

“‘Mind the gap’? Examining political congruence in a comparative perspective ”

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Abstract of the research project

Europe is experiencing a profound democratic malaise as representative democracy is increasingly being challenged. The basic principles of the representative process are profoundly questioned. As such, the crisis of democracy is far from being a new phenomenon and many studies have addressed this issues over the last 40 years (see Runciman 2013; Crozier et al. 1975). But there is converging evidence of a structural public disaffection with political elites, representation and parties (Dalton 2004; Pitseys 2014). Turnout decreases, especially among the younger generations who seem to turn their back on conventional political participation and politics. Citizens feel less well represented and the economic crisis has further undermined public confidence in representative institutions (Armingeon and Guthmann 2014): almost two citizens out of three do not trust their national government and parliament(respectively 59 and 58%) while 50% of them feel that their voice does not count in the EU (Eurobarometer 88, December 2017). People seem increasingly dissatisfied with democracy, politics and government in general (Copsey 2015; Hobolt 2012). It is therefore not surprising to witness the rise of populist and anti-establishment parties and movements in Europe (and elsewhere). These parties reflect the growing discontent of segments of the population towards traditional parties (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2007; Mair 2009) but also coin elites against the people, claiming that politicians have lost touch with voters (Mudde 2004, 2014). But is this populist claim accurate? Is it true that political elite has drifted away from the people or are politicians able to assess what the public want?

This project aims at addressing these broad questions by looking at one key aspect of political representation: the linkage between voters and elected representatives. More particularly, it will concentrate on the issue of congruence, i.e. the correspondence between elites' and citizens' preferences (Walgrave and Lefevere 2013). It is structured around two research questions:

1) to what extent are elected representatives able to accurately perceive public opinion and

2) why some are more able to have correct perceptions of public opinion?

To examine those questions, will rely on an original comparative approach, combining a horizontal comparison between five countries on the one hand and a vertical comparison between the national and European levels on the other hand. It will allow examining empirically the claim of a gap between citizens and elites but more importantly, it ambitions at developing a robust theoretical framework as to why some elected representatives are better able to perceive the wishes of the people they represent.