

Responsiveness when parties are “weak”: A candidate-based analysis of voter-party congruence in Europe

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Abstract

Outside the US, the crucial question of how well politicians represent the preferences of voters is usually investigated at the party level. Reversing this perspective, we examine representation in Europe from the point of view of individual candidates running in national parliamentary elections. This is especially insightful in a period that seems characterized by a decline in parties' representational capacities and an increasing personalization of politics.

We analyze representation by considering the incongruence between candidates' left-right positions and the average placement of their party voters. By combining candidate survey data with mass survey data on voters, we assess how ideological incongruence varies according to predictors measured at the levels of candidates, parties, and party systems. The results highlight a systematic association between a partisan style of representation and candidates' proximity to voters, as well as the interactions between representational roles and factors such as the anti-establishment nature of parties and ideological polarization in the party system.

Keywords:

Representation, Candidates, Political Parties, Congruence, Left-right, Europe.

Forward to the past?

How well do politicians represent their voters? In their seminal article “Constituency influence in Congress”, Miller and Stokes (1963) answered that it depended on three conditions. Voters should choose a representative who shares their ideas; they should be able to punish unresponsive representatives at the next election; and, last but not least, voters should be knowledgeable about the opinion of the candidates, a condition not considered an untenable assumption (Eulau and Karpis, 1977). In a context of uninominal electoral systems and weak parties such as that of the US, Miller and Stokes thought that the quality of the representation nexus differed more among issue domains and in regard to the individual characteristics of the (elected and prospective) candidates than among the voters of a constituency. When empirical studies on representation began in Europe, the question of how representation works changed. It became how well parties, with their distinct policy platforms and almost stable ideological leanings, are able to reflect the points of view of their voters. This approach was named the “responsible party government” model, since in a context where PR electoral systems and multi-party competition are predominant, parties – not individual representatives – were the main representative agent (see, e.g., Converse and Pierce, 1986; Dalton, 1985; Di Virgilio and Segatti, 2016; Thomassen, 1994; Vandeleene et al., 2019). Consequently, in Europe the analytical focus became different from that of Miller and Stokes: European studies have mainly evaluated the extent to which party voters’ views correspond to the aggregated (averaged) ideological stances or issue opinions of their party representatives.

Miller and Stokes’ approach and the European one share a common conceptual premise. Representing a voter means acting in responsive way, i.e. taking into account her/his wills (Pitkin, 1967). The best proxy for it is the degree of congruence between the representatives and the represented. Understanding which factors can influence congruence between individual politicians and voters is the main research question addressed in this article. As in the two aforementioned approaches, our article conceives responsiveness as congruence. However, our analytical perspective takes the side of Miller and Stokes, since we examine representation from the point of view of individual politicians – here, candidates for legislative offices. Differently from the European approach, our goal is to assess which factors make candidates more congruent with the average opinion of their voters, not the other way around.¹

Going back to Miller and Stokes is theoretically rewarding because the triangular relationship between voters, representatives and parties at the core of the responsible party model of representation

¹ Giebler and Wessels’ (2013) and Belchior’s (2013) works are among the very few recent contributions that consider the representational nexus from the point of view of the representatives. The same perspective is adopted in the literature analyzing the accuracy of politicians’ perceptions of voters’ views (Clausen et al., 1983).

appears under strain in many European countries. According to this model, parties are the agents of voters and at the same time the principals of the candidates (De Winter et al., 2020). Although the evidence is mixed, the double role of parties seems to become weaker (Rahat and Kenig, 2018). Leader personalization, decline of the party on the ground as a primary socialization agency, candidate centered campaign activities, and consequently growing importance of candidates' traits as "information shortcuts" – all of these are processes that increase the prominence of the direct relationship between prospective representatives and their represented (Cutler, 2002; Shugart et al., 2005; McAllister, 2007; Adam and Maier, 2010; Van Biezen et al., 2012; Costa Lobo and Curtice, 2015; Van Aelst et al., 2016). The aim of this article is not to ascertain whether and how the role of parties as principals of their candidates is declining, but to look at the potential consequences of it by raising also a relative novel research question in Europe. What are the candidates' characteristics that make them congruent with their voters, and how are they conditioned by certain party- and election-level characteristics?

Congruence is conceived as the ideological distance between candidates' self-placement on the left-right spectrum and the self-placement of their voters. To explain variation in the degree of congruence, we take into account three sets of factors: along with properties of parties and election-specific determinants (i.e. the "usual suspects"), we examine predictors measured at the level of individual candidates. We expect all these factors to have direct effects on the level of congruence. At the same time, we claim that party- and election-specific characteristics condition the effects of candidates' individual characteristics on the degree of ideological distance with their voters.

The article is organized as follows. The next section discusses the main factors that can influence the degree of ideological congruence between party members and voters. In particular, we consider individual attributes, party properties, and election-specific determinants. In the third section we present the comparative dataset that we constructed, which combines candidate survey data with mass survey data on voters, and illustrate variable operationalization. The fourth section reports the results of a set of multi-level models where candidate-voters distance on the left-right scale was regressed on covariates gauged at three different levels. The final section concludes by summarizing the main findings and pointing to some avenues for future research.

Explaining (in)congruence between party candidates and voters

In most European studies, voters' ideological positions are compared with some indicator of the position of the voted party, considered as a unitary actor. A common strategy is to calculate the absolute distance (or the correlation) between the average self-location of party voters and the average self-location of party members (Barnes, 1977; Converse and Pierce, 1986; Costello et al., 2012;

Dalton, 1985; Dalton et al., 2011; Irwin and Thomassen, 1975; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Miller et al., 1999; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012; Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999; Walczak and Van der Brug, 2013). Fewer studies have analyzed congruence at the individual level, computing the distance between single party voters and the average self-location of party members (e.g., Belchior, 2013; Enyedi et al., 2020).²

Voters' left-right scores are usually drawn from mass post-election surveys. The ideological positions of parties are often derived from elite surveys (where respondents are either candidates or elected officials), while they are sometimes obtained from expert surveys or party manifestos. Parties tend to be treated as unitary entities with a single "ideal point" gauged as the mean of the distribution of the surveyed elite members or of country experts' judgements. In contrast, we explore congruence as a relation between individual candidates and the overall electorate of their party.

In what follows, we identify a set of theoretically relevant attributes of candidates that directly or may conditionally affect their ideological proximity – i.e. congruence – with their electorate. Subsequently, we review the main party-level and election-level determinants highlighted in the literature and outline a number of expectations.

Candidate-level factors

Certain attributes can make candidates particularly close to their voters, thereby reducing incongruence. One of them concerns candidates' career patterns and past political experience, since more experienced politicians are presumably more accurate in identifying the preferences of their party voters. Insofar as politicians strategically choose to take a certain position in the policy space in order to acquire votes, candidates with longer experience should be more congruent with their voters. This is consistent with the argument that lower convergence between parties and greater voter-party congruence may arise because of rational behavior by candidates (Downs 1957).

Secondly, the level of proximity between a candidate and her/his electorate may depend on the style of representation. In this regard, the well-known distinction among "trustees", "delegates" and "partisans" helps understand how a candidate conceives her/his role as a representative (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2005; Converse and Pierce, 1986; Eulau et al., 1959; Giebler and Wessels, 2013). Trustees regard themselves as acting as free individuals, constrained solely by their own judgment. Delegates conceive themselves as advocates of their geographically defined constituency. Finally, partisans perceive their role as representatives of the voters of the party to which they belong. Put

² Some scholars have adopted collective indexes whereby congruence is assessed by comparing the entire preference distribution of a country's voters with the entire preference distribution of members of the national legislature (Andeweg, 2011; Dolný and Baboš, 2015; Golder and Stramski, 2010; Lupu et al., 2017).

simply, those candidates who perceive themselves as partisans should be ideologically closer to the opinions of their party voters than those who perceive themselves as delegates or trustees.³

In examining the influence of representational styles on congruence, a caveat is necessary. We acknowledge that the causal direction could also be the reverse – that is, a close matching with the ideological preferences of the party electorate might induce a candidate to define herself/himself as a partisan. At a minimum, the relationship is bi-directional, dynamic and mutually reinforcing. Following a standard approach in studies of representation, we assume that the style of representation weighs more heavily, as representative roles can be viewed as strategies that politicians choose to achieve their own goals more than something determined by voters' preferences (Strøm, 2012; Önnudóttir, 2014). Indeed, the adoption of a given representational style can be better accounted for by a candidate's socialization and career path, and by the incentives created by the electoral rules under which a candidate operates (Önnudóttir and Von Schoultz, 2020).

Party-level factors

Some individual candidates can be closer to their electorate than other candidates simply because they belong to a party with certain characteristics. Here we take into consideration the size, age and internal cohesion of parties, as well as parties' position with regard to the party system. All else being equal, it can be argued that voter-party congruence is lower for large parties. While small parties can more easily identify the ideological profile of their voters, large parties often propound a wide range of policy positions in order to obtain votes from broad portions of the electorate (Mattila and Raunio, 2006; McEvoy, 2012). We expect also that candidates from parties with a longer electoral history are more congruent with their voters because they probably have better information on their electoral base. Those who run for office in a brand-new party are unlikely to know precisely where their voters are because they do not rely on a well-established and recognizable electoral base. In addition, congruence with voters is probably higher for internally cohesive parties. A party with ideologically heterogeneous members will probably attract voters holding a broad range of policy preferences, which will reduce the congruence between a candidate and the party electorate.⁴ Finally, where parties stand in relation to other parties may matter as well. On the one hand, candidates of anti-establishment parties may be subjectively inaccurate as to the left-right positions of their voters since they tend not to use this ideological yardstick. On the other hand, anti-elite parties, even when locating themselves

³ Another individual-level trait that can affect congruence with the party electorate is a candidate's mode of selection. In analyses we report in the online Appendix 3, however, we found no impact either for the degree of openness or for the level of centralization of selection.

⁴ We thank the anonymous referees for bringing this to our attention.

on the left-right, may misunderstand their voters' positions because the latter are often related to discontent and protest (Van der Brug and Fennema, 2007; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, 2018).

Party characteristics, however, do not only exert a direct effect on the level of ideological congruence of any candidate, irrespectively of who they are. In particular, a few party characteristics might moderate the effects of individual determinants of the level of ideological congruence with their voters. Even candidates with a partisan style of representation and those with a long career might be somehow less close to their voters in ideological terms if they belong to parties with certain characteristics: large size, newness, internal heterogeneity and non-mainstream nature.

Election-level factors

The distance between candidates and their voters may vary among candidates also because of the context in which representatives and the represented interact. Here we focus on two contextual variables routinely considered by academic research: the effects of electoral system and the overall degree of ideological polarization.

As regards the former, systems with strong proportional effects are usually expected to produce levels of voter-party proximity higher than those of majoritarian (i.e. disproportional) systems (Blais and Bodet, 2006; Dalton, 1985; Ezrow, 2010; Golder and Lloyd, 2014; Powell, 2000; Wessels, 1999). As regards the latter, polarization in the party system tends to reduce the policy gap between candidates and voters because programmatic differentiation among parties increases the likelihood that voters will find a party that matches their views (Kim et al., 2010; Powell, 2011). Ideological polarization at election time should strengthen left-right identifications, increase their impact on voting decisions, and hence foster proximity between a candidate and the voters of her/his party.

Besides directly affecting candidate-voters congruence, the effects of electoral rules and ideological polarization can interact with predictors measured at the level of individual candidates. More precisely, the distance between a candidate and her/his party voters can be reduced by her/his political experience and partisan style of representation. However, this is unlikely to hold under certain system-level conditions such as high polarization and limited electoral disproportionality. Insofar as ideology works as a structuring force in national electoral contests (Weber and Franklin, 2018), increasing levels of polarization make candidates' traits less relevant. Similarly, when the electoral system has strong proportional effects (Gallagher, 1991), individual attributes of candidates may be less relevant.

Summing up, in this study we test the following hypotheses:

H1: Candidates with individual traits such as a long political experience and partisan representational style tend to be closer to their party voters in ideological terms.

H2: Party-level characteristics such as party smallness, age, internal cohesion and mainstream nature make all candidates closer to their party voters in ideological terms.

H3: Election-level factors such as the degree of proportionality of electoral rules and left-right polarization make candidates closer to their party voters in ideological terms.

H4: The impact of those candidate-level traits that reduce ideological incongruence should be weaker in the case of large, new, internally heterogeneous and anti-establishment parties.

H5: The impact of those candidate-level traits that reduce ideological incongruence should be weaker when the electoral system has strong proportional effects and when left-right polarization is high.

Many of the factors mentioned in the former three hypotheses are well-known in the literature addressing the variation of ideological congruence from the point of view of the voters. Their effects have not been yet investigated from a candidate-based perspective. The latter two hypotheses constitute the most original contribution offered by this study.

Data and methods

We test the hypotheses outlined above using a comparative dataset that combines information about candidates and voters in 21 European democracies. On the basis of data availability, our data cover parliamentary elections held from 2005 to 2017, for a total of 39 country/election occurrences. Data about candidates were provided by the Comparative Candidates Survey, while data about voters were taken from a number of mass post-election surveys.⁵ To harmonize information obtained from different sources, we converted the variables of interest to common scales. In particular, left-right scores were rescaled to a range from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right).

In our dataset, individual candidates are the units of analysis. After dropping from the dataset those candidates who gave inconsistent answers to the survey questions aimed at assessing how they perceived their representation role, our data comprises 20,311 candidates, 280 parties and 39 elections

⁵ Appendices 1 provides the full list of countries and elections and a summary of the data sources. Descriptive statistics for the variables are given in Appendix 2.

(countries/years). In the analyses, the size of the dataset shrinks further – reaching around 14,000 observations – due to missing information on some socio-demographic covariates in certain national elections.

We operationalize the dependent variable (*Candidate-Voters Incongruence*) as the absolute distance between a candidate’s self-location and the average self-location of those who voted for her/his party in the general elections. The distance between a candidate and her/his voters is assessed along the left-right dimension. Figure 1 provides an overview of how our dependent variable varies across Europe. While the average candidate-voters distance in our selection of countries is relatively low (1.35 on a 0-10 scale), there is considerable variation around this value. On considering the country/year averages plotted in Figure 1, one notes that a distance of just one point is observed between a candidate and her/his party voters in Luxembourg (2009), Greece (2015) and Italy (2013), which present the lowest incongruence on the left-right scale. The greatest degree of incongruence (2.31 points) is found in the Montenegrin elections held in 2012 – that is, the second time that the parliament was elected after the country had formally obtained independence in 2006.

[Figure 1]

As to the independent variables, at the level of individual candidates we gauge their level of political experience with a variable counting the number of times a candidate has run in a general election (*Political Experience*). To measure the candidates’ style of representation, we follow the standard approach based on the perception candidates have of their representational role (Önnudóttir, 2014). We then create three dummies: *Partisan*, *Trustee* and *Delegate*.⁶

Turning to party-level variables, the proxy for *Party Size* is the party’s share of votes, while *Party Age* is gauged counting the number of years between the first post-war election contested by the candidate’s party and the surveyed election. *Party Heterogeneity*, as the standard deviation of candidates’ left-right positions within each party, accounts for the degree at which parties lack internal cohesiveness. The dummy *Anti-Establishment* captures the distinction between mainstream (0) and

⁶ Trustees think they should vote in parliament according to their own opinion in the case of both a conflict between their own opinion and the opinion of voters in their constituency and a conflict between their own opinion and their party’s position. Delegates believe they should vote following the opinions of voters in their constituency in the case of both a disagreement between their own opinion and their voters’ opinion and a disagreement between their voters’ opinion and their party’s position. Partisans think they should toe their party’s line in the case of both a conflict between their own opinion and their party’s position and a conflict between their party’s position and the opinion of voters in their constituency.

anti-establishment (1) parties according to Abedi's (2004) definition.⁷ As a robustness check, we build another indicator using data from the Chapel Hill expert survey (Bakker et al., 2015): *Party Anti-EU*, measuring the overall orientation of the candidate's party towards European integration. Although the anti-establishment status of parties and their degree of Euroskepticism are not the same, we contend that in Europe a pro-EU attitude is a crucial aspect of belonging to the mainstream of a country's political system.

As regards election-level predictors, the *Disproportionality* variable accounts for the disproportionality of electoral systems according to Gallagher's (1991) formula.⁸ The overall degree of ideological polarization in a given election (*Polarization*) is operationalized using Van der Eijk et al.'s (2005) index.⁹

A set of variables control for other factors potentially relevant to explaining the degree of ideological incongruence between candidates and voters. At the individual level, three covariates account for basic socio-demographic traits of would-be representatives: a gender dummy (*Women*), age in years (*Age*), and an ordinal variable with seven categories operationalizing education (*Education*). Since in many countries male politicians are still more likely than women to hold central positions in their party organization (Cotta and Best, 2008; Norris, 2005), female candidates are perhaps farther away from their party electorate than their male colleagues. Moreover, proximity to party voters should be greater in the case of older candidates (as they are supposedly more experienced) and better educated ones (as they are more sophisticated and hence more aware of their voters' opinions).

At the party-level, we control for the ideological position of a candidate's party (*Party LR*), which is obtained as the average left-right self-location of all the candidates belonging to the party. Comparative research – which however has analyzed the topic mainly from a party-level or voter-level perspective – has revealed an empirical regularity whereby proximity to voters is greater for right-wing parties and lower for left-wing parties (Belchior, 2013; Converse and Pierce, 1986). Another characteristic of parties that we take into account is their ideological extremeness. Centrist parties tend to maximize votes in the short term, while ideologically extreme parties often pursue

⁷ Here, mainstream parties are simply defined as those parties that are not anti-establishment.

⁸ For any national election, Gallagher's index is computed as $\sqrt{\frac{1}{2} \sum (v_i - s_i)^2}$, where v_i and s_i are the percentages of votes and seats for party i , respectively.

⁹ Polarization is calculated as $\sum_i (|5 - p_i| * v_i)$, where p_i is the left-right position of party i , v_i is the proportion of votes obtained by i in a given national election, and 5 is the numerical center of the left-right scale. To gain a measure ranging from 0 to 10, we divided the index by its theoretical maximum (5) and multiplied it by 10. Party positions are derived from voters' self-location on the left-right.

long-term strategies. Hence, congruence should be greater in case of centrist parties and lower for far left and far right parties (Przeworski and Sprague 1986). We therefore include *Party Extremeness*, which measures in absolute terms a party's distance from the center (5) of the left-right spectrum.

Finally, at the election-level we control for the democratic record of the country where the election took place. Incongruence between party candidates and voters would be higher in countries that had become democratic more recently, and more limited where democratic elections had a long-standing history. We hence incorporate *Age of Democracy*, which counts the number of years from the first democratic election to the surveyed election.¹⁰

Analysis and results

The dataset that we use is organized on three analytic levels. The most basic units of analysis – individual candidates – are nested in parties, and these are nested in elections (i.e. countries/years). A three-level random effects ANOVA reveals that roughly 2% of the overall variance in the candidate-voters incongruence is explained by the election level, and about 14% of the variance is explained by the party level. The individual level accounts for the remaining variance. To model the hierarchical structure of the data, we run a number of multi-level linear regressions with random intercepts on parties and elections. More precisely, we run three sets of regressions: models combining additively the independent variables at the candidate-level, party-level and election-level (Table 1); models where candidate-level covariates are interacted with party-level covariates (Table 2); and models where candidate-level covariates are interacted with election-level covariates (Table 3). We present the models' results in the same order and comment on the most relevant among them.¹¹ Note that in each table a positive sign for coefficients means higher distance (i.e. greater incongruence), while a negative sign indicates lower distance (lower incongruence).

¹⁰ Of course, many other election-level factors can be relevant. For example, the observed degree of incongruence can increase in elections where non-policy considerations lead voters to defect from the party they would usually support for ideological reasons (Warwick, 2016). As an instance of this type of non-policy factors, variations in the unemployment rate (as compared to the average of the four previous years, lagged) were controlled for in Appendix 5. However, this variable has no impact. In Appendix 6 we controlled for other election-level factors: countries' socio-economic development (through the Human Development Index), the degree of "candidate centeredness" of electoral systems (through an index proposed by Shugart, 2001), and differences between post-Communist countries and the rest of Europe. We found that incongruence measured at the candidate-level is lower in more affluent and developed countries, while tends to increase in more candidate-centered systems (which are also the more majoritarian ones) and post-Communist countries (where there is less consensus on the meaning of "left" and "right"; see Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012).

¹¹ The full set of model specifications is given in Appendix 7 and 8.

Additive models

Table 1 reports results from analyses that additively incorporate candidate-level, party-level and election-level determinants. Starting from individual-level predictors, we observe that the style of representation is systematically associated with reductions in candidates' incongruence with the party voters (H1). As hypothesized, the positive coefficients on *Delegate* imply that delegates are more incongruent with their party voters than partisans (the omitted baseline category). At the same time, trustees are not systematically found to be more incongruent than partisans: although always positive, the coefficient on *Trustee* never reaches standard levels of significance. Contrary to our expectations, a candidate's long political experience does not reduce incongruence, since those who have run as a candidate in a general election many times in the past are not closer to the voters of their own party. With regard to the socio-demographic control variables, almost all the estimated coefficients go in the expected direction. Female candidates tend to be more incongruent with their party voters than male candidates. Age affects incongruence following a quadratic function, as the youngest candidates and the oldest candidates are more incongruent with their party voters than the middle-aged ones. Moreover, better educated candidates are less distant from their party voters.

[Table 1]

Turning to party-level covariates, our data support the hypothesis that the smallness, the age, the internal cohesion and the mainstream nature of parties bring all candidates near to their party voters in ideological terms (H2). All else being equal, candidates are more distant from their party electorate if they belong to a larger party, while they are closer to their voters if they are members of a party with a longer electoral history (with the exception of Model 3). Moreover, candidates are farther away from the voters of their party if the latter is more internally heterogeneous. In addition, candidates of anti-establishment parties are more incongruent with the party voters than candidates of mainstream parties (again with the exception of Model 3).¹² Arguably, anti-elite parties may well be closer to their voters on policy dimensions other than the left-right. As expected, Table 1 also shows that candidates belonging to more right-wing parties are less distant from their party voters, while candidates belonging to more leftist parties are farther away from their party electorate. Furthermore, incongruence is more pronounced for candidates whose party is more ideologically extreme.

¹² Similarly, candidates are more distant from their electorate the more Euroskeptic is the party to which they belong (see Appendix 4).

In regard to election-level predictors, our results only partially support H3. As the negative and statistically significant coefficients on *Polarization* indicate, higher differentiation among parties on the left-right scale reduces the distance between candidates and their electorate, which resonates with the literature on ideological congruence. At the same time, however, the disproportionality of the electoral system has no impact on ideological proximity gauged at the level of individual candidates. Finally, the election-level control variable that we introduced does not affect incongruence: candidates running for office in older democracies are not closer to their party voters.

Interactive models

We now explore a few cross-level interactions between factors at different levels of analysis. To begin with, we assess whether the effects of individual determinants – a long record of political experience and representative styles – on ideological incongruence/congruence, are moderated by a few key party properties: size, age, internal heterogeneity and non-mainstream nature. Our argument is that the effects of the individual attributes that increase the congruence (i.e. decrease the distance) with their voters are altered by specific party characteristics. In particular, hypothesis H4 states that ideological proximity increases for candidates with a partisan style of representation and with a long record of political experience, but this does not happen if they belong to a party that is large, brand-new, internally heterogeneous or anti-establishment. To test this hypothesis, in each model we include a cross-level interaction term. Table 2 reports the most relevant regression results, and Figures 2 and 3 display the significant interaction effects.

[Table 2]

The analysis offers some empirical support for H4. Specifically, candidates' electoral history interacts with two party properties (age and mainstream nature), while representational styles interact with party type and (albeit to a limited extent) with party size. The two graphs in Figure 2 display the expected marginal impact of candidates' record of political experience on the degree of incongruence with their party electorate, as estimated for different values of party age and party type. In particular, the upper panel reveals that a candidate's longer political experience does reduce incongruence with her/his voters when her/his party is older than 50 – a condition that applies to about 50% of the observations in our sample. Similarly, candidates' experience decreases incongruence in the case of mainstream parties, but not in the case of anti-establishment parties (lower panel). This implies that a candidate seems better able to identify accurately the ideological stances of her/his party voters only if she/he is member of a non anti-establishment party or of a relatively old party. The impact of

political experience on incongruence is instead undiscernible from zero for any percentage of votes that a party won and for any level of party cohesiveness (see Appendix 7).

[Figure 2]

The marginal effects plotted in Figure 3 lend some support to the expectation that the impact of representational styles on incongruence is conditional on party-level traits. From visual inspection of the upper graph it appears that being a delegate rather than a partisan-type of candidate increases incongruence only for small and medium-sized parties (i.e. between 10% and 25% of votes), which are about 30% of the observations. In other words, while styles of representation do not matter for large parties (as hypothesized), they do not seem to matter either for very small parties. As to party type, the lower graph supports our expectation: compared to partisans, delegates are more distant from their party electorate if they are members of a mainstream party, but not if they belong to an anti-establishment party. At the same time, results concerning the interaction of styles of representation with party age and heterogeneity do not clearly support our expectations (see Appendix 7).¹³

[Figure 3]

Turning to the possible interactions between individual-level and election-level variables, Table 3 reports analyses showing the extent to which the effects of candidates' styles of representation on incongruence are moderated by the degree of polarization in a given election and the disproportionality of the electoral rules. We conjectured that those individual attributes that reduce ideological incongruence between a candidate and the party voters may have a weaker effect when left-right divergence is sizable and when the electoral system has strong proportional effects (H5). The marginal effects of the two interactions are illustrated graphically in Figure 4.¹⁴

[Table 3]

¹³ As to representational styles, being a delegate (rather than a partisan) seems to increase a candidate's incongruence with voters when party cohesion is low. Although unexpected, this finding is not robust as it holds only in a very small sub-sample of the data.

¹⁴ Analyses including interactions between the other individual-level predictor – *Political Experience* – and election-level factors are given in Appendix 8. Results reveal that the impact of candidates' past experience is undiscernible from zero across the whole range of polarization and disproportionality scores.

Figure 4 seems to lend partial support to the idea that the impact of a partisan style of representation in reducing incongruence is stronger when polarization is low, and it is weaker when polarization is high. Close inspection of the graph reveals that styles of representation matter not for the entire range of the polarization index, but “only” for polarization scores between 2.5 and 3.5, an interval that represents as much as 60% of the observations in our sample. In this large subsample of the data, the impact of being delegate rather than partisan increases incongruence, and this effect has the hypothesized negative slope. Put differently, if we exclude elections with an extremely low polarization, we observe what we expected: as left-right polarization grows, the impact of a key individual attribute such as the style of representation becomes weaker, approaching zero above a certain threshold. At the same time, the difference between trustees and partisans (shown in Appendix 8) is never significant.

The findings appear less clear when examining the interaction between styles of representation and the disproportionality of the electoral system (Model 10). The impact of representational styles becomes weaker when disproportionality is lower. However, the estimated effects are never significant, the only exception being those national elections with disproportionality scores between 4 and 9. In these cases, delegate-type candidates are more incongruent with their voters than their colleagues adopting a partisan style. To be noted is that these elections represent less than 20% of the observations – that is, a very small subsample of our data (see Appendix 8).

[Figure 4]

Closing remarks

Democratic representation, understood as preference congruence between voters and members of the political elites, has seldom been investigated from the perspective of individual politicians. When such investigation has been undertaken, the focus has been almost entirely on the US Congress, and the analysis has typically involved the relation between elected representatives and their geographical constituency in a context in which parties on the ground were not structured the way they were in Europe. Here, parties prominent in the representational linkage nurtured a more party-centered tradition of studies, by discouraging research on congruence from adopting the point of view of individual representatives. This article helps fill this gap by exploring the degree of ideological congruence between candidates running for a legislative seat and their party electorate. In particular, it has evaluated how ideological proximity between a candidate and the voters of her/his party is shaped by factors measured at three levels of analysis: the candidate level, the party level, and the

election level. Used for this purpose have been data on candidates and voters in 39 national elections held across Europe in the last fifteen years.

Given the goal of this article and the nature of the data used, we are not in a position to assess whether European parties have become weaker or stronger if compared to the past. However, we can argue that individual candidates' attributes do affect ideological congruence with voters. Our analyses reveal the prominent role of representational styles. Those who perceive their role according to a strictly partisan logic are closer to their party voters than those who think that representatives should behave as delegates of their geographical constituency. Many of our findings regarding party-level and election-level determinants are consistent with extant congruence scholarship adopting a voter- or party-perspective. Our analyses highlight that congruence is greater for smaller, older, and mainstream parties. These types of parties are particularly able to bring together voters and candidates with similar policy preferences. Although our data do not enable us to assess whether party cohesiveness is declining, we also found that candidates and voters are farther apart when parties are internally divided. Moreover, congruence is enhanced by the overall ideological polarization in the party system, while electoral disproportionality fails to show any impact.

The most interesting results reported by this article concern the interactions between individual sources of congruence and factors measured at the level of parties and at higher levels. Notably, candidates' role orientations matter especially for certain types of parties. A closer match with voters is observed in the case of partisans (*vis-à-vis* delegates) not for any type of party, but only for non anti-establishment parties and for small and medium-sized parties. We also discovered that a politician's past electoral experience, which does not seem to matter *per se*, improves congruence with voters when she/he runs for office in a mainstream and relatively old party. We also found that the internal ideological heterogeneity of parties, however, does not clearly moderate the effects of individual characteristics. The findings are more mixed as regards the relationships between candidates' traits and election-level characteristics. On the one hand, the disproportionality of electoral rules does not alter the impact of candidates' attributes. On the other hand, we found some evidence that the impact of a partisan style of representation in reducing incongruence is stronger when ideological polarization is lower, and it is weaker when polarization is high.

Finally, our findings bring us to an issue that has been only marginally addressed in this article, namely the key role of the left-right axis in affecting the quality of representation in terms of ideological congruence. If candidates are ideologically closer to their voters when party divergence on the left-right is large, one could expect that also the representatives, not only for the represented, benefit from party distinctiveness. In other words, in the presence of polarization the categories of left and right seem to work as powerful heuristics not only for voters, but for politicians as well. As

a consequence, to the extent that political elites seek congruence with voters, they may have incentives to differentiate party programs along the general left-right. This is a question that undoubtedly warrants further empirical analysis.

Tables and figures

Table 1. Determinants of candidate-voters ideological incongruence in Europe. Candidate-level, party-level and election-level predictors.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Level: candidate	Level: candidate + party	Level: candidate + party	Level: candidate + party + election
Political Experience	-0.009 (0.008)	-0.010 (0.008)	-0.010 (0.008)	-0.010 (0.008)
Style: Trustee	0.010 (0.021)	0.012 (0.021)	0.012 (0.022)	0.012 (0.021)
Style: Delegate	0.054** (0.024)	0.053** (0.024)	0.051** (0.024)	0.055** (0.024)
Women	0.040* (0.023)	0.040* (0.023)	0.038* (0.023)	0.039* (0.023)
Age	-0.017*** (0.005)	-0.017*** (0.005)	-0.016*** (0.005)	-0.018*** (0.005)
Age X Age	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
Education	-0.031*** (0.010)	-0.032*** (0.010)	-0.031*** (0.010)	-0.032*** (0.010)
Party Size		0.009*** (0.003)	0.006*** (0.002)	0.009*** (0.003)
Party Age		-0.003** (0.002)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.003** (0.002)
Anti-Establishment		0.121** (0.062)	-0.018 (0.042)	0.134** (0.058)
Party Heterogeneity			0.732*** (0.125)	
Party LR		-0.051*** (0.011)	-0.048*** (0.010)	-0.048*** (0.012)
Party Extremeness			0.081*** (0.021)	
Polarization				-0.087** (0.034)
Disproportionality				-0.011 (0.008)
Age of Democracy				0.000 (0.001)
Constant	1.904*** (0.118)	2.085*** (0.160)	0.832*** (0.222)	2.420*** (0.201)
<i>Variance component:</i>				
Election	0.012*** (0.007)	0.017*** (0.005)	0.005*** (0.002)	0.009*** (0.003)
Party	0.141*** (0.017)	0.100*** (0.013)	0.045*** (0.005)	0.099*** (0.013)

Residual	0.920*	0.921	0.922	0.921
	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.023)
N	14535	14535	14535	14535
Log-likelihood	-20251.33	-20230.22	-20172.55	-20225.95
AIC	40524.66	40490.44	40379.10	40487.91
BIC	40608.09	40604.20	40508.04	40624.43

Notes: Multi-level linear regressions with random intercepts on election and party. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Omitted category for Style of representation: *Partisan*. Statistical significance: * p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01.

Table 2. Determinants of candidate-voters ideological incongruence in Europe. Interactions between candidate-level and party-level predictors.

	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Interaction: N. Elections X Party Age	Interaction: N. Elections X Anti-Establ.	Interaction: Style X Party Size	Interaction: Style X Anti-Establ.
Political Experience	0.021 (0.019)	-0.019** (0.008)	-0.011 (0.008)	-0.010 (0.008)
Style: Trustee	0.012 (0.021)	0.012 (0.021)	-0.046** (0.020)	0.013 (0.021)
Style: Delegate	0.055** (0.024)	0.055** (0.024)	0.033 (0.030)	0.064*** (0.022)
Party Size	0.009*** (0.003)	0.009*** (0.003)	0.008*** (0.003)	0.009*** (0.003)
Party Age	-0.003** (0.001)	-0.004** (0.002)	-0.004** (0.002)	-0.003** (0.002)
Anti-Establishment	0.133** (0.058)	0.088 (0.059)	0.132** (0.057)	0.150** (0.062)
Political Experience X Party Age	-0.001* (0.000)			
Political Experience X Anti-Establishment		0.052** (0.025)		
Trustee X Party Size			0.004** (0.001)	
Delegate X Party Size			0.001 (0.002)	
Trustee X Anti-Establishment				-0.008 (0.053)
Delegate X Anti-Establishment				-0.045 (0.064)
Polarization	-0.084** (0.034)	-0.086** (0.034)	-0.085** (0.034)	-0.086** (0.034)
Disproportionality	-0.010 (0.008)	-0.010 (0.008)	-0.011 (0.008)	-0.01 (0.008)
Women	0.040* (0.023)	0.039* (0.023)	0.039* (0.023)	0.039* (0.023)
Age	-0.018*** (0.004)	-0.018*** (0.004)	-0.018*** (0.005)	-0.018*** (0.005)
Age X Age	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
Education	-0.031*** (0.010)	-0.032*** (0.010)	-0.032*** (0.010)	-0.032*** (0.010)
Party LR	-0.048*** (0.012)	-0.048*** (0.012)	-0.048*** (0.012)	-0.048*** (0.012)
Age of Democracy	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)
Constant	2.372*** (0.204)	2.421*** (0.199)	2.448*** (0.199)	2.415*** (0.199)

<i>Variance component:</i>				
Election	0.008*** (0.003)	0.008*** (0.003)	0.009*** (0.003)	0.009*** (0.003)
Party	0.099*** (0.013)	0.101*** (0.014)	0.100*** (0.013)	0.099*** (0.013)
Residual	0.921 (0.023)	0.920* (0.023)	0.921* (0.023)	0.921 (0.023)
N	14535	14535	14535	14535
Log-likelihood	-20224.07	-20222.39	-20223.44	-20225.61
AIC	40486.14	40482.77	40486.875	40491.211
BIC	40630.25	40626.87	40638.562	40642.898

Notes: Multi-level linear regressions with random intercepts on election and party. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Omitted category for Style of representation: *Partisan*. Statistical significance: * p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01.

Table 3. Determinants of candidate-voters ideological incongruence in Europe. Interactions between candidate-level and election-level predictors.

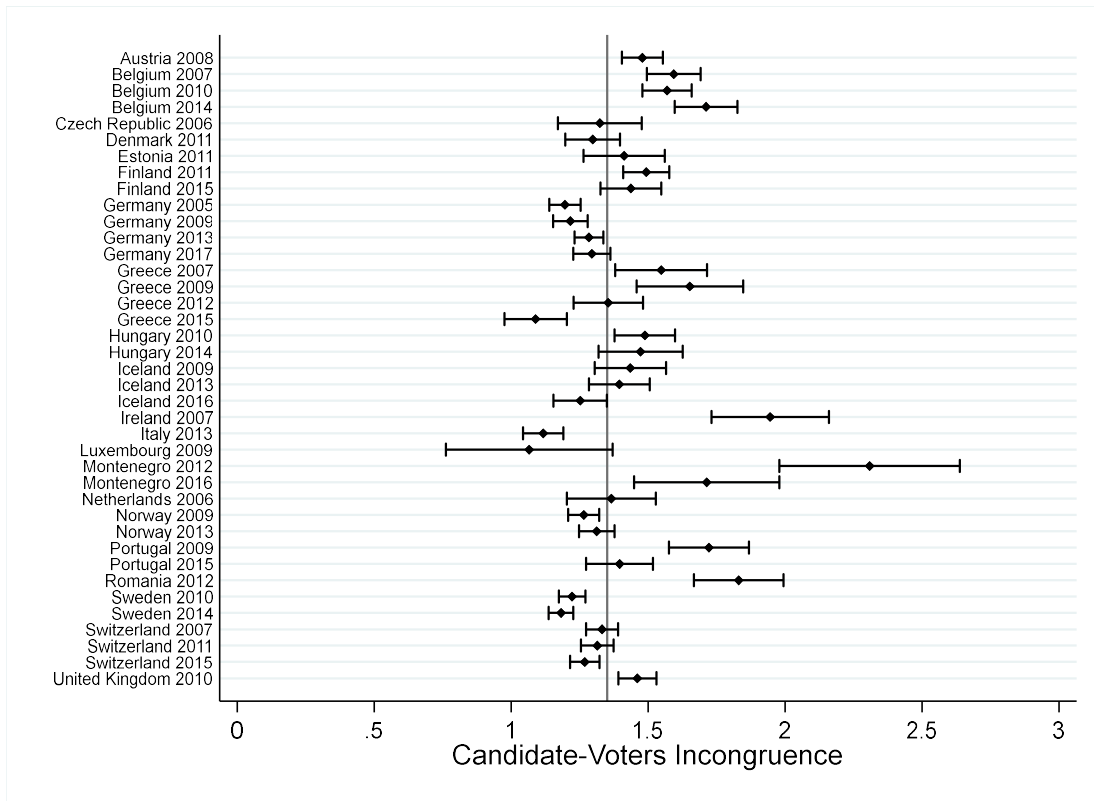
	(9)	(10)
	Interaction: <i>Style</i> X <i>Polarization</i>	Interaction: <i>Style</i> X <i>Disproportionality</i>
Political Experience	-0.010 (0.008)	-0.010 (0.008)
Style: Trustee	-0.042 (0.067)	-0.023 (0.030)
Style: Delegate	0.089 (0.118)	0.043 (0.036)
Party Size	0.009*** (0.003)	0.009*** (0.003)
Party Age	-0.003** (0.001)	-0.003** (0.002)
Anti-Establishment	0.136** (0.058)	0.133** (0.058)
Polarization	-0.089** (0.038)	-0.085** (0.035)
Disproportionality	-0.010 (0.008)	-0.014* (0.007)
Trustee X Polarization	0.018 (0.023)	
Delegate X Polarization	-0.011 (0.036)	
Trustee X Disproportionality		0.007 (0.005)
Delegate X Disproportionality		0.003 (0.006)
Women	0.039* (0.023)	0.039* (0.023)
Age	-0.018*** (0.005)	-0.018*** (0.005)
Age X Age	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
Education	-0.032*** (0.010)	-0.032*** (0.010)
Party LR	-0.048*** (0.012)	-0.048*** (0.012)
Age of Democracy	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)
Constant	2.423*** (0.211)	2.435*** (0.200)
<i>Variance component:</i>		
Election	0.008*** (0.003)	0.009*** (0.003)
Party	0.099***	0.099***

	(0.013)	(0.013)
Residual	0.921	0.921*
	(0.023)	(0.023)
N	14535	14535
Log-likelihood	-20225.38	-20224.72
AIC	40490.75	40489.43
BIC	40642.44	40641.12

Notes: Multi-level linear regressions with random intercepts on election and party. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

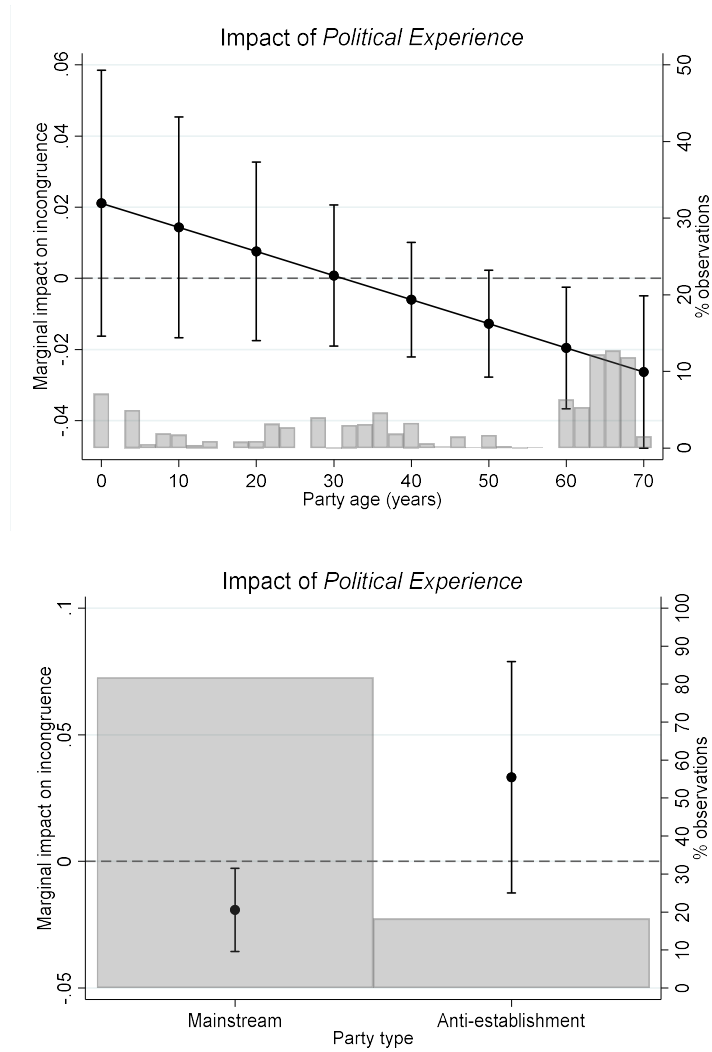
Omitted category for Style of representation: *Partisan*. Statistical significance: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Figure 1. Average candidate-voters ideological incongruence in Europe, by election.



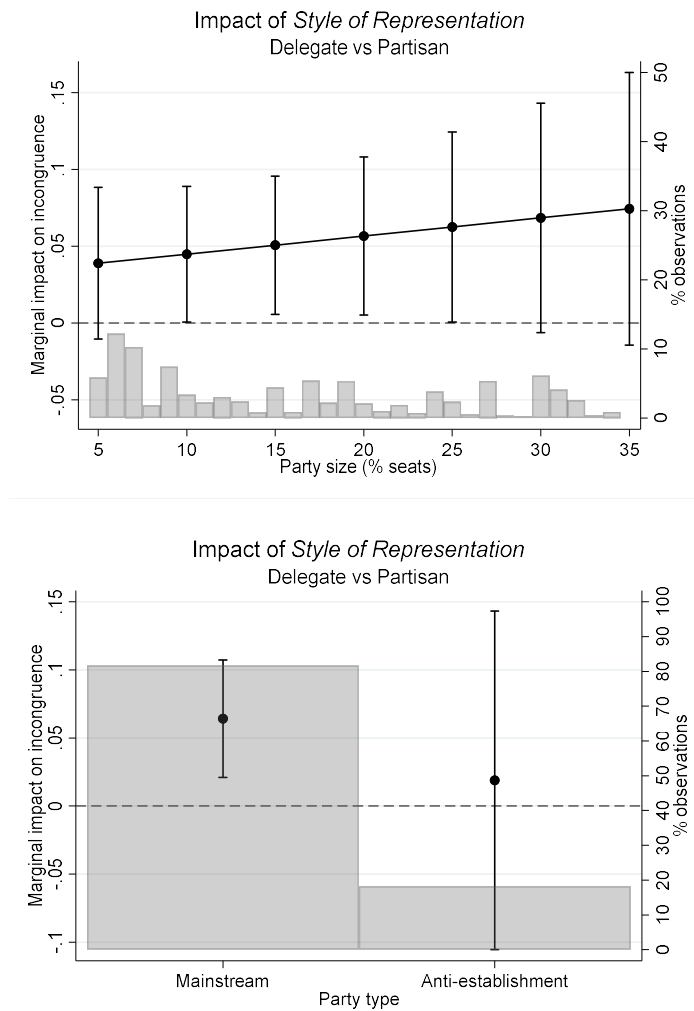
Notes: Average *Candidate-Voters Incongruence* by election, with 95% confidence intervals. The vertical line represents the overall mean in the dataset.

Figure 2. Impact of candidates' past experience on candidate-voters incongruence, by party age and type.



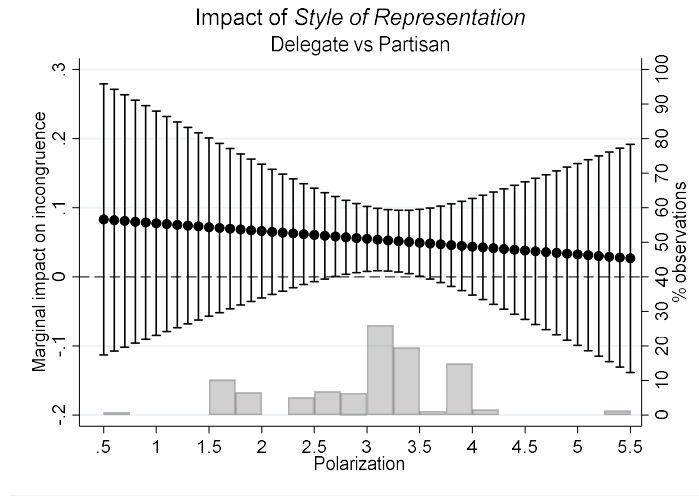
Notes: Marginal effects estimated from Model 5 (upper panel) and Model 6 (lower panel). In each graph, the black dots indicate the impact of *Political Experience* on incongruence at a given value of the party-level variable represented on the horizontal axis. Whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals. The superimposed histogram displays the distribution of candidates according to the party-level variable.

Figure 3. Impact of candidates' representational styles on candidate-voters incongruence, by party size and type.



Notes: Marginal effects estimated from Model 7 (upper panel) and Model 8 (lower panel). In each graph, the black dots indicate the impact of being a delegate-type (as opposed to a partisan-type) of candidate on incongruence at a given value of the party-level variable represented on the horizontal axis. Whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals. The superimposed histogram displays the distribution of candidates according to the party-level variable.

Figure 4. Impact of candidates' representational styles on candidate-voters incongruence, by levels of ideological polarization.



Notes: Marginal effects estimated from Model 9. The black dots indicate the impact of being a delegate-type (as opposed to a partisan-type) of candidate on incongruence at a given value of the ideological polarization. Whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals. The superimposed histogram displays the distribution of candidates according to polarization.

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