Towards convergence in times of crisis? Explaining ideological congruence between voters and parties in four EU elections

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Abstract:
One criterion of the party representation model is that party positions and voter preferences are congruent. The aim of this paper is to identify and explain variation in ideological congruence between parties and their voters on the left-right and the pro-anti-EU dimensions in four EU elections over time. We expect that voters and parties become closer over time against the backdrop of further integration, combined with increased salience and contestation of EU politics up until the outbreak of the Eurozone crisis. We argue that time also matters for effects pertaining to domestic political contexts and the type of political parties themselves. To test our argument, we assess opinion congruence as a 'many-to-one' relationship. Our data comprise the EES studies from 1999 to 2014. Our results suggest that levels of voter-party congruence increase only on the EU dimension, while levels of congruence on the left-right dimension remain high and stable throughout the years. Moreover, we show that congruence between voters and parties on the EU dimension is specifically affected by party political contestation, political information, and Eurozone membership; with varying effects over time. Moreover, we find significant differences between Eurosceptic and pro-European parties as well as centrist and radical parties over time.

Keywords:

Representation, political parties, voters, congruence, EU elections

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Introduction

Ideological congruence between citizens and parties is a major precondition for representative democracy. Political parties are the key intermediaries between citizens and parliaments, as they provide the link between citizen preferences and legislative policy outputs (e.g. Miller and Stokes 1963; Sartori 1968; Dalton 1985; Powell 2000; McDonald and Budge 2005). This political linkage provided by elections is the means 'by which the political leaders act in accordance with the wants, needs, and demands of the public in making government policy' (Luttbeg 1974: 3). The responsible party model of representation captures this idea. It specifies that parties offer different policy alternatives and voters, who have policy preferences of their own, opt for the party that is closest to them (e.g. Schattschneider 1942; Thomassen 1994; Schmitt and Thomassen 1999; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012).

Despite various criticisms (e.g. Thomassen 1999), the responsible party model has been used as a 'yardstick' to assess the process of representation at the European Union (EU) level (e.g. Thomassen and Schmitt 1997). One of the main conclusions in the literature is that the EU is suffering from a democratic deficit (Føllesdal and Hix 2006). European elections do not function as 'proper mechanisms for directing and legitimating the conduct of European affairs' (Franklin and van der Eijk 1996: 3–4). European parties do not offer clear policy alternatives and citizens tend to vote based on national rather than European issues, thus European elections are second-order (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Over the years, as the EU gained more powers, citizen dissatisfaction with EU politics increased, signalling the breakdown of the 'permissive consensus' era (Norris 1997; Hooghe and Marks 2009). The European crisis posed a further shock to EU politics, as it questioned the viability of the system (Glencross 2013; Vasilopoulou 2013). Trends in public opinion substantively deteriorated in the wake of the crisis (Eurobarometer 2014) and Eurosceptic parties made significant gains in the 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections (e.g. Hobolt 2015).

Against a context of severe economic crisis but also increasing voter disillusionment, this paper examines the evolution of democratic representation in the EU –measured through ideological congruence, and asks: To what extent and under what conditions has voter-party ideological congruence changed over time? We put forward an argument that assesses the impact of system and party level explanations on ideological congruence conditional upon time. Given the changing context of EP elections between 1999 and 2014 and the increasing

salience of contestation both on the left-right and EU dimensions, we expect over time increase in voter-party congruence on both dimensions. However, we find that this is only the case for the EU dimension. Levels of congruence on the left-right dimension, by contrast, are rather high throughout the years.

In particular, with respect to the EU dimension we find that characteristics of the domestic political context matter for voter-party congruence. Here, higher levels of party political contestation over EU integration are associated with higher levels of congruence. Yet, the positive effect of maximum levels of contestation decreases over time. Political information provided by commercial broadcasters also leads to higher levels of congruence and increasingly so over time. Lastly, although in Eurozone countries levels of congruence were lower than in non-Eurozone members in 1999 and 2004, the pattern has changed over time with party-voter congruence improving over time among Eurozone countries. At the party level, mainstream parties are better at representing their voters on the EU dimension than parties on the far left, although the latter are improving over time while congruence for centrist parties remains stable. And while Eurosceptic parties are associated with significantly lower levels of congruence in 1999 and 2004, congruence between Eurosceptic parties and their voters increases over time on issues related to EU integration.

This article builds on and extends existing literature by first, comparing voter-party ideological congruence both on the pro-anti EU and the left-right dimensions, which we argue fundamentally capture the structure of EU politics; second, exploring congruence over time and testing the extent to which changing developments in domestic political contexts and at the party level over time have affected the connectedness between the citizens and their parties; and third, we bring new empirical evidence on this topic, using a sophisticated measure of relative voter congruence (Golder & Stramski 2010) that allows us to operationalize congruence as 'many-to-one' relationship, taking into account the distance between the ideological position of the individual voter and her party in relation to the dispersion of the preferences of the party's electorate. The study of congruence allows us to understand the extent to which democratic representation at the EU level works, and whether it has changed over time.

This contribution proceeds as follows. It first discusses representative democracy in EU politics, and identifies the relevant hypotheses that guide the study. It continues with a data and methods section. It finally presents the discussion of the findings.

Voter-party ideological congruence in EU politics

The linkage between parties and citizens is central to the functioning of modern democracies. 'Democratic representation-through-parties' (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012) suggests that political parties offer different and distinguishable policy choices to voters based on a coherent policy programme communicated in pre-electoral campaigns; and citizen policy preferences must overlap with those of the parties they voted for. According to Wessels (1999: 137): 'the smallest common denominator in normative terms, though, is that in a democracy there should be some match between the interests of the people and what representatives promote'. Party-voter ideological congruence is thus a means to ensure that policy outputs are consistent with those preferences (Schmitt and Thomassen 1999; Powell 2004; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012). Once in office, political parties will put forward legislation that is line with their campaign promises and their voter preferences. This will ultimately be rewarded with re-election.

Over the years, the European Union has increased its authority over a number of key public policy areas, including the single market, trade, the euro currency, justice, fundamental rights and citizenship. Hand in hand with the increasing powers of the EU, the European Parliament (EP) has also gained considerable authority and has 'developed into one of the most influential legislators' (Arnold and Sapir 2013: 1292). In the context of EU politics, two dimensions are useful in summarising broad party and voter positions. First, the EU dimension relates to preferences on the constitutional framework and institutional structures of the EU (Norris 1997: 277-278). Second, the left-right dimension captures different views on socio-economic issues and determines party competition in the EP (Hix et al. 2006). A key question is thus whether European citizen preferences are represented in the EP, which constitutes the main direct channel of representation in EU politics. Do people opt for parties in EP elections that are close to their ideological preferences? And what may explain over time variation? The analysis of the conditions under which voter-party ideological congruence occurs is crucial to understanding the process and quality of representative democracy in the EU. If the preferences of European citizens are linked to the preferences of the parties that they voted for, then we can –at least partially– talk about representative legislative outputs and a functioning EU democracy.

This question becomes of paramount importance especially given that the powers and legislative scope of the EU have dramatically increased over time. Following the coming into force of the Maastricht Treaty in the early 1990s 'decision making on European integration entered the contentious world of party competition, elections and referendums' (Hooghe and Marks 2009: 7). The end of 1990s marking the creation of the Eurozone increased contestation on the EU as European integration entered the realm of monetary politics. During the 2000s, EU politics changed even more, not least because of the enlargement of the union to Central and Eastern Europe, but also because of the substantive debate on the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe, and its subsequent rejection in France and the Netherlands (Hobolt and Brouard 2011). With the outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008 which shook both domestic and international politics, politicisation of the EU, i.e. 'higher levels of salience, polarisation of opinion and the expansion of actors and audiences involved in EU issues' (De Wilde et al. 2016: 3), increased even further. The European sovereign debt crisis which affected a number of Eurozone member states, including Greece, Portugal, Spain and Ireland, as well as the establishment of the European Stability Mechanism to provide financial assistance programmes to crisis ridden Eurozone members heightened the politicisation of the EU. Studies have shown that the more the EU increases its power and influence, the more it attracts political attention and provokes both support from interested groups but also a backlash (De Wilde & Zurn 2012: 140). The importance of EU institutions, such as the Euro group, the European Central Bank and the European Commission, in the resolution of the crisis resulted in domestic debates becoming more 'Europeanised', as media across Europe reported upon similar EU-related issues (Kriesi and Grande 2014; Hobolt 2015: 9; Gattermann & Vasilopoulou 2016 forthcoming). In addition to the increased salience of the EU issue, the debate about the resolution of the crisis revealed fundamental elite and voter disagreements about crisis management, i.e. the extent to which austerity and the reduction of government budget deficits is better way to combat the crisis in comparison to government spending and investment. This debate fundamentally pertains to and heightens the relevance of the left-right dimension in structuring political competition in EU politics (see Hix et al. 2006 for the EP).

The introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* contest also marked a significant change in EP elections. For the first time in 2014 each one of the large European party groups put forward and campaigned in favour of a common lead candidate. Candidate recognition reinforced the effect of campaign activities on citizens' propensity to vote (Schmitt et al. 2015a). Although

national issues were present, the 2014 EP elections provided a platform for parties and their lead candidates to express different views on the resolution of the European crisis. Therefore through their party choice, citizens expressed not only their view on the EU's constitutional framework, i.e. whether they wish more or less integration to resolve the crisis; but also on the different EU policies related to crisis management. The personalisation of the campaigns through the association of EP groups with political leaders who offered a clear choice to voters regarding the next Commission President is expected to have increased competitiveness, contestation and clarity of choice. Through this process citizens take cues from parties and their lead candidates, which influence their vote choice (e.g. Lupia 1994; Steenbergen et al. 2007). We thus expect that since voters are exposed over time to more distinguishable alternatives, they will cast a vote for a party that is close to their preferences.

Therefore, given the changing context of EP elections between 1999 and 2014 and the increasing salience of contestation both on the left-right and EU dimensions, we expect that

H1: Voter-party ideological congruence is likely to increase over time.

This over time improvement in ideological congruence, however, is unlikely to have occurred to a similar extent across Europe. Given its profound socio-economic implications, the crisis affected political contestation and the information environment within which parties campaign and voters cast their ballot. Research suggests that in domestic political contexts in which the European issues are more contested, news coverage of EU affairs is higher (Schuck et al. 2011), and national parliamentarians are more active in EU affairs (Gattermann and Hefftler 2015). This also implies that in contexts where levels of political contestation over EU-related issues are high, i.e. where there is great variation in party positions (Schuck et al. 2011), voters should be exposed to clearer cues regarding where each party stands.

H2a: Higher levels of political contestation are likely to lead to higher levels of congruence on both dimensions.

The findings of Schuck et al. (2011) show that higher levels of political contestation also have a positive effect on the volume of EU news coverage during EP election campaigns. Put differently, in countries where the EU is highly salient in domestic politics, more information should be available about EU politics. Information is an important pre-condition for citizens to learn about issues and candidates during election campaigns which then enables them to make informed choices at the polls (e.g., Zaller 1996; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996) At the

aggregate level, the supply of political information in a given political environment improves the opportunity structures for 'informed citizenship' (Esser et al. 2012), which in itself means that citizens are more informed and thus more likely to pick up on party cues and ultimately choose those parties which are closest to their ideological preferences.

H3a: Higher levels of political information are likely to lead to higher levels of voter-party ideological congruence on both dimensions

However, different countries were affected by the crisis in different ways. For example, the effect of the European crisis was much less profound in non-Eurozone countries, which did not actively participate in the debate regarding bailing out those countries that were worse affected by the crisis. Politicisation and controversiality does not take place in exactly the same way across all EU member states (De Wilde and Zurn 2012: 140). While we do know that the EU is no longer a 'sleeping giant' in European politics (Van der Eijk and Franklin 2004), the potential for contestation differs across member states. In countries that have been affected by the crisis, either as debtors or creditors, the debate about crisis management is expected to have been higher than in non-Eurozone countries, which did not participate in the discussion. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

H4a: Voter-party ideological congruence on both dimensions will be higher in Eurozone countries compared to countries outside the Eurozone.

As we argued above, EU affairs become more politicised over time and hence the effect of political contestation, political information and Eurozone membership should also intensify over time:

H2b: The effects of political contestation on ideological congruence are likely to increase over time.

H3b: The effects of political information on ideological congruence are likely to increase over time.

H4b: The effects of Eurozone membership on ideological congruence are likely to intensify over time.

Turning to political parties, which have been identified as key to ideological congruence (e.g. Belchior 2012), it is important to note that despite the fact that the EU is becoming increasingly politicised, political parties have 'a strategic incentive to downplay European issues and to structure competition along the more familiar and thus safer domestic cleavages' (Mattila & Raunio 2012: 590; see also Marks and Steenbergen 2004). This is the case especially for mainstream parties which may be apprehensive of potential internal party dissent on a new issue, and thus may not be willing to offer their voters meaningful choices (e.g. Ladrech 2007). Far left and far right parties, on the other hand, have increased incentives to take on a new issue in order to differentiate themselves from the mainstream. Examining voter-MP ideological congruence, Belchior (2012) finds that as the as party distance from the centre increases, the level of congruence on the left-right dimension decreases. Thus radical parties by locating themselves away from the centre, do worse at representing their voters on the left-right dimension. Since we know that party positions exhibit remarkable persistence on the left-right dimension (Dalton & McAllister 2015), we do not expect this effect to change over time. We thus hypothesise that:

H5a: Levels of congruence on the left-right dimension are likely to be higher for centrist parties compared to radical parties (far left and far right).

H5b: Levels of congruence on the left-right dimension are likely to remain stable over time for centrist parties compared to radical parties (far left and far right).

Yet, we expect that radical parties will do better at representing their voters on the EU dimension, and increasingly so over time:

H5c: Levels of congruence on the pro-anti EU dimension are likely to higher among radical parties (far left and far right) compared to centrist parties.

H5d: Levels of congruence on the pro-anti EU dimension are likely to become better over time among radical parties (far left and far right) compared to centrist parties.

Regarding the distinction between Eurosceptic and non-Eurosceptic parties, the pattern is likely to be the opposite. Vasilopoulou and Gattermann (2013: 614) find that Eurosceptic MEPs are less able to represent their voters on issues pertaining to the left–right dimension than pro-European MEPs.

H6a: Levels of congruence on the left-right dimension are likely to be lower for Eurosceptic parties compared to pro-European parties.

H6b: Levels of congruence on the left-right dimension are likely are likely to remain stable over time for Eurosceptic parties compared to pro-European parties.

By avoiding contestation, Europhile parties do not provide clear signals to their electorates. Conversely by addressing EU issues more than other parties (Senninger & Wagner 2015: 1339) Eurosceptic parties provide clear cues to the electorate on the EU dimension. The increasing powers that the EU has gained over time have provided additional opportunities for Eurosceptic parties to articulate their anti-EU opposition, as there are more aspects of the EU that they can criticize. Thus:

H6c: Levels of congruence on the pro-anti EU dimension are likely to be higher for Eurosceptic parties compared to pro-European parties

H6d: Levels of congruence on the pro-anti EU dimension are likely to increase over time for Eurosceptic parties compared to pro-European parties.

Data and Methods

Dependent variables and model

To test our hypotheses, we created a new dataset based on the post-election Voter Studies as part of the European Election Studies (EES) of the years 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014 (van der Eijk et al. 1999; van Egmond et al. 2013; Schmitt et al. 2009; Schmitt et al. 2015b, 2015c). In these data, we identified the political parties individual voters had voted for, the individual self-placement of these voters on the left-right dimension and their attitudes towards European unification, as well as the placement by the respondents of all parties on the same scales. We calculate our dependent variables as relative voter congruence (RVC) for each the left-right and the pro-anti EU dimension. This measure is based on Golder and Stramski's (2010: 96) relative citizen congruence which is operationalized as 'many-to-one' relationship. RVC considers the distance between the ideological position of the individual voter and her party, in relation to the dispersion of the preferences of all voters having supported the same party:

$$RVC = 1 - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{N} |V_{ij} - MV_j|}{\sum_{i=1}^{N} |V_{ij} - P_j|} \qquad (1)$$

where V_{ij} is the ideal point of the ith voter of party j, and MV_j is the ideological position of the median voter position of all voters (N) of party j. P_j is the party's ideological position, which we calculated by taking the means of the respective placement on either the left-right scale or the pro-anti EU scale of the 40% most educated respondents per country and election year (see also Alvarez and Nagler 2004: 50; Golder and Stramski 2010: 98). The advantage of calculating the mean party position in this way is that voters use the same scale as for their self-placements and at the same point in time (Golder and Stramski 2010: 99). In addition, we agree with Dalton and McAllister (2015: 767) who argue that 'the public's perceptions of the parties create the basis of their voting choices—even if these perceptions are imperfect', which is important for our argument that relates to congruence.

We have two measures for RVC; one for the left-right dimension (RVC$_{LR}$), and a second for the pro-anti EU dimension (RVC$_{EU}$). Our unit of analysis is ideological congruence per party in each country and each election. Both variables range from 0 to 1 (RVC$_{LR}$: M=0.098; SD=0.117; N=553; RVC$_{EU}$: M=0.092; SD=0.0105; N=539). 0 stands for perfect ideological congruence between voters and the party they voted for. Higher values indicate that their ideological positions are further apart from each other. As the low means and the standard deviations of our dependent variables suggest, the distributions are skewed right. A linear regression model is not appropriate as it may 'yield fitted values for the variable of interest that exceed its lower and upper bounds' (Ferrari and Cribari-Neto 2004: 799). We thus choose to estimate a beta regression model, which is suitable for the structure of our dependent variables, which are distributed as $0 < y < 1$, and can also accommodate skewed distribution.[1]

One caveat is that we have a few missing values; we, for instance have no self-placement and party placement on the pro-anti EU dimension for the Swedish sample in 2004 and some Italian parties in 1999. Our data excludes the Maltese sample of 2004 due to missing values. In the same year, we were also unable to calculate the mean party positions on both dimensions for Lithuania because the education variable was missing. We only have one separate sample for Northern Ireland in 2004, but not for the remaining years. Similarly, we

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[1] In accordance to the model specification, we have transformed 0 values to 0.000001 in 16 instances for RVC$_{LR}$ and 15 instances for RVC$_{EU}$.

only have observations for Belgian-Flemish and Wallonian parties in 1999 and for Wallonian parties in 2009, but not for the remaining elections. Moreover, in some countries the electoral coalitions have changed over time. One prime example is Italy, where many parties merged or dissolved over time. In this case, we cannot trace developments individually for each party over time; instead we have values for their various coalitions at different points in time. Similarly, some parties were coded individually in the EES in some years (e.g., the CDU and CSU in Germany in 2004, SGP and CU in the Netherlands in 2004), but treated as electoral coalition in other years. Lastly, we only consider parties for which there were at least 10 respondents in the EES, as we believe that a smaller sample of voters may be unrepresentative and thus bias our results.In spite of the missing values, our data consist of a comparable amount of parties for each election year (see Table 1).

[Table 1 about here]

Independent variables

While our main independent variable is the timing of the election (H1), ranging from 1999 to 2014, we consider the following system-level variables that correspond to our hypotheses H2, H3 and H4. We measure party political contestation using the measure of weighted party system dispersion by Schuck et al. (2011: 45), who themselves rely on Alvarez and Nagler (2004: 50).

$$WPSD = \sqrt{\sum_{j=1} VS_{jk} \left(P_{jk} - \overline{P_k} \right)^2} \qquad (2)$$

where VS_{jk} is the vote share and P_{jk} is the position of party j in country k either on the left-right scale or towards European integration, and $\overline{P_k}$ is the weighted mean of all party positions in country k. The vote share is based on first preference votes in the case of Ireland. In order to compare the party positions over time, we standardised the party positions for all election years, since the placement scales differed in each EES. As with the dependent variables, we have two measures for WPSD, one that measures the extent to which the left-right dimension is contested by political parties in the domestic context (Political contestation$_{LR}$, M=0.211; *SD*=0.053), and a second that measures party political contestation on the pro-anti EU dimension (Political contestation$_{EU}$, M=0.153; *SD*=0.072).

To operationalize the political information environment in each country and at each election, we rely on the definition of Esser et al (2012: 250), who 'define political information environment as the quantitative supply of news and public affairs content provided to a national audience by routinely available sources'. More specifically, they studied television news, which is a prominent indicator of political information supply in studies that examine the effects on public knowledge (e.g., Curran et al. 2009; Aalberg et al. 2010). We rely on the EES Longitudinal Media Study by Banducci et al. (2010), who coded, among other things, 'the main national evening news broadcasts of the most widely watched public and commercial television stations by country' (Banducci et al. 2010: 2). For the purpose of our study, we measure the supply of news about the EU, including the elections, EU politics in general, institutions, integration and enlargement, as an aggregated share of total news two weeks prior to each election in 1999, 2004, and 2009 on either public television or private television programmes. This is similar to the way Boomgaarden et al. (2013) have operationalized their visibility of EU news. In case two television private or public channels were coded in the EES Longitudinal Media Study (e.g., in Germany), we only consider the largest channel (as indicated by audience figures). In case of Belgium, both Franco-phone and Flemish broadcasting news were coded; we matched the respective television channels with Wallonian and Flemish parties and party systems in our data. We subsequently have two independent variables: *Public TV EU coverage* (M=9.187; SD=6.389) and *Private TV EU coverage* (M=6.198; SD=6.427). Unfortunately, we do not yet have data for the 2014 elections; and there are a few missing values in the remaining years. Furthermore, since we know that political contestation impacts on the volume of EU news coverage during the election campaigns (Schuck et al. 2011) the effects of these two variables on congruence are likely to be endogenous. This is why we include them in separate models in the following analysis.

Lastly, we include a *Eurozone* dummy in our models, representing the states which are members of the European Monetary Union (M=0.590; *SD*=0.492). We considered membership at different points in time, as some countries have joined the Eurozone at a later stage.

Turning to our party level hypotheses, we created a nominal variable with three categories, i.e. far left (reference), mainstream and far right (H5). We calculated them by first computing the mean left-right position of all parties in each party system in every year. Those parties

that fell within one standard deviation from the mean were categorised as mainstream. Those that were one standard deviation above the mean were classified as far right and those one standard deviation below the mean as far left. Our *Eurosceptic* dummy (corresponding to H6) distinguishes between those parties which were either affiliated with a Eurosceptic party group in the EP or non-attached and those belonging to the pro-European political groups (EPP, S&D, ALDE, Greens/EFA).

We add the following controls to all models: *Vote share* is operationalised by the party's vote share (or that of an electoral coalition) in the respective European Parliament election out of all national parties in a given country. *Party age* is calculated from the year of establishment of the party. Finally, we calculated the *effective number of parties* measured by the number of seats they received in the European Parliament following the respective election on the basis of Gallagher's (2015) index. The descriptive statistics of all variables can be found in the Appendix.

Findings

Before we proceed to the explanatory part of our analysis, we take an aggregate-level view onto two major components of our dependent variables, i.e. the mean party position and the median voter position on each dimension. Figures 1 and 2 show their average development over the course of the four EP elections on the left-right and the pro-anti-EU dimension, respectively. Although the shown distance between the values is absolute and does not take into account the distance between the ideological position of the individual voter and her party in relation to the dispersion of the preferences of all party voters, we observe remarkable differences. The mean party positions and the median voter both remain close over time on the left-right dimension, albeit voters have recently been leaning more towards the right of the political spectrum and parties, after a peak in 2009, have tended to become more left-leaning on aggregate. By contrast, on the pro-anti EU dimension parties and voters were approaching each other between 1999 and 2004, but since then have drifted further apart from each other. More specifically, we observe that political parties were on aggregate less in favour of EU integration than their voters in 1999 and 2004, while they have since then become more positive towards the EU. For voters, the trend is reverse; on aggregate the median voter was more supportive of EU integration in 1999 and 2004, but then became

more Eurosceptic until 2014. These aggregate-level findings already suggest that we are likely to find more variation in party-voter congruence on the pro-anti EU dimension than on the left-right dimension over time.

[Figures 1 and 2 about here]

The regression results reported in Table 2 support this assumption. Models 1 to 3 report the independent effects of time on congruence on the left-right dimension, while Models 4 to 6 show the effects of time on party-voter congruence on the EU dimension, controlling for everything else. The results indeed show that time has no effect on the level of congruence on the left-right dimension. This means that party-voter congruence does not become better or worse over time. This has probably to do with the circumstance that voter-party congruence is already rather high on the left-right dimension. On the contrary, on the EU dimension, the significant negative effects of time demonstrate that the values for congruence in each election year 2004, 2009 and 2014 are lower compared to 1999. They are comparatively closest to each other in 2009. H1 has thus to be rejected as regards congruence on the left-right dimension, and can only partially be supported with respect to congruence on the pro-anti EU dimension, in as far as comparisons to 1999 are concerned. In fact, if treated as continuous variable (not shown here), time has no statistically significant effect on congruence on the pro-anti EU dimension. The findings suggest further that congruence has decreased between 2009 and 2014. A closer analysis of the time effect is therefore required.

[Table 2 about here]

Before we test our remaining hypotheses and investigate the moderating effects of time, we may examine the effects of our main independent variables from a static perspective. As regards the left-right dimension almost none of the variables that are associated with our hypotheses yield statistically significant effects. Only the effect of the far right is statistically significant and positive in Model 1 suggesting that these parties are further away from their voters than far left parties. However, mainstream parties do not stand out compared to parties on the far left of the political spectrum; H5a has thus to be rejected. Furthermore, the Wald Chi-Square indicates that Model 3 does not comply with conventional levels of statistical significance.

By contrast, the models testing the effects on congruence on the pro-anti dimension are all interpretable. Here, we find that political contestation over the EU dimension has no

statistically significant effect; H2a has thus to be rejected. Yet, higher levels of information provided by news programmes on commercial television channels leads to more congruence between parties and voters (Model 6). This lends support to H3a and underlines that voters are probably better able to identify and choose those parties which are ideologically close to them on the EU dimension in an environment in which more political information is available. EU news reportage by public broadcasters has no effect, however. Furthermore, we find that levels of congruence are generally lower in Eurozone member states compared to countries outside the Eurozone. This does not lend support to H4a. However, this effect only holds in Model 6; it does not comply with conventional levels of statistical significance in the remaining models. In the following, we will investigate how these system-level effects change over time – if at all.

Turning to the party level, we find no difference on aggregate between mainstream and radical parties on either side of the political spectrum. Yet, overall Eurosceptic parties tend to be worse at representing their voters on the pro-anti EU dimension compared to pro-European parties. This is surprising since we expected that Eurosceptic parties exhibit higher levels of congruence ; H6c has therefore to be rejected It remains to be seen to what extent time has a moderating effect on this relationship. Lastly, the control variables show that larger parties tend to be closer to their voters on both dimensions. Congruence on the left-right dimension is also higher when there are more parties present in the respective domestic context. Yet, levels of congruence decrease on the pro-anti EU dimension with longer existence of political parties.

[Table 3 about here]

The models presented in Table 3 test the effects of our hypotheses on voter-party congruence on the left-right dimension over time. As before, hardly any of the effects are statistically significant; and Models 2 and 3 do not comply with the Wald Chi-Square test. Yet, the above-mentioned difference between far left and far right parties also exhibits an over-time effect (Model 5). Figure 3 shows the interaction effect between party type and election time. Even though far right parties, as found in the previous analysis, are worse at representing their voters on the left-right dimension compared to far left parties, congruence is becoming better over time. By contrast, far left parties become less representative of their voters on this dimension, while the extent of congruence does not change over time for centrist parties. Yet, congruence levels for centrist parties are not significantly different from radical parties over

time. These findings therefore only lend partial support to H5b; but none our remaining hypotheses can be confirmed regarding party-voter congruence on the left-right dimension.

[Figure 3 about here]

In contrast, we find for the EU dimension that the above detected effects also vary over time. Table 4 demonstrates that when the interaction effects with political contestation (Model 1), the political information environment (Models 2 and 3) and party type (Model 5) are included in the models, time, as a continuous variable, has a significant negative effect on our dependent variable. This suggests that congruence on the EU dimension does indeed increase over time. As regards political contestation over EU integration (Model 1), this effect is also negative and significant on its own, suggesting that increasing levels of contestation lead to more congruence between parties and voters. The interaction effect with time is positive. Figure 4 shows that only minimum and mean levels of political contestation lead to more congruence over time compared to maximum levels. Maximum levels of political contestation, on the other hand, lead to less congruence. Put differently, they were responsible for better congruence between voters and parties on the EU dimension in previous years, but do not have a positive impact later on compared to lower levels of contestation. The results therefore only lend partial support to H2b.

[Table 4 about here]

Similarly, and in line with the above findings, higher levels of political information provided by private television news programmes leads to more congruence between parties and voters (Models 2 and 3, Table 4). The interaction effect with time is also positive (Model 2). Figure 4 shows that comprehensive EU news coverage is responsible for high levels of congruence between voters and parties on the EU dimension throughout the years compared to less comprehensive news coverage about European affairs on private television. This effect slightly decreases until 2009, but it was responsible for almost perfect congruence between voters and parties in 1999 and 2004. The results therefore lend support to H3b as far as political information provided by commercial broadcasters is concerned. The interaction effect between time and public television news is not significant, and hence not plotted.

[Figure 4 about here]

Turning to the effect of Eurozone membership (Model 6), the interaction effect with time is significant and negative. Figure 4 demonstrates that while congruence between voters and parties on the EU dimension was indeed lower in Eurozone member states compared to countries outside the Eurozone in 1999 and 2004, congruence significantly increases over time in Eurozone countries. By contrast, it decreases in non-Eurozone countries over time. The results lend support to H4b. Moreover, these results partially confirm H1: congruence on the pro-anti EU dimension increases over time in member states that belong to the Eurozone.

Turning to the effects at the party level, the results in Model 5 (Table 4) suggest that mainstream parties are better at representing their voters on the EU dimension than parties on the far left. However, we can see that over time, levels of congruence do not change for centrist parties; nor do they change for parties on the far right of the political spectrum. Both types of parties also do not differ much on this dimension. Instead, parties on the far left become better at representing their voters on issues pertaining to EU integration over time, lending partial support to H5d. Similarly, the levels of congruence for pro-European parties do not vary over time (Figure 4); instead they remain at a high level throughout the years. By contrast, as the negative interaction effect in Model 4 also demonstrates, Eurosceptic parties become better at representing their voters over time up to a level of congruence that is comparable with that of pro-European parties in 2014. The results underline that Eurosceptic parties were associated with significantly lower levels of congruence in 1999 and 2004. Later on voters and their respective parties tend to have a better match regarding their preferences on issues related to EU integration. The results therefore provide support to H6d.

Conclusions

A central tenet of representative democracy is that parties represent their voters in policy making. Essentially democracy is governed by a principal-agent relationship. Citizens are the principals who delegate power to parties in order to put forward public policy. Therefore the closer the ideological congruence between voters and their parties, the more representative are the policies that parties put forward in parliament. In this paper we have analysed party-voter ideological congruence on the left-right and EU dimensions, employing data from the latest four waves of the European Election Study (1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014). Based on Golder and Stramski (2010) we employ a sophisticated measure of ideological congruence

which is operationalized as 'many-to-one' relationship. This measure calculates the distance between the ideological position of the individual voter and her party in relation to the dispersion of the preferences of the party's electorate.

We have tested the conditions under which congruence changes over time. We analysed the effect of time as moderator of system level variables that relate to political contestation, the political information environment, whether a country is a Eurozone member; and on party level variables that relate to whether the party is centrist or radical on the left-right dimension and whether it is Eurosceptic or not. We find that voter-party congruence on the EU dimension varies to a greater extent over time compared to congruence on the left-right dimension. This is also why we have to reject our first hypothesis: given that parties tend to represent their voters fairly well on the left-right dimension, there is little room for improvement over time. Supposedly, the left-right dimension provides stronger cues for voters, and especially in times of crisis in which parties are able to provide clear answers to questions over austerity policies, bailouts, public debts government spending and investment.

Moreover, given the increased salience of EU politics and issues over time, voters and parties become closer on the pro-anti EU dimension. Here, the domestic political context as well as the type of parties play a role for explaining over-time variation. In particular, we find that higher levels of party political contestation over EU integration are associated with higher levels of congruence between voters and citizens. This effect becomes slightly weaker over time, but the results suggest that even lower levels of political contestation also lead to greater congruence over the four elections under study. Political information provided by commercial broadcasters also leads to higher levels of congruence and increasingly so over time; however, we find no effect of news programmes aired on public television. The finding nevertheless underlines the importance of information in democratic processes. The more political information is available, the better are voters able to identify those parties which are closest to their ideological preferences on the EU dimension. In turn, these voters are then fairly well represented in EU politics.

Furthermore, we find significant differences between countries that belong to the Eurozone and countries that do not. On aggregate, we find lower levels of congruence on the EU dimension for the former compared to the latter. However, the effect is conditional upon time, with congruence having significantly improved over time among Eurozone members, while parties from non-Eurozone countries have become comparatively worse at representing

their voters on issues pertaining to the EU dimensions. This suggests an unintended effect of the crisis leading to improve levels of voter-party congruence within Eurozone countries. In this sense, the crisis, despite its dramatic consequences, might represent a chance for increased representation at the EU level.

Moreover, we find that congruence also varies by party type over time. Even though far right parties are generally worse at representing their voters on the left-right dimension compared to far left parties, congruence is becoming better over time. By contrast, far left parties become less representative of their voters on this dimension, while the extent of congruence does not change over time for centrist parties. On the EU dimension, however, mainstream parties tend to be better at representing their voters than parties on the far left, although the latter are improving over time while congruence for centrist parties remains stable, Lastly, Eurosceptic parties are generally associated with significantly lower levels of congruence on issues related to EU integration, also their levels of congruence improve over time amid the sovereign debt crisis across Europe.

Our analysis presents a first assessment of changes in ideological congruence between voters and parties in EU politics over time. Future research should also account for the second-order phenomenon (Reiff and Schmitt 1980). While we have shown that larger parties tend to be better at representing their voters on both dimensions, we should also test the effects of government versus opposition parties as well as the timing of EU elections on levels of congruence over time (see Vasilopoulou and Gattermann 2013).

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Tables and Figures

Table 1. No of political parties included in the study, by year

	Left-right dimension			Pro-anti EU dimension		
Year	Frequency	Percent	No of party systems covered	Frequency	Percent	No of party systems covered
1999	96	17.4	16	90	16.7	16
2004	136	24.6	22	128	23.7	21
2009	163	29.5	26	163	30.2	26
2014	158	28.6	26	158	29.3	26
Total	553	100.0		539	100.0	

Table 2. Beta regressions, explaining variation in party-voter congruence on the left-right and pro-anti EU dimension, respectively

	RVC_LR						RVC_EU					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	Coeff.	*SE*	*Coeff.*	*SE*	*Coeff.*	*SE*	*Coeff.*	*SE*	*Coeff.*	*SE*	*Coeff.*	*SE*
EES year (ref.: 1999)												
2004	0.018	0.168	0.006	0.168	0.142	0.203	-0.350**	0.175	-0.357**	0.17	-0.444**	0.201
2009	-0.135	0.149	-0.132	0.149	-0.018	0.155	-0.444***	0.167	-0.456***	0.161	-0.439**	0.200
2014	0.021	0.160	-0.007	0.164			-0.308*	0.181	-0.317*	0.175		
Eurozone	0.005	0.105	0.004	0.105	0.026	0.159	0.121	0.126	0.104	0.118	0.375***	0.143
Party type (ref. far left)												
Mainstream	0.119	0.146	0.137	0.147	0.088	0.203	-0.047	0.141	-0.055	0.141	-0.056	0.198
Far right	0.283*	0.164	0.261	0.165	0.271	0.222	-0.242	0.168	-0.244	0.167	-0.088	0.206
Eurosceptic	0.167	0.127	0.172	0.128	0.051	0.162	0.409***	0.133	0.415***	0.133	0.537***	0.177
Vote share	-0.013**	0.005	-0.013**	0.006	-0.024	0.007	-0.005	0.005	-0.005	0.005	-0.019***	0.006
Party age	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.001	0.002	0.002	0.002*	0.001	0.003*	0.001	0.004*	0.002
Effective no of parties	-0.057*	0.031	-0.054*	0.031	-0.042	0.043	-0.033	0.037	-0.028	0.039	-0.068	0.044
Political contestation (_LR_ / _EU_)			0.914	0.839					-0.446	0.796		
Public TV EU coverage					-0.002	0.013					0.019	0.016
Private TV EU coverage					0.007	0.015					-0.035*	0.018
Constant	-1.971***	0.293	-2.183***	0.362	-2.308***	0.397	-2.052***	0.302	-1.988***	0.285	-1.907***	0.403
ln(φ)	1.876***	0.094	1.878***	0.094	1.996***	0.129	2.024***	0.109	2.026***	0.110	2.164***	0.132
Log likelihood	722.917		723.416		468.278		749.299		749.562		475.69	
Wald chi2	21.867		23.596		**11.915**		44.595		45.027		101.496	
Prob > chi2	0.016		0.015		**0.370**		0.000		0.000		0.000	
BIC	-1400		-1400		-862.713		-1400		-1400		-878.174	
N	489		489		293		475		475		279	
N clusters	87		87		53		86		86		52	

Notes: * p<.1; ** p<.05; *** p<.01; dependent variables: RVC_LR (Models 1-3) and RVC_EU (Models 4-6); standard errors clustered by party system and election context

Table 3. The moderating effect of time on party-voter congruence on the left-right dimension

|	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	Coeff.	*SE*	*Coeff.*	*SE*	*Coeff.*	*SE*	*Coeff.*	*SE*	*Coeff.*	*SE*	*Coeff.*	*SE*
EES year (*continuous*)	0.004	0.034	-0.032	0.021	-0.024	0.021	-0.007	0.010	0.026	0.023	0.000	0.017
Eurozone	0.006	0.104	-0.058	0.156	-0.007	0.155	0.008	0.106	0.013	0.109	11.551	44.845
Party type (ref. far left)												
Mainstream	0.13	0.149	0.120	0.201	0.124	0.205	0.118	0.146	62.126	53.032	0.136	0.154
Far right	0.241	0.165	0.300	0.211	0.302	0.218	0.229	0.164	116.623*	59.957	0.242	0.164
Eurosceptic	0.169	0.130	0.032	0.165	0.047	0.166	-25.361	44.781	0.188	0.128	0.168	0.129
Vote share	-0.012**	0.005	-0.011*	0.006	-0.011*	0.006	-0.012**	0.005	-0.012**	0.005	-0.012**	0.005
Party age	0.000	0.001	0.002	0.002	0.002	0.002	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.001	0.001	0.001
Effective no of parties	-0.053*	0.030	-0.058	0.04	-0.053	0.038	-0.054*	0.030	-0.055*	0.030	-0.055*	0.032
Political contestation $_{LR}$	70.085	318.947					1.185	0.847	1.259	0.832	1.212	0.834
Private TV EU coverage			-10.627	6.483	-0.006	0.016						
Public TV EU coverage			0.005	0.012	-4.71	3.648						
t* Political contestation $_{LR}$	-0.034	0.159										
t* Private TV EU coverage			0.005	0.003								
t* Public TV EU coverage					0.002	0.002						
t* Eurosceptic							0.013	0.022				
t Party type (ref. far left)*												
t* Mainstream									-0.031	0.026		
t* Far right									-0.058*	0.030		
t* Eurozone											-0.006	0.022
Constant	-10.35	68.38	61.315	42.486	45.975	42.087	11.41	20.931	-54.883	47.035	-2.787	34.713
ln(φ)	1.874***	0.095	1.996***	0.125	1.994***	0.125	1.874***	0.096	1.885***	0.096	1.874***	0.095
Log likelihood	722.584		468.385		467.997		722.815		725.06		722.621	
Wald chi2	22.988		**12.225**		**11.47**		24.235		27.824		25.515	
Prob > chi2	0.011		**0.347**		**0.405**		0.007		0.003		0.004	
BIC	-1400		-862.928		-862.152		-1400		-1400		-1400	
N	489		293		293		489		489		489	
N clusters	87		53		53		87		87		87	

Notes: * p<.1; ** p<.05; *** p<.01; dependent variable: RVC$_{LR}$; standard errors clustered by party system and election context

Table 4. The moderating effect of time on party-voter congruence on the pro-anti EU dimension

|	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	Coeff.	*SE*	*Coeff.*	*SE*	*Coeff.*	*SE*	*Coeff.*	*SE*	*Coeff.*	*SE*	*Coeff.*	*SE*
EES year (*continuous*)	-0.069***	0.025	-0.096***	0.027	-0.061*	0.032	0.000	0.015	-0.049***	0.016	0.033	0.023
Eurozone	0.079	0.121	0.238*	0.137	0.362**	0.143	0.136	0.121	0.131	0.120	155.913***	52.98
Party type (ref. far left)												
Mainstream	-0.075	0.141	-0.009	0.204	-0.033	0.207	-0.022	0.147	-84.452**	40.389	-0.035	0.137
Far right	-0.249	0.156	-0.081	0.222	-0.063	0.216	-0.214	0.154	-59.978	59.885	-0.269*	0.152
Eurosceptic	0.414***	0.135	0.581***	0.174	0.562***	0.176	107.842***	40.564	0.408***	0.140	0.428***	0.132
Vote share	-0.006	0.005	-0.019***	0.007	-0.018***	0.006	-0.005	0.005	-0.005	0.005	-0.006	0.005
Party age	0.003**	0.001	0.004**	0.002	0.004**	0.002	0.003**	0.001	0.003**	0.001	0.003**	0.001
Effective no of parties	-0.032	0.042	-0.053	0.035	-0.053	0.041	-0.022	0.046	-0.022	0.047	-0.031	0.038
Political contestation $_{EU}$	-640.097**	274.853										
Private TV EU coverage			-22.390***	8.31	-0.042*	0.022						
Public TV EU coverage			0.03	0.019	-5.165	6.873						
t* Political contestation $_{EU}$	0.319**	0.137										
t* Private TV EU coverage			0.011***	0.004								
t* Public TV EU coverage					0.003	0.003						
t* Eurosceptic							-0.054***	0.02				
t Party type (ref. far left)*												
t* Mainstream									0.042**	0.020		
t* Far right									0.030	0.030		
t* Eurozone											-0.078***	0.026
Constant	136.775***	50.285	190.160***	55.23	119.664*	65.123	-1.474	29.89	96.577***	31.851	-68.074	46.096
ln(φ)	2.031***	0.109	2.189***	0.137	2.157***	0.134	2.032***	0.110	2.020***	0.111	2.053***	0.104
Log likelihood	750.345		478.064		474.543		750.211		747.557		754.762	
Wald chi2	47.834		112.969		108.578		48.998		48.809		52.906	
Prob > chi2	0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000	
BIC	-1400		-882.922		-875.881		-1400		-1400		-1400	
N	475		279		279		475		475		475	
N clusters	86		52		52		86		86		86	

Notes: * p<.1; ** p<.05; *** p<.01; dependent variable: RVC$_{EU}$; standard errors clustered by party system and election context

Figure 1. Distribution of party means and voter medians on the left-right dimension
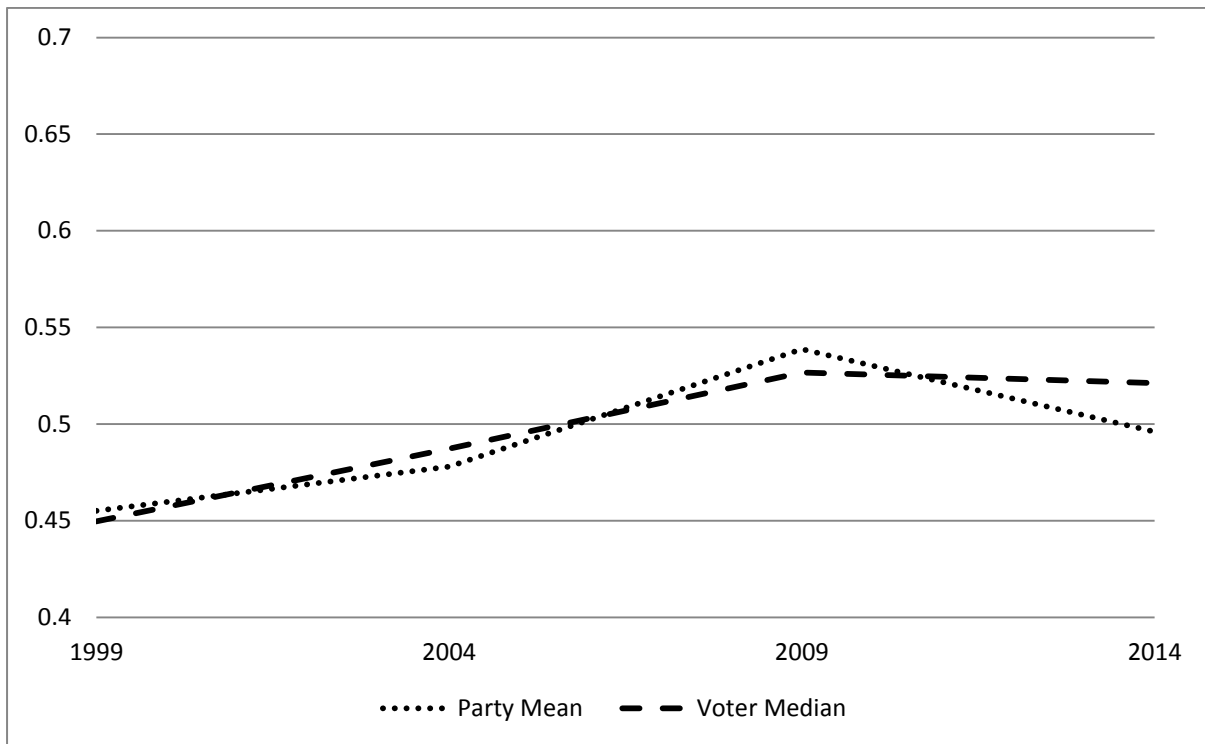

Note: Means and medians are averaged across country for each point in time. 0 indicates 'left', 1 means 'right'.

Figure 2. Distribution of party means and voter medians on the pro-anti EU dimension
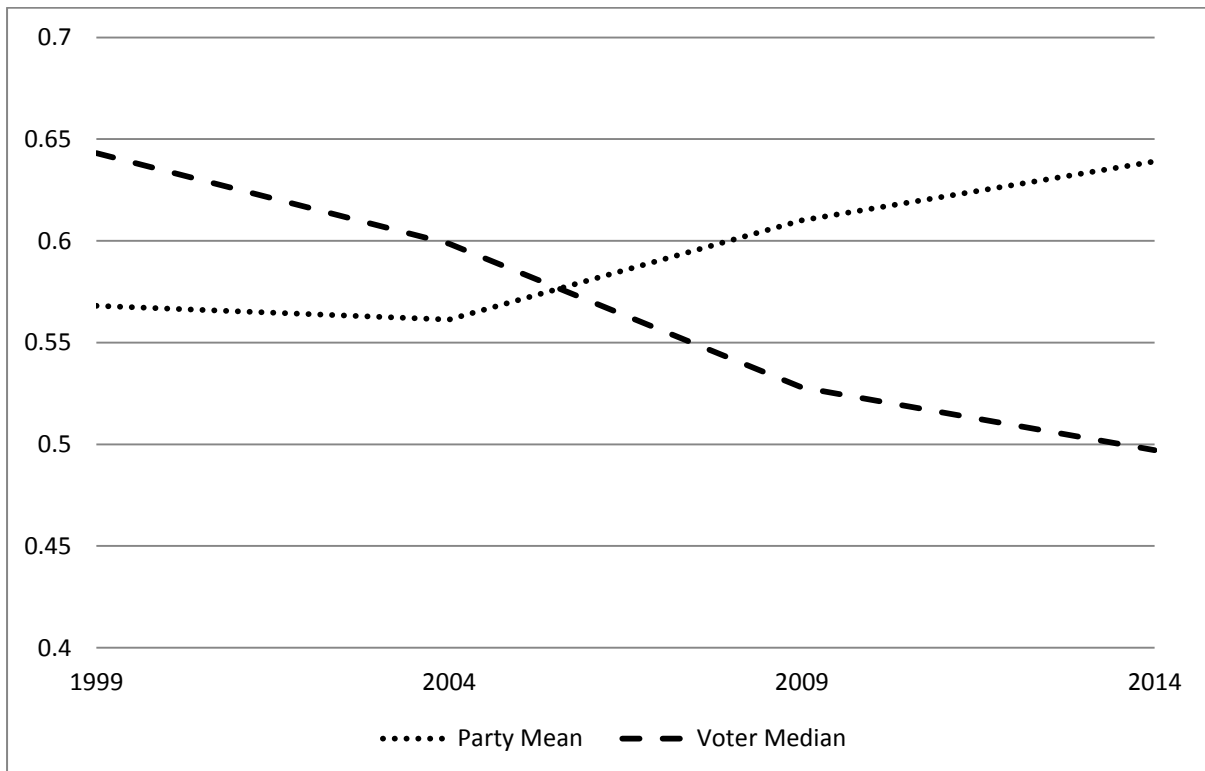

Note: Means and medians are averaged across country for each point in time. 0 indicates 'anti-EU', 1 means 'pro-EU'.

Figure 3. The effects of party type on RVC$_{LR}$ at different points in time
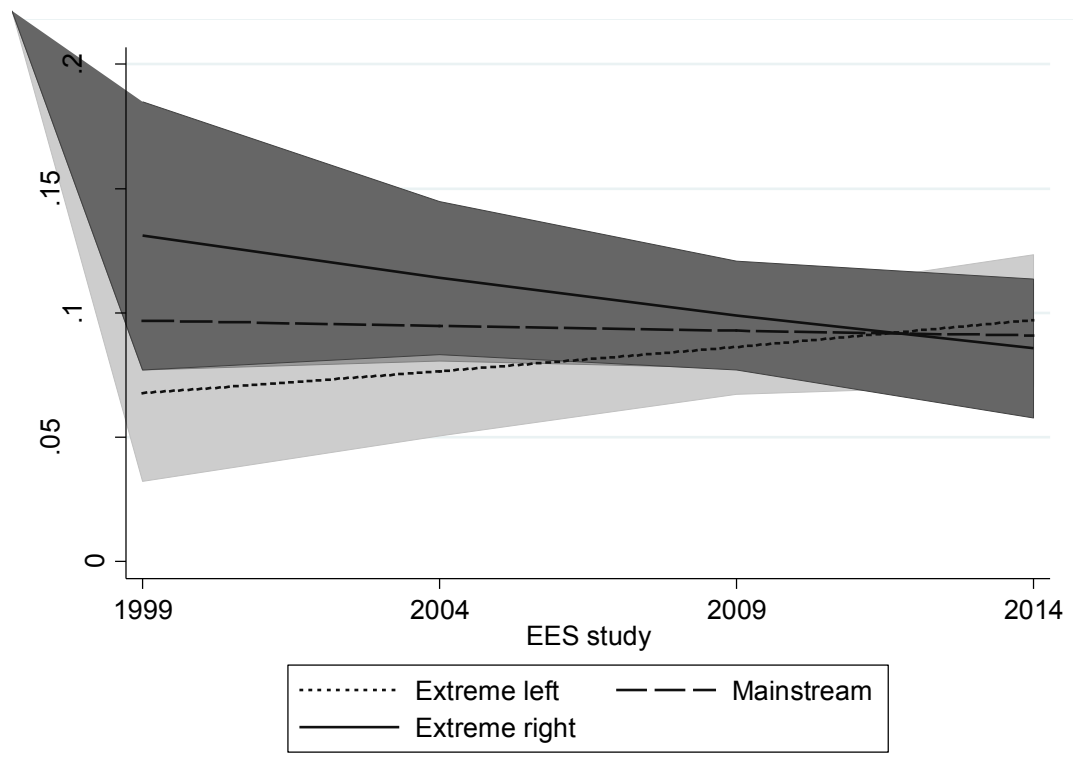
Note: lines represent expected values and shadowed areas 95% confidence intervals. The calculations are based on model 5 in Table 3.

Figure 4. The effects of Political Contestation $_{EU}$, information, Eurosceptic party, party type and Eurozone membership on RVC$_{EU}$ at different points in time
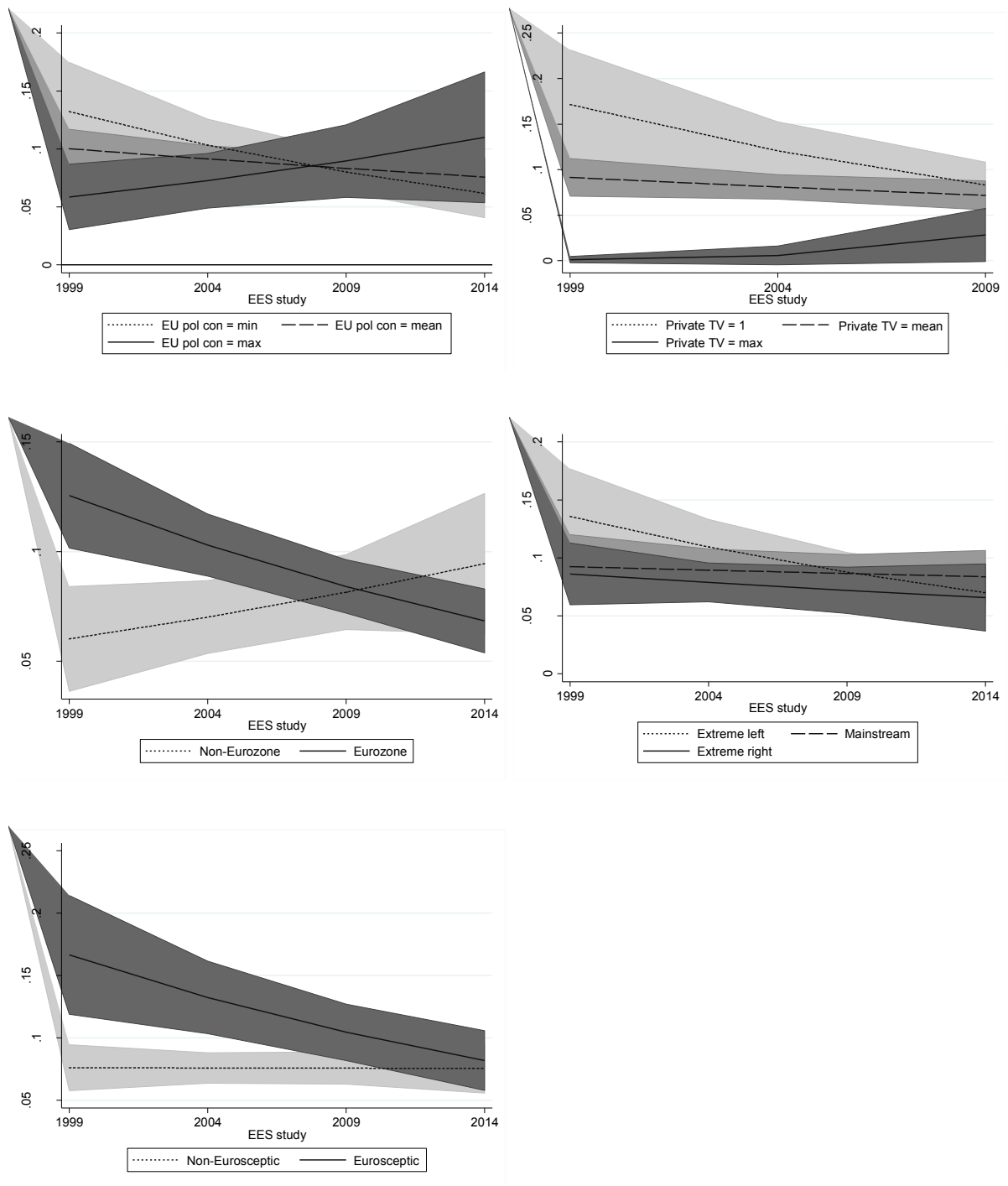
Note: lines represent expected values and shadowed areas 95% confidence intervals. The calculations are based on models 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 in Table 3.

Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	N	Mean	*SD*	Min	Max
RVC_{LR}	553	0.098228	0.117071	0.000001	0.72973
RVC_{EU}	539	0.092299	0.104794	0.000001	0.688044
Party Mean $_{LR}$	553	0.497134	0.24166	0	1
Party Mean $_{EU}$	539	0.599972	0.207784	0	1
Voter Median $_{LR}$	553	0.50206	0.208591	0	1
Voter Median $_{EU}$	545	0.555926	0.173775	0	1
1999	553	0.173599	0.379107	0	1
2004	553	0.245931	0.431028	0	1
2009	553	0.294756	0.456346	0	1
2014	553	0.285714	0.452163	0	1
Eurozone	553	0.589512	0.492368	0	1
Far left	553	0.175407	0.380659	0	1
Mainstream	553	0.641953	0.47986	0	1
Far right	553	0.18264	0.386721	0	1
Eurosceptic	489	0.274029	0.44648	0	1
Vote share	553	14.57217	10.8231	0	56.36
Party age	553	35.2821	36.73327	0	180
Political contestation $_{LR}$	553	0.210758	0.053275	0.101423	0.373988
Political contestation $_{EU}$	545	0.152531	0.071912	0.040657	0.361502
Effective no of parties	553	4.681465	1.602264	1.92	9.92
Public TV EU coverage	376	9.186779	6.388778	1.321586	37.2093
Private TV EU coverage	332	6.197596	6.427446	0	37.55869