Three sides of the same coin:
Comparing party positions in VAAs, expert surveys and manifesto data

Abstract

Existing research on political parties' policy positions has traditionally relied on expert surveys and/or party manifesto data. More recently, Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) have been increasingly used as an additional method for locating parties in the policy space, with a closer focus on concrete policy issues. In this manuscript, we examine the reliability of VAA-generated party positions, utilizing the euandi longitudinal dataset, which provides data on positions of over 400 unique political parties across 28 EU member states from the European Parliament elections of 2009, 2014 and 2019. We cross-validate euandi data with the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). Our results attest the reliability of the euandi trend file vis-à-vis remaining data sources, demonstrating the validity of VAA-based methods to estimate the policy positions of European political parties. Convergence is especially high with CHES party placements. We also explore the sources of divergence in the estimation of policy positions across the three methods, finding little evidence of a systematic source of bias in the estimates between datasets. We conclude with an inventory of arguments in favour of the use of VAA-generated party positions for the study of policy making in European democracies.

Keywords: policy positions; party placement methods; Voting Advice Applications (VAAs); expert surveys; manifesto analysis

1. Introduction

An adequate representation of parties' policy positions is a key element to understand public policy, particularly when employing comparative approaches. Since 'data on the positioning of political parties are vital in evaluating hypotheses on how public policy is shaped by political parties with different agendas' (Marks, 2007: 2), European scholarship has for long engaged in efforts geared at perfecting a method to reliably measure parties' policy stances. First attempts at empirically establishing party positions started to materialise in the 1970s, with an initial approach relying on perceptions of party positions held by citizens or political elites (Trechsel & Mair, 2011: 3). Two additional types of techniques for measuring party positions developed over time, both of them relying on the expertise of non-partisan specialists: expert surveys and party manifesto coding. Ever

since the works of Morgan (1976), and Castles and Mair (1984), expert surveys have proliferated and became a widely used source, offering accurate data on parties' positions based on the judgement of trained specialists in the field (Benoit & Laver, 2007). The most well-known and powerful effort of expert surveys is constituted by the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), founded in 1999. The second technique, manifesto coding, is based on documents emanated from parties themselves coded by non-partisan experts. The most prominent example in this respect is the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP), which has been compiling manifesto data on multiple countries going back to 1945.

More recently, Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) have emerged throughout modern, liberal democracies. A common feature to the wide range of different forms of VAAs is their ability to position parties in the policy space. To do so, VAAs typically make use of a combination of the previously described techniques. Also, they generally distinguish themselves from the other methods through an even closer focus on concrete policy issues (Garzia & Marshall, 2014; 2019).

While VAAs have predominantly been perceived as educational tools for citizens, with the advent of systematically repeated VAAs across time, their measurements of party positions have become an additional source for determining policy stances of political parties and mapping the political spaces. Despite the growing scientific interest towards VAAs, very little research has thus far studied how well does VAA-generated data converge with the other prominent methods of party placement. Previous studies have indeed provided comparisons of VAA data with expert surveys or manifesto data (e.g., Gemenis, 2013a; 2013b; Gemenis & van Ham, 2014; Wagner & Ruusuvita, 2014). Notwithstanding their contributions, we argue that these efforts suffer from two limitations: a) they do not systematically triangulate the three methods, evaluating their relative performances, convergences and divergences; and b) they are either cross-sectional (Gemenis, 2013a; Gemenis, 2013b) or concern a small number of countries (Wagner & Ruusuvirta, 2012; Gemenis & Van Ham, 2014), thus possibly suffering from context-specific issues due to the few election campaigns considered, therefore being less suitable to comprehensively evaluate the method itself.

In this contribution, we aim at addressing this gap in research. We focus on a particular set of measurements stemming from the three consecutive editions of **eu**and**i** – a pan-European VAA developed by the European University Institute in Florence (Italy) in the wake of the last three European Parliament elections of 2009, 2014 and 2019[1]. The large dataset spanning a decade, three elections, hundreds of parties and thousands of policy positions will be cross-validated against the 'classic' party position measurements provided by the CHES and the CMP. We find that the method of party placement used in this set of VAA-generated data is both accurate and reliable. The party

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[1] For simplicity we use the generic naming euandi also when referring to the 2009 edition of the VAA, at the time called 'EU Profiler'.

positions measured by these three VAAs in the wake of the European Parliament elections represent a complementary and legitimate data source for analyses of the European political space.

2. Early VAAs, early cross-validations

VAAs are independent platforms matching citizens' policy preferences with the policy proposals put forward by political parties. First introduced in the late 1990s, they quickly spread both in the geographical coverage of countries and in the number of users. *Wahl-o-Mat* and *Stemwijzer* are among the most established VAAs and typically register several million users during an election campaign, attracted by the ability to intelligibly translate the complex constellation of parties' policy positions. Beyond acting as tools matching voters with political parties, 'by placing political parties on overarching political dimensions (…), VAAs partake in the same endeavour as other more conventional methods of party positioning like manifesto coding, expert surveys and public opinion aggregation' (Reiljan et al., 2019: 651). Arguably the most innovative aspect of VAAs in the measurement of party positions is their ability to combine expert assessments, textual analyses of a broader set of documents (manifestos; party documentation; press coverage; roll-call behaviour, etc.) and, in some instances, even the parties' own input. It is this combination of techniques that can be seen as a VAA-specific method – usually based on fully documented sources - to estimate the policy positions of political parties. VAAs that combine the traditional approaches thus constitute an additional and distinct instrument to derive policy positions of political parties.

A particular characteristic of VAAs is their concrete focus on *policies* rather than latent *dimensions*. While 'most expert, elite and mass surveys ask respondents to place parties directly on interval scales, which represent the latent dimensions of interest' (Gemenis, 2013a: 270), VAAs position parties relative to specific policy statements. Furthermore, by combining data on users' policy preferences and parties' positions on the exact same policy items, VAAs establish a clearer nexus between political supply and demand, going beyond other methods in allowing practitioners to directly compare citizens' and parties' policy positions (McDonnell & Werner, 2019: 1765). VAAs can thus potentially offer a unique contribution for research on political parties, public policy, and public opinion, but only inasmuch as they are able to accurately and reliably measure the policy positions of political parties.

In order to assess the quality of data on party positions, one arguably needs to compare different forms of data sources in a cross-validation exercise. This is what has been undertaken in several studies that compared manifesto coding and expert surveys. For instance, Keman (2007) compared positions on the left-right and progressive-conservative dimensions, raising questions

about internal and external validity. Benoit and Laver (2007) contrasted estimates from their expert survey with data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) revealing some agreement but also inconsistencies. More recently, Bruinsma and Gemenis (2017) have shown that estimates combining mass and expert surveys outperform the CMP on a two-dimensional space. Yet, comparisons using specifically the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) and CMP generally tend to exhibit a relatively high correlation between the two sources (e.g., Bakker et al., 2015a; Hooghe et al., 2010).

Although cross-validation efforts involving CHES and CMP have been frequent, we still know little about how their estimates compare to VAAs. Gemenis and van Ham (2014) have critically examined and compared the several methodologies adopted by VAAs to estimate party positions – party self-placement, conventional expert surveys, the *Kieskompas* method, and the Delphi method. Gemenis (2013a) expanded the comparison beyond the VAA realm, to directly compare EU Profiler positions with a non-VAA data source: the 2006 CHES survey; and, in another instance, also with the closest observation of CMP data in the 2005-2010 period (Gemenis, 2013b). Wagner and Ruusuvirta (2012) compared policy positions from 13 VAAs in seven European countries with policy measures from expert surveys of various sources and 1990-2003 CMP data on left-right economic positions, immigration, and environment measures.

Despite these valuable insights, we still lack a systematic longitudinal triangulation of VAA-derived data with alternative methods of placing parties in the political space. Gary Marks (2007: 2) argues that accuracy can be increased by better measurement tools or by an increase in the volume of information, 'for example, by increasing the number of cases in a sample, or (…) by comparing the datasets that contain observations of the same case or cases'. The present exercise aims at bringing to the table a new method which can potentially have better measurement tools, but especially, at increasing the volume of information by extending the scope of the comparison both geographically and longitudinally across three data sources. In the words of King, Keohane and Verba (1995: 479–480), 'the best method should be chosen for each data. But more data are better. Triangulation, then, is another word for referring to the practice of increasing the amount of information to bear on a theory or hypothesis'.

In this contribution, we make use of the euandi longitudinal dataset and compare it to the two most prominent, classic data sources used to estimate party positions: CHES and CMP. This allows for a triangulation between data stemming from three different methods: expert coding of VAAs complemented with an iterative method of party self-placement, classic expert surveys, and party manifesto analysis. Each of these data gathering strategies carries strengths and limitations, so it is relevant to analyse how they compare across the same dimensions. In going beyond pre-existing studies by expanding on the number and type of data sources for cross-validation, as well as on the

longitudinal scope of the triangulation efforts, we can better compare similarities and divergences across methods. By doing so, we are in a better position to ascertain the reliability of VAA party position estimates vis-à-vis established methods of placing parties in the political space.

3. Using VAAs to place parties in the policy space: The euandi longitudinal dataset, 2009-2019

Researchers have for long explored different methods to empirically determine policy spaces. So far, and as mentioned above, these have been established based on three main sources. First, the policy positions as described by political parties themselves on their manifestos, parliamentary debates, or other types of official documents. Second, expert perceptions of parties' policy positions, by means of expert surveys. Third, perceptions of policy positions derived from either mass public opinion surveys or elite surveys.[2] More recently, VAAs have been added to this list of data sources, frequently combining several elements of the different methods (Trechsel & Mair, 2011).

VAAs now provide a vast amount of data on party positions on numerous policy issues and political dimensions, covering multiple countries over consecutive time-series. Yet, unlike other methods frequently used to map parties' positions, these data sources are usually scattered across countries and over time, thus hindering their potential for comparative research. For this reason, VAA data has rarely been able to provide more than snapshots of given political realities, for which it is often rejected in favour of expert survey data or manifesto data.

The euandi dataset emerged as a response to these limitations, cumulating data collected for three subsequent pan-European Voting Advice Application (VAA) projects, each corresponding to one European Parliament election: the EU Profiler (2009), and euandi (2014, 2019) (Reiljan et al., 2020b). It builds on the first transnational VAA and is the largest dataset on VAA-generated parties' positions, allowing for comparative and longitudinal analyses. The dataset includes all the 'relevant' parties in each of the 27 EU countries and the UK, that is, all the parties already represented in the European Parliament, as well as those that were credited with at least 1% of the popular vote in the polls preceding the EP election. Table 1 contains basic information on the three data collection waves. For more information on the dataset, see Reiljan et al. (2020a).

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[2] A mass public opinion aggregation method was also considered, taking the mean respondents' placement of parties across dimensions from the Voter Study conducted by the European Election Study every EP election year. However, that data source only asks respondents to place political parties on the Left-Right dimension and the European Union integration dimension.

Table 1. The euandi longitudinal dataset: Summary statistics

	N
Data collection waves	3
Countries	28
Political parties	411
Political parties present in all 3 waves	141
Policy statements	42
Policy statements present in all 3 waves	15

In each wave, the parties across all the countries were positioned on a set of identical policy statements. For each policy statement, the parties were placed on a five-point Likert scale, based on their degree of (dis)agreement with the respective statement. In case the party had no discernible position on the statement, it was coded as having 'no opinion'. In 2009 and 2014, parties were coded also on two country-specific statements; in 2019, all statements were identical for every country. Altogether, the dataset contains party positions on 42 different statements; 15 of these were present in all three waves, allowing for a direct comparison over a time span of ten years. While some statements remain pertinent across the three elections (e.g. 'Government spending should be reduced in order to lower taxes'), others have arguably lost saliency over time (e.g. 'The European Union should be enlarged to include Turkey') and have been replaced by policy items that more accurately reflect the political conflict in the context of that election (e.g. 'Asylum seekers should be distributed proportionally among EU Member States through a mandatory relocation system'). Table C1, in the Appendix presents the full list of euandi policy statements and details the continuous statements (i.e. present in all three waves, 2009, 2014 and 2019).

In addition to capturing political parties' stances on the specific policy issues, most statements were also aimed at measuring broader political dimensions. With very few exceptions, the policy statements were attached to one of three overarching dimensions: the socioeconomic left-right, the cultural liberal-conservative (GAL-TAN) and the pro-/anti-EU dimensions. Factor analyses conducted after the data collection waves have confirmed the described three-dimensional structure of the data. The *a priori* decisions regarding which statement should be assigned to which dimension have, in most cases, proven to be valid (Garzia et al., 2015; Michel et al., 2019; Reiljan et al., 2019a).

According to Marks and colleagues (2007: 26-27), expert data may suffer from issues related to inter-coder reliability; information asymmetry regarding the different political parties depending, for example, on their saliency; ex-post contamination of retroactive judgements; and conflating preferences and behavior. Most of these limitations are similarly identified by Krouwel and van Elfrinkhof (2014), who further note that expert data may be particularly problematic for longitudinal data collection efforts, since it tends to produce stable party positions over time. Curini (2010) adds

that expert data is prone to projection biases, according to which experts' judgements may be contaminated by their preferences. Despite these caveats, Marks and colleagues argue that expert survey data has the merit of offering a direct quantification through the use of structured scales; allowing data collections on issues and topics that are not necessarily covered in official party documentations; and, by going beyond official party documentation, increasing validity through a diversification of sources. Expert surveys are also recognizably cost-effective instruments, allowing for the integration of information from a plurality of sources on a variety of dimensions.

Manifesto data, on the other hand, rely on information intentionally divulged by political parties. Since parties use these documents to present themselves, they are unlikely to include any information deemed sensitive from a strategic point of view. Hence, manifestos often entail a selected, partial coverage of policy dimensions. Manifestos are also very much time-bound to national election campaigns, which may downplay the salience of some issues. As they are the expression of party consensus, manifestos are also hardly representative of eventual policy divergencies within political parties. Finally, previous research has highlighted the vagueness inherent to these documents, while also noting that manifestos vary greatly in their nature across political parties and across countries, particularly with regard to their format, substance of content, length, scope, as well as on the party personnel responsible for the drafting of the manifesto (Krouwel & van Elfrinkhof, 2014). Yet, the main criticism subjacent to this type of data source concerns the arguably unrealistic assumption equating saliency to position that generally pervades the use of manifesto data for estimating party positions (Dolezal et al., 2014). Laver and Garry (2000: 620) rightly warn on these grounds that 'position and emphasis are quite distinct parameters of party policy. Two parties may have quite different substantive positions on the same issue, but emphasise this issue to precisely the same extent in their respective manifestos'. Another fundamental critique of manifesto coding regards the issue of inter-coder reliability. Examining this issue in the CMP dataset, Mikhaylov et al. (2017) register fairly low levels of inter-coder agreement, even among more experienced coders. On the brighter side, because it relies on publicly available official documentation, manifesto data facilitates comparison and replicability. Since they usually date back to the party's foundation, their time series cover a party's entire lifespan. As strategic documents, manifestos offer strong evidence of the salience of issues for political parties, also distinguishing between intentions and behaviour.

The iterative method used in the euandi (and other VAAs) was first introduced by the Dutch *Kieskompas* in 2006. The key element of this method is the inclusion of parties themselves in the positioning process. In the euandi, parties included in the VAA were contacted with an official invitation letter and the list of policy statements (both translated into the predominant, official language of each country). Parties then had the chance to record their documented self-placements

on each policy position within a dedicated, web-based form. Country teams, composed of experts, compared these party-generated positions with their own expert-judgements and, in case of discrepancies, asked the respective party to provide more support for its recorded position. After this calibration phase, the experts and the party reached a consensus and final positions on the statements were confirmed. In case the party did not react or disagreement subsisted, the positions were determined solely by the country teams.

In the first edition of the VAA in 2009, the party co-operation rate remained under 40 percent, whereas in 2014 and 2019 it was consistently above 50 percent. Table 2 details party co-operation rates by region across all three waves of data collection (country-by-country rates in Table A1, in Appendix).

Table 2. Degrees of party cooperation in the euandi longitudinal dataset, by macro-region

	2009			2014			2019		
	N Parties	N Experts	% Cooperated	N Parties	N Experts	% Cooperated	N Parties	N Experts	% Cooperated
Total West	175	72	49.9%	154	85	61.3%	175	86	60.4%
Total CEE	85	38	23.4%	88	52	46.1%	99	51	44.4%
Total EU28	260	110	39.5%	242	137	55.0%	274	137	54.3%

This iterative procedure aims at maximizing the strengths and minimizing the weaknesses of other methods (Trechsel & Mair, 2011; Krouwel & van Elfrinkhof, 2014; Garzia et al., 2017). Relative to expert surveys, the involvement of political parties in an interactive coding procedure carries the advantage of reducing 'bias inherent to expert-placing of small and new parties, which are likely to know more about themselves than expert coders usually do' (Garzia et al., 2017: 335). Unlike expert surveys, VAAs code policy positions in the context of election campaigns. This reduces bias associated with timing within the electoral cycle and places a stronger emphasis on prospective policies. Relatedly, another distinctive feature vis-à-vis expert surveys and manifesto coding is the focus on an updated set of policy issues salient at election time. The dynamic consideration of the policies takes into account the changing patterns of issue competition across elections, helps to more effectively discriminate between parties within the same bloc, and provides a more fine-grained picture of the policy space. Policy statements also tend to exclude valence issues in favour of more politically discriminating policy considerations, framed in multiple directions so as to reflect the

trade-offs inherent to each policy (e.g. 'Renewable sources of energy should be supported even if this means higher energy costs'). The data sources for the textual analysis also go beyond those typically considered in manifesto coding, extending to other official party documents, actions/statements of party representatives in office, interviews and press releases, or EU manifestos, so as to reduce the risk of not being able to code a party's position on a given policy. Finally, an additional advantage is the fully documented nature of the policy positions, supported with references to quotes from concrete sources.

4. Triangulating VAA data with expert surveys and manifesto analysis

Before triangulating the different data sources, one needs to address an initial complexity of data content. The euandi data is made up of party positions regarding detailed policy statements, while CHES and CMP operate at a higher level of abstraction, relying on dimensions of political conflict rather than on individual policies. Hence, we have grouped the euandi policy statements onto comparable dimensions, i.e. the Left-Right, the Pro-Anti EU integration and the GAL-TAN dimensions (as detailed in Table C1, in Appendix) and compared the estimates with CHES and CMP across these dimensions. Whenever the years of publication of CHES and CMP data did not match the European election years comprised in the euandi dataset, we have taken the data from the closest year available (details on matching years available in Table A2, in Appendix).

To maximise conceptual homogeneity, the euandi dimensions were constructed using exclusively the policy statements continuously present in all three waves (as described in Table C1). For the same reason, in the construction of the Left-Right, Pro-Anti EU integration and GALTAN dimensions in the CHES and CMP datasets, we have aimed at including variables tapping into the same topics as in euandi statements used to build the dimensions.[3]

For CMP, we constructed the three dimensions as follows[4]:

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[3] For example, in CHES, we used *lrecon* instead of *lrgen*, as the euandi statements only capture Left-Right *economic* positioning. Therefore, for CHES, we relied on the original variables *lrecon*, *position*, and *galtan*, respectively. Despite these efforts, some non-negligible differences subsist between the statements used to build the dimensions in the euandi dataset, and in the CHES and CMP. For example, the fact that left-right socioeconomic positions in the CHES are not disaggregated into policies impedes a straight comparison with the euandi statements tapping into tax policies, social programmes and general government spending. In fact, one of the upsides of the euandi dataset lies in its ability to longitudinally tap into party positions not only across dimensions but, especially, on concrete policy positions. This is also the reason why we preferred using individual 'content analytical data' items from the CMP instead of solely resorting to 'programmatic dimensions' variables such as *rile, planeco or markeco*, as the latter may not encompass all the policy items comprised in the euandi dimensions, or may include other, absent items.

[4] per605 was used instead of per605_1–per605_2 because the latter option significantly depressed the number of observations, due to missing values on the original CMP dataset. Given that it refers to law and order issues, which

$$CMPLR = \frac{(per505 - per504) + (per401 - per403) + (per402 - per409)}{3}$$

$$CMPEU = per108 - per110$$

$$CMPGALTAN = \frac{(per410 - per416) + (per601 - per602) + (per603 - per604) + (per605) + (per608 - per607)}{5}$$

Note that for all three data sources, the dimensions were constructed using a simple additive score, attributing equal weight to all variables used to build the dimensions across all datasets.[5] Details on the dimensions, original variables and their description can be found in Table A3, in the Appendix.

In Figure 1, we move to compare the positions of the main party families on the Left-Right, Pro-Anti EU integration and GALTAN dimensions across the three data sources. The box charts display the median, 25th to 75th percentile range, as well as lower and upper adjacent values. As the original measurement scales are inconsistent across datasets, the variables have been standardised to ensure comparability, so values on the x axis reflect changes in the magnitude of a standard deviation.[6] We have divided the party sample into seven party families, corresponding to the classification used also in the CHES data (see Bakker et al., 2015a).[7]

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approach to valence issues, not having polar positive and negative measures is arguably not as problematic as in other policy issues. In fact, the value of the difference obtain when subtracting per605_1–per605_2 is quite similar to the value of per605 (3.85 and 4.34, respectively). In any case, the analyses were replicated using per605_1–per605_2 and the results do not substantively deviate (detailed analysis in Appendix B)

[5] For example, in the euandi dataset, if Party X was coded 4 in the statement 'Social programs should be maintained even at the cost of higher taxes' and 5 in the statement 'Government spending should be reduced in order to lower taxes', it would score 4.5 on the Left-Right dimension.

[6] Note that the number of valid observations varies substantially across datasets: 768 for the euandi, 560 for CHES, and 386 for CMP. In all three-way comparisons (Figure 1) we have kept only the parties for which we have data on the three dimensions simultaneously available across all three data sources (N=348). Conversely, in pairwise comparisons (Table 3 and Figure 2) we have tried to maximize the number of cases, thus keeping all the parties for which we have data simultaneously available across the two data sources being compared. In these instances, the *N* varies, depending on the datasets being compared.

[7] Due to very low number of parties that belong to these party families, we have not included the families of regionalist, confessional and agrarian parties. These and any other parties that do not fall under any of the seven distinguished families, are compiled into the 'Others' category.

Figure 1. Mapping the European political space: Party positions by party families and dataset
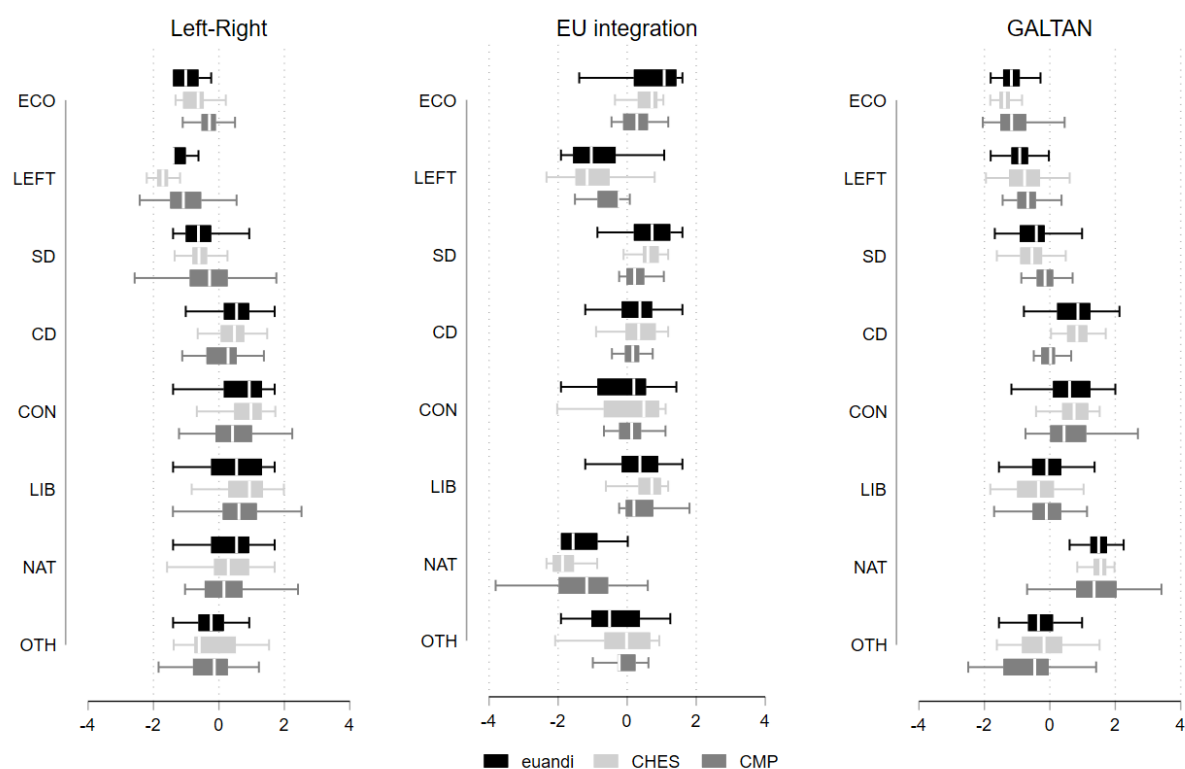
Note: ECO: Ecological/Green; LEFT: Left Socialist; SD: Social Democratic; LIB: Liberal
CD: Christian Democratic; CON: Conservative; NAT: Nationalist; OTH: Others;
N=348; estimates are average positions over 2009, 2014 and 2019

The positions from the euandi dataset across all three dimensions largely overlap with those stemming from CMP and, even more strongly, those from CHES. euandi and CHES positions are remarkably close particularly regarding Conservative, Social Democratic and Christian Democratic party families, where they are almost perfectly coinciding. There is a notable difference between euandi and CHES regarding the placement of left socialist parties on the socioeconomic dimension, as the latter position them much further to the left. It appears that CHES performs better in terms of distinguishing between the more moderate and radical leftism, whereas euandi places social democrats, left socialists and ecological parties rather close to each other. This could derive from the fact that the two continuous socioeconomic dimension statements present in euandi are rather general (see Table C1) and not so suitable for capturing radical left sentiment. Indeed, our replication analysis suggests that if we include all the issue-statements to the comparison (instead of just the continuous ones), this discrepancy becomes less significant (see Figure C1). As expected, the differences between datasets are more pronounced for smaller party families. The agreement in party positions across the three data sources appears to be greater on the GALTAN dimension and smaller on the

Left-Right dimension. The median positions from the CMP dataset also tend to converge more to the centre than the other two datasets. This is likely a consequence of CMP's data collection and coding method, which tends to place extreme parties closer to the centre (Dinas & Gemenis, 2010).

To get a better sense of how estimations correspond across datasets, and to investigate possible variation across time, Table 3 compares the correlations between datasets for the three timepoints, over the three dimensions.[8] The correlation between the euandi dataset and the CHES is very high in all three dimensions and over the three elections under analysis. Overall, the Pearson correlation coefficients between euandi and CHES data are, on average, around .75 for every dimension. The same goes for the correlations across the three election years and within each dimension, with the slight exception of the GALTAN correlations for 2014 (.68). Although to a lesser degree, the euandi and CMP also correlate fairly high, especially on the GALTAN and the EU integration dimension. Only regarding the Left-Right dimension do we find levels of correlations between euandi and CMP that fall slightly below .50. The same goes for the two coefficients regarding the GALTAN and Pro-Anti EU integration dimensions in 2009 (.48 and .41, respectively).[9]

Table 3. Correlation matrix by dimension and election year: euandi, CHES, CMP (N=768)

	euandi – CHES				euandi – CMP				CHES – CMP			
	2009	2014	2019	**All years**	2009	2014	2019	**All years**	2009	2014	2019	**All years**
Left-Right	.74	.74	.77	**.75**	.41	.48	.38	**.43**	.47	.52	.43	**.48**
GALTAN	.78	.68	.78	**.75**	.48	.52	.72	**.55**	.60	.62	.66	**.62**
Pro-Anti EU	.75	.76	.79	**.76**	.41	.56	.67	**.54**	.60	.63	.80	**.65**
N	169	191	200	560	158	163	65	386	140	150	58	348

Note: We have kept all available observations for each pair of dataset comparisons (total N=768)

The overlap between CHES and CMP is apparent in the third block of Table 3. Both data sources are fairly well correlated. On average, however, the overlap between CHES and CMP is

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[8] Following the recommendations from Gemenis (2012: 601; 2013a: 289), we compare the measures using not only the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient but also the concordance correlation coefficient (ρ_c), accompanied by the bias correction factor (C_b). The results reveal high accuracy and do not show meaningful differences from the Pearson correlation coefficient (see Table A4 in Appendix).

[9] The N for the last time-period is substantially smaller for CMP, since the data collection is still ongoing. This likely explains the clear differences compared to the previous two data points and, for this reason, the coefficients for 2019 should be interpreted with caution.

somewhere in between the correlations between euandi/CHES and euandi/CMP, respectively. For all dimensions and most years, the correlation coefficients between CHES and CMP are closer to the euandi/CMP correlations rather than the euandi/CHES correlations, indicating that CMP measures of party positions are generally causing the lower overlap between the two other datasets and CMP. The low correlations with CMP estimates on the Left-Right dimension could be due to the reliability issues of manifesto data for the Left-Right dimension, as previously identified in the literature (Laver, 2003; Gemenis, 2013b). For example, earlier studies have demonstrated that movement in the left-right scale can be determined by other categories not included in the scale (Gemenis, 2013b) and that CMP tends to place extreme left and right parties closer to the centre (Dinas & Gemenis, 2010).

In sum, the triangulation analysis reveals a strong convergence between estimates deriving from the three data sources. The euandi dataset yields party positions largely comparable with standard methods for placing parties in the political space, and is particularly close to CHES. These results substantiate the validity and reliability of party position estimates derived from the euandi dataset, which correlate at a high level with the two most used pre-existent data sources for party positioning. Despite the limitations of the euandi dataset, such as the low number of measures for the Left-Right socioeconomic dimension, it still performs well compared to established data sources. Moreover, such limitations are counterbalanced by other assets such as offering more fine-grained measures of parties' positions on a breadth of policy items.

5. An exploratory analysis into the sources of divergence and convergence across methods

The results from the previous section revealed a strong overlap between the euandi data on parties' positions and both the CHES and the CMP. Despite this general pattern of concurrence, differences in estimations still subsist across datasets. While estimates were not expected to perfectly correspond across datasets, it is important to analyse what factors underly existent discrepancies to investigate potential sources of systematic bias across the different methods. An enquiry into these factors allows not only to better understand divergence across methods but may also help shedding light on their relative strengths and weaknesses.

To that end, we first computed the absolute difference, for each political party, in estimates from euandi and CHES across each of the three dimensions and then summed the total differences across the three dimensions into a single standardised measure of overall (dis)agreement.[10] Again, to

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[10] If there are no differences between the euandi and CHES in the estimates for a given political party in any of the three dimensions the dependent variable will score 0. If, for example, in the euandi, *Podemos* scores 1 standard deviation above the mean on the GALTAN dimension whereas in CHES that party scores 0.5 standard deviation above the mean on the same dimension, the absolute difference for this data entry will be 0.5 on the that dimension. If the absolute difference is also of 0.5 in the remaining two dimensions, *Podemos* will score a total value of 1.5 in the dependent variable. There is

maximise the number of valid observations, the same procedure was repeated separately for euandi and CMP. With these dependent variables, we ran two separate OLS regressions contrasting the differences between euandi vs. CHES and the differences between euandi vs. CMP (Figure 2 - full regression output in Table A5, in the Appendix). The independent variables include the vote share of the party in the corresponding European Parliament election[11], a dummy measuring whether the party was present in previous waves of the euandi dataset or whether it is a newly added party (0=present before; 1=newly added), dummies for all party families (reference category: Social Democratic), regional dummies (reference category: Central/Eastern Europe), year dummies (reference category: 2009 EP election wave), a variable measuring whether parties have collaborated in the euandi data collection process (0.=no; 1=yes), and a ratio of the number of coders per country team by the number of parties coded, to dismiss the possibility that a greater workload per expert coder could result in reduced accuracy.

Figure 2. Sources of convergence/divergence between methods: OLS coefficients with 95% confidence intervals
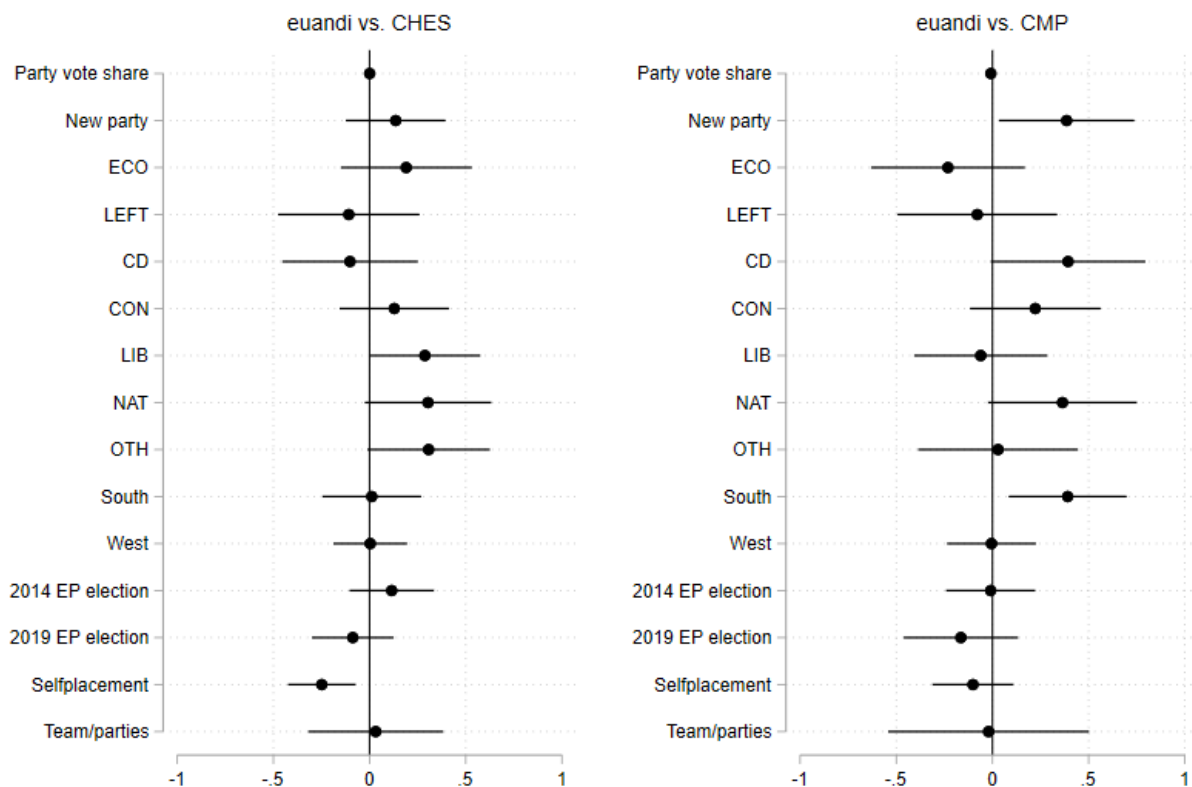
no theoretical upper-bound for this variable since it is measured in standard deviations, and is thus dependent on the distribution of the data. The minimum value for the dependent variable in the sample is .11 and the maximum 6.67.

[11] For the three parties in the sample that ran as part of a pre-electoral coalition, we used the vote share of the whole coalition.

The first regression compared the estimates from the euandi dataset with CHES. Of all variables considered, a single factor is significantly related to differences in the estimates from these two data sources: the difference in estimates is significantly reduced among parties participating in the euandi self-placement procedure. Besides substantiating the added value of the iterative method used in euandi, this important finding suggests that other VAAs not employing the same method may exhibit lower levels of convergence vis-à-vis expert survey data.

The second model contrasts the difference in estimates between euandi and CMP. The results slightly differ from the comparison with CHES. Here, the divergence in estimates is significantly greater for newer parties, for which is arguably harder to retrieve documentation and infer party positions. The differences are also greater for Southern European parties, compared to the reference category of Central/Eastern Europe. However, it should be noted that both models reveal a poor fit, so either other forces not accounted for are at play, or the divergence between the datasets is predominantly random.

Overall, the results from this exploratory analysis show little evidence of systematic source of bias in the estimates between datasets. On the one hand, fewer observations for certain party families and, in some cases, smaller parties, can increase divergence across estimates derived from the different methods. On the other hand, the iterative method is confirmed as a valuable methodological instrument to increase the accuracy of estimated party positions, significantly reducing the differences between VAA data and 'pure' expert survey methods, such as the one employed by CHES.

6. Robustness checks

We have conducted two sets of robustness checks to the preceding analyses. First, we have re-estimated the entire analyses using CMP items per605_1 (positive mentions of Law & Order) and per605_2 (negative mentions of Law & Order) instead of per605 (general favorable mentions of Law & Order). This analysis only concerns estimations for the GALTAN dimension, and implies a substantial reduction in sample size, since per605_1 and per605_2 are only available for a subset of the CMP sample (see footnote 3 for more details). The results do not substantially differ and can be consulted in Appendix B.

Second, instead of relying exclusively on continuous statements, we have considered all available euandi statements for each dimension at a given point in time. This option sacrifices conceptual homogeneity across the three time periods to privilege the consideration of a higher volume of information and a broader consideration of the possible policy issues comprised in each

dimension. The results show even stronger patterns of association across datasets: in all dimensions, the euandi estimates correlate more strongly with both CHES and CMP than in the analyses from Table 3. The results are available in Appendix C.

7. Conclusions

Operating as mediators between political supply and demand, VAAs serve as informational devices articulating parties' policy proposals with citizens' policy preferences, synthesising and making accessible complex yet pivotal information that could otherwise be oblivious to some citizens. The findings from this manuscript add to the literature by highlighting a second major contribution of VAAs: an accurate, reliable method of party placement. Using the euandi, the largest source of cross-national longitudinal VAA-generated data, this study concluded that it constitutes a complementary, legitimate method to estimate parties' positions in a multidimensional European political space, performing akin to the most prominent expert survey (CHES) and manifesto data (CMP) sources.

The unique features of VAAs extend their contributions beyond adding just another available source of party positions. First, the use of detailed policy positions offers a more fine-grained measure of parties' stances on concrete policy items that is closer to the level of policy analysis. The consensus among VAA designers on the policy statement selection criteria guarantees a focus on politically relevant, salient topics; that policy statements are diverse and encompassing of the political space; and that they effectively discriminate between parties, rendering divergent stances across parties, and reflecting the variance in the electorate (Walgrave et al., 2009). In addition, the euandi devotes special attention to the key policy issues at stake in European Parliament elections, so as to better represent the European multidimensional political space. Secondly, by locating parties and citizens in a common policy space, and comparing parties' policy positions with the policy preferences expressed by voters, VAAs offer a 'measurable sense of the extent to which these two core components of representative government are mutually congruent' (Trechsel & Mair, 2011: 3). This approach renders VAAs adequate instruments to measure the existence of representative deficits in policy preferences (Bright et al., 2016; 2020), a repeatedly raised issue particularly at the European Union level (Mair & Thomassen, 2010; Schäfer & Debus, 2018). While research on policy congruence has typically relied on the combinations of party manifestos and expert survey data with mass surveys tapping on approximate issues (Bakker et al., 2020; McDonnell & Werner, 2018), researchers can now count on an additional method measuring congruence on the *same* policy items, using the same question wording and answer options. Thirdly, VAAs can also be useful instruments to study political representation, enabling comparisons between the consistency of pre-election policy pledges with post-election legislative behaviour and policy implementation (Fivaz et al., 2014). This is a

particularly valuable approach in the case of VAAs that also place candidates, enabling analyses 'not directed at the collective enactment of political programmes by fixed parliament majorities [as in manifesto analysis], but rather at the commitment of individual MPs to enact their own – sometimes party-independent – agenda' (Schwartz et al., 2010: 540).

Though consensus on this matter is yet to be achieved, political scientists have for long searched for a *gold standard* in party positioning (Garzia et al., 2017; Marks, 2007). VAA-developers have notably dedicated to this endeavour, since the implications of imprecise party positioning in tools designed specifically for the public at large would be particularly problematic, all the more if we consider potential VAA effects on electoral participation and vote choice. Proposed as a strategy to minimise inaccurate party placements, the iterative method combines multiple methodologies to maximise their strengths and counterbalance their relative limitations.

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