Explaining Left-Right Party Congruence across European Party Systems:

A Test of Micro, Meso and Macro Level Models

Ana Maria Belchior

Abstract

Empirical studies on representation have been based mainly on the descriptive analysis of levels of political or ideological congruence between MPs and voters. Very few studies focus on explaining congruence and those which have done so do not explore all the explanatory dimensions. This article contributes to filling this gap by testing whether three theoretical models can explain left-right congruence among European parties. These models explore causality at the micro or individual level (the characteristics of voters and MPs), the meso level (party characteristics), and the macro or system level (party system and institutional characteristics). Based on data from the PIREDEU project, the study examines the party systems of the 27 countries of the European Union with reference to the 2009 European Parliament elections. The findings reveal that MP-voter congruence is best explained at the party level and by key MP (candidates) characteristics.

Key-words: political parties, left-right, MP candidates, voters, congruence, Europe.

Introduction

Despite the emergence of numerous studies of political representation in recent decades, there is insufficient research about some key areas. In fact, most work in this field is either essentially focused on theoretical matters or, in the case of empirical studies, largely descriptive. Some of these empirical studies comparatively analyze the levels of congruence among European political parties (Barnes, 1977; Converse & Pierce, 1986; Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996; Holmberg, 1989; Miller et al., 1999, except for the chapter by Wessels; Schmitt & Thomassen, 1999; Valen & Narud, 2007; and Freire & Belchior, forthcoming). A few works focus on causality (Huber & Powell, 1994; Dalton, 1985; Wessels, 1999; and Holmberg, 2000), but as far as we are aware, none attempt a comprehensive theory about what causes higher or lower levels of congruence between parties or party leaders and their voters.

This article attempts to explain the levels of left-right congruence within European political parties. The literature suggests different causes for party congruence that can be organized into three levels: individual, party and political system. In order to assess the relative importance of each level, this article uses three explanatory models that compile the predominant contributions in the literature: the Downs-May, the Przeworski-Sprague and the Huber-Powell-Wessels models. The study includes the 27 member states of the European Union, or a total of 189 political parties, and thus, uniquely, provides broad comparative cross-national and cross-party system data about the causes of congruence.

Political parties as instruments of representation is a core feature of the Responsible Party Model, the most frequently used theoretical model for the study of representation (e.g. Dalton, 1985; Converse & Pierce, 1986; Miller et al., 1999; and

Schmitt & Thomassen, 1999). In essence, this model requires voters to weigh their vote based on information about the position of parties, and to reward or punish incumbents based on their performance; and it requires parties to offer clear and distinct policy options and efficiently carry out the mandate they are granted by voters. On this view, the electoral choices of voters indirectly control political decisions, given that political parties fulfil pledges that supposedly correspond to the will of those electing them (Converse & Pierce, 1986, pp. 499-501, 699; Pierce, 1999, p. 9; Thomassen, 1999, pp. 251-252; and Schmitt & Thomassen, 1999, Chap. 6-9).

Although the model has been criticised (see e.g. Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996, Chap. 15; Thomassen, 1999, pp. 34-35; Dye & Zeigler, 2006, pp. 180-181, 203-205), it provides theoretical support for the premises of this article. Indeed, the aim here is to centre the analysis on political parties as privileged agents of representation, and assess the extent to which they constitute an efficient link between voters and leaders. This linking role is generally supported by the literature (for a review of the literature see Thomassen & Andeweg, 2004, pp. 48-49, 61), and there is evidence that the features of Europe's party systems support the Responsible Party Model (Dalton, 1985, pp. 270-271). Considering the normative assumptions of the model – that voters tend to behave consistently and that parties perform responsively – the article estimates the extent to which the left-right positions of MP candidates and their voters in the 2009 European Parliamentary elections are congruent, and the underlying causes of that congruence.

Because the left-right variable is a relevant dimension in the political debate as well as for placing individuals and parties in the political arena, being widely understood by political actors and commonly used in research on representation, it is assumed that left-right self-positioning is a suitable variable for our study. Moreover,

although methodologically problematic in some ways (see discussion below), this is one of the few variables that permits broad cross-national MP-voter comparisons.

The article briefly summarises the most relevant literature on the models to be tested. It then outlines the proposed hypotheses and some methodological issues. Following this, the empirical findings are presented and discussed, offering a preliminary description of party congruence and the causes of congruence.

Explaining Congruence: from Micro to Macro Level Models

The study of MP-voter congruence, examined in the seminal work by Miller and Stokes (1963), lies at the heart of modern theory of democracy for some authors (Huber & Powell, 1994; Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996, p. 83; and Held, 1996, pp. 297-334). However, it is widely recognized that the empirical implementation of straightforward MP-voter congruence is impossible (Pierce, 1999, p. 25; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1999a, p. 19; 1999b, p. 186). It is also thought that congruence should not be seen as the sole legitimate approach to study democratic representation (Thomassen, 1994, pp. 238, 257-258). Pitkin acknowledges that representation should bind representatives to positions that are congruent with the preferences of citizens, although this does not mean that political decisions may be adopted that are contrary to public preferences if the public interest appears to lie elsewhere (1967, p. 209, and 213, 221-224). Indeed, MP-voter congruence should not be regarded as evidence of a normatively *superior* expression of democratic representation, but rather as *a means* of looking at representation, and its constraints should be acknowledged.

The theories that can be mobilized to study congruence causality are not new – some have been around for a long time – but they have never been used together to examine why some parties are more congruent with their voters than others. This

section discusses the Downs-May, Przeworski-Sprague and Huber-Powell-Wessels models deployed in this analysis.

The Downs-May Model

The contribution of the Downsian spatial theory of elections (1957) to the study of the process of representation can be summarized in a few sentences. This model assumes that voters prefer the parties that best represent their political positions, and that parties seek to maximize their votes so that positions tend to converge. "According to spatial theory, a voter's utility for a party depends on the distance between the issue position of the party and the position of the voter" allowing the "assumption that the relation between distance and utility is linear" (Iversen, 1994a, p. 50). Additionally, in a two-party system with voters evenly distributed along the ideological center, the best party strategy to maximize votes is to target the median voter (see also Enelow & Hinich, 1984; Iversen, 1994a).

There is one particularly important criticism of this model (for a review of the critics, see Iversen, 1994a and 1994b): that political parties tend to adopt more extreme policy positions than those of their voters (Rabinowitz et al., 1991, pp. 148-157; and 2003, pp. 3-5). As shown in the Rabinowitz and MacDonald directional model, and as supported by some empirical research (Rabinowitz et al., 1991 and 2003; Valen & Narud, 2007, p. 300), voters choose the party which offers the most intense version of their preferred political positions. Research also shows that voters tend to be more centrist than MPs. This was demonstrated for the 1979 European Parliament election (Dalton, 1985, p. 275) and is generally the case for European party systems over the last decades (Converse & Pierce, 1986, p. 128; Holmberg, 1989, pp. 19-23; Iversen, 1994a, p. 59, and 1994b, pp. 168-175; Essaiasson & Holmberg, 1996, pp. 92-95; Thomassen,

1999, pp. 46-50; Belchior, 2008 and 2010). In order to explain this pattern of divergence, other studies have looked at the structure of voter policy preferences, and have concluded that the directional analysis of party competition generally works when attempting to explain how people vote (Iversen, 1994a).

According to the Downsian logic, and as suggested by May's *law of curvilinear disparity* (1973), the reason underlying MP-voter incongruence lies in the influence of party activists, whose policy positions are more extremist than those of rank-and-file voters or elected party leaders. Activists potentially push their parties to adopt strategic positions that are more distant from those of their party's voters.

Advocating the use of mixed models to explain electoral behavior, Iversen is precursor in testing the effects of this model in an inclusive manner (1994a and 1994b). He used data of West European countries in 1979. His findings neither support for Downsian spatial theory, rejecting the existence of a significant proximity between voters and parties, nor May's theory, since he finds no evidence for a polarizing role of the mid-level elite. Indeed, he simply concludes that "party elites at all levels systematically choose policy positions that are considerably more extreme than those of their own electorates" (1994b, p. 183).

The Przeworski-Sprague Model

The mainstream view of representation is that public preferences essentially shape the preferences of party elites (see e.g. Miller & Stokes 1963). However, some scholars believe that party leaders mold public opinion (see e.g. Eulau, 1987; Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996, Chap.5), while others state that the influence is reciprocal (Hill & Anderson, 1995; Hurley & Hill, 2003).

Przeworski and Sprague (1986) agree that the influence is bidirectional, and in their analysis of the causes of MP-voter disparities at the party level, they argue that party leaders may forego short-term vote maximization when they want to influence public opinion in a certain direction. This is the case of parties pursuing long-term strategies of social mobilization (ideological parties). By contrast, they contend that short-term vote-maximizing party strategies tend to be center-oriented (catch-all parties) (see also Iversen, 1994b, pp. 160, 173-177, 181-183). Catch-all parties therefore tend to show higher levels of congruence than ideological parties, since unlike the latter, the former do not try to change the views of the electorate (Holmberg, 1989, p. 12).

Others state the opposite: ideological parties tend to produce higher MP-voter consonance than centrist parties since communication with voters is more efficient due to a clearer ideological anchoring (see e.g. Klingemann, 1995, pp. 197-198, regarding European party systems in the 1970s and 1980s). More recent evidence on European parties did not support this assumption (Belchior, 2010).

Iversen's is also the main reference in discussing the Przeworski-Sprague model effects on voting behavior (1994b). Using the before mentioned data, he supports the model's expectations regarding its utility for understanding party strategy formation, but does not test for the greater efficacy of catch-all parties which is at the core of the model.

The Huber-Powell-Wessels Model

Despite some controversy (see e.g. Ezrow, 2007, pp. 184-185, 188-189; Wlezien & Soroka, 2007, pp. 809-810), the literature focusing on the systemic or macro level generally agrees that proportional systems are more likely to generate high levels of political representation than majoritarian systems (Dalton, 1985, pp. 287-288, 294;

Huber & Powell, 1994; Wessels, 1999, pp. 138, 145-146, 158; Powell, 2000). Representation is increased particularly in large constituencies, and when the party system is polarized and has a large number of parties, since voter choice and the scope for finding a party that matches voter views are greater (Huber & Powell, 1994, pp. 311-315; Thomassen, 1999, p. 46; Wessels, 1999, pp. 151-153; Powell, 2004, pp. 290-291). In such cases, parties will not be drawn to the median voter as they will be in two-party or majoritarian systems; rather, parties will be spread across the entire political spectrum, given that the key link is between party and party voters, and not the median voter (Iversen, 1994a, pp. 54-55; Wessels, 1999, pp. 146-147). This is the explanation offered by the Huber-Powell-Wessels model, which is the result of the before mentioned research and, as far as we know, was never tested as a comprehensive model. To sum up, according to the Downsian logic, congruence arises because rational behavior: voters choose the party that most closely matches their policy preferences, and parties tend to perform in accordance with their voter preferences since they want to maximize votes. When divergences within parties occur, May's law of curvilinear disparities states that this is caused by dissatisfied party activists, who push their parties towards the extremes and, consequently, towards divergence with voters. The Przeworski-Sprague model posits that congruence varies across parties as a function of the social mobilization strategies of party leaders (congruence tends to be lower among ideological parties and higher among catch-all parties). Finally, at the macro level, the Huber-Powell-Wessels system model indicates that congruence is expected to increase to the extent that party and electoral systems provide a greater variety of party alternatives that represent a broader range of voter preferences. For this reason, polarized proportional electoral systems with a large number of parties are expected to

exhibit higher levels of congruence. In what follows, we test the explanatory power of these models as regards left-right congruence within European political parties.

Hypotheses

Although each model adopts a different perspective, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. On the contrary, taken together, they provide a broad micro, meso and macro-level understanding of party congruence. As none of them was before tested in the present way, its operationalization is basically new. In what follows, we identify the variables that best operationalize each model in order to formulate the research hypotheses.

The Downs-May model can be assessed by using a set of variables that measure one of the premises of the theory: the rationality of actors as a factor conditioning the quality of representation. It is expected that the most politically involved and sophisticated voters will make more rational choices (Downs, 1957). Indeed, it has been found that MP-voter positions are more similar when more politically sophisticated voters are at stake (Barnes, 1977, chap.8; Hill & Anderson, 1995). Thus, it is assumed that the political sophistication and involvement and the level of education of voters will produce higher levels of consonance between voters and parties. Similarly, the more experienced MPs are, the more accurate their perceptions of the position of voters are expected to be, and the more congruence one can expect.

The most distinctive factor in the Downs-May model to explain congruence (which is expected to be very high if one considers only the Downs spatial voting theory) is the existence of a middle-level party leadership or activists, who have more extreme positions and produce a lower level of congruence between legislators and voters. Since there is no data on middle-level party elites, we cannot assess the extent to

which they contribute to incongruence, so we use intra-party polarization and party cohesion as proxies. The distance of MP from the neutral point on the left-right scale (5) measures party polarization. This variable has already been tested, and as expected it has revealed that more polarized MP views produce lower levels of congruence (Holmberg, 2000). Party cohesion is measured using the standard deviation of MP left-right positions in the party. It is expected that high intra-party polarization and low party cohesion will produce lower levels of MP-voter congruence (see the hypotheses in Figure 1: H1a-H1c).

Figure 1: Research Hypotheses for the Three Models (ABOUT HERE)

The Przeworski-Sprague model explores the importance of the nature of party competition, with a particular emphasis on party type (catch-all versus ideological). At the core of the Przeworski-Sprague model is the ideological location of parties (and concomitant party strategies). Operationalizing the model therefore involves not only assessing parties ideological position but also measuring the ideological distance of a party from the neutral center (5) (similar to what Iversen (1994b, p. 181) has done). The position of a party in the context of competition between parties is also assessed by looking at the size of the party (which is measured by the number of votes for the party divided by the total population in the country). In addition, in order to operationalize the model and gain additional information about parties, we use a set of dummy variables to account for party family (Communist, Special Interest[1] and Nationalist as a proxy for ideological parties; and Social-Democratic and Christian-Democratic as a proxy for catch-all parties). In sum, this model suggests that larger parties, and parties closer to

the ideological centre and belonging to the Social Democratic or Christian Democratic party families tend to exhibit higher levels of congruence with their voters (H2).

The Huber-Powell-Wessels model focuses on party and electoral system characteristics. It claims that the more proportional the system and the more differentiated the political parties, the better voters will be represented by parties. In this case, the independent variables are: party system differentiation (measured by the standard deviation of the left-right position of parties according to election manifestoes); the proportionality of the electoral system (as measured by the Gallagher index (1991)); the fractionalization of the party system (as measured by the Rae index (1967)); and the effective number of parties (as in Laakso and Taagepera, 1979). According to this model, higher levels of ideological congruence are likely to be found in the more differentiated and proportional electoral systems (H3).[2]

Since there is no comprehensive theory of what causes higher or lower levels of congruence within parties, and since there is almost no research on the topic, we do not have a clear basis to outline theoretical expectations across models. But we can deduce from general theory that as we go from the micro to the macro level, we can expect the models to increase in explanatory power as broader level constraints will limit the importance of lower level variables (see Table 1 for the operationalization of the models, and Table A1 in the Appendix for the studies used and questions posed).

Table 1: Variables and Operationalization of the Three Causal Models of Ideological Congruence (ABOUT HERE)

Analysis and Data

In this article, congruence is measured by the distance between the positions of representatives and represented. This is computed using a collective approach since the intention is to compare parties (as in Dalton, 1985; Holmberg, 1989 and 1999; Thomassen & Andeweg, 2004, pp. 48-49; Belchior, 2008 and 2010, among others). A simple measure of mean left-right distances between both is used. Congruence occurs if MP candidates and voters share ideological positions, with the distance between them equalling zero.

The left-right dimension generates some difficulties. Left-right self-placement is an abstract ideological exercise, and its results may differ from those obtained using other variables (such as positions regarding substantive public policies). Further, although relatively little information is necessary to identify political actors on the left-right *continuum*, this formula says little about the meaning of this positioning. Comparing actors as different as citizens and elites also raises methodological problems. Unlike MPs, voters are not a coherent collective entity, so their positions have different meanings. For this reason, high correlations between elites' and electorates' positions do not necessarily mean greater proximity between them (Pierce, 1999, pp. 13-15; Powell, 2000, p. 94). An additional problem arises when comparing countries: because it has no fixed definition in terms of substantive policies, the meaning of left and right changes across countries (Benoit & Laver, 2006, chap. 6).

Despite these problems, scholars agree that the left-right variable captures the comparative ideological positions of citizens and parliamentarians reasonably well (Rabinowitz et al., 1991; Iversen, 1994; Holmberg, 2000; Powell, 2000, pp. 162-163; McDonald & Budge, 2005, pp. 31-38, 228). In addition, it has been demonstrated that voters place themselves quite accurately on the left-right scale (Freire & Belchior, forthcoming), and the latter has been used in many studies of mass public and political

elites (e.g. Barnes, 1977; Iversen, 1994; Holmberg, 2000; Powell, 2000; McDonald & Budge, 2005; Mattila & Raunio, 2006; Freire & Belchior, forthcoming). Moreover, even assuming that the left-right dimension has no core role in structuring the political competition across the 27 EU member states, the left-right scale can be looked at as a general cross-country empirical device; that is: a symbolic and subjective ideological reference that allows comparing countries at a higher level of abstraction than if we were using policy issues, which would be the ideal solution (Benoit & Laver, 2006, chap. 6). Of course that the reading of the results should consider all these limitations.

We used four datasets of the PIREDEU project (www.piredeu.eu) for this analysis: the Voter Survey Data (EES, 2009a), the Candidate Survey Data (EES, 2009b), the Manifesto Study Data (EES, 2009c), and the Contextual Data (EES, 2009d). These studies include the 27 EU member states and were carried out in 2009. The first survey is based on a representative sample of voters, and the second includes the whole universe of MP candidates to the 2009 election to the European Parliament. The study of manifestoes was supported by a content analysis of the party programs issued for the 2009 European election.[3] Finally, the Contextual Data contains information about political parties which stood for the 2009 European Parliamentary elections, and offers a set of party, party system and institutional variables (for an explanation of the methodology of this dataset see Czesnik et al., 2010).[4] It is unusual to find such a broad set of variables covering different levels of analysis to carry out this kind of comparative analysis. Indeed, the possibility of using such a large sample of parties (189) is a unique opportunity.

The representatives in our study are candidates for the European Parliament. Although these are not elected representatives, this is not an unusual choice (e.g. Thomassen & Schmitt, 1999a, pp. 17-19). The potential difficulties that can arise from

this choice are mitigated because we are dealing with an abstract and structuring issue (left-right position rather than substantive policy issues). In this case, party linkage with supporters is supposed to be stronger and more perceptible. In order to simplify the presentation and discussion of results, the candidates for the European Parliament are simply designated as MPs.

Congruence across European Political Parties

Research generally shows that levels of congruence between voters and parties positions are low (Thomassen, 1994; Miller et al., 1999; Pierce, 1999). However, the degree of congruence seems to vary according to the issue at stake (Dalton, 1985, p. 380; Thomassen, 1994, p. 255; Thomassen, 1999, pp. 45-52; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1999b, p. 199; Hurley & Hill, 2003). It has been proved that congruence is higher for ideological or highly politicized issues and for left-right positioning (Dalton, 1985, p. 283; Thomassen, 1994, pp. 254-256; 1999, p. 53; Holmberg, 2000, pp. 163-165; Mattila & Raunio, 2006, pp. 437-439). This is the case under study here.

This section explores the situation of MP-voter congruence within European political parties. Figure 2 shows the spatial distribution of European party systems cross-cutting MPs and voter mean left-right position, and Figure 3 does the same for European political parties (Table A2 in the Appendix shows the results for each case in the sample). The diagonal line in the diagrams signals the point where the differences between means equals zero. Congruence is measured at the party level in both figures.

Figure 2: MP and Voter Left-right Spatial Distribution across European Party Systems (ABOUT HERE)

Figure 2, which shows the distribution of European party systems regarding MP-voter congruence within parties, suggests three main conclusions. First, the spatial distribution of the European party systems shows a tendency towards concentration in the ideological centre. Second, MP positions on the left-right scale appear to be directly and positively related to their voters' positions, with a significant and quite robust statistical linear relationship. The diagonal positioning is only slightly biased to the left, showing that MPs tend to be relatively further to the left than voters. Although there is generally an ideological correspondence between MPs and electorates within European party systems, there is no absolute congruence. Were that to be the case, the alignment of the dots would be more parallel to the diagonal line of the diagram. Third, as regards a geographical pattern of congruence, MP-voter congruence seems to be furthest to the left for Southern European party systems and furthest to the right in the Eastern European ones. This is all that can be ascertained in terms of geographical patterns. Indeed, taking a closer look, the least congruent systems are those of Portugal and Malta in Southern Europe, Bulgaria in Eastern Europe, and also Luxemburg. A similar geographical combination of countries is among the most congruent (those closest to the diagonal line).

Indeed, as Holmberg states, MP-voters agreement "seems to be something of a universal characteristic that does not vary too much across different political systems" as confirmed by the concentration of party systems at the centre of Figure 2. Moreover, Holmberg acknowledges that "that universal characteristic should probably not be viewed as signalling any high level of congruence since, if we compare our empirical levels of issue agreement with what a purely random model would yield - that is, if parliamentarians were chosen by lot - the random selection method would most often

16

outperform the representative process" (Holmberg, 2000, p. 170; see also Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996, p. 111). So we should not be too optimistic about these findings.

Figure 3: MP and Voter Left-Right Spatial Distribution across European Political Parties (ABOUT HERE)

Figure 3 reiterates the same conclusions at the level of parties. There is a rather strong linear relationship between MP and voter positions within parties, which demonstrates the existence of a significant correspondence between both. The line is also slightly left-leaning, reiterating the tendency for MPs to position themselves further to the left than their voters (except for parties on the right, in which MPs tend to be to the right of their voters). Similarly, MPs to the left of voters were also found in many European parliaments (Dalton, 1985, pp. 283-284; Converse & Pierce, 1986, chap.19; Holmberg, 1989, pp. 19-23; Thomassen, 1994, p. 255; Thomassen, 1999, pp. 50-53; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1999b, pp. 191, 198-199; Iversen, 1994b, pp. 167-171; Belchior, 2008, pp. 463-458 and 2010). This supports Iversen's conclusion that the spatial distribution of parties and voters suggests that voters choose parties that offer relatively more intense policy alternatives than their own (1994a, pp. 60-70). This seems to be particularly valid for the ideological left.

The general picture emerging from the two figures above (as well as other studies) support the contention that moderate to high levels of congruence tend to prevail within European political parties, although MPs are ideologically more extreme, as well as slightly more to the left than their electors. This suggests that the public is not as ideologically committed as the party elite. As various studies have demonstrated, this can be explained partially by citizens' lower levels of political sophistication as

compared to that of elites (see e.g. Converse & Pierce, 1986, chap. 7; Dye & Zeigler, 2006, p. 3).

European political parties seem to perform well in terms of representing voters ideologically, as parties correspond to the left-right position of voters. In short, party systems reflect the views of their domestic electorates reasonably well. Various studies on this issue have reached similar results for Europe (see e.g. Dalton, 1985; Holmberg, 1999; Mattila & Raunio, 2006, p. 430; Belchior, 2010).

Explaining Party Ideological Congruence

Most research on representation has shied away from explaining variations between countries and between individual political parties. Moreover, contradictory explanations have emerged as to the cause of congruence. In order to contribute to the study of this issue, in what follows the reasons for party congruence is explored using the three models.

In order to compare the importance of the models for levels of left-right congruence, regression analysis was performed for each, taking into account the characteristics of individuals, parties and electoral systems. The dependent variable is ideological distance, which is computed for each party by subtracting the average position of MPs on the left-right scale from the position of voters on the same scale. A high level of difference means there is a low level of congruence, and a low level of difference mean a high level of congruence. Since only the magnitude of the difference matters, all the signs are positive.

Table 1 presents the coding of the variables of the models, and tables 2 to 4 show the results for the three models.

Table 2: The Downs-May Causal Model of MP-Voter Ideological Distance (dependent variable: 0 = congruence; 10 = no congruence) (ABOUT HERE)

The regression analysis in Table 2 is organized into three blocks and presents the results for the three hypotheses of the Downs-May model. Contrary to the Downsian rational choice argument, the more politically sophisticated, involved and best educated voters do not exhibit higher levels of congruence with the party they vote for. Education and political information are not significant, and the coefficients for the significant political involvement variables have positive signs, which means they explain incongruence rather than congruence (either way, the magnitude of the coefficients is rather low for both).

This findings play against the plausible expectation that the more attentive voters would be more able to choose a party congruent with their own ideological self-placement. Indeed, some authors have concluded that "constituents have the capacity to and do in fact hold their members of Congress accountable for roll-call votes" and that "actual roll-call votes directly affect constituents' beliefs, and those roll-call votes, in turn, have substantial effects on approval ratings and electoral behavior" (Ansolabehere & Jones, 2010, p. 596). Notwithstanding the logic of this, the electoral system should be considered when explaining the importance of voters' political sophistication and involvement. It might be appropriate in the US majoritarian case, in which there is a direct linkage between MPs and voters within constituencies (voters vote for candidates). When this linkage does not exist or is weak, as is the case of most of the European countries, where proportional electoral systems prevail (although open party lists are common in Europe, parties tend to mediate the representation process), the

incentives for voters to be attentive to candidates' policies and its potential impact for congruence are very weak.

The political experience of MP candidates does not seem to explain MP-voter congruence: the relationship is either insignificant or works in the opposite direction. However, the accuracy of representatives' perceptions of the position of voters is surprisingly significant and strong, suggesting that the more accurately MPs perceive the ideological placement of voters, the closer they position themselves to voters. This supports Miller's and Stokes' assumption that the accuracy of the perception of legislators is potentially connected with the quality of political representation (Miller & Stokes, 1963; see also Eulau, 1987).

The argument that activists potentially push their parties to position themselves strategically away from their voters does not seem to compensate for the flaw in spatial theory, since there is almost no empirical corroboration of this thesis (for a discussion of this topic see Iversen, 1994b). However, there is evidence that parties with higher levels of cohesion and lower levels of polarization tend to produce higher MP-voter congruence (although the coefficients are low, especially for party cohesion).

To sum up, for the Downs-May model, hypothesis H1a is not supported by the data suggesting that the political sophistication of voters does not have a significant impact on the level of congruence of parties; and hypothesis H1b is only partially supported since in the case of MPs only perceptual accuracy seems to have a significant effect on congruence. However, May's theory seems to play a significant role here since the cohesion and polarization of parties correlate with levels of congruence, which supports H1c.

Table 3: The Przeworski Sprague Causal Model of MP-Voter Ideological Distance (dependent variable: 0 = congruence; 10 = no congruence) (ABOUT HERE)

Contrary to what is suggested by previous research (Holmberg, 2000 on the Nordic countries) and in agreement with the work of other scholars (Converse & Pierce, 1987, chap.19; Belchior, 2008), Table 3 shows that parties on the right tend to exhibit higher levels of congruence than parties on the left (although for that we have to accept a level of significance higher than 0,05, and the coefficients are very small). However, as Eulau puts it, party ideology is a powerful indicator that constrains the emergence of constituency representation (1987, p. 186), and its ambiguity does not permit us to infer a clear trend, as the remaining variables in the model confirm.

Following the Przeworski-Sprague model, Holmberg detects a tendency toward higher congruence among Swedish parliamentary parties at the centre of the ideological spectrum than among parties at the left or right (although there are nuances depending on the issue at stake) (1989, pp. 16-20). For Holmberg this can be explained by the fact that more ideologically extreme parties base themselves more on strategies to transform public opinion rather than to aggregate or articulate the majority views of centrist parties. Likewise, Iversen considers that center parties are generally much closer to the average voter than the parties on the extremes (1994a, p. 59). Indeed, as the distance of the party from the neutral centre increases, the level of ideological distance between voters and MPs also increases. We can interpret party dimension similarly: given the tendency for bigger parties to be closer to the center and for smaller ones to be closer to the extremes of the spectrum, this variable shows that congruence with voters increases with the size of the party. Party family dummies do not support the general expectation, and they are only significant for the Social Democratic and special interest party

families, the latter moving in the expected direction but the former not. But these variables do not seem to be the most significant, since party family does not properly capture the position of parties *vis-à-vis* the ideological centre (which in fact underlies the expectation of the authors regarding catch-all parties).

The findings in this model are very suggestive that what explains MP-voter congruence is fundamentally the placement of parties at the ideological centre where most of the electorate is located. Political competition plays the essential role, rather than party family or ideology. Radical parties tend to locate themselves away from centrist voters and, thus lose voter congruence. This supports the hypothesis of the Przeworski-Sprague model (H2) that political parties competing for the centre are more congruent.

Table 4: The Huber-Powell-Wessels Causal model of MP-Voter Ideological Distance (dependent variable: 0 = congruence; 10 = no congruence) (ABOUT HERE)

The third model in Table 4 proves to be globally insignificant to explain party ideological distance between voters and MPs, which leads us to reject H3. It has been demonstrated that it is essentially the diversity of the political choices on offer that affects the quality of political representation, and not the number of parties in itself that "supports the general notion that the electoral link may be the most important link between representatives and represented in terms of policy representation" (Wessels, 1999, p. 157). For this reason, the effective number of parties included in the analysis is considered a good measure of party system diversity,[5] and the Rae index of

fractionalization and the differences in the ideologies of parties as represented in their election manifestoes. All these variables proved insignificant.

Even though the sample is very small for this model (27 party systems), except for the Gallagher index of proportionality, all the other variables are far from significant. The results for the Gallagher index are also not encouraging: the more proportional systems do not contribute to higher levels of party congruence as expected; paradoxically, they increase party incongruence. To sum up, more differentiated party systems and proportional representation systems do not generate higher MP-voter congruence than the non-differentiated, majoritarian systems.[6]

Other research supports these results showing that macro-level variables do not indicate a clear trend at this level of analysis. Mattila and Raunio, for instance, demonstrate that party system characteristics (number of parties and ideological range) do not affect opinion congruence at the European Union level (2006). For Holmberg, "it is politics – not the structure of the political system – that explains the difference in degrees of issue agreement between parties of the left and the right in the Nordic countries in the 1990s" (2000, p. 170; see also Holmberg, 1999, pp. 106-107). Conversely, Huber and Powell (1994) found that among the institutional variables used, proportionality is the strongest and most significant predictor of the distance between the median voter and the median party. Similarly, in the Swedish parliament between the 1960s and 1985, Holmberg observed that the increase in the level of proportionality between votes cast and seats received in the parliament led to a higher degree of policy congruence (1989, p. 12). Dalton has also demonstrated that more proportional systems and more differentiated party systems offer improved political representation of voters by parties at the European Union level (1985, pp. 287-288).

Given this diversity of results, the conclusions of the research presented here seem less disappointing and even make better sense. Indeed, all these results can only mean that system characteristics do not determine the level of MP-voter congruence within parties. This also means that the theoretical expectation that the macro-level should have greater explanatory power than the meso and micro level models is unfounded. In fact, the macro level does not seem strong enough (or has no strength at all) to constraint the effect of the lower levels variables, as expected. Explanation for congruence should be looked for at the lower levels, and particularly at the party level.

Discussion of Results

This article has focused on an issue of political representation that has received scant attention in the literature: the underlying reasons for higher or lower levels of congruence between MPs and voters within parties. The research explored three theoretical models that encompass the various intervening variables at the micro, meso and macro levels. The article began by establishing the levels of party congruence within the 27 party systems in the sample, and then proceeded to explore causes. In what follows, we discuss the main conclusions of the study.

As regards the descriptive analysis of party congruence, the results corroborate what other studies have also noted: that levels of congruence tend to be moderate to high as shown by the strong correlation between the position of MP candidates and voters within parties, although MP candidates tend to position themselves further to the left than their voters (expect for right wing parties, in which they place themselves further to the right than those voting for them). Electorates therefore tend to be at the centre of the ideological spectrum. This fact is essential for an understanding of the results of research into the causes of congruence.

Of course this finding cannot be overstated: the left-right variable does not correlate the same way with substantive policy positions across countries, and the findings do not allow us to fully support the responsible party premise, since congruence is only seldom fully achieved. Moreover, a high degree of ideological congruence between legislators and voters does not guarantee decisional representation. As noted by Holmberg, policy congruence and decisional representation can act in fully independent ways (1989, p. 4). Despite these concerns, the findings can be considered positive: notwithstanding the methodological risks, the left-right dimension is a very relevant variable in the party systems under study and, although it does not guarantee decisional representation, MP-voter consonance has to be acknowledged as positive.

In light of these considerations, the article then focused on whether the three models could explain the structure of left-right congruence within European political parties. The results emphasize the relevance of the Przeworski-Sprague model, which highlights the importance of political party characteristics and their electoral strategies. The main conclusion is that the larger centrist parties evince the lowest level of ideological incongruence between MP candidates and voters.

It is also important to take note of the individual-level variables pointed at in the Downs-May model, namely: the perceptual accuracy of MP candidates regarding the left-right positioning of voters, intra-party polarization, and left-right party cohesion. As regards the first, the candidates that most accurately perceive the ideological position of their voters are consistently the most congruent with their electorate. Since MPs tend to think that their voters are close to their positions (see Belchior, 2010, pp. 131-133), and because electorates tend to be more centrist than their MPs, when the latter adopt more centrist positions (something that happens with a significant part of our sample), they naturally tend to correctly perceive the views of the electorate at the centre and to be

congruent with the position of voters. This helps to explain the high percentage of variance in MP candidates' perceptual inaccuracy (36.2 percent, the highest of the three models). This is also reinforced by the global results attained when testing the Przeworski-Sprague model.

Similarly, intra-party polarization accounts for a significant percentage of the variance found (19.3 percent), which indicates that the more ideologically polarized MP candidates tend to be less congruent with the position of their electorates. Further, left-right party cohesion supports the notion that MP candidates distance from the left-right mean in the party correlates with lower levels of congruence with voters. In the case of the centrist parties, the result of these two variables corroborates the aforementioned explanation: that the centre is the territory of ideological congruence within parties. These variables also suggest what May is right when he notes that the extremist intermediary party ranks (polarized MPs and less internally cohesive parties) tend to produce less congruence between representatives and voters.

The macro-level model focusing on institutional and systemic characteristics was disappointing, and reinforces the ambiguity one finds in the literature regarding the importance of proportional electoral systems or party system differentiation. However, these results are not an unsolvable puzzle. More research should be done on this topic and the use of substantive policy variables may consolidate (or not) the conclusions reached about the other models, such as unraveling the real significance of institutional norms and the nature of party systems when explaining party congruence. Additionally, other independent variables such as the importance of being government versus opposition party; the type of government (single versus multi party); or the number and salience of the political cleavages, should also be added in future explicative models.

References

Ansolabehere, S. & Jones, P. E. (2010). Constituents' Responses to Congressional Roll-Call Voting. *American Journal of Political Science, 54 (3)*, 583-597.

Barnes, S. (1977). *Representation in Italy: Institutionalised Tradition and Electoral Choice*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Belchior, A. M. (2010). Ideological Congruence among European Political Parties. *The Journal of Legislative Studies, 12 (1)*, 121-142.

Belchior, A. M. (2008). Party Political Representation in Portugal. *South European Society and Politics, 13*, 457-476.

Benoit, Kenneth, & Laver, Michael (2006), *Party Policy in Modern Democracies*, Oxon and New York: Routledge.

Braun, D., Mikhaylov, S., & Schmitt, H. (2010). *EES (2009) Manifesto Study Documentation Advance Release* (user beware/ pre-release B), 22/07/2010. (www.piredeu.eu).

Converse, P., & Pierce, R. (1986). *Political Representation in France*. Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Czesnik, M., Kotnarowski, M., & Markowski, R. (2010). *EES (2009) Contextual Ddataset Codebook, Advance Release*, 16/05/2010. (www.piredeu.eu).

Dalton, R. J. (1985). Political Parties and Political Representation. Party Supporters and Party Elites in Nine Nations. *Comparative Political Studies, 18*, 267-299.

Downs, A. (1957). *An Economic Theory of Democracy.* New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

Dye, T. R., & Zeigler, H. (2006). *The Irony of Democracy.* 13rd ed. Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth.

EES (2009a). European Parliament Election Study 2009, Voter Study, Advance Release, 7/4/2010, (www.piredeu.eu).

EES (2009b). European Parliament Election Study 2009, Candidate Study, Advance Release, July/2010, (www.piredeu.eu).

EES (2009c). European Parliament Election Study 2009, *Manifesto Study Data, Advance Release* (user beware/ pre-release B), 22/07/2010, (www.piredeu.eu).

EES (2009d). European Parliament Election Study 2009, Contextual Data, Advance Release, 16/05/2010, (www.piredeu.eu).

Enelow, J. M. & Hinich, M. J. (1984). *The Spatial Theory of Voting: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Esaiasson, P., & Holmberg, S. (1996). *Representation from Above: Members of Parliament and Representative Democracy in Sweden*. Aldershot: Dartmouth.

Eulau, H. (1987). The congruence Model Revisited. *Legislative Studies Quarterly, 7*, 171-214.

Freire, A., & Belchior, A. M. (forthcoming). Ideological Representation in Portugal: MPs-Electors Linkages in Terms of Left-Right Placement and Substantive Meaning. *European Political Science Review*.

Gallagher, M. (1991). Proportionality, Disproportionality and Electoral Systems. *Electoral Studies*, 10, 33-51.

Held, D. (1996). *Models of Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hill, K. Q., & Anderson, A. H. (1995). Pathways of Representation: A Causal Analysis of Public Opinion-Policy Linkages. *American Journal of Political Science, 39*, 924-935.

Holmberg, S. (1989). Political Representation in Sweden. *Scandinavian Political Studies, 12(1)*, 1-36.

Holmberg, S. (1999). Collective Policy Congruence Compared. In W. Miller, R. Pierce, J. Thomassen, R. Herrera, S. Holmberg, P. Esaiasson, & B. Wessels (Orgs). *Policy Representation in Western Democracies* (pp. 87-109)*.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Holmberg, S. (2000). Issue Agreement. In P. Esaiasson, & K. Heider (Eds.), *Beyond Westminster and Congress: the Nordic Experience* (pp. 155-180). Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Huber, J., & Powell, G. B. Jr. (1994). Congruence between Citizens and Policy Makers in Two Visions of Liberal Democracy. *World Politics, 46*, 291-326.

Huber, J. & Inglehart, R. (1995). Expert Interpretations of Party Space and Party Locations in 42 Societies. *Party Politics, 1(1)*, 73-111.

Iversen, T. (1994a). Political Leadership and Representation in West European Democracies: A Test of Three Models of Voting. *American Journal of Political Science*, *38 (1)*, 45-74.

Iversen, T. (1994b). The Logics of Electoral Politics: Spatial, Directional, and Mobilizational Effects. *Comparative Political Studies, 27 (2)*, 155-189.

Klingemann, H.-D. (1995) 'Party positions and voter orientations', in *Citizens and the State*, eds H.-D. Klingemann & D. Fuchs, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 183-205.

Laakso, M., & Taagepera, R. (1979). Effective Number of Parties: A Measure with Application to West Europe. *Comparative Political Studies, 12*, 3-27.

Mattila, M., & Raunio, T. (2006). Cautious Voters – Supportive Parties: Opinion Congruence between Voters and Parties on the EU Dimension. *European Union Politics, 7*, 427-449.

May, J. D. (1973). Opinion Structure of Political Parties: The Special Law of Curvilinear Disparity. *Political Studies, 21 (2)*, 135-151.

McDonald, M., & Budge, I. (2005). *Election, Parties, Democracy*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Miller, W., & Stokes, D. (1963). Constituency Influence in Congress. *American Political Science Review, 57*, 45-56.

Miller, W., Pierce, R., Thomassen, J., Herrera, R., Holmberg, S., Esaiasson, P., & Wessels, B. (1999). *Policy Representation in Western Democracies*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Pierce, R. (1999). Mass-Elite Issue Linkages and the Responsible Party Model Representation. In W. Miller, R. Pierce, J. Thomassen, R. Herrera, S. Holmberg, P. Esaiasson, & B. Wessels (Orgs), *Policy Representation in Western Democracies* (pp. 9-32). Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Pitkin, H. F. (1967). *The Concept of Representation*. Berkley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

Powell, G. B. Jr. (2000). *Elections as Instruments of Democracy*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Przeworski, A., & Sprague, J. (1986). *Paper Stones: A History of Electoral Socialism.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rabinowitz, G.. MacDonald, S. E., & Listhaug, O. (1991). New Players in an Old Game: Party Strategy in Multiparty Systems. *Comparative Political Studies*, 24(2), 147-185.

Rabinowitz, G., MacDonald, S. E., & Listhaug, O. (2003). Issue Voting in a Responsible Party System. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, August 27-31 (at:

http://www.allacademic.com//meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/6/3/7/8/pages6
3784/p63784-1.php).

Rae, D. (1967). *The Political Consequences of Electoral Laws.* New Haven, CT: Yale
University Press.

Schmitt, H., & Thomassen, J. (Eds) (1999). *Political Representation and Legitimacy in
the European Union*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Thomassen, J. (1994). Empirical Research into Political Representation: Failing
Democracy or Failing Models?. In M. Kent Jennings, & Mann, T. E. (Eds),
Elections at Home and Abroad (pp. 237-264). Ann Arbor: The University of
Michigan Press.

Thomassen, J. (1999). Political Communication between Political Elites and Mass
Publics. The Role of Belief Systems. In W. Miller, R. Pierce, J. Thomassen, R.
Herrera, S. Holmberg, P. Esaiasson, & B. Wessels (Orgs), *Policy Representation
in Western Democracies* (pp. 33-58). Oxford and New York: Oxford University
Press.

Thomassen, J., & Schmitt, H. (1999a). Introduction: Political Representation and
Legitimacy in the European Union. In H. Schmitt, & J. Thomassen (Eds),
Political Representation and Legitimacy in the European Union (pp. 3-21).
Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Thomassen, J., & Schmitt, H. (1999b). Issue Congruence. In H. Schmitt, & J.
Thomassen (Eds), *Political Representation and Legitimacy in the European
Union* (pp. 186-208). Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Thomassen, J., & Andeweg, R. B. (2004). Beyond Collective Representation:
Individual Members of Parliament and Interest Representation in the Netherlands.
The Journal of Legislative Studies, 10, 47-69.

Valen, H., & Narud, H. (2007). The Conditional Party Mandate: a Model for the Study of Mass and Elite Opinion Patterns. *European Journal of Political Research, 46*, 293-318.

Wessels, B. (1999). System Characteristics Matter: Empirical Evidence from Ten Representation Studies. In W. Miller, R. Pierce, J. Thomassen, R. Herrera, S. Holmberg, P. Esaiasson, & B. Wessels (Orgs), *Policy Representation in Western Democracies* (pp. 137-161). Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Wlezien, C., & Soroka, S. (2007). The Relationship between Public Opinion and Policy. In R. Dalton, & H.-D. Klingemann (Eds), *Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior* (pp. 799-817)*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

[1] Special interest parties are supported in specific political issues, such as human rights or representing ethnic minorities.

[2] Given that contextual variables (such as constituency heterogeneity) cannot be used in many of the cases in our sample, we used only party and electoral system variables at the macro level (as defined by the model).

[3] For a methodological specification of the procedures see Braun et al., 2010.

[4] These datasets and files, with an explanation of the methodological procedures used, are available at: http://www.piredeu.eu.

[5] The number of political parties that ran in the 2009 European Parliamentary elections and obtained at least 1 percent of valid votes were also tested in the model, but proved insignificant.

[6] Other potentially relevant variables, used in previous research, were also tested, but proved to be far from significant. The dimension of the country, for instance, was supposed to be relevant for representation because in smaller countries it is easier for MPs and voters to be in personal contact. Holmberg (2000) has proved this relationship among the Nordic countries. Similarly, the number of MPs as a proportion of total number of voters in each country was tested, but it also proved to be insignificant.