

Closer or More Distant? The Congruence Between Elites and Voters on Swiss–EU Relations

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Abstract

Elite-citizen congruence is central to normative theories of representation. This article compares the preferences of Swiss elites and citizens about relations with the EU, examining whether patterns of elite-citizen divergence documented in EU member states extend to a non-member state with exceptionally high levels of economic integration. At a time when Switzerland and the EU are (re)negotiating their relations, this analysis is of great importance. Drawing on survey data from the 2023 Swiss Election Study (Selects) at both candidate and citizen levels, we test two hypotheses from the European integration literature. First, we expect political elites to favor closer relations with the EU more than voters. Second, we hypothesize that elites adopt more extreme positions than voters, with party elites from pro-European parties being more integrationist and those from Eurosceptic parties being more anti-integration than their respective electorates. Results support both hypotheses. Political elites are significantly more pro-EU than voters overall, while voters of the radical right Swiss People's Party are less reluctant about closer Swiss–EU relations than party elites, and moderate party voters (Social Democrats, Liberals, Center, Greens, and Green Liberals) favor closer ties less than their candidates. We argue that elite polarization represents the more fundamental driving factor, while the aggregate pro-EU elite bias reflects the specific balance of political forces in given contexts. This distinction has crucial implications: scholars should prioritize examining polarization dynamics across diverse settings rather than focusing exclusively on directional biases, thereby offering new analytical leverage for understanding democratic representation beyond formal EU membership.

Keywords

democracy; elite-citizen congruence; European integration; European Union; Euroscepticism; political parties; Switzerland

1. Introduction

A central idea of representative democracy is that citizens elect officials who are committed to act on their behalf. It is thus logical that congruence, i.e., the alignment of the political preferences of citizens with those of elected officials, has become a key criterion against which the quality of democracy is assessed by political scientists (Powell, 2000). Their interest in studying mass-elite congruence has substantially increased in the last two decades, leading to an “explosive growth” in publications about the issue—a growth largely driven by congruence studies covering established Western European democracies (Shim, 2024; Shim & Farag, 2025). The question of policy convergence between the masses and political elites strikes at the heart of democratic representation and raises fundamental issues of democratic governance from a normative perspective. Most importantly, substantial divergence between elite and citizen issue preferences may signal a breakdown in the representative relationship that underpins democratic legitimacy (Pitkin, 1967).

Indeed, persistent incongruence carries significant implications for democratic legitimacy. When elites and citizens operate with fundamentally different issue agendas, it becomes difficult for voters to hold their representatives accountable for addressing their most pressing concerns. This disconnect can foster political alienation, reduce civic engagement, and erode confidence in democratic processes more broadly. When political elites do not sufficiently take citizens’ preferences into consideration, this disconnect can undermine the foundational democratic principle that governments should be responsive to the will of the people (Dahl, 1971). Such misalignment potentially violates the implicit social contract between representatives and citizens, thereby calling into question whether democratic institutions are fulfilling their core function of translating citizen preferences into policy outcomes.

Today, this concern is particularly acute in the context of European integration, where persistent elite-citizen incongruence has decisively contributed to what many scholars characterize as a crisis of legitimacy for the European project (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Much ink has been spilled on the widening gap between pro-European political elites and electorates who are becoming increasingly dubious about the European integration process (e.g., Vogel & Göncz, 2018). The recent success of parties that express Euroscepticism or even call for an end to the EU confirms this trend, revealing the extent of mistrust and even open hostility toward European integration among large shares of the electorate.

While most existing research on elite-citizen congruence regarding European integration has focused on EU member states, far less attention has been paid to how these dynamics manifest in non-member states that nevertheless have close ties to the EU. This represents a significant gap in our understanding, particularly given that several European countries have chosen alternative forms of engagement with the EU while remaining outside its formal structures. Switzerland presents a particularly compelling case for examining elite-mass congruence on its relationship with the EU.

Swiss–EU relations not only rank among the most important political problems for Swiss citizens but are also the subject of repeated political contestation, notably in the context of direct-democratic votes. The historic rejection of the European Economic Area membership in 1992, the subsequent bilateral agreements, and ongoing debates about immigration and sovereignty have made European integration an extraordinarily salient and contentious issue in Swiss politics over recent decades (see, e.g., Jenni, 2015; Tresch et al., 2020; Wasserfallen, 2023). This persistent salience creates conditions under which the question of congruence

between political elites and citizens on European integration is of particular significance for both scholarly understanding and practical policymaking, especially in these times as the EU and Switzerland are (re)negotiating the institutional setting of their relationship.

Using data from the 2023 Swiss Election Study (Selects), this article examines the extent to which the opinions of political elites and voters coincide regarding Switzerland's relations with the EU. More specifically, we investigate whether the patterns of elite-citizen divergence documented in EU member states extend to a non-member state with high levels of economic European integration. Our analysis compares the preferences of candidates and voters across Switzerland's main political parties, testing two central hypotheses derived from the extensive literature on elite-citizen congruence in European integration politics.

First, we generally expect political elites to be more in favor of closer relations with the EU than voters, reflecting a pro-integrationist elite stance consistently documented by scholars across European democracies (Lauener, 2022; Mattila & Raunio, 2006; McEvoy, 2012; Moland, 2024; Pareschi et al., 2023; Raines et al., 2017; Real-Dato, 2017; Vogel & Göncz, 2018). This hypothesis draws on the constraining dissensus framework of post-functionalist theory (Hooghe & Marks, 2009) and empirical findings showing that political elites tend to be more cosmopolitan and integrationist than ordinary citizens due to their higher levels of economic, cultural, and educational capital (Stribis et al., 2019).

Second, we add more nuance by hypothesizing that elites adopt more extreme positions than their electorates, with pro-European parties' elites being more integrationist than their voters, while those from Eurosceptic parties are expected to hold more anti-integrationist views than their voters. This expectation is grounded in directional representation theory, which posits that candidates take issue positions that will move the status quo in the direction their electorate presumably prefers, making candidates' positions more extreme than those of their voters (Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989; Valen & Narud, 2007).

The empirical analysis provides support for both hypotheses derived from the European integration literature, thereby revealing patterns that extend established findings from EU member states to the Swiss non-member context. The results thus suggest that the dynamics of elite-citizen congruence on European integration are not confined to formal EU membership but operate according to similar logics more broadly across different forms of institutional arrangements. The fact that the established patterns of elite-citizen congruence on European integration are more universal features of contemporary European politics than previously recognized calls for a more inclusive approach to European integration studies that embraces the full spectrum of European integration experiences, rather than limiting analysis within the EU's internal borders.

Beyond this empirical contribution, our findings carry important theoretical implications for understanding elite-citizen congruence. The relationship between H1 (pro-EU elite bias) and H2 (elite extremity) reveals a crucial theoretical distinction: while H1 shows that elites appear more pro-integrationist overall, this aggregate pattern likely reflects the dominance of pro-European parties rather than a fundamental mechanism; H2 demonstrates the more fundamental dynamic, namely that parties systematically adopt more polarized positions than their voters regardless of their EU orientation, suggesting that elite polarization—not directional bias—is the primary driving force. This distinction has important implications for future research, as it suggests scholars should prioritize examining polarization dynamics across diverse political settings rather than focusing exclusively on directional biases in general.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. In Section 2, we provide a brief overview of the literature on elite-citizen congruence in European integration politics, tracing its evolution from the 1990s to the present. In Section 3, we then outline our case selection, discussing the historical evolution and empirical salience of European integration in Switzerland and describing the specific features that make the country a compelling case for this analysis. After laying out our theoretical expectations and hypotheses in Section 4, we describe the data, the operationalization, and our analytical approach in Section 5. Following the presentation of the empirical results in Section 6, we conclude by discussing their broader implications for understanding democratic representation in the context of European integration in Section 7.

2. Elite-Citizen Congruence on European Integration

The study of attitudes toward European integration has undergone a significant transformation, evolving into an autonomous political dimension within national politics across Europe (e.g., Costello et al., 2020; Pareschi et al., 2024; Shim, 2024). This development has been accompanied by growing scholarly attention to the degree of opinion congruence between political elites and citizens on European matters, particularly in the wake of the various crises that have affected the EU in recent decades. Since the pioneering research by Van der Eijk and Franklin (1991), a substantial body of literature has emerged examining the alignment between elite and mass attitudes on European integration. This research trajectory has been particularly relevant as the politicization of EU matters by partisan issue entrepreneurs has amplified the salience of European questions within individual member states and across the continent more broadly (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020).

The empirical findings reveal a striking pattern in the evolution of EU mass-elite congruence over the past three decades. Initially, during the 1990s, research documented relatively high levels of congruence regarding general European integration attitudes between political elites and citizens (e.g., Schmitt & Thomassen, 2000; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1999; Van der Eijk & Franklin, 1991). However, this agreement began to deteriorate significantly by the 2000s, when a clear divide emerged between pro-European political elites and increasingly opposed citizens (e.g., Costello et al., 2020; Mattila & Raunio, 2006; McEvoy, 2012).

This phenomenon has been characterized by scholars as the rise of “constraining dissensus”—a pivotal shift that highlights the growing gap between supportive political elites and a more skeptical public. The identification of this “sleeping giant” of unrepresented Eurosceptic mass attitudes has raised fundamental questions about democratic representation and legitimacy in the context of European integration (Van der Eijk & Franklin, 2004).

In retrospect, it has become clear that the Maastricht Treaty served as a watershed moment, ushering in an era of heightened issue salience around European integration. Eurosceptic political actors progressively brought the European dimension into the mainstream political discourse, fundamentally altering the political landscape (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Hooghe & Marks, 2009). In line with this transformation of European party systems, research on congruence has consistently identified significant discrepancies between supportive pro-European political elites and more reluctant citizens across various EU countries, thereby confirming this “pro-EU elite bias” (Mattila & Raunio, 2006; McEvoy, 2012; Pareschi et al., 2023; Raines et al., 2017; Real-Dato, 2017; Vogel & Göncz, 2018).

Some empirical studies have specifically targeted EU issue congruence at the party level, investigating the dynamics of congruence within different types of parties. For example, Bakker et al. (2018) find that in the 2014 European Parliament elections, greater incongruence (i.e., a larger distance) between a party's voters and the party on specific issues (including European integration) increases the likelihood of vote switching away from that party. Interestingly, the effects of incongruence are, however, not consistent across party families. While Liberals, Conservatives, and Socialists electorally suffer when they are incongruent with their voters on the EU integration issue, radical left and Christian Democratic party voters do not switch away from their party when incongruence on this issue is high, and radical right parties actually do even better when they are incongruent with their voters on the EU integration issue. In addition, McDonnell and Werner (2019) find that supporters of radical right populist parties are not always closely aligned with their party on the EU integration dimension—although these parties have hardened or made more salient their Eurosceptic positions after the 2008 economic crisis. The increased salience of Euroscepticism has thus not necessarily translated into tighter voter-party congruence on that issue, giving radical right parties some strategic flexibility.

While the “pro-EU elite bias” is still largely present, Mattila and Raunio (2025) interestingly show in their most recent study about voter-party congruence on the European integration dimension that the gap between the political elites and the masses has narrowed in the latest European elections in 2024, suggesting that voter-party congruence has, to some extent, become less of a problem compared to the beginning of the 2000s. Furthermore, it needs to be pointed out that there have been some instances over the past decade in which the population has adopted stronger pro-EU attitudes than their political elites. This applies in particular to some Eastern European countries with a majoritarian far-right Eurosceptic government, e.g., in Hungary and Poland, home to some of the most Eurosceptic elites in the EU alongside their populations that are rarely Eurosceptic (Gherghina & Tap, 2023; Paczeński, 2025), or with a divided political elite between pro-European and Eurosceptic parties cutting across government–opposition lines, e.g., in Bulgaria (Bankov & Gherghina, 2020).

3. Case Selection

This study seeks to gain some analytical leverage by focusing on an EU non-member state. Switzerland presents a particularly compelling case for examining elite-citizen congruence on European integration matters. Located at the heart of Europe, it is characterized by very high levels of economic integration within the EU single market. This makes the European integration issue politically both salient and contested (Dardanelli & Mazzoleni, 2021; Kriesi, 2007).

The trajectory of Swiss–EU relations has been marked by several pivotal moments that have shaped both elite and public attitudes toward European integration. In this respect, direct democracy played a crucial role (Church, 2021). Most importantly, the historic popular vote of December 1992, in which a slim majority of Swiss voters (50.3%) rejected European Economic Area membership, established the foundation for subsequent debates about European integration.

In 1999, Switzerland and the EU agreed on the Bilateral Agreements I (Schwok, 2020). These agreements, covering seven key domains including free movement of persons, technical barriers to trade, public procurement, agriculture, research, civil aviation, and overland transport, were subsequently endorsed by a two-thirds majority of Swiss voters in a referendum. The so-called “bilateral path” was further extended

through the Bilateral Agreements II in 2004, encompassing nine additional domains, including the controversial Schengen/Dublin cooperation agreements.

Despite initial opposition from radical right parties, these agreements were approved by almost 55% of voters in 2005, demonstrating continued public support for the bilateral approach. Since the bilateral agreements were introduced, the free movement of persons proved most controversial, yet Swiss citizens nevertheless confirmed the “bilateral path” through their acceptance of the extension of the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP) to include 10 Eastern European states (2005) as well as Bulgaria and Romania (2009).

Yet the salience of European integration in Swiss politics has experienced some notable fluctuations over time. While the prominence of this topic declined during the 2000s (Jenni, 2015; Safi, 2010), recent years have witnessed a resurgence of European politics as an intensely debated issue (Tresch et al., 2020; Wasserfallen, 2023).

This became particularly evident with the 2014 Against Mass Immigration initiative. This popular initiative, promoted by the Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP; in English, Swiss People’s Party) and opposed by moderate parties, resulted in a narrow victory (50.3% of voters and a necessary majority of cantons) calling for quotas on immigration—a direct challenge to the principles of the AFMP. This case epitomizes the enduring conflict lines in contemporary Swiss debates on European integration. The political constellation mirrored what has become a characteristic pattern: the radical right stood against a broad coalition comprising moderate and left parties, employers’ associations, trade unions, and the federal government.

The campaign rhetoric crystallized around fundamentally divergent visions of Switzerland’s relationship with Europe. The SVP and proponents of the initiative deployed a discourse centered on themes of sovereignty, anti-immigration, and national identity. Their messaging frequently portrayed the EU as an overly bureaucratic entity threatening Swiss autonomy, emphasizing Switzerland’s capacity for independent immigration management.

The opponents of the initiative, meanwhile, stressed economic pragmatism and international reliability, warning that the initiative endangered the bilateral path and Switzerland’s access to the single market. They emphasized the importance of maintaining trust in international agreements and highlighted the economic risks of jeopardizing Switzerland’s relationship with its most important trading partner.

The acceptance of the initiative in the popular vote represented a political shock that highlighted the persistent tensions between European integration commitments and domestic concerns about sovereignty and immigration. Both chambers of the Swiss Parliament implemented the initiative in a diluted form in 2016 by prioritizing Swiss-based job seekers in high-unemployment industries without introducing actual immigration quotas.

Recent developments, including citizens’ rejection of the so-called Limitation Initiative in September 2020, which would have terminated the AFMP in the case of a strict implementation, demonstrate the continued importance of understanding how public preferences align with or diverge from elite positions on European integration.

Still today, the future of Swiss–EU relations remains rather uncertain. The Swiss government’s decision to withdraw from negotiations about the so-called “institutional framework agreement” in May 2021 (Gago, 2024) created new tensions with Brussels. In March 2024, the EU and Switzerland embarked on new rounds of negotiations about the Bilateral Agreements III. This package aims to balance the customized Swiss sectoral participation in the EU single market and the EU’s interest in upholding the integrity of its single market with equal rules for all participants. It comprises several thematic elements, including new agreements (on electricity, food safety, and health) and solutions for the institutional questions, namely a dispute settlement procedure. Negotiations on this package were formally concluded in May 2025.

To summarize, the Swiss case offers valuable insights into how European integration politics function without EU membership, in a context of high levels of economic integration. The combination of direct-democratic institutions, bilateral agreements, and persistent political salience creates conditions where the question of congruence between political elites and citizens on European integration is of particular significance for both scholarly understanding and practical policymaking.

4. Hypotheses

The extensive research on elite-citizen congruence in European integration politics provides a foundation for developing theoretical expectations about how political elites and citizens might diverge in their preferences regarding Switzerland’s relations with the EU. In the following, we formulate two hypotheses based on this literature that focus on the relative positioning of elites and voters regarding Switzerland’s orientation toward European integration.

4.1. *Pro-European Integration Elite Bias Hypothesis*

The first hypothesis posits the existence of a general “pro-EU elite bias.” This expectation relies on the constraining dissensus framework of post-functionalist theory (Hooghe & Marks, 2009) and is underpinned by numerous elite-mass congruence analyses conducted especially since the 2000s across various European contexts (Mattila & Raunio, 2012; Raines et al., 2017; Real-Dato, 2017; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1999; Vogel & Göncz, 2018). Indeed, research on congruence has consistently shown that in EU member states, political elites are generally more supportive of European integration than citizens (e.g., Mattila & Raunio, 2012; Rosset & Stecker, 2019; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1997). In other words, the latter have consistently been found to be more Eurosceptic than the former. This pattern extends beyond parties to include governments, which are generally also more EU-integrationist than the citizens of their countries (Rosset & Stecker, 2019). Alongside increasing intra-party conflict on European integration issues (Hooghe & Marks, 2009), some longitudinal studies found evidence of a widening gap between the public and political elites (e.g., Freire et al., 2014; Vogel & Göncz, 2018), while others point to the relative stability of this gap over time (Marzi & Pareschi, 2025; Real-Dato, 2017).

The theoretical foundation for this elite-mass divide rests on what Strijbis et al. (2019) conceptualize as a pervasive “cosmopolitan-communitarian cleavage” in Western European societies. Several mechanisms explain why political elites tend to be more cosmopolitan and therefore more integrationist than ordinary citizens. Individuals with higher economic capital benefit from globalization and supranational economic integration and therefore support it, while those with lower economic capital tend to oppose it. In addition,

people with higher cultural capital, including transnational networks or elite status, favor globalization, while state-bound individuals oppose it. Finally, education plays a crucial role in explaining the divide between elites and citizens according to this theoretical approach. The highly educated are more likely to support supranational integration because they better understand the functional need for collective international problem-solving compared to those with fewer educational opportunities.

More recent comparative studies continue to confirm this general pattern while offering greater nuance. For instance, Pareschi et al. (2023) still find a structured elite-mass divide with elites being more EU-integrationist than voters in eight out of ten investigated countries. A longitudinal analysis reveals a “double-sided” gap whereby elites of pro-EU parties remain more supportive of integration than their voters, while among Eurosceptic parties, the opposite is true (Marzi & Pareschi, 2025). At the same time, the extent of the “pro-EU elite bias” appears to have changed in recent years. Mattila and Raunio (2025) show in their latest study on voter-party congruence in the 2024 European elections that the gap between elites and citizens has narrowed, suggesting that voter-party congruence on the European integration dimension has become less problematic compared to the early 2000s. This finding indicates that while this bias persists, it is gradually diminishing in some contexts, possibly due to the mainstreaming of EU issues and the politicization of integration in party competition.

Moreover, over the past decade, there have been multiple instances where the population exhibits stronger pro-EU attitudes than their political elites. This reversal is particularly visible in Eastern European countries governed by majoritarian far-right or Eurosceptic parties—such as Hungary and Poland—where elites have become among the most Eurosceptic in the EU, while their publics remain comparatively pro-European (Gherghina & Tap, 2023; Paczeński, 2025). Similar—though less pronounced—dynamics occur in countries with deeply divided political elites, such as Bulgaria, where pro-European and Eurosceptic forces coexist within the governing and opposition blocs (Bankov & Gherghina, 2020) or in the case of the Brexit vote, where almost no traces of a “pro-EU elite bias” could be found (Pareschi, 2024). These patterns highlight that the direction of elite-mass incongruence increasingly depends on domestic political competition and the strategic use of EU rhetoric by ruling elites.

While the general pattern of a more pronounced EU-integrationist stance among the elites than among citizens persists in most EU member states, new empirical evidence shows that such elite-mass incongruence is not confined to member states. In Norway, surveys comparing citizens, politicians, and bureaucrats find that elites—especially bureaucrats—are significantly more supportive of regulatory harmonization with the EU (Moland, 2024). Similarly, research in Switzerland demonstrates persistent elite-voter divergences regarding EU–Swiss relations, with political elites being significantly more EU-integrationist than voters in three out of four European integration matters under scrutiny (Lauener, 2022).

In a nutshell, political elites possess—on average—more economic, cultural, and educational capital than ordinary citizens and are hence more likely to hold cosmopolitan and integrationist attitudes. Yet this tendency is contingent rather than absolute: while in most Western and Southern European contexts, the “pro-EU elite bias” remains robust—although recently diminishing in size—recent evidence from Central and Eastern Europe indicates that the magnitude and direction of the gap depend on domestic political incentives, party-system polarization, and the institutional embeddedness of countries in the EU. Given these theoretical foundations and empirical findings from both EU and non-EU member states, the first hypothesis reads as follows:

H1: Political elites are more in favor of European integration than voters.

4.2. *Extremity Hypothesis*

The second hypothesis adds more nuance by addressing the aspect of polarization between elites and citizens on European integration. Several representation studies on European political systems have found that political parties tend to adopt more extreme policy positions than their electorates (Esaïasson et al., 1996; Listhaug et al., 1990; Valen & Narud, 2007), meaning their support for or opposition to specific issues is more pronounced (Iversen, 1994; see also Holmberg, 1997). This observation challenges the traditional Downsian model of electoral competition (Downs, 1957), which suggests that politicians should reflect their voters' preferences and share similar positions with their electorate. Instead, some empirical evidence in party-level congruence studies supports the directional theory of issue voting (Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989), which argues that direction rather than proximity attracts voters' interest and attention.

According to the directional representation theory, candidates take issue positions that will move the status quo in the direction their electorate presumably prefers, making candidates' positions necessarily more extreme than those of their voters. In multiparty systems with multidimensional policy spaces, voters may not vote for parties that best reflect their own position, but rather for parties that represent a more extreme view in their preferred direction (Valen & Narud, 2007). From an electoral point of view, this pattern makes sense: political parties need clear ideological profiles and strong opinions on important political issues to mobilize their core constituencies, even at the cost of somewhat reducing representational congruence with them (Dalton, 2017; Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2016). With regard to the issue of European integration, the study by McDonnell and Werner (2019) suggests that directional dynamics suit the political struggle better than congruence-based dynamics in the case of populist radical right parties.

Comparative analyses of European party systems show that polarization on European integration has intensified at the elite level. Drawing on expert surveys before and after the Eurozone crisis, Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2016) demonstrate that while mainstream parties in both Western and Eastern Europe largely maintained pro-integration stances, new challenger and extremist parties moved sharply toward Euroscepticism, widening the divide among political elites. The authors' cross-national evidence further shows that elite positions on European integration cluster at the poles of the integration scale (Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2016), whereas public attitudes tend to be more heterogeneous and context-dependent, shaped by national experiences and partisan cues rather than clear-cut ideological extremes (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). This asymmetry reflects a broader pattern of elite differentiation in Europe's "transnational cleavage" (Hooghe & Marks, 2018), in which elites articulate clearer and more polarized positions on supranational governance than the general electorate.

Research on ideological congruence between political elites and citizens in the Swiss context also reveals that elites tend to be more polarized than citizens (Lauener, 2022; Leimgruber et al., 2010). Indeed, party elites systematically adopt positions that are considerably more extreme than those their electorates prefer. Moreover, Giger and Lefkofridi (2014) show that party-voter congruence in Switzerland depends strongly on issue salience, with niche parties in particular achieving higher congruence when they emphasize the issues their voters care most about. In Switzerland's multiparty system with proportional voting, taking a clear stance on European integration policies—which rank among the political concerns citizens voice most frequently

during election campaigns (e.g., Tresch et al., 2020)—helps candidates sharpen their electoral profile. This leads to the expectation that while candidates represent clear yet more pronounced positions concerning European integration questions, the views of voters tend to be more moderate.

We propose to specify the extremity hypothesis by considering two types of parties—pro-European parties and Eurosceptic parties. The former basically refers to moderate parties and typically includes those from the center-left and the center-right. They have constituted a considerably larger grouping than their Eurosceptic counterparts for decades and have presumably driven the overall presence of the pro-EU elite bias. Political elites of pro-European parties likely maintain more positive stances on European integration than their voters. Conversely, recent studies reveal that contemporary Eurosceptic actors often hold more extreme views than their supporters, whether they are radical right populist parties or parties positioned at the edges of the political spectrum (Bakker et al., 2018; Marzi & Pareschi, 2025; McDonnell & Werner, 2019). This pattern implies that both poles of the integration dimension are marked by elite extremity: pro-European elites are more supportive of European integration and Eurosceptic elites are more reluctant than their respective voters. We are now equipped to formulate the second hypothesis:

H2: Political elites have more extreme positions on European integration than voters with higher (lower) support levels among political elites of pro-European (Eurosceptic) parties.

5. Data and Operationalization

This study relies on data collected within the framework of the 2023 Swiss Election Study (Selects). We use a question on respondents' opinions regarding a closer relationship with the EU. The focus on the election year of 2023 is important for our study because it marks a critical turning point in negotiations about Swiss–EU relations: after the failed first attempt to negotiate an institutional framework agreement and the Swiss government's pullout in May 2021 (see Section 3), the bilateral relationship between the two partners deteriorated, creating a vacuum in which no one really knew what direction the future relationship might take. This study thus allows for a unique snapshot of opinions on the bilateral relationship, as the data were collected *before* negotiations about the Bilateral Agreements III began in March 2024. On the voters' side, we make use of the Selects Panel Survey (Selects, 2025a). On the candidates' side, we rely on responses to a question from “smartvote,” the Swiss Voting Advice Application, that was subsequently merged with the Selects Candidate Survey (Selects, 2025b). The merging of this question into the Candidate Survey was due to the fact that, unfortunately, there were no questions about the Swiss–EU relationship asked directly in the Candidate Survey. However, matching the “smartvote” data with the Candidate Survey data, luckily, allows for our article's endeavor of direct voter-candidate comparisons.

The Selects Panel Survey aims at studying the evolution of political opinions and vote intention/choice during the different phases of the election cycle. It started in 2023 with three online panel waves and continues with yearly follow-up waves until after the next federal elections in 2027. In 2023, the first panel wave was fielded *before* the election campaign (June–August), the second *during* the election campaign (September–October), and the third *after* the elections took place (October–November). A total of 30,872 individuals across all Swiss cantons were randomly sampled by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office. Sample members had to be Swiss citizens living in Switzerland, aged 18 or older. 8,197 citizens responded in the first wave (response rate, 26.6%), 6,077 in the second (retention rate based on all those who could be recontacted, 75.1%), and 5,579

in the third (retention rate, 91.9%). For this analysis, we mainly use variables from the first panel wave, which also contains the question about closer relations with the EU. As to party vote choice, we use the question on respondents' party vote choice asked in the third (post-election) wave or, in very few cases, in the second wave for voters who had already voted by postal voting toward the end of wave 2. This leaves us with a final N of 4,437 voters.

The 2023 Selects Candidate Survey was conducted among all candidates running for the National Council (Lower House) and/or the Council of States (Upper House). Its main aim is to understand the candidates' career paths, political attitudes, and campaign activities. This survey was fielded applying a mixed-mode approach: after the federal elections, all candidates were invited to fill in an online questionnaire, and those who had not taken part before December 2023 received a paper questionnaire as part of a reminder. Out of the 5,997 candidates for the National Council and the Council of States, 2,527 took part in the survey (92% online and 8% through the paper questionnaire; response rate, 42.1%). A total of $N = 2,394$ candidates answered the "smartvote" question on closer relations with the EU and could be matched with the Candidate Survey data.

Voters and candidates were asked about their opinions on whether they supported closer relations with the EU, not in an identical but very similar way. The question from the Panel Survey reads as follows: "Some people believe that Switzerland should strengthen its cooperation with the EU. Others believe that Switzerland should increase its independence from the EU. Where would you position yourself on this issue?" Respondents could position themselves on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *very much in favor of strengthening cooperation with the EU* to 5 = *very much in favor of increasing independence from the EU*, with the middle category 3 = *neither nor*. The wording of the question for candidates was the following: "Do you support closer relations with the European Union (EU)?" Respondents were asked to position themselves on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *no* to 4 = *yes*, with "rather no" and "rather yes" in between. To allow for comparison and congruence analyses between voters and the political elites, the two response scales were standardized to range from 0 (least support) to 3 (most support for closer relations with the EU).

Müller et al. (2012) and Shim and Gherghina (2020) suggest that researchers should clearly outline their research decisions in congruence studies. Above all, this requires a definition of the two groups being compared, i.e., elites and citizens. This study puts the election context in the foreground as the two data sources stem from surveys conducted in the framework of the 2023 Swiss federal elections (see Bernhard, 2024). More specifically, we investigate to what extent the electoral supply side (candidates) is congruent with the demand side (voters). Rather than inquire into the quality of representation of citizens' opinions in parliament, we analyze how parties reflect their electorates on the issue of closer relations with the EU. Unfortunately, the number of elected candidates, i.e., MPs, is simply too low (with standard deviations becoming too large) to allow for reliable and conclusive congruence analyses between party voters and MPs. However, as a robustness check, we nevertheless additionally conducted our congruence analyses on the very restricted sample of elected candidates to see whether our main results hold (see Section 6.2). Therefore, in this article, we do not only mean "elected members of parliament" or "parties' (average) positions"—as is the case for most representation studies (Shim & Gherghina, 2020, p. 512), including those using, e.g., manifesto data—but *all* candidates who ran in the election under scrutiny when referring to the term "political elites." The second group, "the citizens," is defined as those citizens who took part in the elections. Hence, non-voters are excluded from the analyses. The analysis considers the six major parties of Switzerland: SVP, FDP.Die Liberalen (FDP; in English, The Liberals), Die Mitte (The Centre), Grünliberale

Partei (GLP; Green Liberal Party), Sozialdemokratische Partei (SP; Social Democratic Party), and Grüne Partei der Schweiz (GPS; Green Party).

Our empirical analysis examines candidate-voter congruence on Switzerland's relations with the EU. We proceed in two steps: first, we provide descriptive statistics that map the distribution of preferences among both voters and candidates for Switzerland's main political parties. Second, we rely on inferential statistics to test our two hypotheses. Using t-test statistics, we hereby investigate whether the mean position of candidates is significantly different from the mean position of voters, overall (H1) and across the different parties (H2). Note that for the descriptive and the overall inferential analyses, we use weights that are already available in the data sets to make the data representative of the surveyed populations. For the candidates, we use the design weight and the party weight that correct biases in the cantonal and party-related distribution of candidates. For the voters, we use the total weight that contains both the design and party weight, correcting biases related to the cantonal distribution of voters and adjusting the distribution of party affiliations to the (real) vote shares of the parties in the 2023 federal elections.

6. Results

6.1. Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive analysis reveals distinct patterns in how Swiss voters and political candidates view closer relations with the EU. Beginning with the electorate, Figure 1 shows that Swiss voters exhibit a nuanced but generally favorable stance toward European integration.

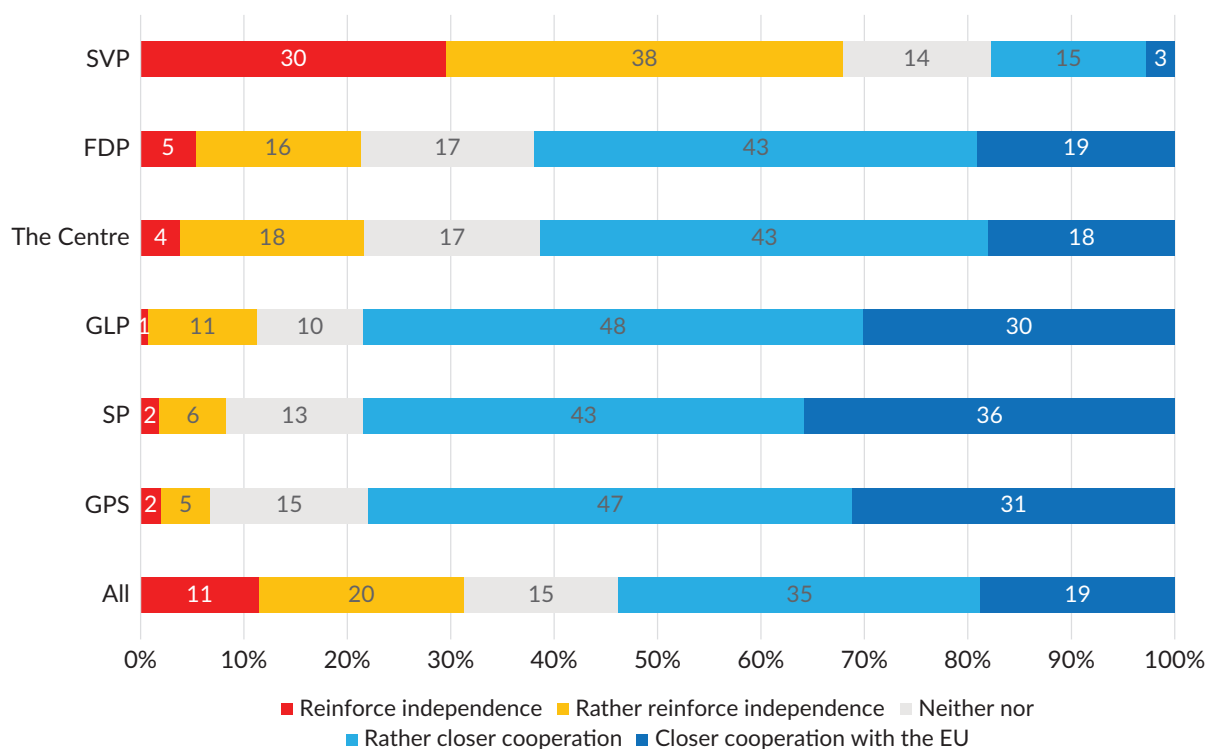


Figure 1. Voters' positions on closer relations with the EU. Notes: Weighted results for the group "all"; $N = 4,437$; N per party, see Table 1.

Overall, a majority (54%) of respondents who participated in the 2023 Swiss federal elections favor closer relations with the EU (sum of the responses “rather closer cooperation” and “closer cooperation with the EU”), while 31% tend to be reluctant (either “reinforce independence” or “rather reinforce independence”), and the remaining 15% choose “neither nor.” This finding indicates that the Swiss electorate maintains a generally pro-integrationist orientation.

However, these aggregate figures mask considerable variation across party lines. The strongest support for closer relations emerges among the electorates of the GLP, GPS, and SP (78–79%), reflecting the cosmopolitan orientation typically associated with these parties. Relatively high support levels are observed among The Centre and FDP voters (61–62%). In stark contrast, opposition to closer EU relations originates primarily from the radical right. Indeed, the voters of the SVP tend to be against a closer relationship (68%). This pattern aligns with the SVP’s long-standing Eurosceptic positioning and its emphasis on Swiss sovereignty and independence.

Turning to political elites, the survey data reveals more pronounced pro-integrationist tendencies (see Figure 2). Overall, 74% of candidates tend to be in favor of closer relations (28% are rather in favor and 46% in favor), while opposition accounts for the remaining quarter (25%). Compared to voters, candidates are found to be more strongly in favor of closer relations with the EU (more pro-integrationist). This pattern provides initial support for H1, confirming the existence of a pro-European elite bias in the Swiss political landscape.

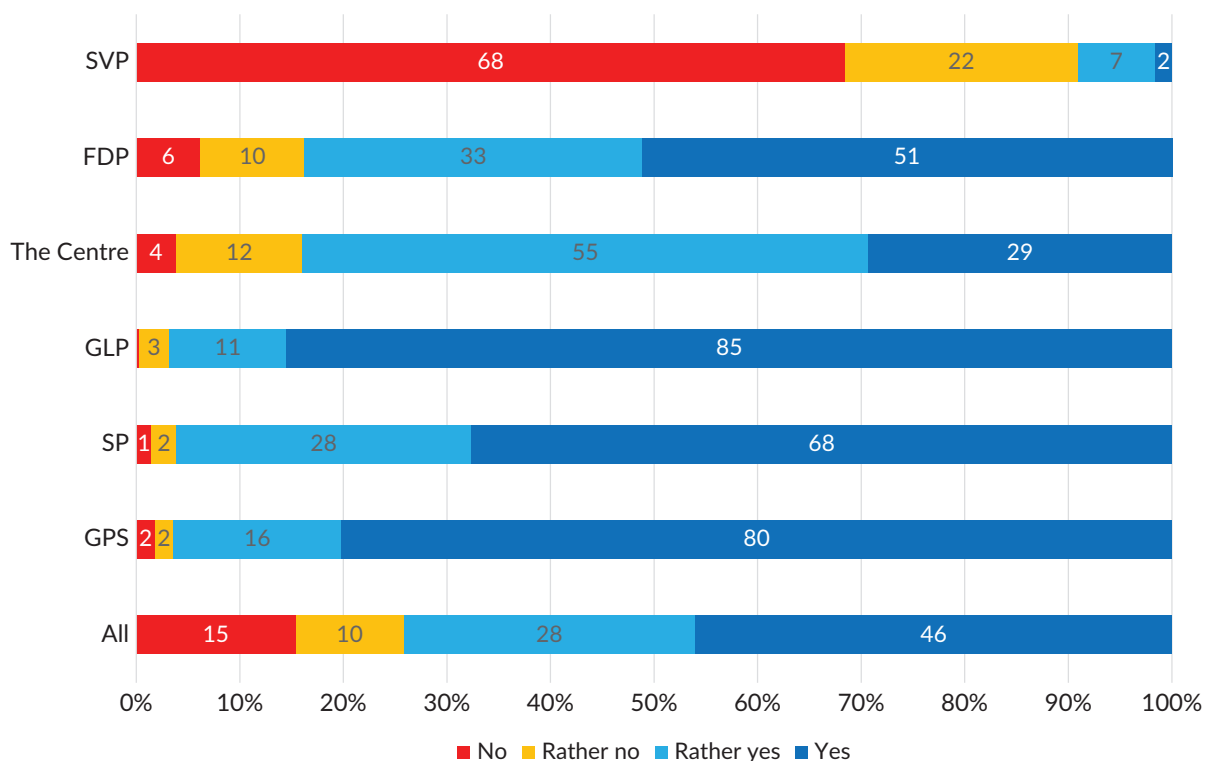


Figure 2. Candidates’ positions on closer relations with the EU. Notes: Weighted results for the group “all”; $N = 2,394$; N per party, see Table 1.

At the party level, the strongest support for closer relations with the EU emerges among candidates from the GLP, SP, and GPS (96%), indicating a widespread pro-integrationist sentiment within these parties’ political

elites. Very high support is also observable for FDP and The Centre candidates (84%), suggesting that moderate parties' elites are substantially more pro-European than their already favorable electorates. By contrast, fierce opposition to closer relations with the EU characterizes the candidates of the SVP (90%), indicating that the radical right party's Euroscepticism is stronger at the elite level than among its voters.

Hence, candidates exhibit more pronounced opinions than voters, with higher shares in the extreme categories. This pattern provides preliminary evidence supporting H2, the extremity hypothesis.

6.2. Inferential Analysis

Table 1 presents a systematic comparison between the average positions of Swiss voters and candidates on closer relations with the EU using the standardized scale that ranges from 0 to 3. The inferential analysis provides strong empirical support for both hypotheses. Beginning with H1, the comparison of all voters and candidates reveals that candidates (2.05) prove to be significantly more integrationist than voters (1.72). The t-statistics confirm that this difference is significant at the 0.1% error level. Overall, we can thus posit that political elites are more supportive of closer relations with the EU than voters, providing robust support for H1.

Table 1. Comparison between voters and candidates on closer relations with the EU.

Groups	N	Mean support for a closer relationship with the EU (0–3)	Difference (voters-candidates)	T-statistic	Are elites more integrationist than voters?
SVP voters	916	0.92	0.50	7.67***	No
SVP candidates	187	0.42			
FDP voters	583	1.91	–0.38	–5.91***	Yes
FDP candidates	258	2.29			
The Centre voters	667	1.90	–0.19	–3.99***	Yes
The Centre candidates	467	2.09			
GLP voters	442	2.22	–0.60	–13.93***	Yes
GLP candidates	378	2.82			
SP voters	1,037	2.28	–0.34	–7.88***	Yes
SP candidates	337	2.62			
GPS voters	459	2.25	–0.49	–10.70***	Yes
GPS candidates	333	2.75			
All voters	4,437	1.72	–0.32	–12.65***	Yes
All candidates	2,394	2.05			

Notes: Negative values for the difference between voters and candidates indicate weaker mean support among voters than candidates; significance levels: *** = $p < 0.001$, ** = $p < 0.01$, * = $p < 0.05$; weighted results for the groups “all voters” and “all candidates.”

Let us now turn to H2. The five pro-integrationist parties all display negative differences, meaning that candidates are, on average, more in favor of closer relations with the EU than their voters. The magnitude of these differences ranges from 0.19 (for The Centre) to 0.60 (for the GLP). However, t-statistics reveal that

these mean differences are highly significant ($p < 0.001$) for all parties. The opposite pattern applies to the SVP from the radical right. Their candidates are, on average, less in favor of closer relations than their voters (0.42 vs. 0.92). Again, the difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that SVP elites adopt more Eurosceptic positions than their electorate.

The analysis at the party level demonstrates that candidates have consistently more pronounced anti-European (in the case of the SVP) or pro-European positions (for the moderate and leftist parties) than their voters. The positions are significantly different in the expected direction across all parties. This pattern thus strongly confirms the extremity hypothesis (H2).

As Golder and Stramski (2010) point out, there are more refined measures of congruence than comparing mean values. In order to investigate the degree to which the two distributions of opinions—among the voters and the political elites—resemble each other, the authors propose a “many-to-many” approach to conceptualize congruence. As this study investigates congruence with regard to where the political elites position themselves and to what degree they represent their electorates’ positions (see H1 and H2), such refined measures of congruence based on the variance or distribution of opinions between the two groups are not conducive to the purpose of this article. However, we use the “many-to-many” congruence measure as a robustness check for the empirical analyses on the differences in mean positions presented in Table 1 and describe the obtained results in Section 1 of the Supplementary File.

Furthermore, we additionally conducted the congruence analyses on the restricted sample of elected candidates (MPs) to see whether the in Tabel 1 reported results comparing all political elites with all voters hold (see Table A2 in the Supplementary File). Because of the very low number of MPs in the Candidate Survey, the results need to be interpreted with caution. However, there is a tendency for elected candidates to be more supportive of closer relations than voters. At the party level, the additional analyses substantiate the results: the elected candidates are always (and mostly significantly) more extreme than their electorates. Interestingly, comparing Tables 1 and A2, we can also state that, on the party level, elected candidates are more extreme than the group of elected and non-elected candidates together.

To sum up, the empirical analysis reveals systematic patterns of elite-citizen divergence that are in line with theoretical expectations derived from the broader European integration literature. Both descriptive and inferential analyses confirm that Swiss political elites are more supportive of closer EU relations than voters overall, while simultaneously demonstrating that candidates adopt more polarized positions than their respective party electorates, whether in a pro-integrationist or Eurosceptic direction.

7. Conclusion

This article examined the congruence between political elites and citizens regarding Switzerland’s relations with the EU, using data from the 2023 Swiss Election Study (Selects). Our empirical analysis aimed to understand whether the patterns of elite-citizen divergence documented in EU member states extend to a non-member state with exceptionally high levels of economic integration with the EU.

The empirical findings provide strong support for both hypotheses examined in this article. Consistent with the “pro-EU elite bias” documented by previous studies across mostly Western European democracies, we

found that Swiss political elites are, on average, more favorable toward closer EU relations than voters. This basic pattern confirms that the constraining dissensus framework extends beyond the scope of the EU to encompass countries navigating complex bilateral relations with it. In this respect, it is interesting to note that Mattila and Raunio (2025) recently found the congruence gap between voters and parties regarding European integration to have narrowed.

In addition, our results support the more nuanced extremity hypothesis, demonstrating that candidates adopt more polarized positions on European integration than their electorates. More specifically, this pattern manifests differently across the political spectrum. While candidates from the main moderate pro-European parties (i.e., GPS, SP, GLP, The Centre, and FDP) express stronger integrationist preferences than their voters, SVP candidates are even more Eurosceptic than their already skeptical electorate. The confirmation of the extremity hypothesis is substantiated by the recent study of Toshkov (2025) based on 19 EU member states, Norway, Switzerland, and the UK, showing that public opinion is much less structured and less extreme than party positions.

Our results contribute to several scholarly debates. First, they extend the geographic delimitation of elite-citizen congruence research beyond EU member states, demonstrating that similar dynamics operate in countries with alternative forms of European integration. The Swiss case provides valuable insights into how European integration politics function in non-member states, complementing recent findings from Brexit-era Britain (Pareschi, 2024) that similarly challenged simplistic narratives of pro-European elites vs. Eurosceptic citizens. We therefore argue that EU scholars should systematically incorporate non-member states into their analytical frameworks, particularly those with significant levels of European integration. Countries like Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and the UK (in the post-Brexit era) offer valuable analytical leverage for understanding how European integration politics function across different institutional arrangements. Such inclusion would not only enhance the empirical robustness of findings but also contribute to more theoretically sophisticated accounts by scholars when it comes to truly comprehensive European integration.

Second, we believe the relationship between the findings based on the two examined hypotheses deserves further consideration, as it illuminates a crucial theoretical distinction in elite-citizen congruence research. While H1 captures the aggregate pattern showing that political elites are more pro-integrationist than voters overall, this general finding may in fact mask more nuanced dynamics revealed by H2. The overall pro-European elite bias (H1) may emerge largely because pro-European parties such as Conservatives, Socialists, Liberals, and the Greens still constitute the dominant force in many countries. However, the confirmation of the extremity hypothesis (H2) reveals that this aggregate pattern can obscure the underlying mechanism: parties consistently adopt more polarized positions than their electorates, regardless of their pro- or anti-European orientation. This probably suggests that H2 represents the more fundamental driving factor (i.e., elite polarization as opposed to pro-EU bias), while H1 reflects the overall issue-specific power balance between supporters and opponents in a given political context. Understanding this distinction may be crucial for future comparative research. Scholars may prioritize examining elite polarization dynamics across diverse political contexts rather than focusing exclusively on directional biases in general. Hence, systematically analyzing how varying compositions of pro- and anti-European forces in different party systems shape aggregate congruence patterns may resolve some puzzles in congruence research, such as the intriguing cases related to the domination of Eurosceptical parties (e.g., Fidesz in Hungary). In any case, such a clarification can be expected to strengthen both theoretical and empirical contributions in congruence research.

Third, our findings qualify the conventional wisdom about elite-citizen gaps in European integration. While we confirm the existence of systematic differences between elites and citizens, these differences are more nuanced than often portrayed. The high overall degree of congruence we observe suggests that Swiss democracy continues to function effectively in translating citizen preferences into elite representation, even on highly contentious issues like European integration. The persistence of European integration as a salient and contested issue in Swiss politics over the last decades may be key in explaining the high level of congruence shown here. More specifically, the Swiss case may illuminate the role of institutional context in shaping elite-citizen dynamics. Switzerland's direct democratic institutions create unique incentives for political elites, who are obliged to regularly defend their positions before voters in the framework of direct-democratic votes. This institutional factor may thus help explain why the elite-citizen gaps we observe, while systematic, remain relatively modest compared to some EU member states.

This study comes with some limitations, however. First, and most obviously, it focused exclusively on Switzerland, limiting the generalizability of our findings to other non-member states with different institutional arrangements or levels of European integration. Future comparative research should account for the temporal, geographical, historical, and political contexts that shape elite-citizen congruence on European integration. In particular, distinctions between Eastern and Western European democracies warrant careful consideration, especially given the dominance of Eurosceptic parties in government in countries such as Hungary and Poland, which may produce fundamentally different congruence patterns. For instance, Winćławska and Paczećniak (2025) show in their recent study that while Poland remains one of the most pro-European societies, the country has nevertheless encountered growing support for Eurosceptic parties, increasing criticism of the EU across the political spectrum, and a general shift toward the right in its political discourse. The authors explain this seemingly paradoxical finding by the fact that parties are increasingly using different frames—either portraying the EU as an opportunity or a threat—in a very strategic manner, allowing them to incorporate some Eurosceptic elements regarding specific EU policies into their narratives and to constantly adapt their responsiveness to voters and evolving public opinion (Winćławska & Paczećniak, 2025).

Second, the slight methodological inconsistencies between the elite and the citizen survey (4-point vs. 5-point scales) may be cause for concern, though we expect no systematic distortions in this regard. Third, our focus on European integration may not reflect congruence patterns in other or more specific domains, suggesting the need for empirical investigations that offer a more comprehensive look at several issues (see, e.g., Lauener, 2022). In addition, the absence of a Eurosceptic far-left party from our analysis reflects the configuration of Swiss party politics but limits our ability to assess whether the extremity patterns we observe extend across the entire ideological spectrum.

Despite these limitations, our findings offer both theoretical and practical insights. They demonstrate that the dynamics of European integration politics extend beyond formal EU membership, contributing to our understanding of how democratic representation functions in highly salient international relations. As European integration continues to evolve and face new challenges, understanding the relationships between elite and citizen preferences in both member and non-member states remains essential for assessing the democratic foundations of states across the European continent. The pro-European elite bias documented across EU member states clearly extends to Switzerland's unique non-member context, while the extremity hypothesis receives robust confirmation across the Swiss party system. The systematic nature

of these patterns, combined with their high statistical significance, suggests that elite-citizen dynamics on European integration operate according to similar logics regardless of formal EU membership status.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in SWISSUBase at <https://doi.org/10.48573/na65-n937> (Selects Panel Survey) and <https://doi.org/10.48573/sc3n-yw36> (Selects Candidate Survey).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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