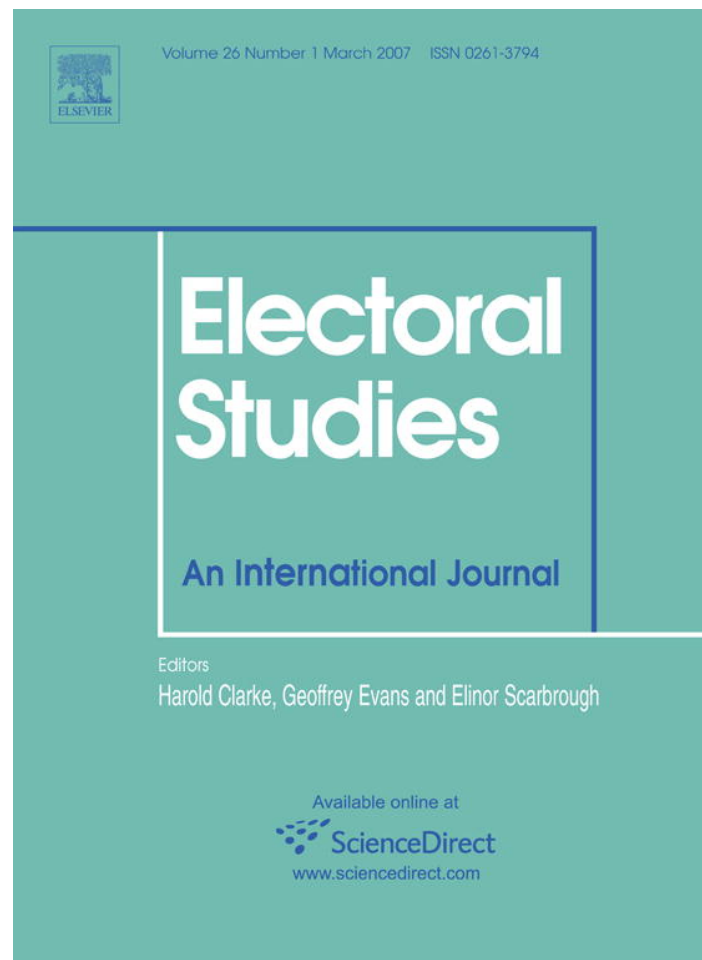


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Do expert surveys produce consistent estimates of party stances on European integration? Comparing expert surveys in the difficult case of Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

Expert surveys have been subject to a number of criticisms concerning their ability to produce accurate estimates of party positions. Such criticisms have particular *prima facie* credibility in new post-Communist democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, where party development is regarded as weak. This paper compares data from two expert surveys independently conducted between 2002 and 2004. We find, contrary to expectations, that there is a remarkable overlap in positions assigned to parties. This suggests the usefulness of expert surveys even in the ‘most difficult’ case of post-Communist party systems. It also suggests that parties in these countries have developed effective means of communicating their positions on major issues.

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Keywords: Survey; Expert data; Cross-validation; Central and Eastern Europe; European integration

1. Introduction

Expert surveys are frequently used by political scientists interested in measuring the positions of political parties on various issues (Castles and Mair, 1984; Huber and Inglehart, 1995; Ray, 1999; Marks and Steenbergen, 2004). Such surveys offer a number of advantages, but they have also been subject to a range of criticisms regarding the validity and reliability of the measures produced (Budge, 2001). To date, expert surveys

have been conducted in the relatively stable, historically established and information-rich environments of Western party systems. Concerns about the validity of expert surveys in the arguably unstable and information-poor environments of new post-Communist democracies, therefore, are likely to be even sharper.

This article considers expert surveys in a ‘most difficult’ context by cross-validating measures obtained from two surveys of party stances towards European integration. One was undertaken by a team at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (henceforth Chapel Hill);¹ the other was conducted by Robert

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Rohrschneider and Stephen Whitefield at Indiana and Oxford Universities (henceforth RW). A comparison of these measures reveals the capacity of expert surveys to obtain useful estimates of party positioning even in the difficult circumstances of the fluid party landscape of Central and Eastern European states.

1.1. *The two expert surveys*

The Chapel Hill survey commenced in September 2002 and was completed in May 2003; the RW survey took place between November 2003 and March 2004. Of the 87 parties in the RW survey and 73 in the Chapel Hill study, 57 parties from nine East European countries are common to both studies. For the purpose of this article, we therefore merged the data on these parties from the two data sets. The distribution of parties across countries is as follows: Bulgaria (4), Czech Republic (5), Hungary (5), Latvia (7), Lithuania (6), Poland (8), Romania (5), Slovakia (9), and Slovenia (8).

1.2. *Sampling*

Respondents were expected to know about the full range of electorally significant parties in a given country and to be familiar with the broad thrust of literature on party systems, though not of course with the particular hypotheses of the researchers. Master lists of respondents were compiled independently by each survey team. In both cases, this list included persons who fulfilled one or more of the following criteria: (1) they were employed at an academic institution and were known experts on the party system of the country in question; (2) they worked in a non-partisan think-tank and analyzed European integration in their country of expertise; (3) they had published two or more articles considering the domestic politics of the country's road to EU membership in English or in the local language; (4) they were recommended by known experts in the field. RW identified 264 experts of whom 111 (or 42 percent) completed the survey questionnaire for the 13 countries surveyed. Chapel Hill identified 291 experts for ten countries of whom 98 (or 34 percent) provided valid responses. The average number of experts for the overlapping countries included in both surveys is 8.7 (RW) and 9.9 (Chapel Hill). Both teams were somewhat surprised and gratified—given the results presented below—to find that only a total of five experts responded to *both* surveys. Any overlap in the positions ascribed to parties is thus not an effect of overlapping samples of experts.

2. Sources of error

Expert surveys are relatively flexible and inexpensive—virtues that help explain their popularity among researchers. But experts, like the rest of us, make mistakes. Depending on the phenomena the experts are asked to evaluate, their knowledge of the subject in question, and the way in which their expertise is tapped, their evaluations may not be accurate. Some degree of inaccuracy can therefore be taken for granted, and this is our point of departure.

In evaluating the relative validity of expert data it is useful to make a distinction between random error and systematic error (Marks, 2007). Random error arises when the sources of the error do not replicate across measurement instruments, i.e. experts. One expert may place a party to the left of where it is truly located, while another expert may locate it to the right of the actual location. If one aggregates these errors, no systematic pattern can be found; on the average, the errors cancel each other out. Random error appears to be at the heart of Budge's (2001) concerns about expert surveys. Budge fears that different experts may in fact be making different judgments. They may be evaluating different segments of the party (activists, leaders, or voters), different facets of the party (e.g. economic versus social ideology), different behaviors (rhetoric versus actual voting behavior in legislatures), or different time points. To the extent that experts differ in the judgments they render, random error in the placement of the parties would be likely. In statistical terms, a measure of this error would be given by the variance across experts.

Systematic error arises when errors are replicated across experts. For example, there may be a systematic tendency to place parties to the left (or to the right) of their actual positions. This kind of error can be described statistically as 'bias,' which measures the discrepancy between the average expert judgment and the true score. The problem of bias is connected to the concerns raised by McDonald and his collaborators in this issue. They worry that experts tend to rely on party family as a shortcut that allows them to place parties. To the extent that many, if not most, experts do this, one would expect to see a replication of errors that, in turn, would produce bias. For example, if experts were to think of party X as a member of the socialist family, they might attribute leftist orientations to that party on all sorts of issues, even if in reality the party may be moderate or to the right on some issues.

We can combine both error conceptions in the mean squared error (MSE—compare Groves, 1989). Let $\hat{\theta}$ denote the placement of a party by experts, then

$MSE = E[\hat{\theta} - \theta]^2$, where θ is the true position of the party. As any statistical textbook will show, the mean squared error is equal to the sum of the unsystematic error—i.e. the variance—and systematic error—i.e. the squared bias. As a general rule, the variance will decline as the number of experts increases. (Or, in the terms of classical test theory, the reliability of a composite of expert judgments increases with the number of experts.) The more experts there are, the greater the chance that random errors will cancel each other out. The squared bias, by contrast, is immune to the number of experts. If experts are making the same systematic errors, then adding to their number will not reduce the error of their estimates. These logical properties are illustrated in Fig. 1. Whereas the mean squared error recedes to zero where there is no bias, it will always remain positive where there is bias (Marks, 2007).

There is good reason to believe that McDonald et al.'s concern about biased expert evaluations is less relevant for Central and Eastern Europe. As we noted earlier, party families are less cohesive and less useful indicators in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. Since the party family heuristic seems to be the most plausible source of bias, we have little reason to believe that expert respondents will misjudge the same political parties in the same direction.

However, random measurement error is as likely to be present in Eastern as in Western Europe. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that expert judgment is rather more difficult in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. Thus, Budge's concerns about expert surveys remain valid (Budge, 2001). We restate these concerns under three rubrics: (1) ambiguity in

the assessment criteria, (2) too many small or new parties, and (3) a lack of policy positions in general.

2.1. Ambiguous assessment criteria

Error will creep into expert evaluations to the extent that the survey instrument is ambiguous (Steenbergen and Marks, in press). With this in mind, both the Chapel Hill and RW questionnaires cue respondents to evaluate the *formal position* of the party (RW) or the positioning of the *party leadership* (Chapel Hill), and both questionnaires specify *the year* of evaluation. Neither survey explicitly asks experts to disregard the actual behavior of parties, but they do state that they are interested in the *policy positions* taken by the party in question.

Given the rapidity of political change in Central and East European countries, the nine-month lag between the surveys could produce divergence in estimates, even if each survey were accurate. Central and East European parties are less institutionalized and have tended to shift positions with greater rapidity than their western counterparts. Presumably, these characteristics would amplify ambiguities in the surveys. One might also argue that since party elites in Central and Eastern Europe may be less effective in communicating the stances of their parties, the best way to measure these would be to analyze their formal party programs.

2.2. Too many small or new parties

Even if the questions posed to experts were unambiguous, it is still possible that experts would not have sufficient knowledge to provide accurate answers. Political parties in the post-Communist party systems of

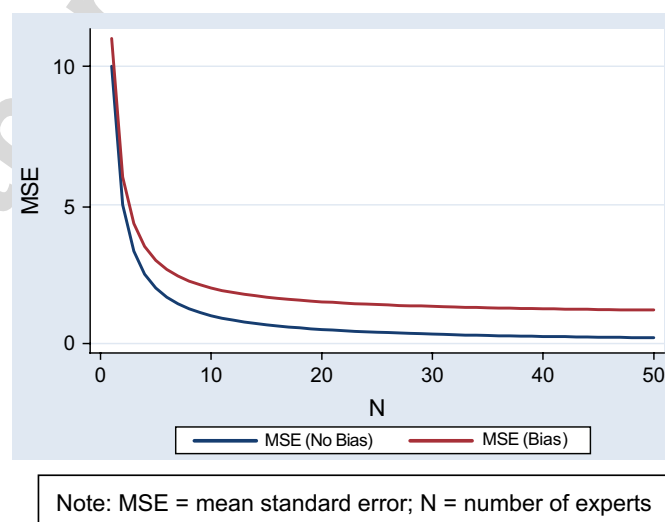


Fig. 1. Error as a function of the number of experts. MSE, mean standard error; N, number of experts.

Central and Eastern Europe tend to be numerous, small, and new. While some level of continuity exists among most Communist-successor parties and, in some states, pre-war ‘revival’ parties (some of which nominally operated during the Communist period itself), the majority of parties are post-Communist creations (Lewis, 2001). Moreover, many post-Communist party systems are characterized by comparatively high levels of organizational instability, party failure, and new party formation, even more than a decade after democratization (Kreuzer and Pettai, 2003). The number of effective parties is also comparatively high, with many small parties that, additionally, compete as part of broader electoral blocs. The median vote of the 57 parties in the combined data set is 9.6 percent, while the average vote is 13.9 percent. So our data set contains mostly small parties with a tail of larger parties that dominate their respective party systems. Hence, the informational challenges facing experts are severe even when the range of parties is restricted—as in the two surveys analyzed here—to those that are represented in national parliaments.

2.3. *Lack of policy positions in general*

A number of scholars have noted a systematic de-emphasis of clear issue positions among political parties in the post-Communist context. Political parties are said to have loose ideological moorings on account of the absence or weakness of political cleavages (Lawson et al., 1999). Unlike parties in Western Europe, those in the East are not easily placed in party families characterized by durable constituencies and programmatic commitments. Rather, many Eastern European parties are believed to appeal to voters on non-programmatic grounds, by virtue of the charisma of their leaders or by stressing their ability to deliver effective governance, economic growth, or patronage (Evans and Whitefield, 1993; Kitschelt et al., 1999). As a consequence, respondents may find it difficult to identify how parties position themselves on EU policy.

On the other hand, there are also scholars who argue that political cleavages in post-Communist societies are actually well established, and that party competition in the East has a surprisingly high degree of structure (Whitefield, 2002; Jasiewicz, 2003). If this is the case, parties have strong incentives to adopt unambiguous policy positions on major issues and to convey these positions to voters—and to experts.

2.4. *Lack of policy positions on European integration*

A distinct and important question for the value of the RW and Chapel Hill surveys of the positions of Central and East European political parties is whether these parties have developed identifiable stances on different aspects of European integration (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2004).

Concern about this might have been valid for the early and mid-1990s. Until joining the EU was fully on the table, many political parties had only superficial positions on European integration. By 1997, all countries in our dataset had applied for EU membership, and by 2002, the process of joining the EU had come so far along that virtually all political parties were induced to spell out positions on the topic (Vachudova, 2005). Moreover, recent work shows a strong connection between European integration and the main issue dimensions in domestic politics (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2004; Marks et al., 2005; Vachudova, 2005), thus reducing the informational challenge for experts. Future surveys will undoubtedly show a further ‘filling in’ of party positions as EU membership forces political parties to take refined stands across a range of EU policies.

2.5. *Empirical consequences*

If the expectation is that placing political parties in Central and Eastern Europe is a difficult task, then random error in expert judgments should run rampant. If so, we would expect the correlations between measures of the same phenomena across the instruments to be attenuated. We now evaluate the extent to which the two expert surveys do, or do not, correspond. We begin with the stances of political parties on European integration and turn next to their stances on the left–right ideological dimension.

3. **Party positioning on European integration**

In this section we consider questions designed to capture variation among political parties on various aspects of European integration. While not identical, the survey questions appear to measure the same, or a similar, thing.

3.1. *Political integration*

We begin the discussion by comparing measures of party positioning on integration as a whole. The broadest measure of party positioning on European

integration in the Chapel Hill survey is the following question:

‘How would you describe the general position to European integration that the party’s leadership has taken over the course of 2002?’ Experts placed the position of parties on a scale from 1 (strongly opposed to European integration) to 7 (strongly in favor of European integration).’

The RW survey asked experts a similar question:

‘How about the EU? Regardless of the specific form that integration may take, where do parties stand on creating a politically unified Europe? (1–7 Strongly Oppose/Strongly Support)?’

The Chapel Hill question is a general one that encompasses political and market integration; the RW survey focuses directly on political integration. Despite this difference in conceptual range, both questions conceive European integration in broad terms. To what extent do experts place parties at similar locations?

Fig. 2 reveals an extraordinary degree of convergence given that we have similar, but not identical, indicators and that there is a nine-month time gap between the two surveys. The correlation coefficient is 0.96—i.e. over 91 percent of the variance of party positions is shared (see Appendix A). This is as strong a relationship as one is likely to find in the empirical world. At the country level, the two surveys produce nearly identical rankings of parties. Note also that the surveys converge in their estimates of the *absolute* positioning of parties. The regression line runs almost perfectly through the origin of the two-dimensional space in Fig. 2.² The country-specific patterns in Fig. 2 neatly duplicate the overall relationship. Despite the fact that the number of cases in each party system is small for the purposes of statistical analyses, the two surveys produce consistently similar estimates for parties’ policy stances on Europe.

3.2. Market integration

Both surveys measure party positions on market integration. The Chapel Hill survey asks:

‘Some parties want to strengthen EU powers to eliminate market barriers (i.e. free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor). Other parties oppose strengthening EU powers in this area.

Where does the leadership of the following parties stand?’ Experts placed the position of parties on a scale from 1 (strongly opposes expanding EU powers on the internal market) to 7 (strongly favors expanding EU powers on the internal market).’

The RW survey asks experts to consider party positions on market integration in the following way:

‘Where do the parties in [country x] stand on creating a Europe-wide, integrated market for the European Union? (1–7 Strongly Oppose/Strongly Support)?’

Again, the conceptual reach of both questions differs slightly. The Chapel Hill survey focuses on the authority of the European Union with respect to market integration; the RW survey focuses on economic integration per se.

Still, both surveys overlap to a substantial degree (Fig. 3). The correlation coefficient is a strong 0.87, which again indicates that a substantial amount of variance in party stances is shared between the estimates (75.3 percent). It is also worth noting that the country patterns are consistent across the surveys.

4. Party positioning on left/right ideological placement

The surveys of party positioning also provide information about how political parties place themselves on the basic ideological dimensions that structure political competition in Central and Eastern European countries. To what extent do the two surveys reveal similar pictures?

Both surveys include a question asking experts to place parties on a general left/right spectrum. The RW survey asks:

‘In [country x], parties may be located to the left or the right of the political spectrum. In general terms, please locate each party on the ideological spectrum in [country x], with 1 standing for left wing, and 7 standing for right wing.’

The Chapel Hill question is worded:

‘First, we would like you to classify the parties in terms of their broad ideology. On the scale below, 0 indicates that a party is at the extreme left of the ideological spectrum, 10 indicates that it is at the extreme right, and 5 means that it is at the center. For each party, please circle the

² We did not force the regression line through the origin.

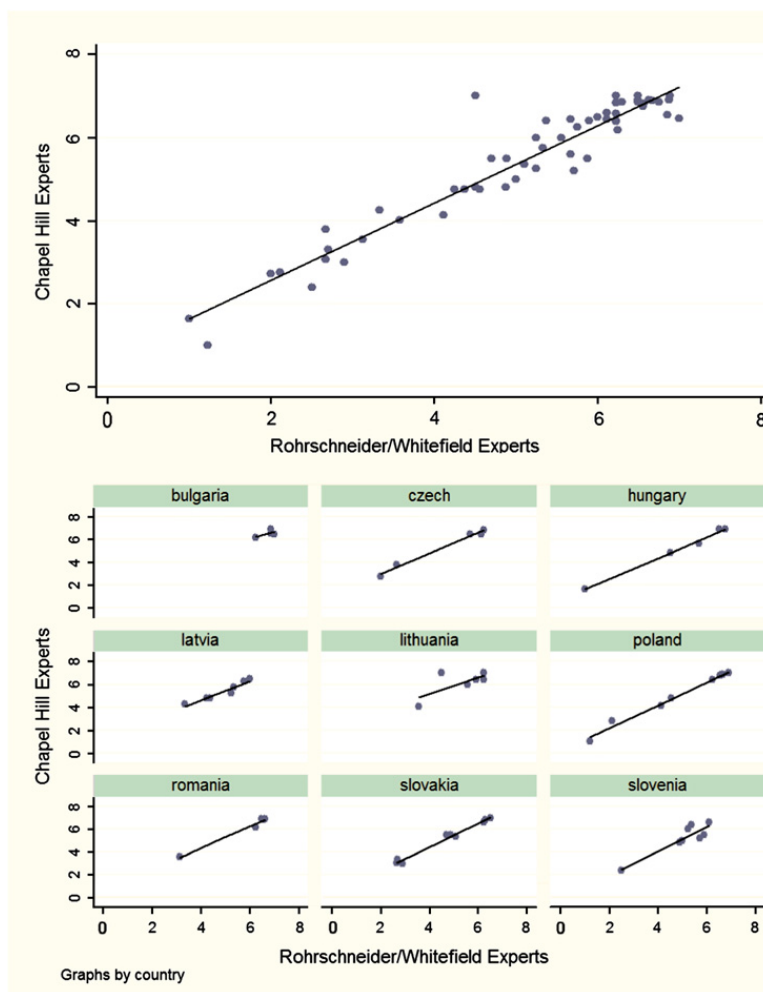


Fig. 2. Party stances on political integration.

ideological position that best describes a party's overall ideology.'

In the post-Communist context, the terms 'left' and 'right' may have nationally distinctive, unstable or unclear meanings (Whitefield and Evans, 1998), given the complexity of the political cleavages with which the terms might be associated (Whitefield, 2002). The general left/right dimension might also be considered to comprise two distinct components: an economic left/right dimension oriented to state intervention versus market outcomes, and a more diffuse, non-economic dimension summarizing conflict on communal, religious, and life-style issues (Kitschelt et al., 2002; Hooghe et al., 2002). Given these potential ambiguities how much overlap, then, do we find in expert placement of parties on the left/right dimension?

As Fig. 4 indicates, the two surveys produce similar information both for all political parties and for parties

within individual countries. The overall association for the 57 common parties is 0.87, which indicates that around three-quarters of the variance is shared.

We find a similarly strong association when we compare where parties stand regarding their more specific policy position on the role of government and on distributional issues. This contradicts the view that many post-Communist parties lack clear stances on economic policy issues (Grzymala-Busse and Innes, 2003) or operate in countries with weak economic cleavages (Lawson et al., 1999). Here, the RW survey asks:

Beginning with [issue 1], could you now situate parties in [country x]? Please use a seven-point scale to score the position of a party. A score of 7 indicates the most strongly liberal position and a score of 1 indicates the least liberal position on any particular issue. If a party has no stance on a given issue, please give it a score of 99.

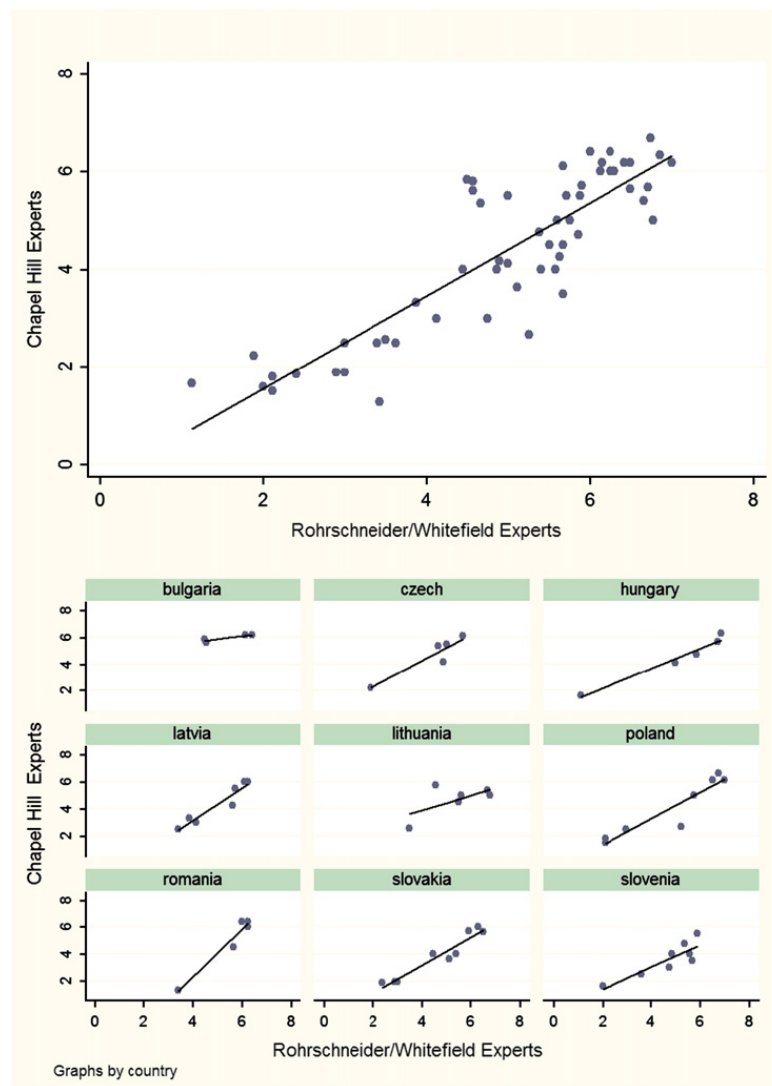


Fig. 3. Party stances on market integration.

(1) 'A. Economy: redistributional issues (for example, tax levels, welfare state spending)', with 7 indicating an 'anti-tax, anti-welfare' policy, and 1 indicating 'pro-welfare distribution'.

(2) 'B. Economy: State-run versus market economy', with 7 indicating 'pro-market' and 1 'anti-market'.

We averaged the two indicators and rescaled it to the original metric (1–7). The Chapel Hill survey asks:

'Political scientists often classify parties in terms of their ideological stance on economic issues. Parties to the right emphasize a reduced economic role for government. They want privatization, lower taxes, less regulation, reduced government spending, and a leaner welfare state. Parties to the left want

government to play an active role in the economy. Using these criteria, indicate where parties are located in terms of their economic ideology.' Experts were asked to place the parties on a scale ranging from 0 (extreme left) through 5 (center) to 10 (extreme right).

Again, the results in Fig. 5 demonstrate a strong association between the two surveys' economic position measures (0.86). As before, around three-quarters of the variance in the data is shared. Country patterns are convergent.

5. Modeling differences

While one might be content to note the high degree of overlap in party stances, we would like to take our investigation one step further in order to explore the

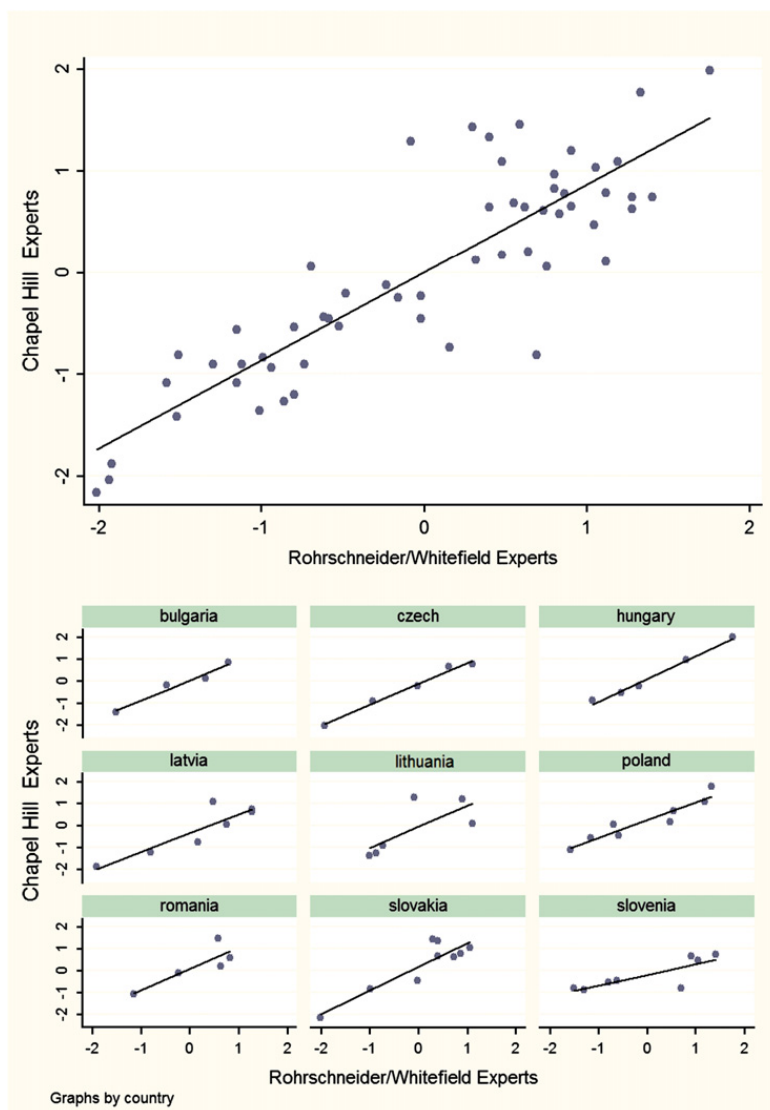


Fig. 4. Left–right placement of parties (standardized scores).

structure of error in the two surveys. To do this, we calculate the absolute difference between Chapel Hill and RW scores for individual political parties for each of the three questions discussed above. The greater the random error in measuring the stance of a party, the greater, on average, should be the difference between the two measures. To what extent, if at all, are these differences patterned by type of party, by issue, or by country?

There are several grounds for suspecting that experts' ability to pinpoint the stances of political parties will vary predictably, and we conduct an OLS analysis to see if they are associated with differences across the surveys. We suspect, for example, that experts can more easily evaluate parties that are large (i.e. win a greater share of the vote), that participate in government, that are centrist rather than

extremist in left/right terms, that are united on the issue of concern, and that regard the issue as salient. There are also grounds for expecting that parties in smaller countries are more difficult to track. Perhaps, in addition, the sheer number of political parties in a country makes their positioning less easy to pinpoint. To evaluate these priors, our model includes the following variables at the party level: the standard deviation of expert scores in each survey; party vote share; incumbency; left/right placement of parties; and left/right extremism. We include two variables that tap the character of the issue: issue salience for the party; and intra-party dissent. At the country level we include population and the number of parties evaluated in a country. [Appendix C](#) provides information about these variables.

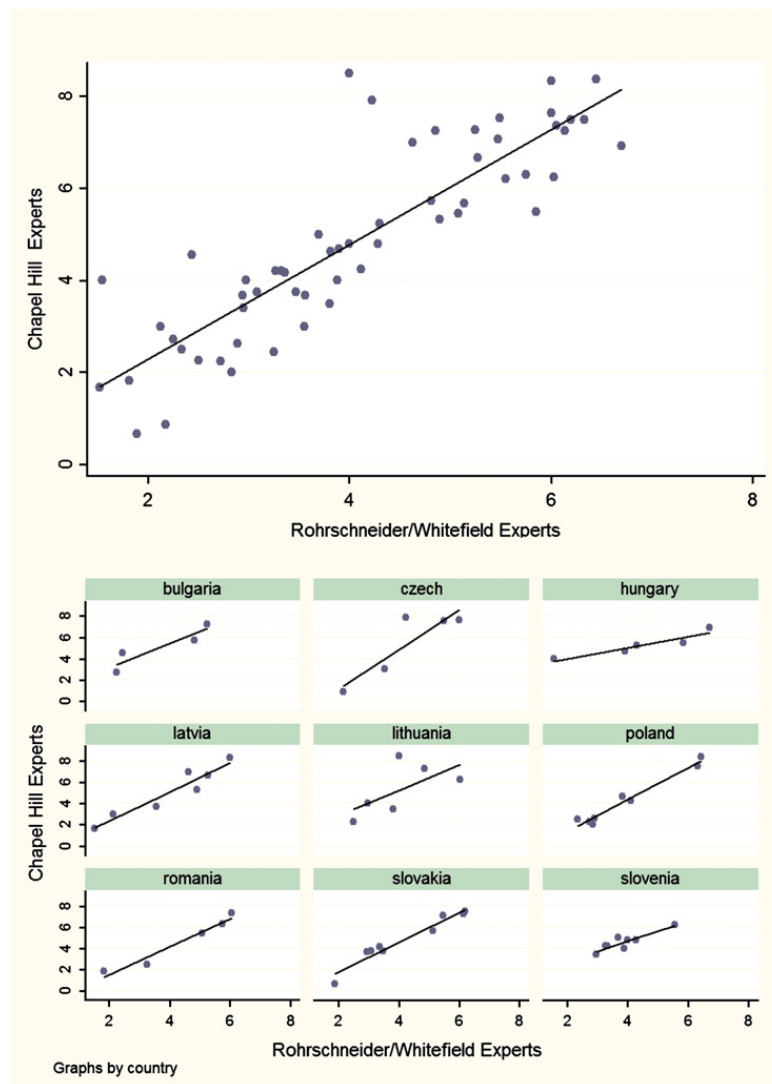


Fig. 5. Party stances on economic policy decisions.

Table 1 presents the results of this analysis for political integration, internal market integration, and left–right placement of parties. We use the original 7-point metric for political and economic integration indicators, and we standardize scores for the ideological placement indicator because the metric of the ideological placement indicators varies.

The standard deviations of expert judgments are robustly associated with the gap between survey measures. However, the estimate for the effect of disagreement among Chapel Hill experts for political integration is negative, not positive as we expect.³

³ These estimates for expert disagreement on left/right are highly correlated across the surveys ($r = 0.73$). We therefore enter only that for the RW survey in our equation.

With respect to other possible sources of error, our findings are spotty. We find that differences among our measures of political integration are significantly greater for smaller parties, and for parties that do not regard European integration as a salient issue. Smaller countries generate greater differences in expert evaluations of the left/right positioning of parties. But these associations are not robust across the three issues dealt with here, and we find also that they are not particularly robust in alternative model specifications.

Our attempt to pin down the sources of difference between the surveys leaves us with the impression that we are dealing mainly with white noise. This is consistent with the high correlations that we have found across the measures. Differences across the measures are relatively small, and as Appendix B reveals, in two of three

Table 1
Explaining absolute differences between the Chapel Hill and the RW expert data

	Political integration	Internal market	Left/right ideology
<i>Constant</i>	0.713 (0.589)	−0.399 (0.740)	0.167 (0.209)
Party characteristics			
CH expert disagreement (SD)	−0.186* (0.106)	0.431** (0.168)	—
RW expert disagreement (SD)	0.335* (0.168)	0.052 (0.203)	0.306** (0.076)
Vote share	0.012** (0.005)	−0.012 (0.007)	−0.001 (0.004)
Government party	−0.113 (0.113)	0.116 (0.168)	−0.068 (0.085)
Left/right position	0.134** (0.056)	0.053 (0.083)	0.060 (0.041)
Left/right extremism	0.080 (0.106)	0.146 (0.171)	−0.043 (0.090)
Issue characteristics			
Saliency of issue	−0.129* (0.064)	−0.041 (0.095)	—
Dissent on issue	−0.070 (0.044)	0.088 (0.066)	—
Country characteristics			
Population size	−0.060 (0.056)	0.072 (0.088)	−0.088** (0.039)
Number of parties	0.019 (0.020)	0.051 (0.034)	0.023 (0.016)
R^2	0.374	0.246	0.447
Adjusted R^2	0.238	0.082	0.368

B-coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. $N = 57$. ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

cases, these differences bear little association with each other.

6. Conclusions

Expert surveys have been subject to a number of criticisms about their capacity to produce accurate estimates of party positions. Such criticisms have even greater *prima facie* credibility in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, where party development has been regarded as weak.

The evidence presented in this article, however, demonstrates that two distinct groups of experts, at somewhat different points in time, converge to a remarkable degree in their assessments of party positions. This suggests that expert surveys are useful even in the challenging case of post-Communist party systems.

At the same time, our analysis sheds light on some substantive properties of post-Communist politics. Obtaining valid and reliable measures speaks to our capacity to know the world, and therefore to the object of our knowledge. Against those who argue that post-Communist party systems are too fluid and ill-defined to be knowable, the fact that we obtain valid and reliable measures of post-Communist party positioning says something important about the capacity of parties to make themselves understood. CEE parties appear

to compete in an intelligible competitive space, which facilitates information signaling and communication between parties and experts (and perhaps voters too).

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A. Correlation matrix of six measures

	Political integration CH	Internal market CH	Left/right CH	Political integration RW	Internal market RW
Internal market CH	0.925				
Left/right CH	−0.047	0.030			
Political integration RW	0.956	0.889	−0.112		
Internal market RW	0.901	0.868	0.067	0.907	
Left/right RW	0.007	0.097	0.865	−0.040	0.135

Appendix B. Correlation matrix of absolute differences (dependent variables in OLS regression)

	Difference on political integration	Difference on internal market	Difference on ideology
Difference on political integration	1.000		
Difference on internal market	−0.019	1.000	
Difference on ideology	0.297**	0.099	1.000

Note: Differences are absolute differences between CH and RW scores. $N = 57$. ** $P < 0.05$.

Appendix C. Description of independent variables

CH expert disagreement (SD)	Standard deviation among experts on party's position on (a) political integration, (b) internal market, and (c) left/right positioning across the 57 parties. Mean = 0.85 (political integration); 1.01 (internal market); 1.20 (left/right). <i>Source</i> : Chapel Hill 2002 expert data
RW expert disagreement (SD)	Standard deviation among experts on party's position on (a) political integration, (b) internal market, and (c) left/right positioning across the 57 parties. Mean = 0.96 (political integration); 1.07 (internal market); 0.88 (left/right) <i>Source</i> : Rohrschneider/Whitefield data
Vote share	Percentage of vote in 2003 or the most recent national election prior to 2003. Range is from 2.9 to 43.1 percent. Mean = 13.9. <i>Source</i> : http://www.electionworld.org
Government party	A three-category variable that takes on the value of 0 if the party was not in government during 2002, 0.5 if it was in government for part of the time, and 1 if it was in government for the duration of 2002. Mean = 0.40. <i>Source</i> : http://www.electionworld.org
Left/right position	Mean of left/right scores of the Chapel Hill and Rohrschneider/Whitefield dataset for each party. Standardized values
Left/right extremism	Absolute distance of a political party from the median left/right position for all parties in the expert dataset (calculated from left/right position above)
Saliency	Saliency for a particular party on (a) political integration and (b) internal market on a seven-point scale, whereby 1 stands for 'not important at all' and 7 for 'very important' in 'how a party appeals to the public.' <i>Source</i> : Rohrschneider/Whitefield data
Dissent	Degree of internal dissent in a party on European integration in 2002, ranging from 1 (party is completely united) to 10 (party is extremely divided). <i>Source</i> : Chapel Hill 2002 expert data
Size of country	Population in millions (natural log function). <i>Source</i> : CIA world facts
Number of parties	The number of parties in a country that obtained 3 percent or more of the vote or at least one seat in the national parliament during the latest parliamentary elections. Values for countries range from 5 in the Czech republic to 14 in Lithuania. <i>Source</i> : http://www.electionworld.org

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