Obtaining Party Positions on Immigration in Switzerland: Comparing Different Methods

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Abstract

The position of political parties on policy issues is crucial for many questions of political science, including studies of political representation.   his research note examines different methods for obtaining party positions on immigration in retrospective. Party positions are obtained using pooled expert surveys, manual coding of party manifestos with a conventional codebook, manual coding of manifestos using check-lists, and automatic coding of manifestos using Wordscores and a dictionary of keywords respectively. In addition, positions from a media analysis and a retrospective evaluation of researchers in the field of immigration are used.   he results suggest that most methods differentiate the same order of party positions. While there are high correlations between many methods, the different methods tend not to agree on the exact positions.   he automatic dictionary approach does not seem to measure party positions reliably.

Obtaining Party Position on Immigration in Retrospective: Comparing Different Methods

Abstract

The position of political parties on policy issues is crucial for many questions of political science, including studies of political representation. This article examines different methods for obtaining party positions on a specific issue (immigration) in retrospective. Most of the research in the field examines relatively comprehensive issues, such as left–right positions and social issues. Party positions are obtained using a pooled expert survey, manual coding of party manifestos with a conventional codebook, manual coding of manifestos using check-lists, and automatic coding of manifestos using Wordscores and a dictionary of keywords respectively. In addition, a retrospective evaluation of researchers in the field of immigration is used. The results suggest that most methods differentiate the same order of party positions. While there are high correlations between many methods, the different methods tend not to agree on the exact positions.

1   Introduction

No matter how precisely the political space is perceived, political parties are understood as differentiating themselves in terms of preferred policies. Although the positions of left and right are probably the most common way to describe the political space, other issue domains are of central interest to political science – notably for questions of political representation or the success of social movements. There are different methods for estimating the positions of political parties on various issues, and the jury is still out on which method is the most suitable. This is particularly the case for specific issue domains and retrospective estimates of party positions.

This article examines a specific issue domain – immigration – and compares how estimates of party positions obtained using different

methods compare over time. With the exception of expert positions, all information was obtained in retrospective. In this sense, the article addresses the issue of how to best obtain party positions backwards in time.

In many situations, expert surveys are the preferred approach. Indeed, expert surveys are often taken as the standard against which different methods are compared (Helbling and Tresch, 2011; Laver and Garry, 2000; Lowe et al., 2011). They are not only relatively cost effective, but experts can also position political parties in multiple issue domains. However, there are applications where expert surveys are not available, such as for studies focusing on party positions in the regional context, or for analyses covering past positions of parties when no expert surveys were carried out. For example, only recently have expert surveys begun to include questions on the position on immigration more systematically.

One method is the use of political texts to obtain party positions, namely using party manifestos. Political texts have the advantage that the time series can be extended backwards as long as archival copies of the manifestos are available. Content analysis is used especially where expert surveys are not available (Lowe et al., 2011; Benoit et al., 2009), and because it is widely assumed that experts are unable to position parties reliably in retrospective (Benoit and Laver, 2007; Klemmensen et al., 2007).

The article considers different methods and examines the extent to which different methods lead to the same estimates of party positions – a test of correlational validity (Carmines and Zeller, 1979). Of course different methods have been compared (e.g. Benoit and Laver, 2007; Chen, 2011; Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2011), but these studies tend to focus on left-right positions. They generally find that manifesto-based approaches are as feasible as expert surveys, and that automatic approaches lead to valid estimates of party positions. Similarly, Helbling and Tresch (2011) show that positions derived from media analyses are accurate, highlighting another method for obtaining party positions. The difference to previous studies is that here we are interested in a specific issue domain and include considerations of changes over time. In contrast to generic issues such as political left and right, or social issues, it is possible that for some parties and some years the specific issue is not salient and thus absent from the manifestos. In many cases, much less space is dedicated to immigration than to other issues such as the economy. This means shorter relevant passages: less data to work with. With less data it might become difficult to obtain nuanced positions. Finally, particular to immigration is the possibility that immigration may only be mentioned when it is opposed; the status quo

of allowing certain immigrants may not be mentioned at all.

2 Methods

This article compares three types of methods for estimating party positions: a pooled expert survey, a retrospective survey, and several manifesto-based approaches. In addition, results of a limited media study are included. All methods are described in more detail in the following paragraphs. In each case, party positions on immigration were estimated for the period between 1995 and 2011, with the retrospective survey going back to 1991. Where necessary, estimates were rescaled to a scale from 0 to 20 to allow comparability. All methods were applied to the five largest Swiss parties. The parties are the Greens (GPS), the Socialists (SPS), the Christian Democrats (CVP), the Liberals (FDP), and the People's Party (SVP).

2.1 Pooled Expert Survey

There is no expert survey available positioning Swiss parties on immigration for the entire period covered in this article. To obtain a time series, a range of expert surveys was pooled (e.g. Lubbers et al., 2002; Benoit and Laver, 2006; Ladner et al., 2009; Hooghe, 2005), and averaged using a 7-year moving average. This means that the position for a given party in 2003, for instance, is taken as the average of all expert positions available between 2000 and 2006. Put differently, in addition to the year in question – in this case 2003 – three years before and after are also included. The long time span for the moving average was necessary to bridge gaps in coverage. While this approach invariably smoothes changes between years, it also lowers the impact of individual expert surveys that may be considered outliers. The same substantive results can be obtained with 5-year moving averages; for shorter averaging periods the time series of the pooled expert survey becomes disrupted.

Whilst expert surveys can be pooled, as is done in this article, there are issues of comparison because of different wordings that may affect comparability (Converse and Traugorr, 1986; Davidov et al., 2010; Foddy, 1993; Sirken et al., 1999). These issues are not addressed in this article. Although depending on the research it may be more appropriate to use methods other than moving averages to address the lack of data for some of the years, such as choosing the closest available survey for each election year.

2.2 Retrospective Survey

The retrospective survey was carried out at the *Swiss Forum for Migration and Population Studies* (SFM) at the University of Neuchâtel. All academic staff of the institute were invited to place the major parties on immigration issues. The question was asked for the current legislative period (2011), as well backwards over time to 1991 – hence largely a retrospective assessment. The survey was carried out at the beginning of June 2011, an election year where immigration was a salient issue. The 9 respondents all work on various aspects of immigration issues, mostly within Switzerland. As such they can be considered experts or specialists on immigration, yet to my knowledge none of them is an explicit expert on the Swiss party system.

The respondents were given a list of the five biggest parties in Switzerland (SVP, SPS, FDP, CVP, GPS), and asked to write the party acronyms on a blank scale. The endpoints were labelled as *liberal* and *restrictive*, with a visible mid-point. A separate scale was used for each legislative period. The question asked the respondents to place parties (write their acronym) on immigration issues overall. Respondents were asked to place parties without recourse to any kind of evidence. Some of the respondents expressed concern at the single scale, suggesting that there are different aspects of immigration policies that need to be differentiated. Others were concerned that they were unable to remember, particularly since they may have been too young to be interested in politics for the early years covered. Despite their initial concerns, most respondents placed all the parties for all the years. I encouraged them to include their 'best estimate', but everyone was given the option not to place parties at all.

At a later stage, invisible to the respondents, the responses were coded on a scale from 0 (liberal) to 20 (restrictive), with a midpoint at 10. The response was measured using the centre of the written party acronym as the party placement. The mean position from all respondents is used as the party position, with standard deviations calculated to give an indication of the spread of estimated party positions.

2.3 Content Analysis of Party Manifestos

There are two fundamental approaches for obtaining party positions from political texts. On the one hand, the political text is perceived as substantive data to be coded. Each statement or section of a manifesto is assigned a position on one or multiple political domains. A codebook is used, but the coders use their own judgements as to which wordings constitute evidence for a certain position. A well-established project using manual coding is the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP,

Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006), where so-called quasi-sentences are coded manually. The CMP has been criticized for its rigid approach, in some cases leading to unexpected positions when compared to expert positions (e.g. Benoit and Laver, 2006). More importantly, however, the available codes are unsuitable to estimate party positions on immigration. The codes available (607, 608, and 705) confound immigration issues with other political issues. For example, code 705 makes no distinction between immigrants as minorities, national minorities, or minorities such as homosexuals and the disabled.

On the other hand, the relative frequency of words and expressions in manifestos can be used as data. In this case, party positions are derived from the fact that the parties emphasize different issues in their manifestos. Moreover, even where the same issues are treated, they tend to be framed in different ways, which is reflected in the words chosen. The underlying assumption is that a more frequent use of a word or expression associated with a particular position means that the party is closer to said position. For instance, a party repeatedly referring to social inequalities is likely to be politically left, based on the observation that parties on the left tend to highlight issues of inequality.

2.3.1 Manual Coding

The manual coding of manifestos used a conventional codebook applied to natural sentences. More common than coding natural sentences is the division of texts into individual quasi-sentences. Quasi-sentences are either natural sentences, or parts of a sentence judged to have an independent meaning. This additional effort does not seem necessary, since natural sentences also lead to valid estimates (Daubler et al., 2011). German manifestos were used for all parties. In order to make the workload manageable, keyword search was used to help coders identify parts of the manifesto that treat immigration. The codebook included a number of variables to capture the position of immigration in a nuanced way. Of relevance for this article is the positional question ("What is the position toward the issue?" – ranging from "strongly restrictive to migrants/ conservative/ pro-national residents/ mono-cultural" to "Strongly open to migrants/ progressive/ cosmopolitan/ multi-cultural"). Examples were included to aid coding. The mean position is taken as the party position.

2.3.2 Check-list

For the check-list approach, a questionnaire using 19 questions was created, with some of the questions drawing heavily on questions in

Eurobarometer and the EU Profiler. The structure of the check-list was designed to resemble the codebook used for the manual coding of natural sentences. The coders are asked to first read the sections of the manifesto about immigration. They then answer the questions of the check-list as if it were a survey. To ensure that the answers chosen draw on the manifestos – and not on preconceptions the coders may have – a snipped of supporting text was required for each answers. The mean position is taken as the party position.

2.3.3 Wordscores

Wordscores are a computerized approach to coding texts based on word frequencies. Being automatic, Wordscores are necessarily reliable, and there are many indications that estimated obtained using Wordscores are valid for analyses in various languages Benoit and Laver (2008); Lowe (2008); Lowe et al. (2011); Martin and Vanberg (2008). The approach has successfully been used in many contexts, including the positions of cantonal parties in Switzerland (Giger et al., 2011). By contrast, the application of automatic approaches like Wordscores to languages where words are not clearly divided may be more difficult (Chen, 2011). A problem particular to Wordscores stems from the fact that Wordscores often appear less reliable at the edges: the extreme positions (Lowe et al., 2011). Depending on the research question, the exact positions at the edges are of crucial interest. For instance, we might be interested in changing positions of parties at the extreme right. Moreover, the choice of reference texts is not a trivial tasks. One way is to rely on expert surveys to reference manifestos (e.g. Benoit and Laver, 2006; Hooghe, 2005, items 19, and 25/27 respectively). A challenge in the case of immigration is that it seems difficult to find clear pro-migration stances for reference: parties with more immigrant-friendly policies tend to include them as part of wider concerns for equality and diversity. What is more, focusing on a single issue, it is conceivable that in certain years other issues dominate to the extent that the issue is not mentioned in the party manifesto. This may affect all parties of interest in a particular year, or specific parties in a particular year or more generally. It is unclear how Wordscores performs on texts that are not actually about the issue in question; manual coding and the automatic dictionary approach would result in a missing value.

Wordscores were carried out using Will Lowe's JFreq software (Lowe, 2010) and Austin package in R (Lowe, 2011; R Development Core Team, 2011). A stemmer was applied, and the 20 most commonly used words in the manifestos were removed (stop words), as were numbers and currencies. Different methods for referencing were used and

compared. The positions reported in this article use 2003 and 2011 as reference texts – setting them to the positions of the pooled expert survey. This leads to stronger correlations with expert positions for the predicted positions than using the GPS and SVP as reference texts for all years. The estimated party positions were rescaled, because neither the raw figures nor the rescaled figures provided by Austin were realistic. The lack of fit for raw figures was as expected, the lack of fit for the rescaled figures provided by Austin is caused by the assumptions used by the software – which proved inappropriate in this instance.

2.3.4   Dictionary Approach

The automatic dictionary coding was implemented using Will Lowe's Yoshikoder (Lowe, 2009). The dictionary was developed in multiple stages. This was done in the context of the European Project XXX. Since the actual coding is done by a computer – there are no human coders involved who would spot the obvious false positive – the dictionary needs to be carefully thought through. The initial plan to develop and refine the dictionary used by Laver and Garry (2000) was dropped, and word frequencies of the British National Party (BNP) manifesto were used as the starting point. Drawing on expert knowledge within the project, this initial list of keywords was expanded and refined to create a first dictionary. The dictionary was then translated into Spanish, Dutch, French, and German, and back-translated to reduce translation effects (Behling and Law, 2000) and to improve the dictionary. This version was then piloted on British, Spanish, and Swiss-German manifestos to further refine the keywords and assign scores to the keywords.

2.4   Media Analysis

As part of the project, a large-scale claims analysis was carried out (Berkhout and Sudulich, 2011). It allows for individual parties to be identified, but the positional variable – the position of the claimant toward immigration – was not coded for many claims made by political parties. As a result, only a relatively small number of estimated party positions are available for each party and election year (range = 0 to 32). These data are included partly to test whether such limited data can also lead to adequate estimates. The mean position is taken as the party position, and at at least for the five biggest parties considered here, the estimates seem plausible (face validity). The estimates from the media analysis still have to be interpreted with great care and findings may not be applicable to other media studies.

3 Findings

3.1 Position of Parties by Method

In a first step, the estimated positions for each party are examined. Figure 1 presents the estimated party positions on immigration for the four biggest parties (SPS, CVP, FDP, and SVP). In each instance, different methods are included. The GPS is not included for presentational reasons, but are discussed in the main text, along with methods that were not included in figure 1 for reasons of clarity.
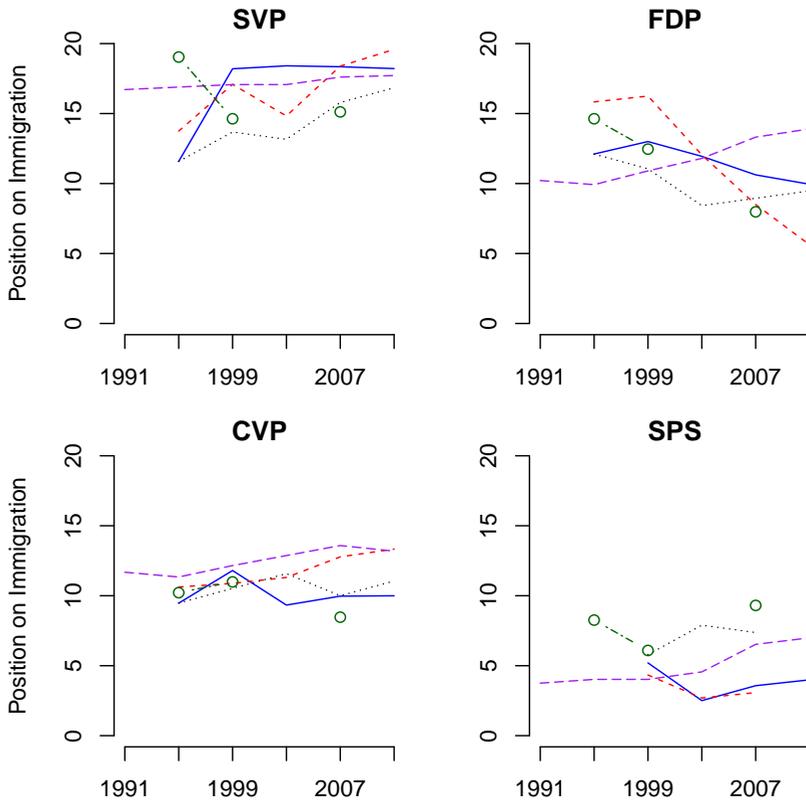

Figure 1: The estimated party positions using different methods. Given are the positions for the years 1991 to 2011 – where available – of the SVP, FDP, CVP, and SPS respectively. The different methods are a pooled expert survey (blue, solid), manual coding of party manifestos (red, dashed), the check-list approach (black, dotted), a retrospective survey (purple, long-dashed), and Wordscores (green, two-dashed). The y-axis gives the position on immigration on a scale from 0 (liberal) to 20 (restrictive).

Starting with the SVP, all methods suggest that the SVP is anti-immigrant, which is plausible – indicating face validity. The different methods, however, to not agree on the exact position of the SVP. Most methods identify a shift toward more restrictive policies over time, but it is not quite clear when this shift occurred. The pooled expert data suggest a clear shift between 1995 and 1999, with little change thereafter. By contrast, the manifesto-based manual coding and the check-list approach suggest a more gradual shift. More stable is the retrospective assessment where no significant shift in position can be identified. With just three points in time it is difficult to ascertain a clear trend using Wordscores, although all estimates are at the restrictive end. This is not the case for the dictionary approach (not shown in figure 1), where there are large changes from year to year. If anything, the dictionary approach suggests a trend toward more liberal positions, including positions that are at the liberal end of the scale: the position for 2007 is estimated to be 7.7. The positions derived from the media study largely mirror the check-list, with the exception of the estimate for 2011, where the media study suggests a rather unexpected shift toward more liberal positions, namely a position of 13.6.

Of the five parties examined in this article, the FDP seems the most difficult party to pin down. The different methods suggest different trends and a wide range of possible positions. All the positions are in the centre, slightly to the more restrictive end. The pooled expert survey suggests a small but steady shift toward more liberal positions. This is somewhat mirrored by the check-list, albeit the check-list suggests a more abrupt change between 1999 and 2003. The Wordscores estimates are also largely in agreement with the shift toward more liberal positions identified by the pooled expert survey. The manual coding also indicates a shift toward more liberal positions, but the change is much more significant, beginning at a more restrictive position (15.8 in 1995), and leading to a rather liberal position in 2011 (5.6).

The opposite trend – toward more restrictive positions – is suggested by the retrospective survey, where a steady trend toward more restrictive positions is indicated. This trend toward more restrictive positions is also suggested by the dictionary approach, with the exception of an unexpected value for 2011: 1.3 is a very liberal position. The media study indicates relatively liberal positions throughout the period, particularly in 1999 (6.2).

The situation is much clearer for the CVP, where most methods come with similar estimates, and suggest little movement around the centre, perhaps slightly toward the more restrictive end. Manual cod-

ing and the retrospective survey both suggest a small but steady trend toward more restrictive positions, whereas the pooled expert survey and the check-list do not indicate such a change. The Wordscores estimates are largely in agreement with pooled expert survey. Not shown in figure 1 are the estimates from the media study that indicate relatively large changes from election to election, and the dictionary approach which suggests a very significant shift from rather restrictive positions to centrist/liberal ones between 1995 and 1999. After 1999 no significant changes are observed.

The Socialists pose an interesting challenge, since immigration is not treated in the party manifesto in 1995 and 2011. There are other documents in which the party takes a position on immigration, but for reasons of comparability, these were not coded. As with the other parties, the retrospective survey suggest a relatively stable pattern, albeit with a clear trend to less liberal positions after 2003. In contrast to the retrospective survey, both the pooled expert survey and the manual coding suggest a shift to more liberal positions in 1999, for which year the pooled expert survey indicates a position of 5.2. Interestingly, the check-list suggest the opposite development – toward more more liberal positions –, but it indicates less liberal positions overall. The dictionary approach equally suggests a trend toward more liberal positions between 1999 and 2007, although the estimate for 1999 is centrist rather than liberal, with a position of 9.2. Similarly, the media study indicates a trend toward more liberal positions over the entire period. The estimates from Wordscores also suggest less liberal positions than say the expert survey, but there is no clear trend visible over time.

The Greens are an interesting case when it comes to immigration. On the one hand, all estimates agree that the Greens have a liberal position – with the exception of the dictionary approach that indicated large and inexplicable changes over time (including a position at the restrictive end in 1995: 17.9). On the other hand, there is significant spread in the estimated positions (from very liberal to rather centrist), and some methods suggest significant changes over time. As with the other parties, the retrospective survey suggests a stable position, in this case at the liberal end. The pooled expert survey agrees for the past three elections, but for 1999 and particularly 1995 suggests less liberal positions, namely 5.8 in 1995. Similarly, the check-list indicates relatively stable positions, albeit all somewhat less liberal. Here the difference to manual coding is noteworthy, because both rely on the same passages of the party manifestos. During the period covered, the Greens dedicated very little of their manifesto to immigration, which makes manifesto-based approaches invariably challenging. While the check-list approach suggest a relative stable development over time,

the manual coding suggests a trend toward more restrictive positions, particularly in 2011, with an estimated position of 8.7. Wordscores, where available, are in line with the check-list, as are the estimates from the media study.

Combining the results presented in figure 1, it is striking to see that there are clear differences between the methods, although the long-term trends tend to be the same: the changes by the FDP and SVP are picked up by most methods in one form or another. More importantly, the differences between methods appear to be random, with no clear bias for any of the methods presented. The persisting differences between methods suggest that relying on a single method may simply mask existing errors, particularly in the case of issue domains for which relevent sections in party manifestos can be short.

3.2   Methods by Party

Rather than looking at each party in turn, a different approach is to look at each method and see how parties are placed. The information is essentially the same as in the previous section, but this presentation allows for a different assessment.

As visible in figure 2, the estimated party positions provided by the pooled expert survey are relatively stable over time. Significant and immediately apparent is the shift toward more restrictive positions of the SVP between 1995 and 1999. We also note that the positions of the FDP and CVP are very similar, a situation repeated for the GPS and SPS. This means that the pooled expert survey distinguishes three very different positions on immigration.

Compared to the expert survey, the manual coding of party manifestos suggests much more change over time. For the SVP a shift toward more restrictive positions is outlined, but not as concentrated as what expert surveys suggest. There is only limited information on the SPS, because immigration was not mentioned in the party manifesto in two of the years covered. For the years covered, their estimated position is similar to that of the Greens. In contrast to the expert survey, the positions for the FDP and CVP are dissimilar. For the FDP, a clear shift toward more liberal positions is identified, whereas the position of the CVP is noticeably stable over time.

The check-list approach leads to estimates of more stable trajectories over time. The ordering of parties is the same as in the pooled expert survey – the SVP at the restrictive end, the FDP and CVP in the centre, and the SPS and GPS at the liberal end. By contrast, the positions derived from check-lists are less spread out: generally more centrist positions are estimated. For the SVP a shift toward more
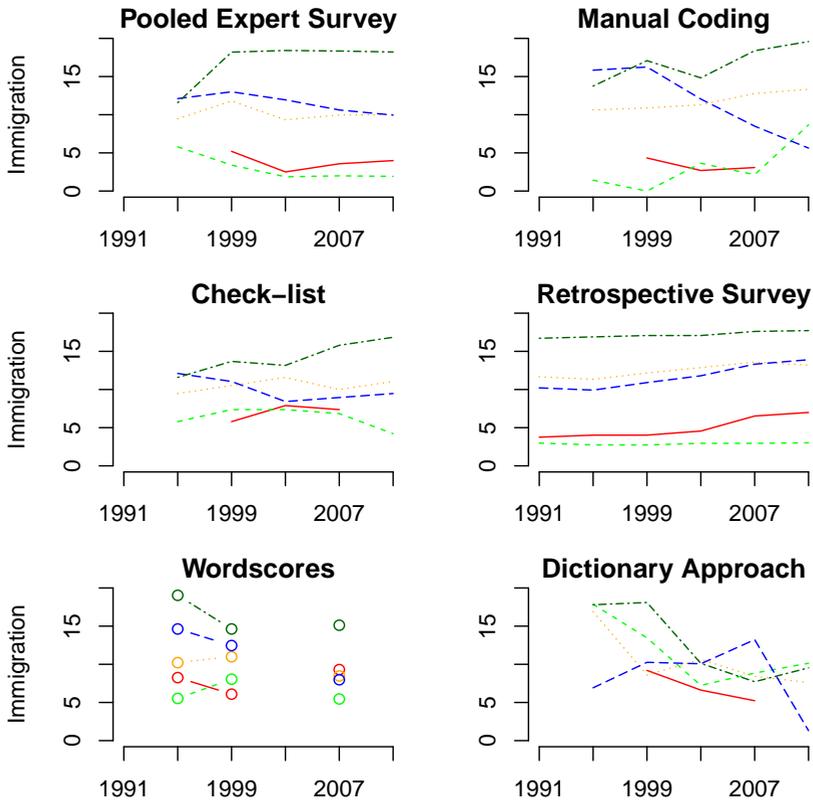
Figure 2: The estimated party positions using different methods. Given are the positions for the years 1991 to 2011 – where available – of the SVP (dark green, two-dashed), FDP (blue, long-dashed), CVP (orange, dotted), SPS (red, solid) and GPS (green, dashed) respectively. The different methods are a pooled expert survey, manual coding of party manifestos, the check-list approach, a retrospective survey, Wordscores, and the dictionary approach. The y-axis gives the position on immigration on a scale from 0 (liberal) to 20 (restrictive).

restrictive positions is outlined, but not as abrupt as in the pooled expert survey. The check-list approach also indicates a shift toward more liberal positions for the FDP, but a less significant one than the one suggested by the manual coding.

The retrospective survey is the method that suggests the most stable positions over time. It can be speculated that a retrospective assessment introduces biases that gloss over changes that actually took place. However, in contrast to this view, the estimated positions are not static. Like in the expert survey, we find three distinctive positions: the SVP at the restrictive end, the FDP and CVP in the centre – tending toward the restrictive –, and the SPS and GPS at the liberal end. The position of the FDP and the CVP seem indistinguishable. In contrast to the expert survey, in the retrospective survey it is suggested that the positions of the SPS and GPS increasingly diverge: The position of the SPS is estimated to have recently become more centrist rather than liberal.

For the retrospective survey, standard deviations are available. Whilst they indicate significant disagreement over the exact position of parties – the range of possible positions is considerable – the three general positions (restrictive, centrist, liberal) are nonetheless clearly visible, and there is hardly any overlap between these positions. Standard deviations range from 0.7 to 5.1, with a median of 3.1. Interestingly, perhaps, the standard deviations are not uniform over time for all parties. For the SVP and CVP, there rate of agreement is largely constant over time. For the FDP, the positions in the past seem less certain than more recent ones. This is probably what we would expect from a retrospective survey. By contrast, for the SPS and GPS, there is surprising agreement on their position in the past, particularly for the period 1991–1999. For more recent years, the exact position seems less clear. It might be that short-cuts are the reason for these low standard errors in earlier years, namely that (unconsciously) left–right positions are substituted for the position on immigration. More generally, the relatively high standard errors may be problematic for some applications, and the fact that standard errors are unevenly distributed over time can indicate problems of the method rather than diffuse party positions.

Not included in figure 2 are the results from the media analysis. Despite relying on a small number of cases for most parties and election years, the general order of positions is in line with the pooled expert survey and the manual coding of party manifestos. According to the media analysis, at the liberal end, the positions of the GPS and SPS are relatively moderate compared to the estimates from other methods. In the centre, the positions of the FDP and CVP seem less stable, but

this may largely be due to the small number of cases.

Because two of the election years are used as reference texts, Wordscores only provide a patchy picture: party positions are estimated for three election years. According to the Wordscores estimates, the position of the SVP at the restrictive end is relatively distinct from the other parties. Yet, an important difference to the pooled expert survey or the check-list approach is that Wordscores suggest a trend toward more liberal position for the SVP. For 1995 and 1999, the order of parties matches the pooled expert survey, and three groups may be identifiable: restrictive, centrist, and liberal. However, in absolute terms, the positions of the SPS and GPS are not as liberal as in the pooled expert survey, for instance. For 2011, Wordscores suggest a rather centrist position for the SPS, and thus a slightly different order of party positions. The estimated position, however, is roughly in line with the estimate from manual coding.

The picture of the automatic dictionary approach is unclear and not in line with the other methods. For all the parties, there are significant changes from year to year. Overall, the dictionary approach seems to suggest a trend toward more liberal positions, with the FDP being a possible exception. It might simply be that the dictionary approach is unsuited to pick up changes in the political debate on immigration over time.

3.3 Correlations between Methods

The correlations between the estimates derived using different methods constitute a test of correlational validity. As visible in table 1, for most methods the correlation coefficients are high (r > 0.70). Exceptions are principally the correlations between the dictionary approach and all other methods in the last column, as well as between the media study on the one hand and Wordscores and the retrospective survey respectively on the other. These generally high correlations are a reflection of the fact that the different methods generally agree on the *order* of the party positions on immigration.

Figure 3 makes it visible that the high correlation coefficients outlined in table 1 are largely driven by the differences between parties, and not by the relatively smaller differences of parties across time. In figure 3, greater differences to the green linear fit line indicate a poorer fit of parties over time.

The density plots included in the central box for each method (figure 3) are interesting in that they give us an indication how the different methods see the political space on the immigration domain. The pooled expert survey suggests a unimodal distribution with a peak
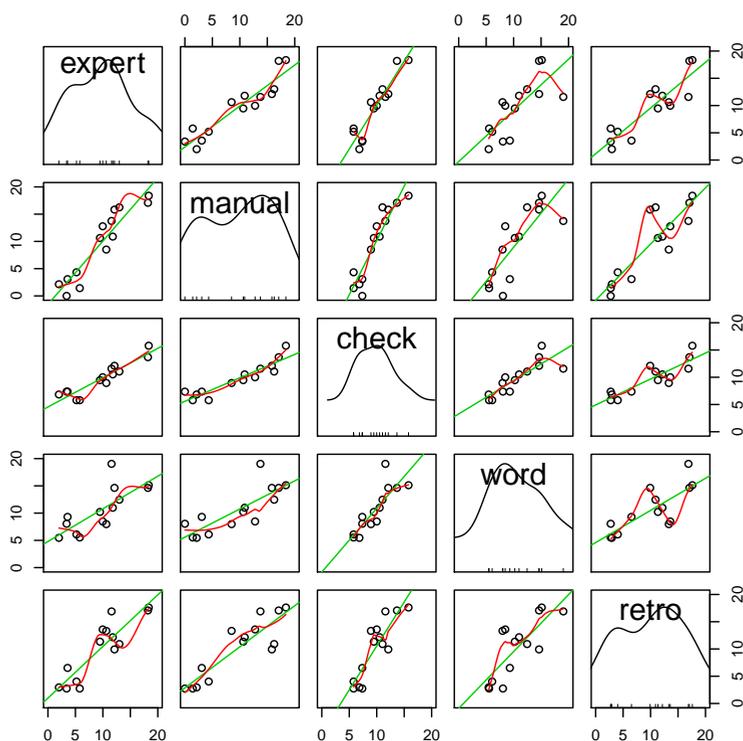
Figure 3: Scatterplot matrix showing the correlation between party positions obtained different methods. Shown are the pooled expert survey, manual coding of party manifestos, the check-list approach, Wordscores, and a retrospective survey. Included in green is the linear fit, as well as a loess smooth in red. The density distribution of each methods is included in the central boxes.

	Expert	Manual	Check	Retro	Media	Word	Dict
Expert	1.00	0.88	0.90	0.91	0.84	0.75	0.16
Manual	0.88	1.00	0.85	0.84	0.72	0.80	0.11
Check	0.90	0.85	1.00	0.87	0.79	0.85	0.02
Retro	0.91	0.84	0.87	1.00	0.57	0.79	0.09
Media	0.84	0.72	0.79	0.57	1.00	0.48	0.41
Word	0.75	0.80	0.85	0.79	0.48	1.00	0.15
Dict	0.16	0.11	0.02	0.09	0.41	0.15	1.00

Table 1: Correlations between party positions obtained using different meth- ods, all years combined. Included are the pooled expert survey, manual cod- ing of party manifestos, check-lists, a retrospective survey, a media study, Wordscores, and a dictionary approach.

in the centre but relatively strong tails: parties with clearly restrictive or liberal positions. The check-list approach is also unimodal, but is more centrist than the expert survey. The distribution identified by the manual coding of manifestos tends toward bimodal: a peak at the centre–restrictive end, and a smaller one at the liberal end. This distribution is somewhat mirrored by the retrospective assessment, although in this case the distribution is more clearly bimodal. Not shown in figure 3, the distribution for the media study is also bimodal, albeit with the higher peak at the liberal end, and a smaller peak at the restrictive end. Incidentally, the distribution of the automatic dictionary approach is almost identical. It could be speculated that the distribution in the media study reflects a liberal bias in the media, were it not for the results from Wordscores – which are based on party manifestos and hence unaffected by media representation. The distribution for Wordscores is unimodal, but very clearly skewed with many more positions at the liberal end.

For Wordscores, I have tried different ways to use reference texts. As expected, the correlation between expert positions and Wordscores is somewhat higher where more manifestos were used as references. The correlation is higher when both 2003 and 2011 are used as references than when only 2003 is used as reference. More interestingly, noticeably higher correlations can be achieved when referencing all the parties in one or two years – as is done here – than referencing the two extreme parties (GPS, SVP) in each year. Put differently, the correlations are higher when a range of positions is referenced rather than just the extremes. Within this, more references lead to higher correlations – which can be understood as more accurate estimates.

The results are less encouraging for the automatic dictionary approach than for the other approaches. The absence of significant correlations in table 1 is surprising, given the extensive preparation of the dictionaries used. However, the situation is slightly different when we look at the correlations between methods for each year. Table 2 shows the correlations between estimates from the pooled expert survey and a selection of other methods for each election year. When interpreting this table, it should be borne in mind that these correlation coefficients are based on five data points.

	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011
Expert–Manual	0.99	0.96	0.96	0.97	0.74
Expert–Check	1.00	0.96	0.82	0.95	0.99
Expert–Retro	0.81	0.99	0.97	0.96	0.96
Expert–Wordscores	0.91	0.95		0.84	
Expert–Dictionary	-0.56	0.45	0.82	0.21	-0.05

Table 2: Correlations between party positions obtained using different meth- ods for each available election year. Wordscores are not available for 2003 and 2011, because these years were used as references. Correlation coefficients are based on 5 data points (one per party and election year).

As expected from the results presented up to this point, the correlations in table 2 are generally high. There are two noteworthy differences. First, the correlation between the pooled expert survey and manual coding is significantly lower in 2011 than in the other election years. This is caused by disagreement on the positions of the FDP and the SVP. Second, there is a relatively high correlation between the pooled expert survey and the dictionary approach in 2003. This is the temporal context in which the dictionary was developed.

4   Discussion

This article asked whether different methods for obtaining party positions on a specific domain lead to similar estimates of party positions. More specifically, it examined whether party manifestos, retrospective assessments, and a limited media study can be used to reliably estimate the position of parties on immigration. For methods replying on party manifestos – manual coding, check-lists, Wordscores, dictionary approach – this was tested using the German language manifestos from the largest five parties in Switzerland, covering 1995 to 2011. Based on the literature, where left-right positions are examined foremost, it

can be expected that the different methods are all able to obtain party positions on immigration.

With the exception of the dictionary approach, this expectation was generally supported – as reflected by the relatively high correlations between estimates obtained using different methods. Of these, the high correlation between expert positions and manual coding is important, since the pooling of expert data makes it less clear, whether expert data should (still) be considered the benchmark. In the absence of expert data, manual coding party manifestos is often considered the next best approach. The high correlations suggest that either approach seems warranted.

By contrast, over time, the different methods do not agree completely on the party positions. Put differently, while there is general agreement on the whereabouts of party positions on immigration, there is disagreement on the exact position. These differences, however, are not systematic, so that overall most of the methods considered lead to equally high correlations with expert positions. Notably Wordscores and the check-list approach can correlate as highly with expert positions than manual coding does. This is an important finding, because these methods use significantly fewer resources than manual coding, for example. The check-list approach offers an abridged approach to manually coding manifestos, whereas Wordscores offer a fully computerized approach. One drawback of Wordscores, however, is that reference texts are needed, which may reduce the number of parties or years for which party positions can be estimated. The way reference texts are chosen, however, can have a significant impact on the estimated party positions. The analysis in this article suggests that the choice of reference texts (which ones) is more important than the number of reference texts. Whereas a higher number of reference texts increases agreement with the pooled expert survey, referencing a range of parties in single years provided higher correlations than referencing the same two parties for all years. This happens despite the larger number of reference texts chosen when all parties in a year are used as reference texts.

For the party manifestos considered in this article, I am unable to replicate Chen's (2011) finding that using a dictionary approach leads to better estimates than using Wordscores, although it is unclear how exactly she used the dictionary. In this article, I find that the automatic dictionary approach performs badly over time, although it was able to pick up party positions more reliably for the year in which temporal context the dictionary was developed.

By contrast, it appears that Wordscores can lead to consistently high correlations with expert data. However, rather than seeing this as

evidence for good performance, another, more troubling interpretation is that the Wordscores approach really picks up left-right positions, and not positions on immigration. Given that in Switzerland the two are largely reinforcing cleavages, this alternative explanation cannot be ruled out. Counter to this interpretation it can be highlighted that the Wordscores estimates reported in this article are based on sections of the manifestos that are about immigration, which gives some confidence that Wordscores actually provide positions on immigration rather than left–right positions. Further research using different issue domains is necessary to ascertain the performance of Wordscores.

A major issue facing all methods of obtaining party positions from political texts is that certain issues may simply not be treated. This is more of a problem for specific issues such as immigration than for generic concepts such as political left and right or social issues. Where an issue is not mentioned, manifesto–based approaches imply that no positions exists. In some cases, parties may choose not to mention their positions for electoral reasons – perhaps fearing that potential voters are alienated. In this case, expert positions will be clearly superior, since they will be able to assign party positions. In other cases, the party members may be divided, and the lack of position in a party manifesto may simply reflect this. In this case, assigning no position to a party may be more appropriate than using expert positions which may use left-right positions or other heuristics to make up lack of data. Finally, parties may simply have no position on an issue, particularly if the issue is not very salient in a specific year. In this case, too, assigning no position to the party seems more appropriate than deriving one by means of expectations or heuristics. This issue also affects Wordscores, unless the analysis is restricted to the sections of manifestos known to be about the issue under study – as is done here.

The lack of coverage in manifestos is not just a hypothetical issue. In the analyses for this article, there was no mention of immigration in the SPS manifestos in 1995 and 2011. Certainly for 2011 it can be ruled out that immigration was not mentioned for the lack of salience. Similarly, the passages on immigration included in the manifestos by the Greens tend to be short, which means less material to work on.

5   Conclusion

This article compared different methods for obtaining party positions on a specific issue in retrospective. The analyses focused on the domain of immigration, covering the five largest Swiss parties 1995 to 2011. The party estimates from most of the methods considered correlate highly. Perhaps surprisingly, this included a retrospective survey,

and a limited media study with a very small number of cases. For the retrospective assessment it can be speculated that this simply work because the positions of the parties did not change radically during the period studied. Nonetheless, the results of the retrospective survey challenge received wisdom that post-hoc estimates of party positions are necessarily inaccurate. This would certainly be the case in the present study, where the respondents had no recourse to external evidence such as archival records. The relatively small changes identified in the retrospective survey may indeed reflect a problematic bias, namely that more importance is given to current positions.

By contrast, the automatic dictionary approach performed very poorly. The estimates derived with this method generally did not agree with the positions from other methods. The exception was the year in the context of which the dictionary was developed: Only for this election a relatively strong correlation could be observed with the pooled expert survey. This suggests that the keyword-based dictionary approach may not be flexible enough to adjust to changes in the debate on immigration over time, which may make the methods unattractive for retrospective assessments for some issue domains. For issue domains where the nature of the debate is stable, there is no reason to believe that the dictionary approach should not work. As with the other methods, longer time series would be needed to make better inferences, but the lack of expert survey and access to party manifestos will prove very challenging.

Overall, the results suggest that findings from the literature on left-right positions also apply to specific issue domains, namely that different methods for obtaining party positions provide similar estimates – suggesting correlational validity. In contrast to generic concepts, research on party positions in specific domains relies on less data, and may face the challenge that manifestos do not mention the issue under study. I have discussed different possible causes for lack of coverage, and suggested that in some instances experts may actually make up for the lack of data by using heuristics even where assigning no position to a party may be the most appropriate step.

There is general agreement on the party positions on immigration using the different methods, distinguishing between liberal, centrist, and restrictive positions. For nuanced positions, however, there is no agreement between methods. Indeed, no two methods agree across time, which leaves us with the question whether there are really clear positions on immigration – or any specific issue domain. To some extent, this reflects the limited data that may be available on specific issues. A different way to look at this is by seeking methods that are able to express uncertainty – for example through standard deviations

– but these are difficult to attain in retrospective or are work-intensive. The findings in this article suggest that the way party positions are measured for specific issue domains may affect reported findings if we are interested in small changes in position rather than general directions. This also implications for research applications, such as research on political representation, where abstractly perceived distances between voters and parties may really be more fuzzy than often assumed and indeed simply indications of general proximities. Where exact positions may not exist, minimizing one's distance to political parties becomes an inexact science. If we are comfortable with more fuzzy entities, however, the different methods generally indicate the same directions of positions, suggesting some degree of correlational validity.

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