

MEANINGFUL CHOICES?

Voter perceptions of party positions in European Elections

Sylvia Kritzinger
Department of Methods in the Social Sciences
University of Vienna
E-mail: sylvia.kritzinger@univie.ac.at

&

Gail McElroy
Department of Political Science
Trinity College, Dublin
E-mail: mcelroy@tcd.ie

1. Introduction

Voting decision processes are complex. Over the years it has been variously asserted that voters choose one party or candidate over another on the basis of their group orientations (see Lazarsfeld et al. 1948), their emotional attachments to parties (see Campbell et al. 1960), their retrospective evaluations of incumbents' performances (Fiorina 1981; Kramer 1971) or on the basis of party policies (Downs 1957).¹ According to the latter, and by now dominant, proximity model, voters favor candidates that are close to them in policy space (usually reduced to one dimension). This conception of voting behavior has been incredibly influential in political science but "scholars have been hard pressed to demonstrate empirically that the perceived distance in policy space between a voter and a competing candidate is a key predictor of which candidate a voter will support" (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002: 20). The conditions for issue voting to take place are non-trivial, not only must voters have strong feelings about an issue, they must know their own position on the issue and they must also know the various competing parties positions on the same matter. Furthermore, parties must actually offer distinct positions. Where parties convey inconsistent or ambiguous messages about their positions, it will be nearly impossible for voters to establish where parties are located in policy space (Bowler 1990; Andeweg 1995). In this paper, we examine one small aspect of the issue-voting puzzle, whether or not voters in European elections can identify, with any degree of accuracy, the location of parties on the principal axes of competition. Furthermore, we explore which types of parties voters can locate most easily and speculate as to why some parties are easier to than others.

Collective agreement over the location of parties in policy space is generally viewed as a necessary (though far from sufficient) prerequisite for democratic representation (e.g. Dahlberg 2009; Wessels and Schmitt 2009; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2010).² If even modest levels of political accountability (e.g. as advocated by the responsible party model) are to be achieved, voters and elites should share relatively similar perceptions of party positions. Where voters cannot locate parties in policy space, meaningful mandates for

¹ Admittedly, this is an extremely parsimonious (even cartoonish) characterization of decades of voting behavior research and there are models not neatly encapsulated within these four overarching strands of research e.g. directional voting (MacDonald et al. 1991; Westholm 1997), strategic decision-making (Kedar 2005) and discounting models (Adams et al. 2005).

² And while perceptual agreement and perceptual accuracy are not the same, the former is needed if the latter is to be achieved.

parties to fulfill cannot be realized. And while there has been considerable research on projection effects in voter placement of parties (Merill et al. 2001), there has been surprisingly little research on the overall levels of agreement amongst voters or on the factors that facilitate such agreement (for exceptions see van der Brug 1998; van der Brug et al. 2008; Dahlberg 2009; Weber 2007; Wessels and Schmitt 2009; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2010). In this paper, we are interested in exploring the extent to which voters agreed on party positions at the time of the last European election. We find that there are systematic differences in perceptual agreement across the member states and parties themselves. We find that voters in the EU15 can agree, more readily on the placement of parties when compared with the newer member states and that extreme parties, in particular those on the left, are easier to locate.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: first we outline our theoretical expectations regarding voters' ability to place parties in European Parliament elections. Second, we present the measure of perceptual agreement and discuss the descriptive results. Next, we examine if there are systematic factors that can account for the variation in parties perceptual agreement scores. And finally we conclude with a brief discussion of potential problems and future avenues of research.

2. Theoretical Expectations

Even the most minimal definition of effective democratic representation requires some degree of congruence between citizens' preferences and policy outputs (Dahl 1997). For this to be achieved, parties must offer a reasonably broad range of alternatives at election time (see Rohrschneider and Whitefield (forthcoming)). To quote Dalton, "the essence of the democratic market-place is that like-minded voters and parties will search out each other and ally forces" (1985: 279). The implicit assumption here, and in spatial theories of voting in general, is that voters can identify parties' positions, compare them to their own positions and then choose the party closest to their ideal point. By extension, it follows that where voters do not possess a common understanding of where parties are located in the political

space, many will fail to choose a party that represents their views.³ Under these circumstances voters' decisions cannot be considered as *meaningful choices*. There should be an overarching collective agreement amongst voters on the placement of a given party (e.g. van der Eijk 2001; Converse 1964; 1975). Even if everyone can place the Liberal party on the Left-Right spectrum but they disagree fundamentally over this positioning, the full Downsian conception of issue voting cannot be said to be operational. So, even if we accept that voters are issue motivated, if they choose parties on the basis of fundamental misperceptions of parties' positions in political space the end result will be 'ineffective representation'. The literature on this topic is surprisingly sparse, as political scientists generally assume that voters are capable of this level of cognition, even allowing for the well-documented projection and assimilation effects.

Our paper scrutinizes the implicit assumption that voters can generally locate parties in policy space and examines in detail this small but crucial part of the democratic representation process. We ask whether or not voters can identify with any degree of accuracy the location of parties in European elections.⁴ The reasons for low or high perceptual agreement amongst citizens are undoubtedly, at the risk of understatement, complex: voter, party and structural factors will interact to affect the level of agreement. For instance, the less informed, the less educated, the less connected a voter is to a party, the less he or she is likely to be able to identify its position. Intra-voter differences are beyond the scope of this paper rather we simply explore (1) the differences between the member states in terms of the ability of voters to agree on party locations and (2) also the differences amongst parties themselves.

2.1 Which Policies?

The number of issues being addressed in any given political arena, even at a single point in time, is almost infinite and no voter, let alone any survey instrument, would be capable of assessing each party position on each issue. However, the complexity of the political space leads voters to take shortcuts and cues into account when *evaluating* parties (see Popkin

³ Note this is not to claim that such agreements are necessarily a precise reflection of a party's 'true' location.

⁴ We do not explore in this paper whether or not these perceptions are correct.

1991). The standard practice is to treat the policy space as unidimensional (typically left-right), which not only makes the placement of parties more tractable but some even argue analytically preferable (Hinich and Munger 1997). Furthermore, research has shown that these general ideological motivations are strong factors in predicting vote choice and better predictors than specific policy positions (e.g. van der Eijk et al. 1999).

We examine the placement of parties by survey respondents on two scales: the generic Left-Right (LR) one and the more specific European Integration (EI) dimension. While the Left-Right continuum is increasingly regarded as the main ideological dimension in the European political space (Tsebelis and Garrett 2000; Kreppel and Tsebelis 1999; McElroy and Benoit 2007; Hix et al. 2007),⁵ some scholars have described the European policy space as consisting of two dimensions, a left-right dimension and an orthogonal dimension of EU integration versus national sovereignty (Hix and Lord 1997). Furthermore, considering the political space simply in terms of Left-Right can lead to distortions such as the classic problem of where to place a fiscally conservative but socially liberal party (see Kriesi et al. 2008; van der Brug and van Spanje 2009). Especially in the context of elections to the European Parliament the exclusive focus on the national-driven Left-Right ideological dimension may neglect an important dimension on which (at least some) parties compete. Party policy with regard to the very process of European integration itself may be one of the main factors on which issue motivated voters cast their vote. Certainly, the rise of Euro-skeptic parties such as the British *United Kingdom Independence Party* (the second largest vote getter in 2009) or the Austrian *Freedom Party*, suggest that this is a politicized dimension in some countries.

Finally, and on a slightly different note, drawing from discussions on European Parliament elections as 2nd order in nature (e.g. Reif and Schmitt 1980; Marsh 1998) and of bigger questions about the democratic deficit, the descriptive question of whether or not citizens have any idea about the positions of parties on European Integration seems relevant. Schmitt (1995) demonstrated that voters do not have much idea as to where parties stand on European issues – even though they were generally prepared to express opinions on the matter. We therefore consider European voters ability to identify party

⁵ There is some disagreement over the issue with others arguing that geo-political pressures define the principal axis of competition (Hoffman 1966; Moravcsik 1998).

positions on the EU integration dimension as important of itself and it is worth examining whether the situation has changed in the past 15 years (since Schmitt's analysis). Has the rise of Euro-skeptic parties, European political groups and the decline of the permissive consensus led to increased voter knowledge about party positions on EU integration?⁶

2.2. Degrees of collective agreement

In an ideal world, parties would have high collective agreement scores on both the Left Right and EU dimensions and we have no strong theoretical expectations as to which dimension will generate higher scores. Consider for instance the Left-Right scale: on the one hand, the reductionism of parties' positions to Left-Right is very common (e.g. in media coverage), so voters should be familiar with these cues. Previous research (Benoit and Laver 2006) has also found that this dimension represents well the national policy spaces. On the other, the meaning of Left-Right is contested and partially contradictory so we might expect some confusion on the part of voters. If we consider the placement of parties on the EU dimension, one the on hand it is far less publicized, even in European elections, but on the other hand the meaning of this dimension is less contested.

More generally, competition in European elections takes place on two different continuums that do not neatly coincide (Hooghe et al. 2004) and the political space is structured by different discourses. Following from this, we expect that voters' collective agreement will vary from country to country and from party to party. All in all, we expect that voters are more likely to collectively identify the European integration position of Euro-skeptic parties or parties that only compete in European elections, while for mainstream, established national parties voters should show more likely common agreements on the Left-Right continuum.⁷

⁶ In individual countries of the EU there are, of course, other salient dimensions on which parties compete, for instance attitudes to immigration have been found to be highly salient in Austria. Nonetheless, research has shown that L-R is a good proxy for the overall policy space in most member states (Benoit and Laver 2006) and the more specific attitude to European Integration is relevant in European elections. Not to mention none of these issues are included in the EES!

⁷ For a definition of mainstream and niche party see Ezrow (2010) who defines mainstream parties as Social Democratic, Christian Democratic, Conservative and Liberal, and niche parties as parties on the extreme left, the extreme right or distinctly noncentrist (e.g. Communists, Right-wing, Nationalist, Green, Ethno-regionalist).

2.3. Collective agreement and party characteristics

While descriptive analyses of collective agreement scores will provide us with a first important overview (1) of voters' ability to identify the nature of the European political space, and (2) some partial insights into the quality of 'choice sets' (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2010), we are also interested in exploring analytically what influences the variation in agreements among political parties. Voters' likelihood of expressing agreement on party positions should be closely connected to the structure of the supply side, that is, the nature of party competition itself (see Wessels 2002; Wessels and Schmitt 2009). Where parties provide distinct cues, voters should be more likely to collectively agree on party positions. Where parties provide ambiguous signals, voters will have greater difficulty in positioning them. Wessels (2002) has shown that there is a connection between party level factors (for instance the effective numbers of parties) and voters' ability to connect party and policy. On the other hand, Wessels and Schmitt (2006) find that the party level characteristics do not impact voters' significantly on evaluations of party positions. In this area of research, where results are conflicting, we extend the analyses by the inclusion of a greater array of party level variables, such as the age of the party, party family, the party's extremism and whether or not a party is an incumbent to see if we can identify the factors that makes it easier for voters to place some parties in policy space compared with others.

3. Perceptual Agreements

3.1 Data and Measure

In the following analyses we use the newly released data from the European Election Study of 2009 (EES09) to examine whether or not there is agreement, among the electorates of Europe, on the placement of parties in policy space. This election study was conducted in the immediate aftermath of the elections of June 2009 in each of the 27 member states of the European Union.⁸ In what follows, we draw on the two questions that ask respondents to identify the location of parties on two dimensions: Left Right and European Integration.

⁸ Circa 1.000 respondents were interviewed in each country. In the EU15 all surveys were conducted via Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) whilst in seven of the newer member states (Bulgaria, Czech

1) For LR positions the question was worded as follows:

In political matters people talk of “the left” and “the right”. About where would you place the following parties on this scale? Please indicate your views using any number on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means “left” and 10 means “right”.

2) For European Integration the question reads as follows:

Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. About where would you place the following parties on this scale? Please indicate your views using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means unification ‘has already gone too far’ and 10 means it ‘should be pushed further’.

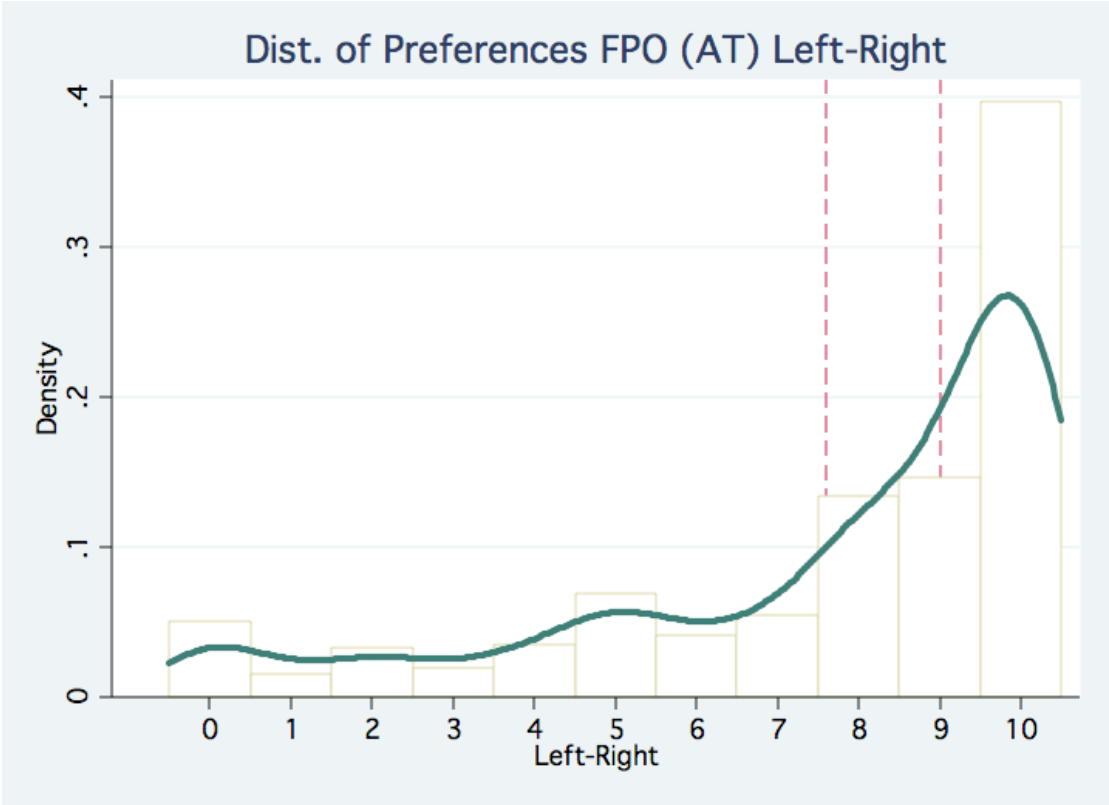
Using responses to these two questions we calculate perceptual agreement scores for each political party according to the measure devised by van der Eijk (2001). The advantage of this measure is that it takes into account the voters’ placement of parties on a given dimension in terms of both the skew of the voter dispersion and also the modality (unimodal, bimodal etc.) of the distribution.

Measuring party positions has become something of a cottage industry in political science in recent years, such is the demand for point estimates. There are many different ways of deriving ideal points: expert surveys, roll call vote analysis, text analysis or manifesto coding. But the use of the mean or median placement of voters of a party (or subset of voters such as self-identifying partisans) remains one of the most popular methods (see Macdonald et al. 1991). This is due, in part, to the ease of calculating these measures, their direct comparability with voters’ self-placement scores and also the availability of comparable cross national data. However, where the data is non-normally distributed, the use of such methods to produce party positions can be misleading and the choice of the mean or median can be critical. To illustrate this point, Figure 1 maps the density of respondent placement of the FPÖ (Austria) on the Left-Right scale from the EES09. The distribution is heavily left (negatively) skewed and the mean placement of the party is 7.6, whilst the median placement is 9 and the modal response is actually 10. On an 11-point scale

Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia) the sample was split between Face to Face Interviewing (70%) and the CATI method (30%).

these differences in measurement of the party's position are substantial and the choice of one over another can have far reaching effects in statistical and substantive analyses.⁹

Figure 1: Distribution of Preferences FPÖ (AT) on L-R

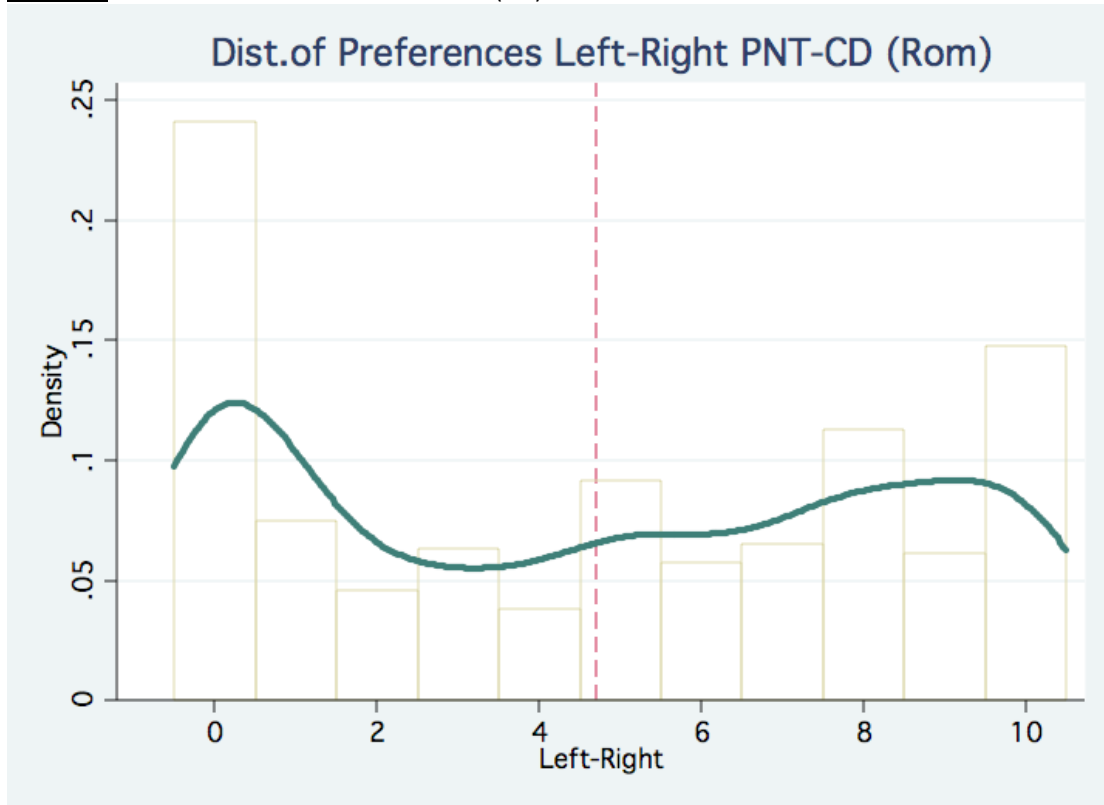


Furthermore, where data is not unimodal the use of means and medians can be deceptive. At the extreme, in a uniform distribution the median and mean are essentially meaningless, even though both measures are equivalent.¹⁰ A uniform distribution of party placement is perhaps better interpreted as indicating voters have no idea where a party belongs on a particular dimension. For instance, Figure 2 maps the distribution of voter placement of the PNT-CD (Romania), and while there is a slight peak around 0, the distribution approximates a uniform distribution far better than a unimodal one.

⁹ Such skewedness also affects measures such as standard deviation.

¹⁰ Where A and B represent the minimum and maximum value of the scale $Mean/Median = (A + B)/2$ in a uniform distribution. There is no mode in such cases.

Figure 2: Distribution of Preferences PNT-CD (RO) on L-R



Figures 3 and 4 illustrate other common types of distribution encountered in the EES09 data. The mapping of the *British National Party* (BNP) on the L-R scale suggests a bimodal distribution with peaks at the extremes of zero and ten and the mapping of the PDS-CC in Portugal is perhaps best described as tri-modal. In general, aggregate statistics like *mean*, *median* and *standard deviations* from the mean are not detailed enough when data is non-symmetrically distributed.

Figure 3: Distribution of Preferences BNP (UK) on L-R

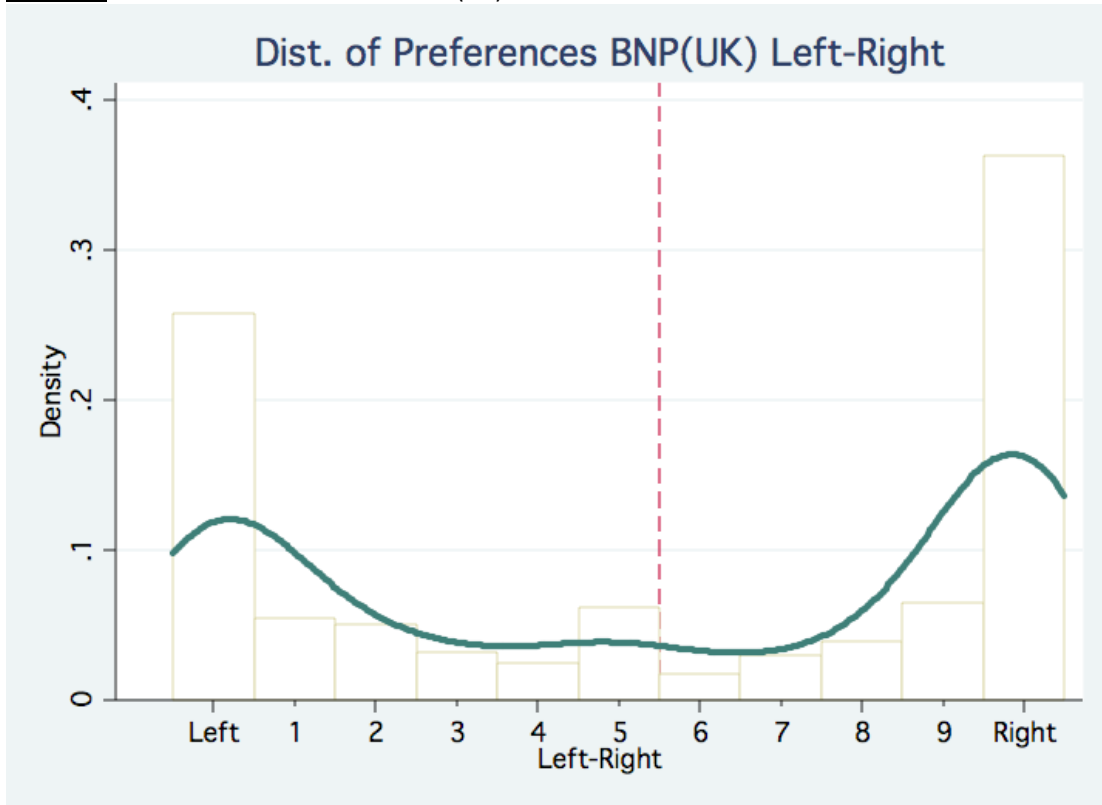
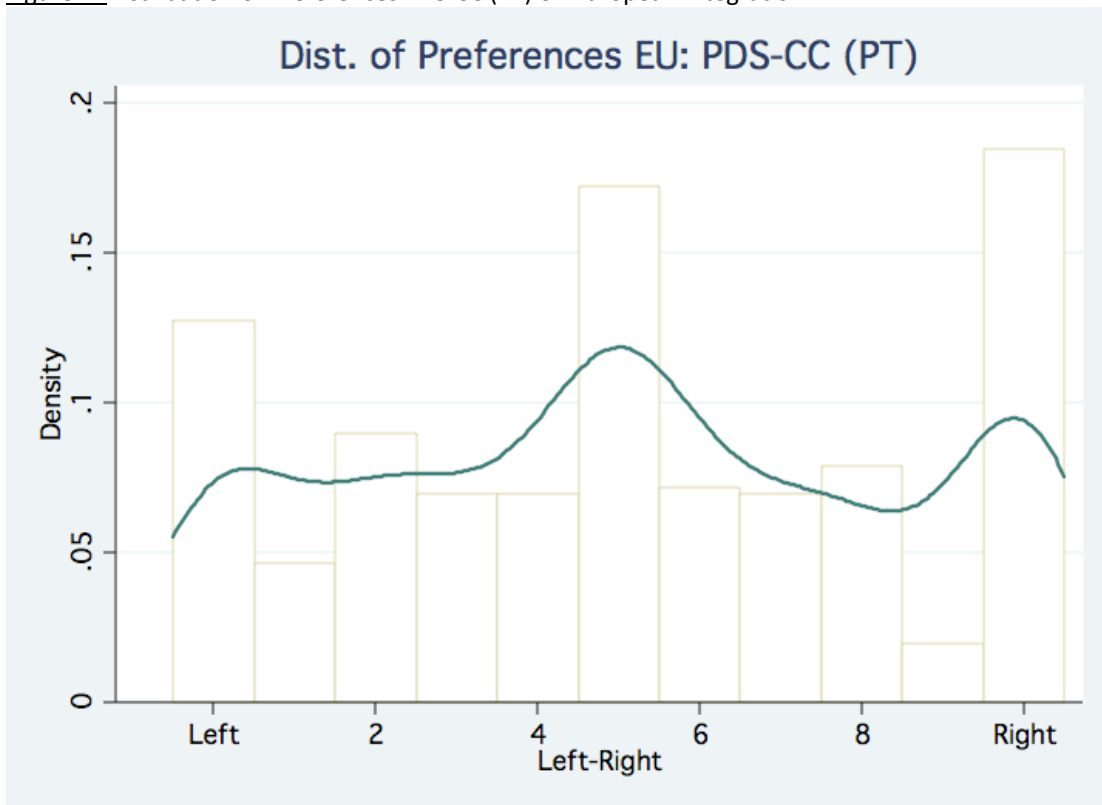


Figure 4: Distribution of Preferences PDS-CC (PT) on European Integration



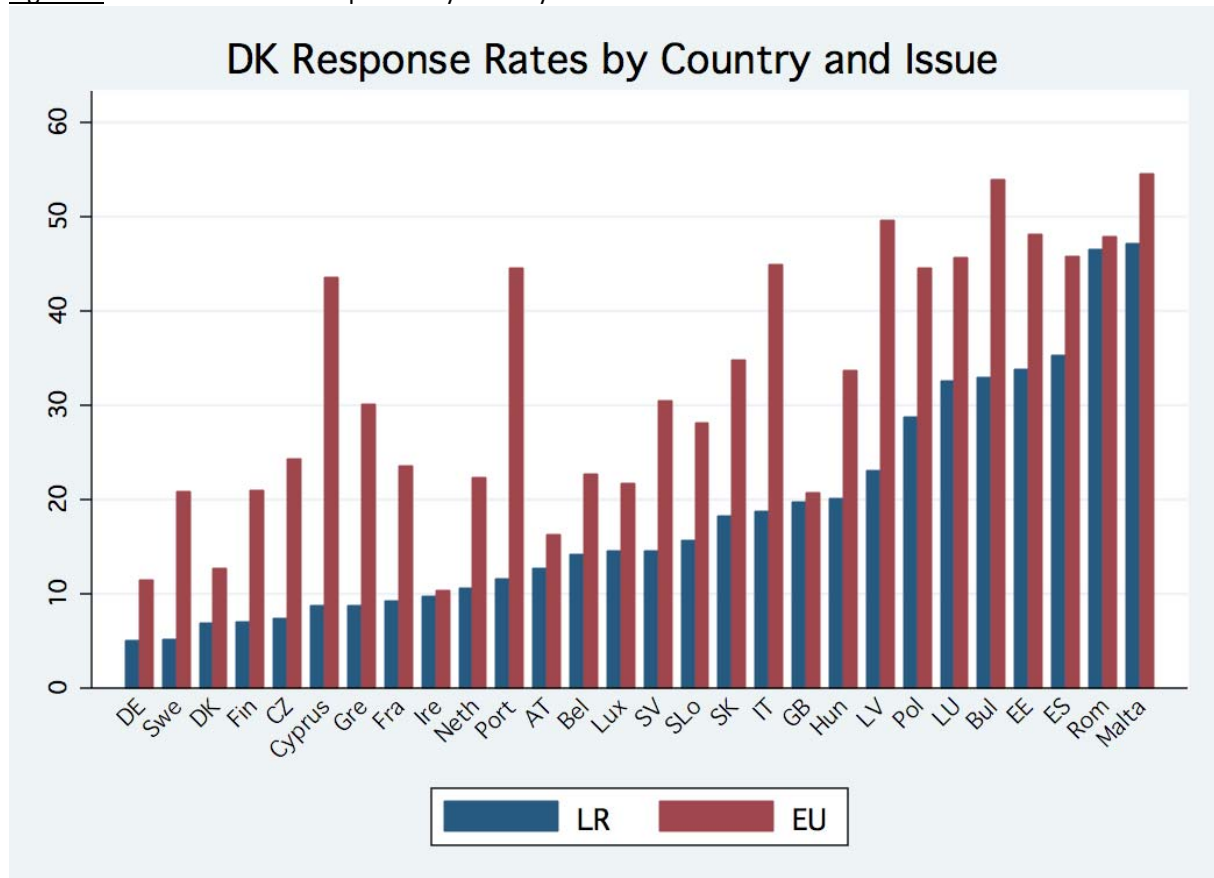
The perceptual agreement (PA) measure used in this paper overcomes several of these problems and ranges from a minimal value of -1 to a maximum value of +1. A score of -1 indicates that half the respondents place a party at one extreme of a scale (0 in this instance) while the other half place them at the opposite extreme (10 in our data). In the figures discussed above, the BNP is an example of this type of distribution. Clearly respondents are uncertain as to whether this is an extreme left or right-wing party. A score of 0 suggest a uniform distribution along the scale while a score approaching 1 indicates that all respondents are in agreement as to where to place the party. The PA score, thus, assesses the collective perceptions of voters, it evaluates to what degree they hold a common understanding of the party positions and overall policy space in a country (van der Eijk 2001).¹¹

3.2 A note on the issue of *Don't Know* responses

Before we commence our analysis of PA scores in the next section, we have a caveat regarding the rather high incidence of 'Don't Know' (DK) responses in the EES09 on the two questions of interest. If we are truly interested in whether or not voters share a common perception of policy space, it is not merely an inconvenience if many respondents feel insufficiently informed to even attempt to place a party on either dimension. Figure 5 illustrates the alarmingly high occurrence of DK responses to both questions in some countries in the dataset.

¹¹ The scores were calculated using an Excel based macro courtesy of Cees van der Eijk.

Figure 5: Mean *Don't Know* Responses by Country and Issue



We observe that in most Western European countries voters' attempt to place the parties' on the L-R dimension, the mean DK response is less than 10 percent. Germany has the lowest rate of DK response for this dimension, the mean rate is less than 6 percent. However, in Central and Eastern Europe this is not the case. In countries such as Romania, upwards of 50 percent of respondents fail to place the parties.¹² When examining European positions we see a more mixed picture across Europe: voters in general have greater difficulty expressing views on this dimension with very high DK rates witnesses even in founding member states such as Italy.

In general, these results reflect poorly on the capacity of voters to place parties and suggest that we should treat perceptual agreement scores with some caution. In some instances, the PA score we derive exclude a majority of the sample (when one includes refusal to answer the question). Unfortunately, while the PA measure has many attractive features it cannot be weighted to include DK responses. Given that it is a common finding in

¹² And this holds across all parties in the system.

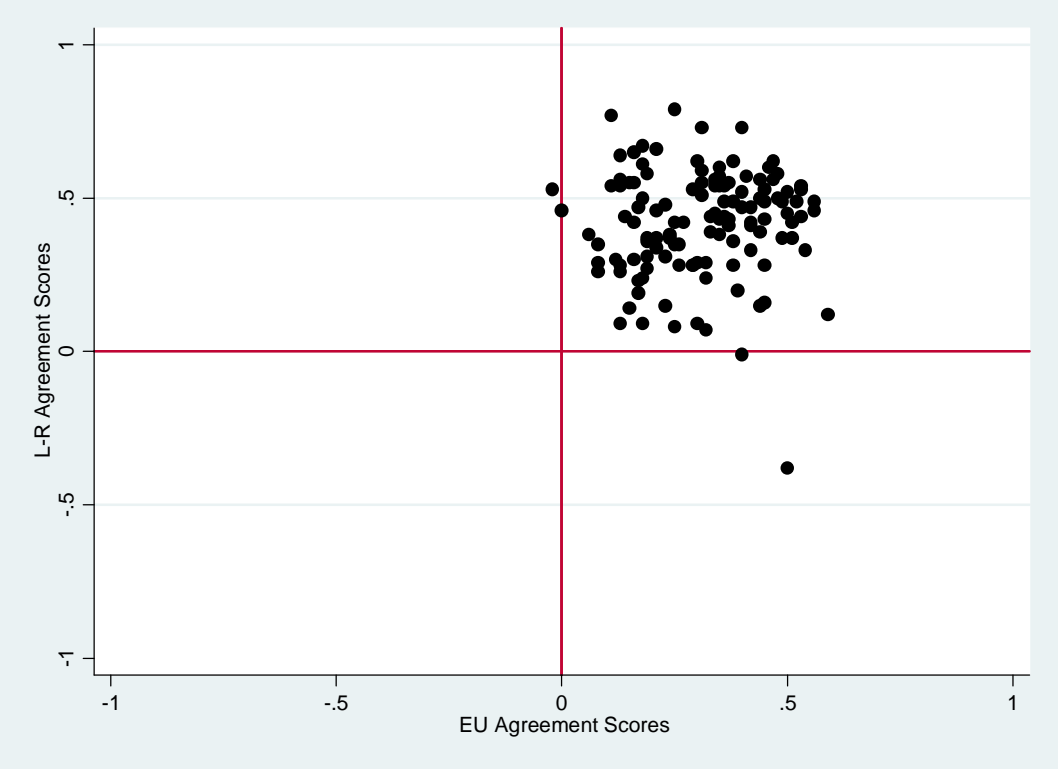
psychological research that individuals believe they know more than they actually do (e.g. Allwood and Montgomery 1987; Griffin and Tversky 1992; Nisbett and Ross 1980) these DK rates are particularly worrisome. Larger questions connected to issue voting cannot ignore this. If half of a country's population (as represented by survey respondents) feels incapable of even placing a party on a major axis of competition, the idea of proximity voting is severely tested.

3.3 Descriptive Analyses

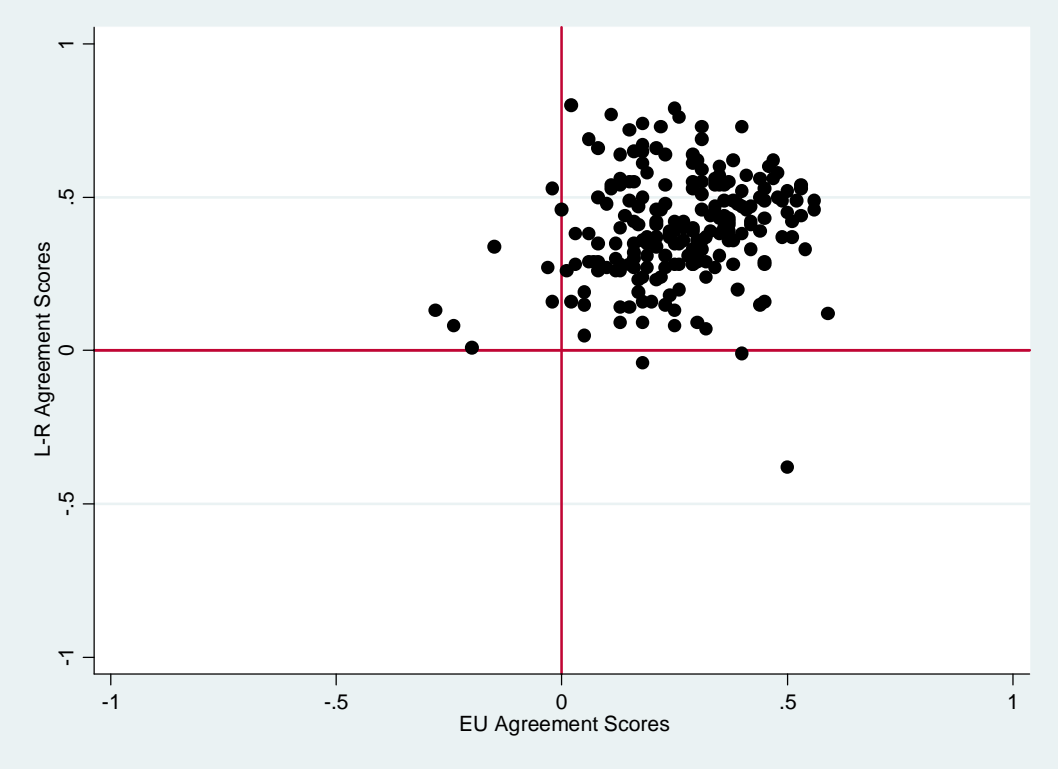
With this (rather considerable) caveat in mind, we proceed to examine the collective agreement scores at the timing of the 2009 European election. Graph 1 examines the PA scores for parties in the EU15, Graph 2 for parties in the EU27. As we can see from the Graph 1, most parties in the EU15 have PA scores above zero on both dimensions, though very few approach the figure of complete agreement of 1. Recall that scores close to 0 suggest a uniform distribution of placement while figures approaching -1 suggest a bimodal distribution at the extremes of the scale. Interestingly, we can also observe that we do not observe major differences between the L-R and the European Integration positioning. Eyeballing this graph suggests two preliminary findings: first voters do not hold strong collective agreements about parties' positions, but second, this is, perhaps surprisingly, the case for both for the L-R and European integration dimensions.

Adding Central and Eastern European parties to the mix (Graph 2), we observe that the scatter plot is stretched towards lower (even negative) agreement scores both on the L-R and the European continuum. Particularly, for the European continuum we observe very low and quite a few negative results. In the newer member states it appears, at least, that these two dimensions are not ones on which voters can easily agree about party positions. Combining these results with the high non-response rates in Central and Eastern Europe a troublesome picture concerning proximity voting models emerges.

Graph 1: Perceptual Agreement Scores on the L-R and European Integration Continuum (EU15)

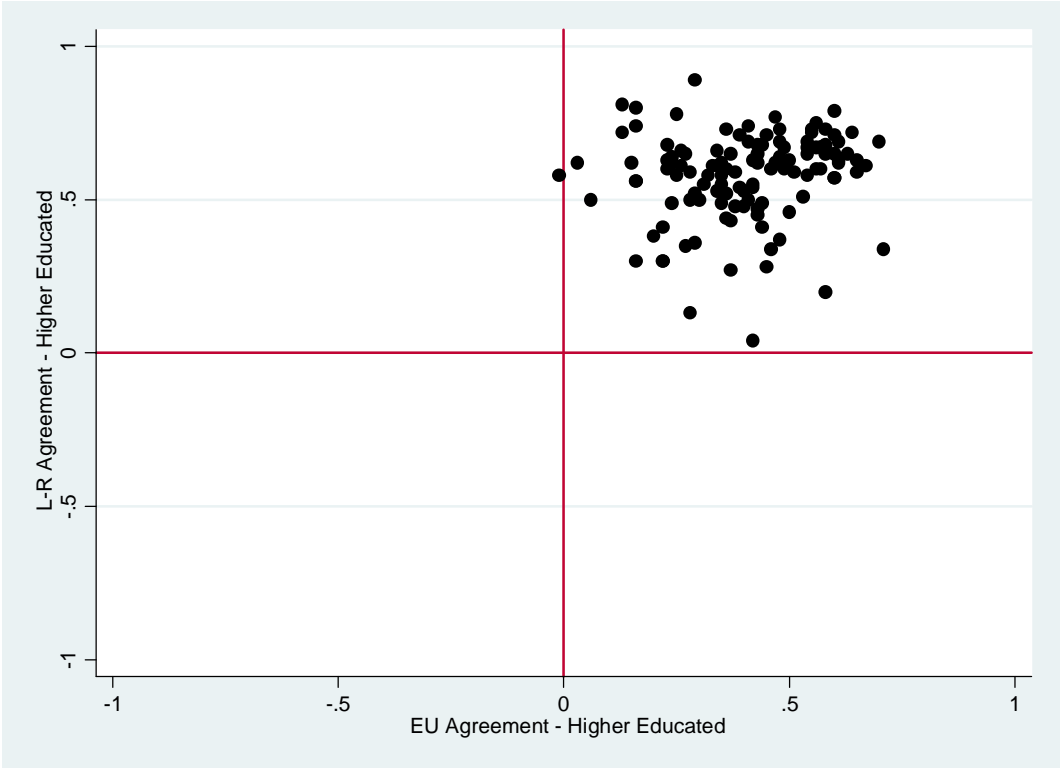


Graph 2: Perceptual Agreement Scores on the L-R and European Integration Continuum (EU27)



Locating parties' positions may be connected with a high level of voter cognition and to examine this possibility we also conducted the analyses with the subset of the mostly highly educated respondents in the EU15.¹³ The PA scores do improve rather significantly with this sample (see Graph 3). Where the scores in Graph 1 (only EU15) mostly accumulated in the square between 0.5 on the L-R and 0.5 on the European integration continuum, now most parties are above the 0.5 line on LR positions. On the European integration continuum we continue to see poor perceptual agreement scores, there are still many parties below the 0.5 threshold.

Graph 3: Perceptual Agreement Scores on the L-R and European Integration Continuum amongst higher educated respondents



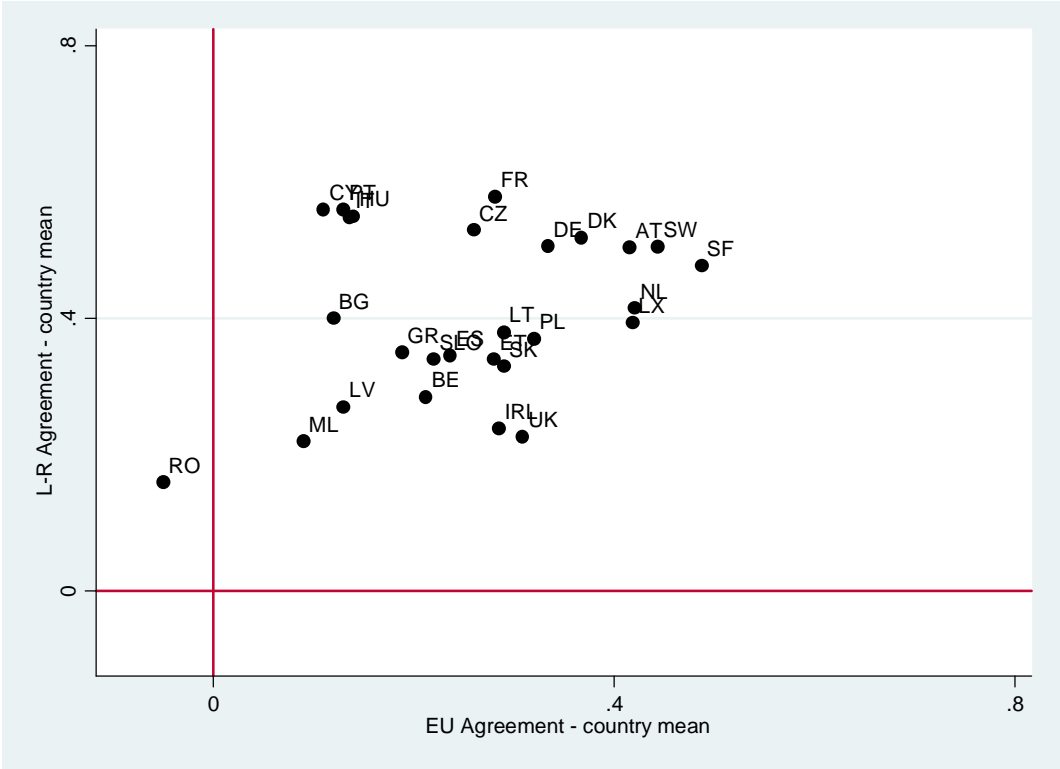
In general, voters (at least voters with higher education) agree to a large extent where to position political parties in the old EU member states on the LR dimensions. The often claimed 'communication device' of the LR dimensions seems to be reasonably effective for

¹³ We restricted this sample to all those respondents with a bachelor's university education or higher. The percentage of respondents falling into category was rather low in some countries, less than 8 percent, and nowhere reached above 20 percent of the total. This is a very select sub-sample.

this set of voters.¹⁴ Nevertheless, there are still significant variations both within and between countries.

Calculating the mean of the perceptual agreement scores per country we obtain general party locations per country (see Graph 4). In the EU15, Greece, Spain, Belgium, Ireland and UK display low agreement scores on both continuums. Meanwhile, in countries such as Portugal, Italy and to a certain extent France voters have a collective grip on parties' positions on the L-R continuum but not on the European Integration one. Voters in the other countries achieve medium collective identification on both continuums. In the newer member states meanwhile we observe Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia, Estonia and Slovenia located around 0.4 on both scales. While the Czech Republic and Cyprus do well on the L-R continuum but less on the European one. The remaining newer member states perform very poorly on both dimensions. In Romania even the mean of the PA scores on the European continuum is negative.

Graph 4: PA-Scores on the L-R and European Integration Continuum (country means)

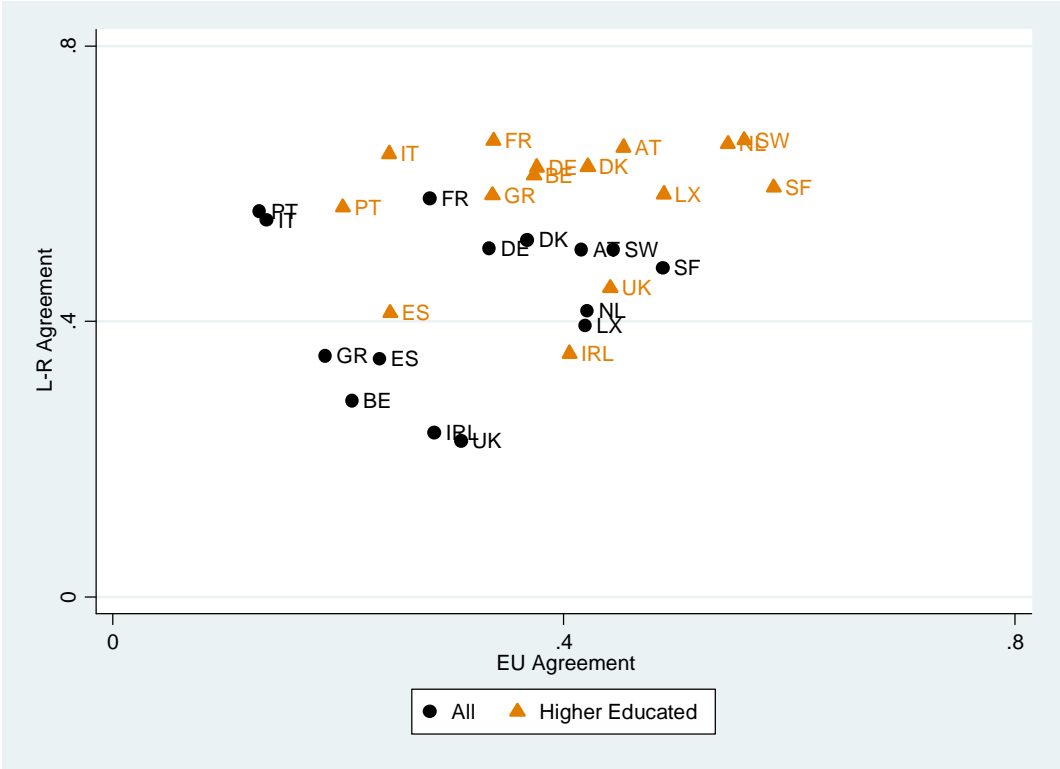


When we compare the means of all voters with the mean of voters with higher education we observe – as Graph 3 already indicated – that the agreement scores rise

¹⁴ These results echo the findings of Alvarez and Nagler (2004).

substantially (see Graph 5). In all countries the mean positions increase diagonally upwards into the right hand corner: both agreement on the L-R and the European integration increases. The effect of education seems to be particularly notable in countries such as the UK, Belgium, Greece and the Netherlands where we find substantial higher agreement scores among those with a university degree. In countries such as Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands, higher educated voters display very high agreement scores on both continuums.

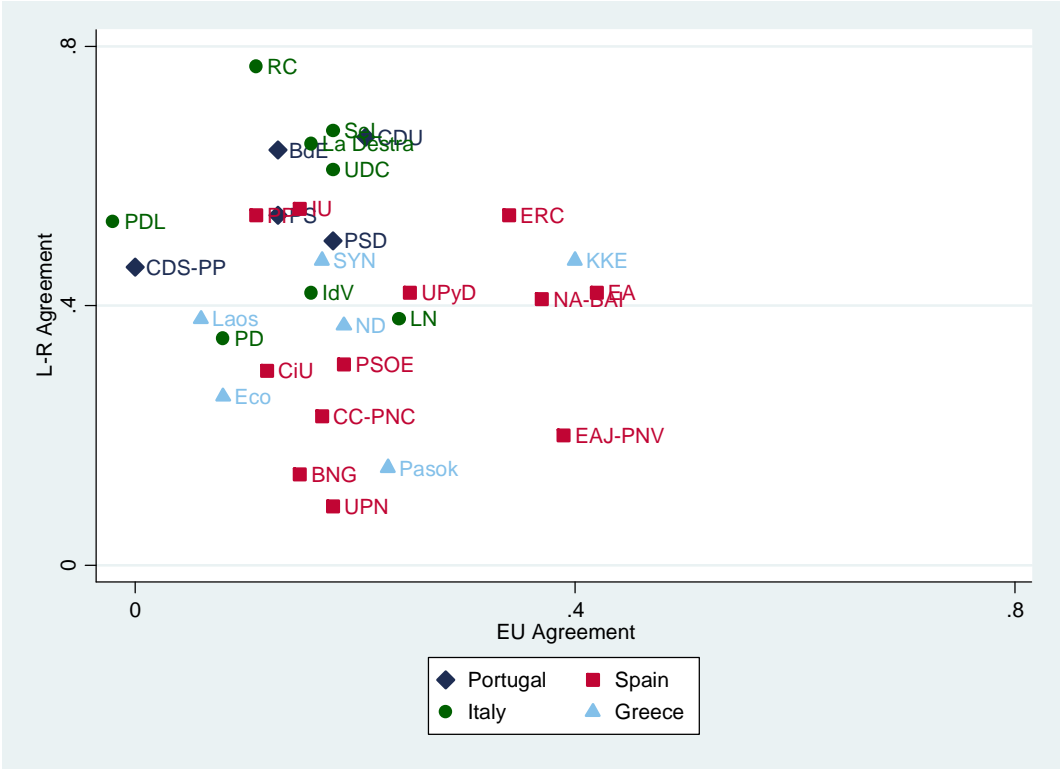
Graph 5: PA-Scores on the L-R and European Integration Continuum (country means all voters versus higher educated voters)



For ease of presentation, Graphs 6 to 9 illustrate individual party differences in subsets of countries. For the first set of countries in Southern Europe (Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece) we observe the main differences between Spanish and Greek parties on the one hand, and Italian and Portuguese parties on the other hand. While the voters’ can place the latter parties rather well on the L-R continuum, this is not the case for the former ones. Most surprisingly are the cases of the Greek PASOK and the Spanish PSOE (both traditional social-democratic parties); voters do not share common perceptions of their place on what would

be generally taken as their most salient axis of competition. Unsurprisingly, parties are far less likely to be collectively identified on the European integration dimension with Berlusconi's *Popolo della Libertà* (PDL) even achieving a negative value (likewise with the Portuguese Peoples' Party). Exceptions are the Greek Communist party as well as the Spanish regional parties, which appear to convey their EU position quite strongly.

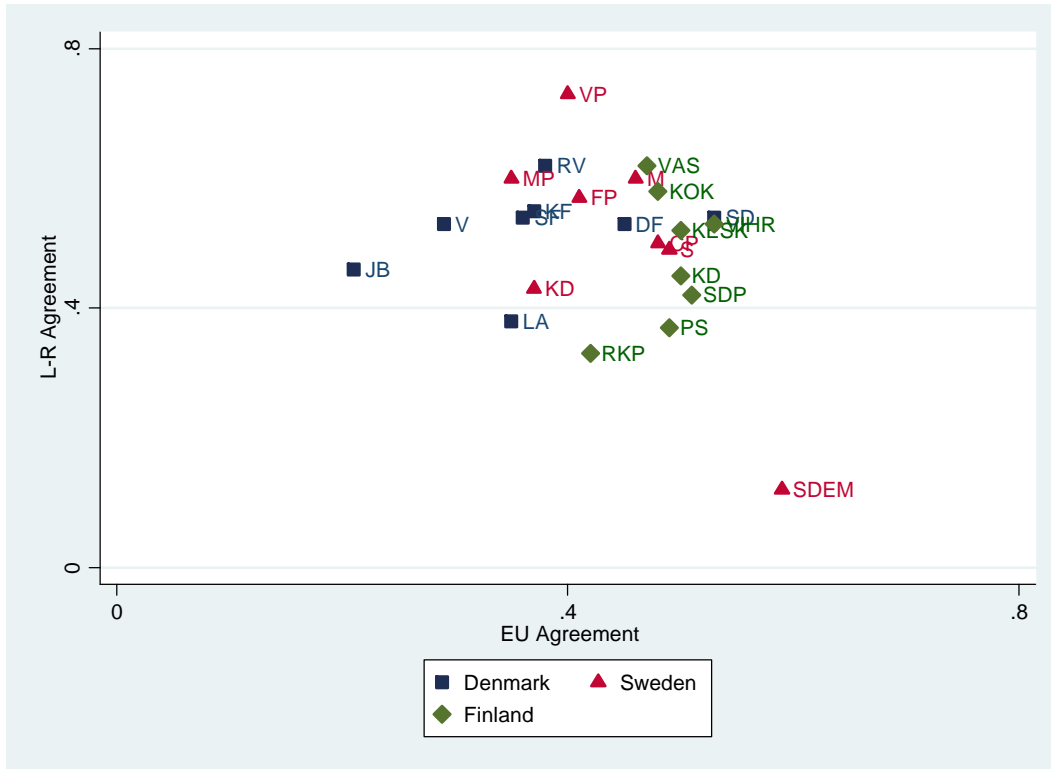
Graph 6: PA-Scores L-R and European Integration Continuum: Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece



A rather different picture emerges in the Scandinavian countries where voters' agreements on both continuums are, in general, rather high. Exceptions are the Swedish *Sverigedemokraterna* (SDEM) – a highly Euro-skeptic party – which does however do well in terms of European Integration. Oddly, the *JuniBevægelsen* (JB), a Danish Euro-skeptic party which only competed at the supranational level displays more agreement on the L-R dimension that on European integration.¹⁵

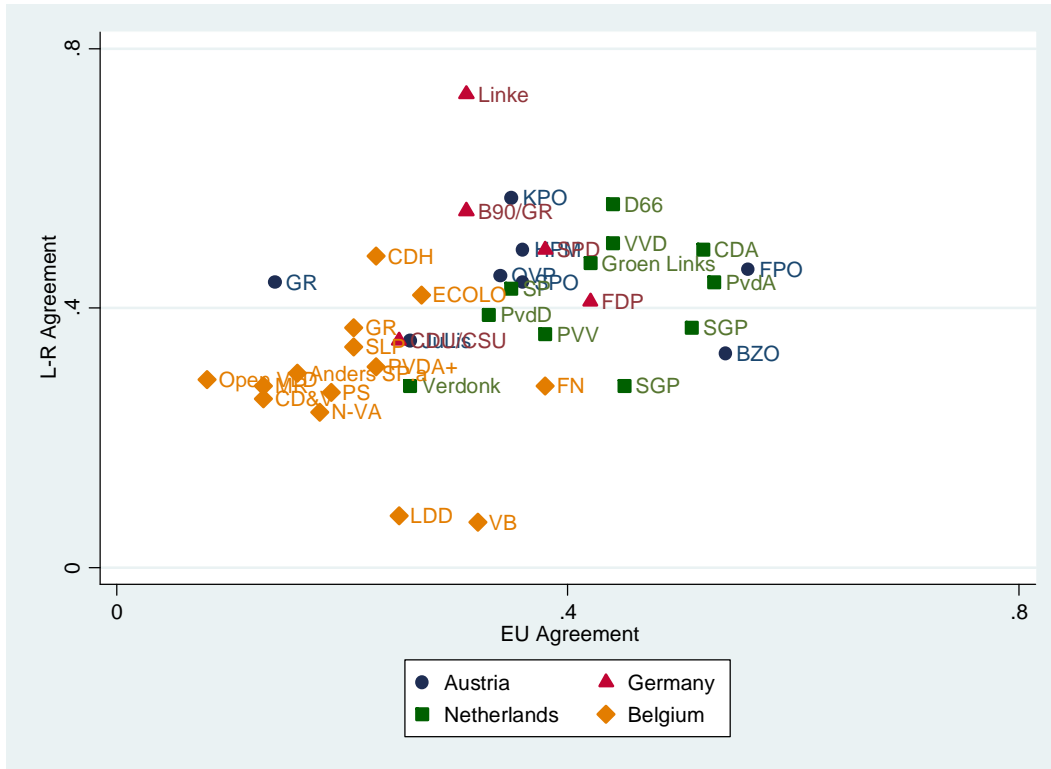
¹⁵ The party disbanded after a disastrous Election performance in 2009.

Graph 7: PA-Scores L-R and European Integration Continuum: Denmark, Sweden, Finland



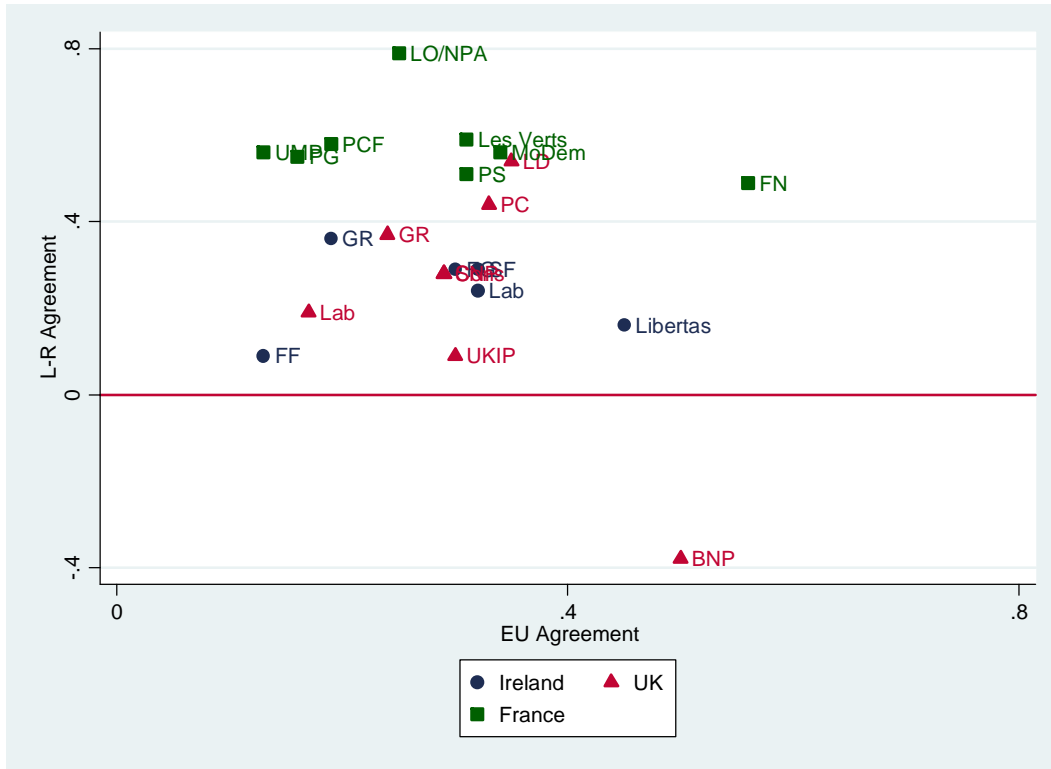
When examining the graph of the parties of ‘continental Europe’ (Graph 8), we find a positive linear distribution by country, with the Belgian parties faring worst in terms of PA scores on these two dimensions. The two continuums may simply not be relevant for Belgian voters. For the Netherlands we observe the opposite: positive agreement scores with parties collectively identified on both continuums. Particularly the main Dutch parties (PvDA, VVD, D66, CDA, Groen Links) do well. Meanwhile, in Germany the L-R continuum is a useful device for collective identification, the European continuum to a lesser extent. Surprisingly, the CDU/CSU is not particularly well identified on either of the two dimensions. In Austria we see a dispersed picture: while the two Euro-skeptic and right-wing parties FPÖ and BZÖ can be located easily on the European continuum (but oddly not Liste Hans Peter Martin, a party which only competes in the European elections), this is not the case for the Greens or the two mainstream parties SPÖ and ÖVP. The latter do however perform well on the LR continuum.

Graph 8: PA-Scores L-R and European Integration Continuum: Austria, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands



Finally, let us turn to the UK, Ireland and France (Graph 9). Most noteworthy is the result for the British BNP: voters agree very highly on their European position but there is great disagreement as to where to locate the party on the L-R continuum. In general, British voters can hardly agree on any party position. Both the Labour Party and the Conservatives score low on the European continuum but also on the LR continuum. Unsurprisingly, the French parties feature high collective agreement scores on the LR continuum perhaps due to the strong historical division on this dimension. The *Front National* meanwhile achieves a very high agreement score on the European continuum as well. Ireland presents low agreement scores on both continuums. This is not surprising considering the fact that the political distinction between Left and Right is of lower importance and thus perceptions might be more easily distorted. Though for the European continuum results are surprising (exception Libertas): in the aftermath of several EU referendums a collective agreement on parties' positions might have been expected.

Graph 9: PA-Scores L-R and European Integration Continuum: UK, Ireland, France



What conclusions can we draw from these preliminary analyses? First, the analysis suggests that data used to calculate any kind of voter-party distance needs to be evaluated carefully. High rates of non-response undermine the validity of using the data and raise questions about the extent of issue voting in some countries. Second, we can observe that voters’ collective agreement over parties’ positions varies significantly across countries and parties. While in most ‘Continental’ European and Scandinavian countries agreement scores on both continuums are rather high, this is simply not the case in the remaining countries (at least on these two dimensions). Furthermore, the evidence suggests that voters are better at agreeing on party’s positions on the LR continuum. This is particularly the case for extreme left parties (the inheritors of Communism) such as the Italian RC, the Swedish VP, the French LO/NPA and the German Linke. On the other hand, right-wing parties are more likely to be placed in a common position on the European dimension: the Austrian FPÖ and BZÖ, the British BNP, the Swedish SDEM, Ireland’s Libertas or the French FN. Surprisingly, however, we notice that the social democratic parties – and here particularly the Southern European ones, but also the British and Irish Labour Parties do not have high collective agreement scores. Third, the very low perceptual agreement scores for some parties indicate that, at a minimum, Left-Right and European Integration do not appear to be the basis on which issue

voting takes place. On the one hand, it may simply be the case that in some countries such as Belgium or Spain the decisive programmatic positions do not run along the LR and the EU continuums and we might find higher PA scores on alternative dimensions such as the regional or nationalist continuums (a question which can only be explored with national election data). On the other hand, certain parties may not convey clear issue positions to their voters and their voter base is not well captured by proximity voting models. A final conclusion focuses on the agreement scores of more educated voters, which in general tend to be much higher. This result suggests that where scholars are using voters' responses on placement scales to extricate measures of party positions they should probably restrict the analysis to subsets of voters.¹⁶

4. Party Characteristics

In this final section of the paper we explore, briefly, the differences in perceptual agreement scores across parties in the EU15.¹⁷ To analyze the influence of party related factors on our dependent variables (the actual PA score), we created a dataset of a variety of party characteristics that might help explain why one party does better in terms of collective placement compared with another.

4.1 Independent Variables

We included information on *Party Age* as we anticipate that, all else equal, the older a party the more likely voters will be able to identify it with specific policies. Voters will be less likely to recognize new parties and place them in policy space. The information on party age

¹⁶ Admittedly, the subset of party supporters is sometimes used to extricate party positions, however, with party identification rates declining, the numbers willing to so identify is getting lower and lower. In the EES09 many parties had fewer than five respondents (and in some cases not a single one) willing to admit that they were close to Party X.

¹⁷ The choice of the EU15 is partly motivated by data availability issues but also these countries, typically, have more institutionalized party systems, longer EU membership and far lower DK responses on the party placement scales. In future work we will extend the analysis to newer member states.

was garnered from a contextual dataset provided by PIREDEU¹⁸ and reflects the age of a party in 2009.

H1: Older parties will have higher PA scores than younger parties, all else, equal.

The party's vote share in the most recent national election (prior to June 2009) is taken as an indicator of its *Size*. We anticipate that larger parties will be easier to place accurately, all else equal, as they will generally get the lion's share of media coverage. However, we allow for the possibility that such parties attempt to appeal to broader audiences and as such may send less clear messages to voters – classic Kirchheimerian 'catch-all' parties (1966).¹⁹ The data was gathered from a variety of official national agencies and websites such as www.electionresources.org.²⁰

H2a: Party size affects perceptual agreement scores positively.

H2b: Party size affects perceptual agreement scores negatively.

The variable *Incumbency* captures whether or not the party was an incumbent at the time of the election. We anticipate that incumbent parties are more difficult to place, all else equal, due to their inability to provide distinct programmatic party positions in their government functions.²¹

H3: Incumbent parties, all else equal, will have lower PA scores.

¹⁸ PIREDEU is a collaborative Project on "Providing an Infrastructure for Research on Electoral Democracy in the European Union" funded by the European Union's 7th Framework Programme.

¹⁹ Of course the effect of party size may be non-linear, with mid size parties faring worst.

²⁰ Where parties ran as a coalition of parties for the European elections, their joint size is recorded. Where parties only ran in the European elections, we listed their size from the European election itself rather than recording a zero.

²¹ This applies particularly to parties in coalition governments. However, we cannot explore this distinction in this paper.

We also include a variable to capture the effects of *Party Extremism* as we anticipate that more extreme parties are easier to place, than those with more moderate views. To capture extremism we make use of two different measures. The first measure captures the *Distance from the Mean* on the dimension in question. We use recent expert surveys to identify the ‘real’ positions of political parties on each of the two dimensions in our study.²² In addition, to the absolute distance we also use a directional measure of distance from the mean, to capture the possibility that the distance effects are not equal for right and left wing parties. Second, we also use a measure of *Ideological Family* to capture extremism. While party family is a crude summary measure of a party’s general orientation, it does have the advantage, unlike the expert scores, of being applicable to more parties in our database. We lose over 20% of our cases with the expert survey based measure, as they have not been included in recent expert surveys.²³ The identification of parties with particular party families is notoriously difficult but we make use of the information from the contextual dataset of PIREDEU, which draws heavily on country experts to code parties as Communist, Green, Liberal, Social Democrat, Christian Democrat, Green or Radical Right. We also added an additional variable to this measure to capture Euro-skeptic parties. While this variable overlaps heavily with the Radical Right category it is not identical. Parties such as the British UKIP or the Austrian HPM, while Euro-skeptic, are not best described as radical right but do, nonetheless, offer a distinct European message.

H4a: Parties with extreme views on the left and right of the political spectrum should have higher PA scores, all else equal.

H4b: Euro-skeptic parties should have higher PA scores on the EU dimension.

²² Specifically, we take the absolute distance of a given party from the weighted mean placement. We used the Chapel-Hill expert survey conducted in 2006 to create this variable. This particular dataset covers a larger selection of parties competing in the 2009 election than alternatives such as the Benoit and Laver (2006) survey.

²³ Almost 40% of the parties competing are not covered by Benoit and Laver.

We also include several control variables in our analyses. As discussed above the high rates of DK responses are not captured in the PA measure and for knowledge questions this seems particularly relevant, we therefore control for the number of missing (DK) responses per party, per dimension, calling the variable *Uncertainty*. The problem with DKs is that responses both “reflect two systematic factors: knowledge and propensity to guess” (Mondak 2001: 225). We expect that high rates of DK responses indicate an element of guessing on the part of those who do place the party.

Finally, it is well established that European elections are second order in nature and that campaign effects are generally much weaker than in national competitions. We thus control for the effect of national election campaigns on perceptual agreement scores (Weber 2007). Where campaigns are intense (as in national elections) voter information should increase and this should have a positive effect on voters’ ability to identify party positions. Hence the nearer the European Election is to the national election, the higher the expected PA score (all else equal). This effect should be particularly evident for the L-R continuum. We adopt Reif’s measure (1984) which expresses on a scale of 0-1 the time-span between an EP election and the preceding national election, controlling for the length of the legislative session in the member state. We also include the square of this term to capture any non-linear impacts, such that when a European election is held in the middle of a national election cycle, the effects should be weakest.²⁴

We ran three separate OLS models on each of the two dependent variables (L-R agreement score and European agreement score).²⁵ The first model considers mostly *traditional* party characteristics such as party age, party size, whether the party is in government or opposition and the extremism of the party as measured by the expert surveys. The second model replaces the expert survey extremism measure with the parties’ ideological families, and the final model takes into consideration the timing of the European election relative to the national electoral cycle.

²⁴ It should be noted that this variable is not party specific but is rather country specific. Other potential structural variables that could be included in the model are the effective number of parties, overall polarization of the party system or the nature of the electoral system (see Wessels 2002). While we have gathered data on all these variables we omit them from the analysis as these all vary at the system level and we may be mistaking group level correlations for individual effects. Running a multi-level model may be one solution, however with a sample of only 15 countries (even 27) there are probably insufficient level 2 variables. Also the appropriateness of country as a level 2 variable is contested.

²⁵ The models are run using robust ordinary least squares regression (Huber-White transformation).

Table 1 presents the results of the 6 models. Overall there are few significant results; party characteristics (at least as measured here) do not greatly impact on agreement scores. The only consistently significant variable relates to the percentage of DK responses (Uncertainty), though this is hardly a surprising outcome: the greater the number of DK responses the lower the overall PA score. The first three columns of Table 1 report the results for the L-R dimension. In model 1 the only significant variable of interest relates to directional distance from the party mean as measured by expert survey results. The further a party is to the left of the political spectrum the higher the agreement scores.²⁶ Absolute distance from the weighted mean position, is however not significant. Model 2 replaces the expert survey measure of extremism with the ideological family variables but none of the variables reach standard significance levels with the exception of yet again the variable that captures extreme left parties (Communist). All in all, the first two models indicate that voters collectively agree on the location of communist parties. Our third model introduces the electoral cycle variable and the results are consistent with the findings of Weber (2007): the closer the European election is to national elections the higher the agreement scores for a party.

Models 4-6 reproduce the same analysis for the European integration dimension. Here the results are slightly more interesting. In the first model for this dimension (model 4) we discover that some of the traditional party characteristics are now significant. As predicted, the older a party, the more likely are voters to agree on its location in political space. In addition, the size of a party is now significant, with smaller parties having higher PA scores. However, neither of the expert survey measures of extremism (absolute or directional) are significant. In model 5, which includes party family, the effects of party size and party age remain significant, and we find that membership in the Communist, Conservative and Green ideological families negatively impacts on PA scores for the European continuum. The electoral cycle does not however (Model 6) appear to have any significant influence, a result which is at odds with that of Weber who, somewhat surprisingly, found that agreement on this dimension was “highest at the midterm and lowest at election time in the member states” (2007: 523).

²⁶ Given the construction of this variable, positive scores on this dimension refer to parties to the left of the weighted mean, while negative ones measure parties to the right. The result holds if one also simply uses the actual placement of the party from the Left-Right Chapel Hill expert survey.

Overall, our findings stemming from this basic OLS-regression are not particularly noteworthy and we are not particularly confident of their robustness. We can interpret the results as indicating that party characteristics are of minor explanatory power in the collective identification of party positions, though of course the measures utilized may also be crude and inappropriate proxies for the underlying causal hypotheses we wish to test. Nonetheless, the results do suggest that on the Left-Right dimension, voters seem to agree on the placement of extreme left parties. Secondly, on the European continuum smaller, older parties feature higher collective agreement scores.

Table 1: Effects of party characteristics on agreement scores (OLS-Regression)

	LR (1)	LR (2)	LR (3)	EUPA (4)	EUPA (5)	EUPA (6)
Party Age	0.000321 (0.758)	0.000123 (0.910)	0.000494 (0.621)	0.00273** (0.004)	0.00300*** (0.000)	0.00278*** (0.000)
Party Size	-0.201 (0.171)	0.0206 (0.905)	-0.0823 (0.629)	-0.300** (0.003)	-0.230* (0.034)	-0.247* (0.016)
Incumbent	-0.0185 (0.583)	-0.00483 (0.881)	-0.000250 (0.994)	-0.0115 (0.717)	-0.0100 (0.755)	-0.0105 (0.731)
Abs. Dist	-0.00639 (0.603)			0.000280 (0.976)		
Directional Dist.	-0.0161** (0.007)			-0.00817 (0.146)		
Uncertainty	-0.607*** (0.000)	-0.554** (0.004)	-0.738*** (0.001)	-0.464*** (0.000)	-0.526*** (0.000)	-0.511*** (0.000)
Communist		0.159** (0.002)	0.147** (0.002)		-0.0991** (0.001)	-0.108*** (0.000)
Euroskeptic		-0.111 (0.065)	-0.105 (0.062)		0.0419 (0.218)	0.0325 (0.330)
Radical Right		-0.0481 (0.663)	-0.0694 (0.518)		-0.0174 (0.755)	-0.00779 (0.897)
Liberal		0.0211 (0.675)	0.0177 (0.712)		-0.0581 (0.065)	-0.0627* (0.044)
Conservative		-0.0480 (0.529)	-0.0350 (0.607)		-0.123* (0.011)	-0.122** (0.010)
Christian Dem.		-0.0140 (0.813)	-0.0224 (0.682)		-0.0983 (0.052)	-0.0993 (0.057)
Soc. Dem		-0.0595 (0.319)	-0.0610 (0.298)		-0.0504 (0.320)	-0.0517 (0.292)
Green		0.0139 (0.789)	0.0119 (0.809)		-0.134** (0.006)	-0.142** (0.003)
Cycle			-0.789** (0.006)			0.0545 (0.792)
Cycle Squared			0.558* (0.021)			0.0288 (0.866)
Constant	0.565*** (0.000)	0.500*** (0.000)	0.764*** (0.000)	0.389*** (0.000)	0.463*** (0.000)	0.427*** (0.000)
N	95	123	123	97	123	123
F	4.988	4.075	4.193	9.035	10.26	10.27

p-values in parentheses

* *p* < 0.05, ** *p* < 0.01, *** *p* < 0.001

5. Conclusions

Our initial analysis of voters' collective location of European parties suggest that political scientists may be unduly optimistic in assuming that voters possess high level of cognition with regard to parties' positions at the time of European elections. Overall the results are pretty grim. This is particularly true for positions on the European Integration dimension. Not only are voters less likely to agree on party positions on this dimension, they are disinclined to even express an opinion about a party's placement in many instances. Citizens do not appear to have cognitive orientations towards this element of party competition. It is beyond the scope of this paper to reach any firm conclusion as to why this is the case but we speculate that parties may not compete on this issue dimension in European elections, that European elections are second order in nature and that citizens are simply not engaged with the European project.

The analyses presented in this paper are very much preliminary and in future iterations we hope to explore the effect of individual voter characteristics on perceptions of party positions in European elections. Our aggregate analysis suggests that education has a powerful impact on respondents' collective agreement on party location. This finding may be particularly significant for those who wish to extrapolate party positions from these survey responses. There also appears to be grounds for concern about priming effects (Krosnick 1991) with these scales items, the distribution of voter responses are quite extreme with greater use of the ends of the scale than typically found in national election surveys. Furthermore, we identified some quite extraordinary and counterintuitive mode effects in Eastern Europe that need to be explored in greater detail.

References:

- Adams, J. F., S. Merrill III, B. Grofman, (2005) *A Unified Theory of Party Competition. A Cross-National Analysis Integrating Spatial and Behavioural Factors*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Allwood, C.M. and H. Montgomery (1987) 'Response selection strategies and realism of confidence judgments', *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes* 39 (3): 365-383.
- Alvarez, M.R. and J. Nagler (2004) 'Party System Compactness: Measurement and Consequences', *Political Analysis* 12 (1): 46-62.
- Andeweg, R. (1995) 'The reshaping of national party systems', *West European Politics* 18 (3), 58-78.
- Benoit, K. and M. Laver (2006) *Party policy in modern democracies*. London: Routledge.
- Bowler, S. (1990) 'Voter perceptions and party strategies: an empirical approach', *Comparative Politics* 23 (1): 61-83.
- Brug, van der W. (1998) 'The Informed Electorate: Political Perceptions and Party Behavior', *Acta Politica* 33: 20-55.
- Brug, van der W., M. Franklin and G. Toka (2008) 'One electorate or many? Differences in party preference formation between new and established European democracies', *Electoral Studies* 27: 589-600.
- Brug, van der W. and J. van Spanje (2009) 'Immigration, Europe and the 'new' cultural dimension', *European Journal of Political Research* 48 (3): 309-334.
- Campbell, A., P.E. Converse, W.E. Miller and D.D. Stokes (1960) *The American Voter*. New York: John Wiley.
- Converse, P.E. (1964) 'The nature of belief systems in mass publics', in: D.E. Apter (ed.) *Ideology and Discontent*. New York: Free Press, pp. 206-261.
- Converse, P.E. (1975) 'Public opinion and voting behavior', in: F.I. Greenstein and N.W. Polsby (eds.) *Handbook of Political Science*, Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, pp. 75-169.
- Dahl, R. (1997) 'Toward Democracy – A Journey', in: *Reflections: 1940-1997*. Berkely: Institute of Governmental Studies Press.
- Dahlberg, S. (2009) *Voters' Perceptions of Party Politics – A Multilevel Approach*. Department of Political Science. University of Gothenburg, Sweden.
- Dalton, R. (1985) 'Political Parties and Political Representation: Party Supporters and Party Elites in Nine Nations', *Comparative Political Studies* 18 (3): 267-299.
- Downs, A. (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Eijk, van der C., M. Franklin and W. van der Brug (1999) 'Policy preferences and party choice', in: H. Schmitt and J. Thomassen (eds.) *Political Representation and Legitimacy in the European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 161-185.
- Eijk, van der C. (2001) 'Measuring Agreement in Ordered Rating Scales', *Quantity and Quality* 35, 325-341.

- Ezrow, L. (2010) *Linking Citizens and Parties*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fiorina, M. (1981) *Retrospective voting in American national elections*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Griffin, D. and A. Tversky (1992) 'The weighing of evidence and the determinants of confidence', *Cognitive Psychology* 24 (3): 411-435.
- Hamill, R., M. Lodge and F. Blake (1985) 'The breadth, depth and utility of class, partisan and ideological schemata', *American Journal of Political Science* 2: 850-870.
- Hibbing, J. and E. Theiss-Morse (2002) *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hinich, M.J. and M.C. Munger (1997) *Analytical Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hix, S., A. Noury and G. Roland (2007) *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hix, S. and C. Lord (1997) *Political parties in the European Union, The European Union series*. New York: St. Martin's press.
- Hoffman, S. (1966) 'Obstinate or Obsolete? The Fate of the Nation State and the Case of Western Europe', *Daedalus* 95: 862-915.
- Hooghe, L., G. Marks and C. Wilson (2004) 'Does left/right structure party positions on European integration?', in: G. Marks and M. Steenbergen (eds) *European integration and Political Conflict*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kedar, O. (2005) 'When Moderate Voters Prefer Extreme Parties: Policy Balancing in Parliamentary Elections', *American Political Science Review* 99 (2): 185-199.
- Kirchheimer, O. (1966) 'The transformation of Western European Party Systems', in: J. La Palombara and M. Weiner (eds.) *Political Parties and Political Development*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 177-199.
- Kramer, G.H. (1971) 'Short-Term Fluctuations in U.S. Voting Behavior', *American Political Science Review* 65: 131- 143.
- Kreppel, A. and G. Tsebelis (1999) 'Coalition formation in the European Parliament', *Comparative Political Studies* 32 (8): 933-966.
- Kriesi, H., E. Grande, R. Lachat, M. Dolezal, S. Bornschieer and T. Frey (2008) *West European Politics in the Age of Globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lazarsfeld, P., N.B. Berelson and H. Gaudet (1948) *The people's choice: how the voter makes up his mind in a presidential*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Macdonald, S.E., G. Rabinowitz and O. Listhaug (1991) 'Issues and Party Support in Multiparty Systems', *American Political Science Review* 85: 1107-1128.
- McElroy, G. and K. Benoit (2007) 'Party Groups and Policy Positions in the European Parliament', *Party Politics* 13: 5-28.
- Marsh, M. (1998) 'Testing the Second-Order model after four European elections', *British Journal of Political Science* 28: 591-607.

- Merrill, S., B. Grofman, B. and J. Adams (2001) 'Assimilation and contrast effects in voter projections of party locations: Evidence from Norway, France and the USA', *European Journal of Political Research* 40 (2): 199-122.
- Mondak, J.T. (2001) 'Developing Valid Knowledge Scales', *American Journal of Political Science* 45 (1): 224-238.
- Moravcsik, A. (1998) *The Choice for Europe, Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Nisbett, R.E. and L. Ross (1980) *Human inference: strategies and shortcomings of social judgment*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Popkin, S. (1991) *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Reif, K. and H. Schmitt (1980) 'Nine Second Order National Elections: A conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results', *European Journal of Political Science* 8 (1): 3-45.
- Reif, K. (1984) 'National electoral cycles and European elections 1979 and 1984', *Electoral Studies* 3 (3): 244-255.
- Rohrschneider, R. and S. Whitefield (2010) 'Consistent choice sets? The stances of political parties towards European integration in ten Central East European democracies, 2003-2007', *Journal of European Public Policy* 17 (1): 55-75.
- Rohrschneider, R. and S. Whitefield (forthcoming) 'Representation in New Democracies: Party Stances on European Integration in Post-Communist Eastern Europe', *Journal of Politics*.
- Schmitt, H. (1995) 'National Party Systems and the Policies of the European Union. First Results from the 1994 European Elections Study', *Il Politico* 90: 93-107.
- Tsebelis, G. and G. Garrett (2000) 'Legislative Politics in the European Union', *European Union Politics* 1 (1): 9-36.
- Weber, T. (2007) 'Campaign Effects and Second-Order Cycles: A Top-Down Approach to European Parliament Elections', *European Union Politics* 8 (4): 509-536.
- Wessels, B. (2002) 'Wählen und politische Ungleichheit: Der Einfluss von individuellen Ressourcen and politischem Angebot', in: D. Fuchs, E. Roller and B. Wessels (eds.) *Bürger und Demokratie in Ost und West: Studien zur politischen Kultur und zum politischen Prozess*. Opladen. Westdeutscher Verlag, pp. 145-168.
- Wessels, B. and H. Schmitt (2006) 'What Shapes Electoral Choice Options? Institutional Determinants of the Distinctiveness of Choice Options', Paper presented at the 'Electoral Systems and Electoral Politics'-CSES Workshop, 2-3 November, Bangalore.
- Wessels, B. and H. Schmitt (2009) 'Meaningful choices, political supply, and institutional effectiveness', *Electoral Studies* 27: 19-30.
- Westholm, A. (1997) 'Distance versus Direction: The Illusionary Defeat of the Proximity Theory of Electoral Choice', *American Political Science Review* 91: 865-883.