Policy Positions in the Eyes of the Beholder

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

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Research Question

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

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

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Who Cares?

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

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

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Determinants of Accurate Party Placement

- Party characteristics
- Party-system characteristics

Party Characteristics

- Party size
  - Attempt to preserve past agendas and distinguish selves from competitors regarding policies.
    - L/R dimension is dominant
    - More info on large party's L/R position
  - EU integration depoliticized
    - Larger parties collude on issues of EU integration
    - Less info on large party's EU position

Party Characteristics

- Governing status
  - Parties in government have greater visibility, and comment on current affairs and reaffirm policy position.
    - L/R is the dominant policy dimension
    - Voters should have more information on government party positions on L/R dimension
  - EU integration depoliticized
    - Government avoid discussing EU integration
    - Non-government parties politicize EU integration

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Party-System Characteristics

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

Party-System Characteristics

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

Hypotheses

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

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Dependent Variables

- Public accuracy in placing parties on a L/R dimension and on an EU integration dimension.
  - 2009 EES Voter Study and Euromanifestos data
  - Voter Study
    - Placed parties on LR and EU (0-10)
    - Mean placement
  - Euromanifestos
    - LR position and EU position (-100 to 100)
    - Rescaled (0-10)
  - |Mean voter placement-Parties' "true" placement|

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Dependent Variables

- |Mean voter placement-Parties' "true" placement|
    - Unit of analysis: Party
    - Left/right spectrum
        - 0.004 (Latvian People's Party) to 3.90 (French Extreme Left)
        - Mean: 1.56; SD: 1.01
    - EU integration spectrum
        - 0.006 (Slovenian People's Party) to 2.96 (Basque Nationalist Party)
        - Mean: 0.72; SD: 0.60

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Independent Variables

- Four main independent variables
  - Party size: Vote share in last national parliamentary election
  - Governing status: Dummy denoting if party was in government in 2009
  - Fractionalization: Inverted Herfindahl index of government parties (1=more fractionalization)
  - Polarization (Dalton 2008)
  - $PI=\sqrt{\sum(\text{party vote share})*([\text{party L/R score}_i - \text{party system average L/R score}]/5)^2}$

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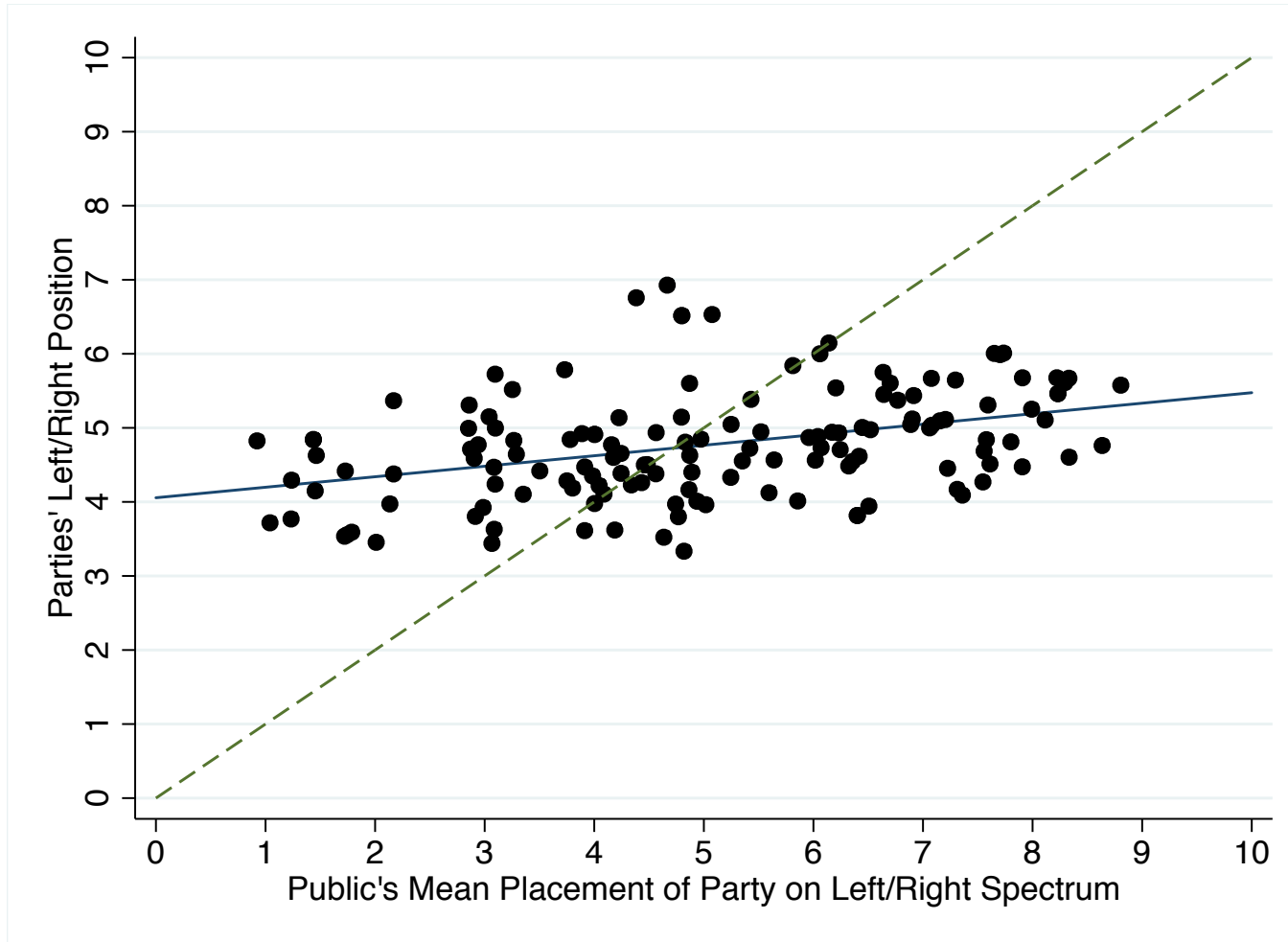
Analytical Strategy

- Political parties are nested within countries
- We include predictors at both party and party-system level
- Linear mixed models with varying-intercepts

How Accurate is the Public?
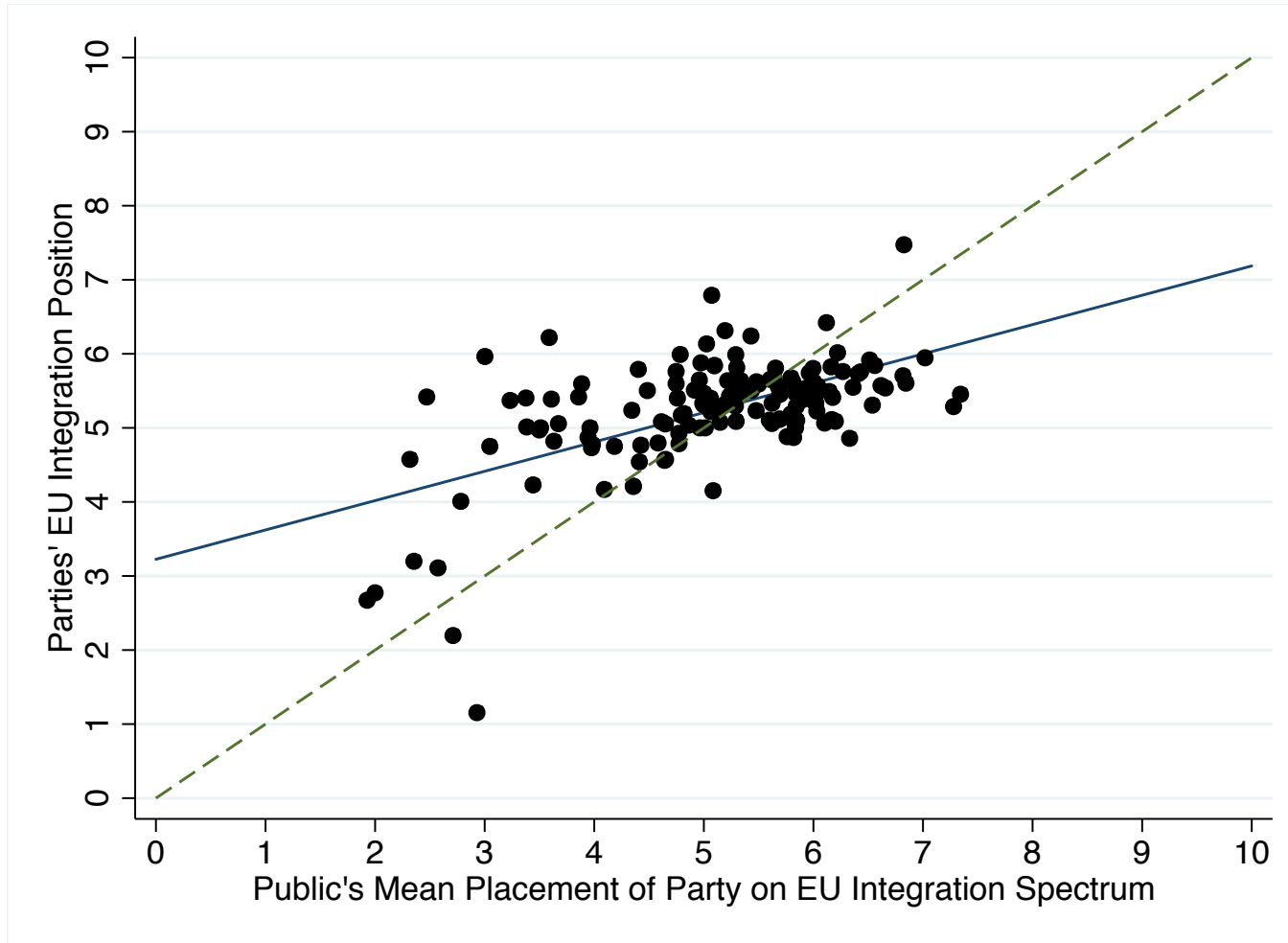

Scatterplot of Parties' L/R Positions and Public's Placement of Parties

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How Accurate is the Public?

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

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Results

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Party Characteristics		Coefficient (SE)		
Party Size	.	0.01** (.007)	.	-0.01* (.004)
Member of Government	.	-0.13 (.18)	.	0.12 (.10)
Party-system Characteristics				
Fractionalization	.	0.06* (.04)	.	-0.04* (.02)
Polarization	.	0.02** (.009)	.	-0.002 (.005)
Controls				
EU/LR Spectrum Accuracy	.	0.27** (.15)	.	0.07* (.05)
Education	.	-.40 (.28)	.	0.39*** (.15)
2004 Member State	.	0.08 (.23)	.	0.03 (.13)
Original Member State	.	0.25 (.25)	.	-0.22 (.13)
Constant	1.55*** (.11)	1.82** (.94)	0.72*** (.06)	-0.46 (.52)
Random-effects Parameters				
Variance of Constant	0.14 (.08)	0.02 (.05)	0.02 (.02)	0.001 (.01)
Variance of Residual	0.87 (.11)	0.78 (.11)	0.34 (.04)	0.27 (.04)
N	143	134	143	134

Notes: Table entries are linear mixed model regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable in the analysis is the parties' position on a left/right or an EU integration spectrum.

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$*p \leq .075$, $** p \leq .05$, $*** p \leq .01$ in a one-tailed test.

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Why the Strange Findings?

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

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Implications

- Findings have important implications for understanding political representation and responsiveness.
    - Larger parties should be more responsive to public on EU dimension (in EP elections)
    - Parties in more fractionalized and/or polarized systems will be less responsive to public on left/right dimension (in EP elections)
    - Parties in more fractionalized systems will be more responsive to public on EU dimension (in EP elections)

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Future Research

Theoretical development to explain findings

Multiple elections

- 2014 EP elections
- National elections

Additional measures of parties' "true" positions

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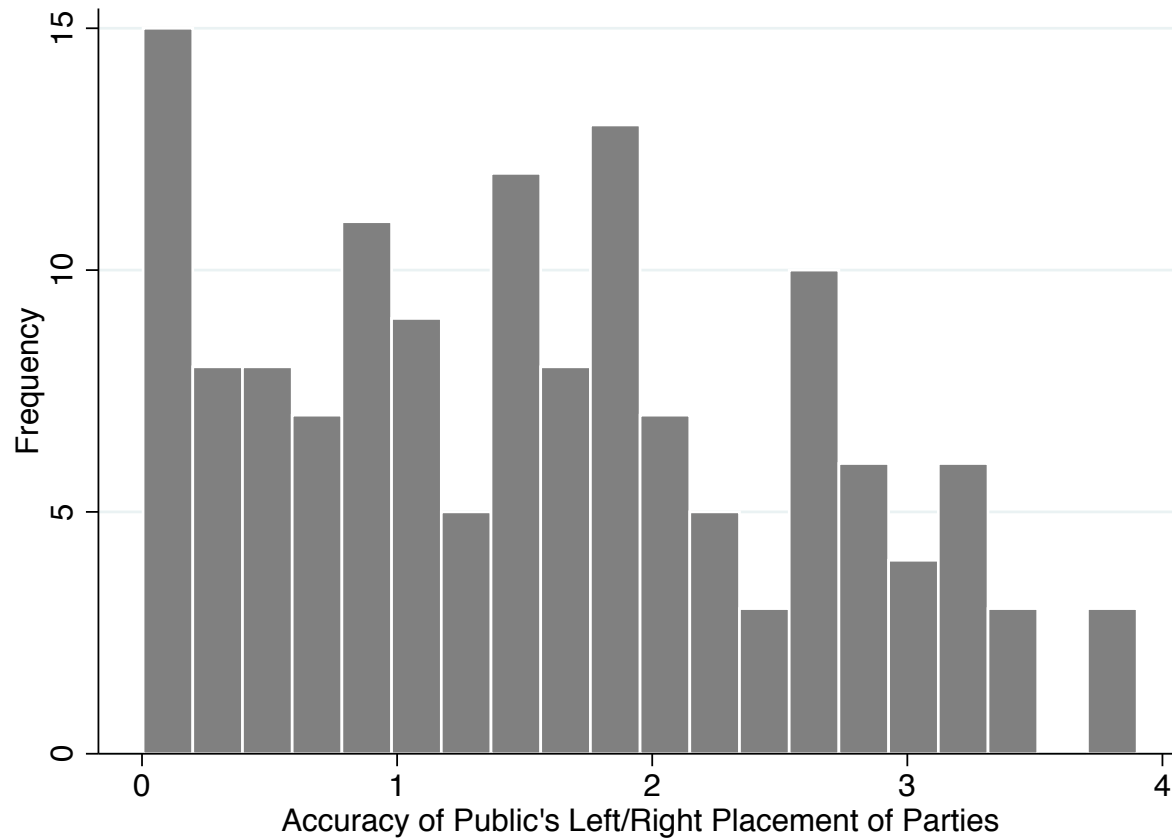Christopher Williams & Christine Arnold   6. November 2015

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Control Variables

Public's accurate placement of party on L/R or EU spectrum

Average education level in country

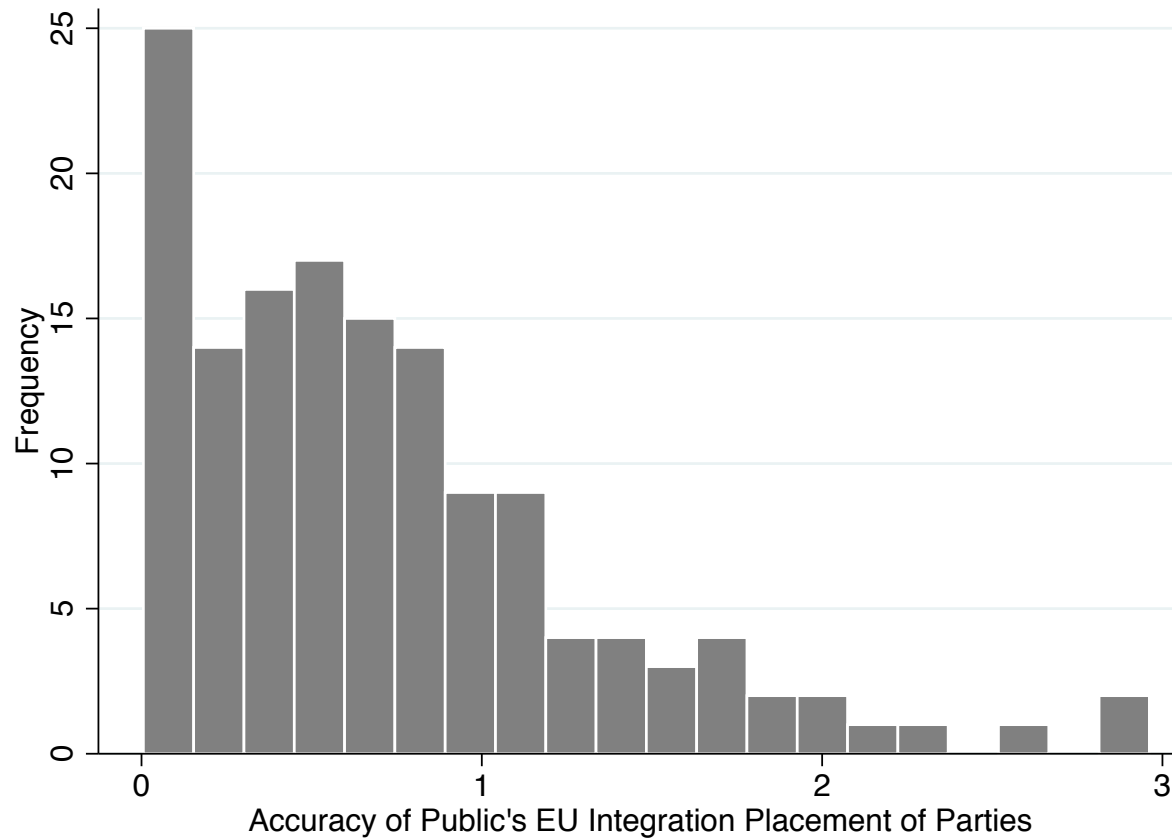EU accession dummies

- Original member state
- 2004 or after

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Distribution of Accurate Placement (L/R Dimension)

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Distribution of Accurate Placement (EU Dimension)

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Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Party Size	162	15.35	12.70	0.60	49.30
Govt. Member	208	0.26	0.44	0	1
Party Fractionalization	180	3.82	2.54	0	7.08
L/R Polarization	208	21.33	9.89	6.21	43.88
EU Polarization	208	20.69	10.52	5.70	47.81
L/R Accuracy	143	1.56	1.01	0.004	3.90
EU Accuracy	143	0.72	0.60	0.006	2.96
Education	180	3.37	0.35	2.44	3.91
2004 Member State	208	0.48	0.50	0	1
Original Member State	208	0.18	0.39	0	1

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