Ideological Congruence Beyond Electoral Systems: Responsibility, Responsiveness, and Particularized Electorates*

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Abstract. Proximity between voters’ ideological positions and governments’ enacted policies is a major goal of liberal democratic systems. Unsurprisingly, a number of studies have analyzed the congruence between citizens’ and (government) parties and conclude that it is largely determined by electoral institutions and party system features. In this paper I argue that the “ideological congruence controversy” (Powell 2013) of the recent years has suffered from a blind spot relating to the empirical changes that parties – thus governments – and electorates have gone through. The ideological congruence controversy has failed to notice that the central actors of its theory may have dramatically changed. In order to overcome this deficient state of the art, this paper sets out to integrate arguments regarding governments’ increased difficulty to fulfill both, democracy’s demands for responsiveness on the one hand and for responsibility on the other (Mair 2013), into explanations of ideological congruence between governments and voters. Analyzing ideological congruence in 14 Western European democracies over the period 1981-2012 the paper finds that party organizational characteristics matter when it comes to explaining congruence. Similarly processes of European integration are found to affect the proximity between voters and governments. Lastly, with regard to the effects of election rules and party system characteristics, the study provides some support for the claim that electoral institutions matter. They appear to do so, however, in unanticipated ways.
Introduction

Proximity between voters’ ideological positions and governments’ enacted policies is a major goal of liberal democratic systems (Kim et al. 2010, 167). Unsurprisingly thus, a number of studies have analyzed the relationship between citizens’ and governments’ ideological position, dubbing it with the term of “ideological congruence” (e.g. Powell 2013, 10). Treating governments as unitary actors whose policy preferences – and accordingly, the policies enacted, the ideological position taken, and eventually the degree of ideological congruence achieved – are largely determined by the process of electoral competition, election outcomes, and government formation (e.g. Huber & Powell 1994, 296-301), the ideological congruence literature has largely revolved around the effects of election rules (Huber & Powell 1994). In that respect the “ideological congruence controversy” (Powell 2009) of the recent years, has been beneficial for the theorizing about causes of varying levels of ideological congruence, extending the literature’s narrow focus on electoral system effects that has been predominant for a long time; it has identified new explanatory factors (Kim et al. 2010; Powell 2013) and revised theoretical mechanisms linking electoral systems with ideological congruence (Blais & Bodet 2006; Golder & Stramski 2010; Golder & Lloyd 2014).

Unfortunately, it seems that this focus on arguments, stemming from the centre of the debate, has created a blind spot with regard to another strand of the literature that provides important insights worth to be considered when thinking about representation in general, and ideological congruence in particular. Mair (2009; 2013), for example, has argued that within the last centuries encompassing changes regarding the link between voters and parties, as well as increased demands for parties in government to act according to external expectations have narrowed down parties’ capability to be responsive to voters’ preferences (Mair 2009; 2013). The ideological congruence controversy has failed to acknowledge the theoretical value of studies concerned with the changes regarding voters, parties and governments that have been ongoing over recent decades (e.g. Katz & Mair 1995; Mair 2009; 2013). It has failed to notice that the central actors of its theory may have dramatically changed. Existing explanations of levels of ideological congruence are thus potentially flawed.

In order to overcome this deficient state of the art, this paper sets out to integrate arguments regarding governments’ increased difficulty to fulfill both, democracy’s demands for responsiveness on the one hand and for responsibility on the other (Mair 2009; 2013), into explanations of ideological congruence in the tradition of Huber and Powell (1994). It argues that govern-
ments’ reduced capability “to listen to voters and to understand, aggregate or process their demands” (Mair 2013, 153) as well as their waning room for maneuver due to demands of responsibility need to be incorporated into theoretical explanations of ideological congruence. It asks the question of whether the factors identified by Mair (2009; 2013) can contribute to the explanation of ideological congruence. More precisely it queries to what extent (a) party organizational characteristics (membership), (b) particularized electorates, and (c) increased demands to act responsibly (globalization, Europeanization, and legacies of the past) affect the level of ideological congruence between voters and their governments.

Analyzing 14 established Western European democracies over the period 1981-2012 the study provides a number of interesting results. Firstly, as expected, it backs the claim that party organizational characteristics matter. The larger the membership base of government parties, and thus the more they are embedded in the electorate, the higher are levels of ideological congruence reached. Secondly, the study finds that ideological congruence varies systematically, and in unexpected ways, with the deepening scope of European integration. With increasing European integration, and according higher pressures to adhere to the principle of responsibility, government ideological positions become more congruent with those of median voters. Lastly, with regard to the effects of election rules and party system characteristics, the study provides some support for the claim that electoral institutions matter. They appear to do so, however, in unanticipated ways. Conditional on the effective number of legislative parties, electoral institutions affect ideological congruence between citizens and their governments, with majoritarian systems reaching higher levels of congruence the more parties are represented in parliament. Similarly, party system polarization is found to improve ideological congruence in PR systems – two findings that run contrary to expectations and previous research.

Clearly, explanations of ideological congruence need to focus on more than just electoral institutions and party system characteristics. In order to take the reader to this conclusion the rest of the paper will be structured as follows. In the next section (II) the theoretical expectations and empirical findings of the ideological congruence literature will be summarized briefly and contrasted with Mair’s (2009; 2013) argument about the general challenges to responsive government in recent decades. Theoretical expectations and hypotheses will be formulated. The subsequent section (III) contains the empirical analysis. First, it will introduce the data used, followed by the operationalization of the relevant variables, and modeling decisions made. The actual analysis, its results and their interpretation will be presented after that. The final section (IV) concludes and
offers a short outlook on the implications of the presented findings, both for existing liberal democracies and future research agendas.

**Ideological Congruence and Governments between Demands of Responsiveness and Responsibility**

**Classical Explanations and the Ideological Congruence Debate**

Normative democratic theory expects governments to represent the will of the citizenry. A representative government ought to operate in a way that corresponds to the *simple* mechanism described by Dahl (1989, 95) by which “a majority of citizens can induce the government to do what they most want it to do and to avoid doing what they most want it not to do.” This expectation takes into account the fact that the citizens’ will is no uniform and tangible object, and specifies that governments in liberal democracies are demanded to act according to the preferences of a majority of the citizenry. Assuming that voters’ positions are distributed along the ideological left-right dimension in most European democracies (e.g. Kim & Fording 2003), the median voter’s ideological position becomes relevant here. Due to the fact that it is her position that “can defeat any other in a straight vote” (Powell 2013, 11) it is her position that most clearly reflects the majority preference.

“Correspondence between the preferences of the people and the commitments of their chosen representatives” (Kim et al. 2010, 167), what will be referred to here as ideological congruence, is accordingly a major goal of democracy. Unsurprisingly then, a vast amount of literature has taken up the task of evaluating how well the universe of existing liberal democracies fares with regard to this important yardstick. In that respect, until recently there was general agreement about the divergent theoretical mechanisms allowing both “visions of liberal democracy” (Huber & Powell 1994), or “patterns of democracy” (Lijphart 1999), to reach favorable outcomes on that dimension (Powell 2013, 13): In majoritarian democracies, employing majoritarian electoral systems, congruence was hypothesized to be achieved by strategic decisions of party elites to converge towards the ideological position of the median voter. In consensus democracies on the contrary, proportional representation (PR) electoral systems create highly representative legislatures that foster the building of coalition governments. These usually include the party holding the median position along the ideological spectrum and are thus close to the position of the median voter as well (Huber & Powell 1994, 302).

Empirically it was established however, that democracies that followed the “Proportionate Influence vision” (Huber & Powell 1994, 298) and employed PR electoral systems, would systemat-
ically reach higher levels of ideological congruence (e.g. Golder & Lloyd 2014, 200). Recently though, the above mentioned ideological congruence debate has been contesting the validity of this claim. Those questioning the superiority of PR systems with regard to ideological congruence have put considerable effort into revising the hypothesized mechanisms connecting electoral systems and ideological proximity between citizens and governments (Blais & Bodet 2006; Golder & Lloyd 2014). Blais and Bodet (2006, 1246; 1258), for example, have convincingly argued that the overall effect of PR systems on ideological congruence is essentially nil. According to them, PR electoral systems exert contradictory effects, leading to more (in numerical terms), but less centrist parties (increased incongruence) while at the same time stimulating the creation of coalition governments which include the median party (increased congruence).

Authors arguing in support of the superiority of PR systems in fostering ideological congruence, on the contrary, have focused on identifying new explanatory factors that might condition the effect of election rules and have equally convincingly made their case (e.g. Kim et al. 2010; Powell 2013). Importantly, they have added the conditional effects of party system polarization and election rules on ideological congruence to their explanations and are therefore able to provide evidence for their general claim (Kim et al. 2010, 179; Powell 2013, 16). Following these authors, low levels of party system polarization are expected to lead to a low distortion of the median voters’ and government’s position, irrespective of the electoral system. High levels of polarization in majoritarian systems, however, lead to majority parties that are remote from the median voter. Accordingly they lead to higher levels of ideological incongruence as compared to PR systems, in which the presence of the naturally more centrist median party in most government coalitions mitigates the negative effects of polarization (Powell 2013, 13).

Essentially, the ideological congruence controversy has led to a refinement of existing theories and has identified formerly omitted explanatory factors. This theoretical flourishing has undoubtedly advanced our understanding of ideological congruence between voters and governments. However, the self-referential nature of the debate has prevented it from taking up alternative explanations of the subject that have been present in the literature for some time now. It has not acknowledged the fact that parties and voters may have changed considerably in recent decades and that the preconditions for successful representation might simply not be present to the same extent anymore as they used to be some decades ago (cf. Mair 2009; 2013). While electoral systems and party system features might still exert their hypothesized effects, a distortion of the relationship between voters’ and governments’ ideological positions might stem from the increasingly difficult position parties find themselves in, trying to respond to the clashing demands of re-
sponsiveness and responsibility (Mair 2009; 2013). Studies explaining ideological congruence by pointing to the effects of electoral- and party systems, have missed the hunch that their main actors, governments and voters, may have changed in a way that might make it much more complicated for them to represent and to be represented. This reveals a flaw in the literature that needs to be evened out.

**Governments between Responsiveness and Responsibility**

The transformation of parties in the last century has been a prominent topic in the literature and its possible implications have been discussed in a number of studies (e.g. Katz & Mair 1995, 22; Müller 2000; Mair & van Biezen 2001; van Biezen et al. 2011). Similarly, the changes that Western European electorates have been going through, such as individualization and a lower impact of social structural factors on voting decisions, typically visible in higher levels of volatility (Drummond 2006), have been documented and possible consequences have been described (e.g. Andeweg 2003). Furthermore, the effects of processes of globalization and European integration on party positions and party competition have been analyzed in numerous publications (e.g. Ward et al. 2012; Nanou & Dorussen 2013). Taken together, the just cited literature – representing many more contributions – bears the clear implication that voters just as parties have changed, or that they are increasingly constrained in making choices, and that, accordingly, their relationship has likely done the same.

It comes thus as a surprise that scholars analyzing ideological congruence between voters and governments have not included factors such as party organizational change into their explanations so far. It becomes even more surprising that those factors have not been considered, once we realize that there are existing arguments that combine all of them, in an attempt to explain why contemporary governments are less able to be responsive to voters’ preferences as compared to governments some decades ago (Mair 2013) – an issue that resembles that of ideological congruence quite strongly. Mair (2013, 157) defines responsiveness as a process “whereby political leaders or governments listen to and then respond to the demands of citizens and groups”. The connection to the definition of “ideological congruence”, involving “the fit between the preferences of the citizens and the committed policy positions of their representatives” (Powell 2013, 10) is quite strong.

Mair (2013) argues that not only the link between voters and their representatives is getting weaker, but that the once “indirect” and “singular” chain of representation, linking voters with parties and thus with governments, is increasingly under stress. Not only are parties losing
their capability to comprehend and process voters’ demands, but they also “have less freedom in which to treat their voters as principals and to act as their agents” (Mair 2013, 153). Both problems, I argue, directly affect the degree to which governments nowadays are able to match their enacted policies with the preferences of the citizenry. Both problems directly affect the level of ideological congruence.

There are a number of reasons to believe that parties’ capability to comprehend and process voters’ demands is weakening. The organizational development of parties from mass- to top-heavy catch-all, and cartel parties (Katz & Mair 1995) has made it “increasingly difficult” for parties “to know what voters want” (Mair 2013, 154). Voters’ reduced involvement with parties that can be observed by looking at generally decreasing membership figures (van Biezen et al. 2011) deprives parties of an effective tool to gauge voters’ preferences and to position themselves accordingly: Nowadays it might be more difficult for parties to listen directly to voters (Mair 2013, 155) and to involve them in great numbers in their decision making processes. Additionally, it has become more difficult for parties to translate public preferences into coherent public policy, since public preferences have become more fuzzy and diverse due to processes of particularization and individualization of society (Mair 2013, 155). Parties, it seems, may have lost their ability of identifying citizens’ preferences and as a consequence their attempts to achieving ideological congruence should become more erratic.

Next to this difficulty of identifying citizens’ preferences, parties also have less leeway to be responsive to voters’ demands (Mair 2013, 158-9). Responsibility, that is to act according to accepted procedures, to govern consistently and with legal means, and to regard the political legacies of the past (e.g. debt, international treaties, etc.) always needed to be balanced against demands of responsiveness (Mair 2013, 157-59). However, both internal (e.g. to acknowledge obligations of past governments’ decisions), and external demands of responsibility (e.g. to acknowledge obligations to international principals such as the EU) increasingly constrain governments’ discretion over public policy. Legacies of past decisions have always narrowed down governments’ ability to shape public policy (Rose 1990). In alleged times of “neo-liberal convergence” the expectation for governments to abide by the economic paradigm of austerity might amplify this effect (Peters 2012). Furthermore, “by disembedding liberalism, globalization in general and Europeanization in particular create many new principals to whom governments owe account” (Mair 2013, 161). Governments, accordingly, interact with an increasingly higher number of actors. And irrespective of how legitimate the demands of external principals such as the European Union or international money lending institutions in times of economic crisis may be, they constrain the set of
choices governments have at their disposal for public policy making and this in turn affects their ability to approximate voters’ ideological position. As a consequence, ideological congruence should be harder to achieve.

To sum up the theoretical expectations regarding the proximity between voters’ and governments’ ideological position so far, four hypotheses can be formulated. These describe the causal effects of the factors identified by Mair (2013) on levels of ideological congruence:

Looking at parties’ ability to identify citizens’ preferences, I expect that organizational changes and especially lower levels of embeddedness in their electorates lead government parties to take on ideological stances that are further away from the position of the median voter. Ideological congruence is expected to suffer. Specifically I hypothesize that:

H1 (party organizational change): The transformation of parties from mass- to top-heavy catch-all, and cartel parties leads to lower levels of ideological congruence.

In addition, electorates have changed, and those changes lead to more diverse preferences, which are less easily aggregated, and are harder to identify and to represent by government parties. Hypotheses 2 thus reads:

H2 (electorates’ change): Particularized and individualized electorates lead to lower levels of ideological congruence.

When it comes to governments’ discretion to shape public policy according to their wishes and to represent citizens in a manner they think fit, these courses of action can be constrained by demands from within a country to adhere to the principle of responsible government. I hypothesize that:

H3 (internal responsibility): Internal demands to govern responsibly lead to lower levels of ideological congruence.

And with regard to the influence of external principals, who similarly demand responsible government, I expect:

H4 (external responsibility): Responsibility towards external principals due to processes of globalization and European integration leads to lower levels of ideological congruence.

In the following section these hypotheses will be empirically tested.
Ideological Congruence in Light of Responsible Governments, Changing Parties, and Individualized Electorates – Empirical Analysis

Data and Operationalization

To test the hypotheses formulated in the last section I compiled a dataset that comprises information on ideological congruence and the afore mentioned explanatory factors for 14 Western European Countries in the period between 1981 and 2012. ¹ The focus on Western European established democracies is justified on two theoretical grounds: First, parties in new democracies on several aspects differ substantially from their counterparts in Western Europe (e.g. Van Biezen 2003; Casal Bétoa 2013; Casal Bétoa & Mair 2012) and achieve ideological congruence by different mechanisms than their Western European matches (Rohrschneider & Whitefield 2012, 174). Second, electoral systems are known to exert divergent effects in established and new democracies (Moser & Scheiner 2012). The impact of both factors is controlled for by focusing on established Western democracies only.

The unit of analysis are country-years (i.e. country, at year,) that reflect more accurately the changes in public opinion (median voter position) and the changes of governments’ ideological positions in between elections that result from altered government compositions. Figure 1 displays the trends of ideological congruence among the sample countries, separated by the electoral system type employed.

¹ The countries included are: Austria, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Great Britain, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden.
The Figure shows that while levels of ideological congruence are broadly stable in PR systems, they seem to vary much more in the two majoritarian countries.

The dependent variable of interest for this study is ideological congruence ("congruence"), defined as the fit between governments’ and the median voters’ ideological position\(^2\) (Huber & Powell 1994, 293) on a 0-10 scale\(^3\) and is accordingly measured as follows:

\[
Congruence = |M - G|, \quad (1)
\]

where \(M\) is the position of the median voter calculated on the basis of individual self-placements on the ideological left-right scale obtained from the Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File 1970-2002 (Schmitt et al. 2008), and the four existing waves of the CSES for the later period (CSES 2016). \(G\) is the ideological position of the government. Government positions are calculated as:

\[
G = \sum g_j (\sum s_i * p_i), \quad (2)
\]

where \(g\) is the share of days government \(j\) has been in office in a given year, \(s\) is the relative strength of government party \(i\) based on the relative number of legislative seats it adds to the government’s legislative fraction (both based on Döring & Manow 2016), and \(p\) is its ideological left-right position based on the Chapel Hill expert survey ("CHES" - Steenbergen & Marks 2007; Bakker et al. 2015). \(G\) thus expresses the weighted mean ideological position of all governments of a country in a given year.

Contrary to most studies ‘participating’ in the ideological congruence controversy, I avoid the most encompassing data source available, the information provided by the Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2016) to infer government and median voter positions for two reasons: Firstly, the uncertainty surrounding MARPOR’s rile measure makes it difficult to distinguish between parties’ genuine change on this dimension, and change that is a mere reflection of measurement error (e.g. Benoit et al. 2009; Mykhailov et al. 2012). Obviously this translates directly into uncertainty surrounding governments’ ideological positions measured based on this source. Secondly, the practice of inferring median voter positions from MARPOR party positions, and then using both to determine the level of ideological congruence (as done for example by Kim & Fording 2010) brings with it huge issues of endogeneity: When estimated voter positions are based on party positions, and ideological congruence is defined as the proximity between the two, the var-

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\(^2\) Due to reasons of data availability, this study only takes into account the ideological left-right dimension.

\(^3\) A value of 0 represents perfect ideological congruence, whereas a value of 10 indicates that governments and voters are found on the opposite extremes of the ideological spectrum. All constituting variables, that is, median voter positions and government positions, have been rescaled to this range.
able will necessarily reflect the level of dependence between the two that results purely from its operationalization. Clearly, measures of government and voter positions need to be independent from one another. Relying on (the CHES) expert surveys to measure party positions, and on citizen self-placements to infer voter positions seems to be a valuable alternative (see also Powell 2009, 1477-78 for a discussion of this approach).

The explanatory factors of ideological congruence as presented in the last section are operationalized the following way. In order to test for the effects of party organizational change (hypothesis 1), I include the share of the electorate that is a member of the governing party (coalition) ("membership"), based on the data provided by Mair and van Biezen (2001) and van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke (2011). The number of voters a government ‘controls’ should be a good proxy for its organizational type and its ability to directly listen to voters and involve them in its decision making process. To incorporate the particularization and individualization of electorates (hypotheses 2) I have included information on electoral volatility ("volatility") based on Chiaramonte and Emanuele (2015), a measure that is commonly used to gauge the extent to which voters’ preferences are independent of their social group (Drummond 2006). Certainly electoral volatility is an indication of “the decline of the traditional large collective constituencies, the fragmentation of electorates, [and] the particularization of voter preferences” (Mair 2013, 155).

In order to estimate the effects of demands for responsible governments (hypotheses 3 and 4) I included a number of potential indicators. “Debt” represents the gross government debt, and “deficit” the government’s budget deficit of a given country in a given year (in percent of its gdp; based on Armingeon et al. 2015). The reasoning behind this choice being that the constraining legacy a government may have inherited from the past may be manifold (and thus hard to measure systematically), but that the overall level of debt and the budget deficit systematically affect the leeway governments have in shaping public policy. More important, both factors are of central concern to both internal principals (voters) and external stakeholders (e.g. actors on financial markets) to whom governments more or less directly owe responsibility. Tapping into a similar dimension, I included the long-term (10 year) interest rates on government bonds (“interest”), to measure governments’ exposure to demands from external principals. The higher those interest rates, the more constrained a government should be to implement a responsive policy package.

Furthermore, the openness of a country to the world economy (“openness”), measured as its share of exports and imports of its total gdp (Armingeon et al. 2014) is included to also measure

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4 Due to their skewed distribution, the natural logarithm of both membership and volatility is used to estimate their effects. Results are substantially the same when the original variables are used.
a country’s vulnerability to demands of external principals. These, again, are possibly numerous and thus hard to measure, but more general measures of a country’s integration in the globalized world might be able to capture this explanatory factor of ideological congruence. All these economic variables have been lagged by one year to account for the fact that they likely take time to realize their impact.

Lastly, to estimate the effect of the most relevant external principal for the countries of Western Europe, the European Union, an index of the scope of European integration (“EU”), based on Börzel (2005, 222-3) has been included in the dataset. The scope of European integration, that is “the procedures according to which policy decisions are taken focusing on the involvement of supranational bodies and Council voting rules” (Börzel 2005, 220), nicely illustrates the depth of European integration, and accordingly provides information on how strongly constrained national governments are by the EU.

Based on Döring and Manow (2016) the effective number of legislative parties (“ENP”), and the level of party system “polarization” (calculated according to Dalton 2008) have been added to the dataset. A dummy variable indicating the use of a majoritarian electoral system (“smd”), and interaction effects of these variables have been included to control for the explanatory factors used in classical studies of ideological congruence (e.g. Powell 2013). To control for the effect that economic conditions have on the position of the median voter (e.g. Stevenson 2001), and thus potentially on ideological congruence, I include the growth of a country’s gdp in the previous year.

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for all variables used.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Congruence</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>4.176</td>
<td>0.939</td>
<td>1.098</td>
<td>0.795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership</td>
<td>0.082</td>
<td>23.361</td>
<td>2.109</td>
<td>2.847</td>
<td>2.818</td>
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<tr>
<td>SMD</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volatility</td>
<td>3.275</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>11.997</td>
<td>5.927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>42.25</td>
<td>17.129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENP seats</td>
<td>2.118</td>
<td>8.413</td>
<td>3.374</td>
<td>3.988</td>
<td>1.709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarization</td>
<td>0.672</td>
<td>5.586</td>
<td>2.153</td>
<td>2.189</td>
<td>0.837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>29.74</td>
<td>7.98</td>
<td>9.094</td>
<td>4.718</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness of the Economy</td>
<td>35.39</td>
<td>183.62</td>
<td>64.805</td>
<td>75.442</td>
<td>33.507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debt</td>
<td>27.78</td>
<td>158.86</td>
<td>67.6</td>
<td>73.247</td>
<td>29.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deficit</td>
<td>-32.55</td>
<td>6.86</td>
<td>-3.415</td>
<td>-4.093</td>
<td>4.423</td>
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<tr>
<td>ΔGDP</td>
<td>-8.87</td>
<td>11.27</td>
<td>2.675</td>
<td>2.741</td>
<td>2.162</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N=250; Countries included: AUT, BEL, DEU, DNK, ESP, FIN, FRA, GBR, GRC, IRL, ITA, NLD, PRT, SWE
Modeling strategy

In order to accurately estimate models explaining ideological congruence a number of modeling decisions have to be made. Firstly, the hierarchical structure of the dataset (i.e. observations are clustered within countries) needs to be taken into account. As observations in my data are not independent of one another, errors are potentially correlated within panels (countries) across time and contemporaneously across panels, and they can display different levels of homoscedasticity across panels and therefore be inefficient. Furthermore, unobserved differences between countries can bias estimated coefficients and lead to false inferences (Beck/Katz 1995; Beck 2008). To remedy these problems I estimate multilevel models with random country-effects (i.e. a random intercept parameter, indicating different starting levels of ideological congruence for each country) that can handle these issues. The random effects specification has been chosen for both theoretical and methodological reasons (cf. Plümper et al. 2005). Theoretically, including fixed effects would mean to estimate models that explain ideological congruence based on within-country differences only, but I expect ideological congruence to be the result of both within-country differences and differences between countries. Furthermore, including fixed effects would suppress the estimation of level effects (i.e. an effect that is due to the level of a certain variable, e.g. those triggered by the level of public debt, and not due to changes in this level) and of effects of (largely) time invariant variables, such as electoral systems, and make inferences about their impact on platform change impossible.5

Analysis and Discussion of Results

Table 2 shows the results of the empirical test of the formulated hypotheses.6 As Breusch-Godfrey/Wooldridge tests for serial correlation, and autocorrelation functions of residuals indicate that errors in my models are first order AR(1) serially correlated, I estimate random intercept models with an adjustment for AR(1) correlated residuals. Model 1 includes the explanatory factors used by Kim and colleagues (2010, 179) and Powell (2013, 16) and serves as a base model.

5 It is noteworthy to point out that previous studies relied mostly on the estimation of simple pooled models with corrected (clustered) standard errors, and sporadically included fixed country effects (e.g. Kim & Fording 2013; Powell 2009; Golder & Stramski 2010). These specifications, however, for the above mentioned reasons, are problematic. These differences in modeling strategies might account for the reported differences between my findings and those of other studies.

6 All analytical procedures have been conducted in R (version 3.3.0 “Supposedly Educational”). Scripts and data are available from the author upon request.
### Table 2. Explaining Ideological Congruence

**Dependent variable: Ideological Congruence**

<table>
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<td>1.749</td>
<td>1.546</td>
<td>1.508</td>
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<td>(1.386)</td>
<td>(1.359)</td>
<td>(1.376)</td>
<td>(1.378)</td>
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<td>Polarization</td>
<td>-.206**</td>
<td>-.193**</td>
<td>-.187*</td>
<td>-.172*</td>
<td>-.194**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(.095)</td>
<td>(.098)</td>
<td>(.099)</td>
<td>(.094)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENP_seats</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.359*</td>
<td>.337</td>
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<td>(.210)</td>
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*Note:* p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01; standard errors in parentheses; all models adjusted for AR(1) correlated residuals. Negative coefficients indicate a higher level of ideological congruence.
In contrast to the findings reported in their models and not conforming to the theoretical expectations (e.g. Powell 2013, 13), model 1 indicates that party system polarization does not unconditionally lead to lower levels of ideological congruence. In contrast, it appears that more polarized PR systems actually achieve higher levels of congruence than their less polarized counterparts. In majoritarian systems the effect seems to turn around. With regard to the effect of the ENP, my findings are substantially in line with those of Kim and colleagues (2010, 179) and Powell (2013, 16) and significant for majoritarian systems (p<.05): in these, more effective parties in parliament lead to higher levels of ideological congruence between governments and voters. The effect of election rules in isolation is difficult to assess, based on coefficients and p-values only (Brambor et al. 2006). Therefore, I will return to a more detailed interpretation of all relevant effects later on.

Models 2 and 3 subsequently introduce the factors that are expected to affect the level of ideological congruence by shaping the capability of parties to perceive and process the demands of the citizenry and by putting them under increased stress to act according to the principle of responsibility. Beginning with the changes of electorates and of party organizations, model 2 indicates that the share of the electorate that is ‘controlled’ by the government significantly affects the level of ideological congruence in the expected direction. The coefficient suggest that parties that have a large membership base at their disposal do significantly better in approaching the ideological position of the median voter as compared to parties that come without large membership figures. The organizational transformation of parties (cf. Katz & Mair 1995) seems to affect their ability to be responsive to voters. I take this as first tentative evidence in favor of hypothesis 1. With regard to hypothesis 2, the statistical evidence suggests that the particularization of electorates does not affect the level of ideological congruence. The insignificant coefficient points to the fact that more particularized electorates cannot be associated with lower levels of ideological congruence as was expected (cf. Mair 2013, 155).

As can be seen from Model 3, the effects of external demands for governments to act responsibly are ambiguous and mostly substantially negligible. None of the economic variables reaches acceptable levels of significance and they point into contrary directions. Legacies of the past, as measured by the debt that a government inherited from the preceding year, its previous budget deficit, or its openness and vulnerability to the forces of economic globalization do not affect ideological congruence. The depth of European integration on the other hand significantly – and surprisingly – affects the proximity between governments’ and voters’ positions positively. Deepening processes of European integration can be linked to more congruence between gov-
ernments and voters. This runs contrary to hypothesis 4 according to which I expected that it is especially the European Union that constrains governments and thus hinders their ability to be responsive to their voters.

Model 4 comprehensively combines all theoretically justified explanatory factors and shows that the found effects are robust to the inclusion of other potential predictors. Model 5, in turn drops all variables that have not been found to affect ideological congruence in any of the previous models. It shows that while controlling for a broad range of independent variables the interactive effects of election rules and party system features remain stable. The model indicates that electoral institutions matter – if in partly unexpected ways. Figure 2 displays the marginal effect of majoritarian election rules for different levels of party system polarization and different effective numbers of legislative parties.

![Figure 2](image.png)

Figure 2. The figure displays the effect of majoritarian election rules for different levels of party system polarization and differently sized party systems. 95-confidence intervals are indicated by the grey-shaded area.

The figure shows that, as already mentioned above, majoritarian systems reach higher levels of ideological congruence (remember that negative coefficients indicate a lower distance between governments and voters) the higher the effective number of parties represented in parliament. For about 25% of the observations with majoritarian electoral institutions, this effect is significant at the five percent level. At the same time, majoritarian systems’ congruence remains statistically unchanged given different levels of party system polarization. Electoral rules matter. They do so, however, in unanticipated ways.

The effects of party system polarization and the effective number of parties are similarly ambiguous (Figure 3).
While mostly insignificant, it is only the negative effect of polarization in PR systems that reaches statistical significance (p.<.05): among PR countries, more polarized party systems lead to a better fit between governments’ an voters’ positions.

With regard to the effect that governments’ party membership base has, the model confirms the earlier finding that governments that are more embedded in the electorate are better able to approximate the position of the median voter. All else equal, a party ‘controlling’ around 3.4% of the electorate (the 75% quantile) is expected to be closer to the position of the median voter by ca .3 scale points as compared to a party controlling just 1.5% (the 25% quantile). Considering the empirical range of ideological congruence (see Table 1), this is a substantial effect. It clearly provides support for hypothesis 1.

Similarly robust is the effect of European integration, which is associated with higher levels of ideological congruence. Contrary to my expectations, the institutional strengthening of this ubiquitous principal does not lead governments to be less responsive to their voters. On the contrary, with an increasing scope of European integration (cf. Börzel 2005), governments become more responsive to their voters. Potentially this is due to increased efforts of governments to remain responsive especially in the face of a prospective threat to this capability. Nonetheless, hypothesis 4, just as hypotheses 1 and 3 cannot be corroborated by the empirical evidence.

Figure 3. The figure displays the effects of party system polarization and the effective number of parties for different electoral systems. 95-confidence intervals are indicated by the whiskers.

To summarize, ideological congruence is affected by electoral institutions and party system characteristics. These effects are conditional on one another, however, and only in some instances significant. When it comes to the alleged changes of parties and voters (Mair 2013) and their impact on this important yardstick of representative democracies, the evidence is similarly
ambiguous. Only the effect of parties’ organizational characteristics, measured as their membership base, affects proximity between governments and voters. Given the clear trend of declining membership figures in Western democracies (van Biezen et al. 2011), this finding has potentially worrying implications for future representation. If membership levels keep declining, parties’ and governments’ connection with the electorate might weaken and they might, to a certain extent, lose their ability to identify and understand what voters want. On the positive side, the analysis above provides no evidence for the claim that external principals and obligations increasingly constrain governments and force them to act in line with the principle of responsibility rather than that of responsiveness as theorized by Mair (2013). On the contrary, it seems that certain external obligations, such as those created by processes of European integration, foster ideological congruence and government responsiveness.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have argued that theoretical explanations of ideological congruence between citizens and their governments that only take into account electoral system and party system features are flawed. Encompassing changes of parties and voters as well as increasing stress on governments to act responsibly may have altered the context in which election rules and party systems work. Naturally then, those factors need to be integrated into theoretical explanations and empirical analysis of ideological congruence.

By analyzing ideological congruence in 14 established Western European democracies in the period 1981-2012 I have found some empirical evidence for the theoretical claims expressed by Mair (2009; 2013), who believed that party organizational change and the growing influence of principals not part of the original chain of delegation between voters and governments would make it harder for parties to be responsive to voters’ demands. My empirical investigation suggests that, in accordance with Mair (2013), certain party organizational types – types that might be dying out – are conducive to reaching higher levels of ideological congruence between governments and voters. Similarly beneficial to this congruence is the effect of European integration. Apparently, the European Union’s alleged democratic deficit at least does not disseminate to its member states.

Considering that government debt has dramatically risen in some European countries in recent years; that trends of particularization and individualization are unlikely to ebb away or to reverse; and that the influence of external principals to whom governments owe responsibility – particularly in times of economic crisis – has undoubtedly increased (Mair 2013, 164), the distance
between citizens and their representatives in government needs to be further and carefully observed. Less responsive governments may be a sign of malfunctioning liberal democracies, as the “reasonable justification for democracy” (Dahl 1989, 95) may not be met anymore. Naturally then, explanations of ideological congruence, drawing on arguments in the tradition of Mair (2009; 2013), although they did not find much empirical support in this analysis, deserve a prominent position on future research agendas.
References


