

Alexandru VOLACU • Iris GOLOPENȚA

THE ELECTORAL FAILURE OF LIBERAL PARTIES IN CENTRAL EUROPE: A DIRECTIONAL MODEL ANALYSIS

Alexandru VOLACU
Faculty of Political Sciences,
National School of Political
and Administrative Studies,
Bucharest, Romania
volacu@gmail.com

Iris GOLOPENȚA
Faculty of Political Sciences,
National School of Political
and Administrative Studies,
Bucharest, Romania
irisgolopenta@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

In this paper we provide a theoretical framework for interpreting the reiterated failure of liberal parties in a series of Central European states (namely Austria, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands). We argue that the directional model of spatial analysis elaborated by Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1989) and Macdonald, Listhaug and Rabinowitz (1991) can be an efficient instrument used for understanding why liberal parties are not able to perform as well as their opponents in elections, our hypothesis being, in consistency with the theoretical predictions made by the directional model, that political parties which ideologically diverge from the center without becoming too radical are more likely to increase their electoral percentage than parties which converge toward the ideological center. We test and partially confirm our hypothesis by comparatively studying the ideological shifts and electoral percentages of liberal parties within the 5 states mentioned above, across a period of five consecutive elections, proving that a correlation between ideological shifts and electoral percentages exists in the sense predicted by the directional model for a large majority of cases.

KEYWORDS

- directional model
- electoral failure
- ideological shift
- liberalism
- liberal party
- plurality maximization/vote maximization

1. Introduction

Ever since the end of the Second World War, liberal political parties have faced a constant electoral struggle in continental Europe, lagging behind the more successful social-democratic and Christian-democratic parties and being regularly perceived as tertiary parties within the political system.

The objective of this paper is to provide a valid theoretical framework for interpreting the constant failure of liberal parties in a series of Central European states (namely Austria, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands). We argue that the directional model of spatial analysis elaborated by Rabinowitz and Macdonald¹ and Macdonald et al.² can be an efficient instrument used for understanding why liberal parties are not able to perform as well as their opponents in elections, our hypothesis being, in consistency with the theoretical predictions made by the directional model, that political parties which ideologically diverge from the center without becoming too radical are more likely to increase their electoral percentage than parties which converge toward the ideological center.

In the first part of the paper we will briefly describe the theoretical framework, i.e. the directional model, concentrating on the elements which differentiate it from the traditional models employed in spatial analysis. In the second part we briefly describe liberalism from an ideological standpoint, while also presenting a short description of the liberal parties involved in our analysis. In the third part we explain the notion of “electoral failure” and empirically prove that all the liberal parties integrated into the analysis can be included in this category for the time period analyzed and we compare partisan ideological shifts between elections to shifts in electoral percentages, showing that in the vast majority of cases there is a correlation between the two, in the sense predicted by the directional model.

2. Methodological Framework: the Directional Model of Spatial Analysis

The spatial analysis of electoral competition is a research field within the Public Choice paradigm which studies electoral competition, partisan ideological tendencies and party placements, as well as party system formation, using mathematical models and instruments traditionally employed in the field of economics³, such as methodological individualism, which postulates the fact that only individuals are characterized by purposes and interests⁴ and that any form of collective action consists in fact of a series of individual actions undertaken when individuals choose to accomplish their purposes in a collective manner rather than in an individual one⁵ as well as instrumental rationality models, which require that the individual assumes a behavior directed toward utility⁶

¹ G Rabinowitz & SE Macdonald, “A Directional Theory of Issue Voting”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 83, no. 1, March 1989, pp.93-121.

² SE Macdonald, O Listhaug & G Rabinowitz, “Issue and Party Support in Multiparty Systems”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 85, no. 4, 1991, pp. 1107-1131.

³ A common point in all research programs derived on a Rational Choice Theory basis.

⁴ J Agassi, “Methodological Individualism”, *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 11, no. 3, September 1960, p. 244

⁵ JM Buchanan, & G Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent*, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1999, p. 13

⁶ There are at least three interpretations which can be given to the term “utility”: 1. pleasure combined with the absence of pain (the benthamian interpretation), 2. happiness and 3. desire fulfillment. The third interpretation is the one generally used when we are referring to instrumental rationality. See: PK Pattanaik, “Limits of Utilitarianism as the Ethical Basis of Public Action”, in Anand, Pattanaik & Puppe (eds.), *The Handbook of Rational and Social Choice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p.326.

maximization⁷ and that the individual calculus on which an action is predicated respects the three Rawlsian principles of rationality: 1. The principle of effective means, 2. The principle of inclusiveness and 3. The principle of the greater likelihood⁸.

The first model of spatial analysis was elaborated by Downs⁹ who was inspired by the models constructed by Hotelling¹⁰, Lerner and Singer¹¹ and Smithies¹² with the purpose of studying an economic market characterized by duopoly. Although both Hotelling and Smithies make analogies between a duopolistic market and the political competition characteristic to the US political system, Downs is the first economist who aims to offer a substantial explanation of ideological party placements and of the formation of party systems through the instrumentality of spatial models and does not limit his project to a tangential approach of political issues but instead makes it the central subject of his work. Although his contribution, along with Black's¹³ is basically seen as the foundation stone of the spatial analysis of political competition, his model has been heavily criticized by subsequent scholars, some of the most frequent critiques referring to the unidimensionality of the model¹⁴, the plurality of potential party goals,¹⁵ the failure to distinguish plurality-maximizing competitors from vote-maximizing competitors¹⁶, the failure to take into account the potential for new entries in the party system¹⁷, the failure to take into account the cognitively limited nature of individuals¹⁸ as well as many others.

In contrast to the above mentioned critiques however, Rabinowitz and Macdonald argue that traditional spatial analysis is “*seriously flawed*”¹⁹ from a

⁷ A maximizing behavior entails the fact that when individuals are confronted with a set of alternatives they will choose the alternative which is not inferior to any other alternative from the set (Sen, 1997, p.746).

⁸ J Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Belknap Press, Cambridge, 1971, pp. 361-362.

⁹ A Downs, *O teorie economică a democrației* [An Economic Theory of Democracy], Institutul European, Iași, 2009.

¹⁰ H Hotelling, “Stability in Competition”, *The Economic Journal*, vol. 39 no. 153, March 1929, pp. 41-57.

¹¹ AP Lerner & HW Singer, „Some Notes on Duopoly and Spatial Competition”, *The Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 45, no. 2, 1937, pp. 145-186.

¹² A Smithies, “Optimum Location in Spatial Competition”, *The Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 49, 3, June 1941, pp. 423-439

¹³ D Black, *The Theory of Committees and Elections*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1958.

¹⁴ D Stokes, “Spatial Models of Party Competition”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 57, no. 2, June 1963, pp. 368-377.

¹⁵ D Wittman, “Parties as Utility Maximizers”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 67, no. 2, June 1973, pp. 490-498.

¹⁶ M Hinich & P Ordeshook, „Plurality Maximization vs Vote Maximization: A Spatial Analysis with Variable Participation”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 64, no. 3, September 1970, pp. 772-791.

¹⁷ T Palfrey, “Spatial Equilibrium with Entry”, *Review of Economic Studies*, vol. 51, no. 1, January 1984, pp. 139-156.

¹⁸ Osborne, M, “Spatial Models of Political Competition under Plurality Rule: A Survey of Some Explanations of the Number of Candidates and the Positions They Take”, *The Canadian Journal of Economics*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1995, pp. 261-301.

¹⁹ G Rabinowitz & SE Macdonald, p. 93

somewhat different angle, contesting the principle which lies at the core of the traditional theory, the fact that voters choose parties according to the ideological proximity between their ideal points represented on an ideological dimension and the positions occupied by the parties. As Rabinowitz and Macdonald conceptualize the political space as a symbolic environment in which voters need to have strong emotional attachments to political parties in order to vote for them²⁰ and as they consider that voters do not perceive ideological dimensions in the rigid positional manner proposed by the traditional spatial theory but instead perceive politics in a diffuse manner²¹, they argue that instead of proximity, the decisional-making process of voters can be quintessentially reduced to the following properties: 1. *directionality*, meaning the fact that direction matters with voters attaching a positive utility to a party when both the voter and the party have a similar directional stance²² and 2. *intensity*, meaning the fact that the intensity with which a party supports a policy is relevant because it evokes emotional responses from voters²³. The directional model, in this basic version termed “*reduced version*” by Westholm²⁴ would therefore predict that the most extremist parties would be the most successful as their radical stances would evoke the strongest emotions from voters. In order to account for this discrepancy between theoretical predictions and empirical proof Rabinowitz and Macdonald construct an additional concept which they term “*region of responsibility*”²⁵, arguing that any party which goes outside this region is penalized by the voters for proposing too “strident” or “extremist” policies²⁶.

The mathematical differentiation between the traditional models of spatial analysis (often termed “proximity” models”) and the directional model can be expressed in the following manner: 1. proximity models can be expressed either as a linear Euclidean distance: $U(v,c) = -|v-c| = -\sqrt{(v_1-c_1)^2 + \dots + (v_n-c_n)^2}$ or as a quadratic Euclidean distance: $U(v,c) = -|v-c|^2 = -[(v_1-c_1)^2 + \dots + (v_n-c_n)^2]$ ²⁷ 2. the directional model can be expressed as a scalar product:

²⁰ Rabinowitz & Macdonald, p. 94

²¹ Rabinowitz, G, “On the Nature of Political Issues: Insights from a Spatial Analysis”, *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 22, no. 4, November 1978, p. 793

²² They are both either in favor of a certain policy or against it.

²³ Rabinowitz & Macdonald, p. 94

²⁴ Westholm, A, “Distance versus Direction: The Illusory Defeat of the Proximity Theory of Electoral Choice”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 91, no. 4, December 1997, p. 874

²⁵ Originally termed “region of acceptability” (See: Rabinowitz and Macdonald, p.108). The name was changed by the authors so as to better capture the purpose of the region which is to penalize irresponsible party policies. In this paper we will use the term region of acceptability only when we provide quotes which contain this concept in the respective form. See: SE Macdonald, G Rabinowitz & O Listhaug, “Sophistry versus Science: On Further Efforts to Rehabilitate the Proximity Model”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2001, p. 484

²⁶ Rabinowitz & Macdonald, p. 108

²⁷ Enelow and Hinich in Merrill, S, “A Probabilistic Model for the Spatial Distribution of Party Support in Multiparty Electorates”, *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, vol. 89 no. 28, 1994, pp. 1191.

$$U(v, c) = v \cdot c - p = \sum_{i=1}^n v_i \cdot c_i - \sum_{i=1}^n p_i = v_1 \cdot c_1 + \dots + v_n \cdot c_n - p_1 - \dots - p_n^{28}$$

As in the case of the Downsian and proximity-based models, the directional model has also received a considerable share of criticism. From a theoretical and methodological perspective Westholm's critique is generally viewed as an optimal point of reference, attacking the fact that the region of responsibility is defined as a property of the entire electorate although preferences cannot be universalized²⁹, the fact that the authors do not specify any universally applicable penalty function³⁰, the fact that consequentially the degree of falsifiability of the theory is significantly reduced³¹ and the fact that the empirical analysis is based on interpersonal comparisons instead of intrapersonal comparisons³². Aside from these critiques the bulk of authors within the specialized literature have concentrated on empirically comparing the directional and proximity models, such as the studies of Platt, Poole and Rosenthal³³ on the American Congress, Gilljam³⁴ on Sweden, Pierce³⁵ on France, Kramer and Rattinger³⁶ on Germany, Karp and Banducci³⁷ on New Zealand, Tiemann³⁸ in the elections for the European Parliament, etc.

None of the above studies decisively prove the superiority of one model over the other. Therefore in this matter, the position which we support is the one adopted by Lewis and King³⁹ who argue that none of the empirical tests conducted can avoid manifesting some sort of methodological bias designed to

²⁸ Where $U(v, c)$ represents the utility gained by voter v when electing candidate c , v_i represents the position of the voter, c_i represents the position of the candidate and p_i represents the penalty attached to candidates which are positioned beyond the region of responsibility.

²⁹ Westholm, p. 872

³⁰ *ibid.* p. 867

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.* p. 868

³³ G Platt, K Poole & H Rosenthal, "Directional and Euclidean Theories of Voting Behavior: A Legislative Comparison", *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 4, November 1992, pp. 561-572

³⁴ M Gilljam, "The Directional Theory Under the Magnifying Glass. A Reappraisal", *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, no. 9, January 1997, pp. 5-12.

³⁵ R Pierce, "Directional Versus Proximity Models: Verisimilitude as the Criterion", *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, no. 9, January 1997, pp. 61-74.

³⁶ J Kramer, & H Rattinger, "The Proximity and Directional Theories of Issue Voting: Comparative Results for the USA and Germany", *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 32, no. 1, August 1997, pp. 1-29.

³⁷ S Banducci, & J Karp, "Electoral System Change and Representation: Testing Directional and Proximity Models", presented at the Annual APSA Conference (American Political Science Association), 1-4 September 1999.

³⁸ G Tiemann, "Choosing Policy, Compensating Stalemate or Pushing for Change? Uncovering the Logics of Proximity, Compensational and Directional Voting in Elections to the European Parliament", presented at the 12th Biannual EUSA Conference, Boston, 3-5 March 2011.

³⁹ J Lewis, & G King, "No Evidence on Directional vs Proximity Voting", *Political Analysis*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1999, pp. 21-33.

increase the likelihood of making successful predictions using the specific type of model favored by the author. It is not our purpose to extend the ongoing debate regarding the adequacy of each model in this paper; therefore we do not attempt to bring arguments in favor or against the directional model, limiting ourselves to presenting the most important literature on the subject. Further, in the anti-realist tradition inaugurated by Friedman⁴⁰ we are not particularly concerned with the assumptions that lie at the basis of each model but in the predictions made and their consistency with empirical facts, our main methodological contention being that despite the valid critiques brought forward and the obvious limitations and deficiencies of the directional model, it can provide a legitimate and accurate theoretical background for explaining the electoral performance of liberal parties in a series of Central European states.

3. Liberalism and Central European Liberal Parties

3.1. *Liberalism as Political Ideology – General Notions and Classification.*

This paper will focus on one particular view of ideology, namely that it represents an instrument used for obtaining political power⁴¹. This being stated, according to the purpose of the present paper, it is necessary to define liberalism, as it represents one of the main ideological perspectives employed ever since the XVIII-th century. Mainly focusing on the freedom of human beings as fundamentally rational individuals, liberalism is centered on “the idea of individual freedom by trying to endure equality of opportunity in a tolerant and open society”⁴². Nevertheless, liberalism cannot be easily defined nor can it be framed into a single theoretical pattern.

Theoreticians such as Locke, J. St. Mill, Tocqueville, Hayek, Keynes, Rawls, Nozick, Popper or Friedman were all fundamentally liberals, despite their different perspectives over the configuration of an ideal society and its functioning mechanisms. It is why it becomes necessary to conceptualize these differences in order to further analyze and use them as such. By severely simplifying the discussion⁴³ we can reduce the debate to the differences that classical liberalism, neo-classical liberalism, libertarianism and social liberalism⁴⁴ present, as they can be considered the main descriptive classes of the liberal ideology. As do we not intend to discuss this issue at a great length, here we only state that the parties analyzed in this paper generally belong to the social perspective of liberalism and to a lesser degree to the neo-classical perspective.

⁴⁰ M Friedman, “The Methodology of Positive Economics”, in *Essays in Positive Economics*, University Press of Chicago, Chicago, 1966, pp.3-16; 30-43.

⁴¹ Downs, p. 143

⁴² T Ball, & R Dagger, *Ideologii Politice și Idealul Democratic* [Political Ideologies and the Democratic Ideal], Editura Polirom, Iași, 2000, p. 60.

⁴³ As an exhaustive analysis of the liberal ideology is not an objective of this paper.

⁴⁴ For the theoretical foundations of liberalism as a political ideology see Gray (1995) and for the distinction between the different strands of liberalism see Ball and Dagger (2000, pp.52-97)

These different traditions manifest themselves in the form of political parties, each bearing the name of liberalism or related labels with more than one such party in a number of countries⁴⁵. Ideological differences, even if subtle, properly reflect the visions of political parties and they are briefly suggested by the labels that they share. For instance, “*moderates can mostly be identified with liberalism or liberal-conservatism whereas progressivism appeared under the label of liberalism as well as under that of radicalism, republicanism and social democracy*”⁴⁶.

In nuce, a general description of liberal parties can be achieved by approaching the two original tenets of the liberal ideology, which still remain central today, “*economic freedom and the liberties of the individual*”⁴⁷.

Regarding the liberal political parties of the current analysis, they are the following: The Freedom Party of Austria, The Flemish Liberals and Democrats and The Liberal Reformist Party of Belgium, The Free Democratic Party of Germany, The Democratic Party of Luxembourg, and The People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy of Netherlands.

3.2. Liberal Parties in Central Europe⁴⁸

*The Freedom Party of Austria*⁴⁹ was founded in 1956 and “is a direct descendent of the German national-liberal camp that dates back to the revolution of 1848”⁵⁰. What is interesting in FPO’s doctrine is the powerful shift to populism and nationalism during the beginning of the last decade of the XXth Century “against the multiculturalism of the left and moral decline that is associated with the development of postindustrial society under the stewardship of Social Democracy”⁵¹. Next to the European integration, typically liberal policies such as a decrease in the size of the government along with the outlining of personal freedom, equality of opportunity and the importance of free markets are still

⁴⁵ E Kirchner, *Liberal Parties in Western Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 2

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 3

⁴⁷ G Smith, “Between Left and Right: The Ambivalence of European Liberalism”, in Kirchner (ed.), *Liberal Parties in Western Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 19

⁴⁸ What we mean by Central Europe in this paper does not accurately encompass the space traditionally associated with this concept. Besides the states analyzed in this paper, that is Austria, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, in general Central Europe also includes other states, mainly Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Switzerland. Unfortunately, the former three states are not included in the data provided by McDonald and Mendes (2002) which constitutes the empirical foundation of our research, while Switzerland is intentionally excluded from the analysis based on its unconventional political system. We do not believe that the analysis is made less relevant by these absences and we remind the reader that throughout the paper we will use the term Central Europe for convenience and we do not wish to imply that the analysis can be generalized to the entire region generally regarded as Central Europe, but only to the five states included in the study.

⁴⁹ Further termed FPO.

⁵⁰ M Riedlsperger, “The Freedom Party of Austria: From Protest to Radical Right Populism” in Betz & Immerfall (eds.), *The new Politics of The Right: Neo-Populist Parties and Movements in Established Democracies*, Macmillan Press LTD, 1998, p. 27

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 32

advocated by FPO in their political program, although their political proposals clearly reflect a populist stance in the contemporary period.

The inclusion of FPO in this analysis may appear strange as today it is rather regarded as a far-right party than a liberal one. However, as the liberal party label is attached in this paper identically to the classification developed by Budge et al.⁵² which stands at the center of the empirical data set provided by McDonald and Mendes⁵³, we could not have possibly omitted it from the analysis. As we will explain in the fourth part of the present paper, the Austrian case is the only one in which the results are not directly applicable in the present day as the political stage does not contain any significant liberal party, but it can serve as an explicative model for the historical lack of success registered by FPO with their primarily liberal agenda and can be a potential explanatory variable for the radical right-turn of the past two decades⁵⁴.

The Flemish Liberals and Democrats and *The Liberal Reformist Party*⁵⁵ are the two Belgian parties to be briefly presented here. PRL is founded upon classical liberal principles, organized by the formula “*less government (tax and economic) best state (in regard to security, scientific research, external relations and social solidarity)*”⁵⁶. By contrast, VLD - created in 1992 – systematically lost its liberal ideological identity first for a centrist political approach and afterwards through its attempts to gain consensus with various others parties, searching for potential political coalitions.⁵⁷

*The Free Democratic Party*⁵⁸ is part of the German political arena since 1948 and starting with the party congress in 1971 it advocated welfare liberal principles. This shift concerning their ideological vision was due to the alliance with the Social-Democratic Party and has ended with the return to their former classical statements, due to the reconnection with the Christian Democratic Union / Christian Social Union⁵⁹.

*The Democratic Party*⁶⁰, founded in 1955 is the most important liberal political party of Luxembourg. Supporting civil liberties next to the principles of free market and also emphasizing individual rights, the DP outlines a moderate position to major issues of national interest, according to the ideological continuum. Particularly

⁵² I Budge, HD Klingemann, A Volkens, E Tannenbaum, & J Bara, *Mapping Policy Preferences: Estimates for Parties, Electors and Governments 1945-1998*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001.

⁵³ M McDonald, & S Mendes, ‘Parties in Parliaments and Governments, 1950-1995’, <http://www2.binghamton.edu/political-science/research/Parl&Govt_Cdbk.doc>, 2002.

⁵⁴ Although we do not explore this hypothesis in this paper and for the moment is formulated merely as a speculation.

⁵⁵ Further termed VLD and PRL.

⁵⁶ <<http://www.mr.be/Le-Mouvement/Notre-Histoire/Le-Liberalisme.php>>, accessed on the 3rd of August 4, 2011.

⁵⁷ For further details on this issue see Rudd (1988, pp. 178-213).

⁵⁸ Further termed FDP.

⁵⁹ E Kirchner & D Broughton, “The FDP in the Federal Republic of Germany: The Requirements of Survival and Success”, in Kirchner (ed.), *Liberal Parties in Western Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 62-93.

⁶⁰ Further termed DP.

interesting about the DP is the fact that it has had a significant contribution to the abolition of the death penalty among with legalizing divorce and abortion in Luxembourg. Nowadays it is also known for strongly supporting the role and position of the European Union, United Nations and NATO, while at the same time emphasizing internationalism and universal rights and liberties⁶¹.

*The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy*⁶² is part of the Dutch political framework since 1948 and its ideological origins outline a welfare liberal philosophical view and conservative principles. Since the end of the XX-th century, however, these former core statements have been significantly denounced on behalf of reformism, state development, economic growth and a sort of populist electoral speech. These basic principles of the VVD are enunciated in the “Liberal Manifesto”, a theoretical foundation stating and explaining the ideological background of the party’s political stances⁶³.

4. The Electoral Failure of Liberal Parties in Central Europe – A Directional Model Analysis

4.1. The Electoral Failure of Liberal Parties in Central Europe

In order to explain the electoral failure of liberal parties in Central Europe, we must first explain what we understand through the concept of “electoral failure” and empirically show that the electoral performance of the liberal parties studied falls within this category.

The failure of liberal parties in Western and Central Europe has been noticed and interpreted in the specialized literature to a relatively great extent. Smith for example, considers that liberal parties occupy “*a minor place and there is the temptation to treat liberalism as just of marginal significance*”⁶⁴, attributing this situation to an ideological incoherence superior to that of Christian-democrats or social-democrats and to the fact that the central themes around which liberal parties were historically developed (universal suffrage, formal equality of rights, etc.) do not represent political issues in the present day⁶⁵. In a somewhat similar manner to the latter argument Meguid contends that the failure of mainstream parties (category in which liberal parties are generally included) can sometimes be determined by the entrance of a niche party into the political market approaching sets of issues “*which were previously outside the dimension of party competition*”⁶⁶.

⁶¹ D Hearle, “The Luxembourg Liberal Party”, in Kirchner (ed.), *Liberal Parties in Western Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 376-396.

⁶² Further termed VVD.

⁶³ H Daalder, & R Koole, “Liberal Parties in the Netherlands”, in Kirchner (ed.), *Liberal Parties in Western Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 152-177.

⁶⁴ Smith, p. 17

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 16-18

⁶⁶ B Meguid, ‘Competition Between Unequals: The Role of Mainstream Party Strategy in Niche Party Success’, *American Political Science Review* vol. 99, no. 3, 2005 p. 347.

In this paper, by the concept of electoral failure we intend to express the fact that a party has failed to achieve the primary goal of the electoral competition, derived from the objective which constitutes the core of party formation, i.e. obtaining political power through winning elections⁶⁷. However, we do not consider that the sole purpose of a party is to form the government, as in this case junior parties in a coalition can also be considered electoral winners. Mainly for methodological purposes, we define electoral failure in a universal manner, attributing to parties either the objective of plurality maximization⁶⁸, that is the objective of obtaining more votes than any other party in the political system, regardless of the number of votes obtained, or vote maximization⁶⁹, that is the objective of obtaining the maximum amount of votes, irrespective of the ranking which the party obtains in relation to the voting percentage of other parties. By subjecting all parties to a universal benchmark we can avoid the relativism inherent to a separate analysis of each party's specific objectives, and thereby we can infer results valid for all cases studied.

Table 1. Central European Liberal Parties Voting Percentages during 5 Consecutive Elections (1974-1995)⁷⁰

| Party | Country | Election 1 | Election 2 | Election 3 | Election 4 | Election 5 | Average |
|-------|-------------|-----------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|---------|
| FPO | Austria | 6.06 (3) ¹ | 4.98 (3) | 9.73 (3) | 16.63 (3) | 22.5 (3) | 11.98 |
| VLD | Belgium | 12.89 (2) | 10.75 (4) | 11.55 (4) | 11.98 (3) | 13.5 (2) | 12.13 |
| PRL | Belgium | 8.57 (6) | 10.21 (5) | 9.41 (5) | 8.14 (5) | - | 9.08 |
| FDP | Germany | 10.62 (3) | 6.95 (3) | 9.11 (3) | 11.03 (3) | 6.92 (4) | 8.92 |
| DP | Luxembourg | 21.89 (3) | 20.73 (3) | 18.88 (3) | 16.09 (3) | 17.82 (3) | 19.08 |
| VVD | Netherlands | 17.32 (3) | 23.08 (3) | 17.41 (3) | 14.57 (3) | 19.96 (3) | 18.46 |

Source: Authors (Adapted after McDonald and Mendes, 2002)

*Note.*¹ The number in the parenthesis represents the rank of the party according to the number of votes obtained for elections in the Lower House of Parliament. In this case, FPO is ranked third with 6.06% of the total votes expressed, behind SPO (Social Democratic Party of Austria) with 51.3% OVP (Austrian People's Party) with 41.9%.

Table 1 displays the electoral percentages obtained by each of the six parties involved in our analysis in the 5 elections studied. By analyzing the data we can observe that none of the parties manage to achieve the universally set objectives of either plurality maximization or vote maximization. In FPO's case, the party is

⁶⁷ Downs, p. 67

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ M Hinich, & P Ordeshook, „Plurality Maximization vs Vote Maximization: A Spatial Analysis with Variable Participation”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 64, no. 3, September 1970, pp. 773.

⁷⁰ The timeframe analyzed falls between 1979-1994 for Austria, 1981-1995 for Belgium, 1980-1994 for Germany, 1974-1994 for Luxembourg and 1981-1994 for the Netherlands.

ranked third during each election failing to gain over 20% at all but the last election, averaging 11.98% during a period of five elections. In VLD's case, the party also fails to gain plurality, being placed second in only one instance. The electoral percentage is however constantly below 15%, averaging only 12.13% throughout the five elections. PRL is the weakest performer out of the six parties in the analysis, constantly gaining under 10% of the voting percentage and ranking in 5th or 6th place. FDP also fails to achieve either a plurality or a significant number of votes, averaging 8.92% and failing to climb above 3rd place. DP's case is similar to FDP's in respect to the plurality issue; however the voting percentage in their case is somewhat more successful with an average of 19.08% (however still far below the two main parties in Luxembourg). Finally, VVD's case mirrors the Luxembourg party both from a plurality-maximizing point of view and from a vote-maximizing perspective.

Keeping this in mind, we can affirm without reserves that the Central-European liberal parties involved in this analysis register a constant electoral failure, as they fail to achieve their universally defined goals, either these goals being of plurality maximization or vote maximization⁷¹.

4.2. Explaining the Lack of Electoral Success of Liberal Parties in Central Europe Using the Directional Model of Spatial Analysis

In the previous section we have shown that liberal parties in Central Europe tend to perform worse from an electoral standpoint than their Christian-democrat and social-democrat counterparts, and therefore register, in our view, a constant electoral failure as the objective of every party is either to obtain a plurality of votes⁷² or to maximize the percentage of votes obtained⁷³. As we demonstrate in Table 1, from each of the two perspectives liberal parties achieve a reiterated

⁷¹ Although the analysis in this paper extends between 1974 and 1995, the present-day situation of liberal parties in four out of the five countries studied is not substantially different. In Belgium, VLD has never obtained over 15.4% after 1995 and in the last elections obtained only 8.4% of the voting percentage. MR, the party formed by an alliance of PRL and other two parties never obtained more than 12.5%, while they currently stand at 9.5% as the 4th ranked parliamentary party. In Germany at the 2009 elections FDP has obtained 14.9% of the voting percentage which is the highest percentage achieved by FDP after the Second World War. Even taking this into account the party is still ranked 3rd in the Bundestag and has a vote share of significantly under 20%. In Luxembourg the Democratic Party managed to obtain 22.4% of votes in 1999 placing for the first time in its history second, however in the next elections it fell back to the third position with percentages of under 17%. After the 2009 elections it stands on 15% closer to the 4th ranked Green Party than to the 2nd ranked LSAP. In the Netherlands, taking advantage of the downfall of CDA, VVD is currently ranked first in the Lower House of Parliament with one seat more than PvdA. However, the voting percentage is not particularly high, VVD obtaining only 20.4% of the entire voting share. The heavily fragmented nature of the present-day Dutch party system, with 10 parties being represented in Parliament contributes decisively to the success of VVD which from an electoral standpoint did not experience any significant changes between the period analyzed in the paper and the period between 1995 and 2011. The Austrian case is the only one significantly different from the analysis, as FPÖ has underwent a major ideological shift toward the far right, basically taking it out of the region of responsibility, as it is currently perceived as having a far-right populist stance.

⁷² Downs, p. 67

⁷³ Hinich and Ordeshook, p. 773

sub-optimal result as they are usually ranked in 3rd place or below, therefore failing to achieve a plurality and in general obtain a voting percentage of under 20%, therefore failing to maximize the voting percentage.

Thus, the research question posed in this paper is how can we explain the constant failure of liberal parties across Central Europe? In answering this question we argue that the spatial analysis of ideological shifts and in particular the employment of the directional model described in Section 2 can provide an adequate methodological framework for explaining why liberal parties fail to gain the electoral support they seek.

One of the key features of the directional model elaborated by Rabinowitz and Macdonald and Macdonald, Listhaug and Rabinowitz is that unlike its proximity-based predecessors it can make general predictions regarding the optimal placement of political parties without taking into consideration the distribution of voters⁷⁴. The theoretical prediction made by the directional model is expressed in the *full proportionality theorem*, which states that “*in a fully proportional representation system*”⁷⁵ *all parties should be located at or beyond the region of acceptability*⁷⁶.

In order to easily understand this theorem let us imagine an example where we have only one ideological dimension in which the political competition takes place, for instance economic interventionism. Let us assume that the ideological dimension is representable on a continuous scale from $\{-5\}$ to $\{5\}$ where $\{-5\}$ represents the extreme left and $\{5\}$ the extreme right. Let us also assume that we have two parties A and B supporting state interventionism, thereby being placed on the left side in respect to the neutral point and that they occupy the positions $\{-2\}$ and $\{-3\}$ respectively. Further, without a loss of generality, let us assume that the border of the region of responsibility is placed at $\{-4\}$, identical to the value chosen by Macdonald, Listhaug and Rabinowitz⁷⁷, therefore both parties being placed within the region of responsibility. Within the picture constructed with the above mentioned variables, let us proceed to establish the winner of the electoral competition envisioned. First of all, as per the condition of directionality, all right-wing voters will attach a negative utility to both parties and therefore they will abstain from voting⁷⁸. Secondly, all left-wing voters will follow the utility calculus $U(v, c) = v_i \cdot c_i$. Therefore $U(v_i, c_A) = -2v_i$ and $U(v_i, c_B) = -3v_i$. $U(v_i, c_A) - U(v_i, c_B) = -2v_i - (-3v_i) = v_i \Rightarrow (\forall)v_i < 0 : U(v_i, c_B) > U(v_i, c_A)$, $(\forall)v_i > 0 : U(v_i, c_A) > U(v_i, c_B)$. But $v_i \in [-5, 0) \Rightarrow U(v_i, c_B) > U(v_i, c_A)$ for every case. B will therefore gain all the votes from the left-wing electorate.

⁷⁴ Macdonald, Listhaug and Rabinowitz, p. 1113

⁷⁵ By fully proportional representation system the authors understand an electoral system in which the threshold required for representation approaches 0 (Macdonald, Listhaug and Rabinowitz, 1991, p.1127).

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 1112

⁷⁸ Abstention is not necessarily implied as right-wing voters could employ a mini-max strategy if it is cost efficient and vote for the party which would produce a negative utility nearer to 0, however this issue does not fall within the scope of the paper therefore we will not analyze this case.

The same mode of reasoning can be applied to every position assumed by a party that is still inside the region of responsibility. If for example party A decides to “jump” over the ideological position of party B and place itself on the position of $\{-3.5\}$, *ceteris paribus*, it would win the elections as the scalar product between its position and every arbitrarily selected voter would be higher than that of his electoral counterpart, i.e. B. The position which cannot be beaten by an ideological repositioning within the region of responsibility is, as Rabinowitz and Macdonald correctly observe, the boundary of the region⁷⁹. If party A would occupy this position and B would try to “jump” it, B would find itself outside the region of responsibility and a penalty will incur for what the electorate perceives to be a much too radical policy proposal.

However, this particularity of the directional model has no effect on the study elaborated in this paper as the distribution of voters in the 5 states analyzed between 1974 and 1995 did not have a predominantly extremist character and the liberal parties analyzed were all well within a reasonably defined region of responsibility, as per the data provided by McDonald and Mendes no party had an ideological position higher than 50 and only one party had in one instance a position higher than 40, therefore eliminating the danger that these parties would be outside the region of responsibility.

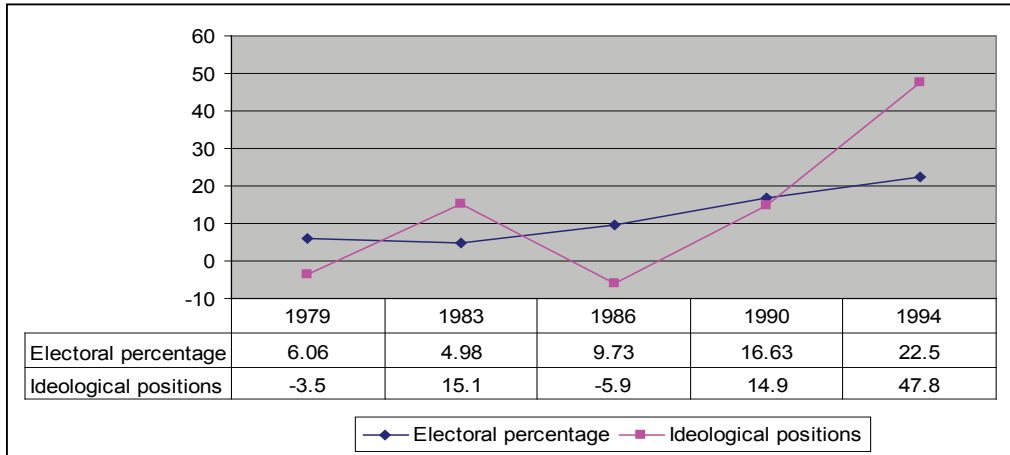
In a stable and reasonable electorate, such as the electorate of Austria, Belgium Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands within the above mentioned timeframe, the ideological conflict between parties is therefore reducible, according to the predictions of the directional model, to the tension between assuming strong and intense issue positions and attempting not to alienate the electorate by proposing policies which are too radical. Therefore, from the perspective of directional model scholars, the ideological goal of a party competing within a non-extremist electorate is to find the boundary of the region of responsibility and make sure that it does not cross it.

Employing the assumptions which lie at the heart of the directional model, we will try to individually analyze the case of liberal parties in the five Central European countries studied. In order for our hypothesis to be confirmed, the ideological fluctuations of parties towards the center, in respect to their previous positions, should lead to a decrease in the electoral percentage gained, while a move diverging from the center should be translated into an increase of votes, as per our previous demonstrations the scalar product of voters should be higher.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Rabinowitz and Macdonald, p. 108

⁸⁰ We should mention at this point that we do not assert or imply that ideological positioning is the only factor relevant in electoral competition. If this would be the case then the results should prove that in all instances analyzed an ideological shift should prove decisive. Furthermore, the results should prove that on both sides of the neutral point the party located farthest from the center but still at a reasonable position should take all the votes. This is obviously not the case because many other factors can influence voting behavior, for example partisan identification (Campbell et al, 1960). However, we argue, following in the footsteps of Downs (1957), Key (1966) and the bulk of Public Choice theorists that ideological dynamics contribute significantly to the decisional process of voters.

Figure 1. Austria – The Freedom Party of Austria



Source: Authors (Adapted from McDonald and Mendes, 2002)

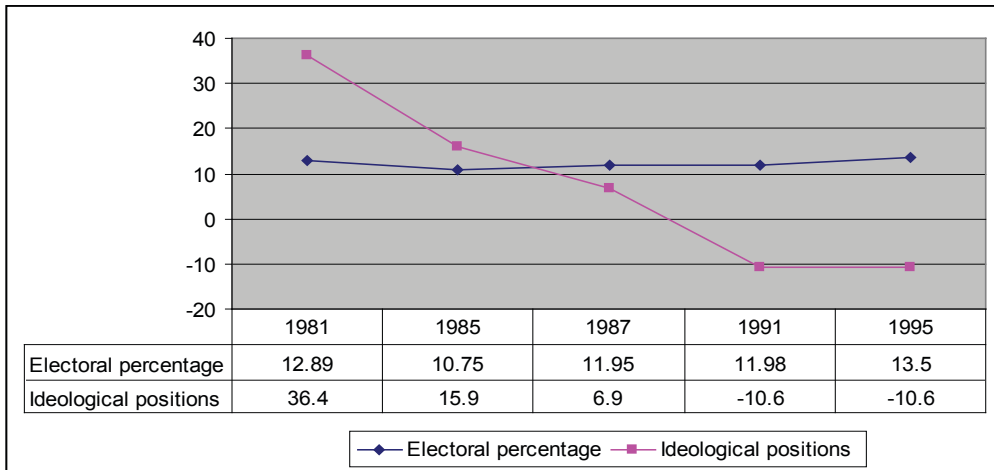
First of all we can observe the first two ideological shifts go against the predictions made by the directional model as the first ideological divergence of the party leads to a slight regress and the first convergence toward the center brings an increase in the percentage of points. For the last two ideological shifts directional model predictions apply as the divergence from the center is complemented by a significant increase in the electorate percentage, much higher than in the previous cases. We might therefore conjecture that the directional model is not applicable in this case as the predictions have a 50% rate of success. However, before disproving its validity let us examine the nature of the first two ideological party shifts. We can see that both times FPO crosses the x-axis therefore losing its previous electorate as per the directionality condition they would now attach a negative utility to it. In this respect, the distribution of voters becomes significant, as it is unreasonable to assume that the neutral point coincides exactly with the median voter. If the neutral point and the median voter are distinct then assuming a position of $\{1\}$ would not translate exactly into the same voting percentage as if the party would have assumed the position of $\{-1\}$. Therefore, when parties cross the ideological divide we cannot make any predictions without taking into consideration the distribution of voters in respect to the neutral point⁸¹. It is important to notice that when they cross the x-axis parties are punished by the electorate which previously supported them, but in the same time a significant shift can be rewarded by the electorate which is now placed on the same direction as the party, therefore a change of policy direction is not necessarily a negative enterprise for a party.

The second interesting observation is that even if we take into account the first two ideological shifts, we can observe that the most significant impact on the party

⁸¹ Unfortunately we do not have the necessary data to further pursue this issue.

score is made by the two elections in which an ideological divergence toward the right is clear, the difference between the 1986 and 1994 percentage being of 12.77% in comparison to the difference between 1983⁸² and 1986 being of only 4.75%.

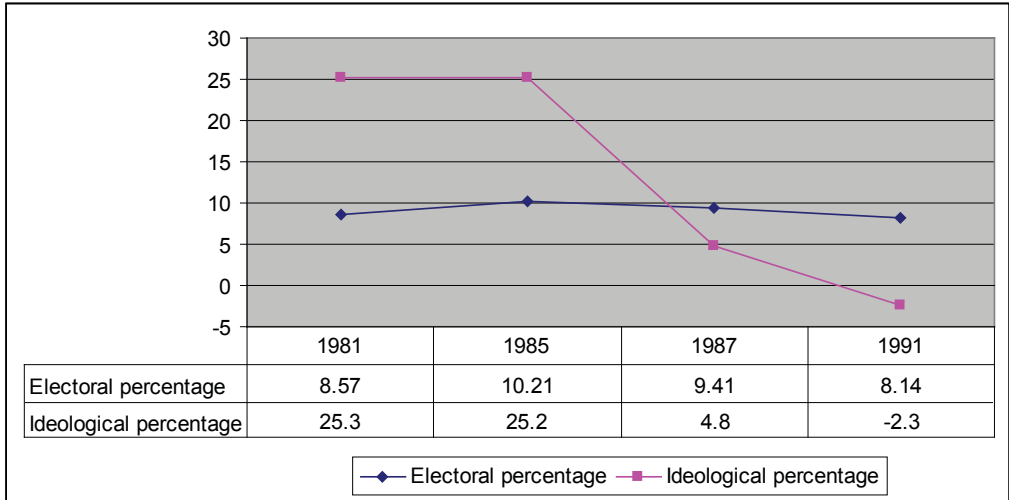
Figure 2. Belgium - Flemish Liberal and Democrats



Source: Authors (Adapted from McDonald and Mendes, 2002)

⁸² We have selected the 1983 elections as it was the lowest point in the 1979-1986 series, identically to 1986 being the lowest point in the 1986-1994 series.

Figure 3. Belgium – Liberal Reformist Party



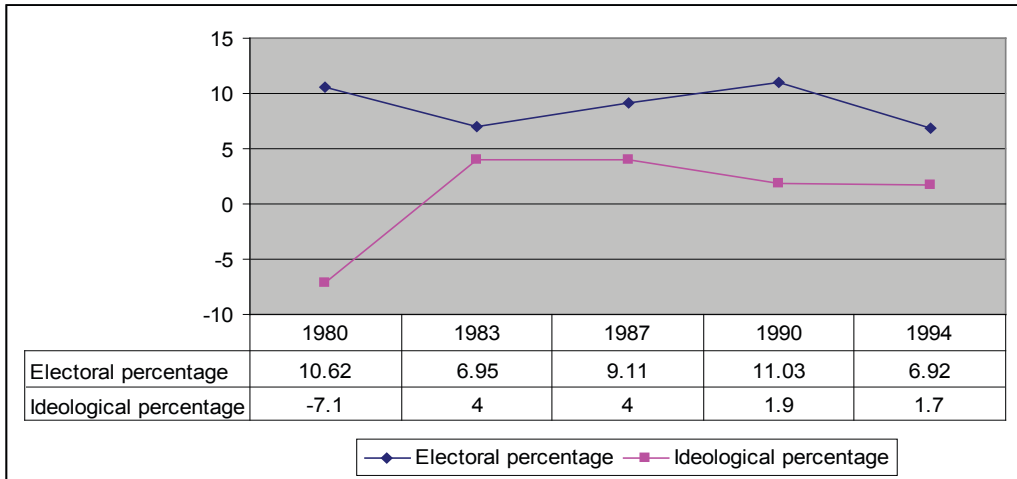
Source: Authors (Adapted from McDonald and Mendes, 2002)

The Belgian case is the most problematic from this paper's point of view, as in this respect both parties appear to enjoy the support of the same number of electors although there are significant ideological variations in both cases. Although in VLD's case the biggest downturn in this period was marked by the biggest ideological shift towards the center, the fact that the following convergent shift was followed by a slight increase shows that this is not particularly relevant. In the case of PRL, the situation is about the same, in the sense that severe ideological shifts are correlated with only slight increases in electoral percentage, although two out of the three cases favor the hypothesis. The problem in Belgium is the rigidity of the party system (particularly in this period). The electoral rigidity corresponds not only to the liberal parties, which between them had a biggest percentage shift of only 2.14, but to the entire party system (e.g. the biggest percentage shift for CD&V was 4.48, for PS it was 2.17, for SPA it was 2.9⁸³). Even in these conditions however, by applying the directional model, although its validity in this case may be questioned as parties obtained a relatively constant share of votes, offers a prediction success of over 50%, and if we consider that during elections in which the ideological stance of parties remained exactly the same a slight positive⁸⁴ variation in percentage (of under 2.5%) is acceptable without refuting the hypothesis then the directional model provides correct predictions in 85.71% of cases.

⁸³ None of the other parties managed to obtain more than 10% during this period.

⁸⁴ A small positive variation in the electoral percentage of a party when it maintains the same ideological position between two elections can be attributed to a loyalization of the electorate complemented by a slight increase in the party credibility.

Figure 4. Germany – Free Democratic Party

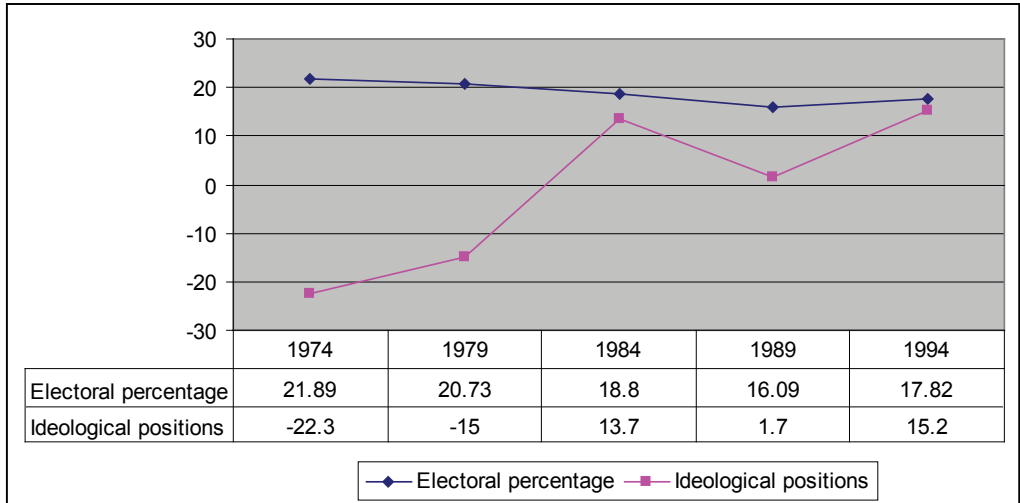


Source: Authors (Adapted from McDonald and Mendes, 2002)

In a somewhat similar fashion to the Austrian case, the situation in Germany seems to only partially confirm the predictions of the directional model. In two instances, 1983 and 1994 ideological shifts toward the center lead to a decrease in the electoral percentage gained⁸⁵. In one instance the theory is clearly contradicted (1990) and in one instance, if we maintain the assumption proposed in the preceding paragraph, that a lack of fluctuation in the ideological stance of the party should allow a small positive fluctuation (of under 2.5%) in the electoral percentage gained, the hypothesis is not disproved.

⁸⁵ In 1983 however the ideological shift cuts the x-axis and the observations made in the Austrian case apply here as well.

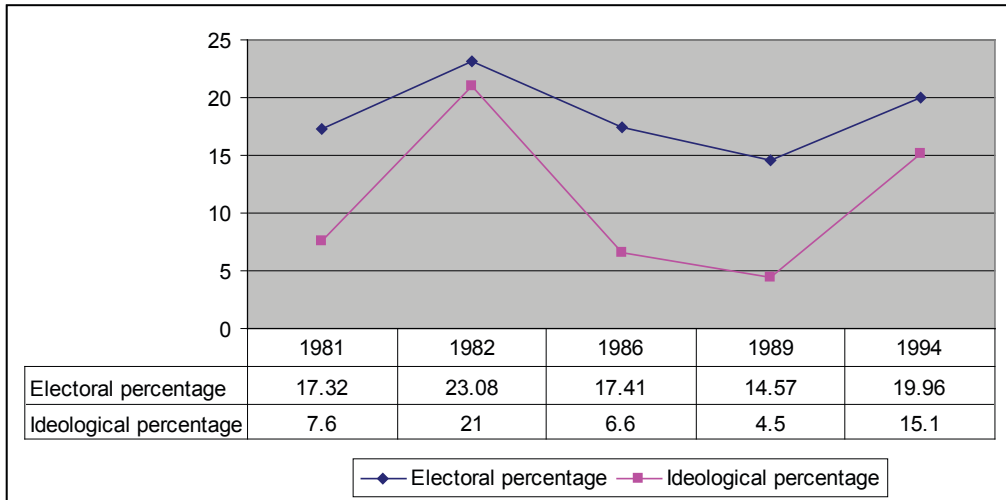
Figure 5. Luxembourg – Democratic Party



Source: Authors (Adapted from McDonald and Mendes, 2002)

In respect to the Luxembourg case the predictions of the directional model are confirmed in all instances. Each of the first three ideological shifts were moves toward the center (although one crossed over the x-axis) while the last one, the only real divergence from the center was rewarded with the first electoral gain in 20 years. This case (as well as the case of Netherlands which we will discuss next) can therefore be described as paradigmatic for our hypothesis, firstly because it confirms it in all cases, and secondly because the ideological shifts are oriented in the same way as the shifts in electoral gains but they are relatively unbalanced, leading to the conclusion that ideology matters, although it is not unilaterally decisive.

Figure 6. The Netherlands – People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy



Source: Authors (Adapted from McDonald and Mendes, 2002)

The case of the Netherlands, identically to the one of the Democratic Party of Luxembourg, confirms the hypothesis with every ideological shift. Unlike the case of Luxembourg, this is also clearly visible in Fig 6 as VVD maintains throughout the five elections the same directional stance, the only variable modified being its intensity.

After examining each case individually, we can now attempt to extract some general conclusions.

Table 2. Confirmation of the hypothesis regarding the role of ideological shifts in electoral percentages

| Party | Country | Election 1->2 ² | Election 2->3 | Election 3->4 | Election 4->5 |
|-------|-------------|----------------------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
| FPO | Austria | 0 ³ | 0 ⁴ | 1 | 1 |
| VLD | Belgium | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 ⁵ |
| PRL | Belgium | 1 ⁶ | 1 | 1 | - |
| FDP | Germany | 1 ⁷ | 1 ⁸ | 0 | 1 |
| DP | Luxembourg | 1 | 1 ⁹ | 1 | 1 |
| VVD | Netherlands | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Note. ² This column represents the confirmation (assigned the value 1) or negation (assigned the value 0) of the hypothesis that ideological convergence toward the center leads to a decrease in electoral percentage and that an ideological divergence away from the center leads to an increase in

electoral percentage, for the ideological shift occurring between the first two elections considered in this study. The adjacent columns are designed with the same purpose, for each of the following elections; ³ Under the assumption that crossing-over the x-axis is irrelevant; ⁴ See footnote 32; ⁵ Under the assumption that ideological constancy between two elections can permit a slight positive variation in the electoral percentage (of under 2.5%), variation which can be attributed to non-ideological factors; ⁶ See footnote 34; ⁷ See footnote 32; ⁸ See footnote 34; ⁹ See footnote 32.

Although refuted in some cases, the theoretical predictions made by the directional model fit remarkably well in a majority of cases with the empirical evidence presented here. Overall, the percentage in which the directional model renders predictions consistent with the empirical proof is **82.6%**, calculated according to the data in Table 2. Moreover, if we remove the cases in which ideological shifts between elections occur by crossing the x-axis, as I have argued previously this presents as a special case where the distribution of voters becomes relevant, the percentage with which predictions made by the directional model are correct increase to **89.47%**.

Taking all this into consideration, we can argue that the empirical data shows that in general, moderate divergence from the ideological center is correlated with an increase in the electoral percentage gained and convergence toward the center is correlated with a decrease of the party's electoral percentage, therefore confirming the theoretical predictions made by the directional model.

Liberal party failure in Central Europe can therefore be attributed, *inter alia*, to the centripetal ideological positions assumed by the liberal parties. By assuming a center-oriented position these parties generally become ideologically trapped between social-democrat parties on the left and Christian-democrat parties on the right which assume more intense policies, consistent with the predictions on optimal ideological placements made by Rabinowitz and Macdonald's directional model.

5. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, we believe that we have managed to achieve our intended objective for this present paper, which was, as expressed in the introductory part, to provide a valid theoretical framework for understanding why liberal parties within a series of Central European states register a constant failure in the electoral competition. We have demonstrated that for six liberal parties (FPO, VLD, PRL, FDP, DP and VVD) from five Central European states (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) choosing a timeframe of five consecutive elections (between 1974 and 1995) there is a correlation between ideological placement and electoral performance. The correlation is consistent with the predictions made by the directional model in 82.6% of the cases studied while assuming that changing directional stances between elections does not affect the theoretical predictions made (in spite of the fact that the distribution of voters

becomes a crucial factor in these instances) and in 89.47% of the cases studied if we remove such cases from the analysis.

We constructed our theoretical enterprise on the premise that ideology still matters within the decision-making process of voters and we believe that we have proved this by confirming that in general, ideological shifts were accompanied by electoral shifts oriented in the same direction, although usually of a slightly different magnitude. Building our hypothesis on this theoretical background we therefore concluded that one of the significant reasons for the electoral failure of liberal parties in Central Europe is their centripetal ideological stance and consequently the impossibility to evoke emotional responses in the electoral pool in a manner similar to the social-democrat and Christian-democrat parties, as they are not sufficiently intense in assuming ideological precepts and policy proposals.

We are however fully aware of the limits of these results. Although the theoretical predictions are generally consistent with empirical proof, this does not imply neither that the directional model outperforms the proximity model, nor that the directional model correctly predicts electoral behavior in all possible cases (or even a majority of them). These theoretical assertions have long been discussed in the Public Choice literature and a viable conclusion has yet to be drawn. Secondly, we do not assume that ideological shifts are the only relevant factors in the decision-making process of voters. As with any theoretical model which attempts to provide empirically testable predictions we have severely simplified the real world so as to infer possible causal relations between variables. We contend that whilst sufficient evidence exists in support of the idea that ideological shifts are one of these variables, we would be remissive in assuming that a general model of electoral behavior would not also include a significant number of complementary variables.

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