2 The Dynamics of Political Representation

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2.1 Introduction

THE DEVELOPMENT OF REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT CREATED THE
potential for modern mass democracy. Instead of directly participating in political
decision making as in the Greek polis or the Swiss canton, the public selects legis-
lators to represent them in government deliberations. Citizen control over gover-
nment thus occurs through periodic, competitive elections to select these elites.
Elections should ensure that government officials are responsive and accountable
to the public. By accepting this electoral process, the public gives its consent to be
governed by the elites selected. The democratic process thus depends on an effective
and responsive relationship between the representative and the represented.

The linkage between the public and the political decision makers is one of the
essential topics for the study of democratic political systems (e.g., Miller and Stokes
1963; Miller et al. 1999; Powell 2000; Shapiro et al. 2010). The topic of represen-
tation is entirely appropriate in a volume dedicated to Jacques Thomassen since
this has been one of his career research interests (Thomassen 1976, 1994, 2009a;
Thomassen and Schmitt 1997; Schmitt and Thomassen 1999). This general topic
has also generated extensive research on the nature of elections and citizen voting
behavior, which examines the choices available to voters and their decision-making
process. A related literature examines the process of government formation, and
the correspondence between electoral outcomes and the resulting government.
Representation research involves the merger of these two literatures to examine
the correspondence between citizens and their elected leaders, and the factors that
maximize agreement.

This representation literature provides the foundation for the research presented
here; however, we offer a different perspective on how elections produce democratic

representation and accountability. Most of the previous literature views elections and government formation as discrete decision-making processes. Voters make their electoral choices much as they might make a major consumer purchase in a car dealership or a department store, and a large part of the literature explicitly utilizes such an economic choice approach. Similarly, research on the formation of government coalitions typically adopts the same approach, except that political leaders and parties are making the choices on cabinet formation once the votes are counted. In terms of game theory, this approach is like modeling representation as discrete decision-making at one point in time, like buying an automobile or new big-screen television. This leads to a focus on the wisdom or accuracy of this one decision; on whether people are rationally making a choice that matches their preferences.

Of course, elections and democracy are an ongoing process. The outcome of one election is just one point in this process. The performance of parties in government inevitably affects decisions – by voters and elites – at the next election. Thus, when a new election approaches, voters enter the campaign with this evidence of prior governing as a starting point for their evaluations. Citizens also look forward to what they expect of the government after the election. This essay suggests that rather than a discrete, point-in-time choice, democracy is based on a process of ongoing, dynamic representation that occurs through a comparison of the past and the future across repeated elections. In other words, elections function not simply as a method of collective political choice at election time, *but as a dynamic method of steering the course of government*. We provide preliminary empirical evidence of this process in this article.

This article proceeds in four steps. First, we briefly review the previous literature on political representation that provides a foundation for our research, and offer a dynamic extension of this literature. Second, we introduce the empirical evidence we use from the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems* (CSES). Third, we examine the empirical correspondence between citizens and their government based on the CSES data as a test of the dynamic model. Our fourth and final section discusses the implications of our findings.

2.2   Conceptualizing representation

What does it mean to be represented in a democracy? Prior research has evolved through three different answers to this question, from studying individual legislatures, to political parties, to the representativeness of governments. First, the early Michigan representation studies focused on the link between a constituency and its representative. This followed from the long-standing debate over trustee-delegate models of representation in a single member plurality (SMP) electoral system (Miller and Stokes 1963; Barnes 1977; Farah 1980; Converse and Pierce 1986; McAllister 1991). This research compared constituency opinions to those of the legislators elec-

ted from the district, and yielded mixed empirical results, especially in the party-dominated European cases.

In a second phase, research shifted its focus to the link between voters and their preferred parties rather than individual legislators. This research drew upon *responsible party government* theories of political representation (Rose 1974; Castles and Wildenmann 1986; Katz 1987, 1997; Blondel and Cotta 2001). This party government model seems more relevant for parliamentary systems with strong political parties (Thomassen 1976; Dalton 1985; Holmberg 1989; Esaiasson and Holmberg 1996; Matthews and Valen 1999). In these nations, parties rather than candidates are the prime political actors. The party government model thus compares agreement between voters and their selected party. The voter half of the dyad is composed of all party supporters in a nation (even if there are geographic electoral districts or regions); the elite half is composed of party officials as a collective. Candidates are selected by party elites rather than through open primaries, so they are first and foremost party representatives. The responsible party government model further presumes that members of a party's parliamentary delegation act in unison (Bowler et al. 1999). Parties vote as a bloc in parliament, although there may be internal debate before the party position is decided. Parties exercise control over the government and the policymaking process through party control of the national legislature. In sum, the choice of parties – rather than constituency-based representation – provides the electorate with indirect control over the actions of legislators and the affairs of government. Sartori (1968: 471) thus maintains that "citizens in Western democracies are represented *through* and *by* parties. This is inevitable" (italics in original).

As cross-national empirical research on representation expanded, this led to an even broader research focus on the extent to which governments represent the citizens who elected them. Powell (2000; Huber and Powell 1994) was one of the first to compare the Left-Right position of the median voters (from public opinion surveys) with the Left-Right position of the governing parties (from expert surveys) for a large set of established Western democracies. He found broad congruence, which varied with the clarity of government responsibility and other contextual factors. Since then several studies have used data from the *Comparative Manifestos Project* to compare citizen-government congruence (Klingemann et al. 1994; McDonald and Budge 2005). Much of this research has considered how electoral system rules might affect the degree of congruence between citizens and their government in Western democracies (Huber and Powell 1994; Wessels 1999; Powell 2000, 2006). And recent research has utilized the surveys from the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems* (cses) to expand the bases of comparison to include new democracies in Eastern Europe and East Asia (McAllister 2005; Blais and Bodet 2006; Golder and Stramski 2010; Powell 2010a).[1]

In broad terms, studies of voter-party congruence and citizens-government congruence have found high levels of agreement – evidence that democracy works. For instance, two cross-national studies of voter-party congruence found strikingly

high correlations between the voter-party dyads on Left-Right positions (Schmitt and Thomassen 1997; Dalton, Farrell and McAllister forthcoming). The first study compared parties for the nations in the CSES project, and the second compared parties competing in the 1994 European Parliament election. Similarly, several representation studies show reasonably high levels of congruence between the public's Left-Right position and those of their government (Thomassen 1994; Wessels 2007). Other research has examined congruence between public policy preferences and government policy outputs, also concluding that public opinion matters (Page and Shapiro 1992; Wlezien and Soroka 2007; see also Erikson et al. 2002). Based on such evidence, Soroka and Wlezien (2003) come to a simple conclusion: 'Democracy works.'

These representation studies, however, have largely examined representation as a cross-sectional relationship between citizens and parties/government based on the results of a single election or at a single point in time. Do voters in an election get a government that is generally congruent with their overall policies preferences – which is the essence of democratic representation? Some of this literature presents a theoretical debate on the nature of representation. Does representation function through voters prospectively evaluating alternatives and providing governments with a mandate for future action, or do voters retrospectively judge the performance of past governments and hold them accountable at election time (e.g., Przeworski et al. 1999)? This is a reasonable starting point, but we believe that this approach creates a false dichotomy and misspecifies the actual nature of democratic representation.

Democracy is not a single event, but an ongoing process. Once elected, people judge parties not just by what they said in the campaign, but by how they actually govern and by the decisions they take that affect people's lives. Sometimes the gap between campaign rhetoric and the reality of governing can be large. George W. Bush's "read my lips, no new taxes" comes to mind. And there are numerous cases where governments followed an unexpected course after taking office, or where external events forced a major change in policy direction.[2] Parties and governments also campaign on a large range of issues, and the attention given to each may change overall public perceptions of government performance because the public's agreement on specific issues should naturally vary. Between elections new parties or political leaders emerge, so citizen decisions might shift with a new choice set. In fact, given the complexity of politics it is almost inevitable that some voters (and expert analysts) are surprised by some of the actions of government once it takes office. Consequently, the fit between citizens and the government is likely to change over a multi-year electoral cycle.

Thus, rather than a single consumer purchase or a single decision game, the representative aspect of elections is more like a repetitive decision process or repetitive game. The analogy of navigating a sailboat on the sea might be useful. The public (the captain) makes the best choice in directing the ship of state at the moment, and then reacts as conditions change. If scandal touches a party or a party

leadership appears ineffective, voters may select the best of the remaining options in one election. If a government moves too far in one direction, the next election provides a mechanism to shift direction back toward the public's collective preferences. If the public oversteers in one election, influenced by a charismatic personality or an intense issue controversy, they can correct course at the next election. And if conditions in the world change, elections can also steer a new course in reaction to these changes. In short, representative democracy is a repetitive decision-making process that provides a method for the citizenry to adjust the course of government, correcting discrepancies in direction that arise from outcomes in the previous election or the autonomous actions of the incumbent government.[3]

In fact, we might argue that this democracy's primary strength is its ability to repeatedly enter such feedback into the political process. Prospective voting on a party or government's election manifesto is only likely to generate meaningful representation if there is accountability at the next election. Retrospective evaluations of a government's performance have greater meaning if considered in terms of the government's initial policy goals. To dichotomize accountability and representation misses the key point that both can function meaningfully in a process where they both are considered on an ongoing basis across elections.

This dynamic perspective appears in time series research linking public opinion and government policy outputs (Page and Shapiro 1992; Wlezien and Soroka 2007), but it is less evident in representation studies that focus on voter-party congruence or public-government congruence at one point in time.[4] This essay provides an initial empirical test of this dynamic hypothesis using data from the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems* project. The comparison of citizen and government positions across nations and across time is a difficult empirical challenge because of the data requirements it imposes. We therefore present a simple first test of the dynamic hypothesis. We ask whether citizen agreement with a newly elected government is greater than with the pre-election government. *If representation is a dynamic process, then post–election congruence generally should be greater than pre–election congruence, as citizens steer the ship of state back in the direction they want it to follow.*

2.3   The empirical evidence

To study representation we need measures of both citizen positions and government positions. The initial wave of representation studies were single nation studies based on surveys of the public and elites. Other research, such as the *Comparative Manifestos Project* or party expert surveys, estimates party positions from their election platforms or the evaluations of academic experts – but lacks data on citizen positions in these same party systems. To compare citizen and government positions, previous research often merged data from different sources or estimated citizen opinions from the positions of political parties. Large, cross-national comparisons

of citizen-government correspondence are thus relatively rare in the research literature.

We use a different empirical base for our research. The *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems* is a coordinated cross-national survey conducted by existing election study teams from around the world.[5] Participating countries include a common module of survey questions in their post-election studies. All surveys must meet certain quality and comparability standards, and all are conducted as nationally representative surveys. These survey data are then merged into a common data file along with a variety of contextual variables. The CSES conducted its second module between 2001 and 2006 and included 40 elections in 38 nations. This wide array of democracies spans established and new democracies, and is spread across Europe, North America, Latin America and Asia. We excluded two non-democratic elections – Kyrgyzstan and Hong Kong – and three cases where there was insufficient information to compute either the pre- or post-election government scores – Albania, Israel and the Philippines – and thus base our analyses on 35 nations.

To measure the agreement between voters and the government, we begin by assuming that party competition is structured along a Left-Right dimension (Downs 1957; Cox 1990). Past studies of political representation have often used the Left-Right scale as a summary of political positions (Dalton 1985; Klingemann et al. 1994; Schmitt and Thomassen 1999c). We do not assume that most voters have an understanding of 'Left' and 'Right' in terms of sophisticated ideological concepts, such as socialism, liberalism or other philosophical concepts.[6] Instead, the Left-Right scale is a *political orientation* that helps individuals make political choices (Fuchs and Klingemann 1989; Inglehart 1990). We expect that positions on this scale generally summarize the issues and cleavages that define political competition to individuals in a nation. Ronald Inglehart describes the scale as a sort of super-issue that represents the "major conflicts that are present in the political system" (Inglehart 1990: 273; also see Gabel and Huber 2000: 96; Dalton 2006). Converse and Pierce (1986: 772-774) further suggested that the Left-Right framework can provide a means of representation and popular control even when specific policy positions are ill-formed. Even if the specific definitions of Left and Right vary across individuals and nations, we assume that the simple structure of a general Left-Right scale can summarize the political positions of voters and political parties.

The CSES asks respondents to position themselves along a Left-Right scale using a standard survey question:

In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Left										Right

Previous analyses show that almost 90 percent of the public in the diverse set of cses nations have a Left-Right position, and this increases further among those who voted in the previous election (McAllister and White 2007; Dalton 2009). This high level also transcends old and new democracies, and nations of quite different heritages. Furthermore, a wide range of research demonstrates that such Left-Right orientations are strongly related to citizen positions on the salient issues in the society (Inglehart 1990; Dalton 2006). For each nation we calculated the *median score for the entire public* who expressed a Left-Right position.

The second step in estimating citizen-government agreement requires that we identify the position of the government in Left-Right terms. To do this we first need to measure the position of political parties that might comprise the government. One common method is to measure the party positions using data from the *Comparative Manifestos Project* (Huber and Powell 1994; Klingemann et al. 1994; McDonald and Budge 2005). The manifesto data have the advantage that they are available for a long time span for most Western democracies, and have been expanded to include the new democracies of Eastern Europe. Another alternative is to utilize academic experts to measure party positions (Benoit and Laver 2006).

While both of the party manifesto and expert methods have their own advantages and disadvantages,[7] we rely on another source – the citizens themselves. The cses asked respondents to place the major political parties on the same Left-Right scale as they used to identify their own Left-Right position. The project guidelines called for the survey to ask for the locations of up to six significant parties. The number of parties actually evaluated across nations ranges from three parties in the United States to nine parties in France and the Netherlands. This has the advantage that evaluations are done for the same election as voters own self-location, and the data are collected simultaneously for citizens and parties. Furthermore, since the question is the extent to which citizens elect parties and governments that represent their political views, citizens' perceptions of the parties is an ideal standard for such comparisons.

A relatively large proportion of the public in most nations does provide a Left-Right position for the parties.[8] To determine each party's position on the Left-Right scale we used the mean placement of the entire electorate as the broadest measure of the citizenry, even broader than just those who voted.[9] In France, for example, the Communist Party receives an average score of 2.4 on the Left-Right scale in 2002, while the National Front is placed at 7.9. By comparison, Americans placed the Democrats at 4.2 on the Left-Right scale in 2004, and the Republicans are located at 6.6.

To what extent can we consider public perceptions of the parties an accurate assessment of the parties' political positions? Those who doubt the public's ability to express their own views in Left-Right terms would understandably question the public's ability to summarize accurately the Left-Right position of political parties. One answer is that these perceptions *are reality* to the voters if they use them in making their electoral choices. In addition, in other research we have compared

citizen placements to other measures of party positions, and the strength of agreement is strikingly high.[10] Individual citizens may have imprecise impressions about politics, but when the views of the entire public are aggregated, the perceptions of ordinary people are virtually identical to the Left-Right scores given by political science professors judging the same parties.

We next used these party scores to define the overall political position of the government. Since most parliamentary governments include more than a single party in a coalition, this often requires combining scores for the parties in the governing coalition. We followed the standard methodology to define the government's Left-Right position as the average of the governing parties, weighted by each party's share of cabinet portfolios.[11] This gives greater weight to large parties that exercise more influence in setting government policy, and undoubtedly are more visible as citizens evaluate the government as a whole. And naturally, in a single party government the government's position is synonymous with this party. This method was used to estimate a Left-Right score for the pre-election government and the post-election government.

2.4   Citizens and governments

The standard methodology in examining the representativeness of government is to compare the position of the median citizen or voter, with the position of the government. The degree of congruence is an indicator of the extent to which elections generate a democratic government that reflects the public overall.

There are, of course, many caveats and conditions that precede such a comparison (Powell 2000, 2010a). The use of a single Left-Right dimension to summarize citizen and voter positions has both advantages and disadvantages in capturing political reality, especially when used to compare citizens and parties across a very diverse group of democracies (Thomassen 2009c). One might ask whether it is better to use the median citizen as a measure of public preferences, or perhaps the median of all those who voted. Or, one might offer a narrower view of representation and maintain that the government is there to represent those who elected it, not the public at large. Similarly, the weighted combination of parties in the governing cabinet might not fully reflect the power of each party in defining government actions. And in the case of multiparty governments, the public's ability to select the government is often supplanted by post-election negotiations among party elites (Powell 2000). In addition, our measures of public opinion and government positions from the CSES project are subject to measurement error, which may be significant with only 35 nations for our analyses. And so we approached these analyses with modest expectations.

Figure 2.1 presents the relationship between the Left-Right position of the median citizen and the Left-Right position of the post-election government. The important finding is the strong congruence between citizens and their elected

governments. Leftist publics generally select Leftist governments, and similarly on the Right. One way of summarizing this is to note that only four of the 36 nations lie in the two off-diagonal quadrants which indicate a government that is basically out of synch with its public.[12] As we should expect, the scores for the median citizen cluster near the center of the Left-Right scale, between 4.0 and 6.0, since there is a center-peaked distribution of Left-Right public attitudes in most nations. The Left-Right positions of governments are more varied, with a standard deviation that is three times larger than for the median citizen position. This means that governments accentuate differences between electorates. In other words, a half-point difference in the citizens' median position predicts a full-point change in the composition of the government. This corresponds to the well-known pattern because the government was selected by only half the public, and thus it is typically more polarized than the public as a whole. In overall terms, the congruence in Figure 2.1 provides strong evidence that democratic representation works even over this diverse set of democracies – as noted by the .57 correlation between these two variables.

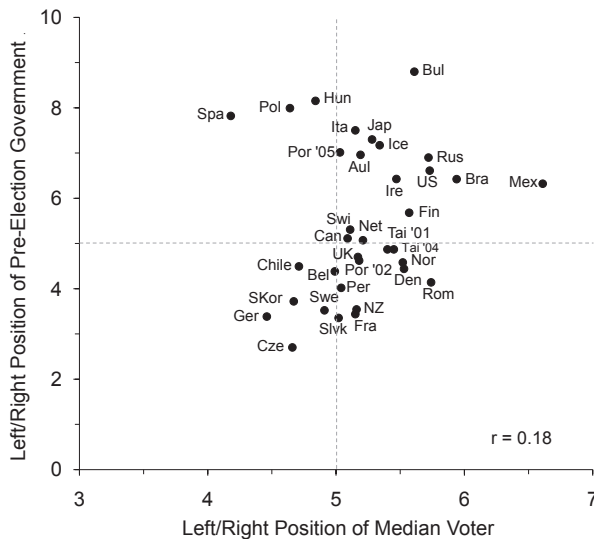**Figure 2.1**   Comparing citizens and post-election government on Left-Right scale
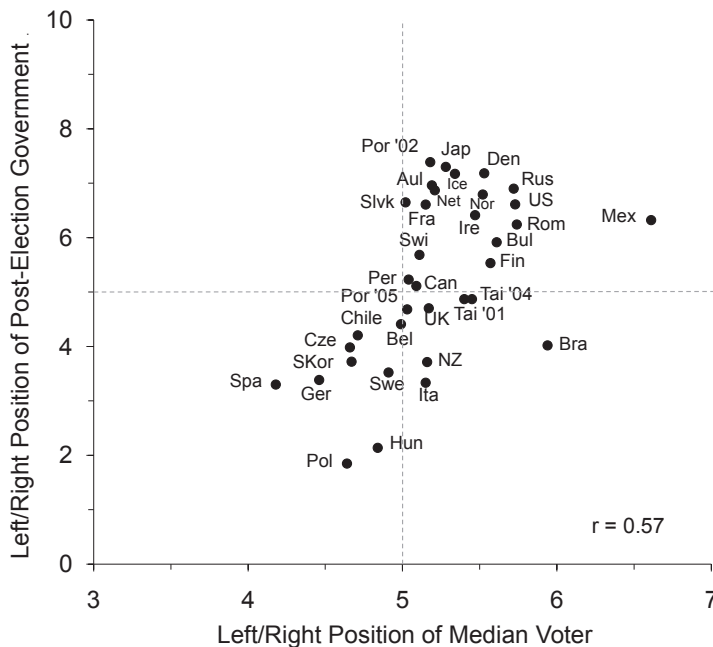
Note: The figure plots the median Left-Right position of the public and the average post-election government position (party scores weighted by shares of cabinet seats) for each nation. N=35.

Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), Module II

Most analyses of political representation stop with the evidence just presented in Figure 2.1, or examine factors such as the structure of government or the electoral system that might systematically affect the level of congruence across nations. By contrast, our dynamic model of democratic representation leads us to ask another question: do elections produce post-election governments that are more congruent with public preferences than the pre-election government? As we have argued, and democratic theorists have maintained, elections should provide the power to remove governments that are not consistent with public preferences while retaining governments that share their political views. We might expect a broadly similar relationship across pre- and post-election governments because of the incumbency advantage and the persistence of government. But theory would predict the congruence should generally be greater for the post-election comparison. This is a basic assumption about accountability in democratic theory, but to our knowledge it has not been empirically tested.

Figure 2.2 compares the Left-Right position of the median citizen and the weighted Left-Right position of the pre-election government. The pattern is strikingly different from the previous figure. For the exact same set of nations there is only a weak and statistically insignificant relationship between citizens and the pre-election government (r = .18). In this comparison, about a third of the nations are

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Figure 2.2   Comparing citizens and pre-election government on Left-Right scale

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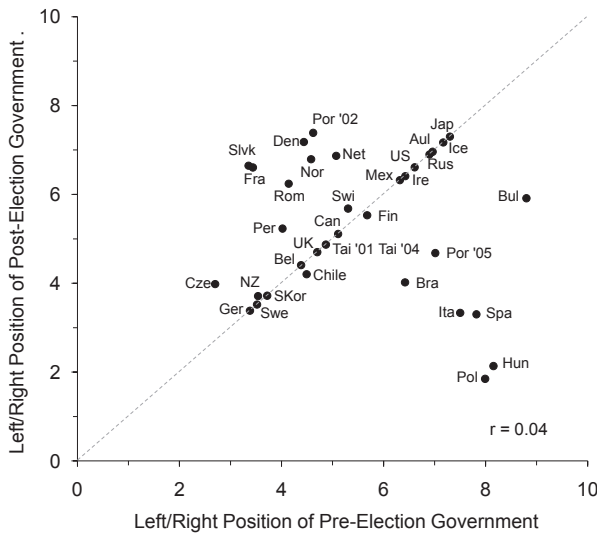
Note: The figure plots the median Left-Right position of the public and the average pre-election government position (party scores weighted by shares of cabinet seats) for each nation. N=35.

Source: CSES, Module II

in the two off-diagonal quadrants. Spain and Poland, for example, had pre-election governments that the public perceived as much more conservative than the median citizen, while the Romanian government was seen as much more liberal than the median citizen. Moreover, this is not because the public has changed its position (it is the same in both figures), or the public changed their Left-Right placement of individual parties (the same party scores are used in both figures to calculate the government position). Another way to express this pattern is to compare the absolute difference in citizen-government Left-Right positions for the pre-election and post-election governments. This difference decreases from an average different of 1.30 for the pre-election government to 1.13 for the post-election government.

These results suggest that by the end of an election cycle, many governments have become distant from the current political values of the public that initially elected them. This is when electoral accountability can improve democratic representation. This disconnect between citizens and many pre-election governments arises from many sources, and we examine some of them below. The essential point, however, is that in nations where citizens see the pre-election government as out of synch with the public's broad political orientations, elections appear to provide a way to increase congruence.

Figure 2.3   Left-Right position of pre- and post-election government

Note: The figure plots the average Left-Right position of governments (party scores weighted by shares of cabinet seats) for each nation. N=35.

Source: CSES, Module II

These analyses indicate that elections can change the course of government, either shifting the tiller of state to the right or the left. And yet, we might presume that there is a generally persisting pattern of congruence as we have measured it: leftist publics will generally elect leftist governments, and rightist publics will elect rightist governments. And most of the time, governments (or the major coalition parties) are reelected. We can marshal more direct evidence on the ideological changeability of government as a result of elections by comparing the pre-election and post-election governments directly in the cses nations.

Figure 2.3 plots the pre-election and post-election Left-Right positions of the governments. First, about half of the nations in this set (19) had elections that returned the incumbent government to office or produced small shifts (less than .50 on the Left-Right scale). That is, these nations lie directly on the 45-degree line indicating the same pre/post-election position, or very close to the line if a small shift in cabinet seats changed the average for the coalition.

The dynamic affect of elections enters when there is a significant change in government between elections. This is quite apparent in the nations that are located off the diagonal. For instance, the 2004 Spanish election produced a shift from the People's Party-led government of José María Aznar to a socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. This caused a 4.5 point shift in the Left-Right composition of the Spanish government. Poland similarly experienced a large shift to the Left when the Democratic Left Alliance victory produced more than a 6 point leftward shift in the government (on a 0-10 scale). Conversely, elections in Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Portugal produced a sizeable rightward shift between pre and post-election governments.

One can provide a post-hoc explanation for the shifts in government in most of these cases. In Spain, for instance, the public had grown weary with the pp's drift to the Right and the party's new leader did not have Aznar's initial popularity; Zapatero also was a popular representative of the Left. The desire for change was then compounded by the Madrid terrorist attack on the eve of the election. Such factors change the vote shares going to different parties, which then shifts the government formed after the election. Furthermore, since the party choices were highly polarized in Spain, a shift in course by the public produced an even greater Left-Right shift in the composition of the post-election government. Elections tend to over-steer the ship of state for this reason.

In addition, there are some systematic patterns in these cross-time comparisons. For instance, the overall Left-Right polarization of the party system is strongly related to the absolute difference in the Left-Right position pre/post-election governments (r = .46).[13] This presumably occurs because more polarized party choices mean that when voters do change course, the available party choices generate a large shift in government positions.

As we might expect from what Powell refers to as a 'proportional vision' (2000), the shifts in pre/post-election governments are also much greater in the proportional representation system than in majoritarian electoral system (Eta = .35). While

it might have been expected that PR systems would produce gradual adaptation to shifting vote shares among parties, the greater diversity of choices creates more volatility, as does the greater preponderance of post-election coalition negotiations leading to post-hoc program and policy renewal by the participating parties. Even though we might expect majoritarian democracies to produce substantial policy shift when the majority changes (as Finer (1975) would argue), the obvious point is that a change in government occurs less frequently in these systems (Powell 2010b, Table 11.1). Among the six majoritarian elections in our set, only one produced a change in government.

Finally, pre/post-election shifts tend to be larger in new democracies than in established democracies (Eta = .18). This seems consistent with a political law of entropy that would suggest greater volatility in new democracies which decreases with the institutionalization of the political system and, more specifically, with the development of a stable party system. Yet, we also note that some of the largest instances of pre/post-election volatility occur in established democracies.

At least to the authors, this pre/post-election comparison is a striking pattern. To the extent that these results from the CSES nations are generalizable to other democracies, this means that the composition of a post-election government is essentially independent of the pre-election government (r = -.04). This might be interpreted as meaning that elections are a random process, with no predictability of what will happen after the votes are counted. However, Figures 2.1 and 2.2 show that this is not a random process, since voters are steering government toward a position more consistent with their Left-Right preferences. If we return to the sailboat analogy from earlier in this essay, a sailboat must tack to starboard and port to make headway; these shifts might seem random but are necessary to make headway. Similarly, it appears that elections produce turns to the Left, or to the Right (and sometimes continue on the same course) in order to generate a democratic course that is generally congruent with public preferences. The median British voter, for instance, has a choice of going Left with Labour or to the Right with the Conservatives, but not a government formed down the center.[14] In summary, our findings provide strong evidence that elections do generate a dynamic of democratic representation if we trace this process over time.

2.5   Conclusion

Normative theories of democracy suggest that elections perform two essential functions. First, elections should ensure that governments are accountable for their actions to the citizens who elected them. Second, elections should perform a representative function, by ensuring that the legislature broadly reflects the distribution of opinions within the electorate. The tensions between these two functions are obvious, and in a range of books and papers, Thomassen has drawn attention to how these tensions vary across different institutional contexts, with majoritarian demo-

cracies stressing the accountability function, consensus democracies the representative function (see Thomassen 1994, 1999, 2002, 2005; Thomassen and Schmitt 1997). Thomassen's seminal contribution has been to enhance our understanding of how institutional arrangements interact with individual political behavior to resolve this tension. His key role in the CSES project during the 1990s has enabled many of these hypotheses to be tested empirically. In particular, drawing on his European background, Thomassen has pointed to the role of political parties in mediating the processes of accountability and representation in modern democracies (Thomassen 1994).

The results presented here build very directly on Thomassen's pioneering work on representation and accountability. We find that rather than elections acting as a discrete, point-in-time choice, as it is often assumed in theoretical and empirical studies, there is a dynamic relationship between governments and voters. Our findings suggest that democracy is based on a process of ongoing representation that occurs through retrospective as well as prospective evaluations of government performance. People elect a government, but then have the chance to reevaluate this decision at the next election. Democracy works by this dynamic process over time, even if decisions at one election deviate from what was desired or expected. Characteristically, Thomassen had anticipated this conclusion, pointing in a 2005 article with Andeweg to the dynamic interaction between evaluations made prior to and after an election (Andeweg and Thomassen 2005). While their empirical case study was a single country – the Netherlands – the conceptual typology that Andeweg and Thomassen developed has wide application to comparative studies of political representation.

The next stage in this research is to gain an understanding of how and why this dynamic relationship between voters and governments takes place. Specifically, why does the empirical correspondence between citizens and their governments increase when we compare pre- and post-election evaluations? Testing these explanations is beyond the scope of this essay, but five explanations immediately occur as worthy of further study. The most straightforward explanation is that citizens may change their median position, or there may be differential turnout between groups of voters which will change the aggregate images of parties. We know that low turnout has a range political consequences (Lutz and Marsh 2007), so it follows that turnout may influence the left-right position of the electorate as well. A variant of this explanation suggests that if voters change their images of the parties, perhaps in response to changes in leadership, this will in turn alter their median position. Such an explanation would certainly apply to the British Labour Party under Tony Blair or the German SDP under Gerhard Schröder, but whether it applies more generally is an open question.

The other potential explanations focus on exogenous factors, such as a sharp economic downturn, a political scandal or the entry (or exit) of a charismatic leader onto the political stage. Such changes may lead people to vote against the incumbent government, independently of whether they agree with it in Left-Right terms.

Voters may also perceive governments as acting differently in office to what they said they would do before the election. When this occurs, a future election permits voters to correct the course of government. The final explanation points to the policy agenda of parties. The changing salience of political issues between elections, which affects vote shares but not the overall Left-Right positions of the parties, may be a factor. For instance, one election may be concerned with the economy, the next about social welfare. Since elections decide a package of policies, it is inevitable that the issue hierarchy will act like winds buffeting our sailboat of state.

Whatever explanations emerge from future empirical studies, the overall assessment of the health of representative democracy is good. The dynamic that we have identified in the representative linkage between citizens and governments is evidence of a corrective process that operates from one electoral cycle to the next. In the lead-up to an election voters may have tired of the government, and are unsure which way to turn in the approaching election. The congruence between the two parts of the classic dyad has weakened. The election allows voters to make the correction and to identify more strongly with the newly incumbent government.

Notes

1   Although electoral system differences are not our primary concern, we should note that these new studies now question whether the electoral system significantly affects the overall level of citizen-government congruence (see Powell 2004, 2010a).

2   Stokes (1999) examined presidential elections in Latin America and counted nearly a quarter of the elections were followed by a fundamental economic policy shift from the pre-election campaign.

3   This analogy is flawed because of principal-agent problems. Even if the public directs government to move in a certain direction, the member of government may choose to act differently. Perhaps in our nautical jargon a significant gap between principal and agents would be an act of mutiny.

4   There are a few time series studies in a single nation that begin to explore the dynamics of representation over time (Holmberg 2009; Thomassen 2009c). But the limited number of elections makes it difficulty to systematically compare levels the representativeness of governments and how this changes. Other research examines the congruence between public policy preferences and government policy outputs over time (Page and Shapiro 1990; Wlezien and Soroka 2007).

5   We gratefully acknowledge access to these data from the project website (www.cses.org) which has additional documentation on the project, details of the participating countries and the teams, and the questionnaires that have been used in the three modules conducted to date.

6   Many public opinion researchers have questioned whether ordinary people can understand and utilize abstract political concepts like 'Left' and 'Right' (Converse 1964; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). We agree that abstract ideological thinking as meant by political

theorists is largely confined to a small sophisticated stratum of the public; we use the Left-Right scale as a surrogate for political identities and positions on contemporary issues.

7   The methods and empirical agreement of several alternative measures of party positions is discussed in Dalton, Farrell and McAllister (forthcoming, chapter 5).

8   Across this wide range of nations, a relatively high percentage can position the two largest parties; the average is 82 percent across 36 legislative elections in Module II. Taiwan is a clear outlier where only a minority uses the Left-Right scale for themselves or the parties. However, in the next lowest case, Romania, two-thirds of the public can locate the two largest parties on the Left-Right scale. Even in multiparty systems, a strikingly large percentage of the public can position some of the smaller minor parties.

9   We use the entire electorate to estimate party positions, but one might use the self-location of party identifiers or the self-location of party voters. These are reasonable alternatives that might yield significant differences in a few instances – often very intriguing cases such as the positioning of extreme parties. Our initial exploration of these alternatives showed high consistency in party locations across these alternative methods. For instance, we compared the Left-Right placement of 115 parties in *CSES module II* for both the public at-large and those who voted for (or partisans of) each party. The two measures are correlated at .95. Consequently, we rely on the estimates of the entire public, which also reduces the likelihood of partisans overestimating agreement by placing the party near themselves on the scale.

Party positions were not available for Belgium. In this one case we estimated party positions using the Benoit and Laver (2006) party expert survey. For additional information on party positions and alternative methodologies see Dalton, Farrell and McAllister (forthcoming).

10   Additional evidence of the validity of citizen perceptions comes from comparing these party locations to those derived from other methodologies. In other research we have extensively studied the agreement between citizens' Left-Right placements of the parties and other methodologies (author citation). For instance, Kenneth Benoit and Michael Laver have collected academic experts' judgements of party positions in 2002-03. A total of 168 parties in 27 nations are included in both the CSES and expert study. Despite different methodologies and a slightly different time reference for both estimates, there is a very strong agreement between where the public and experts locate political parties on the Left-Right scale (r = .89). Another standard methodology estimates party positions from election manifestos. For the 144 parties that overlap with the CSES, there is a .63 correlation in parties' Left-Right positions. The party manifesto data are valuable, especially for their cross-national and cross-temporal coverage, but these data appear to yield the least consistent measures of party Left-Right positions.

11   We want to acknowledge Steffen Blings of Cornell University who calculated these government scores.

12   The significant deviations are Belgium, Brazil, Italy and New Zealand.

13   For a discussion of party system polarization, its measurement and effects see Dalton (2008, 2010). We also considered the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) as a

correlate of pre/post-election differences. The ENEP is not significantly related to the absolute difference of pre/post-governments (r = .07), which further indicates that it is the diversity of parties not their numbers that affects governmental change in Left-Right terms.

14 Although we generally find close agreement between voters and their parties in Left-Right terms, the parties at both poles tend to hold more ideological positions than their voters. So governments of the Left and Right are also likely to be more ideological than their own supporters.