

The Agendas of Voters and Parties in the European Parliament Election of 1999

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1. Political representation in the European Union

Even though democratic systems increasingly incorporate direct-democratic procedures: Modern democracies essentially are representative democracies. The European Union is no exception to this. As a multi-tiered political system, it follows its particular institutional devices (e.g. Weiler, Haltern and Mayer 1995; König et al. 1996; Hooghe and Marks 2000). But this only means that citizens' wants and demands are even less directly involved in the political decision-making process than in an average nation-state. Put differently, the quality of the democratic process in the European Union depends even more on effective mechanisms of political representation than it does in the nation-state.

In the European Union as elsewhere, the political preferences of citizens are transmitted to the decision making apparatus through general elections, through a complex system of interest group involvement in policy making and, to a lesser extent, through political protest activities. These mechanisms of political representation can be evaluated on two dimensions. One is their scope. The question here is: what proportion of the citizenry is involved? The second is their effectiveness. The criterion is: how well are citizens' preferences translated into public policy? If it comes to general elections – with sizeable proportions of citizens participating – the scope of political representation is usually very large. Its effectiveness is less obvious. It takes empirical studies into electoral representation to explore the relative effectiveness of this mechanism of interest intermediation (e.g. Miller et al., 1999; Schmitt 2001).

At the basis of the process of electoral representation are the preferences of the voters. According to theory, parties selectively aggregate those preferences and articulate them in their electoral manifestoes. These electoral platforms, or programmes, are best described as parties' world views and visions. Parties campaign on those views and visions in order to persuade as many voters as possible that their views are accurate and that their visions are credible. Voters, on the other hand, choose the party whose view they most agree with and whose vision

¹ Chapter Draft for *Voters, Parties and European Unification*, ed. Hermann Schmitt. London: Frank Cass (under review). The Euromanifestos project from which it draws has been funded by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (grant identifier: SCHM 835/4-1).

they believe in most. It is the charge of the winning parties to realise as much as possible of their visions before the next election takes place – i.e. before voters are called to evaluate the performance of the incumbent government and to decide on that basis, and on the basis of a new round of partisan views and visions, which party to support (Klingemann et al. 1994).

The effectiveness of electoral representation is dependent upon the relative congruence between the policy preferences of (a majority of) the voters and the policy outcomes produced by the elected government. According to the traditional view of the responsible party model, government behaviour is caused by voter preferences (Kirkpatrick 1971, Luttbeg 1974, Thomassen 1991 and 1994). Recent European work emphasises opinion formation (top down) at least as much as interest intermediation (bottom up; see Esaiasson and Holmberg 1996; Holmberg 1997). However congruence is established, at the end voter preferences and government policies need to converge in order to render political representation effective (Klingemann et al. 1994).

If it comes to the multi-level polity of the European Union, we distinguish two major channels of electoral representation. One is the confederal channel via direct elections to the European Parliament. The other is the intergovernmental channel via first-order national elections (Schmitt and Thomassen 1999). As direct elections to the European Parliament do not lead to the formation of a government, the confederal channel of electoral representation formally lacks the translation of electoral promises into governmental policies. The directly elected European Parliament, however, is increasingly involved in EU policy making as well as in the appointment of the president of the European Commission. It disposes, in addition, of far reaching budgetary powers. This implies that the political orientations of the members of the European Parliament – if less directly than preferred by many – do have an impact on the policy decisions taken by the Union (e.g. Wessels and Schmitt 2000). It is therefore that it makes sense to study the effectiveness of the confederal channel of electoral representation in the European Union.

The intergovernmental channel of EU electoral representation is no less important. A good part of European Union politics is decided by the Council, that is: by representatives of national governments. Collectively, they are a major player in the EU political decision making process. National governments are formed as a result of national elections. This implies that voters may express their European political preferences not only at the occasion of European Parliament elections, but also in national first-order elections – to the degree to which EU po-

litics are put on the national campaign agenda. The same applies to European Parliament elections: they can only contribute to the quality of EU political representation if EU politics play some role in the campaign – i.e. if European Parliament elections are not just “second-order national elections” (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Determining the actual weight of EU politics in national and European election campaigns is therefore an important research question which has received little attention so far.

In this paper, we will concentrate on the confederal channel of electoral representation. We will shed light on the issues that parties emphasise, and on those that are salient to their voters, in the European Parliament elections of 1999. Based on the content analysis of the election manifestos of the four EU-wide party federations and a post-election survey among the voters of these parties, we will compare the political agendas of parties and voters and determine the degree of issue congruence between them.

2. What are European Union issues?

Before we go on to explore the degree of agenda congruence between voters and parties in the European Parliament election of 1999, it will be useful to specify our notion of European Union issues. There are at least two important distinctions to make. The first is that there are more issues than those on which citizens take a position on a policy continuum (so-called position issues). The second is that the scope of European Union issues goes far beyond constitutional matters. Both distinctions are hardly new or original, but they tend to be ignored in much of the relevant literature.

The first of these two distinctions refers to the two major scholarly views of party competition and vote choices: The spatial theory on the one hand (Downs 1957 and most of the rational choice literature after him), and the saliency theory on the other (Butler und Stokes 1972; Robertson 1976; Budge und Farlie 1977, 1983a, 1983b; Klingemann et al. 1994; plus a good deal of modern mass communication studies dealing with processes of agenda setting, framing, and priming). The basic point of dissent is simple and straightforward. Spatial theorists, economically inspired as they are, maintain that voters’ choice is ultimately an effort to maximise their electoral utility by minimising the policy distance between themselves and the

parties and/or candidates on offer.² For saliency theorists, by contrast, the vote is essentially about choosing the contender that appears to be the most competent with regard to the issues that are salient at the time of the election. In this latter perspective, issues can but need not to be of a positional nature – actually, this is the way in which valence issues can affect vote choices (Stokes 1966, 1992).³

Our second point here is that the European Union policy making apparatus is not only concerned with constitutional issues. On the contrary: legislative acts originating in “normal” politics are much more numerous. This may appear a bit counterintuitive at a time when the EU Constitution drafted by the European Convention is discussed in every paper. However, the empirical evidence can not be mistaken. Over the past fifty years, the policy reach of the EU has been growing steadily. Today, an average of one in two legislative acts in some 26 central policy areas is issued by European Union authorities – covering such diverse fields as economic, juridical, foreign and social policy (according to expert judgements compiled by Hooghe and Marks 2000, Appendix 1).

We can summarise these considerations and identify the dimensionality of European Union issues as in the following fourfold table (Graph 1):

Graph 1
Dimensionality of European Union Issues

	valence issues	position issues
constitutional politics	European integration (goal)	European Union (means)
“normal” politics	e.g. unemployment	e.g. immigration

Source: adapted from Schmitt and Thomassen 1999, p. 117.

² Note that the directional theory of vote choice – a recent dissident from the family of spatial models – diverted from this basic consent by assuming that voters would not support the choice option closest to them, but the one which supports their directional preference “clearer” than its competitors (e.g. Rabinowitz 1989). These claims, however, are hardly supported by empirical evidence (e.g. van der Eijk, Franklin et al. 1996; Schmitt 2001).

³ Recent empirical work suggests that the salience-competence mechanism is a much more powerful predictor of vote choices than the policy distance mechanism, and thus a more effective mechanism of interest intermediation and electoral representation (Schmitt 2001).

Care has been taken that all four quadrants of our conceptual map are well covered (in technical parlance: “operationalised”) both in the mass survey and the content analysis of party manifestos. We will come back to that in greater detail.

3. The salience of European Union issues and the effectiveness of electoral representation

Effective representation of voters’ political preferences requires that the issues on the campaign agenda have a sizeable impact on party choice. However, issues come last in a causal chain of competing factors like social background (Berelson 1954; Lipset and Rokkan 1967), party identification (Campbell et al. 1960, 1968), or the candidates standing for office (Wattenberg 1991; King 2002; Aarts, Blais and Schmitt 2004). Therefore, only salient issues can be expected to have an impact on voters’ choice.⁴

A major representation study that was conducted at the occasion of the 1994 European Parliament election found voters’ preferences on EU constitutional issues (e.g., introduction of a common currency) to be particularly poorly represented by the parties they voted for (Schmitt and Thomassen 1999). It became obvious that voters’ party choice was virtually unrelated to those policy preferences. Had these policies been more salient to them, one could assume, they would have taken them into account when choosing the party they voted for.⁵

If, then, the saliency of issues is a precondition for the effectiveness of electoral representation, a number of research questions present themselves. One is, how salient is EU politics to the voters? This question has two dimensions, a procedural (which policies should be decided upon on the EU level) and a material (specific EU policies), and we need to consider both of them. A second question is about the issue emphasis of political parties: What issues do they emphasise, and do their agendas differ? And third and ultimately we will address the basic question of any empirical representation research: how well do the political agendas of voters and parties fit together?

⁴ In the words of Butler and Stokes (1972:288), this reads as follows: “If an issue is to sway the elector it must not only have crossed the threshold of his awareness; he must also have formed some genuine attitude towards it. The more an issue is salient to him and the subject of strong attitudes, the more powerful will be its influence on his party choice. Indeed, given the multiplicity of influences upon the individual elector, only issues that excite strong feelings are likely to have much impact.”

⁵ This is not to say that voters and parties do not agree at all on European matters. The issue congruence between the two is much larger in view of basic attitudes towards European unification (van der Eijk and Franklin 1991; Schmitt and Thomassen 2000).

4. Research design

In the present chapter, we are concentrating on the issue emphasis that the European party federations have put in their electoral manifestos, and compare this to the issue priorities of their electorate in the 1999 European Parliament election. Voters' attitudes are drawn from the series of mass surveys of the European Election Study 1999.⁶ Representative telephone surveys have been conducted in each of the then 15 member countries of the Union shortly after the 1999 election to the European Parliament. Right at the beginning of the survey, respondents were asked what in their eyes the most important political problem is and where it is and should be dealt with.⁷

On the parties' side, the content of the manifestoes that they have issued at the occasion of the 1999 election to the European Parliament is analysed and compared to the survey evidence. This content analysis is part of the Euromanifestos project which – together with the Voters Study and other modules – was one of the components of the European Election Study 1999. Funded by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG), this project content-analyses the electoral programmes of all parties represented in the European Parliament between 1979 and 1999, including the programmes of the European party federations.⁸

While the contents of all documents are coded “conventionally” by expert-coders according to a MRG-inspired coding scheme (the EMCS, see Wüst and Volkens 2003), the 1999 docu-

⁶ Eijk, Cees van der, Mark Franklin, Hermann Schmitt, et al. 2002. *European Elections Study 1999: Design, Implementation and Results*. (Computer File and Codebook). Amsterdam: Steinmetz Archives.

⁷ The precise question wording of the survey data to be analysed is, in the English master questionnaire, the following:

Q1a. What do you think are the most important problems facing <your country>? [INT: note as many problems as R mentions. If R starts telling stories, ask to summarize in one or two words.]

Q1b. [If more than one problem mentioned:] Of those you have mentioned what would you say is the single most important problem? _____ [. . .]

Q1d. As of today, is <the most important issue> mainly dealt with by regional, national, or European political authorities?

1 regional 2 national 3 European 8 dk 9 na

Q1e. And who do you think would be most appropriate to deal with <the most important issue>: regional, national, or European political authorities?

1 regional 2 national 3 European 8 dk 9 na

⁸ see www.euromanifestos.de. In a second phase of the research project, the manifestos issued for the 2004 EP election will be content-analysed.

ments are coded twice. In order to replicate as close as possible the categories of the coding scheme in which the answers on the open-ended agenda question in the post-election voter survey were coded, these documents are additionally content-analysed in a computer-assisted manner.⁹ The categories of the coding scheme for the computer-assisted content analysis match those of the post-election survey. Dictionaries have been developed in the different languages of the EU member-countries which link text units (i.e. words or combinations of words) to those categories (or sub-categories thereof). The computer-assisted part of the procedure is the act of counting those text units. As a result, the proportion of text units that are falling in each of the predefined categories is determined, which is then taken to indicate the relative emphasis that a party puts on the different issue categories.¹⁰

5. Findings

5.1. The agenda of EU citizens

If European citizens are asked to think about the pressing political problems, most of them come up with employment and the fight against unemployment. One in two respondents names unemployment as the most important problem. All other issues are far behind. Among those “other”, that is: less pressing problems, law and order is the most prominent, followed by general economic issues. Welfare state topics, like health care and pensions (and a bit further down education) come next, followed by immigration and taxation.

It serves no purpose to enumerate all the issues mentioned by the respondents of the EES’99 surveys (see Table 1). However, what is important in this context is the rank and relative importance of “European” issues. It is very clear that European constitutional issues are of minor importance to EU citizens. Merely four percent of the respondents mention problems associated with the European Union, the Euro, and the process of European integration in general. It is no exaggeration to say that “Europe”, in the eyes of European citizens, is among the least important of the less important problems. Or, to put it more precisely: is a problem only for very few of them.

⁹ This is done with the Textpack programme developed and supported by ZUMA, Mannheim.

¹⁰ Note that this is only one of a number of different ways to use computers in content-analysing textual information. Another way that was recently proposed by Laver et al. (2003) is the computerised comparison of the frequency of text units in known and unknown or “virgin” documents.

Table 1
EU Citizens' Most Important Political Problem
 (figures are ranks and percentages)

problem	rank	%
(un)employment	1	50,8
law & order	2	5,3
economy in general	3	4,5
health care	4	4,0
pensions	5	2,5
migration	6	2,5
taxes	7	2,3
education	8	2,1
Kosovo	9	2,0
drugs	10	1,8
social conflicts	11	1,7
peace & war	12	1,7
norms & values	13	1,6
environment	14	1,5
EU in general	15	1,5
minorities	16	1,4
Euro	17	1,3
European integration	18	1,0
other		10,5

Source: European Election Study 1999 post-election surveys; data are weighted.
 N=11075.

These few could concentrate in specific party electorates, so that “European” issues could be very prominent among the voters of one party but not among those of the others. They could also concentrate among the non-voters which would characterise abstention in European Parliament elections as a demonstration of EU opposition and discontent. But again, there is not much evidence in the data which would support such claims. Non-voters are hardly more concerned about Europe than voters are (Table 2). This confirms the findings of earlier research which has demonstrated that the low turnout levels in European Parliament elections is not caused by a presumed Euro-scepticism among non-voters (Schmitt and Mannheimer 1991; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Schmitt and van der Eijk 2003; see, however, Blondel, Sinnott and Svenson 1998 with a contrary view).

With regard to party electorates, we do find plausible differences in issue priorities. Socialists are even more concerned about unemployment than the average voter is. Voters of Christ-democratic and conservative parties care somewhat more about the economy. Unemployment for liberals is clearly less of a problem than it is for others, while they put some more empha-

sis on law and order, migration, and the Kosovo conflict. And green voters emphasise the problems of pollution and environment protection. If it comes to European issues, though, there is again not much of a difference. Green voters probably see even less of a problem with “Europe” than the voter on average. Those who voted for a member-party of the two big European party federations – the socialist PES and the Christ-democratic/conservative EPP – state those problems somewhat less often than average, while liberal and other parties voters mention them somewhat more often.

Table 2
Do the Agendas of Party Electorates Differ?
 (only “most important problems” that ought to be solved
 on the European level; figures are column percentages)

most important problem	EU party federation / EP group					all voters	non- voters
	socialist	conser- vative	liberal	green	other		
(un-)employment	57	48	28	44	51	45	37
economy in general	3	7	8	2	6	5	6
Kosovo	5	5	10	7	5	5	5
law & order	3	4	7	4	4	4	6
peace & war	4	3	3	1	3	4	4
migration	1	4	7	1	3	4	4
drugs	2	3	2		3	3	3
environment	2	1	5	12	2	3	3
health care	2	2	1	1	2	3	3
social conflicts	2	1		4	3	2	3
taxes	1	2	2	1	1	2	3
pensions	2	4	1	2	0	2	2
minorities	1	2	1	5	1	2	2
education	2	1	4	2	1	2	2
<i>EU in general</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Euro</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>		<i>3</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>
food policy	2	3	3	2	0	2	1
norms & values	1	1	1	2	1	1	1
foreign policy	2	1	2	2	1	1	1
<i>European integration</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>		<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>
budget	1	0		3		0	0
corruption & fraud		0	1	2	0	0	0
energy	1			2		0	0
<i>three « European » categories together</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>

Source: European Election Study 1999, post-election surveys; data are weighted. N=4542. Note that “no entry” means that none of our respondents mentioned the issue, while “0” means that less than 1 percent of them mentioned it.

Most EU citizens have no problem with the EU and European integration. This is so among non-voters and voters, among socialists and conservatives. Liberals are a bit different, but just a bit: they seem to be taking European matters somewhat more seriously. But the difference is hardly important. Does that mean that voters do not care about European politics? This would have to be our conclusion if we would concentrate on Europe as a series of constitutional issues. But, as we have argued before, there is more to it. European issues are also about “normal” politics. Do citizens realise the policy reach of the European layer of the multi-level system of governance in the European Union? And if they do, are they happy with it, or do they want to cut it back? These are the questions which we will address next.

5.2. Who is and who should be in charge of dealing with the most important problem?

Over the past fifty years, the European Union has become a powerful legislator. In a range of 28 important policy areas from such diverse fields as economic policy, social and industrial policy, legal and constitutional policy and international relations and external security, about every second legislative act originates at the European level of the multi-level political system of the EU (Hooghe and Marks 2000, Table A1.1). This far-reaching policy scope of the European level of governance is probably not fully recognised by the citizens of the Union. This is not to say, however, that EU citizens were unaware of the growing policy making competences of the Union. Every fourth thinks that the EU is in charge of the problem he or she regards as most important; half of them believe that the nation-state is in charge; and for the remaining quarter, sub-national levels of governance are in charge (Table 3).

What becomes evident as well is that the proportion of EU citizens that wishes the EU were in charge of solving their problem is somewhat larger (34%) than the proportion that believes the EU is already in charge (27%). While this is not a dramatic difference, it should be noted that on balance the increase for “Europe” comes at the expense of the nation-state. By and large, people trust in the problem solving capacity of the European level of governance and want to increase its competences, while they want to reduce the powers of the national level of governance. While these findings do not easily square with the current debate about Euroscepticism (Taggart and Sczerbiak 2004), they nicely replicate results of the 1994 European Election Study (see Schmitt and Scheuer 1996; de Winter and Swyngedouw 1999).

Table 3
Most Important Problem: Perceived and Preferred Level of Government
 (figures are percentages)

perceived level of problem solution	preferred level of problem solution			
	region	nation	Europe	all
region	10	7	6	23
nation	10	28	12	50
Europe	5	6	16	27
all	25	41	34	100

Source: European Election Study 1999, post-election surveys. Data are weighted.
 N=10176.

We take another look at the issue agenda of EU citizens, this time sorted by their the preferred level of governance. Which problems do citizens allocate to the European level, is there a pattern? There are two tendencies to be observed. One has to do with the scope of a problem. People prefer Europe to deal with problems that clearly transcend national borders. This is the case with international conflicts like the Kosovo war, and peace and war more generally, but also with the protection of the environment, with drugs, and with migration. Absolute (bold) or relative majorities (*italics*) of respondents considering one of these problems as most important (plus social conflicts?) want the EU to be in charge of it. Conversely, majorities of people who consider problems with a clear domestic scope as most important – examples are taxes, pensions, education, and law and order – prefer the nation state to be responsible (Table 4).

There is an additional tendency born out by the data, however. It seems that the more important issues are – to put it more precisely: the more citizens consider them most important – the less they tend to be allocated at the EU level of governance by majorities of respondents. Unemployment and general economic issues are perhaps good examples. Without a doubt, these are central issues for most EU citizens. Moreover, these problems are arguably of a trans-national nature. And yet they are allocated to the national level of governance by majorities of respondents.

Table 4
Most Important Problems and Preferred Level of Problem Solution
 (figures are row percentages and n of cases)

Problem	Europe	nation	region	N
Kosovo	84	13	3	224
peace & war	72	25	3	188
environment	54	28	18	171
drugs	46	26	28	202
migration	45	45	10	279
social conflicts	41	33	26	192
economy in general	40	48	12	497
taxes	31	52	17	257
(un-) employment	31	39	30	5625
pensions	31	48	21	275
education	28	36	36	235
norms & values	27	44	29	178
law & order	26	41	33	589
health care	21	41	38	446

Source: European Election Study 1999 post-election surveys; data are weighted.

If we try to summarise what we have come up with on the voters side, there are three points to be made. One is that “European” issues in the constitutional sense of the term are salient only to very few voters. No matter whether they stayed home on election day or went to vote, and disregarding which party they supported, EU citizens have not much of a problem with Europe. This does not mean, second, that EU institutions and authorities are ignored: a sizeable proportion of citizens believes that the most important problem they can think of is currently dealt with by the EU, and an even greater number wants the EU to take responsibility. This is mostly the case, third, for problems with a transnational character and also for less important problems.

5.3. The issues that EU parties emphasise

We move on to the agenda of political parties. What issues do they emphasise in their election manifestos? The first impression from the findings of our computer-assisted coding of the contents of the election manifestos issued by the four EU party federations is that they are less heavily biased on one dominant topic. While voters are overwhelmed by the unemployment problem, parties take a more balanced perspective by talking about all the other important things in EU politics as well. Actually, they talk more about most of the other important things than about unemployment: what is paramount for a majority of voters comes in on 11th

place (on the average) on the parties side, which is somewhere in the remote midfield (Table 5).

Table 5
The Issue Emphasis of European Party Federations
(figures are percent)

	socialist PES	conser- vative EPP	liberal ELDR	green EFGP	average
EU in general *	19	23	22	13	19
economy in general \$	9	5	5	5	6
European integration *	6	6	6	3	5
environment	3	3	3	11	5
minorities	7	4	4	5	5
EU institutions *	4	3	7	4	4
parties & political conflicts	3	5	5	4	4
competition policy \$	3	5	4	3	4
democracy	4	2	4	5	4
welfare state	3	6	2	4	4
(un-) employment \$	5	2	4	3	3
foreign policy	4	2	3	4	3
social conflicts	3	4	1	2	2
law & order	2	3	2	2	2
peace & war	1	3	2	3	2
culture	3	4	1	1	2
norms & values	2	4	1	0	2
all three “economic” [\$] categories taken together	17	12	13	11	13
all three “European” [*] categories taken together	29	32	35	20	29
N of codes	593	202	906	772	

Source: The *Euromanifesto* Project. The distributions are generated by a computer-assisted coding (using the *Textpack* programme) of the party federation manifestos. The English language dictionary is applied. A total of 2473 “meaningful” codes have been identified in the four texts and assigned to the different categories. A synopsis of the German and English dictionary which links the different text units to meaning units is available from the homepage of the project: <http://www.euromanifestos.de>.

The reader might wonder whether this central difference between voters’ and parties’ agenda should be attributed to the differing nature of the data sources that we compare rather than to a defective process of political representation in the European Union. Let us be clear about that. The kind of open ended agenda question on the “most important problem” that we analyse on the voters’ side gives respondents just one shot, one problem to mention as their most important one. Parties in their electoral manifestos can do much more, and it is therefore easy for them to appear more nuanced, more fine-graded than the citizenry as we can portray it with our survey findings. The question is, then, whether the methodological worry is justified,

whether we are presenting artefacts? Our answer is no. True, it is indeed difficult to imagine that a political party would spend half of its manifesto text on one paramount issue, and be it such an important one as unemployment. This is just not how those documents are designed. But parties could talk at length about the economy, about the problems there are to secure full employment, and about what the Union and its Parliament could and should do to promote growth and create jobs. This is not what we find in their electoral platforms, however. The economy, broadly defined, is a clear runner-up in the manifestos of European party federations. First comes “Europe” – “EU institutions”, “European integration”, and a broad “EU in general” category which includes treaty and constitutional issues as well as EU legislative instruments in addition to mentions of EU as a level of governance and mentions of EU member countries. Most of these categories and subcategories refer to Europe in terms of constitutional politics. While voters hardly perceive there a problem, this is what parties talk most about. It is much more important to them than it is to their voters.

5.4. Issue congruence between voters and parties

Let us move on and consider the question of issue congruence in some more detail. In contrast to spatial models of issue voting, issue congruence will be measured as the relative fit between voters’ and parties’ agendas. We will do that by confronting the “top ten” issues of both voters and parties, identify the number of “common” issues, and compare the relative emphasis that voters and parties put on them.

The degree of congruence between socialist voters and the election manifesto of the Party of European Socialists (PES) is displayed in Table 6a. If we look “bottom up” and start with voters’ central concerns, we find a remarkable discrepancy between their agenda and the one of the party. The “most important problems” of 82 percent of socialist voters are covered in their “top ten” list, while the party devotes only 20 percent of its document to those issues. Things look somewhat less alarming from a top down perspective: 64 percent of the party document deal with the problems of 67 percent of the voter of the party. The two lists of the “top ten” issues have three categories in common: unemployment, the economy in general, and the environment.

Table 6a
Issue Congruence: The PES and Its Voters
 (figures are percent and percentage differences)

“top ten” voters	voters	party	Δ	“top ten” party	party	voters	Δ
<i>(un-) employment</i>	57	5	52	EU in general	19	1	18
Kosovo	5	0	5	<i>economy in general</i>	9	3	6
peace & war	4	1	3	minorities	7	1	6
<i>economy in general</i>	3	9	6	European integration	6	1	5
law & order	3	2	1	<i>(un-) employment</i>	5	57	52
health care	2	0	2	EU institutions	4	0	4
<i>environment</i>	2	3	1	democracy	4	0	4
pensions	2	0	2	foreign policy	4	2	2
food policy	2	0	2	<i>environment</i>	3	2	2
drugs	2	0	2	competition policy	3	0	3
all	82	20	62	all	64	67	3

Source: *European Election Study 1999* post-election surveys and the *Euromanifesto* project. Note that party and voters have three common issues in their respective “top ten” list (printed in *italics*).

Table 6b
Issue Congruence: The EPP and Its Voters
 (figures are percent and percentage differences)

“top ten” voters	voters	party	Δ	“top ten” party	party	voters	Δ
(un-) employment	48	2	46	EU in general	23	1	22
<i>economy in general</i>	7	5	2	European integration	6	1	5
Kosovo	5	1	4	<i>welfare state</i>	6	0	6
migration	4	2	2	<i>economy in general</i>	5	7	2
<i>pensions</i>	4	0	4	parties & pol conflict	5	1	4
law & order	4	3	1	competition policy	5	0	5
peace & war	3	3	0	social conflicts	4	1	3
food policy	3	0	3	norms & values	4	1	3
drugs	3	0	3	minorities	4	2	2
<i>health care</i>	2	0	2	culture	4	0	4
all	83	16	67	all	66	14	52

Source: *European Election Study 1999* post-election surveys and the *Euromanifesto* project. Note that party and voters have two common issue in their respective “top ten” list (printed in *italics*).

This meagre fit is again found between the election manifesto of the European Peoples Party (EPP) and voters of the member-parties of that federation. The congruence is actually even worse in this case, mainly because unemployment does not make it to the “top ten” categories of the EPP manifesto. There are only two issue categories which the two “shortlists” have in common: general economic concerns and arguments, and those referring to the welfare state (on the party side) and pensions and health care (on the side of the voters; see Table 6b).

We move on to the liberal and the green party and their respective electorates. It appears that the fit between the issues that these parties emphasise and the political concerns of their voters is somewhat tighter than it is for the socialist and for the conservative party. Starting with the liberal ELDR, the voters “top ten” issues comprise the concerns 78 percent of liberal voters; the party dedicates a remarkable 40 percent of its manifesto to this issues (Table 6-c). Seen from the party’s perspective, 63 percent of the manifesto text talks about the “top ten” issues, which 22 percent of the liberal voters mention as one of their most important political problem. Liberal voters and the ELDR have three common issues in their respective “top ten” list: the economy, the environment, and the EU.

The political problems that Green voters worry about and the content of the Euromanifesto of the European Federation of Green Parties (EFGP) are again somewhat closer than what we found for the socialist and conservative party dyad (Table 6-d). Voters’ “top ten” issues, mentioned by 85 percent of them, are referred to in 33 percent of the manifesto text. Conversely, the party’s “top ten” – covering 58 percent of the manifesto content – is referred to by 66 percent of the voters. Moreover, green voters and the EFGP have a record number of five common issues in their respective “top ten” list: unemployment, the environment, minorities, the economy, and foreign policy.

We should not overrate this relative closeness of the two smaller parties with their voters. If it comes to the issues that parties emphasise in European Parliament elections, and the ones that voters care about, it is certainly no exaggeration to say the two are worlds apart. This becomes obvious if we move on from these more descriptive accounts to a systematic analysis of the similarity of voters’ and parties’ political agendas. This can be done using Duncan’s dissimilarity index D. D-values have a range between 0 and 100, where 0 means that two identical

Table 6c
Issue Congruence: The ELDR and Its Voters
 (figures are percent and percentage differences)

“top ten” voters	voters	party	Δ	“top ten” party	party	voters	Δ
(un-) employment	28	2	26	<i>EU in general</i>	22	3	19
Kosovo	10	1	9	EU institutions	7	0	7
<i>economy in general</i>	8	5	3	European integration	6	3	3
law & order	7	2	5	<i>economy in general</i>	5	8	3
migration	7	2	5	parties & pol conflict	5	0	5
<i>environment</i>	5	3	2	minorities	4	1	3
education	4	1	3	democracy	4	0	4
peace & war	3	2	1	competition policy	4	0	4
food policy	3	0	3	<i>environment</i>	3	5	2
<i>EU in general</i>	3	22	19	foreign policy	3	2	1
all	78	40	38	all	63	22	41

Source: *European Election Study 1999* post-election surveys and the *Euromanifesto* project. Note that party and voters have three common issues in their respective “top ten” list (printed in *italics*).

Table 6d
Issue Congruence: The EFGP and Its Voters
 (figures are percent and percentage differences)

“top ten” voters	voters	party	Δ	“top ten” party	party	voters	Δ
(un-) employment	44	3	41	EU in general	13	1	12
<i>environment</i>	12	11	1	<i>environment</i>	11	12	1
Kosovo	7	0	7	<i>economy in general</i>	5	2	3
<i>minorities</i>	5	5	0	<i>minorities</i>	5	5	0
law & order	4	2	2	democracy	5	0	5
social conflicts	4	2	2	welfare state	4	0	4
budget	3	1	2	parties & pol conflict	4	0	4
<i>economy in general</i>	2	5	3	EU institutions	4	0	4
corruption and fraud	2	0	2	<i>foreign policy</i>	4	2	2
<i>foreign policy</i>	2	4	2	(un-) employment	3	44	41
all	85	33	52	all	58	66	12

Source: *European Election Study 1999* post-election surveys and the *Euromanifesto* project. Note that party and voters have five common issues in their respective “top ten” list (printed in *italics*).

distributions are compared, while 100 means that two totally dissimilar distributions are compared.¹¹ D-values have been calculated for all possible pairs of voter agendas, of party agendas, and for each voter-party-dyad.

Table 7 displays the results of this exercise. The basic message is that parties talk about things that voters hardly care about. To give an example: the political agendas of the 1999 electorate of the socialist PES and its 1999 election manifesto differ at D=71. The conservative manifesto and the concerns of those who voted for it are equally dissimilar. The equivalent figure for the liberal and the green party dyad is D=63. These values need to be evaluated in perspective: the agendas of socialist and conservative voters differ at only D=16, those of socialist and liberal voters at D=38, etc. The same goes for the parties side: the socialist platform is farthest apart from that of the Greens, and yet are the two distributions dissimilar at only D=28.

Table 7
Dissimilarity of Voters and Parties “European” Agendas
(figures are Duncan’s dissimilarity index values)

	socialist	conservative	liberal	green
socialist	71	<i>16</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>28</i>
conservative	<u>24</u>	71	<i>32</i>	<i>29</i>
liberal	<u>21</u>	<u>22</u>	63	<i>41</i>
green	<u>28</u>	<u>35</u>	<u>26</u>	63

Source: Table 2, Table 5, and Tables 6a-6d plus additional information. The numbers in the diagonal of the table (**bold**) are Duncan dissimilarity index values comparing voters and parties agendas; numbers above the diagonal (*italics*) compare the agendas of different electorates; numbers below the diagonal (underlined) compare the contents of agendas of different parties.

¹¹ Duncan’s index of dissimilarity is defined as

$$D = 0.5 * \sum |A_i/X - B_i/Y|$$

where A and B are groups of observations that are distributed over i categories, and X and Y is the sum of observations in the respective group.

6. Some first tentative conclusions

Voters care about mundane problems, unemployment, the poor performance of the economy more generally, the environment, and so on. The “technicalities” of the European Union are not among them. This is not to say that voters are ignorant if it comes to European politics. They perceive “Europe” to be in charge of quite a number of important political problems, and they want on average an increase of the political competences of the Union rather than to take things back to the nation-state or sub-national levels of governance. Europe is salient to them as a political actor, not as an institutional or constitutional challenge.

Parties approach Europe in a different way. In their Euromanifestos, they are talking a lot about the European Union and its institutions, less about the substance of political problems that voters care about. This is why the agendas of voters and parties do not match very well. Voters agree with other voters about the important problems more than they do agree with the party they have supported in the recent election. The same holds true for the parties. The contents of the manifestos of the different party federations are more similar to one another than they are to the agendas of their voters.

All this may mean different things. One explanation of these grave differences between voters and the party they have voted for could be methodological. We have therefore considered the danger of an artefact which could result from the different character of empirical data that are compared. And while we cannot rule out that some of our discrepancies have a methodological explanation, we are confident that this is not the real story.

The real story, it seems to us, is that European party federations and voters talk past one another. The parties are preoccupied with their European visions, while voters have a much more instrumental and less visionary and farsighted perspective at it.

One reason for this stark discrepancy could be that we started our analyses with the manifestos of the European party federations. Maybe the platforms of national parties are closer to the concerns of the voters. But this is something that further research will need to address.

7. Literature

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