

COST STSM Scientific Report: Matthew Wall
COST Action: IS1308
**‘Populist Political Communication in Europe: Comprehending the
Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics’**

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COST Action: IS1308
Populist Political Communication in Europe

COST STSM Reference Number: COST-STSM-IS1308-26819

Period: 2015-06-12 to 2015-06-17

STSM type: Regular (from United Kingdom to Greece).

STSM Applicant: Dr. Matthew Wall

STSM Topic: Voter-party agreement of populist versus mainstream parties

Location: Aristotle University
Department of Political Sciences
Thessaloniki
Greece

Host: Dr. Ioannis Andreadis

Purpose of the visit

Details of Collaboration.

My collaboration with Drs. Krouwel and Andreadis is based on our mutual work in the field of Voter Advice Application (VAA) websites. I have a long history of collaboration with Dr. Krouwel – we have produced several peer-reviewed articles and book chapters on the design, implementation and effects of VAA websites. I first began working with Dr. Andreadis in 2013 when we decided to co-author a chapter for the edited volume ‘Matching Voters with Parties and Candidates – Voting Advice Applications in a Comparative Perspective’ (Edited by Diego Garzia and Stefan Marschall, published in 2014 by ECPR Press) entitled ‘The Impact of Voting Advice Applications on Vote Choice’. Dr. Andreadis, Dr. Krouwel and I began working together as a trio in 2014, producing a paper entitled ‘Internet Penetration and Voting Advice Applications’ for the 2014 European Consortium for Political Research General Conference in Glasgow.

In the course of discussing and progressing this research, we began to speculate on the usefulness of VAA data as a potential source of information on the debate surrounding the success of populist parties across Europe. Our intuition in this regard was that because the process of VAA design involves capturing the policy positions of political parties on a wide array of issues, they generate data that can be uniquely useful in the analysis of the policy and public opinion dynamics underlying the success of populist parties. We decided to explore this idea through a Short Term Scientific Mission (STSM) in Thessaloniki, which is the subject of this report.

The collaboration took the form of a series of online discussions and data exchanges in drafting the STSM request and, once approved, in the run up to the STSM itself. Over the course of the 5 day period during which Dr. Krouwel and I were in Thessaloniki, the collaboration took the form of a set of daily meetings and work sessions, during which theoretical aspects of the work were explored, relevant literature was reviewed and initial data analysis was performed. In terms of future collaboration arising from the STSM, an immediate objective is the further development of our co-authored paper

on Internet Penetration and VAA Use, with a view to peer-reviewed publication. In the medium term, the analysis and findings outlined in this report will serve as the basis for several further co-authored peer reviewed publications.

Aims and objectives

The initial aim of this STSM was ‘to use VAA data to address substantive questions of policy representation and populism’. Our idea was to explore the potentialities of VAA data for examining whether there are substantive differences in issue positions between parties that can be classified as ‘populist’ versus ‘traditional mainstream’ parties. An initial hypothesis was that ‘populist’ parties may exhibit less rounded issue correspondence with their supporters than ‘traditional mainstream’ parties. In order to perform this analysis we had to look at various techniques for sample adjustment in our analysis – as VAAs by their nature collect non-random samples of voters (opt-in online samples). The analysis of the representativeness of samples and their adjustment was a key component of our co-authored paper on Internet Penetration and VAA use.

As our analyses progressed, we came to realise that the data that we had on party placement arising from pan-European VAA projects (see next section) could also allow us to contribute to an emerging literature on the congruence of the policy offers developed by populist parties. The key intuition here is that populist parties may ‘blur’ their positions on political dimensions that are not central to their political identity – these insights are developed in a 2013 paper by Jan Rovny in the *European Political Science Review* entitled ‘Where do radical right parties stand? Position blurring in multidimensional competition’. Our data allows us to extend the analysis presented by Rovny.

Description of the work carried out during the visit

The Data Utilised

In exploring these aims and objectives, we relied heavily on two datasets arising from VAAs that sought to provide vote advice for citizens across the European Union during the 2009 and 2014 European Parliament elections. These datasets are referred to as the EU Profiler (2009) and EUVOX (2014) datasets. The datasets capture the policy positions of over 200 European political parties from each EU member-state on a battery of 30 issue-based policy questions. The possible positions on each statement are arranged on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from ‘Completely Agree’ to ‘Completely Disagree’ with a mid-point labelled as ‘Neutral’ and another potential coding of ‘No Opinion’ in cases where no expression of party opinion could be found on that topic.

The parties’ positions were coded by expert teams in each EU member state on the basis of parties’ stated policy positions – relying on a range of sources ranging from party manifestos, to party websites, to leaders’ speeches. In the EU Profiler dataset, parties were contacted to suggest any changes they felt necessary to their coding, while the EUVOX dataset did not employ this methodology.

Crucially for our research, the issue items on which parties were placed were designed to capture underlying dimensions of political competition – the three underlying dimensions measured were economic, European and cultural. Thus these data are uniquely well-suited to identifying dimensional congruence or blurring and to contribute to the emerging literature on the extent to which populist parties can be said to blur their positions on key dimensions of European political competition, compared to ‘traditional mainstream’ parties.

Research Implemented

The research implemented during the STSM proceeded in several steps. Having identified an interesting theoretical question and literature on position blurring by populist parties, we proceeded with initial data analysis. This involved firstly reshaping the EU Profiler and EUVOX datasets by removing country-specific issue statements, in order to develop a fully comparable dataset. A second stage involved identifying radical right populist and radical left populist parties within each dataset, clustering together parties that are generally classified as radical populists in the political science literature. We also identified and

coded parties belonging to the ‘traditional mainstream’ party families, again relying on the party family literature in making our categorisations. Having sorted our parties and made the dataset comparable, we proceeded with an initial analysis of party ‘uniqueness’, by examining the extent to which radical right and left populist parties offer unique policy positions, compared to the other parties competing in the same system. We then performed a dimensional analysis, recreating the logic of the two VAA tools for which our datasets were developed. The early findings of this analysis are described in the next section.

Early Findings

The early findings of our dimensional analysis confirm our theoretical intuition and the findings of the Rovny paper (which uses a completely different analytical approach in terms of data and analysis) – namely that radical right populist parties lack congruence on the economic dimension of political competition. At least according to the logic of the VAA datasets we examine, the ‘radical right populist’ group scores lower in terms of congruence on this dimension than other party groups. On the other hand, these parties tend to have far greater consistency on the European and Social dimensions of political competition. With regards to radical left populist parties, a different picture is emerging – these parties have far greater consistency on economic policy than their radical right counter-parts, but are considerably less consistent on the European dimension of political competition.

Thus, a degree of dimensional ‘blurring’ is evident in both populist party types we analyse. In further developing this analysis, we will also analyse the policy congruence of mainstream parties occupying the political centre. This will allow us to develop the literature considerably by comparing the dimensional blurring of each of the main party families present in European political competition, and will be the basis of several co-authored papers in the future.

Financial Report

Travel	280 EURO
Subsistence (hotel/meals)	392 EURO
TOTAL	672 EURO

Signature,

Dr. Matthew Wall

Date: 30/06/2015