

A Blessing or Curse for Congruence?

How interest mobilization affects congruence between voters and elected representatives in the European News Media*

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Abstract. This paper analyses the role of interest mobilization in facilitating or weakening congruence between Members of the European Parliament (MEP) and public opinion in their home country. It argues that the relationship between public opinion, interest groups and elected politicians can be theorized as a selective transmission process. Rather than all or only certain types of interest groups transmitting public preference to MEPs, we expect that what matters for the ability of groups to affect congruence between their voters and policy-makers is whether they interact with policy-makers with whom the groups are ideologically aligned. To test our theoretical expectations, the analysis relies on a large scale content analysis of a dataset of 4,375 statements made in eight European news media outlets on a sample of 13 EU policy issues. In line with expectations, our results show that MEPs are more congruent with their voters when the interest group community mobilizing on an issue converges with their support base. Hence, we find that the positions of MEPs from leftist parties are more congruent with left-wing voters when civil society mobilizes, while the presence of corporate lobby groups strengthens congruence between rightist MEPs and their voters.

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Introduction

A crucial element of political representation in any democracy is that elected representatives act in line with the preferences of the public (Dahl, 1973: 1-2). The most classic democratic control mechanisms to ensure congruence between the positions of voters and elected representatives are free and fair elections (Stimson et al., 1995; Wlezien, 1995). Between elections, political parties are expected to mediate between citizens and elites. Yet, in an age of electoral volatility and diminishing party membership political parties face severe difficulties in performing this mediating role (Whiteley, 2011; Mair, 2008; Schmitter, 2001). An alternative, but largely underestimated mechanism through which representation works are advocacy groups (Rasmussen et al., 2014; Burstein, 2003). Advocacy groups consist of movements and organizations with a political interest and which are external to the political system, ranging from NGOs, social movements and labor unions to corporate lobby groups (Baroni et al., 2014; Beyers et al., 2008). Where traditional channels of representation fail, advocacy groups thrive. They can become active on very specific or technical issues, their agendas are largely autonomous from party political cleavages and they can easily maneuver outside the purview of public scrutiny (Culpepper, 2010; Beyers et al., 2015).

On the one hand, advocacy groups may be a blessing for congruence. They can inform elected representatives about the grievances and political preferences of citizens on specific policy issues and strengthen correspondence between the views of citizens and policy makers (De Bruycker, 2015; Kollman, 1998; Rasmussen et al., 2014; Bevan and Rasmussen, 2017). On the other hand, they may be a curse. After all, advocacy groups represent specific segments of society or minority views, which makes it doubtful whether they can adequately perform a transmission belt function between the public and elected politicians (Giger and Klüver, 2016; Culpepper, 2010; Flöthe and Rasmussen, 2019). As a result, our paper examines whether and under which conditions the mobilization of advocacy groups facilitates or weakens congruence between citizens and the claims made by elected representatives from the European Parliament in the news media. In this way we add to a sparse US-

dominated literature that has systematically examined the ability for groups to act as a transmission belt between the public and policy-makers (see e.g. Giger and Klüver, 2016; Bevan and Rasmussen, 2017; Gray et al., 2004; Lax and Phillips, 2012; Gilens, 2012; Klüver and Pickup, 2019).

Drawing from pluralist theory, interest groups are often said to perform a ‘transmission belt’ function, maintaining close contacts with both citizens and elected representatives (Rasmussen et al., 2014; Berkhout et al., 2017). This paper goes beyond the transmission belt metaphor by theorizing the interplay between public opinion, interest groups and elected politicians as a selective transmission process. We argue that interest groups selectively transmit the preferences of specific segments of citizens rather than the majority position of the public as a whole. Elected politicians, for their part, are also selective in that they devote their efforts to issues which their voters care about and are more inclined to seek congruence with the segments of society that endorse their own policy views and ideology. Interest groups, we argue, will therefore primarily be able to serve as a transmission belt for their constituents when they interact with elected representatives who share their ideological views. Drawing from this perspective, we expect that claims from rightist politicians are more congruent with their voters when business organizations dominate policy debates, while leftist politicians will be more likely to agree with their constituents when civil society accounts for a large share of the groups mobilized.

While the democratic legitimacy of the EU is widely contested (Follesdal and Hix, 2006), recent studies have found some evidence that EU public policy and Council decisions respond to public opinion (Toshkov, 2011; Bølstad, 2015; Hagemann et al., 2017; Wratil, 2017; Alexandrova et al., 2016). Although representation in the European Parliament is considered quintessential to EU democracy, little empirical research has focused on the role of MEPs in articulating the policy preferences of European citizens (but see Arnold and Sapir, 2013; Walczak and Van der Brug, 2013; Costello et al., 2012). Moreover, the ability of groups to act as a transmission belt has not been examined in this political system. This paper addresses this lacuna by focusing on congruence

between MEPs and their national electorate. In line with research about politicization and the European public sphere, this article takes as a starting point that the news media provide a forum for MEPs to signal to citizens that their voices are being heard or disregarded. The news media connect different EU policymakers, stakeholders, and citizens, allowing for interaction and exchange (Koopmans and Erbe, 2004; Trenz, 2004; De Bruycker, 2017; Gattermann and Vasilopoulou, 2015). Moreover, it has been argued that political competition is to an increasing degree taking place in the “public sphere” rather than in “the smoke-filled backrooms of parliamentary committee and the central offices of parties and associations” (Kriesi, 2009: 154). The article’s empirical focus therefore lies on claim-making by MEPs in the news media and whether these claims comply with public demands in their home country.

Our predictions are tested using a new dataset including information about public opinion and public claims making by MEPs and interest groups in the media on 13 specific policy issues. The issues were polled from Eurobarometer surveys between January 1, 2012, and December 31, 2014 in 28 EU member states and for each issue we are able to estimate public opinion for right and left-wing voters in the MEPs’ country of origin. Based on a large-scale content analysis of coverage in eight European news media outlets on the issues, we analyze a dataset 4,375 media statements articulated by political elites.

Rather than finding that interest groups either act as a blessing or curse for congruence, the empirical results corroborate our expectations about selective transmission. We show that the media claims of MEPs from leftist party groups are more likely to agree with left-wing voters, the stronger civil society organizations dominate interest representation. The public claims of MEPs affiliated with rightist party groups, in contrast, are more congruent with rightist voters, the stronger the representation of business lobbyists on the policy issues in the media.

Congruence and Selective Transmission

By looking at the incentives of MEPs to act as representatives for their voters and promote their interests in media debates, we are ultimately interested in what Pitkin (1967) referred to as “substantive representation”. To examine how closely the positions of the voters and MEPs are aligned, we use the term “congruence”. Yet, rather than focusing on ideological congruence between citizens and their representatives on a left-right scale (e.g. Huber and Powell, 1994; Golder and Ferland, 2017; Costello et al., 2012), we look at the alignment of the positions of voters and MEPs on specific policy issues on concrete policy changes, such as the introduction of the banking union. Focusing on what Golder and Stramski (2010) have referred to as a ‘many-to-one relationships’, our analysis compares the cumulative support for these policy changes among (subsets of) voters to the positions of individual MEPs articulated in public claims. Our focus is on correspondence between left/right-wing voters and individual left/right-wing MEPs respectively, which we refer to as “Left-Right constituency congruence”. Yet we also present analyses of “general congruence”, which examine correspondence between the views of the general public and individual MEPs.

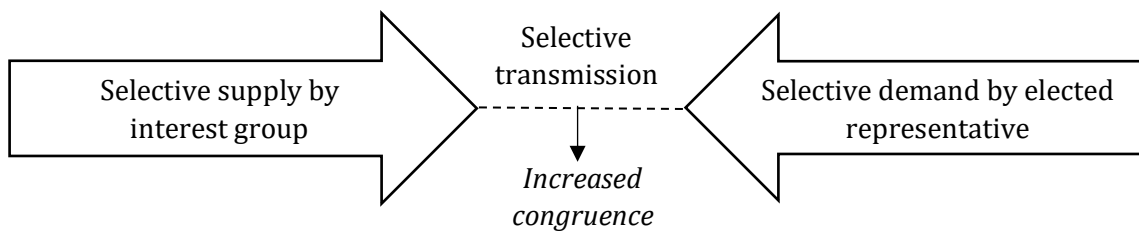
Scholarship on public opinion and interest groups typically relies on the ‘transmission belt’ metaphor to describe the relationship between interest organizations, public opinion and policymakers. The transmission belt function implies that interest groups can act as intermediaries between citizens and policymakers in contemporary liberal democracies distributing information and facilitating contacts between the two (Dahl, 1973; Rasmussen et al., 2014: 250; Berkhout et al., 2017: 1111). To date, only a sparse existing literature has examined the conditioning impact of group mobilization on the linkage between public opinion and policy-making. Most of the studies have focused on the US and have presented somewhat mixed evidence. Rather than arguing that interest group mobilization has a general effect on this relationship, it has for example been pointed out that there may be variation in the transmission capacities of different types of groups (Giger and Klüver, 2016; Klüver and Pickup, 2019), at different stages of the policy process (Bevan and Rasmussen,

2017) or over time (Gray et al., 2004). This paper further develops the transmission belt metaphor by proposing a theory of selective transmission. We argue that the ability of group mobilization to affect congruence between the positions of legislators and their voters is conditioned by the extent to which groups lobby legislators who prioritize the same issues and with whom they are ideologically aligned. In other words, rather than expecting that “all” or only “specific types of groups” (such as civil society organizations) affect opinion congruence between the public and policy-makers, we argue that the extent to which groups interact with certain types of policy-makers affects whether they can credibly help link policy-makers with the opinion of their potential voters. Two key assumptions form the corner stones of the theory. First, we argue that the majority of interest groups do not have an incentive or the capacity of signaling citizen preferences on a broad scope of policy issues. Rather than representing broad and diffuse constituencies, many interest groups specialize in their specific issue niche, and articulate the political preferences of their constituents for their specific area of expertise (Bernhagen and Trani, 2012; Baumgartner and Leech, 2001; Olson, 1965; Gray and Lowery, 1996). In other words, most interest groups provide relevant political information about the opinion of a subset of the public endorsing their political objectives on the issues in which they are specialized (Rasmussen and Reher, 2019). This has an impact on the interactions interest groups entertain with elected politicians and affect their ability to function as a transmission belt between citizens and policymakers.

Second, not only interest groups are selective in the issues for which they supply political support, also politicians carefully select the issues on which they devote their attention. When making claims in the media, elected representatives will try to prioritize issues for which they hold a positive track record and which fit into their ideological profile (Petrocik, 1996; Budge and Farlie, 1983; De Bruycker and Walgrave, 2013). We consider elected representatives as rational, purposeful actors that seek congruence with public opinion to cater to their voters and avoid electoral retribution (Downs, 1957; Giger and Klüver, 2016). However, elected representatives are scarce for

cues about what their voters want on specific policy issues (Bouwen, 2002; Chalmers, 2013). Interest groups can anticipate this scarcity by providing politicians with political information about these issues and acting as intermediaries between voters and parties outside election times and on the specific policy issues they care about (De Bruycker, 2015; Rasmussen et al., 2014). Especially in EU politics, public opinion cues are scarce, since electoral politics are second order and because the EU lacks a coherent public sphere through which citizens can articulate discontent (Van Aelst and Lefevere, 2012; Moravcsik and Katzenstein, 1998). Interest groups can respond to this scarcity by signaling to politicians to what extent their constituents and the broader public care about and support a specific policy issue.

Figure 1. Selective transmission of citizens' preferences on an issue



The two outlined assumptions are summarized in Figure 1 above. The left arrow denotes that interest groups are more likely to transmit information about the views of their constituents to certain policy-makers and the right arrow signifies that politicians usually demand information of a specific subset of the public, which aligns with their ideological views. This mechanism is denoted, *selective transmission*. According to this mechanism, interest mobilization can thus strengthen congruence, but mainly when a selected set of organized interests and politicians interact.

Hypotheses

While the selective transmission mechanism clarifies the role of interest groups in functioning as a transmission belt between citizens and politicians, it does not yet specify on which issues and on behalf of which segments of the public interest groups mobilize nor does it stipulates for which issues different politicians seek popular support. For this purpose we develop testable hypotheses drawing from the literature on interest groups and political party relations (Allern and Bale, 2012; Otjes and Rasmussen, 2017; De Bruycker, 2016; Verge, 2012). This literature is particularly suitable to provide both a theoretical and empirical understanding of which interest groups and political parties prioritize the same issues and share similar constituencies and thus ultimately between which politicians and interest groups a selective transmission process is likely to occur.

Considering the political space in which parties and interest groups can be situated, a left-right continuum would be an evident starting point. Conflicts in the European Parliament are driven by left-right rather than national or territorial controversies (Hix et al., 2005; 2006). Voters, for their part, are often not informed or even aware of EU policies and rely on the left-right continuum as a heuristic decision-making tool to position themselves on specific EU policy issues (Vasilopoulou and Gattermann, 2013: 609). Moreover, previous empirical studies have demonstrated that the political space of interest group and MEP alignment follows a unidimensional, left-right continuum (Beyers et al., 2015; De Bruycker, 2016). Not only elected representatives but also interest groups can be situated on either side of this dimension. A crude distinction can be drawn between civil society organizations and business groups. The former typically advocate for ideals and values in society and provide expressive benefits to their constituents who are diffusely distributed in society (Binderkrantz and Krøyer, 2011; Olson, 1965). Business interest organizations, on the other hand, represent special and economic segments of society, they create concentrated costs and benefits for their supporters or industries. Civil society groups and business interests are typically active on different issues (Wonka et al., 2018). Civil society organizations tend to mobilize on policy areas in

which their core values and ideals are addressed and which are relevant to their diffuse constituencies, such as the environment, health care, and consumer affairs (Bernhagen et al., 2015; Coen and Katsaitis, 2013). Business groups, in contrast, mobilize on (economic) issues that affect the industry or profession they advocate for, such as taxation, trade, and the internal market (Wonka et al., 2018).

Similarly, the issues elected representatives prioritize are linked to the political conflicts their parties promote and the constituencies they represent (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). The issues elected representatives care about and for which they aim at establishing a positive track record can be derived from the general ideological profile of their party. There is variation between issues in the level of attention from different types of groups and parties. Rightist parties generally pay more attention to issues dealing with economic policies and corporate affairs, which would typically attract business lobby groups. Leftist parties, on the other hand, tend to care more about issues situated in areas where civil society groups are active, such as health care, social affairs, the environment and consumer policy (McElroy and Benoit, 2007; Petrocik, 1996). Moreover, not only the salience of issues, but also the positions of parties and interest groups on these issues tend to correspond with the left-right continuum. Both rightist parties and business interests will for example typically strive for a slim state, economic liberty and a competitive economic environment, while NGOs and citizen groups share the concern of more leftist parties for redistribution and social equality (Beyers et al., 2015; Otjes and Rasmussen, 2017).

When we incorporate the former in our theory of selective transmission, we can expect that business groups are more likely to be in contact with rightist MEPs, while civil society groups tend to supply information to left-leaning MEPs. Groups themselves should have a stronger incentive to contact their allies and decision-makers can also be expected to more likely grant access to groups with whom they are ideologically aligned (Hall and Daerdorff, 2006; Beyers and Hanegraaff, 2017). In an environment where information about the preferences of citizens is scarce, we expect that

MEPs will be more congruent with their voters when the interest group community that converges with their respective support base mobilizes. More specifically, we expect that rightist MEPs use business mobilizations as heuristic cues to get information about what their constituents want. Leftists MEPs, in contrast, rely on cues provided by civil society mobilization to estimate what their support base wants. Both leftist and rightist politicians, will therefore be able to more accurately estimate what their constituents want if either civil society or business mobilizes respectively. We therefore expect that congruence between MEPs from rightist parties and rightist voters will increase the more business groups dominate media lobbying on an issue (H1) while congruence of MEPs from leftist parties and leftist voters will increase the higher the share of civil society organizations among the mobilized groups on an issue in the media (H2). In this way, we rather expect that the mobilization of different types of interest organizations, will improve congruence with public opinion for different subsets of elected representatives.

H1: MEPs from more rightist parties will be more congruent with their voters the more dominant business interests are in media lobbying on an issue

H2: MEPs from more leftist parties will be more congruent with their voters the more dominant civil society groups are in media lobbying on an issue

Research design

The starting point for the project is a sample of 41 issues drawn from Eurobarometer polls for which the fieldwork concluded between January 1, 2012, and December 31, 2014. In this study, an issue is operationalized as a *specific* policy topic for which the EU is at least partially competent. We included only questions that were surveyed in *all* EU member states and that could be connected to a specific policy. As an example, one of our issues involved the question of whether citizens agreed or opposed the introduction of a financial transaction tax. In addition, we considered only questions that pertained to the opinion of citizens in terms of agreement or disagreement about a specific policy

(for a similar approach, see Rasmussen et al., 2018). Our analyses are conducted for the 13 issues in our larger sample, for which we could also identify the Left-Right placement of the respondents in the opinion poll where the substantive issue question was asked. This information is necessary to calculate public opinion towards our issues for leftist and rightist voters in order to test not only congruence between MEPs and all voters but between them and the voters belonging to the same side of the political spectrum as themselves. Importantly, the 13 selected issues vary with respect to crucial criteria, such as media salience and policy field (see annex for more info).

To identify relevant interest organizations and their positions on the sampled set of issues, we conducted a large content analysis of news media sources identifying 4,375 statements. While our study does not enquire about who gets access to the news, we should mention that the media arena has its own rules of engagement and consequently will reflect a fragment of the EU public policy universe. Some MEPs will be more publicly oriented than others and previous research has found that some MEPs –particularly experienced MEPs who hold a leadership position in their party– are more likely to get into the media (Gattermann and Vasilopoulou, 2015). Moreover, the European Parliament is more extensively covered in the news when EP plenary sessions are held and when the European public is generally supportive towards EU membership (Gattermann, 2013). However, even if media representation paints only a part of the picture, they are still broadly considered the main forum of exchange between citizens and EU elites (Koopmans and Erbe, 2004; Trezn, 2004; De Bruycker, 2017). The media inform EU citizens about their representatives so that they are able to hold them publicly accountable (Gattermann and Vasilopoulou, 2015; Gattermann, 2013). In addition, media usually do not confine themselves to one side of a policy debate as journalists are incentivized to include voices that are not yet present in public debates in an effort to provide balanced coverage (Donsbach and Klett, 1993; Entman, 2007; Hopmann et al., 2012). It is therefore, crucial to scrutinize which subsets of the public MEPs represent in media debates and which factors strengthen or weaken congruence.

In a first step of our media content analysis, the relevant media coverage in eight media outlets¹ related to the sampled set of cases was assembled manually. The search in media archives was based on keywords that were carefully selected based on the name of the issue, the corresponding Eurobarometer question and extensive desk research. Only articles that were directly related to the sampled cases were retained. Based on extensive keyword searches, 1,450 articles were identified. Once articles were mapped, the statements made by political actors in these articles were archived and coded. A statement is a quote or paraphrase in the news that can be connected to a specific actor. In total, 4,375 statements were identified from various political actors, of which 292 were made by MEPs. Each MEP statement was coded for whether it (1) supported policy change; (2) opposed policy change on the issue; or (3) whether no clear position was articulated. The coding was conducted by two trained researchers and subsequent inter-coder reliability conducted for our variables revealed satisfactory levels with Krippendorff's alpha scores of 0.8 and higher.²

Based on these data we constructed two dependent variables: (1) congruence with LR constituents and (2) congruence with the general public. To identify 'Left-right constituency congruence', we matched the statements of left/right-wing MEPs with public opinion of left/right-wing voters from their own country. To determine the left-right positioning of survey respondents we rely on the standard question "In political matters people talk of 'the left' and 'the right'. How would you place your views on this scale?". Respondents scoring between 1-4 were considered leftist, those between 5-6 centrist and those between 7-10 rightist. To gauge the left-right positioning of MEP's, we relied on the RILE scores of their parties as defined by the Comparative Party Manifestos Project (CMP). The RILE score is a left-right index which encompasses 26 different coding categories and has an empirical range of about [-50, 50] (Lowe et al., 2011). This standardized measure is ideal

¹ These outlets are Aftonbladet, Corriere Della Sera, De Telegraaf, EurActiv, Fakt, Financial Times, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and Le Monde. See annex for more info regarding the selection procedure.

² Krippendorff's alpha reliability coefficients calculated based on double coding of 130 media statements.

for our purpose to compare 63 different national parties and their positions across Europe (see CMP [website](#)). We consider MEPs whose party had a RILE score of below -10 leftist, parties scoring higher than 10 are considered rightist and those between [-10,10] centrist. To measure congruence with general public opinion we linked statements of MEPs with the opinion expressed by all the respondents in the Eurobarometer survey in their home country.

Table 1. Distribution of media statements from MEPs by country (n=202)

Country	EU member since	No of MEPs	Sampled media source	Statements n	Statements %
Germany	Founder	99	Yes	59	28.5%
United Kingdom	1973	72	Yes	27	13.0%
Belgium	Founder	22	No	27	13.0%
France	Founder	72	Yes	24	11.6%
Netherlands	Founder	25	Yes	14	6.8%
Luxembourg	Founder	6	No	10	4.8%
Sweden	1995	18	Yes	8	3.9%
Austria	1995	17	No	8	3.9%
Italy	Founder	72	Yes	6	2.9%
Greece	2004	12	No	6	2.9%
Denmark	1973	13	No	4	1.9%
Czech Republic	2004	22	No	4	1.9%
Portugal	1986	22	No	4	1.9%
Romania	2007	33	No	2	1.0%
Spain	1986	56	No	1	0.5%
Poland	2004	50	Yes	1	0.5%
Finland	1995	13	No	1	0.5%
Bulgaria	2007	17	No	1	0.5%
Malta	2004	5	No	1	0.5%

For instance, on the issue of ‘the financial transaction tax’ the leftist German MEP Sven Giegold supported the introduction of a financial transaction tax in the EU and his ‘left-right constituency congruence’ score equals the 80% of leftist public opinion in Germany that also supported the introduction of a financial transaction tax according to the Eurobarometer survey. His congruence with the general public, in contrast, equals the 74% of the general public in Germany that supported this measure. While these two measures are of course related, we analyze both to

distinguish between selective transmission and transmission of general public opinion of the citizenry as a whole. Moreover, to discriminate between the two, we add a set of analyses in the end of the paper for the subset of MEP statements where there was *disagreement* on an issue between the public majority and the majority of the “Left/right-wing constituency of an MEP”. In this part of the analysis, a statement like the example above would have been excluded since both the majority of the Germans as a whole and left-wing German voters supported the introduction of the financial transaction tax

Statements of MEPs in which an unclear position was expressed (n=90) could not be validly linked to public opinion, which leaves us with 202 observations of MEPs stemming from 19 different EU Member states on the 13 issues . The distribution across countries is portrayed in Table 1. The table shows that MEPs from founding member states and from member states with higher shares of MEPs are more prominent in the news. Moreover, we cannot exclude the possibility that MEPs from countries of which we conducted a media analysis are overrepresented. Thus, we control for variation across news media outlets and countries of MEPs in the analyses. Our main independent variable is an index, which gauges the share of statements by civil society organizations relative to the total number of statements made by civil society and business organizations on the issue. This measure ranges from 0 to 1 and higher values indicate higher levels of civil society mobilization, while lower levels indicate more business mobilization. Civil society groups refer to NGOs, citizen action groups, social movements and labor unions; whereas business interests include business interest associations, firms and professional organizations³.

We also included a set of relevant control variables in the analysis. First, we control for polarization within the mobilized interest group community. While interest groups can send a credible signal of citizen support for specific issues, this signal is not always clear and unambiguous

³ Research organizations, think tanks and regional or local advocates were excluded from the analysis.

(Wonka et al., 2018). When conflict emerges between interest groups, the selective transmission process will be disturbed as elected representatives no longer receive a clear and unequivocal signal of political support for that issue. This may result in weaker congruence compared to issues where group opinion is more united and it is easier for politicians to collect information about what the group majority wants. To measure polarization, we created an index that measures the degree to which policy positions of interest organizations on an issue contrast. The index ranges from 0 (all interest groups adopt the same position) to 1 (50% is against and 50% in favor of regulation) (more information about how the index was established can be found in de appendix). Second, different media outlets employ different journalistic styles and routines and may have different approaches to cover EU related matters. To capture this potential source of error variance we included fixed effects for the different media outlets in which the statements were made as control variables. Third, the statements of MEPs may be affected by the overall salience an issue attracts. To account for media salience, we include the number of relevant articles on the issue (Beyers et al., 2017). This count was log transformed because of its skewed distribution. Fourth, we also controlled for whether the MEP making a statement had the function of rapporteur on the specific policy dossier. We did so because former research has shown that the rapporteur attracts more intense lobbying and generally seeks to build political compromises that enjoy the support of a broad majority in the parliament (Marshall, 2015). Finally, we also coded whether the party of an MEP was in office at the time a statement was made in the news. Hence, MEPs, whose parties are part of the national government and represented in the European Council, can be expected to be more favorable towards the policies the European Commission proposes. These proposals are typically the result of intense collaboration between the European Commission, the national governments and the European Parliament and consequently have a high probability of being adopted by the Council (Moravcsik, 1993). Moreover, government parties sometimes need to endorse less popular policy measures while opposition parties have more leeway to criticize such measures, especially when public opinion is unfavorable towards them. To

capture these potential sources of extraneous variance we included whether the national party was in office or not as a control variable. The dataset is cross-classified in the sense that statements are nested in issues and the MEPs who make the statements are nested in countries. To address this interdependence, random intercepts were included in the model at the country, issue and MEP levels.

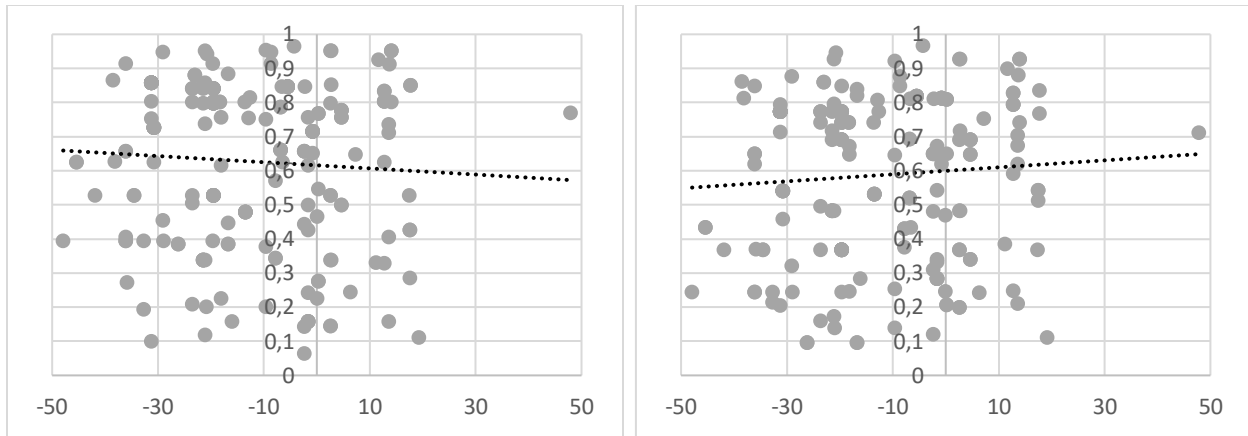
Results

As a first step in the analysis, we inspect the distributions of our main variables of interest and how they relate to each other. Figure 1 portrays congruence scores for MEP statements with (a) leftist and (b) rightist public opinion respectively on the Y-axis. The X-axis shows the leftist or rightist positioning of MEPs based on RILE scores (with lower scores denoting a more leftist and higher scores a more rightist ideology). While the relationship is not very strong, we observe an intuitive pattern between the ideology of MEPs, and the degree to which their statements align with either leftist or rightist public opinion in their home country: Figure 1a illustrates that statements from left-wing MEPs are more likely to align with leftist public opinion, while Figure 1b shows that statements from right wing MEPs agree more with rightist publics. The question is to what extent this relationship is a result of selective transmission business and civil society organizations to right and leftist MEPs respectively.

Figure 1. Congruence between MEP statement (Y-axis) with either (a) left-wing or (b) right-wing public opinion (X-axis)

(a) Congruence with *leftist* public opinion

(b) Congruence with *rightist* public opinion



To test this mechanism, we interact the index measuring the share of statements by civil society organizations relative to the total number of statements made by civil society and business organizations on the issue with the left-right positioning of an MEP’s national party on the RILE index. These interactions are included as independent variables in a mixed effects ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with general congruence (Models 1 and 2) and left-right constituency congruence as the dependent variables (Models 3 and 4). The regression output is presented in Table 2. Models 1 and 3 present only main effects of our variables and Models 2 and 4 include the interaction between our interest group index and the left-right positioning of the MEP⁴.

The results of the regression analysis support our expectations that interest groups affect congruence between MEPs and citizens. Both Models 2 and 4 including the interaction effects with interest groups, yield a significant improvement of the model fit when compared to their baseline models. In line with our theory of selective transmission, we see that a higher share of civil society mobilization results in higher congruence for MEPs from leftist parties. In contrast, a higher share of business mobilization leads to higher congruence for rightist MEPs. This can be derived from the negative and significant interaction term between the left-right index and relative civil society mobilization. The interaction is significant in both the models explaining general congruence (Model

⁴ Variance inflation factor (VIF) scores to test for multicollinearity yield satisfactory results (Average VIF<5).

2) and the model explaining left-right constituency congruence (Model 4). The predicted probabilities of the interaction effect in Model 4 are shown in Figure 4a. The figure illustrates that when civil society organizations dominate mobilization, leftists MEPs are more congruent with public opinion than rightist MEPs. In contrast, when business lobby groups dominate mobilization rightist MEPs are more congruent with their constituency's public opinion when compared to leftist MEPs. The average marginal effects presented in Figure 4b illustrate the same story in a different way by showing under which conditions the model predicts a significant change in constituency congruence for the average values on our interest group index for different values on the left-right ideology scale (RILE index). It shows that an increase in the share of civil society associations has a positive impact on constituency congruence for left wing MEPs whereas it has a negative impact for right-wing MEPs. These findings contrast with the elitist observation that business mobilization biases policymaking at the cost of citizen preferences (Schattschneider, 1960; Giger and Klüver, 2016). Hence, we see that rather than weaken congruence between public opinion and elected representatives, business mobilization in the media can also contribute to strengthening the opinion linkage between the two for rightist representatives.

Table 2. Mixed effects OLS regression of congruence between MEP statement and public opinion

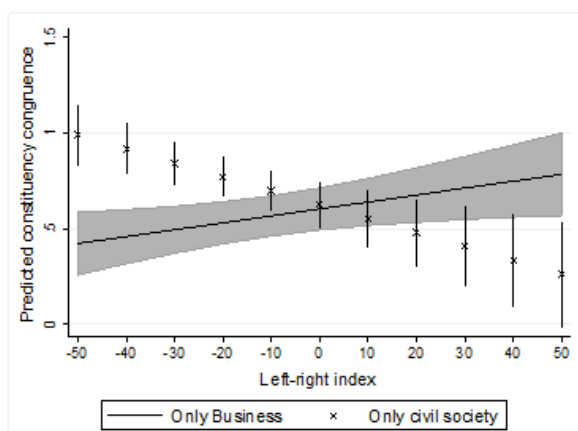
	Model 1: General congruence		Model 2: General congruence		Model 3: Left-Right Constituency congruence		Model 4: Left-Right Constituency congruence	
	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Main effects								
Intercept	0.93 **	(0.11)	0.92 **	(0.09)	0.92 **	(0.11)	0.91 **	(0.08)
Rile index	0.00	(0.00)	0.00 *	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)	0.00 *	(0.00)
Relative civil society mobilization	0.14	(0.10)	0.06	(0.11)	0.13	(0.10)	0.02	(0.10)
Interest group polarization	-0.31 **	(0.08)	-0.33 **	(0.07)	-0.31 **	(0.09)	-0.35 **	(0.08)
Media salience	-0.05	(0.03)	-0.04	(0.02)	-0.04	(0.03)	-0.03	(0.02)
Party in office	-0.03	(0.02)	-0.03 *	(0.02)	-0.04	(0.03)	-0.05 *	(0.02)
Rapporteur	-0.00	(0.03)	-0.00	(0.03)	0.00	(0.03)	0.00	(0.03)
Time	0.01 *	(0.00)	0.01 *	(0.00)	0.01	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)
Media source								
Aftonbladet	-0.22 **	(0.01)	-0.22 **	(0.01)	-0.06 **	(0.01)	-0.06 **	(0.01)
Corriere Della serra	0.04	(0.03)	0.05	(0.03)	0.06	(0.03)	0.07 *	(0.03)
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	-0.13 **	(0.02)	-0.12 **	(0.01)	-0.12 **	(0.02)	-0.10 **	(0.01)

Financial Times	-0.06	(0.04)	-0.06	(0.04)	-0.07	(0.04)	-0.07	(0.04)
Le Monde	0.03 **	(0.01)	0.05 **	(0.02)	0.04	(0.02)	0.06 *	(0.03)
Telegraaf	-0.19 **	(0.03)	-0.23 *	(0.03)	-0.19 **	(0.03)	-0.24 **	(0.03)
Euractiv (reference)								
Interaction effect								
Relative civil society mobilization * Rile index			-0.01 *	(0.00)			-0.01 **	(0.00)
Random effects								
Country	0.01	(0.00)	0.01	(0.00)	0.01	(0.00)	0.01	(0.00)
Issue	0.01	(0.00)	0.01	(0.00)	0.01	(0.00)	0.01	(0.00)
MEP	0.01	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)
Model fit								
N	202		202		202		202	
df	18		19		18		19	
AIC	-135.79		-137.33		-115.47		-119.21	

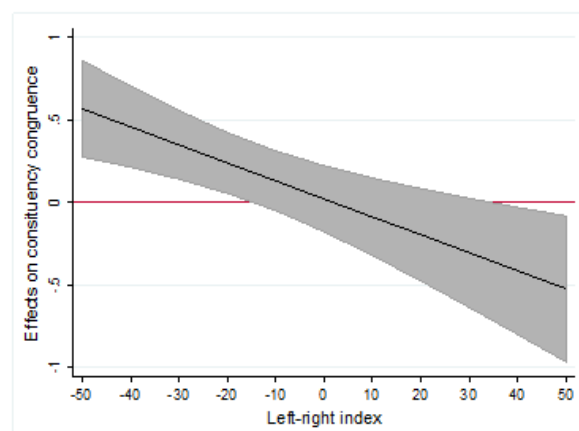
Robust standard errors in parentheses with significance levels indicated by *P<0.05 and **P<0.01

Figure 4. Predicted probabilities and marginal effects of interaction between left-right party positioning and civil society versus business mobilization (with 95% CFIs)

a) Predicted probabilities



b) Average marginal effects



With respect to our control variables, we present several interesting findings. Our expectation regarding the effect of interest group polarization on an issue also finds support in the data. When the mobilized interest group community is more divided, the levels of congruence between MEPs and public opinion are significantly lower. In line with our expectation, we thus see that polarization among interest groups detracts congruence as elected representatives are confronted with more ambiguous and unequivocal signals of political support. We also find significant effects of other control variables in our models. In most of the models the statements of MEPs who belong to a party which is part of the national government are significantly less congruent

with public opinion compared to MEPs who belong to opposition parties. This could be due to the fact that parties in office sometimes need to make unpopular decisions and will justify the decisions they make in the media. Opponents, in contrast, use media claims as a means to criticize the government and will more likely do so when they hold the popular position. Moreover, the EU level is often used by national elites as a venue to bypass public opinion and adopt unpopular decisions (Moravcsik, 1993), which may also lead government officials to not necessarily sponsor broadly endorsed positions. Second, we find mixed effects of media salience. Only for issues where disagreement emerged between constituency public opinion and general public opinion, media salience has a negative effect on congruence, while it is insignificant in the remaining models. In addition, we observe significant differences between the media outlets: MEP statements in the right-leaning *Financial Times* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* or the tabloid-style *Aftonbladet* and *De Telegraaf* experience lower levels of congruence with public opinion compared to statements in the *Europhile* and progressive *EurActiv*. Statements in the left-leaning *Le Monde* are slightly more congruent with public opinion. This may be due to these newspapers political orientation or their (sensational) journalistic approach. Finally, MEPs that make statements in the function of rapporteur for a specific legislative dossier do not experience lower congruence scores than other MEPs. It is possible that we would have seen different results had we looked at European-wide public opinion since rapporteurs typically need to make compromises across political families and territorial alliances (Marshall, 2015).

While the interaction effects presented in Model 4 corroborate our expectations, they do not yet reveal the theorized selective transmission process. Hence, just like the preferences of different income groups and men and women are often relatively similar (Branham et al., 2017; Reher, 2018), it needs to be taken into account that for some issues the differences in overall public opinion and constituency opinion are modest. For instance, support for policy change by public opinion in general and rightist public opinion is correlated at 0.8. This means that our findings in Model 4 may equally

show that selective transmission between interest groups and policy-makers affects congruence with public opinion in general, and not necessarily congruence with leftist and rightist constituencies in particular. We therefore focus *only* on cases where the public majority disagreed with the majority of either leftist/rightist citizens in a country to critically test our theory of selective transmission in the models presented in Table 3.

Table 3. OLS regression of congruence between MEP statement and public opinion for issues where general and constituency public opinion disagreed⁵

	Model 5: General congruence		Model 6: Constituency congruence	
	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Main effects				
Intercept	1.12 **	(0.15)	2.20 **	(0.65)
Rile index	-0.00	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)
Civil society mobilization (relative)	0.16 **	(0.04)	0.41 *	(0.18)
Media salience	-0.13 **	(0.03)	-0.32 *	(0.13)
Party in office	-0.01	(0.01)	-0.07 *	(0.03)
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	0.00	(0.00)	0.03	(0.03)
Financial Times	-0.00	(0.01)	-0.04	(0.05)
Le Monde	-0.04	(0.05)	-0.64 *	(0.24)
Euractiv (reference)				
Interaction effect				
Civil society mobilization (relative) * Rile index	0.00	(0.00)	-0.02 **	(0.01)
Model fit				
N	37		37	
df	9		9	
AIC	-165.37		-89.41	

Robust standard errors in parentheses with significance levels indicated by *P<0.05 and **P<0.01

Focusing on these cases only reduces the analysis to four of the sampled issues on which 37 MEPs made a statement either opposed or in favor of regulation. We see that when running the analysis on the subset of the cases where we can discriminate between selective and general transmission, the interaction effect of civil society mobilization and an MEP's leftist orientation on *general congruence*

⁵ Estimates of some control variables are not presented in the model because of problems of complete separation caused by a lack in variability as a result of the low N. With respect to the included control variables, we see a negative rather than insignificant effect of media salience on the subset of cases where the left-right constituents and the public as a whole are not aligned. Again there is no stable effect of the government status of the MEPs party and in the model where the effect is significant, it is negative.

is not significant anymore. In contrast, we find strong statistical support for our selective transmission mechanism in the subset of cases where we have the most valid conditions for testing its effect. According to Model 6, civil society mobilization improves constituency congruence for leftist MEPs and business mobilization for rightists MEPs. The significant interaction is remarkable given the low number of cases in the analysis decreasing the likelihood that we would find evidence for our hypotheses. These findings shed new light on the role of interest groups in functioning as a transmission belt between citizens and representatives. They deliver support for our theory that the transmission process between interest groups and politicians can be seen as a selective transmission process, where representatives primarily accept political cues about public opinion from advocacy organizations that are expected to hold positions corresponding with the representative's own political goals and ideology.

Conclusion

Whether elected representatives act according the preferences of the public is a crucial criterion for evaluating democratic performance. This paper addressed this topic by focusing on the role of interest groups in facilitating or weakening congruence between the position of the elected representatives of the European Parliament and their constituents' opinion in the member states. The literature on interest groups and public opinion has regularly used the 'transmission belt' metaphor to describe how interest groups affect the relationship between the public and elected representatives (see e.g. Rasmussen et al., 2014: 250; Berkhout et al., 2017: 1111). Building on this literature, our paper theorized about the mechanism connecting citizens, interest groups and elected representatives. Regarding groups as participants in a selective transmission process, we argued that interest groups primarily serve as a transmission belt when the segments of society which they represent, converge with the support base of the elected representatives.

We studied this mechanism by connecting claims from MEPs in the European news media to public opinion polls on specific issues. Rather than finding evidence that groups either act as a

blessing or curse for congruence, we find support for our idea that the ability of groups to secure congruence depends on the match between their constituencies and the constituents of MEPs. Hence, our main finding is that some group types are better equipped to transmit public views when interacting with certain types of MEPs: Leftist MEPs are more congruent with leftist public opinion when civil society dominates media debates, while claims from rightist MEPs are more congruent with constituents when business lobbyists take the lead. These findings support our expectations about selective transmission and shed new light on the role of interest groups as intermediaries between citizens and elected representatives. Importantly, we see that while business mobilization has typically been understood as detrimental to democratic decision making and public responsiveness (Giger and Klüver, 2016; De Bruycker, 2017), it can perform an important role in democracies by increasing the likelihood that rightist representatives are congruent with their support base on specific policy issues.

While former studies of congruence mostly relied on voting behavior by MPs, we studied claims making in the news media. The news media are a key venue for MEPs to signal to their voters that their voices are heard (Gattermann and Vasilopoulou, 2015). It constitutes an important and consequential arena of political and public deliberation which justifies a detailed empirical enquiry (Beyers et al., 2015). One disadvantage of this approach is that MEPs can still act or vote differently than the intention they express in public debates or some MEPs may even avoid media appearances altogether. To the extent that MEPs use the media to signal responsiveness to their electorate, it is therefore possible that media claims making analysis constitutes a most likely case for observing congruence. We should therefore be careful when generalizing findings about the overall level of congruence to voting behavior or other less visible forms of political endorsement. At the same time, we do not have reason to expect that the selective transmission mechanism tested here should work differently depending on whether groups mobilize in the media or not. In addition, focusing on the news media has the important methodological advantage that we are not dependent on the ability to

collect voting data on MEP positions, which would not be available at a similar scale on the issues in question. Yet, there is scope for future studies to examine whether interest mobilization behind the scenes has similar consequences for congruence.

Such research should also extend our results to more cases when data for a larger number of observations become available. Hence, while it is remarkable that we find evidence of selective transmission in our analyses of a relatively low number of critical cases, it is important to ultimately expand our tests to larger sample sizes. At present, the number of cases where the population is polled on specific issues on EU policy and where left- and right wing citizens disagree on an issue is relatively low. However, as more opinion polls are conducted on EU policy, future research will be able to scrutinize our findings in higher n studies. Such research will also be able to examine the external validity of our findings further by extending analysis to other political systems and other political arenas. Hence, while we applied the theory of selective transmission to politics in the European Parliament, its application ought to travel well beyond the EU and to other national legislatures. Finally, future research could also extend our approach by examining not only how the relative numbers of groups mobilized affect congruence but look at how the preference alignment between groups and citizens on the policy issues affects the relationship between the likely of congruence between public opinion and political decision-making (see e.g. Rasmussen et al., 2019).

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Methodological appendix

A Blessing or Curse for Congruence?

How interest mobilization affects congruence between voters and elected representatives in the European news Media

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1. Sampling strategy of the research project

The starting point for the project is a sample of 41 issues drawn from Eurobarometer polls for which the fieldwork concluded between January 1, 2012, and December 31, 2014. Eurobarometer, a policy tool of the European Commission, comprises a collection of surveys on various topics across the EU member states. The tool keeps track of important dynamics and preferences within the European demos. The standard Eurobarometer survey is repeated biannually, while the Special and Flash Eurobarometer studies are conducted ad hoc and revolve around specific topics or trends.

In this study, an issue is operationalized as a *specific* policy topic for which the EU is at least partially competent and for which citizens in all EU member states were surveyed. First, only questions that were surveyed in *all* EU member states were selected. Second, only issues that could be connected to a specific policy were retained. Third, EU policymakers and policies cannot be responsive to issues for which they lack competence. Including these issues would thus bias the results by imposing a selection bias in the main dependent variables of this study. Issues for which the EU has no policy competence were therefore excluded from the sample. Finally, we considered only questions that pertained to the opinion of citizens in terms of agreement or disagreement vis-à-vis EU policy (see Rasmussen et al., 2018). Examples of issue include questions about whether or not

citizens agree with a specific policy measure or objective, such as the financial transaction tax, the banking union or a free trade agreement between the US and the EU.

The operationalization of issues and the criteria resulting from this operationalization can be summarized by the acronym DISCO:

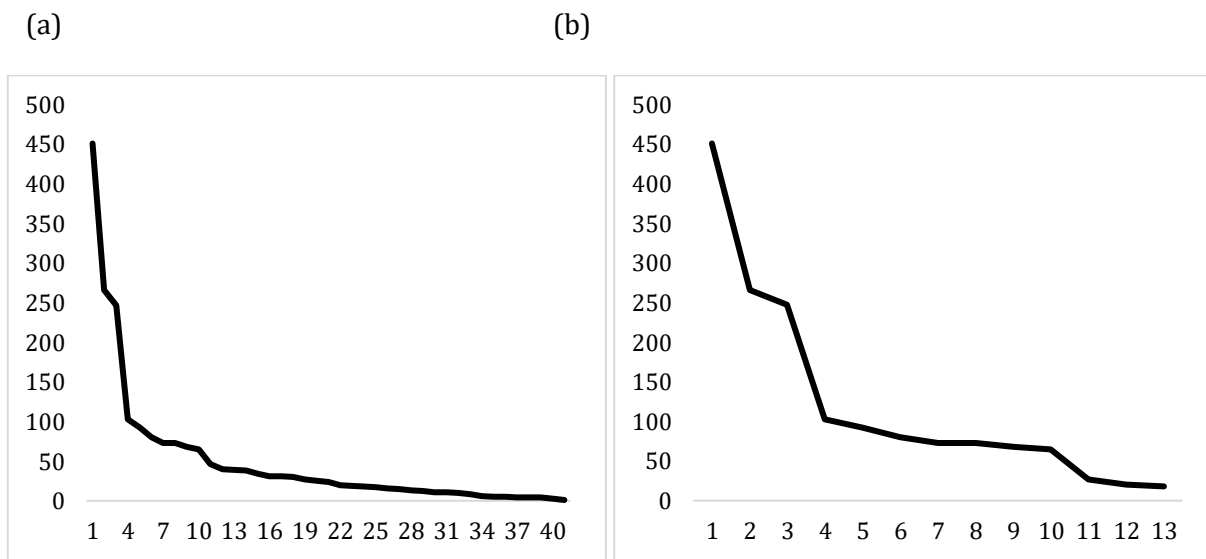
- **Data availability**: Public opinion data are available on the topic.
- **Inclusive**: Citizens in all EU member states were surveyed.
- **Specific**: The survey question deals with specific policy.
- **Competence**: The topic of the question falls (partially) within the competences of the EU.
- **Opinion**: The question pertains to agreement or disagreement vis-à-vis EU policy.

Our analysis is conducted for the 13 of the 41 issues that also contained information about the leftist and rightist orientation of citizens. The first key source of variation across policy issues concerns their public salience. We know from former research that public salience matters for public opinion, for representation and for policy responsiveness (Page and Shapiro, 1983; Wlezien, 2004; Beyers et al., 2017). One important concern for studies that rely exclusively on cases for which public opinion surveys were conducted is that they involve only issues that are already salient to the public and media, which therefore biases the sample of cases (Burstein, 2014). To assess this concern, we tracked the media salience of the sampled set of cases in eight European media outlets: Euractiv, Le Monde, Financial Times, Corriere Della Sera, Aftonbladet, De Telegraaf, Fakt and Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. The media salience of the 41 issues across the different media outlets is highly correlated, with an average correlation of 0.6. This result indicates that the aggregate measure of media salience (the sum of all articles across media outlets) is a reliable measure of media salience.

The left side of Figure 1 portrays the distribution of media articles that discussed the sampled set of issues across the selected media outlets. The distribution clearly shows that these policy cases varied with regard to media salience. Some issues, such as the financial transaction tax, received a lot

of media attention, while other issues received no media attention at all. The right side of Figure A1 shows the distribution of media attention in the same media outlets devoted to the cases for which information about the leftist or rightist orientation of citizens is available. The distribution of the partial sample is comparable to that of the full sample. Both distributions portrayed in Figure 1 are highly skewed and exhibit some degree of variation. These distributions of media attention also resemble the distributions of media attention found in other projects, most notably the INTEREURO project, which relied on a random sample of policy proposals (De Bruycker and Beyers, 2015).

Figure A1. Media salience of the sampled cases

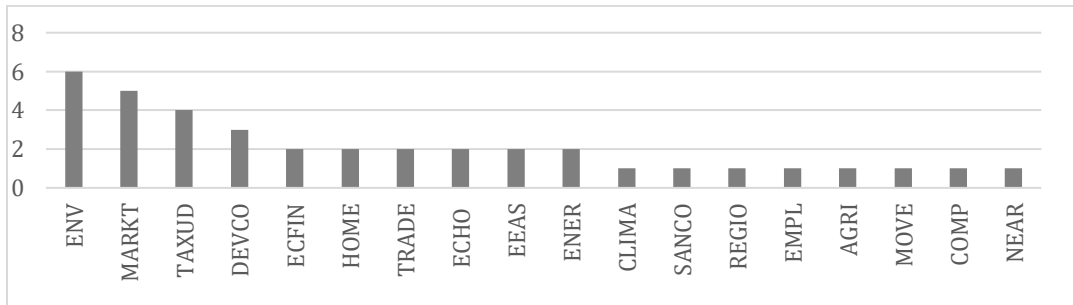


Note: a) full sample; b) partial sample

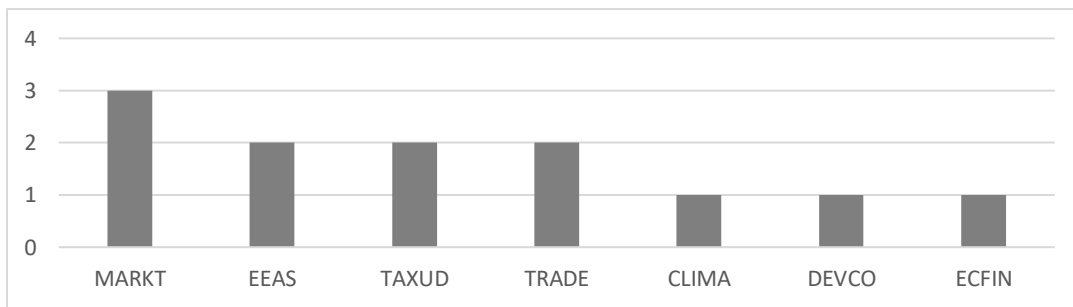
The sample of issues also strongly varies in terms of the policy areas addressed. Figure A2 illustrates the distribution of the cases across policy areas, operationalized by the directorate generals (DGs) responsible for the policy issue.

Figure A2. Distribution of sampled issues across policy areas

(a)



(b)



Note: a) full sample; b) partial sample

2. Selection of media sources

For the selection of news media outlets, a ‘most different case selection design’ was applied to maximize the possible sources of relevant extraneous variance. We selected media outlets from different countries geographically located in different parts of Europe, with different journalistic styles that vary in format and adhere to diverse political orientations. Because of the central research objectives of the project to study the links between elites and the public, we prioritized news outlets with a wide circulation to ensure that their coverage had the potential to reach a wide range of European citizens. To ensure that we would have a substantive corpus of statements from political elites and stakeholders on the sampled set of issues, we selected four news outlets that were studied in former research projects on EU representation (most notably the DEU and INTEREURO projects) and that extensively covered EU-related topics.

Table A1. Overview of eighth selected media outlets

News outlet	Country	Format	Journalistic Style	Political orientation	Studied in former large projects on EU representation	Daily paid circulation in 2016	Number of articles identified
1. Aftonbladet	Sweden	Tabloid	Sensational	Left wing, populist	No	154,900 (2014)	99
2. Corriere Della Sera	Italy	Broadsheet	Quality press	Centrist, liberal	No	310,437	262
3. De Telegraaf	Netherlands	Tabloid	Sensational	Right wing, populist	No	382,000	185
4. EurActiv	Europe-wide	Online	Quality press	Centrist, Europhile	Yes	794,992 (free)	628
5. Fakt	Poland	Tabloid	Sensational	Centrist, populist	No	270,331	40
6. Financial Times	United kingdom	Broadsheet	Quality press	Liberal-conservative	Yes	193,211	413
7. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	Germany	Nordisch	Quality press	Centre-right, liberal-conservative	Yes	256,188	279
8. Le Monde	France	Berliner	Quality press	Centre-left	Yes	267,897	207

3. Content analysis of media statements and quality controls

The relevant media coverage related to the sampled set of cases was assembled manually by the principal investigator and two student-assistants involved in the project. To increase the quality of the media searches, researchers focused on media outlets from their own country. The search in media archives was based on keywords that were carefully selected based on the name of the issue, the corresponding Eurobarometer question and extensive desk research. For newspapers in a language non-native to the research team, external experts were consulted. All the keywords used are documented and will be published on the project's website. Importantly, not all articles that resulted from keyword searches were retained. Each article was screened by the researcher in question for its relevance. Only articles that were directly related to the sampled cases were used. Articles that only vaguely or indirectly related to the legislative proposal were omitted. Keyword searches were finalized only when an information saturation point was met, namely, when the addition of new keyword searches did not result in additional articles. The results were stored by the principal investigator, who conducted an additional consistency check.

Based on extensive keyword searches, 2,085 articles were identified for the full sample. Additional recall tests were performed when the media salience for certain issues strongly varied across media sources. For these issues, recall tests varied from 77% to 89% overlap (with an average overlap of 83%). For the other issues, recall tests were performed randomly and gave satisfactory results (more than 90% overlap). Furthermore, an extensive precision test was conducted by hand coding all the collected articles and their constituting statements. Namely, each article was coded for its relevance to the sampled case. This approach resulted in a precision of 97% for articles and 93% for statements. Non-relevant articles were excluded from further analyses. From all the assembled statements, 7% were not directly connected to the legislative proposals and were therefore also excluded from further analyses.

Table A2. Distribution of statements for different actor types

Actor type	Freq.	Percent
Council and member states	1,913	34%
European Commission	857	12%
European Members of Parliament	608	11%
National Member of Parliament	368	6%
Interest organizations	1,715	30%
Regulatory agencies & central banks	264	5%
International organizations	65	1%
Other (individual citizens, journalists, etc.)	101	2%

Once articles were selected, the statements made by political actors in these articles were archived and coded. A statement is a quote or paraphrase in the news that can be connected to a specific actor. In total, 5,891 statements were identified from various political actors. Four student-assistants as well as the principal investigator were involved in the collection of articles and archiving of statements. An overview of the different actor types and their prominence is provided in Table A2. The statements of these actors were coded for the positions adopted for or against policy change and the various arguments articulated. Two student-assistants did the coding of statements. Intercoder reliability checks (based on 130 double coded statements) proved satisfactory with Krippendorff's alpha ranging from 0.7 to 0.9 for all the variables in the larger dataset. The number of statements as well as the number of articles identified for an issue during a time period of six months are used as indicators of politicization.

4. Measurement of polarization

To measure interest group polarization, we relied on a measure that captures the dispersion of positions vis-à-vis policy change for a specific issue. Each media statement made by an interest group was coded for whether it (1) supported policy change on the issue, (2) was against policy change, or (3) represented an unclear position. The category 'unclear' was excluded since it is irrelevant for measuring the polarization of political conflict. Based on the other categories, a dispersion index was computed. The formula of this index is indicated below.

$$Polarization\ measure = \left| \left| \sum_{i=1}^{k-1} \left(F^*_i - \frac{1}{2} \right) \right| - \frac{1}{2} \right| * 2$$

In this index, k represents the number of categories (k=2). This index, which ranges from 0 to 1, indicates whether all actors making statements about an issue shared a similar position (value 0) or whether the positions were completely polarized (value 1). Complete polarization would mean that 50% of all interest groups are supportive of policy change while the other 50% seek to maintain the status quo. The average value of the measure is 0.56 (S.D.=0.38).