

Having a Say or Getting Your Way? Political Choice and Satisfaction with Democracy

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Abstract

Citizen satisfaction with democracy is greater when parties offer choices that are congruent with voter preferences. But are citizens content with simply having a party that represents their views or does their satisfaction depend on whether that party can also be instrumental in implementing policies? We argue that instrumentality moderates the effect of ideological congruence on democratic satisfaction. Combining an analysis of cross-national survey data with an experimental conjoint design, we find that citizens able to vote for a congruent party with a chance of entering government are more satisfied with democracy, whereas congruence without instrumentality has no such effect.

Key words: Political choice, satisfaction with democracy, congruence, instrumentality

****Published in *European Journal of Political Research*****

Introduction

Democracy is about political choice. A core assumption in much of the literature on political representation is that the quality of democracy is greater when citizens have a party or a candidate that represents their views, and when the system offers policies that are proximate to the mean voter position (Downs, 1957; Huber and Powell, 1994; Powell, 2000; Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson, 2002). Empirical studies have also shown that citizen satisfaction with democracy is enhanced by ideological congruence between citizens and parties in power (Kim, 2009; Curini, Jou and Memoli, 2012; Dahlberg and Holmberg, 2014; Brandenburg and Johns, 2014; Mayne and Hakhverdian, 2017). But despite considerable academic attention to democratic satisfaction, we know less about whether citizens are content with simply having a party that represents their views, or if their satisfaction depends on that party having a realistic chance of influencing policy outcomes. In this article, we contribute to the literature by demonstrating that the effect of congruence on satisfaction with democracy is conditioned by instrumentality.

Our argument builds on the notion that there are two key elements to political choice that, in combination, shape attitudes to democracy: the *intrinsic* and the *instrumental* value of choice. We posit that while citizens may intrinsically value the availability of a political choice that represents their preferences, this will only translate into satisfaction with the democratic system if that choice is also instrumental, and citizens thus realistic chance of influencing policy through their choice (Sen, 1988; Przeworski, 2003; Hamlin and Jennings, 2011). It follows that citizen satisfaction with democracy depends not only on congruence, that is the availability of a specific alternative that matches an individual's preferences, but also on instrumentality, that is the potential to cause policy outcomes (e.g. through office-holding).

We test this proposition by combining an analysis of cross-national survey data with an experimental conjoint design. First, we analyse survey data from the Comparative System of Electoral Systems (CSES) with data from 81 elections held across 27 European countries between 1996 and 2016. This data allows us to examine how variation in perceptions of choice at the individual-level, conditioned by the instrumental nature of that choice, shape

satisfaction with democracy. Yet, observational data alone makes it difficult to establish the causal effect of the two components of choice on satisfaction with democracy. Hence, in a second step we run a conjoint analysis to experimentally study the conditioning effect on instrumentality on the relationship between ideological congruence and satisfaction with democracy.

This article contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the importance of considering how citizens care about not only the availability of parties that represents their views, but also about their ability to change policies, and by testing this in an innovative way using a combination of multi-level cross-national data and an experimental approach. In line with our expectations, we find that the effect of congruence on satisfaction with democracy is conditioned by the instrumentality of that choice: citizens able to vote for an ideologically congruent party that also has a good chance of implementing policies in government are more satisfied with democracy, whereas a congruent choice without instrumentality has no similar effect. These findings have potentially broader implications for the study of contemporary electoral politics, as they imply that the rise of challenger parties may increase the congruence of choices available to citizens without enhancing greater satisfaction with democracy.

How political choice shapes attitudes towards democracy

Political choice is seen as crucial to democracy and lies at the heart of what distinguishes democratic systems from non-democratic ones. The concept of political choice concerns the ability of voters to choose between candidates or parties with distinct positions on issues that are salient to voters. In most systems, political parties play a key role in offering choice to citizens: they organize politics and channel societal conflict into institutionalized patterns of political competition in ways that serve to reveal and aggregate voters' preferences such that governments can represent its citizens (Pitkin, 1967; Dahl, 1973). The extent to which a party system can provide a range of political choices to citizens that match their preferences thus has profound normative implications (Dahl, 1965; Mair, 2000; Powell, 2000; Przeworski, 2003). Importantly, we also expect that the nature of choice offered by a system to shape how

satisfied citizens are with democracy.

Satisfaction with democracy itself is a complex - and sometimes contested - concept, yet few would question the importance of what it seeks to measure. Situated between support for the government of the day and democracy as a form of government, the concept taps into the extent to which citizens are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country- in practice - at a particular point in time. It measures 'system support at a low level of generalization. It does not refer to democracy as a set of norms but to the functioning of democracy' (Anderson and Guillory, 1997, p.70). Low levels of satisfaction with democracy can threaten the legitimacy of a political system. Moreover, higher levels of satisfaction with democracy have been shown to have a positive effect on subjective happiness and life satisfaction more broadly (Orviska, Caplanova and Hudson, 2014).

While many factors can influence people's satisfaction with democracy, we focus on political choice, specifically the intrinsic and the instrumental value of choice. A core strand of theoretical literature focuses on the importance of the intrinsic value of choice, based on the individual agency that choice allows (Sen, 1988). In a political context, this means that there is a value of simply being able to express a political opinion. This choice becomes meaningful when voters have the opportunity to choose a party that represents their views, since doing so enables them to express their preferences, and thereby enter them into the public realm (Hamlin and Jennings, 2011; Harding, 2011). In spatial terms, the intrinsic value of choice can be thought of as congruence, that is, the ability to make a choice that matches individual preferences. The importance of congruence to the quality of democracy is a core idea of much of the theoretical and empirical work on democratic representation. According to the Downsian proximity theory, utility is maximized by having a choice that is ideologically congruent (Downs, 1957), and the congruence between party positions and the preferences of the median voter is seen as a critical measure of political representation (Huber and Powell, 1994; Powell, 2000). This has received support in the empirical literature, which has shown that satisfaction with democracy is higher among individuals when there is a party that represents their views (Harding, 2011), and with greater proximity between voters' ideology and the positions of parties (Curini, Jou and Memoli, 2012; Dahlberg and Holmberg, 2014; Brandenburg and Johns, 2014; Mayne and Hakhverdian, 2017; Dassonneville and McAllister,

2019), greater issue priority congruence between parties and voters (Reher, 2015), and greater diversity of party choice (Ezrow and Xezonakis, 2011; Harding, 2011).

However, while ideological congruence clearly matters to voters, we argue that people do not value political choice only due to its intrinsic value, but also due to the desired outcome that choice can bring about, namely its instrumental value (Sen, 1988). According to the instrumental view, political choice is valuable because it permits citizens to choose a party or candidate with a specific platform that serve their interests and which can be implemented in office (Downs, 1957; Sartori, 1976; Sen, 1988). In other words, political choice matters because it allows citizens to elect governments that can change policy outcomes in ways that are consistent with their preferences.¹ It may be argued that in democracies, voters do not in fact cause outcomes directly, since no policy outcome is ever the result of an individual act of voting. However, while it is not case that a single vote leads to policy change as such, the ability to choose between a set of distinct political platforms that, in turn, leads to the formation of an executive and the implementation of a specific political program does enable citizens to see an indirect link between their democratic choice and policy outcomes. If we accept that democratic choices have the potential to lead to instrumental change that also implies that some choices are associated with greater potential of causing changes. The notion of instrumentality is also related to the idea of substantive representation, namely that the policies governments develop reflect public opinion (Mansbridge, 2003; Powell, 2000). Going back to Downs, the reason why ideological proximity (congruence) maximizes utility is not due to the value derived simply from choosing a party with similar preferences, but rather because of the policy outcomes that this would produce. In the Downsian model of elections, the value derived from being able to choose an ideological proximal party is about instrumentality linked to having that party in office. This model refers to a two-party system where voters care about the “difference between the utility” of the two parties in power (Downs, 1957, 40). Yet, a similar logic can be found in multiparty systems, where congruence

¹ Another strand of work has also considered as instrumental those cases in which voters opt for a political option that has little chances of winning, but with the goal of moving another party’s policy position (Adams et al., 2006), e.g. when a social democratic voter chooses a communist party in order to move the policy position of the Social Democrats to the left. However, in this article we use to the most common understanding of instrumentality, namely the ability to directly affect policy change.

to a party brings utility to a voter through the expected impact on policy (e.g. in a coalition government). We thus argue that the effect of congruence on satisfaction with democracy is inherently conditioned by the instrumentality of that choice.

While the existing literature does not test this proposition directly, a number of studies have examined the direct effect of instrumentality on satisfaction with democracy by analysing difference between the attitudes of election “winners” and “losers”. The key finding is that people on the losing side in an electoral competition have lower levels of satisfaction with the system than do those on the winning side (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Norris, 1999; Anderson and Tverdova, 2001; Bowler and Donovan, 2002; Anderson et al., 2005; Singh, 2014). This is a very important finding, but it also raises the question of whether it is the fact of winning itself that brings satisfaction or the fact that a party that shares your preferences has the power to achieve certain policy goals (Blais and Gélinau, 2007; Singh, Karakoç and Blais, 2012). Equally, it raises the question of why voters who opt for losing options have lower levels of satisfaction with democracy: it might be because their political preference has no instrumental power, or because they do not have a congruent option and were forced to vote for a non-congruent choice. Recent work goes some way towards addressing these questions. For example, a study by Blais, Morin-Chassé and Singh, (2017) employ a measure of satisfaction immediately before and after elections to show that changes are attributable to election outcomes. Moreover, several studies go beyond the binary distinction between winners and losers to look at the effect the past history of winning and losing (see Anderson et al. 2005; Curini et al. 2012) and distinguish between voters’ first and second choice candidates (Singh 2014). They show that satisfaction in democracy is higher for people who have a greater stake in the victory and for those with recent experiences of winning.

In this article, we seek to extend this work by explicitly focusing on the intrinsic and instrumental nature of the choice voters face in elections. First, rather than focusing on the effect of congruence or instrumentality in isolation, our study integrates both of them into a coherent framework by analysing how instrumentality moderates the effect of congruent choice on democratic satisfaction. That is, the importance of being able to vote for a party that shares your preferences and has a chance of influencing policy outcomes. Second, we broaden

the notion of instrumentality beyond the question of being on the winning side in a single election and consider an instrumental choice as one that occurs when an ideologically congruent party has a realistic chance of influencing government policy in the short-to-medium term. In other words, we argue that citizen attitudes towards democracy are about more than simply being on the “winning team”, but about being part of a democratic system that has the potential to offer instrumental choice in this or future elections (rather than one which makes you a “repeated loser”).

In summary, our expectation is that ideological proximity (congruence) leads to greater satisfaction with democracy when it is accompanied by instrumentality, i.e. the possibility that this choice may influence executive formation.

H: Greater closeness to a party that offers instrumental choice increases satisfaction with democracy, whereas closeness to a party that does not offer instrumental choice does not increase satisfaction.

To test this hypothesis, we develop our empirical analyses in two stages. First, we make use of a number of unique features of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) that combines post-electoral surveys from democracies across the world in a single dataset. Second, we rely on an experimental design, a conjoint analysis, that enables us to assess the causal effect of multiple treatment components - which capture congruence and instrumentality in different ways - on satisfaction with democracy.

Multi-level study of satisfaction with democracy

The CSES allows us to measure our dependent and independent variables at the individual level in a wide range of different party systems. Respondents are asked to indicate how satisfied they are with the democratic process. They are also asked to place themselves as well as up to nine political parties on the left-right ideological spectrum on a scale from 0 to 10, allowing us to measure congruence. To adequately assess the impact of instrumental choice, i.e. the extent to which citizens value having a choice option which has a chance to directly influence policy as part of the government, we combine the CSES with additional information

on all parties' history of holding office. Another advantage is that the CSES enables us to examine the impact of different electoral contexts with different choice sets, both across countries and over time. To make sure the systems under investigation are nonetheless comparable, especially when it comes to the electoral salience of the left-right dimension of politics, we include just the European countries in the dataset. Overall, the dataset contains data for around 100,000 individuals from 81 elections in 27 European countries for the time period, 1996-2016.²

In order to assess how satisfied citizens are with the democratic process in general in their country, the CSES survey contains the following classic question item: 'On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in [country]?'³ We recode the variable so that 1 denotes 'not at all satisfied' and 4 'very satisfied', so higher values indicate more satisfaction.⁴ As mentioned above, our approach distinguishes between two components of democratic choice: congruence and instrumentality. First, following the classic approach in proximity models of voting, we measure ideological closeness on the dominant dimension of contestation in Europe, namely the left-right dimension (McDonald and Budge, 2005; Mair, 2007). We thus operationalize congruence as the distance of the respondent to the party closest to her in spatial terms. We choose this operationalization as we are not interested in the effect of vote choice per se, but rather in the availability of ideologically proximate parties and the conditional effect of the potential for policy influence (instrumentality) on such proximity. In order to identify the closest party, we adopt the spatial approach and calculate the distance of the respondents' self-placements to each party they place on the left-right spectrum and then identify the smallest absolute distance. We take the negative of this distance so that larger values indicate greater congruence. As a robustness check, we also use an alternative measure which

² The countries included are: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Rumania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Sweden.

³ This standard item is widely used in the literature on satisfaction with democracy (see Anderson and Guillory (1997); Blais and Gélinau (2007)).

⁴ Some election studies and modules also include a neutral middle category. For these countries, we recoded the middle category as 'not very satisfied'. The results are identical when we count the middle category as 'fairly satisfied'.

calculates the distance using expert party placement of parties (see below).

Second, we measure the conditioning effect of instrumentality by assessing whether being close to a party, which has a high chance of influencing policy as a government party, has a different effect on satisfaction with democracy than being close to a party which is less likely to have a direct impact on policy. To measure different degrees of instrumentality, we distinguish between government parties and opposition parties to capture the effect of having a congruent party with the ability to implement in policies in office. In addition to this traditional distinction between government and opposition parties, we also adopt the approach of recent studies in the party competition literature and distinguish between mainstream opposition parties and challenger parties (Van de Wardt et al. 2014; Hobolt and Tilley, 2016; De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Mainstream opposition parties have formed part of a government in the past and have a reasonable chance of doing so again in the future, thus also offering - at least potentially- an instrumental choice option, albeit not as immediately as government parties. Challenger parties, in contrast, have no government experience (or a maximum of one term in office) and thus have a lower degree of instrumentality.⁵ The advantages of this measure of challenger parties is based on government experience is that it directly taps into a core feature of instrumentality, namely the (in)ability to influence policy outcomes. In practice, the operationalization overlaps with other classifications of challenger or niche parties based on ideology or party family (Adams et al. 2006; Meguid 2008) and challenger parties are more often found on the extreme of the ideological spectrum as well as among single issue and, historically, Green parties.⁶ By examining how the effect of congruence varies across government, opposition and challenger parties, we are not simply capturing the satisfaction that voters may derive from being on the 'winning side', i.e. by voting for a party that enters government, but also the effect of being close to a party that has a realistic chance of entering government in the short- to medium term. We calculate the negative of the distance to the closest government party, mainstream opposition and

⁵ We are interested in measuring the likelihood of a party having a direct influence on policy by forming part of the government rather than indirectly through influencing other parties, as holding office is a clearer signal to voters about instrumental power. A full list of parties coded as challengers can be found in the supplemental information (SI J).

⁶ See also Adams et al. (2006).

challenger party respectively, analogous to the congruence measure described above. This approach also means that we are able to include all citizens in our analysis and not just voters.

In the observational part of the analysis, we thus examine how the entire range of political choices influence satisfaction with democracy, for both voters and non-voters. Our analysis captures how the perceived availability of choice options, with varying degrees of congruence and instrumentality, help shape a respondent's satisfaction with democracy. Our expectation is that the availability of a congruent choice option has a positive effect on satisfaction with democracy that varies with the level of instrumentality of that choice. Equally, the lack of a congruent and instrumental choice is likely to lead to lower satisfaction with democracy, also among abstainers. Hence, this first part of the analysis focuses on the effect of the choice set on satisfaction with democracy, rather than the effect of vote choice per se. In the conjoint analysis, we are able to fully randomize the attributes of the candidates, and this allows us to also examine the effect of the chosen candidate on satisfaction with democracy in an experimental setting.

In addition to the main variables of interest, all of our models control for a number of socio-demographic characteristics at the individual level that have been shown to be correlated with satisfaction of democracy, namely income, education, political knowledge, gender as well as the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP), GDP growth, GDP per capita and the unemployment level. We include these control variables as they could potentially confound the relationship between congruence, instrumentality and satisfaction with democracy. Further information and descriptive statistics is given in the Supplemental Information (SI Section B, Table SI2). We use multiple imputation to deal with missing data. To account for the structure of the data, we fit multilevel models with random intercepts at the level of individual elections for each country. We treat the 'satisfaction with democracy' response variable as continuous and fit linear multilevel models (we run several robustness checks, which can be found in the SI).

To reiterate, our expectation is that voters are more satisfied with democracy the closer they are to a specific party, but this effect is conditional upon the instrumentality of this party - the

extent to which it is likely to be able to influence policy. The results are shown in Table 1. Model 1 includes the variable congruence, that is, the distance of the respondent to the party closest to her in spatial terms. Models 2-4 include, one by one, the effect of congruence conditioned by the instrumentality of the party and Model 5 include all of them in the same model.⁷

We find that a one unit increase in congruence to the closest party leads to a 0.04 increase in satisfaction with democracy (Table 1, Model 1). Citizens thus clearly value having a congruent choice option in line with proximity theory. This is in line with much of the extant literature and confirms what Mayne and Hakhverdian (2017) call the effect of 'egocentric congruence' on satisfaction with democracy (Kim, 2009; Curini, Jou and Memoli, 2012; Dahlberg and Holmberg, 2014). Our results for the socio-demographic control variables are also in line with findings in the extant literature. We find that older citizens are somewhat less satisfied with democracy, whereas the highly educated, the politically well-informed and those on higher incomes are more satisfied, as are those living a country with a higher GDP per capita and with strong economic growth.

However, the key question examined in this paper is whether the effect of congruence is conditioned by the instrumentality of the choice. As expected, we find that the effect of the ideological proximity to the closest party depends on that party's instrumentality. The marginal effects of a one unit increase in the distance to the closest government party, mainstream opposition and challenger party on satisfaction with democracy are shown in Figure 1 (estimates are based on Table 1, Model 5). The figure shows that the marginal effect of a one unit increase in congruence to a government party is associated with 0.04 increase in satisfaction with democracy. The same increase in congruence to the closest opposition party results in a 0.02 increase in satisfaction with democracy. All effects are significant at the 0.01 level. By contrast, the effect of closeness to a challenger party (a party which has not been in government more than once) has a negative effect on satisfaction with democracy.

⁷ The number of groups varies between models as not all country elections included a mainstream opposition as well as a challenger party.

Table 1: The effect of choice on satisfaction with democracy

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Congruence	0.04*				
	(0.01)				
Gov. party congruence		0.03*			0.04*
		(0.01)			(0.01)
Opp. party congruence			0.02*		0.02*
			(0.01)		(0.01)
Challenger party congruence				-0.01*	-0.02*
				(0.01)	(0.01)
Age	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Gender	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Education	0.01*	0.01*	0.01*	0.01*	0.01*
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Income	0.03*	0.03*	0.03*	0.03*	0.03*
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Pol. knowledge	0.04*	0.04*	0.05*	0.05*	0.05*
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.00)
ENEP	-0.02	-0.03	-0.02	-0.03	-0.03
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
GDP Growth	0.03*	0.03*	0.03*	0.03*	0.03*
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
GDP per Capita	0.00*	0.00*	0.00*	0.00*	0.00*
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Unemployment	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Constant	2.33*	2.39*	2.34*	2.25*	2.39*
	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.14)	(0.14)
Random Effects					
Constant	0.24	0.24	0.24	0.24	0.25
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)
Residuals	0.70	0.69	0.70	0.69	0.69
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Number of groups	81	81	77	77	73
Observations	103525	102468	95768	93957	86617

* $p < .05$

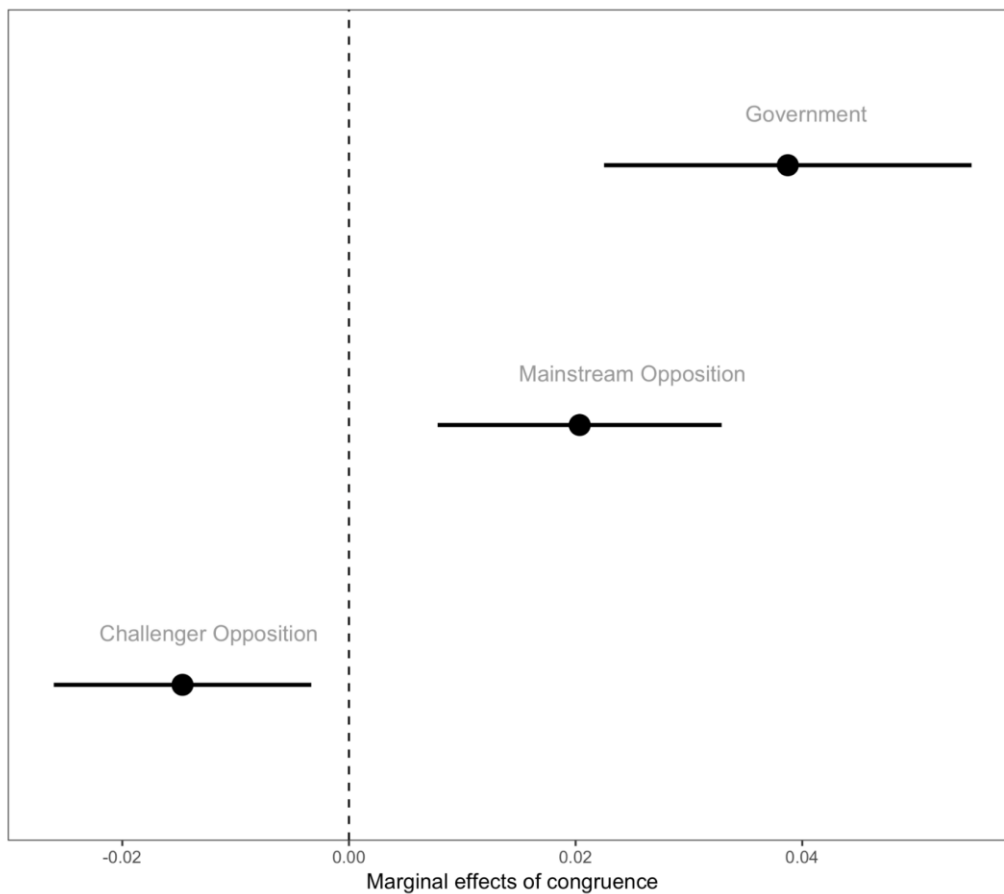
Note: Table 1 shows the impact of explanatory variables on satisfaction with democracy. Multilevel linear regression with random intercepts at the level of country elections. Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses.

To put the substantive size of the effects into context, an increase in congruence to the closest

government party from -4 to -1 is associated with a 4 per cent increase in satisfaction with democracy, equivalent to a change in GDP growth of one standard deviation from the mean, of 4 per cent. The same increase in congruence to the closest mainstream opposition party has a smaller effect of a 3 per cent increase in satisfaction, equivalent in size to the effect of a positive change in GDP growth of 2.5 per cent. Finally, an increase in congruence of the same magnitude to the closest challenger party is associated with a 2 per cent decrease in satisfaction, equivalent to a decrease in GDP growth of 1.5 per cent. It thus becomes clear that the effect of congruence on satisfaction with democracy is not trivial; and that the magnitude of this effect varies significantly at different levels of instrumentality. Indeed, satisfaction with democracy is not enhanced by being close to a party with very little change of entering government.⁸ Of course, this might also have to do with the fact that challenger parties often express vocal opposition to established political institutions, which might reinforce the negative feelings towards the democratic system among individuals close to them (Anderson and Just, 2013). To complement the observational study, we have therefore designed a conjoint experiment that allows us to examine the causal effect of variation in political choice by randomizing the instrumental and ideological attributes of parties. Before presenting the conjoint analysis, however, we discuss the robustness of these observational results.

⁸ Our results also hold if we exclude the two parties with the lowest vote share (included in the survey) in the previous election.

Figure 1: The effect of congruence at different levels of instrumentality



Note: This plot shows the marginal effects of a one unit increase in congruence to the closest government party, mainstream opposition party, and challenger opposition. Estimates are based on the multilevel model included in Table 1 (Model 5). Whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals.

Robustness checks

In order to assess the robustness of our results, we employ various alternative operationalizations and estimation strategies, which can be found in the Supplemental Information (SI).

First, we examine the robustness of the effect of congruence on satisfaction with democracy. To address the concern that the effect of congruence may be driven by satisfied citizens who place parties closer to their own ideological position, we estimate our models with an alternative operationalization of congruence using the expert placements of parties included in the CSES instead of voters' self-placement. We calculate the distance of the voters' self-placement to the closest party overall, the closest mainstream and the closest challenger party

based on expert placements (SI Section C, Table SI3). We find a highly significant effect for congruence to a government party, as hypothesized, on satisfaction with democracy, but not for closeness to a mainstream opposition or challenger party.

We also examine the possibility that ideological extremity of respondents might explain part of the observed congruence effect. Respondents, who place themselves on the extremes, are less likely to have a party close to them than those placing themselves in the centre. We thus run an additional set of models in which we include an indicator variable who place themselves on the extremes (1 and 2 as well as 9 and 10) of the ideological scale. The results remain identical (SI section I, Table SI11).⁹ Moreover, we examine whether the results are driven by the act of voting for the closest party, however, we do not find a substantial difference between those who voted for the closest party and those who did not (SI Section, K Table SI13).

Second, we examine the robustness of our operationalization of instrumentality using alternative operationalizations of parties with high levels of policy influence. More concretely, we calculate the ideological distance to parties that have never been in government, and those that have been in government one or more than once. As it is shown in the SI (Section C, Table SI4), using this alternative operationalization of challenger parties does not change our main results. We also explore whether parties that make it into the parliament have greater influence compared to those that do not get any seat (see van der Meer and Kerns 2019). Indeed, the results show that, controlling for the ideological proximity, citizens who vote for a party that does not get a seat are less satisfied with democracy than those who vote for a party represented in parliament (SI Section J, Table SI12).

Another related concern is that the effect of congruence on satisfaction with democracy is capturing the satisfaction with being on the ‘winning side’ rather than satisfaction with instrumental choice. As discussed, the empirical literature has shown that citizens who voted

⁹ In general, the average levels of satisfaction with democracy are very similar across the ideological scale.

for a winning party are generally more satisfied with democracy (e.g. Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Anderson et al., 2005). To rule that our findings are driven by being on the 'winning team', we run additional models where we control for the effect of winning by including a dummy indicating whether the respondent voted for a government party. Our results for this specification are very similar to the results presented above (SI Section H, Table SI9). To further explore the relationship between winning an election and our operationalization of instrumentality, we run two additional robustness models (Table SI10). The first model distinguishes between respondents who voted for a party in the opposition, an opposition party supporting the government party, a junior coalition party, a senior coalition party or a single-party government. Results show that, all else equal, respondents who voted for a junior coalition party are less satisfied with democracy than those that supported a senior coalition party. In addition, if we consider an interaction between ideological proximity and voting for a junior/senior coalition partner, we once again observe that voting for a junior coalition party has a negative effect on satisfaction with democracy compared to voting for a senior coalition party, even if both options are spatially equally close to respondents. This supports the logic of our argument: the greater the instrumentality of a congruent choice, the higher the satisfaction with democracy.

Third, we use a number of alternative estimations strategies. We treat 'satisfaction with democracy' as a dichotomous instead of a continuous variable and fit a logistic regression model, grouping 'not at all satisfied' and 'not very satisfied' as well as 'fairly satisfied' and 'very satisfied', again with almost identical results (SI Section D, Table SI5). We also run an ordered logistic regression with very similar results (Section E, Table SI6). We run all models with fixed effects at the level of individual country-elections and find substantially identical results (SI Section F, Table SI7). Finally, we run a robustness check holding the number of observations constant across all models by only including respondents which placed each type of party (government, mainstream opposition, challenger). Again, the results are substantially similar to the main model (SI Section L, Table SI14).

Conjoint analysis of satisfaction with democracy

The robustness checks presented above provide additional support for our main argument that the instrumentality of choice conditions the effect of congruence on satisfaction with democracy. Nonetheless, cross-sectional observational data, such as the CSES, makes it difficult to identify the causal nature of the relationship. To examine the causal effect of the political choice on satisfaction with democracy, we therefore present the results from a conjoint experiment. In a conjoint study, participants are shown a series of vignettes that vary according to a determined set of characteristics of the candidates, with combinations of features randomly varied and this enables research to identify and estimate the causal effects of many treatment components simultaneously (Hainmueller et al. 2013; Leeper et al. 2020). This design complements the cross-national study by addressing three potential weaknesses in the observational analysis.

First, evidence has shown that individuals tend to shorten the perceived ideological distance between themselves and parties they favour (projection effect) and exaggerate the distance to parties for which they do not intend to vote (contrast effect) (Merrill, Grofman and Adams, 2001). By exogenously changing parties' policy position in the experiment, we are able to circumvent both problems. Second, a conjoint design also allows us to capture multiple dimensions of instrumentality. In the previous observational part, we captured instrumentality by assessing the moderating effect of congruence with government parties, mainstream opposition parties and challenger parties on satisfaction with democracy. Yet, these party types are, of course, also associated with different characteristics other than simply their propensity to be in government. In the experimental setting we exogenously alter instrumentality along several dimensions (including likelihood of entering government), which provides a more fine-grained test of the exogenous effect of instrumentality on satisfaction with democracy. Third, we can address the concern in the observational analysis that challenger parties are likely to attract support from disaffected citizens and reinforce such attitudes. Since these features of parties are randomly varied in the experiment, the exogenous effects of instrumental characteristics, and their interaction with congruence, can be assessed in the conjoint design.

All in all, an experimental design is a suitable complement to the previous observational approach as it allows testing the conditional effect of instrumentality on congruent choice in a controlled and multi-dimensional setting, albeit in just one country. Moreover, it helps us to causally examine how the choice set – the supply side of electoral politics – affects people’s satisfaction with democracy.

To enhance the credibility and external validity of the survey experiment, it was fielded during the campaign of the UK General Election of 2017. It was embedded in an online survey that was conducted in May 2017 in the UK by well-established polling organization YouGov. The survey was sent to a sample of the YouGov panel (1 million British adults) of 1,936 respondents, representative of the British population in terms of age, gender, social class, education and vote choice. Moreover, YouGov uses reweighting methods to ensure that the data reflects the entire population. In the Appendix, we show that our sample is indeed very similar to nationally representative population-based samples¹⁰ (see also Mullinix et al 2015).

The conjoint experiment was designed to assess how candidates’ intrinsic (ideological) and instrumental attributes affect voters’ satisfaction with democracy.¹¹ Respondents were presented with two generically labelled candidates who were characterized by eight dimensions. For each dimension there were several possible attributes. We asked respondents to choose between the two candidates. After making a choice, respondents had to answer the following question: “If these were the candidates you could choose between in a General Election, how satisfied would you be with democracy in Britain?”. Just as in the CSES surveys, the possible answers ranged from “Not at all satisfied” to “Very satisfied”.¹² Each respondent

¹⁰ The Appendix N provides further details as well as several robustness checks.

¹¹ It is not our claim that candidate’s ideology and instrumentality are the only dimensions that matter for vote choice. Our design simply focuses on the effect of congruence conditioned by instrumentality, but does not rule out the possibility that other factors might drive voting patterns.

¹² Our question primes respondents to think about candidates and elections when evaluating the functioning of democracy. This represents a difference with the observational part that should be taken into account when interpreting the results. Moreover, our design is slightly different from many other conjoint experiments in which researchers estimate attitudes or choices that can be expressed through the ranking or the rating of alternatives. Instead, our estimates are based on the characteristics of the choice set. However, the random configuration of each conjoint table still enables us to estimate the causal effect of choice attributes on satisfaction with democracy.

repeated this task six times. The eight dimensions and their attributes are described in Table 2. As in the observational part, our main indicator for congruence is the similarity between the citizens and the candidate's ideological position. It ranges from extreme left to extreme right and will allow us to examine whether the effect of congruence is conditional upon instrumentality. To make it more realistic, we also included two additional dimensions that were salient during the election campaign: the candidate's immigration position and the candidate's position in the EU membership referendum.

Table 2: Conjoint design: Attributes and attribute levels

Attributes	Attribute Levels
Candidate's ideological position	Extreme Left, Left, Centre, Right, Extreme Right
Candidate's immigration position	Immigration should be reduced a lot, Immigration should be reduced a little, Immigration should remain the same as it is, Immigration should be increased a little, Immigration should be increased a lot
The candidate campaigned for	Leaving the European Union, Remaining in the European Union
Candidate's chances of being elected to Parliament	Very unlikely, Unlikely, Unknown. The race is competitive, Likely, Very likely
Candidate's party is likely to...	Be in the opposition, Form a single-party, Form a coalition majority government with another party
The candidate is likely to become...	A member of the opposition, A junior minister in the government, A senior minister in the government
Gender	Male, Female
Ethnicity	White British, Asian British, Black British

Following the logic implemented in the observational part, the conjoint set up also captures the degree of the candidate's instrumentality. Thus, the conjoint table included three additional attributes: the first instrumentality attribute corresponds to the candidate's chances of being elected to parliament.¹³ This is important as a voting for a losing candidate in a first-

¹³ Previous works have traditionally conceptualized instrumentality as unidimensional. For example,

past-the-post system is likely to be considered a wasted vote from a purely instrumental perspective. The second instrumentality indicator relates closely to the observational analysis as it measures whether the candidate's party will be in the opposition or form a government (and, in turn, whether the cabinet will be a single-party government or a coalition). Finally, we complement the observational definition of instrumentality by also capturing the candidate's influence in the cabinet (as a senior or junior minister). The attributes of gender and ethnicity were also included to make the choice more realistic and to offer a baseline level against which the rest of the attributes can be compared.¹⁴

Which attribute is most important in driving individual's satisfaction with democracy? As Figure SI17 in the Appendix shows, respondents care about both instrumentality and ideological attributes. As expected, people feel most satisfied with the system when presented with a candidate with similar ideology (see also Figure SI19 in the Appendix). For instance, when left-wing respondents are facing a choice between right-leaning candidates, their satisfaction with democracy decreases by 0.4 point, as compared to a choice set composed of two left-leaning candidates. Our findings also confirm that instrumentality considerations matter to individuals in their evaluation of the state of democracy. When the race is competitive or the candidate is likely to be elected to Parliament, satisfaction with democracy is significantly higher than when there is little chance of the candidate being elected.

Our main interest, however, lies in testing whether the effect of congruence on satisfaction with democracy is conditional upon instrumentality. Does having a close party increase individual satisfaction with democracy, regardless of the party's level of instrumentality? Or does instrumentality moderate the effect of congruence? We hypothesized that being confronted with congruent choices will only have a positive effect on satisfaction with

they have operationalized instrumentality as the candidate's chances of being elected to Parliament or, in a lab setting, as the individual's probability of being pivotal (Cox, 1997; Hamlin and Jennings, 2011; Wiese and Jong-A-Pin, 2017)

¹⁴ There are only a few UK parliamentary candidates that are Asian British or Black British. Therefore, we constrained the randomization so that these categories only appear one sixth of the times. We opted for a fully randomized conjoint design for two reasons: First, coming up with a substantive or theoretical justification for their inclusion/exclusion was out of the scope of the article and, ultimately, could have introduced bias in the results. Second, we follow Leeper et al.'s (2020) approach, which recommend the use of an unconstrained design to ease the interpretation of the coefficients.

democracy if accompanied by the capacity to make changes.

Similar to the observational analysis, we consider a congruent choice one where respondents choose a candidate that shares the same ideological positioning on the left-right dimension.¹⁵ To capture different levels of instrumentality, we computed an additive index of the three instrumentality indicators. It ranges from 1, which corresponds to a situation in which the candidate is very unlikely to be elected and, if elected, very likely to be in the opposition,¹⁶ to 8, which occurs for candidates that are very likely to be elected, form a single-party majority government and become a senior minister in the government. We took these two end-points as indicators for low and high instrumentality, respectively.¹⁷

The importance of the conditional effect of instrumentality on the relationship between congruence and satisfaction with democracy is summarized in Figure 2, which plots the predicted level of satisfaction with democracy with congruent and non-congruent choices at low and high levels of instrumentality. Figure 2 thus compares the predicted satisfaction with democracy across the different levels of instrumentality among individuals that opted for either congruent or non-congruent candidate. Voting for a candidate with the same policy position as one's own and with high levels of instrumentality results in high levels of satisfaction with democracy. In contrast, those respondents who opted for a congruent candidate whose instrumentality was low report a significantly lower satisfaction with democracy. In substantive terms, an individual's satisfaction with democracy decreases on

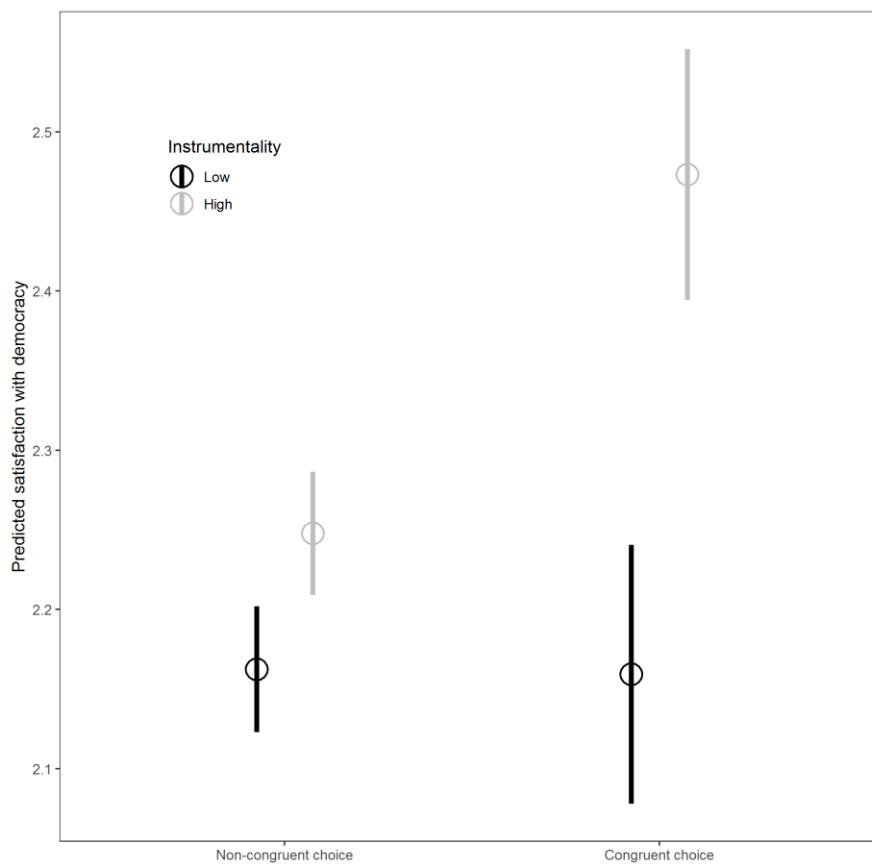
¹⁵ Due to the random distribution of attributes in a conjoint, 63.7% of the scenarios display two candidates with a different ideological category than the respondent's ideological position. Yet, as a robustness check, even if we restricted the analysis to those cases in which at least one of the candidates shares the same ideological position as the respondent, results are robust. In these cases, about 70% of the respondents choose a candidate with the same ideological position than their own. When we analyse choice sets that offer at least one candidate with the same ideological platform than the respondent's, results are still robust.

¹⁶ The conjoint choice design presented to respondents framed the different attributes as probabilities and, therefore, it was possible for a candidate to have a very low probability of being elected and, at the same time, a very high probability of being a member of the cabinet. In addition, some candidates' characteristics, such as a candidate that wants to increase immigration a lot, might have been considered as unrealistic by some respondents. Thus, we ran several robustness checks in order to see whether some plausible unrealistic combinations affect our results (see Figure SI21 in the Appendix).

¹⁷ When we employ the full scale, results also show the conditional effect between instrumentality and congruence. See Figure SI120 in the Appendix.

average 0.3 points when the level of instrumentality goes from its minimum to its maximum. Interestingly, satisfaction with democracy among individuals who cast a congruent but a low-instrumental vote is as low as voters opting for a non-congruent and low-instrumental choice. Finally, Figure 2 also shows that, among those casting a non-congruent vote, satisfaction with democracy is significantly higher when the level of instrumentality is high.

Figure 2: Predicted satisfaction with democracy across different levels of instrumentality by congruent versus non-congruent choices

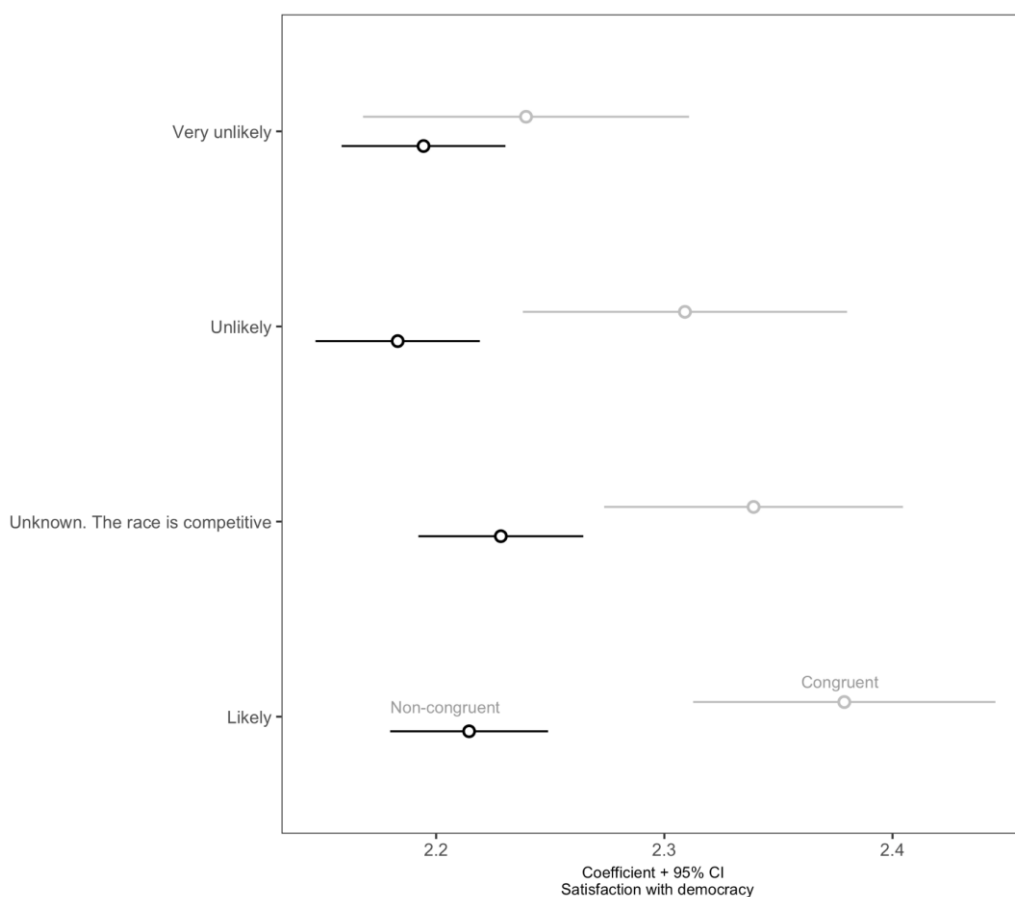


Note: This plot shows estimates of voting for an ideologically congruent vs non-congruent choice on satisfaction with democracy when the chosen candidate has low or high levels of instrumentality. Estimates are based on the regression estimators with clustered standard errors; bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Congruence is a dummy variable that captures whether respondent voted a candidate with his/her own ideological position or otherwise. Low instrumentality candidates are those that are very unlikely to be elected, and, if so, they are likely to be in the opposition.

Next, we unpack the instrumentality index and test whether the same logic applies when we separately analyse the conditional effect of each indicator of instrumentality on the relationship between congruence and satisfaction with democracy. These instrumental

indicators act as moderator variables; the interaction coefficients are obtained by multiplying the congruence dummy and the instrumentality attributes. Figures 3-5 report the effect of these attributes across the different congruence categories. Figure 3 shows the effect of the chances of being elected on satisfaction with democracy, comparing congruent and non-congruent choices. As the figure illustrates, congruence makes no significant difference when the candidates have no chance of being elected, the difference only arises when the candidate is likely to be elected to parliament and we see much higher levels of satisfaction for those participants who have a congruent choice (on average, on a 1 to 4 scale, satisfaction with democracy is 0.2 points larger).

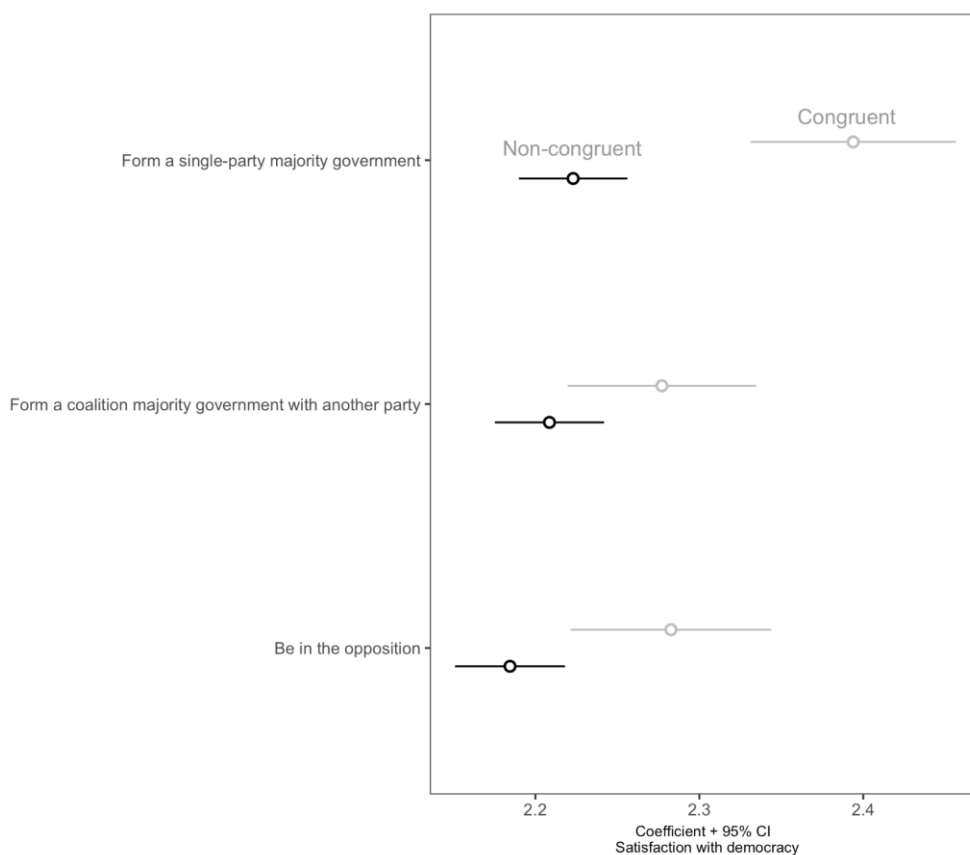
Figure 3: The effect of the chances of candidate being elected for congruent versus non-congruent choices



Note: This figure shows estimates of the effect of the candidate's chances of being elected on satisfaction with democracy across congruent and non-congruent choices. Estimates are based on the regression estimators with clustered standard errors; whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals. Congruence is a dummy variable that captures whether respondent voted a candidate with his/her own ideological position or not.

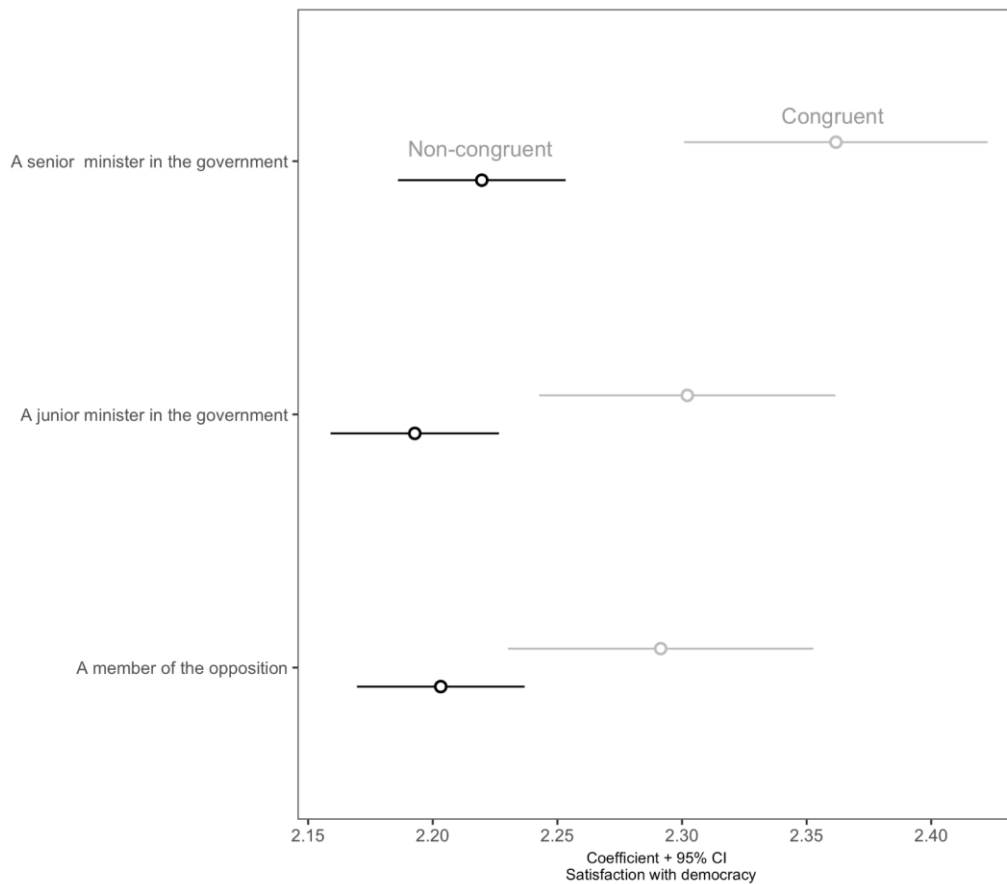
Figure 4 tells a similar story. Satisfaction with democracy is higher when participants choose a congruent candidate whose party is able to form a single-party majority government. Respondents that choose a candidate likely to be in the opposition, but with an identical congruent ideological position, report significantly lower levels of satisfaction with democracy. Along the same lines, Figure 5 shows that congruence has a positive effect on satisfaction with democracy, but that this is conditioned by whether the candidate is likely to be influential, for instance when s/he is likely to become a senior minister in the government.

Figure 4: The effect of government prospects for congruent versus non-congruent choices



Note: This figure shows estimates of the effect of the candidate's party's government status on satisfaction with democracy for congruent and non-congruent choices. Estimates are based on the regression estimators with clustered standard errors; whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals. Congruence is a dummy variable defined that captures whether respondent voted a candidate with his/her own ideological position or not.

Figure 5: The effect of ministerial prospects for congruent versus non-congruent choices



Note: This figure shows estimates of the effect of the government status of the candidate's party on satisfaction with democracy across congruent and non-congruent choices. Estimates are based on the regression estimators with clustered standard errors; whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals. Congruence is a dummy variable defined that captures whether respondent voted a candidate with his/her own ideological position or otherwise.

While the observational and the experimental components of our empirical strategy rely on slightly different operationalizations of congruence and satisfaction with democracy, they complement each other and allows us to assess a more complete picture of the effect on congruence and instrumentality on satisfaction with democracy. The observational study using CSES data focuses on the underlying choice set and congruence in a spatial context, controlling for a number of potential confounders such as political knowledge and education, and thus the latent congruence of the voters to the closest party in the political system. In the conjoint analysis, we focus on the act of voting as such, by presenting respondents with choice options that are exogenously and randomly varied along dimensions of congruence and instrumentality. Thus, the fact that the two parts of the analysis operationalize congruence

differently arguably provides for a more robust assessment of the effect of congruence and instrumentality on satisfaction with democracy. We test the effect of congruence and instrumentality both as latent characteristics of a party system and as revealed preference and trade-off in a forced choice scenario. As described above, both test show very similar results, highlighting the robustness of our argument and providing further evidence that it is important to consider both congruence and instrumentality when assessing the effect of political choice on satisfaction with democracy.

Conclusion

Citizen satisfaction with democracy is crucial to the stability of democratic regimes and to the engagement and political efficacy of individual citizens. There is a large and significant literature seeking to explain why some people feel dissatisfied with democracy and others satisfied, and why some political systems facilitate greater regime support. The congruence between the ideological positions of parties and their voters is an important predictor of citizens' satisfaction with democracy (e.g. Kim, 2009; Brandenburg and Johns, 2014; Mayne and Hakhverdian, 2017). Moreover, winning elections, and even the legacy of winning, can boost citizens' satisfaction (e.g. Anderson et al. 2005; Curini et al. 2012). In this paper, we contribute to this literature by arguing that congruent political choice is not sufficient to ensure satisfaction with democracy. Ultimately, citizen satisfaction with democracy is only enhanced by systems that offer them choices that are both ideologically congruent and have the potential to cause policy change.

To test this argument, our paper combines a cross-national study and a conjoint experiment. First, our analysis of satisfaction with democracy in 81 elections and 27 countries, using CSES data, confirms the importance of the availability of a congruent choice on satisfaction with democracy: voters are more satisfied with the democratic process if they have a party which is close to their own ideological position. But this relationship is conditioned by the instrumentality of the congruent party: ideological congruence only has an effect on satisfaction with democracy, if that party has a realistic chance of influencing government formation. We also show that the conditioning effect of instrumentality is about more than

simply being on the ‘winning’ side in an election. Importantly, we complement this cross-national analysis with an innovative conjoint analysis that allows us to randomly vary the ideological and instrumental characteristic of candidates to test this moderating effect in a controlled experimental setting. The results from the conjoint experiment are strikingly similar to those that we found in survey data analysis, demonstrating that the impact of congruence on satisfaction with democracy depends on the instrumentality of the choice set.

Taken together, these findings have important implications for the literature on political representation. We show that congruence alone cannot explain why political choices make citizens are more or less satisfied with the functioning of democracy. It is critical to voters that their closest choice option has a reasonable chance of affecting political outcomes in their country. Our findings are especially pertinent in the context of the rise of populist challenger parties, particularly on the far right, in Europe over the last decade (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Such parties expand the choice set and produce more polarized and fragmented party politics. They offer congruent choices to voters who may not have felt adequately represented. However, because most challenger parties have little prospect of entering government and thus influencing policy, the findings in this paper suggests that the emergence of such parties are unlikely to make their supporters more satisfied with democracy. In the long run, they could instead contribute to a reduction in political efficacy. What happens to the supporters of such challenger parties when these parties do enter government? The findings of this study suggest that the ability to influence policy should increase satisfaction with democracy. Yet, further research is needed to establish whether the long-term effects on people’s satisfaction with democracy depend on what parties do when they are in office.

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