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It's Just Nice to Know There's Someone Close at Hand: Representational Distance and Satisfaction with Democracy in Europe

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In this paper, we assess the impact of the representativeness of European party systems on satisfaction with democracy. Starting from the proposition that voters care not just about what they get out of government, but also about having their views represented, we examine whether satisfaction is driven by a new measure of policy (in)congruence that we are introducing, namely the ideological distance between a voter and his or her closest party. Using European Election Study data from 1989-2009, we measure these distances by comparing respondents' self- and party-placements on two dimensions: left-right ideology and a European integration policy scale. Controlling for a range of socio-demographic and attitudinal variables that have previously been shown to impact on system support, and working with a multilevel design that nests individuals within their country and survey year, we find that perceived policy-distance matters: the more distance a voter sees between herself and her nearest party's left-right or EU policy position, the less satisfied she is with democracy. We also observe that mean distances between voters and parties have increased in the past few years. This lends support to suggestions that recent manifestations of public dissatisfaction and cynicism in Europe has to do with the declining representativeness of party systems.

1. Introduction

This is not a golden age for electoral democracy in Europe. Turnout has long been declining in most countries, party identification likewise, established party systems have been breaking down, and the fallout from recent economic crises seemed to expose a worrying disconnect between elites and electors. When Schmitter and Trechsel assert that “one of the most striking features of European democracies is an apparently widespread feeling of political discontent, disaffection, scepticism, dissatisfaction and cynicism among citizens” (2004, p. 15), they can be accused of exaggeration but not fabrication. Admittedly, there is debate about just how new is this discontent, and whether the current situation constitutes a ‘crisis’ (Budge and Newton, 1997; van de Walle et al., 2008; Norris, 2011). But this should not obscure the key point which is that, across Europe, the competition between the major parties at election time leaves a large (and probably a growing) proportion of citizens unimpressed.

In this article, we examine one possible source of such disillusionment: the representativeness of European party systems. Our basic argument is that citizens derive satisfaction from having a party that represents their views – even if that party does not necessarily gain office. Conversely, those voters feeling that no party out there shares their preferences are liable to feel let down by electoral politics. There is a straightforward analogy with social representation, which bonded citizens to the political system by making them feel that there was a party catering for the interests of ‘people like them’. Policy or ideological representation has the potential to do the same, making people feel that views like theirs are given expression at election time. Essentially we propose that voters care not just about what they get out of government, but also about having their views represented – between elections as well as at them.

While there is no shortage of prior research seeking to predict, explain and understand satisfaction with democracy (see, *inter alia*, Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Blais and Gélinau, 2007; Lühiste, 2013), relatively little of this has focused on aspects of representation. One exception is Myunghee Kim’s (2009) study showing that ‘incongruence’ – defined as the distance between a voter’s ideological position and the position of the median party in parliament – generates dissatisfaction with democracy. This provides a useful departure point for our own work but we move beyond it, conceptually as well as empirically. The conceptual shift is to allow voters’ policy preferences to be represented by parties as well as by parliaments or governments. Following from this, the empirical shift is to examine whether satisfaction is driven by a different measure of incongruence, namely the ideological distance between a voter and his or her closest party. Using European Election Study (EES) data from 1989-2009, we show that it is. Citizens perceiving a party – even a relatively small one – closer to them, whether on a left-right ideological or a European unification issue scale, were more satisfied with democracy in their member state. In other words, the representativeness of the party system matters. In the next two sections, we explain why that is, before presenting the data and results and our conclusions about the representation-satisfaction nexus.

2. The representativeness of a party system

In a previous article (Brandenburg and Johns, 2013), we proposed an innovative way of conceptualising and operationalising the notion of substantive or policy representation, i.e. the extent to which parties or governments manage to represent or respond to the policy preferences of voters (Adams and Merrill, 1999; Blais and Bodet, 2006; Huber and Powell, 1994; Miller and Stokes, 1963; Powell, 2004; Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999). Previously, scholars tended to almost invariably assess dyadic relationships: between candidates and their electoral districts (Miller and Stokes, 1963), between voters and parties (Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999) or between governments and the electorate (Huber and Powell, 1994). The latter investigates whether governments enact the popular will – and how well institutional arrangements ensure as much. In those models, the popular will is typically represented by the median voter. As Matt Golder and Jacek Stramski (2010, p. 90) summarise, ‘the predominant way to conceptualize and measure citizen–representative congruence is in terms of the absolute ideological distance between the median citizen and the government’. Representation is thus understood in terms of what those authors call ‘absolute median citizen congruence’.

We argued that this ‘commonality’ approach of focusing on governments and the mean or median voter neglects all information about the distribution of citizen preferences – that is, about whether and how opinions vary. As such, it implies consensus, downplays ideological divisions and thus gives an incomplete account of the representative capacity of political parties. While parties are widely acknowledged as the crucial linkage between public preferences and policy making, most clearly so in the ‘responsible party’ model of representation (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Powell, 2004; Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999), the focus remains on governments. It is by gaining office and enacting their programmes that parties are held to represent their voters. The notion that parties might fulfil representative functions while in opposition is largely ignored.

In contrast, we argued that the quality of policy representation can and should be understood and assessed in terms of how adequately a legislature reflects existing ideological diversity in society – ‘the ideal of having a legislature that accurately reflects the ideological preferences of the citizenry as a whole’ (Golder and Stramski, 2010, p. 91). Instead of dyadic relationships and the concept of one-to-many representation which underlies much of the policy congruence literature, we decided to focus on many-to-many representation, or the notion of party system representativeness, as a measure of how well a society can be represented in politics.

Our earlier work then focused on three elements: first, to propose a robust measure of party system representativeness, second to use the case of British politics to trace the declining quality of political representation (i.e. the continuous erosion of party system representativeness over time), and thirdly to show with individual level data that declining party system representativeness comes at a cost: it renders more citizens dissatisfied with democracy in their country.

The core difficulty in conceptualising many-to-many representation, or the representativeness of party systems, lies in the fact that voters are continuously distributed – whether normally or otherwise – across the entire ideological spectrum, whereas parties are few and (sometimes) far between. The task is therefore to establish how the distribution of a small number of parties – maybe only two and never more than single figures if we consider only pivotal parties – matches with the continuous distribution of an entire society. Golder and Stramski (2010, pp. 96ff.) deal with

this by means of cumulative distribution functions (CDFs) for both citizens and party systems, and then measuring how much the area between the two CDFs differs from zero. However, this does artificially convert a highly discontinuous small-N distribution of parties into a continuous distribution, weighted by party size. We argue that this can be avoided by a much simpler means of conceptualising and, ultimately, operationalising party system representativeness. *Basically, for any number of parties and any continuous distribution of citizens along an ideological or policy dimension, those parties can be arranged along that dimension so that the mean distance of a citizen from his or her nearest party is minimised.* As a simple example, imagine six voters being uniformly distributed along a six-point policy dimension: that is, one located at each of the six points. If there are two parties, party system representativeness would be maximised with the two parties at points 2 and 5. No voter would be more than one point away from a party, and the total sum – and thus the mean – of voter–party distances is minimised. Thus, while party system representativeness is an aggregate-level concept, on this reading it is operationalised via an individual-level indicator: *the average distance of a citizen from his or her nearest party.* The smaller that mean distance, the more representative the party system.

As that simple example highlights, the maximally representative party system may be quite different from any Downsian competitive equilibrium. And that was the crux of our argument: that competition for votes does not necessarily preserve the normative ideal in terms of party system representativeness. Were the two parties to move to points 3 and 4 in the spectrum, which as Downsian vote-maximisers they'd be compelled to, the mean distance-to-nearest-party among voters at points 2–5 would remain unchanged but the two voters at the extreme points would see their policy representation reduced.

And this was the second element of our earlier work, to show for the British case that competition for votes undermines party system representativeness. Our work can also be understood as an empirical application of work by Laver and Sergenti (2011) who argued that vote-seeking parties tend to outperform parties that remain ideologically representative of their traditional or current supporters, and who showed with computer simulations that over time party competition almost invariably leads to suboptimal representation. We calculated for six British elections (1987-2010) what would have been the ideal placement of the two main parties given the distribution of policy preference on a left-right scale among the British electorate, and found that the main parties converged rapidly and dramatically from 1997 onwards. Given only moderate conversion in the electorate, the evidence clearly pointed towards increasingly suboptimal representation. Even the 1980s when parties were more polarised than would have been ideal given the distribution in the electorate, provided far superior representation than Britain has nowadays.

3. Representational distance and satisfaction with democracy

The final step in that earlier work was to show that party system representativeness matters. Capitalising on the fact that our measure of party system representativeness translates straightforwardly to the individual level, we can do this with a simple regression model. The hypothesis is simply that a citizen's distance from her nearest party should be inversely related to her satisfaction with democracy. If this hypothesis is borne out, then an optimally representative party system will (*ceteris paribus*) also maximise public satisfaction with the workings of democracy.

Two findings from that individual-level analysis in Brandenburg and Johns (2013) are worth noting here. The first is the strong support for the core hypothesis. There was a clearly significant and negative relationship between distance from the nearest party and satisfaction with democracy. The size of that effect was considerable, too, being exceeded only by the effects of variables like political trust and approval of the government's record that are troublingly similar – and thus potentially endogenous to – the dependent variable. The second point is that satisfaction was driven by a sense of ideological proximity, not ideological variety. There was no effect of respondents' perception of the gap between the two parties. Thus, although the severe convergence in the British party system has reduced satisfaction with democracy, this is not because it has reduced choice but because it has left the average voter further from the nearest major contender for office.

For present purposes, the big question is whether these findings will be replicated in a wider cross-national setting. And that question is especially pertinent given the idiosyncrasy – especially within a European context – of the British electoral and party system. How do our arguments and expectations translate to countries with more parties, more ideological diversity and a less pronounced trend to convergence? On the one hand, there seems no reason to suppose that the core individual-level hypothesis will not stand up. The tendency to dissatisfaction among those without an ideologically nearby party should remain, even if the larger number of parties means that there are fewer such voters. So our primary hypothesis remains:

H1: There is a negative relationship between distance to nearest party and satisfaction with democracy

However, there is an important potential moderator to this effect: the size of that nearest party. This variable was not relevant in the British case where, for the large majority of respondents, their nearest party was a major contender for office. It is not clear that citizens will find all that much solace in ideological proximity to a party that is very small and/or stands no chance of participating in government – as will often be the case in some of the more fragmented party systems in Europe. We therefore hypothesise:

H2: The negative relationship between distance to nearest party and satisfaction is weaker where that party is smaller

Whereas the British findings mentioned above were based on left-right and tax-spending scales, the use of European Election Study data also allows us to test for distance effects on a cross-cutting policy divide, that of support for European unification. The unidimensionality of the Hotelling-Downs model does not match the reality of party competition in most European countries, and the European unification issue itself has become a significant divider in many member states. Moreover, our argument here should apply to any salient dimension. Insofar as voters are concerned with an issue or dimension, they should derive satisfaction from feeling their views represented and dissatisfaction if there is no proximate party to do so. So our main expectation is that H1 should hold with both left-right and European unification distances. However, given that left-right is generally the more dominant dimension across the continent (Hellwig, 2008), we also hypothesise as follows:

H3: The negative effect on satisfaction with democracy is stronger with distances on the left-right than with distances on the European unification dimension.

4. Data and research design

The first thing to make clear here is that, although the analyses in this paper are cross-national, the unit of analysis remains the individual citizen. We could shift up a level and correlate mean distance to the nearest party with mean satisfaction across countries and across time. But that kind of aggregate-level analysis is plagued by a shortage of observations and a surfeit of variables that really need to be controlled to allow for causal inference. More fundamentally, unless and until we establish that the individual-level relationship hypothesised above actually holds, there is no theoretical basis to anticipate an aggregate-level effect.

There are two major cross-national survey data sources which offer the key individual-level variables – ideological placements and satisfaction with democracy – necessary for testing our hypotheses. These are the European Election Study (EES) and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) series. The former offers a longer time series; the latter covers a wider range of countries. For this analysis we chose to use EES data for a number of reasons. For one, the expansion of the EU has seen the number of countries available for analysis increase steadily. While not as large and diverse as the CSES countries, they do offer substantial variation in party systems and country characteristics. Secondly, the EES offer comparable data for a substantial number of countries over a longer time frame – up to 30 years for the core EU member states – than CSES offers, potentially allowing for over-time trend analyses. Lastly, the EES offers us information on multiple dimensions, viz Left-Right and EU-integration, which allows us to test the effect of distances on more than one dimension, of varying political importance

By including data from five European Election Studies, from 1989 to 2009, we accumulate a huge sample of over 60,000 respondents (despite hefty proportions of non-response on the ideological placement questions in particular, and a number of control variables being available for only fractions of the EES samples). All five studies include an identical battery of questions based on a 1-10 left-right scale,¹ with respondents asked to place both themselves and their perceived positions of all political parties with parliamentary representation. Since we are concerned with public perceptions of representation, it makes sense to use these subjective placements rather than quasi-objective measures of the sort provided by expert judgments of party positions or content analysis of platforms (as from the Comparative Manifesto Project). We therefore calculated, for all respondents across up to 27 countries (in 2009) and five European elections, their nearest party and distance to that party on the left-right scale. A substantial proportion of respondents proved to be equidistant from multiple parties, which does not affect the representational distance calculation but does necessitate a choice when calculating variables like the size of that nearest party. In cases of equidistance, we took the largest – in terms of vote share – as the relevant nearest party.²

¹ Unhelpfully for those undertaking longitudinal analysis, this was changed to a 0-10 scale for the 2009 study.

² By choosing the largest of the joint-nearest parties, we limit the chance of a Type I error in testing H2.

It is worth emphasising that our analysis is not intended to take account of voting behaviour. We could have measured distance to the party for which a respondent voted, either at that European or the previous general election. In many ways the expectation would remain the same: those obliged to vote for a party more ideologically distant would be less satisfied with the electoral offering and thus with democracy in that country. (And of course many people will vote for their nearest party in any case.) Our choice of distance to the nearest party reflects our core argument that citizens derive satisfaction from having an ideologically proximate party that shares and expresses their views, at least to some extent independently of electoral calculations.

Our core dependent variable is the long-established question which measures respondents' satisfaction with democracy in their own country, using a four-point scale from very satisfied to very dissatisfied. While there has been much valid criticism of this measure (Canache et al., 2001; Linde and Ekman, 2003), it remains ubiquitous in cross-national survey research and is the obvious choice for an analysis of this kind.

While individual EES questionnaires offer an extensive range of control variables, the field narrows rather when we seek questions asked in all five years. Nonetheless, we are able to include a reasonable battery of controls that have been shown to influence satisfaction with democracy at the individual level, notably age, sex, education, social class, party identification, approval of the government's record, and of course left-right position (and its quadratic term, measuring left-right extremity) itself.³

Finally, at the party rather than the country level, we used vote shares – from the national election directly preceding the EP election in question – to measure the size of the nearest party.⁴

5. Results

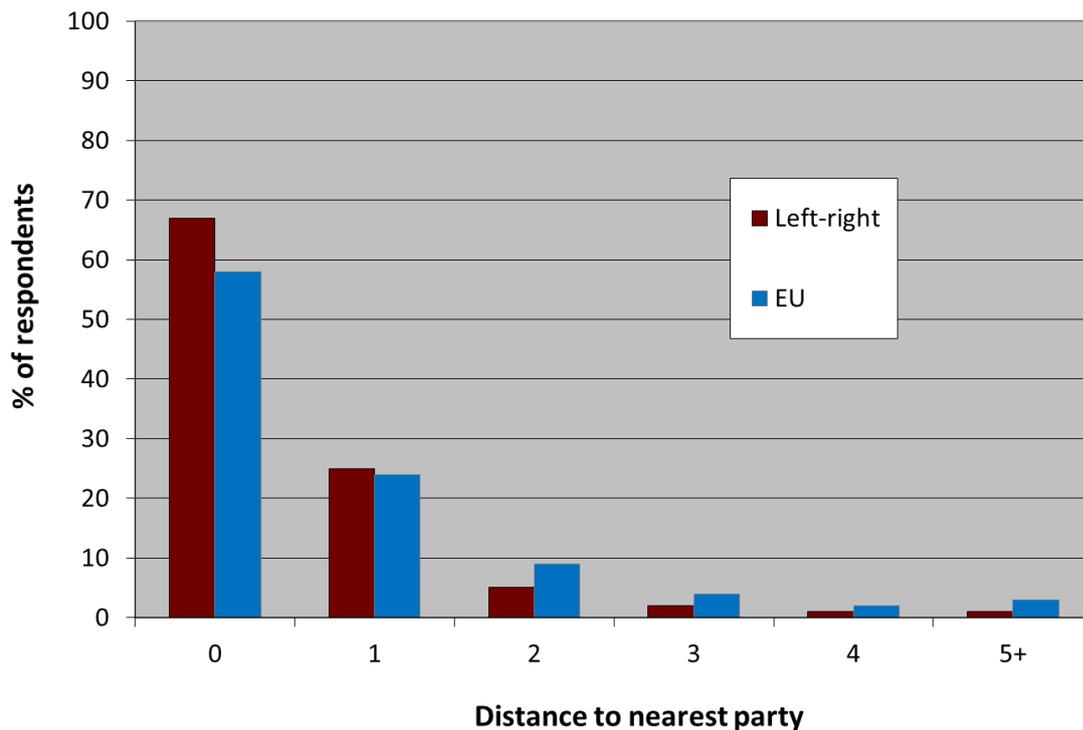
Prior to an investigation of their effects on satisfaction with democracy, it is useful to show the distribution of our key distance-to-nearest-party variables. Their distribution across individuals is shown in Figure 1 which shows that, whether on the left-right or the European unification scale, by far the most common distance is 0 and it is very unusual for respondents to lie a long way away from their nearest party. On the whole, this is heartening. It means that party systems are not widely perceived as unrepresentative and that any dissatisfaction from feeling unrepresented is the province of a relatively small minority.

³ It is worth adding that the nature of our independent variable eases concerns that its measured effect is inflated by omitted variable bias. If we had measured representational distance by a single direct item, like for example the CSES question "Would you say that any of the parties in [country] represent your views reasonably well?", there would be concerns that a general disillusionment was creating a spurious association between that variable and satisfaction with democracy. However, our measure is based on separate placement questions, less directly or immediately connected to the dependent variable.

⁴ In cases where no national election data was available – such as with newly emerged parties or electoral coalitions – then the actual vote share in the concurrent EP election was used as a substitute.

Figure 1

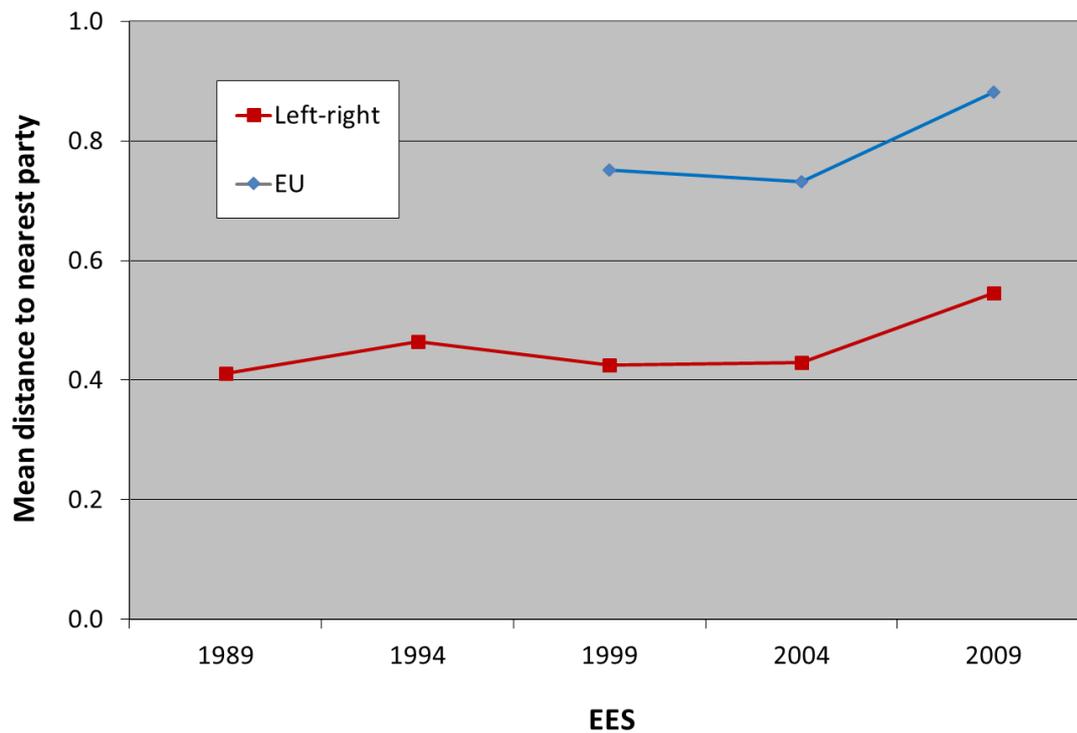
Distribution of distances to nearest party on left-right and European unification scales



Three caveats are necessary, however, before we draw too sanguine a conclusion. First, the proportion of 0s is heavily inflated by the widespread tendency among respondents to satisfice on these cognitively arduous items by using the midpoint of the scale. (If they do the same for themselves and, say, an unfamiliar party, they will automatically record a 0.) Second, on the more concrete European unification scale, where respondents were rather more dispersed, there was slightly more evidence of people seeing all parties at a distance. Third, there is evidence that representational distances have recently widened. While Figure 1 aggregates across all EES for which each scale is available (i.e. 1989-2009 for left-right and 1999-2009 for European unification), Figure 2 shows the mean distance in each of the EES years separately. There is no steady upward trend but there is clear evidence that the mean distance on both dimensions increased appreciably between 2004 and 2009. On the assumption that representational distances do take a toll on satisfaction, then that toll will have increased recently.

Figure 2

Mean distances to nearest party on left-right and EU scales by EES year



Our main business in this section is to test that assumption. In the first analysis, we pool all five EES datasets to generate an overall indication of any impact of left-right or EU representational distances over the 1989-2009 period. To reflect the non-independence of observations in the data, we run multi-level mixed-effects regression models, nesting respondents within years within countries. We run three pairs of models: with left-right distances only, with EU distances only, and then with both together. In each case there is a pair of models, the first specifying only a main effect of distance (to test H1) and the second introducing a size*distance interaction (to test H2). The results – coefficients and robust standard errors – are in Table 1.

Table 1

Multilevel regression of satisfaction with democracy based on left-right (LR) and EU issue distances (pooled EES)

	Left-right				EU				Combined			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	coef	se										
Distance to nearest party LR	-0.029**	0.004	-0.030**	0.004					-0.030**	0.005	-0.030**	0.005
Size of nearest party LR	0.003**	0.000	0.003**	0.000					0.002**	0.000	0.002**	0.000
Distance LR * size			0.000	0.000							-0.000	0.000
Distance to nearest party EU					-0.021**	0.003	-0.024**	0.003	-0.022**	0.003	-0.025**	0.003
Size of nearest party EU					0.003**	0.000	0.002**	0.000	0.003**	0.000	0.002**	0.000
Distance EU * size							0.001**	0.000			0.001**	0.000
EES year	-0.008	0.005	-0.008	0.005	-0.026*	0.011	-0.026*	0.011	-0.025*	0.011	-0.025*	0.011
Age	-0.000	0.000	-0.000	0.000	-0.000	0.000	-0.000	0.000	-0.000	0.000	-0.000	0.000
Male	0.031**	0.006	0.031**	0.006	0.035**	0.007	0.035**	0.007	0.037**	0.008	0.037**	0.008
Terminal education age	0.004**	0.001	0.004**	0.001	0.006**	0.001	0.006**	0.001	0.006**	0.001	0.006**	0.001
Subjective social class	0.061**	0.003	0.061**	0.003	0.064**	0.004	0.064**	0.004	0.063**	0.004	0.063**	0.004
Party identifier	0.083**	0.007	0.083**	0.007	0.084**	0.008	0.084**	0.008	0.082**	0.008	0.082**	0.008
Interest in politics	0.028**	0.004	0.028**	0.004	0.035**	0.005	0.035**	0.005	0.032**	0.005	0.032**	0.005
Left-right position	0.019**	0.001	0.019**	0.001	0.019**	0.002	0.018**	0.002	0.017**	0.002	0.017**	0.002
Left-right position squared	-0.006**	0.000	-0.006**	0.000	-0.004**	0.000	-0.004**	0.000	-0.005**	0.000	-0.005**	0.000
Constant	18.287	10.248	18.298	10.247	54.528*	21.685	54.726*	21.668	51.889*	21.584	52.061*	21.569
<i>N</i>	60,231		60,231		40,851		40,851		39,407		39,407	
Log-Likelihood	-67,628.274		-67,628.060		-45,757.975		-45,751.587		-43,979.856		-43,974.350	
aic	135,284.548		135,288.120		91,545.951		91,535.174		87,993.712		87,986.701	
bic	135,410.632		135,432.215		91,675.216		91,673.057		88,139.600		88,149.753	

note: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05. Data nested (respondents within countries within years).

The first key point to note is that the distance-to-nearest-party main effects are uniformly negative and significant across all six regressions. Other things remaining the same, the further away is a voter's nearest party on either the left-right scale or the European integration scale, the less satisfied is that voter is with democracy in her country. This is clear and robust confirmation of H1. The effect sizes are barely altered by including both dimensions in the same regression and so distances on both continue to have an impact on satisfaction. As foreshadowed in H3, distance from the nearest party on the left-right scale has a stronger effect than on the EU scale, but the difference is not large. Policy distance matters on more than one dimension.

One other consistently significant predictor is the size of the nearest party. The positive effect throughout confirms that there is a boost to satisfaction for those whose nearest party, on whichever policy dimension, is a more powerful electoral force. In H2, we suggested that party size might also moderate the effect of distance, with voters particularly prizing having a relatively large party that is close to them. This hypothesis receives no support. For one thing, there is no sign of a significant interaction when it comes to the left-right scale. In the EU analyses, the interaction does reach statistical significance but is a good deal weaker than the two main effects of distance and party size. Moreover, the positive form of the interaction means that it runs contrary to H2. The relationship between nearest party and satisfaction is actually weaker among those for whom that party is large. What that means in practice is two things. First, voters are particularly aggravated if, peering into the distance for their nearest party, they still see only a minor player. Second, voters can derive satisfaction from feeling represented by a nearby party even if it is small. This is clear support for our broader argument that satisfaction is not just about winners and outputs.

In an earlier analysis, we saw that the mean distance between voters and their nearest party on both policy dimensions has widened over our period. Our results so far suggest that this widening will have come at a cost – that is, unless the negative consequences of distance have eased over time. To check that, we re-ran LR and EU model 2 but on each EES dataset separately. Since the EU scale is only available for the last three EES, we did not run the model with distances on both policy scales but rather present findings here separately for LR and EU distances. Since the controls are there for that purpose and not of central interest here, we save space by reporting only the core coefficients for distance and size in Tables 2 and 3.

In Table 2, we see that while the positive effect of nearest party size is fairly consistent across time, the impact of left-right distances seems to take a step change upwards. Distance to the nearest party is basically irrelevant in the first two years but becomes clearly relevant in the three most recent EES. Moreover, since the results in Table 1 were based on a pooled dataset that included 1989 and 1994, we can infer that the effects of left-right distance are actually stronger than was implied in that table. In other words, at a time when European party systems are becoming less representative of their voters, these increasing distances have begun to matter more.

Table 2

Distance effects from models of satisfaction with democracy based on left-right distances (separate EES)

	1989		1994		1999		2004		2009	
	B	s.e.	B	s.e.	B	s.e.	B	s.e.	B	s.e.
Distance to nearest party	-0.013	0.012	0.025	0.023	-0.048**	0.010	-0.034**	0.007	-0.030**	0.006
Size of nearest party	0.004**	0.001	0.002	0.001	0.003**	0.001	0.003**	0.001	0.001**	0.000
Distance * size	-0.000	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001*	0.001	-0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
N	8,853		2,249		9,229		18,195		21,705	
Log-Likelihood	-10,449.504		-2,604.728		-9,931.727		-19,679.891		-24,700.030	
AIC	20,927.009		5,237.456		19,891.453		39,387.782		49,428.061	
BIC	21,026.248		5,317.511		19,991.275		39,497.106		49,539.855	

note: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Those most recent three EES are also those for which we can run a parallel analysis using the cross-cutting European unification dimension. The results – again showing only the coefficients of interest here – are shown in Table 3. Party size again matters throughout, and in contrast to the LR models both as a main effect and in interaction with distance. But more important for present purposes is that the main effect of distance remains resolutely negative and significant. Admittedly, consistent with earlier results and probably reflecting the greater salience of left-right in most if not all EU countries, the effects are generally weaker than those in the corresponding years from Table 2. Yet still we have clear support for H1 even on this less salient dimension. In other words, insofar as voters have views on an issue, they want those views expressed within the party system and are dissatisfied if there is no party to do so.

Table 3

Distance effects from models of satisfaction with democracy based on EU issue distances (separate EES)

	1999		2004		2009	
	B	s.e.	B	s.e.	B	s.e.
Distance to nearest party	-0.024**	0.007	-0.036**	0.005	-0.019**	0.004
Size of nearest party	0.003**	0.001	0.003**	0.001	0.001**	0.000
Distance * size	0.001**	0.000	-0.000	0.000	0.001**	0.000
<i>N</i>	7,631		14,441		18,779	
Log-Likelihood	-8,265.151		-15,814.641		-21,556.359	
AIC	16,558.302		31,657.281		43,140.718	
BIC	16,655.462		31,763.371		43,250.485	

note: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

6. Conclusion

Empirical studies in this field have been preoccupied with the median voter. How well are his or her views reflected by the median legislator or by the elected government and its policies? These are reasonable questions but they reflect too narrow a conception of representation – especially if we expect that the quality of representation will influence levels of system support. Maintaining high rates of satisfaction with democracy requires more than keeping the median voter happy. In this article, we show that satisfaction also depends on whether citizens across the ideological spectrum perceive a party as representing them on the dimensions and issues that matter to them. ‘Valence’ models of satisfaction, focused on government performance and delivery (e.g. Clarke et al., 2004, 301-10), are thus useful but incomplete. Voters derive satisfaction from feeling their views represented, even by smaller parties unlikely to be able to translate those views into policy.

This raises the question of what makes for a more representative party system – or, in the terms used here, what minimises the distance between voters’ and their nearest parties? This calls for a more detailed country-level scrutiny of the institutional and other factors which shape party systems, with the related factors of electoral system proportionality and number of parties likely to be prominent players. Certainly the trend towards ideological convergence and catch-all parties had the potential to leave voters at the margins feeling very remote from the ‘representative action’.

Aggregate-level modelling of mean distance could be extended to include mean satisfaction with democracy as an ultimate dependent variable, thus providing an aggregate-level parallel of the analysis presented here.

In this analysis we used time principally as a source of additional data. Trends were not our main focus. That said, there is something striking in the marked upturn in mean distance – and thus the decline in party system representativeness – between 2004 and 2009. While careful analysis has now established quite convincingly that there is no long-term steady decline in variables like satisfaction, engagement and trust, this does not rule out step changes (of the sort often held to have happened in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but largely missed through lack of survey data). The fact that this is a recent development makes it no less significant. Of course, 2009 might simply be a blip. However, the events since and especially the results of the European elections in 2014 tend to suggest otherwise. They are all eerily consistent with the notion of a growing failure of Europe's party systems to cater for the ideological diversity of their citizens. Of course, we should not overstate the case and lapse into 'crisis hyperbole'. Large proportions of citizens nestle comfortably alongside their nearest party, and the effects on satisfaction were not dramatic even among those who do not. Still, as with any ailment, there is no sense in ignoring it until it becomes serious. Those with an interest in maintaining citizens' satisfaction with democracy need also take an interest in the representativeness of their country's party system.

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