

TWO DIFFERENT EPOCHES OF LEFT AND RIGHT WING POLITICAL POLARISATION

Jiří Nesiba – Marián Děd

Abstract

The paper examines the social polarization, which is expressed by electoral preferences in the possession of left-wing parties or right-wing in the national European parliaments and the proportion of Democratic and Republican Party in the U.S. The research covers the period 1900-2020 and concludes that there are weak significant longitudinal statistical correlations between right-wing and left-wing preferences over the entire period. On the contrary, if the period is shortened to the period 1917-1989, the results show statistically the strongest significant correlations between the different right-left wing preferences. Result from the years 1900-2020 has a low correlation, in the years 1917-1989 this correlation increases significantly. The interpretation of this phenomenon confirms the assumption of „*Short Century Theory*“, which was described among others by British historian Eric Hobsbawm. The years 1917-1989 form a certain closed epoch, where social phenomena within 72 years show different connections than for the entire examined period 1900-2020. The article shows that the general philosophical assumption about the possible existence of closed social „epochs“ (Hesiodos, T. Aquinas, G. Vico, G. W. F. Hegel, R. Steiner, M. Foucault) can be confirmed on partial empirical data of the social world.

Key words: Parliamentary election, Europe, U.S., Short Century, Social Polarisation, Epoch

JEL Code: N32, N33, Z18

Introduction

The article examines the hypothesis of the so-called „Short Century Theory“, which it verifies on the political electory results in the Europe and the USA. The theory of the short century was most prominently presented in the work of the British historian **E. Hobsbawm** in the 20th century. Similarly, the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner uses this idea as a closed epoch with a different *Zeitgeist*. Currently this topic appears in the work of the Slovak philosopher **E. Pálež** (cf. Pálež, 2009). Hobsbawm formulated this idea in his work *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (Hobsbawm, 1994). Using a number of

examples, the author discusses the fact that within the entire 20th century there is a shorter epoch from 1914-1989, which represents the most significant series of extreme political and economic situations compared to the entire century 1900-2000. This presented paper examines this theory as an empirical hypothesis and tests it on the results of all parliamentary elections in Europe and the elections in the U.S. The authors transform the quantitative research of election results into a qualitative output, where they show the share of right-wing and left-wing parties in Europe and the U.S. on a timeline. The article examined the alternation of right-wing and left-wing parties in the period 1900-2020. The result of their research was the finding that the spillover of voter preferences between Europe and the U.S. was most pronounced precisely in the years 1917-1989. At this time, there was the most pronounced correlation between the percentage share of left-wing parties in Europe and the share of republicans in the U.S. (right-wing party) over the entire length of the examined period. These opposite extremes can partially confirm Hobsbawm's theory of extremes in the short 20th century.

1 Political Parties System

The formation of political parties has its rich historical tradition in the 19th century. Etymologically, a (political) party is composed of the latin word *pars* = part, party. In **G. Sartori's** work, this term comes from the latin word *partire* = to divide (something). The system of political parties created an environment of polarization of electoral preferences among voters, where the most prominent feature was polarization into right-wing and left-wing parties since the 19th century. This particular understanding persists until the middle of the 19th century when the history of modern political parties begins (Rybář, 2011).

There were several reasons for the emergence of political parties but the most powerful was the effort of people – later the citizens, to promote their opinions, ideas and interests at the nationwide level. Parliamentary national elections in individual European countries and presidential elections or elections to Congress and the Senate in the U.S. they are the least significant element of the polarization of right-wing and left-wing preferences. The societal sources of modern political parties are liberalism and the era and thoughts of enlightenment. The institutional basis for the emergence of modern political parties is definitely parliamentarism. On parliament ground, individual deputies were forming themselves into fractions and so called *voting communities* were created. Those are identifying themselves with the representative system of governance when elected

representatives gain the necessary legitimacy to represent the people in public authorities. *"...representation invites other people to speak for you and that other person speaking for you can be a good thing or bad thing, depending on the origins of their particular mandate"* (Tormey, 2017, p.84) There is an uptake of a human designation – a certain part of the population is predestined to rule and the other – in the case of application of democratic principles, can articulate their interests into practice through them. Last but not least, there is a huge ambition of people to hold public positions and develop both the administration of the state and its legislative apparatus. (Krno, 2006)

The standard definition of a political party comes from the British philosopher and politician **E. Burke**, who described it as *a group of individuals who, guided by shared principles, have come together to promote the national interest by common effort*. Although Burke's definition was based on the state just before the formation of political parties (as they are known nowadays), the emphasis on principles promoted by the organized efforts of politicians has its disciples also in current political analysis. When analyzing the origin, development and existence of individual parties and the party system in a country or region, a purely historical approach may appear way too limited. Therefore, a sociological or institutional approach is also frequently used. (Kováčová, 2012) One of the most complex definitions of political parties is offered by G. Sartori, he made an explanation of the party system *"any political group identifiable by an official name that participates in elections and through elections, whether free or not, places its candidates for public office."* (Rybář, 2011, p.15)

Political parties and party systems are subject to constant dynamic change, which is conditioned by both external and internal factors. The impact of various external factors on the popularity of political parties, the growth or decline of their current preferences and also real chances in the political contest is described quite a lot and often in the media. The most common of the external factors include the overall image of a political party, causes, affairs or scandals experienced by the party as a whole or its individual representatives. *"Currently, we are witnessing an increase of popularity and preferences of new non-traditional political subjects, whether those are ideological political parties, movements or individuals - specific political figures."* (Klučiarovský, 2018, p.134) As voter preferences change in national parliamentary elections, do they not show the changes of a certain temporal closed epoch that philosophy called *Zeitgeist*?

The perception of the conceptuality of the *Zeitgeist* (the *Spirit of the time*) and time itself is a specific element of the existence and functioning of political systems and party systems within them. Based on this, we can claim that the party system and political culture in the state are influenced by a number of cultural phenomena that cannot be accurately captured, even in the sociology of culture. While the *Zeitgeist*, according to **Krause**, can be perceived as a hypothesis of meaningful practices' patterns, that are specific to a particular historical period, they combine different spheres of social life and reach deeper across the geographical contexts. *"If separate regions have distinct political dynamics with varying notions of left and right, this would naturally diminish the national consistency of left and right terminology and give rise to further dimensions of these ideas."* (Carroll, Kubo, 2021, p.5) If we are to apply the principle of time to some political period, it is necessary to examine the given era truly comprehensively and critically and to find out all the important variables connected with the historical heritage of the examined period. If we were to look at the topic through nowadays' lens, especially last two or three years, various entirely different variables would enter into it (global experience with the pandemic, recession, health threats, war and thereafter the economic and energy crisis). Those elements form every era which they affect and thus have a fundamental influence on the character and hue of the party system. But the spirit of the time is not limited only to the historical era and the period in which it takes place, it is possible to identify within different periods – as noted by **K. Mannheim** – in the event of 1968 we must refer to the entire period of the societal spatium in which the given political and social situation took place. The concept of the *Zeitgeist*, understood as a term can be used to capture a broad cultural diagnosis known as postmodernism or neoliberalism. The sociological dimension of this topic deals with the possibility of focusing on the investigation of the phenomenon in different periods and sociological constructs (Auerbach, Petrova, 2022). This is highly reflected in voting for the same political parties and leaning towards the same political courses; right or left. However, the party system is not monochromatic and therefore we must take into account the elements of extremism and radicalism that may appear as a part of it at different times. *"...higher levels of party system institutionalization increase citizens' satisfaction toward the way democracy is perceived to work, and an improvement in the set of rules, procedures, and outcomes that define the extent to which a country can be considered democratic. This is not exactly good news for Western Europe, as the region is undergoing a decline in party system institutionalization. Should this process continue over the next few years, it would have a detrimental impact on both components of democracy, by stirring dissatisfaction among citizens, and rendering rules, procedures, and*

outcomes—the very foundations of democracy—more fragile than ever." (Chiaramonte, Emanuele, 2022, p.194). The support of such entities depends on a number of variables and concepts mentioned above and those altogether make a perfect reflection of a particular time period and the social setting within. Elections are an ideal – if not perfect picture of the real political situation and the society's frame of mind on an election day. Therefore elections are reflection of the true social, economic, political, security situation of the state and all their subsets (Smolík, 2013). We intend to take up sociologist **H. Garfinkel's** (1988) challenge – to take observable setup and interactions as a point of departure where all transsituational or translocal orders must be carefully accounted for. In the research presented below, it is shown that in the period 1900-2020, one of the main directions of politics was to determine the left or right orientation of parliamentary parties in Europe or the U.S. The division of political parties into right and left is one of the most characteristic features of the typology of political parties, which is known as *the Nolan Chart* after the American political activist **D. Nolan**. *The Nolan chart* structures political parties according to the spectrum of the two axes "x" and "y" in the relation between liberalism-conservatism and left-right as the two binary political options (e.g. Gołebiewska, Sznajd-Weron, 2021). Such a division corresponds to the fact that *"...parties can disseminate functional appeals to inform the electorate and make them aware of their most important values, issues, and candidates (information), they can use content which is more appealing to initiate direct contact and exchange between political actors and citizens (interaction). Further, they can publish content which encourage users to actively engage with and support the party (mobilization).*" (Kruschinski, et al., 2022) The division of political parties into left-wing and right-wing shows the preferences of social polarization in society (Smolík, 2018). The results of parliamentary elections are a social fact that describes the collective characteristics of the voters' mindset at a certain time. Analysis of the results of elections to national parliaments in Europe and the U.S. it objectively reflects thinking in society. How this thinking changed during the 20th century is part of the presented research.

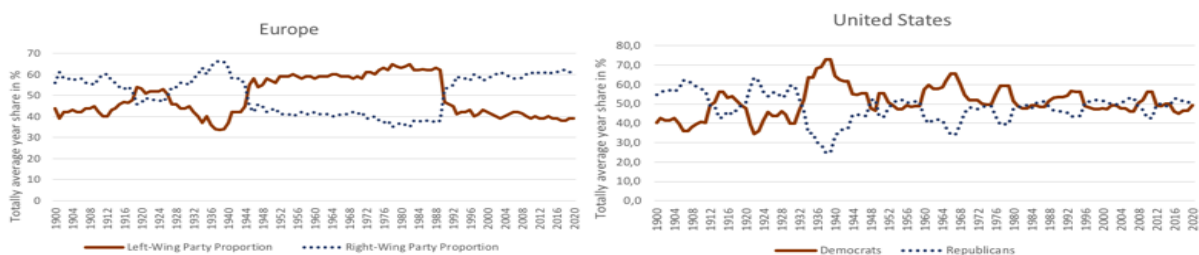
2 Research

2.1. European and U.S. Election Results 1900-2020

The research is based on an analysis of the elections in Europe and the U.S. in terms of the percentage share of profits of each party. The research was first carried out in a quantitative form, where the individual results of elections to parliaments in European countries from 1900 to 2020 were examined. In the same way, the analysis of elections in the U.S. according to the share of the Republican Party or the Democratic Party (for the total share of percentage

holdings between the office of the President, Congress, and the Senate). These election results were converted into the polarization of the right-wing and left-wing results of the percentage share in the elected political bodies using a qualitative method. The research created a longitudinal study of the development of right-wing and left-wing electoral preferences among voters in both Europe and the U.S. European states included those that geographically or culturally belong to the European political space (including Israel, Turkey or Transcaucasian republics). It should be explained that in the case of the U.S. it is a clear data analysis of the results of presidential elections and elections to Congress or the United States Senate. In the case of Europe it is specific research from all European states from elections to individual national parliaments. Due to specific and different electoral systems and intercultural differences, in the case of Europe, presidential elections, elections to the upper houses of the parliament or regional elections were not included. The research also included the results of elections in all states (including the communist bloc 1948-1989). The research examined the absolute frequency of occurrence, which considered the fact that the proportion of European states has gradually increased since 1900. 19 states were analyzed in 1900-1918, 29 states in 1919-1945, 30 states in 1946-1989, and finally 47 states were analyzed in 1990-2020. The percentage polarization of right-wing and left-wing preferences in national parliaments was evaluated using a qualitative method. Political parties that declared themselves to the voters as centrist (or populist, undefeated) political parties were divided equally between the right and the left. The result of the development is represented by Fig. 1.

Fig. 1: Share of Europe and U.S. left-wing and right-wing preferences 1900-2020



Source: own processing according to Bértoa, Enyedi (2022) and Siaroff (2019)

The results obtained were analyzed using statistical methods in the SPSS Statistics program. Quadratic Pearson correlation (P) was chosen as the statistical method. The authors analyzed the political results between the left-wing and the right-wing in Europe and in the U.S. When we examine the relationship between the share of the left-wing parties in Europe and the democrats in the U.S., or conversely the share of the right-wing parties in Europe and the Republicans in the U.S. we do not find any significant statistically relevant result (r). But

if we examine the relationship between the percentage share of left-wing parties in European parliaments and the percentage share of the Republican Party in the U.S., or conversely the relationship between the percentage share of right-wing parties in European parliaments and the percentage share of the Democratic Party in the U.S., it has shown that there is a moderate correlation between the percentage share of left-wing parties in Europe in correlation with the percentage share of republicans in the U.S. In this case, the Pearson correlation is lower than the recognized statistical minimum of significance of less than 0.05, but not less than 0.01. More Tab. 1.

Tab. 1: Weak correlation between right-wing and left-wing preferences (1900-2020)

% share of left-wing parties in Europe	% share of republicans in U.S.	r=0.896	P=0.012
% share of right-wing parties in Europe	% share of democrats in U.S.	r=0.654	P=0.041

Source: own processing

Correlation between percentage share of left-wing parties in Europe and percentage share of republicans in U.S. and between percentage share of right-wing parties in Europe and percentage share of democrats in U.S. are not significant.

2.2. European and U.S. Election Results 1917-1989

A different result was shown if data were analyzed only from a short century, characterized by Eric Hobsbawm as the "epoch of extremes. For the statistical analysis, a specific hypothesis of the Slovak philosopher Emil Pálež was chosen, which limits the short century to the years 1917 – 1989. According to Pálež, this period was manifested by strong political extremes, which were driven by a strong right-wing or left-wing polarization. Statistical analysis of the linear correlation found that during this period the correlation between right and left parties in Europe and the U.S. increases randomly. On the one hand, there is a positive correlation between the different right-left political polarization in Europe and in the U.S., on the other hand, a negative correlation between the right-left political polarization in Europe and the U.S. is demonstrated. Both negative and positive static comparison shows a strong significant correlation (Tab. 2).

Tab. 2: Strong correlation between left-wing and right-wing preferences (1917-2020)

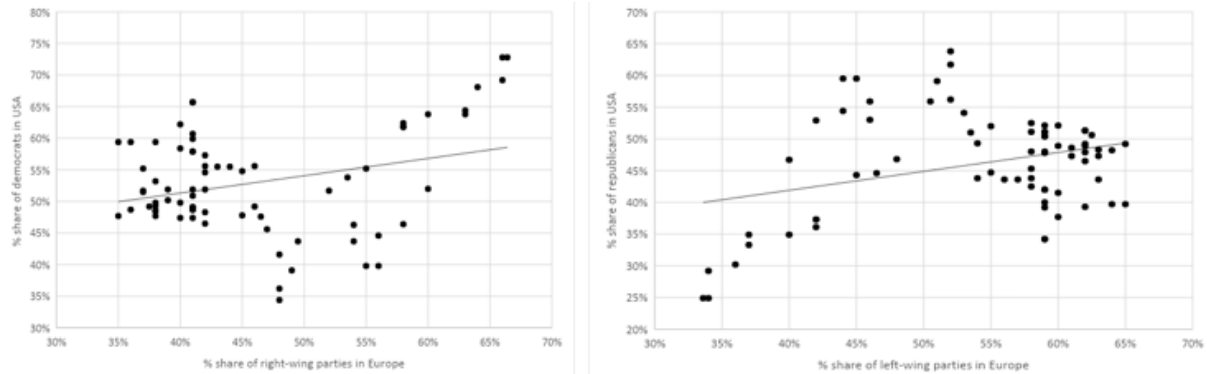
% share of left-wing parties in Europe	% share of republicans in U.S.	r = 0.321	P=0.006
% share of right-wing parties in Europe	% share of democrats in U.S.	r = 0.296	P=0.011

Source: own processing

Significant (0.006) weak-moderate (0.321) correlation between % share of left-wing parties in rope and % share of republicans in U.S. Scatterplot with fitted quadratic curve

(coefficient of determination $R^2 = 0.448$). On other hand, there is significant (0.011) weak-moderate (0.296) correlation between % share of right-wing parties in Europe and % share of democrats in U.S.. Scatterplot with fitted cubic curve (coefficient of determination $R^2 = 0.461$). See Fig. 2.

Fig. 2: Statistical Expression of Strong Correlation (1917-1989)



Source: own processing

Significant (0.006) weak-moderate negative (-0.321) correlation between % share of right-wing parties in Europe and % share of republicans in U.S. Scatterplot with fitted quadratic curve (coefficient of determination $R^2 = 0.448$). Significant (0.011) weak-moderate negative (-0.296) correlation between % share of left-wing parties in Europe and % share of democrats in U.S.. Scatterplot with fitted cubic curve (coefficient of determination $R^2 = 0.461$). From the results of the statistical analysis, we can consider that both negative and positive correlations for the hypothesis of a short century 1917-1989 were in the case of national electoral preferences between Europe and the U.S. proven. The significance and correlation increases if we examine the section 1917-1989, if we examine the entire period 1900-2020, the correlation is lower.

3 Interpretation

The obtained results show that the assumption about the existence of social and political polarization is justified if we talk about the *theory of the short century* (1917-1989). The examined data for the entire examined period 1900 – 2020 show a lower degree of statistical dependence between right-wing and left-wing electoral preferences in a comparison of Europe and the U.S. On the contrary, the examined data from the years 1917 – 1989 show a higher degree of correlation of mutual statistical dependence between right-wing and left-wing electoral preferences between the U.S. and all national parliaments in Europe. Relations of mutual negative polarization of electoral preferences can have several causes, which have a

common denominator: both Europe and the U.S. they come from the same cultural context. In the *short century* (1917-1989), both regions directly influenced each other economically and politically directly. The existence of the Second World War and subsequently the polarization during the Cold War intensified this process. On the contrary, before the First World War and after the democratization process in Europe after 1989, this mutual connection was lower and the influences were politically and economically indirect.

4 Discussion

The hypothesis of *the short century* (1917-1989) in the case of polarization of electoral preferences between Europe and the U.S. is considered as confirmed. This fact is related to the philosophical idea of the existence of certain "epochs" that show different social aspects compared to the previous and subsequent "epochs", which correspond to the different *Zeitgeist* (Nesiba, 2022). This idea of the continuity of closed time units was part of Presocratic philosophy (e.g. Hesiodos), Greek philosophy (e.g. Plato), Christian philosophy (T. Aquinas), Arabic philosophy (e.g. Ibn Khaldun), as well as modern presociology (e.g. G. Vico, G. W. F. Hegel). In the modern thinking of the 20th century, this idea was developed by a number of philosophers and historians (e.g. A. Toynbee, R. Steiner). In this context, modern philosophy speaks with specific structuralist terminology of "episteme" and "discourse" (e.g. M. Foucault). The present contribution therefore proves that these philosophical theories have real empirical validity and can be investigated using data analysis. Statistical analysis proves that "epochs" or *Zeitgeist* can be investigated empirically. It reveals the new scientific perspectives of the social, economical and political research.

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Contact

Jiří Nesiba

Newton University

Kongresové centrum Praha, 5. května 1640/65, 140 21 Praha 4

e-mail: jiri.nesiba@newton.university

Marián Děd

Newton University

Kongresové centrum Praha, 5. května 1640/65, 140 21 Praha 4

e-mail: marian.ded@newton.university