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Voting Advice Applications**

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I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)

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Abstract

With this paper, we pay tribute to Peter Mair by looking back at the three waves (2009, 2014, 2019) of the pan-European Voting Advice Application (VAA) EU Profiler/euandi – a project in which Peter Mair had a very crucial role in its early years. We describe the unique standing of the EU Profiler/euandi in the VAA landscape and take an analytical look at the central elements of this tool. We show the project has been innovative in many ways, such as: a) in 2014 and 2019, more than half of the over 200 parties included in the project took part in the self-placement procedure, showing great interest towards the pan-European VAA; b) the EU Profiler/euandi team has managed to apply a common set of issue-statements to the whole EU and find the topics that are both salient (on most statements, more than 80% of the parties have been coded to have a distinguishable position) and polarize between parties (in a large majority of issues, there is a considerable share of parties on both sides of the centrepoint of the scale); c) the party placements on the central dimensions of the political space show high external validity with other prominent methods of party placement. At the same time, we reveal worrisome regional divergences, as the post-communist countries are less likely to co-operate with the VAA in self-placing themselves, have more parties that are left uncoded on many issues, and party positions in this region show less convergence with other methods. Also, when studying issue polarization at the European level, we demonstrate that party positions are often determined rather by the regional than ideological affiliation of the parties, raising some questions about whether and to what extent can we even talk about common EU political space. In the end of the paper, we present the data from the German euandi2021, one of the national stepping stones towards improving the VAA for the 2024 European edition. The paper ends with a retrospective discussion of which hopes and promises from more than a decade ago have/have not materialized.

Keywords

Political parties, expert surveys, manifesto analysis, party placement methods, policy positions, Voting Advice Applications (VAAs), European elections, German elections, Chapel Hill Expert Survey.

I. Introduction

On 7th November 2007, the Department of Political and Social Sciences (SPS) of the European University Institute (EUI) organized a seminar for its postdoctoral and professorial fellows. Almost all faculty members of the SPS Department were present, including, of course, its newly appointed Head of Department, Peter Mair. The overall topic of the seminar was “Democracy in Europe” and one of the contributions was entitled “A novel way of studying democracy in Europe: smartvoting in the EP 2009 elections”. In this presentation, Alexander H. Trechsel put forward an idea to create the first pan-European voting advice application (VAA). It marked the beginning of an adventurous journey, co-led by Peter Mair and bringing together many colleagues in the Department, including professors, fellows and doctoral students from all disciplines taught at the EUI. The “EU Profiler” project – and its later editions named “euandi” - was born

The intellectual point of departure was much in line with Peter Mair’s work on political parties in particular, and European democracy more in general: the breakdown (or at least the weakening) of traditional mechanisms of representation. Electoral turnout, party identification, party membership, party government and other central elements of contemporary democracies were arguably in decline (see Mair 2006). This in turn affected the political offer: traditional cleavages (another central topic in Peter Mair’s work) structured party politics less and less, parties became detached from civil society and cartelized (Katz and Mair 2009), their ideological positions became increasingly opaque (see Rovny 2013) and unholy coalitions saw the light of day. With party system fragmentation also on the rise, voters became ever more challenged to identify who were those that best represented their interests, leading to disaffection from electoral politics amongst large parts of society. In the audience of the seminar, a general consensus was apparent that these dark diagnoses were generally to the point.

More controversial, perhaps, was what followed: the claim that, ironically, voters got lost, while remaining politically curious. This claim stemmed from the empirical observation of what has happened over the few years preceding the fellows’ seminar in several European countries: a widespread usage by literally millions of voters of so called “voting advice applications” (VAAs) that were offered online for free to its users preceding elections in countries like the Netherlands, Switzerland and Germany. By offering some very recent insights from the Swiss “smartvote” project, whose latest edition had just taken place for the October 2007 federal elections, the presentation proposed that a similar VAA should be tried for the 2009 European Parliament elections, as political science could benefit from the enormous amount of data generated by such a project.

Peter Mair was probably the first one in the audience to immediately jump on the idea and to support its implementation. Other colleagues joined. A vivid discussion arose on what political science could learn from developing such a tool in a transnational context: could one, by applying the smartvote method of placing parties and candidates, learn more about those actors? Could we get a better understanding about the spatial distribution of parties in the European political space and tensions between European and national levels of party politics? How would the VAA-generated party position data compare with other prominent party placement methods, such as manifesto coding or expert surveys? How about methodological advances, such as the introduction of large-scale experimental designs, matching techniques, observational designs and many more? Could we learn more about public opinion by having access to mappings of detailed policy preferences within countries and across the entire European Union? Could we better grasp what issues are salient in European public opinion and map the elite/citizen congruence levels across Europe? How about political behaviour? Could cross-national VAA data help us to better understand vote choice at the polls and confront/complement the traditional models of electoral behaviour? These and many other questions and ideas were discussed with regard to this proposal of creating the first pan-European VAA.

Rather boldly, it was announced that the project had actually been decided upon before the seminar took place and that the Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies (RSCAS), directed by Stefano Bartolini, as well as the EUI as whole, through his President Yves Mény, was supporting the project within the framework of the European Union Democracy Observatory (EUODO). However, such a large-scale project needed the support from many experts covering all of Europe, and the EUI was arguably the best place to find those. The call for help was very successful, as a long list of doctoral students, fellows and professors started to build up, with everybody wanting to help out in the project.

Peter Mair was quintessential, right from the very beginning, for the EU Profiler project to take off, to become a success and to show the way forward to what came after: a series of three editions of a transnational voting advice application, numerous publications and an ongoing research agenda that has spread way beyond the premises of the EUI. In this short contribution, we would like to pay a tribute to Peter's unconditional support to the first edition of a transnational voting advice application. We do so by offering an overview of where we have arrived after three editions of such a tool, highlighting the elements that Peter thought were paramount for presenting initial insights to a wider audience (see Trechsel and Mair 2011).

This paper is structured as follows. First, we present a brief literature review on the history of VAAs and the EU Profiler/euandi. Subsequently, we explain the party placement methodology of this pan-European VAA with the focus on the very central and innovative aspect of parties placing themselves on the given set of issues. Then, we analyze how well has the common set of issues been able to capture the salient topics in European political space (and whether there even is such a common space?) and which issue-statements have proven to be most polarizing between parties. We also scrutinize the main dimensions of the political space, including their reliability and validity. For each of these elements, we summarize and analyze the accumulated literature and data, building on what has already been published, but also adding new empirical input. We put special emphasis on the regional aspect, revealing that the common set of issues and dimensions has clearly worked better in Northwestern European context, as compared to Southern and especially Central Eastern Europe. Finally, we also go beyond the three transnational editions by adding recent data from a national experience with the EU-Profiler/euandi methodology and tool, which was launched for the 2021 German elections.

II. The history of VAAs and the EU Profiler/euandi

The (offline) history of Voting Advice Applications begins over three decades ago, when the “ancestor” of all VAAs, the Dutch StemWijzer, was developed. Back then, the StemWijzer package consisted of a small booklet with 60 statements taken from political party manifestos and a diskette. An internet-based version was released on the occasion of the 1998 parliamentary elections. In the following years, the StemWijzer grew into the most used political application on the internet by Dutch voters at election time. From 50 sold brochures in 1989 to 6500 given advices in 1998, the number of users rose to more than 2 million in both 2002 and 2003, then up to about 5 million in the elections that followed (de Graaf 2010). At the beginning of the new century, the highly successful experience of StemWijzer was exported to several other countries, such as Germany, where the Wahl-O-Mat quickly turned into most used VAA in the world. Suffice it to say that its most recent version, launched before the German federal election of 2021, accounted for over 20 million user sessions

Apart from the expansion of the Stemwijzer model, a second VAA type contributed to the success story of Voting Advice Applications – and the development of the EU Profiler in turn – the Dutch Kieskompas. This VAA was explicitly designed as an alternative to the Stemwijzer by implementing different methods for the positioning of the parties/candidates and for calculating and displaying the issue congruence between the users and the political supply. While Stemwijzer and Wahl-o-mat offer just three response options for each political statement (agree, neutral, disagree) and display to the user only their agreement percentages with each party, then Kieskompas expanded the response

options into a 5-point Likert scale and also graphically displayed to the users their placements on central ideological dimensions. Some of the most innovative features of the Kieskompas were inspired by the forerunner of a third family of VAAs: the Swiss smartvote (Marschall and Garzia 2014; Krouwel and Elfrinkhof 2014).

In the coattail of these national VAAs, the EU Profiler emerged in 2009, led by the EUI in cooperation with Kieskompas and smartvote. Similar to its cooperation partners, the EU Profiler represented a more elaborate type of VAA with 5-point response scales and graphical illustrations of the political dimensions in addition to the classic user/party congruence list. However, in this case, the volume of the project was immensely larger than in any national VAA: 274 parties from 30 European countries were represented in the application (Trechsel and Mair 2011).¹ As the first truly transnational VAA, the EU Profiler was awarded the World e-Democracy Forum Award for its “commitments to carry out meaningful political change through the use of internet and new technologies”. Building on this success, the 2014 follow-up VAA – this time called euandi – gathered over a million users and placed over 240 parties in 28 EU countries (Garzia et al. 2017). European voters could access euandi again in 2019. The application was developed by the EUI in close collaboration with the University of Lucerne (Switzerland) and reached over 1.2 million users (Michel et al. 2019).

The establishment of VAAs in virtually all European countries – along with the growing number of users resorting to these tools at election time – has suddenly captured the interest of political scientists. In the early phase of VAA-related research, involved scholars attempted by and large to establish a common language for future studies. In more recent years, however, a new stream of quantitative research on VAAs has emerged. Electoral researchers have worked intensively on VAA-generated data, and found that a small but significant proportion of VAA users (e.g., in a range from two to ten percent, according to the various national settings under analysis) declared to be willing to “move” their vote in accordance with the advice obtained by the application (for a review, see: Garzia and Marschall 2019).

In turn, scholars’ concerns about the consistency and reliability of the voting advice provided by these applications has resulted in a rapidly growing body of literature. Most notably, this stream of research has fueled a number of empirical works dealing with the process of statement selection and – most importantly to the purposes of this article – the way in which parties’ positions on such statements are established (Lefevere and Walgrave 2014; Gemenis and Van Ham 2014; Gemenis 2015; Reiljan et al. 2020a). The best attestation of the quality of VAA-generated party placements is high external validity, i.e. large overlap with other prominent party placement methods in terms of where the parties are placed on different political issues and dimensions. Although VAA data still needs some more cross-validation, some research has given very promising results, showing that VAAs, indeed, place parties in a similar way with established methods such as expert surveys and manifesto coding (see Wagner and Ruusuvirta 2012; Gemenis 2013). In a very recent publication, Silva et al. (2021) demonstrated that this goes also for EU Profiler/euandi data, as it showed very high convergence with Chapel Hill Expert Survey party positions and also good overlap with Manifesto Project data.

Early VAAs (e.g., Stemwijzer, Wahl-O-Mat) have usually relied on similar methods to place party positions, resorting to party elite surveys, i.e. parties placing themselves without additional checks. Such a method, however, could give parties the chance to manipulate some of their positions for strategical reasons. The EU Profiler relies instead on a novel methodology for placing political parties, which avoids most drawbacks of earlier party placement approaches: the so-called “iterative method” (Krouwel and Elfrinkhof 2014; Sudulich et al., 2014). Expert coding and party self-placement of positions take place independently. Both experts and parties are required to justify their placement with supporting evidence. The respective results, in order to introduce a control mechanism, are compared. When country experts and the parties themselves disagree on where to precisely place a party on an issue, they interact in a so-called “calibration phase”, which usually results in an

¹ On top of the then 27 EU countries, Switzerland, Turkey and Croatia were also included in the EU Profiler.

agreement (Trechsel and Mair, 2011; Garzia et al., 2017). In doing so, the iterative method combines evidence-based expert coding with interaction with political parties themselves during a campaign period.

The dataset resulting from the last three editions of the EU Profiler/euandi includes the positions of 411 parties from 28 European countries on a wide range of salient political issues. Altogether, the dataset contains more than 20 000 unique party positions. The political statements that the parties were placed on, were identical across all the countries and 15 of the statements remained the same throughout all three waves (2009, 2014, 2019) of data collection (Reiljan et al. 2020b). That makes it - to the best of our knowledge - the largest dataset of VAA-based party placements. Also, it is the first VAA dataset that allows for both cross-national and longitudinal comparisons of party positions (cf. Gemenis et al. 2019). The empirical parts of this paper mostly rely on this unique dataset that will hopefully be of broad interest to political science community in the future.²

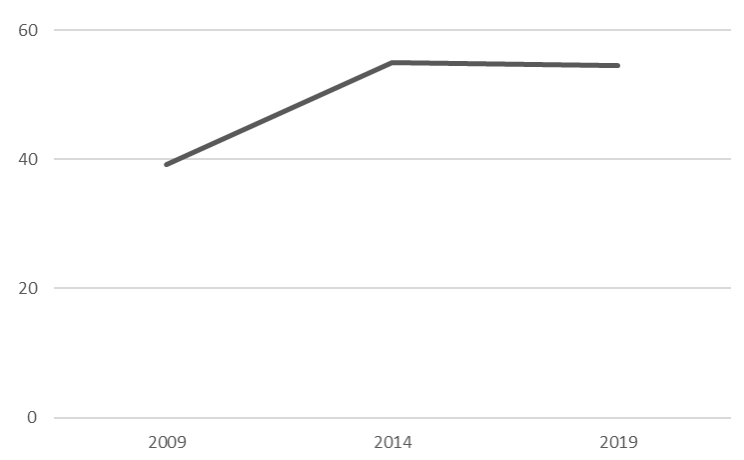
III. The EU Profiler/euandi methodology: parties placing themselves

As described in the previous section, the EU Profiler/euandi methodology relies on the concomitant input of parties themselves and experts. The latter are divided into country teams, so that the parties in each country are coded by scholars who are well acquainted with the local context (see Trechsel and Mair 2011, Reiljan et al. 2020b).

In an ideal scenario, the iterative method entails the initial self-placement from the parties, expert placement, and then the calibration phase where parties and country experts interact to determine the final position of the party on each issue. In reality, the process does not always run so smoothly. Trechsel and Mair (2011) identified seven different degrees of cooperation by parties, ranging from a proactive attitude of contacting the EU Profiler team even before they were contacted by the country experts (as is the standard procedure) to not participating in the self-placement procedure, while also not being satisfied with the expert placements and invoking a conflict with the country team.

The most general classification of party co-operation, however, is simply whether they did or did not cooperate (i.e. provided self-placements or ignored the country teams). As we see from Figure 1, party cooperation rate remained just under 40% in 2009, but then increased substantially by 2014 (55%). In 2019, the rate remained more or less at the same level (54%).

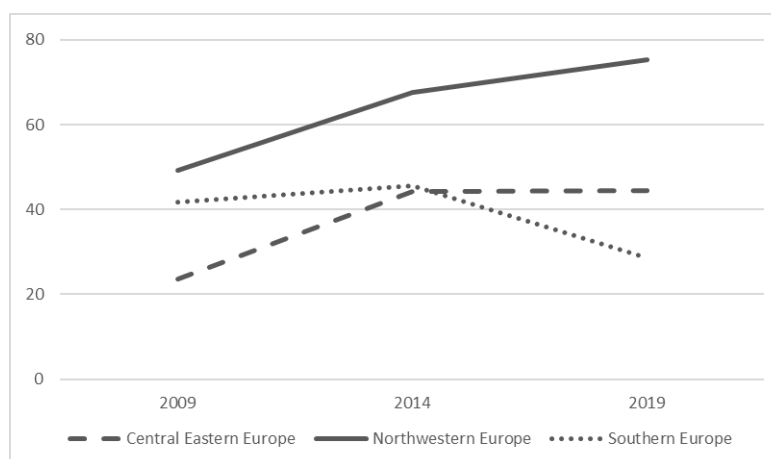
Figure 1. Party co-operation rate (%) in self-placement, 2009-2019



² To access the dataset directly, see Reiljan et al. 2020c.

However, this cooperation rate has proven to be very uneven across countries and regions. As displayed on Figure 2, Northwestern European countries are at the top of the list, as their cooperation rates have increased steadily and reached almost 80% in 2019. In Central Eastern European (CEE) countries, parties have participated much less in the self-placement procedure, although compared to 2009, the co-operation has increased substantially, from barely 20% to above 40%. In Southern Europe, conversely, the co-operation rates have dropped and parties in that region showed very little interest in participating in self-placement in 2019.³

Figure 2. Party co-operation rates (%) in self-placement, by region



In their recent study, Silva et al. (2021) find that the EU Profiler/euandi party placements have a higher convergence validity with other prominent party placement methods if parties cooperate and take part in the self-placement exercise. Thus, participation in self-placement is a crucial element of this project, which will hopefully continue increasing in the future, as countries get more familiar with VAAs and as coding teams have more members that already have experience in working with VAAs (see Garzia et al. 2017 for the predictors of party co-operation in 2014).

Looking only at those parties that did participate in the self-placement, Trechsel and Mair (2011) showed that in 2009, parties and experts came up with identical placements in 83.3% of the cases, while in 12.3% of the placements, there was just a one scale-step difference (on a 5-point Likert scale) between the two sources. In less than 5% of all party positions, there were a 2-scale step (or higher) difference between party and expert placements. These numbers look encouraging, as they confirm the validity of both the expert placements and party self-placements. Unfortunately, we do not have the data of party/expert agreement in our disposal for the 2014 and 2019 editions of the VAA, but this constitutes a promising avenue for future research on VAA party positioning.

IV. The pan-European political space

Common set of issue-statements: issue salience

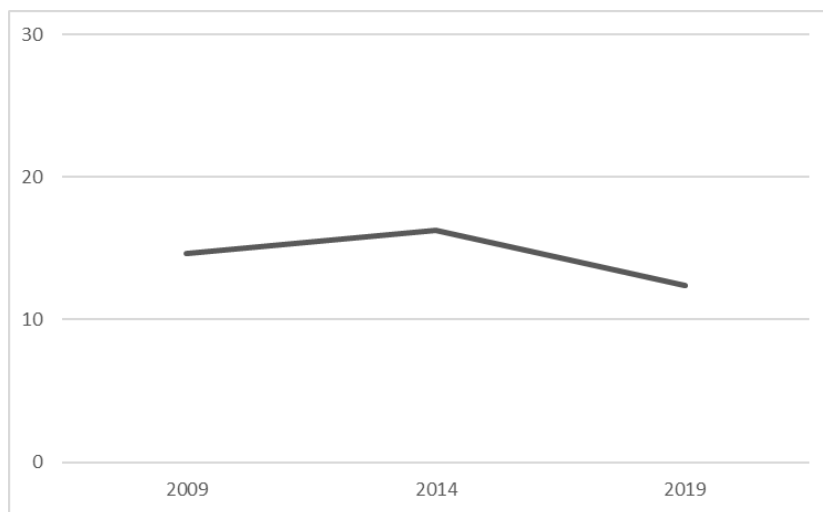
As many VAA researchers have argued, in the heart of every VAA are the issue-statements that are presented to the parties, experts and finally the users of the tool. Selecting appropriate statements has a crucial effect on reaching valid voting advice and placing parties accurately on central political dimensions (Walgrave et al. 2009; Garzia et al. 2017; Lefevere and Walgrave 2014; Reiljan et al. 2020a). One of the most remarkable elements of the EU Profiler/euandi project is the attempt to apply an identical set of political issue-statement to all European Union countries. In 2009 and 2014, the statement list consisted of 28 pan-European and 2 country-specific issues, in 2019 the number of statements was reduced to 22 and the country-specific items were dropped. How well have the EU Profiler and euandi teams managed to find the statements that are relevant in the whole European

³ See the co-operation rate breakdown by individual countries in Reiljan et al. 2020b..

party system?

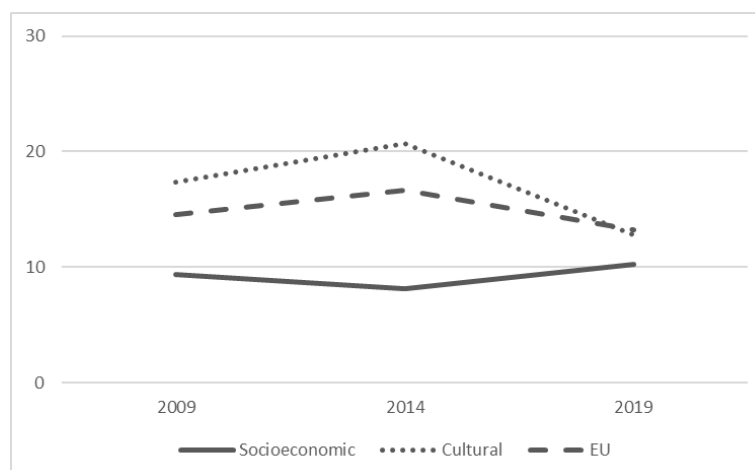
The most general indicator here is whether the parties were able to place themselves (and/or country experts were able to place parties) on the given issues. euandi methodology requires that each position is justified with a text snippet from party programme or other relevant sources. Thus, parties cannot assign their position without any proof and also coders cannot just assume party's position on an issue if there are no sources to confirm that assumption. If there is nothing that could back up the position, the expert group (that makes the final decision regarding each placement) is supposed to code the party as having "no opinion". Figure 3 displays the percentage of "no opinion" codes across the three waves of the VAA.

Figure 3. Percentage of "no opinion" codes, 2009-2019



As Figure 3 illustrates, the uncoded positions made up around 15-16% of all party placements in 2009 and 2014. By 2019, this indicator dropped to 12.4 per cent, but as mentioned above, in 2019, the number of common pan-European statements was also reduced from 28 to 22. As there is really no benchmark to compare with, it is difficult to put these numbers in context. However, considering the diversity across the 28 countries in our dataset, it is encouraging that by 2019, almost 90% of all the positions have been coded.

Which kind of issues are the most problematic in terms of missing codes? Figure 4 displays the percentage of "no opinion" for three central dimensions in the EU Profiler/euandi: socioeconomic left-right, the cultural (GAL-TAN) and EU integration dimension. As we see, the statements pertaining to cultural and EU integration dimensions tend to be more difficult to code. In 2014, the percentage of "no opinion" on cultural issues reached even above 20%, meaning that more than 1 out of 5 potential placements were missing. The classic socioeconomic left-right issues have proven easier to code, as the percentage of missing values have remained between 8-10%.

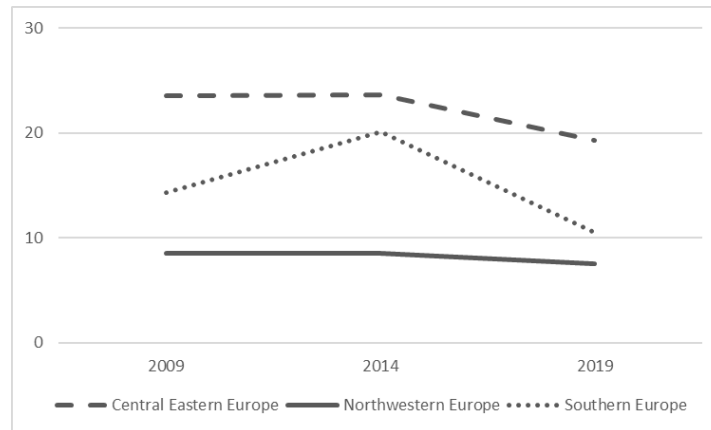
Figure 4. Percentage of “no opinion” codes by dimension of statement

These dimensional differences are strongly driven by few issues where very large numbers of parties were left uncoded. For example, it has been difficult to place parties on some rather specific cultural/EU dimension issues such as allowing stem cell research and euthanasia: in 2014, 40% and 38% of the parties were left uncoded on these statements, respectively. In 2019, the question of allowing transnational electoral lists in EP elections turned out to be the least salient issue with 40% of the parties across Europe uncoded.

On the other end of this list are some rather broad statements where party position could be derived from more implicit sources. For example, on the issue “European integration is a good thing“, the percentage of missing values has been below 4 per cent across all three waves and dropped even under 1 per cent in 2019. Above 96% of the parties have always been coded also on a classic socioeconomic issue “Social programs should be maintained even at the cost of higher taxes.“ Thus, we remain somewhat cautious in claiming that cultural and EU integration issues are less salient in the European political space, as the differences could also derive from the degree of concreteness of the statement, with more general items being easier to code than the very specific ones. However, it is clear that some cultural and EU integration dimension issues have not become salient across the whole EU.

There are also notable regional differences in the share of missing party codings. As Figure 5 demonstrates, the common set of issue statements has been least salient in the CEE countries where in 2009 and 2014, above 23% of the codings were missing. In Northwestern European countries, this indicator has remained under 10% across all three waves. South European countries are between these two groups, but by 2019 they are clearly closer to the Northwestern countries. Thus, we can see that a clear difference between older Western democracies and the post-communist countries has persisted throughout the three waves of the VAA, which cannot be considered as a surprise. It is apparent that the salience of issues strongly varies across countries. For example, more than 50% of the parties in CEE and Southern European countries were uncoded on the issue of stopping embryonic stem cell research, while in Northwestern European states, the percentage of missing values was only slightly above 20. These numbers certainly indicate that there are some problems in applying an identical set of political issues to a set of countries as diverse as the European Union. Nevertheless, the fact that in 2019, more than 4 out of 5 positions were coded in each region is certainly a promising result that justifies the continuation of this pan-European project.

Figure 5. Percentage of “no opinion” codes by region

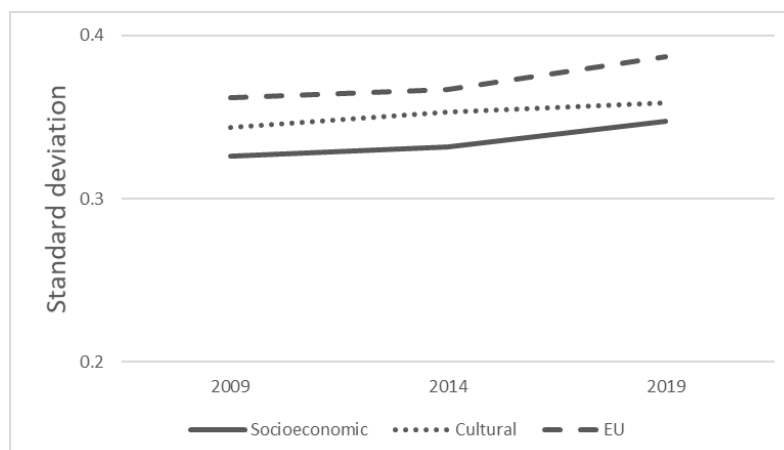


Polarization in the European political space, 2009-2019

When talking about how politicized certain issues are, the second crucial component next to salience is polarization (see Hutter and Kriesi 2019). In this section, we analyze which are the most and least polarizing issues in the EU political space according to the EU Profiler/euandi party data. First, we look at the distribution (standard deviation) of party positions on the issues more generally, comparing the average degree of polarization on the three central dimensions.

Figure 6 indicates, that on average, the standard deviation is highest on issues that pertain to the EU integration dimension and lowest on socioeconomic issues. Cultural issues are also clearly more polarized than socioeconomic left-right questions. Thus, we see that while the socioeconomic topics are still salient, the issues that pertain to the “transnational” (Hooghe and Marks 2018) or cultural integration/demarcation (Kriesi et al. 2006) cleavage that polarize the parties more. This is not surprising, considering the rise of authoritarian populism that has occurred across the world over the last decades. Issues that relate to EU integration and cultural issues are often “owned” by right-populist parties that use polarizing rhetoric that pushes parties and voters further apart from each other (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018)

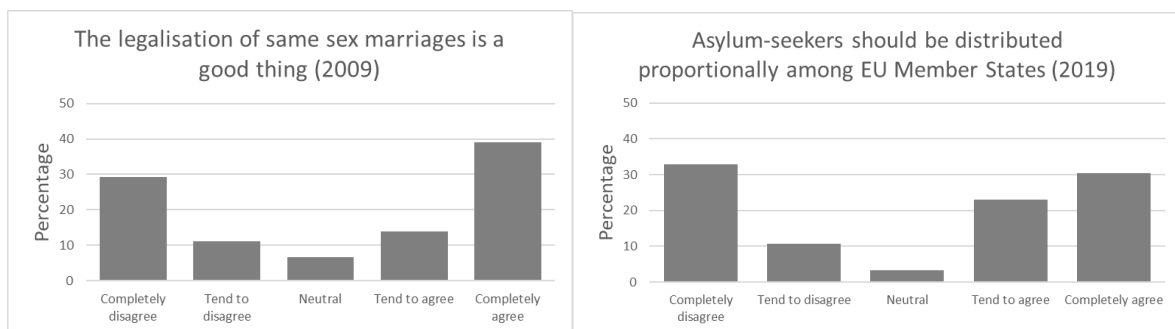
Figure 6. Polarization on issues, by dimension



Note: Party positions are coded to run from 0 to 1, with each answer category constituting a 0.25-step increment.

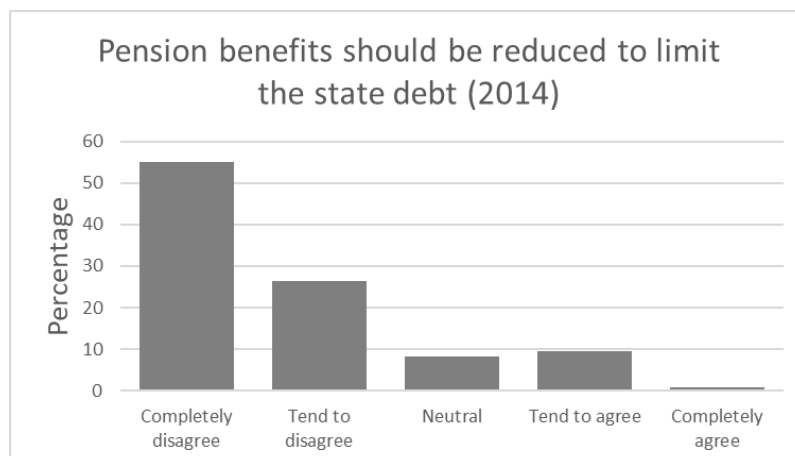
We continue with a more detailed analysis and look at what were specifically the most polarizing individual issues in the three recent European Parliament elections according to our data. The single most polarizing issue-statement in 2009 and 2014 was “The legalization of same sex marriage is a good thing”. In 2019, a highly contentious matter of EU mandated refugee quotas dethroned the gay marriage as the most polarizing statement. Again, such findings could be considered as quite predictable, as same sex marriage has been a highly central “cultural” value issue for decades. Moreover, the refugee quota issue combines in itself elements of immigration, identity and transferring powers from national to the EU level. On such issues, parties are pushed to take clear and strong stances, which in turn enhances polarization. Figure 7 displays the distribution of different answers on the 5-point Likert scale regarding these two statements (for same sex marriage, we display the 2009 distribution that was the most polarized one), demonstrating that the two strongest positions (completely agree/completely disagree) made up above 60% of the placements.

Figure 7. Two most polarizing issues in EU Profiler/euandi data



The least polarizing issues across the dataset were the proposals to increase childcare benefits (2009) and to reduce pension benefits (2014), which essentially turned out to be valence issues, as an extremely small number of parties “dared” to support cutting pensions or not support raising child benefits. On both issues, more than 80% of the parties remained on the same side of centrepont, rendering these issues strongly non-polarizing (see Figure 8 for the pension benefits issue that is the single least polarizing item in our dataset). These results show that parties are very reluctant to openly declare that they want to reduce certain welfare benefits that many people rely on. Therefore, the issue-statements must propose clear trade-offs and be phrased in a way that the majority of parties are not highly prone to want to be placed on the same side of the centrepont (see Reiljan et al. 2020a for a longer discussion on statement selection and wording). For the third wave of euandi in 2019, both of the above-mentioned non-polarizing statements were removed from the euandi questionnaire and no item in 2019 showed such a one-tailed distribution as the statements regarding pensions and childcare benefits.

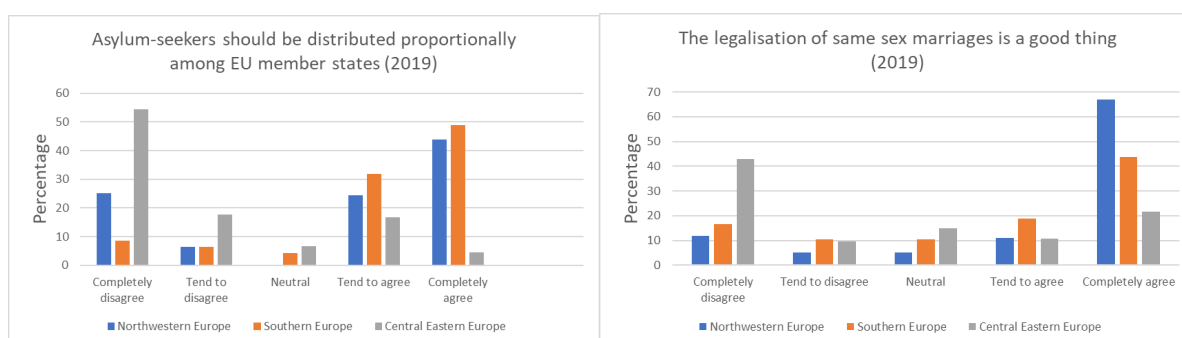
Figure 8. The least polarizing issue in EU Profiler/euandi dataset



This analysis, however, perceives the EU as one unified political space. In reality, the degree of polarization and average placement on issues varies significantly across countries and regions.⁴ This is especially evident regarding the refugee quota issue. While the overall distribution across 28 countries indicates strong polarization, then within regions, this issue is polarizing only in Northwestern Europe. In Southern Europe, there was a strong consensus that asylum-seekers should, indeed, be distributed proportionally, whereas in CEE countries we find an opposite consensus – there is widespread opposition to such measure, with the large majority of parties disagreeing with it. For example, in Bulgaria, Slovakia and Czech Republic, not a single party took a position in favor of refugee quotas, whereas in Italy and Malta, all parties agreed with the statement.

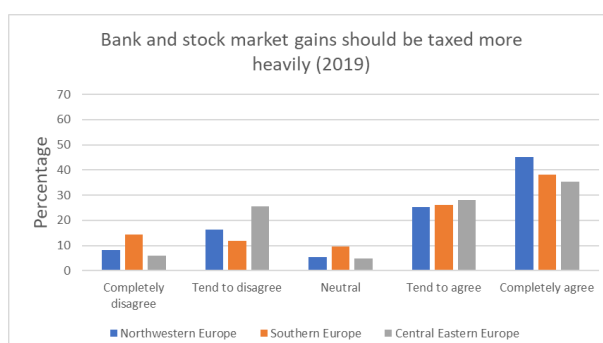
Similarly, there are significant regional divergences on issues that relate to cultural values, with CEE countries being clearly more conservative, on average. The best example of this pattern is the same sex marriage issue. While in Northwestern European countries, there is a wide consensus on the legalisation of gay marriage (almost 80% of the parties agree or tend to agree), then in Central Eastern Europe the issue is polarizing parties, as ca 50% of them are against and 30% in favour of it. Southern Europe remains between the CEE and NWE groups on same sex marriage issue. Figure 9 illustrates this regional disparity on asylum-seekers and same sex marriage issues.

Figure 9. Regional patterns on asylum-seekers and same sex marriage issues



On socioeconomic issues, party placements tend to be more aligned with a party’s ideological affiliation, independently of regional factors. For example, the distribution of answers on the issue of taxing bank and stock market gains is similar across all three regions (see Figure 10), as the left-leaning parties clearly support such policy across all regions.

Figure 10. Regional patterns on bank and stock market taxation issue



⁴ On average, the set of issue-statements in the EU Profiler and euandi has been the most polarizing in Northwestern Europe and least polarizing between parties in the CEE region, just as it was shown to be in the previous section regarding issue salience.

Thus, our data reveals that if we want to analyze polarization in the European political space, we should consider both, the classical ideological polarization, but also regional patterns of polarization, as on some issues, party positions are determined rather by regional than ideological affiliation of the party. Our dataset allows to explore such peculiarities of the European political space across time and countries.

Mapping the European political space: Validity of party placements on three central dimensions

In the previous sections analyzing the most/least salient and polarizing statements in the EU Profiler/euandi dataset, we referred to the three central dimensions of the European political space – socioeconomic left-right, liberal-conservative (GAL-TAN) and pro/anti-EU dimension. But how well does such a priori determined three-dimensional structure actually capture the European political space? And how well do EU Profiler/euandi party placements converge with other broadly used party positioning methods such as expert surveys and manifesto coding? In this section, we aim at answering these questions.

Garzia and colleagues (2017) have conducted a principal component analysis of the statements from the 2014 wave, demonstrating that the large majority of the statements, indeed, load on three factors that mostly correspond to the socioeconomic, cultural and EU integration dimensions. Michel and colleagues' (2019) factor analysis identified four major factors: a pro-anti EU continuum; socio-economic left-right; socio-cultural conflict mainly related to law and order and immigration; and a broader post-materialist dimension including legalisation of soft drugs, euthanasia, and transnational voting rights. Thus, although the cultural dimension could also be divided into two sub-dimensions, the three-dimensional structure seems to be rather appropriate in describing the European political space. However, some regional differences must, again, be highlighted. Analyzing the EU Profiler (2009) party placements, Louwse and Otjes (2012) find that the most appropriate dimensional solution varies substantially across countries and aggregating these differences into one pan-European political space is problematic.

In Table 1, we build on these previous efforts and present the results of a factor analysis for all three elections, disaggregated by region. For parsimony, we only report the total variance explained by each factor. To ensure comparability across time, Table 1 only takes into consideration the 15 policy statements repeatedly present across all three waves of the EU Profiler/euandi dataset. The results show that there are meaningful differences in the variance explained by the different factors across regions. In CEE countries, the five-factor solution is generally able to capture less variance than in Southern European and West European countries. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the total variance explained has increased substantially for CEE countries between the 2009 (74.8) and the 2019 edition (99.8), now surpassing Southern Europe. Although the number and the nature of the factors diverge depending on the election year and/or the region, they generally correspond to the four categories identified in Michel et al. (2019). However, in all election years studied, nearly 80% of the variance is accounted for by a three-factor solution tapping on the socioeconomic left-right, pro/anti-EU integration, and a progressive-conservative continuum, as suggested by Garzia et al. (2015).

Table 1. Factor analysis of the statements of the EU Profiler/euandi trend file - continuous statements only

	2009						2014						2019					
	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	Total	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	Total	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	Total
<i>All regions - Variance (%)</i>	34.0	25.4	20.2	15.7	–	95.3	31.9	27.7	20.8	15.4	–	95.9	31.5	30.4	23.9	19.0	–	1.05
<i>East</i>																		
Variance (%)	31.6	14.4	11.0	10.4	7.5	74.8	20.9	20.8	16.9	15.7	12.7	87.1	25.6	25.1	20.8	19.4	9.0	99.8
<i>South</i>																		
Variance (%)	40.6	20.5	11.5	7.3	5.4	85.3	54.0	33.9	12.1	–	–	1.00	20.9	19.8	15.8	12.7	11.5	80.6
<i>West</i>																		
Variance (%)	29.6	29.1	18.7	13.2	7.7	98.2	31.6	31.0	19.3	16.7	–	98.6	33.6	33.5	19.8	16.4	–	1.03

Based on these three dimensions, Silva et al. (2021), have recently shown that the party placements of the EU Profiler/euandi trend file are valid and converge well with other prominent party placement methods on the socioeconomic, cultural and EU integration dimensions. In Table 2, we extend this analysis by adding a regional dimension. In accordance with the previously presented results, we also find very high overall convergence with CHES data, and rather high overlap with CMP data. These results hold whether we limit the analysis to the policy statements repeatedly present across all three waves of the EU Profiler/euandi dataset (Table 2), or whether we use all available statements. However, we observe vast regional differences, with the convergence being consistently much lower among CEE countries. This, again, attests to the fact that capturing the European political space with an identical set of issues for all EU countries is a complicated task, especially in the post-communist region. Although longitudinal comparisons within regions are hampered by the small number of cases in certain election years, there seems to be some improvement in the convergence for CEE countries, especially in the GAL-TAN and EU integration dimension, from 2009 to 2019.

Table 2. Correlations between euandi, CHES and CMP time-series data, by dimension and region

	euandi - CHES		euandi - CMP	
	r	(N)	r	(N)
Left-Right	.75	(560)	.47	(386)
<i>East</i>	<u>.67</u>	<u>(237)</u>	<u>.37</u>	<u>(136)</u>
2009	.64	(70)	.31	(61)
2014	.74	(79)	.45	(63)
2019	.63	(88)	.44	(12)
<i>South</i>	<u>.77</u>	<u>(88)</u>	<u>.41</u>	<u>(61)</u>
2009	.79	(26)	.35	(28)
2014	.62	(31)	.52	(27)
2019	.88	(31)	.72	(6)
<i>West</i>	<u>.81</u>	<u>(235)</u>	<u>.54</u>	<u>(189)</u>
2009	.79	(73)	.59	(69)
2014	.80	(81)	.61	(73)
2019	.84	(81)	.39	(47)
GAL-TAN	.75	(560)	.58	(386)
<i>East</i>	<u>.66</u>	<u>(237)</u>	<u>.32</u>	<u>(136)</u>
2009	.65	(70)	.30	(61)
2014	.59	(79)	.41	(63)
2019	.73	(88)	.02	(12)
<i>South</i>	<u>.83</u>	<u>(88)</u>	<u>.45</u>	<u>(61)</u>
2009	.90	(26)	.61	(28)
2014	.72	(31)	.30	(27)
2019	.85	(31)	.95	(6)
<i>West</i>	<u>.81</u>	<u>(235)</u>	<u>.75</u>	<u>(189)</u>
2009	.82	(73)	.70	(69)
2014	.80	(81)	.76	(73)
2019	.82	(81)	.79	(47)

Pro-Anti EU in- tegration	.76	(560)	.54	(386)
<i>East</i>	<u>.73</u>	<u>(237)</u>	<u>.38</u>	<u>(136)</u>
2009	.70	(70)	.21	(61)
2014	.73	(79)	.48	(63)
2019	.74	(88)	.76	(12)
<i>South</i>	<u>.72</u>	<u>(88)</u>	<u>.55</u>	<u>(61)</u>
2009	.67	(26)	.48	(28)
2014	.69	(31)	.53	(27)
2019	.84	(31)	.94	(6)
<i>West</i>	<u>.83</u>	<u>(235)</u>	<u>.60</u>	<u>(189)</u>
2009	.83	(73)	.61	(69)
2014	.84	(81)	.63	(73)
2019	.83	(81)	.61	(47)

Note: this analysis takes into consideration the continuous statements only.

V. euandi2021 – Germany

The EU Profiler/euandi project, as described in previous paragraphs, is transnational in nature. Certain national elections, however, are of particular interest; and in the constant pursuit of adding new and better features to the VAA, the decision to implement a national euandi for the German federal elections of 2021 was taken. In particular, testing these new features is intended to be a “stepping stone” towards the European elections in 2024 and the fourth edition of the pan-European VAA. In this paragraph we describe the project euandi2021 with particular attention to the novelties of the workflow and methodology, and provide a basic empirical analysis of both party data and user data. These innovations were then confirmed in a series of further national versions of euandi: euandi2022, developed for the Spring 2022 French presidential elections; Navigatore Politico, implemented for the Italian (snap) elections held in September 2022; and finally, Valijakompass, launched for the Estonian general elections of March 2023.

euandi2021 was launched in the first week of September 2021, and was used by over 40,000 users before the elections taking place on September 26th. The team responsible for euandi2021 was composed of three scientific co-coordinators, with one native speaker overseeing the data collection (“country team leader”); two advisory board members; and five political scientists responsible for the data collection for party placement (“coders”). Web developers and communication experts completed the team.

The selection of parties has followed a slightly more inclusive rationale than the previous, transnational waves, where only parties represented in Parliament or expected to receive more than 1% of votes (according to most recent polls) were usually included. Here, a total of 15 parties – some of which received less than 1% - have been included⁵: CDU/CSU, SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, Freie Demokratische Partei, Die Linke, Alternative für Deutschland, Freie Wähler, Die Partei, Piraten Partei, Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands, Ökologisch-Demokratische Partei, Partei Mensch Umwelt Tierschutz, Volt, Bayernpartei, Liberal-konservative Reformer.

⁵ Retrospectively, only one party scoring more than 1% has not been included: the lockdown opposing and anti-vaccination party Die Basis (1.4%). Conversely, Volt, ÖDP, NPD and Piraten have been included but scored less than 1%.

The statements selection has been improved with a two-step approach. First, an initial extended list of 41 statements was developed in a collaborative effort by the team leader and the coders. Of these statements, 17 were part of the longitudinal pan-European list, repeated in the same form over the course of the previous waves. Parties were placed, with the established iterative method combining source-justified expert judgment and party self-placement, on these 41 statements. Then, the statements not performing well according to the one of the main criteria of the “gold standard” of effective VAA statements (Reiljan et al. 2020a), namely not polarizing enough between the parties, were excluded. In total, six items – including two of the continuous statements – were removed from the final version of the VAA, for a total of 35 final statements. This new workflow, yet creating a more cumbersome procedure (facilitated, in this case, by the single country taken into consideration) could be replicated in the next transnational VAA, although distinguishing between EU-wide and within-region/-country polarization (see the “Polarization in the European political space, 2009-2019” section) might complicate this process.

The self-placement procedure participation rate shows lower numbers in comparison to previous European waves for Northwestern Europe (over 80% in 2019) and in Germany in particular (in 2019, all parties replied positively to the self-placement request): “only” seven parties out of 15 co-operated with euandi2021 team.⁶ This can be explained by a number of factors. First of all, the ample proliferation of VAAs, limiting the time that party functionaries can devote to this exercise: almost 20 different VAAs were launched, including the extremely popular Wahl-O-Mat that is clearly the most prioritized tool from the parties’ perspective. In the European elections campaign, instead, less VAAs are usually developed; in addition to this, German parties recognize euandi as one of the few EU-wide VAAs, and therefore arguably have a greater interest to participate in it. Second, the timeframe to implement euandi2021 has been substantially shorter than usual. Third, and trivially, this project was conducted over the course of the summer, when parties are less responsive.

The analysis of the party data shows some consistency but also differences from the previous European waves. First, the number of “no opinion” is substantially lower than, on average, in transnational waves: 4.95%, in comparison to above 10% of the 2019 euandi. This is easily explained by the statement selection procedure. In pan-European VAAs, one of the key challenges is to develop a set of statements that works sufficiently well for more than two dozen different political spaces. In a single-country VAA such as euandi2021, the statements are tailored, with the exception of the continuity statements mentioned above, to the specific domestic context. Therefore, parties tend to have more structured positions on them. However, it should be noted that for Germany in particular, the euandi transnational statements worked also rather well. While in 2014, the number of missing codings was slightly above 10%, then in 2019, it dropped to less than 6%, thus, to a very similar level than in euandi2021.

While the number of parties included in the German VAA is too low to conduct a meaningful statistical analysis of the dimensionality of the political space, the euandi2021 did introduce some changes in the dimensionality design. The classic socioeconomic left-right and cultural liberal-conservative axes were displayed to the user on the two-dimensional political landscape visualization (see Figure 11). The EU integration dimension that was clearly less salient in the national election context was plotted on a horizontal “unidimension” next to the main landscape. Alongside the EU dimension, three other unidimensions were displayed to the user: ecological (sustainability – economic growth), Covid-19 (health – economy) and the federalism dimension (centralization – decentralization). Two latter dimensions were completely new in euandi and corresponded to the recent global developments (Covid-19) and the German national context (federalism). An additional foreign policy dimension was also included and attached to a number of statements but, given the difficulty to convert it into two clearly understandable poles, it was excluded from this result visualization. Figure 12 shows an example of how the unidimensional axes looked like in euandi2021. This visualization constituted a change from the “spider graph” that was previously used in euandi pan-European editions to display

⁶ Die Linke, AfD, Freie Wähler, Piraten Partei, Tierschutzpartei, Volt and Bayernpartei. Not by chance, these are mostly smaller parties that see the VAA as an opportunity to gain visibility.

voter and party placement on smaller sub-dimensions (see Trechsel and Mair 2011).

Figure 11. Two-dimensional political space, euandi2021

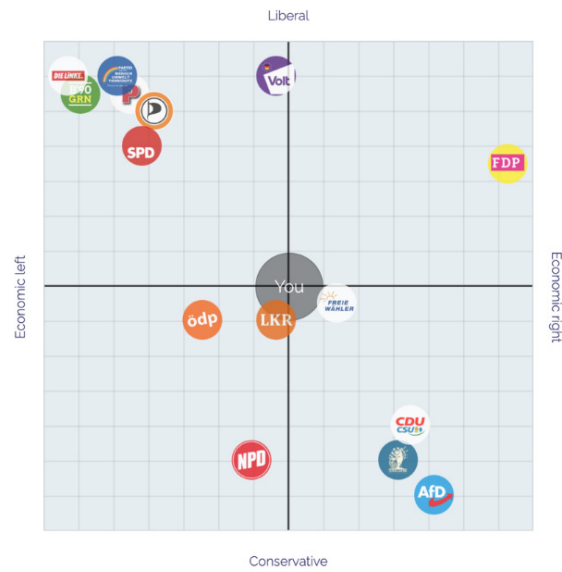


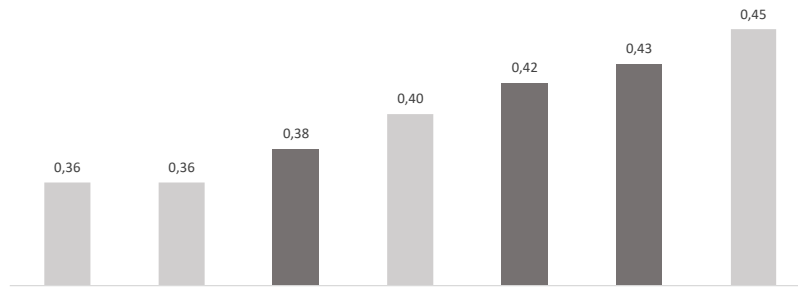
Figure 12. Example of unidimensional political space (ecological dimension), euandi2021



Interesting insights also come from the analysis of the most polarizing issues in the German federal elections according to euandi2021. Figure 13 below shows the average standard deviation of statements pertaining to each of the previously described central and sub-dimensions. Looking only at the three continuous central dimensions present in pan-European VAA editions (marked in darker grey), we see that, on average, the standard deviation is highest on issues that pertain to the EU integration dimension and lowest on socioeconomic issues. Cultural issues are also clearly more polarized than socioeconomic left-right statements. The order of most-least polarizing dimensions in Germany replicates rather exactly the 2019 European elections pattern. It is also interesting to see that, of the additional four dimensions, foreign policy is the most polarized one; federalism and (to a certain degree, surprisingly) Covid-19 are the least polarizing; the ecological dimension lies in between socioeconomic and cultural issues.⁷

⁷ We have, in this case, separated the ecological dimension from the more directly value-related cultural issues (e.g. the ones regarding same sex marriage or the position of church in the German society), although it could also be argued that all these issues together form the cultural dimension.

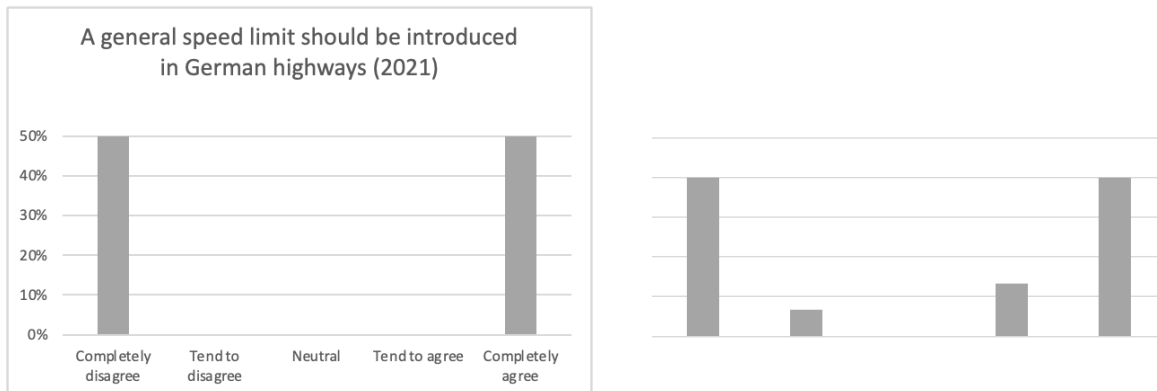
Figure 13. Polarization on issues, by dimension



Note: Party positions are coded to run from 0 to 1, with each answer category constituting a 0.25-step increment.

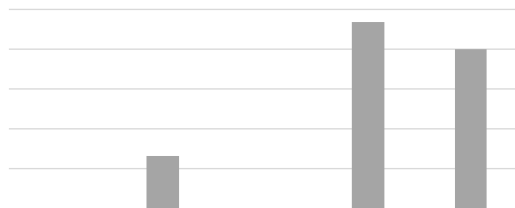
The single most polarizing issue in Germany 2021 was the statement regarding the general speed limit in highways. Another highly contentious matter is, indeed, abortion. Figure 14 displays the distribution of different answers regarding these two statements, demonstrating that the two strongest positions (completely agree/completely disagree) represent the entirety of placements for the former, and for the latter, around 80%.

Figure 14. Two most polarizing issues in euandi Germany 2021 dataset



By contrast, the least polarizing statement in Germany 2021 pertains to permitting employees to decide whether to work from home or from the office if their job permits it. Here, only two parties are on the disagreement side, yet with the milder position of “tend to disagree” (AfD and NPD); all others are roughly equally split on the agreement side between tend to agree and strongly agree.

Figure 15. The least polarizing issue in the euandi Germany 2021 dataset



At the end of this section, we shed some light on interesting patterns from the user data collected from euandi2021. euandi2021 featured a number of additional questions to the user, after completing the statements section: three basic sociodemographic questions (gender, age and education); the selection of up to three most important (salient) statements⁸; and finally, a “propensity to vote” page where the user is asked to select which parties they consider voting for, and which parties they would never vote for (with no limit of number of parties to indicate). The latter element corresponds with the increasing interest towards negative partisanship next to the classic partisan identification in recent scholarship (see Medeiros and Noël 2014, Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Mayer 2017). Table 3 below summarizes the main usage figures of euandi2021.

Table 3. Usage figures of euandi2021

Completed	Sociodemographic	Saliency #1	Saliency #2	Saliency #3
26,605	13,872	15,146	14,678	13,678

As it can be seen, roughly 50% of users decided to give additional information about themselves before moving on to the results visualization (it was possible to skip this); even more than half of the users, then, indicated at least one statement as particularly important for them. These numbers are very promising.

Another fruitful exercise is to see, in total, which parties receive more propensity to vote indications by users. Table 4 below shows these figures for the six largest parties, calculated in percentages, alongside the actual vote share received in the federal elections. First, it is at least encouraging – in terms of representativeness of the sample – to acknowledge that positive PTV’s percentages do not deviate too much from the actual vote share of parties (excluding the smaller FDP and Die Linke). Secondly, and unsurprisingly, AfD is the champion of negative partisanship: almost one third of total users indicated that they would never vote for them, corroborating the claims on the particularly intense polarization around this political party in the existing literature (Helbling and Jungkunz 2020; Rensmann, 2018; Shahrezaye et al., 2021).

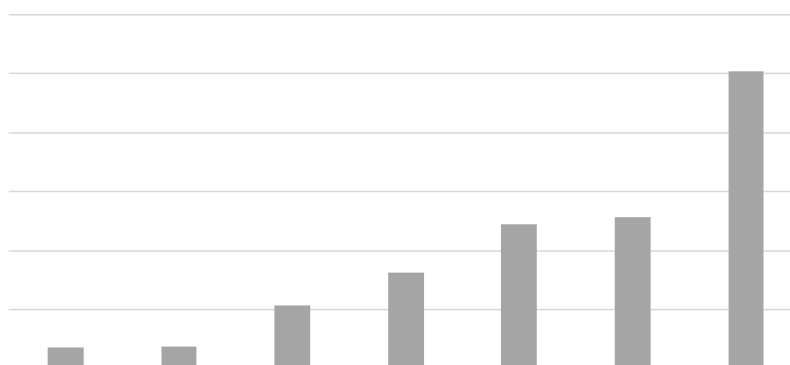
⁸ In the previous pan-European VAA editions, users could assign a + or a – sign to each statement to indicate whether the issue is important or not so important to them, respectively.

Table 4. Main parties' vote share and propensity to vote

Party	Vote	PTV (yes)	PTV (no)	Total
SPD	25,7%	27,1%	7,0%	34,1%
CDU/CSU	24,1%	22,8%	11,0%	33,8%
Grüne	14,8%	16,6%	19,7%	36,2%
FDP	11,5%	22,3%	7,1%	29,5%
AfD	10,3%	16,7%	29,7%	46,4%
DIE LINKE	4,9%	12,7%	15,6%	28,3%

Finally, we investigate the salience of dimensions, calculated as the average number of times a user indicated a statement pertaining to that dimension as particularly salient for them⁹ (figure 16 below). As it can be seen, foreign policy and EU issues are the least salient for German users. Environment and federalism come next, with 500-800 average entries; Covid-19 and cultural issues rank higher, close to each other (around 1200-1300). The classical socioeconomic stands out as the first, by far, most important dimension of the German political landscape in 2021 (2500, approximately two times the ensuing ones). Despite some claims (Franklin 1992) about the decline of the importance of economic left-right in Western contemporary political spaces and the vast literature on the importance of non-economic factors (Inglehart 1977; Ignazi 1992; Hix and Lord 1997; Hooghe and Marks 1999, 2018), German electors seem to still consider this dimension as crucial in defining their vote choice.

Figure 16. Most salient dimensions according to euandi Germany 2021 users



⁹ Not all dimensions are made up of the same number of statements (e.g. foreign policy, two statements; socioeconomic dimension, 10 statements). Therefore, simply counting the absolute number of entries per dimension would lead to biased results.

VI. Discussion

We have started off this contribution with a short account of how the first pan-European voting advice application was conceived at the European University Institute in Florence. Now, some 14 years later, we can take stock.

One of the most influent scholars of party politics, party organization and party systems in Europe, Peter Mair, was right from the beginning a pivotal team co-leader on this journey. He immediately bought into the idea of taking the early, national experiences with VAAs to the European level to learn more about party competition in Europe, about the potential European political space, public opinion and, crucially, novel ways for positioning parties on political issues. We believe that his “scientific nose”, his eagerness to experiment with innovative designs, his strong, personal commitment (he hand-coded the positions of Irish parties together with PhD students), his enthusiasm (he travelled to Brussels for a press conference in 2008, a year before the European elections, to declare the EU Profiler to become the “holy grail” of research on parties, electoral campaigns and public opinion) and analytical mind have proved him right. His expression “holy grail” was an exaggeration, charming the journalists present at the press conference in Scotland House, and whoever had the privilege to personally get to know Peter Mair will recognize his humour, in which one would often find some deeper insight. Or was it really an exaggeration? In 2008 it was. Today, given the remarkable success, both in academic and in practical terms, of three consecutive editions of this pan-European endeavour, one may wonder.

The idea of launching a pan-European VAA was implemented in 2009 and arguably stirred a great deal of interest among voters, parties, the media and academia. With the EU Profiler, and its successors, the euandi projects, a unique dataset on party positions across the EU has been generated. And quite some scientific contributions utilizing this data saw – and still see – the light of day in top journals in political science. It led to methodological debates about positioning parties, about calculating overlaps between users’ positions and those of the parties, to research questions that, for the first time, could be answered empirically (e.g. Bright et al. on transnational voting), to first experimental designs in VAAs (Vassil 2011), to detailed comparisons with the traditional party positioning efforts (Silva et al. 2021) – the list could be expanded. But it also led to some broken promises. The EU Profiler also profiled Swiss and Turkish parties’ positions and ran the VAA in both Switzerland and Turkey, simply to find out what the party competition would look like if these two countries, as a counterfactual, had been members of the EU in 2009. But so far, nobody wrote about this. The intended strong connection between the EES and the pan-European VAA was never really strong, for various reasons. Detailed analyses of campaign dynamics by observing party-user-congruence never materialized. Here, too, the list could be extended.

With this contribution we intended to go one step further in the list of possibilities that a series of pan-European VAAs allows us to do. We now can find patterns across time. And we can find more nuanced, regional patterns, where we could show how, for example, post-communist Europe is still distinct from the rest of Europe in many aspects of party competition. We could also discuss the fragility of the idea of a “European political space”, despite the ever more clearly visible macro-dimensions structuring it. And some more.

Now, it is time to look ahead. Will it become possible to establish VAAs as a valid method of party placement? We hope it will. Or can we make more of user-generated data? The fresh results from the German euandi instill us some optimism that this is possible. Come up with more experimental designs? We hope so, too. Indiana Jones has found the Holy Grail – but he could not hold on to it. Peter Mair may have failed, against his expectations, to find the Holy Grail of party-voter research. At least for the time being.

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Authors

Andres Reiljan

University of Tartu

andres.reiljan@ut.ee

Lorenzo Cicchi

European University Institute

Lorenzo.Cicchi@eui.eu

Diego Garzia

University of Lausanne

diego.garzia@unil.ch

Frederico Ferreira da Silva

University of Lausanne

frederico.silva@unil.ch

Alexander H. Trechsel

University of Luzern

alexander.trechsel@unilu.ch