

Original research article  
Received: 23 May 2018  
<https://doi.org/10.20901/pm.56.3-4.01>

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## Ideology, Partisanship, and Change: Voter Profiles of Main Political Parties in Croatia

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### *Summary*

This paper analyzes changes in the Croatian party system in the 1990-2016 period by looking at trends in the ideological makeup of voters of the main center-right (HDZ) and center-left (SDP) parties. An assessment of changes in voter self-placement on a left-right scale has shown a gradual increase in the ideological distance among voters of these parties. Further, the paper detected a trend towards an increase in the share of self-declared far-right voters among HDZ voters and far-left voters among SDP voters. In addition, an analysis of categorical ideological identification has demonstrated that, on average, two thirds of HDZ voters were Christian Democrats, while two thirds of SDP voters were Social Democrats. However, among all Christian Democrats, an average of 55 percent voted for the HDZ, while just shy of 60 percent of Social Democrats voted for the SDP. Finally, a logistic regression analysis has confirmed the importance of the cultural dimension of voter behavior in Croatia. Religiosity levels, as well as left-right self-placement serve as rather good predictors of a vote for the HDZ and the SDP, with the model showing greater explanatory strength for HDZ voters. In conclusion, the observed trends in ideological characteristics of HDZ and SDP voters could serve as pointers of underlying shifts in patterns of party competition and offer clues to the increased instability of the Croatian party system following the 2015 and 2016 parliamentary elections.

*Keywords:* Left-Right Self-Placement, Voter Behavior, Voter Ideology, Partisanship, Croatia

### **Introduction**

Both electoral studies and party competition and party system studies can place their emphasis either on the supply side (provided by political competitors through policy content and electoral manifestos) or on the demand side (stemming from public emphasis, media coverage, and voter interests, values, and policy preferences). This

paper takes the latter approach in its attempt to shed some light on the ideological underpinnings of voters of the two main Croatian political parties – the center-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), a member of the European People’s Party (EPP), and the center-left Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP), a member of the Party of European Socialists (PES). A party system analysis focusing on only two parties, rather than looking at the structural features of the whole party system might seem odd, yet, in the Croatian case, these two parties have demonstrated great resilience and permanency, despite several changes of both the electoral and the party system, during the last 27 years. Indeed, until the turbulent 2015 and 2016 parliamentary elections, both the Croatian party system and its two main parties have shown a high degree of stability, showcased in nationwide party organizations reaching to almost every township, strong party identification, and high party membership numbers (Nikić Čakar and Čular, 2016: 109). Besides the second-shortest (147 days in office) government headed by non-partisan Tihomir Orešković, all other prime ministers since the transition election in 1990 have been either from the HDZ or the SDP. Since the change from a mixed-member parallel to a party-list proportional representation electoral system in 1999, and the subsequent transformation of the party system towards moderate pluralism (see Čular, 2001: 130), the average joint share of parliamentary seats of the HDZ and the SDP has been around two thirds (see Raos, 2015a: 9), highlighting their leading role in the Croatian party system. Thus, this article tries to sketch out ideological profiles of HDZ and SDP voters in the last quarter century, in order to offer additional knowledge that might enable a better understanding of the direction of party system change in Croatia. Hereby, the key element for the determination of ideological profiles of voters shall be their self-placement on the left-right scale. In a second step, regression models will try to test whether ideological indicators can predict voter choice for these parties.

### **Left-Right Self-Placement and the Study of Voter Behavior and Party Competition**

Ever since Inglehart and Klingemann’s ground-breaking 1976 study (2010), showing that self-placement of voters on a 10-point left-right scale can consistently serve as a very good predictor of voter behavior and party identification, researchers have extensively used this measure to infer about patterns of party competition and voter support. Although some researchers doubt that the left-right scale can point to an actual ideological identity of voters, but rather gives insight to voter identification with a party or group (Čular, 1999: 165), in this analysis we are using the left-right self-placement of voters as somewhat of a proxy measure that will enable us to discern the relative ideological characteristics of voters of Croatia’s two main political parties. Studies assessing the left-right self-placement of voters often use the left-

right positioning as a clue to voter policy preferences, yet a voter's left-right placement does not automatically translate into a corresponding policy choice offered by a given political party (Todosijević, 2004: 413-414). Furthermore, researchers have spilled much ink about the inquiry whether left-right self-placement is more strongly related to party choice (as well as an indicator of partisanship, i.e. affective attachment to a political party) or to policy preferences and value orientations (cf. Knutsen, 1997). Later studies have (re)introduced a third factor – social identities, produced by class (socioeconomic identity) and belonging to an organized religion or a trade union (cf. Freire, 2006), that is strongly related to the left-right positioning of voters. However, a recent study has also demonstrated that voters often determine their self-placement on the left-right scale in accordance to their party preference and identification with a perceived ideological image of their preferred political party projects (cf. Medina, 2015: 787). Such findings are also supported by research which has shown that left-right placement has greater explanatory power in highlighting policy positions of parties than in pointing to policy preferences of voters (Lesschaeve, 2017). Thus, we might infer that it is easier to detect a voter's attachment to, say, the "left" and a party that embodies the notion of the political left, than to discern leftist policy preferences of the said voter. This in turn emphasizes the idea that voters are more often motivated by affective behavior and feelings of belonging to a political camp, than by genuine ideas about different policy alternatives. Although Western European, as opposed to Eastern European party systems, tend to follow a somewhat clearer pattern of what constitutes left and right in the left-right ideational scheme, where there is an overlap of economic and cultural right positions (free market economy and social conservatism), i.e. economic and cultural left positions (welfare state economy and social progressivism), scholars have shown that the driving forces behind left-right self-placement can be in flux even in established democracies and have to be analyzed contextually, pointing to the example of migration and integration as new cultural issues that have started reshaping voter identities across Western Europe (de Vries, Hakhverdian, and Lancee, 2013: 235-236). Therefore, it is worth investigating whether the Croatian case, which combines a Western party structure with strong organizational features and a high degree of stability, with the emphasis on religious, cultural, and historic issues that drive voter identities, as often found in post-communist countries, could be a suitable sandbox for the testing of voter values and ideological profiles as determinants of party choice.

### **Ideology, Values, and Party Competition in Croatia**

Research on the left-right placement of parties (based on the Comparative Manifesto Project methodology) and voter self-placement on the left-right scale has revealed that, contrary to Western Europe, in Croatia, party competition, voter behavior and

partisanship follow long-term attachments and structural features, disregarding policy innovation, policy shift or ideological re-alignments of mainstream political parties (Čular and Nikić Čakar, 2012: 27-28). The same study has also shown that, although political parties to the left in Croatia do place a stronger emphasis on economic issues in their manifestos than their right-of-the-center counterparts, voter left-right positioning is clearly determined by (cultural) values, and not economic interests or policy preferences.<sup>1</sup> This analysis of voter ideology of two main political parties in Croatia and the attempt to test predictors of the vote for the HDZ and the SDP should, thusly, also give preference to cultural, as opposed to economic explanations. In addition, these previous findings by Čular and Nikić Čakar may also serve as a justification for this paper's exclusive emphasis on the voter dimension, i.e. the demand side of party competition.

The choice of predictors pertaining to the cultural dimension builds upon a body of previous research about party competition in Croatia and the structure of the electorate. A study of 2003 polling data has shown that the ideological structure of Croatian voters and their left-right positioning can be primarily explained through their attachment to or distance from the Catholic Church, history, tradition, and the legacy of World War II and the Croatian War for Independence, while socioeconomic factors play a secondary role (Henjak, 2005: 102). Such findings are supported by earlier studies that tried to determine the structural features of party competition in Croatia and detect the underlying cleavages (see Milas and Rimac, 1994; Zakošek, 1994) or to determine specific political subcultures that shape voter behavior and are rooted in distinct cultures of memory (of World War II) (see Šiber, 1997). Later studies that have combined voter behavior study with electoral geography have once again highlighted the importance of the religious/secular cleavage for the understanding of long-term attachments of voters to Croatian parties, especially the two largest ones – the HDZ and the SDP (cf. Grdešić, 2013). A repeated study using a pre-electoral survey for the 2007 parliamentary election confirmed the importance of the cultural dimension of party competition and voter behavior (i.e. values) over interests (socioeconomic policy orientations), even though the 2007 election saw both major parties structure their campaigns around key economic policy issues (e.g. tax code reform) (cf. Henjak, 2007). Finally, a study on asymmetric voter mobilization, whereby the main center-right party HDZ has maintained a much stronger voter cohesion and stronger attachment of its core electorate than centrist and center-left parties, has both confirmed the primacy of cultural and symbolic issues as determinants of voter behavior in Croatia, as well

<sup>1</sup> However, some authors have challenged an overemphasis of the cultural dimension of party competition and voter behavior and tried to revisit economic (i.e. class-based) voting patterns in Croatia (see Dolenc, 2012).

as highlighted the specificity of HDZ voters as opposed to the general electorate (cf. Henjak, 2011).

Building upon previous studies, which had established that voter choice and party identity in Croatia are more closely linked to values than interests, we shall structure our analysis of ideological profiles of HDZ and SDP voters around the following research questions:

1. *What kind of distinct trends can we observe in the change of left-right positioning of HDZ and SDP voters, their relative distance from each other and from the average voter?*
2. *What kind of distinct trends can we observe in the share of far-right voters among HDZ voters and far-left voters among SDP voters?*
3. *Have the HDZ and the SDP succeeded in becoming parties representing voters that primarily identify with the proclaimed ideologies of these parties (Christian Democracy and Social Democracy, respectively)?*
4. *How well can we establish the likelihood of a vote for the HDZ and the SDP using predictors pertaining to the cultural dimension of party competition, including voter self-placement on the left-right index?*

## Data and Methods

The dataset used in this paper is derived from the Croatian Electoral Studies<sup>2</sup> collection of pre-electoral and post-electoral surveys. The timeframe ranges from the first parliamentary election in 1990 to the most recent, 2016 election for the Croatian Parliament. This valuable dataset was produced as part of long-term projects conducted at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Zagreb, which makes it comparable to similar national electoral studies in other European countries. However, due to various sources and models of funding the execution of the polling, there is a degree of internal inconsistency that had to be dealt with during the data management phase of this analysis. In other words, although all nine surveys included in this dataset share most of the same questions, the questionnaires did vary over time, so that

<sup>2</sup> Croatian Electoral Studies encompass datasets derived from pre-electoral (1990, 1992, 1995, 2000, 2003, 2007) and post-electoral (2011, 2015, 2016 parliamentary elections, survey conducted in 2012, 2016, and 2017 respectively) surveys conducted by the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Zagreb. The former surveys were financed through two long-term projects funded by the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education – *Elections, Parties, and Parliament in Croatia: 1990-2000* (project leader: Ivan Grdešić) and *Elections, Parties, and Parliament in Croatia: 2000-2010* (project leader: Mirjana Kasapović), while the latter polls were financed through projects funded by the University of Zagreb (project leader: Nenad Zakošek), as well as through a European Social Fund-supported project *Advancing the Quality of Higher Education through the Implementation of the Croatian Qualification Framework* (project leader: Andrija Henjak).

some questions asked in earlier polls were omitted in later ones or the same question asked over numerous polls does not contain the same number of possible answers. Therefore, to prepare the data for analysis, we had to recode and rescale some of the variables, a process we shall briefly describe here. In addition, there is another disclaimer to be made concerning the datasets used in this analysis. Namely, these polls were not all conducted by the same polling agency, which in practice means that the stratified sampling methodology used for selection of survey participants is not the same for all nine surveys. The Croatian polling industry includes several major polling agencies that roughly use the same methodology for this kind of survey, yet one should bear in mind that slight differences might exist. It is important to mention this as to understand that some of the figures derived in our analysis, e.g. average scores for the whole dataset might suffer from possible underlying discrepancies in the polling process. However, we are confident that this contextual fact will not affect the overall reliability of the analysis presented in this paper.

Because one and the same question that appeared on questionnaires across the timeframe encompassed by the dataset could take two, three, or four values (answers presented to respondents), we had to standardize them on a 0 to 1 scale. Besides recoding, for one of the surveys, we had to employ some rescaling. Namely, in all but one of the nine surveys included in this dataset, the one pertaining to the 2011 parliamentary election, the left-right index was measured using a 10-point scale. Thus, the 11-point Likert scale employed for the 2011 survey had to be transformed into a 10-point scale.<sup>3</sup> While Inglehart and Klingemann (2010: 247) have argued that the inclusion of a mid-point would be suggestive and induce undecided and conformist survey respondents to hide behind a neutral position, some studies (cf. Kroh, 2007: 212) claim that an 11-point scale offers better quality in capturing all the subtleties of voter left-right self-placement. A cross-country study of the relative merits of using a 10-point versus an 11-point scale for the measurement of left-right voter positions has ended with inconclusive results, showing that the inclusion or omission of a true mid-point does not significantly affect the number of non-responses in a survey, but is rather a reflection of country-specific research traditions (Zuelli and Scholz, 2016: 13). In the Croatian case, the tradition seems to lean towards a 10-point scale, while the 2011 survey data represent an exception.

The analysis conducted in this paper is divided in two parts. In the first part, we assess the change in the mean scores on the 10-point left-right scales for HDZ and SDP voters for nine electoral cycles, from 1990 to 2016 and contrast these values with the mean scores for the entire electorate (i.e. all respondents in each survey). We can interpret the scores obtained through voter self-placement on the

<sup>3</sup> See IBM, 2016 for a guide on transformation of measurement scales that have an odd versus an even number of points.

left-right scale as corresponding to distinct political positions. Thus, we can view “the values 1-2 on the scale as an expression of an extreme left location, 3-4 as an expression of a moderate left location, 5 a center-left location, 6 a center-right location, 7-8 a moderate right location, and 9-10 an extreme right location” (Knutsen, 1998: 293). Therefore, after analyzing the change in mean values for both parties, we look specifically at the shares of those HDZ and SDP voters that placed themselves on the far-right or the far-left side of the spectrum. Further, we look at data showing ideological self-placement of the HDZ and the SDP regarding descriptive ideological categories, offered by the survey questionnaires – *Christian Democracy*, *Communism*, *Conservatism*, *Nationalism*, *Liberalism*, and *Social Democracy*. In addition, we look at the share of HDZ voters and SDP voters among voters self-identifying as *Christian Democrats* and *Social Democrats* respectively. Unfortunately, for this categorical variable, we only have data from 2000 to 2016, as this question was not included in surveys in 1990, 1992, and 1995. In the second part, we test a regression model in our attempt to understand voter choice of HDZ and SDP.

To test the likelihood of votes for the HDZ and the SDP, we used a logistic regression model centered around several predictors that pertain to the cultural dimension of party competition in Croatia. Since the pre-electoral and post-electoral polls conducted as part of Croatian Electoral Studies in the 1990-2017 period vary in the makeup of their questionnaires, only a handful of variables that appear in all polls encompassed in the dataset could be used for this model. Although it would be certainly interesting to use predictors such as main social values (e.g. equality, freedom, security, etc.) and the respondents’ connection with categories of notions of language, tradition, nation, and culture, the only variables relevant for the cultural dimension of party competition that appear in all nine polls in this dataset are religiosity (attachment and commitment to doctrine and practice of a denomination) and the stance on abortion, as a measure of a key bioethical cleavage running through the electorate.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the left-right self-placement scale (RILE index) was added as a third predictor. Thus, in a trade-off between a more comprehensive set of predictors and a more inclusive timeframe, this analysis opted for a longer timeframe. Nevertheless, when evaluating the results of the regression analysis, one should certainly bear in mind that the inclusion of more indicators, albeit with a smaller (temporally shorter) dataset would not necessarily have yielded different results but would have provided models with a better fit.

As mentioned before, the categorical predictors had to be recoded, to standardize them across all nine polls. The religiosity variable was recoded to *Convinced*

<sup>4</sup> Voter opinion on the legality and availability of abortion was already used in earlier studies as an indicator of religious/secular or conservative/liberal values. See, for example, Bagić, 2007.

*Believer* (1), *Traditional Believer* (0.5) and *Non-Religious* (0), while the abortion variable was recoded to *Abortion Ban* (1) and *Abortion Choice* (0). The reference values (1) reflect the fact that the model was first run as a test for the outcome of voting for the HDZ, with the assumption that HDZ voters were more likely than SDP voters to have this value (1) on both predictors.

For those survey years where the HDZ and the SDP formed pre-electoral coalitions with junior partners from the center-right and the center-left respectively, the data about the specific vote for each of these parties was obtained from a question in the survey questionnaire that asked respondents to say who they would vote for if the parties ran individually. However, for the last two elections, in 2015 and 2016, the survey questionnaires did not include this additional question. Yet, given the fact that HDZ and SDP voters far outnumber all their pre-electoral partners, one can safely assume that the fact that for these last two surveys the data for the HDZ and the SDP vote, the mean scores for left-right placement and the shares of descriptive ideological categories were obtained from respondents that chose the HDZ-led and SDP-led coalition, and not individual parties, should not have a major impact that would skew the results of our analysis.

For the logistic regression models, we report two pseudo  $R^2$  measures, the Cox and Snell r-squared and its corrected version,<sup>5</sup> the Nagelkerke r-squared, as produced by default in the SPSS output. Pseudo r-squared indices cannot be interpreted in the same way as true r-squared measures in linear regression, i.e. we cannot infer a percentage of variance explained. However, they can serve as indicators of goodness-of-fit and as an approximation of the likelihood of events occurring (binary outcome on the dependent variable) given the predictors used in the model (cf. Smith and McKenna, 2013: 17). The significance of the models is assessed by reporting Pearson's chi-square test, while the effect sizes of individual predictors are evaluated based on their odds ratios, i.e. the amount by which a rise on a predictor increases the log odds of an outcome on the dependent variable (cf. Kirkpatrick and Kidd, 2012: 103).

## Results and Discussion

In our assessment of the mean scores on the left-right scale for HDZ and SDP voters, we use both a tabular and a graphical approach, as an attempt to capture specific trends over time. The mean scores for HDZ voters, shown in *Table 1*, let us observe a gradual, yet steady rightward trend of this party's electorate. While the

<sup>5</sup> The Nagelkerke r-squared measure takes the original Cox and Snell r-squared measure and transforms it so that it can encompass the full 0-1 range, as the actual r-squared measure does in linear regression.



**Table 1.** Left-Right Self-Placement of HDZ and SDP Voters, 1990-2016

	HDZ Voters		SDP Voters		<i>M</i> Diff. HDZ/SDP	All Voters
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
1990	6.66	2.36	3.25	2.02	3.41	5.12
1992	6.27	1.75	3.57	1.47	2.70	5.82
1995	6.48	1.66	3.80	1.30	2.68	5.70
2000	6.79	2.13	3.92	1.55	2.87	5.13
2003	7.61	1.85	3.91	1.89	3.70	5.63
2007	7.68	1.88	3.81	1.62	3.87	5.46
2011	7.76	1.97	3.64	1.93	4.12	4.41
2015	7.75	2.06	3.39	1.62	4.36	5.47
2016	7.78	1.86	3.57	1.86	4.21	5.45
<b>Average</b>	<b>7.19</b>	<b>1.95</b>	<b>3.65</b>	<b>1.70</b>	<b>3.55</b>	<b>5.35</b>

*M* – mean, *SD* – standard deviation, *M* Diff. – difference between means for HDZ and SDP voters.

mean left-right score for HDZ voters at the first democratic election after the end of one-party rule placed it at the center-right (6.66), at the beginning of the new century its constituents were to be found at the moderate right, with scores surpassing the 7.5 mark. The average left-right score for HDZ voters was over 7. SDP voters consistently achieved scores revolving around 3 to 3.5, placing this electoral group in the moderate left camp (see *Table 1*). The difference between the mean scores of HDZ and SDP voters has been on the increase since 2000 and has become especially pronounced in recent years (over 4 points). We can interpret the standard deviations of the mean left-right scores of HDZ and SDP voters as a measure of the relative ideological spread of voters both parties attract. Namely, a higher standard deviation would imply more variance in left-right scores for the party and thus a more heterogeneous electoral basis. On the contrary, a smaller standard deviation could be interpreted as a sign of a clearer ideological profile of the party, as it manages to attract voters that are ideologically more homogeneous. Both parties started in 1990 with a standard deviation that would imply a more heterogeneous voter clientele (which should not come as a surprise, given that stable partisanship could not form before the first democratic election). Over time, both HDZ and SDP voters have become slightly more homogenous in ideological terms, judging from decreased standard deviations for the mean left-right scores, presented in *Table 1*. A comparison of averages of standard deviations for both parties shows a somewhat narrower ideological spread for SDP voters.

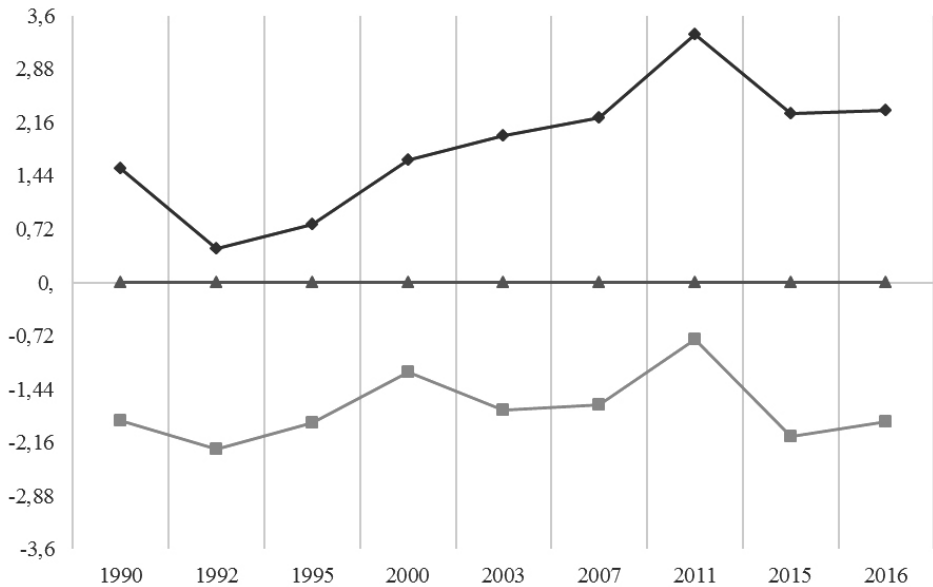
When we look at the average left-right positions of HDZ voters, we can see that they were at the moderate right (7.19), while SDP voters were at the moderate left (3.65). The average ideological spread was somewhat lower for SDP voters (1.70 as opposed to 1.95). Over time, SDP voters have shifted to the center in early 2000s and then back to the left in recent years, while for HDZ voters, we can talk about a center-right phase in the 1990s and a moderate right phase after 2000, which is at odds with the fact that the party has shifted to the center after 2000. If we compare the mean scores of HDZ and SDP voters with the mean scores for the whole electorate, we can see that, on average, SDP voters were somewhat closer to the electorate mean than HDZ voters (-1.70 difference versus 1.84 difference). In addition, we can see that the whole electorate was mildly tilted towards the center-left (a true center position would be a 5.5 score) in 1990 and again in the period after 2003, and more strongly shifted to the left (4.41) in 2011, when the center-left coalition won the election. Such results for the whole electorate might come as a surprise, given the fact that conventional wisdom in Croatia sometimes claims that Croatian voters were generally more tilted to the right of the political spectrum, which would provide the main center-right party, the HDZ, with a distinctive advantage over its competitors. Nevertheless, one should not forget the obvious limits and pitfalls of our usage of the RILE index as an indicator of ideological leanings of voters. Therefore, we should be cautious not to overemphasize the importance of some of the findings of this analysis.

In *Figure 1*, we plotted the differences in mean left-right scores of HDZ and SDP voters against the mean for all voters (settled as 0). A visual inspection of the plot in this figure reveals that HDZ voters were closest to the total electorate mean in 1992 (+0.45 difference), at the time of the intra-conflict parliamentary election of 1992<sup>6</sup> and during a period in which the HDZ held a dominant position in the party system (see also Kasapović, 1996; Zakošek, 2008). In 1995, at the end of the war, HDZ voters were also very close to the whole electorate, with a +0.78 difference. In the same year, the SDP was at its lowest point, in terms of electoral success. SDP voters came close to the electorate mean in 2000 (-1.21 difference), when a critical election brought the first center-left coalition to power and changed the characteristics of the party system into moderate pluralism (see also Čular, 2001; Kasapović, 2003). The voters of this party were the closest to the electorate mean (-0.77 difference) in 2011, when the SDP-led coalition decisively won the parliamentary election.

However, we can also detect a trend of a steady movement of HDZ voters further away from the electorate mean, followed by a less drastic, yet also noticeable drift of SDP voters away from the average voter. In 2015, the voters of both par-

<sup>6</sup> On the concept of intra-conflict elections and the Croatian case, see Picula, 2012.

**Figure 1.** Relative Left-Right Positions of HDZ and SDP Voters Compared with the Electorate Mean, 1990-2016



ties were the farthest apart from each other and the farthest from the total electorate mean. While Dalton's polarization index (see Dalton, 2008) uses a measurement based on scores collected at the level of the party system, here we may employ an indirect assessment of party system polarization through the analysis of the relative distances of mean left-right scores of voters of two main parties from the mean scores of the whole electorate. In other words, we might infer that over time, HDZ and SDP voters have moved further to the right and left, respectively, positioning themselves farther from the electorate mean and the more centrist positions one would expect from voters of the two largest, mainstream parties. Coupled with the already discussed narrowing of the ideological spread among electorates of both parties, this could imply a general increase in the polarization of the Croatian party system, interpreted through the lens of the nature and position of voters of the two parties that drive the main forces of party competition in the country. Thus, we can answer the first research question by stating that *voters of both parties have gradually moved away from the center and away from the electorate mean, while this movement has become more pronounced in recent years (2015 and 2016 parliamentary elections).*

**Table 2.** Far-Right and Far-Left Voters among HDZ and SDP Voters, 1990-2016

	1990	1992	1995	2000	2003	2007	2011	2015	2016	Average
Far-Right (9-10) among HDZ Voters	21.1	7.9	10.3	21.6	31.0	34.4	32.3	37.9	36.2	<b>25.9</b>
Far-Left (1-2) among SDP Voters	37.4	20.8	14.6	13.8	20.1	18.1	28.5	28.5	27.3	<b>23.2</b>

Next, we shall discuss the change in the share of far-left and far-right voters, as presented in *Table 2*. The high proportions of voters in two main parties that self-placed themselves at the edges of the left-right spectrum should not come as a surprise in the early days of establishing a viable multiparty democracy, as survey respondents might not fully understand the implications of the left-right index and are still struggling to clearly define personal ideological leanings. Indeed, subsequent polls have shown a reduction in the shares of such voters in the HDZ and the SDP electorate. However, since 2003, we can observe an increase among HDZ voters, with almost a third of this party's voters consistently self-identifying on the far-right of the political spectrum. This is especially curious since this coincided with the rise to power of party president and prime minister (2003-2009) Ivo Sanader, a pro-European leader who had gone to great lengths to move his party to the center. Yet, another interesting finding lies in the fact that in 2015 SDP voters also featured more than one third of voters who self-identified on the fringes of the political spectrum, albeit on the far-left, in this party's case. Together with the data presented in *Table 1* and *Figure 1*, we can state that the year 2015 was the most polarized point in the development of the Croatian party system, whereby the two major parties' voters had the greatest ideological distance between each other, while the share of far-right and far-left voters among both parties' electorates reached substantial levels. This was also the year in which the parliamentary election ended in an even result between the HDZ-led center-right and the SDP center-left blocks, leaving the newcomer centrist populist and anti-establishment reform party *Most*, a heterogenous coalition of independent mayors and local lists, to play the kingmaker (cf. Grbeša and Šalaj, 2017).

The finding that the share of far-right and far-left voters among HDZ and SDP voters is growing in recent years is rather interesting, given the fact that a study of voter polarization and partisanship has shown that parties well rooted in the society (usually in established democracies) are able to thwart the rise of extremist parties even in a situation of a polarized electorate (Ezrow, Tavits, and Homola, 2014: 1575). This brings us back to the notion of the Croatian party system as an exception among party systems of Central and Eastern Europe, as it features strongly organized mainstream parties with wide membership that can maintain their electoral strength despite the underlying polarization among voters. However, the increase

in the proportion of far-right and far-left voters among voters of two parties around which the whole party system revolves might also indicate that the voters have noticed an end to the pre-accession pro-EU supra-partisan consensus and have since 2013 started to drift away to their true ideological leanings that are less mainstream than the leaders of their preferred parties would like them to be (cf. Raos, 2015b: 172). The answer to the second research question is also confirmative and goes as follows: *While the share of far-right voters among HDZ voters has been around one third ever since the 2003 parliamentary election, in recent years, especially in 2015, we could observe a significant rise in far-left voters among SDP voters as well, so that both major parties now attract large shares of voters that find their ideological home at the fringes of the left-right spectrum.* We might infer that the experience of the 2008 economic crisis might have had an impact on the rise of far-left voters among SDP voters. In addition, the high proportion of far-right voters among HDZ voters at the two latest elections could be linked to the fact that for these years the polls show aggregate results for voters of the HDZ-led coalition that have included smaller parties that lie further to the right from the HDZ.

The idea behind *Table 3* (on the next page) and the data on the descriptive ideological self-placement of HDZ and SDP voters is the notion that a self-proclaimed Christian Democratic party,<sup>7</sup> the HDZ, should be able to attract voters that self-identify as Christian Democrats, while the SDP, hence the name, would be expected to be the party that gathers Social Democrats.<sup>8</sup> Findings which would meet such expectations would further confirm the clear ideological profile of these parties, measured through the ideological profiles of their voters. As already noted, the descriptive ideological self-placement encompasses a reduced dataset, because data before 2000 is not available in the master dataset of Croatian Electoral Studies. In the observed period, HDZ voters were made up of, on average, roughly two thirds of self-identifying Christian Democrats, with smaller shares held by conservative, nationalist, and liberal voters. Curiously, the analysis revealed that in 2000, the year of the critical election that for the first time sent the HDZ into opposition, slightly over 20 percent of HDZ voters identified as Social Democrats. There are no straightforward explanations for this finding and further research will be needed

<sup>7</sup> Article 1, paragraph 1 of its party statute defines the party platform of HDZ as rooted in “traditional, Christian democratic and universal humanist values (...)” (HDZ, 2018). However, in 1989-1990, the party began as a broad national movement for self-determination of Croatia, with full independence as its final goal. European integration of Croatia and its active membership in the European People’s Party have provided HDZ with a more Christian democratic profile, yet it still remains a “broad church”, center-right to right-wing big-tent party that tends to emphasize its role as a “people’s, central, and state-building party” (HDZ, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> SDP lists its goals in article 10 of the party rulebook, while article 11 stipulates that these goals shall be achieved with “principal social democratic values” as a starting point (SDP, 2018).

to offer plausible clarifications of such discrepancies and exceptions. In the case of SDP voters, an average of two thirds identified as Social Democrats, while slightly over 15 percent identified as Liberals.

**Table 3.** Ideological Self-Placement of HDZ and SDP Voters, 2000-2016

		Ideology							
		Christian Dem.	Communism	Conservatism	Nationalism	Liberalism	Social Dem.	Other	None
2000									
	HDZ	68.3	0.0	2.2	3.8	5.4	20.3	0.0	0.0
	SDP	1.5	2.6	0.8	0.4	12.8	81.9	0.0	0.0
2003									
	HDZ	64.8	0.0	5.0	13.1	8.5	7.0	1.6	0.0
	SDP	8.8	1.9	2.5	0.6	20.8	65.4	0.0	0.0
2007									
	HDZ	56.3	0.0	0.8	5.0	11.8	12.2	0.0	13.9
	SDP	7.2	1.9	0.4	1.1	16.7	63.3	0.4	9.0
2011									
	HDZ	72.9	0.0	3.9	1.9	7.7	8.4	0.6	4.6
	SDP	17.3	1.0	1.6	0.3	11.9	62.8	0.0	5.1
2015									
	HDZ	52.3	1.1	11.5	11.5	10.9	6.3	0.0	6.4
	SDP	9.2	1.7	1.7	0.4	19.3	58.8	2.9	6.0
2016									
	HDZ	69.6	2.1	9.4	4.7	4.2	7.9	0.0	2.1
	SDP	10.4	2.2	0.0	2.2	15.3	63.4	0.0	6.5
<b>Average</b>									
	<b>HDZ</b>	<b>64.0</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>6.7</b>	<b>8.1</b>	<b>10.4</b>	<b>0.4</b>	<b>4.5</b>
	<b>SDP</b>	<b>9.1</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>16.1</b>	<b>65.9</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>4.4</b>

In addition, we should note that the lowest share of Christian Democrats, with a parallel rise in the proportion of Conservatives and Nationalists could be observed for the 2015 election, which the HDZ contested in a pre-electoral coalition with small parties to its right. In 2000, the SDP almost exclusively featured Social Democrats, yet over time, its share of self-identifying Liberals, but also Christian

Democrats has increased. The relatively prominent shares of Christian Democrats among SDP voters can hardly be explained by pointing out the fact that data for last two electoral cycles could not be disaggregated on individual party level, because the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS), a member of the European People's Party, only joined the SDP-led coalition in 2016, while already in 2011, we could detect an increase in Christian Democrats among voters of the Social Democratic Party. Of course, the increased number of Liberals could also be explained by arguing that this party's elites have drifted further towards (economic) liberalism and do not adequately represent and embody Social Democracy and thus cannot attract voters with social democratic leanings (see Dolenc, 2014).

We can assess the ideological profile of the HDZ and the SDP through voter analysis not just by looking at whether there are high percentages of Christian Democrats among HDZ voters and Social Democrats among SDP voters, but by asking ourselves how successful they were in capturing the overall Christian Democratic and Social Democratic vote. In *Table 4*, we can see that just over 55 percent of self-declared Christian Democrats voted for the HDZ in 2000, while the party was least successful in attracting this electorate in 2011, with only 40.5 of Christian Democrats choosing this party. On average, 55 percent of Christian Democrats voted for the HDZ. The SDP was somewhat more successful in capturing the Social Democratic vote over the years, yet with a low point in 2003 (the year they lost the election to the HDZ after being in government for the first time), with only 42.3 percent of Social Democrats voting for the SDP. On average, a little less than 60 percent of Social Democratic voters cast their ballots for the SDP.

**Table 4.** Share of HDZ and SDP Voters among Christian Democratic and Social Democratic Voters, 2000-2016

	2000	2003	2007	2011	2015	2016	Average
Christian Democratic voters that voted for HDZ (%)	55.7	49.6	67.3	40.5	56.3	60.4	<b>55.0</b>
Social Democratic voters that voted for SDP (%)	59.5	42.3	59.9	65.3	65.7	63.6	<b>59.4</b>

We can, therefore, state that the *analysis has shown that both parties have developed an electoral basis that consists of a two-thirds majority of self-identifying Christian Democrats and Social Democrats respectively, yet the SDP is somewhat more successful in capturing the Social Democratic vote than the HDZ in attracting Christian Democratic voters.* In addition, we can confirm that *both parties have developed clear ideological profiles of their voters that match the official party ideologies.*

The logistic regression models presented in *Tables 5 and 6* showcase an attempt to test the likelihood of a vote for HDZ and SDP by using predictors pertaining to the cultural dimension of party competition. Three variables were used – the RILE index, as well as the religiosity and the abortion variables. In the models, we used the *Convinced Believer* category for the religiosity variable and the *Abortion Ban* category for the abortion variable. As already mentioned in the Data and Methods section, we first tested the model on HDZ voters, with the assumption that there was a higher likelihood that these voters will score 1 on the religiosity variable (*Convinced Believer* category) and 1 on the abortion variable (*Abortion Ban* category).

Pearson's chi-square test for the model across all nine surveys/points in time was highly statistically significant for both the HDZ and the SDP vote, which enables us to safely reject the null-hypothesis. In addition, the relatively good fit of the model is showcased by relatively high r-squared values for almost all years, except for 1992 and 1995. As these years coincide with the Croatian War of Independence, that context might serve as an explanation for the difference in model fit, as other factors influenced voter choice in those years, not captured by the variables included in the proposed logistic regression model.

Of the three predictors used in the model, the RILE index proved to be highly statistically significant across all time points. This predictor has maintained similar effect sizes across time, while the importance of religiosity as a predictor has decreased over time. Put differently, being a *Convinced Believer* raised the odds of voting for the HDZ, i.e. decreased the odds of voting for the SDP, yet this effect has diminished over time. The third predictor, stance on abortion, was not statistically significant for some years, especially in the case of the SDP vote. The model also highlighted the differences between HDZ and SDP voters, with effect sizes much larger for HDZ voters. In other words, both the cultural predictors and the left-right index were better in estimating the likelihood of a vote for the Croatian Democratic Union than for the Social Democratic Party of Croatia.

We can infer that *cultural predictors indeed play a role in explaining the likelihood of the vote for the two main parties, yet key religious and bioethical indicators are far better in predicting the odds of someone voting for the HDZ than for the SDP. Self-placement on the left-right index, as one of the predictors used in the model, serves well in explaining the likelihood of the vote for both the HDZ and the SDP.* Such a finding is consistent with Čular's and Nikić Čakar's 2012 study that pointed out that, based on electoral manifesto analysis, one could conclude that cultural categories were much more important for the right's policy positions than for the left's (see Čular and Nikić Čakar, 2012: 15-16).



Table 5. Logistic Regression Model: Voting for HDZ, 1990-2016

		Models									
		1990	1992	1995	2000	2003	2007	2011	2015	2016	
L-R Index	<i>B</i>	.334 (.024)***	.113 (.026)***	.297 (.039)***	.407 (.050)***	.608 (.051)***	.718 (.054)***	.583 (.056)***	.539 (.054)***	.698 (.056)***	
	<i>OR</i>	1.397	1.120	1.346	1.503	1.837	2.051	1.792	1.714	2.010	
Convinced Believer	<i>B</i>	1.229 (.119)***	.832 (.106)***	.854 (.147)***	1.133 (.199)***	.474 (.199)*	.361 (.205)	.691 (.228)**	1.324 (.212)***	.344 (.215)	
	<i>OR</i>	3.419	2.297	2.349	3.106	1.606	1.435	1.997	3.758	1.411	
Abortion Ban	<i>B</i>	.641 (.127)***	.523 (.116)***	.383 (.158)*	.587 (.214)**	.322 (.200)	.303 (.210)	.755 (.238)**	-.033 (.213)	.601 (.209)**	
	<i>OR</i>	1.898	1.688	1.466	1.798	1.381	1.354	2.128	.968	1.824	
Constant	<i>B</i>	-3.325 (.151)***	-2.107 (.159)***	-2.915 (.247)***	-4.639 (.330)***	-5.653 (.355)***	-5.885 (.358)***	-5.769 (.414)***	-5.311 (.377)***	-6.000 (.398)***	
	<i>OR</i>	.036	.122	.054	.010	.004	.003	.003	.005	.002	
<i>N</i>		2608	2359	1144	1126	1153	1083	1002	1001	1000	
Cox & Snell <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.210	.069	.125	.161	.209	.288	.228	.235	.287	
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.303	.101	.175	.273	.342	.438	.380	.379	.440	
$\chi^2$		569.857*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	166.408*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	148.872*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	178.083*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	248.932*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	335.359*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	215.954*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	236.760*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	288.173*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	

*B* – coefficient, *OR* – odds ratio.

Standard errors in parentheses.

Significance levels:  $p < .05$  \*,  $p < .01$  \*\*,  $p < .001$  \*\*\*.

**Table 6.** Logistic Regression Model: Voting for SDP, 1990-2016

		Models									
		1990	1992	1995	2000	2003	2007	2011	2015	2016	
L-R Index	<i>B</i>	-.485 (.028)***	-.554 (.064)***	-.506 (.079)***	-.487 (.049)***	-.522 (.055)***	-.576 (.053)***	-.613 (.049)***	-.623 (.054)***	-.564 (.057)***	
	<i>OR</i>	.615	.575	.603	.614	.593	.562	.542	.536	.569	
Convinced Believer	<i>B</i>	-2.248 (.279)***	-.638 (.393)	-.675 (.437)	-.912 (.214)***	-.315 (.222)	-.509 (.219)*	-.222 (.218)	-.982 (.289)**	-.571 (.270)*	
	<i>OR</i>	.106	.528	.509	.402	1.370	.601	.801	.375	.565	
Abortion Ban	<i>B</i>	-.723 (.203)***	-.687 (.484)	-.415 (.468)	-.942 (.214)**	-.372 (.245)	-.567 (.228)***	-.617 (.247)**	-.317 (.221)	-.454 (.251)	
	<i>OR</i>	.485	.503	.660	.402	.690	.567	.511	.729	.635	
Constant	<i>B</i>	1.451 (.123)***	-.571 (.266)*	-.308 (.341)	1.451 (.123)***	.775 (.246)**	1.951 (.246)***	2.541 (.248)***	2.117 (.239)***	1.523 (.252)***	
	<i>OR</i>	4.268	.565	.735	4.268	2.170	7.036	12.690	8.303	4.587	
<i>N</i>		2608	2359	1144	1126	1153	1083	1002	1001	1000	
Cox & Snell <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.254	.044	.053	.175	.111	.209	.279	.268	.194	
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.372	.174	.162	.259	.195	.308	.385	.394	.304	
$\chi^2$		711.321*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	104.172*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	60.443*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	194.889*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	124.765*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	232.431*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	273.092*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	276.657*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	184.261*** ( <i>df</i> =3)	

*B* – coefficient, *OR* – odds ratio.

Standard errors in parentheses.

Significance levels:  $p < .05$  \*,  $p < .01$  \*\*,  $p < .001$  \*\*\*.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to explore the ideological profiles of voters of Croatia's two largest parties, the HDZ and the SDP. We have looked at the mean left-right self-placement scores for voters of both parties and assessed their positions in relation to the mean scores for the whole electorate. A trend of a drifting away from the electorate mainstream was observed for voters of both parties, with 2015 as the peak year. Together with the findings about the increase in voters who self-identify as far-right among HDZ voters and far-left among SDP voters, this could point to a general trend of increased polarization of the Croatian party system, as viewed from the perspective of voter demand. One possible explanation for this observed polarization could be found in the fact that the long and strenuous process of Croatia's EU accession was characterized by a cross-ideological multipartisan Alliance for Europe, an informal agreement of not contesting votes on adoption of the *acquis communautaire* in the Croatian Parliament. This has in turn somewhat frozen the underlying conflicts of the Croatian party system, which have then reemerged after the 2013 accession and started manifesting in voter behavior and self-identification (cf. Raos, 2015b: 168, 172).

In addition, we have looked at descriptive ideological categories and voter self-placement on the RILE index, as to determine whether the HDZ was successful at attracting Christian Democrats, while the SDP managed to attract Social Democrats. The results show that the share of Christian Democrats among HDZ voters has been around two thirds for the observed period, with similar figures for the share of Social Democrats among SDP voters. Fifty-five percent of all self-declared Christian Democrats voted for the HDZ, while almost 60 percent of self-declared Social Democratic voters cast their ballots for the SDP. The logistic model that tested the likelihood of the vote for the HDZ and the SDP, using the RILE index, religiosity and stance on abortion as predictors, has confirmed the importance of cultural and ideological indicators in predicting voter choice. These indicators were better in explaining the likelihood of the vote for the HDZ than for the SDP.

In future research, more complex models should be built, so that we might be able to provide more detail and predictive power. Nevertheless, the conducted analysis has confirmed the importance of cultural determinants and ideological positions for voter behavior in Croatia. Such findings were already established by previous studies, yet this paper offers a comprehensive approach, analyzing a large set across the entire timeframe of democratic party politics in the last quarter century, and assessing the issue with a combination of descriptive and inferential techniques.

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