22. Measuring representation: policy congruence

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The measurement of policy congruence between voters and representatives is one of the main areas of the empirical study of political representation. Ever since Miller and Stokes' (1963) pioneering study on the relationship between attitudes (and behaviour) of representatives and their constituents, as well as Pitkin's (1967) argument that substantive representation should be of central importance when determining the strength of the representative link between citizens and politicians, scholars have attempted to measure the policy difference between voters and representatives. This has resulted in a rich body of literature, but also one with quite divergent empirical findings. Our aim here is to shed light on the sources of this divergence and draw some general conclusions from the empirical literature on policy congruence under various political and electoral systems.

There is great diversity in the way policy congruence is studied, both in terms of the conceptualization and the operationalization of *policy congruence*. We discuss three main choices that those studying policy congruence have to make. First, *who are the representatives* that are expected to be congruent with voters? Are we looking at the attitudes or behaviour of political parties, legislators, governments, or at the actual policies that these representatives enact? Second, it matters what policy congruence is measured on: a single left–right ideological scale, multiple ideological or policy dimensions, specific policy proposals or the congruence of issue priority rather than policy positions? Third, is congruence conceptualized in terms of a *single position* for voters and representatives or a *distribution of preferences* and how does this choice translate into a measurement of (in)congruence? One might compare the policy position of the median voter with the singular position of the government, while one might also compare the distribution of voter preferences with the distribution of representatives' preferences. Understanding these choices is crucial in understanding the variety of findings in the empirical literature on policy congruence.

Studies of policy congruence generally not only aim to describe the level of policy congruence, but also to explain it and explore its consequences. The major explanatory factor that has been studied is the electoral system, usually dichotomized as proportional vs. non-proportional electoral systems. More recently, scholars have started to look at other sources of variation in policy representation, in particular unequal representation of societal groups. The consequences of policy congruence are another relatively new field of study, particularly its impact on democratic legitimacy. This chapter highlights the main findings from these studies and offers a number of suggestions for the further study of policy congruence.

CONCEPTUALIZING AND OPERATIONALIZING POLICY CONGRUENCE

Policy congruence is concerned with the similarity of policy preferences of voters on the one hand and the preferences and actions of representatives on the other hand. It is important to distinguish this *static* conception of policy congruence from the *dynamic* notion of policy responsiveness (Arnold and Franklin 2012). The former is concerned with the extent of policy differences between citizens and representatives at a given point in time. If citizens and representatives take the same position on an issue or ideological dimension, we speak of congruent policy preferences. Policy responsiveness is, however, a dynamic process (see also Chapter 25 in this *Handbook*), in which representatives (potentially) respond to changes in voter policy preferences, and vice versa (Soroka and Wlezien 2010). This chapter focuses on *congruence* as a static measure of representation.

We understand the term *policy congruence* in broad terms to include policy linkage between citizens, representatives and policy output. Thus, it includes both the linkage between the policy preferences of citizens and political representatives, sometimes called *citizen–elite ideological congruence* (Golder and Ferland 2018; Powell 2019), as well as the linkage between preferences of citizens and policy output. In fact we would argue that it is worthwhile to assess studies of policy linkage along the entire chain of delegation from voter to policy output rather than treating *ideological congruence* and *policy outcome congruence* separately.

The term *policy congruence* thus represents a large variety of approaches in which the opinion(s) of voters are compared with opinion(s) or policies of representatives. To understand the sometimes divergent conclusions of these empirical studies, it is important to distinguish between the various ways in which policy congruence can be studied. In particular, we should look at the questions: who are the representatives or elites that are being studied, for which policy is congruence being measured, and how is it conceptualized?

Who are the Representatives?

Political representation can be thought of as a chain of delegation from voters, through parties, to legislatures, governments and policy (Müller 2000). Congruence can be established at each of these stages (Dalton et al. 2011, p. 7; Golder and Ferland 2018, pp. 218–29; Louwerse 2011, p. 21; Powell 2019, pp. 31–54). Some studies compare the very start of the representative chain (citizens) with the very end (policy outcomes) (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Lax and Philips 2012; Rasmussen et al. 2019; Schakel 2019). Other work compares a smaller part of the chain, for example the congruence between policy preferences of voters and legislators (Andeweg 2011; Dolný and Baboš 2015) or voters and parties (Converse and Pierce 1986; Dalton 1985; Costello et al. 2012). So in most of these studies the voters or citizens are selected as the ultimate principal: those whose policy preferences should be approximated. Studies vary in their selection of the elite, the representative agent, for example parties, legislators or governments. Moreover, some studies focus on policy *preferences* of representatives, for example those expressed in elite surveys or provided for voting advice applications (or inferred from party positions as measured in expert surveys or perceived by voters), while other studies focus on *behaviour* of representatives, such as voting behaviour in parliament or governments' policy decisions. Lastly, the timing of observing representatives' preferences and actions matters: a party at election time might hold different policy preferences from when they are in parliament or in government.

The choice of what elite to study potentially impacts upon the levels of congruence observed and the explanations for variation in those levels. Generally, the further one moves along the chain of delegation, the more likely it is that incongruences appear (Powell 2019, p. 54). As we will see, however, this differs between electoral systems, which is the main explanatory variable used in studies of policy congruence.

As with most work in the field of political representation, there is also a normative dimension to the selection of which representative(s) to study (Thomassen 1994). In a populist-majoritarian view of democracy in which the ultimate test for representative democracy would be that the policy outcome is identical to the outcome under direct democracy, the study of citizen–policy output congruence would be seen as most important (Andeweg and Louwerse 2020). Proponents of a liberal/consensual model of democracy, however, do not expect policy output to approximate the aggregate of the people's preferences under direct democracy: the intervention of representatives and their deliberation about the common good are expected to result in a different (better) outcome. There should still be linkage between the preferences of the citizens and the initial preferences of the representatives, but not necessarily with the eventual policy decisions. Thus, in this view we should focus on only part of the representative chain, such as the link between citizens' and representatives' preferences at election time.

What needs to be Congruent: Ideological Scales, Specific Policies or Issue Attention?

If we know whose policy positions we will be comparing, a second important question is what will we be comparing them on? The left–right policy scale is perhaps the most well-known tool for measuring policy positions. It arguably offers the most succinct summary of policy positions in most countries and, from a practical view, is available in many studies of elite and voter policy preferences. Therefore it has been dominant particularly in large-*N* comparative analyses of policy congruence (Blais and Bodet 2006; Ferland 2016; Golder and Stramski 2010; Golder and Lloyd 2014; Powell 2000, 2009, 2019). In other studies, a left–right dimension is obtained by aggregating preferences or behaviour (Bafumi and Herron 2010).

One could, however, question whether a one-dimensional view suffices to capture all important policy differences between voters and representatives. If relevant issues are not (fully) captured by an overarching left–right policy dimension, measures of left–right policy congruence could under- or overestimate actual policy congruence (Thomassen 2012; Lesschaeve 2017a). An alternative is to measure congruence on a range of issue dimensions that may vary between countries or over time (McDonald and Budge 2005; Rosset and Stecker 2019; Stecker and Tausendpfund 2016). Of course, here the selection of relevant policy dimensions is an important choice, also from the perspective of having comparable observations between countries. Instead of using ideological dimensions, one can also establish policy congruence on a set of specific policy proposals (Gilens 2012; Lax and Phillips 2012; Rasmussen et al. 2019).

Finally, one can opt to abandon the comparison of issue positions altogether and focus on the congruence of issue attention, or *priority congruence*, instead. This type of analysis focuses on whether voters and representatives think the same issues are important (Klüver and Spoon 2016; Lindeboom 2012; Reher 2015).[1]

Related to the question of indicators is the question of how policy positions are measured. Some studies use the position of a voter's preferred party as a proxy for the voter's policy position, while other studies use voter perceptions of party positions as a measure of those elite positions, leaving it unclear whether one is measuring *actual* elite positions or merely *perceptions* of these positions. Both methods carry a risk of overestimating the degree of congruence. When comparing the position of the median voter with that of the median legislator or the weighted average of governing parties, for example, a commonly used method to estimate the position of the median voter was devised by Kim and Fording (1998). This KF measure estimates the median voter's position from the position of the political parties and the amount of support received by each party. This method assumes that all voters engage in proximity voting, that is, they express their ideological preferences by voting for the party with the ideological position that is closest to their own. Retrospective voting, directional voting, personalization of voting, and other alternative models of voting are assumed not to exist. However, using data in which both the position of the party voted for and the voter's self-placement on a left–right scale were available, Warwick (2016) shows a substantial discrepancy between the induced KF median and the actual median voter and concludes that ideological congruence based on the KF median is *an illusion*. Powell (2018) concedes that the KF measure is imperfect and indeed usually overestimates congruence, but argues that KF-estimated congruence and congruence calculated using voters' self-placement are strongly correlated. In this view, using the position of the party voted for as a proxy for the voters' own position is still acceptable if the voters' self-placement is not available.

Measuring the positions of voters and representatives independently avoids the risk of overestimating congruence, but it is vulnerable to differential item functioning or DIF (Golder and Stramski 2010, pp. 98–9). For example, studies that use expert surveys to measure parties' policy positions run into the problem that the question wording in expert surveys and voter surveys may not be identical. Even if the positions of voters and representatives are obtained in surveys with identical question wording, there is no guarantee that both sides in the representational relationship interpret the questions in the same way. With the often used left–right scale, for example, it has long been known that especially lower educated voters may have more difficulty in dealing with these abstract ideological concepts than more highly educated individuals, such as most representatives (e.g. Klingemann 1979).

Comparing Central Tendencies or Distributions?

Congruence is generally conceptualized as the (ideological) distance between voters on the one hand and representatives or policy output on the other hand. Where conceptualizations differ, however, is on whether we should be comparing the preferences of individual voters with those of individual representatives, of individual voters with those of all representatives, of all voters with those of a single representative, or of all voters with those of all representatives.[2]

Table 22.1 Conceptualizations of congruence

		Representatives	
		One	All
Voters	One	One-to-one congruence	One-to-many congruence
	All	Many-to-one congruence	Many-to-many congruence

Source: Based on Golder and Stramski (2010).

In Table 22.1 we use the terminology of Golder and Stramski (2010; also see Golder and Ferland 2018), assuming that where they speak of *many* citizens or representatives, they actually mean all, as it is not clear which voters or representatives could be excluded from the comparison if we do not include them all. These are logical possibilities, but not all are relevant for our purpose. Golder and Stramski argue that the situation of a congruence relationship between one voter and many representatives is unlikely to be of practical importance in political representation and thus can be safely ignored (Golder and Stramski 2010, p. 91). For an individual voter, the distance to her representative (one-to-one congruence) is likely to be an important indicator of the quality of representation (Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017), but it says little about the overall quality of representation in a particular polity.

An additional complication is that the literature often seems to be about the number of actors that are compared (one or many/all), while the actual discussion is rather about whether the preferences of all voters or of all representatives should be reduced to a single position, or the full distribution of preferences within both collectives should be taken into account: 'Although we use the term "single representative" here, we can just as easily think of the "single representative" as being the policy position of the government' (Golder and Stramski 2010, p. 92). The position of the government is then measured as the weighted average of the positions of the political parties in the government, in which the weights are the parties' shares of the seats controlled by the governing coalition in parliament (Golder and Stramski 2010, p. 96). Or if the representative is parliament, the position of parliament is represented by the position of the median member of parliament. Similarly, when Weissberg (1978) distinguishes dyadic and collective representation, dyadic representation is between a representative and the voters in her constituency, but the latter are reduced to a single *constituency* opinion measured by the mean scale position of the voters. Thus we can repeat Table 22.1, replacing the distinction between one and many/all with that between reducing the opinions of voters and/or representatives to a measure of central tendency (a mean or a median) or not (Table 22.2).[3]

Table 22.2 Measurement of congruence

		Representatives	
		Central tendency	Distribution
Voters	Central tendency	Absolute median citizen congruence	–
	Distribution	Absolute/Relative citizen congruence	Many-to-many congruence

Note: Terms used by Golder and Stramski (2010).

Although there are a few examples of studies comparing the distribution of voter preferences with a central tendency of representatives' preferences (Achen 1978; Blais and Bodet 2006), the main debate is between those who compare central tendencies of both voters and representatives, and those who compare the full distributions of both sides. It is not accidental that the debate on how to conceptualize and measure congruence focuses on this distinction, because, as with the choice regarding which representatives to compare with the voters, these two operationalizations relate to the two dominant traditions in normative democratic theories of political representation (Andeweg and Louwerse 2020). Operationalizing congruence as a coincidence of the policy position of the median voter with the policy position of the median representative fits with the populist-majoritarian tradition of representative democracy: democracy implies that the policies pursued by the representatives are identical to those that are preferred by the electorate. As long as there is only one ideological dimension, there is no majority in the electorate that does not include the median voter, as there is no majority in the legislature that does not include the median legislator. If the position of the median legislator approximates that of the median voter, the outcome of legislation will be in line with the wishes of the majority of the electorate: the *median mandate theory* (McDonald et al. 2004).

The alternative liberal/consensual tradition sees representative democracy as the absence of tyranny, including the tyranny of the majority. To protect the interests of the minority (or minorities), they must be included in the policy-making process. For that purpose, the distribution of preferences in parliament ideally should reflect the distribution of preferences in the electorate. McDonald et al. (2004) argue that even in this conceptualization of democracy, to be democratic, the final outcome of the deliberations and/or the formation of a government in this proportionally composed parliament should still be policy that conforms to the preferences of the median voter. However, this focus on the outcome of policy-making is absent in many accounts of liberal/consensual democracy: a parliament reflecting the preferences of the voters should proceed to deliberate about the common good and seek to define a policy that transcends the narrow interests of either majority or minorities. The weakness of this tradition is that somewhere in the decision-making process the distribution of preferences must be transformed into a policy which may well be a zero-sum choice. The assumption that the policy choice that emerges from the deliberations will approximate the *common good* is more wishful thinking than a logical necessity.

Advocates of assessing the congruence between the full distribution of preferences of voters and representatives argue that comparing central tendencies can be misleading, as the same mean or median can result from very different distributions. Extreme polarization in parliament may result in an almost empty centre while preferences in the electorate may present a normal distribution; yet the central tendency of both distributions may be identical. This is not a mere theoretical possibility, as Pierce discovered in the Netherlands:

> In 1971, the mean position on the abortion issue of the voters for the three parties that later merged into the Christian Democratic Appeal, an umbrella religious party, was 3.76 (on a 7-point scale), while the mean position of the CDA deputies was a very similar 3.57. Of those deputies, almost 40 percent located themselves at 3 or 4 and none placed themselves at the extremes of 1 or 7. Among the voters, however, fewer than 25 percent placed themselves at 3 or 4 on the same scale, while almost 45 percent located themselves at the extremes. (Pierce 1999, pp. 14–15)

Another problem is that comparing the median position of voters and representatives only makes sense if only one dimension structures the political preferences of voters and of representatives. Where a second dimension is relevant, the median voter/legislator on that dimension may well be different. In a study edited by Müller and Strøm (2000), the authors of the country chapters reported which party controlled the median legislator on the first and, where relevant, second dimension: under 215 governments in 11 countries, the median party on the first dimension was different from the one on the second dimension in 56.7 percent of the cases, which indicates the magnitude of the problem (but see McDonald and Budge 2005, pp. 40–47).

Within both camps there are different views on the best indicator of congruence. With respect to comparing central tendencies, we already mentioned the controversy about inferring the median voter's position from voters' party preferences (the KF measure) versus measuring the median voter's position on the basis of voters' self-placement. For the purpose of comparing the entire distributions of voters and of representatives, several measures have been proposed. Holmberg (1999) uses Galtung's scheme for classifying the shape of distributions (AJUS) and compares the shape of the distribution of voter preferences with that of representatives' preferences. However, similarly shaped distributions may be located at very different parts of the scale that is used. Golder and Stramski's measure takes into account both shape and location of the distributions: it measures the overlap between the cumulative distribution functions (CDF) of both the voters and the representatives and effectively conforms to a two-sample Kolmogorov–Smirnov test (Golder and Stramski 2010, pp. 96–7; also

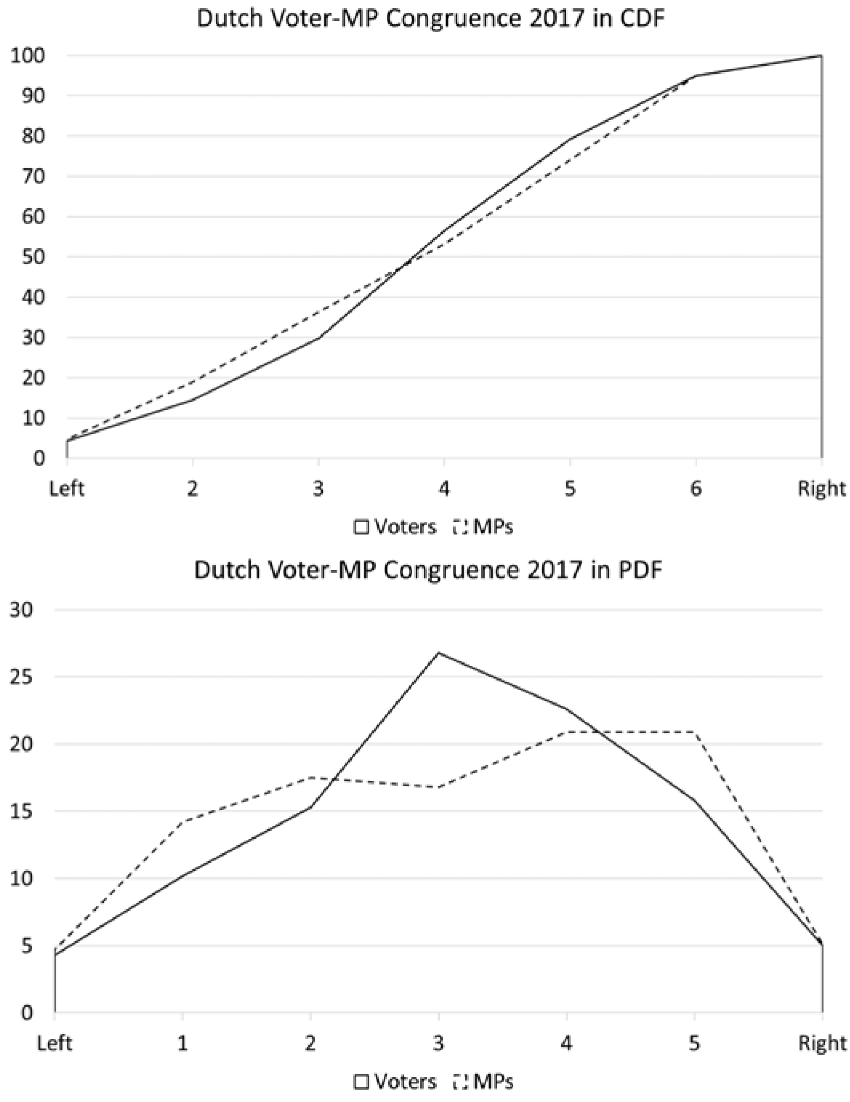

Figure 22.1 *Dutch Voter–MP Congruence 2017 according to CDF and PDF measures*

Source: Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2017 (Van der Meer et al. 2017) and Dutch Parliament Study 2017 (Andeweg and Van Vonno 2018).

see Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017). By means of example, Figure 22.1 (top panel) illustrates this for the case of the Netherlands in 2017. The CDF measure is calculated by the sum of the absolute difference in the cumulative distributions of MPs and voters at each scale point, which equals 19.0 (a score of 0 would represent perfect congruence). Andeweg (2011) proposes a similar measure, but uses the overlap between the two empirical probability distribution functions (PDF) rather than the cumulative functions, conforming to the Bhattacharyya coefficient (also see Dolný and Baboš 2015; Buquet and Selios 2017; Lupu and Warner 2017). This is illustrated in the bottom panel of Figure 22.1: here the overlap of the distribution for each scale point is summed, which for this data amounts to 88.3 per cent (0 = no overlap, 100 = perfect overlap). For most real-world data, the CDF and PDF measures are almost perfectly correlated. Only in the unlikely event that two PDFs do not overlap at all, has the size of the gap between the two distributions no effect, other than when using CDFs. On the other hand, the PDF-based measure has the advantage that it ranges from 0 (no overlap, no congruence) to 100 (complete overlap, perfect congruence), facilitating straightforward interpretation. Lupu et al. (2017) argue that, as both the CDF and PDF measures compare histograms, they ignore variation within bins, they are not affected by comparable bins being empty, and they have difficulty in handling multi-dimensional comparisons. A more fine-grained measure (Earth Mover's Distance or EMD) does not have these disadvantages. They show that using the EMD leads to different conclusions regarding many-to-many congruence than PDF or CDF overlap measures.

RESULTS: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF POLICY CONGRUENCE

The study of causes of citizen–elite congruence has focused to a large degree on the effects of electoral systems. Powell (2000) claims that systems of proportional representation (PR) do better in terms of issue congruence between the median voter and the government than plurality systems. Other authors (Blais and Bodet, 2006; Golder and Stramski 2010; Lupu et al. 2017) do not find this difference, however. One explanation might be the data and measurements used: Powell compares citizens' surveys with expert surveys of party positions, while Blais and Bodet as well as Golder and Stramski use citizens' own positions and their perceptions of party positions. Powell (2009) claims that these measurement issues are not, however, responsible for the different findings, but rather the time frame that is studied: in more recent data, PR systems have lost their advantage over plurality electoral systems. Golder and Lloyd (2014) argue, contrarily, that PR systems still have an advantage if we look at the congruence between the median voter and the median legislator, but not if we look at the congruence between the median voter and the government. In addition, Golder and Stramski (2010) find higher levels of congruence in more proportional systems in terms of many-to-many congruence (but see Lupu et al. 2017). Recent research on public opinion–policy congruence between the median voters' preferences on specific issue policies and the enactment of these policies argues that institutions have limited influence (Rasmussen et al. 2019).

All in all, the advantage of proportional electoral systems in terms of issue congruence seems to depend on what you are looking at. If anything, in terms of many-to-many congruence as well as in terms of the difference between the median voter and median legislator, PR systems seem to fare somewhat better than plurality systems. This difference does not exist at the government stage in the chain of representation. This makes sense: the strength of PR is its ability to represent a wider spectrum of voices in parliament, so it would do better in terms of legislative congruence, especially measured as the distributional overlap of voters and politicians (many-to-many congruence). The weakness of proportionalism is the link from legislature to government, because here most political systems with proportional electoral systems switch to a majoritarian logic for parliamentary decision-making and government formation: bills are generally enacted by simple majority vote and, in parliamentary systems, governments require the support of at least a plurality of legislators. As a result, the formation of a government in proportional systems often requires coalition negotiations, and there they would lose their edge over plurality systems (McDonald and Budge 2005, p. 125).

In recent years, scholars have looked increasingly beyond electoral systems as an explanation for policy congruence. This recognizes that congruence can not only be considered as a systemic property, but also as something related to a particular party or societal group. First, policy congruence is higher for some voters and for some parties than for others. Parties with clear electoral profiles are more likely to be congruent with voter preferences (Walczak and Van der Brug 2013; cf. Belchior 2013).

Second, congruence is higher for some groups of voters than for others, which results in unequal representation. Voter characteristics such as the level of education and political knowledge are related to higher levels of congruence (Lesschaeve 2017b; Rosset and Stecker 2019; Walczak and Van der Brug 2013). This has been argued to be the result of higher educated voters' higher likelihood to vote for the closest party in ideological terms, but also of the lower availability of an ideologically close party for lower educated voters (Lesschaeve 2017c). Policies supported by high income groups are more likely to be enacted than policies supported by low income groups (Gilens 2012; Schakel 2019). Lower levels of political participation of lower income citizens (only) partially account for this effect (Schakel 2019, p. 14). Besides education and income, unequal representation has been linked to gender and ethnicity. Dingler et al. (2019) find no gender imbalance in parliamentary policy congruence, while Reher (2018) does find that when men's and women's opinions diverge, men's views are more likely to be translated into concrete policies. Policy congruence has been shown to be lower for ethnic minority groups (Griffin and Newman 2007), but descriptive representation of minority groups can foster policy congruence (Kroeber 2018). From a normative democratic perspective, this growing body of literature on equality of representation of various social groups is of central importance.

More recently, scholars have started to analyse the consequences of policy congruence, in particular on satisfaction with democracy. Voters who are more distant from the government in terms of policy tend to be more dissatisfied with democracy. This is found to hold when looking at left–right policy congruence (Dahlberg and Holmberg 2014), multidimensional policy congruence (Stecker and Tausendpfund 2016), and priority congruence (Reher 2015). It is also found consistently along the chain of representation, because satisfaction with democracy correlates positively with higher levels of voter–party congruence (Ezrow and Xezonakis 2011) as well as higher voter–government congruence (Kim 2009).

AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

While the literature on policy representation is rich, there are a number of avenues for further research that could enhance the comparability of findings. In order to avoid a confusion of tongues, we suggest that scholars clearly outline how they define and measure policy congruence, specifically: who are the representatives, what dimensions or items are used, and are preferences of behaviour aggregated to a single position or is congruence measured in terms of the overlap of preference distributions?

Limited cross-national and cross-temporal data availability has meant that all too often, studies of policy congruence did not measure voter and representative positions independently. Ideally, voters' and representatives' positions should be measured independently, but on the same policy scales – and researchers should establish that both groups – voters and representatives – understand and use these scales in the same way. For this purpose, moving to specific policies rather than focusing on policy dimensions might help. This could also make it easier to link voter preferences to what representatives actually do, instead of focusing (only) on their attitudes.

We welcome the fact that the explanatory study of policy congruence has moved away from an exclusive focus on the electoral system, and instead focuses on the unequal representation of societal groups and the consequences of policy incongruence for political legitimacy. In fact, future work could link these two more explicitly, as one could theorize that unequal levels of policy congruence between social groups might be related to lower levels of democratic satisfaction for the disadvantaged groups. If this is the case, the lower levels of trust of these social groups are entirely understandable, which from a normative perspective should be cause for democratic concern – and as such a topic that warrants scholarly attention.

NOTES

1. For the purpose of this chapter, we ignore the small but growing number of studies that compare voters' and representatives' views on the process rather than the content of representation (e.g. André et al. 2017; Méndez-Lago and Martinez 2002; Von Schoultz and Wass 2016).
2. When we write 'representatives' here, this can also refer to policy output or outcomes, although in that case there naturally will only be one point of reference.
3. In Table 22.2 we again use the terms proposed by Golder and Stramski, but the confusion in the literature is illustrated by the fact that they consider both 'absolute median citizen congruence' and 'absolute' or 'relative citizen congruence' to be operationalizations of 'many-to-one congruence' in Table 22.1. 'Absolute median citizen congruence' compares the median citizen with 'the' representative being either the median legislator or the weighted average of the governing parties. 'Absolute citizen congruence' measures the average *absolute* distance between citizens and the representative (with the latter still measured as a median or a mean) and 'Relative citizen congruence' is the average *relative* distance between these two. We are not aware of any studies comparing the median voter with a distribution of representatives' preferences, thus the top-right cell in Table 22.2 remains empty.

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