not take into consideration ideological differences, which, even if they exist, are assumed to be less important for vote choice (Stokes, 1963). Having described the categorisations in table 1 it is next essential to analyse closer the four vote choice criteria and discuss their usefulness in the age debate.

Table 1: Voting considerations and voting behaviour models

	<b>long term</b>	<b>short term</b>
<b>ideological considerations</b>	ideological voting	issue voting
<b>non-ideological considerations</b>	party loyalty	valence

Ideology is defined as a system of values and beliefs that involves social economic and political aspects of life (Knutsen, 1995, 160). Its importance for electoral politics lies in its ability to act as a shortcut for political issues and conflicts in a country, providing even unsophisticated voters with easier criteria for opinion and party preference formation and vote choice (Downs, 1957; Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976). The formation of ideological positions is deeply rooted in social characteristics that indicate one’s left-right position, making it thus a long-term measure of political allegiance (Bellucci, 2006). As a vote predictor, left-right was dominant until the early 1990s (e.g. ?), when its predictive value started to lose ground. The reasons can be found in the slow convergence of political parties, especially in two-party systems (Pennings and Keman, 2003), and the emergence of new issues that are largely not connected to it making left-right ideology somewhat less relevant (e.g. immigration See van der Brug & Joost van Spanje (2009)). Belonging to a generation politically socialized with the concept of left and right increases the relevance of this heuristic. Younger generations may feel alienated by such discourse and thus rank ideology lower in their vote choice criteria.

The second long term-vote criterion, party identification, assumes a strong and lasting emotional attachment of an individual voter towards one political party. This emotional connection becomes part of the voter’s identity (Campbell et al., 1960, ch.7) and is derived from characteristics deeply embedded in ones’ personality and social background. The circumstances around individual political socialization through parental influences and membership of primary groups such as social classes, religious denominations and living environments (e.g. neighbourhoods, villages) form party attachments early on in the individual’s life (p.135). Being one of the most stable vote predictors, it is expected to change only when the individual experiences dramatic changes with regard to his social characteristics. These could take the form of marriage, work-related social mobility or geographical change. Party identification should be a significant vote choice criterion for

those age groups with strong political identities based on their social background. These tend to be the older generations in the current electorate.

Issue voting, the first short-term vote choice criterion, is policy oriented; It views citizens as sophisticated and capable of fine distinctions between policy platforms (Miller and Shanks, 1996). Citizens vote according to their position on issues they believe more salient. Party competition is not only based on positional proximity but also on ideas of issue competition and issue ownership (Green-Pedersen, 2007). Issue voting is considered to be superior to emotive voting, as it requires higher levels of cognitive thinking. Carmines and Stimson (Carmines and Stimson, 1980, 79), however, contest this view demonstrating a difference between hard and easy issues. Easy issues, they argue, do not need the expected high cognitive thinking, but are based on “gut feelings”. Despite this intervention this paper follows the view that issue voting falls in the cognition category. It is also considered short term as the effect of issue ownership on vote choice is conditioned by the perceived salience of issues, which fluctuate from election to election (Blanger and Meguid, 2008). This uncertainty is enhanced by the role of the media. which is unpredictable in the ways it stresses issues during campaigns, and thus adds to the short term nature of issue voting (Green-Pedersen, 2007). Younger generations with more volatile attitudes to politics should be more perceptive to this category of criteria.

The fourth model of voting, valence, has been developed to explain voting in two-party systems. It came as a criticism of the Downsian proximity theory of voting (Downs, 1957), which argued in favour of the existence of issues with one desired outcome for the whole electorate. In other words, all citizens agree on the ends and thus vote choice is focused on the means to achieve these desired ends (Stokes, 1963). Valence structures party competition and thus vote choice around the means to accepted ends, and therefore focuses on performance, observed or anticipated. Measuring valence voting is not straight-forward. It has been measured using various operationalizations, such as leader and party performance Clarke et al. (2004), issue ownership and issue salience (Green and Hobolt, 2008). In this paper we accept the view of valence voting being rooted in performance politics. Therefore it is perceived to be very much short term, as performance changes at every given election. Evaluating performance requires low levels of cognitive thinking. It is instead attached to an emotive way of perceiving politics thus expected to be more popular among young voters.

## **5 Age cohorts in the 2009 European parliament election**

The anticipated shift from long-term to short-term factors reveals a loyalty and an ideology gap. Young voters are expected to reach their final vote

Table 2: Behaviour of age cohorts in percentages

	<b>64+</b>	<b>50-63</b>	<b>35-49</b>	<b>18-34</b>	<b>population</b>
Not Voting	53.11	58.55	63.76	68.52	60.80
Declaring Party ID	64.05	59.88	52.02	51.02	56.77
Declaring European Socialist ID	14.24	13.74	9.70	9.21	11.76
Declaring Party Valences	41.53	39.51	36.24	34.19	37.96
Declaring European Socialist Valence	9.67	10.73	8.92	9.38	9.68
Voting European Socialist	25.19	29.63	24.35	26.77	26.50
Number of cases	3,455	4,055	4,362	2,954	14,826

decision using very different mechanisms to their elders. Are these differences rooted in the way social characteristics form opinions on the major vote criteria or is it the relative importance of those criteria that structures the differences among age groups? Focusing on the generational differences between older and younger political generations we can identify different levels of political engagement, party loyalty and evaluation.

Table 2 gives us a snapshot of the generational differences within the 2009 European (EU15) electorate. Divided into four generations capturing the major patterns in an individual's life, the electorate shows some clear variations in the way they engage in politics. The percentages in Table 2 draw a picture of a 64+ generation that has higher party identification and declares clear opinions on party performance. Their vote for the largest group in the European Parliament, the European Socialists (ES) can be most easily explained by their relatively high percentage of party identification with the national party member of ES, with 14.24 per cent and 9.67 per cent positive EPP-ED evaluations. These numbers decline as we move to younger cohorts. In fact, the slightly higher percentage of the ES vote in the 18-34 age cohort is not followed by a similarly high percentage in our assumed vote predictors. Viewing these differences, we are faced with the



question, what is it that drives the vote of the younger generations? To disentangle this puzzle, this paper focuses on the following: does generation determine the influence of social characteristics on vote choice criteria? To answer this, the paper first analyzes the role of social characteristics in determining the main vote choice predictors of the voting models discussed and then moves to analyzing the differences between generations in ranking those vote choice predictors.

## 6 Hypotheses and Expectations

As already indicated in table 2, the generations of the electorate are divided into four cohorts. The criteria used for this division are a) special considerations of individuals that vary with age and are shared among people in the same stage of life, and b) the common socialization processes experienced at the time of their early adulthood. The older generation consists of those people who were born before the end of the second world war. Their socialization took place in times with clearer social division lines. They have reached the age of retirement and they are slowly disconnecting with public life. The second generation captures citizens born between 1946 and 1959: the baby boom generation, which experienced the reconstruction of Western Europe and the first wave of prosperity after the war. They are individuals now aged 50 to 63, in their late adulthood, having reached the heights of their careers and established their lifestyles. The third generation was born between 1960 and 1974. These individuals were socialized in a world with new values where new politics were already a common phenomenon, but also in a Europe that deeply felt the consequences of the cold war. They are 35 to 49 years old, in the most economically active years of their lives, starting families and engaging more with the community. Finally, the younger voters, born between 1975 and 1991, have seen a world without the cold war, with European integration and no memory of a European war. They are 18 to 34, young adults, still in education or taking their first career steps.

Based on this division and on the preceding theoretical discussion, the voting behaviour of the older generations should be more predictable than that of the younger generations. Socialization at a time of strong party identification and coherent social groups should mean that vote choice can be predicted in a straight-forward manner. There is a direct relationship between social characteristics and the major vote choice criteria. Socialization at times of greater ideological instability, where political dealignment was already in place and higher volatility characterized elections, should lead to less predictable voting behaviour. Going back to the discussion on the funnel of causality, social characteristics should form the individual's stable predispositions and through them influence party evaluations and vote choice. Based again on the idea that before the appearance of political dealignment

social characteristics shape political identities, I expect to find differences in the influence of social characteristics on stable predispositions and evaluations among the four generations. Depending on the time period their political socialization took place, their social characteristics should vary in importance in shaping their identities. Thus I hypothesize that:

*H1: Social characteristics can predict the individual's stance towards the four vote choice criteria for older generations to a larger extent than for younger generations.*

Based on hypothesis H1, I expect to find that the impact of long-term vote choice criteria on vote choice will be stronger for the older than for the younger generations. I also expect to find that short-term vote choice criteria will have a higher impact on the younger generations than long term predictors. In other words, party evaluations and issue preferences should be stronger predictors than party identification or ideology. Exposure to economic changes in society is also an important reason why individuals would turn to short-term vote choice criteria. In periods of economic recession, more economically active voters might turn to short-term criteria to express their fears and try to shift policy towards their preferences. At the same time, such special considerations at the time of elections also influence younger and more volatile individuals. Thus we expect to see the three younger cohorts more perceptive to short-term vote choice criteria and older the cohort be more faithful to long term considerations. Summarizing the above, I hypothesize that:

*H2: Older cohorts rank stable vote choice criteria higher than short-term criteria, while the opposite is true for younger cohorts.*

Having established the questions, hypotheses, and expected findings, the paper moves on to explaining the methods used to test these claims.

## 7 Methodology

To address these questions, I employ a sub-section of the European Election Study on the 2009 European Parliament elections. This is an individual-level dataset including citizens from the fifteen European Union countries before the eastern expansion. The reasons for choosing this sample over a national or a EU-wide one are twofold. Firstly, a comparative study can offer a larger view of the political events that influenced all of the so-called West European electorate. Western Europe is quite homogenous in terms of common history and political divisions. The addition of Greece Portugal and Spain might come as a surprise due to their late democratization.

These countries are nonetheless consolidated democracies and in terms of electoral politics they seem to have similar mechanisms for voting behaviour as the older West European democracies. This homogeneity would be lost with the addition of the Eastern and Central EU countries. Secondly, the nature of European elections, being second-order elections, allows people to really follow their ideological predispositions and not to vote pragmatically meaning not necessarily to vote for the two larger political parties.

This paper intends to analyse the impact of social characteristics on the four main vote choice determinants: party identification, left-right ideology, issue voting and party valences. In order to compare the results for these four models, measures of goodness of fit are needed. However, the nature of the four dependent variables makes it difficult to create comparable models. For the comparisons to produce any interpretable results the dependent variables are constructed as continuous variables and OLS regression is used. Specifically, party identification and party valences indicate the individual choice of party family in these two respects. Thus, the two variables are on a scale from one to seven indicating the generally accepted left to right positioning of the chosen party family. The left-right variable reflects individual self-placement on a scale from zero (meaning extreme left) to 10 (meaning extreme right). Similarly, the issue ownership model employs the EU question, with zero being "EU integration has gone too far" and ten being "unification should be pushed further". These four variables can be compared successfully only in an OLS regression.

Using a similar methodology and reasoning to Bartle Bartle (1998) this article employs OLS regression. The results are not substantially different to a logistic regression approach with categorical variables needing a multinomial logit. Following the funnel of causality, the independent variables are divided into blocks depending on their stability. Starting with the stable characteristics, the first block comprises of age and gender. The second block includes acquired social characteristics, such as education, religion and region of residence. In practice, the models include dummies for the three major religions that would influence vote choice: Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox. Education is expressed as the age the individual finished full-time education. The third block deals with life-style choices, such as employment sector, being unemployed, belonging to a trade union and religiosity. Religiosity is measured as the number of times one goes to church. All other variables of this block are dummies. Finally, the fourth block includes class identity. These characteristics are more stable and in the funnel of causality precede the stable predispositions and evaluations. Arranging variables in the form of a cumulative chain creates a perceived idea of causation, which is based on the theory discussed.

The final test relates to the ability of the four main vote choice determinants to predict vote choice and their different importance depending on the age of the voters. This test uses the previous dependent variables as in-

Table 3: The influence of social Characteristics on Party Identification across cohorts

	<b>population</b>	<b>64+</b>	<b>50-63</b>	<b>35-49</b>	<b>18-34</b>
Block 1: Stable Characteristics	0.003	0.002	0.002	0.003	0.003
Block 2: Acquired Characteristics	0.03	0.04	0.06	0.03	0.03
Block 3: Lifestyle Choices	0.06	0.07	0.08	0.04	0.03
Block 4: Social Class	0.07	0.09	0.09	0.05	0.04

dependent in a vote choice model. The aim is to determine the variation in the effectiveness of each of the independent variables in the different cohorts. The same methodology is used as in the previous models.

## 8 Results

The impact of social characteristics on the four main vote choice criteria is very low according to the results. However, a clear variation is seen among the four cohorts. The R squares presented in Table 3 show the percentage of explained variance in party identification. With the addition of each block of social characteristics, the R square increases, showing a higher percentage of explained variance in party identification. The numbers, however, remain low. Despite that, the cohort differences are clear. Party identification can be explained by social characteristics more efficiently for the two older cohorts than for the two younger ones. This result, even though less prominent than expected, is in line with the idea that the social characteristics of younger generations are less important for their vote choice.

Similarly, Table 4 presents the R-squares for individual left-right positioning. Social characteristics again show a gradual drop in their influence for younger cohorts. The observable patterns are very similar to those for party identification, despite the low impact of the effects. This is to be expected, since party identification and left-right ideology are considered long term vote determinants. Their impact on vote choice depends very much

Table 4: The influence of social characteristics on left-right ideology across cohorts

	<b>population</b>	<b>64+</b>	<b>50-63</b>	<b>35-49</b>	<b>18-34</b>
Block 1: Stable Characteristics	0.01	0.009	0.003	0.003	0.0001
Block 2: Acquired Characteristics	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.02
Block 3: Lifestyle Choices	0.06	0.06	0.07	0.04	0.03
Block 4: Social Class	0.08	0.09	0.09	0.06	0.04

on long term behaviour and repeated choices. Thus they should be more embedded in the behaviour of the older cohorts. The results capture this even though the differences are not dramatic.

The following two vote choice predictors are used under the short-term table. Issue voting is presented in Table 5. There we see that social characteristics do not influence EU issue positions as much as the left-right ones. The full model, which includes all the blocks of social characteristics, has an R square of only 0.02 for the whole population, which is the lowest in comparison to the previous two predictors. Despite the weaker result, there is still an observed variation among the cohorts following the same pattern as with the previous two predictors. Younger cohorts are simply less influenced by social characteristics.

The final vote predictor is valence. In Table 6 we see that this predictor behaves slightly differently to all the others. The difference is that the influence of social characteristics on the vote choice predictor does not drop gradually as the age cohorts become younger. The second cohort, aged 50 to 63, is in fact the one that has a stronger connection between social characteristics and valence opinions. This result reflects the special nature of valence considerations. Valence is attached to performance and retrospective voting. Voters are concerned about efficient governance most of the time with regard to what they believe is the most important problem facing the country at the time. Voters of 50 to 66 are the ones who are one step before retirement, are reaching the height of their careers, and have families

Table 5: The influence of social characteristics on EU integration issue across cohorts

	population	64+	50-63	35-49	18-34
Block 1: Stable Characteristics	0.004	0.004	0.003	0.001	-0.0006
Block 2: Acquired Characteristics	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.007
Block 3: Lifestyle Choices	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.01
Block 4: Social Class	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.01

and dependents. Thus they feel their background needs much stronger. This reflects in their valence choices. The older cohort has already passed the threshold of economic inactivity. Thus, they slowly disconnect from their social background, which does not weigh as much for their valence evaluations.

Having seen the effects of social characteristics on vote choice criteria, we have established that there is a clear pattern in their rather weak influence. Younger cohorts tend to be less influenced than older cohorts, which confirms the first hypothesis. The question that remains is how these voting behaviour criteria rank and if there is variation among cohorts. Table ?? shows that the ranking of criteria does not differ among cohorts. On the contrary, all cohorts seem to follow similar patterns ranking party identification as strongest, then valence considerations, followed by left-right ideology and finally by EU issue voting.

Table 7 offers us two kinds of insights. The first is that there is no variation in vote criteria ranking among the four cohorts. This finding rejects the hypotheses that voters belonging to different cohorts use different criteria to arrive at their final vote choice. This shows that for all the cohorts the causal sequence of the main criteria is the same. In fact, in a combined OLS model including all four vote choice criteria the results demonstrate that for all cohorts the left-right ideology and the EU issue voting measures lose their significance. Party identification and valence measures remain significant and account for approximately sixty per cent of the explained variance of

Table 6: Influence of social characteristics on Party Valences across cohorts

	<b>population</b>	<b>64+</b>	<b>50-63</b>	<b>35-49</b>	<b>18-34</b>
Block 1: Stable Characteristics	0.003	0.002	0.002	0.009	0.0008
Block 2: Acquired Characteristics	0.04	0.04	0.06	0.04	0.03
Block 3: Lifestyle Choices	0.06	0.07	0.09	0.06	0.03
Block 4: Social Class	0.07	0.09	0.1	0.06	0.03

Table 7: Ranking of vote choice criteria

	<b>64+</b>	<b>50-63</b>	<b>35-49</b>	<b>18-34</b>
EU issue	0.005	0.012	0.012	0.015
Left-right	0.25	0.25	0.26	0.29
Valence	0.61	0.63	0.62	0.72
Party ID	0.78	0.83	0.79	0.85

the vote. Of the two variables, party identification has the strongest impact on vote choice.

The second important insight is derived from the results of the 35 to 49 cohort. Looking at Table 7, we see an increasing strength of the models in predicting vote choice as we approach the youngest cohort. However, the 35 to 49 cohort shows a slight anomaly to this pattern. The impact of valence and party identification on their vote choice resembles more that of the eldest cohort rather than either of their neighbouring ones. This finding, even though not very extreme in terms of differences, shows that this cohort has been influenced by an external stimulus that is exogenous to the life-cycle process.

## 9 Concluding remarks

What have we learned from this research that we did not know before? Even though there are small differences among the impact of the social characteristics on the four main vote choice criteria of the four cohorts, at the end of the day all cohorts rank these criteria in exactly the same way. The impact of these criteria on vote choice is greater for younger cohorts than for older ones. How can these findings be interpreted and how do they connect to existing political behaviour debates?

The findings suggest the oldest generation, aged 64 and above, was socialized in an environment where political alignment was still dominant. Despite the changes in the political environment they have experienced over the course of their lives, their social characteristics still to a large extent dictate their party identification, left-right ideology and valence evaluations, when it comes to a Labour vote. The baby boom generation, aged 50 to 63 at the time of the 2009 elections, do not show such clear effects of alignment during their socialization. They were socialized politically in the period from the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s, where new politics and new social movements appeared and dealignment was at its peak. This generation's left-right ideology is not influenced by social characteristics, which is the first indication of their socialization at the time of dealignment. Also, this generation shows a reduced willingness to declare party identification as we saw in Table 2. However, party identification is still influenced by their individual social characteristics, though to a lesser extent than for the older cohort. Similarly, their valence evaluations are influenced by their social characteristics. The real effects of dealignment appear in the socialization processes of the two youngest cohorts. Being socialized in the period from the early 1980s to the early 2000s, they have experienced a world without strong alignments, with high insecurity and changing values. Their behaviour is less predictable by social characteristics. Only their party identification, when they decide to declare one, depends heavily on them.



Valence evaluation show the strongest differences between cohorts. Despite the theoretical expectation that evaluations come later in the funnel of causality and thus are influenced by social characteristics, the findings here show that this is not the case for the two youngest cohorts. For those voters aged 18 to 49, social characteristics do not determine the way they evaluate which party is best able to solve the most important issues facing their country. This major difference between cohorts can of course be attributed to their different socialization. However, that would be incomplete. Being at different points in their life cycle, the four different cohorts have different levels of embedded political practices. The older a person is, the stronger are their convictions and party identifications. After a longer period of habit formation and peer socialization, the older generations tend to be more aware of their social background than the younger ones.

Similarly, as generations are at different points in their lives they are influenced by different considerations. Being more economically active, the two younger generations, are faced with financial insecurities and survival considerations. The older cohorts are either retired or have secured a career and are close to retirement. The youngest cohort is in the process of building a career and is influenced by changes in the economic situation of their country, as well as the financial crisis threatening their prospects in 2009. In much a similar way the cohort aged 35 to 49 includes the largest part of the economically active population. They are the individuals supporting families, who cannot afford to lose their jobs. For that reason the two youngest cohorts are not greatly influenced by their social characteristics when evaluating political parties in their countries. They are focused on the delivery of the highest quality governance so they can achieve their own personal goals.

The findings of the dealignment thesis both in terms of party identification and left-right ideology point towards the idea that social characteristics, have a weaker influence on the formation of a party identification effect and ideology than they once did. The fading of traditional alignments was partly a result of the loosening connection between layer effects such as social characteristics and stable predispositions such as party identification and ideology. This link between the two may be the key to understanding the new mechanisms leading to vote choice.

For the de-alignment thesis to hold, one should observe decreasing direct and indirect effects of the stable social characteristics on vote choice. As a result, it is not only party identification that decreases, but also the connection between party identification and social characteristics. In practice, this means that even in cases of strong identification it can be less predictable just by looking at social characteristics. The results show that older generations have a slightly stronger connection to their social characteristics than do younger generations. However the numbers are not impressive, meaning that the effects are marginal. As an implication, traditional social groups

have already felt a decline in numbers, causing political dealignment, and, also the remaining numbers of social groups do not have a straight-forward voting behaviour. The dealignment thesis is fulfilled by demonstrating the declining role of social characteristics as vote predictors, and also as determinants of ideology and party identification.

Finally, this paper will offer some reflections on the structure of the funnel of causality and its function in European parliament elections. There is clearly a difference between national and European elections. Any single individual has various considerations in mind when he votes, but the background social characteristics affect these considerations in a different way. Substantial numbers of voters support different parties for different reasons. In practice, means that the switch from National to European elections mainly benefits anti-integration and smaller parties (van Egmond, 2005). The role of social characteristics in vote choice is therefore also different in European elections.

The link between social characteristics and the vote looks to be looser within the context of european elections. The generational effect still exists showing that the older cohorts are still influenced more by their social characteristics. However, overall this impact is minimal. The idea of European elections is not very old. They became prominent during the socialization period of the two youngest cohorts and thus only the two oldest cohorts can be claimed to have developed habits connected to them. Considering their special nature, the funnel of causality works much less, as they are specific to a supernational body and not to national governing structures.

Overall, we have established that the party identification measure is the most prominent vote choice criterion. Its traditional functions, however, do not seem to work as it is somewhat disconnected from social characteristics. This clearly begs the question of the nature of party identification for the current European electorate, especially in the context of European elections. The middle class, which numerically dominates the electorate, has no clear class consciousness. This new class has no clear party loyalty, and no clear party identification in the traditional sense, increasing the size of the available electorate. These middle class individuals have taken a different approach to party identification. Rosema (Rosema, 2006) shows that in the multiparty systems that dominate western Europe partisanship is based on evaluation instead of identification. For that reason party identification cannot be considered stable. In fact it reflects an affiliation of an individual to a party that can fluctuate over time. It can mean anything from mere sympathy to a belief that the party is beneficial to the country. But these beliefs can vary and change over time, depending on personal evaluations. Overall, this criterion becomes more important for younger voters, even though it is less possible to predict their vote by using their social characteristics.

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