Assessing the Quality of European Democracy: Are Voters Voting Correctly?

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Abstract

This paper addresses the quality of democracy in the European Union by examining how well citizens’ political views are represented in the political arena. By introducing the concept of ‘voting correctly’, which was developed by Lau and Redlawsk (1997, 2006), we analyze if voters select parties that most accurately represent their policy preferences. We focus on the two conflict dimensions that characterize contestation at the European level: left/right ideology and European integration. By employing data from the European Election Study 2004, we demonstrate that in terms of left/right approximately six out of ten voters appear to get it right, whereas in terms of European integration about half get it right. Those not voting correctly in terms of left/right more often select parties more right-wing than themselves, but the resulting bias is limited in size. In terms of European integration these effects are more pronounced. Those not voting correctly mostly vote for parties that are less Euroskeptic than themselves. Consequently, political parties fail to accurately represent their voters on this dimension. In addition, we show that extensive variation exists across member states. This variation is largely a function of choice set (number of parties) and the electorate’s level of support for European integration. These results bear important implications for our understanding of democratic representation in Europe.
The most critical question for a functioning democracy [is] the linkage between the vote and government accountability.

If voters cast votes that fail to represent their interests, this linkage is severely damaged.

- Richard R. Lau & David P. Redlawsk, 2006: 15

Introduction

During the last two decades the process of European integration has undergone important changes. Whereas until the early 1990s, the integration process was seen – by (neo-)functionalists and (liberal) intergovernmentalists alike – as an elite-driven project in which public opinion was largely irrelevant,¹ today there is increasing evidence to suggest that issues relating to European integration are shifting from the realm of elite politics to that of mass politics. Major European initiatives, such as the creation of the common currency and with that the destruction of important political symbols such as national currencies, influence the everyday lives of citizens throughout Europe. In addition, many of the major European Treaties sparked of popular interest through contentious referendum campaigns.

To date only six out of the current 27 European Union (EU) member states have yet to hold a referendum on matters relating to the European project.² Consequently, it is safe to say that European issues have reached the contentious world of popular referenda and electoral politics, and that citizens are increasingly aware of the ramifications of the process (Hooghe and Marks, 2008).

Against this backdrop, the debate regarding the lack of accountability and responsiveness in Europe intensified. Journalists and scholars alike argue that these recent events show a largely pro-European elite which is increasingly out of touch with their base – as became painfully evident through the rejections of the Constitutional Treaty in popular referendum in France and the Netherlands. While the integration process motors full speed ahead, citizens throughout Europe’s capitals are increasingly weary of the project (see Eichenberg and Dalton, 2007; De Vries and Van Kersbergen, 2007). Although recent studies demonstrate that political elites are actively monitoring their constituents (Carrubba, 2001; Steenbergen et al., 2007), we are currently witnessing a Europe that is divided: on average

¹ Such sentiments led to the notion coined by Lindberg and Scheingold (1970) that European integration was accompanied by a ‘permissive consensus’. The process secured peace, welfare and stability throughout Europe and was presumed to generate a diffuse feeling of approval on the part of the European citizenry.

² Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Portugal and Romania have not experienced an EU referendum.
political elites are much more in favor of European integration than their citizens (Hooghe, 2003).

Part of the problem is that voters do not voice their opinions about European integration when they cast their votes. They base it on other considerations instead. Several scholars have emphasized that citizens fail to do so in European Parliament (EP) elections, as these constitute ‘second order national elections’ (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). However, the integration process is only partly shaped by supranational structures, such as the European Parliament. The future of the European project is primarily in the hands of national political leaders that reach agreements through intergovernmental structures, in particular the Council of Ministers and the European Council. Hence, the real problem in terms of representation exits if citizens do not consider their opinions about European integration when voting in national elections. After all, national political leaders are accountable for their European activities in national elections, not those to the EP.

This being said, there are grounds for optimism. To date, evidence demonstrates that the contestation over Europe is increasingly influencing national politics. In particular with respect to the impact of attitudes towards European integration on vote choice in national elections – a process referred to as EU issue voting (De Vries, 2007). Tillman (2004) for example finds evidence of EU issue voting around the time of accession in Austria, Finland, and Sweden. Moreover, De Vries (2007) finds EU issue voting in countries in which there are high levels of partisan conflict and salience over Europe (like Denmark and the United Kingdom), but no evidence of EU issue voting in Germany or the Netherlands, where partisan conflict and salience is limited. Consequently, at least in some countries an “electoral connection” between national and European politics seems to be emerging (Carrubba, 2001).

These developments beg the question to what degree voters are actually choosing parties in national elections that adequately represent their views about European integration. Although we know the extent to which opinions about European integration influence vote decisions, we know relatively little about how well parties selected by voters represent their views on European integration. Addressing this pivotal matter is crucial for being able to assess the quality of democracy in the European Union. This study addresses this lacuna in the literature. It brings to bear empirical data on the quality of democratic representation throughout Europe. We do so by relying on the concept of ‘voting correctly’
introduced by Lau and Redlawsk (1997, 2006). The notion of a ‘correct vote’ refers to a vote that “is the same as the choice that would have been made under conditions of full information” (Lau and Redlawsk, 2006: 75). Hence, voting correctly determines if a voter “in the hurly-burly of an actual electoral campaign, with all the constrains imposed by real life still manage[s] to select a candidate [or party] that he or she would have chosen in the ideal world of fully informed preferences” (Lau and Redlawsk, 2006: 16).

The concept employed by Lau and Redlawsk (1997, 2006) is essentially generic, that is to say it provides a measure of the extent to which voters vote the way they would if they were fully informed about all the issues and all candidates/parties in the election. In Lau and Redlawsk’s model ‘fully informed’ relates to all information available in the campaign. We employ a more specific use of the term, however. We assume that ‘fully informed’ entails that voters have knowledge about two crucial factors, namely (a) which conflict dimensions characterize political contestation at the European level, and (b) which positions political parties take on these dimensions. In doing so, we focus on the degree to which voters vote correctly when it comes their preferences in terms of the two conflict dimensions: left/right ideology and European integration (cf. Steenbergen and Marks, 2004; Hix et al., 2006). The extent to which voters cast a correct vote in terms of left/right and European integration provides an indication of the quality of democratic representation in Europe. Hence, we compare representation in terms of European integration to representation on the central dimension of political conflict, namely left/right ideology.

By employing data for Western EU member states from the 2004 European Election Survey (EES), we demonstrate that in terms of both dimensions voters appear to be getting it right about half of the time. In terms of left/right, approximately six out of ten voters appear to be getting it right. In terms of European integration about five out of ten voters get it right. Those who do not vote correctly mostly choose parties that are more right-wing and less Euroskeptic than themselves. The size of this bias is largest in representation of EU preferences, although large variation exists across member states.

In the following sections, this paper first outlines the concept of EU issue voting in greater detail. In a next step, we elaborate the idea of correct voting as an indicator of democratic quality and present some expectations about the ability of voters to make correct voting decisions in terms of left/right and European integration. Thirdly, we present the measure of correct voting used in the analysis. We then determine the extent of correct
voting in terms of both dimensions and offering a test of our expectations using the EES 2004 data. We conclude by summarizing our findings and discussing some of its implications for the quality of European democracy.

**European Union Issue Voting: Two Electoral Channels**

One of the central claims of the discussion regarding the democratic deficit is the inability of voters to express their views on EU affairs.\(^3\) Within the context of a multi-level Europe, voters wishing to express their preferences regarding European integration in order to influence political elites are presented with two electoral channels: the *intergovernmental channel* (i.e. national parliamentary elections) and the *supranational channel* (i.e. European Parliament (EP) elections). In national elections voters authorize and hold accountable their national representatives, who in turn shape the course of integration in the Council of Ministers and the European Council. In European elections voters can influence the partisan composition of the EP, which decision-making powers have increased rapidly over the two decades since the introduction of co-decision making. Over a decade ago Van der Eijk, Franklin and their colleagues concluded that European politics is in a “crisis of legitimacy” since voters are unable to express their EU preferences in either of these channels (Franklin and Van der Eijk, 1996: 3). EP elections “are fought primarily on the basis of national political concerns, rather than on problems relevant to the European arena” (Franklin and Van der Eijk, 1996: 7). National elections do not serve as substitutes either as they are characterized by a “lack of inter-party policy differences on European matters [which] makes it difficult for parties to fight elections on European issues” (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996: 369). Consequently, neither in their choice of national political leadership nor in their choice of members of the EP are voters able to make their preferences regarding European integration heard and democratically control the integration process. Hence, European politics lacks “an electoral connection between its citizens and its leaders” (Franklin and Van der Eijk, 1996:7).

\(^3\) Note that an extensive discussion exists regarding the actual extent or even the existence of a democratic deficit in EU politics (see for example Majone, 1998; Zweifel, 2002; Moravcsik, 2002). Moreover, authors that do argue that EU politics is plagued by a democratic deficit oftentimes ascribe it to several sources, such as the dominance of executive powers, the weak institutional powers of the EP or the lack of a European public sphere (for an overview see Follesdal and Hix, 2006).
More than a decade later, however, much has changed. Although EP elections are still for the most part ‘second-order national elections’ (Schmitt, 2005), there is increasing evidence of the impact of EU attitudes on vote choice in national elections. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as EU issue voting (De Vries, 2007). Recent studies demonstrate that attitudes toward European integration are an increasingly important source in determining voters’ national party choice both in absolute terms as well as relative to other typically more central concerns facing voters, such as left/right ideology (Evans, 1999; Gabel 2000, Tillman, 2004, De Vries, 2007).

These findings of increased EU issue voting in the intergovernmental channel, i.e. in national elections, are not surprising. Several authors have argued that it is more rational for voters seeking a voice in the integration process to do so via national elections than via EP elections (Gabel, 2000; Mair, 2005, 2007). In national elections voters authorize and hold accountable national political elites, which are active in the Council of Ministers and the European Council. These institutions impose an important constraint on EU legislation in which nationally elected heads of states and government can wield power directly. In addition, nationally elected members of parliament are able to influence or at least comment on EU legislation – although their influence varies greatly among the EU member states (see Raunio, 1999). Moreover, the Lisbon Treaty – still to be ratified by several member states – strengthens the role of national parliaments in the scrutiny of EU policies. Hence, national elections constitute an important channel through which European citizens can exert influence on European policies.

EP elections may represent a less effective channel of influence for European citizens as the role of the EP in shaping the course and direction of European integration at the present time is more limited (Mair, 2005: 7). In principle, EP elections should allow voters to change or endorse policies and affect the personnel of the EU’s political leadership. In practice, however, the EP is constrained in fully performing these functions. First, the EP can only partially hold the Commission accountable. Second, the composition of the European

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4 In keeping with Van der Eijk and Franklin (2006) Follesdal and Hix (2006: 3-4) also argue that national elections contain no “European element”, as they “are fought on domestic rather than European issues, and parties collude to keep the issue of Europe off the domestic agenda” (Follesdal and Hix, 2006: 3). Indeed, the evidence of EU issue voting so far has been conflicting. Recent research shows that EU issue voting varies across countries and times as it is conditional on the extent of partisan conflict over European integration – do voters have a range of choices with respect to party positions on Europe? – and the degree of salience of the EU issue among voters -are voters concerned about European integration? (De Vries, 2007).
Council and Council of Ministers are unaffected by EP elections. Third, due to the fact that its elections are fought on national rather than European concerns, the EP lacks a clear European mandate to use its power in policy-making (see Franklin and Van der Eijk, 1996; Magnette, 2003; Mair, 2005, 2007). Finally, even though the influence of the EP on policy making has increased, in particular in fields where the co-decision procedure applies, in central policy domains the position of the European Parliament vis-à-vis the Council of Ministers and the European Council remains weak. So, citizens seeking voice in the European integration process should do so in national rather than EP elections.

Voting Correctly and the Quality of Democracy

The most straightforward way for voters to ensure that their opinions about European integration are heard in national elections, is by selecting representatives that have similar views on this matter. We the extent to which voters do so by employing the notion of ‘voting correctly’ (cf. Lau and Redlawsk, 1997, 2006). Determining the correctness of a voter’s ballot seems a daunting task which is inherently subjective. This is mainly due to the many normative lenses with which the correctness of one’s vote can be evaluated. Lau and Redlawsk (1997, 2006), however, provide a fairly straightforward way in which to determine the extent of correct voting. In their view, a correct vote indicates a voting decision that is the same as one performed under conditions of full information (Lau and Redlawsk, 2006: 75). This definition resembles Dahl’s (1989: 180-81) notion of a ‘real’ vote: “a person’s interest or good is whatever a person would choose with the fullest attainable understanding of the experiences resulting from that choice and its most relevant alternatives”.

The pivotal question, then, becomes: what does ‘fully informed’ mean? In their work Lau and Redlawsk (1997, 2006) define this in relation to the information available in a campaign. They provide two measures of voting correctly. The first is based on experimental data. In a controlled experimental setting, subjects were provided with complete information about mock candidates in a simulated election after they had voted. The vote of those participants who indicated they would not have changed their vote in light of this new information were classified as correct (Lau and Redlawsk, 1997: 588-9). In such an experimental setting researchers have full control over what information is available and
hence are able to approach vote decision making in this way. In the real-world, however, this is virtually impossible. Lau and Redlawsk (1997, 2006) thus provide another measure, which builds on the presumption that voters will never be fully informed. The measure of correct voting should shed light on the vote choice when voters have full information about all those things that they render important to their decision. Consequently, Lau and Redlawsk (1997, 2006) developed a second measure of the extent of correct voting which uses the evaluation of voters’ own, naive information gathering strategy in order to find out if they would vote differently if the same criteria of judgment (i.e. issue stances, group endorsements and candidate evaluations) are applied to all candidates/parties.

These two measures suggest that the information upon which voters base their choice may be biased in two ways. The first measure, which focuses on the hypothetical vote that would have been made under full information, puts emphasis on the fact that voters lack information about what parties/candidates stand for. The second measure, which focuses on the hypothetical vote that would have been made if all parties/candidates would have been evaluated using the same yardstick, puts emphasis on the fact that for different parties/candidates different sorts of information may be available. If we combine both elements, this implies that a correct vote is a vote that builds on information about all parties/candidates on all relevant dimensions of judgment, while putting equal weight on each dimension for all parties/candidates.

This observation shifts the question to what are the relevant dimensions of judgment. Although representative democracy can be evaluated from various normative standards, most scholars would agree that “the smallest common denominator in normative terms is [...] some match between the interests of the people and what representatives promote” (Weßels, 1999: 137). Indeed, the basic criterion of the quality of democracy is the linkage between the vote and government accountability: “if voters cast votes that fail to represent their interests [i.e. vote incorrectly], this linkage is severely damaged” (Lau and Redlawsk, 2006: 15). In our view in the context of the EU ‘fully informed’ is best defined as holding accurate views regarding the conflict dimensions that characterize political contestation at the European level, as well as the positions of the competing political parties in terms of each dimension. Although the question what conflict dimensions characterize the EU may always remain debatable, choices have to be made to enable meaningful analysis. In this paper we assume that contestation at the European level is best characterized in terms
of two dimensions. The first concerns the well-known ideological division between left and right, whereas the second concerns issues of European integration (cf. Steenbergen and Marks, 2004; Hix et al., 2006).5

Note that our conception of a correct vote is a narrower focus than Lau and Redlawsk’s (1997, 2006). Indeed, campaign information addresses many more issues than policy preferences of parties/candidates, such as information concerning personal characteristics of candidates. There are two reasons, however, which justify a more narrow focus. First, selecting political leadership at the EU level is, as yet, beyond the control of the European electorate(s) (see Schmitt, 2005 and Follesdal and Hix, 2006). Second, the key functions of elections – authorization and accountability of political leadership – serve to establish responsiveness between citizens and their representatives in terms of the policies adopted (Powell, 2000). So, a more narrow focus can also be justified on normative grounds.

Our analysis also deviates from Lau and Redlawsk’s (1997, 2006) in two additional ways. First, in our view the question if voters vote correctly is not the only relevant question for assessing quality of democratic representation. What also matters, is if parties/candidates that best represent particular voters, do this well. In other words, it is not only relevant if parties are closer to voters’ issue positions than other parties, but also if they are generally close at all. Furthermore, we consider it crucial to not just examine voting correctly in terms of all dimensions of judgment combined, but rather on each individual dimension of judgment. This allows us to examine what dimension voters fail to take into account when they do not vote correctly.

Note that many authors argue that next to left/right ideology political space in Western Europe consists of a cultural dimension as well (Inglehart, 1977; Flanagan, 1987; Kitschelt, 1989; Inglehart, Rabier and Reif, 1991; Hooghe, Marks and Wilson, 2002; Kriesi, et al, 2006). Different labels are used within the literature to capture the second dimension of political contestation. For example, Inglehart (1977) refers to it as ‘materialism versus post-materialist’, Kitschelt (1989) uses the terms ‘libertarian versus authoritarian’ and Hooghe, Marks and Wilson (2002) label it the ‘GAL (green/alternative/libertarian) versus TAN (traditional/authoritarian/nationalist)’ dimension of political conflict. But what these authors have in common is their contention that a second cultural dimension exists next to the economic left/right dimension. This second dimension of political contestation involves the divide between values, such as public order, national security and traditional life styles, and values, such as individual choice, political participation and environmental protection (Dalton, 1996: 81-2).

In this paper we focus on left/right ideology in conjecture with the European integration dimension as the EES 2004 does not include indicators of party or voter positioning on a cultural dimension of political competition. Although unfortunate, this may be less problematic as research shows that left/right ideology in Western Europe is still by far the most dominant dimension in party competition and elections (see Pierce, 1999).
This brings us to a first expectation for the analysis. As noted above, one problem regarding representation on EU matters is that voters choices at the polls are not strongly shaped by their opinions about European integration. Because the ideological division between left and right is widely conceived as the dominant dimension of conflict in national politics (Pierce, 1999), we expect that voting correctly in terms of left/right occurs more frequently than on European integration (hypothesis H1).

**H1. The levels of voting correctly will be higher in terms of left/right than in terms of European integration.**

When assessing the quality of European democracy, it is important to bear in mind that the various EU member states have very different political context characteristics. These may affect the extent of correct voting within each country. In their book *How Voters Decide* Lau and Redlawsk (2006: 22) develop a model explaining the way in which the political environment influences the degree to which voters get it right (i.e. the *process-oriented framework for studying voter decision making*). Although a complete description of this model is beyond the scope of this paper, several expectations regarding the way in which the political context (i.e. macro-level factors, such as party system characteristics, etc.) affects the extent of voting correctly are important for our endeavor. In keeping with Lau and Redlawsk (2006: 84), we focus on several macro-level hypotheses relating to the choice set, range of party positions and aggregate levels of EU support. Here, we focus on differences in voting correctly in terms of European integration, as the deficiencies along this dimension are most serious.

The second hypothesis (H2) relates to the size of the choice set, i.e. the number of parties/candidates in the respective election. We expect higher levels of correct voting when there are fewer alternatives in the choice set rather than when there are more parties to choose from. One reason is voters’ cognitive constraints: it is easier to have knowledge about few parties than about many parties. The second reason is methodological. If voters would cast their vote at random, the chances that they would have voted for the party closest to them on a particular issue is simply higher if with a lower number of parties: it amounts to 50 percent when two parties compete, but is only 20 percent in the case of five parties.
**H2.** The greater the choice set of political parties, the higher the extent of correct voting in terms of European integration.

The third hypothesis (H3) relates to the distinctiveness of issue positions of political parties. The intuition is that the easier it is for voters to distinguish between issue positions of political parties, the higher the likelihood of correct voting. In our case this means that the higher the distinctness of party positions on European integration, the more accurate voters’ decisions will be in terms of their EU preferences.

**H3.** The more distinct the positions of political parties on European integration, the higher the likelihood of correct voting in terms of European integration.

Thirdly, it may prove useful when addressing European integration to also focus on the aggregate level of support for European integration in a country. From the extensive literature on support for European integration, we know that since the mid 1990s political elites on average are much more supportive of the European project than the mass public (see Hooghe, 2003). As a result, it should be quite difficult for harsh critics of European integration to vote correctly in terms of this preference, unless such voters would ignore all other considerations they consider important. On the other hand, it should be easier for avid supporters to vote in line with their preferences regarding European integration. Hypothesis H4 below formalizes this expectation.

**H4.** The more extensive the support for European integration, the higher the likelihood of correct voting in terms of European integration.

Self-evidently, this last factor is not included in the model by Lau and Redlawsk (2006) as they do not focus on representation in terms of European integration. Instead they (2006: 84) instead they introduce a different macro-level factor: the balance of an electoral campaign. The idea here is that voters are better able to make correct decisions when the campaign is balanced, i.e. giving all sides equal opportunity to get their message out. Coming from the US context, the researchers focus on the (material) resources available to each candidate. This is less useful in Western Europe, as material resources appear to play a less crucial role and thus are not suitable as a proxy for campaign attention. In the European
context the degree of partisan bias in media reporting on particular issues has to be assessed differently. Unfortunately, we lack encompassing empirical data on media reporting regarding European integration in national electoral campaigns to include this factor into our analysis.

**Measuring Correct Voting in Terms of Left/Right and European Integration**

To measure the extent of correct voting, we rely on the European Election Study (EES) data from 2004. Albeit that the EES focuses on EP elections, it also contains a measure of vote choice in national elections. The survey asks respondents for which party they voted in the latest national elections. The EES has the advantage that it allows for a comparison of correct voting in terms of left/right as well as European integration – and with that the quality of democratic representation – in the same way for a large number of countries simultaneously. Because the twelve member states that fairly recently joined the EU have such a different position compared to the fifteen older members, we only focus on the latter. Also, we have to limit our analysis to thirteen member states as the surveys of Belgium and Sweden did not entail all relevant information concerning party and voter placements on European integration. Consequently, we excluded these two countries from our analysis.

The EES furthermore contains virtually identical measures for left/right and European integration. Regarding left/right respondents are asked to indicate their political views by choosing the number between 1 and 10, where 1 means ‘left’ and 10 means ‘right’, that best represents their position. Using the same scale, they are asked to indicate what number best represents the position of several political parties. The number of parties listed varies between five (Austria) and fourteen (Italy); in most countries respondents are asked to rate six to eight parties. In the same vein, respondents are asked to place their own views as well as those of the same set of parties on a ten-point scale concerning European integration. In this case the end-points are that European unification has already gone too far (1) and that it should be pushed further (10).  

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6 Parties for which data on its issue stands are not available have been excluded from the analysis (e.g., Conservative People’s Party in Denmark).
By answering these questions voters indicate, albeit indirectly, how similar they perceive their own political views to be compared to the positions of the various political parties. We employ a simple measure as indicator of perceived agreement in terms of either dimension, namely the distance between a voter’s position and the perceived position of a party. Voting correctly in terms of left/right is thus defined as voting for the party (or one of the parties) that is perceived closest on this scale. Note that this matches the ‘shortest distance hypothesis’ in Downs’ (1957) conception of rational voting (see also Enelow and Hinich, 1984). Voting correctly in terms of European integration implies casting a vote for the party that is perceived closest on this scale. In the case of ties – two or more parties equally close – a vote for any of them is considered a correct vote.\(^7\)

One might argue that these measures employed fail to take into account the bias resulting from inaccurate perceptions of parties’ positions on both scales and that the respondents’ scores should be replaced by externally validated party positions, e.g the mean score awarded by all voters. This would only make sense, however, if voters would use the scale in an identical manner to indicate their own view. Whether they in fact do, is questionable. In particular with respect to left/right, respondents may interpret these labels in different ways. For example, whereas some may define left/right in terms of economic issues, others may define it in terms on cultural issues. For that reason, we use respondents’ own perception of party positions. To the extent that this affects our results, it will imply that we are most likely to overestimate the degree of correct voting.

Note also that if one conceives of both dimensions as making up one ‘political space’ (cf. Downs, 1957), voting correctly may also be analyzed by creating measures that indicate distances in this two-dimensional space. In our analyses we have not included such measures, but focus solely on the quality of representation in terms of each dimension individually. As will become clear, we observe stark differences between both dimensions; such differences would have been masked if both dimensions were combined (see also hypothesis H1 above).

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\(^7\) Votes for partisan alliances are considered correct if this alliance included the party that best represents a voter’s views; for the German alliance of CDU/CSU perceived issue positions of the CDU have been used.
The Degree of and Variation in Correct Voting in Terms European Integration

Before we turn to the examination of the extent of correct voting in terms of both the left/right and European integration dimension of political conflict, let us first provide an overview of voters’ and parties’ positions on left/right and European integration. These pieces of information are the key components in determining the extent of correct voting. Figure 1 provides an overview of voters’ left/right positions across the thirteen EU member states. To enhance clarity of presentation, we rescaled the left/right continuum to three categories: left-wing (1-4), centre (5-6), and right-wing (7-10).8 Figure 2 shows voters’ stances towards European integration. We rescaled this scale similarly to the following three categories: ‘should be pushed further’ (7-10), ‘has gone too far’ (1-4), and ‘neither’ (5-6).

--- Figures 1 and 2 about here ---

These figures provide several important pieces of information. First, in the EU as a whole in terms of both left/right and European integration voters are fairly evenly spread across the three categories. Second, however, the figures show extensive variation across countries. These differences are most pronounced with respect to European integration. For example, in some countries, like Spain or Greece, voters are more likely to be in favor of further European integration, while in other countries, like Austria or Finland, voters are more weary. Third, citizens’ views on European integration contrast with the apparent widespread support for further integration at the elite level (see figures discussed below). There is only one member state where a majority of its citizens favors further integration (Greece). In all other countries this figure falls below the 50 per cent mark. Moreover, in four member states (e.g., Austria, Finland, Sweden, United Kingdom) citizens who feel that integration has already gone to far outnumber citizens who favor integration to move ahead.

How are parties in these countries positioned on the scales of left/right ideology and European integration? Figure 3 plots parties’ positions on European integration against their left/right placements for each individual country. We obtained these values by calculating the mean of voters’ perceived placements of parties on both scales. The underlying idea is that although single voters do not accurately perceive the positions of all parties on both

--- Figures 3 about here ---

8 In Sweden only the value ‘5’ is labeled ‘centre’, because here an eleven-point scale (0-10) was used instead.
dimensions, at aggregate all voters do as the mistakes of individual voters cancel each other out (cf. Erikson, et al. 2002; Surowiecki, 2004). So, the electorate as a whole holds a fairly accurate image of where parties stand. In order to ensure the validity of these measurements, we cross-validated them with the positions identified using the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) from 2006 (Bakker et al., 2008). This study entails party placements on left/right ideology as well as on European integration. The mean scores from the EES 2004 proved valid, as they correlated highly with the CHES 2006 data (Pearson’s R amounts to .93 on the left/right and to .86 on the European integration scale; both correlations are significant at the p=0.001 level).

--- Figure 3 about here ---

The results show substantial differences between both dimensions of conflict. Whereas in most countries parties are spread across the continuum in terms of left-right, in terms of European integration most parties have less pronounced views. This is not to say, most parties hold identical views. Closer inspection of the data reveals that parties are, like voters, quite evenly spread across the three aforementioned categories when it comes to their stances regarding European integration. Across the thirteen countries 31 percent of all parties take a negative stance towards European integration, 35 percent take middling positions, and 34 percent favor further integration efforts.

These figures, however, do not accurately indicate the strength of the forces pulling towards further integration in the political arena. The simple reason for this being that the figures do not take into account the size of parties. If we weight these positions by vote share in the latest election, we observe that almost half of all parties – namely 43.5 % – view further European integration in a positive light. This indicates that opposition towards the European project is strongest among smaller parties, especially those on the extremes of the left/right dimension (see also Hooghe et al., 2002). Hence, these findings underline previous research demonstrating that we are witnessing a divided Europe in which voters on average are more skeptical about European integration than political parties in the same country (Hooghe, 2003).

Keeping these things in mind, let us turn to the levels of correct voting in terms of both dimensions. How accurate are voters at determining the party that best represents
their political views in terms of left/right as well as European integration? In other words, are voters able to translate their perceptions about political parties’ stands on both dimensions into a correct vote? Figure 4 provides an overview of the extent to which voters are getting it right. It seems that across the thirteen Western EU member states in terms of left/right approximately six out of ten voters appear to get it right. In terms of European integration the figure is slightly lower: about five out of ten. These findings support our first hypothesis (H1): correct voting occurs more often in terms of left/right than in terms of European integration. This pattern holds across all member states with the exception of Greece, in which both figures are identical.

The results also make clear that the level of correct voting varies considerably across countries. For example, in terms of European integration Spanish voters appear to do the best job making quality vote decisions with 76 percent of their votes representing best their preferences on this issue. On the other hand, barely 39 percent of Finnish and Luxembourguian voters managed to cast a correct vote. In total, six out of the thirteen countries under investigation – i.e. Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands – have levels of correct voting in terms of European integration that lie well below the 50 percent mark. Interestingly, four of these six countries are founding members of the European project.

--- Figure 4 about here ---

Figure 4 shows that roughly half of Western EU citizens vote in line with their political preferences. The question now becomes in which direction are their voting decisions biased. In other words, do voters vote for parties that are more, equally, or less right-wing or Euroskeptic than themselves? Table 1 provides an overview of the direction of the bias in voters’ choices and makes a distinction between those voters who voted in line with their left/right position and those voters who voted incorrectly. The results indicate that of all voters who voted correctly, about two out of three votes for a party that they perceived to take an identical position in terms of left/right. The others sometimes opted for a party they perceived as more left-wing, whereas similar numbers opted for a party perceived as more right wing. Consequently, at the aggregate level in terms of left/right voters who voted correctly were represented quite accurately by their parties. When voters did not get it right,
they tended more strongly to parties that they perceive to be more right-wing than themselves. Whereas 36 per cent voted for a more left-wing party, 64 per cent voted for a more right-wing party. Bearing in mind that about 40 per cent voted incorrectly, these figures imply that at aggregate roughly one in ten voters cast their vote for a party that is perceived somewhat more right-wing than voters themselves.

Table 2 presents a similar analysis for the European integration dimension. These results show that those who voted correctly mostly did so for a party that took an identical position. The others, again, split more or less evenly between parties that held more or less favorable opinions about further integration. Furthermore, the findings clearly indicate that those voters that did not get it right mostly voted for parties – on the basis of other apparently more important considerations – that were less Euroskeptic. Those voting for parties with more favorable stands towards integration outnumbered those voting for parties less supportive of moving ahead with integration by three to one. As a result, at the aggregate level about one out of every four voters cast their vote for a party that favored integration more strongly. Hence, whereas in terms of left/right the bias in representation is modest, regarding European integration the bias is rather severe.

--- Table 1 and 2 about here ---

The results also indicate that extensive variation exists across countries in the ability to which voters get it right when it comes to their left/right and EU preferences. Since the bias is strongest with respect to European integration, we now solely focus on this dimension. The size of this bias on this dimension is the lowest in Spain and the highest in Finland and Luxembourg. How can we make sense of this cross-national variation? Recall that we posited three general expectations relating to the size of the choice set, the distinctiveness of party positions on European integration, and the overall level of support for the integration process in a country. Let us address these factors one-by-one.

Hypothesis H2 stated that we are likely to expect more correct voting in terms of European integration as the number of alternatives in the choice set decreases. The high levels of correct voting in Spain fit this expectation, as two large parties characterize its party system. To address this matter more systematically, figure 5 below plots the extent of correct voting on European integration in percent against the number of political parties in

--- Table 1 and 2 about here ---
parliament for each country. This figure shows that indeed a negative (but relatively modest) relationship exists between the number of choices presented to voters and the extent to which voters choose the party that best represents their EU interests. In countries where the number of parties in parliament is relatively low (<7) half or more of the voters voted correctly, whereas in countries where the number of parliamentary parties is relatively high (>7) half or less of the voters voted correctly. Hence, the ability to make the best possible choice, given the options available, increases as the number of choices decreases. These findings are in line with hypothesis H2. Although they focus on correct voting on a specific issue dimension, i.e. European integration, they do corroborate more general findings presented by Lau and Redlawsk (2006, chap. 4).

--- Figure 5 about here ---

The second factor expected to influence the extent of correct voting on European integration relates to the meaningfulness of the choices available to voters. In other words, we expect higher levels of correct voting as the positions that political parties take on European integration are more distinctive (H3). We use the range of party positions on an European integration scale as perceived by voters as an indicator for the distinctiveness in party stances. Figure 6 shows the relationship between the percentage of correct voting in terms of European integration and the range of party positions on offer on this issue across countries. The results provide no evidence for the hypothesized effect of distinctiveness of partisan stances. Quite the contrary, there is a fairly weak negative relationship between the range in party positions and correct voting. In countries like Spain or Portugal with relatively high levels of correct voting, the range in party positions on the EU is limited, while in other countries like Denmark or Finland in which the range is high correct voting is fairly low. Thus, we find no empirical evidence supporting hypothesis H3.

--- Figure 6 about here ---

The final factor we consider is the average direction of support for European integration. We expect that the more extensive the support for European integration in a country, the higher the likelihood of correct voting in terms of European integration (H4).
The graph in Figure 7 provides an overview of this relationship. The results support the idea that correct voting on European integration is positively related to general levels of support for European integration among voters. For example, Greek and Spanish voters are both keen EU supporters (see Figure 1) and in both these countries we find the highest percentages of correct voting regarding European integration, i.e. 66 percent in Greece and 76 percent in Spain. The strength of the link between correct voting and support for European integration is the strongest of all three macro-level factors and amounts to an $R^2$ squared of 0.40.

--- Figure 7 about here ---

In all, our results show that in terms of left/right, approximately six out of ten voters appear to be getting it right, while about five out of ten voters get it right when it comes to European integration. Those who do not vote correctly in terms of left/right relatively often choose parties that are more right-wing than themselves, but the bias resulting from these effects is modest. A larger bias exists when it comes to the European integration dimension of political conflict. Here voters are relatively likely to vote for parties that are less Euroskeptic than themselves. This bias in representation in terms of European integration varies greatly across member states. Our results indicate that this variation is a function of choice set (number of parties) and the average level of support for European integration.

Concluding Remarks

This study assesses the health of democratic representation in Europe by examining the success of voters in selecting a party that most accurately represents their policy preferences. The analysis focused on the two dimensions that characterize political contestation in the European Union: left/right ideology and European integration. In order to determine the quality of democratic representation we introduced the concept of voting correctly, i.e. are voters’ actual votes the same as the choices they would have made if they would be aware of these dimensions of conflict and voted accordingly. Our analysis of correct voting demonstrates that on average voters make more accurate choices on the basis of their positions on the left/right dimension than on the dimension of European
integration. In terms of left/right 61 percent of voters appear to be getting it right, while in terms of European integration 52 percent voted correctly.

The bias in representation in left/right ideology is modest, at the aggregate level leading one out of ten voters to choose parties slightly more to the right of their own positions. The bias is larger in terms of European integration and is clearly one-directional: at aggregate about one out of every four voters select a party less Euroskeptic than themselves. The analysis also demonstrates large variation across member states regarding the size of this bias in representation on EU matters. We hypothesized this variation to be a function of choice set (number of parties) as well as the range in parties’ EU positions. If voters have fewer options to choose from, and if the options are more widely spread across the continuum of stands regarding European integration, this should increase the chance that they select a party that best represents their views. The findings lend support for the former hypothesis, but not the latter. Furthermore, we observed, as expected, that correct voting was more likely in countries where voters’ opinions were relatively positive (like on average those of political elites).

The analyses also indicate that the bias in representation along the dimension of European integration is not present among those who correctly voted for the party that best represented their views on this matter. In other words, the problem is not that all parties are less Euroskeptic and voters are more or less forced to select parties with different views. The bias results solely from the choices made by citizens who did not vote correctly. So, the problem for representation in this case is that many voters just do not take this matter into account and knowingly choose parties that hold different views about the future of Europe. Nonetheless, these low levels of EU issue voting – i.e., low impact of voters’ opinions about European integration on their vote – result to elected representatives failing to accurately represent their voters on this dimension.

Hence, this study suggests that a failing linkage exists between political elites and their voters regarding EU matters. As such, it need not be a surprise that when European integration matters are put up for referendum, citizens are not as enthusiastic as the politicians that represent them. These findings do not only shed light on the origins of the ‘no’ votes in the French and Dutch referenda on the Constitutional Treaty, but also constitute a ‘warning-sign’ for Europe’s political leaders. What lies ahead when the integration process is pushed further, is likely to be met by increased popular backlash. As a
result, this study is not only relevant to scholars of representation or European integration, but also to practitioners and journalists debating the scope and breadth of the democratic deficit in Europe. It has identified major deficiencies in the politicization of European integration matters in national political arenas. Our findings emphasize the importance of establishing better linkages between voters and elites in ensuring the quality of democratic representation on matters relating to European integration. Currently, many voters are willing to put their EU preferences on hold in national elections, and knowingly vote for parties more favorable of European integration than they themselves are. However, as integration efforts increasingly encroach upon voters’ everyday lives, this may not prove a stable equilibrium. In the process of consolidating previous integration efforts, such as enlargement or the Lisbon treaty reform, but especially when embarking on major European projects in the future, political elites may experience the electoral costs of failing to represent their voters on Europe affairs.
References


Notes: The ten-point scale of left/right has been recoded into three categories: left-wing (1-4), centre (5-6), and right-wing (7-10). In Sweden only the value ‘5’ is labeled ‘centre’, because here an eleven-point scale (0-10) was used instead.

Source: EES 2004

Figure 1: Citizens’ Ideological Left/Right Position
Notes: The survey question upon which this figure is based reads as follows: “Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using a 10-point scale. On this scale 1 means unification has ‘already gone too far’ and 10 means it ‘should be pushed further’. What number on this scale best describes your position?” The scale has been recoded into three categories: push European integration further (7-10), European integration has gone too far (1-4), and neither (5-6).

Source: EES 2004

Figure 2: Citizens’ Support for European Integration
Figure 3: Political Parties’ Positions on Left/Right Ideology and European Integration
Notes: Values are percentage of voters who perceive the party they voted for as closest to them regarding left/right ideology and European integration respectively.
Source: EES 2004

Figure 4: Percentage of Voters that Voted Correctly in Terms of Left/Right and European Integration
Figure 5: Correct Voting in terms of European integration and Number of Political Parties

Source: EES 2004
Source: EES 2004

Figure 6: Correct Voting in terms of European integration and Range of Party Stances on European Integration
Figure 7: Correct Voting in terms of European integration and Stance on European Integration

Source: EES 2004
Table 1: Do Voters Vote for Parties More Left-Wing or Right-Wing than Themselves? (%)

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Source: EES 2004
Table 2: Do Voters Vote for Parties More or Less Euroskeptic than Themselves? (%)

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| **voters who voted correctly in terms of European integration**
| More           | 18 | 25 | 14 | 28 | 26 | 29 | 20 | 29 | 18 | 27 | 25 | 14 | 18 | 22         |
| Equally        | 47 | 48 | 57 | 58 | 54 | 52 | 57 | 54 | 56 | 51 | 52 | 72 | 51 | 55         |
| Less           | 35 | 27 | 29 | 14 | 20 | 20 | 23 | 16 | 26 | 22 | 23 | 15 | 31 | 23         |
| Total          | 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100        |
| **N**          | 366| 434| 206| 414| 172| 234| 513| 353| 358| 435| 266| 398| 510|           |
| **voters who did not vote correctly in terms of European integration**
| More           | 21 | 25 | 17 | 32 | 21 | 34 | 26 | 36 | 23 | 33 | 31 | 17 | 20 | 27         |
| Less           | 79 | 75 | 83 | 68 | 68 | 66 | 74 | 65 | 77 | 67 | 69 | 83 | 80 | 73         |
| Total          | 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100| 100        |
| **N**          | 338| 443| 320| 524| 182| 123| 380| 340| 554| 485| 202| 127| 449|           |

Source: EES 2004