



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Electoral Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/electstud

Stability and change in party issue positions: The 2009 and 2014 European elections

Democratic elections must necessarily be about change¹ Events change between elections, and thus new government responses are required. Voters' preferences may change in reaction to events and their changing life circumstances. And political parties also may reevaluate their positions in the light of new circumstances or the positions of competing parties. This potential for change contributes to making democratic governments accountable and representative of public preferences. If parties and voters did not change their positions between elections in reaction to events and government performance, there would be little reason for more than one election.

The 2009, 2014 European Parliament elections should provide a clear example of the dynamics of electoral change (Schmitt and Toygür forthcoming). The 2008 financial crisis had a diverse effect across Europe; by late 2009 economic growth in some nations was beginning again. But then the problems of national debt and the Eurozone crisis plunged several nations into recessions, and some—Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain—on the verge of economic collapse. In October of 2009 Greece's finance minister first revealed the large shortfall in the government's budget; the first bailout of the Greek government occurred in May 2010. The Irish bailout was in November of 2010, followed by the Portuguese bailout in May 2011 and a second Greek bailout in July. Spanish banks received a bailout in June 2012, and the Cyprus bailout occurred in April 2013. Unemployment grew between 2009 and 2014 in both the Eurozone and the full EU membership; and growth rates stagnated across most of Europe.² What began as a sharp downturn because of the banking crisis became long-term stagnation with many new developments between 2009 and 2014.

These financial difficulties also produced a crisis for the institutions of the Europe Union that struggled to respond to these developments. The initial banking crisis raised issues of balancing EU standards and national sovereignty. EU member states began to diverge in how to address these problems and restructure the

banking industry. The emergency of the sovereign debt crisis in 2010–2014 generated even more tensions on the EU's appropriate role, the vitality of the Euro, and how economic costs should be shared across member states. These events substantially affected European public opinion. The Eurobarometer surveys found that the positive/negative balance of support for the European Union decreased from +29 percent in Spring of 2009 to +10 in Spring of 2014 (European Commission, 2014). These trends were even more marked in the nations that most directly suffered from the Eurozone crisis.

Faced with these severe economic challenges, the established party systems and the voters reacted to these developments as discussed in this special issue ([Hobolt and de Vries in this collection]; also De Sio and Legnante, 2010). Some parties advocated austerity policies to deal with the economic slowdown, most visibility in Germany and later in the United Kingdom (Wonke, 2016; Maatsch, 2014). Other parties favored stimulus policies to revive economic growth, often advocated by leftist parties (Cliff, 2013). EU actions on the Eurozone crisis encouraged some citizens and political parties to rethink the EU's role and decision making process. Rising public concerns about immigration were another reason for parties to reconsider their positions. Thus several scholars see this period of one of heightened policy and partisan change (Wilde et al., 2016; Otjes and van Der Veer, 2016).

Among the 19 Eurozone nations, the first post-2008 election produced a change in government in 13 nations, and only 6 nations had a prime minister from the same party across elections. In Ireland, for example, Fianna Fail suffered a historic 24 percent drop in its vote share in 2011 Dail election because it held power when the financial crisis struck. Even in the nations that weathered the economic crisis relatively well, governing parties struggled to deal with the new economic conditions and the political strains on the Euro and the European Union.³

In addition, a host of extreme right parties mobilized opposition to the European Union and its economic and social policies. Negativity toward the EU fueled anti-EU rhetoric from the UKIP in Britain, the AfD in Germany, the Dutch PVV, the True Finns in Finland and longer-established extreme right parties, as well as anti-EU

¹ This paper was initially prepared for the workshop "The European Parliament Elections in Times of Economic Distress," at Kansas University, April 2015. I want to thank Ken Benoit, Patrick Dumont, Diego Garzia, Oddbjorn Knutsen, Ian McAllister, Robert Rohrschneider, Hermann Schmitt, Alex Trechsel, and the journal reviewers for their assistance on this research. I also want to thank Ian McAllister since this research builds on our collaborative study of parties' changing Left/Right positions.

² See Eurostat trend data (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained>).

³ The Pederson index of electoral volatility increased from an already high level in 2009 (26.1) to an even higher level in 2014 (29.7). Volatility increased in 16 nations and decreased in 11. These data were provided by Hermann Schmitt in a personal communication.

leftist populists such as the dramatic growth of SYRIZA in Greece and Podemos in Spain. In other examples, the far-right Danish People's Party outpolled the governing Social Democrats; the French National Front did better than either the UMP or the Socialists. The post-election BBC headline after the 2014 EP vote announced "Eurosceptic 'earthquake' rocks EU elections" (May 4, 2014). In short, 2009–14 appeared to be a time of exceptional political change in modern European party systems.

This article has two goals. First, I raise the empirical question of the degree to which parties altered their policy positions in reaction to the changing political context between the 2009–2014 European Parliament elections. Since the economic and political strains placed on the parties during this period were exceptional, this is a critical case study of the general topic of the stability/change in party policy positions. Second, what factors systematically influence the stability (or change) in party policies? For instance, parties in the nations that faced the greatest economic downturn after 2008 might be more likely to reshape their economic positions; or the new EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe may display more fluidity in party positions compared to the established party systems of Western Europe. The characteristics of individual parties may also affect the stability of their issue positions. Thus, this pair of EU elections has the potential to add valuable evidence on how parties present themselves to voters and adapt to changing political contexts, as well as understanding the processes leading to the 2014 election results.

The empirical evidence comes from a relatively new data source. In 2009 the EUProfiler project based at the European University Institute developed a voter advice application (VAA) to help citizens make informed party choices in the election (Garzia and Marschall, 2014).⁴ A team of researchers coded parties' positions on issues that were relevant in the election. The online VAA program let citizens enter their own policy preferences and the salience of each issue, and then receive advice on how well each of the parties in their nation matched their preferences. This project was repeated in 2014 as the Euandi project (EU and I), which again coded party issue positions and allowed voters to compare their policy preferences to party positions through an online VAA (Garzia et al., 2015). I combined the measures of party issue positions in 2009 and 2014 to produce a panel dataset that is the basis of the analyses.

This paper consists of four sections. I first introduce the party dataset constructed from the two VAA projects. The next section addresses the question of the relatively stability or change in parties' issue positions across the two EU elections. Section three presents theories to potentially explain the patterns of issue stability/change that we observe, and tests these theories empirically. Finally, I discuss the implications of the findings both for understanding the electoral dynamics of these two European Parliament elections, and for understanding broader questions of electoral change and the functioning of democracy.

1. Measuring parties' issue positions

The electoral research literature has long argued that issue positions and other short-term factors should explain a substantial part of the ebb and flow of party vote shares across elections (Stokes, 1966; Budge and Farlie, 1983). Researchers realize this point, but it is difficult to systematically study how these dynamic forces change across elections and across parties. Some national elections seem to repeat the pattern of the previous contest with minor

variations; other elections seem to signal a broad shift in policy choices. Some parties seem to have more fixed policy preferences; others seem to follow public opinion rather than lead. In any single nation there are too few parties to build a systematic model of how parties' issue positions might change across elections, so comparisons tend to be descriptive or anecdotal.

Longitudinal cross-national data on party Left-Right positions are now expanding (Dalton and McAllister, 2015; Bakker et al., 2015; McElroy and Benoit, 2011; Budge et al., 2012). These data are used as a summary of party issue positions, and the Left-Right scale is often used as a shorthand by citizens and elites in describing party positions. However, the Left-Right scale cannot provide evidence on the specific issue positions of parties. This is problematic because the factors that explain how most voters decide in an election are less likely to explain why some voters change their choices between elections.

The presumptive logic suggests that issues that are engrained in the identity of European political parties, such as the class and religious concerns that traditionally structured party competition, should be more stable over time. A comparison of parties' broad economic positions using party experts found very high stability from 1989 to 2002 (Dalton, 2009, 13). However, the financial difficulties of the 2009–14 period may have prompted parties to adjust their economic positions in response. Conversely, relatively new issue conflicts—such as those over immigration, gender or environmental policies—might be more fluid. Yet these are often intensely held issues, so the established parties might resist changing their positions. The same study of party experts found that parties' environmental positions from 1989 to 2002 were as stable as economic positions. And if changes in party issue positions were ever likely, it seems that positions toward the European Union should have been affected by the exceptional events of the 2009–2014 period. We can speculate and prognosticate, but the crucial point is that systematic cross-national evidence on the stability of party issues positions is quite rare.

The 2009, 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections provide an opportunity to study the dynamics of parties' issue positions. Even though these are second order elections, they still represent national elections that are held simultaneously in 27 European democracies. Parties at each EP election are competing at the same point in time and in the same international context, although specific national conditions vary. These simultaneous elections also mean that instead of five or ten parties to compare in one nation, more than a hundred parties are represented in the EP and many more compete in the election.

The other exceptional feature of these two elections is the European University Institute's development of voter advice applications (Trechsel and Garzia, 2009; Sudulich et al., 2014; Garzia et al., 2015). In the 2009 election the EUProfiler project identified 28 political issues that they felt were relevant across the EU member states. A team of scholars and graduate researchers coded party positions on these issues on a five point Likert-type agree/disagree scale, with the option of no position. Team members reviewed information about each party's policy positions: the party's EP election manifesto, party websites, statements in the media and other secondary sources. The parties also had the opportunity to state their position on each issue. When the party self-placement and the expert coding were completed, the two results were compared. If there were discrepancies, the party was asked to provide more support for its declared position. The EUI team made the final coding decision.⁵

⁴ The 2009 party data and documentation, and the data from citizens using the VAA are available from the GESIS Archive (<https://dbk.gesis.org>). Data from the 2014 VAA are now being processed for public dissemination.

⁵ For a review of the EUProfiler methodology in 2009 see Trechsel and Garzia (2009), Gemenis (2013) and Garzia and Marschall (2014).

Table 1
Principal components analysis of party issue positions.

Issue	2009				2014			
	EU	Socio- econ	Moral issues	Culture issues	EU	Culture issues	Socio- econ.	Moral issues
Immigration should be made more restrictive	-0.13	-0.14	-0.20	0.83	-0.31	-0.70	0.29	0.00
Immigrants should be required to accept our culture & values	0.10	-0.18	-0.36	0.72	0.04	-0.64	0.38	-0.33
Criminals should be punished more severely	-0.07	-0.27	-0.42	0.68	-0.11	-0.61	0.40	-0.30
Public transportation should be fostered through green taxes	0.22	0.46	-0.05	-0.58	0.09	0.74	-0.25	-0.09
Renewable energy sources should be supported	0.12	0.58	0.08	-0.37	-0.09	0.78	-0.03	0.13
Legalization of same sex marriage is good	0.03	0.14	0.69	-0.45	0.21	0.64	-0.05	0.49
Legalization of personal soft drugs should be welcomed	0.06	0.29	0.73	-0.17	-0.04	0.29	-0.29	0.75
Euthanasia should be legalized	0.08	0.08	0.87	-0.19	0.19	0.13	-0.08	0.84
Government spending should be reduced to lower taxes	0.13	-0.73	-0.27	0.14	0.31	-0.32	0.79	-0.06
Social welfare should be maintained even at the cost of higher taxes	-0.14	0.81	0.26	-0.11	-0.02	0.42	-0.69	0.29
Governments should reduce worker protections to fight unemployment	0.08	-0.80	-0.03	0.15	0.00	-0.19	0.79	-0.13
The EU should have its own tax raising powers	0.57	0.25	0.39	-0.16	0.54	0.05	-0.45	0.52
The EU should strengthen its security and defense policy	0.88	-0.05	-0.14	0.13	0.88	-0.01	0.28	-0.05
The EU should speak with one voice on foreign policy issues	0.88	-0.05	0.14	-0.01	0.90	0.00	0.15	0.02
European integration is a good thing	0.89	-0.01	0.07	-0.04	0.88	0.25	0.01	0.12
EU member states should have less veto power	0.84	-0.04	0.23	-0.22	0.80	0.01	-0.31	0.28
EU treaties should be approved in referendum	-0.70	0.22	0.31	0.14	-0.60	-0.12	-0.08	0.54
Eigenvalue	4.06	2.77	2.65	2.61	3.98	3.38	2.72	2.52
Variance Explained	23.9%	16.3%	15.5%	15.4%	23.4%	19.9%	16.0	14.8%

Note: The results are from a principal components analysis using a varimax rotation, pairwise deletion of missing data.

Source: 2009 and 2014 EU Waves for parties included in both waves.

No single data source is without complications, and the VAA are relatively new data in comparative politics. In a recent comparison of expert, party manifestos and VAA placement of party positions, Gemenis (2013, 288) concluded “when compared with the 2006 Chapel Hill expert survey, the EU Profiler party placements appear to be more valid in comparison with the placements derived from the Euromanifestos Project.”⁶

The project repeated this basic procedure in 2014. The Euandi team developed a list of policy issues that seemed relevant for this election. By design, they replicated 17 issues from the 2009 election to compare party positions over time. The 2014 study added 11 new issues to capture the changes in the political context. The project then repeated the process of consulting with political parties and reviewing published party materials to identify each party's position on these issues.

A total of 151 political parties span both VAA projects, which allows us to track parties' ascribed issue positions over time.⁷ As a sign of the representativeness of these data, for the 165 parties elected to the European Parliament in 2009, 124 are included in this VAA panel data; and the VAA parties represent 616 of the 736 seats in the 2009 European Parliament. Most of the missing parties are small parties with only one or two seats.

⁶ As a further validation of party positions in the VAA, I compared party issue positions in the 2009 EUProfiler to the positions of the EP candidates from the respective party in the 2009 European Election Study. Five issues had functional equivalence between the two studies, but different specific wordings. For each party with at least 2 candidates in the EP study, I calculated the mean of the candidates' own positions (N of candidate had a median of 5, with a range of 2–51 candidates). This yields comparisons for approximately 120 parties in both datasets. The simple Pearson *r* correlations are presented below. Given the sampling variability of the candidate half of the dyad and the differently worded questions, these correlations show a reasonably high degree of fit: 0.71 Same sex marriage; 0.68 Decrease immigration; 0.67 EU treaty change by referendum; 0.54 Immigrants adopt customs; 0.52 Harsher sentences for criminals; 0.71 Factor scores of the five issues.

⁷ Another source of electoral change is the composition of the party system. Even between these two adjacent elections, parties from the first election ceased to exist (or merged with another party by the second election) and relevant new parties emerged by the 2009 wave. The EUProfiler coded over 270 potentially electorally relevant parties in 2009, and the Euandi coded 242 parties.

This article's analyses focus on the 17 policy issues that are included in both the 2009 and 2014 VAA projects. The policy questions are phrased in general terms that would be relatively straightforward to citizens using the voter advice program. For example, one of the questions asks “social programs should be maintained even at the cost of higher taxes,” with five response categories from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” The full set of questions cover a broad range of potential issue controversies in the EU member states.

I conducted a principal components analysis to identify common meanings among these 17 issues. Table 1 separately presents results for both waves. Both years yield four broad policy dimensions, albeit the ordering of the dimensions varies.⁸ As might be expected in a European Parliament election, and because of the large number of EU issues, the first dimension in both years connects the six items tapping some aspect of the EU policies. Because the EU issue tends to run orthogonal to traditional Left-Right party alignments, the nations with the highest support for the EU in 2009 span this divide (e.g., both the Socialist Party and the UMP in France, or the sp.a and VLD in Belgium). Conversely, the harshest critics of the EU in 2009 include the predictable extreme right parties (e.g., the UKIP and National Front) as well as a set of leftist Swedish parties (Social Democrats, Greens and Feminist Initiative).

A next set of issues comprises socio-economic issues such as the trade-off between taxes and social services, cutting government spending, or worker protection legislation. These political conflicts over the economic roles of the state have long-structured European party systems. This is the second dimension in 2009 and the third in 2014, but the content is essentially the same. Party positions on this dimension generally follow a predictable Left-Right pattern. The parties that are most supportive of state action in 2009 include parties such as the French PS, the Swedish Social Democrats, and the German LINKE. The opposition comes from parties such as

⁸ Table 1 is based on a varimax-rotated principal components analysis that identified four components with an Eigenvalue greater than 1.0 in both years. Pairwise deletion of missing data was used.

Table 2
Change in average party issues positions from 2009 to 2014.

Issue	2009	2014	Change	Eta
The EU should have its own taxes	−0.38	−0.28	0.10	0.07
EU should strengthen its security/defense policy	0.32	0.25	−0.07	0.05
EU should speak with one voice on foreign policy	0.42	0.34	−0.08	0.06
European integration is a good thing	0.54	0.49	−0.05	0.04
Individual EU states should have less veto power	0.01	−0.13	−0.14	0.10
EU treaties should be approved in referendum	0.17	0.28	0.09	0.07
EU index	0.32	0.16	−0.16	
Social welfare should be maintained	0.23	0.18	−0.05	0.03
Government spending should be reduced	−0.05	0.01	0.06	0.04
Governments should reduce worker protections	−0.36	−0.44	−0.08	0.05
Socio-economic index	0.21	0.21	0.00	0.00
Legalization of same sex marriage is good thing	0.19	0.28	0.09	0.05
Legalization of personal soft drugs welcomed	−0.44	−0.36	0.08	0.05
Euthanasia should be legalized	−0.20	−0.20	0.00	0.00
Moral index	−11	−0.05	0.06	
Immigration should be more restrictive	−0.09	−0.16	−0.07	0.05
Immigrants should be required to accept culture	0.21	0.08	−0.13	0.10
Criminals should be punished more severely	0.15	0.14	−0.01	0.01
Public transportation should be fostered	0.23	0.05	−0.18	0.13
Renewable energy sources should be supported	0.41	0.22	−0.19	0.17
Cultural Index	−0.01	0.00	0.01	

Note: Table entries on each issue and summary indices are the mean scores: 1.0) Completely agree to −1.0) Completely disagree; Ns for indices range from 83 to 120 parties.
Source: 2009 and 2014 Panel for parties included in both VVA waves.

the French UMP, the Swedish Center Party, and the German CDU.

The third dimension reflects moral or religious issues: legalizing same-sex marriage, the use of soft drugs, and euthanasia. Finally, the fourth dimension involves what might be described as cultural conflicts. On one end is support for environmental reforms, and on the other end are conservative positions on issues of immigration and treatment of criminals. This appears similar to Hooghe's et al. (2004) GAL/TAN policy dimension that pits green, alternative and libertarian (GAL) positions versus traditional, authoritarian and nationalist (TAN) positions.

These four dimensions are similar to what Garzia et al. (2015, 5) found using all of the issue items coded in 2014. Even though this list does not include all the issues of either EP election campaign—as witnessed by the addition and subtraction of issues across waves—these items do span the major issues cleavages in European party systems. And the structure of issues across both surveys suggests they have a relatively constant meaning. Thus the VAA data provide a reasonable basis for studying the stability in parties' issue positions over time.

2. Continuity or change

Almost every election is accompanied by media reports (or academic punditry) of political parties shifting their political positions in order to court new voters or regain voters lost at the last election. The classic Downsian spatial model assumes that the distribution of voter preferences are relatively fixed, while parties vary their political position to maximize their electoral appeal (Downs, 1957). However, a growing mass of empirical research suggests that broad ideological shifts by political parties are quite rare. Dalton and McAllister (2015) examined citizens' placement of parties of the Left-Right scale and comparable scores from academic experts. In both instances there is nearly perfect continuity of party Left/Right positions (t_1t_2 correlations in excess of $r = 0.90$). Similarly, other studies demonstrate very strong correlations between experts' Left/Right scores across studies spanning a decade or more (Keman, 2007; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012).

This research on the continuity of parties' Left-Right positions partially stimulated the analyses presented here. The stability of parties' Left/Right positions seems to undercut the common

Downsian descriptions of parties shifting their ideological stances to garner new voters.⁹ But election results do still change. Parties may be a more likely to change their issue profiles because they presumably can alter their issue positions more easily than their ideological identity. The VVA projects provide an unusual opportunity to examine the dynamics of party issue positions for a large number of political parties across two adjacent EU elections.

The empirical comparisons of party issues positions involve two methods. First, I examine whether there are aggregate changes in the average party positions on each issue over time. Second, I calculate the overtime correlation of party positions on each issue to assess the relative stability of individual party positions.

2.1. Aggregate policy shift across time

Table 2 presents the average issue positions for the 151 parties in the 2009–2014 panel. I also constructed a summary index for each policy dimension.¹⁰ The first set of issues measure support for the EU. The Eurobarometer surveys show a marked decline in public affect and trust toward the European Union from 2009 to 2014, and in June of 2014 a plurality of Europeans felt the financial crisis would continue (European Commission, 2014). Correspondingly,

⁹ Dalton and McAllister (2015) speculate that by averaging many specific issues together, party Left-Right positions becomes a relatively blunt measure for the study of inter-election policy change.

¹⁰ I explored several alternative methods of index construction. One method used principal components scores from Table 1. This is problematic because if a party lacked data on even one of the 34 items then it was assigned to missing data on all four indices. A second method created simple additive indices from the variables with substantial loadings on each dimension. This lessened the missing data problem, but still produced two indices where at least half of the parties dropped out of the analysis. I decided to maximize the reliability of each index, while minimizing missing data losses. If a variable had at 20 percent or more missing data, it was not included in index construction. For example, about a third of political parties lacked a position on the euthanasia issue. Including this question in the religious/moral index drops the number of parties to $N = 69$. An index based only on same-sex marriage and legalizing soft drugs has an N of 101. Thus I excluded euthanasia from the cultural/morals index; EU taxes and referendums on EU treaties were dropped from the EU issue index. The additive indices were adjusted for the number of variables (and the polarity of the response options) so the resulting variables runs from −1.0 to 1.0 as do the individual issue questions.

support for the EU decreased slightly by 2014. For example, 71 percent of these parties supported a stronger EU security/defense policy in 2009, and this dipped slightly to 65 percent in 2014 (reflected in the -0.07 shift in mean scores). The EU items generally move in the same direction, but the magnitude of change is modest as shown by the small eta correlations in the rightmost column.¹¹ The summary EU support index shows a larger cumulative decline in parties' overall support for the EU.

The next set of items deal with socio-economic topics that have long been a framework for party competition in Europe. Given the economic shocks Europe was experiencing, this should be an area of potentially significant change in issue positions. Again the data present very little systematic change. Support for maintaining social welfare programs decreases slightly, but opposition to reducing worker protections also increases slightly. Despite the massive economic problems Europe experienced as a result of the 2008 recession and its aftermath, the average positions on the socio-economic index overall did not change substantially over time.

The third issue cluster involves moral/religious concerns. Parties generally became more positive toward same sex marriages and legalization of soft drugs. But overall there was little aggregate change in party positions on these issues between the elections.

The final set of issues taps cultural (or GAL/TAN) issues. The largest issue shifts involve eroding support for environmental issues of renewable energy sources (-0.19 mean shift) and public transport (-0.18). Europe's economic problems may have pushed environmental quality into the background for some parties. Somewhat surprisingly, attitudes toward immigrants changed only modestly with parties becoming less supportive of restrictions of immigration, but also less supportive of an assimilationist policy for immigrants. These two counter opinions tended to cancel out overall sentiments toward immigrants.

In summary, aggregate stability in the parties issue positions seems more apparent than change—even in this period of dramatic political and electoral change for Europe—although aggregate stability may mask substantial change for individual parties. The parties became less supportive of the EU, but these changes are modest. Other issues show little systematic change. And most striking given the ongoing economic crisis, the balance of party positions on taxes/welfare programs and worker protection policies seem to have been little affected by the economic crises.

2.2. Inter-election correlation

Another possible form of issue change involves the consistency in individual party positions across time. The small aggregate shifts in overall party positions may mask considerable change for individual parties. Some parties might move to the center in response to the changing political climate and some might move to the poles. For instance, some parties advocated austerity policies in response to the fiscal crisis, while others supported an economic stimulus. Such cross-patterns would produce little aggregate change in average party positions.

Table 3 describes the stability of individual issue positions from 2009 to 2014. The economic and political tensions among EU member states during this period may have stimulated some parties to reevaluate their support for the European Project. Yet the correlation coefficients for party positions are very high on each of the EU issues.

One can gain a better sense of the underlying patterns by

Table 3

The stability of party issues positions from 2009 to 2014.

Issue	Correlation
The EU should have its own taxes	0.73
EU should strengthen its security/defense policy	0.78
EU should speak with one voice on foreign policy	0.76
European integration is a good thing	0.76
Individual EU states should have less veto power	0.75
EU treaties should be approved in referendum	0.66
EU index	0.91
Social welfare should be maintained	0.57
Government spending should be reduced	0.61
Governments should reduce worker protections	0.54
Socio-economic index	0.79
Legalization of same sex marriage is good thing	0.78
Legalization of personal soft drugs welcomed	0.81
Euthanasia should be legalized	0.82
Moral index	0.89
Immigration should be more restrictive	0.69
Immigrants should be required to accept culture	0.71
Criminals should be punished more severely	0.65
Public transportation should be fostered	0.56
Renewable energy sources should be supported	0.53
Cultural index	0.80

Note: Table entries are the Pearson r correlations between party positions in both waves, N is approximately 150; the N s for issue indices range from 68 (moral issues) to 120 for socio-economic issues.

Source: 2009 and 2014 Panel for parties included in both VVA waves.

plotting party scores on the EU support index in 2009 and 2014 (Fig. 1). Of the 93 parties in the figure, 42 have 2014 EU index scores below those in 2009 and 24 have higher scores in 2014. Support for the EU in 2014 dropped most among those parties with higher support in 2009—in part because initially critical parties had little room to become more critical. Nevertheless, the continuity of the parties is very high ($r = 0.91$). Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2016) have found similar results using party expert surveys from 2008 to 2013.

The complicated, and perhaps idiosyncratic, nature of change is illustrated by some of the outliers in the figure—parties that changed the most between elections. Among the six parties that became more skeptical of the EU were two far right parties (VB in Belgium and PCTVL in Latvia), SYRIZA in Greece, Fine Gael in Ireland, PiS in Poland, and the Swedish Center party. In contrast, support for the EU increased among two far right parties (the German Republikaner and the Austrian BZOE), the Swedish Greens and the Finnish Social Democrats. There is no clear color to the patterns of change. And even within nations the patterns are complex.

Government spending and protecting workers display some of the weakest temporal correlations in the table. The socio-economic index displays the lowest temporal correlation (index $r = 0.79$) of the four policy areas.¹² This is not far below other policy areas.

Moral/religious issues in the third panel of Table 3 show high temporal stability. This implies that these issues are deeply tied to a party's political identity (or perhaps the stability reflects that the winds of political change between 2009 and 2014 focused on other issues). These three issues also exhibit substantial stability in aggregate party positions in Table 2.

Finally, cultural issues are modestly stable over time, with the TAN issues displaying more stability than the GAL issues. An index

¹¹ Support for referendums on EU treaties increases over time. However, the principal components analysis shows that this question reflects a reservation about the EU since the variable loads with the opposite sign from the other EU questions.

¹² There is even higher stability in the Chapel Hill Expert Study (CHES) that identifies the parties' position on a spending versus taxes issue (2006–2010 $r = 0.91$). The contrast between data sources might be methodological, but it also might reflect the growing impact of the financial crisis on parties running in the 2014 EU election.

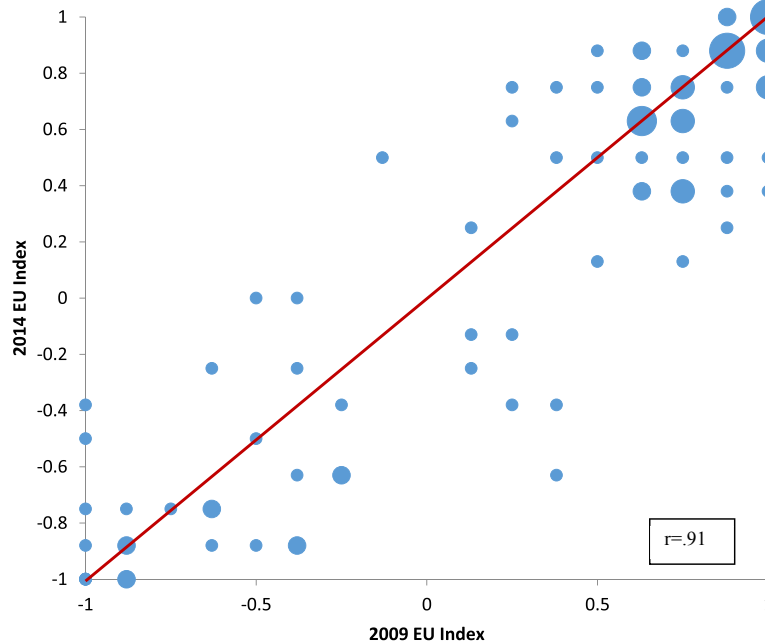


Fig. 1. Party support for the European Union in 2009 and 2014.
 Source: 2009 and 2014 Panel for parties included in both VVA waves.

contrasting these two broad issue areas finds a stability in party policy positions that is comparable to the socio-economic issue index.¹³

The years after the onset of Europe's financial difficulties were a turbulent period for many nations, and a period of exceptional change in electoral results. Thus, we expected that many parties would shift their issue positions in response to this changing context—perhaps expressing more skepticism about the EU and its actions, reconsidering their economic policies in the light of falling growth rates and rising unemployment, or shifting positions as the immigration issue gained prominence. Yet, the evidence presented here underscores the stability of party issue positions—in aggregate terms and relative terms—for those parties that are included in both the 2009 and 2014 VAA projects. Before reaching a conclusion, however, we probe how party issue positions varied within nations and between nations.

3. Theorizing issue stability and change

Studying why parties change (or don't change) their issue positions between elections, and the consequences of these patterns, offers a fresh perspective on how parties respond to the political environment (Fagerholm, 2015; Dalton and McAllister, 2015; Meyer, 2013; Schumacher et al., 2013). We have seen that party issue positions changed only modestly between 2009 and 2014. Some change in party positions (and vote shares) did occur, however, and by identifying whether specific factors contribute to issue change can enrich our understanding of electoral dynamics.

3.1. Party-level effects

Much of the previous literature on changes in parties' Left/Right positions draws upon rationalist spatial models in which parties may consciously shift positions in order to increase their vote share

(e.g., Budge et al., 2012; Laver and Sergenti, 2012; Adams, 2012; Schumacher et al., 2013). A vote-maximizing strategy of party change can appear in several ways, and just testing the possible variants of this theory would be a full research project. Here I test a simplified correlational model. Given the large exogenous shock to European parties because of the financial crisis and subsequent events, we might expect parties to shift their positions relevant topics, such as EU support and socio-economic policies. We can hypothesize various causal rationales, but the process implies that the amount of change in issue positions is related to the amount of change in party vote shares—without determining the direction of any causal relationship. Supporting this position, Dalton and McAllister (2015) found that party shifts in their Left-Right positions across elections is related to changes in vote share. Alternatively, stability in party issue positions is probably more likely to co-occur with stability in vote share.

Another common approach emphasizes the importance of a party's ideological identity in shaping party strategy (Laver, 2005). Some parties are committed to advocating their basic principles, which should not be abandoned in the hunt for more votes. This policy-driven strategy is commonly associated with extreme or niche parties that are presumably more ideologically-oriented—communists, nationalists and green parties—and thus more rigid in their political positions (Meguid, 2005; Adams et al., 2006; Tavits, 2007). Conversely, centrist or catch-all parties may be more likely to follow the political currents and be more changeable in their issue positions.

Party size may also affect the stability of a party's issue positions. Smaller parties may have more flexible political positions because they must be more responsive to the political context (Tavits, 2005, 2006; Sikk, 2005). Conversely, large parties typically have a substantial institutional base, an established network of supporters, and a long political record. Thus in physics terms, because of their large and probably more diverse voter base (a large mass), large parties may find it more difficult to change their image between a pair of elections (inertia).

A related characteristic is the age of the political party. New parties are developing their political identities and gradually

¹³ Similarly, the CHES expert study finds that party positions on their GAL/TAN dimension is very stable across the 2006–2010 waves ($r = 0.95$).

expanding their programs beyond the issues that gave rise to the party. For example, the new extreme right parties that formed around cultural issues soon were confronted with debates on socio-economic issues, the EU and other policy matters. In contrast, older parties have an established political identity and thus it is presumably more difficult for them to shed their past and make substantial changes in policy programs.

Finally, because of the observed problems faced by incumbent parties in the wake of the recession, and the general pattern of protest voting in second-order EU elections, parties in the current national government may tend to defend their positions, possibly unsuccessfully, while non-incumbent parties can call for new policy actions. The prior evidence on incumbent effects is decidedly mixed, however, and the EU elections are often a counter to the existing national government (Fagerholm, 2015).

3.2. Contextual effects

Prior research on party Left/Right positions suggests that the national context also can influence the variability of party positions. Party positions appear to be more volatile in new democracies where party systems are still evolving, and the number of party competitors is still in flux (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012; Dalton and McAllister, 2015). Even two decades after democratization, the new EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe have more volatile party systems than the established party systems of the West. If change is concentrated in East European states, then the continuity for West Europe would be even stronger.

Another obvious contextual factor is the possible impact of the recession and the following financial crisis across member states (Fagerholm, 2015). The financial crisis had a differential effect across nations, both in the nature of the effects and the degree of impact. As economies slowed down and tax revenues fell, many nations were forced to adapt austerity budgets. Other nations were relatively unscathed either because their economy was stronger or was not overextended by a large debt ratio, or pursued stimulation programs to counteract the declining economy. To measure economic change from 2008 to 2013 for each nation, I use change in the Gross Domestic Product.¹⁴

4. Predicting party stability and change

4.1. Alternative definitions of change

Our research question—the degree to which parties change issue positions between elections—seems relatively simple, but the measurement of policy change for individual parties is open to multiple methods. First, we are often concerned with whether parties systematically moved left or right in their policies. For example, in reaction to the financial crisis in Europe, some political parties may have seen the EU as contributing to the problems and thus became more critical of the Union, while other parties may have seen the EU as a possible solution to the problems and become more positive. I measure this type of change by calculating the *simple difference* between t_1 and t_2 party positions on each issue dimension. This is illustrated by the rightmost column in Table 3 that displays aggregate t_1 - t_2 differences.

Second, we can assess the total volatility of party positions.

¹⁴ There are also good reasons to expect that characteristics of the national party system, such as effective number of parties or polarization, will affect the rigidity of party positions—although researchers disagree about the nature of these effects. However, we explored various characteristics of the party system and none seems to generate significant relationships.

Which parties changed a lot versus which parties held stable positions? I constructed this measure as the *absolute difference* between t_1 and t_2 party positions, ignoring the direction of change.

5. Empirical analyses

To simplify the analyses of the potential predictors of parties' issue change, I focus on the four issue indices to summarize each area. Table 4 presents OLS regression models predicting change in parties' issue positions (simple 2009–2014 difference and the absolute value of this difference).¹⁵ Not all noteworthy parties are included in each nation (largely because the list of competing parties changes between both elections), and multivariate analyses allows us to partially control for such compositional differences as well as the potentially overlapping effects of individual predictors.

The first column in the upper half of the table shows that simple 2009–14 changes in party positions toward the EU are not significantly linked to any of the theorized predictors. Smaller ideological niche parties did not become systematically more critical or less critical of the Union. Support was slightly lower in new democracies and slightly higher in EU states that fared relatively well economically—but these relationships fail to reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($p < 0.10$ for this small sample). The absolute amount of issue change in the lower half of the table shows a clearer pattern. Younger parties are less likely change ($\beta = -0.23$) and larger swings in vote shares correspond to larger swings in EU issue positions. In addition, there is significantly greater change in the new democracies of Eastern Europe ($\beta = 0.25$).

The other prime candidate for broad policy change are socio-economic issues because of the economic effects of the financial crisis. Notably, change in GDP is the only significant predictor of liberal/conservative change on the socio-economic index ($\beta = 0.19$). As an illustration, the three nations with the largest GDP decline shifted toward favoring more social spending (+0.17), while the three nations with the largest GDP increase became less supportive of social spending over tax cuts (−0.20). This highlights the growing cross-national tensions within the EU: parties in the strongest economies tended to favor austerity while parties in the nations with the weakest economies became more supportive of social spending. But again, changes in parties' socio-economic policies (in simple terms or as absolute values) were not clearly tied to other party characteristics such as size, age of party, or niche party status.

Some other results are noteworthy. The absolute amount of policy change on each of the four dimensions is greater in new democracies as expected, and two of these relationships are statistically significant even with our small number of cases. Although not statistically significant, the absolute amount of vote change is related to the absolute amount of issue change for all four dimensions. The year a party was formed also has consistent, and often statistically significant negative effects on absolute issue change. Perhaps

¹⁵ Because of the small N and weak relationships I have not developed more complex multi-level models. The basic question here is whether there are any significant relationships. The bivariate correlations (Pearson's r) for simple differences demonstrate the lack of relationships is not because of multivariate controls.

	EU support	Cultural index	Moral issues	Socio-economic issues
Vote change (2014–2009)	−0.05	0.10	−0.13	−0.07
Niche party vs all others	0.03	0.05	0.07	−0.08
Party vote share (2009)	0.00	−0.10	0.04	0.00
Year party formed	0.08	0.24	−0.09	−0.04
In government	0.04	−0.03	−0.05	0.07
New democracy	−0.07	0.04	−0.12	0.09
GDP Change 2008–2013	0.08	−0.07	0.04	0.20

Table 4
Correlates of change in parties' average issue positions from 2009 to 2014.

	EU support	Socio-economic	Moral	Cultural
Simple difference in issues, 2014–2009				
Vote change (2014–2009)	–0.06 (0.78)	–0.11 (.31)	–0.15 (0.20)	0.09 (0.71)
Niche party vs all others	0.03 (0.65)	–0.04 (0.71)	0.07 (0.57)	0.02 (0.67)
Party vote share (2009)	0.02 (0.57)	–0.11 (0.34)	0.05 (0.69)	–0.03 (0.29)
Year party formed	0.14 (0.15)	–0.05 (0.62)	–0.06 (0.60)	0.25 (0.06)
In government	0.06 (0.93)	0.06 (0.57)	–0.09 (0.44)	0.06 (0.64)
New democracy	–0.12 (0.27)	0.09 (0.41)	–0.12 (0.32)	–0.02 (0.90)
GDP Change 2008–2013	0.11 (0.26)	0.19 (0.05)	0.07 (0.49)	–0.05 (0.66)
Multiple R	0.18	0.25	0.23	0.27
Absolute value of issue difference, 2014–2009				
Absolute value (Vote change 2014–2009)	0.12 (0.33)	0.07 (0.55)	0.11 (0.36)	0.07 (0.58)
Niche party vs all others	0.19 (0.11)	–0.15 (0.16)	–0.03 (0.81)	0.11 (0.38)
Party vote share (2009)	–0.14 (0.30)	0.04 (0.72)	–0.13 (0.32)	–0.06 (0.69)
Year party formed	–0.23 (0.06)	–0.02 (0.83)	–0.07 (0.54)	–0.22 (0.09)
In government	–0.05 (0.67)	–0.04 (0.69)	0.10 (0.49)	–0.09 (0.49)
New democracy	0.25 (0.04)	0.13 (0.25)	0.16 (0.17)	0.29 (0.03)
GDP Change 2008–2013	0.09 (0.39)	–0.08 (0.40)	0.03 (0.76)	–0.16 (0.16)
Multiple R (Minimum N)	0.32 (86)	0.26 (111)	0.20 (95)	0.33 (75)

Note: Table entries are the standardized regression coefficients predicting change for each of the four policy indices; significance levels (p values) in parentheses.

Source: 2009 and 2014 Panel for parties included in both VVA waves.

younger parties are already responsive on newer issues such as gender conflicts, immigration and the EU, while older parties only changed in 2009–14 when political pressures forced a reconsideration of past positions. In most instances, however, party characteristics have inconsistent effects (positive and then negative) across these four issue dimensions.

In summary, there is only a limited ability to predict issue change across these two EP elections. This might not be surprising because the very high continuity in party positions leaves little real change to explain. And yet, I expect that exploring the interactions between party characteristics and national context may produce more interpretable results. In EU elections parties move in response to their respective national forces, not in broad pan-European patterns. For example, the dynamics of changing party positions may be different in the peripheral nations that struggled with plunging economies than in those states with relatively strong economies—or so I would expect. The same national distinctiveness is seen in party outcomes measured by vote shares. Extreme right parties did very well in some nations, but not in others. Leftist governments won in some nations, conservatives in others. Broad Europe-wide patterns of change are less apparent.

6. Conclusion: issue continuity and change

The period between the 2009 and 2014 European Parliament elections was an exceptional time for Europe. The financial crisis, a following recession, the sovereign debt crisis, and Euro controversies created unusual strains on economic and political systems. The public was concerned and wanted parties and governments to respond to these challenges. These were not normal times. How did political parties respond?

The two EU elections did display a considerable change in the parties' electoral fortunes. As in national elections during this period, swings in vote shares were common. Among the parties in our VAA panel, 30 percent experienced at least a 5 percent swing in their vote share, 20 percent saw greater than a 7.5 percent change, and a full 10 percent had a vote swing greater than 10 percent. This volatility seems high compared to other EP elections. Moreover, the swings ranged across the entire political spectrum: up 18.5 percent for the extreme right Front National in France, but also up 22.9 percent for the extreme left SYRIZA in Greece. Both the conservative Popular Party and Socialist Party lost more than 15 percent of their previous EP vote shares in Spain. Elections are about change, and thus understanding the processes of electoral change illuminates the dynamic nature of democratic elections.

Confronted by extraordinary times, these two EU elections provide an opportunity to examine the degree to which parties alter their political offerings in reaction to a changing political context. If political parties significantly adapt to the political environment, this seems to be a natural experiment to observe this process. However, despite the economic and political context, there is substantially greater continuity in parties' issue positions than change.¹⁶ On the issue of EU support, political parties overall modestly move in a negative direction, but the stability of relative party

¹⁶ Another way to estimate the potential elements of change is to compare the between component variance for each predictor using ANOVA. These statistics for the EU index show the dominance of cross-party differences in explaining party positions: party = 0.397, time = 0.007, country = 0.065. The same dominance of party appears for the three other issue indices.

positions is exceptionally high ($r = 0.91$). Welfare state protections and worker rights is another area where policy change might occur in the context of Europe's economic struggles. Here the average change in party positions is even smaller than for EU support, and the continuity in policy positions ($r = 0.79$) across elections was quite apparent. Two other policy areas—cultural and moral issues—demonstrate even greater stability in party positions between elections. Moreover, if one factors in the measurement error intrinsic to social science data, the stability coefficients would approach unity.¹⁷

Thus it appears that the shifts in party shares between elections does not coincide with parties substantially changing their policy positions—since the change in party issue positions is quite modest. These results suggest two broad implications. First, if the established parties are not substantially reacting to the economic struggles confronting the public, then this raises questions about the responsiveness of political parties. If the established parties are under-responsive, one possible reaction is for voters to support new party options, whether through AfD in Germany, SYRIZA in Greece, or Podemos in Spain. Future longitudinal analyses might test this hypothesis, especially given the exceptional data resources of the European Election Studies. Similarly, the rise of Green parties in the 1980s occurred because established parties gave insufficient attention to these issues. In short, if European political leaders are concerned about the recent rise of extreme parties, they might look in a mirror for the explanation.

Second, the results address the more general theoretical question at the heart of this research: how much do parties actually change their political positions between elections. Analysts and political scientists often talk of shifts in election outcomes in terms of policy shifts in voter or party positions—or both. This study shows that parties' issue positions are less changeable than voting outcomes.

If we combine these results with those from earlier research showing even higher stability in party Left-Right positions, they leads us to several speculations about the nature of electoral change that transcends the results for these two EU elections. Rather than the basic spatial model of electoral competition based on changes in parties' political positions, it seems that the major source of electoral change comes from other sources. One possibility is the changing salience of issues across elections. If one election is about the Euro and austerity and the previous one highlighted expansion of welfare state benefits, for example, the changing issue agenda can drive voters to change parties across elections. Another possibility is that performance criteria—leader evaluations and valence factors—may heavily influence changes in electoral results (Clark, 2009; Clarke et al., 2008; Laver and Sergenti, 2012; ch. 9). Incumbent governments of both the Left and Right struggled in the years following the onset of the financial crisis, not necessarily because citizens disagreed with their overall political program but because they were holding the bag when the crisis developed (and did not quickly resolve it). Similarly, Eurosceptics on both the Left and Right benefitted. Even in normal times the competence of a party to deal with the nation's problems is intermixed with the party's policy positions in shaping voting choice (Stokes, 1966; Clarke et al., 2008).

Another potential source of electoral change—especially in proportional representation systems—may be the changing composition of the party system. Even the short span between 2009 and

2014 saw some parties leaving the electorate and other parties entering to offer new choices. As an illustration, the EUI data collection had only 150 constant parties across both elections compared to the total of 361 parties included in either wave. Often this turnover involves small parties with fringe support. The higher turnover of party choices in Eastern Europe also continued in 2014. Especially in second-order EP elections, small parties are more likely to garner support, and grow or decline with the winds of political change.

These rival hypotheses assume that electoral change is focused on parties changing their positions. It is equally possible that electoral change comes from the voters' side of this equation. Multiple opinion polls showed that Europeans became more skeptical of the EU between 2009 and 2014; concerns about economic conditions changed in salience and this may have shifted socio-economic attitudes. I cannot explore this possibility with the VAA data, but it is unclear whether the large changes in electoral results between 2009 and 2014 result primarily from policy shifts among the European publics. However, several of the articles in this collection [Hobolt and de Vries; Franklin, De Sio and Weber] disagree on whether the financial crisis increased the impact of EU attitudes on voting support between the 2009 and 2014 elections. The opinion change hypothesis deserves further examination.

Finally, these results have potentially larger implications for our views of the democratic electoral process. Victorious parties, and political observers, often present election outcomes as conferring ideological or policy mandates on the new government. One can easily imagine why victorious parties want to make this claim. Moreover, this claim seems consistent with the logic that electoral change is driven by policy choices. Our findings suggest that mandate claims of newly elected governments may be overstated. The real interpretation of electoral change is more complex, and appears less related to rationalist spatial models of electoral competition.

Ideological and policy choices are important to electoral outcomes, but probably more in defining 'normal' electoral alignments and party voter bases. In the cross-section, parties are highly representative of their voters' policy preferences. When electoral outcomes change, however, it is likely that other factors come into play that temporarily alter normal electoral alignments. This does not diminish the representation and accountability of democratic elections in the long run, but it does make interpretation of party shifts in the short term more dependent on a broader variety of factors.

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¹⁷ As a reference point, assume that measurement error is minimal so the correlation between real and observed scores at both time points is $r = 0.95$. The cross-time stability of these two imperfect measures with no objective change ($0.95 \times 0.95 = 0.9025$) would yield a 0.9025 correlation. The correlation for the EU index is 0.91.

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