

Citizens' representation in the 2009 European Parliament elections

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Abstract

Political theorists maintain that citizens' representation through elections is the cornerstone of democracy. However, many analysts claim that a deficit in democratic representation exists within the European Union. This research examines the ideological match between voters and their party using the 2009 European Election Study. Aggregate agreement between voters and their parties' ideological position is very high, but agreement at the individual level is modest. Barely a majority of partisans favor the party that is closest to them on the Left–Right scale, and vote shifts to another party triples the representation gap. We model the factors affecting the size of this gap and voting for a nonproximate party. The results illustrate the representation gap that individual voters perceive in EU elections with implications for democratic representation.

Keywords

Elections, European Parliament, Left–Right, political parties, representation, voting

Claims of a deficit in democratic representation have been especially prominent in the context of the European Union (Crombez, 2003; Farrell and Scully, 2007; Rohrschneider and Loveless, 2010; Zweifel, 2003). However, previous empirical research on political representation presents a more positive picture. The representation literature generally compares the average (or median) positions of all party voters to the parties' policy positions (Dalton, 2016; Huber and Powell, 1994; Powell, 2009; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012; Thomassen and Schmitt, 1999). In broad terms, this research finds very high levels of voter–party agreement,

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which is widely interpreted as positive evidence of the functioning of the representation process in EU democracies.

We suggest another perspective that is not based on aggregated units but on individual citizens. For the individual, it may matter little whether the average position of all party voters is close to the party's position; more relevant is whether the party is close to their own position. Such personal feelings of representation might strongly affect citizens' intention to vote, their support for parties or the government, and their feelings of being well represented in the EU's electoral process.

A large proportion of Europeans selected a party in the 2009 European Parliament elections that is not closest to their own ideological position—a stark contrast to the normal conclusion from aggregate models of representation. In other words, high levels of congruence in terms of aggregated voter–party dyads coexist with much lower levels of representation at the individual level.

This research addresses this topic by asking: To what extent do individual voters fit the spatial model of evaluating the policy choices offered by parties in EU elections and selecting a party that closely represents their views? Then we ask a slightly different question: is there another party that would be a better choice, and if so, what leads individuals away from this better choice? Ultimately we want to consider what this bottom-up approach tells us about the representation process and its consequences in comparison to aggregated models of representation?

We find that a bare majority of partisans favor the party that they say is closest to them on the Left–Right scale, and even smaller numbers when the entire public determines party positions. The vote shift from the most proximate choice to another party triples the Left–Right representation gap. We find that party attachments, size of the closest party, and government evaluations strongly predict nonproximate voting. The results speak to the non-Downsian nature of voting choices in EU elections, with implications for democratic representation.

Representation as Left–Right congruence

The most common understanding of political representation begins with a Downsian framework of political parties arrayed along a Left–Right dimension and voters selecting the party that most closely matches their own positions. This framework is widely used in the electoral behavior literature to predict voting choice and to link a voter's self-location on the Left–Right dimension to the ideological supply of political parties (Downs, 1957; Eijk et al., 2005). Most people in established democracies can position themselves along the Left–Right scale, which arguably summarizes an individual's positions on the issues of the day (Fuchs and Klingemann, 1989; Mair, 2009). Left–Right positions can also be a political identity that provides a heuristic for making political decisions. Large majorities of the public can locate the major parties in their nation along the same Left–Right scale. The spatial model presumes that most voters use this framework to select the party that is closest to their own political position.

Consequently, Left–Right self-placement is often a strong predictor of voting choice. For example, Left–Right distance to parties was one of the strongest predictors of voting choice in both the 1984 and 1994 EU elections (Van der Eijk et al., 1996, 1999). Similarly, cross-national analyses find that the average correlation of citizen Left–Right positions and party choices in national elections is quite high (Dalton et al., 2015: 145–147; Kroh, 2009). **[AQ1]**

Much of the empirical democratic representation literature then builds on this Left–Right framework. Researchers aggregate the Left–Right positions of party supporters from a mass public survey to calculate a mean/median scale score (or perhaps on policy dimensions). The analyses then use other data to position the parties on the Left–Right scale. The degree of representation is typically calculated as the agreement between the average (or median) of voters’ positions and the party position (Budge et al., 2001; Dalton et al., 2011; Miller, 1999). Several studies have found a very high Left–Right congruence between voters and party candidate dyads in EU elections, in the 1994 ($r = .86$) and 2009 EU elections ($r = .85$) (Belchoir, 2012; Dalton, 2016; Thomassen and Schmitt, 1999). **[AQ2]** Thomassen and Schmitt (1999: 198–199) concluded: “our data underline the argument that the left-right dimension can be seen as a generalized political disposition facilitating efficient communication and orientation in the political sphere.”

[AQ3] These studies follow Pitkin’s dictum that representation is a systemic property (1967: 216–225). This is an important aspect of representation. However, this article examines representation from a different perspective—from the standpoint of each individual citizen, which is counter to most other representation research (however, see Golder and Stramski, 2010). We follow the traditional representation approach by calculating voter–party congruence on the Left–Right scale but at the individual level.¹ We calculate a *representation gap* that measures how close individual voters are to their chosen party.

The contrast between macro and micro definitions of voter–party congruence has several implications for how we think about democratic representation. While aggregate representation models assess the overall representativeness of a political system, the micro-level model illustrates how individuals view representation. As Golder and Stramski (2010: 92) stated: “From the perspective of each individual citizen, this is arguably the main conceptualization of congruence that matters—each citizen wants to know how far the representative is from her preferred position.”

We expect that a person’s representation gap is more important in predicting their behavior, such as satisfaction with party choices or the likelihood of voting. The strength of the political bonds between individuals and their party may also be related to an individual’s representation gap. Public policies may be based on averages, but the impact of government policy varies across individuals. These individual effects can be lost in aggregate analysis.

The factors affecting this individual-level representation gap may also differ from aggregated analyses. A large, diverse party, such as large centrist catch-all parties, may be representative of its average supporter; but many of its voters may

feel distant from their own party. Conversely, smaller, ideologically driven parties may display greater voter–party congruence. The variance of voters’ positions should be closely tied to congruence for individuals.

Furthermore, we extend the analyses to examine *nonproximate voting*, in which people vote for the party that is not closest to their Left–Right position. Even if this conflicts with the spatial model of representation, this is likely to be quite common at the individual level. Previous research demonstrates that many factors beyond Left–Right attitudes affect voting choices. Even studies that show the strong impact of Left–Right attitudes on voting in EU elections also show that issue opinions, candidate images, performance judgments, and other attitudes influence voting (Van der Eijk et al., 1996, 1999). These other factors can potentially push individuals away from their ideologically closest party. Indeed, research suggests that many voters do not follow Downs’s advice when making their voting decision. Budge et al. (2012) found that nearly 40% of voters in the 2004 EU election did not select the most proximate party in Left–Right terms. Similarly, Best and McDonald (2011: 96–97) showed that almost half of the voters in a set of national elections did not select the party that was closest on the Left–Right scale.

Nonproximate voting means that voter–party congruence measured in any election (the representation gap) inaccurately measures the theoretical representation possible in a party system. Nonproximate voters, almost by definition, are less well represented by their chosen party than what is possible. If the causes are individual choices, such as the characteristics of party leaders or distinct issue positions, this may be another form of rational voting. But understanding the extent and sources of this behavior should help us judge its significance for democratic representation.

These two individual-level questions—the size of the representation gap and the frequency of nonproximate voting—open new doors in studying party representation by applying the spatial model to individual voters.

The European Election Study (EES)

We analyze data from the 2009 EES.² The project interviewed at least 1000 people in each EU member state after the election. The EES asked people to place themselves on an 11-point Left–Right scale (see the Online appendix). Nearly everyone has a Left–Right position; the percentage of “don’t know” responses is under 10% in the EU15 nations and slightly higher in the postcommunist nations. We identify citizens’ party by their vote in the election; to increase the number of partisans, we also include as partisans nonvoters who expressed a party voting preference.

We use multiple methods to locate the parties on the Left–Right scale. One method asks each respondent to place the national parties on the Left–Right scale. The number of evaluated parties ranges from four to 10 or more parties. However, there is a potential circularity to using each individual’s placement of the parties in comparison to their own self-placement. Voters perceive greater

consistency with their chosen party to reduce cognitive dissonance (Markus and Converse, 1979; Page and Jones, 1979). On the one hand, partisans might *project their own position* onto their chosen party to be consistent. On the other hand, perceptions of a party's position *may persuade individuals* to adjust their own position to fit.

Because the psychological processes of projection and persuasion should increase congruence between individuals and party positions, an alternative uses the party placements of the entire public. This is a less individualistic measure of party positions. We use the *median party location of all survey respondents* to estimate each party's position. The perceptions of a party's own voters, supporters of other parties, and nonpartisans are thus combined to identify party positions. Prior research shows a very high correlation between the overall public's estimates of party Left–Right positions and the results from party experts or party elites (Dalton and McAllister, 2016). [AQ4]

Both of these approaches may generate concerns about endogeneity by using citizens to position both themselves and the parties on the Left–Right scale. As a further validation, we turned to the 2009 EP candidates study. This survey attempted to interview candidates of all the electorally relevant parties. We calculated candidates average Left–Right placement of their own party and compared this to citizens' party placements.³ The aggregate voter–party correlation based on party voters' Left–Right placements is $r = .87$ and using the entire public's Left–Right placement it is $r = .90$. In other words, citizens placements of the parties' broadly agree with the parties' own elites (also see Dalton and McAllister, 2016). [AQ5] Because individual-level analyses can be affected by the size of parties and the heterogeneity within parties, and to maximize sample size and party coverage, we compare both citizen measures in our analyses.

We focus on the established democracies of the European Union 15 for several reasons. Much of the representation literature has examined Western democracies, and this links our analyses more closely to these other studies. Moreover, our analyses identified significant contrasts between the established democracies in the West and the still developing postcommunist party systems. Fewer individuals in the East place themselves on the Left–Right scale. There is also a greater drop-off in identifying the Left–Right positions of parties in the East. This is partially because of the uncertain meaning of Left–Right within these systems and partially because of the volatility in the Eastern party systems. Comparing West and East is an important research topic, but rather than focus on the varied meaning and utility of Left–Right across regions, we examine a baseline model of how individual-level representation functions in established democracies.

Measuring congruence

We first estimate how well each person's chosen party in the 2009 election represents their own Left–Right position, what we call the *representation gap*. We calculated the absolute difference between each person's Left–Right position

and their perception of their chosen party's position. The smaller the gap the better the representation. A third of partisans (35%) locate themselves at the exact same Left–Right position as their party, and an additional 27% are one position away. The median partisan is only 1.07 points away from their chosen party. This seems like a high level of congruence considering the complexity of contemporary politics and the diversity of issues facing voters.

This estimate of the representation gap may be overly optimistic, however, because it might be constrained by psychological processes to reduce cognitive dissonance. Therefore, we also use the median party location by all survey respondents. This method produces noninteger agreement scores so a perfect match between an individual (integer values) and their chosen party (a continuous variable) is much less likely. Overall, the median partisan–party Left–Right difference is only slightly larger (1.38) even with the paucity of zero difference respondents. Nearly two-fifths of partisans (38.8%) are within one point of their party with this measure.

Figure 1 shows the aggregate level of Left–Right representation by comparing these two measures across nations. Most publics hover between 1.00 and 1.50 as the median distance along either axis. Perhaps because of cognitive dissonance, the representation gap using respondent party placements is smaller than when the entire public places the parties on the Left–Right scale.

British partisans display a large representation gap, which may be due to two factors. First, the Liberal Democrats have historically occupied a centrist position in Left–Right terms which places them close to the modal citizen, yet many centrists vote either Labour or Conservatives. Second, the UKIP's very strong showing in the 2009 election (second with 16.5%) reflects the protest vote common in second-order EU elections, presumably drawing votes from many previously Labour or Conservative voters. Greeks and Spaniards are also substantially more distant from their preferred parties using the entire public's Left–Right party scores, again possibly following from the polarization of opinions following the post-2008 financial crisis.

Conversely, Irish partisans are closer to the entire public's positioning of the parties than to their own party locations. This may reflect the antipartisan negativity that the Irish felt toward because of the established parties' actions during the post-2008 fiscal crisis.

These results might be a function of the second-order nature of European Union elections. First, turnout is lower than for national elections, although we compensated for this by using voters and nonvoters. There is only a weak relationship between voting/nonvoting and the two measures of partisan–voter differences ($r = .05$ and $r = .02$) in Figure 1. In addition, the second-order nature of EP elections stimulates protest voting and this may distort these results. To some extent, this is a factor. The surge in UKIP support in the United Kingdom seemingly illustrates this situation, although the change to a PR electoral system in EU elections may also affect voting results. Yet, the levels of congruence are broadly similar to Best and McDonald's (2011) analyses of national elections.

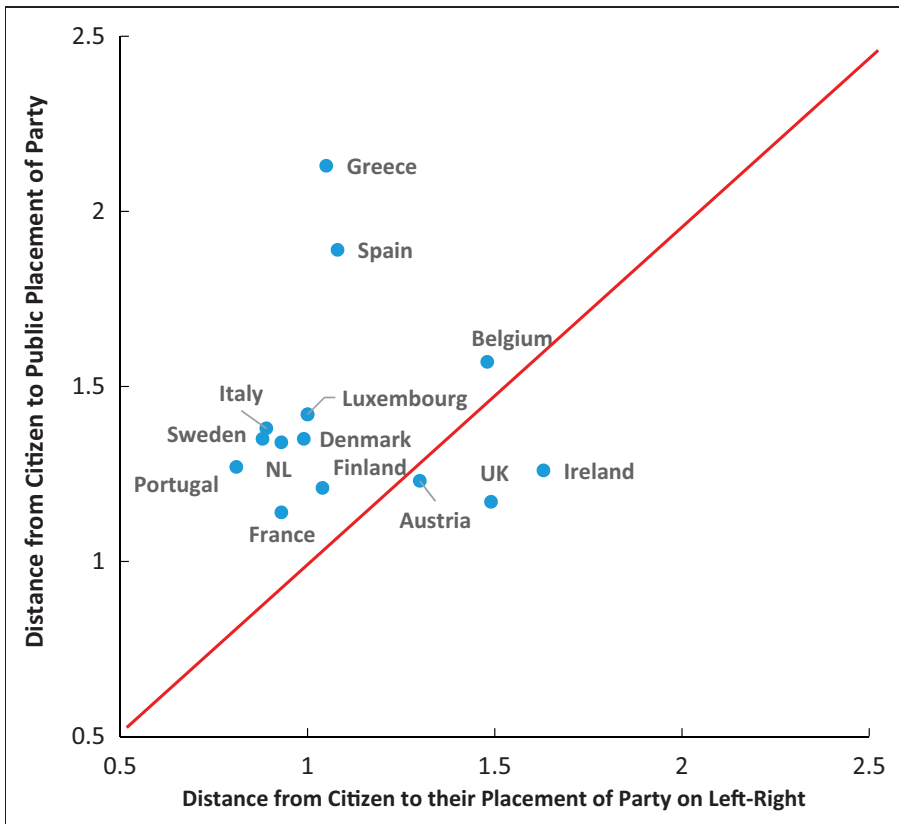


Figure 1. Distances between partisans and their chosen party on Left–Right scale.

Source: 2009 European Election Study.

Note: Figure entries are median distance between partisans' Left–Right self-placement and their placement of their chosen party on horizontal axis or the whole sample's placement of the party on vertical axis.

Nonproximate voting

One might accept these results as evidence of strong congruence between citizens and their parties in most nations. This is typically where research stops, at such aggregate comparisons. We want to press further to ask whether a person's chosen party in an election is really the closest party on the Left–Right dimension. And if voters deviate from their most proximate choice, what are the causes and consequences.

To create this measure of *nonproximate voting*, we compare the Left–Right distance between each partisan and their chosen party to the distance to the party that is actually closest to each person's Left–Right position. We might expect a very high percentage would see their chosen party as the most proximate on the

Left–Right scale. This is even more likely because the partisans locate themselves on the Left–Right scale as well as the parties in this initial comparison.⁴ In fact, a bare majority (54.7%) favor the party that is actually closest to them on the Left–Right scale. And among this group, nearly half (26.5% of partisans) see two or more parties as equidistant from their own position. When we use the overall public's placement of parties on the Left–Right scale, the percentage of partisans who prefer the closest party drops to 28.4%. On average, people vote for a party that is seen as more than 1.0 scale points away from their closest party.

Figure 2 illustrates the cross-national pattern. The horizontal axis displays the median closeness to one's *chosen party* previously displayed in Figure 1.

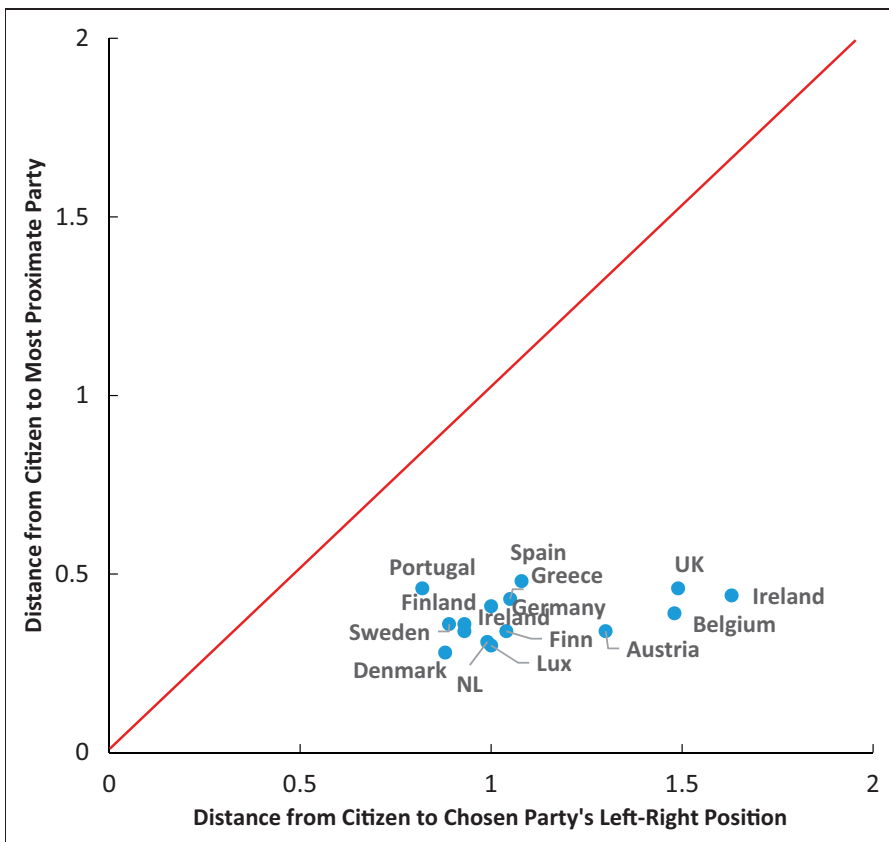


Figure 2. Closeness to chosen party and to closest party on Left–Right scale.

Source: 2009 European Election Study.

Note: Figure entries are median distance between partisans' Left–Right self-placement and their chosen party on horizontal axis or the placement of the closest party on the Left–Right scale on the vertical axis.

The vertical axis presents the distance to the *most proximate party* in each nation. The representation gap averages 1.1 across these nations, but the gap to the theoretically closest party is much smaller and varies only slightly across nations (average = 0.4). That is, many voters see a party that is a close Left–Right fit to their own position, but then vote for a more distant party. If we use the overall public’s placement of the parties, the size of both gaps increases but the relative difference between voted party and closest party remains. In terms of the simple Downsian prediction of voters selecting the ideologically proximate choice, barely a quarter of vote choices can be predicted by this approach (half vote for a non-proximate party, and a quarter have two equidistant parties so there is an indeterminate choice of which party to support).

European party systems appear surprisingly similar in offering voters a party that is quite close to their own Left–Right position. This does not sharply vary by the number of parties in the election, the polarization of the party system, or the other systemic characteristics that a priori we might theorize will affect potential congruence. So ideological congruence with a party in theoretical terms is not heavily conditioned by national traits. At the same time, some factors push a significant number of citizens away from their ideal choice and thus diminish ideological representation.

In retrospect, the high percentage of people who deviate from their ideologically most proximate party might not be surprising. Left–Right positions are supposed to capture an individual’s position on the salient issues of the day. However, much more than ideology enters into voters’ electoral choices, such as party identities, candidate images, performance criteria, idiosyncratic variables, and many other factors. And prior research suggests that a modest number of voters deviate for strategic reasons (Abramson et al., 2010; Blais and Nadeau, 1996). However, when half the public selects a party that they feel is not closest to them, this should affect their views of how well their views are being represented. This process triples the Left–Right representation gap at the individual level between the actual party choice and the theoretically closest choice.

In short, a large proportion of Europeans did not conform to the Downsian logic of Left–Right spatial voting in the 2009 elections, and other evidence points to similar results in national parliamentary elections (Best and McDonald, 2011; Budge et al., 2012). Examining these choices could illustrate the workings of democratic representation in EU elections and perhaps elections more generally.

Predicting Downsian deviations

What leads people to vote for a party that is *not closest* to them on the Left–Right scale? Understanding the decision to make nonproximate voting choices offers a new perspective on political representation. We pursue this topic in a sequential way. We first present various hypotheses from the literature that might explain this phenomenon and that can be tested with the available data. Then we examine each hypothesis with empirical evidence.

Political sophistication

The choice of the nonproximate party may result from a limited understanding of the Left–Right scale. Research has long debated the public’s ability to make informed, rational political choices. Studies that ask respondents to define the meaning of Left and Right often show that the less sophisticated have limited ability to identify their own position or that of the parties (Best and McDonald, 2011; Fuchs and Klingemann, 1989).⁵

More broadly, we expect that political interest or sophistication is related to proximate voting. The politically engaged might follow the Downsian logic, the less engaged may make less structured political choices. For example, Walczak and Van der Brug (2013) found that the individual-level representation gap for EP party groups was smaller among the better educated and those higher in political knowledge. Belchior (2013) showed that the aggregate voter–party gap was smaller among politically involved voters. By extension, we expect these same individuals to vote for the most proximate party option. We use education and political interest as potential measures of political skills and resources.

Party identification

A party identification binds individuals to a specific party, even possibly overlooking short-term policy differences with the party. The implications for the representation gap are unclear, however (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012). On the one hand, partisans might be more likely to vote for “their” party, even if they feel another party better represents their Left–Right position in the election, thus producing a larger representation gap. On the other hand, partisans may be more susceptible to the feeling of cognitive dissonance, which produces a smaller representation gap when using self-identified party positions. Since nonpartisans lack these considerations, they may have a smaller representation gap because they vote more consistently with their policy viewpoints.

The impact of partisanship on nonproximate voting may be complex. Partisans may be more likely to endorse their party, even when it is not the closest. But they are also likely to adjust their party perceptions to reduce cognitive dissonance. Perhaps the key factor is how party positions are defined: by the respondent or by the public at large. We test these alternative hypotheses as a function of the strength of party attachments.

Strategic voting

Nonproximate voting also may arise from strategic voting (Alvarez et al., 2006; Blais and Nadeau, 1996). As widely used, strategic voting occurs when a voter is concerned about the electability of their chosen party, and consequently votes for another party that is more likely to win the election or gain legislative seats. This theory is typically tested by comparing a respondent’s most liked party to the party for which they voted. However, the most liked party may reflect ideological

agreement, partisan loyalties, candidate personalities, and other factors. It seems somewhat tautological to compare the most liked party to actual vote, which explains why so few people appear as strategic voters. We offer an ideologically centered model, hence there are more people who deviate from their preferred Left–Right choice because of other considerations.

The core logic of the strategic voting literature is that voters are hesitant to waste their votes on small parties with limited electoral potential and thus shift their votes to a compatible larger party. We can use party size (vote share in the 2009 election) to indirectly test whether individuals whose most proximate party garners few votes are more likely to shift to a (larger) nonproximate party choice.

Blais and Nadeau (1996: 45) suggested that the size of the preference differences between parties affects strategic vote switching. In multiparty systems, voters typically have several leftist (or rightist) parties to choose between. If ideological deviations occur within a small range of the closest parties, then this would limit the political significance of the results. Thus, it would not be problematic in terms of maximizing representation if they factor in party performance, leadership, or competency to make their decisions when the size of preference differences is small.

Performance criteria

Research has argued that ideological proximity competes with the performance of parties (or valence criteria rather than positional issues) when voters make their choices (Clarke, 2009; Clarke et al., 2008). Even if one agrees with a party's program, a poorly judged leader, a record of mismanagement, or political scandals may prompt voters to find an alternative. The record of recent European elections—especially since the onset of the financial crisis in 2008—is replete with voters turning out a government because they are dissatisfied with the economy or the government's performance on another policy.

The survey asked two general performance questions: approval of the government's record and satisfaction with the working of democracy. In terms of the representation gap, we might expect that people who are positive about government performance will follow their ideological preferences.

The impact of performance judgments on nonproximate voting choices is more complicated. Performance evaluations may have contrasting effects depending on whether a party is in the government or in opposition (Anderson et al., 2005). If the party closest to the respondent is currently in government, then positive performance evaluations would encourage a vote for this party. Dissatisfaction might make them look for another party alternative. In contrast, if the closest party is in political opposition, then negative performance evaluations might encourage a vote for this opposition party as a vehicle for change. In short, the relationship should be reversed depending on the incumbent/opposition status of the closest party.

Party characteristics

A final possibility is that a party's characteristics may affect levels of nonproximate voting. Prior studies theorize that the clarity of party positions helps voters identify party positions, and thus select the most proximate party (e.g. Belchior, 2013; Dalton, 2016; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012; Walczak and Van der Brug, 2013). One surrogate for clarity might be the age of the party. Established parties have a track record that may enable voters to better identify the parties' positions as well as committing to a party that matches their positions. In comparison, new parties often evolve their positions over successive elections as they expand their programs beyond their initial formative issues.

A more direct test of clarity comes from the party's actual policy position. Walczak and Van der Brug (2013) showed that ideologically extreme parties are generally closer to their voters, similar to Belchior's (2013) findings for aggregate agreement. This is because these parties have more distinct positions that enable like-minded voters to identify the party as sharing their preferences. But they do not compare chosen party versus the most proximate party.

A correlate of the ideological clarity argument holds that niche parties that advocate distinct political positions—Communist, Green parties, Nationalist/regional parties, and Extreme Right parties—similarly offer clear political profiles to potential voters, which should maximize representation (Belchior, 2013; Meguid, 2008). We test this assumption by comparing the individual representation gap across party families.

Empirical analysis

We assembled predictors to test the above hypotheses (see the Online appendix for variables and coding). There are two different aspects of representation that merit comparison. First, we examine the correlates of the *representation gap* between respondents and their chosen party in the 2009 election. This replicates the typical representation model at the micro level and is a reference point for our analyses. Second, we determine what factors lead voters to *choose nonproximate parties*, instead of the party closest to them on the Left–Right Scale. We conduct bivariate analyses before paring down the variables for multivariate analysis.

The left side of Table 1 presents two estimates of the representation gap; on the right are two measures of nonproximate voting. For both comparisons, the first column is based on the respondent's own Left–Right placement of the parties, and the second is based on the overall public's placement of the parties.⁶

We first test whether politically interested and more educated individuals have a closer fit between their own views and their parties. The correlations on the left of the table generally support this position. Individuals who are more interested and more educated have a smaller representation gap, similar to Walczak and Van der Brug's (2013) evidence for political knowledge.

The right-side panel extends this analysis to nonproximate voting choices. The two sophistication measures are not significantly correlated with nonproximate

Table 1. The correlates of representation gap and nonproximate party choice.

Predictor	Representation gap		Nonproximate choice	
	Citizens' placement	Public's placement	Citizens' placement	Public's placement
Sophistication				
Political interest	-.07*	-.01	-.02	-.03
Education	-.08*	-.11*	-.01	.06*
Party identification				
PID strength	-.05*	.08*	-.09*	-.05*
Strategic voting				
Party vote share	.02	-.03	-.12*	-.34*
Distance to closest party	-	-	-.14*	-.05
Performance criteria				
Satisfied with democratic Performance	.00	.06*		
Incumbent party closest		.00	.06*	
Opposition party closest		-.01	-.10*	
Approve of government	.02	.18*		
Incumbent party closest		.02	.18*	
Opposition party closest		-.02	-.20*	
Party characteristics				
Party age	-.02	-.01	-.02	-.03
L-R position	(.22)*	(.07)*	-	-.18*

Source: 2009 European Election Survey; only EU15 states. Maximum number of weighted cases for pairwise correlations is 10,708.

Note: Table entries are Pearson *r* correlations. Left-Right position of the party is based on overall public's placement. Value in parentheses is *R* from quadratic regression; *means significance $p < .01$.

voting when using the respondent's placement of the parties. However, education ($r = .06$) shows a weak tendency to increase nonproximate voting when based on the public's placement of the parties. For example, 34% of the least educated voted for the closest party, while only 27% of the best educated followed this course (while still finding a party close to their position as shown in the previous paragraph). Education seems to help voters navigate electoral politics, in identifying parties generally compatible with their policy positions (the representation on the left side of the table), but also increasing the willingness to deviate from the closest party if the conditions warrant it and pick another reasonable choice (nonproximate voting).

People with strong party attachments have a slightly smaller representation gap when the respondent locates the parties on the Left-Right scale ($r = -.05$).

This may occur because partisans psychologically seek congruence with “their” party, while nonpartisans are less affected by projection and persuasion effects. Reinforcing this conclusion, when we use the overall public’s placement of the parties, strong partisans actually display a larger representation gap ($r = .08$). The strength of partisanship also has a consistent effect on nonproximate voting in the right columns. Strong partisans are less likely to defect from the closest party on the Left–Right scale, presumably because their party ties generate a resistance to deviation based on nonideological factors.

We tested the strategic voting model in multiple ways. A party’s vote share in the 2009 election was essentially unrelated to the size of the representation gap. We then correlated vote share for the most proximate party with the likelihood of switching to a nonproximate party as a test of the strategic voting thesis. When the closest party on the Left–Right scale has a small vote share, respondents are more likely to vote for a nonproximate party, which is generally a larger party.⁷ Using the public’s placement of the parties, this relationship is relatively strong ($r = -.34$).

The logic of Blais and Nadeau (1996) and others holds that the size of the preference gap affects strategic voting, another test of the strategic voting model comes by considering the absolute distance between the respondent’s Left–Right position and the position of the closest party. As this distance increases, nonproximate voting might increase because the nearest party is not a close fit. Thus, the gap to other parties presumably is not much larger. In fact, there is a weak relationship in the opposite direction. It is statistically significant, but the range is less than 10% difference.

The size of the representation gap is weakly to modestly related to performance evaluations of the democratic system and the national government. This is consistent with earlier representation studies, although the direction of causal flow is ambiguous. Performance evaluations may have a differential effect on nonproximate voting, depending on whether the closest party is a member of the current national government or in opposition. The rightmost columns show this contrast. When the closest party is an incumbent, positive evaluations of the performance of the democratic system encourage voting for this party, and negative evaluations decrease the willingness to vote this way. For opposition parties, people are more likely to support the closest, nonincumbent party when they are dissatisfied with the performance of the democratic system. Evaluations of the national government have similar effects.

Aggregate representation studies have found that the representation gap is smaller for older parties because they have established political identities. We find very weak support for this thesis in the positive relationship between the year the party was formed and the size of the representation gap. The relationship between party age and nonproximate voting is not statistically significant.

Another possible factor is the ideological position of the parties. The representation gap shows a complex pattern. Prior research shows that the aggregate representation gap is large at the poles of the Left–Right dimension because parties

tend to be more extreme than their voters, as others have shown (Dalton, 2016; Dalton and McAllister, 2015; Thomassen and Schmitt, 1999). We model these effects with a nonlinear equation. These effects are much stronger when we use respondents' Left–Right placement of their chosen party ($R = .22$) rather than the public's party placement ($R = .07$). In both cases, however, the relationship is statistically significant.

In terms of nonproximate voting in the rightmost columns, individuals who position themselves on the right are less likely to support a nonproximate party. This is partially because rightist parties are generally more representative of their voters (Dalton, 2016, Figure 2), which lessens the motivation for deviation. And in contrast to the representation gap, the pattern of nonproximate voting is a linear relationship with only slight deviation at both ideological extremes.

A more differentiated indicator of a party's political identity is membership in a party family. Comparing the party family of the ideologically closest party and the party chosen in the election shows the complexity of the representation process (Table 2).⁸ There is, predictably, a strong relationship between the party family of the ideologically closest party (the column variable) and chosen party in the 2009 election (row variable) (Cramer's $V = .35$). The modal pattern for each party family is to retain the voters who are ideologically closest to the parties, but seldom does this represent a majority (only for the larger Socialist (49.6%), Christian Democratic (50.2%), and Conservative parties (58.4%)). Especially for voters who are ideologically closest to the so-called niche parties (Communists, Greens, and Nationalists), there is a marked tendency to vote for a larger and more centrist party.

Another striking feature of Table 2 is the pattern of inter-bloc voting. When voters do not support the party closest to themselves on the Left–Right scale, the normal expectation is that they would choose an adjacent party on the scale. For example, for those closest to a Green party, 35.7% switch to a socialist party and 5.3% switch to a communist party. Such intra-Left voting is understandable and may not shift the overall balance of power in a party system. However, there is also more inter-bloc voting than we might expect. For instance, for citizens closest to a Green party, 23.4% vote for a party on the right side of the Left–Right scale (Christian Democrat, Conservatives, Nationalists, or Center/Agrarian). Except for Communists, this inter-block pattern reaches double digits for all the other party families.

The diversity of patterns across family patterns raises several basic questions. One might ask if the party family label is too vague, since within each party group there are a diversity of parties. Among Green parties, for example, their Left–Right placement by the overall public ranged from 2.77 (Austrian Greens) to 4.83 (Finnish Greens). Nationalist parties have an even wider range across the Left–Right scale. Some voters with strong party identities undoubtedly vote for the party based on this allegiance, while their actual interests lie elsewhere. Similarly, there is inevitable confusion (or disagreement) on the actual position of the parties, and even party experts can disagree on parties' Left–Right positions. Performance criteria can also trump Left–Right agreement. In short, the diversity of choices

Table 2. Chosen party in election by family of closest party.

Party voted	Closest party by family										Total
	Communists	Greens	Socialists	Liberals	Christian Democrats	Conservatives	Nationalists	Center/Agrarian	Ethnic/Linguistic		
Communists	32.7%	5.3%	5.6%	0.0%	1.1%	1.4%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	6.0%
Greens	14.6	26.8	13.0	1.5	4.7	3.5	3.3	13.0	8.9	10.3	10.3
Socialists	46.7	35.7	49.6	32.8	19.2	8.4	13.2	11.0	25.2	31.2	31.2
Liberals	0.1	6.7	3.3	23.6	7.4	4.7	25.6	11.0	11.6	7.4	7.4
Christian Democrat	2.0	8.4	20.0	20.0	50.2	2.1	22.5	10.3	2.7	18.5	18.5
Conservatives	0.4	4.4	5.3	0.0	9.8	58.4	7.2	14.4	24.0	14.3	14.3
Nationalists	0.1	0.8	1.9	22.1	5.1	2.8	24.4	0.0	1.9	4.9	4.9
Center/Agrarian	2.2	9.8	0.3	0.0	1.2	10.9	0.0	38.4	12.4	4.4	4.4
Ethnic/Linguistic	1.2	2.1	1.1	0.0	1.4	7.7	3.7	2.1	13.2	2.9	2.9
Total %	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
(N)	694	656	2130	195	1085	1032	657	146	258	6853	6853

Source: 2009 European Election Study; only EU15 states.

Table 3. Predicting nonproximate voting choices.

Variable	Respondent placement of parties				Public placement of parties			
	B	SE	Sig.	Exp(B)	B	SE	Sig.	Exp(B)
Education	-.042	.024	.085	1.042	-.022	.028	.436	.978
Weak partisanship	.210	.026	.000	1.233	.168	.030	.000	1.183
Party size	-.303	.028	.000	.738	-.781	.035	.000	.458
Distance to closest party	-	-	-	-	-.093	.030	.002	.912
Year party formed	.001	.001	.195	1.001	-.002	.001	.004	.998
Party Left-Right position	.043	.056	.441	1.044	.033	.019	.087	1.034
Approve government	.041	.010	.000	1.042	.950	.066	.000	2.587
Constant	-2.083	1.286	.105	.125	4.512	1.436	.002	91.096
Nagelkerke Rsqr	.039				.213			

Source: 2009 European Election Study; only EU15 states; N = 6619.

Note: Table presents results from logistic regression. Dependent variable is coded: 0) proximate choice, 1) nonproximate choice.

across party families illustrates the cumulative political effects that can produce large deviations from the Downsian model.

Multivariate model

The bivariate analyses identified the factors that are the most strongly linked to citizen representation, and how the correlates of nonproximate choice compare to the correlates of the representation gap. We assembled predictors of nonproximate voting based on Table 2 results. To simplify the analyses and avoid multicollinearity, we dropped political interest, since education seemed the more important variable. Instead of including two system performance evaluations, we use only government approval as the strongest correlate in Table 2.

Table 3 presents the results of two logistic regressions that use the respondent's or the overall public's positioning of the parties. In overall terms, the results of the two models are similar. Most coefficients work in the same direction, and the magnitude of effects is generally similar.

Supporting the strategic voting hypothesis, when the closest party is large, voters are less likely to change to a nonproximate choice. It is often difficult to judge the magnitude of effects from logit coefficients, so Figure 3 plots the probability of a nonproximate vote choice based on the size of the proximate party (2009 vote share) for the second logit model in Table 3. The effects are quite striking; for the largest parties only about a quarter of proximate voters deviated from this choice. Among the parties with less than a 10% vote share, around three-quarters deviated from this choice. This occurs even though the EP elections are

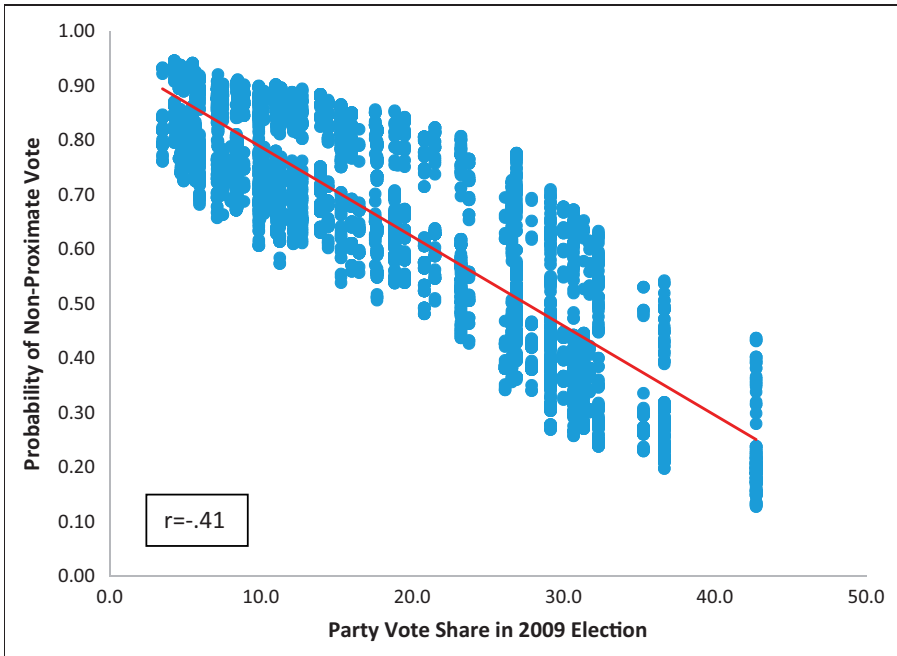


Figure 3. Party vote share and likelihood to vote for nonproximate party.

Source: 2009 European Election Study; only EU15 states; N = 6619.

Note: Figure plots the individual predicted probability of voting for nonproximate party by the party vote share in the 2009 election. These values are from second logit model Table 3. The OLS regression line describes the relationship between both variables.

proportional representation so many minor parties could gain representation with a small vote share. This is the strongest effect in these logit models.

Another significant predictor of nonproximate voting is the strength of partisanship among voters. Independents and weak partisans are substantially more likely to make nonproximate choices in both models. To give a sense of these effects, the predicted percentage choosing a nonproximate party increases from 57% among very close partisans to 69% among nonpartisans.

Government performance is also a significant predictor. We recoded the government performance variable to capture the contrasting effects for incumbent and opposition parties.⁹ The contrast between approval/disapproval yields a 20% shift in the probability of a nonproximate vote.

Most of the other variables in the model have weak effects, with their bivariate influences in Table 2 captured by other factors in the multivariate analyses. Education, which had a weak effect in the bivariate relationships drops to insignificance in the multivariate model. Similarly, a party's Left-Right position is a nonsignificant predictor in both models.

Presumably because of psychological processes to reduce cognitive dissonance, the predictive model is less effective when using the respondent's placement of parties ($R_{sqr} = .039$) than when the overall public places the parties ($R_{sqr} = .213$). The success in predicting nonproximate voting follows the same pattern; the first model has a 59% correct prediction rate, and the second has a 73% correct rate.

A citizen's view of party representation

The significance of this research depends on how we answer a short question: what do we mean by political representation? Like many other questions, the answer is "it depends." If one frames the question as to whether partisans as a collective are close to their own party's Left–Right position, as many scholars have argued, the previous empirical evidence shows extremely high levels of correspondence across EU elections (Belchior, 2013; Dalton, 2016; Thomassen and Schmitt, 1999). In fact, the distinction between the chosen party and the most proximate party that structured this article is almost irrelevant for collective representation.¹⁰ Collectively, party representation works quite effectively in broad Left–Right terms across West European democracies for EU elections and national parliamentary elections.

However, if we ask the question at the individual level—how well is each citizen represented by their chosen party—our results suggest more modest evidence of representation. The average person is one scale point (out of 10) away from the party they supported in 2009. This means that half of the partisans see an even larger representation gap. The small voter–party gaps at the aggregate level grow considerably at the individual level. And individual-level political behavior is more likely affected by this personal participation gap than by an aggregate result.

Part of the reason for this larger representation gap is that many people end up supporting a party in the election that is not closest to themselves on the Left–Right scale. Something distances them from their "most representative" party. Using the respondent's placement of parties on the Left–Right scale, a bare majority of West Europeans favor the closest party. Using the entire public's placement of the parties, only a quarter of partisans favor the ideologically closest party. Often these voters swing to an adjacent party so the effects on Left–Right representation are small. However, a significant number of voters jump across the Left–Right divide and support parties much different than their closest option. The median Left–Right representation gap to the party supported in the 2009 election is over three times greater than the gap to the party that is actually closest. In other words, the decision to define representation as an aggregate or individual property makes a sizeable difference in how well contemporary party systems represent the citizens.

One might expect that Left–Right positions cannot fully predict voting choice, since citizens weigh several factors in making their decisions. But that half of the public (or more) prefers a nonproximate party undermines the logic of interpreting voters' choices primarily in Downsian terms. **[AQ6]** In addition, another large part

of the public is nonvoters who lacked a preferred party in the 2009 election. For them, individual-level representation seems severely lacking. Thus, the contemporary democratic process means that many people do not vote for the party that best represents their view, nor see a party that represents their policy positions (Weßels and Schmitt, 2014).

Our modeling of nonproximate voting suggests that this is most strongly linked to the size of the most proximate party. Voters who are closest to a small party are most likely to deviate to a larger party, consistent with the strategic voting theory. There is also significant evidence that the performance of government, linked with the incumbency status of the party, influences nonproximate voting. If people rate government performance highly, they are more loyal to parties in government and less likely if they are critical of the government. Other theorized factors seem to have less influence on nonproximate voting.

A possible caveat is that we are looking at Left–Right differences between individuals and their preferred parties. Elections are a process of collective decision-making about governing policies, so perhaps issue representation works more effectively than Left–Right identities. However, other research shows that issue representation is less robust than for Left–Right attitudes, and the party that best represents voters on one issue is unlikely to be equally representative across a range of policy areas (Dalton, 2016; Thomassen, 2012). The most striking evidence comes from the EUProfiler voter advice application (VAA) in this same 2009 EP election (Alvarez et al., 2014). After voters identified their positions on 30 issues and the salience they attached to these issues, they were asked for their party preference in the election. Then the VAA listed the party that best matched their expressed issue positions. Only 17.8% of voters initially favored the party that best matched their self-stated preference! Alvarez et al. (2014) state this is not primarily an artifact of poor coding by the VAA. **[AQ7]** Moreover, by factoring in issue salience this should adjust for the impact of specific issue publics on electoral choice.

We suspect that valence considerations—competency, experience, valence issues, and candidate images—play a significant role in Downsian deviations from Left–Right voting (Stokes, 1966). **[AQ8]** The data to test this hypothesis are not available in the EES, but there is some supporting evidence from other sources (Clarke, 2009; Clarke et al., 2008). It seems entirely rational to include such considerations in the calculations of voting choice, but it is a different calculation that Downs and other public choice theories emphasize. The evidence of differential effects for evaluations of government performance for incumbent and opposition parties is direct evidence in support of the valence. Thus, if vote shifts between elections primarily result from valence factors, this suggests that changes in governments are not a mandate for the direction of policy, but a judgment of the performance and competency of the party contenders.

It is also possible that the complexity of contemporary party choices affects the patterns we have described. The increasing fluidity of European parties and the

concomitant decline of long-term voting influences (social milieu and party identification) may impede the representation process in terms of Left–Right attitudes. Large parties struggle to maintain their electoral base by broadening their appeal, at least compared to the more ideological mass parties of the past. Smaller parties may highlight a specific policy theme, such as environmentalism or national identity, but then have voters with different preferences on economic or foreign policy. These factors would increase policy heterogeneity among party supporters. In other words, the fragmentation of public interests and European parties increases the difficulty for a party to represent most of its voters most of the time.

Given the European Parliament's reputation as second-order elections, one might speculate that these patterns are different from national parliamentary elections. Some research suggests that orientations toward the EU create a policy dimension that is orthogonal to traditional Left–Right. We think this is unlikely. Cross-national data for national parliamentary elections yield quite similar estimates of the amount of nonproximate voting (Best and McDonald, 2011; Budge et al., 2012). Similarly, Weßels and Schmitt (2014) find that too few citizens believe their views are represented either by a party or a candidate. In short, the sharp contrast between aggregate and individual representation seems to be a common characteristic of contemporary elections. Very high levels of representation at the aggregate level can coexist with feelings of being unrepresented for many or most voters.

These results suggest that we need to go deeper into the process of political representation than just calculate congruence between the average voter and their party. Something important is lost by aggregation. To the individual, this missing element might shape their images of how well they are represented in contemporary electoral politics. If one is a voter who feels dissatisfied with the party offerings, it is little consolation to know that the average partisan is close to their respective party. Instead, they would ask: *does the party represent me* (also see Golder and Stramski, 2010). The evidence of a deficit in representative democracy is much stronger at the individual level. Thus, it is predictable that dissatisfaction with the democratic process is significantly related to this individual-level representation gap.

In summary, this study illustrates a paradox in democratic representation studies. Aggregate studies conclude that democratic elections are very effective means of representation, yet individual citizens see the shortfalls in party representation we have described here. Both are important political realities. Thus, how we define and measure representation strongly affects our conclusions about the effectiveness of party representation in European democracies.

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Notes

1. Walczak and Van der Brug's (2013) studied individual congruence in the 2009 election, but they examined transnational EP party blocs rather than specific parties. Belchior (2013) researched the impact of individual traits on representation, but in terms of aggregate agreement rather than individual level.
2. Additional information is on the project homepage (also see Schmitt, 2010): <http://eeshomepage.net/ees-2009-study/>. The surveys are available from the GESIS archive (dbk.gesis.org).
3. We required at least two candidate respondents, which exclude about a quarter of the parties in the candidate survey. This small number of cases pushes the candidate data to its limits, but with higher numbers we lose many additional parties (Dalton, 2016). On the voter side, we include only parties with at least 20 supporters in the EES. Left–Right party positions from the candidate study and EES are available for 80 parties.
4. We calculated the minimum difference for up to 10 parties in the EES survey within each nation. Then we compared this *minimum distance* to the previously calculated distance of the chosen party.
5. Our analyses suggest that the patterns Best and McDonald (2011) described are not a major factor in nonproximate voting. First, we counted the number of respondents who gave the same Left–Right score to the first five parties, presuming this shows an inconsistent application of the scale. Among those who evaluated five parties, only 1.4% gave them identical scores. Second, we examined the size of the gap between the respondent's Left–Right score and that of the chosen party. The range of scores has a highest value of 10 using respondent's party placements and a highest score of 8.66 for the overall public's party placements. This involves a small number; however, less than 4% have a difference score greater than five. Since the total number falling into these categories is so small (circa 5%) we discount claims that misuse of the Left–Right scale explains the findings.
6. Because this second measure produces fractional scores for parties, exact fit with the integer values of respondents' Left–Right positions is less common. For comparability, we considered a gap of 1.0 scale points or less as proximate voting.
7. When individuals shift to a nonproximate party, the new party is more likely to be larger than the proximate party ($r = .14$) using the public's placement of the parties.
8. Not all party families compete in all nations. For instance, some nations have a major conservative party, others have a major Christian Democratic Party, and some nations have both.
9. We transposed the codes on the government approval question depending on whether closest party was an incumbent/opposition party. This implies the effects are symmetric albeit reversed for government and opposition parties.
10. The aggregate correlation between the average Left–Right position of party voters and the position of their respective party ($r = .92$) is only marginally smaller than the correlation for the ideologically closest party ($r = .94$).

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