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Do Citizens Perceive an empty Left-Authoritarian Quadrant? Citizen Perceptions of Parties' Positions in a Multi-Dimensional Space

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Abstract

Given that there are few parties in the left-authoritarian quadrant of a two-dimensional ideological space, citizens that combine economically left and socioculturally conservative attitudes have been described as lacking representation. We do not know, however, whether left-authoritarian voters perceive this lack of representation themselves. We collect comparative data that include perceptual measures of parties' positions across economic and sociocultural issues in ten countries, allowing us to compare the objective and subjective distances between voters and parties. We find that left-authoritarians are objectively the least well represented ideological group

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but this gap appears to be unnoticed by left-authoritarians. We furthermore uncover that left-liberals systematically perceive the smallest distance to their parties, even though they are not particularly close to them objectively. In showing large differences between the objective and subjective gaps in representation, our work calls into question research that has argued that objective gaps in representation trigger citizen political disaffection.

Keywords
political parties, representation and electoral systems, elections, public opinion, voting behavior

Much scholarly work in the field of party politics and electoral behaviour describes party competition and voting behaviour in advanced democracies as structured by two main ideological dimensions: an economic left-right dimension and a second—sociocultural— dimension (De Vries, 2018; Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Kitschelt, 1988; Kriesi, 2010). In a political space that is defined by two cross-cutting dimensions, political parties as well as voters can theoretically take positions in four different quadrants. Following earlier research, we refer to these as the left-liberal, right-authoritarian, left-authoritarian, and right-liberal quadrants of a two-dimensional space (Hillen & Steiner, 2020; Lefkofridi et al., 2014; Steiner & Hillen, 2021).

Research that has studied the positions of parties and voters has demonstrated that voters and parties are not equally distributed across the four quadrants of a two-dimensional political space. At the voter level, research indicates that a large share of the public combines economically left views with socially conservative views. van der Brug and van Spanje (2009), for example, report that across 15 EU countries, there are about three times as many voters who are economically left and anti-immigration (left-authoritarian) than voters who are economically right and pro-immigration (right-liberal). Similar patterns emerge from other comparative (Lefkofridi et al., 2014) and country-specific analyses (Hakhverdian & Schakel, 2022; Steiner & Hillen, 2021) in European democracies.

Political parties in established democracies, in contrast, mostly combine economically left (right) and socially progressive (conservative) issue positions (Dassonneville et al., 2023; Hillen & Steiner, 2020; van der Brug & van Spanje, 2009). Furthermore, in several countries there are parties that take a position in the right-liberal quadrant (Close and Van Haute, 2019). But in contrast to what holds for voters, there are few parties that occupy a place in the left-authoritarian quadrant of the two-dimensional space (Hillen &

Steiner, 2020; Lefkofridi et al., 2014; Steiner & Hillen, 2021; van der Brug & van Spanje, 2009). This mismatch between where citizens and voters are positioned has led scholars to worry about the fact that left-authoritarians lack representation in established democracies. Concerns about the lack of representation for left-authoritarians have been strengthened by the observation that left-authoritarians are less likely to turn out to vote, are less satisfied with democracy, have lower levels of political trust and higher levels of political cynicism (Hakhverdian & Schakel, 2022; Hillen & Steiner, 2020). More generally, there is much evidence that shows that voters who perceive incongruence with parties are less satisfied with democracy (Carroll et al., 2025; Van Egmond et al., 2020). Such findings seem consistent with the assumption that it is their lack of representation that leads left-authoritarian voters to grow politically dissatisfied and disaffected.

However, we miss direct evidence demonstrating that left-authoritarian citizens indeed perceive that they do not have a party to vote for close by. And there are reasons to doubt that left-authoritarians perceive a lack of representation in a two-dimensional space. Specifically, Steiner and Hillen (2021) show that left-authoritarians in Germany vote for left-liberal parties when they misperceive them to hold anti-immigrant positions and for right-authoritarian parties when they misperceive the economic positions of these parties. Such misperceptions could result from the psychological process of projection whereby citizens tend to perceive parties they like as closer to them—which the literature has referred to as an assimilation effect (Drummond, 2011; Grand & Tiemann, 2013; Merrill III, Grofman and Adams, 2001). In addition, the behaviour of parties can contribute to citizens misperceiving parties' positions too. For strategic reasons and in order to appeal broadly, parties can maintain ambiguity in their ideological positions (Somer-Topcu, 2015). Parties can also strategically blur their positions (Koedam, 2021; Rovny, 2012, 2013) and previous work has shown that right-authoritarian parties are particularly likely to blur their economic positions (Rovny & Polk, 2020). Such party strategies increase the uncertainty in parties' positions, which in turn reinforces projection effects (Nasr, 2021).

If misperceptions are widespread, left-authoritarians might not realise that they are less well represented compared to voters in other quadrants of the two-dimensional space. To asses to what extent left-authoritarians and voters in other quadrants perceive themselves to be well represented, we require data about citizens' own positions, *and* their perceptions of parties, on multiple issue dimensions. In contrast to measures of citizens' own positions, such perceptual indicators are not commonly available, and most work that has studied congruence in a multidimensional space has hence matched citizens' positions with expert perceptions of party positions (Bakker et al., 2020;

Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016). There are few datasets that allow studying citizens' perceptions of parties' positions beyond a general left-right dimension or a European integration dimension (Adams et al., 2019). In their work on misperceptions of party positions in a multidimensional space, Steiner and Hillen (2021) made use of data from the 2017 campaign panel of the German Longitudinal Election Study, which included measures of perceptions of parties' positions on one economic issue (lower taxes and welfare benefits vs. higher taxes and welfare benefits) and one non-economic issue (restricting immigration). From time to time, other surveys, such as the British or Danish election studies, also include perceptual measures of party positions on different issues. While a useful starting point, ideally we would prefer to have access to comparable information on citizens' perceptions of party positions on multiple issues, across democracies.

To overcome these data issues, we collected our own data, consisting of parallel voter and expert surveys measuring perceptions about the positions of 58 different parties on multiple issues, across ten advanced democracies. By using information on issues that cover the economic dimension (income redistribution and government intervention in the economy) and the sociocultural dimension (climate change, immigration, and gay rights), we are able to position citizens and parties in a two-dimensional space, and we can assess how well citizens' perceptions of parties' positions match parties' objective positions (as perceived by experts). We examine how well individuals are represented by focusing on the distance between them and their preferred party (i.e., the party they vote for or identify with).

Leveraging this unique dataset, we confirm that a substantial share of voters in advanced democracies is positioned in the left-authoritarian quadrant, while parties are absent from this area. As a consequence, left-authoritarian voters are, objectively, less well represented— in terms of the match with the party that they vote for or identify with.

While our analyses indicate that left-authoritarians are objectively less well represented than others, examining measures of the subjective distance to parties indicates that this lack of representation goes largely unnoticed. Left-authoritarians do not perceive parties to be further away from them than other ideological groups. We also find that of all groups, left-liberals perceive the smallest distance to their party—even though they are not particularly close to their party objectively. We find that these patterns are not specific to some countries, but hold across Western democracies. Furthermore, our conclusions are robust to using different operationalisations to examine distance, including a measure of distance that accounts for the importance of different dimensions for voters. Finally, by conducting supplemental analyses of Danish National Election Study data, we show that the findings with

regards to the limited differences in perceptions of various ideological groups are not specific to the current time period.

The notable mismatch between the objective and subjective distances to parties among left-authoritarians and left-liberals begs the question: which positions in particular do these groups misperceive? Exploring this question, we find that different dimensions matter for the two groups. While left-authoritarians misperceive their preferred parties to be economically more left-leaning than experts, left-liberals misperceive their parties to hold more socioculturally progressive positions than these parties do according to experts.

Finally, shifting the focus to the supply side we find that voters and partisans of right-wing parties on average perceive their parties' positions with more error. Of all party families, it is parties in the radical right party family in particular—which are known to blur their positions (Rovny & Polk, 2020)—whose electorates misperceive their parties' positions the most.

Our findings carry important implications for research that studies citizens' and parties' positions in a multidimensional space. By showing that left-authoritarians do not perceive a lack of representation, our results nuance earlier work that has raised concern about this lack of representation. In demonstrating that these voters do not—themselves—perceive a lack of parties close by, our findings cast doubt on the idea that it is the absence of representation that leads them to grow more politically disaffected.

The next section briefly discusses the importance of ideological proximity for democratic representation. We then present our data and measures, and clarify how we analyse the data. This is followed by a presentation the results, robustness tests, a discussion of the role of error in citizens' perceptions of party positions and an analysis of differences between types of parties. We end with a conclusion in which we discuss the broader implications of our findings.

Ideological Congruence and Representation

A well-functioning democracy entails that citizens' political opinions and views are reflected in the policies that governments pursue (Powell, 2004). And in representative democracies, the linkage between public opinion and policy is achieved through parties (Dalton, 2017; Powell, 2004). Specifically, when voters choose parties that match their ideological views and issue preferences, this results in ideological congruence between public opinion on the one hand and the views that are represented in parliaments as well as governments on the other (Golder & Stramski, 2010).

Given the centrality of ideological congruence for democratic representation, a voluminous literature has examined how well the ideological views of voters match those of parties. From this work, we know that—despite variation between parties (Costello et al., 2021) and institutional differences (Best, 2023)—the ideological and issue preferences of voters generally match those of the parties they vote for. This holds both for work that has studied congruence in terms of a general left-right dimension (Dalton et al., 2011), as well as for work that has studied congruence from a multidimensional perspective (Dalton, 2017).

Congruence is not only important from a normative perspective, there is evidence that citizens themselves value ideological congruence too. This is clear from the fact that citizens are less satisfied with democracy when they perceive parties to be ideologically distant from them (Carroll et al., 2025; Van Egmond et al., 2020).

But do citizens' perceptions of congruence match reality? There are reasons to think that they don't. First, it is well known that there is substantial variation in citizens' perceptions of the ideological positions that parties take—which Aldrich et al. (2018) argue results from both a lack of awareness about ideology (which they label incognizance) as well as deviations in the perceptions due to unclear party positions. From research that has studied variation and error in citizens' perceptions of party placements—mostly on a left-right dimension— we know that it systematically correlates with individual-level characteristics. For example, party position accuracy is lower among the less educated, and among lower income groups (Aldrich et al., 2018; Carroll & Kubo, 2018). There also is much evidence showing that perceptual accuracy of parties' ideological positions is context-dependent, with evidence of an impact of polarisation (Vegetti et al., 2017) as well as party collaborations on how the positions of these parties are perceived (Adams et al., 2016; Adams, Weschle and Wlezien, 2021; Fortunato & Stevenson, 2013), for example. In addition, Çakır et al. (2026) show that citizens' accuracy about parties' left-right positions substantially drops outside of election campaigns—when political and partisan information is less present. This is particularly important for our work, as the surveys we analyse were collected outside of election periods.

Second, it is well established that citizens rationalise their views of party positions and project the positions of parties based on whether they like them or not. This pattern has been described as resulting from assimilation and contrast effects. Assimilation captures the fact that individuals tend to assimilate the positions of parties they like—resulting in a smaller perceived distance between their own positions and those of liked parties. Contrast effects, on the other hand, lead citizens to perceive a larger distance between

their own positions and those of parties they dislike (Merrill III, Grofman and Adams, 2001). Evidence of projection effects comes from different countries, including the United States as well as

European democracies (Grand & Tiemann, 2013; Merrill III, Grofman and Adams, 2001). And while contrast effects tend to be more pronounced in majoritarian systems, assimilation effects are strong across electoral systems (Drummond, 2011).

Third, the behaviour of parties can contribute to misperceptions of the positions that parties take. Perhaps because they seek to appeal broadly and wish to appeal to voters who take different ideological positions, parties can purposively maintain ambiguous ideological positions (Somer-Topcu, 2015) and make vague statements about their positions (Tomz and Van Houweling, 2009). Rovny (2012, 2013) has labelled parties' efforts to take "vaguely broad positions" on an issue or to "present a mixture of positions" as position blurring. Such blurring, the literature shows, is particularly used by parties that take centrist positions on an issue (Rovny, 2012) and on parties' secondary issues and less salient dimensions (Koedam, 2021; Rovny, 2013). Consistent with these findings, right-authoritarian parties in particular tend to blur their positions on the economic dimension (Rovny & Polk, 2020).

These considerations cast doubt on citizens' ability to accurately position parties, leading to the question whether citizens are aware of gaps between a demand for specific ideological positions and where parties actually stand? To answer this key question, we rely on unique comparative data of citizens' and experts' perceptions of party positions in a multidimensional space.

Data and Methods

Our design consists of parallel surveys among citizens and experts[1] in 10 advanced democracies: Austria, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Great-Britain, France, Ireland, Italy, Spain, and the United States. This selection of countries covers parliamentary as well as presidential systems, countries that use majoritarian and proportional electoral systems, and includes small as well as large party systems. Across the set of countries, there also is much variation in where parties are positioned in a two-dimensional space.[2]

For the citizen part of the data collection, we collaborated with Cint (formerly Lucid), to recruit a non-probability sample of approximately 2000 citizens in each of the ten countries. We made sure that the samples matched the population in terms of gender, age, and region— based on the most recent census.[3] Given concerns about data quality when relying on online samples, we introduced several questions in the surveys that allowed us to exclude inattentive respondents and responses we suspected to be from

bots.[4] The core part of the survey included a series of issue position questions, in which respondents were asked to position the main parties in their country on several issues, using 0–10 scales. We also asked respondents to position themselves on the issues. Here, we focus on five issues that were included in the survey, covering the economic and sociocultural dimensions of a two-dimensional political space: income redistribution, government intervention in the economy, immigration, climate change and gay rights. Table 1 shows the question wording that was used to measure positions on each of these five issues (with a focus on the party position measures).

Data collection happened between January 2023 and May 2024, and we made sure that all data was collected outside of a specific election or campaign period. Details on the timing of the fieldwork in each country can be found in Appendix B.

In parallel with the citizen surveys, we also carried out an expert survey in each country. We identified experts of party politics and elections in each of our cases, and invited them to position political parties in their country using the same issue scales as citizens.[5] By using the exact same question wording and scales for experts and citizens, we aim to limit problems of differential item function (Ferland & Golder, 2021)—providing us with a good benchmark to assess misperceptions in citizens' views of where parties are positioned vis-à-vis expert-based positions. As is common in work that relies on expert surveys to position parties, we use the mean expert position as an estimate of a party's 'true' position on an issue.[6] Details on the timing of the fieldwork in each country can be found in Appendix B.

Using the survey items presented in Table 1, we asked citizens and experts to position the main parties in each country on each of the issues. To decide which parties to include in the surveys, we used as a criterion that the party had to obtain at least 5% in recent vote intention polls—according to *Poll of Polls*.[7] The number of parties in each country ranged from two in the United States to eight in Denmark and France. A full list of the parties that were included in the surveys can be found in Appendix C.

Our main analyses focus on citizens' and parties' positions on two dimensions: an economic dimension and a sociocultural dimension. We combine issue positions to construct these dimensions, but first verified that the economic items and the non-economic items indeed scale together. In the pooled dataset, the Cronbach's α is 0.59 for the two economic items[8] and 0.67 for the three non-economic items.[9] We combined both sets of issues using sum-scales, so we obtain 0–10 summary indicators of respondents' economic left-right (higher values are more right) and sociocultural positions (higher values are more socioculturally conservative). We construct the indicators of parties' positions on the two main dimensions in the same way,

Table 1. Question Wording of the Issue Position Measures

Income redistribution	Some people think that [country] should do less to reduce the income gap between the rich and the poor. Others think that [country] should do more to reduce the income gap between the rich and the poor. Where would you place the political parties on a scale where 0 means "[country] should do much less to reduce the income gap", and 10 means "[country] should do much more to reduce the income gap"?
Government intervention in the economy	Some people think that the [country's] government should intervene less in the economy. Others think the [country's] government should intervene more in the economy. Where would you place the political parties on a scale where 0 means "the [country's] government should intervene much less in the economy", and 10 means "the [country's] government should intervene much more in the economy"?
Immigration	Some people think that [country] should allow fewer immigrants to come to [country]. Others think that [country] should allow more immigrants. Where would you place the political parties on a scale where 0 means "[country] should allow much fewer immigrants", and 10 means "[country] should allow much more immigrants"?
Climate change	Some people think that [country] should do less to combat climate change. Others think that [country] should do more to combat climate change. Where would you place the political parties on a scale where 0 means "[country] should do much less to combat climate change", and 10 means "[country] should do much more to combat climate change"?
Gay rights	Some people think that [country] should do less for gays and lesbians. Others think that [country] should do more for gays and lesbians. Where would you place the political parties on a scale where 0 means "[country] should do much less for gays and lesbians", and 10 means "[country] should do much more for gays and lesbians"?

aggregating the economic and non-economic issues to obtain measures of citizens' and experts' perceptions of party positions on the economic and sociocultural dimensions.

In Appendix D, we use these indicators to describe the data and illustrate where citizens and parties are placed in the space. In line with earlier research (Hillen & Steiner, 2020; Lefkofridi et al., 2014; van der Brug & van Spanje, 2009), we find that voters are spread across the four quadrants, while political parties do not cover the whole space. Parties tend to take positions in the left-liberal or right-authoritarian quadrants while the left-authoritarian quadrant in particular is left unoccupied across countries.[10]

The descriptive results in Appendix D also clarify that there is much variation between countries in the positions of public opinion in the two-dimensional space. Furthermore, the distribution of responses on the two dimensions suggests that ideologically centrist positions do not coincide with the middle positions on our sumscales (i.e., a position of 5 on the 0–10 scales). To account for this issue, we follow Hillen and Steiner (2020) and categorise respondents in quadrants based on their relative ideological positions in their country. In each country, we consider where all respondents are positioned on the economic and sociocultural dimensions, and we code those who are on the economically left side of the distribution in their country, and on the culturally conservative side of the distribution in their country as left-authoritarians. We proceed in a similar way to position respondents in the left-liberal, right-authoritarian or right-liberal quadrants, or code them as centrists if they are in the centre of their country's distribution on one or both dimensions (for a similar approach, see also Gidron, 2022).[11] Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents across the five ideological categories in each of the ten countries where we collected data. The share of respondents that we categorise as left-authoritarians is around 10% across countries. At first sight, this is substantially lower than the percentage of left-authoritarians in previous comparative work (Lefkofridi et al., 2014; van der Brug & van Spanje, 2009). However, Lefkofridi et al. (2014) and van der Brug and van Spanje (2009) only distinguished between four groups and did not have a separate centrist category. The centrist group is the largest in our data.

To assess how well citizens in different ideological quadrants are represented, both objectively and subjectively, we estimate OLS regression models in which the categorical indicator, shown in Tables 2, is our main independent variable. Our dependent variable is the total distance between a respondent's self-placements on the two dimensions and those of a party.[12] We calculate distance with a focus on respondents' preferred party,[13] and consider the objective and subjective distance to the party for which they vote.[14] Because a vote intention question was not included in the Canadian

Table 2. Distribution of Citizens in Ideological Quadrants

Country	Group	Size (%)	Country	Group	Size (%)
Austria	Centrist	36.7	Great-Britain	Centrist	29.5
	Right-authoritarian	22.0		Right-authoritarian	26.0
	Left-authoritarian	12.1		Left-authoritarian	8.7
	Left-liberal	20.1		Left-liberal	24.4
	Right-liberal	9.1		Right-liberal	11.3
Canada	Centrist	41.4	Ireland	Centrist	35.8
	Right-authoritarian	24.7		Right-authoritarian	22.7
	Left-authoritarian	8.5		Left-authoritarian	10.9
	Left-liberal	20.0		Left-liberal	22.1
	Right-liberal	5.5		Right-liberal	8.5
Denmark	Centrist	29.0	Italy	Centrist	28.7
	Right-authoritarian	27.3		Right-authoritarian	25.2
	Left-authoritarian	8.0		Left-authoritarian	11.5
	Left-liberal	28.3		Left-liberal	23.7
	Right-liberal	7.4		Right-liberal	10.8
France	Centrist	35.4	Spain	Centrist	32.8
	Right-authoritarian	21.7		Right-authoritarian	26.8
	Left-authoritarian	9.1		Left-authoritarian	7.9
	Left-liberal	22.4		Left-liberal	24.6
	Right-liberal	11.5		Right-liberal	7.9
Germany	Centrist	35.2	United States	Centrist	25.2
	Right-authoritarian	21.2		Right-authoritarian	30.0
	Left-authoritarian	10.4		Left-authoritarian	8.0
	Left-liberal	25.7		Left-liberal	30.6
	Right-liberal	7.5		Right-liberal	6.2

and US surveys,[15] we also estimate models in which we focus on the party that a respondent identifies with, allowing us to include responses from all ten countries.[16] All models include country fixed effects. Crucially, we assess the distance between respondents' positions and parties' positions according to experts (objective distance) as well as the perceived distance between respondents and parties (subjective distance).[17] The comparison between the coefficients of both sets of models allows us to verify whether groups that are objectively less well represented also perceive this lack of representation.

Results

Turning to the results, we examine differences between ideological groups in the distance to the party a respondent intends to vote for, or identifies with. Table 3 presents the coefficients of these regression models, showing results in terms of the objective distance between a respondent and their preferred party, as well as their perceived distance to this party. A respondent's preferred party either corresponds to the party a respondent intends to vote for (Models 1 and (2) or the party they identify with (Models 3 and 4). We start by considering the results in terms of the party that individuals intend to vote for, using data from the eight European countries (where we included a measure of vote intentions in the surveys). The estimates of Model 1 indicate that left-authoritarians are, objectively, significantly further away from the party they intend to vote for compared to centrist individuals. Specifically, they are about 0.9 points further away on average from the party they intend to vote for compared to centrists. These results confirm that left-authoritarians are indeed

Table 3. Ideological Quadrants and Objective/Subjective Distances to Own Party

	Vote intention		*Partisanship*	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	DV: Objective	DV: Subjective	DV: Objective	DV: Subjective
Quadrant (ref. Centrist)	—	—	—	—
Right-authoritarian	−0.106	0.162	−0.055	0.130
	(0.066)	(0.056)	(0.073)	(0.047)
Left-authoritarian	0.862***	0.092	0.920***	0.056
	(0.109)	(0.040)	(0.107)	(0.045)
Left-liberal	0.414*	−0.205***	0.358***	−0.267***
	(0.121)	(0.020)	(0.097)	(0.045)
Right-liberal	−0.038	0.136*	0.011	0.149*
	(0.097)	(0.040)	(0.088)	(0.047)
Country FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Constant	2.227***	1.386***	2.200***	1.476***
	(0.044)	(0.016)	(0.036)	(0.020)
Observations	11116	10210	12156	11241
R^2	0.069	0.024	0.065	0.031

Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by country.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

less well represented objectively in advanced democracies. Surprisingly, we also find that left-liberals are on average positioned significantly further away from their preferred party compared to centrists, with a coefficient that is about half the size as that of left-authoritarians (0.4). Right-authoritarians and right-liberals, in contrast, seem to be as well represented as individuals who hold positions in the centre of the ideological distribution.

Moving to the findings for respondents' perceived distance to the party of their choice in Model 2, the results suggest that left-authoritarians do *not* perceive themselves to be particularly far away from the party of their choice. In fact, the estimates of Model 2 in Table 3 indicate that left-authoritarians are most similar to centrists in terms of the distance they perceive to the party of their choice. Unlike what we found for objective distances, thus, the estimates indicate that in terms of their subjective perceptions of distance to the party of their choice, left-authoritarians do not stand out. They perceive themselves to be roughly as far away from the party they vote for as centrists, and perceive to be closer to the party they vote for compared to right-authoritarians and right-liberals. Interestingly, left-liberals, who are objectively among the groups that are most distanced from the party they intend to vote for (cfr. Model 1), perceive themselves to be significantly closer to their party than all other groups, including centrists.

Examining the distance to one's party in terms of partisanship instead of vote intentions allows us to analyse data from all ten countries. As can be seen from the estimates of Models 3 and 4 in Table 3, patterns are very similar when we analyse distances to the party one identifies with rather than the party one intends to vote for. We still find that left-authoritarians are objectively the least well represented by the party of their choice, while left-liberals are *also* significantly less well represented compared to the other ideological groups. The results for subjective distances furthermore confirm that this lack of representation goes largely unnoticed by both groups. Left-authoritarians do not perceive their own party as significantly further away from them than what holds for centrists, while left-liberals think their party is significantly closer to them than what holds for any of the other groups.

The intercepts of Models 1 and 2 indicate that objective distances between citizens and parties are larger than the distances that citizens perceive themselves. This is clarified in Figure 1, which shows the expected objective (white circles) and subjective (black circles) distance between members of different ideological groups and the party of their choice, based on the estimates presented in Table 3.[18] Panel (a) shows the results with respect to the party respondents intend to vote for, while panel (b) does so for partisanship. The expected values and differences between groups are rather consistent irrespective of whether the focus is on vote intention or

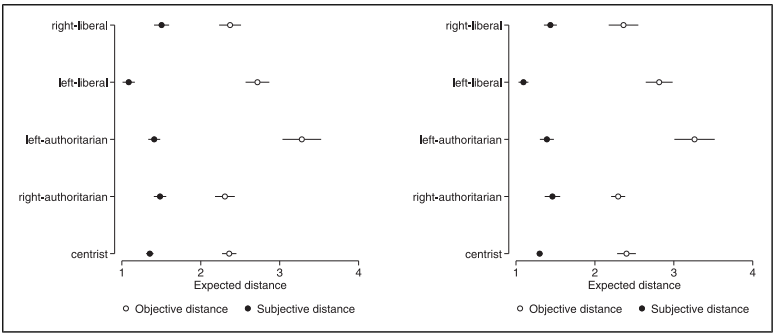


Figure 1. Predicted objective and subjective distance to own party by ideological group (a) Vote intention (b) Partisanship

partisanship. The large gaps between the expected objective distance to one's party and the expected subjective distance indicates that all voters perceive their own party as much closer to themselves than it is in reality. That this happens is not surprising, given what we know about projection effects (Nasr, 2021). But the importance of these projection effects appears to differ markedly between different ideological groups. As a result, while left-authoritarians are objectively the group that is least well represented by the party they vote for or identify with, they perceive the party of their choice to be about as close to them as what holds for right-liberals, right-authoritarians, or centrists. Furthermore, while left-liberals are the group that is objectively the second most distanced from the party of their choice, they think their party is significantly closer to them than all other groups.

The analyses reported in Table 3 and Figure 1 show the results for distances to respondents' preferred party—either the party they intend to vote for or the party they identify with. When not focusing on respondents' preferred parties but examining distances to all parties (Appendix E) or the distance to the most proximate party (Appendix F), we still find that the differences between ideological groups are more sizeable for objective distances than for subjective distances. For the distance to the most proximate party, it is notable that left-authoritarians perceive the largest subjective minimal distance to a party of all groups—though differences between the groups are substantively very small. For left-liberals, these additional analyses also show they are the group that perceives the smallest subjective distance to parties, though in these tests left-liberals no longer stand out in terms of their objective distance to parties.

Finally, the main analyses reported here focus on the overall distance between respondents and parties, which we do by summing distances on the economic and the sociocultural dimensions. In Appendix G, we verify whether our conclusions hold for both of these dimensions, or whether they are driven by one dimension in particular. As can be seen from the results that are presented in this Appendix, we find that objective distances are substantially larger than subjective distances on both dimensions. Furthermore, for both the economic and sociocultural dimensions holds that left-liberals subjectively perceive the smallest distance to a party. However, these additional analyses also point out that the differences in objective distances between respondents in different ideological quadrants are more pronounced on the economic dimension. On this dimension in particular, left-authoritarians are objectively positioned substantially further from their preferred party (e.g., a distance of 3.7 to the party they intend to vote for), than what holds for the other ideological groups (a distance of between 2.3 and 2.9). These additional analyses suggest that our main findings are driven in large part by positions on the economic dimension.

Challenges

Our results could be challenged in a number of ways. Here, we address six challenges, relating to country-level differences, different measurement issues, and whether our findings are time-bound.

First, the results that are presented in the previous section are based on analyses of a pooled comparative dataset. This dataset includes respondents in ten countries, with important differences in the size and structure of party systems. Given these differences in the supply of parties, it is important to verify that our results are not driven by one or a few countries. As can be seen from additional analyses that are reported in Appendix H, however, the results are very consistent. Across countries, left-authoritarians and left-liberals are the ideological groups that are objectively positioned the furthest away from their party. The observation that subjective differences between ideological groups are much more limited, or disappear entirely, also holds across countries. Our findings, therefore, seem to apply across the Western democracies for which we collected data.

Second, our decision to rely on relative positions to determine respondents' membership of an ideological quadrant could be challenged. Even though we prefer to operationalise quadrant membership based on respondents' relative ideological positions, we also verified whether our conclusions hold when we use respondents' absolute positions on the economic and sociocultural dimensions. On these dimensions, we code respondents with

positions of 4.5 or lower as left/liberal and positions of 5.5 or higher as right/authoritarian. As can be seen from the results in Appendix I, our main conclusions hold when we examine differences between ideological groups based on absolute rather than relative positions on the economic and sociocultural dimensions. The main difference is that in these analyses, left-liberals no longer stand out in terms of their objective distance to parties—but they are still the group that perceives the smallest subjective distance to parties.

Third, we verified whether coding decisions in the construction of the two dimensions (economic and sociocultural) drive the results. One concern relates to the question whether environmental attitudes and views on climate change load onto the economic or sociocultural dimension, or form an independent dimension (Kenny & Langsæther, 2023). As can be seen in Appendix J, climate change views in our data correlate highly with both the economic and the sociocultural items. As additional analyses that are reported in Appendix J indicate, however, when we remove climate change views and positions from the analyses and only include positions on immigration and gay rights in the sociocultural dimension, our substantive conclusions are unaltered. Another point relates to the economic dimension. As indicated before, the Cronbach's α statistics for the economic items are lower than for the sociocultural items. This holds for the self-placements as well as for the association between citizens' placements of parties on the two economic items. In contrast, experts' assessments of parties' placements of parties on the two economic items seem to form a strong and coherent economic dimension (see Appendix K). To assuage concerns that the low scaling reliability of the economic dimension drives our results, in Appendix K we verify whether our conclusions hold when we only use positions on income redistributions to capture economic positions. As can be seen from the results, our conclusions hold when we do this.

Fourth, our data provide indications that despite the identical question wording, citizens and experts use the scales quite differently when placing parties. This can be seen from descriptive information in Appendix L, where we compare the mean perceptions of parties among citizens with those of country experts. This comparison highlights that experts perceive larger differences between parties on both dimensions compared to citizens. As a result, the average citizen always perceives parties as more centrist compared to where experts place them. This pattern is more pronounced for the economic dimension than for the sociocultural dimension, with the mean citizen perceptions of all parties clustering around a center-left economic position—and experts perceiving both extreme left and extreme right economic positions in the different party systems. Despite important differences in how

experts and citizens position parties, even if we use the mean citizen perceptions as an objective indicator of parties' ideological positions, our main findings hold. As can be seen from additional analyses that are reported in Appendix L, in these operationalisations left-authoritarians are still the most distant (objectively) from the party they intend to vote for or identify with.

Fifth, our analyses point to important differences in how distant different ideological groups are—objectively—from the party they vote for or identify with. We interpret these results as signaling that there are important differences in how well ideological groups are represented. Our measures of the distance between respondents and parties weighs distances on the economic and sociocultural dimension equally. And it could be argued that in order to tap representation and perceptions of representation, it is important to take into account how important these dimensions are to voters (Traber et al., 2018). After all, if a party is very distant from an individual on a dimension that the individual does not find important, that should not affect representation as much as when the party takes very different positions on a dimension and issues the individual cares greatly about.

To account for this possibility, we make use of indicators of how important respondents found the different issues for which we collected data. We use answers to these questions to construct indicators of the salience of the economic and cultural dimension for respondents, which we then use to create salience-weighted indicators of the distance between respondents and parties. As can be seen from the results that are reported in Appendix M, focusing on salience-weighted indicators of the ideological distance between respondents and parties does not affect our conclusions.

Finally, while the data that we collected are unique and allow contrasting experts' and voters' perceptions of party positions, an important limitation of these data is that they only provide insights about one point in time. As a result, we do not know if the lack of ideological differences in the distances that voters perceive is specific to the current time period. To explore this issue, we draw on data from the Danish National Election Study (DNES), which provides measures of citizens' subjective perceptions of party placements on different issues from 1994 onwards. While we cannot use these data to study objective distances to parties, we use the Danish election surveys to examine whether individuals in different ideological quadrants of the ideological space hold different subjective perceptions of distance to parties and whether these perceptions vary over time. We describe the data and our approach in Appendix N and summarise the main results visually in Figure 2. As can be seen from this graph, while there is some fluctuation in perceived distances from year to year, there is no evidence of a systematic over-time change in perceived distances among any of the ideological groups. These

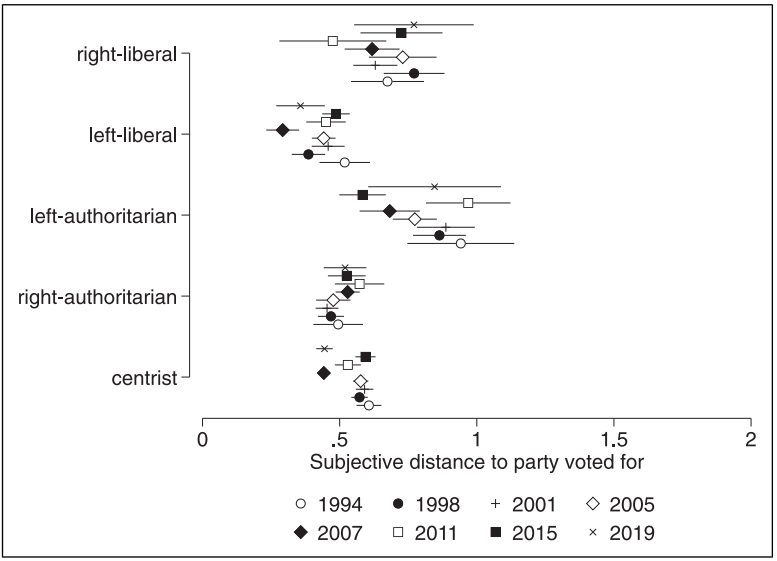


Figure 2. Predicted subjective distance to party voted for by ideological group and year, Danish National Election Study 1994–2019

analyses indicate that, at least in Denmark, the lack of distinctiveness of left-authoritarians is not a recent phenomenon.

Unpacking Error in Citizens' Perceptions of Party Positions

Despite a lack of supply of parties in the left-authoritarian quadrant, we find that leftauthoritarian individuals do not perceive parties to be far away from them. Furthermore, our results indicate that left-liberals systematically perceive a very small distance to their party even though, objectively, they are not more proximate to it compared to other ideological groups. These results indicate that there is much error in the perceptions of party positions that these ideological groups hold.

Here, we explore in more detail which party positions respondents misperceive, by unpacking error in the two main dimensions. Specifically, we examine the direction of error in voters' perceptions, which we operationalise by subtracting experts' perceptions of where a party stands from respondents' own perceptions of where the party is positioned. Positive numbers imply that a party is perceived to be more right-wing/authoritarian, and negative

numbers imply that a respondent perceives a party to be more left-leaning/liberal compared to experts.

Our focus here is on perceptions of the positions of the party a respondent intends to vote for. We thus analyse the data from the eight European countries. In Appendix O, we instead consider the party respondents identify with (allowing us to include Canada and the United States) and find very similar results.

In Table 4, we present the results of two OLS models explaining error in the perceived economic (Model (1) and sociocultural (Model (2) positions of the party respondents intend to vote for. The estimates indicate that all groups perceive parties to be closer to their preferred position. The estimates also clarify that left-authoritarians are strongly misperceiving the economic positions of their parties, which they on average perceive to be almost 2.5 points more left-wing than where parties are positioned according to experts (-1 from the intercept + -1.4 from the coefficient of this group = -2.4). For left-liberals, it is in terms of the sociocultural position of their party that misperception is particularly important. On average, they perceive the party they vote for to be 1.8 points more liberal compared to where experts place the

Table 4. Error in Positions of Party One Intends to Vote for on the Economic and Cultural Dimensions

	(1)	(2)
	Economic error	Sociocultural error
Quadrant (ref. Centrist)	—	—
Right-authoritarian	0.744***	0.452***
	(0.133)	(0.117)
Left-authoritarian	−1.447***	0.395*
	(0.114)	(0.140)
Left-liberal	−0.717***	−1.005***
	(0.156)	(0.144)
Right-liberal	0.961***	−0.126
	(0.141)	(0.111)
Country FE	✓	✓
Constant	−1.073***	−0.800***
	(0.050)	(0.045)
Observations	10628	10410
R^2	0.121	0.099

Standard errors in parentheses $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

party (−0.8 from the intercept + −1.0 from the coefficient for the group = −1.8).

These analyses indicate that left-authoritarians strongly misperceive the economic positions of their preferred party—placing it substantially more to the left compared to experts. Left-liberals, on the other hand, markedly misjudge the sociocultural positions of the party they intend to vote for or identify with—perceiving it to be more liberal than it is according to experts.

We further break down these results and examine error by issue. These additional analyses, which we report in Appendix O, show that left-liberals particularly misperceive their parties' positions on immigration and gay rights.[19]

Party-Level Differences

The ideological differences in how much error there is in citizens' perceptions of the parties they intend to vote for imply that there are differences in the extent to which electorates and supporters of different parties perceive their preferred party as closer to them than it is according to experts. Parties themselves can contribute to such misperceptions when they are ambiguous or blur their ideological positions (Rovny, 2012, 2013; Rovny & Polk, 2020; Somer-Topcu, 2015). Previous work has shown that some parties do this more than others. The work of Rovny and Polk (2020), for example, indicates that radical right parties in particular tend to blur their economic positions. This leads to the expectation the supporters of these parties perceive them to be closer to them than they are according to experts, especially on the economic dimension.

In Appendix P, we shed more light on party-dynamics by exploring the party-level differences in our dataset. We study differences between parties of different party families and examine how much closer voters and partisans of different types of parties perceive them to be to themselves than it (really) is. Doing so—for the total distance, distance on the economic dimension, and distance on the sociocultural dimension—we find that there are substantial differences between parties. In line with expectations, we find that distances are substantial for voters and partisans of many of the radical right parties in our dataset. This holds especially for the cultural dimension. We also find larger distances for voters and partisans of conservative and liberal parties—a finding that is mostly driven by distances on the economic dimension. Beyond differences between specific party families, we observe a general pattern whereby the difference between the subjective and objective distances is larger for right-of-centre parties than for left-of-centre parties.

Conclusion

The literature has established that left-authoritarians lack representation in advanced democracies, because few parties take positions in the left-authoritarian quadrant of a two-dimensional space. It is unclear, however, whether left-authoritarians perceive this lack of representation— in particular because right-authoritarian parties are known to blur their economic positions (Rovny & Polk, 2020). In this paper, we sought to deepen our knowledge of this well documented representational gap by directly measuring citizens' own perceptions of parties' positions in a multidimensional space.

Our results confirm that, objectively, left-authoritarians are least well represented by the parties they prefer. But despite the distance to the parties of their choice, left-authoritarians do not appear to consistently perceive these parties as far away from them. Instead, when we consider subjective distances to parties, the differences between ideological groups tend to be very small. Across the range of tests we conducted, left-authoritarians are generally not the group that perceives the largest distance, and when they are, differences with other groups are substantively small and not statistically significant. The observed mismatch between a lack of objective representation and left-authoritarians' perceptions of how well their parties match their own preferences appears to be driven by the fact that they misperceive their preferred parties to be more economically left-wing than they are in reality.

The contrast between our analyses of objective distance and those of the subjective distance between voters and parties indicates that all voters, across the space, overestimate how well parties' positions align with their own preferences. As a result, the gaps in how well different ideological groups perceive to be represented are very limited. For left-authoritarians in particular, this implies that they do *not* perceive to be less well represented than others—casting doubt on the assumption that it is out of a lack of representation that left-authoritarians become more politically disaffected. If it does not stem from a perceived lack of representation, the question remains what is leading left-authoritarians to be more dissatisfied. It might be that they are influenced by the rhetoric of the parties they prefer, which have been described as actors that 'fuel discontent' (Rooduijn et al., 2016). While answering this question is outside the scope of our paper, we hope our findings prompt further research into the sources of political disaffection among left-authoritarians.

In showing that there are important differences in the objective and subjective distances between citizens and their preferred parties, our findings are consistent with a rich literature that has shown evidence of projection effects in citizens' perceptions of party positions. Importantly, however, our

results add important nuance to this literature—by showing that there is much variation across ideological quadrants in the extent to which citizens project to bring parties close to themselves. Left-authoritarians in particular, whose preferred parties are on average much further from them than what holds for other ideological groups, overcome a large distance through projection.

Our comparison between subjective and objective distances draws attention to important differences between both. Arguably, the ultimate benchmark to evaluate whether individuals are well represented is how well they are represented objectively. In that regard, left-authoritarians are not well-served by the party offer. That left-authoritarians do not perceive that they are less well represented does not alter the fact that they are. While subjective perceptions are thus normatively less important, they likely are more important than objective distances for explaining downstream political attitudes and behaviour.

Our project was designed to allow for an examination of error and bias in citizens' perceptions of parties' ideological positions. To do so, we fielded parallel surveys among citizens and experts, using identical wording in both. Despite our best efforts to obtain comparable perceptual and objective measures of party positions, however, we find indications that experts use the scales differently than citizens. As we document in Appendix L, experts use a wider range of the scale when positioning parties compared to citizens, which could signify differential item functioning. The implication is that even when holding the wording and timing of surveys constant, it is still challenging to compare citizen and expert perceptions of party positions.

Despite these measurement challenges, our results have implications for research that relies on objective measures of the distance between citizens and parties—which is a fairly standard approach in work on ideological congruence and representation. The large differences between objective and subjective distances imply that this approach could lead to wrong inferences, especially if the goal is to study citizens' attitudinal and behavioural responses to parties' positions in a multidimensional space.

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Ethical Considerations

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Data Availability Statement

Replication materials and code can be found at Dassonneville, Fournier and Somer-Topcu (2026).

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Replication materials and code can be found at Dassonneville et al. (2026).
2. With this selection of countries, we limit the sample to countries where party competition is structured similarly, with most parties connecting economic left (right) positions with progressive (conservative) sociocultural positions (Rovny & Edwards, 2012) It would have been interesting to also collect data in countries

where the structure of party competition is very different—such as countries in Central and Eastern Europe where economic left (right) parties tend to be conservative (progressive) on the sociocultural dimension (Rovny, 2015; Rovny & Edwards, 2012) The very different structure of competition implies different individual-level mechanisms and patterns of representation too, and exploring context-level variation in that regard unfortunately is outside the scope of the current project.

3. We additionally set quota for language in Canada as well as ethnicity and race in the United States. As descriptive statistics in Appendix A show, the country-samples generally match the quota we set.
4. This included a CAPTCHA question, questions for which we instructed respondents to choose a particular answer, and a repeated socio-demographic question (Griffin et al., 2022). We also excluded respondents who speeded through the questionnaire, responding in less than two minutes.
5. We retrieved answers from 14 experts in Austria, 8 experts in Canada, 11 in Denmark, 15 in France, 17 in Germany, 10 in Great-Britain, 13 in Ireland, 16 in Italy, 18 in Spain and 10 in the United States. These numbers are in line with the number of experts typically surveyed in other expert surveys such as the Chapel Hill Expert Survey.
6. By making use of expert surveys, we thus assume that experts—on average—know the 'right' positions of parties. However, we cannot entirely exclude that experts also have biased perceptions of parties' ideological positions. Because we do not have information on the ideological and partisan preferences of our experts, we unfortunately cannot examine this directly. Reassuringly, however, earlier work that has relied on expert surveys—using instruments very similar to our own—finds that they produce "reliable" and "valid" estimates of parties' ideological positions (Hooghe et al., 2010) that correlate highly with estimates based on party manifestos or parties' policy stances as captured by VAAs (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2023), for example.
7. Available here https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/.
8. It is 0.44 in Austria, 0.56 in Canada, 0.52 in Germany, 0.61 in Denmark, 0.64 in Spain, 0.51 in France, 0.60 in Great-Britain, 0.54 in Ireland, 0.62 in Italy, and 0.71 in the United States.
9. It is 0.65 in Austria, 0.67 in Canada, 0.71 in Germany, 0.63 in Denmark, 0.69 in Spain, 0.51 in France, .68 in Great-Britain, 0.55 in Ireland, 0.65 in Italy, and 0.78 in the United States.
10. In Appendix D, we also present descriptive statistics on respondents' self-placement on the economic and sociocultural dimensions. In the pooled sample, the mean economic self-placement is 3.3, while the mean sociocultural self-placement is 4.2. The Pearson correlation between placements on the two dimension is 0.469. Appendix D also includes detailed information on these

descriptive statistics in each country sample. We observe the lowest correlation between placements on the two dimensions in Austria (Pearson correlation = 0.327) and the highest correlation in the United States (Pearson correlation = 0.662).

11. In their main analyses, Hillen and Steiner (2020) use the 40th percentile on the economic left-right distribution to identify left-wing respondents and the 60th percentile on the sociocultural distribution to identify socially conservative respondents. We use the less strict cut-offs of 45th and 55th percentiles to reduce the size of the centrist category. For details on the operationalisation of the quadrants, see Appendix D.
12. To do so, we consider the sum of the distance on the economic dimension and the sociocultural dimension.
13. The focus on distances to respondents' preferred party comes with a number of disadvantages. Doing so implies restricting the analyses to respondents who indicate a vote intention or who are partisans, and it introduces variation due to differences in respondents' likelihood to prefer the closest party. That is, if some ideological groups are more likely to vote for or identify with the 'correct' ideologically proximate party, objective distances for these groups will naturally be smaller than for other ideological groups. To address these concerns, in Appendix E and Appendix F we report the results of two alternative approaches—in which we examine distances that are not anchored to the party a respondent intends to vote for or identifies with. Specifically, in these Appendices we examine the distance to all parties (Appendix E) and the distance to the party that is ideologically the most proximate to the respondent, as perceived by experts (objective) or the respondent (subjective) (Appendix F).
14. Our measure asks respondents which party they would vote for 'if there was a general election tomorrow.
15. The larger project that motivated the collection of the survey data used in this paper focused on contextlevel determinants of partisanship and partisan identities. As a result, in the initial countries where we collected data (Canada and the United States), we included measures of partisanship but not vote intentions. As the project advanced and we collected data from other countries, we decided to add a measure of vote intentions too.
16. We asked respondents whether they usually think of themselves as close to any political party. For those who say no, we followed-up by asking whether there a party they feel a little closer to. We then asked which party this is.
17. The correlation between the perceived (subjective) distance and the objective distance to the party a respondent intends to vote for is weak, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.061 in the full sample. For distances to the party respondents identify with, the correlation is also weak, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.089.

18. More precisely, we plot predictive margins using the margins command in Stata.
19. We describe the difference between where experts and voters perceive parties to be positioned as reflecting misperceptions. However, another possibility is that voters are well informed about the positions of their preferred party, but rationalise their own preference when answering the survey. While we cannot firmly establish whether error is due to misperceptions or rationalisation, if rationalisation is key we would expect perceptual error in party positions to be larger when respondents position their own party than when they are asked about other parties. We find that, in contrast, error is smaller for the party respondents vote for or identify with than it is for other parties. Specifically, the average absolute error in a party's economic or cultural dimension is 2.00 for the party voted for and 2.12 for other parties. Furthermore, it is 1.97 for the party one identifies with and 2.12 for other parties. Both differences are statistically significant.

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