

Still Out of Touch? Parties and Their Voters on the EU Dimension

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Abstract

Previous research has uncovered a significant mismatch between parties and their voters on the EU dimension, showing that parties across the EU typically support more European integration than their electorates. Yet there are good theoretical reasons to expect that the gap has narrowed over time. The breakthrough of so-called challenger parties means more ideological alternatives, and the multiple crises have resulted in further politicization of European integration. But both the supply of parties and the impact of crises vary between member states. Utilizing EES survey data from European elections, this article studies opinion congruence between parties and their voters on the EU dimension in the five European Parliament elections conducted in the early 21st century. The findings underline the change in the overall congruence that has taken place in the last two EP elections. Especially, in the latest 2024 elections, the congruence on the EU dimension was practically on the same level as congruence on the left–right dimension, implying that party responsiveness in EU matters is no longer such a major problem as in the beginning of the millennium.

Keywords

congruence; elections; European Parliament; European Union; parties

1. Introduction

European integration and more broadly European politics have gone through testing times since the Treaty of Lisbon, the most recent reform of the treaties, entered into force in late 2009. Multiple crises have brought about increased contestation of both the future trajectory of the EU and of EU policies. While the impact of individual crises has varied, and even though the politicization of the EU has also varied between individual member states, there has arguably been a shift from the era of permissive consensus to one of constraining dissensus (Hooghe & Marks, 2009)—and, perhaps, even to post-constraining dissensus (Sus &

Hadeed, 2021). Shim (2024b) has theorised how the combination of critical junctures and elite agency can produce mass-elite preference discrepancy, and how such incongruence may persist in the long run. Yet also the opposite outcome is possible, with crises and politicization bringing the views of the voters and their representatives closer together.

Politicization requires agency, and so-called challenger parties (de Vries & Hobolt, 2020) have capitalized on the turbulence in European politics, accusing the mainstream parties of neglecting the interests of ordinary people and presenting themselves as defenders of national sovereignty and cultures. In line with the constraining dissensus thesis, this has forced the traditional governing parties to pay closer attention to the preferences of citizens. Intuitively, one would expect this contestation and politicization to result in closer congruence of positions between political parties and their supporters. Yet, a counterargument is also plausible: Crises detach particularly governing parties even further from their electorates, as they have agreed to new European-level measures, many of which have increased the authority or resources of the EU, such as the bailout packages during the euro crisis or the Next Generation EU loan in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. The rise of challenger parties, most of which are on the far right, has also contributed to the fragmentation of party systems. National parliaments have more parties, as do coalition governments. This should produce a closer match between the preferences of supporters and their parties, as citizens have a wider range of alternatives to choose from.

European election studies (EES) surveys provide an excellent opportunity for assessing ideological congruence between parties and their supporters. Conducted at the time of European Parliament (EP) elections across all member states, in the surveys, respondents are asked not just about their position regarding European integration, but also about the positions of the political parties in their respective countries. Whether citizens really know where parties stand on the EU dimension does not matter; it is their perceptions of party positions that count. Scholars have shown that a lack of congruence over the EU affects party choice and turnout. In particular, if citizens view their first-choice party or parties in general as being too pro-integrationist or too critical of the EU, they either stay home or choose a different party in national or EP elections (e.g., Bakker et al., 2020; Carrieri, 2024; Carrieri et al., 2025; de Vries et al., 2011; Hobolt et al., 2009; Pannico & Costa Lobo, 2023). This indicates that political parties need to take congruence seriously.

Drawing on EES data, this article examines congruence between political parties and their supporters in all EU member countries. It is structured around two research questions:

1. Has congruence on the EU dimension changed between 1999 and 2024?
2. What factors explain congruence over the EU between parties and their supporters?

The next section contains our theoretical framework, where we discuss the general trends regarding congruence and take stock of existing research to develop hypotheses about factors explaining variation in congruence. After that, we introduce our data and methods before presenting our main findings. The concluding section reflects on our results and suggests avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Why Congruence Over the EU Matters

Opinion congruence between citizens and decision-makers matters. Sometimes, policy leadership by elected representatives might be needed and tolerated, not least during crises that often produce a “rally around the flag” effect with citizens supportive of their leaders (Mueller, 1970). However, should politicians consistently ignore the preferences of the electorate, both regarding the content of policies or patterns of governance, the political system would likely face a serious legitimacy crisis, leading to its potential collapse or at least a major shake-up of the party system.

Wessels (1999, p. 137) argued that “the smallest common denominator in normative terms...is that in a democracy there should be some match between the interests of the people and what representatives promote.” This statement echoes the broader sentiments expressed in research on congruence that has expanded significantly in the first quarter of the 21st century (Dalton, 2020; Lefkofridi, 2020; Shim, 2024a; Shim & Farag, 2025; Shim & Gherghina, 2020). A plausible expectation is that issue salience impacts congruence. The further we move away from salient issues, the less knowledgeable citizens probably are of party positions and the lower the congruence between citizens and their parties (e.g., Giger & Lefkofridi, 2016; Spoon & Klüver, 2015; Walgrave & Lefevere, 2013).

Previously, one could convincingly argue that, in most (western) European countries, the left-right dimension constituted the main axis of contestation, and research confirmed congruence on that dimension to be also quite high (e.g., Dalton, 1985; Melchior, 2010; Pierce, 1999; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1999). However, the increasing relevance of the sociocultural, GAL-TAN cleavage means that issues such as multiculturalism, immigration, and the EU shape national debates to a larger extent than before. And this transformation of cleavage patterns is both driven by and creates opportunities for challenger parties, as argued for example by Hooghe and Marks (2018, pp. 126–127):

Change has come not because mainstream parties have shifted in response to voter preferences, but because voters have turned to parties with distinctive profiles on the new cleavage. These parties raise issues related to Europe and immigration that mainstream parties would rather ignore. Radical TAN parties set the frame of competition on these transnational issues, and green parties take diametrically opposite positions. Both parties give these issues much greater salience in their appeals to voters than mainstream parties, and they are less handicapped by internal divisions.

Hooghe and Marks (2018, p. 126) also note that parties, particularly more institutionalized ones, face constraints in their adaptability: “Their efforts are constrained by the policy commitments of self-selected activists and leaders, by brand reputations embedded in the expectations of voters, and by the interests and values of their social base.” But while challenger parties, particularly those on the far right, may not face similar constraints, they have also developed a brand reputation in their core questions—such as opposition to immigration and defense of national sovereignty (de Vries & Hobolt, 2020). Here, we must remember that many of these parties have already existed for several decades.

These changes in cleavage structures do not apply equally across the 27 EU countries. Variation between member states remains important, with election campaigns in Central and Eastern European member states (those that joined the EU from 2004 onwards) often revolving around the broader theme of economic development and the fight against corruption. Moreover, accession to the EU has generally been characterized as a one-sided process where the applicant countries adjust to the conditions set by “Brussels” and implement EU legislation. In such circumstances, contestation over the EU may remain low in the pre-accession stage since the goal is to achieve membership. This underlines the need to pay attention to the preferences of the citizens in the post-accession stage when there is more space and need for position-taking and debates on national EU policies and on the future trajectories of European integration (e.g., Bankov & Gherghina, 2020; Božina Beroš & Grdović Gnip, 2023; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020).

Despite such variation, the salience and practical relevance of the EU have clearly increased. Even before the multiple crises, European integration was among the most salient issues in party competition throughout the EU (Benoit & Laver, 2006). The EU wields significant influence in a wide range of policy areas, also due to the expansion of its competences through the Lisbon Treaty. Whether parties are responsive to their electorates over the EU is therefore significant in terms of how both national and EU-level representative democracy works in Europe. It is not just a question of the legitimacy of the EU, but also of the national parties themselves. Overall, these changes in dimensions of contestation and in the division of authority between member states and the EU mean that political parties must navigate a more complex environment than before, and this makes it more difficult for them to maintain internal unity.

2.2. Evidence of Congruence Over the EU

But have the positions of national parties on the EU dimension been congruent with those of their supporters? The empirical evidence provides a mixed picture, starting with the first studies from the 1990s (Thomassen & Schmitt, 1997, 1999; van der Eijk & Franklin, 1991). Marsh and Wessels (1997) showed that MEPs from countries with highly proportional electoral systems represented citizens better than MEPs from countries with less proportional systems. Drawing on elite and citizen survey data from 1979 and 1994, Schmitt and Thomassen (2000) found that congruence between voters and parties about the general development of integration was as high as on the left–right dimension but lower in specific EU policy issues. Based on the 1999 EES data, van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) concluded that the diversity of opinion among the electorate was not replicated among the parties and that parties were far more supportive of integration than the voters.

Utilizing the 2004 EES data, Mattila and Raunio (2006) found that parties were both closer to their voters on the left–right dimension than on the EU dimension and more supportive of European integration than their voters. In a subsequent article, the same authors found that “parties were in 2009 even less representative of their voters over the EU than at the time of the 2004 EP elections. In each of the 27 member states the parties were more pro-European than the voters” (Mattila & Raunio, 2012, p. 602). Whitaker et al. (2025) assessed MEP-voter congruence using EES surveys (1999–2014) and MEP surveys (2000–2015). They showed that the median voter was more Eurosceptic than the median MEP across most mainstream political groups, and that this gap had increased over time.

Pareschi et al. (2023) analysed issue congruence in 2016 in ten member states and established a limited degree of pro-EU bias among the elites and variation in congruence between different dimensions of

integration. Drawing on a variety of surveys from 1979 to 2016 in nine countries, Marzi and Pareschi (2025) reported a difference between pro-EU and Eurosceptic parties, with the former more supportive of integration than their voters and the latter holding even more negative views than their supporters. Covering 15 countries with survey data from 2009, Dolný and Baboš (2015) found congruence to be high, and even higher on the EU dimension than on the left-right dimension. Comparing the positions of the voters and candidates in the 2009 EP elections, Costello et al. (2012) concluded that congruence was higher on the left-right dimension than on the EU dimension, with most parties having more pro-EU positions than their voters. Kelbel et al. (2023), in turn, compared the views of citizens and MEPs in seven member states in 2019–2020, and uncovered considerable variation between different EU issues, with voters in some cases being more pro-integrationist than MEPs. Many of the studies referred to in this section have used different sources for estimating the positions of citizens and political parties or MEPs. We return to this issue when presenting our data and methods.

2.3. Explaining Congruence

Drawing on the previous discussion, we put forward seven hypotheses about congruence on the EU dimension. Three hypotheses deal with developments over time, while four focus on factors explaining levels of congruence. Before motivating the hypotheses, it must be emphasized that we are measuring congruence between the positions of the parties and their voters. Therefore, our party-level approach does not cover non-voters whose preferences may diverge even significantly from those of parties and their supporters (Shim & Farag, 2025).

Starting with the longitudinal dimension, the multiple crises have certainly meant that the EU has received more media coverage than before. But the attention has concentrated very much on the individual crises from the euro crisis, refugee crisis, Brexit, Covid-19, to finally Russian war of aggression in Ukraine. Utilizing EES data from 1999 to 2014, Vasilopoulou and Gattermann (2021) focused on the link between politicization and congruence. Their results indicated no such effect, with party polarization or salience of the EU not affecting levels of congruence. With nine countries in his sample, Real-Dato (2017) observed that the euro crisis did not impact levels of congruence. However, the politicization and increased salience of the EU should bring parties and their supporters closer together. While previously mainstream parties often managed to avoid debates over the EU (e.g., Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008), such a strategy is difficult to follow when the EU is in the news and challenger parties are demanding explanations for why “Brussels” takes citizens’ money or forces countries to accept more asylum-seekers. Politicization of European integration has clearly favoured Eurosceptic parties (Beaudonnet & Gomez, 2024). Mainstream parties have needed to respond, both through defending EU decisions and/or re-thinking their positions (e.g., Carrieri et al., 2025). Hobolt et al. (2009, p. 112) argued that, if there is an upward trend in the salience of the EU, “then we might expect the gap between the positions of governing parties and voters on European integration to become smaller over time, as parties adopt positions closer to voters to avoid electoral punishment.” While we acknowledge that each crisis has impacted individual member states to different degrees, this leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: Opinion congruence on the EU dimension has increased over time.

The crises are also different from one another. Brexit and especially the war in Ukraine have united EU citizens, the latter even producing a moderate “rally around the flag” effect, with the large majority of

citizens and parties supportive of assisting Ukraine and of further security and defence integration. There is also evidence that the war has resulted in stronger overall support for the EU (e.g., Fernández et al., 2023; Hooghe et al., 2024; Unan & Klüver, 2024). On the other hand, the euro crisis and the refugee crisis created strong tensions within member states, with governments having to defend unpopular and often expensive EU level decisions. In line with Shim (2024b), these constituted critical junctures, providing opportunities for elite agency to disrupt established patterns of contestation. Particularly the Eurosceptical far right parties, almost all of which were in the opposition in their national parliaments, exercised that elite agency during those turbulent years. However, the EES data is gathered every five years in conjunction with the EP elections, and this is problematic in terms of measuring how individual events affect congruence. The refugee crisis peaked in 2015, one year after the 2014 elections, but then Brexit became the centre of attention in the run-up to the 2019 EP elections. The impact of the euro crisis is less challenging to assess. The crisis lasted for several years from 2010 onwards, and the bailout packages and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) resulted across the EU in heated debates about the legitimacy of European integration. The Eurosceptical parties clearly benefited from the euro crisis at the expense of mainstream parties in the 2014 EP elections (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; Nielsen & Franklin, 2017). Mattila and Raunio (2012) also reported lower congruence in the 2009 elections, and this may have resulted at least partly from the global financial crisis that hit many EU countries hard and created uncertainty about economy. This leads to our second and third hypotheses:

H2: Congruence was highest at the time of the 2024 EP elections.

H3: Congruence on the EU dimension was lowest in the 2014 EP elections.

Turning to variables explaining congruence, we have chosen to test the impact of variables identified as having explanatory weight in previous research on party-level congruence over the EU. First, we focus on government-opposition dynamics. The logic is simple and applies to both normal times and crisis periods. While individual parties may have exhibited high levels of congruence before entering the government, joining multi-party coalition cabinets and the bargaining inside them results in ideological compromises among cabinet parties. Moreover, governing parties represent their member states in the Council and the European Council, and this results in further compromises that may distance parties from their voters. Such national and European-level decision-making dynamics should increase the distance between parties and their voters, even though the constraining dissensus argument by Hooghe and Marks (2009) suggests that leaders need to pay more attention to the views of the electorate over the EU. Mattila and Raunio (2006) showed that congruence was lower among governing parties, while Mattila and Raunio (2009) found that government size affected the level of ideological alternatives, with large coalition governments hindering party competition on the EU dimension.

In terms of the general ideological orientation of parties, we draw on the idea initially formulated by Dalton (1985), who showed that ideological centrism had a negative effect on congruence on the left-right dimension. Mattila and Raunio (2006, 2012) reported the same pattern in congruence over the EU: In the 2004 elections, congruence was lower among centrist parties, and in the 2009 elections, it was higher among ideologically more extremist left-wing parties. Whitaker et al. (2025), in turn, showed that challenger parties were not closer to their voters than mainstream parties on the EU dimension. We acknowledge that the dichotomy between mainstream and niche or fringe parties can be misleading, as there is a large variation among the more radical

parties, many of which have diverse electorates and unstable or ambiguous policy agendas (Gherghina & Fagan, 2021). Moreover, there may not be much difference in whether niche or challenger parties and mainstream parties are responsive to their supporters or the general electorate (Ibenskas & Polk, 2024). Yet, we argue that parties situated further away from the centre should overall have clearer policy profiles than centrist parties. Most of such parties are smaller than mainstream parties, and, regarding party size, we expect congruence to be lower in larger parties. Mattila and Raunio (2006, 2012) found that opinion congruence over the EU was higher in smaller parties. Our justification is straightforward: Small parties are likely to be more homogeneous than larger parties that have bigger and thus more heterogeneous electorates. Finally, the fragmentation of party system should make it easier for citizens to choose an alternative that is closer to their own preferences. This discussion leads to the following hypotheses regarding party level factors:

H4: Governing parties have lower opinion congruence than opposition parties.

H5: Parties further from the centre on the left–right dimension display higher congruence.

H6: Congruence is higher in small parties than in large parties.

H7: The more fragmented the party system, the higher the congruence between voters and parties.

3. Data

Our data come from the 2004 (Schmitt et al., 2009), 2009 (van Egmond et al., 2017), 2014 (Schmitt et al., 2015), 2019 (Schmitt et al., 2022), and 2024 (Popa et al., 2024) EES surveys, which consisted of identical post-election voter surveys in EU member states. We use EES data for measuring the positions of both parties and their voters on the anti/pro-integration dimension. Hence, our approach focusing on voter-party congruence differs somewhat from most previous studies on policy representation that typically compare voter data with elite-level data (mainly surveys of MPs or MEPs).

Our analyses are based on the comparison of voters' own policy positions with their assessment of the position of the party they voted for. Our assumption is that when the distance between voters and their party is small, parties perform well in representing their voters and vice versa. For each party, two measures were calculated. First, using only the respondents who indicated that they voted for a particular party in the EP elections, we calculated their average positions on the EU dimension. Second, we calculated from the same respondents where they perceived their "own" party to locate on the same EU dimension. Comparing these two average values enables us to analyse how close voters feel that their parties are to themselves.

We recognise that voters' perceptions of party positions may not be accurate reflections of reality, because most European citizens probably have relatively limited knowledge of party policies, at least when it comes to European integration. It is also possible that voters engage in wishful thinking and project their own policy positions onto their preferred parties (e.g., Brandenburg & Johns, 2013; Melchior, 2010). If this is the case, our data would systematically underestimate the distance between parties and their voters. Nevertheless, it has to be emphasized that, although voters may not be able to locate parties very accurately on political dimensions, they are likely to base their vote choices on their own perceptions of party positions. Another option would be to use almost similar survey questions from separate surveys of party voters and elites conducted quite

close to each other (Whitaker et al., 2025), but this too would be problematic for at least two reasons. First, party voters and party elites are likely to interpret the party position scales differently, and second, given the longitudinal approach and the wide breadth of parties included in our study gathering such data would be impossible.

It is also worth stressing that other approaches for measuring party positions, such as expert surveys, content analysis of party programmes, or using elite survey data, do not allow for direct comparisons of voter positions and their perceptions of where the parties are located. And, as Golder and Stramski (2010, pp. 98–99) maintain, using different data sources—for example, EES data for placing voters and expert surveys for placing parties on policy dimensions—is problematic, particularly as the surveys are typically not conducted at the same time and they may employ different scales or differently worded questions. EES is the only data where the party and voter placements are measured on the EU dimension at exactly the same time point and with precisely the same question. Additionally, comparisons of different measures of party positions—party manifesto data (1945–1998), Chapel Hill expert surveys (1999), EES data (1999), and elite surveys of MPs and MEPs (1996)—on the EU dimension found that all these measures correlated considerably with each other and, hence, “provide convergent measures of party positioning on European integration” (Marks et al., 2007, p. 33). This implies that voter perceptions are also empirically accurate measures of where parties stand on European integration.

Our data set comprises most of the parties competing in EU member states in the five EP elections held between 2004 to 2024. In the case of some minor parties, only a small number of respondents voted for them. Thus, in our analyses, only parties with a vote share of more than three percentage points are included to decrease the potential unreliability of measuring policy positions only from a very small group of voters. This restriction means that some small parties are excluded from the data set. Fortunately, for most of the member states, it was possible to include all or, at least, most of the major parties.

The main focus of this study is on the distance between voters and their parties on the EU dimension, which was operationalized in the questionnaires as a 0–10 scale measuring voters’ attitudes towards European unification. The precise wording of the question was: “Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it has already gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using an 11-point scale. On this scale, 0 means unification *has already gone too far*, and 10 means it *should be pushed further*. What number on this scale best describes your position?” This question was followed by several questions in which the respondents were asked to indicate, with the same scale, where the main parties of their respective countries were located. Although we are mainly interested in where party voters locate their own parties, to check for the validity of our party position measure, we compared it with the Chapel Hill party data (Jolly et al., 2022; Rovny et al., 2024), which is based on country expert surveys. Pearson’s correlation coefficient between these two measures is 0.66 for the parties that were included in both data sets, which indicates a relatively good fit.

The rest of the variables, relating to hypotheses H4–H7, are measured in the following way. Government participation was measured with an indicator variable, coded 1 if the party was in government at the time of the EP elections and 0 if it was in opposition. The size of the party was measured with its vote share in the same EP elections. Ideological extremism (or centrism) on the left–right dimension was measured with two indicator variables showing whether the party was a left-wing or a right-wing party. Parties that had average

values below 4 on the 10-point left–right scale were defined as left-wing parties, while parties with values over 7 were categorized as right-wing parties. As the choice of these threshold values was based only on our own deliberation, we also tested how the results change if more stringent threshold values were used to classify a party as a left-wing or a right-wing party. This did not change the results significantly. Finally, party system fragmentation was measured with the effective number of parties competing in the EP elections (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979), calculated from the election results.

Although the data we use makes it possible to study the development of party-voter congruence in a longitudinal view, it is not without its limitations. Given the observational nature of the data, theoretically, we cannot make strong causal claims about our findings (see Pannico & Costa Lobo, 2023). Nevertheless, we can present a comprehensive description of the development of congruence on the EU dimension in a twenty-year perspective covering practically all EU member states.

There are two more limitations in the data. First, comparisons between different EP elections may be biased simply because the member states and parties vary during the research period. The 2004 EP elections were conducted in 25, the 2009 elections in 27, the 2014 and 2019 elections in 28, and, finally, the latest 2024 elections in 27 member states. The EES data also considers Belgium as two distinct party systems with separate surveys in Flanders and Wallonia. Furthermore, the EES2004 study included all the EU member states except for Malta. Unfortunately, in three countries, the 2004 questionnaire did not include the EU and left–right scale questions necessary for our analysis. Therefore, the data set does not include Belgium, Lithuania, and Sweden in 2004. At the same time, the party systems in member states have changed with new parties entering the contestation and old ones leaving the race. To see whether the changing number of member states affects our empirical results, we repeated the analyses using only countries that were included in all five waves. This did not change the overall results significantly, although there were some small changes in the statistical significance of some variable coefficients.

Second, there was a problem with the conduct of the 2014 ESS survey as the first questionnaire did not include the crucial party and voter EU position questions (Popa & Schmitt, 2015). This omission was corrected in the supplementary survey that was fielded about half a year later than the first one. Furthermore, this second survey, which we use to calculate the positions of the voters and their parties on the EU scale, did not include a question about which party the respondents voted for in the 2014 EP elections. As a result, we had to link voters and their parties with a question based on their then-current party choice if parliamentary elections were held at the time of the survey. This may have important consequences for the reliability of the data, as it is well known that in European election voters are more likely to prefer opposition parties than in national parliamentary elections (Ehin & Talving, 2021). This means that one must be cautious when comparing the 2014 results to other elections.

4. Empirical Analysis

To analyse party-level opinion congruence on the EU dimension, we use the regression-based approach originally developed by Achen (1978) and later applied by Dalton (1985). They referred to this approach as responsiveness or dyadic correspondence, but here we prefer the term congruence as it does not imply any directional causal relationship between voter opinions and party positions. This regression-based approach, in its different variants, has been previously used, for example, to study general elite-voter congruence in

West European countries (Iversen, 1994), party congruence in Europe on the left–right dimension (Belchior, 2013), left–right and issue-level congruence in EU member states (Dalton, 2017), and congruence on various EU issues in 10 European countries (Pareschi et al., 2023). The model has also been applied to study party-voter congruence in EP elections by Mattila and Raunio (2006, 2012), but they concentrated only on individual EP elections instead of providing a longitudinal view of the development of congruence as in this study.

The important idea behind the approach is that the better we can predict party positions on issue or policy dimensions with party voter positions on the same dimensions, the higher the congruence. As a regression equation, this can be expressed in the following way (see Dalton, 2017, p. 612):

$$\text{Party EU position} = a + b * (\text{party voter's mean EU position})$$

Here, the degree of dyadic correspondence between a party and its supporters is affected by the intercept, a , and the regression coefficient, b . Ideal congruence ensues when the intercept of the regression line is 0 and the slope coefficient is 1. For example, when the party voter average on the EU dimension is located at 6, the position of their party is also at 6. When the average party voter is located at 3, so will the party be, and so on. Different combinations of a and b correspond to different types of deviation from ideal congruence. If both b and a equal 1, parties have a positive bias in the policy positions, meaning that they are, on average, 1 point more favourable to EU integration than their average voter. Hence, if parties adopt more pro-European positions than their voters, we should see positive intercepts in our regression models.

The regression coefficient b also has a relevant interpretation for congruence. When it is less than 1, parties adopt more convergent positions than their voters, meaning that the opinion differences between parties are smaller than the opinion differences between their voters, indicating a lack of responsiveness among parties. In contrast, if b is greater than 1, the party system is more polarized, and parties accentuate the differences between voters. In practice, this means that, at both ends of the policy dimension, parties are adopting more extreme positions than their voters do.

In the empirical analyses, we did not use fixed country effects for two reasons. First, theoretically, Dalton's congruence measure requires that if country dummies are used, one should also add interactions to produce country-specific slopes for each country. Second, adding country effects and interactions leads to further loss of degrees of freedom, which might be problematic as our N 's are not too large to begin with. However, we performed robustness analyses with fixed effects both with and without interactions. The results remained very similar to the ones we presented here.

The congruence results for the last five EP elections are in Table 1. They show that the constant has been clearly larger than one in all elections, indicating, rather unsurprisingly, that throughout the whole research period parties, on average, have been more positive towards European integration than their voters. However, it is the changes in the value that are more interesting. It seems that the gap between parties and their voters increased in the 2009 and 2014 elections compared to the 2004 situation. After this, the gap has markedly decreased and was, in 2024, already rather small. Even with the potential unreliability of the 2014 data, it seems apparent that incongruence between voters and their parties was largest in the first half of the 2010s and, after that, parties and voters have moved closer to each other. Our data cannot directly reveal if the change has occurred because parties have moved closer to voters or vice versa, or whether

voters have switched to supporting parties more closely aligned with their own EU positions. However, given the surge in popularity of Eurosceptical right-wing parties across the EU, we believe that this change has been induced by both the growing support of populist parties and the adoption of more EU-critical positions by many of the other parties.

Table 1. Party-voter congruence on the EU dimension (dependent variable: party EU position, OLS regression, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$).

| | 2004 | 2009 | 2014 | 2019 | 2024 |
|-------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Constant | 1.39** (0.45) | 3.13** (0.28) | 2.97** (0.38) | 1.46** (0.23) | 0.90** (0.27) |
| Voter EU position | 0.85** (0.08) | 0.58** (0.06) | 0.75** (0.06) | 0.83** (0.04) | 0.91** (0.05) |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.52 | 0.44 | 0.43 | 0.70 | 0.69 |
| N | 114 | 154 | 180 | 180 | 167 |

The regression coefficients on the voter EU position variable in Table 1 seem to be consistent with this interpretation. They also show that, especially in the 2009 and 2014 elections, the range of EU positions offered by the parties (compared to voters) was narrower, suggesting that many voters were forced to choose parties that did not really represent their integration views. Later, in 2019 and 2024, the coefficient started to increase towards one (which would indicate optimal distribution of party positions relative to voter positions). Overall, the results in Table 1 show that incongruence between voters and parties peaked in the 2009 and 2014 elections and, after that, congruence has improved in the two latest elections.

Table 2 adds to the analysis the party or country-level variables related to hypotheses H4–H7. The results show that belonging to the governing coalition increased the gap between voters and parties in the 2004 elections,

Table 2. Party-voter congruence on the EU dimension when party and party system variables are included (dependent variable: party EU position, OLS regression, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$).

| | 2004 | 2009 | 2014 | 2019 | 2024 |
|--------------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Constant | 1.21** (0.46) | 2.60** (0.35) | 3.11** (0.51) | 1.71** (0.37) | 0.95** (0.40) |
| Voter EU position | 0.81** (0.07) | 0.52** (0.05) | 0.74** (0.07) | 0.80** (0.04) | 0.91** (0.05) |
| Government party | 0.56** (0.16) | 0.10 (0.14) | 0.32 (0.18) | −0.00 (0.13) | 0.08 (0.13) |
| Party size | 2.12** (0.70) | 2.81** (0.65) | −0.18 (0.85) | 1.76** (0.66) | 1.72** (0.64) |
| Left-wing party | −0.38* (0.18) | −0.49** (0.16) | −0.07 (0.25) | −0.12 (0.14) | −0.00 (0.14) |
| Right-wing party | 0.08 (0.17) | −0.05 (0.14) | 0.00 (0.18) | −0.20 (0.13) | 0.09 (0.14) |
| Effective no. of parties | −0.02 (0.04) | 0.09* (0.03) | −0.03 (0.05) | −0.04 (0.03) | −0.05 (0.03) |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.63 | 0.53 | 0.43 | 0.71 | 0.72 |
| N | 114 | 150 | 178 | 180 | 166 |

as expected by H4, but in subsequent elections this effect disappears. It seems that the gap was smaller among leftist parties in the 2000s, but this effect vanishes later. Rather surprisingly, party system fragmentation is not related to congruence in any of the elections, but this result may be related to the relative stability of the party system level variable (the finding is also consistent with Vasilopoulou & Gattermann, 2021). Finally, congruence seems to be better in smaller parties, although this effect has also decreased after the 2009 elections (and vanishes momentarily in the 2014 data, but this may be due to the data comparability problems we explained above).

Our results hence demonstrate how, over time, voters and their parties have moved closer to each other. However, without a comparison point, the significance of this closeness is difficult to interpret. An obvious comparison point would be the left-right dimension, arguably still the most important cleavage dividing parties in national politics. For this comparison, we calculated the average distance between parties and voters on both the EU and left-right dimensions in each of the five elections studied here (Figure 1). In accordance with our previous results, they show that party-voter distance over the EU peaked in the 2014 elections and then started to decline. This large peak may be partly explained by the fact that, in the 2014 data, the respondents were asked which party they would support in the national parliamentary elections, unlike in other data sets where the respondents were linked to the party through their vote choice in the EP elections. In contrast, congruence on the left-right dimension has been stable over the elections. Hence, the most interesting observation from Figure 1 is that in the most recent 2024 elections, there was no longer a significant difference between congruence on the EU and on the left-right dimensions, which represents a major change compared to the first three EP elections of the 21st century. However, further research is needed to uncover the exact reasons for this finding. One possible reason could be that the over-time growth in the share of EU-sceptical voters has resulted in a situation where it is easier for these

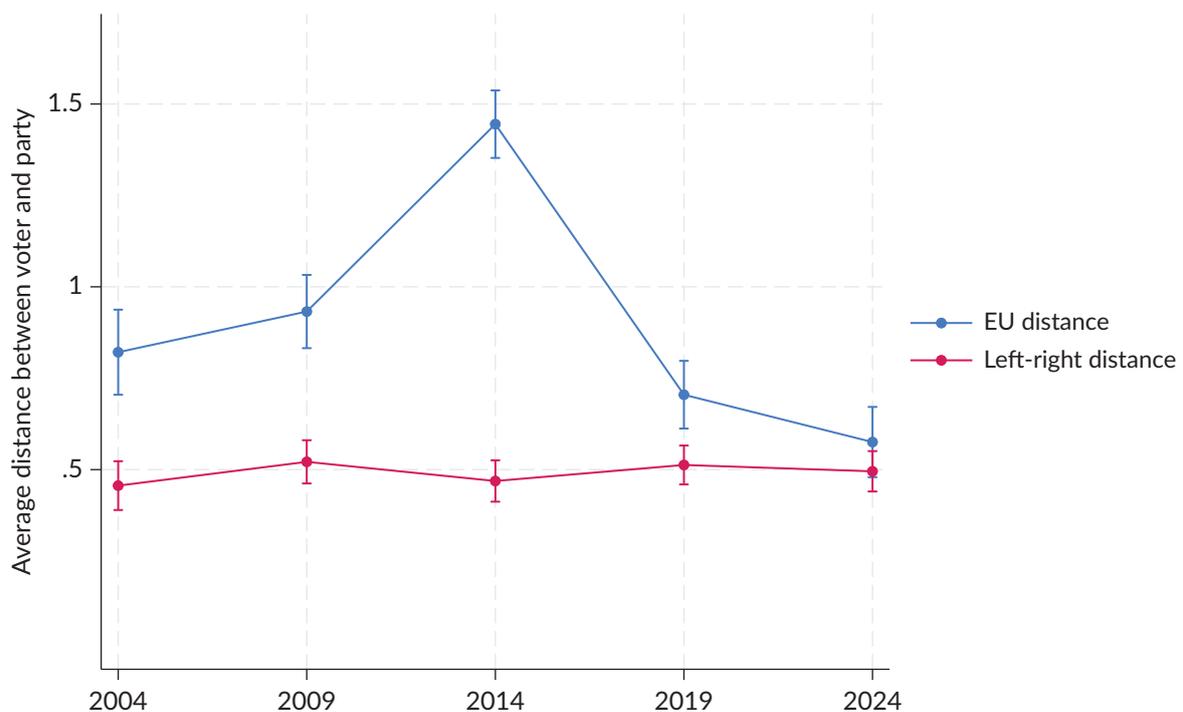


Figure 1. The development of the average distance between voters and their parties on the EU and left-right dimensions, 2004–2024 (the vertical bars indicate the 95% confidence intervals).

voters to find a party that is close to their own EU-position.

5. Conclusions

Surely our findings must be comforting for those concerned about the gap between political parties and their electorates. The incongruence between voters and parties on the EU dimension has become much smaller, and at the time of the 2024 EP elections, congruence over the EU was effectively as high or low as on the left–right dimension. Congruence was at its lowest in the 2014 elections held in the aftermath of the euro crisis. The longitudinal analysis, therefore, confirms our hypotheses about fluctuations in congruence (H3) and overall increasing congruence (H1).

However, we have deliberately been cautious in interpreting our findings, as it is very difficult to pinpoint the exact mechanisms behind the increased congruence. While we argued in line with the constraining dissensus thesis (Hooghe & Marks, 2009) that politicization of integration through the multiple crises should make parties more responsive to their voters, it is not possible to establish exact causality between individual crises and levels of congruence. For example, our analysis cannot answer the question of whether the observed increase in congruence in the last two elections is due to position movements by parties, voters, or both.

Furthermore, the EES surveys are executed every five years, meaning that factors other than crises can impact congruence. Yet it is interesting to note that the highest congruence recorded in 2024 followed both Brexit and the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, two crises that united more than divided Europeans, thus confirming H2. Future research could thus examine in more detail how individual events shape congruence, also at the level of countries, as the impact of crises varies between member states. More generally, scholars could explore contextual factors explaining variation in levels of congruence between different member states, for example, between southern and northern EU countries. These differences may be related to, for example, varying levels of EU salience between member states, parties, and voter groups.

Our explanatory party-level analysis yielded only weak support for H4–H7. Governing parties were no further apart from their voters than opposition parties. Ideological positions mattered in the 2004 and 2009 elections, but after that, congruence was rather similar between centrist and more radical parties. Party system fragmentation did not matter, and the explanatory power of party size has decreased over time. These findings warrant closer scrutiny in future studies. Particularly intriguing is the situation inside far-right or populist parties, most of which are highly critical of European integration. Many of these parties have joined governing coalitions and have therefore been directly involved in EU decision-making. Subsequent research should thus investigate variation within the far right and other party families. Another potentially interesting line of inquiry concerns variation driven by alternative party organizations. Theoretically, a plausible argument is that leader-centric parties should be more flexible and agile, both in terms of mobilization efforts and policy positions, than more decentralized parties where the leaders have less freedom of manoeuvre (Rahat, 2024; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). Such capacity for quick moves should facilitate ideological congruence, although, of course, party leaders have brand reputations and constant ideological zigzagging might backfire.

In line with most existing research, we have relied on the general EES question about the direction of

European integration. This question is arguably a valid measure as it captures respondents' overall preference regarding the future of the EU. Yet scholars have uncovered interesting variation in congruence between specific EU issues (e.g., Kelbel et al., 2023; Pareschi et al., 2023; Schmitt & Thomassen, 2000), but currently, data limitations make it impossible to examine congruence throughout the EU in a range of European questions. Another interesting line of inquiry concerns comparisons between the EU dimension and other cleavages or issues other than just the standard left-right dimension (e.g., Dalton, 2017). It is difficult to determine how congruence works over the EU without meaningful points of comparison. Finally, scholars should pay closer attention to the preferences of non-voters (Shim & Farag, 2025) who comprise around half of all eligible voters in the European Parliament elections.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data is available from the authors upon request.

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