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Measuring Issue Congruence in Western Europe: How Voting Advice Applications Compare to Expert- and Manifesto-Based Estimates

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Abstract

Do congruence estimates derived from different sources converge? A growing number of scholars are studying party–voter congruence in a comparative perspective, increasingly focusing on specific issues that depart from the general left–right dimension. When doing so, however, they often encounter a missing-data problem: Researchers must combine citizen preferences and party positions derived from distinct sources, frequently presenting different question formats, wordings, and scales. This exacerbates perceptual biases and requires demanding assumptions regarding the common understanding of issues between voters and experts. While multiple techniques have been proposed to address these issues, they remain burdensome and rarely used. Consequently, this article focuses on the most widely employed approaches to estimating party–voter issue congruence. I confront measures constructed by matching European Election Study voter preferences with expert (Chapel Hill Expert Survey) and Euromanifesto party position estimates against those generated by voting advice applications (VAAs)—specifically the euandi dataset—which present the benefit of measuring parties and voters on the same scale, with the same wording. Focusing on 60 party–voter dyads across 12 Western European countries in 2014, the results indicate clear divergence between estimates derived from manifesto data and those from VAAs. Correlations between VAAs and experts are consistently positive and significant, though moderate. These estimates do not seem to be driven by different sampling methods or quality filtering. Finally, an exploratory analysis on the sources of divergence finds that manifesto length, expert uncertainty, and party newness help explain some of the differences between congruence estimates.

Keywords

issue congruence; representation; voter–party linkages; voting advice applications

1. Introduction

Among the most influential normative models of representative democracy, the responsible party model (Schmitt & Thomassen, 1999) assumes that political representation takes place when the policy preferences of the citizenry are closely reflected in the policies enacted by their parties in office. To engender this linkage, parties are expected to offer clear and distinct policy options that align with citizens' electoral demands (Belchior, 2013). Equally important, voters should select the party that advocates policy programs that most closely align with their preferences (Thomassen & van Ham, 2014).

Congruence, defined here as the positional correspondence between voters and their preferred party, constitutes, thereby, an invaluable instrument to evaluate effective policy representation, as a close match between the representatives and the represented should signal a higher chance that the former will incorporate their voters' interests and demands into the decision-making process (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005; Mansbridge, 2009).

Unsurprisingly, a rich tradition has flourished in the political representation literature examining the extent of this match, with a growing focus on the cross-national level (Belchior, 2013; Dalton, 2017b; Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2011). While the traditional approach examines ideological congruence on the overarching left–right dimension (e.g., Schmitt & Thomassen, 1999), the increasing salience of specific issues has prompted recent contributions to focus extensively on what Jacques Thomassen calls the "blind corner" of political representation research (Thomassen, 2012): the paucity of works measuring issue congruence. One of the main findings of this strand is that parties are considerably out of step with their own voters on policy issues that poorly relate to the ideological dimension (Elsässer & Schäfer, 2023). This is the case for immigration, European integration, gender issues, and the environment.

Despite its heightened relevance, the study of issue congruence presents significant methodological hurdles for researchers interested in comparing estimates across countries. This often forces researchers to combine voter issue preferences and party issue positions derived from distinct data sources, frequently measured at different points in time, on different scales, and presenting different question wordings (Rosset & Stecker, 2019). Although techniques exist that mitigate some of these issues (Aldrich & McKelvey, 1977; Kurella & Rapp, 2024; Park et al., 2006), such methods are often too data-intensive and cumbersome to apply. As a result, the issue congruence literature still predominantly relies on the practice of matching different data sources, notwithstanding the potential drawbacks.

As the issue congruence literature expands, along with the sources and methods to measure it, it thus becomes critical to understand how these heterogeneous estimates compare. In short, I ask: To what extent do congruence estimates derived from different sources converge? And, if divergence is found, what predictors help explain it?

To answer these questions, I first confront congruence estimates on five relevant issues by matching cross-national survey data on citizens' issue preferences with party positions derived from two sources—manifesto data and expert surveys—across 12 Western European countries in 2014. More specifically, I leverage data on voter issue preferences derived from the extensively used European Election Study (EES) 2014 Voter Study (Schmitt et al., 2015). I then separately match these data with party issue position

estimates from the 2014 Euromanifesto project (Schmitt et al., 2016) and the 2014 wave of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES; Polk et al., 2017). Innovatively, I assess the convergence (or better, divergence) of these more traditional measures with voting advice applications (VAAs)-generated data, specifically leveraging the 2014 euandi dataset (Garzia et al., 2017)—a pan-European VAA aimed at helping citizens make an informed choice in the 2014 European Parliament elections—containing party and voter preferences on the same issues, same scale, and at the same point in time. Going a step further, I explore the determinants of such divergence by investigating characteristics inherent to both the voter survey- and party-level.

Although this article cannot provide a test for convergent validation (Adcock & Collier, 2001) as no objective, drawbacks-free benchmark indicator exists, I argue that assessing the alignment of distinctly derived congruence estimates remains imperative. This is particularly so in light of the growing "representative deficit" characterizing Western European polities (Alvarez et al., 2014; Bright et al., 2020). Parties appear increasingly ill-suited to read and aggregate voter demands as a result of the decline of traditional collective constituencies and particularization of voter preferences—trends that have prompted a withdrawal from civil society toward collusive cartelization (Katz & Mair, 1995). In this context, extending the comparison to VAA-based congruence measures is particularly fruitful. Recent scholarship has demonstrated the applicability of VAAs for constructing congruence measures as well as their suitability for cross-national analysis (Costello et al., 2021). As contributions based on VAAs proliferate (Stockinger et al., 2024), this study advances the literature by exploring the extent to which measures derived from such sources converge with those constructed from more "traditional" methods.

I find manifesto-based issue congruence estimates to correlate moderately and inconsistently across the five issues. Conversely, I find higher levels of correlation as well as consistent significance between euandi and the CHES-based measures. The overlap appears higher on EU integration and redistribution, the latter being poorly convergent for both CHES and euandi with Euromanifesto. The exploratory analysis finds some evidence supporting systematic bias between euandi-based measures and both Euromanifesto and CHES data. On the voter survey side, sampling procedure and quality filtering do not improve the match between the measures. Conversely, the length of the manifesto, expert uncertainty, and the newness of the party in the euandi dataset appear to explain some of the divergence.

Matching multiple issue congruence estimates reveals important patterns of convergence and divergence. Euromanifesto-based congruence measures correlate only moderately across the five issues and do so inconsistently in terms of statistical significance. By contrast, congruence measures derived from euandi exhibit higher correlation coefficients and consistently significant associations with CHES-based estimates. Substantively, overlap across data sources is greatest on EU integration and redistribution. Yet redistribution also emerges as an issue of particularly weak convergence between Euromanifesto-based measures and both expert- and euandi-based indicators. Exploratory analyses further suggest that divergence across data sources is not random but partly systematic. Indeed, I find some indications of bias between euandi-based measures and both Euromanifesto and CHES data. More specifically, on the voter-survey side, neither sampling procedures nor quality filtering substantially improve correspondence between congruence measures. Instead, features of the estimation procedures underlying party position measures—manifesto length, expert uncertainty, and party newness in the euandi dataset—account for at least some of the observed discrepancies. Taken together, these findings speak directly to both the congruence literature and the growing body of work leveraging VAAs to study political representation.

2. Combining Voter Preferences and Party Position Estimates Derived From Different Data Sources

Comparative studies on issue congruence often struggle with a missing-data problem. The traditional relevance of the left–right dimension as a super-issue structuring party–voter relations across Western Europe has not only contributed to confining studies on party–voter congruence to the realm of ideological dimensions (Belchior, 2013); it has markedly shaped the set of political attitudes and preferences that are measured through cross-national surveys.

In a context where multidimensional congruence—i.e., the ability of parties and governments to be in line with citizen preferences on different issues—has become an increasingly relevant indicator of the quality of democracy (Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016), scholars wanting to estimate issue congruence in a comparative perspective must confront with two sets of methodological challenges: (a) finding survey items through which to gauge voter preferences on specific issues; (b) meaningfully combining these items with comparable estimates of party issue positions, ultimately generating a dataset that builds on two distinct sources.

2.1. Mass Survey Items Measuring Voters' Issue Preferences

The first step in measuring issue congruence between parties and voters is to retrieve information about their preferences on issue sets of interest. An examination of the empirical literature indicates that the large-scale cross-national European Social Survey (ESS; e.g., Devine & Ibenskas, 2021; Ibenskas & Polk, 2022; Rosset & Stecker, 2019; Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016) and the EES (Belchior, 2013; Costello et al., 2014; Dalton, 2017a, 2021; Lefkofridi & Casado-Asensio, 2013; Rosset & Stecker, 2019) constitutes one of the most frequently used sources of voters' preferences in issue congruence studies focusing on Western European polities. While the EES is particularly well-suited, the ESS has also been widely employed to measure positional correspondence as it provides authoritative cross-national mass surveys on social and political values and attitudes since 2002, providing researchers with a longitudinal perspective on multi-dimensional congruence (see e.g., Devine & Ibenskas, 2021; Ibenskas & Polk, 2022; Rosset & Stecker, 2019; Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016).

The EES Voter Study is a nationally representative post-election survey conducted in each member country of the EU in an arrangement with the European Parliament. Launched in 1979, it offers post-election individual-level survey data on electoral behaviour in both European Parliament and national elections, trust in and assessment of European institutions, as well as information on general value orientations. It is important to note that the EES Voter Study includes questions assessing voter preferences on various policy issues. These questions cover attitudes towards European unification and enlargement, state regulation and market control, wealth redistribution, taxation, public spending, same-sex marriage, civil liberties, immigration, and the environment. Additionally, since 2014, the EES Voter Survey has presented these questions using the same scale and wording as the CHES, one of Europe's most prominent sources of party position estimates.

2.2. Party Position Estimates

Plenty of cross-national party position estimates from different sources exist, yet they vary in the extent to which they can be suitably employed in measuring party–voter issue congruence. The two most widely used sources are manifesto data and expert-based judgments.

The former rely on hand-coding quasi-sentences which are assigned to—often—pre-defined categories of left and right. The position estimate is then operationalized as the proportion of left versus right quasi-sentences in the party manifesto. The reliance on party manifestos makes large-scale cross-national datasets such as the Manifesto Project (Lehmann et al., 2025) or the Euromanifesto project (Schmitt et al., 2016) extremely valuable for time series analyses, as some data can reach back to the pre-war period. Moreover, manifesto-based measures draw on written and publicly available records, allowing for competing and replicable measurement of party positions (Hooghe et al., 2010).

That said, combining manifesto data with voter preference data poses several challenges. For example, Marks et al. (2007) note how some manifestos may be too short to capture variation among parties and to provide precise measurements on issues that depart from the left–right dimension. This helps governing parties—which also tend to be older and gain more votes—be measured more accurately as they publish longer manifestos explaining their positions on a wide variety of issues (Gabel & Huber, 2000). Most importantly, manifesto data do not lend themselves too well to being combined with voter preference data (Kurella & Rapp, 2024). On the one hand, while, e.g., the ESS and EES present respondents with specific labels for the endpoints of a position item, the endpoints of the scale in, e.g., the Manifesto Project are just the maximum imbalance between two categories. On the other hand, the nature of the coding scheme makes it problematic to obtain fine-grained data on substantive issues. For example, the Manifesto Project provides two non-specific categories on immigration: Multiculturalism: Positive (607) and Multiculturalism: Negative (608). Similarly, quasi-sentences on European integration are clustered in just one category: Multiculturalism: Negative (608).

Against this background, it is unsurprising that—despite their continued use (e.g., Werner, 2020)—researchers seeking to combine party positions with voter issue preferences have increasingly turned to expert survey data. Here, party position estimates are obtained by averaging all expert judgments. Expert-based measures address several of the shortcomings of manifesto data by directly eliciting party positions on clearly defined policy scales, which are more readily comparable to voter survey items. In this approach, party positions are typically derived by aggregating expert judgments, most commonly through simple averaging, yielding estimates that are both substantively interpretable and cross-nationally comparable. Expert surveys have consistently produced reliable and valid measures of party positions when cross-validated with other measures (Hooghe et al., 2010; Marks et al., 2007). Importantly, what makes them suited for measuring issue congruence is their traditional focus on concrete issue dimensions. One example is provided by the Ray dataset (Ray, 1999), measuring party positions on EU integration and policies since 1984. This dataset has then been extended by the CHES, which to this day represents the most complete expert data source on party issue positions. In the 2019 wave of the CHES (Jolly et al., 2022), experts provide party positions on specific issues such as redistribution, state intervention in the economy, European integration, social lifestyle, immigration, and environment, as well as on more general issue dimensions as in the case of the GAL–TAN dimension (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). Further, experts in CHES

and other expert surveys are asked to evaluate positioning directly on structured scales with meaningful endpoints, allowing for a less problematic match with voter survey data.

2.3. Challenges in Matching Voter Issue Preferences With Party Position Estimates

As noted above, a large number of contributions in the issue congruence literature are nowadays matching voter preferences with party position estimates from either manifesto or expert data. Even if the selected items to be matched are comparable (e.g., same wordings and scales), researchers face a serious methodological challenge whose severity resides in perceptual biases and information asymmetry between experts and the average voter. As long noted by the literature (Aldrich & McKelvey, 1977), voter responses to issue scales and their perceived party positions suffer from differential item functioning (DIF). DIF arises when survey respondents perceive survey items in fundamentally different ways. Golder and Stramski (2010) highlight how this perceptual bias can be markedly accentuated in comparative analysis settings. That is because respondents in different countries may place themselves differently on a scale even though they share identical preferences, or they may place themselves at the same point on the scale even though the nature of political debate in these countries is different (King et al., 2004). The latter often describes the fact that respondents tend to locate themselves—or their preferred party—toward the centre of the scale, even when they—or their preferred party—are non-centrist, while pushing disliked parties toward the extremes. This is because moderation is generally considered a socially desirable trait, implying being reasonable and objective (Hare et al., 2015). The main consequence of this pattern of social desirability is an underestimation of polarization in voter opinions.

While voters tend to prime moderation over extremism, experts might comfortably locate parties clearly at the endpoints of the scale. While there is some empirical evidence challenging the assumption of expert judgments being free from perceptual biases (Curini, 2010), experts do tend to interpret issue scales differently from voters. They are usually more politically interested than the average voter and have access to a variety of different sources such as opinions voiced by intra-party factions (Marks et al., 2007). In turn, they are likely to interpret the endpoints of the scale more consistently through dimensions and time, making their judgments less amenable to those short-term factors (e.g., current political debates) affecting survey respondents (Kurella & Rapp, 2024, p. 3).

Several methods have been proposed to eliminate these systematic sources of bias, all sharing Aldrich and McKelvey's (1977) intuition to estimate respondent's distortion parameters (the intercept/"shift" and weight/"stretch") to recover the locations of voters and parties on a common underlying dimension (Hare et al., 2015; Jessee, 2021; Kurella & Rapp, 2024). Nonetheless, besides the rescaling technique developed by Kurella and Rapp (2024), these methods require voters' perceived party positions, which are seldom asked on concrete issues, especially from a comparative perspective.

2.4. VAAs

VAAs represent an emerging method for studying political representation in Europe. First introduced in the late 1990s, these informational devices help voters find the "best party fit" based on the match between their recorded policy issue preferences and the issue positions held by a set of political parties. Importantly, their two-pronged nature allows researchers to estimate issue congruence measures without resorting to two distinct data sources (Garzia et al., 2017).

Consequently, a primary advantage of VAAs is the measurement of voter and party preferences on the same issues, using the same scale and wording, and at the same point in time (Garzia & Marschall, 2019). This allows scholars to rely on fewer demanding assumptions regarding the shared understanding of items between experts and voters, as both groups are presented with identical scale endpoints and labels. A further benefit stems from the specific methodology frequently employed by these applications to estimate party positions. The iterative (Kieskompas) method combines the insights from country teams of experts and an extensive textual analysis with parties' self-placements on each policy item included in the survey (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2023). Including parties in the positioning process should minimize some of the weaknesses typical of methods based solely on expert judgments, namely informational asymmetry regarding different political parties. As noted by Marks et al. (2007), errors in expert surveys such as CHES are most pronounced for new, small, and non-governmental parties. These parties tend to garner fewer votes, be less visible in the media, and switch positions more readily, making it harder for experts to locate these parties accurately (Steenbergen & Marks, 2007). Finally, by utilizing parties' self-placements, VAAs reduce situations in which party position estimates are derived from only a small number of expert judgments, whose scores may additionally be in sharp disagreement (Hooghe et al., 2010; Marks et al., 2007).

Concurrently, VAA user data present distinct advantages over traditional surveys of public opinion. Because they attract an ever-increasing number of respondents during election campaigns, VAAs provide researchers with sufficient observations to reliably estimate the aggregate preferences of smaller parties' electorate base, usually plagued by a small-*n* problem (McDonnell & Werner, 2019).

To be sure, VAA-generated data are not without limitations. First, regarding measurement validity, social desirability bias remains a challenge even with identical scales. Additionally, research indicates that party self-positioning in VAAs may respond to strategic incentives, introducing noise into the equation (Cedroni & Garzia, 2010; Ilmarinen et al., 2022). Further, being freely available online, these tools suffer from self-selection bias (Pianzola, 2014). This usually results in convenience samples featuring younger and better-educated respondents who are also highly interested in politics (Garzia & Marschall, 2014). As noted by Bright et al. (2020), the highly non-representative nature of the sample can be mitigated by recalling Almond's (1950) seminal distinction between the general public (the object of traditional representative samples in election and social surveys) and the attentive public largely informing the former through a process of osmosis. Even so, this does not eliminate the non-representativeness of the sample, which must necessarily be addressed to produce reliable congruence estimates.

Notwithstanding these limitations, VAA data significantly enhance our understanding of public opinion while facilitating a more nuanced study of political representation (De Angelis, 2020; Popp, 2024). Recently, scholars have begun utilizing VAAs to derive congruence measures (Costello et al., 2021), a development paralleled by the shift from purely national applications to cross-national platforms. A prime example is the euandi dataset (Garzia et al., 2015). Developed by the European University Institute of Florence, it represents the first cross-national VAA project cumulating users' policy preferences and parties' positions across three European Parliament elections (2009, 2014, 2019). The dataset covers 27 EU countries and the UK, including all parties credited with at least 1% of the popular vote in the opinion polls preceding the respective European Parliament election (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2023). Both parties and users are provided with a set of identical policy statements. These five-point Likert scales measure the level of (dis)agreement with the respective statements: E.g., the item measuring users' and party positions on welfare benefits says,

"Social programmes should be maintained even at the cost of higher taxes," where 1 means *completely disagree* and 5 *completely agree*.

In sum, VAAs present an emerging alternative to traditional methods of studying political representation across Europe. An ever-growing number of contributions now match users' and parties' information provided by VAAs to examine the "representative deficit" in Western democracies (e.g., Bright et al., 2020; McDonnell & Werner, 2019; Popp, 2024). Further, growing evidence attests to the reliability and validity of VAAs' party position estimates vis-à-vis other standard methods (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2023; Gemenis, 2013).

What remains absent, however, is a systematic comparison of VAA-generated party–voter issue congruence measures with more established approaches to measuring congruence—specifically, those combining election surveys with expert or manifesto data. The remainder of this article is dedicated to addressing this gap.

3. Data and Methods

The first step in analysing congruence is choosing how to conceptualize it and measure it. As noted by Golder and Stramski (2010, p. 92), I can think of congruence as concerning one citizen and one representative (one-to-one relationship), many citizens and one representative (many-to-one relationship), and many citizens and many representatives (many-to-many relationship). In this article, I define congruence as a many-to-one relationship involving parties and their voters, thereby incorporating information about the distribution of citizen preferences. Accordingly, issue congruence is measured as the average distance between a party and its voters, so that each respondent's congruence score is averaged and then aggregated per party. Crucially, I depart from previous contributions measuring "absolute" issue congruence (Giger & Lefkofridi, 2014). Instead, I follow Rosset and Stecker (2019), and I operationalize congruence in relative terms. This allows me to assess the direction of (in)congruence between parties and voters, providing a more refined picture of the convergence—or rather divergence—of congruence estimates.

The formula I use is the following:

$$RCC = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} P_i - C_i$$

Where N is the number of citizens having supported party P_i, and C_i is the ideal point of citizen i^{th}.

I combine four distinct data sources—the 2014 EES Voter Study, the 2014 Euromanifesto project, the 2014 CHES, and the 2014 euandi dataset—to generate three sets of issue congruence estimates: (a) EES-Euromanifesto, (b) EES-CHES, and (c) euandi. Table A1 in the Supplementary File provides the list of issue position items and question wording. To allow for meaningful matching, I recoded all items into the same polarity so that higher values represent a more market-liberal economic preference/position or a more conservative stance on cultural issues. Further, I normalized all response categories on a 0–1 scale. Accordingly, negative issue congruence scores signify that parties hold a relatively more left-wing position than their voters. Conversely, positive values highlight a relatively more right-wing party position than their electorate.

I restrict my analysis to five issues: redistribution, immigration, EU integration, gender issues, and the environment. While euandi offers a comprehensive range of policy statements, the EES and CHES are more limited in their coverage, necessitating this focus. Nevertheless, these five issues provide a comprehensive mapping of the Western European political space, capturing the increasing relevance of secondary issue dimensions (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2006).

Except for the euandi dataset, I used binary vote choice items to match parties and the respondents who stated they have voted for them either at the most recent national election or at the latest European Parliament election. For the former, I leveraged propensity-to-vote (PTV) scores, reported on a 10-point scale. Where the user indicated the same PTV value for more than one party, I selected the party with the highest agreement score. To ensure comparability with the VAA estimates, which are inherently tied to the 2014 electoral context, I utilize the EES item on European Parliament vote choice. For reliability purposes, I excluded parties with less than 30 supporters for either of the combined data sources. The final dataset returns 60 party–voter dyads. My analysis extends to 12 Western European countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden.

Several important methodological issues arise when comparing estimates derived from such heterogeneous sources and must be considered when interpreting the findings. Whereas the composite congruence measures rely on retrospective vote recall (EES), the euandi data utilize prospective vote intentions. Although this can induce divergence due to cognitive biases (van Elsas et al., 2016), the immediate fieldwork of the EES following the 2014 European election partially mitigates this concern (Schmitt et al., 2015). Second—similarly—the timing of data collection introduces potential noise. Notably, CHES data were collected well after the election, with experts evaluating party positions for the entire year rather than the specific campaign period. Third, due to the different wording and scale endpoints of the items on which party and voters are matched, there is no certainty that we are not comparing "apples" with "pears." This problem is exacerbated by the fact that euandi's issue statements are highly detailed and positional in nature, compared to the higher level of abstraction on which CHES operates. While it is more difficult to make assumptions about voters, Kurella and Rapp (2024) show how party standpoints on different issues from the same underlying dimension (economic or cultural) are highly correlated. I assume this to be the case between party–issue items of CHES and euandi belonging to the same underlying dimension.

4. Empirical Results

4.1. Confronting Three Sets of Congruence Estimates

Table 1 reports pairwise correlation coefficients between congruence estimates derived from the three data sources across five issues. Focusing first on issue-specific patterns, only two issues—European integration and immigration—display consistently positive and statistically significant correlations across all three datasets. This pattern suggests a certain degree of convergence across both sources and methods. By contrast, congruence estimates for the remaining issues show more inconsistency, both in terms of magnitude and statistical significance across datasets. Redistribution is a particularly salient case: Correlations are weak and, in two out of three pairwise comparisons, negative and statistically insignificant.

Such inconsistencies may point to the fact that different estimation strategies ultimately capture distinct aspects of issue congruence rather than a single underlying construct. This interpretation is reinforced when examining the specific matching between estimates. The convergence between manifesto-based congruence measures and euandi estimates is limited: Beyond European integration and immigration, no additional issue reaches conventional levels of statistical significance. A similar, though somewhat less pronounced, pattern emerges when comparing Euromanifesto-based measures with those derived from CHES. Apart from European integration, correlations across the remaining issues are at best moderate.

Importantly, I observe consistently moderate-to-strong convergence between congruence estimates derived from EES-CHES and those based on euandi. Both the stability and magnitude of these correlations suggest these estimates likely measure similar things. This greater convergence is plausibly attributable to the substantial similarities between the two methods. In both cases, party positions are ultimately grounded in expert-based judgements: euandi's iterative method can be understood as a more refined extension of traditional expert surveys, combining expert judgments with parties' self-placement. Importantly, as shown in Table A10 in the Supplementary File, the correlation coefficients remain equally strong and statistically significant when I substitute EES voter data with estimates derived from the ESS.

By contrast, the strong overlap between EES-CHES and euandi, coupled with the markedly weaker correlations involving Euromanifesto-based congruence estimates, lends indirect support to earlier work identifying manifesto data as something of an outlier among party positioning methods (Kurella & Rapp, 2024; Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2012). A key reason lies in the fundamentally different logic underpinning manifesto-based measures. Whereas CHES and euandi ask experts to locate parties directly on specific issue scales, projects such as the Euromanifesto or the Manifesto Project infer party positions from the relative salience of issue categories within manifestos. As a result, estimated positions on any given issue or broader dimension are affected by the salience of other categories in the document, reducing the likelihood of extreme placements and, in turn, convergence with expert-based measures (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2023, p. 17). This remains the case even when, as in my analysis, I apply the logit-scaling technique proposed by Lowe et al. (2011), which addresses several well-known limitations often associated with manifesto-based data.

Table 1. Correlations between congruence measures constructed from alternative datasets by issue.

Issue	Euromanifesto/CHES	*N*	Euromanifesto/euandi	*N*	CHES/euandi	*N*
Redistribution	−0.11	60	−0.09	59	0.56***	59
Immigration	0.36***	60	0.22*	58	0.44***	58
EU integration	0.68***	60	0.63***	60	0.72***	60
Gender issues	0.41***	60	0.01	60	0.46***	60
Environment	0.25*	60	0.17	57	0.27**	57

Notes: Pearson correlations (*r*); * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$; *N*s are pairwise complete observations.

Figure 1 illustrates these patterns by presenting scatterplots of the congruence estimates. When pooling all five issues, the strongest correlation is observed between the EES-CHES and euandi measures ($r = 0.53$). This is closely followed by the correlation between the two EES-based estimates (EES-CHES and EES-Euromanifesto), which stands at $r = 0.47$. By contrast, the convergence between euandi and Euromanifesto-based congruence is markedly lower ($r = 0.26$), further highlighting the distinctiveness of the manifesto-derived data.

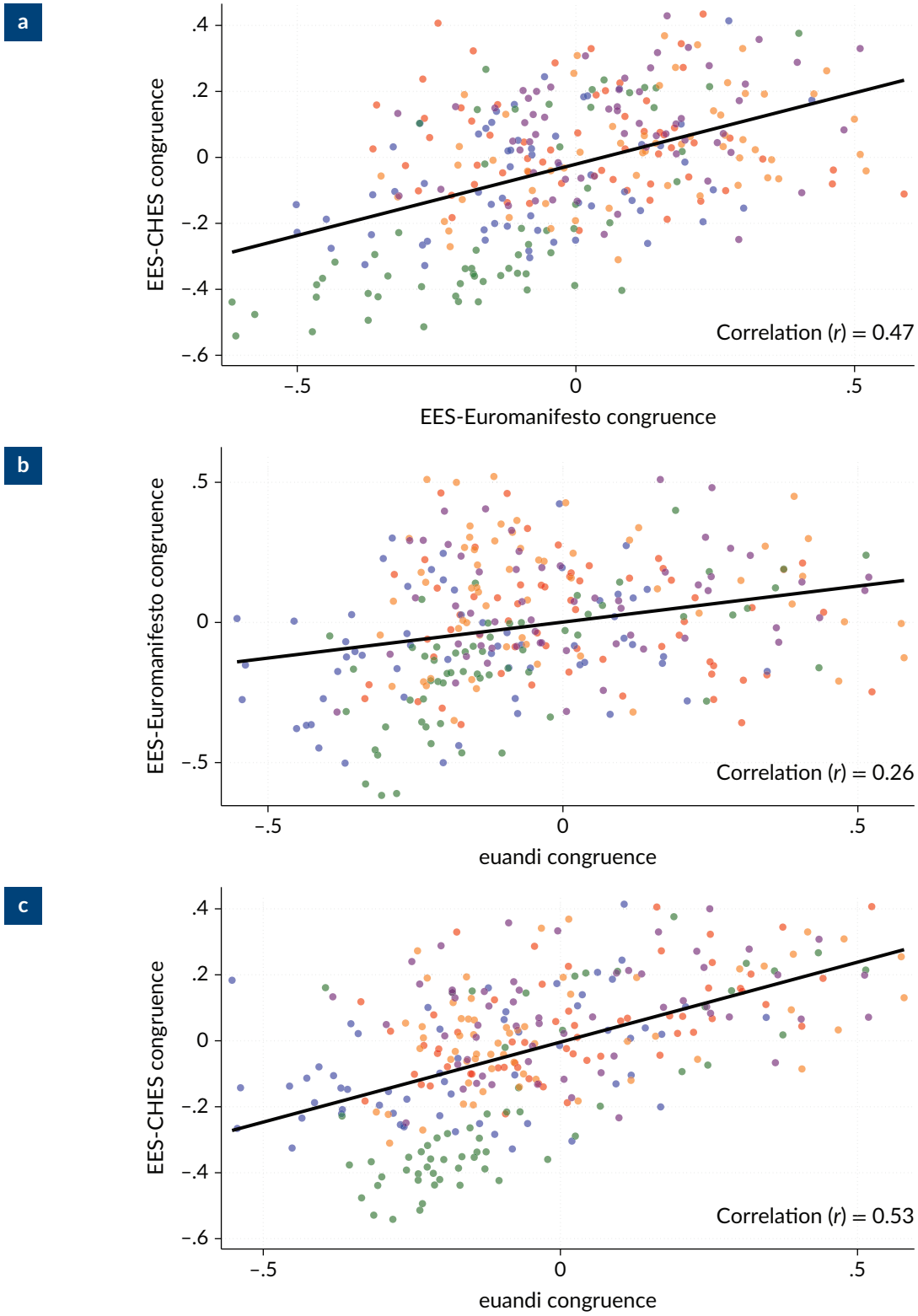

Figure 1. Overall correspondence between alternative issue congruence measures: (a) EES-Euromanifesto and EES-CHES congruence estimates; (b) euandi and EES-Euroromanifesto congruence estimates; (c) euandi and EES-CHES congruence estimates. Notes: The panels report pairwise correlations between congruence estimates derived from three data combinations, EES-Euromanifesto, EES-CHES, and euandi-based measures; each panel plots one congruence estimate on the horizontal axis against another on the vertical axis; the pooled sample comprises 300 observations across 12 countries and five issues.

4.2. Exploring Divergence: Sampling Techniques and Quality Filtering

Moving a step further, I ask which specific features of the composite methods used to derive the congruence measures help explain at least part of the observed differences across data sources. A natural starting point is the respondent side of the equation, and particularly the sampling methodologies underlying the different datasets.

As discussed above, whereas the EES relies on probability sampling, euandi draws on a self-selected subset of voters who are disproportionately male, younger, more highly educated, and politically sophisticated (van de Pol et al., 2014). If self-selection affects the distribution of voter preferences, it may in turn translate into differences in estimated levels of issue congruence. To assess whether such selection effects contribute to the divergence between congruence measures—and to test whether correcting for sample composition improves the performance of VAA-based estimates—I follow Toshkov and Romeijn (2021) and apply post-stratification weights to the euandi data. Specifically, observations from underrepresented demographic groups are up-weighted, while those from overrepresented groups are down-weighted. The weighting scheme is calibrated using the demographic profiles of party electorates derived from the same 2014 EES. Tables A2 to A4 in the Supplementary File report the demographic profile (gender, age, and education level) of the EES, euandi, and ESS.

Table 2 reports the pairwise correlations between the weighted euandi congruence estimates and those derived from EES-Euromanifesto and EES-CHES data. Contrary to expectations, weighting does not lead to a meaningful improvement in correspondence across measures: Convergence with Euromanifesto-based estimates remains weak, while correlations with expert-based measures continue to be comparatively strong.

Table 2. Correlations between congruence measures constructed from alternative sources by issue with weighted euandi user data.

Issue	Euromanifesto/euandi	*N*	CHES/euandi	*N*
Redistribution	−0.07	59	0.56***	59
Immigration	0.27**	58	0.45***	58
EU integration	0.64***	60	0.70***	60
Gender issues	0.11	60	0.41***	60
Environment	0.18	57	0.26*	57

Notes: Pearson correlations (*r*); * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$; *N*s are pairwise complete observations; euandi user data are weighted by age, gender, and education based on socio-demographic information derived from the EES Voter Study sample.

Beyond sampling, differences in the quality of respondent-level data may also contribute to variation in convergence across congruence estimates. First, previous research has shown that VAA top-PTV scores do not always correspond to the party ultimately chosen at the ballot box (Talukder et al., 2021; Walgrave et al., 2008). This evidence raises concerns about relying on agreement scores as a decisive criterion for retaining or excluding VAA-user observations, as such a strategy may introduce additional noise into congruence estimates. To assess the sensitivity of my results, I thus re-estimate correlations after excluding all observations with tied top-PTV scores (i.e., cases in which two or more parties share the highest score). Second, I exclude respondents who completed a VAA questionnaire for a country other than their country of residence, on the assumption that these individuals may be less familiar with the relevant party system.

Third, I remove observations associated with unusually short or long completion times, which may signal suboptimal engagement with the survey instrument. I operationalize this by excluding observations with completion times below the 10th percentile and above the 90th percentile.

Tables A5 to A8 in the Supplementary File report the pairwise correlations based on these adjusted samples. Across all specifications, the resulting coefficients closely resemble those reported in Table 2. Taken together, these analyses provide little evidence that sampling methodology or data-quality filtering on the respondent side substantively affects the level of convergence between euandi-based congruence measures and those derived from Euromanifesto- or expert-based data.

4.3. Exploring Divergence: Features of Party Position Estimation Methods

As a final step, I move to the party-level of the equation and explore potential determinants of divergence between congruence estimates that may ultimately derive from the way in which party position estimates are constructed or derived. To be sure, predicting divergence is not straightforward when examining composite measures such as issue congruence ones. With this in mind, I took inspiration from previous studies examining patterns of convergence across datasets (e.g., Ferreira da Silva et al., 2023) and operationalized divergence as the absolute difference in issue congruence for each party between pairs of datasets: EES-Euromanifesto and EES-CHES, euandi and EES-Euromanifesto, and euandi and EES-CHES, calculated separately for each of the five issues. This procedure yields a continuous measure capturing the overall degree of disagreement between methods, with higher values indicating greater divergence. Using these measures as dependent variables, I then estimated three separate OLS regressions, one for each combination of data sources.

I include several predictors corresponding to the specific estimation procedures of each congruence measure. For Euromanifesto-based measures, I use a continuous variable counting the number of quasi-sentences devoted to the analysed issues, as shorter manifestos with fewer statements are likely to yield less precise estimates. For expert-based measures, I include a measure of expert uncertainty, calculated as the sum of the standard deviations of expert judgments across the five issues. Higher disagreement among experts reduces confidence in the mean position assigned to a party. For VAA-based measures, I include a measure of party newness, indicating whether the party has never been included in previous waves of the euandi dataset, and a dummy variable identifying whether the party actively participated in the iterative process, placing itself on the issues. In addition, I consider two characteristics that may affect all methods equally: Party size and government status are expected to improve the quality of party position estimates, as larger and governing parties are more visible and better documented and tend to have a more extensive and diverse policy agenda (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2023; Marks et al., 2007).

Figure 2 presents the coefficient plot from the OLS regression analysis explaining the divergence between the two “traditional” measures: manifesto- and expert-based congruence estimates. As the figure illustrates, no predictor appears to systematically affect the alignment between these two sources.

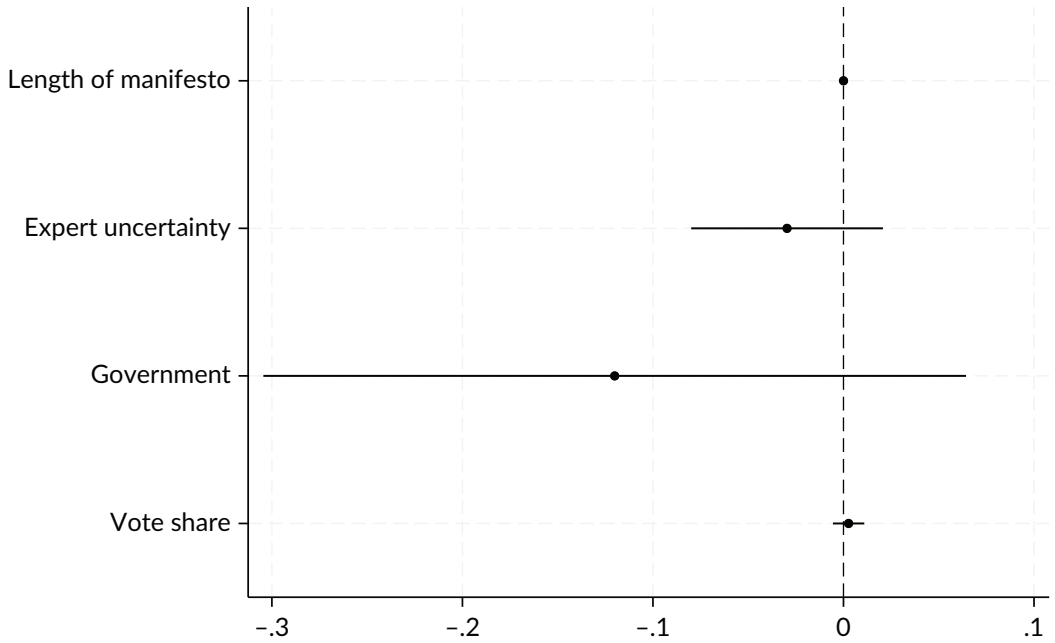

Figure 2. Determinants of divergence between EES-Euromanifesto and EES-CHES congruence estimates (coefficient plot). Notes: The figure displays OLS regression coefficients with 90% confidence intervals; the dependent variable is the absolute difference between congruence estimates derived from EES-Euromanifesto and EES-CHES; horizontal lines crossing the vertical zero line indicate statistically insignificant effects.

Turning to Table 3, however, I find evidence that the divergence involving euandi-based estimates is at least partially systematic. Model 1, which analyses the discrepancy between euandi and Euromanifesto, reveals a negative and significant relationship between manifesto length and divergence. Specifically, the higher the number of quasi-sentences in a party manifesto, the lower the difference (i.e., the higher the convergence) between the two measures. This suggests that longer manifestos—which likely provide more granular policy information—improve the accuracy of position estimates.

In contrast, Model 2 identifies expert uncertainty as a driver of divergence between CHES and euandi measures. I find that higher levels of standard deviation among experts regarding a party's position significantly led to larger discrepancies ($b = 0.05$, $p < 0.05$). This highlights a potential limitation of expert-based approaches: When experts struggle to agree on a placement—likely also due to the complexity of comparing parties across countries or time—the resulting estimates tend to drift further from the VAA benchmark.

Finally, regarding shared factors, being a "new party" in the euandi dataset leads to significantly greater divergence ($b = 0.55$, $p < 0.05$), but this effect is confined to the Euromanifesto comparison (Model 1). This likely reflects the difficulty of coding shorter or less standardized platforms typical of emerging parties. Finally, I observe a weak, counterintuitive effect of incumbency: Being in government tends to slightly increase rather than decrease the divergence between estimates, specifically in the CHES–euandi comparison ($b = 0.15$, $p < 0.10$). Party self-placement, by contrast, shows no significant effect in reducing divergence across either model.

Table 3. OLS regression models explaining divergence between euandi and traditional congruence estimates.

	Diff. Euromanifesto/euandi (1)	Diff. CHES/euandi (2)
Length of manifesto	−0.00*	
	(0.00)	
Expert uncertainty		0.05**
		(0.02)
New party	0.55**	−0.06
	(0.27)	(0.20)
Self-placement	0.02	0.04
	(0.14)	(0.09)
Government	0.13	0.15*
	(0.14)	(0.09)
Vote share	0.00	0.00
	(0.01)	(0.00)
R^2	0.14	0.20
Observations	57	55

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; the dependent variable is the absolute difference between the congruence estimates derived from the specified sources; * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

5. Conclusion

Assessing the quality of political representation requires reliable measures of the linkage between citizens and their representatives. As the political space in Western Europe becomes increasingly multidimensional, with specific salient issues structuring party–voter relations, the need for precise issue congruence estimates is more acute than ever. However, scholars attempting to measure these linkages frequently encounter a missing-data problem, forcing them to combine heterogeneous data sources that often present different scales, wordings, and estimation techniques.

By systematically confronting "traditional" composite measures (EES-Euromanifesto and EES-CHES) with estimates generated by VAAs (specifically the euandi dataset), this study offers a critical comparison of these approaches. My analysis of 60 party–voter dyads across 12 countries yields three main insights.

First, methodological choices entail important consequences for the estimation of congruence. I find that Euromanifesto-based estimates correlate only moderately and inconsistently with other congruence measures. This reinforces the argument that the salience-based logic of manifesto coding translates imperfectly into the positional one required for party–voter comparisons. Conversely, the convergence between euandi and EES-CHES estimates suggests that these two methods measure common latent concepts. This likelihood is underpinned by their shared reliance on expert judgment.

Second, my exploratory analysis clarifies the sources of the observed divergence. Contrary to expectations regarding the "demand side," the self-selected nature of VAA users does not appear to drive the discrepancies. Weighting the sample to correct for socio-demographic biases yielded no significant improvement in the match between congruence measures. Instead, characteristics inherent to the estimation of party positions—specifically manifesto length, expert uncertainty, and party newness—appear

to explain a portion of the divergence. This suggests that "noise" in congruence estimates often stems from the difficulty of locating parties (especially newer or smaller ones) rather than from the non-representativeness of the VAA user base.

These findings attest to the centrality of VAAs not merely as information tools for voters, but as a valuable data source for studying political representation. Having said that, euandi represents only one VAA, as the proliferation of the latter across Europe offers a rapidly expanding avenue for research and validation of these findings. Future scholarship should extend this validation to other platforms and election cycles, further refining scholars' ability to monitor the "representative deficit" in an era of transforming party–voter linkages.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data used are available at the following links:

https://search.gesis.org/research_data/ZA5917?doi=10.4232/1.12138
https://search.gesis.org/research_data/ZA5160
https://search.gesis.org/research_data/ZA5162
https://ess.sikt.no/en/study/ccd56840-e949-4320-945a-927c49e1dc4f
https://www.chesdata.eu/2014-chapel-hill-expert-survey

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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