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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

(Mis)perception of party congruence and satisfaction with democracy

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Abstract

This study examines how voters' perceptions of ideological incongruence with political parties affect their satisfaction with democracy. Using panel data from the British Election Study, we first demonstrate that greater misperception of party positions correlates with higher perceived ideological distance from one's preferred party. We then show that this increased perceived incongruence is associated with lower satisfaction with democracy when controlling for objective measures of incongruence. These findings are consistent across several alternative measures and specifications, and similar results are found in cross-sectional data from Europe. The results suggest that subjective perceptions of representation, potentially distorted by misperceptions, play a role in shaping citizens' attitudes toward the political system. While the limitations of the study warrant caution in interpretation, the study contributes to the literature by highlighting the importance of perceived ideological congruence for understanding the link between representation and satisfaction with democracy.

Keywords: political parties; representation; attitudes toward democracy

1. Introduction

Political parties play a crucial role in representing the preferences of voters (Downs, 1957; Stokes, 1963). Consequently, many studies have concentrated on the congruence between the ideology of parties and their supporters (Powell, 2010; Arnold *et al.*, 2012; Arnold and Franklin, 2012; Mattila and Raunio, 2012; Butler and Dynes, 2016; Carroll and Kubo, 2018; Werner, 2019; Costello *et al.*, 2020; Best, 2023; Carroll and Meireles, 2024), including the implications for political representation and voters' attitudes toward the political system (Bakker *et al.*, 2020; Noordzij *et al.*, 2021; Wardt and Otjes, 2022; Marchal and Watson, 2022a). However, perceptions of party ideological positions are often flawed (Dahlberg, 2013; Grand and Tiemann, 2013; Calvo *et al.*, 2014; Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016; Carroll and Kubo, 2017; Ahler and Sood, 2018; Meyer and Wagner, 2020; Nasr, 2021), and this may influence perceived ideological gaps between parties and their voters. This study examines the relationship between these potentially inaccurate perceptions of party-supporter ideological congruence and citizens' satisfaction with democracy.

A substantial body of research has investigated the determinants of citizens' satisfaction with democracy, encompassing a wide range of factors (e.g., Anderson and Guillory 1997; Rohrschneider 2005; Kim 2009; Hobolt 2012; Reher 2015; Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017; Dassonneville and McAllister 2020; Loveless and Binelli 2020; Hobolt *et al.* 2021; Valgarðsson

and Devine 2022).¹ A growing set of studies has focused on the role of voter–party alignment (Mayne and Hakhverdian, 2017; Bakker *et al.*, 2018, 2020; Goldberg *et al.*, 2020; Van Egmond *et al.*, 2020; Ibenskas and Polk, 2022; Wardt and Otjes, 2022; Marchal and Watson, 2022b), including how the degree of ideological congruence between voters’ preferences and the positions of parties can influence attitudes toward the political system. While congruence can be objectively measured (Bakker *et al.*, 2018, 2020), it is also influenced by voters’ subjective perceptions (Van Egmond *et al.*, 2020; Best and Seyis, 2021; Wardt and Otjes, 2022). If voters inaccurately perceive parties’ stances, such misperceptions could distort assessments of the alignment between party positions and their own preferences, potentially affecting satisfaction with democracy.

This study examines how voters’ subjective perception of party representation relates to their attitudes toward democracy. When voters perceive incongruence between their own positions and those of the parties they support, dissatisfaction with democracy may increase, notwithstanding the actual degree of representation. Conversely, the perception that a preferred party is more ideologically aligned may correspond to greater satisfaction with democracy, even when the objective degree of congruence is weak. Thus, *misperceptions* of party stances could distort assessments of party–supporter incongruence, impacting perceived representation and, in turn, satisfaction with democracy. That is, subjective evaluations of positions may impact democratic attitudes, where inaccurate beliefs can potentially distort these evaluations.

Our main analysis uses panel data from the British Election Study (BES) to examine how perceived party congruence relates to satisfaction with democracy. The panel structure permits examining within–respondent relationships over time. The UK party system provides a relevant context for this study, as prior research has highlighted perceived gaps between voters’ ideological positions and those of British parties (Brandenburg and Johns, 2014). Moreover, the majoritarian institutional setting limits voters’ options for supported parties, with fewer viable party alternatives (Hobolt *et al.*, 2021). Leveraging this case, we examine whether misperceptions correspond to greater perceived incongruence between voters and their preferred parties and whether such perceived incongruence is negatively associated with satisfaction with democracy, accounting for objective congruence.

We first demonstrate that perceived incongruence—the subjective ideological gap between voters and their preferred party—is associated with greater misperception of party positions. Our main analysis then investigates how perceived incongruence relates to voters’ satisfaction with democracy. The analysis shows that greater perceived incongruence between parties and voters corresponds to lower satisfaction with democracy, holding constant the degree of actual party–supporter incongruence measured by expert assessments of party placements. These findings are shown to be robust across multiple model specifications and alternative ways of measuring party and respondent positions. We also conduct a supplementary cross-sectional analysis, utilizing recent data from European countries from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), finding similar results.

Taken together, the results underscore the importance of subjective evaluations, potentially shaped by misperceptions, in how citizens assess democratic performance. While limitations of the study do not allow conclusions about causality, the findings across analyses suggest that subjective perceptions of representation consistently correlate with democratic attitudes. The paper concludes with a discussion of the limitations of these findings and future directions for research, including the need to identify the causal relationships between subjective perceptions, objective congruence, and attitudes toward democracy.

2. Party incongruence, satisfaction with democracy, and the effects of misperception

A large literature has investigated the influence of various factors on citizens’ satisfaction with the functioning of democracy (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Rohrschneider, 2005; Hobolt,

¹For an overview of this literature, see Singh and Mayne (2023).

2012; Leiter and Clark, 2015; Mayne and Hakhverdian, 2017; Dassonneville and McAllister, 2020; Loveless and Binelli, 2020; Ridge, 2022). Factors contributing to lower satisfaction include disproportionality and government fractionalization (Christmann and Torcal, 2018), voting for losing parties (Curini *et al.*, 2012; Singh *et al.*, 2012; Blais *et al.*, 2017; Nemčok, 2020), and the ideological representativeness of government policies or the overall party system (Kim, 2009; Ezrow and Xezonakis, 2011; Dahlberg and Holmberg, 2014; Dahlberg *et al.*, 2015; Stecker and Tausendpfund, 2016; Blais *et al.*, 2017; Mayne and Hakhverdian, 2017; Ferland, 2021).

While much of the research in this area is concerned with broader government-citizen congruence (e.g., Powell and Bingham, 2000; Golder and Stramski, 2010; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010), a growing body of work examines the consequences of the relationship between individual voters and specific parties, including those they choose to support (Bakker *et al.*, 2018, 2020; Van Egmond *et al.*, 2020; Goldberg *et al.*, 2020; Hobolt *et al.*, 2021; Marchal and Watson, 2022b; Wardt and Otjes, 2022). The degree of alignment between the ideological positions of political parties and their supporters is central to the effectiveness of party representation (Mattila and Raunio, 2012; Boonen *et al.*, 2017; Dalton, 2018; Carroll and Kubo, 2018; Werner, 2019; Costello *et al.*, 2020; Costello, 2021; Wardt and Otjes, 2022). Some consequences of incongruence between parties and voters found in this literature have included decreasing support (Bakker *et al.*, 2018; Marchal and Watson, 2022b), decreasing antipathy toward other parties (Marchal and Watson, 2022b), and driving voters to support emerging parties (Wardt and Otjes, 2022).

Bakker *et al.* (2020) specifically explore the relationship between the representation of voters by parties and citizens' satisfaction, revealing that party incongruence on issues increases citizens' dissatisfaction with democracy, leading to support for anti-establishment parties. In closely related work, Van Egmond *et al.* (2020) find a correlation between perceived congruence with the closest party and satisfaction with democracy. Hobolt *et al.* (2021) also corroborate the importance of party congruence in influencing such attitudes, conditional on party influence.

Party congruence with supporters can be conceptualized through both objective party positions and through supporters' subjective perceptions of those positions (Louwerse and Andeweg, 2020). Some work has defined incongruence based on an objective evaluation of the distance between the parties' and voters' views, as gauged by expert surveys (McEvoy, 2012; Polk *et al.*, 2017; Bakker *et al.*, 2020; Marchal and Watson, 2022a). Perceived congruence, meanwhile, refers to the subjective distance between the positions of parties and supporters, typically measured by surveys of respondent and party left-right placements (Adams *et al.*, 2004; Mattila and Raunio, 2006; Ezrow and Xezonakis, 2011; Ezrow *et al.*, 2011; Mattila and Raunio, 2012; Schumacher *et al.*, 2013; McAllister *et al.*, 2015; Adams *et al.*, 2016; Boonen *et al.*, 2017; Stiers, 2022). Because voters may have inaccurate or biased perceptions of party positions, perceived congruence can differ from actual congruence.

Citizens' ability to perceive the ideological positions of political parties accurately is known to be influenced by a wide range of factors, such as education levels and political knowledge or a lack of clarity in party labels (e.g., Palfrey and Poole, 1987; Luskin, 1990; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Bartels, 1996; Meirick, 2013; Dahlberg, 2013; Banducci *et al.*, 2015; Busch, 2016; Carroll and Kubo, 2017; Nasr, 2020). In addition to such information gaps, other literature has found that partisan identities can shape information processing or result in motivated reasoning influencing voters' understanding of policy issues (e.g., Bartels, 2002; Evans and Andersen, 2004; Carsey and Layman, 2006; Evans and Andersen, 2006; Bartels, 2008; Evans and Pickup, 2010; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011; Jerit and Barabas, 2012; Grand and Tiemann, 2013), which may distort their perception of party policy positions and the gap between perceived and actual party placements.

These misperceptions of where parties fall on the left–right ideological spectrum can, in turn, distort voters’ assessments of their ideological distance from those parties.² Importantly, voter misperceptions about party positions can distort assessments of ideological congruence. When voters inaccurately perceive a party as more ideologically distant from their own stance than objective measures indicate, such misperceptions correspond to greater perceived incongruence. Alternatively, when a voter inaccurately perceives a party as closer to their ideology than expert placements suggest, this misperception might increase their subjective sense of ideological alignment with that party (Merrill *et al.*, 2001; Drummond, 2010).

Here, we explore the relationship between subjective perceptions of representation and attitudes toward the political system. While the objective ideological mismatch between voters and the parties they support may naturally contribute to perceptions of incongruence, we consider whether there is a distinct impact on perceived incongruence separate from the effects of actual incongruence. That is, potentially inaccurate perception of positions may influence satisfaction with democracy by distorting voters’ perceived ideological linkage to parties, even accounting for the actual degree of representation.

In the following analysis, we describe and implement empirical tests to evaluate these questions. The analysis proceeds in two parts. First, we examine the correlation between misperceptions of party positions, actual incongruence, and perceived incongruence. Second, in our main analysis, we investigate whether respondents’ level of satisfaction with democracy decreases with greater perceived incongruence between themselves and the party they support, accounting for actual congruence.

3. Data and measures

3.1 Measuring perceived and actual congruence

While cross-sectional designs are often used to study satisfaction with democracy, this approach may not fully account for the effects of individual characteristics. To address this limitation, we use panel data that allow us to measure changes in key variables for the same individuals over multiple surveys, allowing us to gain better insight into these relationships when holding constant individual-level factors.

Specifically, we use data from the BES data (Schmitt *et al.*, 2021). The UK is useful for studying party representation because of the relative weakness of the party system’s representativeness (Brandenburg and Johns, 2014). In particular, in a cross-sectional study of British voters, Brandenburg and Johns (2014) have found that democratic satisfaction correlates with the lack of perceived proximity to the nearest identified party and not the lack of choices between the major parties. Thus, there is some evidence that UK voters’ attitudes toward democracy are sensitive to how well parties accurately represent their views.

The BES provides periodic surveys of political opinions, perceptions, and preferences, which provides a panel structure appropriate for our study. Because of the variation across regional party systems and contexts in the UK, we restrict the sample used in the analysis to England. Because this study focuses on parties and supporters, only respondents who indicate supporting a party are included. All respondents in these panels were asked to respond to self-reported perceptions of the parties’ left–right positions. Five years of surveys are included in the analysis, from wave 4 in 2015 to wave 18 in 2019. Thirteen waves include the necessary questions about self-reported perceptions of parties’ left–right positions. Ten of these waves

²Misperception is therefore one reason why voters would support parties with policies diverging from their own preferences in objective terms (Hooghe and Stiers, 2016; Boonen *et al.*, 2017; Lesschaeve, 2017; Voogd and Dassonneville, 2020; Dassonneville *et al.*, 2020; Steiner and Hillen, 2021). In addition, a larger objective ideological distance between a voter and the party they support may also make it more difficult for that voter to accurately perceive party positions (Bartels, 2002; Evans and Andersen, 2004).

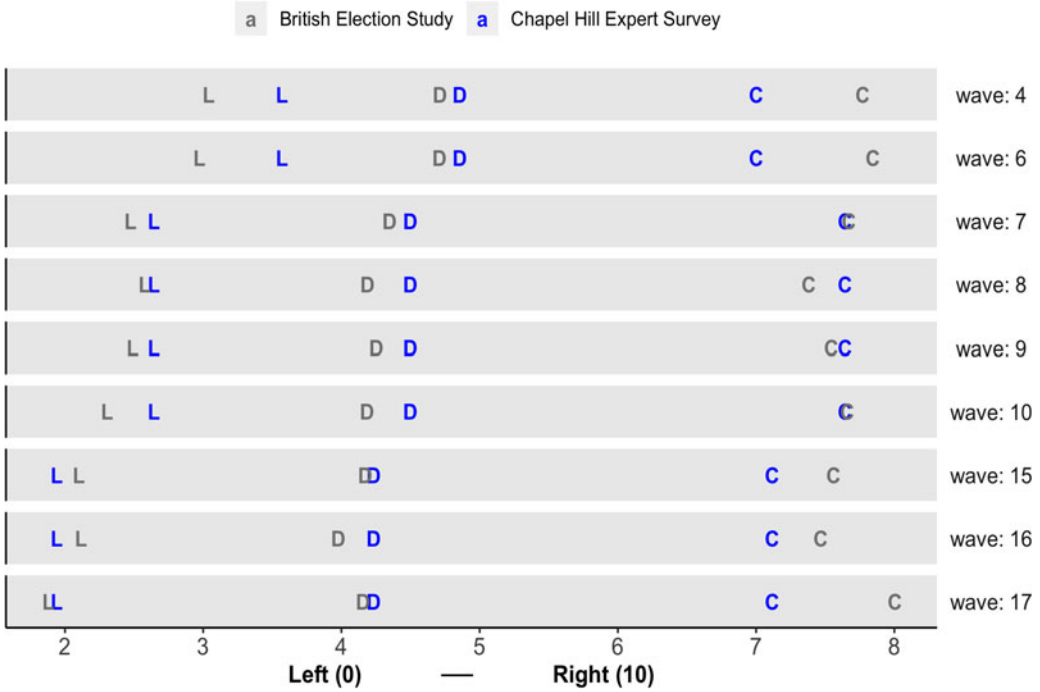


Figure 1. CHES expert placements and average BES respondent misperceptions (Note: C = Conservatives, L = Labour, D = Liberal Democrats).

include the information needed to analyze satisfaction with democracy and these are used in the main analysis below.

Our first aim is to measure perceived and actual incongruence. To measure the actual left–right ideological positions of British parties, we use the mean ideological positions for each party obtained from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) for 2014, 2017, and 2019 (Jolly *et al.*, 2022; Bakker *et al.* 2018, 2020). While expert placements are still ultimately subjective judgments of parties’ positions, they are independent of voters’ own judgments and reflect experts’ efforts to place parties for analytical purposes. These CHES positions are then matched with the responses from the BES for the closest year of the survey wave (see Appendix A, Table A.1 for the exact survey structure).³

Figure 1 presents the average voter’s perceived ideological position of the major parties in England on a scale from 0 to 10, where scale 0 represents the “left” in ideology and scale 10 represents the “right.” The Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat parties are denoted by capital letters C, L, and D, respectively. The gray placements correspond to the average perceived positions of voters from the BES data, while the blue placements correspond to the average positions measured by Chapel Hill Survey experts.

While voters’ perceptions of party positions generally align with expert measurements on average, there is significant variation in how accurately individual citizens perceive party ideology. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the difference between an individual voter’s perception and

³Note that the CHES data limits the temporal variation in party positions across time in the panel analysis. An alternative notion of “actual” positions that aligns with the variance in the individual voter perception data can be constructed based on averages from voter perceptions. As described below, we replicate the main analysis using average voter placements and specifically more sophisticated voter placements in Appendix C.9. This approach produces substantively similar results to those reported below.

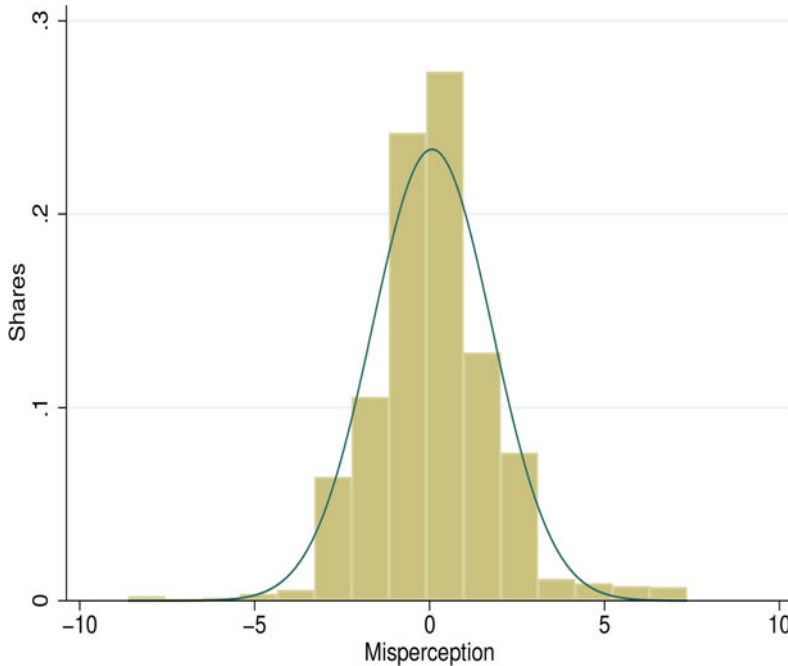


Figure 2. The distributions of misperception (BES wave 7).

the corresponding actual position for wave 7, as well as continuous lines indicating the fitted normal distributions.

3.2 Misperception and incongruence

In this section, we examine the relationship between perceived incongruence, actual incongruence, and misperceptions. We first illustrate these concepts and how inaccuracies in party placements can distort voters' assessments of representation. We illustrate two scenarios to show how voters can misplace party positions and how this would relate to the actual and perceived political incongruence between themselves and the party they support. First, BES respondents may perceive their own political ideology to be closer to their perceived party placement than to the actual position assessed by CHES experts, as shown in Figure 3b. Conversely, BES respondents may place themselves closer to the actual position than the location they perceive for political parties, as shown in Figure 3a. In this scenario, misperception leads to an underestimation of the degree of representation.

Here, *Misperception* ($\pi_{i,t}$) is defined as the absolute distance between an individual respondent's perception of their preferred party's position and the corresponding average position from the CHES expert placements.⁴ Specifically, it is calculated as

$$\pi_{i,t}^p = |\alpha_{i,t}^p - \bar{\alpha}_t^p|, \quad (1)$$

here, for respondent i in wave t , $\alpha_{i,t}^p$ represents their perception of the party's left–right ideological position and $\bar{\alpha}_t^p$ is the average position of the same party reported by the expert survey. This produces a distance, $\pi_{i,t}$, between the respondent and the experts, which indicates the level of

⁴Preferred party is coded based on the party identification variable in each wave of BES surveys, which asks, “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat or what?” to determine voters' party identification.

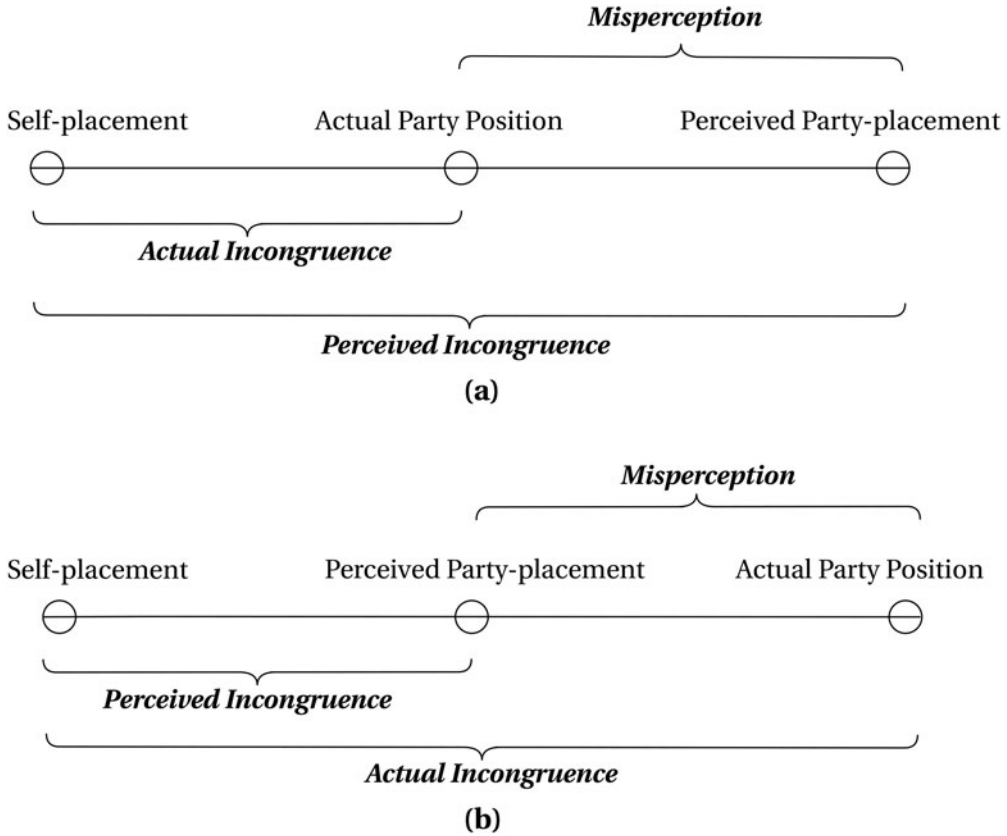


Figure 3. Misperception of party locations: two scenarios, (a) perceived party position farther than actual party position, (b) perceived party-placement is closer than actual party position.

misperception of the respondent i regarding the position of the party p on wave t . Specifically, $\pi_{i,t}$ measures the misperception that voter i has about the party they voted for in the previous general election.

Actual incongruence ($\gamma_{i,t}$) is defined as the absolute difference between the individual respondent's self-placement on general left–right positions and the corresponding average expert placement. This is calculated as

$$\gamma_{i,t}^p = |\alpha_{i,t}^s - \bar{\alpha}_t^p|, \tag{2}$$

α_t^s denotes voter i 's self-placement in wave t . *Perceived incongruence* ($\hat{\gamma}_{i,t}$) is measured as the absolute gap between a BES respondent's self-placement and the perceived position of the party they support. $\hat{\gamma}_{i,t}$ is calculated as

$$\hat{\gamma}_{i,t}^p = |\alpha_{i,t}^s - \alpha_t^p|. \tag{3}$$

Finally, we consider the following panel regression model by including both individual-specific fixed effects and dummies for each wave (v_i and m_t):

$$\hat{\gamma}_{i,t} = \beta_1 \pi_{i,t} + \beta_2 \gamma_{i,t} + v_i + m_t + e_{it}, \tag{4}$$

Table 1. Party misperception and perceived and actual party incongruence, BES panel

Dependent variable:	Actual incongruence		Perceived incongruence	
	(1)	(2)	(2)	(3)
Misperception ($\pi_{i,t}$)	0.199*** (0.005)	0.327*** (0.008)	0.327*** (0.008)	0.254*** (0.008)
Actual incongruence ($\gamma_{i,t}$)				0.372*** (0.009)
Constant	1.007*** (0.022)	0.934*** (0.030)	0.934*** (0.030)	0.559*** (0.033)
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Time FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>N</i>	130,305	130,305	130,305	130,305

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

where $\hat{\gamma}_{i,t}$ denotes respondent i 's perceived incongruence of their own affiliated party in wave t and $\gamma_{i,t}$ denotes the actual incongruence between respondent i and their party in wave t . The misperception of respondents about the ideological position of the party they support at time t is represented by $\pi_{i,t}$, accounting for the perceived positions of political parties in the context in which they compete (Wagner and Meyer, 2023).

The results of the panel analysis exploring the relationship between perceived incongruence and voters' misperception are presented in Table 1. We first show the bivariate relationships between misperception and both measures of party congruence. In column (1) of the table, we first show the bivariate relationship between voters' misperception and *actual* party incongruence, which we establish has a positive association. That is, voters who misperceive their party's ideology tend to have a larger discrepancy between their own preferences and the positions of the party they support. In column (2), we find a positive bivariate correlation between misperception and perceived party incongruence, with individuals who misperceive their party's position perceiving greater incongruence.

The subsequent model (column 3) shows the specification described in 3, examining the relationship between misperception and perceived incongruence when controlling for the level of actual incongruence. Here, we see that both actual incongruence and the degree of misperception each explain some proportion of variation in the perception of incongruence among voters. That is, even when controlling for actual incongruence, greater misperception is associated with perceiving a larger gap between themselves and the parties they support, on average. This suggests that misperception plays a distinct role in shaping voters' perception of incongruence, separate from the influence of actual incongruence.⁵

We also performed a cross-sectional analysis using a pooled OLS approach, which accounted for demographic characteristics such as age, education level, gender, survey year, party affiliation, and the number of information sources reported by each respondent. The results of this analysis, presented in Table C.6 of Appendix C, are consistent with the panel findings in Table 1.

4. Perceived incongruence, actual incongruence, and satisfaction with democracy

Having shown the correlation between misperceptions and perceived incongruence in the previous analysis, we now turn to our main investigation of how such perceived incongruence relates to satisfaction with democracy, accounting for actual incongruence based on expert surveys. To

⁵While not the focus of the present study, we also illustrate some of the correlates of party position misperceptions in Appendix D. We find that misperceptions are reduced by factors such as education, political interest, media use, and partisan attachment.

Table 2. Panel regression: effects of perceived incongruence and actual incongruence on satisfaction, BES panel

Dependent variable:	Satisfaction with democracy	
	(1)	(2)
Actual incongruence	-0.007** (0.004)	-0.001 (0.004)
Perceived incongruence		-0.015*** (0.003)
Constant	-0.469*** (0.010)	-0.455*** (0.010)
Individual FE	✓	✓
Time FE	✓	✓
Observations	93,213	93,026
Adjusted R^2	0.069	0.069

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

investigate this relationship, we consider the following panel regression model, which again utilizes individual-specific fixed effects to control for individual heterogeneity

$$\hat{y}_{i,t} = \alpha_1 \gamma_{i,t} + \alpha_2 \hat{\gamma}_{i,t} + \epsilon_i + w_t + u_{it}, \quad (5)$$

where $\hat{y}_{i,t}$ denotes the semi-standardized measurement of respondent i 's democratic satisfaction.⁶ $\gamma_{i,t}$ denotes the actual incongruence between respondent i and their party in wave t and $\hat{\gamma}_{i,t}$ denotes the perceived incongruence of the respondent i of their own affiliated party in wave t . v_i captures the respondent-specific fixed effects, and m_t captures the time (wave) effect.

Columns (1) and (2) in the upper panel of Table 2 report the estimation results using satisfaction with democracy as the dependent variable. Column (1) considers the case where perceived incongruence is not included as a regressor, while column (2) shows the results when both perceived and actual incongruence are included in the model. In column (1), we see that actual incongruence negatively correlates with satisfaction with democracy.

Once perceived incongruence is also included in the model, the association between voters' actual incongruence and satisfaction with democracy is no longer statistically significant, while perceived incongruence has a negative and statistically significant association with voters' satisfaction with democracy. The estimated relationships between perceived and actual party incongruence and satisfaction with democracy are plotted in Figure 4. As shown, a larger perceived incongruence is correlated with a decrease in voters' satisfaction with democracy, while there is no longer a statistically significant correlation with actual incongruence.

Although the correlation with actual incongruence is not statistically significant when accounting for perceived incongruence, it is important to emphasize that greater objective distances between voters and parties still contribute to dissatisfaction. However, the results suggest that this effect may occur mainly via the influence on perceived incongruence. Consistent with the notion that subjective perceptions are important for attitudes toward democracy, the overall pattern of results suggests that the effect of perceived incongruence remains when accounting for actual congruence.

To evaluate the robustness of this result, we also conducted several additional analyses, shown in the Appendix. First, in column (3) of Appendix Table C.4 we show a model that adds a control

⁶*Satisfaction with Democracy* is normalized as follows. The respondents were asked: "On the whole, how satisfied, or dissatisfied are you with how democracy works in the UK?" The interviewee responds on a four-point scale ranging from "Very dissatisfied" to "Very satisfied." We normalize so that the response "Very dissatisfied" is valued at -1.5 and "Very satisfied" is valued at 1.5. Then we divide the distribution by its standard deviation. In this way, the mean response across the population can be interpreted as standard deviations away from a neutral effect.

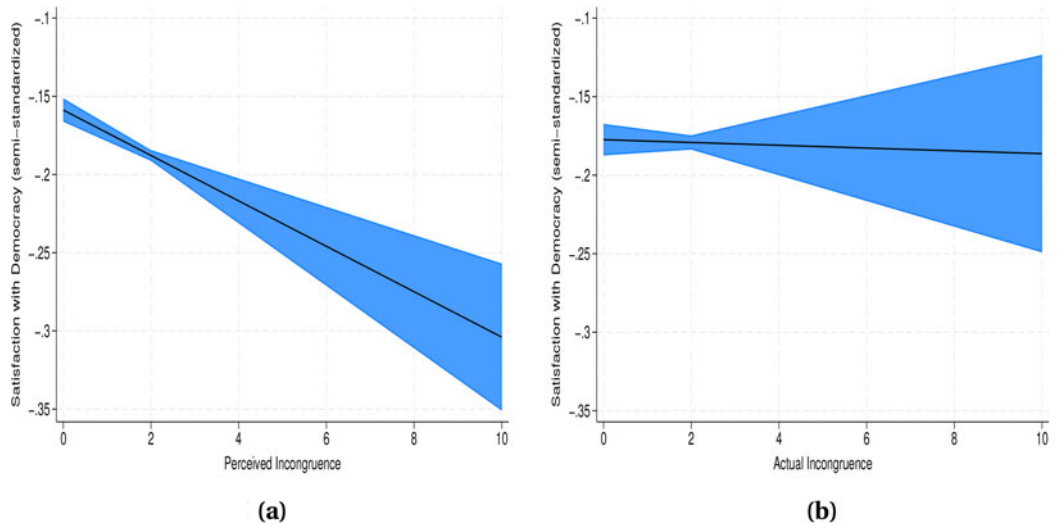


Figure 4. BES: predicted effects of perceived and actual party-supporter incongruence on democratic satisfaction, (a) BES: predicted values of democratic satisfaction by perceived incongruence, (b) BES: predicted values of democratic satisfaction by actual incongruence.

for misperception itself to assess its influence alongside perceived and actual incongruence on satisfaction with democracy. We find no statistically significant effect for misperception when actual and perceived incongruence are accounted for, and the effects of perceived incongruence remain nearly the same as those presented above. While perceived incongruence is associated with greater misperception, the effects of the former are present separately from the degree of misperception.⁷

Second, we also performed an analysis using a pooled OLS approach, which accounted for demographic characteristics such as age, education level, gender, survey year, party affiliation, and the number of information sources reported by each respondent. The results of this analysis, presented in Table C.6 of Appendix C, are consistent with the findings in Table 1.⁸

A third set of additional analyses is intended to partially evaluate the potential endogeneity of perceived incongruence, detailed in Appendix C.4. The first of these uses lagged measures of incongruence and democratic satisfaction, which relates the level of satisfaction to perceived incongruence in the prior survey wave. Similar to our main analyses, the lagged measure of perceived incongruence retains a significant association with lowered democratic satisfaction when including current perceived incongruence and lagged satisfaction with democracy. Second, another analysis examining changes in satisfaction with democracy over time as the dependent variable is detailed in Appendix C.5, which also corroborates the main findings. Third, we also explored an instrumental variable approach, described in Appendix C.6, which is also consistent with the main results. While these supplemental analyses do not eliminate the possibility of endogeneity, they provide some additional evidence suggesting that perceived incongruence may at least partially influence satisfaction with democracy.

A fourth set of supplemental analyses considers a series of alternative measures. First, while expert surveys are useful measures of parties' "actual" positions independently of respondents,

⁷In addition, each of the substantive findings in the supplementary analyses of satisfaction with democracy presented in the appendix and described below also remain similar when controlling for misperception.

⁸We further investigate in this Appendix an alternate approach using ordered logit regression with individual respondent random effects, where the dependent variable is the ordered categorical level of satisfaction with democracy. The results are consistent with the main results in the linear fixed-effects model.

these periodic data limit this measure of congruence to be influenced more by changes in self placements. As an alternative to the expert survey data, we employed an approach that uses average voter placements as a proxy for actual party positions. This method allows for variation in party positions across each survey wave. We conduct a supplementary analysis, detailed in Appendix C.9, where we replace the expert left–right party placements with mean positions derived from BES respondents. To calculate these mean positions, we use both the entire set of BES respondents and a subset of respondents likely to be more politically informed—measured as those with postgraduate degrees or higher. When we use these voter-based measures to measure actual incongruence, the results using these alternative measures remain substantively similar to our main findings, regardless of whether we use the overall respondent average or the more sophisticated subset. The consistency across these measurement approaches provides some evidence that the main findings do not depend on the specific nature of the expert survey data.

Further, we also considered alternatives to left–right ideology measures for respondents and experts and examined an alternative approach to estimate a latent measure of ideological positions based on responses to multiple substantive issue scales using Blackbox scaling (Poole, 1998; Poole *et al.*, 2016). This facilitates measuring expert and respondent locations based on latent policy preferences rather than interpretations of an abstract left–right scale. For this analysis, we used the BES expert ratings, which include party positions on multiple issues but are limited to certain waves and thus restricted to use in a cross-sectional analysis. We applied this method to BES waves with expert and respondent ratings on four available issues: immigration, redistribution, environment, EU integration. The results using the latent ideological measures mirror the main findings for left–right placements. The details are provided in Appendix C.7. Finally, we also explored the robustness of the aggregate pattern to using each of these policy scales separately, shown in Appendix C.8. The issue-specific results exhibit patterns similar to the main findings using aggregate measure and consistent with the results using the left–right scale.

5. Cross-national analysis of European democracies

As our main panel analysis focuses on a single country context, we also examine whether similar relationships between misperceptions, incongruence, and satisfaction may emerge in a broader set of contexts. To explore this, we use a cross-national sample from the CSES across 14 European countries in Module 5 of the CSES from 2015 to 2021. Examining this broader set of political systems helps assess if perception-driven gaps in ideological representation generally correlate with lower democratic satisfaction when accounting for actual policy incongruence. We utilize CSES data on voters' perceptions of party positions, self-placements, and satisfaction to estimate cross-sectional models otherwise similar to the main analysis.

We estimate the following specification:

$$\hat{y}_i = a_1 \gamma_i + a_2 \hat{\gamma}_i + \theta \tilde{C}_i + \eta X_t + \phi Y_i + \epsilon_i, \quad (6)$$

where \tilde{C}_i is a set of demographic characteristics of the respondents, including household income (binned), gender, highest level of education, marriage status, employment status, and household size. We also control for survey years and the country of respondent i by including X_t and Y_i , respectively. The rest of the notation remains the same as Equation (5).

Table 3 reports the findings. Column (1) illustrates that actual incongruence has a statistically significant negative association with respondents' satisfaction with democracy in the model that does not include perceived incongruence. However, when perceived incongruence is included in column (2), the correlation between actual incongruence and satisfaction with democracy is no longer statistically significant, while the association between voters' satisfaction with democracy and perceived incongruence is statistically significant. The fitted values are plotted in Figure 5. The results are consistent with the main findings presented above that voters' perception of

Table 3. Regression: effects of perceived incongruence and actual incongruence on satisfaction, European democracies (CSES)

Dependent variable:	Satisfaction with democracy	
	(1)	(2)
Actual incongruence	-0.026*** (0.008)	-0.012 (0.009)
Perceived incongruence ($\hat{\gamma}_{i,t}$)		-0.041*** (0.009)
Constant	-1.043*** (0.210)	-1.031*** (0.219)
Year dummies	✓	✓
Country dummies	✓	✓
Individual-level controls	✓	✓
Observations	9327	8664
Adjusted R^2	0.229	0.227

Standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

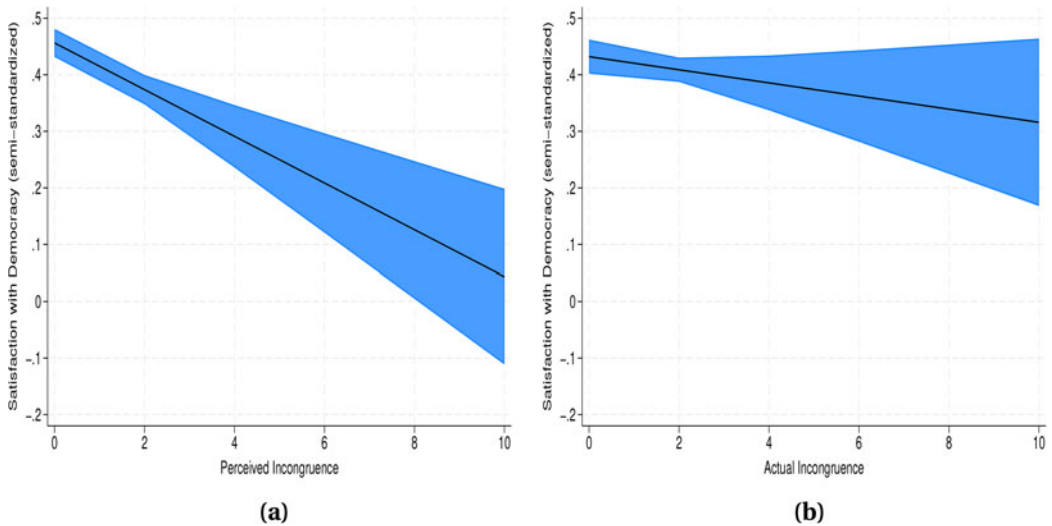


Figure 5. CSES: predicted effects of perceived and actual party-supporter incongruence on democratic satisfaction, (a) CSES: predicted values of democratic satisfaction by perceived incongruence, (b) CSES: predicted values of democratic satisfaction by actual incongruence.

the mismatch between themselves and the party they support is especially important to the relationship with satisfaction with the political system, accounting for actual incongruence.⁹

6. Conclusions

Effective representation of voter preferences is fundamental to a well-functioning democracy. A crucial element of party representation is the alignment between a political party’s policy positions and its supporters’ preferences. If there is a misalignment between the positions parties adopt and the preferences of those who support them, this may contribute to political

⁹We also used the CSES cross-sectional sample from Europe to conduct an analysis similar to the earlier study regarding the correlation between party misperception and perceived and actual voter–party incongruence. The results, which are consistent with the main results from the panel data, are reported in Appendix C.3.

dissatisfaction. However, the impact of this misalignment may depend not only on actual policy divergence but also on voters' perceptions of party positions. This study investigates the extent to which voters' potentially inaccurate perceptions of party positions relate to the relationship between incongruence and democratic dissatisfaction.

To address this question, we differentiate between actual and perceived party incongruence. Perceived incongruence refers to the subjective gap that voters perceive between their own political views and the positions of the parties they support. Actual incongruence, in contrast, captures the gap between voters' views and objective assessments of party positions, as represented by expert evaluations. Perceived incongruence depends on how accurately voters understand party policy stances, as misperceptions can distort assessments of ideological alignment. Consequently, voters may subjectively perceive a degree of congruence (or incongruence) with their preferred parties that is not reflected in more objective measures.

Our empirical analysis investigates the relationship between perceptions of party positions and democratic satisfaction using a panel regression with data from the BES (Schmitt *et al.*, 2021). We first establish that perceived incongruence is correlated with misperception of the position of the supported party. The main analysis then shows that greater perceived party incongruence is associated with lower satisfaction with democracy among voters, while actual incongruence has no effect when both variables are considered. That is, we find that greater perceived incongruence between a party and its supporters is associated with a lower level of satisfaction with democracy for respondents, separate from the actual degree of party congruence. The findings suggest that subjective perceptions of party incongruence, which are partly a function of misperception, are related to lower satisfaction with democracy. A series of alternative measures and specifications using the panel data and a cross-sectional analysis of European countries corroborates these findings.

Overall, the findings suggest that voters who perceive a greater ideological gap between themselves and the parties they support are associated with less satisfaction with democracy, even when accounting for the actual degree of representation by those parties. Although objective representation influences perception, the results suggest that perception of representation may be a distinct contributor to satisfaction with democracy. This implies that potentially inaccurate perceptions of the degree of representation could play a role in citizens' attitudes toward democracy.

Our study builds on work on the consequences of party congruence, such as Bakker *et al.* (2020), suggesting that subjective perceptions contribute to democratic satisfaction. The results reinforce existing findings that a lack of perceived ideological congruence undermines satisfaction with the party system (Wardt and Otjes, 2022) and the democratic system overall (e.g., Brandenburg and Johns, 2014; Stecker and Tausendpfund, 2016; Van Egmond *et al.*, 2020) by highlighting the perceived congruence as an important contributing factor. In particular, our findings extend the work of Brandenburg and Johns (2014), who demonstrate that reduced democratic satisfaction in the UK is associated with perceived policy distance from parties. The findings also relate to work on US institutions that suggest that perceived ideological proximity to representatives improves attitudes toward legislative institutions (Kirkland and Banda, 2019). Further, the results complement those of Ridge (2022) on the importance of voters' subjective perceptions for citizens' satisfaction with the democratic process.

Several limitations are important to note. First, while literature on democratic satisfaction suggests that these attitudes are endogenous to various features of the political context, such as perceived representation, it is also likely that some part of the relationship results from placements being influenced by motivated reasoning, as seen in other contexts (Lenz, 2012; Tiemann, 2022). That is, voters who become more dissatisfied with the democratic system may be motivated to report a greater ideological distance from the parties they support. While alternative measures and supplementary analyses offer some evidence that perceived incongruence may influence satisfaction with democracy, this study cannot definitively resolve the direction of causality. Addressing the predominant causal direction remains an important area to investigate.

In addition, while not central to this study, the positive correlation found between misperceptions and actual party incongruence is also open to interpretation. This relationship may emerge due to how misperception affects whether more congruent parties are chosen for support, or it may be that larger actual ideological distances may result in distortions in perception by making it more difficult for voters to accurately locate a party's position relative to their own.

Further research using experimental designs could help establish the causal relationships and identify circumstances under which reverse relationships between these variables are likely to be observed. Directly manipulating information about party positions or satisfaction levels in a controlled setting would help illuminate how each factor influences the other. Survey experiments could also measure how misperceptions influence satisfaction with democracy, and whether voters adjust their behavior when presented with accurate information. Such studies could also more precisely test how providing accurate party placement information affects satisfaction levels. Experimental extensions of this type will complement the observational findings presented here.

In addition, while we demonstrate that misperceptions of party positions are related to greater perceived incongruence, we do not directly address the origins of those misperceptions in this study. Misperceptions can reflect various factors (Nasr, 2021), such as information gaps due to political knowledge and sophistication (Bartels, 1996), elite messaging (Jerit and Barabas, 2012), and partisan biases (Bartels, 2002). High levels of actual incongruence may, for example, lead to greater misperceptions if, for example, voters seek to minimize cognitive dissonance. While existing research has investigated the reasons for subjective perceptions of party positions and self-placements using survey data, experimental manipulations will also be important to clarifying causal relationships with the political information environment to better understand why the misperceptions emerge that can translate into perceived representation gaps and, potentially, forms of political disaffection. Future work could evaluate more precisely the role that motivational biases and informational gaps play in misperceptions, particularly in light of the potential impact on attitudes toward democracy.

Finally, the present study has important limitations to its scope worth noting. Among these is the focus on supporters of a political party, which does not allow exploring broader sets of groups who may relate to the party system, nor the possible variation across demographic and partisan groups. Additionally, while we include a cross-sectional analysis of Europe, our main panel study is focused on a single country context. Future research will benefit from exploring these issues across additional contexts and populations to better understand the generalizability and conditionality of the findings.

Overall, the findings underscore the importance of subjective perceptions of parties in potentially shaping political attitudes. As voters vary widely in how accurately they perceive party stances, the study highlights the value of understanding how misperceptions affect, and are affected by, attitudes toward democratic institutions.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2024.48>. To obtain replication material for this article, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/DAOOUF>

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