Representation in Western Europe: Connecting party-voter congruence and party goals

The British Journal of Politics and
International Relations
2020, Vol. 22(1) 122–142
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DOI: 10.1177/1369148119873102
journals.sagepub.com/home/bpi

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Abstract

One of the most common critiques of political parties is that they no longer represent the interests of their voters. On one hand, representation literature tasks all parties equally to ensure high ideological congruence with their voters. On the other hand, party behaviour literature acknowledges that parties have legitimately different primary goals, in particular vote-maximisation or policy-seeking. Thus, this article analyses whether ideological congruence depends on the general goals that parties pursue. Furthermore, this article proposes a novel, distribution-based measure of party-voter ideological congruence that reduces the loss of voter information stemming from the many-to-one data relationship. This measure is applied to 470 data points from parties in 10 Western European countries from 1970 to 2009. The article finds that vote-maximising parties create higher levels of congruence than policy-seeking parties. On this basis, the article calls for evaluations of party behaviour considering party-type specificity.

Keywords

congruence, policy-seeking, political parties, representation, vote-maximising, Western Europe

The notions that political parties are central to modern democracies, and that modern democracy is indeed unthinkable without parties, are rarely disputed. In established democracies, like those in Western Europe, parties are meant to fulfil important democratic functions. At the core of these is societal representation, whereby parties are the prime actors connecting citizens and political decision making (Lawson and Merkl, 1988; Müller and Meyer, 2010). Whether parties fulfil this function has been called into increasing doubt (Mair, 2006, 2008) while empirical studies of congruence between parties and voters usually come to positive conclusions (e.g. Belchior, 2010, 2013; Dalton, 1985). This article contributes to this discussion by focusing on different goals parties might be

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pursuing, by proposing a new measure for party-voter policy congruence, and by utilising a new, longitudinal and cross-country data set matching parties and their voters.

Within democratic models that focus on how parties are bound to their voters through elections, chiefly the Responsible Party Model (RPM), evaluating ideological congruence between parties and their voters is one of the prime strategies to assess party performance (Arnold and Franklin, 2012; Belchior, 2013; Golder and Stramski, 2010). On one hand, the RPM is a theoretical model to analyse how parties and voters might interact in the democratic representation process. On the other hand, it bears a strong normative component. As its name implies, only parties behaving in the way the model proposes, including creating high ideological congruence with their voters, are considered 'responsible' (APSA, 1950). Thus, RPM and theoretical democracy models that rest on similar delegation mechanisms task all parties to match their voters' preferences to the same (high) degree.

However, the scholarship on party behaviour has established that parties can have different, equally legitimate goals (Müller and Strøm, 1999). Furthermore, it has been shown that two of these goals, vote-maximising and policy-seeking, are closely connected to specific party types, that is mainstream centrist and niche extreme parties, respectively (Meyer and Wagner, 2013). This article, thus, connects these streams of literature and assesses whether party types, which can be assumed to have different primary goals, produce consistently diverging levels of ideological congruence with their voters. The overarching hypothesis of this article is that vote-maximising parties create higher ideological congruence than policy-driven parties.

This article proceeds by connecting the theoretical logics of ideological congruence and party goals as well as party types. To analyse ideological congruence, a novel distribution-based measure is proposed that aims at preventing the loss of voter information caused by established measures. To be clear, this new measure is not able to solve all well-known issues concerning congruence measurement limitations (e.g. scale comparability). Instead, it focuses on advancing the comparison of voter and party positions and contributes to the existing methods by producing more realistic outcomes than previous measures. This is shown in the validation section. The distribution-based measure is then applied to a novel data set combining Manifesto data with a series of cross-country election surveys, which allows for the analysis of 470 data points from 85 parties in 10 Western European countries across 92 elections between 1973 and 2009. Finally, the analysis of this data finds that vote-maximising parties indeed create higher ideological congruence than vote-seeking parties. Thus, this article argues that to come to valid conclusions about evaluations of party behaviour and party representation, models should take the fundamental distinction of party goals into account.

Representation by parties: The role of ideological congruence

Modern representative democracy is based on the interaction between parties and voters, with usually the former bearing the main burden of making the relationship work. However, there are fundamentally different ways of understanding the underlying mechanism. The delegate conceptualisation of political representation tasks the representative to carry the positions of the represented into the decision-making process (Pitkin, 1967: 146; Schedler, 1998). This direction of responsibility can also be found in Jane Mansbridge's (2003: 516) 'promissory representation' that is closely related to the concept of accountability, where the representative is bound to the represented and punished or rewarded for their faithful

execution of stated preferences of the represented. Empirical studies tend to be based on the RPM, which prescribes more concrete steps to make the same mechanism work (Thomassen, 1991). RPM is widely used as an explanatory tool to understand how voters and parties find each other in the pre-election process and how voters directly influence parties' behaviour after the election (Powell, 2009; Thomassen and van Ham, 2014). In a nutshell, RPM assumes that voters have policy preferences and parties make offers to voters in the form of distinct election manifestos before the election. During elections, voters choose the best fitting programme considering their own interests and, post-election, parties that are elected into parliament/government enact their pre-electoral policy proposals. Apart from being a theoretical model of party and voter behaviour, RPM also has a clear normative connotation. This is most evident in its origin, the APSA report on the state of the US parties (APSA, 1950), which advocates for changes in the US party system to conform more to the ideal RPM lay outs. Many empirical studies based on the RPM directly or indirectly assume that parties offering distinct policy programmes which fit to the preferences of their voters and then fulfil these promises as faithfully as possible are cornerstones of 'good representation' (Andeweg, 2011: 39).

Likely for reasons of reducing complexity, empirical studies have focused on testing the different elements of RPM and have come to varying conclusions. While studies have shown that parties largely do enact their election programmes once in government (Naurin, 2014; Thomson et al., 2017), RPM has come under criticism especially for its assumption that voters choose the party closest to their policy preferences (e.g. Pierce, 1999; but, for example, Dalton et al., 2012: ch. 6). Thus, the rest of this article does not assume that voters elect their closest party but that parties need to deal with the voters they have.

One main strategy to evaluate the performance of parties regarding their representative function is to evaluate the congruence between party positions and voter preferences (Dalton, 1985; Huber and Powell, 1994). Very generally, congruence can be defined as the positional correspondence between the represented and the representative (Dalton et al., 2012: ch. 7; Thomassen and van Ham, 2014). Higher congruence, then, is a sign that representatives take up the interests and demands of their voters in their programmatic positioning and attempt to carry them into the political decision-making process, thus it demonstrates good political representation (Andeweg, 2011: 33; Wlezien and Soroka, 2007). When congruence is interpreted as a sign of parties' responsiveness to their voters, the dyadic link is between a party and its declared voters (also see Casado-Asensio and Lefkofridi, 2011; Dalton, 1985; Lefkofridi and Casado-Asensio, 2012; Rosset et al., 2013). Especially in studies of party-voter congruence, the theoretical and normative sides of RPM are very close. Congruence and the quality of democratic representation are equated, as for instance, Thomassen and van Ham state that

the quality of representation should be assessed in the first instance by the end-result of the process, i.e. the degree to which elections generate congruence between the policy preferences of voters and the policy positions of the parties they voted for (Thomassen and van Ham, 2014: 402).

There are, furthermore, two general approaches to understanding the 'positional' part of congruence, which either focuses on specific policy positions or on a broader ideological dimension, usually in terms of left-right (Mair, 2007). This distinction has become increasingly important as there is evidence that the traditional left-right dimension does not capture the full policy space in which both parties and voters operate (e.g. Thomassen, 2012; Van der Brug and Van Spanje, 2009). Furthermore, as we will see

below, the left-right dimension might be more relevant for some parties than for others. Unfortunately, this issue cannot be solved at this stage as studies of congruence on specific policy dimensions are seldom cross-country as well as longitudinal because the required data on party positions and voter preferences for specific policy issues are rare. Some exceptions are analyses of congruence on European integration issues (e.g. Arnold et al., 2012; Casado-Asensio and Lefkofridi, 2011). Other policy-specific studies are single-country studies (Green, 2007; Thomassen, 2012) or focus on a specific point in time (e.g. Dalton, 2017; Lefkofridi and Casado-Asensio, 2012; Lefkofridi et al., 2014). As mentioned, such restrictions are based on the unavailability of the necessary data. Furthermore, the data availability limitation is highlighted by the fact that some of the existing multi-dimensional studies must assume the equivalence between party positions and aggregated positions of MPs (which are rather positions of parliamentary factions, for example, Holmberg, 1999; Thomassen, 2012) or candidates (e.g. Dalton, 2017). Thus, as the aim of this article is to investigate the differences between parties with systematically different goals and because this requires a sufficiently large data base solving the comparability of scales issue, the following analysis cannot be based on a multi-dimensional position space. Instead, the analysis is based on a uni-dimensional left-right space. As will be explained below, the left-right dimension is constructed in a way that takes local- and time-specific aspects into consideration (Franzmann and Kaiser, 2006). However, that party-voter congruence is measured in a uni-dimensional space is a restriction that needs to be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

The second and more common approach is to operationalise congruence on the ideological level, assuming a broad bundling of policy issues onto the left-right dimension (Esaiasson and Holmberg, 1996; Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999). While the centrality of the single left-right ideological dimension is disputed (see above), there is still good reason to assume its relevance. Voters are still able to place both themselves and their national parties confidently on the left-right dimension and it is still one of the European party competition's structural features (Benoit and Laver, 2006). Much of the validity of the left-right position, though, hinges on its composition. Traditional approaches assumed a temporally and spatially fixed meaning of left and right that was largely based on socio-economic issues (e.g. Huber and Powell, 1994;). More flexible approaches allow for a variation of issues to constitute a country- and time-specific left-right dimension that might include both socio-economic and social-cultural policies (e.g. Franzmann and Kaiser, 2006). This approach, which will be used in the empirical section, has the advantage of capturing the salient policy issues within a specific party competition, no matter whether there is an underlying cleavage or not, and of requiring less stringent assumptions about the comparability of parties' and voters' left-right positions, as is argued below.

Ideological congruence and system characteristics

Many empirical studies of party-voter congruence have found a generally good match between ideological positions and preferences (Golder and Stramski, 2010; Powell, 2009). Furthermore, they have shown that congruence varies substantially, over time and across countries (most chapters of Miller et al., 1999; Valen and Narud, 2007). The specific level of congruence is influenced by the electoral and party system as well as party characteristics (Belchior, 2013; Wessels, 1999). One of the most prominent debates on the systemic level is the role of the electoral system. In a nutshell, proportional systems create party systems with more parties and, thus, should create higher party-supporter

congruence. However, the net effect of the PR system on government-voter congruence is nil (Blais and Bodet, 2006) and Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012) have shown that, by themselves, electoral institutions have no effect on congruence with the median voter (also Golder and Stramski, 2010). In addition, the composition of the party system might play a role independent of the electoral system (Belchior, 2013: 357). The more parties there are in the system, the less room for movement parties have in order to place themselves where their supporters are. However, some studies indicate that party system characteristics do not have an effect (Mattila and Raunio, 2006).

Ideological congruence and party goals

With respect to party characteristics, the representation theory generally assumes that it should be the task of *all* parties to generate as high congruence as possible. At the same time, it has been argued that parties can – legitimately – have different goals (Müller and Strøm, 1999). In particular, the distinction between vote-maximising and policy-driven parties is crucial at this point. Vote-maximising parties are geared towards convincing and mobilising as many of their voters as possible to indeed vote for them. In terms of programmatic positioning, this means to create as much ideological congruence between themselves and their voters. Policy-driven parties, on the other hand, are more rooted in their ideology and geared towards convincing their voters of their programme. Thus, as they should be less inclined to shift their position towards where their voters are, policy-driven parties will create lower levels of ideological congruence with their voters. The main hypothesis of this article is, thus, that *vote-maximising parties create higher ideological congruence than policy-seeking parties*.

To identify vote-maximising and policy-driven parties, two approaches have been employed in studies of party-voter congruence as well as party positions: first, the distinction between mainstream and niche parties and, second, the distinction between centrist and extreme or non-centrist parties.¹ The following builds on both these distinctions.

While there are different conceptualisations of niche and mainstream parties (e.g. Adams et al., 2006; Meguid, 2005; Meyer and Wagner, 2013), one dominant definition states that mainstream parties are those with broad policy programmes that are based on traditional cleavage structures, while niche parties have policy programmes that are focused on narrower sets of policies (Meguid, 2005). The advantage of this definition is that it is relatively straightforward to operationalise, based on the party family a party belongs to: traditional families like social democrats and conservatives belong to the mainstream parties while families like the greens and radical-right are niche (Meguid, 2005). Empirical analyses have shown that mainstream parties, which are considered to be vote-maximising parties, have a tendency to change their ideological position in relation to the general public opinion (Adams et al., 2004).² Niche parties, on the other hand, are usually considered policy driven and are found to prioritise their own supporters (Adams et al., 2006; Lefkofridi and Casado-Asensio, 2012; Meyer and Wagner, 2013). Building on this and focusing on the parties' voters, we could argue that mainstream parties should tend to move to where they can reach as many supporters as possible to convince them to also vote for the party. Niche parties, being more policy driven, should be aiming at trying to convince their supporters of their political agenda and not moving to where their voters are already located (Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow, 2008; but see Lefkofridi and Casado-Asensio, 2012). Thus, the first hypothesis is as follows:

HP1. Party-voter congruence is higher for mainstream than niche parties.

The second dimension on which vote-maximising and policy-driven parties can be distinguished is their location on the ideological space. Parties at the centre of the left-right dimension should have a high likelihood of being central players within the party system, for example, regarding coalition building or within the political communication process. With this status they should have a higher incentive to maximise their vote and move on the left-right dimension to where they can reach as many voters as possible and exploit their pivotal position in the party system. Extreme parties should not be interested in moving their own position but instead seek to convince voters of their policies. Previous studies have shown that the distance of the party to the centre of the left-right dimension influences congruence (Belchior, 2013; Holmberg, 1989; Mattila and Raunio, 2006). Therefore, the second hypothesis is:

HP2. The closer the party to the centre of the left-right dimension, the higher the party-voter congruence.

In addition, being a mainstream or a niche party and the degree of centrism are not unrelated. Based on Przeworski and Sprague (1986), one could argue that being a centrist and a mainstream party should go together and strengthen the general short-term vote-maximising strategy, concentrating on consolidating their central role in the party system. Thus, the closer a mainstream party is to the centre of the left-right dimension, the higher the party-voter congruence should be, which means that a mainstream party away from the centre should produce lower congruence. We would expect the same effect for niche parties, but it should be much stronger. Niche parties at the extremes of the left-right dimension are more likely strongly policy oriented, trying to convince their voters of their position (Holmberg, 1989: 12). Thus, the last hypothesis interacts centrism and niche party status, thus contrasting the quintessential vote-seeking party (centrist mainstream) with the quintessential policy-driven party (non-centrist, niche):

HP3. The negative effect on party-voter congruence of being less centrist is stronger for niche than for mainstream parties.

As mentioned earlier, an important consideration in the distinction between mainstream and niche parties is the role of the left-right dimension. As mainstream parties tend to be those based on the classical socio-economic cleavages, it is more likely that they are competing squarely on the left-right dimension than niche parties, which have a smaller set of salient issues. Thus, it would be preferable to measure congruence on a range of individual policy issues and take the salience of these issues into account. However, this data does not exist in sufficient quantity for this analysis. This problem can, though, be partially alleviated through the construction of the left-right dimension that is heavily influenced by the individual country's party competition, which takes the niche party issues into account (see below).

Finally, there is evidence that the congruence between political representatives and voters has a temporal dimension. It could be argued that parties only know who their voters were at the last election and, thus, have a time lag in the policy preferences that they can reasonably represent (similar Adams et al., 2004; Stimson et al., 1995). While including the respective analysis is beyond the limits of the article, Supplemental Appendix IV replicates the analysis including this time lag and finds consistent results to the findings below.

Measuring congruence: Data and operationalisation

To measure the proposed congruence between parties and their voters, the policy positions of both sets of actors need to be compared. For the party positions, manifesto data, expert surveys and voter surveys could serve as starting points. As the creation of ideological congruence as a measure of representational quality is focused on the party position taken vis-à-vis their voters, party data needs to come from a source that can be clearly allocated to the party. As party positions by both experts and voters are likely influenced by additional factors like media reporting, manifesto data is used here. The source of data for the voters is the *MARPOR Party-Voter Data Set* provided by the Manifesto Project (Lehmann and Schultze, 2012), which combines Manifesto Data (see below) and survey data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) waves 1–3, running from 1996 to 2011, and the Eurobarometer trend file, running from 1970 to 2002 (Schmitt and Scholz, 2005). Both CSES and the Eurobarometer data contain information about which party an individual voter does or would vote for and this voter's self-placement on the left-right dimension.

Party positions using Manifesto data

The Manifesto Project (formerly CMP, Werner et al., 2014) provides the most comprehensive collection of party position data. Using specially trained coders, the Manifesto Project performs content analysis of party programmes by grouping every content unit (called a quasi-sentence) into one of 56 policy categories and counting the categories' relative shares. There are several strands of literature criticising the Manifesto Project data, which can neither be rehashed nor resolved here (see Mikhaylov et al., 2012; Volkens et al., 2013). One of the central points of contention and with special relevance for the measurement of congruence is the creation of parties' positions on the left-right dimension, which the next section is concerned with.

Left-right party positions from Manifesto data. The Manifesto Project provides the relative shares of the coding categories within each party manifesto and there is much debate about how to get the best left-right positions from this information. All approaches come with different assumptions but most of them produce very similar results that correlate highly (Franzmann, 2010). Many of these measures, though, rest on the assumption that the attribution of left and right categories holds for all countries and over time, an assumption that has come under increasing challenge (Benoit and Laver, 2006). Since the early 20th century, political cleavages and, more generally, policy issues have changed or disappeared, and new ones have formed. Powell, for instance, argues that the meaning of left-right depends on what he calls 'local discourses', which 'are composed of somewhat different issues, weighted differently, and most important, the meaning of the centre and other positions varies' (Powell, 2009: 1477). If we accept the notion that left and right have different meanings between countries and over time and want to compare the positions of parties and citizens (inevitable if we want to assess congruence), we must come to terms with the idea that the left-right positions of respondents measured in surveys are necessarily country and time dependent.

To solve the problem of comparing party positions from an internationally standardised party left-right dimension with context-bound respondent party placements, replacing the internationally comparable party dimension is one possibility. As I focus on the differences between parties and voters at particular points in time in individual countries,

the left-right dimension does not need to be internationally and cross-time comparable. Instead, it is necessary that the left-right dimension has the same meaning for parties and voters at one point in time in one country, leaving the distance of the positions comparable (similarly Powell, 2009).

One method to construct such time- and country-dependent party positions was proposed by Franzmann and Kaiser (2006), which – in a nutshell – uses regression analyses between parties and coding categories in order to discern left, right and valence categories for each country.³ Careful analysis of the regression results enables them to identify categories that change between these three groups over time.⁴ Using this method, the main remaining assumption is that parties and voters in one time and place also share the same understanding of the policy space. Given the direct and indirect communication between them, including the common media landscape, this assumption is not overly problematic. Furthermore, this inductive approach allows for niche parties to influence which policy categories are left, right and neutral because the usage of categories by all parties in the system is incorporated in the analysis. The resulting category scores are added up into left, right and valence issue scores, which are then summarised into a Left-Right score, calculated using the formula $P = (R - L)/(R + L + V)$, where R is the sum of the right policy categories, L is the sum of the left policy categories and V is the sum of valence policy categories.

A final issue is that the left-right scales of surveys and the Manifesto Data are different.⁵ Most analyses that use survey data and non-survey party data use linear rescaling (Adams, 2012; Powell, 2009). While this might result in a conservative congruence measure, other options (e.g. fitting the centre or the boundaries of one scale to the other) would introduce uncontrollable distortions.

Combining Manifesto data and surveys. To attribute respondents to parties, both Eurobarometer and CSES contain questions for the respondent's party identification or vote intention. Based on this information, I use a novel data set combining survey and party data with the parties of 10 Western European countries: Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, the United Kingdom and Ireland, as well as Flanders and Wallonia. For these countries, the data are mostly complete from 1973 to 2009, which allows for tracing temporal changes in congruence. The data set comprised 470 data points stemming from 85 parties and 92 elections.

Many-to-one congruence: A proposal to go beyond point-estimates

To evaluate how well parties create congruence with their supporters, the positions of both sets of actors need to be compared. This is problematic since the party position is a one-point estimate while voters create a distribution of positions. A way of solving this problem is to condense the voter distribution into a single point estimate, which results in a one-to-one congruence measure (Achen, 1978; Golder and Stramski, 2010). Such solutions, however, come with a troublesome reduction of voter information. This makes it a worthwhile endeavour to build on and refine the available mathematical approaches. After discussing the existing approaches, the following section will introduce one such possibility.

Established approaches to construct congruence. When measuring the quality of representation, that is, how well a party represents its voters, two main options are discussed (see Golder and Stramski, 2010). First, congruence is measured by calculating the difference

between the party position and the mean position of the voters. This measurement, however, does not take the distribution of voters into account (also Holmberg, 1999: 87–88). Two groups of party voters might have the exact same mean but be differently distributed over the whole issue space (Golder and Stramski, 2010: 92). A congruence measure using the mean (or median) voter position does not pick up on such differences. Hence, a conceptualisation of congruence is needed that allows the comparison of the party position with positions from all their voters. Another possible solution is to use the difference between each individual and their party and then aggregate these differences for each party (Aldrich and McKelvey, 1977). This approach has the problematic effect that voters cancel each other out. This effect is especially important between very close and very distant voters, where very close voters can ‘pull in’ very distant voters.

Comparing distributions. Golder and Stramski (2010: 55–56) propose another congruence measure, which compares the distributions of voters and of parliamentarians, which could either be grouped together to investigate the congruence of the whole parliament or grouped into parties. On one hand, the parliamentary faction and the party are distinct entities. On the other hand, the distribution of parliamentarians highlights that parties are heterogeneous political actors with preferences that are not all located at the same point on the left-right dimension. Hence, in order to use the distribution of voters and fully exploit the wealth of data from modern survey research, we need a distribution of left-right positions on the party side.

The most straightforward solution for this would be to construct an empirical distribution based on the left-right positions of a party’s internal groups. Unfortunately, such data does not exist in a cross-country or longitudinal setting. Alternatively, we could use the spread of voters’ perception of parties as a basis for the party distribution. The assumption would be that fractionalised parties lead to more heterogeneous voters’ perceptions. Indeed, voters’ party perception is related to the measured party position (e.g. Busch, 2016). However, studies have also shown that voters do not or wrongly update their perceptions (Adams et al., 2011, 2014; Busch, 2016). Furthermore, voter perceptions are systematically influenced by, for example, leaders (Busch, 2016: 167) and the wider informational environment (Adams et al., 2014: 974). Thus, using voter perception would introduce bias that cannot be controlled for. Hence, I stick as closely to available party-based data as possible and work with how the parties position themselves in their election programmes.

Constructing the party function. It seems reasonable to assume that parties are seldom uniform and intra-party groups do not all have the same position on the left-right dimension (Boucek, 2009). There is also evidence that the point-estimate based on the party election programme tends to reflect a compromise between all of these intra-party groups (e.g. Budge, 1994). The point estimation of the party position is then likely an aggregation of all these different intra-party left-right positions.

To construct a distribution of likely intra-party ideological positions, assumptions are necessary about the shape, median and spread of the distribution. First, Holmberg (1999) has shown that within-party opinion distributions are usually unimodal, which means we can assume that the shape of the intra-party distribution is normal. Second, as the party position from the electoral programme is assumed to be the aggregate of the intra-party distribution, assuming that it is indeed the median of the left-right distribution of a party is consequential.⁶ The different intra-party actors are then distributed around this point.

Third, the spread of the distribution can be described by its standard deviation. One possible assumption is that the space a party covers in the left-right continuum of a country depends on the size of this party. The bigger a party is, that is, the more members, candidates, personnel, factions, groups and wings a party has, the more likely these individuals and groups have more heterogeneous policy positions and the wider the distribution of positions should be spread on the left-right dimension (c.f. Bernauer and Bräuninger, 2009). As mentioned, there is still a lack of comparative intra-party data that would allow a direct inference of the standard deviation from empirical data. Therefore, a proxy is used to measure party size: the vote share a party attracted at the last election.⁷ To be clear, the argument is not that vote share is the optimal measure for the spread of the intra-party distribution; however, other options are either not sufficient for cross-country and cross-time analyses (e.g. intra-party membership surveys or membership numbers) or rely on data generation techniques with unclear confounding effects (e.g. automated content analysis, where the effect of language structures are not clear). Furthermore, the analysis below controls for the effect of the vote share and shows that the congruence measure does not punish smaller parties. As the aim is to measure the congruence every party creates for election t and the vote share of the party at time point t is likely a result of this congruence, the *lagged* vote share of the party from the previous election $t-1$ is, consequently, used as the proxy for its size.⁸

In order to construct the party position functions mathematically, a distribution of 1000 artificial party elite positions is created around the median, which is determined by the left-right party position, and the different distribution characteristics are applied.⁹ One could think of these 1000 positions as participants at a party congress that decides the party's manifesto. I first take the normal distribution, then modify its standard deviation based on the lagged vote share and finally assign the appropriate share of artificial party elites to a specific distance from the median according to the modified normal distribution.

Constructing the congruence measure. The final creation of the congruence measure from the two distributions is based on the comparison of the space under the two functions (similarly for voters and MPs: Andeweg, 2011: 43ff). The percentage of shared space is calculated using the discreteness of the data: $\text{Congruence} = \sum_{i=s}^N (\min\{s_{1,i}; s_{2,i}\})$, with S as the start value of the discrete values space, N as the end value, $s_{1,i}$ the share of votes with position i and $s_{2,i}$ the share of party elites with position i . In substantive terms, the shared space signifies the per cent of supporters represented by the party.¹⁰ Thus, this measure has a theoretical range between 0 and 100, corresponding to no congruence and 100 per cent congruence, respectively (see Supplemental Appendix I for illustrations).

Validation

In order to analyse whether this distribution-based measure of congruence is valid and superior to established methods, the following section compares its results with those of two common, established methods of measuring many-to-one congruence (Golder and Stramski, 2010): (1) absolute congruence as the distance between the party position and the mean position of the party's voters and (2) relative congruence as the mean distance between the party position and its voters. The absolute and relative congruence are calculated using the same data set of 470 party data points and on the same left-right dimension. As these two congruence measures denote distances, lower values mean better congruence.

Table 1. Comparison of congruence measures.

	Distribution congruence	Absolute congruence	Relative congruence
Distribution congruence	1		
Absolute congruence	−0.55***	1	
Relative congruence	−0.57***	0.87***	1

Pairwise correlations.

*** $p < 0.001$.

Figure 1. Comparison of congruence in Western Europe using three different measures.

The first test is whether the new, distribution-based measure behaves in the same way as the established measures. Significant negative correlations between the new congruence measure and the standard measures means that they resemble each other, as higher congruence should come with smaller distances. Indeed, Table 1 shows exactly this result. The distribution-based measure correlates with both standard measures with a moderate strength of 0.6, and the correlations are negative and highly significant. This lends confidence to the distribution-based measure’s criterion validity (Adcock and Collier, 2001).

While the general association between these measures is encouraging, Figure 1 shows that they produce substantially different results. In Figure 1, each bar shows the frequency of party-voter congruence values. First, both measures of distances produce much more positive results, that is, many low distances, than the new distribution-based measure. The relatively good performances of parties are a common finding in the literature that uses distance-based congruence measures (Andeweg, 2011; Belchior, 2013). This common finding has always been slightly surprising given the equally common agreement that parties do not perform and develop in desirable ways (Mair, 2006, 2008). Second,

Figure 2. Frequency of party-voter congruence in 470 Western European parties.

both distance-based measures produce results concentrated on a 40-point part of the dimension that encompasses 100 points. The absolute congruence measure produces highly skewed results towards the lower end of distances, meaning better congruence. The relative congruence measure is more normally distributed but does not deviate highly and equally skewed towards better congruence. The new distribution-based measure produces results that span the whole dimension and are much more in line with what could be expected given the diversity among parties. Thus, while the distribution-based measure proposed here is not able to solve adjacent issues like scale comparability between voter and party position measures, it is valid on the level of how voter and party positions are compared to each other: the distribution-based measure is clearly related to the two established measures and, additionally, it produces much more realistic results in comparison to the absolute and relative congruence measures.¹¹

Analysis: Ideological party-voter congruence

A mixed picture emerges when examining the congruence Western European parties create with their supporters as shown in Figure 2. Encouragingly, of the 470 parties in elections included in the data set, none display an overlap of zero and only in 11 instances have parties a congruence of less than 5 per cent. On the other hand, Figure 2 also shows that only one-third of the parties represent more than half of their voters. Only the Spanish Popular Party in 2004 achieved the nearly perfect result of being congruent with 91 per cent of their voters. On average, Western European parties represent around 40 per cent of their voters (std. 20.4). This first result is in line with previous accounts that are concerned with the quality of representation that parties offer.

The operationalisation for all necessary measures to test the hypotheses is the following: the distinction between mainstream and niche parties is realised using the Manifesto Project's party family variable and the allocation by Adams et al. (2006). In accordance with the definition above, niche parties are those in the Green, nationalist, agrarian, ethnic and regional as well as 'special issues' families. Respectively, mainstream parties are

Table 2. Explanation of congruence in Western Europe, regression models.

Variables	Model without interactions			Model with interactions		
	Coefficient	Standard error	Significance	Coefficient	Standard error	Significance
Niche Party	-2.56	1.94	0.22	3.66	6.39	0.58
Distance to centre	-0.38	0.02	0.00	-0.26	0.08	0.02
Party size	0.66	0.09	0.00	0.89	0.12	0.00
Interactions						
Niche × Centre				-0.17	0.20	0.42
Niche × Size				-0.12	0.79	0.88
Size × Centre				-0.01	0.01	0.32
Niche × Size × Centre				0.00	0.02	0.95
Government status (lag)	1.49	1.67	0.40	2.03	1.20	0.12
District magnitude	0.97	0.75	0.23	0.88	0.90	0.36
Effective <i>N</i> parties	-0.83	0.29	0.02	-0.76	0.35	0.06
Time	0.19	0.07	0.02	0.20	0.09	0.07
Constant	39.42	4.03	0.00	35.05	3.52	0.00
Observations	470			470		
<i>R</i> ²	0.47			0.48		
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.46			0.47		
AIC	3883.6			3876.6		

OLS: ordinary least square; AIC: Akaike information criterion.

OLS regression with standard errors adjusted for 10 country clusters.

those in the families of socialists, social democrats, liberals, conservatives and Christian Democrats. Furthermore, the distance of a party to the centre of the left-right dimension is measured using the absolute value of the left-right position (which originally runs from -100 to 100). To avoid the omitted-variable bias, several common control variables are included. The electoral system is measured using the logarithm of the district magnitude (André and Depauw, 2013) and the number of effective parties as measured by Laakso and Taagepera (1979). The information on the government status is taken from the data set by Doering and Manow (2012). Furthermore, to test whether the congruence measure punishes small parties and to obtain coefficients for the main hypothesised effects controlled for parties' vote shares, the size of the parties is introduced as a further interacting variable to the niche party status and the distance to the centre.

As the data has a cross-sectional structure, several assumptions of an ordinary least-square (OLS) regression are likely violated, which can result in biased and inconsistent standard errors. Of these assumptions, there is particular concern about heteroscedasticity and within-country correlation of the errors, as country-specific aspects like political culture and media communication patterns might influence party congruence. Accordingly, I fit an OLS multiple linear regression with standard errors clustered by parties.¹² The generalised information matrix (GIM) test (King and Roberts, 2015) shows that there is no misspecification in the clusters ($p = 0.42$, null hypothesis is no misspecification). Table 2 shows the result of the full model with and without the interaction terms.

Table 2 shows both the full model with and without interaction terms, the latter proving statistically superior. However, the interactions do not add substantively to the explanatory power and do not seem to have a significant effect. Yet, coefficients and

Figure 3. Linear prediction of congruence, interaction party type and party centrism.

significances for the interaction effects can only be interpreted if all main effects take on values of zero, which is meaningful in this case but highly limited. Non-significant interaction coefficients can, thus, hide significant effects that are limited to specific levels of the independent variables (Ai and Norton, 2003). Therefore, we need to unpack these interaction effects further and plot the linear predictions of the dependent variable over the whole ranges of the interacted variables.

First, Figure 3 shows how the effect of being a niche or a mainstream party develops depending on how centrist the party is on the left-right dimension. Generally, being a niche party has a negative effect on congruence (H1) as the intercept for niche parties is lower than for mainstream parties. This is also confirmed by Supplemental Appendix II, which shows a significant difference between the predicted congruences for mainstream and niche parties. However, the interaction effect between niche party status and the distance to the centre of the left-right dimension appears to be not statistically significant in Table 2. As an explanation, Figure 3 shows that the confidence intervals for mainstream and niche parties overlap at the centre of the left-right dimension. At the same time, Figure 3 shows that, while the predicted congruence decreases for both party types with higher distances to the centre (confirming H2),¹³ the negative effect is stronger for niche parties (confirming H3).

A closer inspection shows that while the lines look parallel, the slope for the niche parties is steeper. A mainstream party directly at the centre has a predicted congruence of 52.9 per cent, which falls by 45 to 30.6 per cent at the empirical extreme (60 scale points). A niche party falls from 43.9 to 16.8 per cent and, thus, by 60 per cent. Table A1 in Supplemental Appendix II includes the differences between the two predicted congruences for a range of distance values and shows that the difference between the congruences of mainstream and niche parties increases with larger distances to the centre of the left-right dimension. In short, both H2 and H3 regarding the effects of both proxies for vote-maximising and policy-oriented parties are confirmed. This effect is also confirmed in a series of robustness checks in Supplemental Appendix VI.

The other main effect from the model in Table 2 regards the effect of parties' vote share. The regression results indicate a small but significant effect. However, Figure 4,

Figure 4. Average marginal effect of party type depending on party vote share.

which depicts the average marginal effect of the niche party status depending on the vote share of the party, shows that the significance of this effect is restricted to a very specific vote share. Only at a party size of 7 per cent does the confidence interval not include the zero value and, thus, does party size affect congruence. For all other possible values of parties' vote shares, there is no effect on party-voter congruence. This confirms that the congruence measure used here does not systematically penalise small parties.

Conclusion

Few, if any, political actors are criticised as extensively and heavily as political parties and in one way or the other, the argument is usually that they do not fulfil their democratic functions (Mair, 2006, 2008). At first glance, the results of this study adds to the worrying accounts as it finds that Western European parties only create ideological congruence with an average of 40 per cent of their voters. This result seems to indicate that the vast majority of parties either do not try or do not succeed to offer policy programmes that match the interests of their voters. The analysis of which parties create higher or lower congruence, however, gives reason to qualify this conclusion.

On one hand, theories and empirical studies of representation and, in particular, ideological congruence assume that all parties are tasked to ensure congruence with their voters to the same extent (e.g. Miller et al., 1999; Thomassen, 1991). On the other hand, theories on party behaviour state that parties may, legitimately, have different primary goals, concentrating on winning a maximum of votes and offices or seeking to change policies (Müller and Strøm, 1999). These goals are, traditionally, connected to different party types like mainstream and niche parties (Meyer and Wagner, 2013). At the same time, empirical studies of how parties take policy positions have shown that there is a connection between these party types and how ideologically flexible parties are (Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow, 2008). This article connects these two streams of literature and finds that centrist, mainstream parties create significantly higher ideological congruence with their voters than non-centrist, niche

parties. In other words, vote-maximising parties create higher congruence than policy-seeking parties.

One could, of course, argue that niche parties are not necessarily representing their voters on the left-right dimension anyway and thus have a natural disadvantage when evaluated on their fit on this policy dimension. It would certainly be advantageous to replicate this analysis allowing for a multi-dimensional policy space. However, the conceptualisation of left-right as both country- and time-sensitive overcomes many of the limitations of the traditional left-right dimension. While still creating a one-dimensional space, it allows non-socio-economic issues to be part of this dimension and, thus, more accurately reflect the party competition in question as well as the meaning of left-right for the voters in this circumstance. Another possible objection regards the normative assumption that parties create congruence even though it is voters who choose a party. As previous research has shown that voters not always choose the party that ‘fits best’ (e.g. Pierce, 1999), incongruence might also be argued to stem from voter decisions. However, this article did not focus on voters and how they make their vote choices but on parties and their positions. Thus, instead of prescribing what voters should do, this study takes the voters as they are and assumes that parties must relate to them. Further research could investigate the relationship between voters’ decision-mechanisms and party-voter congruence.

Thus, in showing that there are legitimate differences – based on party goals – in the level of congruence parties create, this article identifies a new challenge to the RPM and evaluation of party behaviour measures that are built on RPM. From the perspective of the party, RPM comes under further strain as there are two possible approaches to positioning themselves relative to their voters, which lead to very different results in ideological congruence and, subsequent, evaluation of party representation. Parties can, on the one hand, try to maximise their vote. Within the parameters of RPM (i.e. leaving personalisation considerations aside), parties could do this by being responsive to the preferences of their voters and modelling their policy programme accordingly. On the other hand, parties might aim at convincing their voters of their policy ideals, be willing to sacrifice winning votes from fickle, non-committed voters and rather advocate their ideology or specific policies. If we use ideological congruence as the measure to evaluate party behaviour, the vote-maximising party would have a much higher motivation to create high congruence than the policy-driven party. As there is no generally valid reason to believe that either of these party goals is theoretically or normatively superior, this result calls for integrating party-type differences into our theories on how representation and, indeed, democracy function. There is need for a closer connection between democratic (including representation) theory and party literature because, to date, these do not speak to each other.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Supplementary information

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.

Appendix I. Illustration of congruence measure.

Figure A1. Voter and party distribution for UK Labour 1997.

Figure A2. Voter and party distribution for Spanish PP in 2004.

Figure A3. Voter and party distribution for Danish Social Democrats in 1979.

Appendix II. Effects in main analysis.

Figure A4. Predicted congruence for mainstream and niche parties.

Figure A5. Predicted congruence for parties depending on their distance to the centre of the left-right dimension.

Table A1. Difference between predicted congruences of mainstream and niche parties for different distances to the centre.

Appendix III. Robustness check by replication using RILE.

Table A2. Comparison of descriptive characteristics of congruence, $N = 470$.

Figure A6. Distribution of party-voter congruence based on RILE scores.

Table A3. Main analysis explaining congruence, measure based on RILE.

Figure A7. Replication of Figure 3 (Linear prediction of congruence, interaction party type and centrism) with the RILE-based congruence.

Figure A8. Replication of Figure 4 (Average marginal effect of party type depending on party vote share) with the RILE-based congruence.

Appendix IV. Robustness checks by replication using lagged voters.

Table A4. Comparison of descriptive characteristics of congruence, $N = 412$.

Figure A9. Distribution of party-voter congruence based on parties at t , voters at $t - 1$.

Table A5. Main analysis explaining congruence, parties at t and voters at $t - 1$.

Figure A10. Replication of Figure 3 (Linear prediction of congruence, interaction party type and centrism) with parties at t and voters at $t - 1$.

Figure A11. Replication of Figure 4 (Average marginal effect of party type depending on party vote share) with parties at t and voters at $t - 1$.

Appendix V. Replication using absolute and relative congruence.

Table A6. Analysis explaining congruence measured as absolute congruence.

Figure 12. Effect of niche party status on predicted absolute congruence.

Figure 13. Effect of distance to the centre of the left-right dimension on predicted absolute congruence.

Figure A14. Replication of Figure 3 (Linear prediction of congruence, interaction party type and centrism), DV. absolute congruence.

Table A7. Analysis explaining congruence measured as relative congruence.

Figure 15. Effect of niche party status on predicted relative congruence.

Figure 16. Effect of distance to the centre of the left-right dimension on predicted relative congruence.

Figure A17. Replication of Figure 3 (Linear prediction of congruence, interaction party type and centrism), DV. relative congruence.

Appendix VI. Further robustness checks of main analysis.

Table A7. Analysis without effective number of parties.

Figure A18. Replication of Figure 3 (Linear prediction of congruence, interaction party type and centrism) based on model excluding the effective number of parties.

Table A8. Main analysis without controls.

Figure A19. Replication of Figure 3 (Linear prediction of congruence, interaction party type and centrism), model without controls.

Notes

1. The more fine-grained distinction of party families, on the other hand, does not add explanatory power (Belchior, 2013).
2. Furthermore, mainstream parties are especially responsive to opinion leaders among their voters (Adams and Ezrow, 2009). As this analysis is targeting the overall ideological congruence between voters and parties, sub-groups among voters are, however, not incorporated.
3. To test the consequences of this decision, the whole analysis was replicated using the MARPOR provided RILE score. The results can be found in Supplemental Appendix III; the analysis yields the same results.
4. For the resulting category allocations, see Franzmann (2010).
5. A possible objection to the use of Manifesto Project data is that their coding scheme does not reflect the full spectrum of possible intra-party conflict because of missing negative categories. While it cannot solve this possible problem, the method discussed above by Franzmann and Kaiser (2006) alleviates it.
6. Choosing the median is less sensitive to relatively weak but extreme positions within a party that might exist but are of little consequence for the overall party position.
7. A further temporal aspect in responsiveness and congruence is highlighted by Best et al. (2018: 13–15), who show that government responsiveness to the median voter is a long-term process that evens out

individual governments' incongruences if government parties alternate frequently. Such a (very) long-term perspective is, however, less applicable to representation by parties.

8. Furthermore, the ratio between party size and the standard deviation of the distribution needs to be defined. Looking at it from the side of the election result, it is feasible to assume that a party that spans the whole left-right dimension should win 100 per cent of all voters, if the latter are normally distributed and vote according to the rationale of best match on the left-right dimension. Translating the 100 per cent example into standard deviations means that 95 per cent of the distribution should cover 95 per cent of the dimension. Turning this logic around would mean that a party with 50 per cent vote share would span 50 per cent of the left-right dimension. For a party with 50 per cent vote share, thus, the standard deviation is 23.75 points.
9. I create 1000 data points for every party per election in such a way that their attributed left-right positions form a normal distribution with the specified characteristics. Strictly speaking, this is not a data simulation, which includes random error, but the creation of data points that adhere exactly to the specific parameters.
10. This means that supporters outside the party-position distribution are perceived as not represented. This effect assumes that voters too far away from a party are generally not represented by this party, no matter how far they are away. In substantive terms, this is the argument that it does not matter that a conservative voter might technically be better represented by a socialist party than a communist party; this voter is assumed to be represented by neither of them.
11. Replication of the following analysis using both alternative measures as dependent variable shows that they are insensitive to important differences between party types (see Supplemental Appendix V).
12. A test for the superiority of multi-level models, with countries as second level, shows an intra-class correlation index (ICC) of 0.07. This suggests that such a model is not superior. Furthermore, using a two-level model with countries as the second level as the strategy for the full model yields the same results as the analysis presented here.
13. This is also confirmed by Figure A5 in Supplemental Appendix II, which shows the steady and significant decline of congruence with increasing distance to the centre of the left-right dimension.

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