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Elections and Ideological Congruence in Parliamentary Democracies

Democracy means, classically, "government by the people." For a very long time, democracy in a large political system was believed by most thoughtful people to be both undesirable and unachievable. It was undesirable for two reasons. First, "the people" did not have the time, interest, knowledge, or ability to be able to govern with competence. Second, the majorities of "the people" were much less well-off and, in governing, would strip the better-off of their assets and status, precipitating intense conflict, bankruptcy, or both. Democracy in a large political system was in any case unachievable because, practically, it was impossible to bring the people together to collectively engage with the issues and tasks of governing.

In the nineteenth century, these views of democracy began gradually to change. One important element in the changes was the emergence of institutions of electoral representation, especially competitive legislative elections and political parties. In a practical way, these made an indirect form of democracy possible; "the people" could not all be brought together to engage the tasks of governing, but they could choose representatives to act for them. As legislators, these representatives could consider issues and make policies. As executives, these representatives could maintain institutional order and implement the policies. Elections could become "instruments" of democracy (Cohen 1971). The citizens also came more often to be seen as capable of identifying their own most fundamental interests and as deserving an equal opportunity to pursue these (e.g., Mill [1861] 1958; Dahl 1989).

Moreover, representation could be more than just a practical way of indirect popular government. It could also be a way of overcoming the

problems created by an uninformed and disinterested citizenry. In her penetrating analysis of the concept of representation, Hanna Pitkin characterized good political representation as "acting in the interests of the represented, in a manner responsive to them" (1967, 209). She appreciated the potential issue conflicts between the informed and engaged representative and his or her less aware principals and explained how the good representative should work in the political context to alleviate these.

Jane Mansbridge develops and expands these concepts of political representation. "Representation," she argues, "is, and is normatively intended to be, something more than a defective substitute for direct democracy. Constituents choose representatives not only to think more carefully than they about ends and means, but also to negotiate more perceptively and fight more skillfully than constituents have either time or the inclination to do" (2003, 515).

Yet, representation has its distinctive problems. Even in the simplest case of single issues and single principals, there is always the temptation for the representative to take advantage of knowledge and proximity to power to advocate in his or her own interests rather than those of his or her constituents. As Mansbridge explains, however, election can create a "promissory" connection between the voters and their representative and also a sanctioning mechanism that enables citizens to punish the unfaithful representative who fails to keep those promises. Elections can also promote an "anticipatory" connection between citizens and representatives as the representatives try to guess what the citizens will want in the next election, and a connection through selection, when citizens select a "gyroscopic," or internally propelled, representative to serve their interests. Like Pitkin, she also stresses the critical role of the good representative in framing issues and educating the citizens in a dynamic way, which enhances the potential superiority of representation over direct democracy.

Beyond the problem of unfaithful and incompetent representation, the complexity of citizen preferences poses further problems for representation. Most adult residents in democracies tend to be ignorant of many political issues, especially those removed from their daily lives. Vast increases in levels of education and communication no doubt alleviate the problem somewhat. Yet, the first public opinion surveys in the mid-twentieth century revealed depths of citizen ignorance that shocked the academic investigators; today, even better information underscores that

shock (Lazersfeld et al. 1948; Campbell et al. 1960; Achen and Bartels 2016).

At roughly the same time that public opinion surveys revealed widespread citizen ignorance of politics and political issues, even in an educated representative democracy, rigorous analysis of the theoretical properties of aggregating preferences revealed unsuspected limitations of majority rule. The landmark work of Kenneth Arrow (1951) and his successors, especially in its political applications of William Riker (1982a), revealed how, when people have many dimensions in their preferences, applying majority rule to those preferences can lead to many different outcomes, with no single "best" outcome preferred to all the others. Results of this kind led Riker to despair of the value of the entire promissory connection between voters and their governments. There is no popular "will" that can be discovered, no best substantive connection between citizens and policy makers, only nearly random outcomes that frequently result in electoral dismissals of incumbents (Riker 1982a, 244).

At this point, "ideology," in the sense of a dominant single dimension of political discourse, comes to our aid. As the formal studies have shown, and as Riker explicitly acknowledges (1982a, 128), if the issues can be understood in a single dimension, then it is possible to identify the ideally best single outcome. That outcome is the position that would defeat each other position if voted upon in a pair comparison by rational voters. That position corresponds to the position of the median voter in a single-dimensional space. On the scale of large democracies, political parties and party competition often are seen to structure the potentially infinite issue configurations into something like a single dimension of electoral competition.

IDEOLOGICAL CONGRUENCE AS DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION

Progress and doubts. A large empirical, comparative literature has taken shape in the last 25 years comparing and analyzing the correspondence between the ideological preferences of citizens and the positions of policy makers in national democracies (see, e.g., Cox 1997; Powell 2000; McDonald and Budge 2005; Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011; Budge et al. 2012; Warwick 2016).[1] This research has engaged us because

[1] There is also a much older literature analyzing such connections in particular democracies, such as the United States, dating back at least to the paradigmatic work of Miller and

consistent ideological correspondence seems to be an essential democratic value.

Almost all of this research assumes that both the ideological preferences of citizens and the commitments of those who govern them can be identified in each country on the same single-dimensional continuum. This continuum is usually referred to as a "left" to "right" scale, as I shall refer to it here, but in some elections, other terms may be applied. No great sophistication or constraint is assumed. The policy contents of similar ideological positions may and do vary from country to country and even from election to election in a single country. (Similarly, for differing numerical positions assigned to similar parties by citizens in their respective countries, see Best 2013.) The ideological content in each election is shaped by the political discourse of active participants in the political process, especially by the political parties as they compete for elected office.

The now extensive scholarship on ideological congruence has used a variety of approaches to identify the left–right positions of citizens and political parties in a given election.[2] Each of these has advantages and disadvantages of availability, accuracy, and comparability (Powell 2009). In this book, I use primarily two simple public opinion survey questions that first ask citizens to place themselves on a 0–10 scale from "left" to "right" and then to place each of the parties on that scale. Greater distances between those positions, not the positions themselves, indicate failure of ideological congruence. This approach seems most plausibly to estimate the distance between the position of the average citizen and the average perceived position of each political party on the same scale. However, in Chapter 2, several other approaches, using expert placements and parties' self-declared positions, are also applied to demonstrate the general robustness of some major conclusions.

Because "ideological" self-placements of this kind summarize in simple fashion the policy issues in the political discourse that are significant to the average citizen in a democratic country at the time of election, the

Stokes (1963) and extended to a variety of other democracies. See the review in Powell (2004).

[2] In the parliamentary systems in developed democracies, members of the same party frequently are required to campaign under a common party platform (manifesto), and there is usually very, very high consistency in the ideological behavior of members of the same party in the legislature. In some countries, citizens may not even be able to vote for individuals within the same party. For these reasons, there is little choice but to focus on political parties as the ideological units in the comparative analysis.

congruence between those citizen self-identifications and the commitments of the parties that control policy making after the election is normatively meaningful. We would expect such correspondence as a democratic value and as an implication of much theory about electoral competition, representation, and government formation. As we shall see, after some elections, this expectation is realized. But after other elections, it is not – for a variety of reasons, congruence goes astray.

Political science research has made great progress in revealing and explaining various aspects of left–right representation and the contexts and processes that shape it. Yet, each theoretical advance (e.g., Riker 1982a) and each development in the empirical tools (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960) has also led to new and often painful recognition of the problems of democratic representation.

Some of our finest scholars have concluded their increasingly sophisticated empirical analyses with doubts about the quality of democratic representation. For example, in 2005, McDonald and Budge summarized their impressive cross-national analyses of 20 developed parliamentary democracies as follows: "Looking at distortions in the policy correspondence based on single elections led us to the conclusion that representation runs aground everywhere" (143). Warwick provocatively called his incisive 2016 article "The Ideological Congruence Illusion," explicitly challenging the view that "a close matching of government policy positions with median left–right voter opinion generally prevails in liberal democracies" (445). Achen and Bartels (2016), focusing empirically on the United States, but with broader concerns, found disqualifying flaws in both "folk theorems" and scholarly substitutes that link competitive elections and responsive policy commitments.

For many observers, the European elections of 2015–2017, apparently reacting to the shock of the wave of refugees in 2015, following the shocks of the Great Recession of 2008–2010, seemed to underscore the long-standing doubts based on earlier evidence.

The concerns of these and other scholars deserve to be taken seriously. I do not doubt the primary results in any of these important studies. Indeed, I draw shamelessly on them and on other fine studies that have helped elucidate the complexity of the connections between elections and representation. We can use the theories and research from political science to explain just how and where the path from elections to policies can go astray.

But I also wish to put these doubts in perspective. At least in the developed parliamentary systems, representative democracy is sometimes

very precisely achieved, sometimes achieved to some degree, and seldom fails disastrously. I shall argue that ideological congruence is not an illusion. When the government comes close to the preferences of the median citizen, we can reasonably declare the democracy a success on this dimension. When the government differs notably from median citizens' preferences, our goal should be to find out why. There are also some well-understood costs to representative achievement that democrats must be willing to pay if congruence is the goal.

This research draws on a set of 71 elections in developed parliamentary democracies between 1996 and early 2015 to describe and explain how, when, and to what extent the elections and the formation of legislatures and parliamentary governments achieved at least a rough ideological representation of their citizens. At the end, I briefly return to those unsettling elections of 2015–2017 to support these inferences.

Why do we care? There are at least two somewhat different reasons to care about ideological congruence. Most generally, making policies that correspond to what most citizens want, and avoiding policies that most citizens reject, is what democracies are supposed to do. In his thoughtful review of justifications for democracy, Dahl refers to such correspondence, emerging from an "orderly and peaceful process," as "a more reasonable justification for democracy" as compared to other political systems (1989, 95; see also Cohen 1971, 3–7; Pitkin 1967, 234; Mill 1861; Huber and Powell 1994; Powell 2000, chapter 1; Mansbridge 2003, 2011; Rehfield 2009). In Rehfield's words, "the presumption of democracy is that there be a close correspondence between the laws of a nation and the preferences of citizens who are ruled by them" (2009, 214). If the claim to create good congruence is an important justification for democracy, then the degree of congruence created would seem definitionally to be a significant criterion of democratic performance.[3]

In another book, I attempted to assess the role of elections as "instruments of democracy" (Powell 2000). I was thinking of democracy in its old meaning as "government by the people," transformed into a form

[3] There are, of course, deeper aspects of this correspondence and what it should achieve that we could develop. See, for example, Warren's (2011, 684) discussion of "two norms that are increasingly common in contemporary democratic theory: *nondomination* and the *all-affected principle* (italics original). Dahl (1989) discusses similar issues, reflecting the autonomy of individuals and their self-protection through involvement in policy making. Congruence reflects a "thin" or partial version of democratic theory. For more skeptical views of the value of ideological congruence, see Sabel (2015) and Achen and Bartels (2016).

suitable for large populations by the institutions of elections and representation. I did not then assume, and am not now assuming, that democracy is a synonym for good government or even, in all circumstances, good representation. There are other criteria of good government, such as avoiding violent conflict, protecting the rights and persons of citizens, and initiating or sustaining prosperity. "The people" at any given moment may not always prefer the policies that ensure these ends.[4] But for a political system to function as a "democracy," I shall assume that we mean that its leaders are in some way chosen by the people, that those leaders are committed to policies generally consistent with what its citizens want, and that the leaders generally implement those policies when they can.

In the general justifications of democracy, the emphasis is on congruence between the preferences of citizens and public policies. Although I conceptualize policy making as the last stage in the representation process, this is not a book about policy congruence. The emphasis here is on congruence between the preferences of citizens and the perceived positions of their institutional representatives rather than on policy outcomes. However, conditions that other research shows help connect party policy commitments and their realization are discussed and related to ideological congruence in Chapter 8. That chapter also shows the consistencies and the incompatibilities between ideological congruence and several other aspects of representation.

On the simple, but critical, dimension of representation that I investigate here, of left–right ideological correspondence, when a democratic election results in a government whose commitments clearly depart significantly from the expressed preferences of its citizens, democratic theories would, I think, agree that such behavior calls at least for an explanation for this departure (Pitkin 1967, 163–164; Przeworski et al. 1999; Mansbridge 2003; Rehfield 2009, 214; Stokes 2001). In a democratic context, such an explanation might rest on the broader, longer term or other interests of the citizens that transcend the left–right dimension.[5] Description and analysis of left–right ideological congruence set the stage for such explanations of deviation from citizen preferences.

[4] Whether representatives of the people accomplish these ends more often than other kinds of rulers is a question beyond our scope here. See literatures on democratic peace, human rights abuse, economic growth and sustainability, rule of law, and so forth.

[5] See Pitkin (1967) and Mansbridge (2003) for more complex understandings of good representation, taking account of circumstances when a "good" representative might depart from his or her constituents' preferences, even circumstances under which

Although there is by now a substantial body of research on how and under what conditions elections induce congruence, there has been less attention to when and why congruence goes astray. This book intends to begin to fill that gap. Although the normative implications are more general, I confine my analysis of elections and congruence to economically developed parliamentary democracies and contexts of established programmatic electoral competition.[6] These 19 countries, mostly located in Western Europe, plus Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, are listed in Table 1.1.

A STYLIZED THEORY OF ELECTIONS AND IDEOLOGICAL CONGRUENCE: IDEOLOGICAL VOTERS AND DOMINATING MEDIAN PARTIES

Competitive elections, more than any other single feature, now identify a country as a democratic political system. At least one reason that such elections are so important is that we think they can and do connect citizens and the policy makers who govern them. But how, more specifically, is that connection supposed to work?[7]

Theorists, observers, and participants have different views of this connection. One line of thought emphasizes primarily the power of voters to

constituents themselves might prefer representatives to follow broader policy principles and not switch positions with every fluctuation in the polls.

[6] Because the role of left–right ideological placements in the political discourse seems still to be quite complex and not fully established in the postcommunist systems of Central and Eastern Europe, I have not included them here (see some attempts in Powell 2011, 2014b). The separation of powers systems, with strong, directly elected presidents and independently elected legislatures, pose additional complexities for representation analysis. Although important projects are under way exploring these, especially in Latin America, they are beyond my competence here. Similarly, I have not dealt with the interaction between programmatic electoral competition, captured in the left–right scale, and various forms of clientelistic politics, although clientelism can be considered a form of representation and, in many less economically developed countries, dominates electoral politics. (For a survey of programmatic and clientelistic party policies, see Kitschelt and Kselman 2012; for in depth analysis, see, e.g., Stokes et al. 2013.) I am also constrained for the bulk of the analysis to the elections covered by the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems project and in which comparable questions on party and voter placements were asked. Regretfully, these constraints have led me here to delete Belgium, Italy, and Japan from this study.

[7] For a more extended discussion of these mechanisms and the literatures associated with them, see Huber and Powell (1994), Cox (1997, chapter 12), and Powell (2000). Also see the more recent analyses and findings in Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister (2011, esp. chapter 7) and Budge et al. (2012).

TABLE 1.1 *Elections and Congruence: Successful – but Not as Successful as They Might Be*

Distances from Median Citizen of Most Distant Available Party, the Closest Available Party and Government Formed after the Election
Distance from Median Citizen Self-Placement on 0–10 Scale (CSES Surveys) Of:

Country-Election	Most Distant Party		Closest Party	Government
Greece 2012	4.38	Golden Dawn	.88	1.95
Norway 2013	4.37	Red Party	.02	2.46
France 2007	4.21	Ligue Comm	.49	2.34
Sweden 2002	4.06	Conservative	.86	1.36
Israel 2003	4.04	Meretz	.91	1.33
Denmark 2001	3.90	Red-Green List	.11	1.80
Germany 2002	3.76	Republikaner	.69	.94
Finland 2007	3.71	Left Alliance	.23	1.38
Portugal 2015	3.65	Unitary (Com and Grn)	1.10	1.10
Spain 2004	3.55	PP	.34	.98
New Zealand 2011	3.26	Mana	.31	1.86
Switzerland 2011	3.25	People's (SVP)	.30	.34
Iceland 2007	3.18	Left-Green Movement	.15	1.14
Ireland 2011	3.00	Sinn Fein	.14	.12
Austria 2008	2.99	Freedom (FPOe)	.03	.54
Netherlands 2002	2.85	Green Left	.73	1.70
Great Britain 2015	2.47	Conservative	.20	2.47
Australia 2013	2.16	Greens	.99	1.57
Canada 2011	2.12	Conservative	.08	2.12

This list selects the most distant of the distant party scores for each country among the 71 elections in the 19 experienced parliamentary democracies for which we have CSES surveys 1996–2015.

Averages of all 71 Elections	**3.03**		**.43**	**1.22**
Standard Deviation	(.72)		(.28)	(.75)

use retrospective assessments of government performance to punish policy makers' failure to accomplish what citizens want. Such retrospective punishments can replace the incompetent and unfaithful – and its anticipation is expected to keep most policy makers in line. A complementary

line of thought emphasizes forward looking connections – promises and electoral selection (mandates). Both forward and backward looking mechanisms are needed. Selection is of little use if promises are not kept; eviction is of little use if the replacement governments do not offer and execute desired policies. Ideally, the combination should create a reinforcing democratic equilibrium of congruent governments. But sometimes it does not.

In order to estimate congruence, we need to begin with the citizens, most specifically with the median citizen in a single-dimensional space. That is the citizen with as many others to his or her left as to his or her right. The position of the median citizen constitutes a base line against which to assess ideological congruence. The perception of a single-dimensional ideological space allows us to identify this ideally best single outcome. When final policies are made in a democracy, the preferences of the majority of citizens should prevail over the preferences of the minority. Social choice theory has shown repeatedly that in a choice between the median position and any other positions on a single-dimensional scale, if the voters support the position closer to them, the median position will always win.[8] The further away the policies from the median voter, the greater is the number of citizens who are in the defeated majority.

Although the most common policy referent of political discourse in the developed democracies seems to be the role of government in the economy, with "left" referring to greater government intervention and "right" to less intervention, many other policies may also be subsumed into the discourse in a given election. New issues continually appear, and losing politicians have an incentive to find and emphasize them (Riker 1982a), but sooner or later, they tend to be folded into the general ideological discourse. This has already happened to environmental parties and issues to a striking degree.[9] Never perfectly, but to a considerable extent, the left–right placement summarizes a number of different issues and even dimensions into a perceived single measure. Surveys of citizens show that in each of the developed democracies,

[8] Some majoritarian theorists might prefer the median of the majority – if that were uniquely identifiable. The general median takes account of all the citizens, including voters for the opposition, to define it (but see Mill [1861] 1958, 102). Most of the scholarly literature has used the median of the entire citizenry (following Mill in this respect).

[9] On the changing content of citizens' perceptions of left and right over time, see, e.g., Inglehart (1984). For more recent and comprehensive analyses of changing discourse of left and right in specific elections, see Franzmann and Kaiser (2006) and Chapters 2 and 3.