



2014

2014-05-20

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Report 2014: 03
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How Voters Make up Their Minds: Consideration Set Models for Party Choice in European and National Elections.¹

*Paper prepared for the Swedish Network for European Studies in Political Science
Conference: ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE, Brussels, 7–9 April 2014*

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Abstract

In order to gain more insight into voters' decision-making processes, we applied a consideration set approach to explain party choice in European and national elections. In line with the work on first and second decision rule criteria in EP elections by Catherine de Vries and her co-authors (C. d. Vries, Steenbergen, & Hangartner, 2009), we set out to develop some first hypotheses about how standard components of voters' calculus have different weights in the two types of elections and at different stages of the voting decision process. We present preliminary tests of hypotheses about consideration set size and content, primary and secondary decision criteria, and the effects of proximity voting using Swedish data from two self-recruited internet campaign panels conducted in conjunction with the 2009 EP election and the national election in 2010. The findings indicate that, as expected, the impact of left–right ideology is lower in European elections than in national elections, both as a primary and secondary decision rule. At this stage, we have not been able to discern whether this is an effect of cross-pressure from the ideological position to the EU, which is probable. We conclude that the consideration set model approach is a viable way of disentangling the decision processes behind party choice in European parliamentary elections, as well as national elections.

¹ This paper presents preliminary hypotheses and “pre-tests” for the research project “Developing Consideration Set Models of Voting Behavior” run by Henrik Ekengren Oscarsson and Maria Oskarson, with Edvin Boije as research assistant. The project is financed by Riksbankens jubileumsfond for the years 2014–2016. Project number P13-0721:1.

Introduction

The most fundamental conception of elections to the European Parliament is that they are “second order elections” (Marsh, 1998; Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt, 2005). Compared to national elections, which are “first order,” elections to the European parliament are perceived as being less important as less is at stake, especially since no government will be formed on the basis of the electoral outcome. Due to their second order status, participation is generally lower; big parties as well government parties tend to lose support, whilst smaller, niche, and fringe parties tend to succeed in comparison to their performance at national elections. Also, multiple studies have concluded that the voters in European elections base their voting decision on an evaluation of national government performance rather than on European issues. However, since this conception was formed, the European Union, as well as the power and significance of the European Parliament, have changed. Even though the general characterization of the European Elections as second order is still valid, recent research has pointed to the fact that with more information on European matters, voters now to a higher degree base their voting decision on actual EU matters (Sara B. Hobolt & Spoon, 2012; Sara Binzer Hobolt & Wittrock, 2011; C. E. d. Vries, Brug, Egmond, & Eijk, 2011).

To cast a vote for a party in an election—local, national or European—is a manifestation of two decisions: first, whether or not to vote; second, in the event of voting, which party to vote for. How voters make these decisions has of course been the focus of research on voting behavior and elections ever since the beginning of individual-based election research. Still, the knowledge of the actual *decision-making process* behind party choice is limited. That factors such as social background, political identification, degree of political sophistication, ideological position, and perceived issue proximity are central to party choice is well documented (R. J. Dalton & Klingemann, 2007). It is also well documented that electoral volatility has increased over time, as long-standing stabilizing factors such as political identification and class voting have waned (Bengtsson, Hansen, Narud, Hardarson, & Oscarsson, 2013; R. Dalton, 2013). Thus, we can expect that there is, behind the party vote, increasingly an actual *party choice* rather than a manifestation of any long-lasting party identifications. However, research on how voters actually make up their minds has still not been able to fully detect how different explanatory factors behind the decision how to vote relate to each other and when they occur in the decision-making process.

In order to respond to this development we applied the “consideration set models of party choice” (CSM) as an intriguing remedy to the many challenges of a highly individualized voting behavior. The CSM approach will be illustrated empirically and tested by elections in Sweden—national as well as European. The focus of this paper is on how a CSM approach

can further clarify the decision-making process in secondary elections (i.e., European elections) compared to primary elections (national elections).

Theoretical approach

The general idea behind consideration set models of party choice is that, at the time of elections, many voters actively consider voting for more than one party. But, voters are not believed to consider the entire supply of parties, at least not in multiparty systems. Rather, voters are believed to enter election campaigns with an existing subset of voting alternatives from which they subsequently select the party to vote for. While earlier generations of citizens often manifested group-based interests or identifications by routinely supporting certain parties at elections, many voters of the 21st century are believed to engage in an actual decision-making process. This decision process takes place in a context of intense campaigning and information processing. In spite of this development, party choice still tends to be analyzed with the same models and methods used in more predictable and steady periods. The CSM approach, which is inspired by consumer research, provides a theoretically-based explanatory model in response to the contemporary voting behavior of citizens.

Applying a CSM approach to party choice enables researchers to combine insights from political sociology with insights into political psychology. More precisely, CSM allows a thorough analysis, and takes into account how voters expose, evade, and process political information. The implication of the CSM assumption that voters form consideration sets to reduce the cognitive costs of resource-demanding information processing is that voters only expose themselves to certain political information during intense elections campaigns, namely, the type of information that is needed to pick a winner from a preselected set of considered alternatives. These assumptions of the model have testable implications, as we would expect that exposure to party messages and campaign events will be limited to the parties included in an individual's party set.

When phased decision-making processes are studied in consumer research, more stages are often discussed. For example, according to Shocker, Ben-Akiva, Bocara, & Nedungadi (1991) as well as Roberts and Lattin (1997) the decision process involves several nested steps. All possible options form the universal set, whilst the subset of options that the individual actually knows about forms the awareness set, of which some options are considered and others not. Thus, the consideration set is nested in the awareness set (Roberts & Lattin, 1991, 1997; Shocker, Ben-Akiva, Bocara, & Nedungadi, 1991). In previous studies of the application of a consideration set approach to party choice the first two stages, the universal set and the awareness set, are generally excluded since the universal set (all possible parties) still presents a more restricted number of options than is the case in most consumption research. For this reason there is also believed to be only very limited variation

between voters in the awareness set in established party-based democracies, which is why the analysis of this stage is considered futile and the use of the consideration set model for party choice generally only distinguishes two separate stages in the decision process: the consideration stage and the choice stage (Steenbergen & Hangartner, 2008; Steenbergen, Hangartner, & Vries, 2011; Wilson, 2008; C. d. Vries et al., 2009). The consideration set model approach for party choice is schematically illustrated in Figure 1.

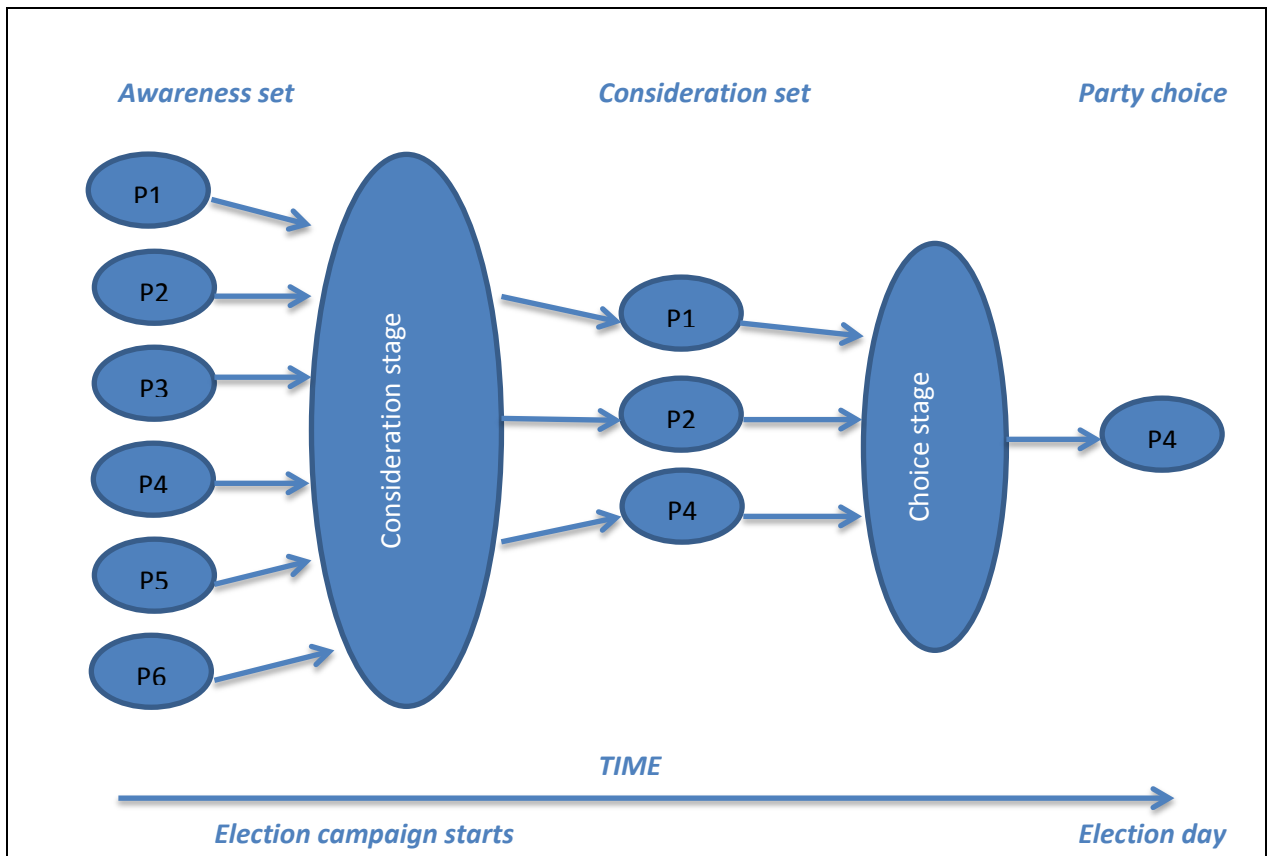


Figure 1. Schematic illustration of the decision-making process for party choice according to the consideration set model. Note: P1–P6 represents the parties entering the election.

The first stage, when the focus is on party choice, is accordingly the formation of the consideration set, in other words, concerning which parties there is considered to be an option to vote for and which parties are excluded early in the election campaign or have already been excluded even before the campaign actually starts. Of course, some voters have only one party in their set and might see it as excluded if they voted for any other. However, according to research on the decline of party identification and voting stability, this group is believed to be in decline. Still, the size (number of parties) and content (which parties) of the consideration set is expected to be mainly dependent on more stable and longitudinal predispositions such as ideological orientation and proximity, political

identification, political sophistication, and voting history. In the second stage an actual decision about which party to vote for is formed. This decision process is limited to the parties in the consideration set, and is dependent mainly on short-term factors such as issue positions and issue proximity, evaluations, and expectations of party performance, and events taking place during the election campaign (Steenbergen & Hangartner, 2008; Wilson, 2008; C. d. Vries et al., 2009).

Distinguishing the two stages—the consideration stage and choice stage—from each other requires more finely-tuned analytical models, where it is possible to distinguish factors and criteria that influence the consideration set formation from factors and criteria influencing the actual vote choice, and it also requires the temporal factor of different criteria and considerations to be examined. Furthermore, this is consistent with the view of voters as “cognitive misers” who use heuristics to minimize information costs (Popkin, 1991; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; Wilson, 2008). To distinguish the consideration set from the actual choice set is also in line with Zaller’s notion that voters’ attentiveness and response to election campaigns are expected to be dependent on their predispositions, not only in ideological terms, but also in terms of what parties they actually consider voting for (Zaller, 1992). The distinction between separate phases in the decision-making process about party choice enables us to distinguish the effects of election campaigns in a more realistic fashion than when we simply understand party choice as a choice between all parties in the party system.

So far, research on applying consideration set models to party choice has been limited and is mainly oriented towards statistical modeling, for example, probabilistic choice set multinomial logit models (Paap et al., 2005; Steenbergen & Hangartner, 2008) or choice set logistic regression (Steenbergen et al., 2011). In part, the technical nature of previous research into consideration set models of party choice has been due to the limited instrumentation in surveys, necessitating various indirect techniques to identify the considerations sets. A more complete analysis is presented by Carole J. Wilson, who shows that local party strength forms a contextual determinant of the consideration of voters (Wilson, 2008).

Previous research with consideration set models in Sweden

Previous research that has applied to consideration set approaches to voter choice in Sweden has been concentrated on issues of survey instrumentation for identifying choice sets. There are a few descriptive analyses of *choice set size* (i.e., the number of parties voters consider voting for) and *choice set content* (i.e., what combination of parties are selected in the party formation stage) (Oscarsson, 2004, 2009; Oscarsson, Gilljam, & Granberg, 1997; Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2008). A large number of ways of identifying the choice sets of individuals have been tested out using both established measures such as

dislike–like scales, feeling thermometers, propensity to vote scales, and second best party preferences, and new survey instruments with questions about the likely, feasible, and considered alternatives and what parties’ voters can choose between. The choice of the operationalization used in this study to identify considered alternatives rests heavily on past experiences of applying different instruments in this context.

However, CSM has also been applied in explanatory analyses of party choice. The approach allows for voter, party, and choice set characteristics to be modeled simultaneously. A pilot study by Oscarsson (2004) retrieved consideration sets using the number of parties that were positively evaluated along an eleven-point dislike–like scale from –5 to +5, using data from the Swedish national elections 1979–2002; it estimated the effects of party size, campaign momentum, leader evaluations, ideological proximity, perceived party competence, and habit (previous voting for the party) on the probability of a given party being picked in the final stages of party choice. In these analyses, leader evaluations—the party picked from a set was the party with the most liked leader—had a surprisingly small and insignificant effect while momentum, habit, and party size turned out to be significant. Ideological proximity and general assessments of parties’ policies on prioritized issues had the largest and most robust impact on the probability of voting for a party included in a voter’s choice set.

In another study, open-ended questions about the pros and cons of all the alternatives in the choice set was used to assess the selection criteria applied by voters in the final stages of the decision process (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2008). The results of this explorative approach showed that among the open-ended answers, statements about ideology and issues were most frequent. In second place came voters’ judgments of confidence and trust in the alternatives. References to group loyalty and socialization were only found among the left-green party voters, and references to the strategic context of the election (parties’ standing in opinion polls, government formation, and parliamentary thresholds) were present to a surprisingly large degree.

Swedish election studies have introduced appropriate questions into recent surveys and internet campaign panels carried out in conjunction with both national and European elections. This has provided a unique opportunity to analyze consideration set models of party choice more thoroughly. More specifically, we are now able to empirically test a large number of hypotheses about consideration set formation in low and high stimuli elections.

Although other data sources are readily available, in this paper we focus on analyzing data collected through opt-in internet campaign panels in 2009 and 2010 (Dahlberg, Lindholm, Lundmark, Oscarsson, & Åsbrink, 2011). The justification for using campaign panel data is that the comparison of the decision processes taking place in a European parliamentary election and a national election demands that data are available that is collected before the

elections. Pre-election data on consideration set formation is not available in the large representative Swedish EP election studies.

Party choice in European Parliament elections compared to national elections

When it comes to comparing voting decisions in European elections to national elections, the consideration set approach has the potential to offer a deeper understanding of the mechanisms at play when it comes to party choice in second-order compared to first-order elections. Cleavage structures and ideological orientations are based historically in national politics and believed to structure the relation between voters and parties; accordingly, they provide the main explanation of a voter's consideration set in elections. These fundamental structures in the relationship between voter and party do not have a counterpart in the European elections, restricting the possible impact of European issues on the discrimination between the parties already in the consideration set.

In a paper from 2009 on EU issue voting in Britain from a consideration set perspective, Vries et al. (2009) built on the work on issue evolution by Carmines and Stimson (1986) and asked if EU issues act as primary (consideration stage) or secondary (choice stage) decision criteria when voters form their consideration sets. The basic assumption was that in the case of gradual issue evolution an issue starts as a "secondary decision criterion," or put differently, the issue is not of such great importance that it is used to eliminate alternatives. Over time, such an issue may become a "primary decision criterion," decisive in determining which parties people consider voting for (Carmines & Stimson, 1989; C. d. Vries et al., 2009, p. 8). The results suggest that even though EU issue voting has increased in Britain, it still does not have the position of primary decision criteria. Furthermore, there are grounds for believing that the issue evolution process could depend on the level of information on EU matters, since the degree to which EU issues actually influence decisions on party choice in the European Parliament elections is found to depend upon information about EU issues. Vries et al. (2009) found in a comparative study of the 2009 election that EU issue voting was slightly more pronounced among sophisticated voters, but it was clearly more determining in contexts that provided more information on EU matters (C. E. d. Vries et al., 2011). Accordingly, it is probable that higher levels of sophistication and information increase the occurrence of EU issues as secondary decision criteria.

By applying a CSM perspective on party choice for the European Parliament elections, we will be able to better understand and depict the underlying decision-making processes among voters. In order to do this, we will make distinctions between the consideration stage and the choice stage. For the consideration stage, it is also vital to distinguish between the *size* of the consideration set (how many parties) and the *content* of the set (which

parties). Together with the insights from previous research on European Parliament elections as second order elections, a number of hypotheses will then be formulated.

First, in considering the lower intensity and visibility of the EUP elections, we expected that more voters would actually report consideration sets of more than one party, and also that the initial consideration sets are in general larger (contain more parties) in EP elections than in national elections. Consequently, two descriptive hypotheses can be formulated:

- H1) There are more voters with consideration sets of more than one party in EP elections than in national elections
- H2) Voters with consideration sets have larger sets (more parties) in EP elections than in national elections

Maybe, the most debated and researched aspect of voting in the elections to the European parliament is the question of whether the party choice is based on European issues, or on the general left–right orientation and national issues (van der Brug & Eijk, 2007). Due to the cleavage character of the Swedish multiparty system, and the low salience of the European elections we believed EU issues would have an impact as secondary decision rules (choice stage), whilst the probability of even considering voting for a party is primarily dependent on the left–right ideological position. Furthermore, even though national elections matter for European integration through the government’s influence in the Council, European affairs are even less politicized and discussed in national election campaigns. In spite of the low perceived significance of EU issues in European elections, it is still viable to expect EU issues to matter more at the choice stage of the EP elections than in the national elections. Accordingly, we have formulated two hypotheses on the relative impact of the left–right and European ideological positions:

- H3) The content of the consideration set for the European Parliamentary election is dependent on left–right position rather than the position on EU issues.
- H4) The position on European issues matters more at the choice stage (which party to vote for) than at the consideration stage.

Still, to a large degree the weak impact of the position on the EU dimension has been found to be due more to the alternatives presented by the parties on EU issues than a lack of EU attitudes among the voters (van der Eijk & Franklin, 2007; C. E. d. Vries, 2007). Therefore, it is not just a question of how the voters place themselves ideologically that matters, but also how the party positions are perceived, that is, the ideological proximity between voters and parties. Referring to the previous discussion of primary versus secondary decision criteria, we expected the consideration stage to reflect that:

- H5) The consideration set is based more on left–right proximity than on EU issue proximity in EUP as well as national elections.
- H6) The effect of ideological left–right proximity on inclusion in the consideration set is lower in EP elections than in national elections.

Furthermore, in the choice stage we believed that:

- H7) Proximity voting along the left–right dimension is lower in EP elections than in national elections.
- H8) Proximity voting on the position on European integration is higher in EP elections than in national elections.

However, due to the lower intensity of EP campaigns, political sophistication is expected to have stronger interaction effects in the EP than in the national elections, since it is believed to be more cognitively demanding in a low intensity campaign (C. E. d. Vries et al., 2011).

- H9) Political sophistication has a stronger interactive effect on proximity voting in EUP elections than in national elections.

One aspect of the EP elections as second order elections is that less is at stake. This leaves the floor open for voting for a “best” party, disregarding issues on government formation or tactics. Accordingly, we can formulate a final hypothesis regarding the choice stage as follows:

- H10) Voters who consider voting for more than one party tend to vote more for the most sympathized with (dislike–like scale) party in the EP elections than in the national elections.

Data

The Swedish election study program offers good opportunities to explore these hypotheses. Empirical data on Swedish voters choice sets has been accumulated over the past ten years and a number of different suggestions for instrumentation have been proposed (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004; Oscarsson, 2009; Oscarsson et al., 1997; Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2008). However, ordinary election studies are not the most appropriate for enabling analyses of consideration set models since they are restricted to measurements at one or, at the most, two points in time, and they also not always include optimal instrumentation for consideration sets for party choice. In order to fully study the decision process we need panel studies with more steps. The National Swedish Election Studies (SNES) program has conducted web-based campaign panel studies in conjunction with the 2002 and 2006 national elections, the 2004 referendum on the euro, and the election to the European

Parliament in 2009. These studies were quite limited in scope, but have opened up opportunities to develop designs with web-based campaign studies. During the campaign for the 2010 national election, a more elaborate campaign panel was designed as part of the research program entitled, “Multidisciplinary Research on Opinion and Democracy” (MOD) at the University of Gothenburg. For the 2014 elections to the European Parliament, as well as to the national parliament, a specific web-based campaign panel was set up explicitly for the research project, “Developing Consideration Set Models of Voting Behavior.”² The analyses in this paper are meant to form a pre-test for analyses of the consideration set model for the 2014 elections, and will be based on the 2009 and 2010 internet campaign panels. Most of the previous analyses have been largely descriptive. In the coming years, we will have the opportunity to exploit the full analytic power of existing data, and cover the EP and national elections in 2014 for the purpose of developing the CSM.

The 2010 internet campaign panel as well as the 2009 European election internet campaign panel both include explicit questions about party choice considerations, enabling the consideration set models proposed here to be analyzed. The 2009 campaign panel study was a continuation of the 2006 study, using the same self-recruited sample. It was a five-step panel, with four questionnaires applied before the election and one after. The 2010 internet campaign panel was a six-wave panel of initially 14,434 self-recruited respondents (Dahlberg, Lindholm, Lundmark, Oscarsson, & Åsbrink, 2010). The survey was carried out between 24 August and 30 September, which was before and just after the national general election, which was held on 19 September. The recruitment was performed through ads and pop-up ads on homepages linked to the Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, as well as through cooperation with several newspaper web editions. Although these campaign panels have been based on convenience samples (self-recruited via social media channels), it is possible to track individual level changes during the intense election campaigns in 2009 and 2010. Due to the self-recruited character of the panel it is not representative of the Swedish population as a whole—men, middle-aged, highly educated, and politically interested respondents are overrepresented.

Operationalization and instrumentation

Most previous studies applying consideration set models to party choice have been restricted to basing their analyses on questions not specifically designed for this purpose, such as dislike–like scales (Oscarsson, 2004). To infer consideration sets from dislike–like scales requires the researcher to define some kind of more or less arbitrary cutoff point in

² The projected is run by Henrik Ekengren Oscarsson and Maria Oskarson, with Edvin Boije as research assistant. The project is financed by Riksbankens jubileumsfond in the years 2014–2016. Project number P13-0721:1.

order to identify a consideration set, for example, all parties with a positive value. However this cutoff is done, we can never be sure that the respondent actually has the same considerations in voting as for parties that are “liked.” When it comes to voting, factors such as coalition possibilities, strategic voting, and short-term issue salience might also matter in which parties are considered. Another strategy has been to use recall questions in post-election surveys (Did you consider voting for any other party?). Even though this strategy might lead to the actual choice set on Election Day, it is not possible to use it for tracking the actual decision process that lies behind the party choice.

In the Swedish web panel surveys used here, the questions are explicitly designed for analyses of pre-election consideration sets. The question used is: Which party or parties are you considering voting for in the upcoming (national/European) elections? Is there any other party you are considering voting for? The questions were asked in the first phases of the panel surveys, a month or so before the election in question, and then in consecutive surveys. In order to analyze how different factors such as ideological proximity affects whether or not a party is included in the consideration set we “stacked” the dataset. This means that every alternative within the possible consideration set, here the party system, is used as the unit of analysis; in other words, every respondent occurs as many times as there are parties to choose between. For the analysis with the stacked datasets, robust logistic analysis was employed. The standard errors were corrected since the observations emanated from the same respondent and are not independent.

Results

The first two hypotheses concern the consideration sets per se, and how they varied between the 2009 European election and the National election in 2010. The expectation was that the second-order character of the EP election would be reflected in the weaker influence of long-term factors such as party identification, and accordingly voters would have larger consideration sets in the European elections, as formulated below. Due to the non-representative traits of the web panels on which the analysis was based, our focus of interest was on the differences between the European and the national elections, rather than on the absolute levels. Hence,

- H1) There are more voters initially with consideration sets of more than one party in EP elections than in national elections.
- H2) Voters with consideration sets have larger sets (more parties) in EP elections than in national elections.

To test the hypotheses, we specified the “consideration stage” as 21 days before the respective elections. Table 1 shows that the proportion of respondents in the panels actually considering more than one party was very similar in the 2009 European Parliament election (55%) and the national parliamentary election of 2010 (58%).

Table 1. Share of respondents with more than one party in a consideration set, 21 days before election

	Swedish EP election (EP 2009)	Swedish national election (EP 2010)
Considering one party	45%	42%
Considering >1 party	55%	58%
Number of respondents	1650	1918

Note: Respondents not reporting any party are not included in the percentage base.

In Table 2 we report the number of parties in the consideration sets at the respective elections from those respondents who were considering more than one party. The difference in the average size of the consideration sets is negligible: 2.62 parties in 2009 compared and 2.65 parties in 2010.

Table 2. Average consideration set size among respondents considering more than one party, 21 days before election

	Swedish EP election (EUP 2009)	Swedish national election (EP 2010)
Average consideration set size	2.62	2.65
Number of respondents	901	1119

Note: Respondents not reporting any party are not included in the percentage base.

So, these preliminary results suggest that there are no significant differences in either the proportion of the voters that were considering more than one party three weeks before the election or in how many parties the voters were considering. In the Appendix (Tables A1 and A2), we report the sizes and content of the consideration sets of the internet panel samples in more detail. The similarity between the consideration set for the European (EP) and the national (Riksdag) election is further validated in this more detailed analysis. The main difference is that in the national election the left bloc included the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party and the Green Party as the most common three-party consideration set, whilst the one-, two-, and three-party consideration sets for the EP election were

dominated by the right-wing coalition parties. Of course the content of the consideration sets reflects the biased self-recruited sample and is not representative of the Swedish electorate. In the following, we have therefore concentrated on ideology as an explanatory factor for the consideration and choice stages, and the comparisons between the two elections.

The first hypotheses concerns the impact of the respondents' ideological position on the content of the consideration sets in the European election of 2009.

- H3) The content of the consideration set for the European Parliamentary election is dependent on left–right position rather than the position on EU issues.
- H4) The position on European issues matters more at the choice stage (which party to vote for) than at the consideration stage.

In order to test these hypotheses we looked at the effect of ideological position on the inclusion of the party in the consideration set, compared to the effect of ideological position on actual voting for the party. This means that the analysis was made party by party, as reported in Table 3 below.

Table 3. The effect of left–right ideological position compared to position on EU integration on consideration set and on party vote in the European Parliamentary election of 2009; logistic regression

		L	S	G	C	Lib	CD	M
Consideration stage	LR (0–10)	-0.86***	-0.60***	-0.39***	0.23***	0.27***	0.39***	0.83***
	EU (0–10)	-0.17**	0.23***	0.14***	0.27***	0.30***	0.08	0.27***
	Constant	2.88***	0.68**	0.23	-5.01***	-4.53***	-5.52***	-7.78***
	Log-likelihood	-264.12	-427.91	-517.86	-390.77	-575.42	-324.59	-487.76
	Pseudo R2	0.39	0.24	0.12	0.07	0.11	0.09	0.36
	N	1161	1161	1161	1161	1161	1161	1161
	<hr/>							
Choice stage	LR (0–10)	-0.96***	-0.53***	-0.35***	0.21**	0.28***	0.33***	0.66***
	EU (0–10)	-0.41***	0.12	0.17**	0.08	0.19***	0.19*	0.26***
	Constant	3.04***	0.26	-0.93**	-5.28***	-4.57***	-6.36	-7.88
	Log-likelihood	-132.71	-298.40	-321.49	-141.28	-403.91	-179.22	-361.27
	Pseudo R2	0.41	0.19	0.09	0.03	0.07	0.07	0.23
	N	1011	1011	1011	1011	1011	1011	1011

Comment: The party abbreviations are L = Left Party, S = Social Democrats, G = Green Party, C = Center Party, Lib = Liberal Party (People’s Party), CD = Christian Democrats, and M = Moderate Party (Conservative). Dependent variable for the consideration stage is “the party is included in the consideration set 21 days before the EP election.” Dependent variable for the choice stage is the party vote in the EP election of 2009. The independent variable LR is the respondents reported position on a left-right scale where 0 = *extreme left* and 10 = *extreme right*. Ideological position on European integration is based on an index constructed from respondents’ evaluation of EU impact on a number of policy areas.³ The index ranges from 0 = *most EU negative* to 10 = *most EU positive* (Cronbach’s alpha: 0.87). Marked cells are not in accordance with the hypotheses.

The table indicates no unequivocal support for either hypothesis, but a rather different patterns for different parties. The first hypothesis concerned whether the parties for which voting is being considered (part of the consideration set) are mainly influenced by the ideological left–right position of the respondent. This is not the case for the Center Party or the Liberal Party, for which the impact of EU position is higher than the impact of LR position. However, for most of the other parties the effect of EU position is significant, if not stronger than LR position. Only for the Christian Democrat Party (CD) do we have an insignificant effect of position on the EU dimension.

³ The question was formulated as: “What is your opinion on the impact of the EU membership on the following areas?” The policy areas are environment, economy, employment, health care, immigration, social welfare, and the possible impact on EU politics. The alternatives ranged between 1 = *big improvement* and 7 = *large deterioration*.

The second hypothesis on the impact of ideology on the EP election of 2009 was that the EU position should matter more for the party vote than for inclusion at the consideration stage. Here, the result varies somewhat between the parties. For the Centre Party and the Liberal Party, the impact of EU position is far weaker on party choice than on inclusion in the consideration set, and for the Centre Party the effect for party choice is insignificant. Also, for the Social Democrats the effect of EU position is insignificant for party choice, whilst it has a significant effect in the consideration stage, albeit weaker than that for left–right position.

As discussed previously, ideological proximity is generally believed to be one of the main factors influencing which parties people consider voting for. Not least, in a multiparty system such as the Swedish, several parties might be perceived as quite close ideologically. We therefore proceeded to compare the effect of ideological proximity on the content of the consideration sets in the two elections. Unfortunately, there were no questions about perceptions of the EU ideological position of parties in the surveys, which means that any comparison between EU proximity and left–right proximity as primary decision rules must be deferred at this stage.

However, it is possible to test the effect of left–right ideological proximity on the consideration stage using the 2009/2010 data. The following hypothesis is based on the assumption that even though previous research has stated that voting in European parliamentary elections is primarily influenced by national left–right issues, the left–right position should matter less in the EP elections due to the fact these elections are *also* influenced by the EU dimension. Accordingly H6 stated that:

H6) The effect of ideological left–right proximity on inclusion in the consideration set is lower in EP elections than in national elections.

The hypothesis was tested with robust logistic regression with the stacked datasets from 2009 and 2010 combined. The dependent variable was whether a party is part of the consideration set. The independent variable is ideological proximity between the respondent and the party in question, operationalized as the difference (in absolute numbers) between the respondents' positions on a left–right scale and the perceived position of the party. The results are displayed in Table 4 and Figure 2 below.

Table 4. Probability of the party being included in the consideration set as a function of ideological left–right proximity; robust logistic regression

	Coefficients	Robust standard error
Ideological proximity	−0.53***	0.020
National election	0.46***	0.085
National election* proximity	−0.09**	0.036
constant	−0.21***	0.043
<i>N</i>	2156	
<i>Log pseudolikelihood</i>	−6138.6417	
<i>Pseudo R2</i>	0.18	

Comment: Combined stacked datasets (voter–party dyads) from the internet campaign panels in 2009 and 2010. The dependent variable is whether the party is included in the consideration set or not. The 2009 European Parliament election is the reference category, and the 2010 national election is a dummy variable. Proximity is the absolute difference between a respondent’s position and the perceived party position on the left–right scale (0–10). Significance levels are marked * = <0.05, ** = <0.01 and *** = <0.001.

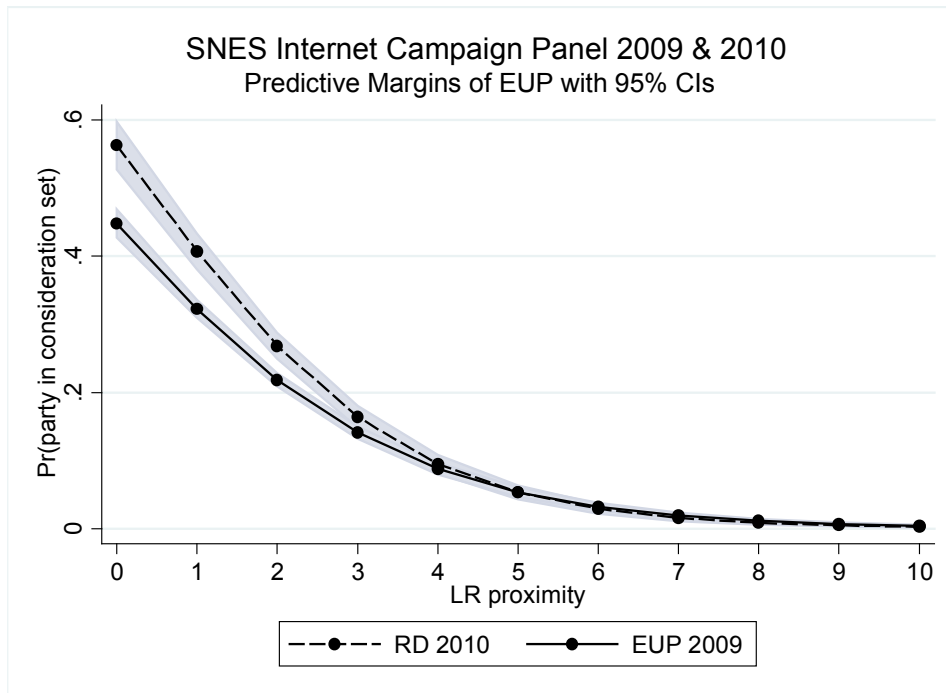


Figure 2. Probability of the party being included in the consideration set as a function of ideological left–right proximity.

The results support the hypothesis that ideological left–right proximity has a stronger effect on the consideration of parties in the national election than in the election to the European

Parliament, as the difference between the two curves is significant. The figure also supports the notion that ideological proximity is a vital factor in party considerations in both elections. The probability of having a party in the consideration set basically doubles if there is a tie up between the respondent's own position and the perceived position of the party, compared to a situation where there is a two steps difference in ideological placement.

Unfortunately, we are not able to contrast these results with the effect of ideological proximity along the ideological dimension by focusing on European integration, as the questions were not asked in the 2009 or 2010 panel. The hypothesis that proximity voting on the position on European integration is higher in EP elections than in national elections will therefore have to wait for the upcoming analyses of the 2014 panel study. This is also the case for the hypothesis concerning the mediating effect of political sophistication.

After concluding that left–right ideology is of higher significance in considering a party for the national than the European elections, the next step was to test if this is also the case at the choice stage; that is, when the voter makes the final voting decision from the different parties being considered. The hypothesis (7) is that due to the second order character of the European elections as well as the impact of attitudes to European integration, left–right proximity should matter less than in the national elections. Table 5 and Figure 3 provide the results.

Table 5. Left–right (LR) proximity voting among voters with the consideration sets in the 2009 EP election and the 2010 national election; robust logistic regression

	Coefficients	Robust standard error
LR proximity	–0.53*	0.33
National election	0.37**	0.10
LR proximity* National election	–0.16*	0.06
Constant	–0.85***	0.05
<i>Number of observations</i>	737	
<i>Log pseudolikelihood</i>	–1627.4495	
<i>Pseudo R2</i>	0.15	

Comment: Combined stacked datasets from E-panels for 2009 and 2010, meaning that every respondent occurs as many times as there are parties to choose between. Only respondents with more than one party in the consideration set are included. The 2009 European election is the reference category, and the 2010 national election is a dummy variable. Proximity is the absolute difference between respondent's position and the perceived party position on the left–right scale (0–10). Significance levels are marked * = <0.05, ** = <0.01 and ***=<0.001.

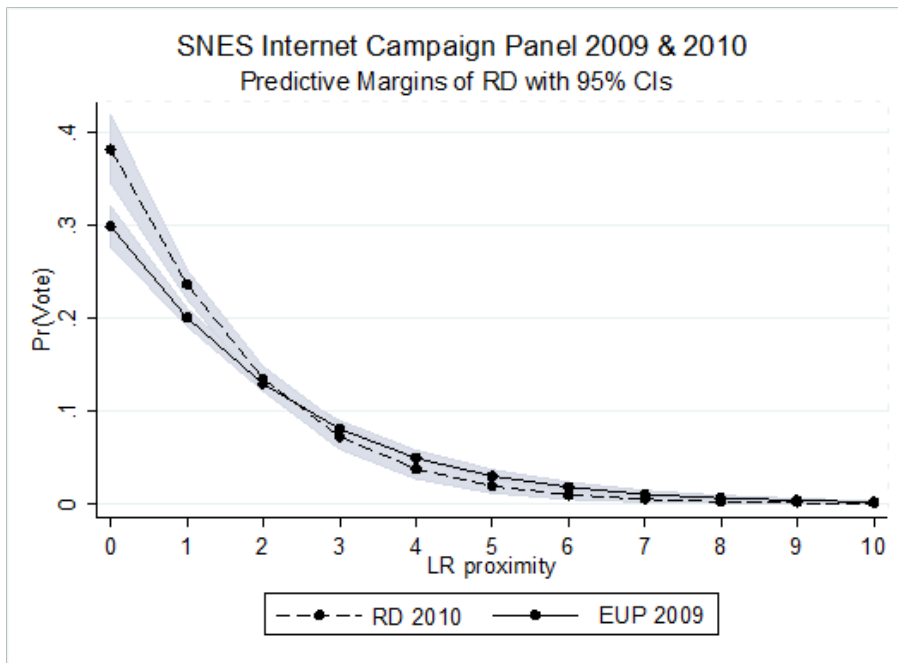


Figure 3. Left–right proximity voting among voters with the consideration sets in the 2009 EP election and the 2010 national election.

The results are in line with the hypothesis that left–right proximity should matter more for the final party choice in the national elections than in the European. The effects are slightly weaker at the choice stage (here) than in the consideration stage presented in Table 3 and Figure 2.

As discussed earlier, a central difference between the national and the European election is that in the European election there is no issue of government formation, and consequently less focus on potential coalitions and a credible government. This has led to the expectation that party choice in the European Parliament election is based more on “true” party sympathy, which is free from strategic or instrumental considerations. With the consideration set approach this would leave us to believe that among people considering choosing between several parties, the actual sympathy for the parties matters more in the EP elections than in the national.

H10) Voters who consider voting for more than one party tend to vote more for the most sympathized with (dislike–like scale) party in the EP elections than in the national elections.

We tested this hypothesis using the same stacked dataset as previously, including all respondents considering more than one party. Party choice was coded as 1 if the party received the final vote and 0 otherwise. The party most sympathized with is based on a

dislike–like scale ranging from 0 to 10. The results for both elections are displayed in Table 6 and Figure 4 below.

Table 6. Emotional attachment to parties as a secondary decision rule for party choice in national and EP election campaigns in 2009 and 2010 among the SNES internet campaign panel participants

	Coefficients	Robust standard error
Best party	3.31***	0.17
National election	0,08	0.054
Best party* National election	0.30	1.39
Constant	-2.82***	0.044
<i>Number of observations</i>	<i>11696</i>	
<i>Log pseudolikelihood</i>	<i>-2895.1615</i>	
<i>Pseudo R2</i>	<i>0.21</i>	

Comment: Combined stacked datasets from E-panels for 2009 and 2010, meaning that every respondent occurs as many times as there are parties to choose between. Only respondents with more than one party in the consideration set are included. The 2009 European election is the reference category, and the 2010 national election is a dummy variable. The best party is the party with the highest positive value on the dislike–like scale. Significance levels are marked * = <0.05, ** = <0.01 and *** = <0.001.

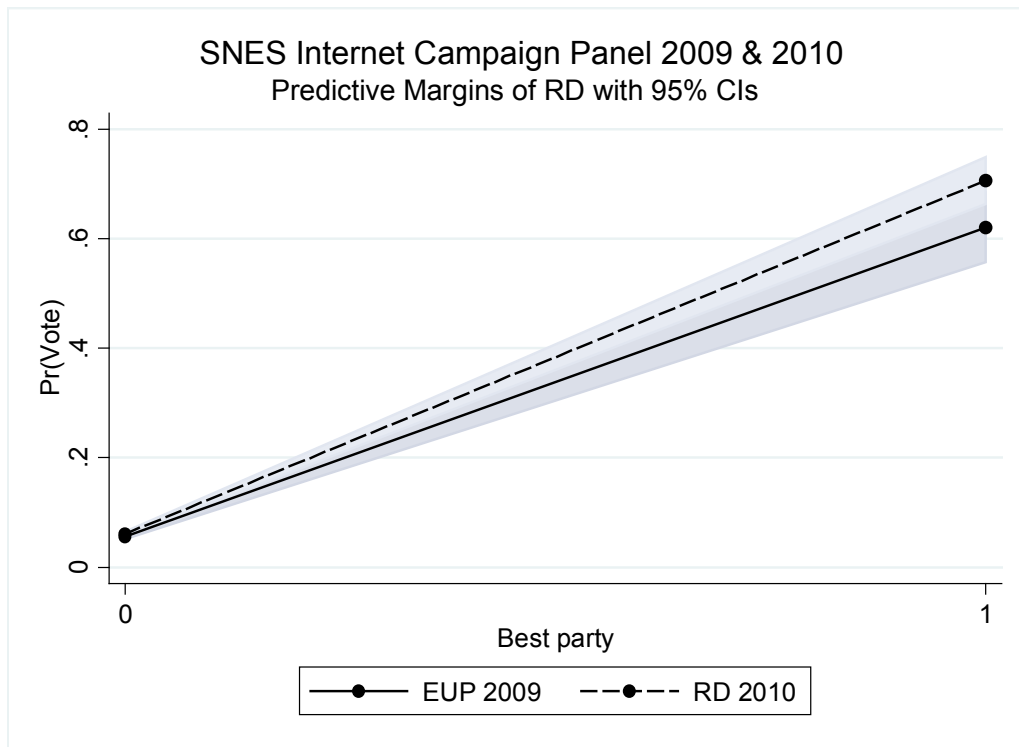


Figure 4. Emotional attachment to parties as a secondary decision rule for party choice in national and EP election campaigns in 2009 and 2010 among the SNES internet campaign panel participants.

The result actually indicates the opposite pattern; that is, a slightly stronger effect of emotional attachment on party choice in the national election. However, the results are not significant, which is why the test of the hypothesis is inconclusive.

Conclusions and further research

Elections to the European Parliament are known to be “second order elections.” With the consideration set approach presented here we are able to compare explanatory factors for elections on different levels in a way that is more thorough than when the analysis is restricted to actual party choice. Distinguishing between the consideration stage and the choice stage opens up further insights into how different explanatory factors work in different aspects of the decision-making process, not the least the interlaced effects of left–right vs EU dimensions.

The preliminary analyses of the application of the consideration set approach to party choice in the European election of 2009 and Swedish national election of 2010 have provided some relevant findings. The analyses indicate a high degree of similarity between the consideration sets in the two elections respectively, both in terms of how large the proportion of respondents is that actually considers voting for more than one party, as well as the size of the consideration sets. Ideological position matters for which parties are included in the consideration set, with a general pattern that left–right position matters more than EU issue position at the consideration stage, whilst EU issue position matters more at the choice stage. However, for the Centre Party and the Liberal Party, EU issue position actually matters more at the consideration stage than at the choice stage. We have also confirmed that left–right proximity matters more in relation to which parties are being considered to vote for in the national election than in the election to the European Parliament, and that the same goes for the actual vote decision. Due to limited data at this stage in the project, we have not been able to discern whether this means that proximity between the voters’ and the parties’ ideological positions on European issues matters more. Finally, we could not confirm the hypothesis that sincere voting was more decisive at the choice stage in the EP election than in the national election.

The consideration set model approach, as applied here, confirms the value of distinguishing between the consideration and the choice stage in the decision-making process about party choice. It enabled us to isolate the primary from the secondary decision criteria, which is vital, not least when comparing European with national elections. Only by doing so will we be able to fully understand how voters decide what party to vote for.

Appendix: Table A1. The content of party set for EUP 2009

# of Parties in Set	Content of Party Set	Electoral Support (percentage)	Number of Respondents	Ranking of the 10 Most Common Combinations
0	0-parties (including "do not know")	8.5	140	
1	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- M	11	182	#1
1	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- CD --	2.1	35	#9
1	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- C -- --	1	17	
1	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- Lib -- -- --	3.7	62	#6
1	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- SD -- -- -- --	2.1	34	#10
1	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- JL -- -- -- --	0.9	15	
1	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- G -- -- -- --	4.1	68	#5
1	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- PP -- -- -- --	5.4	90	#4
1	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- S -- -- -- --	6.3	104	#2
1	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- FI -- -- -- --	1	17	
1	L -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- --	2.5	41	#8
		40.1	665	
2	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- Lib -- -- -- M	5.5	91	#3
2	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- PP -- -- -- -- M	3.1	52	#7
2	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- S -- G -- -- -- --	2.1	34	#10
2	L -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- S -- -- -- --	2	33	
2	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- PP G -- -- -- --	1.5	25	
2	L -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- G -- -- -- --	1.5	24	
2	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- CD M	1.2	19	
2	Other 2-party combinations	14.3	238	
		31.2	516	
3	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- Lib C -- -- M	1.8	29	
3	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- PP -- -- -- -- Lib -- -- M	1.3	22	
3	L -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- S -- G -- -- -- --	1.2	19	
3	L -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- PP G -- -- -- --	0.9	15	
3	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- Lib - CD M	0.9	15	
3	L FI -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- G -- -- -- --	0.8	13	
3	Other 3-party combinations	7	117	
		13.9	230	
4	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- Lib C CD M	0.5	8	
4	L -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- S PP G -- -- -- --	0.4	6	
4	L FI S -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- --	0.4	6	
4	Other 4-party combinations	3.1	52	
		4.4	72	
5-8	5-8-party combinations	1.8	30	
		100	3136	

Appendix: Table A2. The contents of party set for RD 2010

# of Parties in Set	Content of Party Set	Electoral Support (percentage)	Number of Respondents	Ranking of the 10 Most Common Combinations
0	0-parties (including "do not know")	5.2	686	
1	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- M	11	1451	#1
1	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- CD --	1.3	175	
1	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- C -- --	1.1	143	
1	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- Lib -- -- --	3.2	424	#8
1	-- -- -- -- -- -- SD -- -- -- --	4.8	629	#5
1	-- -- -- -- -- JL -- -- -- -- --	0	2	
1	-- -- -- -- G -- -- -- -- -- --	4.8	632	#4
1	-- -- -- PP -- -- -- -- -- --	1.1	144	
1	-- -- S -- -- -- -- -- -- --	7.9	1034	#2
1	-- FI -- -- -- -- -- -- -- --	0.5	61	
1	L -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- --	4.2	555	#6
		39.9	5250	
2	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- Lib -- -- M	5.2	676	#3
2	-- -- S -- G -- -- -- -- -- --	3.7	489	#7
2	L -- S -- -- -- -- -- -- -- --	3	388	#10
2	L -- -- -- G -- -- -- -- -- --	2.5	331	
2	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- CD M	2.2	282	
2	-- -- -- -- -- -- SD -- -- -- M	1.7	222	
2	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- C -- M	1.2	154	
2	Other 2-party combinations	9.9	1363	
		29.4	3905	
3	L -- S -- G -- -- -- -- -- --	3	391	#9
3	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- Lib C -- M	1.8	234	
3	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- Lib -- CD M	1.7	217	
3	L FI -- -- G -- -- -- -- -- --	1.4	180	
3	-- FI S -- G -- -- -- -- -- --	0.7	85	
3	-- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- C CD M	0.6	78	
3	Other 3-party combinations	7.6	1000	
		16.8	2185	
4	L FI S -- G -- -- -- -- -- --	1	125	
4	L -- S PP G -- -- -- -- -- --	0.4	37	
4	-- -- -- -- G -- -- Lib C M	0.3	33	
4	Other 4-party combinations	2.6	339	
		4.3	534	
5	5-party combinations	1.2	153	
6-8	6-8-party combinations	0.3	39	
		100	12752	

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