

Ideological voting, ideological congruence, and satisfaction with democracy

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Abstract

From the point of view of normative models of political representation, issue and ideological voting are positive factors. When citizens rely more strongly on substantive criteria when making their voting decision, the quality of political representation should be positively affected. A high level of ideological voting should reinforce the congruence between the preferences of citizens and the positions advocated by their representatives. This should also lead citizens to be more satisfied with the functioning of the system of representation. While much research has investigated the relationship between issue voting and the citizens–legislators congruence, we know less about how ideological voting and the level of congruence influence citizens' satisfaction. This paper investigates this link by analyzing how citizens' satisfaction with the political process is influenced by the degree of voter–legislators congruence and by the strength of ideological voting. The effects of these variables are tested at both the individual and aggregate level. This study is based on data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems.

Introduction

Legislative elections are a key element in the process of political representation (Powell 2000). They fulfil central democratic functions by allowing citizens to choose the parties and candidates that will represent them in the parliamentary arena. Also, they allow citizens to hold their representatives accountable for the decisions and actions taken during the previous legislature. How well elections fulfil these functions in a given political system will strongly influence the quality of political representation. The way in which this process of political representation works should also be an important factor for understanding citizens' attitudes toward the democratic process. When elections guarantee a good representation of citizens' interests and preferences, citizens should be more supportive of the political system. By contrast, when many citizens feel that their political preferences are insufficiently represented, they may be less satisfied with the way in which the democratic process works in their political system.

What is 'good' political representation? Several normative models have been suggested in the literature to define how the representation process should ideally work (e.g., Mansbridge 2003; Pitkin 1967; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). These are models of the role of elections and of the relationships between citizens and their representatives. They suggest answers to fundamental questions about the working of democracies: What criteria should guide the choices of citizens in elections? What criteria should guide the decisions of representatives and governments? How can the quality of a system of representation be assessed? Among the various normative models of representation which have been suggested in the literature, one plays a particularly important role in the empirical analysis of electoral competition. This is the model of 'substantive representation' or 'policy representation' (e.g., Thomassen and Schmitt 1997). Contrary to the 'descriptive model' of representation (Pitkin 1967), it does not attach much importance to who the representatives are. Rather, it centres on their issue positions and policy preferences. Following this model, the quality of representation depends on the degree to which legislators represent citizens' substantive preferences, such as their ideological orientation and issue preferences. The congruence between citizens' and legislators' political positions is a central criterion for evaluating how well the representation process works. It is also an implicit reference for politicians, parties, and governments, who seek to legitimate their decisions based on the mandate conferred upon them by voters.

The normative model of policy representation is also an important point of reference for much work on elections and parties. Several studies have assessed empirically how well this model's expectations are met in practice. Many studies, for instance, have analysed the role of issues and ideology in the voting decision process (e.g., Adams et al. 2005; Merrill and Grofman 1999). There are also a large number of studies investigating the congruence between citizens and their representatives (Powell 2004).

This paper extends this research on the substantive model of political representation by looking not at the quality of representation, but rather at the *expected consequences* of 'good' political representation. I investigate the degree to which citizens' level of democratic support respond to changes in substantive representation. The policy model of representation sets out the conditions to be met for representation to be qualitatively high. In particular, it suggests that citizens should choose among the competing parties based on their issue preferences or ideological orientation, and it suggests that this should reinforce the degree of ideological congruence between citizens and their representatives. Are citizens more satisfied with the functioning of democracy when these conditions are met? This is the central research question of this paper. Following the policy model of representation, the general hypothesis is that citizens' satisfaction with the way in which democracy works should be positively influenced by both ideological voting and ideological congruence. This paper will develop this general hypothesis and test its implications using data on citizens' and political contexts' characteristics in 16 elections from 15 established democracies, based on the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES).

In the following section, I discuss in more detail the hypotheses about the relation between ideological voting, congruence, and satisfaction with democracy. Then, I define more precisely the concept of democratic support—this study's dependent variable. I also review some previous research on the institutional determinants of these attitudes. Section four introduces the data and discusses the variables' operationalization. The following section presents the results from multilevel analyses. The paper's last section discusses some avenues for future research.

Ideological voting, congruence, and democratic support

‘Good’ political representation should lead citizens to be more satisfied with the working of democracy. To assess whether this relationship holds in practice, I investigate how democratic support is affected by the degree to which the assumptions of the substantive model of representation are met. That is, I consider how it relates to the determinants of voting choices and the level of voter–party congruence. As regards the determinants of voting choices, the ideal model of substantive representation is more closely met if citizens’ choices are guided by substantive criteria, such as ideological orientation and issue preferences. Due to data limitation, however, this study will consider only the impact of left–right preferences, as comparable data on issue preferences is not available for a sufficiently large number of cases.

The second central explanatory factor is the degree of congruence between citizens’ preferences and the positions articulated by legislators. Substantive representation should be stronger when there is a close match between the preferences of voters and the positions of their representatives. In line with much research on ideological congruence, I will focus on the ideological distance between voters and the median representative.

The effects of ideological voting and ideological congruence can be conceived at both the individual-level and aggregate level (Table 1). At the individual level, ideological voters should be more satisfied about the way in which democracy works than citizens who rely less strongly on substantive criteria when making their voting choice. Also, citizens who are closer to the median legislator should also display a higher level of democratic support. At the aggregate level, citizens’ satisfaction with democracy should increase with both the level of ideological voting and the degree of voter–legislator congruence.

[Table 1 about here]

Democratic support and its determinants

Ideological voting and ideological congruence are expected to influence citizens’ attitudes toward the democratic process. This is one aspect of the more general concept of ‘political support’ (Easton 1965, 1975), which has played an important role in the analysis of democratic values and democratisation processes. An important aspect of democratic support

in Easton's framework is the idea that positive or negative attitudes can be directed toward different 'levels' of a democratic regime. From the general to the specific, he distinguishes between support for the political community, for the regime, and for the authorities. This typology has been refined by other authors. In particular, several scholars have suggested distinguishing between different aspects of the political regime: its principles, performance, and institutions (Dalton 2004; Linde and Ekman 2003; Norris 1999).

The notion of democratic support on which this study focuses corresponds to the attitudes towards the *performance* of a democratic regime. It is not related to 'democracy-in-principle' or the ideal of democracy, but to 'democracy-in-practice' (Shin 2007). It pertains to how citizens evaluate the working of democracy in their country. In other words, it does not regard the legitimacy of democratic systems, but their effectiveness (Lipset 1981). The ideal of democracy is widely shared. 'A clear majority of the population in virtually every society endorses a democratic political system' (Inglehart and Welzel 2005: 264). These democratic norms and values should not be affected (or at least not in the short run) by a regime's performance. Citizens' perception of how well democracy works, by contrast, may be related to the quality of representation.

The quality of political representation and the characteristics of the voting decision process are, of course, only some of the possible determinants of citizens' attitudes towards the performance of a democratic regime. It is important to consider also additional explanatory factors. Research on democratic support has highlighted several potential explanatory factors. Three main types of explanations can be distinguished (Norris 1999), based on cultural factors, Government or regime performance, and institutional factors. Cultural arguments follow on the idea that attitudes toward a democratic regime are related to social and political values, which differ across countries (Almond and Verba 1963). Some scholars have investigated, for example, whether social trust leads to trust in institutions or to positive attitudes toward a democratic regime. Others have examined how value change relates to changes in political support (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Studies based on performance indicators consider how the output of a regime influences citizens' attitudes toward the regime. It has for example been shown that democratic support is positively related to economic performance (Norris 1999). Institutional explanations, finally, relate democratic support to the configuration of democratic institutions, such as the type of electoral system (e.g., Listhaug et al. 2009).

In this study, I will consider mainly the third type of explanation. There are two main reasons for this. First, I focus only on established democracies, in a cross-sectional design. Cultural factors are particularly important for explaining changes over time or differences across old and new democracies. As regards performance indicators, it has been shown that the impact of economic indicators is more limited in old than new democracies (Thomassen and Kolk 2009). The second main reason is more pragmatic. As the number of elections that I can include is relatively limited, only a small number of context-level indicators can be estimated simultaneously.

As far as institutional explanations are concerned, there is relatively few previous research and the results are surprisingly inconclusive. Norris (1999) was among the first to offer a cross-national analysis of how institutions are related to political support. She finds that support is slightly higher in unitary states and in majoritarian electoral systems. But the differences are small. Furthermore, Norris's dependent variable is an index of trust in institutions, rather than a measure of satisfaction with the democratic process. It is thus unclear if these results based on support for a regime's institutions also apply to attitudes toward the regime's performance. A more recent study of institutional effects by Listhaug et al. (2009) found virtually no effects of institutions on satisfaction with democracy, external political efficacy, or whether citizens think it makes a difference who is in power.

A possible reason for the weak effects of institutions may be that the main functions of elections can vary across types of democracies. Following Powell's (2000) seminal study, elections, from the point of view of voters, can fulfil two basic functions: give parties a mandate or hold parties accountable for their previous performance or behaviour. Furthermore, the 'object' of voters' evaluations is either the government or their representative. The first distinction corresponds to different time perspectives: prospective or retrospective voting. The second distinction is associated with different conceptions of the distribution of power and corresponds to the distinction between majoritarian and proportional systems (Lijphart 1999). Citizens focus on the Government when power is concentrated and on single representatives when power is dispersed. The latter perspective corresponds to the idea that elections are not decisive and that bargaining among representatives will be necessary (Powell 2000).

The combination of these two distinctions leads to four theoretical models of the role of elections. However, one of these combinations—retrospective voting focusing on single representatives—plays a lesser role in practice. The three remaining models require different conditions for elections to fulfil their role (Powell 2000: 8ff.). The ‘accountability model’, in which elections allow citizens to hold the previous government accountable for its performance, requires clarity of responsibility. Citizens must be able to identify who is responsible for the previous decisions. This will typically be easier with a one-party government than with a coalition government. The ‘mandate model’, in which voters confer an electoral mandate on the future government, requires clear alternative. Citizens must be in a position to identify alternative future governments. Citizens’ ability to do so will decrease with the number of parties in competition. A more fragmented party system increases the chances that the elections will lead to negotiations among potential government coalition members. In the model of ‘authorized representation’, finally, citizens choose representatives which will act in their interest in the policy-making process. This model requires that electoral outcomes reflect the distributions of citizens’ preferences, that is, it requires a low degree of disproportionality between the distribution of votes and the distribution of seats.

I expect these characteristics of the electoral context to influence citizens’ level of democratic support. In addition to the expected effects of ideological voting and ideological congruence, democratic support should be higher in systems which offer better conditions for elections to fulfil their role. This should be the case in systems with a one-party government or a less fragmented government coalition, in contexts with a less fragmented party system, and in elections with a more proportional distribution of seats.

Data and operationalization

Testing the impact of congruence and ideological voting on satisfaction with democracy requires data on both voters and the characteristics of their electoral context. The number of contexts needs to be sufficiently large in order to estimate models reflecting this hierarchical structure. I rely here on data from the second module of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems. Democratic support, the dependent variable, is measured with a question on satisfaction with democracy. Respondents were asked if they were ‘very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works’ in their

country. For the purpose of this analysis, answers on this four-point scale were recoded to the 0–1 range.

The central explanatory variables are the strength of ideological voting and the distance between voters and the median legislator. The strength of ideological voting is conceived of in this paper as an individual-level characteristic. That is, it is necessary to determine separately for each voter how strongly their party preferences or voting choice is based on ideological considerations. This is a procedure which is unusual in models of voting choice, in which the impact of ideology—like that of other determinants of the vote—is normally estimated at the level of the entire electorate. The procedure suggested here is to consider how citizens' degree of sympathy for the parties in competition relates to the left–right ideological distance to these parties. The criteria used to identify 'ideological voters' is a relatively simple one. Citizens are deemed to be ideological if the party closest to them on the left–right scale is also the party for which they have the highest degree of sympathy. If a voter is equally distant from two or more parties, I consider them to be ideological if none of the parties more distant from them has a sympathy score higher than any of the closest parties.¹ In order to rule out projection effects, voter–party distances are measured using the positioning of parties by the CSES country collaborators, rather than voters' perceptions of these party positions.

A similar measure could be based on voting choice, rather than citizens' degree of sympathy for the parties. The reason why I do not follow this alternative procedure is that voting choices are more likely to be influenced by strategic considerations (van der Eijk et al. 2006). Based on strategic considerations, a voter may decide not to support the party he or she likes most, when this party has weak electoral chances.

The number of parties for which experts' left–right positions and voters' level of sympathy are available varies across countries. In most cases, this information is available for a maximum of six parties. In some countries, that information is available for up to nine parties. In order to have a more or less comparable basis on which to measure ideological voting, I consider in each country only the six most important parties (or less if there are fewer parties in competition). Also, I include only respondents who voted for one of these parties.

¹ This means that if a voter has the same location as two parties and rate them with scores of 9 and 7 (out of 10), it is considered to be an ideological voter as long as no other party receives a score higher than 7.

The second central explanatory factor at the individual level is the distance to the left–right position of the median legislator. The latter position is the weighted average left–right position of the parties in Parliament, where ideological positions are weighted by the parties’ proportion of seats. To measure ideological congruence and ideological voting at the aggregate level, I simply take the country average of these individual-level measures.

The other context-level measures are those linked with the various functions that elections can fulfil. I rely here on fairly standard indicators. To measure citizens’ ability to define a clear mandate, I consider the degree of fragmentation of the party system, defined as the Effective Number of Electoral Parties (ENEP) suggested by Laakso and Taagepera (1979). The disproportionality of the electoral results is based on the Gallagher index (Gallagher 1991). This is a measure of the disproportionality of the distribution of seats in the legislature, compared to parties’ shares of votes.² Accountability, finally, is based on the number of parties in Government. The higher the number of parties in a governing coalition, the more difficult it is for voters to attribute responsibility to single parties for governmental decisions. The number of governmental parties is measured as the Effective Number of Governing Parties (ENGP). This is a measure similar to the ENEP, with governmental parties being weighted by their share of portfolios.

At the individual level, I include a few variables in addition to ideological voting and the distance to the median legislator. First, I distinguish between election ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, that is, if voters supported a party that ended up being part of the Government or not. Several studies have shown that this is a central factor for explaining the degree of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy (Anderson et al. 2005; Anderson and Guillory 1997). I also include a dummy variable for party identifiers, as Listhaug et al. (2009) have shown that these voters tend to display a higher level of democratic support. Finally, I also control for some standard socio-demographic or political characteristics: age, gender, and political sophistication. The latter variable is a four-point scale of political knowledge (coded in the 0–1 range) based on country-specific factual questions about the political system. Descriptive statistics on all individual-level variables can be found in Table A1 in the appendix.

² The values of the index were multiplied by 100 in order to have a range of values comparable to the measures of party system and governmental fragmentation.

The information necessary to construct the above variables is not available for all countries or observations from the second CSES module. First, I focus only on data from legislative elections of the Lower House—excluding the few cases in which the survey was conducted only for a presidential election or only for the Upper House election. At the individual level, I include only voters, for which all of the necessary individual-level variables can be measured. 16 elections (from 15 countries) can be included in the analysis. Table A2 in the appendix indicates the corresponding number of observations as well as the values of the context-level variables.

Results

The combination of individual-level and context-level characteristics requires a multilevel framework. I estimate random-intercept multilevel models with voters at the first level and electoral contexts at the second one. Table 2 presents the results of four models, including the following sets of variables: only individual-level characteristics (Model 1), all individual-level and context-level variables (Model 2), all variables except the two indicators of ideological congruence (Model 3), all variables except the individual-level and context-level of measures of ideological voting (Model 4). For each model, Table 2 presents the estimated coefficients and standard errors, the fit statistics, and the intra-class correlation, that is, the context-level variance of the dependent variable unexplained by the model's covariates.

[Table 2 about here]

As regards the two central explanatory factors, ideological congruence and ideological voting, we can see that only the first of these is relevant. This is the case at both the individual and contextual level. Citizens who are closer to the median legislator are more satisfied with how democracy works. The effect is clearly significant, it is in the expected direction, and it is robust across the various model specifications. The magnitude of the effect, however, is relatively modest. Both the distance to the median legislator and satisfaction with democracy are coded in the 0–1 range. As the largest observed distance between a voter and the median legislator is about 0.6 on the 0–1 left–right scale, the least and most distant voters will differ by a value of about 0.04 in terms of their satisfaction with democracy. There are also differences between elections in terms of ideological congruence. The average degree of democratic support is higher in elections with a smaller average distance between voters and

the median legislator. The point estimate appears to be particularly large, but the variance of this aggregate-level measure is also relatively small. The average distance ranges from 0.14 (Canada) to 0.25 (Israel). Still, this corresponds to a strong difference in terms of average levels of democratic support. The predicted difference between these two extremes is almost 30 per cent of the range of values of the dependent variable. Clearly, citizens strongly respond to this aspect of the quality of representation.

The other central explanatory factor is the strength of ideological voting. The expectation was that democratic support would be higher for ideological voters and in electoral contexts with a strong proportion of ideological voters. The results of Table 2 offer no support for this hypothesis. There are no significant effects of ideological voting, neither at the individual level, nor at the level of elections. This negative result is not due to the inclusion of ideological congruence. As ideological voting is expected to reinforce ideological congruence, one could think that any effect of ideological voting would be indirect. Removing ideological congruence from the model, however, does not change the estimated effects of ideological voting (Model 3).

As far as the other context level characteristics are concerned, there are no systematic effects. Proportionality, party system fragmentation, and government fragmentation do not seem to influence how citizens evaluate the functioning of democracy. The individual-level controls, by contrast, show some differences across groups of citizens. Most important among these is the lower level of satisfaction of ‘election losers’, which had been emphasized in several previous studies. The results of Table 2 also confirm that party identifiers are slightly more satisfied with the political system than political independents.

Conclusion

The normative model of policy representation is an important foundation for much empirical research on electoral behaviour. It suggests that the quality of representation should be higher when voting choices are guided by substantive considerations and when elections guarantee a high degree of congruence between the preferences of voters and those of legislators. This paper started from this model of representation to investigate whether citizens’ respond to such variation in the quality of representation. I expected that stronger ideological voting and stronger ideological congruence would result into more positive attitudes toward the

functioning of democracy. These hypotheses have been only partially confirmed. Ideological congruence is an important factor. Most important, there are strong differences between electoral systems. When an election leads to a close match between the ideological position of the median legislator and of the median voter, the average degree of democratic support is substantially increased. Also, there is a similar individual-level effect. Voters close to the median legislator are also tend to be more satisfied with the performance of their regime—though this effect is of a much smaller magnitude. In contrast, the strength of ideological voting does not appear to be relevant to explain attitudes towards the functioning of democracy.

Obviously, the analyses and hypotheses presented in this paper are preliminary. First, the number of electoral contexts considered here was rather limited. Increasing the number of elections and including as well new democracies would clearly raise the confidence in the obtained results and their generalizability. This is possible by complementing the available CSES data with additional context-level variables. Second, the effects of many context-level variables tested here are likely to vary in strength across both elections and groups of voters. Such interactions between context-level factors or cross-level interactions have not been considered here, given the very small number of level-2 observations. But with a larger sample of elections, such effects should be considered. The effects of (governmental or partisan) fragmentation and of votes–seats disproportionality, for instance, could be conditional on the type of electoral rules, that is, on the distinction between proportional and majoritarian systems. This distinction may also influence the effects of congruence and ideological voting. Finally, some of the measures used in this paper are far from being optimal. The measure of ideological voting, in particular, should be more detailed. I relied here on a simple dichotomy, starting from a contrast between the closest party and all other parties. A more fine-grained measure would be necessary to be more confident that this characteristic of the voting-decision process really is unrelated to the level of democratic support.

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Table 1. Individual-level and aggregate level implications of substantive representation

	Individual level	Aggregate level
Ideological voting	Citizens who rely more strongly on substantive criteria for making their voting choice should be more supportive of how democracy works in their political system.	Citizens in a context with a higher level of ideological voting should be more supportive of how democracy works in their political system.
Ideological congruence	Citizens who are closer to the median legislator should be more supportive of democracy.	Democratic support should be higher in contexts with a higher congruence between the median voter and the median legislator.

Table 2. Effect of individual-level and context-level characteristics on democratic support

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Individual-level variables</i>				
Ideological voter	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	
Distance median legislator	-0.07*** (0.01)	-0.07*** (0.01)		-0.07*** (0.01)
Election loser	-0.08*** (0.00)	-0.08*** (0.00)	-0.08*** (0.00)	-0.08*** (0.00)
Age	0.00* (0.00)	0.00* (0.00)	0.00* (0.00)	0.00* (0.00)
Woman	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)
Political sophistication	0.04*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)
Party identifier	0.03*** (0.00)	0.03*** (0.00)	0.03*** (0.00)	0.03*** (0.00)
<i>Context-level variables</i>				
ENEP		0.00 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.02)
Disproportionality		-0.02 [†] (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)
ENGP		-0.01 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.02)
Proportion ideological voters		0.15 (0.12)	0.05 (0.17)	
Av. distance median legislator		-2.58*** (0.72)		-2.38*** (0.72)
Constant	0.59*** (0.02)	1.06*** (0.18)	0.52*** (0.16)	1.12*** (0.18)
<i>Random-effect parameters</i>				
Constant	0.07 (0.01)	0.06 (0.01)	0.08 (0.02)	0.06 (0.01)
ICC	0.10	0.06	0.12	0.06
N	15'069.00	15'069.00	15'069.00	15'069.00
Groups	16.00	16.00	16.00	16.00
Log Likelihood	983.20	979.01	962.57	984.06

[†] $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table A1. Descriptive statistics for individual-level variables

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Satisfaction with democracy	15069	0.58	0.24	0.00	1.00
Ideological voter	15069	0.43	0.50	0.00	1.00
Distance to median legislator	15069	0.19	0.14	0.00	0.59
Election loser	15069	0.44	0.50	0.00	1.00
Age (centered)	15069	0.34	16.11	-31.00	51.00
Woman	15069	0.49	0.50	0.00	1.00
Political sophistication	15069	0.59	0.32	0.00	1.00
Party identification	15069	0.54	0.50	0.00	1.00

Table A2. Context level characteristics

Election	N	ENEP	Gallagher Index	ENGP	Ideological voting	Av. ideological distance
Australia 2004	1273	2.91	3.38	1.41	0.52	0.15
Canada 2004	1151	3.68	3.68	1.00	0.45	0.14
Switzerland 2003	767	4.37	0.96	3.77	0.48	0.21
Germany 2002	1630	3.65	1.53	1.55	0.35	0.21
Spain 2004	777	2.71	1.80	1.00	0.70	0.19
Finland 2003	720	5.17	1.15	3.06	0.35	0.17
Britain 2005	421	3.04	7.63	1.00	0.71	0.16
Ireland 2002	1119	3.28	2.62	1.14	0.21	0.16
Israel 2003	628	4.18	0.82	2.50	0.40	0.25
Netherlands 2002	1236	5.77	0.28	2.78	0.28	0.19
Norway 2001	1454	5.55	1.14	1.00	0.41	0.18
New Zealand 2002	817	3.87	0.75	1.47	0.22	0.19
Portugal 2002	653	3.01	1.79	1.00	0.55	0.20
Portugal 2005	1510	3.00	2.94	1.50	0.51	0.21
Sweden 2002	771	4.24	0.43	1.00	0.48	0.22
United States 2004	635	2.00	1.45	1.00	0.70	0.19
Total	15069	3.87	1.98	1.61	0.43	0.19