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European Parliament Elections and Political Representation: Policy Congruence between Voters and Parties

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It is often said that European Parliament elections fail as an instrument to express the will of the European people. However, while the elections are not contested at the European level and are often dominated by national issues, this does not necessarily imply that they fail to connect policy views of voters and representatives. This article examines policy congruence between voters and candidates, utilising the candidate and voter surveys of the European Election Study 2009. First, it demonstrates that policy preferences of candidates and voters are constrained by three separate policy dimensions. Second, it shows that the quality of representation is high in terms of left/right, the main dimension of conflict in European politics, but lower on the cultural and European integration dimensions. Finally, it establishes that in some cases the aggregation of national parties in political groups in the European Parliament poses problems for effective political representation.

The referendums on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 in the Netherlands and France and the referendum on the Lisbon Treaty in 2008 in Ireland revealed a major lack of congruence between the policy views of the political elites and the electorate. The most extreme case was the Netherlands where a clear majority (62 per cent) of the electorate voted 'nee' in the referendum, against the will of the major political parties in parliament, together occupying 85 per cent of the seats. Obviously, the great majority of voters were far more Eurosceptic than their political leaders. A similar phenomenon is the sudden rise of populist parties across Western Europe. To a large extent their success is built on their crusade against non-western immigrants, in particular from Muslim countries, and the 'Islamisation' of Western societies. Just like the issue of Europeanisation this development

suggests a failure of the traditional mainstream parties to represent the policy views of the electorate. Our main contention in this paper is that this is due to the fact that policy positions on such issues are not constrained by the main dimension of contestation in European politics, the left/right dimension.

We develop our argument as follows. In the next section we discuss the main conditions for an effective process of representation. One of these conditions is that both at the level of political parties and the electorate issue positions are constrained by the same ideological dimension. We argue that in the European context this can only be the left/right dimension. The section that follows describes the policy dimensions that form the basis for electoral competition in European Parliament elections. We argue that policy preferences at the level of candidates as well as voters are structured in terms of three distinct dimensions: the left/right dimension, a cultural dimension, and a European integration dimension. We hypothesise that political representation in the European Parliament will only be effective on issues constrained by the main dimension of political contestation in European politics, that is, the left/right dimension.

We test this hypothesis on the basis of data on the 2009 European Parliament elections. We first examine the dimensionality of the issue space in each country using confirmatory factor analysis. The goal is to identify whether policy issues are constrained by the left/right dimension or form several separate policy dimensions. Our second research goal is to examine the level of congruence between voters and candidates across different policy dimensions at the national level. As the left/right dimension is the primary dimension of contestation in domestic European politics, we expect that there will be a relatively high level of congruence between voters and representatives on this dimension. To the extent that issues are not related to this left/right dimension, we expect that the level of congruence will be lower. In the last part of the analysis we examine to what extent the national parties are compatible policy-wise and hence whether the process of political representation is still effective when we aggregate it to the level of the political groups in the European Parliament. Finally, we reflect on the implications of our findings for the quality of representation in the European Union and its member states.

The Requirements for Effective Political Representation

What constitutes an effective process of political representation depends on one's view on the function of this process. In modern (theories of) representative democracy there is hardly any dispute about the main function of this process: it should connect, either directly or indirectly, the policy preferences of the citizenry to public policy. The key actors in this process, in addition to the voters, are political parties. They directly or indirectly translate their electoral mandate into public policy. Directly in majoritarian democracies where a single party gets an electoral mandate to

implement its policy programme, indirectly in consensus democracies where after the elections parties in parliament have to form a coalition government based on a compromise between their policy programmes (Powell 2000). In both systems the first important step in connecting the policy preferences of the voters to public policy is that elections connect these preferences to the policy views of political parties and their representatives in parliament. In this paper we focus on this first step by examining to what degree the policy views of political representatives match the views of the citizens in the context of the European Parliament and hence how well the system of political representation works on the European level.

For elections to function as instruments to link citizens' policy preferences with the policy positions of representatives, two main requirements must be met. First, the parties must offer a choice to the electorate in terms of their policy proposals. Second, voters must vote according to their policy preferences. These conditions are familiar elements of the Responsible Party Model of representation (see e.g. American Political Science Association 1950; Katz 1997; Thomassen 1994). The common assumption is that if both conditions are met, the electoral process will lead to policy congruence between a particular parliamentary party and the voters who voted for it.

However, as argued elsewhere (Thomassen 1994, 1999), these two requirements do not guarantee policy congruence between voters and representatives. Even when parties offer distinct policy programmes and all voters vote according to their issue positions, the election outcome does not necessarily convey an unequivocal electoral mandate to political parties on any given policy issue. Political parties offer a package deal to the voter. By voting for a particular party, voters are forced to vote for the whole package, even though they might favour another party on some issues. Consequently, it is possible that a party represents the view of a minority of its voters on individual issues.

The problem is only avoided when the voters voting for a particular party because of their position on a particular issue(-dimension) agree with the other policy positions of that party as well. Logically, this will only occur when these issue positions, both at the level of political parties and at the level of the electorate, are highly correlated – i.e. when both political parties, in the composition of their programmes, their representatives in parliament, in their legislative behaviour, and voters, when they decide which party they will vote for, are constrained by the same ideology. If that is the case then voters, by using this ideology or belief system as a shortcut, can vote for the party that represents their policy preferences best without even knowing the position of political parties on each and every issue (Downs 1957). Only when this condition is met will elections connect the policy preferences of the voters for a particular party across a range of issues to the policy position of the party of their choice.

Examining the effectiveness of political representation at the level of the European Parliament is even more complicated than at the national level.

A familiar criticism of the system of political representation at the European level is that there is no such system. European political parties as such do not compete for the votes of a European electorate. European elections are fought by national political parties and mainly on national issues, voters make their choice on the basis of their opinions on national issues and their perception of national political parties on these issues, and, as a consequence, European elections fail as an instrument of democracy at the European level, that is, they fail to link the policy preferences of the European people to the decision-making process in the European Parliament.

However, even though it is true that there is no European system of political representation as such, this does not necessarily mean European elections fail as an instrument of linkage. If the requirements spelled out above are met within each member state this will lead to policy congruence between voters and their national MEPs. Furthermore, if the various national systems are compatible – in terms of having similar sets of parties putting forward similar policy programmes, based on the same ideological dimension – then they can be successfully aggregated at the European level if like-minded national political parties jointly form political groups in the European Parliament. This in turn would lead to congruence between the policy positions of these transnational political groups and the people who (indirectly) voted for them. Taking this into account is relevant, because the general pattern is that MEPs vote in accordance with the majority of their political group in the European Parliament (Hix *et al*. 2007: 137). Therefore, the compatibility of the national political parties jointly forming political groups in the European Parliament is an additional requirement to be met for an effective process of political representation at the European level.

Policy Dimensions in European Parliament Elections

It has often been argued that party competition in European democracies can be largely reduced to a single dimension of left/right (e.g. Sani and Sartori 1983). Empirical research seems to confirm that left/right is the main dimension of contestation. Voters in general have no problem locating themselves on the left/right dimension; they have a clear perception of where the main political parties stand; and they vote in large numbers for parties near their own position on this dimension (van der Brug and van der Eijk 1999; van der Brug *et al*. 2009; van der Eijk *et al*. 2005). Therefore, the language of 'left' and 'right' seems to create a unidimensional discourse providing the common yardstick for masses and elites that is required in a model of political representation (Huber and Powell 1994). Research also shows that vote choice in European elections is strongly related to left/right positions (van der Eijk *et al*. 1996: 359).

In terms of content, the left/right dimension is most closely associated with economic questions, such as the redistribution of wealth and the role of

the state in the economy. As Hooghe *et al.* (2004: 164) put it, the left/right dimension 'constrains the positions that parties take on competing versions of capitalism in Europe'. Support for the economic interpretation of the left/ right dimension is also provided by the cross-national study of Benoit and Laver (2006). They find that in all EU countries, except for Malta and Austria, party positions on the issue of 'taxes and spending' were significantly correlated with positions on the general left/right dimension. Due to the dominance of the left/right dimension in shaping party competition across countries, the national systems of political representation in EU member states are largely compatible. This is the case even after the 2004 enlargement of the European Union with 10 new member states, mainly from Central and Eastern Europe. As a consequence these national systems of political representation can be aggregated to the European level without losing much of their effectiveness. Even though there is not much of a truly European system of political representation, European party groups are remarkably distinct (competitive) and internally cohesive with regard to the left/right dimension, while voters across member states mainly vote according to their position on the left/right dimension (Rosema and de Vries 2011; Schmitt and Thomassen 2009; van der Brug *et al.* 2009).

All these studies suggest that the process of political representation is likely to be effective on the left/right dimension and therefore on issues constrained by this dimension. However, they do not really prove that this process is effective on each and every issue. This will only be the case when all policy issues are encompassed or constrained by this single dimension. This requirement is unlikely to be met. On the contrary, a growing body of research suggests that attitudes and policy positions on issues like law and order, European unification, immigration and the place of ethnic minorities in society are *not* constrained by the left/right dimension (Hooghe *et al.* 2004; Kriesi *et al.* 2006). If this is the case, whereas at the same time the behaviour of both political parties and voters at election time is still dominated by the left/right dimension, elections are doomed to fail as an instrument of linkage with regard to such issues.

The idea that the space of political conflict in most modern Western societies can be reduced to a single ideological dimension was never undisputed. In Western Europe the religious cleavage used to be a second dimension of conflict in addition to the left/right dimension, basically understood as a class cleavage. Although it might be true that this dimension is no longer a *dimension of conflict* but 'only' a *dimension of identification* (Sani and Sartori 1983), people might still use it as a compass guiding them on moral issues. A second more or less classic dimension is the libertarian-authoritarian dimension (Kitschelt 1994; Lipset 1966). Lipset (1966) was the first to argue that the traditional parties on the left were not representative of their voters on this dimension. Whereas these parties tend to combine a left position on the (socio-economic) left/right dimension with a libertarian position, their voters, in particular as far as they are less well

educated, tend to combine a position on the left with a traditional or authoritarian position on non-material issues.

Recently this discussion has been brought back to life, mainly because of the rise of populist parties. It is difficult to understand their success in the simple left/right framework. For example, Kriesi *et al.* (2006, 2008) argue that the antagonism between winners and losers of the contemporary process of globalisation leads to a conflict between *integration* and *demarcation*. They expect that this new conflict dimension will increasingly take on an ethnic or nationalist character. Also, they expect that new issues like European integration and immigration will be absorbed into this cultural dimension. The cultural dimension has been gaining in importance as it has become the primary basis on which new parties or transformed established parties seek to mobilise their electorate and therefore has developed into a second dimension of conflict (Kriesi *et al.* 2006, 2008). The cultural dimension is conceptually strongly related to the classic libertarian-authoritarian dimension. The same applies to the GAL-TAN dimension (green/alternative/libertarian vs. traditional/authoritarian/nationalist) introduced by Hooghe *et al.* (2004).

While the cultural dimension is distinct from the left/right dimension, most studies find that it is not entirely separate. In terms of the positions of European political parties in Western Europe, Marks *et al.* (2006) find a moderately strong correlation between the two dimensions, with parties on the left typically associated with libertarian (or GAL) positions, and parties on the right associated with more authoritarian (or TAN) positions. In contrast, the relationship was found to be in the opposite direction for parties in former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe: parties on the right (with free market economic policies) tend to be more liberal on cultural matters and more in favour of European integration than parties on the left. This suggests that on this dimension the major political groups in the European Parliament will have difficulty meeting the requirement of the compatibility of national party delegations (cf. van der Brug *et al.* 2009; Voeten 2009).

In both Kriesi's and Hooghe's conceptual framework the issue of European integration is part of the cultural or GAL-TAN dimension respectively. However, in analyses of the issue positions of both members of the European Parliament and members of the national parliaments of the member states, European integration clearly came out as a separate dimension, distinct from both the left/right and libertarian-authoritarian dimensions (McElroy and Benoit 2007; Thomassen and Schmitt 1999). European integration appears not completely independent from left/right, though, in particular at the elite level, because parties opposing European integration are typically found relatively close to the extremes of the left/right dimension, whereas centrist parties are characterised by more favourable attitudes towards European integration (Hooghe *et al.* 2004; Rosema and de Vries 2011; Schmitt and Thomassen 2009). These findings

lead us to expect that policy preferences can be understood best in terms of three distinct, but moderately correlated, dimensions of political contestation: the traditional left/right dimension, which is strongly associated with economic issues, a cultural dimension, which strongly overlaps with GAL-TAN and incorporates issues like immigration, and a dimension related to the issue of European integration.

The Dimensionality of the Policy Space

To test our hypotheses we use data from the Candidate Study and Voter Study of the European Election Study 2009 (EES 2009) (Giebler *et al*. 2010; van Egmond *et al*. 2010). The Candidate Study surveyed a total of 1,576 candidates from all 27 member states. The sample focused on parties that received over half the national electoral threshold and excluded candidates very low on the party list. On average, there were 58 respondents per member state. However, this varied widely, from seven respondents in Bulgaria to 258 respondents in the UK. The Voter Study surveyed 27,069 individuals from all 27 member states, with a minimum of 1,000 respondents per country. Data files and documentation are available from the project website: http://www.piredeu.eu.

The present study employs 11 attitudinal items contained in both the candidate and voter surveys, listed in Table 1. These items were selected as they measure different aspects of the three policy dimensions discussed in the previous section, namely the economic left/right dimension, the cultural dimension, and the EU dimension. It was also important to have a balance in terms of the orientation of the items – in other words, to include both positively worded and negatively worded items with respect to the

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTION   OF SURVEY ITEMS IN EUROPEAN ELECTION STUDY 2009

| Item	Description
Redistribution	Income and wealth should be redistributed towards ordinary people
State	Public services and industries should be in state ownership
Enterprise	Private enterprise is the best way to solve (country's) economic problems
Immigration	Immigration to (country) should be decreased significantly
Sentences	People who break the law should get much harsher sentences than now
Marriage	Same-sex marriage should be prohibited by law
Abortion	Women should be free to decide on matters of abortion
Trust	You trust the institutions of the European Union
Parliament	The European Parliament takes into consideration the concerns of European citizens
Referendum	EU treaty changes should be decided by referendum
Democracy	How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in the EU? (4-point scale)

Note: All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale with values ranging between 1 (strongly agree) and 5 (strongly disagree), except the 'democracy' item, which was measured using a four-point scale with values ranging between 1 (very satisfied) and 4 (not at all satisfied).

dimension being measured – in order to be able to identify an acquiescence bias in the data. Ten of the selected items elicited a response to a statement on a 5-point Likert scale, while one item used a 4-point scale.

The first set of analyses examines the structure of policy views among voters and candidates. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using STATA version 12.0 to test our expectations regarding the policy space in each country. Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation was used for the analysis, with missing data handled by listwise deletion.[1] The candidate data and voter data are examined together, in order to produce comparable estimates of their respective positions on the underlying dimensions, enabling us to determine the degree of policy congruence. We also looked at voters and candidates separately (results not presented). A comparable structure was found for both levels, the main differences being that for candidates, positions are more tightly constrained by the underlying dimensions (indicated by higher factor loadings for the candidate data than the voter data) and the dimensions are somewhat more strongly correlated with each other.

The model we test is shown in Figure 1. It assumes a three-dimensional policy space: an economic left/right dimension, on which the three economic variables load; a cultural dimension, on which four items load; and an EU dimension, on which four items load. Correlations between these latent factors are also expected (indicated by the double-headed arrows).

FIGURE 1
PATH DIAGRAM FOR THE STRUCTURE OF POLICY PREFERENCES
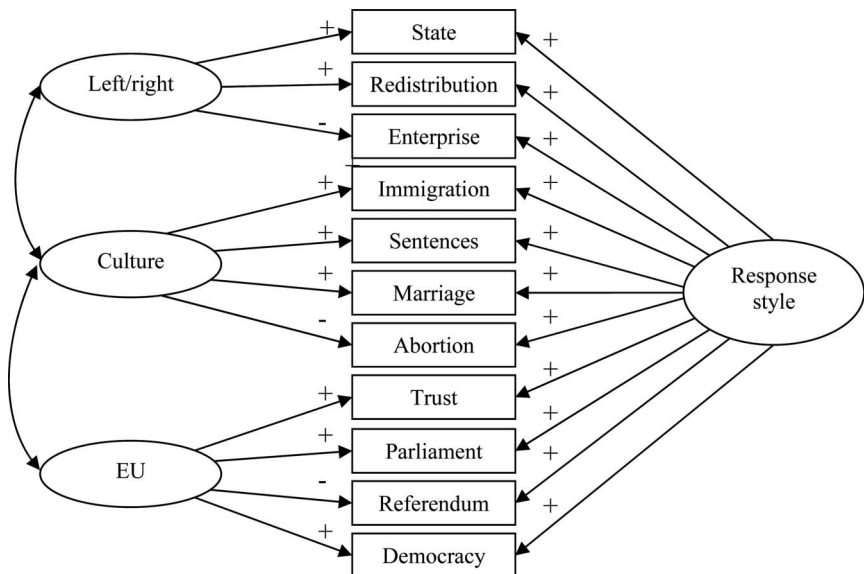
Note: Error paths not included.

In addition to the factors corresponding to the three policy dimensions a 'response style' factor is included in the model. We include this factor to address a measurement problem in the data. As is common in Likert items, there is evidence of acquiescence bias, that is, a tendency among some respondents to agree with statements regardless of their content (McClendon 1991). This tendency is picked up by the inclusion of the response style factor, which follows the recommendations of Billiet and McClendon (2000) and Welkenhuysen-Gybles *et al.* (2003). There is no reason to believe that different items will be affected differently by acquiescence (Welkenhuysen-Gybles *et al.* 2003: 707), so the style factor is constrained to have an identical loading on all of the Likert items in the model (but loads freely on the non-Likert item 'democracy'). The style factor is further constrained to be uncorrelated with each of the three 'content' factors (Billiet and McClendon 2000: 612).[2] An additional test confirmed that the response style factor does indeed measure acquiescence.[3]

For member states in Western Europe the standardised factor loadings are presented in Table 2. In each of these countries the four-factor model (three policy dimensions plus the response style factor) provided a good fit with the data, as discussed in more detail below. In general, the factor loadings (which have a possible range of −1 to +1) are reasonably strong and in the anticipated direction. Only the item about abortion has consistently low loadings, which suggests that in most countries this issue is not incorporated in the cultural dimension. We kept the item, though, in order to maintain a mix of pro-trait and contra-trait items for each dimension.

In Central and Eastern Europe our model was not always supported by the data, as shown in Table 3. In five countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) the model that included three policy dimensions plus the response style factor provided a good fit with the data. In Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary, however, a simpler model containing just two policy factors performed better than the full model: a broad left/ right factor on which the economic and cultural items load, and a separate EU factor. For four countries no acceptable model was found: Greece, Malta, Lithuania and Latvia.[4] For reasons of comparability, these four countries are not included in the analyses below of policy congruence between voters and parties.

Model fit indices and the inter-factor correlations for each country are listed in Table 4. The adequacy of the fit is evaluated using a number of recommended statistics (Brown 2006: 87). The standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) measures the extent to which the correlations from the input matrix are adequately predicted by the model; good-fitting models have values below 0.08. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) expresses the degree of model misspecification; values below 0.08 can indicate an acceptable model fit, while values below 0.06 indicate a good fit. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) evaluates the fit of the model in comparison to a baseline model on a scale of 0 to 1; values above 0.90 can be

TABLE 2
RESULTS OF CONFIRMATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS OF POLICY PREFERENCES: FACTOR LOADINGS BY COUNTRY FOR WESTERN EUROPE

Item		AT	BE	CY	DK	FI	FR	DE	IE	IT	LU	NL	PT	ES	SE	UK
Left/right	State	0.47	0.23	0.16	0.40	0.43	0.50	0.61	0.26	0.10	0.58	0.48	0.29	0.32	0.58	0.48
	Redistribution	0.43	0.67	0.25	0.18	0.56	0.41	0.55	0.61	0.17	0.16	0.36	0.44	0.34	0.61	0.42
	Enterprise	−0.72	−0.29	−0.28	−0.73	−0.21	−0.60	−0.63	−0.22	−0.34	−0.26	−0.35	−0.27	−0.61	−0.61	−0.80
Culture	Immigration	0.79	0.57	0.15	0.77	0.67	0.76	0.77	0.60	0.77	0.58	0.61	0.66	0.45	0.78	0.73
	Sentences	0.62	0.41	0.19	0.67	0.57	0.57	0.54	0.41	0.48	0.53	0.53	0.36	0.44	0.54	0.64
	Marriage	0.40	0.25	0.53	0.30	0.45	0.52	0.41	0.24	0.44	0.28	0.39	0.29	0.54	0.46	0.52
	Abortion	−0.15	−0.11	−0.25	−0.13	−0.12	−0.42	−0.08	−0.06	−0.07	−0.10	−0.24	0.04	−0.49	−0.30	−0.22
EU	Trust	0.75	0.63	0.68	0.75	0.71	0.83	0.67	0.81	0.88	0.66	0.73	0.72	0.77	0.77	0.82
	Parliament	0.75	0.62	0.49	0.58	0.59	0.70	0.68	0.62	0.56	0.64	0.66	0.66	0.62	0.64	0.73
	Referendum	−0.54	−0.36	−0.15	−0.36	−0.49	−0.39	−0.39	−0.26	−0.06	−0.39	−0.49	−0.28	−0.20	−0.49	−0.55
	Democracy	0.48	0.41	0.35	0.54	0.48	0.56	0.45	0.47	0.22	0.51	0.46	0.45	0.37	0.65	0.60
Style	(Mean loading across items)	0.21	0.28	0.37	0.10	0.21	0.20	0.22	0.20	0.23	0.22	0.18	0.24	0.22	0.13	0.20

Note: Countries are abbreviated as follows. AT: Austria; BE: Belgium; CY: Cyprus; DK: Denmark; FI: Finland; FR: France; DE: Germany; IE: Ireland; IT: Italy; LU: Luxembourg; NL: The Netherlands; PT: Portugal; ES: Spain; SE: Sweden; UK: The United Kingdom.

TABLE 3
RESULTS OF CONFIRMATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS OF POLICY PREFERENCES: FACTOR LOADINGS BY COUNTRY FOR CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

	Item	Four-factor solution						Three-factor solution		
		CZ	EE	PL	SK	SI		BU	HU	RO
Left/right	State	0.46	0.51	0.47	0.70	0.29	**Left/right**	0.55	0.58	0.51
	Redistribution	0.51	0.28	0.33	0.38	0.23		0.54	0.37	0.34
	Enterprise	−0.27	−0.33	−0.57	−0.45	−0.30		−0.44	−0.15	−0.52
Culture	Immigration	0.65	0.39	0.38	0.41	0.42		0.34	0.62	0.27
	Sentences	0.33	0.41	0.53	0.18	0.16		−0.05	0.29	0.32
	Marriage	0.37	0.43	0.51	0.41	0.72		0.38	0.50	0.27
	Abortion	−0.04	−0.02	−0.28	0.02	−0.39		−0.12	−0.15	−0.07
EU	Trust	0.71	0.75	0.75	0.74	0.65	**EU**	0.82	0.78	0.66
	Parliament	0.73	0.67	0.54	0.5	−0.26		0.67	0.62	0.64
	Referendum	−0.31	−0.14	−0.38	−0.17	−0.26		−0.15	−0.38	−0.29
	Democracy	0.50	0.47	0.46	0.48	0.43		0.33	0.49	0.36
Style	(Mean loadings across items)	0.22	0.26	0.23	0.27	0.24	**Style**	0.26	0.31	0.28

Note: Countries are abbreviated as follows. CZ: Czech Republic; EE: Estonia; PL: Poland; SK: Slovakia; SI: Slovenia; BU: Bulgaria; HU: Hungary; RO: Romania.

TABLE 4
RESULTS OF CONFIRMATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS OF POLICY PREFERENCES:
MODEL FIT AND INTER-FACTOR CORRELATIONS BY COUNTRY

	Model fit			Inter-factor correlations			
	RMSEA	CFI	SRMR	Left/right culture	Left/right EU	Culture EU	N
Western Europe							
Austria	0.067	0.917	0.067	−0.42	−0.04	−0.57	667
Belgium*	0.066	0.834	0.054	−0.22	−0.14	−0.45	674
Cyprus	0.042	0.900	0.042	−0.40	−0.69	−0.05	671
Denmark*	0.060	0.910	0.048	−0.63	−0.11	−0.15	715
Finland	0.078	0.835	0.061	0.01	−0.48	−0.53	600
France	0.054	0.947	0.041	−0.70	−0.39	−0.22	600
Germany	0.079	0.851	0.062	−0.17	−0.25	−0.29	788
Ireland	0.050	0.900	0.043	0.27	−0.18	−0.42	721
Italy	0.049	0.917	0.047	−0.64	0.07	−0.36	657
Luxembourg	0.066	0.833	0.056	−0.03	−0.20	−0.33	721
Netherlands	0.099	0.745	0.072	−0.29	−0.26	−0.46	652
Portugal	0.055	0.889	0.048	0.43	−0.41	−0.57	503
Spain	0.057	0.891	0.046	−0.73	−0.13	−0.10	588
Sweden	0.060	0.929	0.044	−0.07	−0.57	−0.28	782
UK	0.077	0.914	0.052	−0.54	0.33	−0.64	732
Mean				*−0.28*	*−0.23*	*−0.36*	
Central/Eastern Europe (3 factors)							
Czech Republic	0.082	0.812	0.060	0.57	−0.34	−0.48	411
Estonia	0.067	0.862	0.053	0.67	−0.53	−0.49	419
Poland	0.064	0.865	0.053	0.33	−0.34	−0.58	334
Slovakia	0.080	0.822	0.063	0.67	−0.33	−0.62	350
Slovenia	0.065	0.835	0.062	−0.10	−0.58	−0.12	530
Mean				*0.43*	*−0.43*	*−0.46*	
Central/Eastern Europe (2 factors)							
Bulgaria	0.056	0.906	0.051	–	−0.42	–	339
Hungary	0.053	0.943	0.050	–	−0.85	–	378
Romania	0.059	0.875	0.056	–	−0.59	–	324
Mean					*−0.62*		

Note: RMSEA: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation. CFI: Comparative Fit Index.
SRMR: Standardised Root Mean Square Residual.
*Minor modifications to the basic model were made for these countries. See note 2.

taken as an acceptable fit, and values above 0.95 indicate a good fit (Brown 2006: 87).

For most countries the four-factor model was superior to a model with fewer factors (i.e. a model without the style factor, or models with fewer policy factors). Ten countries score well on all three fit indices. Most of the other countries (both east and west) have acceptable SRMR and RMSEA scores but are below the 0.90 threshold for CFI. Only the Netherlands and the Czech Republic perform poorly on two of the three measures of model fit. Overall, taking into account the fact that any model will perform better in some countries than in others, the model that includes three policy dimensions plus a response style factor can be taken to be a reasonably good fit for the data.

The direction and the strength of the correlations between the content factors are also of interest (see Table 4). The first thing to note is that the correlations are generally modest (there is only one instance of an inter-factor correlation above 0.80, which is sometimes taken as a cut-off point for discriminant validity; see Brown 2006: 32), supporting the conclusion that the three policy dimensions are indeed distinct. In terms of the direction of the relationships, there are notable differences between west and east. For nearly all Western European countries, there is a negative correlation between the left/right and culture factors. Given the way the factors are oriented, this means those on the left on economic issues tend to be liberal on cultural issues, as expected. In contrast, there is a moderately strong positive correlation between these two factors for nearly all countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). In line with the findings of Marks *et al.* (2006), this implies that economically leftist voters and candidates from CEE countries are culturally conservative.

These differences between east and west are not found for the other correlations. For all countries, there is a negative correlation between the culture and EU factors, implying that culturally conservative respondents tend to be more Eurosceptic. There is also a negative correlation between the left/right and EU factors for most countries, indicating that left-wing respondents tend to be more opposed to EU integration. However, this relationship is quite weak in several Western European countries. This does not necessarily mean that the factors are not related, because the analysis focuses on linear relationships and previous research identified a non-linear relationship (Hooghe *et al.* 2004; Schmitt and Thomassen 2009). However, those findings concerned the EU as a whole and focused on the elite level. At the mass level and when focusing on individual countries, those patterns are much weaker (Rosema and de Vries 2011: 209).

To summarise, the confirmatory factor analysis shows that the attitudes of voters and candidates are not constrained by a single dimension. Rather, three separate policy dimensions were found to best capture the observed variation: an economic left/right dimension, a cultural dimension and an EU dimension. In only three countries (Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania) two policy dimensions produced the best fit. Thus, the assumption implicit in the Responsible Party Model of representation – that the opinions of voters and representatives on all relevant issues are constrained by a single dimension – does not hold. This raises the possibility that the congruence between voters and representatives will be weak for certain types of issues.

Analysis of Policy Congruence between Voters and Representatives

We have argued that the level of agreement between voters and representatives will vary across policy domains: issues that are related to the left/right dimension are expected to be associated with higher levels of congruence than issues that are independent of this dimension. To test these expectations,

we compare the positions of voters and candidates from each national party on the three dimensions identified in the previous section. Factor scores (predicted values for each latent factor) are produced for each dimension on the basis of the confirmatory factor analysis reported in the previous section. The advantage of using factor scores instead of additive indices is that they enable us to control for acquiescence bias, as done in the above analysis. The factor scores are standardised variables with a mean of zero.

Policy congruence is analysed by determining how close each national party is to its voters on each dimension.[5] National party positions are measured as the mean position of their candidates. The proximity of parties to their voters is measured as the mean absolute difference between the position of each voter and the position of the party he or she voted for. To increase the reliability of the estimates, only parties that have at least five candidates and 40 voters with valid responses to all 11 items are included in the analysis. So in countries where the response rate of the candidate survey was low, several parties had to be excluded. This also applies to several small parties, which did not meet the criterion of the voter survey. In addition, the four countries for which an acceptable factor solution was not found (Greece, Malta, Lithuania and Latvia) are excluded. In total, 39 national parties meet all selection criteria and these are now focused on.

The policy congruence between voters and parties is presented in Figure 2. Each bar represents the mean absolute difference between a national party and its voters on a particular dimension. The results are organised by party groups and by country. The first panel gives the results for 12 parties affiliated with the centre-right European People's Party (EPP). The difference between parties and voters is smallest on the left/right dimension in nearly all countries. The only exception is Slovakia, where the party is closest to its voters on the culture dimension.

The second panel in Figure 2 shows the results for eight parties affiliated with the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). Again, parties and their voters are found to match best on the left/right dimension, the only exceptions being Belgium and Germany, where parties are slightly closer to their voters on the culture dimension. The pattern is repeated for parties affiliated with the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and the Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens). In both cases, parties perform best on the left/right dimension in all but one of the countries analysed.

For the smaller party groups (the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR), the Confederal Group of the European United Left–Nordic Green Left (EUL-NGL) and Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group (EFD)), there are very few national parties that meet our selection criteria. For four out of the five national parties included, the parties are closer to their voters on the left/right dimension than on the other two dimensions. This is somewhat surprising, given the emphasis these parties typically place on issues related to the other two dimensions. Because of the low number of

FIGURE 2
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN VOTERS AND PARTIES ON THREE POLICY
DIMENSIONS
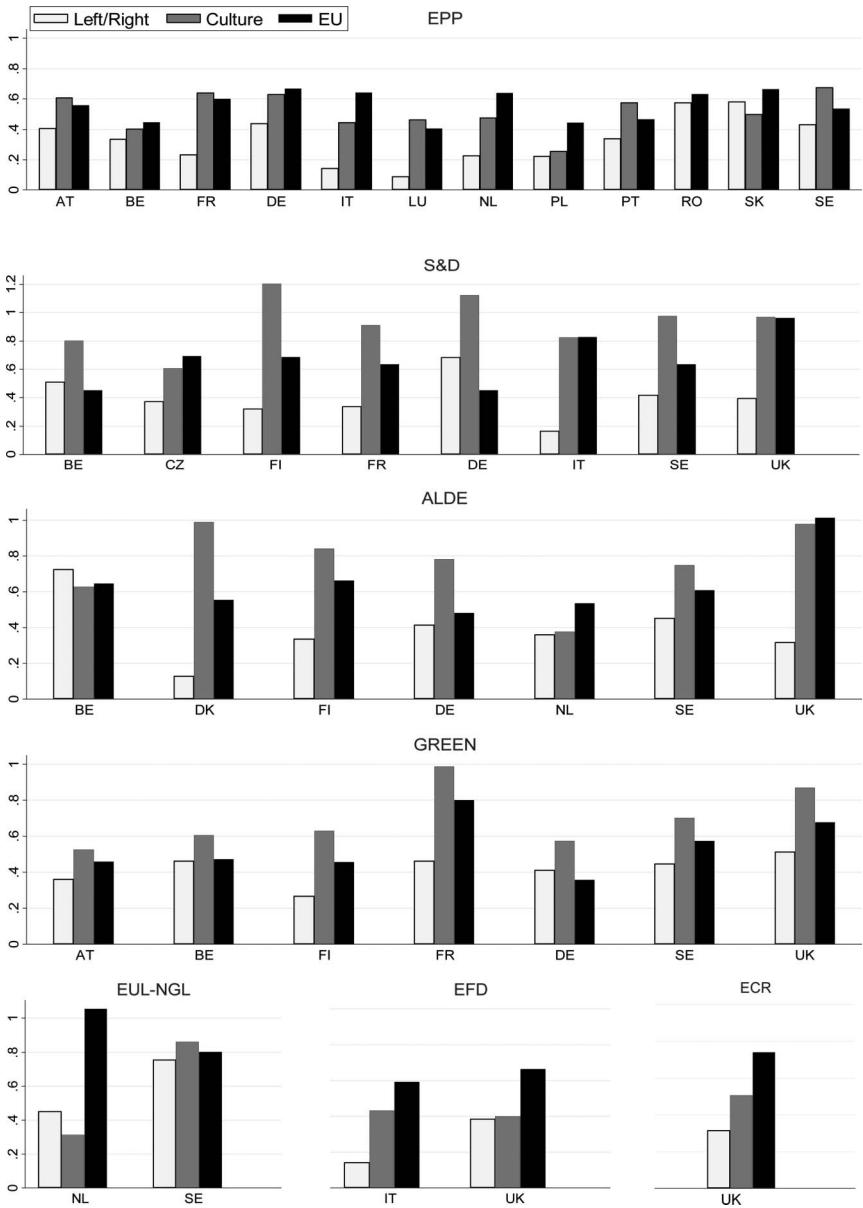
Note: Entries are the mean absolute difference between the voter positions and the party position. Countries are abbreviated as follows. AT: Austria; BE: Belgium; CY: Cyprus; CZ: The Czech Republic; DK: Denmark; EE: Estonia; FI: Finland: FR: France; DE: Germany; IE: Ireland; IT: Italy; LU: Luxembourg; NL: The Netherlands; PL: Poland; PT: Portugal; RO: Romania SI: Slovenia; SK: Slovakia; ES: Spain; SE: Sweden; UK: The United Kingdom.

national parties, however, we cannot reach strong conclusions about these party groups.

The differences between positions of parties and their voters are illustrated in Figure 3, which plots the mean position of voters against the mean position of candidates for each party on the three dimensions. When the mean positions of candidates and voters for a particular party are the same, the party will be placed on the 45 degree reference line. For the left/right dimension, the mean positions of candidates and voters are relatively close together, with most parties placed on or close to the reference line. The differences that exist follow a pattern, in that parties on the right (i.e. where the mean candidate has a high score on this dimension) tend to be slightly to the right of their average voter, while parties on the left tend to be slightly to the left of their average voter. For the culture dimension, the mean position of candidates for most parties is higher than the mean position of their voters. Given the way this dimension is orientated, this indicates that candidates for most parties are more liberal than their voters on cultural issues.

For the EU dimension, the mean position of candidates is lower than that of voters for most parties. This implies that candidates are typically more in favour of EU integration than their voters. The three outliers at the top right corner of the graph are parties associated with EUL-NGL and EFD, where the mean candidate position is strongly anti-EU. The average size of the gap between mean candidate and mean voter positions is 0.26 on the left/right dimension, 0.52 on the culture dimension and 0.41 on the EU dimension.

The Compatibility of National Parties within Political Groups

So far, we have established that an important requirement for an effective process of political representation is not met. Instead of a single left/right dimension three separate policy dimensions can be identified in most EU member states, with different relationships between these dimensions for CEE and Western European countries. As expected, the congruence between parties and their voters is consistently higher on the economic left/right dimension than on the culture and EU dimensions. In this section, we investigate whether the process of political representation is still effective when transferred to the EU level. As argued above, this will only be the case when an additional requirement is met, i.e. when the policy positions of the national parties from each political group are compatible. If national parties represent their voters well on the left/right dimension and have similar positions on this dimension to the other parties in their political group, then we can infer that the groups represent their voters well, albeit indirectly. In a similar way, how well voters are represented on the culture and EU dimensions depends in part on how well national parties from the same political group in the European Parliament match in those terms.

To estimate policy positions for national parties that are comparable across countries, the confirmatory factor analysis model was applied to the

FIGURE 3

COMPARISON OF MEAN POSITIONS OF CANDIDATES AND VOTERS FOR NATIONAL PARTIES
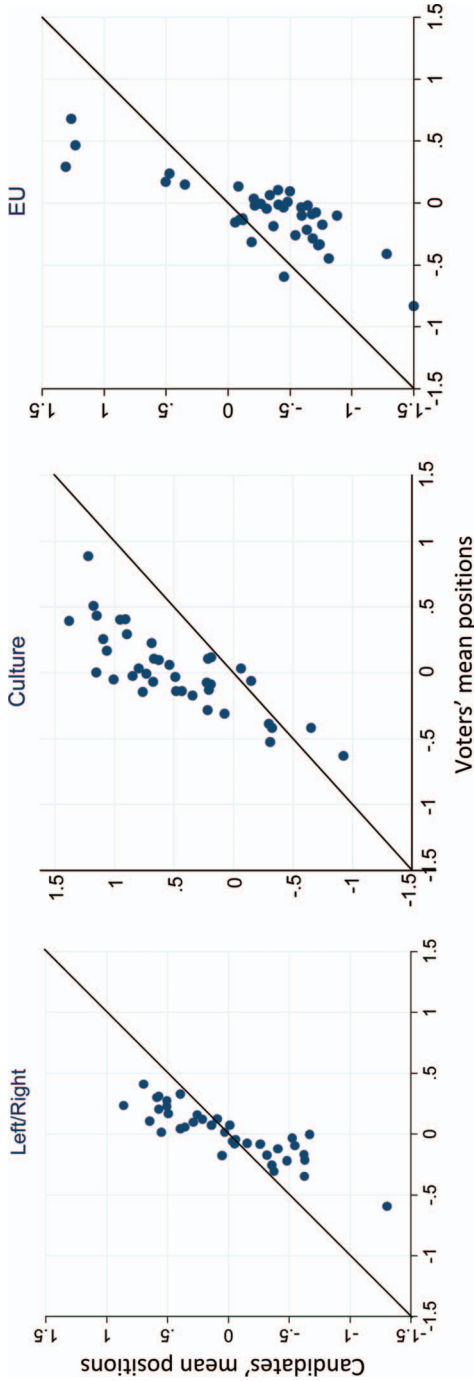
candidate data with all 27 countries included together. As before, national parties with fewer than five candidates with valid responses to all 11 items are excluded from the analysis. A total of 61 national parties are included as a result (the breakdown by political group is as follows: 15 EPP, 10 S&D, 10 ALDE, 12 Green, 4 ECR, 6 GUE-NGL and 4 EFD). The model has an acceptable fit on most indicators (SRMR = 0.06; CFI = 0.93; RMSEA 0.09), and the three policy dimensions having strong loadings (> 0.5) on all items. Factor scores were produced for each of the three policy dimensions on the basis of this analysis. The position of each national party on the three dimensions was calculated as the mean position of its candidates.

Figure 4 shows the position of the national parties from each political group on the three policy dimensions. For the left/right dimension, clear differences are apparent between groups on the left (GUE-NGL, Green and S&D) and groups on the right (ALDE, EPP, ECR, EFD). The national parties for each group are generally clustered closely together, although some differences are apparent, particularly in the Green and ALDE groups. No significant differences are apparent between Western European countries (represented by the white circles) and CEE countries (represented by black circles). Overall, political group membership explains 77 per cent of the variation in all national party positions on this dimension, and 67 per cent of the variation in the positions of national parties associated with the three largest groups (EPP, S&D and ALDE).[6] Such high figures can only be reached if the political groups are to a considerable extent both cohesive and distinctive.

Turning to the culture dimension, more significant internal divisions are apparent in several political groups, and these divisions appear to follow geographic lines. For the Greens, S&D and ALDE, parties from CEE countries are noticeably more conservative than their Western European counterparts. The internal differences are smallest for the relatively extreme GUE-NGL group and for ECR. Political group membership explains less variation in party positions on this dimension compared to the left/right dimension: the figure for all parties is 69 per cent, and for parties from the three largest groups it is 55 per cent.

Finally, a noticeably different picture emerges for the EU dimension. The smaller fringe parties (GUE-NGL, Greens, ECR and EFD) appear quite divided on this dimension, although tending towards the anti-EU end of the spectrum. The larger centre parties (EPP, S&D and ALDE) are more cohesive, but there are no significant differences between them, as they all take similar pro-EU positions. The percentage of variation in party positions explained by group membership is relatively high when all parties are analysed (74 per cent), but the figure is just 14 per cent for the three largest parties. This low figure results from the lack of distinctiveness of the major parties on the EU dimension.

The graphs in Figure 4 also reveal something else, namely how positions of the political parties on the three dimensions are related (keeping in mind

FIGURE 4
POSITIONS OF NATIONAL PARTIES ON THREE POLICY DIMENSIONS,
ORGANISED BY POLITICAL GROUP IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT
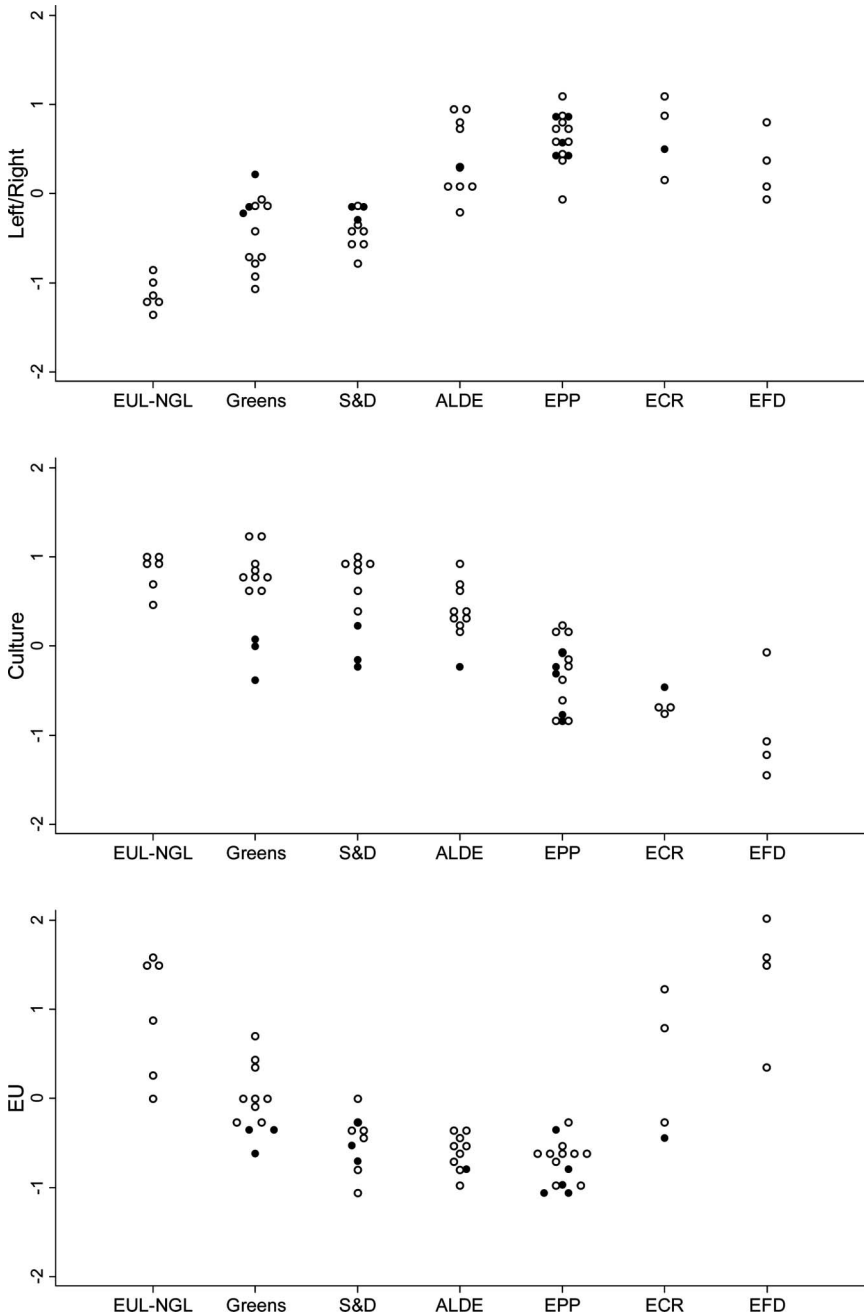
Note: The position of each national party is the mean position of its candidates. Parties from Western European countries are represented by white circles; parties from Central and Eastern European countries are represented by black circles.

that the positions of the groups are not always very clear due to internal differences). Comparing the first and second graphs, there is a general tendency for political groups with parties that take leftist positions on the left/right dimension to take liberal positions on the cultural dimension. A comparison of the first and third graph reveals that at the elite level the left/right and EU dimensions are also related, though in a different way. The relationship is not linear but follows the familiar pattern: party groups close to the centre of the left/right dimension favour European integration more strongly, whereas party groups further to the left and further to the right take a more Eurosceptic position.

In conclusion, the coherence and compatibility of political groups is highest on the left/right dimension, with most of the variation in positions occurring between rather than within political groups. The groups are generally more internally fragmented on the culture dimension, while for the EU dimension the largest groups are relatively cohesive, but not distinctive.

Conclusion

The system of political representation may be viewed as a means to establish the democratic ideal of policy congruence between citizens and representatives, and ultimately congruence between citizens' preferences and government policy (Powell 2000). In this paper we have examined how well the system of democratic representation works at the level of the European Union. We have not only analysed policy congruence between voters and their representatives in the European Parliament, but also highlighted one of the conditions necessary to enable policy congruence between voters and representatives: namely, that the attitudes of voters and positions of parties on the key issues are constrained by one ideological dimension. The implications of this were analysed in the context of the 2009 European Parliament elections on the basis of voter and candidate data from the European Election Study.

Confirmatory factor analysis of voters' and candidates' political opinions revealed that in fact this crucial condition is not met in the context of elections to the European Parliament. In line with research on previous European Parliament elections (Thomassen and Schmitt 1999), it was found that three dimensions were necessary to describe the policy attitudes of voters and candidates: an economic left/right dimension, a cultural dimension capturing attitudes towards a broad range of social issues, and a dimension capturing attitudes towards the EU. The correlations between these dimensions are generally modest, particularly when voters alone are considered.

These findings have two important implications. First, the fact that policy preferences are not structured in terms of a single dimension implies that if voters would fully base their choice on their policy preferences, this still does not guarantee that parties in parliament will reflect the policy preferences of

their voters. Second, the fact that the dimensions are not highly correlated at the mass level makes it difficult for political parties to organise in such a way that citizens will find options that reflect their preferences on all three dimensions.

An analysis of the level of agreement between voters and parties on the three policy dimensions confirms this. Congruence was found to be higher on the left/right dimension than on the culture and EU dimensions for nearly all of the national parties analysed. On the culture dimension, most parties were found to have more liberal positions than their voters; while on the EU dimension, most parties were found to have more pro-EU positions than their voters.

It has long been noted that a gap exists between political elites and the electorate on issues of European integration. The findings here suggest that a substantial gap also exists on the cultural dimension. This may explain the success of populist parties across Europe in mobilising voters on issues related to this dimension. The sad news is that with policy preferences that are weakly structured at the level of citizens, adequate representation on different types of issues becomes difficult. However, representation can work well on particular sets of issues. We found this to be the case on issues related to the economic left/right dimension. As long as the majority of the European Parliament's legislative workload relates to economic issues such as the regulation of the single market, European elections do fulfil an important function in linking citizens' and representatives' policy preferences.

Notes

1. While ML assumes the data are continuous, it is generally found to work well on ordinal data on at least 5-point scales (Harrington 2008). As a robustness check, an alternative Weighted Least Squares estimation was also conducted. There is disagreement in the literature as to which approach performs better in the presence of ordinal variables (Brown 2006: 388). However, the results from the two procedures were similar and the ML estimates are reported here.
2. The exact same model was applied to each country, with two minor exceptions. For Belgium, it was necessary to allow the 'response style' factor to load freely on the 'parliament' item in order to achieve convergence. This might be explained by the fact that this question appeared in a different part of the survey from most of the other items. For Denmark, it was necessary to allow the covariation in the error terms for the 'marriage' and 'abortion' items to reach a good model fit.
3. The items in the factor analysis are a mix of positively and negatively worded items, but a perfectly balanced set was not available. To test if the response style factor does indeed measure acquiescence, and not attitudes, we compare it with a balanced set of 18 items using 5-point scales in the candidate survey. We follow a procedure suggested by Billiet and McClendon (2000: 622–3) and apply it to candidates from the UK (the country with the highest number of candidates in the data, at 258). Acquiescence is measured using an additive scale that identifies the number of items that respondents agreed with. When this variable is included as an additional indicator for the response style factor in the confirmatory factor analysis, the loading was very high (standardised loading = −0.93). This supports the conclusion that the response style factor does indeed measure acquiescence.

4. The full model (with three policy factors plus the response style factor) did not achieve convergence for these countries. Lack of convergence is a common problem with confirmatory factor analysis, particularly with complex models (Brown 2006: 74). A simpler model with two policy factors was not an acceptable fit, having several insignificant factor loadings.

5. In a small number of cases, there are two or more parties from the same country affiliated with a particular political group in the European Parliament. These parties are treated as one single party in the present analysis.

6. This is based on the R^2 of an analysis of variance of party positions, with party group membership as the independent variable (cf. Schmitt and Thomassen 2009: 37).

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