Policy Positions in the Eyes of the Beholder

Voters’ Understanding of Parties’ Positions on the Left/Right and on European Integration

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Research Question

How accurate are voters in identifying the positions of parties in salient policy domains?

What are the determinants of accurate placement of parties on a left/right spectrum and an EU integration spectrum?
Who Cares?

Informed public understanding of party positions is necessary for representative democracy to work properly.

- Parties adjust positions according to public preferences.
- Public votes based on party position
- If the public is uninformed, this model doesn’t work.

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Determinants of Accurate Party Placement

- Party characteristics
- Party-system characteristics
Party Characteristics

Party size

Attempt to preserve past agendas and distinguish selves from competitors regarding policies.

L/R dimension is dominant

More info on large party’s L/R position

EU integration depoliticized

Larger parties collude on issues of EU integration

Less info on large party’s EU position

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Party Characteristics

Governing status

- Parties in government have greater visibility, and comment on current affairs and reaffirm policy position.
  - L/R is the dominant policy dimension
  - Voters should have more information on government party positions on L/R dimension

EU integration depoliticized

- Government avoid discussing EU integration
- Non-government parties politicize EU integration

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Party-System Characteristics

Fractionalization

- More fractionalization means parties strive to be ideologically distinct
- Leads to parties taking sides on L/R and EU integration issues and more policy information
- Public should be more accurate for both dimensions

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Party-System Characteristics

Polarization

- More polarization means a differentiated ideological supply
- Differentiated ideological supply means more information on policy positions
- Public should be more accurate for both dimensions

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Hypotheses

- Greater party size $\rightarrow$ greater accuracy on L/R
- Greater party size $\rightarrow$ no effect on accuracy on EU
- Government party $\rightarrow$ greater accuracy on L/R
- Government party $\rightarrow$ less accuracy on EU
- Fractionalization $\rightarrow$ greater accuracy on L/R
- Fractionalization $\rightarrow$ greater accuracy on EU
- Polarization $\rightarrow$ greater accuracy on L/R
- Polarization $\rightarrow$ greater accuracy on EU

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Dependent Variables

Public accuracy in placing parties on a L/R dimension and on an EU integration dimension.

2009 EES Voter Study and Euromanifestos data

Voter Study

Placed parties on LR and EU (0-10)

Mean placement

Euromanifestos

LR position and EU position (-100 to 100)

Rescaled (0-10)

|Mean voter placement-Parties’ “true” placement|
Dependent Variables

|Mean voter placement-Parties’ “true” placement|

Unit of analysis: Party

Left/right spectrum

- 0.004 (Latvian People’s Party) to 3.90 (French Extreme Left)
- Mean: 1.56; SD: 1.01

EU integration spectrum

- 0.006 (Slovenian People’s Party) to 2.96 (Basque Nationalist Party)
- Mean: 0.72; SD: 0.60
Independent Variables

Four main independent variables

- Party size: Vote share in last national parliamentary election
- Governing status: Dummy denoting if party was in government in 2009
- Fractionalization: Inverted Herfindahl index of government parties (1=more fractionalization)
- Polarization (Dalton 2008)

\[ PI = \sqrt{\sum (party\ vote\ share) \times ([party\ L/R\ score_i - party\ system\ average\ L/R\ score]/5)^2} \]
Analytical Strategy

- Political parties are nested within countries
- We include predictors at both party and party-system level
- Linear mixed models with varying-intercepts
How Accurate is the Public?

Scatterplot of Parties’ L/R Positions and Public’s Placement of Parties

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How Accurate is the Public?

Scatterplot of Parties’ EU Positions and Public’s Placement of Parties

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## Results

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>Model 2</th>
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**Notes:** Table entries are linear mixed model regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable in the analysis is the parties' position on a left/right or an EU integration spectrum.

*p < 0.075, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01 in a one-tailed test.

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Why the Strange Findings?

Findings are somewhat puzzling

- Larger parties: factions may confuse voters on left/right dimension, fewer factions on EU dimension
- In fractionalized or polarized system number of parties may create noise along L/R dimension
- There may be less noise in fractionalized systems and with larger parties along the EU dimension.
- Election effects?

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Implications

Findings have important implications for understanding political representation and responsiveness.

- Larger parties should be more responsive to public on EU dimension (in EP elections)
- Parties in more fractionalized and/or polarized systems will be less responsive to public on left/right dimension (in EP elections)
- Parties in more fractionalized systems will be more responsive to public on EU dimension (in EP elections)

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Future Research

- Theoretical development to explain findings
- Multiple elections
  - 2014 EP elections
  - National elections
- Additional measures of parties’ “true” positions

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Control Variables

- Public’s accurate placement of party on L/R or EU spectrum
- Average education level in country
- EU accession dummies
  - Original member state
  - 2004 or after
Distribution of Accurate Placement (L/R Dimension)
Distribution of Accurate Placement (EU Dimension)
# Descriptive Statistics

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