

The Representation Gap and Political Sophistication: A Contrarian Perspective

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A long tradition in political behavior research questions the ability of the average citizen to make voting choices that accurately reflect their preferences. If most or even many voters cannot make choices consistent with their policy views, this erodes the logic of democratic political representation. Moreover, some experts argue that such inaccurate choices undermine the democratic process itself.

From its founding studies, modern electoral research has questioned the abilities of the voters to make informed choices on which party best represents their views. For example, *The American Voter* declared that the electorate “is almost completely unable to judge the rationality of government actions; knowing little of the particular policies and what has led to them, the mass electorate isn’t able either to appraise its goals or the appropriateness of the means chosen to secure these goals” (Campbell et al. 1960, 543). Surveys routinely show that many people have limited political knowledge (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Caplan, 2011). This is not just a feature of the American public, the same negative characterization emerges from public opinion research in other democracies.

Probably the most influential skeptic of the mass public was Philip Converse. In a series of seminal writings, he argued that most people lacked a sophisticated, ideological understanding of politics (1964, 1970, 1972, 1990). Only the most politically involved and the most educated matched his high standards for being knowledgeable voters—and this was a small share of the public. He also demonstrated that issue opinions were only weakly interrelated and were very unstable over time. This research led Converse (1970) to conclude that public opinion

researchers often study “nonattitudes”—that is, many people apparently do not have informed opinions even on long-standing policy concerns. This has been a common presumption of electoral behavior research.

Moreover, an update of *The American Voter* claimed that little had changed among contemporary electorates (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008; also see Kinder, 2006). Another study asked the question:

Voters don't know very much, aren't aware of how little they know; aren't particularly proficient at getting the information they need, and can't remember the information once they've learned it. The problem is made worse by politicians and interest groups that actively hide information, by issues that are often complex enough to stymie the experts, and by the vast number of important issues... How can democracy possibly be successful when it relies on the choices of voters who know so little? (Oppenheimer and Edwards, 2012, 32–33)

Achen and Bartels' (2016) recent provocative study argues that models of democracy based on a citizenry making reasonable choices reflect “fairy tales” and a “folk theory” of democracy. They highlight the limited information of many voters. Then they present a buffet line of examples where public opinion and electoral choices seem flawed from a rationalist perspective, such as voters punishing incumbents for shark attacks, floods, and droughts. In short, this research maintains that many citizens are unable to make party choices that closely match their preferences, and thus elections as tools of popular representation are flawed. At its extreme, this critical perspective has led some scholars to advocate forms of epistocracy (e.g., Brennan, 2016; Caplan, 2011).

The research presented here first offers an alternative way to conceptualize the accuracy of voters and the efficacy of democratic representation. We focus on the basic question of whether citizens generally find a party that shares their political positions and vote for that party.

Then we test whether political sophistication is strongly related to making reasonable electoral choices. We address this topic not by focusing on the process of electoral choice but on the outcomes in terms of voter-party agreement.

The empirical base is the 2014 European Election Study (EES) that asked citizens' positions on a diverse set of issues. The EES data are paired with the Chapel Hill Experts Survey (CHES) which locates the parties on the same issues. This research focuses on outcomes, asking how well party voters can select a party that matches their own policy beliefs—regardless of the processes of choice.

From Process to Outcomes

The literature on the nature of mass belief systems is extensive and rich in detail. One commonality is the focus on the *process of political thinking and electoral choice* (inputs) rather than the *content of voting choice* (outcomes). For example, one stream of research examines the ideological sophistication of voters and draws negative conclusions about the public's ability to make reasonable choices (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008, ch. 10; Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017). Other studies examine the correlation among issue opinions or the stability of issue opinions over time to assess citizen political sophistication (Aardal and van Wijnen, 2005; Converse and Markus, 1979). Some studies measure political knowledge to judge citizens' political awareness as a presumed prerequisite to reasonable voting (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996).

These approaches often correlate specific issues (or other evaluative criteria) to voting choices. If there is a weak relationship between issue positions and voting choice, then they conclude that voters are falling short of making decisions based on their own policy views.

However, another way of thinking about elections is *in terms of outcomes*. Does the

individual voter select a party that is a reasonably close match to the voter's political preferences? This approach looks at the end product of voting, not how it was achieved. Richard Lau and his colleagues initially addressed this question in the United States and cross-nationally (Lau, and Redlawsk 1997; Lau et al., 2014). They defined 'correct voting' as being consistent with party identification, evaluations of the economy, and ideological proximity to the chosen party. This was an innovative approach, but it presumes that all party-line votes mean agreement with the party on policy grounds. They were not able to assess party policy positions and directly compare to the voters' positions.¹

The 2009 European Election Study was another research advance in asking the same issue questions for both voters and candidates for the European Parliament so that they could be directly compared.² In aggregate terms, there is a very strong agreement between voters' and party elites' positions across parties. But at the level of individual voters, the extent of agreement was not closely tied to the standard measures of political sophistication. For example, Belchior (2013) and Dalton (2017) compared voters' Left/Right positions to the Left/Right position of their party's candidates in the election—and found that voter-party agreement at the individual level was only weakly correlated with citizen sophistication. Walczak and van der Brug (2013) examined individual-level voter-party agreement across several issues and concluded that the overall impact of voter sophistication was not very strong. Each of these articles had different theoretical foci and sophistication was not central to their inquiry, so the null findings were not emphasized or explored further. However, these studies provide a base for a more direct and expansive examination of this topic with an alternative measure of party issue positions in the 2014 EES.

The contrast between the evidence from research focused on process and research

focused on outcomes is the focus of our research. Can less sophisticated voters make voting choices that are as reasonable as a highly sophisticated voter? The answer, we believe, is in research that argues that electorates are heterogeneous and use multiple decision-making processes (Bartle, 2005; Blumenstiel and Plischke, 2015; Stubager, Seeberg and So, 2018). Instead of thinking of electoral choice as a closed-book exam where the voter should study and then independently make the right choice that matches their preferences. Instead, voting is like other decisions in life where we have our own views as well as asking friends for advice or using other heuristics. In other words, deciding how to vote is similar to the process when individuals buy a new car, a flat-screen TV, or make other life decisions—not a closed-book exam—and people can use various methods to arrive at a reasonable choice.

Some voters many turn to a family member, neighbor, friend, or another individual for advice on how to vote (Beck et al. 2002; Huckfeldt, Ikeda and Pappi, 2005; Sokhey and McClurg, 2012). Political communication networks comprised of family, neighbors, and co-workers can help inform the participants, and the flow of political information through such a network can be an important way to cue voters on appropriate choices. A less politically involved spouse who asks their partner about voting choice based on their shared values may make as accurate a choice as the engaged partner (Zuckerman, Dasovic, and Fitzgerald, 2007; Coffé, and Need, 2010).³

Citizens can use heuristics and cues to make political and other life choices (Popkin, 1991; Lau and Redlawsk, 2006). Some individuals rely on group cues as a basis of electoral choice (Lupia, 1994; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). The political message of a union leader or a church pastor can be a powerful cue for many individuals in each milieu. Arthur Lupia's (1994) referendum voting study found that voters with limited knowledge of the initiatives used

information shortcuts (group cues) to vote as though they were well informed. Party is one of the most powerful group heuristics for evaluating parties, candidates, and issues as supporting or opposing one's interests (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002; Bergland et al., 2005; Lewis-Beck, et al. 2008).

The media and other information networks are natural political cues (Aalberg and Curran, 2012; Eveland, Hayes, Shah, and Kwak, 2005;). Voter advice applications have become commonplace in Europe (Garzia and Marschall, 2019). In fact, the supply of various political cues probably exceeds most people's ability to assimilate all this information. People are exposed to an abundance of political cues rather than a shortage.

In short, there are many ways to connect individual preferences and the "correct" choice of a party. The widespread presumption in the electoral research literature is that the informed issue voters, the politically engaged, and those with relevant skills and resources are substantially more accurate in selecting a party that matches their political positions. In contrast, it is assumed that people who lack these skills and resources and therefore rely on informal sources of information, group cues, and other heuristics are less likely to make accurate voting choices. *This presumption deserves an empirical test.*

To examine this topic, we ask how well do voters choose a party that matches their political views. Then we determine whether the accuracy of choice is highly stratified by various measures of political sophistication. We do not directly determine the efficacy of the various heuristics to supplement for political sophistication or other possible causal pathways, rather we examine the overall outcomes of voting choice as a function of sophistication.

Examining voting outcomes requires a different way of researching the topic of the accuracy of voters' choices. One element is the voters' policy positions; a second is the parties'

positions on these same issues. Until recently, such evidence was in short supply, especially cross-nationally, because the necessary evidence on both halves of the dyad was rare. We argue that the policy match between voters and their chosen party should be the primary standard for judging the accuracy of voting choices and not the process of making these decisions. In other words, the path voters choose is less important than whether they reach their desired destination.

Data Sources

The 2014 European Election Study (EES) provides the empirical base for this research. The study includes a variety of party systems in which to study democratic representation. The project surveyed citizens in all 27 member states of the European Union including issue opinion questions.⁴ Pooling national experiences allows us to identify broad patterns of voter behavior and consider contextual factors that might influence individual-level agreement.

The 2014 Chapel Hill Experts Survey asked academic experts to position the parties on the same issues in each EU member state (Polk et al. 2017).⁵ These paired EES-CHES studies include eight common questions, enabling us to compare citizens and parties on the same issues. For theoretical and empirical reasons, the analyses examine the established democracies of the EU15 (EES N=16,701). Most of the belief systems literature focuses on citizens in established democracies, so this provides a more direct test of past research. The post-communist party systems in East Europe are also evolving and the nature of political competition often taps different issues than in the West (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2009; 2012). Thus it would be difficult to meaningfully compare the party space in West and East Europe with the available data.

We combined two strands of research to frame our analyses. First, previous research

indicates that broad political orientations or issue dimensions (rather than single issues) provide a more meaningful political framework for electoral choice. For example, overall views toward the government's role in the economy may be more strongly and consistently related to voting choice than a question on a specific economic issue. Opinions on broad issue dimensions are more stable over time and have stronger effects on voting when compared to specific issue items (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder. 2008). Other studies show that such policy dimensions are stronger predictors of voting choice (Goren, 2005; Knutsen, 2017). This approach also reflects the logic that elections determine the broad boundaries of politics, rather than providing mandates for specific issues.

Second, recent research describes electoral competition in Europe as structured by two (or more) dimensions of political cleavage (Kriesi et al., 2008; Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015; Dalton, 2018; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Rovny and Polk, 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Citizen *economic views* toward the role of government and the representation of class interests were formative influences on many party systems and still structure contemporary elections. Several *cultural issues* are also now an important part of political discourse: support for gay rights, immigration, and gender equality—and their conservative counterparts—are very salient issues today. These issues can divide Europeans between culturally liberal and conservative parties. So this is a fertile setting to study representation on both issue dimensions.

The eight issues in the 2014 EES-CHES span both economic and cultural themes. We used Principal Components Analyses (PCA) to determine whether an economic and cultural cleavage structure specific issue opinions for citizens and parties. The analyses also yield PCA scores that are weighted by the coefficients of the PCA. For us, a further benefit is that the PCA constructs a standardized space for both citizens and parties to maximize comparability.

The left side of Table 1 presents the general public results, the right side displays the CHES results for political parties. Only two components exceed Kaiser's criterion in both PCAs. The two analyses yield fairly consistent results as seen in the highest loading issues on both components. Partially because of the greater number of cultural items in the survey, the first component is the cultural dimension.⁶ The issues linked to this component speak to the breadth of the dimension. Immigration policy has the highest loading; this is highly contentious, integrates several cultural themes, and now polarizes political parties. Same-sex marriage is the next highest loading issue, followed by EU attitudes and privacy/crime concerns. The fusion of these issues in the cultural dimension reflects a broad value divide rather than a single issue topic.⁷ The second dimension comprises three traditional economic issues: state intervention in the economy, redistribution of wealth, and the tradeoff between taxes and social services. Although dating to the formation of West European party systems, these conflicts over the state's economic role and the protection of individual well-being are a persisting cleavage

The component loadings are much higher for party positions on the right side of the table.⁸ The higher loadings are likely because experts have more informed and congruent issue beliefs and the expert responses were aggregated into party values; both factors lessen measurement error. The last two items in the table have mixed interpretations in both PCAs. The tradeoff between the environment and the economy can be treated as either a cultural or an economic issue depending on which side of the equation is emphasized. Similarly, the EU question mixes both economic and cultural themes.

Based on these PCA results, we calculated a component score for each voter on the economic and cultural dimensions. Independently, we calculated a component score for each party based on the party experts' average placement of the parties on the same eight issues.

Table 1. Citizen and Party Expert Issue Structures, 2014

Issue Questions	EU15 Publics		Party Positions	
	Cultural	Economic	Cultural	Economic
State intervention in economy	-.12	.70	.36	.88
Redistribution of wealth	.02	.70	.47	.82
Raise taxes for social service	.25	.41	.44	.85
Same-sex marriage	.57	.23	.92	.09
Privacy rights even if crime effects	.50	.14	.91	.16
Restrictive immigration policy	-.70	.06	.88	.23
EU authority over economies	.57	.01	-.40	.73
Economic growth over the environment	.32	.54	.72	.43
Eigenvalue for rotated dimensions	1.55	1.52	3.66	2.98
% Variance explained	19.4	19.0	45.8	37.2
<i>Source:</i> European Election Study 2014; Chapel Hill Experts Survey 2014 (N=186 parties), EU15 nations. <i>Note:</i> Table entries are coefficients from Principal Components Analysis with Varimax rotation.				

Predicting the Representation Gap

Most representation research focuses on the aggregate agreement between all party voters and their chosen party—typically based on the Left-Right scale that is widely available in electoral studies (Thomassen, 1994; Ezrow, 2010; Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister, 2011; Budge, et al. 2012; Belchoir, 2013). The general conclusion is that aggregate voter and party positions are highly congruent. The same pattern applies to the economic and cultural issue dimensions (see Appendix).

Our study asks a different question, however. What is the policy agreement for individual

voters and their chosen party, and what influences the level of agreement? This section discusses the factors that might affect how accurately people choose a party that matches their preferred policy positions. One set of factors might be attributes of the individuals themselves, such as their level of political interest or knowledge. Party characteristics also might influence congruence levels, as well as features of the electoral system. The following sections discuss these potential predictors

Political Cognition. Some voters presumably are better able to deal with the complexities of politics and this should yield a closer match between their preferences and the policies of their chosen party. We test this thesis with three potential measures of political cognition.

Philip Converse (1972, 324) argued that education level is of paramount importance in measuring factual knowledge, conceptual sophistication, or modeling actual voting behavior. An extensive literature demonstrates that the better educated are more politically engaged, have a greater understanding of political issues, and display a strong relationship between issue positions and voting choice (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1993). Thus, we may hypothesize that the more-educated are more likely than the less-educated to select a party that closely represents their policy views. For example, Walczak and van der Brug (2013) found that the representation gap was smaller among the better-educated for four different types of issues in the 2009 election for all 27 EU nations. However, two studies of Left-Right congruence in the same EES found weak effects for education (Belchoir, 2013; Dalton, 2017).

Political interest may be a more direct predictor of the accuracy of voters' choices. Engaged citizens devote more attention to political news, track party statements during elections, and (presumably) make a more informed choice. The disinterested voter may rely on crude heuristics or even vote with little understanding of the options—producing a larger representation gap.

Political knowledge is another trait that can help citizens navigate the complexities of the political world and make appropriate electoral choices. Achen and Bartels (2016), for example, claimed that knowledgeable citizens make clearer and more accurate voting choices—and then lamented the limited knowledge of most citizens. Walczak and van der Brug (2013) showed that the individual-level representation gap was slightly smaller among more knowledgeable EU citizens in 2009 for three of their four types of issues.⁹

Political Engagement. Another potential stratifying factor is active political engagement. For example, the EES asked how often respondents discussed politics with others. Political discussion requires more effort than passive political interest. In addition, discussion with others at least partially indicates participation in individual social networks that can be a source of information and political cues.

A related form of engagement is information-seeking through the media. Rationalist models of vote choice presume that access to information is a prerequisite to accurate choices. For example, Belchoir's (2013) analysis of the 2009 EES demonstrated greater Left-Right congruence between voters and parties among those who actively acquire political news through the media. This logic may apply to the size of the representation gap on the economic and cultural dimensions.

Party Identification. Party identification is one of the strongest heuristics guiding voting choice. However, the implications for the representation gap are unclear. Partisans may be attentive to their party's actions and respond to the issue cues provided by their party, which produces a smaller representation gap. Non-partisans presumably lack these considerations, and the conventional view holds that most independents make less informed and accurate voting decisions (Campbell et al., 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002; Lewis-Beck, et al.,

2008).

In contrast, other research suggests that partisanship may become a habitual orientation that leads voters to support their party regardless of the party's current policy stance. Thus, the less attentive partisan may be unaware of the party's current election promises, the policy implications of a change in leadership, or even falsely project their preferences onto their party (Haidt, 2012; Lodge and Taber, 2013; Kosmidis, 2020). Partisanship might guide the voting choice, but the accuracy of blind partisan loyalty on the representation gap is ambiguous. Previous analyses of the representation gap for Left-Right attitudes showed contrasting results (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012; Dalton, 2017).

Party Effects. Voting choice is a supply/demand relationship, and the supply of party choices may affect individual-level differences in the representation gap. The clarity of party positions is one factor that may affect voter-party agreement (Wessels, 1999; Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012; Dalton, 2017). Political parties with distinct positions help voters identify the available choices, and thus select the most appropriate party. One surrogate for clarity is the party's distance from the center of the policy space. Walczak and van der Brug (2013) showed that ideologically extreme parties are generally closer to their voters, similar to Belchoir's (2013) findings. However, extreme parties are often more polarized than their voters, which increases the representation gap for the Left-Right scale (Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister, 2011).¹⁰ We measure clarity as each party's distance from the center of each issue dimension and the Left-Right scale.

A variant of the clarity argument holds that niche parties that advocate distinct political positions—Communist, Green parties, Nationalist/regional parties, and far-right parties—similarly offer clear political profiles, which should maximize representation (Belchoir, 2013).

We test this assumption by comparing the representation gap across party families.

Another potential marker of the clarity of party cues is the size of the party. Large parties are more visible during campaigns, and often have governing experience that increases their policy profiles. Conversely, smaller parties normally receive less media attention and often have a narrow policy profile that makes them difficult to position in a multidimensional policy space. We use party vote share to consider these alternatives.

Finally, the age of a party may affect the representation gap. Established parties have a track record that may help voters to better identify the parties' positions. In comparison, new parties are often difficult to position politically, and they typically evolve their positions over successive elections to go beyond their initial formative issues. Prior evidence for the Left-Right scale is mixed, but the policy focus of the economic and cultural dimensions may shape party images more clearly.

Party System Effects The diversity of party choices available to voters varies widely across the EU15 nations. We might hypothesize that more party choices, and presumably more diverse party choices, should produce a closer fit between voters and their parties (Wessels, 1999). For instance, with fewer parties competing in British elections than in multi-party systems such as Sweden and The Netherlands, British voters might be at a greater policy distance from their preferred party.¹¹ Such cross-national traits might affect levels of individual voter-party agreement.

Another common measure of the diversity of party choices is the polarization of parties across the issue dimensions. If political parties are dispersed along the economic (or cultural dimension), this provides more distinct choices for voters (Mattila and Raunio 2006; Dalton, 2018, ch. 8). To test this hypothesis, we use polarization indices for the economic and cultural

dimensions constructed with the CHES data.¹²

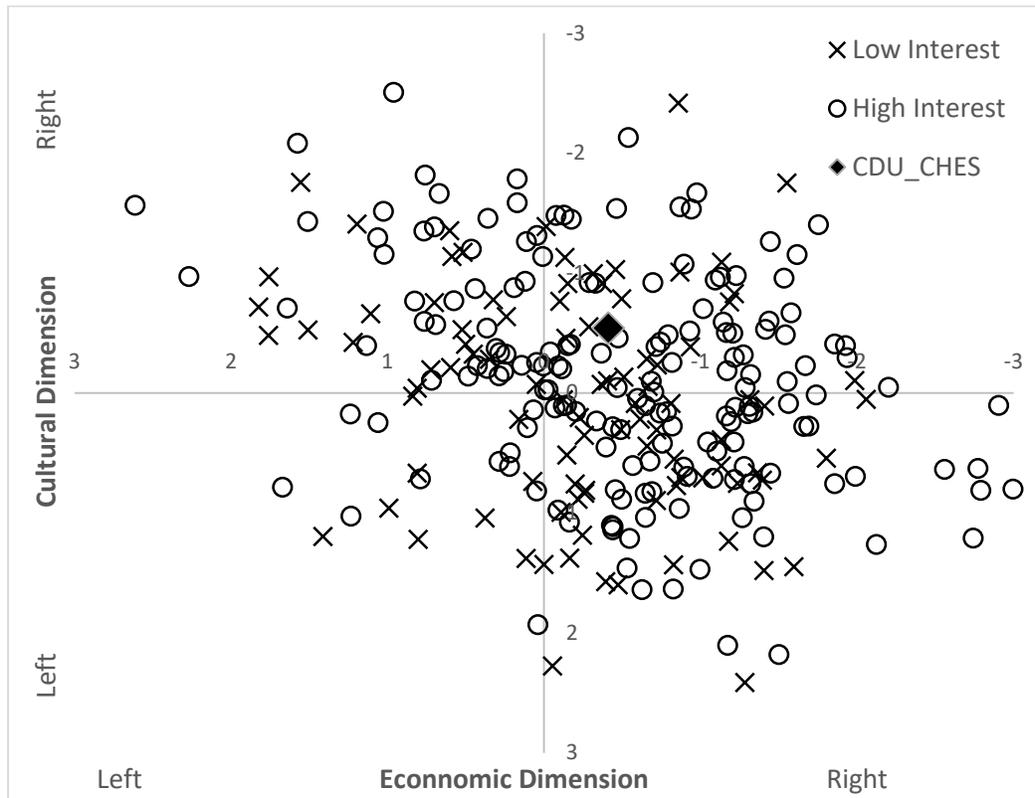
A model including the characteristics of individuals, parties, and the party system will show whether each factor affects the representation gap, and whether the individual-level results are robust with these controls.

The Correlates of the Representation Gap

The *representation gap* is measured using the voter and party component scores from the PCA models in Table 1 above. The gap is the *absolute value of the difference* between each voter's component score on each issue dimension and the CHES-based location of the party.¹³ The representation gap measures are essentially unrelated since they are derived from PCA. We similarly computed the representation gap for the 0-10 Left-Right scale included in both the EES and CHES.

We test the political sophistication thesis by examining the relationship between political cognition measures and the representation gap. To conceptualize our methodology, Figure 1 illustrates voter and party issue positions for the German CDU. The dark diamond is the experts' location of the CDU in terms of the economic and cultural dimensions—a bit to the right of center on both issue dimensions. Located around the party is a cloud of the CDU voters from the 2014 EES. The figure displays two groups of voters: those with high levels of political interest (Os) and those low on political interest (Xs). Rather than high-interest voters being tightly clustered near their chosen party, they form a cloud around the party's policy positions. Moreover, low-interest voters form a largely overlapping cloud. Rather than distinct differences in the distance between high and low-interest Christian Democratic voters and their party, there is considerable similarity.¹⁴

Figure 1. Voter and Party Locations for the German CDU/CSU



Source: European Election Study 2014; Chapel Hill Experts Survey 2014.

Note: Figure entries are the location of CDU voters in terms of their economic and cultural positions, distributed around the CDU derived from CHES (black diamond). (N=95 high-interest voters; N=175 low-interest voters; five outliers were excluded from the figure).

To systematically test the political sophistication thesis, we correlated the three political cognition measures (education, interest, and knowledge) with the representation gap for the two issue dimensions and Left/Right positions using the entire 2014 EES sample of voters. The first panel of Table 2 shows a slight tendency for the gap to be smaller for the most sophisticated citizens, but these effects are quite small. The average Pearson's r for the nine relationships is -0.07. Some of these correlations are statistically significant ($p < .01$) because of the very large pooled sample size (typically more than 10,00 cases).¹⁵ Such weak relationships stand in stark contrast to the claims about an electorate highly stratified by their political sophistication—and democracy at risk as a result.

Table 2. The Correlates of the Representation Gap

Predictor	Economic Dimension	Cultural Dimension	Left-Right Scale
Political Cognition			
Education	-.05	-.11*	-.06
Political interest	-.04	-.06	-.09
Political knowledge	-.05	-.08	-.12*
Political Engagement			
Discuss politics	-.06	-.06	-.08
Follows newspapers	.02	-.01	-.01
Follow TV news	-.03	-.06	-.04
Follow internet news	-.05	-.06	-.05
Closeness to party			
	.02	-.01	-.07

Source: Authors' merged file: EES Study 2014; Chapel Hill Experts Survey 2014. EU15 nations.

Note: Table entries are Pearson's r correlations between traits and the absolute difference between party voters and CHES scores for their respective parties on the economic dimension, cultural dimension, and Left-Right scale. Relationships significant at .01 level are denoted by an asterisk (*)

The second panel of Table 2 looks at four measures of political engagement. Discussing politics with friends, for example, has a weak impact on voter-party agreement. None of the political engagement relationships exceeds an $r=-0.10$, and the average correlation is barely $-.05$. These results also erode the claims that the accuracy of voting choice is highly stratified by political sophistication.

The strength of party ties is the last individual attribute in Table 2. Surely, strong partisans should display greater policy agreement with their voting choice than non-partisans because of a reciprocal relationship between party bonds and party positions. The empirical evidence is even weaker in this case. Partisans might be more strongly committed to their preferred party, but agreement on economic, cultural, or Left/Right positions is similar for non-partisans. The average correlation across these three measures is -0.03 .¹⁶

Because these findings are somewhat contrarian, we probed the data further by testing whether the process effects widely noted in the literature apply to this EES study. Table 3

presents the correlation between voters' issue or Left/Right positions and their voting choice stratified by the three political cognition measures used in Figure 1. For example, the correlation between economic issue positions and voting choice is $r=.17$ for the least educated and $r=.36$ for the most educated in the sample. The gradient for cultural issues is even steeper. Political interest and political discussion follow a similar pattern, and parallel results exist for the other political sophistication traits in Table 2. In short, political sophistication significantly affects the process of voting choice as generally demonstrated, *but not the size of the representation gap*.

Table 3. The Correlates of Vote Choice by Levels of Political Cognition

Control Variable	Level of Control Variable		
	Low	Medium	High
Education			
Economic issues	.17*	.19*	.36*
Cultural issues	.25*	.34*	.46*
Left/Right scale	.53*	.58*	.65*
Political Interest			
Economic issues	.17*	.28*	.41*
Cultural issues	.32*	.41*	.48*
Left/Right scale	.49*	.63*	.68*
Discuss Politics			
Economic issues	.13*	.25*	.38*
Cultural issues	.24*	.39*	.48*
Left/Right scale	.49*	.60*	.68*

Source: Authors' merged file: EES 2014; Chapel Hill Experts Survey 2014. EU15 nations.

Note: Table entries are Pearson's r correlations between citizen political views and party choice with parties scored by their CHES values. Relationships significant at .01 level are denoted by an asterisk (*)

Methodologically, one might ask whether this is an anomalous result of the 2014 EES or the CHES measures of party positions. However, research using the 2009 European Election Study that measured party positions by the opinions of party candidates found similarly weak relationships between the political cognition variables and the representation gap (Walczak and van der Brug, 2013; Belchoir, 2013; Dalton, 2017). These studies focused on other theoretical interests, so the weak relationships for political cognition were barely mentioned.

As further validation of our measures, the appendix presents aggregate comparisons of voters-party agreement in the 2014 EES using these issue indices. As in other recent representation studies, there is a very strong aggregate voter-party agreement on the economic dimension ($r=0.64$) and the cultural dimension ($r=0.81$). Overall, party voters as a collective seem to be making reasonable choices in terms of their policy preferences—regardless of their levels of political sophistication and engagement.

The Influence of Party and Institutional Factors

To ensure that partisan or contextual effects are not distorting the previous results, we developed a series of hierarchic multilevel linear models to predict the size of the representation gap for both issue dimensions and the Left-Right scale (Table 4).¹⁷ The first panel in the table for each dependent variable (Econ1, Cult1, and LR1) uses only the individual traits as predictors. To lessen collinearity, we combined the three news usage questions into an information-seeking index. The regression coefficients are generally weak.¹⁸ Education, and sometimes political knowledge, are significantly related to a smaller representation gap, but these effects are modest and statistical significance largely reflects the very large size of the EES sample.

The strongest effects of the political sophistication variables in all of the models exist for the Left/Right scale. The Left/Right representation gap shows the largest number of statistically significant effects. This might occur, in part, because understanding the terms “Left” and “Right” requires some political sophistication (Bauer, Barberá, Ackermann, et al. 2017). Alternatively, it might reflect the changing meaning of Left and Right across social strata, while the issue indices have a clear policy content. But even these relationships for the Left/Right scale are modest.

Table 4. Modeling the Correlates of the Representation Gap

Predictor	Economic Dimension			Cultural Dimension			Left-Right Scale		
	Econ1	Econ2	Econ3	Cult1	Cult2	Cult3	LR1	LR2	LR3
Individual Traits									
Education	-.018	-.033*	-.032*	-.058*	-.059*	-.058*	-.053*	-.064*	-.066*
Political interest	.010	-.001	.002	.018	.013	.015	-.058*	-.056*	-.058*
Political knowledge	-.026*	-.025*	-.021*	-.016	-.016	-.018*	-.107*	-.101*	-.095*
Discuss politics	.003	.009	.006	-.008	-.002	-.001	-.001	.013	.006
Follows news index	.011	-.001	-.001	.024*	.020*	.020*	-.035	-.012	-.013
Closeness to party	-.015	-.016	-.021*	.001	.001	.002	.029	.027	.017
Party Traits									
Extreme position		.321*	.320*		.150*	.129*		.172*	.168*
Party size		.005*	.005*		.001	.001		.000	.021
Year party formed		.001*	.002*		.001*	.001		-.003*	-.003*
Party System									
Number of parties			.013			-.016			-.040*
Economic polarization			-.026*						.041*
Cultural polarization						.013*			.004
Intercept	.504*	.476*	.475*	.394*	.388*	.387*	1.982*	1.937*	1.933*
-2 Log likelihood	21,124	20,666	20,649	18,849	18,664	18,655	32,230	32,901	32,901
N of cases	9820	9806	9804	9823	9807	9802	9414	9372	9369

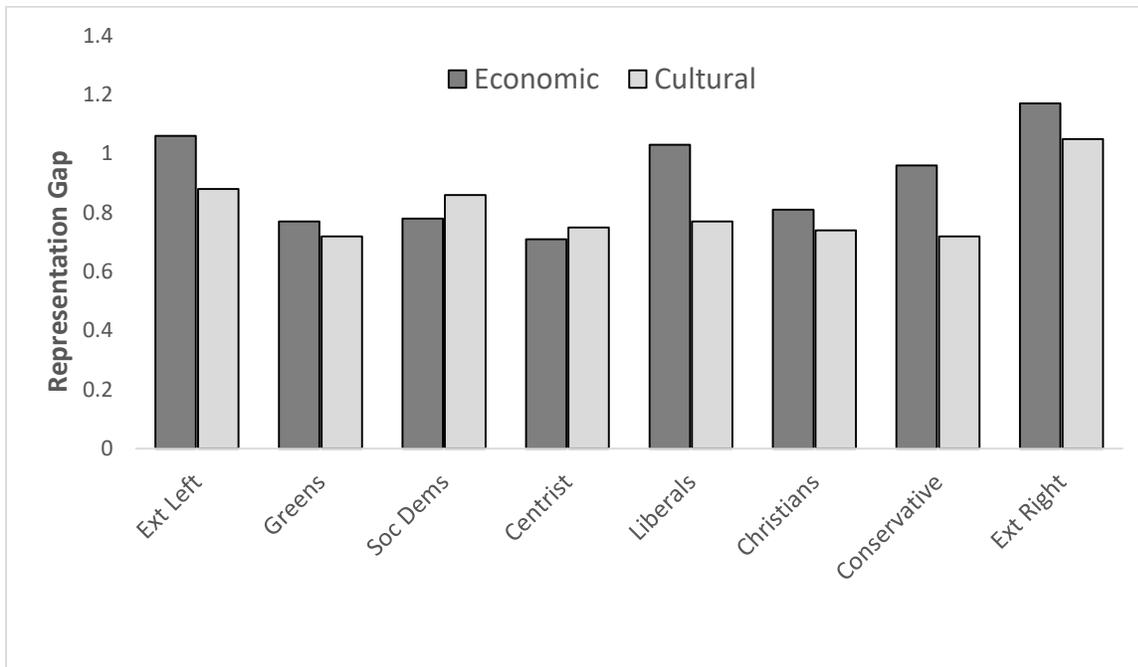
Source: Authors' merged file: European Election Study 2014; Chapel Hill Experts Survey 2014. EU15 nations.

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from hierarchic multilevel models predicting the absolute difference between party voters and their respective parties on each dependent variable. Coefficients significant at $p < .01$ are marked by an asterisk.

The second set of models (Econ2, Cult2, and LR2) add party traits that might reflect the clarity of party positions. Voters for parties with extreme positions experience a larger participation gap than voters for centrist parties—for all three models. This strong effect is a common pattern that parties on each end of a political continuum tend to “over-represent” their voters by holding more extreme positions than their voters (Dalton 2018).

However, party differences are more complex than just extremism. Figure 2 compares the representation gap across party families.¹⁹ Party families convey more information about party positions than just the distance from the center of a dimension. Social Democratic parties have a traditional economic identity just as Christian parties have an established cultural identity. The figure confirms that extreme Left and extreme Right parties are further from their voters than most other parties. Green and centrist parties display some of the smallest differences for their

Figure 2. Voter-Party Differences by Party Family



Source: Authors’ merged file: European Election Study 2014; Chapel Hill Experts Survey 2014. EU15 nations.

Note: Figure entries are the average difference between party voters and their respective parties on the economic and cultural dimensions across party families.

voters. The representation gap on both issue dimensions also varies across parties. Extreme Left, Liberals, and Conservative parties are notably more distant from their voters on economic issues compared to cultural issues. Conversely, Social Democrats and Centrists are closer to their voters on economic issues than on cultural issues. This may reflect parties' differential emphasis on the two dimensions in their voter appeals.

Table 4 also shows that the representation gap is wider for large parties, most clearly for economic and Left/Right position. Party age (the year in which a party formed) also displays a weak pattern of greater agreement among newer parties, which suggests that older parties tend to drift from their traditional partisan base. Taken together, these three party traits are substantially more important in predicting the size of the representation gap than individual citizen traits.²⁰

The third set of models add party system characteristics. The number of parties slightly decreases the size of the representation gap. The new consideration is whether the diversity of party choices—measured by the political polarization of the parties—affects the representation gap. Greater party polarization on the economic dimension narrows the representation gap for the economic cleavage and Left/Right, but the cultural dimension shows a contrasting pattern. However, all of these effects are small in substantive terms. Most central to our core hypotheses, controlling for party traits and party system characteristics only modestly affects the already weak coefficients of most political sophistication measures for the economic and cultural dimensions.

Voters' Abilities and the Representation Gap

At the end of their influential study of citizens and voting choice, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels present a series of questions that guided their study (2016, 299):

Can ordinary people, busy with their lives and with no firsthand experience of policy-making or public administration, do what [democratic] theory expects them to do? Can they formulate policy preferences, assess where candidates stand on the issues, set aside cognitive biases and group prejudices, and then choose a candidate who embodies an uplifting version of their own policy views?

For them, the answer was “no”. They enumerated a list of areas where the public did not match their standards, which sounds like a Ph.D. in political science (or more) is required to be a good citizen. They claimed that those who believe in representative democracy have accepted a misguided folk theory of democracy. In short, they joined the many distinguished scholars who maintain that only a small stratum of politically sophisticated citizens make electoral choices that are a reasonably accurate representation of their political views—and democracy suffers.

The limitation of such conclusions, in our opinion, is the focus on the *process of electoral choice* but not considering the *outcome of the voting process*. The ability of some individuals to articulate their political views to a friend or survey interviewer is strongly linked to political sophistication (Converse 1964; 1990), which is treated as evidence that only the politically sophisticated have well thought out political views. This is especially true in discussing abstract concepts, such as the Left/Right scale.²¹ Similarly, electoral research routinely finds that issue voting or ideological voting is stronger among people with high levels of political interest and political knowledge (as demonstrated in table 3). So researchers assume that the remainder of the electorate falls short in choosing a party that matches their issue interests.

This article offers a different conceptual approach to studying democratic representation. We asked how closely do voters’ issue positions match the issue positions of their chosen party—and whether the degree of agreement is strongly linked to levels of political

sophistication. This yields a very different view of the functioning of representative democracy in contemporary Europe.

Various measures of voter sophistication, engagement, and political knowledge are virtually unrelated to the individual level voter-party policy agreement on the economic and cultural policy dimensions. To be politically informed and interested benefits good citizenship, but our evidence demonstrates that it is not a prerequisite for making voting choices consistent with one's views. Moreover, previous cross-national studies of European publics have reached this same conclusion using varied but complementary methodologies. Belchoir (2013) examined Left/Right agreement between voters and MEP candidates in 2009 and found weak effects for sophistication variables: "These findings contradict the plausible expectation that the more attentive voters would be better able to choose a party congruent with their own ideological self-placement" (Belchoir 2013, 367). Dalton (2017) compared the difference between voters' Left/Right positions and the overall public's perceptions of the parties' Left/ Right positions. He found that the average difference for education and interest was below $r=.10$. Walczak and van der Brug (2013) examined voter-party agreement across issues. Some sophistication effects were statistically significant, but they concluded: "The effects of the individual-level variables are not very strong." (p.16). Thus, our results are not unique to one election or a specific measurement of party positions, but prior research passed over the significance of the null findings.

Why is there a disconnect between our findings and previous studies of electoral choice? Several factors may be at play. Previous studies have focused on the process of choice, and intuited the outcome of this process based on the researcher's high expectations. Political scientists expect the average citizen to share their information base; economists argue that people need to be better informed about the economy; geographers think we should be able to identify

every nation on a map. And yet, the world goes on. As Arthur Lupia (2007) has argued, experts may impose their own standards for good citizenship on people who are not studying for the next election, while overlooking the ways that these voters actually make reasonable choices.

This should lead to a reconsideration of how heuristics and other information cues may effectively guide citizen action (Popkin, 2001; Lupia and McCubbins, 2008). There are many pathways that a voter can use to collect information—through personal networks, heuristics, and party cues—that can lead to a reasonable vote choice. Indeed, there is probably too much information readily available to voters, and the task is to select sufficiently accurate information to make reasonable choices. We should not discount the argument that the experiences of average citizens give them valuable information to draw upon when making life choices—whether it is where to live, what car to buy, or how to vote. Although we accept the caution that heuristics can distort information and are open to manipulation in specific instances, the pattern of our findings is reassuring about their general efficacy.

One might speculate that the less sophisticated voter is simply following party cues on what issues to support, but this presents a paradox. How does the disinterested citizen with little information monitor party cues so efficiently? Moreover, the political psychology literature on motivated reasoning and confirmation biases would suggest that consistency would be stronger among strong partisans (and perhaps sophisticated citizens) and this is not the case.

We cannot test the functioning of these alternative pathways with the evidence at hand. Our results suggest a need for research on what paths are used and which are sufficient for competent voting. This would require more complex data collections that directly measure personal networks, media consumption, party campaign statements, and other cue givers (e.g., Beck et al. 2002; Huckfeldt, Ikeda, and Pappi, 2005). The efficacy of pathways is likely to vary

across individuals reflecting their interests and social location. The complementary research question is what pathways are more prone to error.

The other notable empirical finding is the variation in the representation gap as a function of party characteristics. For example, politically extreme parties are the most distant from their supporters. Thus, the vote share of these parties does not mean their voters fully endorse the parties' views.²² The patterns of agreement by party family also suggest that parties may focus on maximizing representation on one issue dimension over another. These patterns argue that party supply can be more important in voter-party agreement than the characteristics of individual voters.

The goal of representative democracy is to provide a mechanism where like-minded voters and parties may form a linkage at election time. Voters are imperfect. Sometimes we misjudge an issue, or even worse, misjudge a party and its leaders. Sometimes events change our opinions, which leads to alternative party choices. The lesson of this research is that being well-educated, interested, and informed about politics does not guarantee party choices that are more consistent with the voters' policy preferences. The most and least politically sophisticated probably follow different paths to make their voting choice, but overall they are about equal in the gap between their issue orientations and their party's position.

In summary, across a range of party systems and voting choices, we find clear evidence that most citizens can make reasonable voting choices that reflect their own policy preferences—and this is not strongly linked to a voter's level of political sophistication. Thus, representative democracy in terms of voter-party agreement appears to function equally across the spectrum of citizen cognition and engagement.

Appendix: Aggregate Voter-Party Agreement

Although this study focuses on the individual level agreement between voters and their chosen party, to validate our measures we replicated previous research that demonstrated high levels of aggregate voter-party congruence. The methodology is straightforward. We calculated the average score for the voters of each party on both policy dimensions and then correlated this with the party experts' location for each party.

Figure A.1 displays the relationship for 92 party dyads on the economic issue dimension.²³ The average economic position of voters for each party is arrayed along the horizontal axis, and the vertical axis presents the party experts' average score for each party. There is a strong relationship between voters and their party ($r=.64$). The dashed regression line in the figure is at a sharper angle ($b=1.301$) than the solid 45-degree line that represents equal positions. Thus, the figure shows the typical pattern of parties "over-representing" their voters at the political extremes. For example, supporters of the German Linke have an average score of 0.65 on the economic dimension, but their party has an average of 1.33. Conversely, voters for the British Conservative Party score -0.13, while the party scores at -0.75.

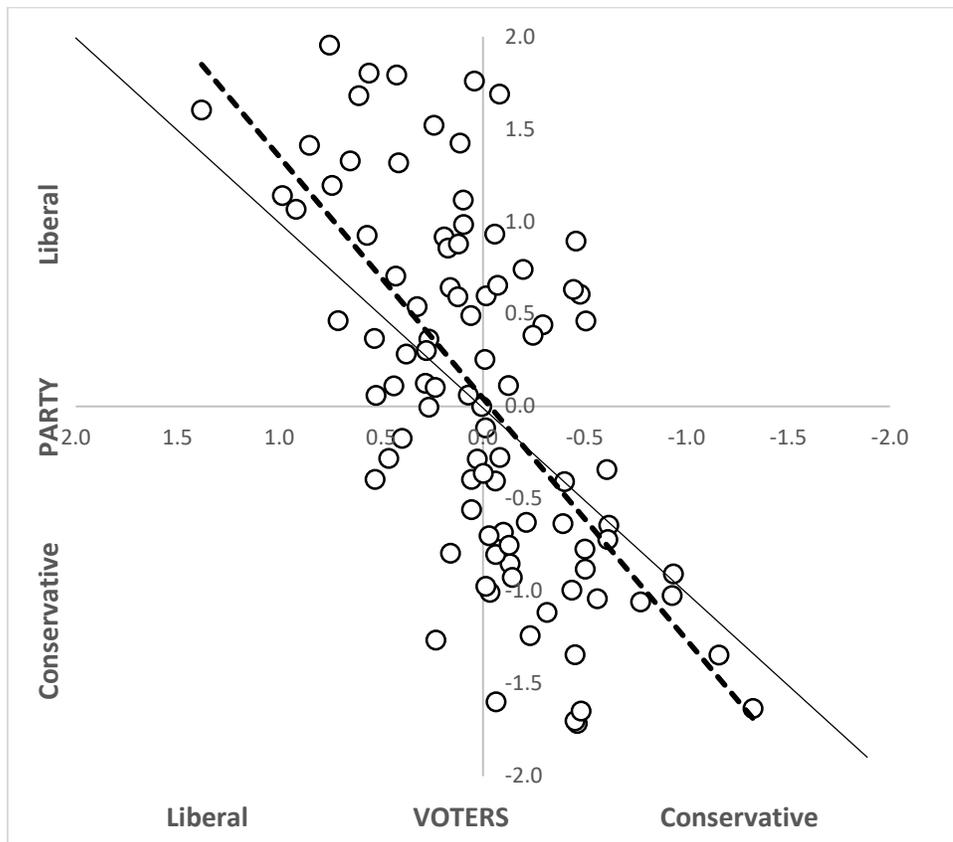
=== Figure A.1 goes about here ===

There is also a strong relationship on cultural issues, Figure A.2. The positive slope ($b=1.310$) indicates that parties are more polarized than their party supporters. Compared to the economic dimension, there is an even tighter spread of parties around the regression line ($r=.81$). This rivals what other research has found for Left-Right positions, which implies that cultural issues are salient to both voters and party elites in contemporary elections.

=== Figure A.2 goes about here ===

Thus, if we think of democratic representation as an aggregate process, as well as the individual-level relationships examined in this research, the process works fairly well in contemporary European democracies.

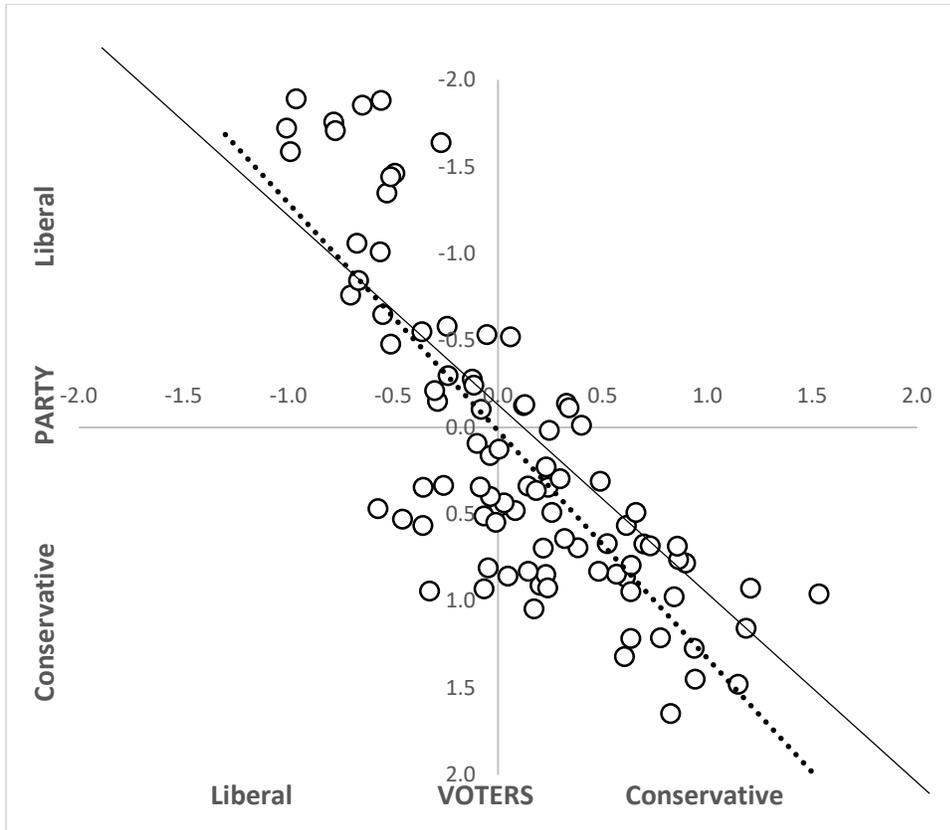
Figure A.1 Economic Dimension Correspondence Between Voters and Parties



Sources: Author's merged file: 2014 European Election Study; 2014 CHES Study (EU 15 nations).

Note: Figure entries are mean scores for party voters and party candidates on the economic dimension. (N=92). Positive values represent liberal economic positions.

Figure A.2. Cultural Dimension Correspondence Between Voters and Parties



Sources: Author's merged file: 2014 European Election Study; 2014 CHES Study (EU 15 nations).

Note: Figure entries are mean scores for party voters and party candidates on the cultural dimension. (N=92). Positive values represent liberal cultural positions.

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Endnotes

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¹ Lau et al. (2014) used the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems surveys that measure partisanship by "closeness" to a party, rather than identities, which increases consistency. They did, however, find significant sophistication effects in predicting correct voting.

² A forerunner to this study were the 1979 and 1994 European Election Studies that ask parallel questions of the public and elites (Dalton 1985; Thomassen and Schmitt 1997).

³ Indeed, when California has complex referendum choices on the ballot, one member of our faculty examines them all and gives us her voting suggestions. Undoubtedly, such personal networks are a valuable resource for average citizens and university professors in making a reasonable decision on Election Day.

⁴ For further information on the EES survey see: <http://europeanelectionstudies.net/european-election-studies/ees-2014-study>. We are indebted to the researchers who collected these data and the CHES survey and shared them with the international scholarly community.

⁵ EU15 Experts N=1917. For information on the CHES survey see: <https://www.chesdata.eu/>.

⁶ The mix of questions in the issue battery can affect the ordering of dimensions, but whether a cleavage is the first or second dimension is largely irrelevant to the research presented here.

⁷ Based on a larger battery of issue questions, several studies identified a similar two-dimensional space in the 2009 and 2014 European Election Study (Walczak and van der Brug, 2013; Dalton, 2018).

⁸ We first averaged the the party experts' scores for each of the eight issues for each of the 183 parties in the EU15 nation. The PCA analyses use these averaged experts' scores.

⁹ Principal Components Analysis identified three of the four questions as forming a reliable scale: Switzerland is not an EU member; EU states don't have same number of seats in the European Parliament, and estimates of the size of the national parliament. We constructed an additive political knowledge scale with these three items.

¹⁰ Supporting this point, the Appendix demonstrates that parties at the liberal and conservative extremes on both issue dimensions are generally more distant from the average party voter than centrist parties.

¹¹ The calculation of the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) is from ParlGov (<http://www.parlgov.org/>). Party size was vote share in the 2014 EP election. The year party formed was discrete year beginning in 1945 or earlier up to 2014.

¹² These statistics were calculated as the weighted standard deviations of party positions on each issue dimension.

¹³ The voter's party was based on how they would vote if a national election was the next day.

¹⁴ The fit between voters and parties varies across parties. I selected the CDU/CSU because it is located near the center of the political space in a multiparty system and has a large number of voters for subanalysis. In the case of the CDU/CSU, the higher interest voters was on average 0.24 points closer to the party than the least interested voter on the economic cleavage, with a difference of only 0.06 on the cultural dimension. A difference, but barely so.

¹⁵ The simple size of the representation gap between high and low cognition categories finds a range of differences typically less than 0.10 on each issue scale; the $p < .01$ confidence interval is about .09 because of the large sample sizes. In short, small differences given the large sample sizes.

¹⁶ The 2014 EES contains a limited measure of issue salience. We counted the salience of economic and cultural issues on this list of EES questions. Neither index was substantially related to the relevant representation gap (economic salience $r = .05$; cultural salience $r = -.02$),

¹⁷ Each model has random intercepts and fixed effects for the other predictors. The standard OLS model is quite comparable and is available on request.

¹⁸ A traditional OLS model has very low Multiple Rs: economics = .062, culture = .115, and Left/Right = .104. This increases once party traits are added to the models: economics = .241, culture = .167, and Left/Right = .178.

¹⁹ An alternative model substituted dummy variables for six party families to capture these differences. These models generate a small change, so we present the more parsimonious models in table 4.

²⁰ See note 17.

²¹ This may explain why political cognition is more important in reducing the representation gap for the Left/Right scale because the scale itself requires a higher level of political understanding (Bauer, Barberá, Ackermann et al., 2017).

²² Some research argues that change-oriented voters support more extreme parties to effect desired policy reform because they expect that the policy-making process will moderate calls for change (Kedar, 2005; Adams, Grofman, and Merrill, 2005)

²³ The comparisons only include parties with at least 20 voters in the EES. However, the smaller parties are included in the individual-level analyses.