Freedom and equality are defining issues in politics. The question of which one of these political goals is more important is a subject of fundamental debate among political philosophers and politicians. In general, liberals would argue that freedom comes first and even that freedom is a prerequisite for equality. For socialists and social democrats, it is the other way around: equality is more important than freedom. Equality is in fact necessary to achieve freedom as a political goal. The conceptual problem is that liberals and socialists have different understandings of the two concepts and of the relationship between them.

Because of these conceptual problems, contrary to the conventional approach in scientific writing (which is to proceed from theory to operationalization to data), in this chapter I begin by describing the item in the European Values Study (EVS) questionnaire where the respondent is asked to choose between freedom and equality as political goals. The chapter then continues with a discussion of two possible theoretical interpretations of the operationalization. This leads to an analytic strategy where I argue for the choice of equality as a political goal as the focal point of interest.

The EVS question

The task is to analyse the following question: ‘Which of these two statements comes closest to your own opinion? A: I find that both freedom and equality are equally important. But if I were to choose one or the other, I would consider personal freedom more important, that is, everyone can
live in freedom and develop without hindrance. B: Certainly both freedom and equality are important. But if I were to choose one or the other, I would consider equality more important, that is, that nobody is underprivileged and that social class differences are not so strong.' The response categories are (1) ‘agree with statement A’, (2) ‘agree with statement B’, (3) ‘neither’, (8) ‘don’t know’, (9) ‘no answer’. Instructions ask the interviewer not to read out response categories (3), (8) and (9), thus putting pressure on the respondent to choose between freedom and equality. Answering that one equally values freedom and equality was not possible. (Statements A and B are both introduced in the same way: ‘I find that both freedom and equality are important.’)

Of all Europeans, 50% preferred freedom above equality, 40% preferred equality above freedom, 5% answered ‘neither’ and 5% answered ‘don’t know’ or gave no answer. Since the interviewers did not explicitly offer other response categories than freedom and equality, the low proportion of ‘neither’ and ‘don’t know’ answers is not surprising. There is, however, a large variation among the countries in the percentage of ‘don’t know’ and ‘neither’ answers. For instance, in the Czech Republic, Portugal and Switzerland, the ‘neither’ answers are about 10%, whereas they are only 1% in Kosovo and Hungary. In Finland and Sweden, the ‘neither’ category was not part of the questionnaire. In Azerbaijan, 34% of the respondents answered ‘neither’.

Two theoretical approaches

To my knowledge there exists no explicit theoretical background for the question. However, based on the literature I will offer two possible interpretations of the relationship between freedom and equality as political goals. The first is based on Rokeach’s value research, and the second derives from political philosophy.

Rokeach’s two-value model

Rokeach (1973) argued that the traditional left-right dimension was insufficient to grasp the political ideologies at that time. Instead, he proposed a model with two theoretically independent values: freedom and equality. If the two values are dichotomized, four combinations are possible. These are, according to Rokeach, (1) socialism = high equality and high freedom, (2) communism = high equality and low freedom, (3) capitalism = high freedom and low equality and (4) fascism = low freedom and low equality.