Hooligans, Hobbits, and Vulcans: Voters, their Parties, and the Accuracy of Political Choice

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Abstract

Political behavior research persistently questions the ability of the average citizen to make appropriate voting choices and thereby accurately represent their political views. This essay puts this question to a new empirical test. Using data from the 2014 European Elections, we assess the policy agreement between party voters and their chosen party. Moreover, we consider how this agreement is affected by the characteristics of individual voters, as well as the political context of elections. Negative results are rarely reported widely—but they can be important. We find little evidence that traits such as political interest, education, information level or even party identification significantly affect levels of political agreement. The results suggest that even less sophisticated citizens find ways to make voting decisions that close fit their policy positions. This reconsideration of the diversity of decision making yields a more positive view of voters and the electoral process.
A long tradition in political behavior research questions the ability of the average citizen to make accurate choices at election time and thereby effectively represent their political views. If most voters cannot make informed choices, this erodes the logic of political representation. Moreover, some experts argue that such a result undermines the democratic process itself.

The long-standing theoretical debate about the sophistication of the public took on added weight with the advent of scientific opinion surveys. For example, the authors of *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). Other studies showed that many people could not name their elected representatives, were unfamiliar with the institutions of government and did not understand the mechanics of the political process (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). This was not just a failing of the American public, the same negative characterization emerged from public opinion research in other established democracies.

Probably the most prominent critic of the mass public was Philip Converse. In a series of seminal writings, he argued that most citizens lacked a sophisticated, ideological understanding of politics (1964, 1970, 1972). Only the most politically involved and the most educated matched his high standards for being ideological 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 are often studying “nonattitudes”—that is, many people apparently do not have informed opinions even on issues of long-standing policy concern. This model of mass behavior became a common assumption 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). A recent study thus 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)

Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels (2016) offer the most recent assault on the citizen. Their provocative study argues that models of democracy based on a sophisticated citizenry reflect “fairy tales” and a “folk theory” of democracy at odds with reality. 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. Similarly, the libertarian philosopher, Jason Brennan (2017) described most voters as hooligans (ardent party identifiers) or hobbits (passive independents), leading him to argue for an epistocratic political system that gives greater voice to knowledgeable, rational Vulcans like himself. In short, the conventional wisdom is that citizens falls short of the democratic ideal.

The research presented here offers an alternative way to consider the accuracy of voters. Not by finding anomalies in citizen electoral behavior while overlooking other evidence or similar limitations among political elites and political analysts. Rather, we turn to the basic question of whether citizens are generally effective in finding a party that shares their political positions, without assuming political sophistication is a prerequisite for making reasonable electoral choices. We address this topic not by focusing on the process of electoral choice but on the outcomes.

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 these same issues. This research focuses on outcomes, asking how well party voters are able to 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, some research examines the ideological sophistication of voters and draws negative conclusions about the public’s ability to make reasonable choices (Converse 1964; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, ch. 10; Kinder and Kalmoe
Other literature assesses the correlation among issue opinions or the stability of issue opinions over time as an assessment of citizen political sophistication (Converse and Markus 1979). Some research measures political knowledge to judge citizens’ political awareness as a presumed prerequisite to reasonable voting (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1986). This approach often links specific issues (or other evaluative criteria) to voting choices. If there is a weak relationship between ideological of issue positions and voting choice, then voters are falling short of meaningful decision-making. There is a rationale to this approach, especially for academic researchers who judge their students’ learning by asking and grading questions.

However, another literature argues that electorates are heterogeneous and use multiple decision-making processes (Bartle 2005; Blumenstiel and Plischke 2015; Stubager, Seeberg and So 2018). Instead of a single model of voting choice applied to the entire electorate, this research argues that citizens can use different methods to make meaningful choices beyond the rationalist models of the mass belief systems literature. Some are these rational, ideological voters, like the good students who study for exams and pass with flying colors (but not very many).

Other voters may turn to a family member, a neighbor, a friend or other individual for advice on how to vote (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Beck et al. 2002; Sokhey and McClurg. 2012). Political communication networks comprised of family, neighbors, and co-workers help inform the participants, and the earliest work on the two-step flow of political information viewed such network as an important way to spread information among voters. 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 (Coffé, and Need 2010; Zuckerman, Dasovic, and Fitzgerald 2007). For each California election, one member of our faculty lunch group examines the complex referendum choices on the ballot 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.

Personal networks are one example of a process where people find some cognitive shortcut to make political and other life choices (Popkin 1991; Lau and Redlawsk 2006). Some individuals are part of a narrow issue public, and make an informed choice on this subset of issues. Other research emphasizes the importance of heuristics such as group cues as a basis of electoral choice (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). The political message of a union leader or a church pastor can be a powerful cue for many individuals in these milieu. The American Voter
introduced the concept of party identification as the ultimate heuristic, guiding individuals to follow campaigns, participate in elections, and the vote for their party (Campbell et al. 1960, ch. 6 and 9; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). The tribal elements of party identification make it simple to evaluate parties, candidates, and issues as supporting or opposing one’s interests as represented by partisanship. The media and other information networks are natural political cues. In fact, the supply of various political cues probably exceeds most people’s ability to assimilate all this information. In short, there are many ways to make a connection between 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 generally more accurate in selecting a party that closely matches their political positions. In contrast, individuals that rely on informal sources of information, group cues and other heuristics are more likely to make less-informed and less accurate choices. This presumption deserves an empirical test.

To examine this assumption, this research asks how well do voters choose a party that represents their political views. In addition, is the accuracy of choice highly stratified within the mass public? That is, what individual and contextual factors might affect the accuracy of voters’ choices. We believe a more appropriate way to evaluate accurate voting choice is to consider the outcomes of voter decisions.

This requires a different way of approaching the topic of the meaningfulness of voting choice. One element is the voters’ policy positions. A second element is the parties’ positions on these same issues. 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 an empirical base for this research. This study includes a variety of party systems and voter choices in which to study democratic representation. The project surveyed citizens in all 27 member states of the European Union asking about their issue opinions. Pooling national experiences allows us to identify broad patterns of voter behavior and consider contextual factors that might influence agreement.
In each nation, the 2014 Chapel Hill Experts Survey asked academic experts to position the parties on the same issues. These paired surveys include a common battery of eight questions, enabling us to compare citizens and parties on the same issues. For theoretical and empirical reasons, the analyses focus on the established democracies of the EU15. The party systems in post-communist EU nations are still evolving and the nature of political competition in the East often taps different issues than in the West. Most of the belief systems literature also has focused on publics in established democracies, so this provides a more direct test of past research.

This study combines two literatures as a basis of our empirical approach. First, several studies indicate that broad political orientations or issue dimensions (rather than single issues) provide a meaningful political framework for electoral choice. For example, broad views toward the government’s role in the economy may be more strongly and consistently related to voting choice than a specific economic issue. So indices that include several issues tapping a broad political dimension should be more valid and reliable than single issues. For example, Stephen Ansolabehere, Jonathan Rodden, and James Snyder (2008) demonstrated more stable opinions over time and stronger effects on voting when broad issue dimensions were compared to specific issue items. Other studies show that such broad 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 (Key 1961, ch. 1).

Second, recent electoral research describes electoral competition in Europe as broadly structured by a two-dimensional political space (Kriesi et al. 2008; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Dalton 2018; Rovney and Polk 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Citizen economic views the role of government and the representation of class interests were formative influences in many party systems, and still affect contemporary elections. Second, many cultural issues are now an important part of political discourse. Issues of gay rights, expansion of gender equality, and immigration—and their conservative counterparts—are salient issues today. Ongoing political debate on these cultural issues should add more structure and coherence to public opinion.

The issues included in the 2014 EES span both economic and cultural themes. In addition, the highly polarized nature of politics at the time might heighten attention to both issue dimensions. Most of the EU15 economies had experienced the negative fallout of the 2008 recession and subsequent financial difficulties across Europe. These disrupted established party
alignments in many cases. In addition, rising political tensions over a variety of cultural issues had fuelled the rise of far-right parties in the 2014 European Elections, and strong opposition to these parties by those hold liberal cultural views. So this is a fertile setting to study representation on both issue dimensions.

We used Principal Components Analyses (PCA) to determine whether an economic and cultural cleavage structures specific issue opinions for citizens and party experts (Table 1). The left side of the table presents the general public results, the right side displays the CHES results. 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 included in the issue battery, the first component represents the cultural dimension. The variety of issues linked to this component speaks to the breadth of the cultural dimension. Among the general public, immigration policy has the highest loading since 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.

Table 1 goes about here

The second dimension focuses on three traditional economic issues: state intervention in the economy, redistribution of wealth, and the tradeoff between taxes and social services. The component loadings are much higher for the party experts on both dimensions. This is likely because experts have more informed and congruent issue beliefs, which tends to 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 a voter emphasizes. Similarly, the EU question mixes both economic and cultural themes.

We calculated voter-party agreement in a two-step process. A first step computed component scores separately for citizens and parties from the PCA models. For the party experts, we averaged their scores for each party to identify each party’s positions on both dimensions. Then, we calculated the representation gap as the absolute value of the difference between each voter’s score and their chosen party’s scores on the two dimensions. For example, British Labour party voters averaged an economic score of .28 and CHES yielded a .38 value for
the party, which produces a voter-party gap of .10. The average representation gap for the economic dimension is .89 (standard deviation .70), and for the cultural dimension .86 (st. dev. .65). Both measures are essentially unrelated since they are derived from PCA (r=.01). As an additional comparison, we also computed the representation gap for the 0-10 Left-Right scale included in both surveys.

Predicting Voter-Party Agreement
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 (Budge et al. 2012; Dalton, Farrell and McAllister 2011; Thomassen 1994). 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 representation gap? This section considers the factors that might systematically affect how closely individuals match their preferred party’s policy positions. One set of factors might be attributes of the individuals themselves, such as their level of political interest or knowledge. Party attributes also might influence congruence levels, as well as features of the electoral system. The following sections discuss these potential predictors

Political Cognition. Our research considers the general claim that voters’ individual characteristics might influence the accuracy of their electoral choices. Some voters presumably make better choices than others, and this should yield a closer match between the voters’ 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, the better-educated should be more likely to select a party that closely represents their policy views. For example, Walczak and van der Brug’s (2013) analyses of all 27 EU
nations in the 2009 EES found that the representation gap was smaller among the better-educated for four different types of issues. 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 the accuracy of voters’ choices. Engaged citizens devote more attention to following political news, tracking party statements during elections, and (presumably) making a more informed choice. The disinterested voter may rely on crude heuristics or even vote with little rational evaluation of the options.

Political knowledge is often considered a vital trait in helping citizens to navigate the complexities of the political world and make appropriate electoral choices (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). 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 smaller among more knowledgeable EU citizens in 2009 for three of their four types of issues. We can examine all three of these traits with evidence from the 2014 EES.

Political Engagement. Another potential stratifying factor is active political engagement. For example, the EES asked how often respondents discussed politics with others. This form of political engagement 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. Implicit in rationalist models of representation is the presumption that access to information is a prerequisite to accurate choices. Belchoir’s (2013) analysis of the 2009 EES demonstrated that Left-Right congruence between voters and parties was higher among those who actively acquire political news through the media. The same logic should apply to congruence on the economic and cultural dimensions.

Party Identification. Party identification is generally considered one of the strongest heuristic guiding voting choice. However, the implications for the representation gap are unclear. On the one hand, partisans might be more likely to vote for ‘their’ party, even if they feel another party better represents their position in the election—thus producing a larger representation gap. On
the other hand, partisans may be drawn to the issue cues provided by their party, which produces a smaller representation gap. Non-partisans lack these considerations, but the conventional view holds that they make less informed and accurate voting decisions. The only previous evidence comes from Dalton’s (2017) analyses of the representation gap for Left-Right attitudes, which showed conflicting results depending on how party position is measured.

**Party Effects.** Voting choice is a supply/demand relationship, and the supply of party choices may affect individual-level differences in the representation gap. Thus we include party traits and characteristics of the party system as possible controls for the size of voter-party policy differences.

The clarity of party positions may affect voter-party agreement (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, Dalton’s (2017) found that extreme parties are often more polarized than their own voters, which increases the representation gap for the Left-Right scale. We measure clarity as each party’s distance from the center of both issue dimensions and Left-Right scale.

A correlate of the ideological 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 clarity 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. However, strategic voting may complicate these effects if potential voters shift their support to larger, more electorally secure parties.

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. The evidence for the Left-Right scale is mixed (Dalton 2017), but the policy focus of the economic and cultural dimensions may shape party images more clearly. Each of these party traits may counteract the effects of political sophistication.

**Party System Effects**

The range of party choices available to voters varies widely across the EU15 nations. We might expect that more party choices, and presumably more diverse party choices, should produce a closer fit between voters and their parties (Wessels 1999; Dalton, Farrell and McAllister 2011). For instance, with fewer parties competing in the British electoral system than in diverse PR systems such as Sweden and The Netherlands, British voters might be at a greater policy distance from their preferred party.10 Such cross-national differences might affect levels of individual voter-party agreement.

A more direct 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).11

A fully specified model that includes characteristics of the parties and the party system will show whether these factors affect the representation gap, and whether the individual-level results are robust with these controls.

**The Correlates of Voter-Party Agreement**

We test the political sophistication thesis by determining whether the representation gap is related to levels of political cognition and engagement. In other words, do the most educated, most interested, and most knowledgeable citizens make demonstrably better political choices than the average citizens?

Figure 1 presents six simple relationships between three measures of political cognition and the representation gap on economic and cultural issues. There is a slight tendency for the gap to be smaller for the most sophisticated citizens, but these effects are quite small. The range of scores is typically less than 0.10 on each issue scale, whereas the p<.01 confidence interval for
most groups is about .09. Several of these relationships are statistically significant because of the very large pooled sample size (typically more than 10,000 cases), but the magnitude of effects is very weak as seen in Table 2.

Further evidence comes from comparing the size of the representation gap for active forms of political engagement; discussing politics and consuming news from various media sources. Table 2 shows very similar weak relationships. Actively discussing politics with friends, for example, has little impact on voter-party agreement. None of these relationships exceeds a value of 0.10, and the average correlation is barely 0.05. Such null findings stand in stark contrast to the claims about an electorate highly stratified by their political sophistication—and democracy at risk as a result.

The last individual attribute in table 2 is the strength of party ties. Surely, strong partisan display greater policy agreement with their chosen party than non-partisans. The empirical evidence is even weaker in this case. Partisans might be more strongly committed to their preferred party, but the match on economic, cultural or Left/Right positions is no greater than for non-partisans. The average correlation across these three indicators is only 0.03.

There are two possible interpretations of these minimal relationships. The first is that the politically sophisticated are not very accurate voters after all. The match between their own broad policy views and their political party is barely better than the average citizen. The elitist perspective in the belief systems literature might emphasize this small difference. The other interpretation is that the less educated, interested, and knowledgeable voters find a way to make pretty good choices on Election Day. It seems excessive to proclaim that representative democracy is a fiction or a fairy tale based on the weak correlations in these two tables.

Because these findings are somewhat unexpected, we probed the data for further validation. If we direct our attention back to the process of voting choice, the cognitive measures perform as normally expected. Table 3 presents the correlation between voters’ Left/Right or issue positions and their voting choice stratified by the three sophistication measure 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 similar results exist for the set of political traits linked to political sophistication (table 2). In short, levels of political sophistication do affect the process of voting choice as generally demonstrated, but not the policy accuracy of these choices.

Methodologically, one might also question the accuracy of measuring citizen and party issue positions in the 2014 EES. However, research using the 2009 European Election Study which measured party positions from the opinions of party elites found similar results for the political cognition variables, although their focus was on different research questions (Walczak and van der Brug 2013; Belchoir, 2013; Dalton 2017). These studies focused on patterns in voter-party agreement as a function of party performance, party characteristics, or the nature of the electoral system—but not political cognition or engagement. All of these studies found that political interest and engagement are not significant predictors of the representation gap for individual voters.

As further validation of the validity of our measures, the appendix presents aggregate comparisons of voters-party agreement in the 2014 EES using these same issue indices. As in other recent representation studies, there is a very strong aggregate voter-party agreement on the economic dimension (r=0.641) and the cultural dimension (0.807). Individual citizens are distributed around the party means, and these individual-party differences are not dependent on political sophistication. Overall, voters 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

The simple relationships between citizen characteristics and the representation gap may depend on the choices available to voters. To ensure that such differences in party supply are not distorting the previous results, we considered party characteristics and electoral system characteristics as control variables.

Table 4 presents a series of multiple regression analyses to predict the voter-party differences for the economic and cultural indices, and for the Left-Right scale. The first panel for each dependent variable (Econ1, Cult1, and LR1) presents just the individual traits as predictors. Because of the overlap between these traits, the standardized regression coefficients are
generally weaker than the simple bivariate correlations. And overall, all six predictors have a weak impact on the size of the representation gap.

Another set of models (Econ2, Cult2, and LR2) add in 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 reflects a common pattern that parties on each end of a political continuum tend to “over-represent” their own voters by holding more extreme positions than their voters (Dalton, Farrell and McAllister 2011, ch. 5). Some research argues that change-oriented voters support more extreme parties in a strategy 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).

However, party differences are more complex than just extremism. We also compared the representation gap across party families (Figure 2). 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 a distinct cultural identity. The figure confirms that extreme Left and far Right parties are further from their voters than most other parties. Green and centrist parties display some of the smallest differences for their voters. In addition, the fit on both issue dimensions 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 both dimensions in seeking to attract voters. In summary, the nature of party choice systematically affects the representation gap because some parties accentuate the policy preferences of their supporters.

A second party trait is party size. The representation gap on the economic dimension is wider for large parties, but the differences in the other two examples are minimal. Party age (the year in which a party formed) also displays a weak pattern of greater agreement among newer parties, which may suggest that older parties tend to drift from their historic partisan base. Taken together, these three party traits are substantially more important in predicting the size of the representation gap than individual citizen traits.
The third set of models add party system characteristics. The number of parties in a nation has a minimal relationship with the size of the representation gap. This is consistent with prior studies of Left/Right voting that show the simple number of choices does not affect the accuracy of choice (Dalton 2017). The new consideration is whether the diversity of party choices—measured by the political polarization of the parties—affects the representation gap. For the economic cleavage, greater party polarization on the economic dimension narrows the representation gap; a similar pattern exists for Left-Right voting. The cultural dimension shows a contrasting pattern with a wider polarization gap increasing the representation gap. However, all of these effects are minor, producing a very modest increase in the Multiple R compared to the prior models.

The Accuracy of Voter Choice

At the end of their 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 a resounding “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. Thus, they claimed that those who believe in representative democracy are adherents to a misguided folk theory of democracy. In short, many scholars maintain that only a small politically sophisticated stratum of the public fulfills the requirements for representative democracy.

The limitation of such conclusions, in our opinion, is the focus on the process of electoral choice but not actually examining the outcome of the voting process. The ability of 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 (Cf. Lane 1962). Similarly, electoral research routinely finds that issue or ideological voting is stronger among voters with high levels of
political interest and political knowledge (as demonstrated in table 3), so it is assumed that the remainder of the electorate falls short in choosing a party that matches their issue interests.

This paper offered a different approach to studying democratic representation. We asked how well do voters’ issue positions match the issue positions of their chosen party on Election Day—and whether this agreement is a function of the voter’s political sophistication. This yields a very different view of the functioning of representative democracy in contemporary Europe.

Our study found that various measures of voter sophistication, engagement, and political knowledge are virtually unrelated to the extent of voter-party policy agreement on the economic and cultural dimensions. To be politically informed and interested benefits good citizenship, but our evidence demonstrates that it is not a prerequisite for making reasonable voting choices on Election Day.

Why is there a disconnect between our findings and previous studies of citizens’ political competency? 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 lofty 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; physicists think everyone should know about physics. And yet, the world goes on. In short, experts impose their own elite standards for good citizenship on people who are dealing with life and not studying for the next course exam (Lupia 2007).

An elitist bias in expectations can thus discount the value of heuristics and other information cues that can 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 sufficient 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. We cannot test these alternative pathways with the evidence at hand, but the results suggest a need for more research on what paths are used and which are sufficient for competent voting. 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. Politically extreme parties are actually the most distant from their own supporters. Thus, extreme left parties and extreme right parties are not as representative of their own voters who generally are more moderate. 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 is more important in voter-party agreement than the characteristics of individual voters.

Voters are imperfect. Sometimes we misjudge an issue, or even worse, misjudge a party and its leaders. Sometimes events change our opinions, which lead to alternative party choices. The lesson of this research is that being well-educated, interested and informed about politics does not guarantee the policy accuracy of our choices. The most and least politically interested follow different paths to make their voting choice, but overall they are about equally accurate in selecting a party that represents their broad issue orientations. In short, representative democracy functions equally well across the spectrum of citizen cognitive 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 examined the aggregate agreement between party voters as a collective and their party. Previous research demonstrated high levels of congruence for Left-Right positions and broad policy dimensions, and we sought to demonstrate the same aggregate agreement for the economic and cultural cleavages in 2014. The methodology is straightforward. We calculated the average score for voters of each party 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. 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, especially 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.

On cultural issues, the parties are also highly responsive to their supporters on cultural issues, Figure A.2. The positive slope (b=1.310) indicates that parties are more polarized as their party supporters. Compared to the economic dimension, there is an even tighter spread of parties around the regression line. In overall terms, therefore, there is a stronger relationship between voters and their party on cultural matters (r=.81). This rivals or exceeds 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.

Thus, if we think of democratic representation as an aggregate process, as well as the individual-level process examined in this research, the process works fairly well in contemporary European democracies. The functioning of citizen representation has a strong empirical basis in terms of blocs of party voters.
Figure A.1  Economic Dimension Correspondence Between Voters and Parties

Sources: 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: 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.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue Questions</th>
<th>EU15 Publics</th>
<th>Party Positions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>Economic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Intervention in economy</td>
<td>-.119</td>
<td>.698</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redistribution of wealth</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.701</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise taxes for social service</td>
<td>.250</td>
<td>.414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-sex marriage</td>
<td>.568</td>
<td>.225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy rights even if crime effects</td>
<td>.499</td>
<td>.143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrictive immigration policy</td>
<td>-.697</td>
<td>.060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU authority over economies</td>
<td>.566</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic growth over environment</td>
<td>.316</td>
<td>.542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue for Rotated Dimensions</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Variance Explained</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: European Election Study 2014; Chapel Hill Experts Survey 2014. EU15 nations.  
Note: Table entries are coefficients from Principal Components Analysis with a Varimax rotation and pairwise deletion of missing data.
### Table 2. The Correlates of Voter-Differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Economic Dimension</th>
<th>Cultural Dimension</th>
<th>Left-Right Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political Cognition</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political Engagement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss politics</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follows newspapers</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow TV news</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow internet news</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Closeness to party</strong></td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* European Election Study 2014; Chapel Hill Experts Survey 2014. EU15 nations.

*Note:* Table entries are Pearson’s r correlations between traits and the difference between party voters and their respective parties on the economic dimension, cultural dimensions, and Left-Right scale.
### Table 3. The Correlates of Vote Choice by Levels of Political Cognition

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

*Source*: European Election Study 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.
Table 4. The Correlates of Voter-Party Differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Economic Dimension</th>
<th>Cultural Dimension</th>
<th>Left-Right Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Econ1</td>
<td>Econ2</td>
<td>Econ3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Traits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.025</td>
<td>-.040</td>
<td>-.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge</td>
<td>-.030</td>
<td>-.031</td>
<td>-.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss politics</td>
<td>-.004</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follows news index</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness to party</td>
<td>-.019</td>
<td>-.020</td>
<td>-.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Traits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme position</td>
<td></td>
<td>.219</td>
<td>.218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party size</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>.072</td>
<td>.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year party formed</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>.070</td>
<td>.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party System</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of parties</td>
<td></td>
<td>.034</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic polarization</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.070</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural polarization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple R</td>
<td>.062</td>
<td>.241</td>
<td>.248</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: European Election Study 2014; Chapel Hill Experts Survey 2014. EU15 nations.

Note: Table entries are standardized regression coefficients predicting the difference between party voters and their respective parties on the economic dimension, cultural dimensions, and Left-Right scale.

[The final paper will present appropriate multilevel statistical models]
Figure 1. Political Sophistication and Voter-Party Differences

Source: European Election Study 2014; Chapel Hill Experts Survey 2014. EU15 nations.
Note: Figure entries are patterns in the average difference between party voters and their respective parties on the economic and cultural dimensions. The scaling of the vertical axis approximates one standard deviation for the full EES samples.
Figure 2. Voter-Party Differences by Party Family

Source: 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.
References


Converse, Philip. 1975. Some mass elite contrasts in the percent of the political space. *Social Science Information* 14: 49-83.


Endnotes

1 This title borrows from Jason Brennan’s (2017).
2 For further information on the survey see: http://europeanelectionstudies.net/european-election-studies/ees-2014-study. We are indebted to the researchers who collected these data and shared with the international scholarly community.
3 For further information on the survey see:https://www.chesdata.eu/. We appreciate the assistance of Ryan Bakker, Liesbet Hooghe, and Gary Marks in providing access to these data.
4 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.
5 Based on similar questions, several studies identified a similar two-dimensional space in the 2009 European Election Study (Walczak and van der Brug 2013; Dalton 2018).
6 To reduce possible bias from non-response on the issue questions, we chose a moderate solution. We allowed one missing data response out of the eight issues and replaced this with the sample mean. This excludes only 5 percent of the sample who gave more than one missing data response.
7 The vote question asks how they would vote if a national election was the next day.
8 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.
9 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.
10 The calculation of the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) is from Parlgov (http://www.parlgov.org/). The ENEP varied from 4.0 in Italy to 10.0 in Belgium.
11 These statistics were calculated as the weighted standard deviations of party positions on each issue dimension.
12 Each party’s CHES score (economic issues, cultural issues or Left/Right) was correlated with each voter’s score on the respective measures from the EES.
13 We focus on substantive significance (the size of the standardized coefficients) rather than statistical significance because with this large cross-national survey most coefficients larger than 0.02 are statistically significant even with very modest effects. Subsequent analyses will apply hierarchic multilevel models, but preliminary analyses suggest the results will be similar.
In an alternative model we substituted dummy variables for six party families to capture these differences. These models generate an increase of 0.02 in the Multiple R compared to the political extremism models, so we present the more parsimonious regression model in table 4.

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