

Public Opinion, Turnout and Social Policy: A Comparative Analysis of Policy Congruence in European Liberal Democracies

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Abstract: According to democratic theory, policy responsiveness is a key characteristic of democratic government: citizens' preferences should affect policy outcomes. Empirically, however, the connection between public opinion and policy is not self-evident and is increasingly challenged. Using an originally constructed data set with information from 21 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries between 1980 and 2014, our research design allows for a comprehensive investigation of the linkages between ideological positions of citizens, parliaments and cabinets on one hand, and redistributive policies in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries on the other hand. We find that the role of the cabinet is more important than that of parliament. Although citizens' left-right positions do not have an effect (directly or indirectly) on the level of social expenditure, there is a connection between mass preferences and the ideological position of parliament and government in high-turnout contexts.

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“Unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense.”

— (Key, 1961: 7)

V. O. Key’s famous assertion about the relation between mass preferences and policy outcomes is striking for its clarity in the expectation of a relationship between both elements. Other authors (Dahl, 1989; Mill, 1861) have similarly stressed the importance of a connection between public opinion and policy. While policy congruence is a classic research topic in political science, in the current era, observers increasingly point to a perceived lack of government responsiveness to public opinion as a potential determinant of the climate of democratic discontent. In such a context, it becomes all the more important to determine whether policy congruence occurs, and if so, what is the main causal mechanism. In the decades since the original studies on policy responsiveness, empirical evidence has suggested that public opinion can influence policy outcomes (Erikson, 2015; Erikson et al., 2002; Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2005; Miller and Stokes, 1963; Page and Shapiro, 1983; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). A number of scholars have also found evidence of reciprocal causality, implying that political elites can shape public opinion as well (Bartels et al., 2005; Hill et al., 2015; Stimson et al., 1995). The take-away message from these studies is that there is substantial evidence for a correlation between citizens’ opinions and the policies that are implemented. While most previous studies investigated only part of the mechanism that could explain this correlation, the goal of this article is to offer a comprehensive analysis of the entire policy cycle, starting from the preferences of citizens, over the potential effect of voters, elections, parliaments and governments, to real-life policy indicators.

Thus far, little is known about the various links in the chain between mass preferences and policy decisions. First, studies have shown that voters have a stronger policy influence than non-voters, and this holds both in US-based studies (Hicks and Swank, 1992; Hill and Leighley, 1992; Hill et al., 1995; Leighley and Oser, 2018) as in comparative research (Larcinese, 2007; Mahler, 2008; Mahler et al., 2014). For other groups too (e.g. highly educated, and those with more economic resources), we know that they can exert more political influence (Rigby and Wright, 2013).

Second, citizens could either have a direct impact, or their preferences could be mediated by the ideological position of parliament and/or the governing cabinet (Kang and Powell, 2010). However, most previous work did not use a direct measure of public opinion but inferred citizens’ ideological positions from electoral

results. In addition, we know virtually nothing about the contribution of different political institutions in establishing congruence between citizens' preferences and policy outcomes. Even if we observe a correlation between preferences and policy, it is important how exactly this correlation is achieved.

In this article, we contribute to the literature on policy congruence by means of a longitudinal comparative analysis. We move beyond single-case studies and investigate whether citizens have an effect on policy in European democracies. We focus on the relation between left–right ideological positions and social policy, as this is an important policy domain that can be measured by reliable and internationally comparable indicators. More specifically, we analyse the relation between the left–right ideological position of citizens, parliament and the governing cabinet on the one hand, and social expenditure on the other hand. Our theoretical expectations are that citizens base their vote on their ideological preferences and, to a lesser extent, on other possible voting motives. Subsequently our assumption is that both members of parliament and cabinet members are driven by policy-seeking motives, so that they indeed will pursue policy options that are in line with their ideological program. Finally, a working assumption is that national governments, despite the presence of various external constraints, have the possibility to develop a distinct policy.

Our analyses result in four key findings. First, we find no direct effect of citizens' ideological preferences on social expenditure. Second, the composition of parliament has an effect on welfare-spending levels. Third, the position of the governing cabinet is much stronger than the role of parliament for explaining welfare spending. Fourth, we find that in high electoral turnout contexts, mass preferences are significantly related to the ideological position of parliament and government. In the remainder of this article, we first review the literature on causal mechanisms in policy congruence research, before we present the empirical data and our modelling strategy. We close with some considerations on what our findings imply for the occurrence of policy congruence in specific circumstances.

Citizen–Policy Congruence: What Is the Causal Mechanism?

Two main theoretical approaches are dominant in the study of congruence between citizens' opinions and policy (Kang and Powell, 2010). A first model draws on Dahl's (1998: 37–38) discussion of ordinary citizens 'determining the policies' of

democratic communities, and this model assumes that in some way or another citizens influence policy. A second model is based on the assumption that elections are mere mechanisms for leadership selection, suggesting that citizens will not be able to determine policy (Achen and Bartels, 2016).

In order to assess the impact of different procedures and institutions, it is important to include the full causal chain linking population preferences and policies (Powell, 2000). Figure 1 summarizes our theoretical model by depicting the ways in which public opinion can influence policy in representative democracies. First, it is assumed that citizens choose candidates and parties that correspond to their preferences (a1 in Figure 1), in this way electing a parliament that represents the preferences of the citizens (a2). Second, in parliamentary systems, the executive branch is appointed or approved by parliament (b). The governing cabinet, then, takes decisions on what policies to implement (c). In most political systems, however, parliament remains involved in policy making in its legislative or controlling role (d) (Schmidt, 1996). Furthermore, citizens might also influence policy decisions in a direct manner, for example, by protest behaviour (e). There is no reason to assume, however, that this process is similar across political systems, as variance in the characteristics of the electoral system might have a strong effect on the relation between citizens, voters, representatives and government officials. The underlying assumption for this theoretical model is that all actors in the chain (from voters, to members of parliament to cabinet ministers) are mainly motivated by ideological preferences, and for the time being, we disregard other motives or various external constraints.

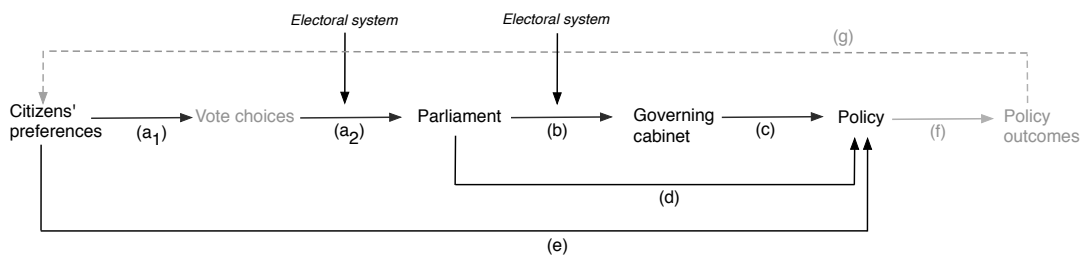


Figure 1: Theoretical Model Linking Citizens' Preferences to Policy Outcomes

In this article, we focus on relations (a), (b), (c), (d) and (e). Relations (f) and (g) – depicted in grey – fall outside the scope of the analysis. For reasons of clarity, external determinants are not included in the figure.

As noted in Figure 1, government policy is not the final link in the causal chain, as policy measures can lead to specific policy outcomes that subsequently affect society or the economy (f). In the literature, however, there is no consensus on how to trace the potential link from government policy indicators (e.g. social expenditure) to specific policy outcomes (e.g. inequality measures) (Moene and Wallerstein, 2003). Furthermore, previous work has shown that policies affect citizens' preferences as well (g) (Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). Integrating this feedback loop into our model, however, falls outside the scope of the current article.

By investigating the full sequence of potential relations between public opinion and policy, our theoretical framework builds upon three areas of prior research that have examined only specific sections of the full causal chain depicted in Figure 1.¹ A first set of studies has examined ideological congruence between citizens on one hand, and representatives and government on the other hand (Blais and Bodet, 2006; Ferland, 2016; Powell, 2009). These studies have relied on a measurement of voter preferences as a proxy indicator for public opinion, even though it is well known that voters are never fully representative of the total adult population (Lijphart, 1997). What is even more important: most of this research relies on election results to identify the ideological position of the median voter, but this assumes that election results perfectly reflect the ideological positions of voters. These studies have shown a strong link between the position of the median voter and the government's ideological position.

A second set of studies has argued that the ideological position of government is consequential for the policies that are implemented (Blais et al., 1993; Franzese, 2002). According to a meta-analysis of over 40 published papers, however, the evidence for this link between governments' positions and policies is far from conclusive, as governments might not be motivated to keep their electoral pledges or might be limited by various external constraints (Imbeau et al., 2001). Importantly, due to the isolated focus on the link between government and policies, these studies have not accounted for a more direct policy-making role of parliaments, independent of which parties are in charge of the executive (arrow d in Figure 1). Especially in multiparty systems, we do not expect the governing cabinet to decide unilaterally on policy, as this would sideline parliament. The possibility that par-

1. While starting from citizens in the theoretical model enables a more comprehensive research design in comparison with prior research, the concluding discussion considers the larger consequences of this modelling choice, including avenues for future research.

liaments might also have a direct effect on policy should therefore be included in our theoretical models.

A third area of research has focused on the link between the median voter's left-right position and government spending. Kang and Powell (2010) show that when the median voter is positioned more to the left, governments spend more on social policy. Coman (2015) uses the same data to show that responsiveness to ideological shifts varies depending on whether it concerns a shift to the left or to the right. These studies also investigate how congruence and responsiveness are both moderated by electoral rules. While Kang and Powell (2010) find similar levels of congruence under majoritarian and proportional electoral rules, Coman (2015) argues that governments are less responsive to what citizens want under proportional electoral rules. Both studies, however, do not include a direct measure of citizens' preferences.

In sum, while studies have added knowledge about specific sections of the full causal chain, empirical studies have not yet taken mass preferences of citizens as a starting point to understand the relationships between all actors in the model. In the following section, we review how our research design encompasses a broader perspective to investigate the preference-policy linkage.

Research Design and Expectations

By accounting for the ideological positions of citizens, parliaments and governing cabinets, our study is the first comparative analysis that links citizens' preferences to policy in both a direct and indirect way (processes a, b, c, d and e). We take citizen preferences as the starting point as we know that electoral results do not always offer a perfect representation of voters' preferences (detailed further in 'Data and Measures' section). The electoral system or different turnout levels therefore could be a potential source of a lack of congruence, and the only way to detect this phenomenon is to start from the preferences of all citizens, whether or not they voted.

A main challenge for investigating policy congruence is to identify a policy indicator that captures the ideological dimension we want to operationalize. We follow previous work on left-right ideological positions, as this measurement captures ideological positions in a broad comprehensive manner, despite obvious limitations. As Fortunato et al. (2016) – among others – have indicated, left-right po-

sitions might not refer to the same policy dimensions in various countries, and they might reflect strong individual variance. An analysis of survey data in the countries in our sample, however, shows that a right-wing self-placement correlates with a preference for less welfare spending and with opposing government action to reduce inequalities (Supplemental Appendix 11).² This is in line with previous studies showing that in most countries, a leftist ideological position expresses a preference for stronger government intervention to support economic equality (Lesschaeve, 2017; Rueda, 2018). Following previous studies, we focus on the proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) the government spends on social expenditure (Franzese, 2002; Hooghe and Oser, 2016). In this way, our work builds further on earlier studies that have investigated policy responsiveness with regard to social expenditure (Coman, 2015; Kang and Powell, 2010).

Our expectations follow from our theoretical model (Figure 1). First, we expect that citizens' left-right preferences affect levels of social spending.³ This could be the result of citizens influencing policy in a direct way (arrow e in Figure 1) or as the result of an indirect effect, through the parties that are elected in parliament and form the government (arrows a, b and c). To assess how exactly an indirect effect might occur, we perform mediation analyses.

In electoral democracies, the guiding assumption is that citizens elect members of parliament who subsequently will establish a government majority. The vote choice and the behaviour of elected politicians in our model are assumed to be ideologically driven. Even if the executive branch generally dominates policy making, the legislative branch still has leverage over this process (Tsebelis, 2002). Furthermore, citizens can voice their opinions in a variety of ways outside of election times as well, affecting policy while circumventing parliament (Leighley and Oser, 2018; Wlezien and Soroka, 2012).

While we expect these patterns to apply to electoral democracies in general, the extent to which the different actors (citizens, parliament and governing cabinet) have an impact on policy will depend on specific electoral rules. In proportional systems, we expect parliament's ideological position to be more important, as this electoral system is associated with an emphasis on consensus-seeking be-

2. Only for Poland, this correlation was not positive, but removing Poland from the data set did not change results (Supplemental Appendix 6).

3. In line with previous studies, we consider government spending as an important outcome measure for empirical research on representation processes, despite potential external constraints on this type of government policy decision.

tween groups that are represented in parliament (Powell, 2000). In majoritarian electoral systems, in contrast, we expect the governing cabinet's ideological position to be more important. A majoritarian vision of democracy entails a concentration of power, implying that the cabinet has a strong mandate (Golder and Ferland, 2017; Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2005). Furthermore, single-party majority governments are more likely to occur under majoritarian electoral rules, and in that case, there is much less need for consensus-seeking with opposition parties (Costello and Thomson, 2008). Finally, it can be assumed that if citizens exert political influence mainly through their vote, higher turnout levels will be associated with a stronger correlation between citizens' preferences and policy outcomes.

Data and Measures

We make use of an originally constructed data set that includes measures of ideological positions, government policy as well as institutional variables.

For a reliable indicator of citizens' preferences, we rely on general population survey data. Prior research has estimated voter ideology based on the median voter position as revealed in their party choice (Coman, 2015; Kang and Powell, 2010; Kim and Fording, 1998, 2003). In these studies, the underlying assumption is that the ideological position of a political party can be used as a proxy indicator for the preferences of its voters. That would be a valid approach if parties would perfectly represent the preferences of their voters, but there are numerous reasons to challenge this assumption. While ideological (left-right) positions are important to explain voter behaviour, research has shown that it is not the only determinant of vote choice (Warwick and Zakharova, 2013). Party and electoral system characteristics also affect the extent to which voters' ideological positions correlate with parties' ideological positions (Dalton, 2008). Specific elements of the electoral and the party system might also have an effect on selective patterns of electoral turnout, and therefore, the signal of some groups of the population will not even be heard as a result of elections. Kim and Fording (2003: 99) furthermore only have data on ideological positions in election years, and they use linear interpolation for estimating ideological positions in non-election years. This, however, is again a very strong assumption, as fluctuations of ideological positions are more volatile. Direct public opinion data, on the contrary, are available on a more frequent basis.

For all these reasons, we prefer relying on a direct estimate of citizens' prefer-

ences. Fortunately, such data are available for a large number of European countries, as the Eurobarometer surveys have included measures of left–right self-placements (on a 1-10 scale) on a yearly basis from 1973 onwards. The availability of such a long and continuous time series of public opinion data that is representative for the citizens of a country makes the Eurobarometer data unique, and therefore, many scholars have already used these data for comparative and longitudinal analyses of left–right positions (Ezrow et al., 2011). We calculate the mean left–right position in the countries included in the Eurobarometer survey by year, combining multiple surveys for years when more than one measurement is available. Ideological positions were measured by means of a 10-point scale (1=left; 10=right), and the mean left–right positions vary between 4.3 and 6.9.⁴ Importantly, mean ideological positions vary over time and between elections (Supplemental Appendix 1), demonstrating it is important to have annual measurements.

Second, we need information on the ideological position of parliament in terms of the political parties that have seats in the assembly. For this measure, we use the CMP data. Party manifesto data have often been used to offer indications of parties' ideological positions, and they have a wide geographical scope, covering elections since 1945 (Adams et al., 2006). The Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) data include estimates of parties' policy positions, based on a content analysis of election manifestos. The most often used indicator is a summary left–right index (the *rile*-index), based on parties' positions on different issues. Even though the value of the CMP data is widely acknowledged, some studies have questioned their validity, focusing on an alleged confounding of issue positions and salience (Kim and Fording, 2003). In order to address this problem, Lowe et al. (2011) recommend a logarithmic transformation of the raw CMP scales. These log-transformed scales indeed correlate highly with the positions that experts accord to political parties. We use the log-transformed CMP *rile*-indicator⁵, as made available by Lowe et al. (2011).⁶ We use these measures of parties' ideological positions to estimate the ide-

4. The highest score was recorded in Turkey in 2007. Removing this and other potential outliers from the analysis did not lead to different results (Supplemental Appendix 6).

5. We also estimated models in which we included more precise manifesto-based measures of parties' positions on welfare instead of the more general left–right measures. Doing so resulted in somewhat weaker results, but our conclusions remained substantively the same (Supplemental Appendix 9).

6. We also verify whether our results are robust to relying on the original, non-transformed *rile*-indicator that is provided by the CMP project. These results are largely in line with the main results that are presented in this article (Supplemental Appendix 5).

ological position of parliament, by calculating a weighted mean of the ideological positions of all parties that are represented in parliament, with parties weighted according to their seat shares.⁷ For information on the seat shares, we rely on the ParlGov database (Döring and Manow, 2016).

Third, for estimating the ideological position of the incumbent government, we use the same approach as we used for parliament: the left–right position of the governing party or parties is weighted according to the weight of the party in the governing coalition. As we do not have detailed information on ideological preferences of different fractions and members of parties, we assume that the position of the party in government corresponds to the average ideological position of the party – as reflected in its programme. For coalition governments, a weighted average is used, with the coalition parties weighted according to their seat share in parliament, as recorded in the ParlGov data set (in the case of a single-party government, the weight is 1.0).⁸

Fourth, we need a reliable indicator of government policy for an important policy domain. Social expenditure is ideal to investigate our hypotheses, and this indicator has been used in prior studies with a similar theoretical focus (Coman, 2015; Kang and Powell, 2010). Social policy is the single most important policy domain in sheer scope, as within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, 21% of GDP on average is spent on social expenditure, which is 10 times as much as the proportion that is allocated to education or the military. Reliable statistical information on social policy expenditures, furthermore, is available for long time periods (1980–2014) through the OECD Social Expenditure Database (SocX). An advantage of this indicator is that it reflects a fundamental cleavage in public opinion, and that it strongly correlates with redistribution preferences (De Vries et al., 2013; Hellwig, 2008; OECD, 2017).

Taken together, these measurements of the ideological preferences of citizens, parliament and the governing cabinet operationalize the main elements of our theoretical model (Figure 1). Although relying on the Eurobarometer data to measure citizen ideology has important advantages, a drawback of this data set is that we

7. Given that the CMP data set does not include information on the ideological placement of some (mostly smaller) parties, we set a threshold of the information that is required for including parliaments in these analyses. We set the threshold at 90%: if we had information for 90% or more of the seats in parliament, we calculated the mean ideological position of parliament.

8. In line with how we proceeded for estimating the ideological position of parliament, only cabinets for which information was 90% or more complete are included.

cannot include a measure of voting because political participation is not measured consistently. This means that, in comparison with prior studies, our research design is uniquely capable of testing whether the will of the mass public – regardless of whether individuals vote or not – affects policy (arrow e). We cannot empirically test whether the preferences of those who vote are faithfully represented by the parliament members who are elected. We are able to examine the important role of turnout levels, however, by testing whether mass preferences have a stronger impact in high-turnout electoral contexts.

The models include standard control variables, such as economic growth, which is expected to be negatively correlated to spending. Furthermore, we control for unemployment rates and the proportion of elderly in the population, both of which are positively correlated to spending (Hooghe and Oser, 2016; Kang and Powell, 2010). We also control for inflation and inequality indicators (Moene and Wallerstein, 2003). In addition, we add to our models an indicator of globalization to investigate the possibility that globalization leads to welfare state retrenchment (Dreher et al., 2008). Given indications that governments spend more in (the run-up to) election years (Blais and Nadeau, 1992), we add an election-year variable to the model. In an additional robustness test, we also validate whether our results are robust to controlling for the level of public debt.⁹

Finally, we verify whether there are indications of between-country heterogeneity that depend on the electoral system. In line with previous research, we focus on the distinction between majoritarian and other systems (proportional or mixed), and this information was obtained from Bormann and Golder (2013). In addition, we have verified the robustness of our results when relying on an indicator of disproportionality (Gallagher, 1991). Supplemental Appendix 2 reports the sources and operationalization of all variables.

Our analyses are limited to the 21 OECD countries for which the Eurobarometer data also provide information on left–right placements. Our unit of analysis is a country-year, implying that all our indicators are measured by year, which is in line with previous studies on this topic (Coman, 2015; Kang and Powell, 2010). Changes in the composition of parliament or government can happen at any time during the year. Therefore, we make use of the country-year format version of the ParlGov data set, which includes weights that reflect the proportion of a year that

9. For reasons of data availability, our sample is greatly reduced when adding this control. Results of this analysis (Supplemental Appendix 7) are substantively the same with this control.

a parliament or cabinet was in office (Döring and Manow, 2016).

Estimation Technique

Our data are time-series cross-sectional, with yearly measures for each of the countries included. Our estimation approach takes into account the specific properties of the data, thus controlling for the fact that observations are not independent. First, panel-level heteroskedasticity is a likely problem in time-series cross-sectional data. That would be the case when the error terms for different panels (the countries in our data set) have different variances or if error terms are correlated across countries (Beck, 2008). Performing a Breusch–Pagan test for heteroskedasticity,¹⁰ we indeed found indications for heteroskedasticity. We deal with this issue by estimating models with panel-corrected standard errors (PCSE), and this procedure takes these dependencies into account (Beck and Katz, 2011).

Second, we note that the errors in the data are not serially independent, indicating a problem of autocorrelation.¹¹ We add a lagged dependent variable to our model to address this issue. In order to make an optimal comparison with previous studies possible, we opted for a 1-year lag, but a robustness test with a 2-year lag led to the same results. Finally, when analysing time-series data, it is important to verify whether the data are stationary, but we know that levels of social spending tended to increase over previous decades.¹² Therefore, we take the first-difference of the dependent variable and focus on explaining short-term changes in social welfare spending through differentiated independent variables (Beck, 2008). We further add to this specification a set of variables that corresponds to the lagged level of their values at time t . In doing so, we effectively estimate an error correction model, which allows moving beyond a focus on short-term effects (Kang and Powell, 2010). We furthermore include, for the variables of interest and for the controls, a change variable (denoted by Δ , or δ) as well as lagged indicators (denoted by t_1). We account for unobserved heterogeneity between countries by means of country dummies and report PCSE. This estimation approach corresponds to the

10. $\chi^2(1 \text{ df}) = 4.46$, $p \text{ value} = 0.035$.

11. More precisely, we performed a Lagrange multiplier test (Beck, 2008). Doing so, we had to reject the null hypothesis of no serial correlation between the errors ($\chi^2(1 \text{ df}) = 10.52$, $p \text{ value} < 0.001$).

12. This suspicion is further confirmed when we estimate a dynamic model explaining social welfare spending by means of our independent variables. The residuals of such a model do not appear to be stationary, as the coefficient of an autoregression of the residuals on their lags is far from zero (Beck, 2008).

modelling strategy used previously (Coman, 2015; Franzese, 2002; Kang and Powell, 2010), which makes it possible to compare our results with previous work.

We first estimate three models to establish whether the positions of citizens, parliaments and governing cabinets are significantly correlated to policies. A first model allows verifying whether there is an impact of citizens on policy – either directly (through arrow e in Figure 1) or indirectly (through a1 and a2, b and c). In a second model, we validate whether the ideological position of parliaments is significantly correlated to policy, regardless of whether this correlation is the result of a direct (d) or indirect (through b and c) effect. In a third model, we estimate the correlation between the ideological position of the cabinet and the policies that are implemented (arrow c).

Subsequently, we estimate a model in which we explain policy by means of the ideological position of citizens, parliaments and the cabinet. This allows verifying whether – once we control for the role of cabinet – there are additional, and direct, effects of citizens and parliaments (arrows d and e in Figure 1). Our full model is hence:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \Delta\text{Spending}^t = & \beta_0 + \beta_1\text{Spending}^t\text{-1} + \beta_2\Delta\text{Left-right position citizens} \\
 & + \beta_3\text{Left-right position citizens}^t\text{-1} \\
 & + \beta_4\Delta\text{Left-right position parliament} \\
 & + \beta_5\text{Left-right position parliament}^t\text{-1} \\
 & + \beta_6\Delta\text{Left-right position government} \\
 & + \beta_7\text{Left-right position government}^t\text{-1} + \beta_i\text{Controls} + \epsilon
 \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

While this model provides insights into the effects of citizens, the parliament and cabinet on social spending, in a next step, we gain additional insights into the interconnection between the different actors by regressing them against one another. That is, we estimate models in which the change in the ideological position of parliament and government is the dependent variable. We also examine the role of the parliament and the cabinet as mediators by means of a step-wise approach (Baron and Kenny, 1986).¹³

13. We are aware of the limitations of the Baron and Kenny approach to test mediation (Imai et al., 2010). Alternative approaches for estimating and distinguishing direct and indirect effects, however (Hicks and Tingley, 2011), can currently not be applied to a time-series framework. As the structure of our data necessitates taking into account the independence of error terms within countries as well as serial correlation, it is not possible to implement this alternative approach to our data set. We hence fall back to the Baron and Kenny approach, but given the limitations, we proceed with great care when interpreting the results of these supplementary analyses.

Results

What Actors Affect Welfare Spending?

Table 1 presents the results of our total effects models, assessing the effect of the ideological position of citizens (Model 1), parliament (Model 2) and the cabinet (Model 3) while controlling for contextual factors and country-level differences in spending. We include all indicators simultaneously in Model 4.

Model 1 suggests that a change in the position of citizens does not significantly affect changes in social spending. Furthermore, the estimated long-term effect of citizens' ideological positions – which we can obtain by dividing the coefficient of the lagged left–right position of citizens by the coefficient of lagged social welfare spending (all long-term effects are summarized in Table 2) – is not significant either. Despite the fact that our models are very close to the ones used by Kang and Powell (2010), we cannot confirm their finding of a small long-term effect of voters' preferences on spending. It has to be remembered that, however, their finding was based on (potentially biased) party-based measures of voters' preferences. At least for this policy domain, we do not find any evidence of policy congruence.

Model 2 in Table 1 allows verifying whether the parliament's ideological position affects social spending, and here, results are in line with expectations. First, the negative effect of Δ left–right parliament suggests that as parliament's ideological position shifts to the right, less is spent on social expenditure. Furthermore, the coefficient of the lagged ideological position of parliament is significant too. By dividing this estimate (0.258) by the negative coefficient of the lagged dependent variable in Model 2 (0.192), we obtain an estimate of the long-term equilibrium effect of parliament's ideological position of 1.344, which is significant at the 0.05 level (Table 2). Substantively, a one-point difference in a parliament's left–right position on the log-transformed right/left (rile)-indicator (for which values in the sample vary between 1.232 and 1.614) is associated with a difference of 1.4 percentage points in social spending (Supplemental Appendix 4). These results confirm previous findings by Kim and Fording (1998).

In Model 3, we investigate the role of the cabinet's ideological position, and these effects are highly significant. We observe that a right-wing shift in the position of the cabinet reduces social spending. In addition, dividing the estimate of the lagged cabinet position by the coefficient obtained for lagged spending, we obtain an equilibrium effect of 1.352 ($p < 0.01$).

Table 1: Determinants of Social Expenditure: Ideological Positions of Citizens, Parliament and Governing Cabinet

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Social welfare spending t-1	-0.186*** (0.037)	-0.192*** (0.036)	-0.200*** (0.036)	-0.197*** (0.036)
Δ Citizen left-right	0.381 (0.237)			0.303 (0.246)
Citizen left-right t-1	-0.123 (0.209)			-0.055 (0.217)
Δ Left-right parliament		-0.408* (0.183)		-0.148 (0.185)
Parliament left-right t-1		-0.258* (0.101)		-0.067 (0.119)
Δ left-right cabinet			-0.369*** (0.095)	-0.305** (0.102)
Cabinet left-right t-1			-0.271*** (0.074)	-0.235** (0.088)
Δ GDP	-0.215*** (0.016)	-0.216*** (0.016)	-0.212*** (0.016)	-0.214*** (0.016)
GDP t-1	-0.194*** (0.025)	-0.195*** (0.025)	-0.191*** (0.025)	-0.193*** (0.025)
Δ inflation	-0.120*** (0.036)	-0.133*** (0.034)	-0.124*** (0.034)	-0.125*** (0.034)
Inflation t-1	-0.108*** (0.026)	-0.111*** (0.027)	-0.105*** (0.027)	-0.106*** (0.027)
Δ unemployment	0.147*** (0.039)	0.128** (0.040)	0.139*** (0.039)	0.133*** (0.039)
Unemployment t-1	0.017 (0.020)	0.019 (0.020)	0.020 (0.019)	0.020 (0.020)
Δ gini	-0.011 (0.048)	-0.017 (0.049)	-0.019 (0.048)	-0.026 (0.048)
Gini t-1	-0.025 (0.032)	-0.018 (0.032)	-0.024 (0.032)	-0.027 (0.032)
Δ globalization	0.010 (0.030)	0.014 (0.030)	0.013 (0.029)	0.013 (0.029)
Globalization t-1	0.002 (0.016)	0.010 (0.015)	0.005 (0.015)	0.004 (0.015)
Δ 65+	-0.155 (0.345)	-0.216 (0.338)	-0.190 (0.326)	-0.175 (0.326)
65+ t-1	0.028 (0.053)	0.001 (0.051)	0.039 (0.052)	0.039 (0.052)
Election year	-0.001 (0.081)	0.012 (0.080)	0.026 (0.080)	0.022 (0.080)
Observations	285	285	285	285
R ²	0.636	0.641	0.653	0.657

Note: Coefficients of OLS models with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses. Country dummies included. Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Looking at the control variables, it can be noted that GDP growth significantly decreases social spending. This should not come as a surprise as social expenditure is expressed as a percentage of GDP, implying that an increase in GDP automatically leads to a lower percentage spent on social policy. Furthermore, an increase in inflation has a significant negative effect on changes in social spending. The results also indicate that increasing unemployment rates increase the budget that is spent on social welfare. For the other controls, we find no significant effects.

The results in Table 1 suggest that the effects of the ideological composition of parliament and the cabinet are about the same when estimated separately. To assess whether parliament or the cabinet is the most important actor, we simultaneously estimate their effects (Model 4 in Table 1). It is clear that the effect of the cabinet is very strong. The relation with citizens' and parliaments' position is non-significant. This leads to the conclusion that cabinets have a strong effect on social policy, with right-wing cabinets investing less in social security. Controlling for the debt ratio of a country yields the same results (Supplemental Appendix 7).

Table 2: Determinants of Social Expenditure: Ideological Positions of Citizens, Parliament and Governing Cabinet

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
- Citizen left-right t-1 / Social welfare spending t-1	-0.659			-0.281
	(1.162)			(1.115)
- Parliament left-right t-1 / Social welfare spending t-1		-1.344*		-0.338
		(0.577)		(0.610)
- Cabinet left-right t-1 / Social welfare spending t-1			-1.352**	-1.191*
			(0.431)	(0.473)

Note: Long-term effects based on estimates in Table 1. Obtained using the nlcom-command in STATA. Standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The Connection Between Citizens, Parliaments and Cabinets

The results in Tables 1 and 2 suggest that citizens' ideological positions do not affect social spending. However, the positions of parliament and the cabinet do influence social welfare spending. Citizens could, therefore, indirectly influence policy through their impact on the ideological composition of parliament and the

cabinet.

To study these effects, we regressed the ideological positions of cabinets and parliaments, respectively, on citizens' ideological preferences. The results (Supplemental Appendix 10) are clear: there is no significant correlation between the position of citizens on the one hand, and the ideological position of parliament or the cabinet on the other hand. This means that we do not find any indication for an indirect relation between public opinion and social policy, either.

In terms of the model depicted in Figure 1, we can conclude that there is no correlation between mass preferences and policy for this specific policy area. This lack of a correlation might be driven by the fact that election results are not an expression of the ideological preferences of the total population. As electoral turnout is never universal, an obvious mechanism is that voters are not representative for the adult population as a whole. Therefore, we include electoral turnout – and its interactions with citizens' ideological positions – in our models, with the expectation that under conditions of high electoral turnout, there is less distortion of popular preferences (Supplemental Appendix 10). The results show an interaction effect in the expected direction: when electoral turnout is high, there is a stronger correlation between public opinion and the position of parliament. We also find a significant interaction effect between mass preferences and electoral turnout on the cabinet's ideological position. These interaction effects mean that parliament and the governing cabinet are more likely to reflect the will of the people in contexts of high turnout, where electoral results reflect more accurately the preferences of the entire population. High levels of electoral turnout therefore seem to be an important link in the causal chain leading to policy congruence.

Turning to the role of parliament, the results in Table 1 indicate that while there is an overall correlation between the position of parliament and welfare spending, this effect is non-significant when controlling for the ideological position of the cabinet. This suggests a mediation effect, implying that parliament is relevant for policy making through its influence on government formation. We have tested this possibility using a mediation analysis (Supplemental Appendix 10). These findings suggest that the short-term and long-term effects of the ideological position of parliament on welfare policy are indeed mediated through the cabinet.

The Role of Electoral Systems

Our results show that public opinion does not have a direct effect on social policy. It is important to verify, however, whether these effects are dependent on the electoral system, and therefore, we add interactions between the ideological variables and a dummy variable identifying the majoritarian systems. As we are exploring the impact of a variable that varies mostly between countries, we begin by re-estimating our full model (Model 4 in Table 1) without country dummies. Subsequently, we add the main effect of the majoritarian system dummy as well as its interactions with the change and lagged indicators of citizens', parliament's and government's ideological position.

In Table 3, we present the results. Before interpreting the interaction effects, it is important to point out that when replicating the full model without the country-intercepts, the results are in line with what we found for Model 4 in Table 1. We still find an impact of government's ideological positions only, though the long-term effect now falls short of statistical significance (the coefficient for the long-term equilibrium effect is 1.892, with a p value of 0.068).

In Model 2 in Table 3, we add a dummy variable identifying elections that were organized under majoritarian rules as well as its interactions with the ideological position-variables. The dummy variable does not reach statistical significance, indicating that social expenditure is not significantly different in countries with a majoritarian political system. Majoritarian electoral systems are not less responsive to changes in public opinion. As is evident from the estimates in Table 3, one interaction term is significant, and it suggests that the ideological position of the parliament has a stronger effect in a majoritarian electoral system. To interpret this effect, we plot in Figure 2 the average marginal effects of a change in the parliament's left-right position under majoritarian and non-majoritarian rules.

In contrast to expectations, we observe that under majoritarian electoral rules, a shift of parliament's ideological position to the right – under control for the ideological position of the governing cabinet – leads to less spending, while the effect is not significant in non-majoritarian systems. This suggests that under majoritarian rules, where single-party governments are more common, government takes into account the views that are represented in parliament. That is, in addition to the mediated effect of parliament (through the role of the governing cabinet), there is a direct short-term effect of the parliament's ideological position as well. When we

Table 3: Determinants of Social Expenditure: Ideological Positions of Citizens, Parliament and Governing Cabinet

	(1)		(2)	
Social welfare spending t-1	-0.084***	(0.019)	-0.117***	(0.019)
Δ Citizen left-right	0.349	(0.237)	0.282	(0.239)
Citizen left-right t-1	-0.064	(0.088)	-0.015	(0.090)
Δ parliament left-right	-0.228	(0.199)	-0.078	(0.211)
Parliament left-right t-1	-0.066	(0.130)	-0.005	(0.133)
Δ cabinet left-right	-0.229*	(0.107)	-0.227	(0.118)
Cabinet left-right t-1	-0.159	(0.086)	-0.090	(0.096)
Δ GDP	-0.224***	(0.016)	-0.221***	(0.016)
GDP t-1	-0.183***	(0.022)	-0.187***	(0.023)
Δ inflation	-0.118***	(0.035)	-0.110**	(0.035)
Inflation t-1	-0.082***	(0.021)	-0.094***	(0.020)
Δ unemployment	0.118**	(0.039)	0.128**	(0.040)
Unemployment t-1	0.008	(0.009)	0.008	(0.011)
Δ gini	-0.036	(0.047)	-0.003	(0.047)
Gini t-1	-0.011	(0.014)	-0.021	(0.014)
Δ globalization	-0.003	(0.033)	0.006	(0.032)
Globalization t-1	-0.003	(0.007)	-0.004	(0.007)
Δ 65+	-0.112	(0.300)	-0.089	(0.309)
65+ t-1	-0.006	(0.024)	0.026	(0.022)
Election year	0.017	(0.087)	0.032	(0.085)
Majortarian			0.743	(3.128)
Majortarian × Δ Citizen left-right			0.200	(0.825)
Majortarian × Citizen left-right t-1			-0.130	(0.618)
Majortarian × Δ parliament left-right			-1.646**	(0.549)
Majortarian × parliament left-right t-1			-0.625	(0.326)
Majortarian × Δ cabinet left-right			0.555	(0.337)
Majortarian × cabinet left-right t-1			-0.395	(0.270)
Constant	3.752***	(1.132)	4.164***	(1.141)
Observations	285		270	
R^2	0.599		0.617	

Note: Coefficients of OLS models with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses. Country dummies included. Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

focus on the level of disproportionality of an electoral system (Supplemental Appendix 8), we similarly find indications that policy responsiveness is strengthened as the proportionality of the electoral system decreases.

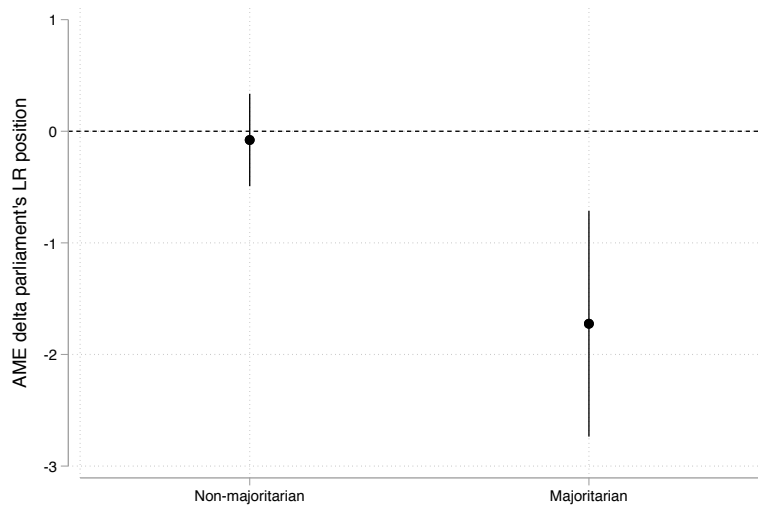


Figure 2: Average Marginal Effects and 95% Confidence of Δ Parliament Left-Right, by Electoral System.

Note: Average marginal effects and 95% confidence intervals are presented. Based on estimates of Model 2 in Table 3. Dashed line is a reference line at $y=0$. Majoritarian=United Kingdom and France.

Discussion

This study adds an important new piece of knowledge to the puzzle of democratic representation. Relying on a broad ideological self-placement question, in line with previous research, we did not find indications of a direct effect of citizens' ideological preferences on social policy. An important new finding, however, is that in high-turnout contexts, mass preferences have an effect on the ideological position of parliament and the governing cabinet. This means that there are indications that the position of voters matters for representation in parliament and the governing cabinet. In this regard, our results suggest that high levels of electoral turnout are important for ensuring that the preferences of the population inform policy. This suggests that in high-turnout conditions, electoral results are more representative of public opinion as a whole, thus allowing for an effective transfer of public opinion preferences to the policy-making process. A limitation of the current approach, however, is that we did not include external constraints that might have an effect on ideological positions, vote motives and government policy.

Our findings suggest that in the short run, the ideological composition of a cabinet makes a difference, while this is not the case for parliament. It should be

acknowledged, however, that while some effects are significant, substantively they tend to be limited. Another limitation we have to take into account is that public opinion also reacts to government policy (Campbell, 2012). Although investigating this feedback loop is beyond the scope of this article, various studies have shown that government policy also has an impact on public opinion and this should be a topic for further research (Wlezien and Soroka, 2012).

Furthermore, we focused only on one fundamental cleavage in society, namely, the broad ideological self-placement question that measures preference for economic redistribution and social expenditure. Future research should investigate the use of more precise measurements of this cleavage, as well as whether the pattern we observed for social policy might be different for other policy domains. Ethical or legal issues, for example, typically depend on a stronger involvement of parliament, and this clearly is an important focus for future research.

Returning to the two main theoretical approaches to citizen–policy congruence, our findings do not support Dahl’s (1998) assumption that citizens can determine the policies of their democratic communities. This means that even with our broader empirical perspective of 21 European countries over a 34-year period, our findings concur with the second model exemplified by Achen and Bartels’ (2016) assessment of US politics that the will of the people as a whole is not reflected in policy. At most, our findings indicate an indirect effect that citizens might have an effect on the ideological position of parliament under conditions of high electoral turnout. If voters send right-wing parties to parliament, leading to a right-wing cabinet, our results suggest social expenditure decreases. Electoral turnout levels, therefore, seem to be an essential link in the chain that leads to policy congruence.

Our knowledge about the relation between the ideological preferences of the population as a whole, and specific election results, however, remains sketchy at best. Classic research questions on the relation between public opinion and electoral behaviour, therefore, should receive more attention in the study of policy congruence, as we cannot assume that (changing) electoral results are a faithful expression of (changes in) ideological preferences. It also needs to be mentioned that in the current analysis, we departed from the normative assumption that all citizens have an equal weight when they express a vote. An important area of future research is to investigate whether our conclusions still hold when accounting for the fact that more privileged groups of the population have more opportunities to exert influence on the political decision-making process. If policy congruence

is very limited and indirect, it becomes all the more important to investigate the causal mechanisms that allow for a linkage between public opinion and policy.

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