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# Blessing or Curse for Congruence? How Interest Mobilization Affects Congruence between Citizens and Elected Representatives

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## Abstract

This article examines the role of interest mobilization in strengthening or weakening congruence between elected representatives and citizens on EU policy issues. It argues that the relationship between public opinion, interest groups and elected politicians can be theorized as a selective transmission process. We expect interest groups to strengthen congruence between citizens and elected representatives who share their ideological views. To test our hypotheses we conducted a content analysis of statements made in eight European news outlets on a sample of 13 policy issues and combined this with Eurobarometer polls. Our results indicate that elected representatives from leftist parties are more congruent with left-wing voters when civil society mobilizes, while the prevalence of corporate lobby groups strengthens congruence between rightist politicians and their constituents. These findings contribute to our understanding of the role of interest groups in political representation and democratic governance.

**Keywords:** European public policy; EU politics; interest groups; congruence; representation

## 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, pp. 1–2). 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 (Schmitter, 2001). An alternative but largely underestimated mechanism through which representation works is interest groups (Burstein, 2003; Rasmussen *et al.*, 2018b; Rasmussen and Reher, 2019). Consisting of movements and organizations that have a political interest and are external to the political system, interest groups range from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social movements and labour unions to corporate lobby groups (Baroni *et al.*, 2014).

On the one hand, interest 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 the correspondence between the views of citizens and the actions of policy-makers (Bevan and Rasmussen, 2020; De Bruycker, 2020; Rasmussen *et al.*, 2014). On the other hand, they may be a curse. After all, interest groups typically represent specific segments of society or minority views, and it is therefore doubtful whether they can adequately perform a transmission function between the public

[Correction added on 6 May 2021, after first online publication: Grammatical changes have been made to the article to improve clarity]

and elected politicians (Giger and Klüver, 2016). In light of this, our article examines whether and under what conditions the mobilization of interest groups strengthens or weakens congruence between citizens and the claims made by elected representatives as shown in the news media. In this way, we add to a sparse literature that has systematically examined the ability of groups to act as a transmission belt between the public and policy-makers (Bevan and Rasmussen, 2020; Giger and Klüver, 2016; Lax and Phillips, 2012; Rasmussen *et al.*, forthcoming; Willems and De Bruycker, 2019).

In the pluralist tradition interest groups are often said to perform a transmission belt function by maintaining close contact between citizens and elected representatives (Berkhout *et al.*, 2017; Albareda and Braun, 2019; Flöthe and Rasmussen, 2019; Willems and De Bruycker, 2019). This article goes beyond the transmission belt metaphor by theorizing the interplay between public opinion, interest groups and elected politicians as a selective process of transmission. We argue that interest groups selectively transmit the preferences of specific politicians and segments of citizens rather than the majority position of each as a whole. Interest groups therefore serve as a transmission belt primarily between citizens and the elected representatives who share their ideological views.

We tested our argument in the context of the EU, which is in many respects a least likely case for finding an effect of interest mobilization on congruence. EU public policy is relatively distant from citizens' everyday experiences and receives much less attention in public and electoral debates than domestic issues (Boomgaarden *et al.*, 2013). As European parliamentary elections are generally second-order, members of the European Parliament (MEPs) experience few incentives to comply with their voters' positions on often highly complex and technical EU policy issues (Follesdal and Hix, 2006; Van Aelst and Lefevre, 2012). Moreover, even if national parliamentarians are involved in EU public policy and increasingly 'Europeanized', they typically compete on domestic issues and are less likely to be held accountable for their behaviour in EU policy-making (Christiansen *et al.*, 2014; De Wilde, 2011). We therefore presume that interest groups are both less incentivized and less able to act as a transmission belt between citizens and elected representatives in the EU than in a national context.

Our analyses used a new dataset with information about public opinion and public claims made by elected representatives and interest groups in the media on 13 policy issues. The issues were selected from Eurobarometer surveys conducted between 1 January 2012, and 31 December 2014 in 28 EU member states. For each issue, we identified the opinions of right and left-wing voters in the elected politicians' countries of origin. We conducted a large-scale content analysis of coverage of eight European news media outlets on the issues, which resulted in a dataset of 368 media statements by elected representatives from the European and national parliaments.

Rather than indicating that interest groups either strengthen or weaken congruence, the empirical results corroborate our expectations about selective transmission. We found that the media claims of politicians from leftist party groups are more likely to be aligned with left-wing voters' views when civil society organizations dominate interest representation. The public claims of elected officials affiliated with rightist parties, in contrast, are more congruent with rightist voters when business lobbyists are strongly represented on policy issues in the media. These findings have important implications for understanding the role of interest groups in policy representation and democratic governance.

## I. Congruence and Selective Transmission

In examining the incentives for elected politicians to represent their constituents and promote their constituents' interests in media debates, we are ultimately interested in what Pitkin (1967) described as 'substantive representation'. To examine how closely the positions of citizens and elected representatives are aligned, we use the term 'congruence'. Yet, rather than focusing on the ideological congruence between citizens and their representatives on a left–right scale (see Costello *et al.*, 2012), we look at the alignment of the positions of citizens and elected representatives on specific policy issues, such as the introduction of the banking union. Focusing on what Golder and Stramski (2010) have referred to as 'many-to-one relationships', we compare the cumulative support for these policy changes among subsets of voters to the positions of individual representatives articulated in public claims.

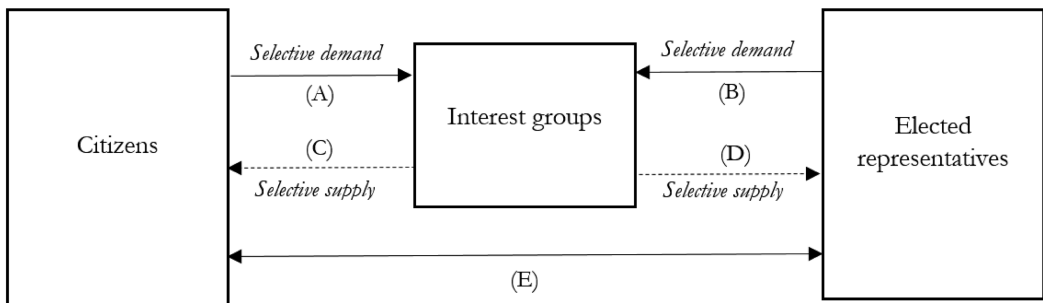
Scholarship on public opinion and interest groups typically relies on the transmission belt metaphor to describe the relationship between interest organizations, public opinion and policy-makers. The transmission belt function implies that interest groups can act as intermediaries between citizens and policymakers in distributing information and facilitating contact between them (Berkhout *et al.*, 2017, p. 1111; Rasmussen *et al.*, 2014, p. 250). Rather than arguing that interest group mobilization has a general effect on this relationship, researchers have pointed out that there may be variation in the transmission capacities of different types of groups (Giger and Klüver, 2016) and that the transmission capacity of groups varies at different stages of the policy process (Bevan and Rasmussen, 2020). This article develops the transmission belt metaphor further by proposing a theory of selective transmission. We argue that the ability of group mobilization to improve congruence between the positions of elected representatives and their natural constituency is conditioned by the extent to which groups interact with politicians and constituencies with whom they are ideologically aligned. In other words, rather than expecting that all or only specific types of groups affect opinion congruence between the public and policy-makers, we argue that the extent to which groups align with the natural constituents of policy-makers affects whether they can effectively help link policy-makers with the opinion of their presumed voters. Three assumptions form the cornerstone of the theory. First, most interest groups represent narrow segments of society and do not have the incentive or capacity to signal the preferences of a wide array of political parties or the whole population. Rather than representing broad and diffuse constituencies, many interest groups specialize in their respective niches and transmit the political preferences of their constituents and politicians for their specific area of expertise (Baumgartner and Leech, 2001; Bernhagen and Trani, 2012). In this way, interest groups provide political information about the opinion of a subset of the public and politicians with whom they ideologically align.

Second, not only are interest groups selective in the political information that they convey, politicians also purposefully seek congruence with segments of the public with whom they ideologically align (Wouters *et al.*, 2019). When making claims in the media, elected representatives try to advocate policy goals that their constituents endorse and that fit their ideological profile (Petrocik, 1996). We consider elected representatives to be rational, purposeful actors who seek congruence with public opinion to cater for their voters and avoid electoral retribution (Giger and Klüver, 2016).

However, elected representatives often lack information about what their voters want with respect to specific policy issues (Chalmers, 2013; De Bruycker, 2016). Interest groups can respond to this informational scarcity by signalling to politicians the extent to which their natural constituents care about or support a specific policy issue (Rasmussen *et al.*, 2014). Finally, citizens, for their part, are also known to be selective in that they seek to reinforce existing predispositions through motivated reasoning and selective exposure to party communication (Hameleers and van der Meer, 2019). Citizens select and process partisan information in ways that affirm their ideological identities. Interest groups aligning with citizens’ ideologies can (selectively) offer issue-specific partisan cues to expedite this process and align citizens more closely with the party’s policy position.

The assumptions outlined are summarized in Figure 1. A indicates that citizens seek information that supports their ideological views, and B signifies that politicians usually demand information from the specific subset of the public that aligns with their ideological views. We presume that interest groups will selectively offer information cues to both citizens (C) and elected representatives (D) that help link them together. This mechanism is termed ‘selective transmission’. According to this mechanism, interest mobilization can strengthen congruence mainly when a selective set of organized interests, citizens and politicians interact. We acknowledge that citizens and representatives may exchange information directly or through intermediaries (E) and that the selective transmission process takes place in a context where various factors – such as news media coverage, party political struggles and exogenous events – are simultaneously constructing a dominant climate of opinion (Burstein, 2014). We have limited our inquiry to the concept of congruence and not responsiveness, as we do not aspire to disentangle the complex network of causal relationships that connects public opinion, interest groups and elected representatives. We assume that the co-occurrence of selective supply and selective demand for political information will result in increased congruence. Rather than assuming a one-directional relationship, we allow for the possibility that congruence can occur in different ways, with both politicians and citizens being able to adapt their positions towards each other through interest groups as intermediaries (see Rasmussen and Reher, 2019).

Figure 1: Selective transmission between citizens and elected representatives.



## II. Hypotheses

The selective transmission theory clarifies that both the supply of information by interest groups and the demand for information among politicians and citizens are selective. However, the theory does not specify which segments of the public different interest groups represent, nor does it stipulate from which citizens and interest groups different politicians seek popular support. Considering the political space in which parties, citizens and interest groups can be situated, a left–right continuum is an evident starting point. Hence, whereas divides across the European integration continuum have been gaining in prominence for high politics issues such as the Euro crisis and budgetary policies (Blumenau and Lauderdale, 2018), it is widely agreed that everyday policies in the European Parliament are largely driven by left–right controversies rather than national or territorial ones (Hix and Noury, 2009; McElroy and Benoit, 2007; but see Proksch and Slapin, 2010). Moreover, for their part, citizens are often not informed or even aware of EU policies and rely on the left–right continuum as a heuristic to position themselves on specific EU policy issues (Vasilopoulou and Gattermann, 2013, p. 609).

With respect to interest groups, a crude distinction is often drawn between civil society organizations and business groups (Beyers *et al.*, 2015; Hanegraaff and Berkhout, 2019). Members of civil society organizations, on the one hand, are composed of individual (or associations of) citizens, advocate ideals and values in society and provide expressive benefits to their constituents, who are diffusely distributed in society. They advocate equality, pluralism and participation and are typically seen as associated with the ideological left (Beyers *et al.*, 2015; Berkhout *et al.*, 2019; Otjes and Rasmussen, 2017). Business groups, on the other hand, represent special and economic segments of society and create concentrated costs and benefits for their supporters or industries (Hanegraaff and Berkhout, 2019). They tend to oppose a strong state and pursue profit maximization by promoting neoliberal policies, which links them to the ideological right (Beyers *et al.*, 2015; Berkhout *et al.*, 2019; Otjes and Rasmussen, 2017).

This distinction is corroborated by empirical research showing that business groups are more likely to agree with and interact with rightist parties and civil society groups with leftist parties (Beyers *et al.*, 2015; Berkhout *et al.*, 2019; Otjes and Rasmussen, 2017). Moreover, a recent study has found that business interests donate selectively to right-wing parties (Katsaitis, 2020).<sup>1</sup> While there are, of course, exceptions to this pattern, we have strong reasons to expect that civil society groups have the potential to act as transmission belts strengthening congruence between leftist citizens and politicians and that business organizations are capable of fulfilling a similar function in establishing congruence between rightist citizens and politicians.

Different *mechanisms* may be at play here. The first mechanism is *informing* (see Bevan and Rasmussen, 2020). Allied interest groups may be seen as providing credible cues for both citizens and elected representatives to obtain information about each other's

<sup>1</sup>It needs to be stressed that there can also be controversies within the communities of business and civil society organizations. As an example, the business community can be divided between small and medium enterprises and multinationals or between exporters and import-competing firms (see also Eising, 2007). While we acknowledge that these internal differences are real and important, they are less structurally engrained in the party political spectrum and hence we do not consider them to be problematic for our theoretical assumptions on ideological convergence. Nonetheless, we explore internal differences within the observed business and civil society communities in the empirical section.

preferences. Both leftist and rightist politicians and constituents are therefore better informed and more likely to align their positions to each other when the interest group community that converges with their ideology mobilizes. When opposing groups mobilize, politicians and citizens may construe this as an information cue. However, as we assume that elected representatives purposefully respond to aligned interest groups rather than the most vocal interests mobilizing in the public sphere, we do not expect the mobilization of opposing groups to affect congruence significantly. In sum, we expect that the congruence between constituents and politicians will be strengthened when they predominantly receive information from interest groups with which they are ideologically aligned.

A second mechanism is *amplification*. While both citizens and elected politicians may be well aware of each other's preferences, the pressure they feel to adjust their positions may be stronger when allied interest representatives mobilize in public (Agnone, 2007). As such, interest mobilization will not necessarily offer new information cues to elected representatives and citizens but rather encourage them to give more weight to acting in line with each other's positions or at least not change this position in the opposite direction. When opposing groups dominate, in contrast, we expect that congruence will not be significantly affected, as representatives are presumed to listen to aligned interest groups rather than to groups that feature most prominently in public debates.

Importantly, we do not distinguish between these amplification and information mechanisms empirically but rather assume that both are at play. Incorporating these expectations into our theory of selective transmission, we predict that congruence between elected representatives and citizens will be strengthened when groups with whom they are ideologically aligned mobilize:

*H1* Elected representatives from more rightist parties will be more congruent with rightist citizens the more dominant business groups are over civil society organizations on an issue in the media.

*H2* Elected representatives from more leftist parties will be more congruent with leftist citizens the more dominant civil society organizations are over business groups on an issue in the media.

### III. Research Design

The starting point for the project was a sample of 41 issues drawn from Eurobarometer polls for which the fieldwork concluded between 1 January 2012, and 31 December 2014.<sup>2</sup> The research design built on insights from previous policy-centred research projects that used concrete policy issues for which public opinion polls were conducted as their starting point (Rasmussen *et al.*, 2018a; Wratil, 2019). An issue

<sup>2</sup>This was the most recent period in which we could trace media claims and policy responses 3 years after the Eurobarometer polls were conducted and before the data collection of the project concluded in December 2017.

is operationalized as a *specific* policy topic which falls – at least partially – within the policy competences of the EU. 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 supported 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 with a specific policy. Of this sample, we analysed only the 13 issues where the opinion poll, including the substantive question, also contained information about the left–right placement of the respondents. This information was necessary to determine the opinions of leftist and rightist voters on our issues so that we could test congruence not only between elected representatives and all voters but also between them and voters on their side of the political spectrum. Importantly, the 13 selected issues vary with respect to crucial criteria such as media salience and policy field (see annex Figures A1, A2 and A6).

To identify relevant interest organizations and their positions on the sampled set of issues, we conducted a content analysis of news media sources identifying 4,375 statements. Only articles that were directly related to the sampled cases and published between 1 January 2010 and 31 December 2016 were retained.<sup>3</sup> While the media visibility of EU debates varies across issues and member states, the news media offer a crucial forum for communicating policy positions to constituents, especially for national but also for European parliamentarians (De Wilde, 2011). The media arena is not neutral and has its own rules of engagement. Previous research has, for example, found that some MEPs – particularly experienced MEPs who hold a leadership position in their party – are more likely to be mentioned in the media (Gattermann and Vasilopoulou, 2015). Even if the media paint only part of the overall picture, they are still broadly considered the main forum of exchange between citizens and EU elites (De Bruycker, 2017; Koopmans and Erbe, 2004; Trenz, 2004), enabling citizens to hold their representatives publicly accountable (Gattermann, 2013; Gattermann and Vasilopoulou, 2015).

We used the media as a proxy for measuring interest group activity rather than assuming that elected representatives and citizens would know each other's opinions only if they had read a particular newspaper. It is, for example, very likely that elected representatives and citizens are exposed to the same groups that appear in the media in other ways (such as by having been contacted directly by certain groups or having read press releases and consultation submissions from groups). We know from the interest group literature that strategies tend to be cumulative, meaning that groups typically try to voice their concerns in multiple arenas at the same time (Binderkrantz *et al.*, 2015). We also know from existing research that there is a high correlation between the positions voiced by interest groups on specific policy issues in the media and other arenas, such as parliaments and the administration (Rasmussen *et al.*, 2018a).

<sup>3</sup>The empirical time frame of our content analysis captures the aftermath of the financial crisis and the emergence of right-wing populism and political fragmentation in Europe. Arguably, the pro and anti-integration dimension has grown in relevance in European politics since then, but we have no reason to assume that patterns of group and party alignments along the left–right continuum have changed greatly (see Berkhout *et al.*, 2019).



In the first step of our media content analysis, we manually assembled the media coverage related to the sampled set of cases by eight media outlets.<sup>4</sup> We based our search of media archives on keywords that we carefully selected based on the name of the issue, the corresponding Eurobarometer question and desk research. We retained only articles that were directly related to the sampled cases. Based on keyword searches, we identified 1,450 articles. After mapping the articles we archived and coded the statements made by political actors in these articles. We defined a statement as a quote or paraphrase in the news that could be connected to a specific actor. We collapsed quotes or paraphrases from the same actor in one article and treated them as one statement. In total, we identified 4,375 statements from politicians, interest groups and other stakeholders, of which 296 statements were made by 106 MEPs and 212 statements by 135 national members of parliament (MPs). We coded each statement according to whether it (1) supported or (2) opposed policy change on the issue or (3) did not articulate a clear position. For the remaining analyses, we retained only statements for which a position in favour or against a policy initiative could be identified, resulting in 208 statements from 87 MEPs and 160 statements from 110 MPs ( $N = 368$ ). Two student assistants coded the MEPs' and MPs' statements under the supervision of the principal investigator. Intercoder reliability checks proved satisfactory (based on 180 double-coded statements), with a Krippendorff's alpha of 0.83 for the variable capturing representatives' positions on the sampled policy issues.

Based on these data, we constructed two dependent variables: (1) congruence with left–right constituents and (2) congruence with the general public. To identify left–right constituency congruence, we compared the statements of left or right-wing politicians with the opinions of left or right-wing voters from their own country. To determine the left–right positioning of the survey respondents, we relied on the following question: 'In political matters people talk of 'the left' and 'the right'. How would you place your views on this scale?' Respondents scoring between one and four were considered leftist, those between five and six centrist and those between seven and 10 rightist. This is the standard categorization in the Eurobarometer datasets and it resulted in three nearly equal-sized groups of respondents across the left–right dimension. To gauge the left–right positioning of the elected representatives' parties, we relied on the parties' Rile scores as defined by the Comparative Party Manifesto Project (CMP). The Rile score is a left–right index that encompasses 26 coding categories and has an empirical range of about (–50, 50) for the parties in our sample (see Figure 2b) (Lowe *et al.*, 2011). This standardized measure was better suited for our purpose of comparing 68 national parties and their positions across Europe than the alternative Chapel Hill expert survey data. First, it allowed us to use left–right ideological positions measured as close as possible to the time when a political party made a statement in the news, which reduced noise caused by potential

<sup>4</sup>These outlets are *Aftonbladet*, *Corriere Della Sera*, *De Telegraaf*, *Euractiv*, *Fakt*, *Financial Times*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Le Monde*. We selected one pan-European outlet and national media outlets from seven different countries geographically located in different parts of Europe, with different journalistic styles that vary in format and adhere to diverse political orientations. Because central research objectives of the project were 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 and that cover EU-related topics (Klüver *et al.*, 2015). Our media selection procedure allows us to capture as much variation as possible, but inhibits us from deductively comparing among countries and specific media outlets (see for instance Gattermann, 2013).

shifts in ideological positioning over time (that is, we have statements ranging from 2010 to 2016). Second, the number of missing values for the parties is higher in the Chapel Hill data than in the CMP data. Nonetheless, we present robustness checks with Chapel Hill data in Table A10 in the annex.

To label parties as left, centre or right, we took the average Rile score in our dataset minus and above half a standard deviation for determining the boundaries between leftist, centrist and rightist parties, respectively. To measure congruence with general public opinion, we linked statements of elected representatives with the opinions expressed by all respondents in the Eurobarometer survey in their home country. 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 80 per cent of the left-wing German voters who also supported the introduction of this tax, according to the Eurobarometer survey. His congruence with the general public, in contrast, equals 74 per cent of the general public in Germany that supported this measure. While these two measures are related, we analysed both to distinguish between selective transmission and the transmission of general public opinion of the citizenry as a whole. In addition, we added a set of analyses for the subset of statements where there was *disagreement* on an issue between the public majority and the majority of the left–right constituency (see annex Table A5). In this part of the analysis, a statement such as the example above was excluded as both the majority of Germans as a whole and left-wing German voters supported the introduction of this tax. This agreement between left-wing, right-wing voters and the general public does not apply to the issue of a free trade agreement between the EU and the USA. Whereas the majority of the general public and rightist voters in Germany supported this agreement, the majority of leftist voters opposed it. For these issues, leftist representatives such as Sven Giegold must choose whether to side with their natural constituents or endorse the general will of the people. These issues are particularly suitable for testing our hypotheses, as they allow us to distinguish between mechanisms that lead to general congruence and those that lead to constituency congruence, thereby critically testing the selective transmission mechanism.

We could not exclude the possibility that representatives from the countries where we conducted our media analysis were overrepresented. Thus, we controlled for variation across news media outlets and countries in the analyses. Our main independent variable is an index that gauges the share of statements by civil society organizations relative to the total number of statements made by civil society and business organizations on a given issue.<sup>5</sup> This measure ranges from 0 to 1. 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 labour unions, whereas business interests include business interest associations, firms and professional organizations.<sup>6</sup>

We also included a set of relevant control variables in the analysis. First, we controlled for polarization within the mobilized interest group community. When conflict emerges

<sup>5</sup>The index is based on 1,089 statements made by 548 unique organizations. In total, 498 statements were made by 289 business groups; 291 by 96 civil society groups and 300 by 163 other groups (research organizations, think tanks and regional or local advocates)

<sup>6</sup>Research organizations, think tanks and regional or local advocates were excluded from the analysis.

between interest groups over a given issue, elected representatives no longer receive an unequivocal signal of political support for that issue. This may result in weaker congruence compared with issues on which group opinion is more united and it is easier for politicians to collect information about what the majority group 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% are against and 50% are in favour of regulation) (see section 4 in annex for more information). Second, different media outlets employ different journalistic styles and routines and may have different approaches to covering EU-related matters. To capture this potential source of extraneous variance we included fixed effects for the different media outlets in which the statements were made. Third, the statements of elected representatives may be affected by the overall salience of an issue. To account for media salience, we included the number of relevant articles on the issue. This count was log-transformed because of its skewed distribution (skewness = 1.61). Fourth, we controlled for whether a statement was made by an MEP or by a national MP. Fifth, to capture variation over time, we included a time trend indicating the 6-month time period in which the statement of an elected official was made. Finally, we also coded whether the party of an elected representative was in office at the time a statement was made in the news. Table 2 below gives an overview of the variables included in our regression analyses. The dataset is cross-classified in the sense that statements are nested in issues and the representatives who make the statements are nested in countries. To address this interdependence, random intercepts were included in the model at the country and issue levels.

#### IV. Results

Before turning to our explanatory analysis, we evaluate our theoretical assumptions. First, a large part of the theory relies on the implicit assumption that business groups and civil society organizations are relatively cohesive in terms of the positions that they adopt on policy issues. To inspect this presumption, we calculated the Rice index, which ranges from 0 (completely divided) to 1 (completely unified) and is typically used to calculate party unity (Hug, 2010). The business community in our dataset has an average Rice index of 0.69 ( $SD = 0.26$ ), whereas the score is 0.95 ( $SD = 0.03$ ) for the mobilized civil society community. While the business community<sup>7</sup> is more divided than civil society, both communities are fairly cohesive, and their Rice scores fit in the range of Rice indices from European political parties (see Hug, 2010).

Second, while the business and civil society communities seem reasonably unified, do they also significantly align with rightist and leftist public opinion respectively? To answer this question, we correlated the share of business and civil society statements opposing (relative to supporting) an EU policy initiative with the relative share of leftist and rightist public opinion opposing that initiative. We found that the relative opposition from civil society is positively correlated with both leftist ( $r = 0.69$ ;  $P = 0.01$ ) and rightist public opinion ( $r = 0.12$ ;  $P = 0.08$ ), but the association with leftist public opinion is much stronger. The share of business groups opposing an EU policy initiative, in contrast, is

<sup>7</sup>The Rice scores of specific (intra-sectoral) business and encompassing (cross-sectoral) business groups are 0.63 and 0.82, respectively. Encompassing business groups are arguably more cohesive because they aggregate many and diverse business interests and their position is often a compromise reached among their members.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Variables Used

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max</i>
<i>Dependent variables: congruence (n = 368)</i>				
Constituency	0.58	0.24	0.10	0.97
General	0.56	0.23	0.09	0.95
<i>Main explanatory variables (n = 362)</i>				
Civil society mobilization (%)	0.24	0.22	0	0.63
Left–right index (Rile)	–11.01	17.36	–49.03	47.89
<i>Control variables (n = 368)</i>				
Media salience (logged)				
Party in office when statement was made	0.46	0.50	0	1
Media source				
<i>Aftonbladet</i>	0.02	0.15	0	1
<i>Corriere della Sera</i>	0.02	0.15	0	1
<i>Euractiv</i>	0.45	0.50	0	1
<i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i>	0.23	0.42	0	1
<i>Fakt</i>	0.01	0.07	0	1
<i>Financial Times</i>	0.14	0.35	0	1
<i>Le Monde</i>	0.11	0.31	0	1
<i>De Telegraaf</i>	0.02	0.15	0	1
Time unit when statement was made	6.86	3.21	0	13
National MP or not	0.43	0.50	0	1

Table 2: Correlation matrix of alignments between public opinion, elected representatives and interest groups<sup>a</sup>

<i>Opposing statements from</i>	<i>All cases (N = 212)</i>		<i>Left–right conflicting cases (n = 46)</i>	
	<i>Percentage of public opinion opposing a policy initiative</i>			
	<i>Rightist</i>	<i>Leftist</i>	<i>Rightist</i>	<i>Leftist</i>
Business groups	–0.16**	–0.44**	0.65**	–0.53**
Specific business groups	–0.16**	–0.37**	0.53**	–0.32*
Encompassing business groups	0.15**	–0.23**	0.64**	–0.70**
Civil society groups	0.12	0.69**	–0.95**	0.87**

We used fewer observations for these correlations than in the regression analyses as we did not identify statements from civil society groups for several issues in the dataset. For issues where opposing or supporting statements from civil society groups were missing we could not calculate the relative share of opposing statements, which is why these issues were excluded from the correlation analysis.

\* $P < 0.05$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ .

negatively associated with opposition among leftist ( $r = -0.44$ ;  $P = 0.01$ ) and rightist public opinion ( $r = -0.16$ ;  $P = 0.01$ ), but the negative association with leftist public opinion is much stronger. With respect to different types of business interests, encompassing business groups that represent members across economic sectors (such as Business Europe) conform more to our assumptions regarding alignment with rightist public opinion when compared with specialized business organizations that represent corporations within one economic sector (such as the European Automobile Manufacturers' Association).

While these correlations largely support our assumption, they do not yet perfectly reveal the anticipated alignment between business and rightist public opinion. One of the reasons is that leftist and rightist public opinion are strongly correlated ( $r = 0.78$ ;  $P < 0.01$ ) and do not exhibit distinctive patterns of disagreement. To further disentangle leftist and rightist public opinion, we selected only cases where leftist or rightist voters adopted a majority position different from that of the general public (right hand columns of Table 2). When analysing the correlations for these cases, we observed a distinctive pattern whereby business groups strongly align with rightist public opinion ( $r = 0.69$ ;  $P < 0.01$ ) and oppose leftist public opinion ( $r = -0.53$ ;  $P < 0.01$ ), while civil society groups strongly agree with leftist public opinion ( $r = 0.87$ ;  $P < 0.01$ ) and oppose rightist public opinion ( $r = -0.95$ ;  $P < 0.01$ ). Focusing on *critical* cases where these groups disagree is thus helpful for discerning patterns of alignment and opposition between leftist and rightist public opinion.

To test our hypotheses we interacted 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 elected representative's national party on the Rile index. These interactions are included as independent variables in a mixed-effects ordinary least squares regression with general congruence (models 1 and 2) and left–right constituency congruence (models 3 and 4) as the dependent variables. Table 3 presents the regression output. Models 1 and 3 present only the main effects of our variables, and Models 2 and 4 include the interaction effect.<sup>8</sup>

The results show that there is no apparent relationship between a politician's ideology and congruence with their natural constituency (Model 3); yet when particular interest groups are mobilized, this relationship becomes significant (Model 4). The results of the regressions support our expectations that interest groups affect the congruence between elected representatives and citizens. Both models 2 and 4, which include the interaction effects with interest groups, yield a significant improvement of the model fit when compared to their baseline models. We see that a higher share of civil society mobilization results in higher congruence for elected representatives from leftist parties. In contrast, a higher share of business mobilization leads to higher congruence for rightist representatives. This result 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 model explaining general congruence (Model 2) and that explaining left–right constituency congruence (Model 4). Results for representatives from centrist parties are in line with what we found for leftist parties, although the results are less significant (see Figure A3).

The average marginal effects of the interaction effect in Model 4 are depicted in Figure 2a. This figure shows the average change in constituency congruence for a one-unit increase on our left–right index for different values on the relative civil society scale. The figure shows that an increase on the Rile index (more rightist) has a negative impact on constituency congruence for high relative levels of civil society mobilization, whereas an increase on the Rile index has a positive impact for low relative levels of civil society mobilization. Figure 2b shows that an increase in the share of civil society associations has a positive impact on constituency congruence for left-wing politicians and a negative impact for right-wing politicians.

Table 3: Mixed effects ordinary least squares regression of congruence between elected representative's statement and public opinion

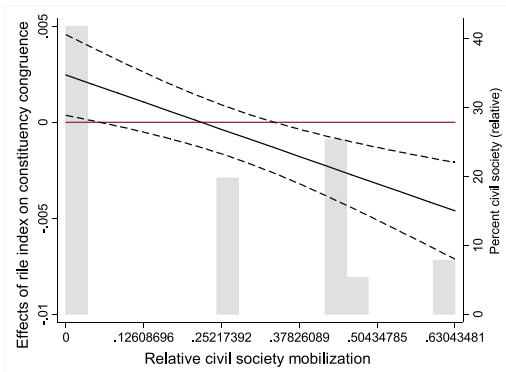
	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>		<i>Model 3</i>		<i>Model 4</i>	
	<i>General congruence</i>				<i>Left-right constituency congruence</i>			
<i>Main effects</i>	<i>Coef</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Coef</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Coef</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Coef</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	0.86***	0.13	0.86***	0.13	0.85***	0.13	0.86***	0.13
Rile index	0.00	0.00	0.00**	0.00	-0.00	0.00	0.00**	0.00
Relative civil society mobilization	0.08	0.08	-0.00	0.09	0.06	0.08	-0.06	0.09
Interest group polarization	-0.27***	0.07	-0.29***	0.08	-0.27***	0.08	-0.29***	0.08
Media salience	-0.03	0.03	-0.03	0.03	-0.03	0.03	-0.02	0.03
Party in office	0.00	0.02	-0.00	0.02	-0.00	0.02	-0.01	0.02
National MP	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.03
Time	0.01	0.00	0.01*	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01*	0.00
Media source								
<i>Aftonbladet</i>	-0.08	0.08	-0.08	0.08	-0.13	0.08	-0.12	0.08
<i>Corriere Della serra</i>	0.05	0.10	0.05	0.10	0.07	0.11	0.08	0.10
<i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i>	-0.08**	0.04	-0.08**	0.04	-0.07*	0.04	-0.07*	0.04
<i>Fakt</i>	-0.11	0.13	-0.11	0.13	-0.14	0.14	-0.13	0.14
<i>Financial Times</i>	-0.06**	0.03	-0.05*	0.03	-0.08**	0.03	-0.07**	0.03
<i>Le Monde</i>	-0.04	0.04	-0.03	0.04	-0.03	0.04	-0.01	0.04
<i>Telegraaf</i>	-0.32***	0.09	-0.36***	0.09	-0.35***	0.09	-0.41***	0.09
<i>Euractiv</i> (reference)								
Interaction effect								
Relative civil society mobilization x Rile index			-0.01***	0.00			-0.01***	0.00
Random effects								
Country	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Issue	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00
Residual	0.03	0.00	0.03	0.00	0.03	0.00	0.03	0.00
Model fit								
N	359		359		359		359	
df	18		19		18		19	
AIC	-160.64		-165.74		-133.67		-144.10	

Standard errors in parentheses with significance levels indicated by \* $P < 0.10$ , \*\* $P < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $P < 0.01$ . AIC, Akaike information criterion.

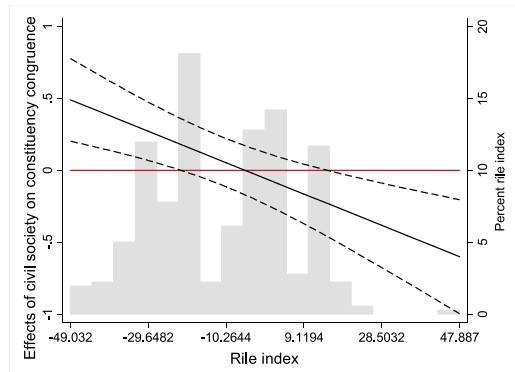
The regressions do not allow us to distinguish between top-down and bottom-up forms of opinion formation (Figure 1). Moreover, we cannot yet determine whether representatives respond to aligned interest groups or to those groups that feature most prominently in the news. We therefore ran robustness checks in which we modelled statements from leftist and rightist representatives separately. Table A12 shows that leftist representatives are more congruent with leftist voters when civil society dominates issues, while for rightist representatives, civil society mobilization has no impact on their congruence with leftist voters. This result aligns with what we expected for selective transmission to be in place. Table A13 presents a similar analysis for rightist representatives. As we expected, the share of civil society mobilization has a negative effect on their congruence with rightist citizens, even if the size of the effect is not large enough to achieve statistical

Figure 2: Average marginal effects of interaction between left–right party positioning and civil society versus business mobilization (with 95% CI). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

(a) Marginal effects of RILE index



(b) Marginal effects of relative civil society mobilization



significance. Overall, these analyses lead us to be cautiously optimistic with respect to the selective transmission mechanism: they provide tentative support for the assumption that representatives are indeed selectively responding to particular types of interest groups rather than to those groups that are the loudest in the media (see section 13 in annex for further discussion). At the same time, follow-up (experimental) research with a larger sample of observations is needed to scrutinize whether and when representatives (especially rightist ones) respond to different types of organized interests.

With respect to our control variables, we present several interesting findings. First, when the mobilized interest group community is more divided, the levels of congruence between elected politicians and public opinion are significantly lower. Second, the statements of elected representatives who belong to a party that is part of the national government are not significantly more or less congruent with public opinion compared with politicians who belong to opposition parties. Third, media salience does not have a significant impact on congruence. Fourth, we observed significant differences between the media outlets: statements in the right-leaning *Financial Times*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *De Telegraaf* experience lower levels of congruence with public opinion compared with statements in the Europhile and progressive *Euractiv*. Fourth, we observe a slight increase in congruence over time, although this increase is barely significant. Finally, we did not find a difference in congruence between national and European parliamentarians.

Just as the preferences of different income groups or of men and women are often relatively similar (Branham *et al.*, 2017; Reher, 2018), the opinions of leftist voters and rightist voters are highly correlated and often in agreement on policy issues. As a critical test of our theory, we therefore focused on issues where leftist and rightist public opinion disagree. This means that our findings in Model 4 may demonstrate that selective transmission affects congruence with public opinion in general and not necessarily congruence with leftist and rightist constituencies in particular. Table A5 therefore focuses *only* on cases where the majority public disagreed with the majority of either

leftist or rightist citizens in a country. Focusing on these cases reduced the analysis to seven of the sampled issues, on which 55 statements were made by elected politicians opposed to or in favour of an EU policy initiative. In the analyses of these cases, the interaction effect of civil society mobilization and a politician's leftist orientation on *general congruence* was no longer significant. In contrast, we found strong statistical support for our hypotheses in the subset of cases where we had the most valid conditions for testing its effect. According to Model A2 in Table A5, civil society mobilization improves constituency congruence for leftist representatives and business mobilization for rightist politicians and vice versa.

We ran a number of robustness checks to qualify our findings. They included models using the Chapel Hill leftist and rightist indices instead of the CMP data (Model A7) and with European instead of national public opinion data (Model A6). We also ran models with fixed (Model A4) and random effects (Model A3) for policy areas and with bin estimators for left–right indices (Model A5) to check the robustness of the interactions. Finally, we conducted a regression in which we distinguished between different types of business interests (Model A8). These robustness checks largely corroborated our findings and they showed that the findings are strongest when we examine the critical cases where left or right-wing citizens disagree with the general public.

## Conclusion

Whether elected representatives act according to the preferences of the public is a crucial criterion for evaluating democratic performance. We have addressed this topic by focusing on the role of interest groups in strengthening or weakening congruence between the position of elected representatives and their constituents' opinions in EU policy-making. 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 Albareda and Braun, 2019; Berkhout *et al.*, 2017, p. 1111; Rasmussen *et al.*, 2014, p. 250; Willems and De Bruycker, 2019). Regarding groups as participants in a selective transmission process, we argue that interest groups primarily serve as a transmission belt between citizens and politicians when they represent segments of society that converge with the support base of the elected representatives.

Rather than finding evidence that groups act as either a blessing or a curse for congruence we found support for our idea that the ability of groups to improve congruence depends on the match between their constituencies and the constituents of national and European parliamentarians. We found that leftist representatives are more congruent with leftist public opinion when civil society dominates media debates, while claims from rightist politicians are more congruent with constituents when business lobbyists take the lead. These findings support our expectations 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 (De Bruycker, 2017; Giger and Klüver, 2016), it can also perform an important role in democracies by increasing the likelihood that rightist representatives are congruent with their support base on specific policy issues.

While previous studies of congruence relied mostly on voting behaviour by MPs, we studied claims-making in the news media, which allowed us to measure politicians'



opinions on issues that are not yet on the legislative agenda or where no roll call votes had taken place. Needless to say, elected politicians may still act or vote differently from the intentions they express in public debates, while some may avoid media appearances altogether. To the extent that national and European parliamentarians use the media to signal responsiveness to their electorate, it is therefore possible that an analysis of media claims-making constitutes a most likely case for observing congruence. We should therefore be careful when generalizing findings about the overall level of congruence to roll call voting 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 will work differently in other political arenas.

This study did not test the full breadth of the selective transmission theory. At least three aspects require further clarification. First, future research should empirically disentangle the causal mechanisms that enable selective transmission between citizens, interest groups and elected representatives. Second, future experimental or longitudinal studies should further distinguish between bottom-up and top-down forms of opinion formation and the role of interest groups therein. Such studies could further clarify whether elected representatives are selectively and purposefully responding to aligned interest groups or indiscriminately listening to the groups that feature most prominently in public debates. Finally, while it is remarkable that we found evidence of selective transmission in our analyses of a relatively low number of critical cases, it is important to expand our tests ultimately to larger samples of issues. By extending the analysis to other political systems and other political arenas, such research will be able to examine the external validity of our findings in more detail. While we applied the theory of selective transmission to EU public policy, its application ought to travel well beyond the EU to other national legislatures.

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Figure A1:** Media salience of the sampled cases.

**Figure A2:** Distribution of sampled issues across policy areas.

**Figure A3:** Marginal effects of left-right positioning for different levels of civil society mobilization with 95% CFIs.

**Figure A4:** Marginal effects of left-right positioning for different levels of civil society mobilization with 95% CFIs.

**Figure A5:** Marginal effects of left-right positioning for different levels of specialized and encompassing business mobilization with 95% CFIs.

**Figure A6:** Distribution of statements and representatives by issue.

**Table A1:** Sampled issues and corresponding Eurobarometer questions.

**Table A2:** Overview of eighth selected media outlets.

**Table A3:** Distribution of statements for different actor types.

**Table A4:** Descriptive statistics of parties in our dataset.

**Table A5:** OLS regression of congruence between elected representative and public opinion for issues where general and constituency public opinion disagreed.

**Table A6:** OLS regression of congruence between elected representative and public opinion with random intercept for policy area.

**Table A7:** OLS regression of congruence between elected representative and public opinion with fixed effects for policy area.

**Table A8:** OLS regression of congruence between elected representative and public opinion with bin estimators for left-right positioning.

**Table A9:** OLS regression congruence between elected representative and European-wide public opinion.

**Table A10:** OLS regression congruence between elected representative and public opinion with Chapel Hill left-right indices.

**Table A11:** OLS regression of congruence between elected representative and public opinion.

**Table A12:** Congruence with leftist public opinion for leftist and rightist representatives respectively.

**Table A13:** Congruence with rightist public opinion for leftist and rightist representatives respectively.