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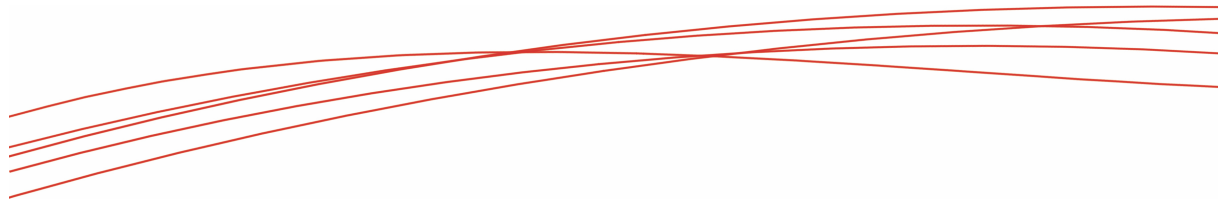
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**Manifestos and public opinion: a new test of  
the classic Downsian spatial model**

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Partners //



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# **Manifestos and public opinion: a new test of the classic Downsian spatial model**

**Abstract.** According to the Downs spatial model of electoral competition, in bipartisan systems political parties' manifestos are closer to the median voter's concerns, while in multiparty democracies partisan concerns are more covered in parties' platforms. Based on data in political manifestos and public opinion in 23 European countries from 2004 to 2012, we show that the Downsian model provides correct predictions. Two more specific points are uncovered in this article: first, unlike the previous studies and the original model, we focus on the people's most important issue, instead of on their preferences. Second, we analyse seven different issues, and we show that the Downsian model works only on the issues which reflect the left-right continuum.

## **Introduction**

Building on Hotelling's seminal paper, Downs (1957) developed a model whose aim is to predict the behaviour of candidates in a two party electoral competition, under the assumptions of a one-dimensional political space, rational and self interested voters and election seeking candidates.

One of the core predictions of the model is that parties in a two-party system change their platforms so that they reflect the median voter preference; whereas parties in a multi-party system try to remain as ideologically distinct from each other as possible (see also Cox 1990). Indeed, on the one hand, two main parties or candidates have an incentive to converge toward

the position of the median voter, because this position is the only one which cannot be defeated in the context of a bipartisan competition. On the other hand, in multi-party systems, the party which gets close to the median preference would lose votes on its previous ideological ground because of a more extreme party's strategic choice to converge a little to the centre too.

In two party systems, political platforms accurately display the median voter's preference only under the strong assumption of full inelasticity of voter preference. In other words, citizens vote for the closest party whatever the ideological distance between their preference and that of this party. If citizens decide to not vote when the distance is too far, the spatial model concludes that the party platform ceases to approach the centre when in order to win a centrist voter it has to lose two extremist voters. Under this more reasonable assumption, in two party systems, each party is located somewhere between the median voter's ideology and the right-wing or left-wing mean voter preference. In multi-party systems, this dilemma does not exist; each party is located on specific partisan ground<sup>1</sup>.

This paper tests this Downsian statement based on data from political manifestos in 23 European countries between 2004 and 2012. Political manifestos are more appropriate than public policies to test the spatial model for two reasons. First, manifestos are more manipulable, i.e.: it is easier to adjust platforms than policies in response to changes in public opinion. Second, manifestos are equally available for each citizen at the national level, whereas policies can concern specific interest groups because there are more of them and they are less visible. This choice is far from new: an abundant literature has already tested the spatial model with political manifestos.

The most original empirical feature of this paper consists in using party or citizens' concerns instead of preferences. Concerns are measured with "the two most important problems"

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<sup>1</sup> A formal model is provided by Plümper and Martin (2008).

(MIPs) facing the nation. Despite criticism towards empirical and conceptual property of this measure (Wlezien 2005), this strategy has two advantages. First, data allow us to test our hypotheses on several political issues rather than exclusively rely on a global placement on the left-right scale, used in previous studies on this topic. Second, it allows us to weaken another strong assumption of the spatial model that citizens have a preference about what policies should be decided. With our design, we just assume that citizens have an opinion about the most important issue, without necessarily knowing how to solve it.

Note, however, that the importance of the problem is not always associated with the left-right preferences. For example, the economy is generally deemed as a relevant problem by all, even though there are partisan disagreements about the policies which should be undertaken. In contrast, other problems, such as criminality or environment, are more important for people who place themselves, respectively, on the right or on the left of the political spectrum. This study, therefore, shows that when the problem importance is distributed along the left-right one-dimensional space, the Downsian prediction prove to be correct.

The next section deals with the empirical literature on the Downs' hypothesis. Then we present our data and hypotheses. The fourth section presents the result, before concluding.

## **Background**

There is overall little evidence for a general convergence of parties' positions in two party systems: some studies even show that political parties tend to adopt more extreme positions than their own electorate (for a review, see Iversen 1994). In particular, a large literature has provided evidence for a party polarization in the US, which is among the most typical case of two-party system (Theriault 2006). The most common explanation lies in the too strict assumptions underlying Downs' model (Stokes 1963; Grofman 2004). However, empirical studies show that parties adjust their policy positions in response to factors identified by the

spatial theory, such as shifts of the median voter's and rival parties' positions or past election results, even in the context of multiparty elections (for a review, see Adams 2012). Wagner (2012) finds that the largest parties respond to shifts in the opinion of the median voter, whereas smaller parties are rather responsive to the preferences of their own voters (see also Adams et al. 2004, Ezrow et al. 2011).

Building on Cox (1990) some empirical studies analyze the impact of institutional factors on the validity of the predictions derived from the spatial theory. Most of these studies focus on the comparative effect of PR and plurality or majority systems and analyze either the direct impact of electoral laws or their indirect effects (through the party system). However, the results are mostly contradictory. Dow (2001, 2011) compares the degree of convergence of parties' positions in majority and proportional systems, and finds that parties and candidates are located closer to the median voter in majority systems which are, according to Duverger's law, generally two-party systems. By contrast, Ezrow (2008) shows that the true number of parties has no effect on the party system's dispersion, and that proportional settings do not necessarily induce stronger centrifugal incentives for political parties. Moreover, contrary to the predictions of the spatial theory, parties represent the mean voter in proportional systems but not in disproportional systems (Ezrow 2011; see also Ezrow et al. 2011). Calvo and Hellwig (2011) find that electoral rules have different impacts on large and small parties: as proportionality decreases, large parties tend to converge toward the centre of the political spectrum, whereas small parties radicalize their ideological positions and move away from the median voter. Andrews and Money (2009) show that only the number of parties in the system is relevant to predict the ideological convergence or divergence of parties' positions. By contrast, Matakos and his colleagues (2013) find that both the electoral system and the number of parties affect the ideological distance between parties.

All in all, empirical literature about the Downsian hypothesis based on party manifestos tends to be centred on the effect of the number of parties, the difference between mainstream and minor parties and the electoral system. In this study we focus only on the number of parties and their size. As previously stated, we also analyze the Downsian prediction across different issues.

## **Hypotheses and data**

### *1. Hypotheses*

The core hypotheses of this article are that (H1) Public opinion influences the content of political manifestos and (H2) the number and the size of parties impacts the way in which the public opinion influences political manifestos. These general hypotheses include three expectations:

Ex1. In multiparty systems, manifestos reflect the partisan public opinion, that means that right-wing parties' manifestos and left wing parties' manifestos are respectively influenced by right-wing and left-wing public opinion.

Ex2. In two-party systems, mainstream party's manifestos reflect median public opinion

Ex3. In two-party systems, small parties' manifestos reflect partisan public opinion

The second expectation could be more or less true, according to the degree of elasticity of voters' preferences, as we noted above. The third deals with the problem that there are no pure two-party systems, but only systems approaching it.

### *2. Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) dataset*

Our data are based on the Eurobarometer survey and on the CMP data in 23 European countries and over 9 years during which 48 elections occurred (data are detailed in the

appendix). For each election, 345 party manifestos are taken into account, on average around 7 per election. The CMP dataset reports the total number of (quasi-)sentences in a party manifesto for several specific issue areas. Thus, we compute the attention given by each manifesto to 7 issues: Foreign Policy, the Economy, Environment, Healthcare and pensions, Education, Crime, and Immigration, which well suit the problems cited by the Eurobarometer survey<sup>2</sup>. Table 1 shows the average attention that each issue takes in the European manifestos. Note that the Economy is widely the most cited issue in manifestos whereas immigration is the least cited.

### **Table 1 about here**

### *3. Eurobarometer surveys*

Since 2003, the standard Eurobarometer surveys ask respondents which issues they regard as the most important ones facing their own country. Respondents have to pick out two answers among a list of fourteen issues<sup>3</sup>. We select the issues which match those of the CMP:

economy (including economic situation, crime, inflation, taxation, and unemployment), crime,

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<sup>2</sup> On the Manifestos database, some of them are easily traceable: Environment is coded par501 (Environmental Protection); Crime: per605 (Law and Order); Education: per506 (Education Expansion); and per507 (Education Limitation); Immigration: 607 and 608 (Multiculturalism positive and negative). Healthcare and pensions are gathered in the general categories 504 and 505 (Welfare State Expansion and Limitation). Foreign Policy includes all codes in Domain 1 (External Relations), except those about the European Union (per108 and per110). Finally, the Economy includes per401 (Free enterprise), per402 (Incentives), per403 (Market regulation), per404 (Economic planning), per406 and per407 (protectionism positive and negative), per408 (economic goals), per409 (Keynesian Demand Management), per410 (productivity), per412 (Controlled economy), and per413 (Nationalization).

<sup>3</sup> The list includes the following issues : economic situation, crime, inflation, taxation, unemployment , terrorism, foreign affairs, housing, immigration, healthcare system, educational system, pensions, environment, energy.



environment, immigration, healthcare and pensions, education and foreign affairs) and identify for each of them, the percentage of respondents who regard them as important. Then we collect public concerns declared from between 6 months and 1 year before each election<sup>4</sup>. This time lag allows us to be sure that manifestos are an effect and not a cause of the public opinion changes. For each issue, we obtain the priorities of the median voter, which correspond to the concerns of median voter on the left-right scale. Note that response 5 includes the median voter in almost all countries in the sample, except Denmark (2007), Ireland (2007) and Romania (2008) in which the median voter gives the response 6. Also, we collect the priorities of left-wing voters (respondents placing themselves between 1 and 4 on the left-right scale) and right-wing (6-10 and 7-10 for the three cases mentioned above) voters (Table 2).

### **Table 2 about here**

Table 2 reveals that for almost all issues, the percentage of attention in the category including the median voter along the left-right continuum is situated between the percentages of left-wing and right-wing voters. Only education does not display this pattern. Distinguishing the issues, therefore, allows us to expect specific results according to the issues considered. More accurately:

Ex.4 The hypotheses tested are less valid about education than about the other issues, and more valid about the issues in which the distance between left and right is large (environment, crime and immigration).

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<sup>4</sup> In some cases, we collected data on public opinion only four months before the election (Spain, 2004; Poland, 2007; Denmark, 2005; Portugal, 2005) because the desirable slot was not available.

In order to test the impact of partisan voters on manifestos, a specific variable is needed which matches the opinion of left-wing voters to the left-wing parties and the opinion of right-wing voters to the right-wing parties. To identify the ideological position of each party on the left-right scale, we use non-expert surveys provided by the European Election surveys. They ask respondents to place each political party on the left-right scale in 2004 and 2009. The closest date is used to assess whether each party is situated on the median, on the left or on the right of the left-right scale. This informs us which part of the public should influence which party manifesto<sup>5</sup>.

#### *4. Effective number and size of parties*

Finally, to distinguish the two-party systems from the others, the effective number of parties (Laakso and Taagepera 1979) is computed for the period which precedes the election. Three groups are distinguished: elections with fewer than 2.9 parties (two party systems), elections with 2.9 to 4.9 effective parties, and the elections with more than 4.9 parties. Generally, each country belongs to the same category, regardless of the election. However, Austria, Denmark, Germany, Portugal, Slovakia and the Netherlands switch categorization across elections (detailed data are provided in the appendix).

The percentage of seats for each party is also computed, in order to distinguish mainstream parties (over 30%) and other parties (less than 30%).

## **Results.**

### *1. Effective number of parties, median and partisan preference*

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<sup>5</sup> Note that with this method, 13 small parties about which we have no information are lost.

The two estimations gather all issues together in a pooled panel linear regression. The dependent variable is the place given to each issue by each party, before a given election. Since we do not have invariant explanatory variables and since the model with random effects necessitates stronger assumptions about the relationship between the error terms and the nation effects, we prefer to carry out country and year fixed effect estimates. And even though the seven issues considered capture only 46% of the content of each manifesto, we can suppose that the attention given to each issue is not totally independent from the others. This is why the variance of errors is corrected with the cluster method at the manifesto level. Table 3 shows four estimates: model A analyzes the whole sample. Model B selects only elections in two-party system context. Model C selects moderate multi-party systems (2.9 to 4.9 parties), and model C analyzes extreme multi-party systems (more than 4.9). Each model is double. The first column shows the effect of both median and partisan public opinion on political manifestos. However, both input variables are strongly correlated. The second column shows the estimates when the difference “partisan opinion minus median opinion” (hereafter PMM) is used as an independent variable to capture the relative effect of median and partisan opinion without collinearity problems. When PMM is positive, manifestos resemble partisan opinion more than median opinion. When PMM is negative, median opinion is more influential. Finally, when PMM is not significant, the party does not prefer one to the other.

**Table 3 about here**

Models A and A' show that partisan public opinion clearly influences political manifestos more than the median public opinion. However, in two-party systems (model B) the impact of partisan public opinion ceases to be significant. In moderate multi-party systems (model C),

the coefficient of the partisan public opinion and of PMM are significant and their magnitude is comparable to those in model A. Finally, in highly fragmented party systems the impact of partisan public opinion is particularly strong, and the PMM coefficient confirms that parties clearly choose to represent their own electorate rather than the median voter.

These results confirm expectation 1 and provide clues for expectations 2 and 3. According to model B, it is difficult to say whether in two party systems the manifestos reflect both median and partisan public opinion or if public opinion does not impact manifestos at all. The first interpretation, however, is more likely because both median and partisan opinions are highly predictive of manifesto content when each of them is an isolated input (respectively R2 equals .30 and .32). However, to test expectations 2 and 3 the size of the party has to be taken into account.

## *2. Size of parties*

The model shown in table 4 exclusively uses PMM as explanatory variable, and interacts it with the size of the party. Estimations are run for two party, moderate multiparty and extreme multiparty systems.

### **Table 4 about here**

Results show that in multiparty systems, the party manifestos clearly follow the partisan public opinion, and there is no significant difference between mainstream parties and other parties. This pattern is more pronounced in extreme multiparty systems.

In two party systems, mainstream parties follow the median public opinion (the PMM coefficient is negative) and the other parties do not seem so attracted by partisan opinions. So, expectation 2 is confirmed, but not expectation 3. This result globally confirms the Downsian

hypothesis: bipartisan systems provide centripetal incentives for mainstream political parties, whereas multiparty systems do not. More surprisingly, non-mainstream parties tend to be less partisan when the number of parties is low.

### *3. Issue by issue*

This section aims to verify whether the same results are observed for each issue or for issues in which the difference between left-wing and right-wing public opinion is meaningful. Now the panel is not pooled anymore, and the estimates are similar, but the errors are clustered at the country level.

To maximize information, we use only the PMM input interacted with the effective number of parties in each country before a given election. We also use two control variables: the size of the party (measured by each party's number of seats in the parliament) and the effective number of parties (which could have an impact on the dependent variable within each specific category).

Dummy variables for years and countries are not shown, but they can also give useful information about the attention voters pay to each issue.

### **Table 5 about here**

Table 5 shows that the pattern found in the previous section – with the partisan opinion impact growing with the effective number of parties – is found, as expected, for the three issues in which public opinion is the most polarized: education, crime and immigration.

About the environment, the partisan impact is particularly strong. The number of seats also has a negative impact, which means that this issue is overrepresented in small parties' manifestos (like green parties, which are generally left-wing). Also, there is no special trend

for this issue, which is more discussed in Scandinavian countries and Estonia than in other countries.

Crime is also a partisan value in multi-party systems. Unlike the environment, however, it is discussed in the majority parties' manifestos. This effect is particularly informative for the Downsian hypothesis because it means that the importance given to crime in multi-party systems is not only due to the presence of niche parties in those systems. Mainstream parties are partisan in multi-party systems and they are more interested in median-voter concerns in two-party systems. Note that crime is more discussed in Czech Republic, Slovakia, Italy and the Netherlands.

Finally, the importance given to immigration does not depend on the party's number of seats and its importance decreases over time. This issue is more debated in western and rich countries, particularly in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands.

Contrary to what was expected, there is no partisan effect on the economy and foreign policy. A slight effect is observed for the healthcare and pension problem. As expected, for education no significant impact is observed. The mention of the economy in manifestos is essentially predicted by the year: after the 2008 crisis its place grows. Foreign policy is most debated in France, Germany and the United Kingdom, while the importance of education declines over time. For healthcare and pensions, there is a partisan effect in extreme multiparty systems, and no notable effect per year or per country.

All in all, when left-wing parties and right-wing parties are polarized on a specific issue – such as the environment, crime and immigration – the political manifestos reflect this polarization as the system is multi-partisan, while they tend to stay slightly closer to the median concerns when the system is bipartisan.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, in two-party systems, mainstream parties tend to follow the median public opinion, while the other political parties do not clearly choose to represent the median voter rather than the priorities of their own electorate.

In multiparty systems, left-wing and right-wing parties tend to represent respectively left-wing or right-wing voters rather than the median voter.

These findings are confirmed in issues in which there is a relative polarization within public opinion – such as environment, crime and immigration – while when issues are not clearly polarized in a linear two-dimension space, the Downsian prediction is not observed.

These results are consistent with those from previous studies testing the spatial theory of elections (Dow 2001, 2010; Andrews & Money 2009; Calvo & Hellwig 2011; Matakos et al. 2013). The only exception is Ezrow's article (2008), which shows no evidence that multipartism promotes more extreme party positioning.

In addition to these findings, our analysis allows new specifications. First, political parties react to the most important problems for public opinion in a Downsian way. Previous studies are based on parties and opinion preferences. This article focuses on public attention and shows that, as this attention varies according to the placement on the left-right political space, the number and the size of parties influence the way in which public opinion impacts on party manifestos.

Second, since our analysis is based on specific issues, it contributes to better understand which incentives parties have to talk about one problem instead to another. The relative attention given by each party for each problem partly depends on which part of the electorate is concerned for, and on how many other parties run for the parliament.

Finally, the findings only regard European countries and contradict what it has been observed in the Unites States. In this specific two-party system, the main political parties tend to polarize since at least ten years. Of course, it could simply be an outlier. However, unlike the

European party systems, the US is based on two types of elections: primary and general. Even though it is officially a two-party systems, some parties, such as the Tea Party, chose to run at the stage of primary elections. This makes the US situation quite unclear (Rasmussen and Schoen). That is why, quite surprisingly, Europe is a useful piece of evidence for testing the Downs hypothesis.

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**Table 1. Percentage of attention in political manifestos to the following policy domains (2004-2012) :**

	Mean	Standard Error	N
Foreign Policy	4.50	0.17	345
Economy	14.22	0.39	345
Environment	5.57	0.35	345
Healthcare and pensions	9.72	0.28	345
Education	5.35	0.20	345
Crime	4.33	0.21	345
Immigration	1.85	0.17	345
<b>Total</b>	<b>8.75</b>	<b>0.14</b>	<b>3795</b>

**Table 2. Percentage of attention in public opinion to the following policy domains (2003-2011). SE are in parentheses.**

	Median	Left	Right
Foreign Policy	1.96 (0.16)	2.05 (0.16)	1.92 (0.08)
Economy	74.59 (0.91)	75.51 (0.92)	73.43 (0.95)
Environment	4.05 (0.27)	5.88 (0.39)	3.83 (0.20)
Healthcare and pensions	26.25 (0.68)	27.43 (0.73)	26.21 (0.65)
Education	5.63 (0.27)	7.53 (0.33)	6.36 (0.23)
Crime	23.27 (0.61)	19.67 (0.55)	23.59 (0.61)
Immigration	10.65 (0.54)	9.12 (0.46)	13.32 (0.64)

**Table 3. Estimations of attention paid to all issues in political manifestos (split samples according to the effective number of parties)**

	A	A'	B	B'	C	C'	D	D'
Partisan	0.21** (0.03)		0.11 (0.07)		0.19** (0.04)		0.45** (0.07)	
Median	-0.08* (0.03)		0.00 (0.07)		-0.04 (0.04)		-0.31** (0.07)	
Partisan-Median		0.14** (0.04)		0.07 (0.09)		0.10* (0.05)		0.36** (0.08)
Constant	3.16** (0.41)	6.23** (0.38)	1.41 (1.53)	3.39 (1.83)	2.29** (0.36)	5.70** (0.30)	5.43** (0.84)	8.35** (0.80)
N	2324	2324	532	532	1210	1210	582	582
R2	0.34	0.03	0.33	0.03	0.36	0.03	0.35	0.06

\*\* p<0.01 \* p<0.05

Country and year fixed effects included. SE (in parentheses) are adjusted for 84 clusters in manifestos.

A includes all country-years. B includes situations with fewer than 3 effective parties. C includes situations in which there are between 3 to 5 effective parties. D includes situations with more than 5 effective parties.

**Table 4. Estimations of attention paid to all issues in political manifestos** (split samples according to the effective number of parties and interaction with seats)

	Two Party System (B)	Moderate Multi Party System (C)	Extreme Multi Party System (D)
Partisan-Median	0.18 (0.11)	0.12* (0.05)	0.39** (0.08)
(Partisan-Median)*more than 30% of seats	-0.33* (0.16)	-0.08 (0.14)	-0.58 (0.38)
Constant	1.69 (2.07)	5.73** (0.30)	7.96** (0.85)
N	532	1210	582
R2	0.04	0.03	0.06
<p>** p&lt;0.05 * p&lt;0.01  Country and year fixed effects included. SE (in parentheses) are adjusted for 84 clusters in manifestos. B includes situations with less than 3 effective parties. C includes situations in which there are between 3 to 5 effective parties. D includes situations with more than 5 effective parties.</p>			

**Table 5. Estimations of attention paid to each issue in political manifestos**

	Foreign Policy	Economy	Environment	Healthcare and pensions	Education	Crime	Immigration
(Partisan-Median)*less than 3 parties	0.22 (0.25)	-0.08 (0.11)	0.15 (0.14)	-0.02 (0.26)	0.26 (0.18)	-0.09 (0.14)	0.01 (0.05)
(Partisan-Median)*3-5 parties	0.17 (0.14)	0.22 (0.19)	0.19** (0.06)	0.05 (0.09)	0.23 (0.21)	0.21** (0.05)	0.10 (0.10)
(Partisan-Median)*more than 5 parties	0.22 (0.23)	-0.01 (0.08)	1.26** (0.35)	0.22* (0.10)	0.19 (0.14)	0.43** (0.11)	0.31** (0.07)
Number of parties	0.25 (0.60)	0.76 (1.04)	-2.18** (0.68)	0.59 (1.17)	0.21 (0.47)	0.00 (0.39)	-0.41 (0.29)
% of seats	-0.75 (1.85)	3.32 (3.06)	-8.16** (2.30)	3.76 (1.80)	2.40 (1.89)	4.56* (1.90)	-1.28 (0.89)
Constant	4.27* (1.84)	5.45 (3.07)	13.22** (2.39)	5.24 (3.98)	4.23* (1.55)	5.68** (1.49)	5.93** (0.85)
N	332	332	332	332	332	332	332
R2	0.25	0.37	0.23	0.44	0.33	0.45	0.32
<p>Country and year fixed effects included. SE (in parentheses) are adjusted for 84 clusters in countries.  *p&lt;0.05 **p&lt;0.01</p>							

### Appendix I : Countries, elections and effective number of parties (2004-2012)

Country	Parliamentary election month	Effective number of parties (before the election)
Austria	200809	3.38
	200610	2.88
Belgium	201007	9.03
	200706	7.03
Bulgaria	200907	4.8
	200506	2.92
Croatia	201112	3.08
	200711	3.55
Czech Republic	201005	3.1
	200606	3.67
Denmark	201109	5.33
	200711	4.89
	200502	4.48
Estonia	201103	4.37
	200703	4.67
Finland	201104	5.12
	200703	4.93
France	200706	2.16
Germany	200909	3.44
	200509	2.8
Great Britain	201005	2.47
	200505	2.17
Hungary	201004	1.66
	200604	2.08
Ireland	201102	3.01
	200705	3.41
Italy	200804	5.08
	200604	5.18
Luxembourg	200906	3.81
	200406	4.34
Netherlands	201006	5.54
	200611	4.75
Poland	200710	4.26
	200509	3.6
Portugal	201106	3.14
	200909	2.54
	200502	2.56
Romania	200811	3.37
Slovakia	201203	4
	201006	4.81
	200606	6.12

Slovenia	201112	4.43
	200809	4.9
Spain	201111	2.35
	200803	2.5
	200403	2.48
Sweden	201009	4.15
	200609	4.23