

Where does Volt stand?

Evidence from the European Elections 2019 in the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Germany

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Abstract

Only a few years after its foundation, Volt is represented in the EU and in two national parliaments. While the party describes itself as pro-European, little is known about where it stands on other issues. This analysis draws on party positions from European Voting Advice Applications for the 2019 elections, which includes data from the Dutch, German and Luxembourgian Volt branches. All branches show a strong proximity to the Social Democratic, Green and Liberal parties and are polar opposites to the populist radical right. However, there are also differences between the national chapters. Luxembourg is the most progressive chapter, whereas Volt Netherlands is the most centric economically: While both are best described as left-progressive parties, the Luxembourg chapter is slightly more supportive of progressive policies, while Volt Netherlands is taking less radical left-leaning economic positions.

Keywords: Volt, Voting Advice Applications, European Parliament, European Elections, Parties

Introduction

Despite its young age, Volt Europe has shown a steadily increasing voter potential in Europe. Volt has won around 2% of the Dutch and Luxembourgian votes just two years after it was founded and secured one seat (in Germany) in the 2019 European elections – something that other pan-European competitors such as DiEM25 have

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not managed to. Volt continued its success by winning seats in the Dutch elections (2021: three, 2023: two). In 2021/2022 and again in 2023, Volt Bulgaria became part of the government coalition. In the 2024 European elections, Volt won three seats in Germany and two in the Netherlands; it also secured 2.9% of the Cypriot vote and won 1% in Greece and Luxembourg.

Two terms that are commonly used to describe Volt are pro-European and pan-European. So far, however, little is known about Volt's political positioning on important cultural and economic issues. Moreover, as a pan-European party, the national Volt chapters should have almost identical positions, but it is an empirical question whether this is the case. Therefore, this article addresses two research questions: 1) Which European party family is Volt close to? 2) To what extent can ideological discrepancies be identified between the national chapters?

The analysis draws on the party positions from Voting Advice Applications (VAA) designed for the 2019 European elections when Volt entered the European Parliament. It includes three national Volt branches from Germany, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, the countries with the highest Volt vote shares in the 2019 European elections. The analysis will explore high-dimensional VAA matching models to assess the alignment of the three national Volt branches with each other and with other European parties, as well as low-dimensional matching models that show how Volt is located on a left-right dimension.

In this article, Volt is first presented as a case study and the current findings on its political positioning are summarised. This is followed by a discussion of the data for the analysis of three national Volt chapters, which is outlined in the following section. Finally, the results are summarised and discussed in the conclusions.

Classifying Volt

Volt was founded in 2017 as a pan-European party. The party claimed to be the first to have a common, European-wide platform and to “re-energise” Europe. According to its founding declaration and the supporting document, the party's manifesto for the 2019 European elections (Volt Europe, 2018b, 2018a), the party follows three main objectives:

- ‘Fixing the EU’ by creating a strong union, empowering citizens and increasing security and accountability;
- ‘Making Europe an economic powerhouse’ by boosting growth and the standard of living, investments in the future and a focus on education and
- ‘Building a just and sustainable society’ by seizing ‘green opportunities’, a ‘human’ migration management and ensuring fairness and equality.

The party competed for seats in the 2019 European elections in seven countries and received the most votes in Germany (250,000 votes, 0.7%, one seat), the Netherlands and Luxembourg (around 2% each). At national level, Volt currently has two seats in the Dutch parliament (2021: three) and one in the Bulgarian parliament. In Bulgaria, Volt became part of the government coalition in 2021/2022 and again in 2023. Volt won five seats in the 2024 European elections (Germany: three, Netherlands: two).

Volt primarily pursues the goal of deepening European integration (Leruth, 2021). Despite this strong focus, the label of a single-issue party is not the best description of Volt. Volt's Amsterdam Declaration (2018b) is 13 pages long, accompanied by a more detailed (63 pages) supporting document (2018a), which discusses the implementation of numerous policies from different areas. Volt fits perfectly into a growing trend: Parties in Europe are increasingly separating the issue of European integration from economic and cultural issues (Bakker et al., 2012). Certainly, European integration is not a 'new' cleavage, as classical cleavage theory would explain the emergence of new parties (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). For example, the EU reforms proposed by Volt (directly elected European President, European Prime Minister elected by the European Parliament, 2018a, p. 3) hardly constitute a 'new ideology'. Instead, Volt occupies the pro-European pole on the dimension of Euroscepticism, where the opposite pole is now held by the populist radical right. The Dutch Volt leader Dassen mentions that this was one of the main motivations for him to join the party (Erdbrink, 2021).

One of the main problems with Volt's political agenda is that, apart from its pro-Europeanism, little is known. Volt stands for numerous different, sometimes seemingly contradictory policies (Kolster & Von Homeyer, 2019, p. 10). The emphasis on European security tends to be associated with conservatism, while the focus on economic growth is a typical theme for liberal parties. On the other hand, a proposed 'human migration systems' and green investments are more associated with centre-left and Green parties. Overall, Volt is strongly in favour of implementing 'best practises' from other member states (Volt Europe, 2018a, p. 13). On the one hand, as one of Volt's co-founders explained, the party does not want to 'be put in ideological boxes' (Cahen-Salvador, 2018). This underlines the difficulty of positioning the party, but also its unwillingness to be positioned. On the other hand, the party sees itself as progressive. Volt MEPs have joined the Greens/EFA group (Volt, 2024).

There is also the question of how heterogeneous the national chapters are. Party representatives admit that terms such as 'progressive' do not have a universal meaning but depend on the national contests themselves (Gieda, 2019, pp. 45–46). In the Netherlands, the party supports a pro-environmentalist framing of nuclear power (Otjes & Krouwel, 2023) and called for a higher military budget in its 2021 national manifesto (Leruth, 2021). Such positions were not expressed, for example, in Volt Germany's national manifesto (Volt Deutschland, 2021), which is not surprising

given that both militarism and nuclear energy are viewed more critically in Germany. Klein's (2020) findings suggest that Volt has country-specific positions in the individual member states. This would lead to the assumption that although Volt is a pan-European party, the national chapters could differ significantly. For the European elections, however, Volt is only campaigning with a common European programme and refrains from national manifestos.

In view of Volt's increasing importance in European and national politics, this article poses two questions: Which European parties is Volt close to? How homogeneous are the positions of Volt's national chapters?

Data

The following analysis is based on data from the European Voting Advice Application website 'Votematch.eu'. Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) are 'issue matching systems' (Ladner & Fivaz, 2012, p. 178) that calculate a match between (potential) voters and parties. Votematch includes well-known VAA agencies in Europe: the Dutch Stemwijzer, the German Wahl-O-Mat and smartvote in Luxembourg. Votematch coordinated the VAAs in 19 member states and defined a set of 16 statements that were used in all VAAs, as well as additional country-specific statements. After completing the national tools, VAA users received vote advice for parties from their member states. In addition, they were able to obtain a result for all parties from the 19 member states within Votematch (see Appendix for the list of common statements).²

In order to determine parties' positions, the parties were asked to position themselves on the VAA statements.³ While this way of estimating party positions is common in VAAs and yields reliable positions (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2021), there are also alternative methods that are well known in political science. Two major projects for determining party positions are the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES, Jolly et al., 2022), which estimates party positions based on expert opinion, and the coded manifestos by the Manifesto project (Lehmann et al., 2023). However, while the Manifesto Project only has data on Volt Netherlands based on their 2021 manifesto, CHES did not include Volt. Similarly, the competing European VAA 'EU and I' (Reiljan et al., 2020) only included the Volt branch in Luxembourg. Therefore, the Votematch data is the only available data source that includes the positions of multiple national Volt chapters for a common set of items collected at the same time.

While the inclusion criteria of Votematch vary from country to country, the tools from Germany, the Netherlands and Luxembourg have invited all competing parties.

2 The data was kindly made available by the Dutch ProDemos Institute that managed Votematch.

3 <https://votematch.eu/index.html>, accessed 20 December 2023 (2019 elections version).

For all three countries, the positions of Volt chapters are available, which also represent the three countries where Volt received the most votes in the 2019 European elections.

Both low- and high-dimensional VAA matching models (Mendez, 2017) are used in the analysis to compare Volt chapters with other European parties and with each other. The aim of high-dimensional matching is to calculate the ideological proximity of the three Volt chapters to the other European parties. The low-dimensional matching aims to summarise the individual items in fewer dimensions. For the analysis of the low-dimensional matching, the party positions were combined into one main dimension, which is explained in the next section.

Analysis

The analysis begins with the high-dimensional matching model as used by Votematch. For this purpose, the matching scores of Volt Germany, Volt Netherlands and Volt Luxembourg were calculated with the other European parties. The matching scores indicate the percentage of the maximum agreement that was achieved between two parties. Votematch used a three-point Likert scale for the answers (-1: disagreement, 0: neutral, +1 agreement). The match calculation is based on the proximity city block metric (see Table A1, Appendix). A neutral position corresponds to 50% agreement with a position one of the two sides (Thomeczek, 2023, pp. 13–15). A complete (100%) agreement is achieved when the same response categories are selected. 0% agreement is achieved when agreement and disagreement are selected as categories. The final matching score indicates the percentage agreement between two parties based on the maximum agreement that could be achieved.

Figure 1 summarises the results for the three Volt branches. They can be interpreted as Volt's agreement scores with the other party if they were to complete the VAA questionnaire. The figure shows all parties with a high percentage agreement with the respective Volt branch ($\geq 75\%$). The parties are coloured according to the parliamentary groups they joined after the elections: the Conservatives (ECR), the Greens (G/EFA), the Identity and Democracy (ID) group, the Social Democrats (S&D), the Christian Democrats (EPP), the Left/Nordic Greens (GUE/NGL), and Renew (RE).⁴

In all three Volt chapters, support is highest for the parties of the Green group, the Social Democrats and Renew. Parties such as the French Greens (EELV), the Italian (PD) and the Dutch (PvdA) Social Democrats achieve high scores in all three cases.

4 See <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/organisation-and-rules/organisation/political-groups>, accessed February 12, 2024 (based on the 2019 elections). Parties without seats, non-inscrits and parties that split MEPs in multiple groups are excluded from the analysis.

However, a closer look also reveals differences. Volt Germany shows the highest agreement with the Danish Social Liberals (R) and Greens Luxembourg (87.5%). At the same time, Volt Netherlands shares the highest scores with the Italian Social Democrats (PD) and Volt Luxembourg with the French Greens (EELV). Two parties from the EPP group only appear in the list of Volt Germany (with the Greek Nea Demokratia) and Volt Netherlands (Nea Demokratia and Irish Fine Gael), but not Volt Luxembourg. In addition, Volt Luxembourg, with parties from the G/EFA and Nordic Greens/Left groups, has higher values than the other two branches.

To complete the analysis, Figure 2 shows the parties with the lowest agreement score ($\leq 25\%$). All parties are from the European ECR or ID group and are categorised as far-right populist (Rooduijn et al., 2023): German AfD, Dutch FvD, Austrian FPÖ, Danish DF, Swedish SD and French RN. Volt Germany has the lowest values with the FvD (9.4%), Volt Netherlands with the FPÖ (18.8%) and Volt Luxembourg with the AfD (9.4%). Although all parties have very low overall agreement scores with these parties, Volt Netherlands has slightly higher agreement scores than the other two branches.

The different agreement values in the previous section have shown that the political positioning of the three Volt chapters is not identical. The question is therefore: To what extent do the three state chapters agree with each other? Since Volt ran in the EP elections with only a common European manifesto, i.e. renounced national EP manifestos, and describes itself as 'pan-European', one would expect the level of agreement to be very high. However, Figure 3 shows that there are discrepancies. Volt Germany has 81.2% agreement with Volt Luxembourg and Volt Netherlands. In contrast, Volt Netherlands and Volt Luxembourg have the lowest agreement scores with each other, reaching only 75%. This means that the national Volt chapters actually have a higher level of agreement with other parties, as shown in Figure 1. The 75% agreement that Volt Netherlands has with Volt Luxembourg, for example, is also achieved between Volt Netherlands and the Christian Democratic parties, Nea Demokratia and Fine Gael. On the other hand, Volt Luxembourg has an equally high agreement of 75% with socialist parties such as Vänsterpartiet (Sweden) and Die Linke (Germany) from the GUE/NGL group. This is somewhat surprising, as the analysis focuses on three different branches from neighbouring countries within the same party.

This raises the question of where the discrepancies lie. The responses of the three national chapters can be found in Table 1. The three Volt chapters gave identical responses for more than half of the statements (9/16). Moderate differences of opinion, with Volt Germany and Volt Luxembourg taking the same position, and Volt Netherlands taking a neutral position, exist for four statements. These include three statements on economic issues (access to social benefits in other member states, financial aid for poorer countries, sanctions for non-compliance with deficit rules), where Volt Luxembourg and Volt Germany take a more left-leaning position.

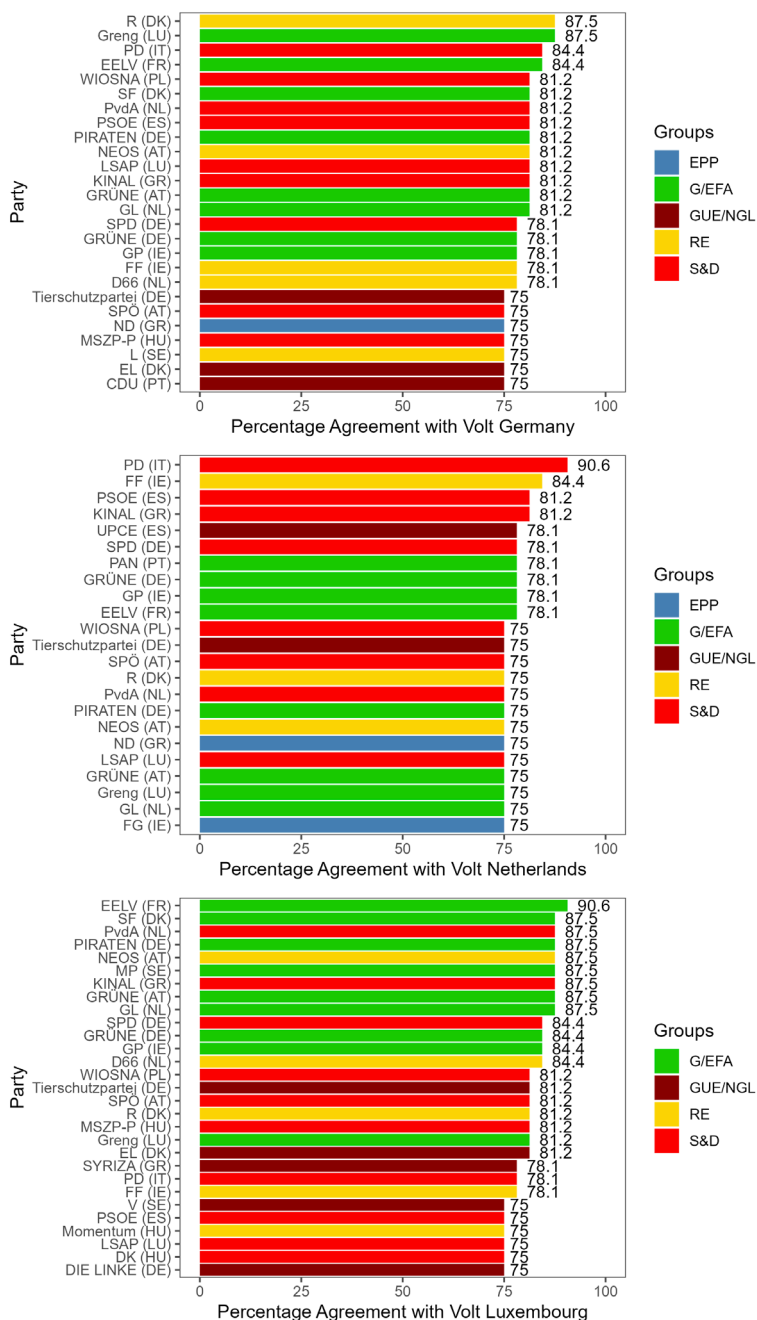


Figure 1 Highest Percentage Agreement of European Parties with Volt ($\geq 75\%$)

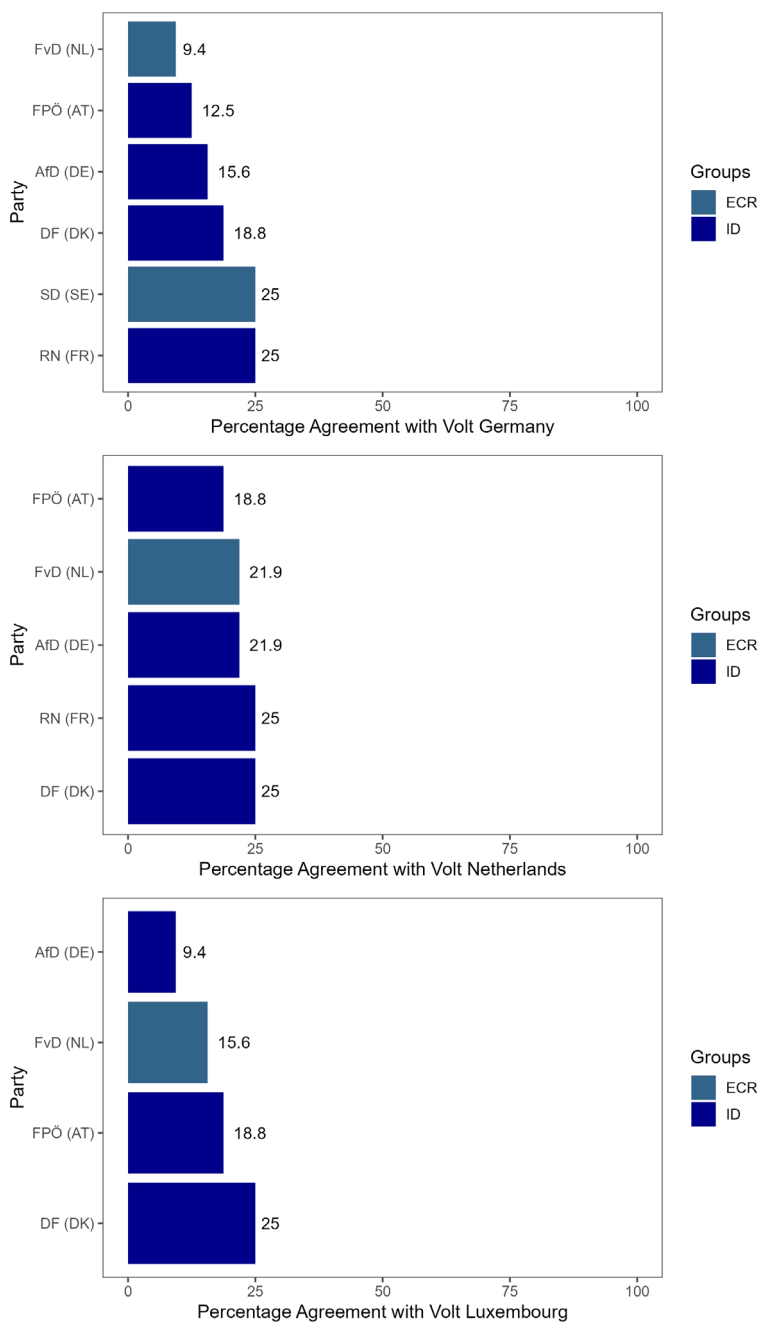


Figure 2 Lowest Percentage Agreement of European Parties with Volt ($\leq 25\%$)

In addition, there are three points on which the three chapters differ greatly. Volt Germany is against the possibility of holding simultaneous referendums in the EU, while Volt Luxembourg favours this policy, and Volt Netherlands has a neutral position. Volt Netherlands is also neutral towards genetically modified crops, which are supported by Volt Germany but rejected by Volt Luxembourg. Finally, the question of whether there should be an EU-wide minimum wage also polarises between the three chapters. Volt Germany and the Netherlands call for it but Volt Luxembourg rejects it.

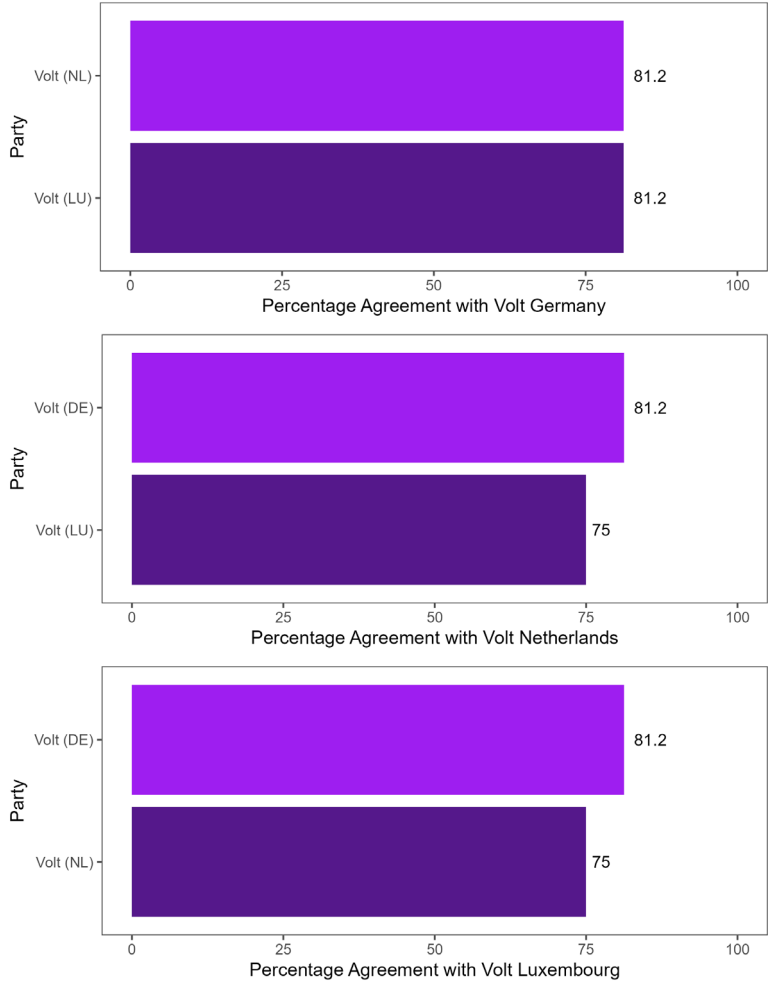


Figure 3 Percentage Agreement among the individual Volt National Chapters

Table 1 Answers towards the 16 Statements by the three Volt Chapters

Statement	Volt DE	Volt NL	Volt LU	Maximum difference between two chapters
The EU should push for every member state to introduce a minimum wage.	1	1	-1	2
The European Union should allow the cultivation of genetically modified crops.	1	0	-1	2
It should be possible to hold simultaneous referendums in all EU countries.	-1	0	1	2
EU countries that do not comply with budget rules should be severely punished.	-1	0	-1	1
More money should go to aid for poor countries.	1	0	1	1
It should become more difficult for EU citizens to access social services in another country.	-1	0	-1	1
In European Parliament elections, citizens should be able to vote for a party or a candidate from another Member State.	1	0	1	1
EU targets for reducing CO2 emissions must be strictly adhered to.	1	1	1	0
Less money should go to aid for less developed areas within the EU.	-1	-1	-1	0
There should be a tax on stock trading.	1	1	1	0
EU countries that violate media freedom should be financially punished.	1	1	1	0
There should be a common European army.	1	1	1	0
Asylum seekers should be distributed equally among EU member states.	1	1	1	0
The EU should impose fewer sanctions on Russia.	-1	-1	-1	0
The EU should send asylum seekers trying to cross the Mediterranean back to their countries of origin.	-1	-1	-1	0
The EU should encourage member states to recognise same-sex marriages.	1	1	1	0

The last step of the analysis focuses on low-dimensional matching. In contrast to high-dimensional matching, where each item is treated as an individual policy, low-dimensional matching models aim to structure the information in one or more dimensions (Mendez, 2017, pp. 35–36). It is an established matching method for VAAs, especially from the Kieskompas family (Thomeczek, 2023) and ‘EU and I’ (Reiljan et al., 2020). In general, national VAAs use two dimensions: a cultural and an economic dimension (Mendez, 2017). The former is also known as the GAL-TAN dimension (Green-Alternative-Libertarian/Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist). Although the European integration positions correlate with both dimensions, it form a dimension on its own.

Although low-dimensional matching is not used in the Votematch VAAs, it is possible to extract dimension(s) from the data based on the party positions. To achieve this, an Exploratory Factor Analysis with Oblimin rotation was first performed to determine the number of meaningful dimensions. The Scree-Test Acceleration Factor (n_{af}) (Raïche et al., 2013) indicates that the 16 items can be summarised in one factor. This somewhat surprising finding could be related to the relative low number of items and the three-point scale, which limits variation. Based on the scaled items (see Appendix, Table A2), the content of this factor can be described as a general left-right dimension that includes both economic and cultural items, with left-progressive items forming one end of the scale and right-conservative items forming the other pole. Second, based on all items with an absolute value above 0.4, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis was conducted to estimate the factor scores for each party on this dimension using the R-package lavaan (Rosseel, 2012). At 0.937, the Comparative Fit Index indicates that the models adequately describe the data (Bentler, 1990).

The estimated positions for all parties are shown in Figure 4. The results point in a similar direction to the high-dimensional matching. Volt Germany is the most left-wing chapter, as indicated by comparatively high scores, with a similar position on this dimension as Social Democrats and Greens from Austria, Germany and the Netherlands, but also some far-left parties such as Germany’s Die Linke, Greece’s Syriza and Ireland’s Sinn Féin. Volt Luxembourg is positioned relatively similarly, with a slightly less left-progressive position. Volt Netherlands, on the other hand, differs from the other branches with a significantly lower value, i.e. a more right-wing position, which results in a more centrist position.

Parties with a similar valued position come from different political camps, such as the Spanish Social Democrats (PSOE), liberal parties from Hungary (Momentum) and Sweden (Centerpartiet) or on the far left like the French France Insoumise (FI) and the Swedish Vänsterpartiet (V). It should be noted that this does not mean that these parties hold the same positions. Rather, they do not fully support left-wing progressivism, which may be the result of different positions. Typically, far-left parties

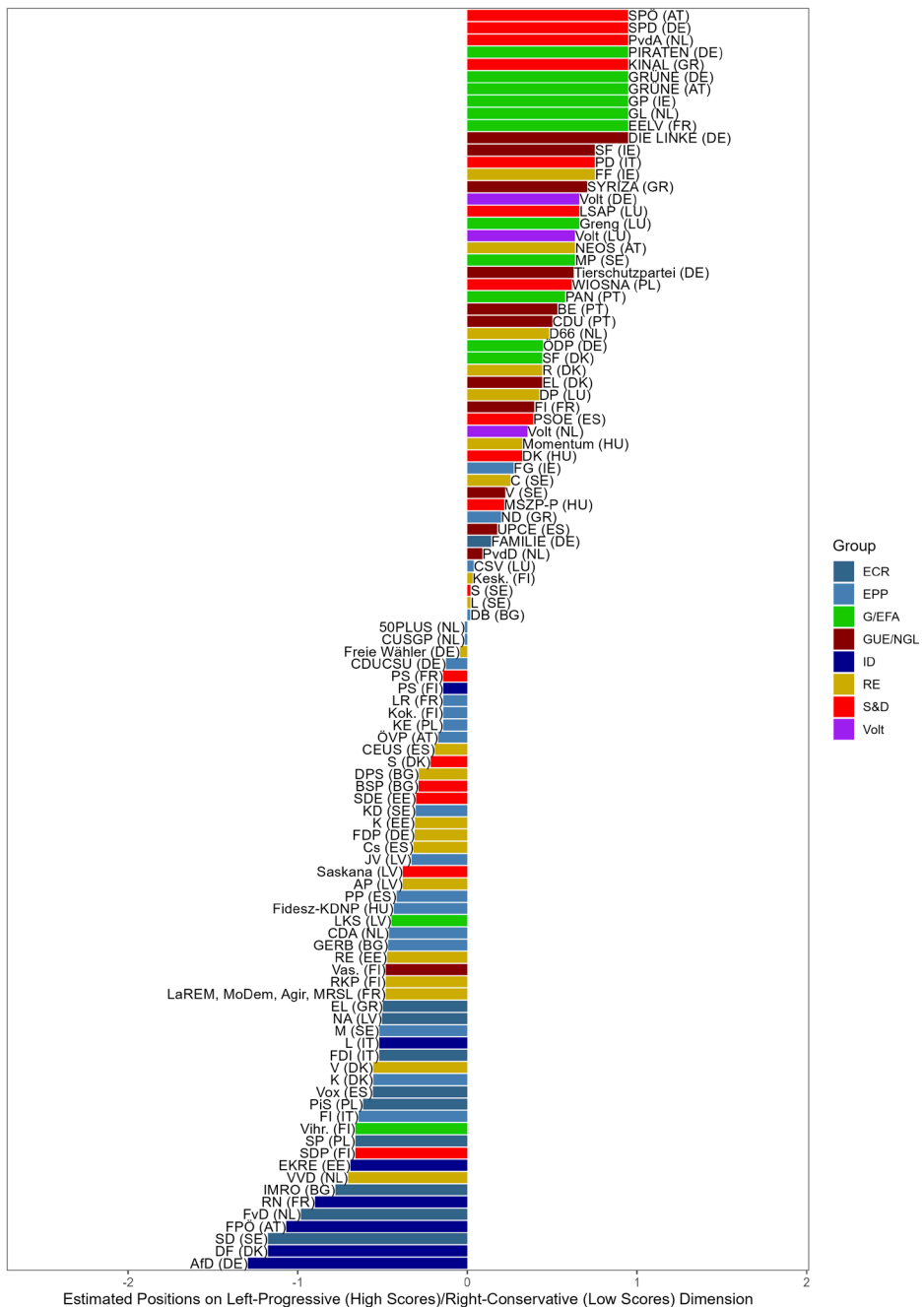


Figure 4 Party Positions on the Left-Right Dimension

sometimes disagree with culturally progressive statements but support strongly leftist economic statements, while the opposite is true for liberal parties.

How valid are these results? The VAAs for the national elections in the Netherlands (2021, Kieskompas) Germany (2021, Wahl-Kompass) and Luxembourg (2023, smart-vote) included the Volt chapters of all three countries. While the three tools had no common items, they all summarised the results using a two-dimensional matching method.⁵ They show a high correlation with the results of this analysis. Volt Germany is the chapter most clearly positioned in the left-progressive quadrant. Volt Luxembourg is positioned more centrist, but still left-of-centre. In contrast, Volt Netherlands is slightly right of centre in economic terms, while sharing the progressive stance of its Dutch and German counterparts.

Conclusions

Despite its young age, Volt has already celebrated its first successes and won seats in the European Parliament as well as the Dutch and Bulgarian national parliaments. Although the party now holds five seats in the European Parliament and as participated in the Bulgarian government, we know little about the party's political positions apart from its pro-European core. Furthermore, there is also a lack of knowledge about Volt's internal heterogeneity, which is an interesting aspect due to its pan-European character. In this article, both questions were analysed by comparing the VAA responses to the three national Volt branches that received the most votes in the 2019 European elections: Germany, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg.

The analysis has shown that the Volt branches are generally close to Social Democrats, Greens and Liberals. Volt can be seen as the polar opposite of populist radical right parties such as the Dutch FvD, the German AfD, the Austrian FPÖ and the French Rassemblement National. Nevertheless, there is an interesting degree of internal heterogeneity: Volt's national branches show the highest matching scores with different parties. Volt Netherlands shows the highest agreement with Social Democratic parties, while Volt Luxembourg is closer to the green parties and Volt Germany to the liberal parties. If the parties are positioned on a general left-right dimension, Volt Germany and Luxembourg are relatively close to the Social Democrats and Green parties, while Volt Netherlands is positioned substantially less to the left.

5 See <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1562942007241892&id=153072008228906&set=a.323504627852309>, accessed December 10 2024 (Netherlands); <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1426839601049954&id=457954874605103&set=a.860085741058679>, accessed December 10 2024 (Germany); https://2023.smartwielen.lu/en/matching/results?tab=1&locale=en_CH, accessed December 10 2024 (Luxembourg).

Future research should focus more on the national Volt branches, including those from other countries. For example, in relation to party-voter congruence: do ideological differences between national chapters reflect a broader strategy to attract Europhile voters in European metropolitan areas who have context-specific policy preferences? The only voter-level analysis to date has been published for the Netherlands, where Volt attracts 'green' sympathisers of nuclear energy (Otjes & Krouwel, 2023). Such a profile is unlikely in Germany, for example, a country with a strong history of scepticism towards nuclear energy, especially among left-wing voters.

This analysis provides insights into the agenda of an insurgent pan-European party, that has increased its number of MEPs from one to five. Nevertheless, the analysis also revealed some of the problems that the party faces. The party combines a center-left economic agenda, similar to the Social Democrats, with strong progressive stances like the Greens. The core of Volt is undoubtedly its strong pro-European position. However, the Social Democrats and the Greens are also Europhile parties, to which Volt is also close on cultural and economic issues. Finding a political niche is therefore a challenge as more established and experienced parties are highly competitive in this political space.

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Appendix

Table A1 Match Calculation (Cityblock Metric, Proximity Model).

	Agreement	Neutral	Disagreement
Agreement	2 (100%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)
Neutral	1 (50%)	2 (100%)	1 (50%)
Disagreement	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	2 (100%)

Table A2 Result of Exploratory Factor Analysis

Factor Loading	ID	Name
-0.725	answer12	The EU should send asylum seekers trying to cross the Mediterranean back to their countries of origin.
-0.578	answer15	It should become more difficult for EU citizens to access social services in another country.
-0.560	answer04	Less money should go to aid for less developed areas within the U.
-0.185	answer11	The EU should impose fewer sanctions on Russia.
-0.115	answer02	The European Union should allow the cultivation of genetically modified crops.
-0.028	answer01	EU countries that do not comply with budget rules should be severely punished.
0.064	answer08	There should be a common European army.
0.338	answer16	In European Parliament elections, citizens should be able to vote for a party or a candidate from another Member State.
0.466	answer07	EU countries that violate media freedom should be financially punished.
0.481	answer06	It should be possible to hold simultaneous referendums in all EU countries.
0.486	answer03	EU targets for reducing CO2 emissions must be strictly adhered to.
0.487	answer05	There should be a tax on stock trading.
0.490	answer14	The EU should push for every member state to introduce a minimum wage.
0.631	answer10	Asylum seekers should be distributed equally among EU member states.
0.643	answer09	More money should go to aid for poor countries.
0.680	answer13	The EU should encourage member states to recognise same-sex marriages.