

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# How well are citizens represented by their governments? Issue congruence and inequality in Europe

Jan Rosset<sup>1,\*</sup> and Christian Stecker<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland and <sup>2</sup>Mannheim Center for European Social Research, University of Mannheim, Mannheim, Germany

\*E-mail: [jan.rosset@unige.ch](mailto:jan.rosset@unige.ch)

(Received 07 March 2018; revised 05 February 2019; accepted 11 February 2019)

## Abstract

This study analyses congruence across various issues in 16 European democracies. Making use of public opinion and expert survey data, our analyses show that congruence between the policy preferences of citizens and the stances of governments is much more complex than what is revealed by studies focusing on ideology solely. Size and directions of incongruence are larger and more systematic on specific issues than on the left–right scale. On redistribution, citizens are more to the left than their governments, while popular support for European integration is systematically lower among citizens than among their representatives. Moreover, the relatively poor are particularly underrepresented on redistribution, while the preferences of the relatively lower educated are not well reflected in government preferences in relation to European integration. We interpret these results as being partly linked to a representation gap with privileged social groups enjoying higher levels of congruence with their government.

**Keywords:** congruence; political representation; public opinion; Europe

## Introduction

It is a core requirement for the quality of democracy that governments reflect the preferences of citizens.<sup>1</sup> To meet this requirement, regular and free elections are considered a central instrument. They enable citizens to control their representatives by selecting those parties or candidates who advocate policies that correspond most closely to their wishes and by firing those who perform badly in office. This hiring and firing by the voters shall create representative bodies that closely reflect the broad policy goals of the majority of citizens. Many studies investigate the actual extent of (in)congruence between citizens and their representatives as a way of measuring substantive political representation. Most arrive at a positive conclusion finding a considerable proximity between the policies preferred by voters and those advocated by their party or between the preferences of the median voter and the government (Thomassen and Schmitt, 1997; McDonald and Budge, 2005; Dolný and Baboš, 2015).

Yet, the bulk of these positive conclusions is based on analyses of congruence on a general left–right axis. However, in a context in which multi-dimensional congruence, that is the ability to bring policies in line with citizen preferences *simultaneously on different issues*, is becoming an increasingly relevant indicator for the quality of democracy (Ward and Weale, 2010; Ganghof,

<sup>1</sup>As Dahl (1989) puts it, ‘democratic government provides an orderly and peaceful process by means of which a majority of citizens can induce the government to do what they most want it to do and to avoid doing what they most want it not to do’.

2015; Stecker and Tausendpfund, 2016), research also shows that there are differences across policy issues.

In a nutshell, a growing amount of evidence hints towards considerable representation gaps when we move beyond the general left–right axis (Elsässer *et al.*, 2017). Party-voter congruence, for example, is lower on specific issues than on the left–right axis (Thomassen and Schmitt, 1997; Freire and Belchior, 2013; Dalton, 2017). Specifically, it has been shown that parties are more in favour of European integration than their voters (Thomassen and Schmitt, 1997), and that they hold less conservative or authoritarian preferences than the public (Thomassen, 2012). Moreover, elected representatives do not reflect their citizens' mostly favourable view on state intervention in the economy very well (Rosset, 2016; Lesschaeve, 2017). To date, this scepticism is mainly based on studies focusing on the link between parties and their voters. Whether these findings hold for citizen–government congruence in comparative perspective has – to our knowledge – not been assessed. This is regrettable as governments are key actors in policy-making and their actions are central yardsticks for the quality of representation (Dahl, 1971; Huber and Powell, 1994). Hence, we take congruence between governments and their citizens as our main reference point.

In doing so, our article makes several contributions. First, we provide an assessment of government–citizen issue congruence in Europe on the issues of European integration, redistribution and on the general left–right axis. Instead of providing only a snapshot, we analyse multi-issue congruence in 16 countries between 2006 and 2016 and uncover more long-term patterns of representation over several election cycles.<sup>2</sup> In our second contribution, we explore potential explanations for systematic incongruences across issues. In line with current research, we argue that incongruences might be linked to social inequalities and the fact that some groups get systematically better represented than others. Specifically, richer and better educated citizens are likely to get a representation bonus from their representatives or their governments (Bartels, 2008; Giger *et al.*, 2012; Hakhverdian, 2015; Peters and Ensink, 2015; Aldering, 2017).

Economic resources have been used to explain citizens' preferences with regard to redistribution. Higher income is usually associated with preferences that are less favourable to redistribution (and can be characterized as more 'right'). At the same time, education is one of the main variables structuring individual preferences on European integration (Hakhverdian *et al.*, 2013) or with regard to the libertarian–authoritarian dimension (Stubager, 2006). In this case, higher education is linked to more universalistic (or more 'left') preferences. Potential inequalities in issue congruence, thus, also have consequences for overall levels of correspondence between the preferences of the (median) citizens and their governments. Given the pattern of public opinion described above, governments are likely to be 'to the left' of their citizens on cultural issues but 'to the right' on economic issues. By analysing congruence on several issues, we take the increasing multi-dimensionality of political competition into consideration (de Vries and Marks, 2012).

In order to explore congruence on specific political issues, we analyse data on citizens' preferences from seven waves of the European Social Survey (ESS) (European Social Survey Cumulative File, 2016) as well as the 2014 European Election Study (EES) (Schmitt *et al.* 2016) and measures of government policy stances based on three waves of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Polk *et al.*, 2017) covering 16 countries. While matching these data sources is challenging, it opens a new perspective on representation patterns beyond the general left–right scale. Our analyses confirm that the high level of ideological congruence between citizens and governments on the left–right scale cannot be reproduced with survey questions measuring specific policy orientations: when asked about their stances on redistribution or the EU, citizens tend to be less congruent with their governments. In particular, citizens favour more redistribution but less EU integration than their governments. Finally, when analysing subgroups of the population separately, socially disadvantaged groups turn out to be less well-represented by their

<sup>2</sup>Our focus on this specific time period is linked to data availability. We aggregate different years in order to analyse systematic differences in public opinion over several electoral cycles within the same country.

governments – even if we control for the preferences of the majority of citizens. This applies specifically to issues on which their individual characteristics are most likely to matter for their preferences. In other words, relatively poor citizens are particularly under-represented on redistribution, while the views of the less educated citizens are poorly reflected in the stances of government on EU integration.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. We first discuss the literature on the congruence between citizens and political elites with a focus on the variation in levels of congruence across political issues and across social groups and develop our hypotheses. Then data and methods used to measure citizen–government congruence in a comparative perspective are introduced. We then present the results of our empirical analysis and conclude with a more general discussion of their implications.

### (In)congruence across policy dimensions

Most studies on congruence have looked at the match between voters and their parties (Dalton, 1985; Ezrow and Xezonakis, 2011; Belchior, 2013). This perspective is often linked to the ‘responsible party’ or ‘party government’ model of representation which assumes that parties propose coherent political platforms, from which voters chose according to their ideological proximity and that, once elected, parties will implement their political programmes. As a result, if parties are congruent with their voters, governments should also ultimately represent the preferences of the majority of voters well (Pierce, 1999).<sup>3</sup> Another strand of research studies left–right congruence in relation to representative bodies, by matching the preferences of the voters with the position of the corresponding government or parliament (Huber and Powell, 1994; Powell, 2000; Blais and Bodet, 2006; Ferland, 2016). Within that tradition, research has focused on different aspects: citizens’ and policymakers’ median (or mean) preferences (Huber and Powell, 1994; Powell, 2000), the distribution of preferences among both citizens and political elites (see e.g. Golder and Stramski, 2010) or individual determinants of congruence (Bernauer *et al.*, 2015).

Existing studies of government congruence almost exclusively focus on the left–right scale referring to ideological orientations rather than policy goals. This empirical approach presupposes that policy preferences across a wide range of issues can be summarized in a single left–right dimension. Yet, this assumption seems to be increasingly violated. Although a very large proportion of survey respondents have no problem placing themselves on such a continuum, it is not exactly clear what this position entails in terms of policy stances (Bauer *et al.*, 2017). Political competition in Europe has evolved over the last decades, with non-economic issues gaining in importance (Kriesi *et al.*, 2006). A cultural dimension has supplemented the traditional economic divide between pro-state intervention in the economy and pro-market stances. There individuals with universalistic and progressive values oppose those who hold more nationalistic and conservative views (Bornschieer, 2010). As a result, it is not obvious where a moderately left person (e.g. 4 on a 0–10 left–right scale) stands on specific policy domains. It could be that this person holds indeed moderately left preferences on all issues, but this positioning could for instance reflect a resolutely ‘leftist’ position on economic issues combined with a moderately conservative position on socio-cultural topics such as immigration or morality issues. Indeed, many survey respondents fail to associate specific policies with overall left–right orientations (Freire and Belchior, 2011; Dolezal *et al.*, 2013) rendering left–right incapable of providing an unbiased summary of citizen preferences across issues (Munzert and Bauer, 2013; Rosset *et al.*, 2016). Accordingly, various studies call for distinguishing between preferences on different political themes.

Our article heeds this call and looks at congruence on the left–right scale as well as on two specific issues which are salient in the current context: redistribution and European integration.

<sup>3</sup>Note that although many studies focus on party-voters congruence, the normative argument for being interested in congruence usually relates to the proximity between the citizenry and policy makers in general (see, e.g., Huber and Powell Jr, 1994; Thomassen, 1994).

To be frank, this choice of issues is closely linked to data availability. At the same time, their inclusion in the citizen and elite surveys we use attests to the fact that these are also important issues on the European continent. One of these issues – European integration – can be linked to the cultural divide in societies between nationalistic and conservative views on the one hand and universalistic and liberal views on the other. Redistribution refers clearly to the economic cleavage. But what can we expect to find in relation to levels of policy congruence between the citizens and governments across specific issues?

The comparative research on issue congruence has mostly focused on the link between parties and their voters. Drawing on this literature, we can formulate some expectations with regard to citizen government congruence. First, it is one of the most consistent findings of the literature that congruence on general left–right attitudes tends to be relatively high (Thomassen and Schmitt, 1997; Dalton and McAllister, 2015). In contrast, studies focusing on more specific issues tend to come to more negative conclusions regarding the match between preferences of citizens and elites (Thomassen, 2012; Freire and Belchior, 2013). Thus, our first hypothesis:

**HYPOTHESIS 1:** Levels of congruence are higher in relation to ideological (left–right) orientations than in relation to specific issues.

When looking at other issues than left–right, congruence appears to be particularly low on cultural issues. Dalton (2017), for instance, finds that the match between parties and their voters is lowest on the authoritarian–libertarian divide as well as on gender issues. Regarding the direction of this incongruence, the majority of current research documents that party voters are more conservative than party elites. For instance, European voters have been consistently found to be more Eurosceptical than political elites (Thomassen and Schmitt, 1997; Mattila and Raunio, 2006). Country studies also reveal more conservative stances of the public as compared to the parties they vote for. Portuguese voters display more authoritarian stances than their parties (Freire and Belchior, 2013). The same conclusion can be drawn from an analysis on The Netherlands showing that voters are more in favour of law and order than the parties, especially among left party supporters (Thomassen, 2012). Research is, however, not completely unanimous on this matter as on issues of immigration there is little gap between parties and voters and, when such a gap exists, voters tend to be more liberal than elites (Lefkofridi and Horvath, 2012). Taken together, however, these results show that, when there are differences between parties and voters, parties tend to hold more liberal views on cultural issues than their voters. This is consistent with the assumption that politicians are more tolerant than the general population, notably due to their socialization in party structures (Sullivan *et al.*, 1993). Therefore, we provide our second hypothesis:

**HYPOTHESIS 2:** Governments tend to be more in favour of European integration than citizens.

In relation to economic issues, research has generally found smaller gaps between voters and parties than for cultural issues (Freire and Belchior, 2011; Dalton, 2017). There is, however, also evidence for a systematic bias with citizens being generally more left or pro-state intervention than elites. This has been documented in the Netherlands where party voters favour more income equality than their representatives, especially among the voters of right parties (Thomassen, 2012). In Switzerland a similar trend has been identified with the parliament as a whole holding views that are significantly less favourable to social security and redistribution than the median citizen (Rosset, 2013). There is also an emerging literature on responsiveness showing that policy preferences of the relatively poor (and left-leaning on economic issues) citizens are less well translated into economic policy and that government decisions tend to follow the preferences of richer

(and right-leaning) citizens (Donnelly and Lefkofridi, 2014; Peters and Ensink, 2015). In sum, based on the results of previous research, we formulate the following hypothesis:

**HYPOTHESIS 3:** Governments tend to be less in favour of redistribution than citizens.

One of the potential explanations for the differences that we expect in relation to the direction of congruence for cultural and economic issues is related to representational inequalities. The current literature points to a systematic bias in the extent to which citizens' preferences are reflected in political institutions or public policy (Gilens, 2012). Social inequalities, so the argument goes, might translate into political inequalities with lower levels of issue congruence among socially disadvantaged citizens. At least two mechanisms could account for such a systematic bias. First, disadvantaged social groups tend to turn out less to vote and thus have proportionally a more limited influence on election results. Studies show, for example, that on average highly educated citizens tend to participate more in elections. The same is true for lower income groups that display lower levels of participation in most European countries (Armingeon and Schädel, 2015; Schäfer, 2015). Second, there is also an under-representation of individuals sharing those groups' characteristics among political elites. This descriptive under-representation is very high in relation to features such as education and wealth (Pontusson, 2015). Regarding these two categories, representative bodies tend not to include many (or oftentimes any) members of very large groups of citizens defined in these terms, and this despite of the fact that these features have been consistently found to be associated with individuals' policy preferences.

Insofar as individuals' characteristics in terms of income or education are related to specific policy preferences, these two mechanisms may tilt governments' positions in the direction of advantaged social groups. These preferences, however, are not easily summarized in a single dimension as the systematically under-represented groups tend to hold policy preferences that are to the 'right' in some policy domains, but to the 'left' in other policy areas.

On economic issues, research has shown that individuals tend to hold less pro-state intervention preferences when their income increases, possibly reflecting self-interested attitudes (Cusack *et al.*, 2006). Education also gives individuals more confidence in their own capacity of faring well on the job market or coping with difficulty. Holding income constant, education is consequently found to be negatively associated with demand for redistribution (Rehm, 2009). It, thus, seems that if politicians are affected by their social background, they should be more to the right of citizens on economic issues, which has been documented in a number of studies (Carnes and Lupu, 2015; Rosset, 2016). In relation to cultural issues of internationalization and universalistic values, however, the descriptive representation gap is likely to have the opposite effect with politicians being on average more libertarian or more 'left' than the citizens. Indeed, the new social cleavage revolving around cultural issues linked in particular to globalization is one that particularly divides along educational lines with better educated people displaying on average much more liberal (Stubager, 2006) and pro-European preferences (Hakhverdian *et al.*, 2013). To some extent, the more pro-EU stances of political elites (Mattila and Raunio, 2006) could be read in the light of the fact that the social background between citizens and their representatives differs considerably. If politicians' social background plays a role in the way parties perceive political problems, we would expect the party system to be tilted to the right on economic issues and tilted to the left on sociocultural issues and that there would be a similar tendency for governments. Interestingly, the existence of such a pattern would likely be associated with a close congruence between governments and citizens if solely measured on a left–right scale, but low levels of congruence on specific policy domains.

If these patterns are indeed associated with inequalities in how governments reflect preferences of citizens from different societal groups, preferences of individuals with high income and educational status should also be better reflected than the preferences of citizens belonging to

complementary groups. Given that income is associated with specific preferences on economic issues and education on cultural issues, we can expect poor citizens to be particularly incongruent with the preferences of their government on economic issues and those with relatively low education not to have their preferences taken into account on cultural issues. As both education and income tend to be associated with the better educated usually earning higher salaries, the poor are also likely to be under-represented on cultural issues and the relatively lower educated on economic issues, too. However, the magnitude of these gaps should be smaller than for the policies most closely associated with the individual characteristics considered. Thus, our two hypotheses regarding representational inequalities are the following:

**HYPOTHESIS 4:** Holding education constant, low-income citizens tend to be less congruent with their governments on economic issues.

**HYPOTHESIS 5:** Holding income constant, low-educated citizens tend to be less congruent with their governments on cultural issues.

### Data and methods

Congruence has different conceptual dimensions. One dimension refers to the choice of representative agents as reference points. It has been studied with reference to parties or party systems (Ezrow and Xezonakis, 2011; Lefkofridi and Horvath, 2012), legislatures, governments (Stecker and Tausendpfund, 2016), or combinations of these (Golder and Stramski, 2010). Another dimension refers to the question of whether agents are modelled as unitary or collective reference points; or, to put it in the words of Golder and Stramski (2010), whether we study one or many citizens and representatives respectively. This one-to-many dichotomy can be further refined, when the focus lies on specific groups of voters (e.g. Belchior and Freire, 2013).

These different options to conceptualize congruence lead to quite different results and conclusions. It is therefore important to make the choices that are appropriate for the research question at hand. With regard to the representative agent, we take the government as our reference point. This brings us as close as possible to an answer to the question of whether different groups (e.g. rich vs. poor) are equally well served by the outputs of a political system. With regard to the citizenry, we take on different perspectives, which we explain in detail in the following. Most importantly, we move beyond absolute values of distances as we are also interested in the direction of (in)congruence.

There are also different approaches when it comes to choosing the actual data with which congruence is measured. In most studies, congruence between citizens and parties or governments is measured based on how citizens place themselves on a scale and how they perceive parties to be positioned on that same scale. This can be easily done, for example, with data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (e.g. Blais and Bodet, 2006). Unfortunately, such data are only available for the left–right axis, while information on issue specific preferences for citizens and parties are spread across different sources. In analysing congruence between citizens and governments on multiple issues across time we, hence, face an unfortunate data limitation. We dealt with this problem by combining different sources: measures of citizen preferences are taken from the EES (2014) and ESS (all six waves, 2006–2016), for party positions we refer to CHES (2006, 2010, and 2014).

These surveys present an interesting selection of position items that can be meaningfully matched onto each other. Moreover, CHES and ESS in particular provide a perspective on the multi-dimensional congruence between citizens and governments over a period of several election cycles in each of the countries. Matching these different sources raises various methodological problems. The wording between CHES and ESS varies as well as the scales for the issue specific

**Table 1.** Question wording of policy congruence variables

Issue dimensions	ESS	EES	CHES
Left-right	In politics people sometimes talk of 'left' and 'right'. Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?	In political matters people talk of 'the left' and 'the right'. What is your position? Please use a scale from 0 to 10, where '0' means 'left' and '10' means 'right'.	CHES: Please tick the box that best describes each party's overall ideology on a scale ranging from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right).
Redistribution	The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels. Answer categories range from 1 (agree strongly) to 5 (disagree strongly).	Position on redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor ranging from 0 (strongly favours redistribution) to 10 (strongly opposes redistribution).	Position on redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor ranging from 0 (strongly favours redistribution) to 10 (strongly opposes redistribution).
European integration	Now thinking about the European Union, some say European unification should go further. Others say it has already gone too far. Using this card, what number on the scale best describes your position? Answer categories range from 0 (unification has already gone too far) to 10 (unification should go further).	Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion ranging from 0 (unification has already gone too far) to 10 (unification should be pushed further).	How would you describe the general position on European integration that the party leadership holds ranging from 1 (strongly opposed) to 7 (strongly in favour).

ESS = European Social Survey; EES = European Election Study; CHES = Chapel Hill Expert Survey.

questions (see Table 1). Hence, to what extent a position on the citizen scale matches a position on the government scale is uncertain. Assessing the direction of incongruences is, hence, on shaky ground. Instead of postponing this research until more congruent party and citizen surveys are available, we tried to optimally address these limitations. Most importantly, we use the European Election Study of 2014 as a bridging measure between ESS and CHES. The advantage of the EES is that it includes a question about citizens' position with the same wording and scale as the CHES data measuring party positions. Although the match is less exact in relation to European integration, the EES provides a more fine-grained response scale than the ESS, which arguably reduces potential limitations linked with rescaling. Inspecting citizen preferences from both EES and ESS allows us to assess the direction of incongruences with greater confidence. In fact, for most countries (see Appendix in Supplementary material) the direction (though not the exact distances) of incongruences turn out to be the same for ESS and EES.<sup>4</sup>

Matching citizens' self-placement with expert placements of parties also raises methodological problems beyond the exact scales and question wordings. Adams *et al.* (2011), for example, show that voters are sensitive to their *perceived* ideological distance to parties, while voters' perceptions are not necessarily in line with 'objective' measures such as scores generated from manifestos or expert surveys. Yet, this problem affects our research only marginally. First, we are not interested in congruence between citizens and parties but between citizens and governments. On government policy, voters are likely to be better informed than about mere manifesto rhetoric (Adams *et al.*, 2011: 380). Second, as shown by Powell (2009: 1481–1482), the results of congruence studies do not change much when measures of party positions are derived from manifestos, expert surveys, or citizen placements.

<sup>4</sup>We chose to use the ESS over the EES in the main analysis as it is available over more waves and it includes more fine-grained socio-economic information on the respondents, which is crucial in some of our analyses.

We generate congruence measures in the following way. Citizen preferences are taken from different items of the ESS, while measures of party preferences are taken from the CHES (Bakker *et al.*, 2015). From the CHES we calculated government policy positions. To single-party majority governments we attribute the positions of the governing party. When it comes to coalition governments we take the standard approach of using the seat-weighted average of the positions of all cabinet parties (Warwick, 2001; Martin and Vanberg, 2011; Curini *et al.*, 2012: 249–250). Coalitions do not exclusively compromise but also engage in logrolls (Laver and Shepsle, 1996) or invoke intra-coalitional vetoes. Nevertheless, the seat-weighted average seems to be a reasonable approximation of the actual policy output of a coalition (Warwick, 2001; McGann, 2006; Martin and Vanberg, 2014).

We calculate the policy proximity between citizens and governments on three items: general left/right, redistribution, and European integration. Congruence scores on the issue of redistribution, for example, were generated by using the question of whether the ‘government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels’ in the ESS and from the expert rating of parties according to their ‘position on redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor’ in the CHES. We recoded all items into the same polarity and standardized all response categories on a 0–1 scale. Accordingly, individual congruence scores vary between 0 (perfect congruence) and –1/1 (perfect incongruence). Table 1 gives a detailed overview of the question wording and the scale of the different items we combined from ESS and CHES.

Given the different timelines of CHES, ESS, EES, and cabinets, we took various steps to provide for an optimal combination of our measures of government policy positions and citizen preferences (see Figure A1 in the Appendix of Supplementary material). In a first step, we assigned each cabinet party the position from the closest CHES wave (2006, 2010, or 2014). From these positions, we calculated government policy positions in the aforementioned way. In merging government positions with citizen preferences, we determined for each respondent in the ESS which cabinet she or he faced at the exact day of the interview. This day-exact matching is important as the actual ESS field periods vary considerably and are sometimes carried out astonishingly distant from the official year of an ESS round. The ParlGov infrastructure (Döring and Manow, 2016) has been very helpful for the task of merging the two surveys. We use the 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016 ESS rounds for our analysis.<sup>5</sup> We kept all countries that provided for complete information on government positions<sup>6</sup> and that were part of at least seven of these eight ESS waves. Overall, we analysed 165,316 citizens from 16 countries (see Appendix in Supplementary material).

## Empirical results

In a first step, we present descriptive results on multi-dimensional representation in Europe. We use graphics as this sheds light on several important things: the distribution of citizen preferences, the gap between the policy preferred by the majority of citizens and the stances of the government (the absolute distance between the median citizen and the position of the government), and the direction of this gap (whether citizens are to the left or the right of the government). Figure 1 gives a first nuanced picture on representation in four selected countries (a less busy presentation is given by plots for each country in the Appendix in Supplementary material). The violins summarize the distribution of citizen preferences in all six waves of the ESS on the three selected issue dimensions. A vertical line represents the citizen median, a hollow circle the mean of these distributions. The asterisk gives the respective mean of citizen preferences in the EES 2014. Triangles represent the mean preference for different subgroups – grey triangles for people with

<sup>5</sup>Note that the 2010 ESS misses an item on European integration.

<sup>6</sup>Due to missing values of government party positions in the CHES, we had to drop the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Estonia.



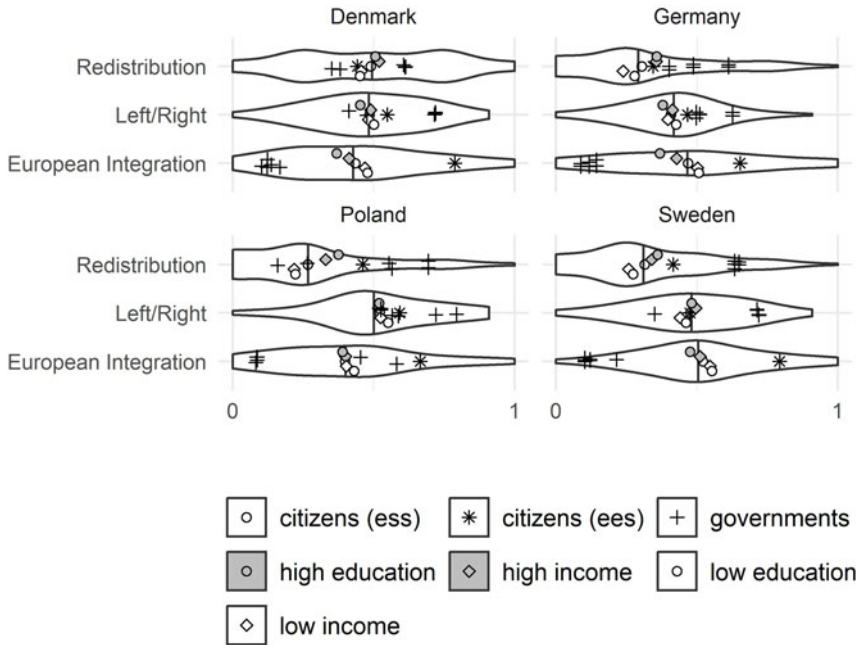


Figure 1. Distribution of citizen preferences and governments in four countries: Denmark, Germany, Poland, and Sweden.

high and low income, white triangles for people with high and low education. High income and high education categories correspond to respondents belonging to the two highest deciles regarding these characteristics in their countries, whereas income and low education correspond to the two lowest deciles. Finally, crosses represent the position of all governments that were in place during the period of investigation. Various insights can be derived.

First the shape of distributions varies considerably, while there are some typical issue-related patterns (see also Figure 2). On the left–right dimension citizen preferences come closest to a normal distribution with a peak in the middle of the scale. With a view to redistribution, preferences are clearly right-skewed while preferences on European integration are quite diverse across countries. The mean positions of different sub-groups correspond to our expectations: People with below-average income and education prefer more redistribution than people who are better off. The ordering is reversed when the same groups are asked about European integration. On the general left–right-axis no clear group-sorting emerges.

The positions of the government relative to the citizenry are quite variable. Denmark, for example, witnessed governments that were both to the left and right of the mean citizen on the issues of redistribution and on the general left–right axis. We note that the mean preferences of the EES correspond rather closely to the EES results with regard to redistribution and the general left–right axis. There are, however, quite striking disparities with regard to European integration.

This nuanced perspective is further condensed in Figure 2. The violins again sketch the preference distribution and grasp the location of the median citizen (middle line). The line running through the zero of the *x*-axis now corresponds to the mean position of all governments. Accordingly, when the median takes a negative value, the majority of citizens are to the left of the government and when it takes a positive value, the majority of citizens are to the right of the government.

The first conclusion we can draw from this country-specific perspective is that there are some substantial variations in the level of congruence across policy dimensions. As expected, the highest level of congruence exists on the left–right scale. In a majority of countries, left–right is the

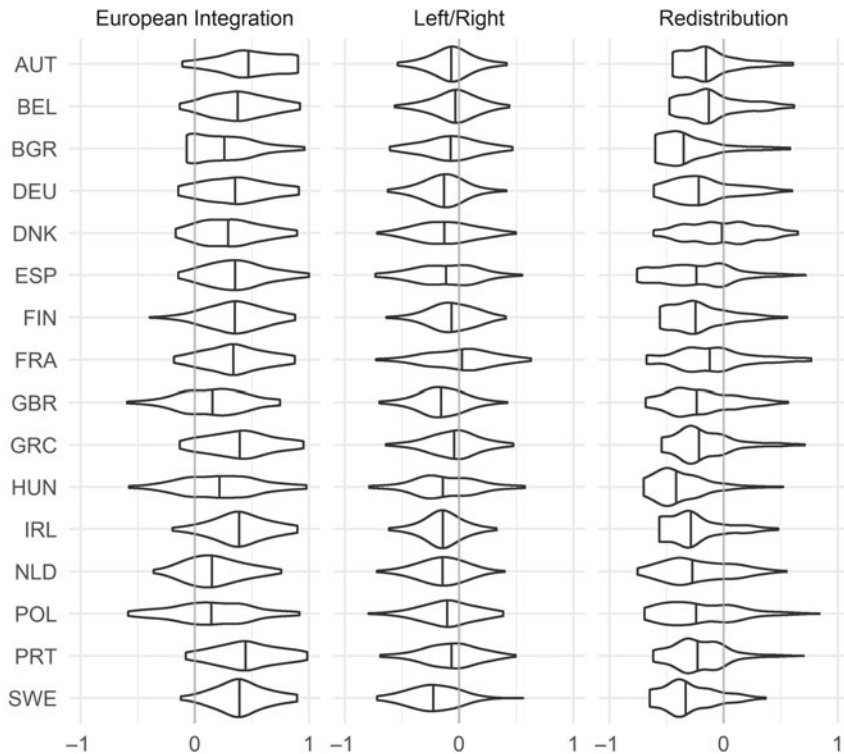


Figure 2. Multi-dimensional citizen-government congruence across countries and issues.

dimension on which the match between citizen and government preferences is the closest. In contrast, the more specific policy domains show a considerably higher degree of incongruence.

Regarding the direction of incongruence, we also find interesting issue-specific patterns. On the left-right scale, citizens are more often to the left of the government. In fact, only in France the pattern is inverted. However, the magnitude of citizens-government incongruence is lower than on the two more specific issues. On European integration, there is also a clear directional pattern. Citizens are on average much more Eurosceptical than governments. In all countries the gap between the median citizen position and the government position is substantial and goes in the same direction. Regarding redistribution, it appears that citizens are, on average, much more in favour of redistribution than their governments, with the exception of Denmark where the position of the median citizen matches with the government position.

This first overview already highlights that measuring policy congruence only on the left-right scale over-estimates the level of agreement between citizens and elites, which is in line with our first hypothesis. Furthermore, it suggests that moving beyond absolute congruence values provides interesting insights that would otherwise be blurred. Most importantly, it reveals that on issues like redistribution and European integration, the congruence gap and its direction is large and systematic. Citizens are clearly more to the left on redistribution and much less pro-EU integration. These findings are consistent with our hypotheses 2 and 3. These hypotheses were based on a representation bias argument which implied that wealthy and educated individuals are systematically better represented by governments on these specific issues. We test this argument in the following section.

### Representational inequalities

One way to measure representational inequalities is to disentangle the citizenry into different categories and analyse whether the opinions of privileged social groups are more closely reflected

in the stances of governments than the preferences of other groups. To assess how congruence varies by income and education, we move to an individual-level analysis in which we compute issue specific congruence measures for each respondent based on his or her proximity with the government position. We estimated regression models for each country and issue predicting the mean policy congruence of rich and poor as well as highly and low-educated citizens. Most importantly, we control for the distance of each citizen to the median voter on an issue. This reflects the notion that incongruences of certain societal groups are not problematic *per se*. If, for example, the views of the low educated are more distant to what the median voter thinks than the views of the highly educated, a better representation of the latter's view might even be seen as normatively desirable. This becomes, however, a problem if we hold the distances to the median citizen constant and still representational biases prevail.

Furthermore, we also control for age, gender, and political interest. Political interest, in particular, may have an impact on how precisely people will situate themselves on the different issue scales (de Vries and Giger, 2014; Mayne and Hakhverdian, 2017). In the models for different income groups, we also control for education and vice versa (see Table A1). However, we do not include other explanatory variables such as government ideology or issue salience. To be sure, these variables are important, when we aim to explain the variance in congruence in an outcome-centred approach (Lax and Phillips, 2012). As our factor-centred approach wants to estimate the representation gaps between different societal groups, however, we should only include as statistical controls those variables that may influence this relationship (George and Bennett, 2005: 80). Of course, salience is an important variable when it comes to an overall assessment of incongruences. Normatively, incongruences are the more disconcerting the more salient a specific policy area is in a particular country (Reher, 2015).

Figure 3 present the results (see the Appendix in Supplementary material for the country-specific regression tables). We contrast the regression coefficient for advantaged and disadvantaged groups in society, specifically looking at the two top deciles in terms of income and education vs. the two bottom deciles.<sup>7</sup> Circles represent the difference in the effects of top and bottom group identifiers in terms of income and diamonds present the same results in relation to education. When the differences between the two groups are significant at a  $p < 0,001$  level, the symbols are black, when this difference is insignificant it is filled with grey. The centre of the  $x$ -axis, marked by a grey vertical line, corresponds to a situation when both effects are equal, i.e. advantaged and disadvantaged groups enjoy same levels of congruence with their government. When the symbols are to the left of the grey line, disadvantaged groups (i.e. low educated, low income) are more congruent with their government than their advantaged counterparts (i.e. high educated, high income). When the symbols are to the right, the opinions of advantaged groups are better reflected in the position of the governments than those of the corresponding disadvantaged groups.

To begin with, it appears that on all three congruence measures, a better representation of advantaged groups than disadvantaged groups is much more frequent than the opposite situation. The over-representation of high income and high educated is the least prevalent in the case of left-right ideology. It is still more frequent that the rich are significantly better represented than the poor in terms of left-right orientations, but the pattern in relation to education is much less clear cut. With regard to European integration, the better representation of advantaged groups is particularly visible. On that issue, it appears that the contrast between high and low education groups is particularly strong and the former enjoy higher levels of congruence. The pattern is similar in relation to income, but the magnitude of the differences between high- and low-income groups is on average smaller than for education. With regard to redistribution, advantaged groups also enjoy better representation than their counterparts much more frequently than the other way around. In contrast to European integration, the differences are generally greater between

<sup>7</sup>Note that the overall patterns of incongruence remain if we discern the below- and above-median income categories of the ESS.

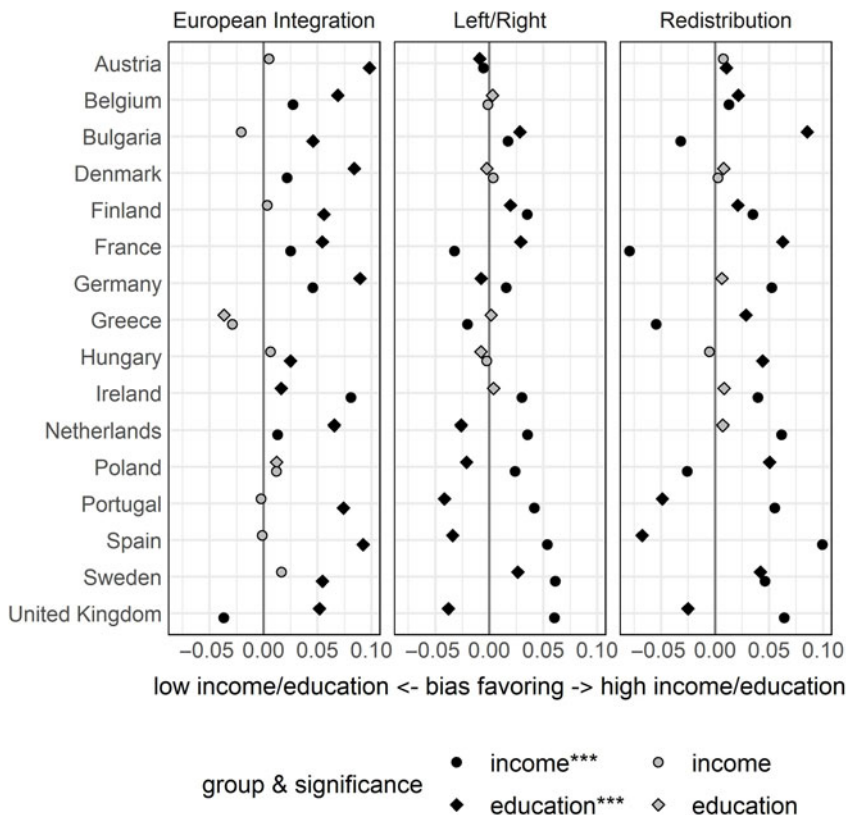


Figure 3. Multi-dimensional citizen-government congruence separated by income and education.

high- and low-income groups than between groups defined by education. There are, however, more exceptions to the generally described pattern with a better representation of low income in four countries (Bulgaria, France, Greece, and Poland).

Taken together, the results presented in Figure 3 support hypotheses 4 and 5. They show that inequalities in the representation of income and educational groups might contribute to explaining the direction of the overall gap between the stances of the median citizen and the position of governments in a given country. However, the magnitude of the difference between advantaged and disadvantaged groups is rather limited. Comparing the magnitude of these differences with overall levels of incongruence (see Figure 2), it is clear that systematic inequalities can only constitute a partial explanation for the high levels of incongruence found between governments and their citizens. Indeed, although the position of privileged groups is on average closer to the stances of governments, there is still a substantial gap: most governments exhibit less redistributive and more pro-European stances than even their privileged citizens. A potential explanation for this pattern could be found in the fact that governments face a trade-off between representing their citizens and acting responsibly (Mair, 2009). Redistribution and European integration are precisely issues in which political elites are bound by economic factors or international agreements and might, for these reasons, take stances that are far away from the wishes of the public.

### Conclusion

Research on citizen-government congruence in a comparative perspective has mainly focused on the left-right ideological scale (see e.g. Huber and Powell, 1994; Powell, 2000; Blais and Bodet,

2006; Golder and Stramski, 2010). This focus, mainly due to the lack of available data on different policy domains, may be problematic in the context of a growing complexity of policy spaces in Europe where cultural issues have gained in importance in recent years (Kriesi *et al.*, 2006). In particular, the use of an overall left–right scale might hide larger distances between citizens and government stances on specific policy domains as the public is likely to be to the left of governments on some issues and to the right of governments on some other issues. In relation to descriptive representation, we would expect that governments tend to reflect the policy preferences of richer and more educated citizens better. While the economic differences would entail that governments hold more rightist stances on economic issues, the more educated political elites would be likely to hold more universalistic values on sociocultural issues.

Our analysis of European survey data clearly indicates the relevance of analysing policy congruence across various dimensions of political competition. In line with previous research, it shows that the level of policy congruence tends to be overestimated when measured on a left–right scale as compared to specific issues. This might be due to the fact that, as our research demonstrates, citizens tend to be systematically to the left of governments on some issues and to the right of governments on some other issues. As a result, when summarized into a single left–right scale, these deviations might cancel each other out and the level of congruence on the ideological scale seems much higher than it actually is on specific issues. Drawing on the literature on representational inequalities of income and education groups and on research on the determinants of policy preferences, we were expecting that political elites would display both economically less leftist views with regard to the state intervention in the economy and more progressive and universalistic views with regard to sociocultural issues. Our results confirm these expectations. Citizens are indeed much more pro-redistribution than their governments. They are also clearly less favourable to European integration than their governments. Differentiating between groups defined on the basis of their income and education, we also find that individuals belonging to advantaged segments of society are on average better represented on both issues than those belonging to disadvantaged groups. This suggests that part of the citizens–government incongruence might be linked to systematic inequalities in the way in which preferences of citizens coming from different social groups are channelled in the political arena.

Future research should take issue salience into consideration. If governments do not represent the policy preferences of citizens on issues that are of little importance to them, it is arguably less consequential than if it is on issues that are particularly important for the public. The current study focused on arguably very salient issues, but with no direct measure of this salience.

Nevertheless, our findings are significant in several ways. First, they might point to the fact that despite high levels of ideological congruence, issue incongruence might explain citizens' dissatisfaction with representative democracy, especially at a time when citizens' preferences tend to be less and less ideological and citizens make up their minds issue by issue. In that sense, the study of issue congruence or policy congruence might be closer to citizens' sentiments than ideological congruence. It could also provide valuable insights explaining the erosion of electoral success among mainstream parties. Second, the fact that we find systematic differences in the way the majority of citizens are represented on redistribution echoes recent research on the link between socioeconomic and representational inequalities. Our findings confirm that some groups are systematically under-represented as some previous studies have shown, but it also shows that this under-representation is not uniform across all types of issues but particularly strong in relation to specific policy areas relevant to this group. Finally, our study might also show that political elites are not very good at explaining their stances to citizens and at least are not very successful persuading citizens on some issues and that more communication effort might be needed to raise citizens' acceptance of political decisions.

**Supplementary material.** To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773919000043>

**Acknowledgement.** Both the authors contributed equally to this work. Rosset gratefully acknowledges support from the European Research Council (Research program *Unequal Democracies*; Advanced Grant no 741538).

## References

- Aaldering L. (2017), 'Political representation and educational attainment: evidence from the Netherlands (1994–2010)', *Political Studies* 65: 4–23.
- Adams J., L. Ezrow, Z. Somer-Topcu (2011), 'Is anybody listening? Evidence that voters do not respond to European Parties' policy statements during elections', *American Journal of Political Science* 55: 370–382.
- Armington K. and L. Schädel (2015), 'Social inequality in political participation: the dark sides of individualisation', *West European Politics* 38: 1–27.
- Bakker R., C. de Vries, E. Edwards, L. Hooghe, S. Jolly, G. Marks, J. Polk, J. Rovny, M. Steenbergen and M.A. Vachudova (2015), 'Measuring party positions in Europe: the Chapel Hill expert survey trend file, 1999–2010', *Party Politics* 21: 143–152.
- Bartels L.M. (2008), *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*, New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Bauer P.C., P. Barberá, K. Ackermann and A. Venetz (2017), 'Is the left–right scale a valid measure of ideology?', *Political Behavior* 39: 553–583.
- Belchior A.M. (2013), 'Explaining left–right party congruence across European party systems: a test of micro-, meso-, and macro-level models', *Comparative Political Studies* 46: 352–386.
- Belchior A.M. and A. Freire (2013), 'Is party type relevant to an explanation of policy congruence? Catchall versus ideological parties in the Portuguese case', *International Political Science Review* 34: 273–288.
- Bernauer J., N. Giger and J. Rosset (2015), 'Mind the gap. Do proportional electoral systems foster a more equal representation of women and men, poor and rich?', *International Political Science Review* 36: 78–98.
- Blais A. and M.A. Bodet (2006), 'Does proportional representation foster closer congruence between citizens and policy makers?', *Comparative Political Studies* 39: 1243–1262.
- Bornschieer S. (2010), 'The new cultural divide and the two-dimensional political space in Western Europe', *West European Politics* 33: 419–444.
- Carnes N. and N. Lupu (2015), 'Rethinking the comparative perspective on class and representation: evidence from Latin America', *American Journal of Political Science* 59: 1–18.
- Curini L., W. Jou and V. Memoli (2012), 'Satisfaction with democracy and the winner/loser debate: the role of policy preferences and past experience', *British Journal of Political Science* 42: 241–261.
- Cusack T., T. Iversen and P. Rehm (2006), 'Risks at work: the demand and supply sides of government redistribution', *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 22: 365–389.
- Dahl R.A. (1971), *Polyarchy, Participation and Opposition*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Dahl R.A. (1989), *Democracy and its Critics*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Dalton R.J. (1985), 'Political parties and political representation: party supporters and party elites in nine nations', *Comparative Political Studies* 18: 267–299.
- Dalton R.J. (2017), 'Party representation across multiple issue dimensions', *Party Politics* 23: 609–622.
- Dalton R.J. and I. McAllister (2015), 'Random walk or planned excursion? Continuity and change in the left–right positions of political parties', *Comparative Political Studies* 48: 759–787.
- de Vries C. and G. Marks (2012), 'The struggle over dimensionality: a note on theory and empirics', *European Union Politics* 13: 185–193.
- de Vries C.E. and N. Giger (2014), 'Holding governments accountable? Individual heterogeneity in performance voting', *European Journal of Political Research* 53: 345–362.
- Dolezal M., N. Eder, S. Kritzingner and E. Zeglovits (2013), 'The structure of issue attitudes revisited: a dimensional analysis of Austrian voters and party elites', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties* 23: 423–443.
- Dolný B. and P. Baboš (2015), 'Voter–representative congruence in Europe: a loss of institutional influence?', *West European Politics*, 38: 1274–1304.
- Donnelly M. and Z. Lefkofridi (2014), *Economic & Political Inequality in Modern Democracies: Differential Responsiveness to the Policy Preferences of Economic Classes*, Florence: MWP Red number series, Florence.
- Döring H. and P. Manow (2016), Parliament and government composition database (ParlGov): an infrastructure for empirical information on parties, elections and governments in modern democracies.
- Elsässer L., S. Hense and A. Schäfer (2017), 'Dem Deutschen Volke'? Die ungleiche Responsivität des Bundestags', *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 27: 161–180.
- European Social Survey Cumulative File, ESS 1–7 (2016), 'Data file edition 1.0', NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data, Norway–Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC.
- Ezrow L. and G. Xezonakis (2011), 'Citizen satisfaction with democracy and parties' policy offerings', *Comparative Political Studies* 44: 1152–1178.

- Ferland B.** (2016), 'Revisiting the ideological congruence controversy', *European Journal of Political Research* 55: 358–373.
- Freire A. and A. Belchior** (2013), 'Ideological representation in Portugal: MPs'–electors' linkages in terms of left–right placement and substantive meaning', *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 19: 1–21.
- Freire A. and A.M. Belchior** (2011), 'What left and right means to Portuguese citizens', *Comparative European Politics* 9: 145–167.
- Ganghof S.** (2015), 'Four visions of democracy: Powell's elections as instruments of democracy and BEYOND', *Political Studies Review* 13: 69–79.
- George A.L. and A. Bennett** (2005), *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Giger N., J. Rosset and J. Bernauer** (2012), 'The poor representation of the poor in a comparative perspective', *Representation* 48: 47–61.
- Gilens M.** (2012), *Affluence and Influence*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Golder M. and J. Stramski** (2010), 'Ideological Congruence and Electoral Institutions', *American Journal of Political Science* 54: 90–106.
- Hakhverdian A.** (2015), 'Does it matter that most representatives are higher educated?', *Swiss Political Science Review* 21: 237–245.
- Hakhverdian A., E. Van Elsas, W. Van der Brug et al.** (2013), 'Euroscepticism and education: a longitudinal study of 12 EU member states, 1973–2010', *European Union Politics* 14: 522–541.
- Huber J.D. and G.B. Powell Jr** (1994), 'Congruence between citizens and policymakers in two visions of liberal democracy', *World Politics* 46: 291–326.
- Kriesi H., E. Grande, R. Lachat, M. Dolezal, S. Bornschiefer and T. Frey** (2006), 'Globalization and the transformation of the national political space: six European countries compared', *European Journal of Political Research* 45: 921–956.
- Laver M. and K.A. Shepsle** (1996), *Making and Breaking Governments. Cabinets and Legislatures in Parliamentary Democracies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lax J.R. and J.H. Phillips** (2012), 'The democratic deficit in the states', *American Journal of Political Science* 56: 148–166.
- Lefkofridi Z. and K. Horvath** (2012), 'Migration issues and representation in European liberal democracies', *Representation* 48: 29–46.
- Lesschaeye C.** (2017), 'Finding inequality in an unlikely place: differences in policy congruence between social groups in Belgium', *Acta Politica* 52: 361–383.
- Mair P.** (2009), 'Representative versus responsible Government', *MPIfG Working Paper 09/8*.
- Martin L.W. and G. Vanberg** (2011), *Parliaments and Coalitions. The Role of Legislative Institutions in Multiparty Governance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Martin L.W. and G. Vanberg** (2014), 'Parties and policymaking in multiparty governments: the legislative median, ministerial autonomy, and the coalition compromise', *American Journal of Political Science* 58: 979–996.
- Mattila M. and T. Raunio** (2006), 'Cautious voters-supportive parties opinion congruence between voters and parties on the EU dimension', *European Union Politics* 7: 427–449.
- Mayne Q. and A. Hakhverdian** (2017), 'Ideological congruence and citizen satisfaction: evidence from 25 advanced democracies', *Comparative Political Studies* 50: 822–849.
- McDonald M.D. and I. Budge** (2005), *Elections, Parties, Democracy: Conferring the Median Mandate*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McGann A.J.** (2006), *The Logic of Democracy. Reconciling Equality, Deliberation, and Minority Protection*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Munzert S. and P.C. Bauer** (2013), 'Political depolarization in German public opinion, 1980–2010', *Political Science Research and Methods* 1: 67–89.
- Peters Y. and S.J. Ensink** (2015), 'Differential responsiveness in Europe: the effects of preference difference and electoral participation', *West European Politics* 38: 577–600.
- Pierce R.** (1999), Mass-elite issue linkage and the responsible party model of representation, in W.E. Miller (ed.), *Policy Representation in Western Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Polk J., J. Rovny, R. Bakker, E. Edwards, L. Hooghe, S. Jolly, J. Koedam, F. Kostelka, G. Marks, G. Schumacher and M. Steenbergen** (2017), 'Explaining the salience of anti-elitism and reducing political corruption for political parties in Europe with the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey data', *Research & Politics* 4: 2053168016686915.
- Pontusson J.** (2015), 'Introduction to the debate: does descriptive misrepresentation by income and class matter?', *Swiss Political Science Review* 21: 207–212.
- Powell G.B.** (2000), *Elections as Instruments of Democracy: Majoritarian and Proportional Visions*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Powell G.B.** (2009), 'The ideological congruence controversy: The impact of alternative measures, data, and time periods on the effects of election rules', *Comparative Political Studies* 42: 1475–1497.
- Reher S.** (2015), 'Explaining cross-national variation in the relationship between priority congruence and satisfaction with democracy', *European Journal of Political Research* 54: 160–181.
- Rehm P.** (2009), 'Risks and redistribution: an individual-level analysis', *Comparative Political Studies* 42: 855–881.

- Rosset J.** (2013), 'Are the policy preferences of relatively poor citizens under-represented in the Swiss Parliament?', *The Journal of Legislative Studies* **19**: 490–504.
- Rosset J.** (2016), *Economic Inequality and Political Representation in Switzerland*, Heidelberg: Springer.
- Rosset J., G. Lutz and K. Kissau** (2016), Representation of political opinions: is the structuring pattern of policy preferences the same for citizens and elites? in M. Bühlmann and J. Fivaz (eds.), *Political Representation. Roles, Representatives and the Represented*. London: Routledge, pp. 117–134.
- Schäfer A.** (2015), *Der Verlust politischer Gleichheit. Warum die sinkende Wahlbeteiligung der Demokratie schadet*, Frankfurt am Main: Campus.
- Schmitt H., Hobolt S.B., Popa S.A., Teperoglou E. and European Parliament, Directorate-General for Communication, Public Monitoring Unit** (2016), *European Parliament Election Study 2014, Voter Study, First Post-Election Survey*. GESIS Data Archive, Cologne.
- Stecker C. and M. Tausendpfund** (2016), 'Multidimensional government-citizen congruence and satisfaction with democracy', *European Journal of Political Research* **55**: 492–511.
- Stubager R.** (2006), *The Education Cleavage: New Politics in Denmark*, Aarhus: Politica.
- Sullivan J.L., P. Walsh, M. Shamir et al.** (1993), 'Why politicians are more tolerant: selective recruitment and socialization among political elites in Britain, Israel, New Zealand and the United States', *British Journal of Political Science* **23**: 51–76.
- Thomassen J.** (1994), Empirical research into political representation: failing democracy or failing models, in M.K. Jennings and T.E. Mann (eds.) *Elections at Home and Abroad: Essays in Honor of Warren E. Miller*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Thomassen J.** (2012), 'The blind corner of political representation', *Representation* **48**: 13–27.
- Thomassen J. and H. Schmitt** (1997), 'Policy representation', *European Journal of Political Research* **32**: 165–184.
- Ward H. and A. Weale** (2010), 'Is rule by majorities special?', *Political Studies* **58**: 26–46.
- Warwick P.V.** (2001), 'Coalition policy in parliamentary democracies: who gets how much and why', *Comparative Political Studies* **34**: 1212–1236.