

# Likeminded? Congruence Between Political Elites and their Voters Regarding Policy Choices in Swiss-EU Relations



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## Abstract

Swiss-EU relations not only rank among the most important political problems for citizens but are also the subject of repeated political contestation. Using data from the 2019 Swiss Election Study (Selects), this article examines the extent to which the opinions of political elites and voters coincide on four European integration issues: 1) the trade-off between maintaining the bilateral agreements and limiting immigration, 2) the cohesion billion, 3) the trade-off between the institutional framework agreement and the accompanying measures, and 4) EU membership. The results show that, overall, candidates represent voters extremely well with regard to *positions*, i.e., both groups are “on the same side”. However, candidates are generally more EU-integrationist and hold more extreme opinions than voters. Moreover, this article investigates how well candidates represent the *variety* of voter opinions and finds that – contrary to previous research – there is no systematic difference between centrist and pole parties.

## Zusammenfassung

Die Beziehungen zwischen der Schweiz und der EU gehören nicht nur zu den wichtigsten politischen Problemen aus Sicht der Bürgerinnen und Bürger, sondern sind auch immer wieder Gegenstand politischer

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Auseinandersetzungen. Anhand von Daten der Schweizer Wahlstudie (Selects) 2019 untersucht dieser Artikel, inwieweit die Meinungen der politischen Eliten und der Wählenden zu vier Themen der europäischen Integration übereinstimmen: 1) dem Zielkonflikt zwischen der Beibehaltung der bilateralen Abkommen und der Begrenzung der Zuwanderung, 2) der Kohäsionsmilliarde, 3) dem Zielkonflikt zwischen dem institutionellen Rahmenabkommen und den flankierenden Massnahmen und 4) einer EU-Mitgliedschaft. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Kandidierenden ihr jeweiliges Elektorat in Bezug auf die *Positionen* insgesamt sehr gut vertreten, d.h. beide Gruppen stehen "auf derselben Seite". Allerdings sind die Kandidierenden im Allgemeinen EU-integrationsfreundlicher und vertreten extremere Meinungen als die Wählenden. Ausserdem untersucht der Artikel, wie gut die Kandidierenden die *Vielfalt* der Wählermeinungen repräsentieren, und stellt fest, dass es diesbezüglich – im Gegensatz zu früheren Studien – keinen systematischen Unterschied zwischen Mitte- und Polparteien gibt.

### Résumé

Les relations entre la Suisse et l'UE figurent non seulement parmi les problèmes politiques les plus importants pour les citoyen-ne-s mais font également l'objet de contestations politiques répétées. Cet article se base sur les données de l'étude électorale suisse (Selects) 2019 et examine dans quelle mesure les opinions des élites politiques et des électeur-trice-s coïncident sur quatre questions d'intégration européenne: 1) le conflit entre le maintien des accords bilatéraux et la limitation de l'immigration, 2) le milliard de cohésion, 3) le conflit entre l'accord-cadre institutionnel et les mesures d'accompagnement et 4) l'adhésion à l'UE. Dans l'ensemble, les résultats montrent que les candidat-e-s représentent extrêmement bien les électeur-trice-s en ce qui concerne les *positionnements politiques*: les deux groupes sont «du même côté». Cependant, les candidat-e-s sont généralement plus favorables à l'intégration européenne et ont des opinions plus extrêmes que les électeur-trice-s. En outre, l'article

examine dans quelle mesure les candidat·e·s représentent la *variété des opinions* des électeur·trice·s et constate que – contrairement aux recherches précédentes – il n'y a pas de différence systématique entre les partis centristes et les partis situés aux extrêmes de l'échiquier politique.

#### KEYWORDS

European Integration, Swiss-EU Relations, Public Opinion, Issue Congruence, Political Elites

## INTRODUCTION

Ideological congruence between political elites and citizens is central to normative theories of representation. Yet, it also helps measure how satisfied citizens are with their political system (e.g., Curini et al., 2012; Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2011; Kim, 2009), whereby the alignment of attitudes of political elites with those of citizens is indicative of citizens' satisfaction with the political system. This article investigates the congruence between stances held by citizens and political elites on European integration politics, one of the most heated domains in contemporary politics.

At a time when the United Kingdom has left the European Union (EU) and Switzerland is (re-)negotiating the future of its EU single market access, it is crucial for public opinion researchers and policy shapers to understand which policy preferences of political elites and citizens are subject to alignment or difference and how this plays out. Switzerland is a compelling case to study congruence between the two groups, as the Swiss political system features a high frequency of legally binding direct-democratic decisions. Moreover, European integration politics play a prominent role in the country's struggle to balance increasing economic integration and *interdependence* on the one hand with sustained national sovereignty and *independence* on the other. It is therefore unsurprising that European integration politics constantly ranked among the three main political concerns in Switzerland throughout the 2019 election year (Tresch et al., 2020: 65).

As a non-EU member state with a high level of economic integration in the EU single market, the option for either *more* or *less* European integration in various policy domains is ever-present. Indeed, in recent times, Swiss citizens had the tangible option of voting for *less* European integration when they were called to the urns to decide on the “Limitation Initiative” in September 2020. Had this popular initiative been accepted, it would have led to the termination of the existing treaty on the free movement of persons (FMP) between Switzerland and the EU, further leading to all other agreements included in the “bilateral treaties I” package eventually being suspended as well.<sup>1</sup>

Had it been adopted, the “institutional framework agreement” would have allowed for *more* European integration since it would have regulated Switzerland's future access to the EU single

<sup>1</sup>The treaty on the free movement of persons confers upon the citizens of Switzerland and EU member states the right to freely choose their place of employment and residence within the national territories of the contracting parties. The link between the FMP and the “bilateral treaties I” is due to the so-called “guillotine clause”, which refers to the following mechanism: if either the EU or Switzerland terminates one of the seven bilateral agreements, the remaining six agreements are also null and void after six months.

market and solved a number of institutional questions, by, for example, introducing a dispute settlement mechanism and a dynamic adoption of EU law developments. However, the Swiss government withdrew from negotiations about the institutional framework agreement in May 2021.

The main aim of this article is to assess whether *positions* of voters and candidates align along four different European integration questions: 1) the trade-off between maintaining the bilateral agreements and limiting immigration, 2) the cohesion bill, 3) the trade-off between the institutional framework agreement and the accompanying measures, and 4) EU membership. To what extent do political elites and citizens agree on these issues concerning Swiss-EU relations? In addition, I also seek to investigate the *positional congruence* between the opinions of political elites and citizens, that is to say, I compare the distribution of these opinions among candidates with the distribution of the same opinions among their electorate. In so doing, I apply a fine-grained method, the so-called “many-to-many congruence”, which was introduced by Golder and Stramski (2010). How well do the political elites represent the variety of opinions among their voters? And do potential congruence gaps vary across the different parties and/or European integration issues?

For the empirical analyses, I use survey data from the Swiss Election Study (Selects). More specifically, I draw on two surveys conducted within the scope of the 2019 Swiss federal elections, namely the Panel Survey on the level of voters and the Candidate Survey on the level of political elites (Selects, 2021a, 2021b), both of which contain questions on the four above-mentioned European integration issues.

The empirical analyses reveal that, overall, Swiss candidates represent voters extremely well with regard to *positions* on European integration politics: the candidates are always “on the same side” as their voters. However, they are generally more EU-integrationist and hold more extreme opinions than citizens. Results are very mixed when considering how well candidates represent the *variety* of voter opinions. While I do not find any systematic difference in the positional congruence between candidates and their respective electorates comparing pole and centrist parties, this article shows that the various issues yield very different congruence levels across the main six Swiss parties. For example, candidates of the right-wing populist Swiss People's Party (SVP) represent their voters' variety of opinions very well when it comes to the trade-off question between the bilateral agreements and limiting immigration. Yet voter-candidate congruence within the SVP is lowest where the question about EU membership is concerned. On this point, candidates from the leftist Green Party (GPS) and Social-Democratic Party (SP) seem to represent their voters' variety of opinions best, while they score poorly on the congruence regarding preferences between the bilateral agreements and limiting immigration. Hence, what matters for congruence is the *combination* of issues and parties.

This article is structured as follows: in the next section, I provide an overview of how the Swiss political system, with its strong direct-democratic elements, interacts with theories of political representation and congruence. After some background information on the salience of European integration politics in Switzerland, the theoretical expectations and hypotheses are laid out. In the “data, operationalisation and method” section, I describe the four European integration issues, the exact type of congruence analyses conducted, and the data used in this article. After presenting the empirical results, I conclude by discussing their relevance and implications.

## HOW DIRECT-DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS INTERACT WITH POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND CONGRUENCE

Switzerland is a representative multi-party system with distinct direct-democratic elements. Swiss citizens can overturn parliamentary decisions in national referendums and launch

a popular initiative whenever they estimate the constitution needs amending. Moreover, direct-democratic decisions are legally binding. Citizens are called to the ballot-box up to four times a year to vote on national referendums and initiatives, which makes the country the undisputed world champion when it comes to the usage of direct-democratic instruments (Qvortrup, 2014).

The direct-democratic setting can have two diverging effects on voter-candidate congruence. On the one hand, it can be argued that due to a trade-off between parliamentary elections and popular votes,<sup>2</sup> congruence between voters and candidates does not necessarily need to be high because citizens can “correct” parliamentary decisions or inactivity through participation in direct-democratic votes. On the other hand, because of the high frequency of direct-democratic votes, it can reasonably be assumed that Swiss citizens heavily rely on issue-voting when forming their opinions on policy proposals. This implies that they base their decisions on considerations about the issue at stake rather than on a general evaluation of governmental performance or other extraneous criteria, as suggested by the second-order election thesis (cf. Beach, 2018, for an extensive discussion about issue-voting vs. second-order election on European integration). This view is compounded by the fact that no demands for resignation are made when the Swiss government (Federal Council) is defeated in a direct-democratic vote. Indeed, such demands would make little sense as, following the principle of concordance, all the country's major parties are represented in the Federal Council (Linder & Mueller, 2021). When issue-voting is predominant for opinion formation, there is reason to believe that Swiss citizens consider candidates' positions on political issues extensively when deciding on who to vote for in national elections, thereby entailing high levels of voter-candidate congruence.

The literature on direct democracy argues that referendums and initiatives are conducive to policy congruence between citizens and their political elites because citizens are supposed to get what they want when they are entitled to partake in policy making (e.g., Gerber, 1996; Matsusaka, 2010). The empirical findings of some scholars substantiate this thesis (Gerber, 1996; Helfer et al., 2021; Matsusaka, 2010). However, other researchers do not find such a positive correlation (Lascher et al., 1996; Lax & Phillips, 2012; Tausanovitch & Warshaw, 2014). Leemann and Wasserfallen (2016) empirically show that direct democracy does not have a unique and constant effect on policy congruence. Interestingly, in direct-democratic systems, a large deviation between the preferences of the political elites and the voters is good for policy congruence, not bad, as the representation literature suggests (Leemann & Wasserfallen, 2016). More precisely, the authors find that direct-democratic institutions have no effect on policy congruence when the preferences of the elites and the electorate are aligned – because in systems where citizen-elite congruence is high, policy congruence is already high. However, in cases in which these preferences deviate from each other, referendums and initiatives exert a positive effect on policy congruence – and this effect grows the larger the preference deviations (Leemann & Wasserfallen, 2016). In a direct-democratic system like Switzerland, initiatives and referendums can hence act as powerful correctives when voters and political elites hold deviating political preferences.

## ON THE SALIENCE OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION POLITICS IN SWITZERLAND

Two main reasons make Switzerland a compelling case to study congruence between political elites and voters in European integration politics. First, the relationship between the EU and Switzerland is a very multifaceted one and second, European integration politics have recently

<sup>2</sup>In their exhaustive analyses of the Swiss cantons, Stadelmann-Steffen and Freitag (2009) find a trade-off between participation in elections and participation in popular votes: the more a canton is open to direct democracy, the lower the electoral participation.

gained a high level of salience in the Swiss political arena. This allows for an in-depth study of specific policy questions that are salient for both candidates and voters.

Although Switzerland is not part of the EU, its level of European integration is very high, especially in economic terms. This is primarily attributable to the so-called bilateral agreements which regulate the manifold areas of cooperation between the two partners and make their relationship a complex one (Schwok, 2020). Hence, European integration is not just a general “yes” or “no” question but depends on the specific policy choices at stake. Given Switzerland's direct-democratic decision-making process, various European integration policies are repeatedly subject to political debate and public contestation. European politics has thus become a recurring topic in Swiss politics, not only in national elections but also in popular votes.

In a historic popular vote in December 1992, a slim majority of Swiss voters (50.3%) rejected a membership in the European Economic Area (EEA). Due to this decision and the subsequent political bargaining about the future relationship with Europe, the issue of European integration became omnipresent in Switzerland in the 1990s. However, the topic's salience declined during the 2000s (Jenni, 2015; Safi, 2010). But, while the salience of EU-related issues *decreased* in the political discourse, the frequency of European integration measures *increased* (Jenni, 2015: 524). In recent years, European politics has yet again surged to become a hotly debated matter in Switzerland. In the 2015 federal elections, European integration politics was the second most important political concern of voters (13% first mentions) after migration and asylum policy (44%) which – in the year of the refugee crisis – was by far voters' most important political problem (Lutz, 2016: 26). In the 2019 elections, European integration politics ranked among the top three political problems – next to “environment and energy” (26% first mentions) and “social security and welfare state” (20%) – with 18% (compared to 13% in 2015) (Tresch et al., 2020: 30).

Today, the very future of the bilateral relationship is uncertain. After the Swiss government withdrew from the negotiations about the institutional framework agreement, the EU has made clear that it is unwilling to update the existing bilateral treaties or conclude new ones before the institutional questions have been clarified (adoption of new EU law developments and dispute settlement mechanism). To advance the future policy shaping process, it seems crucial – both scholarly and politically – to elucidate what priorities citizens and political elites attach to European integration policies and how they align with or diverge from one another.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES FOR VOTER-CANDIDATE CONGRUENCE

In this chapter, I elaborate on the theoretical expectations regarding divergencies between political elites and citizens on European integration policies. While the first two hypotheses shed light on the *relative positioning* of voters and candidates regarding these policies, the third hypothesis investigates the *positional congruence* by looking at the distribution of opinions within the two groups.

Research on congruence between political elites and voters has shown that in EU member states, political parties are generally more supportive of European integration than citizens (e.g., Conti et al., 2018; Mattila & Raunio, 2012; Rosset & Stecker, 2019; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1997). Otherwise put, voters have consistently been found to be more Eurosceptic than political elites. Rosset and Stecker (2019) find evidence that not only parties but also governments are more EU-integrationist than the citizens of their countries. Furthermore, in the investigation of longitudinal trends for voter-party congruence on European integration issues, Hooghe and Marks (2009) observe a widening gap between the public and the political elites, in addition to an increasing intra-party conflict. In an extensive study covering all EU member states, Mattila and Raunio (2012) show that in each country,

parties are more pro-European than voters, a divide that increased between 2004 and 2009: parties were therefore becoming less representative of their voters on questions regarding European integration.

Strijbis et al. (2019) reason that the elite-mass divide on supranational integration is part of a pervasive “cosmopolitan-communitarian cleavage” in Western European societies.<sup>3</sup> The authors mobilise several theoretical approaches to explain why political elites are more cosmopolitan – and therefore more integrationist – than ordinary citizens (see Strijbis et al., 2019: 39ff. for a detailed discussion). Diverging material interests between elites and citizens are likely to be at the origin of this rift: individuals with economic capital benefit from globalisation and supranational (economic) integration and therefore support it, while those without economic capital oppose it. Cultural incentives are also at work here: people with a higher cultural capital (e.g., transnational networks or elite status) favour globalisation, while state-bound individuals oppose it. Finally, according to cognitive mobilisation theory, education plays an important role in explaining the elite-mass divide. The higher educated are more likely to support supranational integration because they understand the functional need for collective (international) problem solving more than those with less educational opportunities. Compared to citizens, political elites are more likely to possess economic, cultural and educational capital and, hence, cosmopolitan and integrationist attitudes.

Given these findings, I postulate that in Switzerland, political elites are more favourable of integrationist positions than voters when it comes to European affairs.

*H1: Political elites are more EU-integrationist than voters.*

Enquiring into the ideological congruence between political elites and citizens in the Swiss context reveals that the former are generally more polarised than the latter (Leimgruber et al., 2010; Lutz, 2008). Iversen (1994) shows that party elites systematically choose positions that are considerably more extreme than those their electorates opt for, i.e., their support of or opposition to a specific policy is more pronounced.

According to the Downsian model of electoral competition (Downs, 1957), politicians should reflect their voters' preferences and hence share similar, if not identical, positions with their electorate. This *proximity model* of political representation has been fundamentally challenged by the *directional theory* of issue voting (Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989). In this vein, Valen and Narud (2007) argue that *direction* rather than *proximity* attracts voters' interest and attention. Accordingly, political representation is driven by a directional mechanism: candidates take on issue positions that will move the status quo in the direction their electorate presumably prefers. Thereby, candidates' issue positions are bound to be more extreme than those of their voters. Valen and Narud (2007) even argue that in multiparty systems with a multidimensional policy space, voters do not necessarily vote for parties that best reflect their own position, but rather for parties that represent a more extreme view.

Several representation studies on suchlike political systems in Europe have found that political parties tend to adopt more extreme policy positions than their electorates (e.g., Esaiasson et al., 1996; Listhaug et al., 1990; Valen & Narud, 2007). This empirical observation clearly deviates from the theoretical assumptions put forth by the Downsian *proximity model*. Yet it makes sense from an electoral point of view, as political parties need a clear profile and strong opinions on important political issues to convince voters to support their candidates.

<sup>3</sup>The opposing sides in this cleavage have also been labeled “GAL vs. TAN” (Hooghe et al., 2002) or “integration vs. demarcation” (Kriesi et al., 2008).

In Switzerland's multiparty system with proportional voting, a clear stance on European integration policies, which figure among the political concerns that citizens voice most often during election campaigns (Tresch et al., 2020), helps candidates sharpen their electoral profile. I thus hypothesise that while candidates represent clear yet somewhat “extreme”, i.e., more pronounced, positions concerning European integration questions, voters' views are more moderate.

*H2: Political elites have more extreme positions on European integration issues than voters.*

While the first two hypotheses concentrate on the *relative positioning* towards European integration policies, that is to say, whether candidates are more EU-integrationist and more extreme in their opinions than voters, the third hypothesis focuses on the *positional congruence* between the candidates and their electorate. It investigates how – equally or not – opinions are distributed among the candidates of a party and their electorate and how congruence levels vary across parties and issues.

While theorising for H1 and H2 is well established in the scientific literature, and empirical findings lend overwhelming support to the claim that political elites are more EU-integrationist and more extreme in their views than voters, the literature suggests two conflicting hypotheses regarding how parties' ideological positioning connects to voter-candidate congruence.

Some claim that parties in the political centre exhibit higher levels of congruence with their electorates compared to parties ideologically distant from the centre (e.g., Belchior & Freire, 2013; Holmberg, 1989, 2000; Iversen, 1994). Others have provided evidence that the opposite is true (e.g., Dalton, 1985; Klingemann, 1995; Pierce, 1999). Proponents of the first hypothesis argue that centrist parties need to move towards the opinion of the median voter to captivate public opinion successfully, maximise social mobilisation and ultimately gain political power, while pole parties take on extreme positions and seek to change the electorate's views (cf. Holmberg, 1989; Iversen, 1994). Accordingly, centrist parties' candidates should be *more* congruent with their voters than those of pole parties.

Proponents of the competing hypothesis suggest that centrist parties produce *less* congruence with their electorate than parties located at the ideological poles. Unlike centrist parties who wish to approach the median voter, pole parties tend to position themselves in a way that better matches the desires of very specific segments of their electorate (cf. Dalton, 1985; Klingemann, 1995). Hence, pole parties are expected to have clearer policy positions and therefore a clearer electoral profile than centrist parties. This ideological clarity should, in turn, lead to a higher voter-candidate congruence, leaving ideological centrism to have a negative effect on policy representation.

Which of these conflicting hypotheses is most pertinent for the Swiss context? Kedar (2005a, b) argues that a consensual political system like the Swiss one electorally favours ideologically extreme parties. This is because in a consensual system, a winning party risks its policy preferences to be “watered down” through the process of political bargaining and compromising that follows elections. Assuming citizens care about future policy outcomes and are aware of the institutional mechanisms of consensual policymaking, they might be more inclined to support an extreme rather than a moderate party on their side of the ideological spectrum so that their preferences are not diluted too much (Kedar, 2005b). In this case, citizens would apply a *directional* or *compensational* voting strategy (Kedar, 2005b). Strategic (i.e., *directional* or *compensational*) voting suggests that ideologically extreme parties should be less congruent with their voters than centrist parties. Indeed, a Swiss study on congruence between parties and their electorates revealed lower levels of congruence for parties on the left and the right poles of the ideological spectrum (Leimgruber et al., 2010).



In line with the above, I postulate that the placement of parties on the left–right dimension should have a bearing on voter-candidate congruence regarding European integration policies, in that congruence should be lower for ideologically extreme parties compared to centrist parties.<sup>4</sup>

*H3: Voter-candidate congruence on European integration questions is lower for parties situated further from the political centre on the left–right dimension than for centrist parties.*

## DATA, OPERATIONALISATION AND METHOD

### European Integration Issues

Citizens and political elites were asked about their opinions on four European integration issues: 1) the trade-off between maintaining the bilateral agreements and limiting immigration, 2) the cohesion billion, 3) the trade-off between the institutional framework agreement and the accompanying measures, and 4) EU membership.<sup>5</sup>

The trade-off situation between the bilateral agreements and limiting immigration is due to the fact that the free movement of persons treaty with the EU is part of the “bilateral treaties I”, a set of seven bilateral agreements that mainly govern Switzerland’s access to the EU single market. Were Switzerland to impose immigration quotas and draw out of the FMP treaty – as two popular initiatives (the accepted “Mass Immigration Initiative” in 2014 and the declined “Limitation Initiative” in 2020) proposed – the remaining six treaties would automatically be terminated.

The cohesion billion is a financial contribution to selected Eastern EU member states that aims to reduce economic and social disparities within the EU. Initially recognised as a “goodwill payment” out of solidarity, the cohesion billion is now increasingly regarded as the “price to pay” for Switzerland’s privileged access to the EU single market.

Another trade-off situation existed between the institutional framework agreement and the accompanying measures, and still exists, in more general terms, between European economic integration and sovereign social protection. When the FMP was introduced in 2002, the Federal Council simultaneously put wage protection arrangements in place (more widely known as “accompanying measures”). Yet the EU has always argued that some of these measures are not in conformity with the FMP treaty. The institutional agreement would have led to the creation of a dispute settlement procedure between Switzerland and the EU and a dynamic

<sup>4</sup>Some scholarly literature highlights the role of political knowledge and political interest as important determinants of voter-candidate congruence (e.g., Costello, 2021; Walczak & van der Brug, 2013; Walgrave & Lefevere, 2013). While this article does not focus on explanations of voter-candidate congruence at the level of the individual (because the main aim is to investigate how well political elites represent *all* voters – overall and across parties), I nevertheless conducted some supplementary analyses across two subgroups of voters: the politically more sophisticated (politically more interested and knowledgeable) voters vs. the politically less sophisticated ones. The results of these supplementary analyses lend strong support for the existing finding in the literature that politically more sophisticated voters are more congruent with the political elites than politically less sophisticated voters. The difference in congruence levels is statistically significant. See chapter 6 of the [Online Appendix](#) for the supplementary analyses on the relationship between political knowledge/interest and congruence.

<sup>5</sup>One might view the four issues as constituting one underlying dimension of whether someone is in favour of European integration or against it. Cronbach’s alpha, which is a measure of internal consistency that ranges from 0 to 1, attains a value of 0.72 among voters and 0.67 among candidates for these four issues. The questions are thus closely related, as values above 0.6 generally mean that there is a “reliable” relation between the items. Interestingly, the items relate better to each other for voters than for candidates. Hence, candidates differentiate more between the specific policies when making up their opinions. As this article is interested in the specific policy choices at stake, rather than a general pro- or anti-EU stance, it is crucial to treat the European integration questions distinctly and not to fold them into a single dimension. Furthermore, in some cases, the results for the three hypotheses strongly differ between the issues (cf. chapter “Results”).

adoption of new EU law developments by Switzerland, as well as a certain diminution of the accompanying measures. However, the Federal Council withdrew from negotiations about the institutional agreement in May 2021. The trade-off persists, however, as Switzerland cannot solve the institutional questions with the EU while maintaining the totality of its accompanying measures (cf. Lauener et al. in this Special Issue).

Regarding the membership issue, it seems politically unfeasible that Switzerland joins the EU in the near future, as the rejection of EU membership by Swiss citizens has levelled off at around 80% in recent years (Sarrasin et al., 2018). Still, the topic has recently witnessed a cautious upswing, with EU membership becoming a valid option for some political forces on the Left in the wake of the failed institutional agreement and the resulting uncertainty regarding the future of the bilateral agreements.

The four European integration issues are listed in ascending order, ranging from the least to the greatest possible European integration. Whereas a preference for limits on immigration as opposed to the current status-quo (existing bilateral treaties) can be considered as a statement in favour of the *least* possible European integration, Swiss membership of the EU would mean the *greatest* possible European integration. These four questions are much debated issues in Swiss-EU relations and represent salient policy choices in realpolitik, which makes them ideal empirical cases for the study of voter-candidate congruence. In chapter 1 of the [Online Appendix](#), I describe the historical developments and the current state regarding the four questions in detail and show the exact question wordings (see Table B1 in the [Online Appendix](#)).

## Empirical Analyses

The first part of the empirical analyses is concerned with the *positions* of voters and candidates, that is to say, whether these groups are on average for or against the European integration policies and how pronounced (“extreme”) their opinions are (cf. H1 and H2). For this purpose, I rescaled the variables to range from  $-2$  (complete disapproval of the European integration policy) to  $+2$  (complete approval). The mean positions are used to find out whether political elites are more EU-integrationist than voters (H1), while the mean distances to the centre position (0) are used to investigate whether candidates have more extreme opinions than voters (H2).

The second part of the empirical analyses sheds light on the *positional congruence* between political elites and citizens. More specifically, I investigate to what extent the distribution of opinions among the political elites overlaps with the distribution of opinions among their electorates. Scholars who work on ideological congruence have highlighted the importance of the method researchers use to conceptualise congruence because different methods applied to the same data yield different findings on the existence and size of congruence gaps (for a comprehensive discussion, see Golder & Stramski, 2010; Müller et al., 2012; Shim & Gherghina, 2020).

Müller et al. (2012) and Shim and Gherghina (2020) urge researchers to pose themselves a set of questions to determine the appropriate congruence measure for their analysis. First, the two groups that shall be compared (elites and citizenry) need to be clearly defined. This article puts the election context in the foreground as the two data sources stem from surveys conducted in the framework of the Swiss Election Study 2019. More specifically, I investigate to what extent the electoral supply side (candidates) is congruent with the demand side (voters). Rather than enquire into the quality of representation of citizens' opinions in Parliament, I analyse how parties reflect their electorates on issues of European integration. Therefore, by “political elites” I mean not only elected members of Parliament or parties' (average) positions – as is the case for most representation studies (Shim & Gherghina, 2020: 512) – but *all* candidates who ran in the 2019 federal elections. The second group, “the citizenry”, is defined as those citizens who took part in the elections; non-voters are hence excluded from the analyses. The analyses consider the main six political parties

(SVP, Liberals (FDP), Christian-Democratic Party (CVP), Green Liberal Party (GLP), SP, and GPS).<sup>6</sup>

A further question relates to which data sources are available and what limitations these data present. Müller et al. (2012) note that it is often problematic when different types of data (surveys, expert judgements, party manifestos, roll-call votes, governmental policy outputs, etc.) and different metrics are used because researchers are sometimes forced to make daring assumptions. The present study has the advantage of not needing to construct elite positions in an indirect way, for example by deriving them from expert judgements or party manifestos, because political elites were asked about their opinions directly in the Selects Candidate Survey. Furthermore, candidates and voters received identical (or highly similar) questions, which allows for a direct comparison of their issue positions.<sup>7</sup>

Another methodological question pertains to what political dimension or issue items the analysis shall be based on. Here, the answer is straightforward, as the study is centred on voter-candidate congruence regarding four very specific European integration issues.

When conceptualising congruence, researchers also need to think about whether they focus exclusively on issue positions or additionally include issue salience in their measure. Schmitt and Thomasson (2000) argue that the difference in *importance* that voters and political elites attach to an issue might be an even better indicator than the difference in *position* with regard to the issue. Moreover, Walgrave and Lefevere (2013) show that voter-party congruence is especially high for issues that are important to both voters and their preferred party. Unfortunately, measures of the individual importance that candidates and voters attribute to each of the four specific European integration issues are unavailable in the survey data used for this study.<sup>8</sup>

The above reflexions lead to the choice of the appropriate method for measuring congruence between political elites and voters. There are different ways to aggregate policy preferences of the two groups. As Shim and Gherghina (2020: 514–515) demonstrate, researchers can compare voters' and candidates' average (either mean or median) positions or investigate the extent of the resemblance between the distributions of opinions among the two groups. If there are two distributions of opinions, for voters and political elites (which is the case here), Golder and Stramski (2010) recommend a “many-to-many approach” to conceptualise congruence.<sup>9</sup> Their proposed measure relies on the cumulative distribution functions of citizen and elite opinions and compares the areas under these functions:

$$\text{Congruence (many – to – many)} = \sum_x |F_1(x) - F_2(x)|$$

Many-to-many congruence is defined as the absolute difference between the two cumulative distribution functions for the voters' ( $F_1(x)$ ) and the candidates' preferences ( $F_2(x)$ ).

<sup>6</sup>The parties are ordered from the right to the left of the political spectrum. According to data of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), in 2019, the parties can be placed at the following positions on a scale that ranges from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right): SVP 8.7; FDP: 7.0; CVP: 5.3; GLP: 4.9; SP: 1.4; GPS: 1.1 (Bakker et al., 2020). See Table B15 in the [Online Appendix](#) for the parties' placements along other ideological dimensions.

<sup>7</sup>See Table B1 in the [Online Appendix](#).

<sup>8</sup>As Shim and Gherghina (2020: 514) aptly describe mass-elite congruence on issue *salience* is increasingly important in the literature as it is seen as complementary to congruence on issue *positions*, i.e., complementary to spatial theories of representation/ congruence (see also Alonso, 2012). As noted, there are no measures of individual importance that voters and candidates attribute to the specific issues tested in this article. However, the Selects Panel Survey provides a range of salience measures for different general policy dimensions (European, immigration, social, environmental, and economic politics) that allow light to be shed on the importance these dimensions have relative to one another. Furthermore, there are questions about the most and second most important political problem in the Panel Survey. One Swiss study that convincingly utilizes individual-level salience measures is that by Giger and Lefkofridi (2014).

<sup>9</sup>See Golder and Stramski (2010) for an overview of different measures of congruence and how they are calculated.

To test H1 and H2, concerned with *relative positioning*, I rely on voters' and candidates' mean positions and their mean distances to the centre position in order to reveal whether candidates are more EU-integrationist (H1) and hold more extreme opinions (H2) than voters. For H3, concerned with *positional congruence* between voters and candidates, that is to say, the degree to which the opinion distributions between the two groups resemble each other, I use Golder and Stramski's (2010) many-to-many measure.

## Data

The data used for this study was collected within the framework of the 2019 Swiss Election Study (Selects). The questions about the different European integration issues were submitted to participants in two large-N surveys: the Panel Survey (Selects, 2021a) for citizens and the Candidate Survey (Selects, 2021b) for political elites.

The Selects Panel Survey aims at studying the evolution of political opinions and vote intention/choice during the different phases of the election cycle. In 2019, it consisted of three online panel waves: the first was fielded *before* the main election campaign period (Mai/June), the second *during* the election campaign (September/October), and the third *after* elections took place (October–December). A total of 25'575 individuals across all Swiss cantons were randomly sampled by the Federal Statistical Office (FSO). Sample members had to be Swiss citizens living in Switzerland aged 18 or older. 7939 citizens responded in the first wave, 5577 in the second, and 5125 in the third. For the analyses in this article, I mainly rely on the first panel wave, which featured questions about the four European integration issues. I also use the question on respondents' party vote choice asked in the third (post-election) wave or, in very few cases, in the second wave already (for voters who had already voted by postal voting towards the field end of wave 2). This leaves me with an N between 3885 and 4009 respondents depending on the policy issues.<sup>10</sup>

The Selects Candidate Survey was conducted among all candidates running for the National Council (Lower House) and/or the Council of States (Upper House). Its main aim is to understand the candidates' career paths, political attitudes, and campaign activities. The 2019 Candidate Survey was fielded applying a mixed-mode approach: after the federal elections, all candidates were invited to fill in an online questionnaire and those who had not taken part before December 2019 received a paper questionnaire as part of a reminder. Out of the 4736 candidates for the National Council and the Council of States, 2158 took part in the survey (87% online and 13% through the paper questionnaire).<sup>11</sup>

## RESULTS

Table 1 reports the mean positions on the four European integration questions across all candidates and voters as well as across the candidates and electorates of the six most important political parties (first two columns).<sup>12</sup> The values range from  $-2$  (complete disapproval of European integration policy) to  $+2$  (complete approval) with 0 reflecting the centre position. Standard errors of the mean positions are reported in parentheses. The third column of Table 1 displays the difference between the mean candidate and the mean voter position with positive

<sup>10</sup>For more details on the Selects Panel Survey see chapter 2 of the [Online Appendix](#) and Tresch et al. (2020: 78 f.).

<sup>11</sup>For more details on the Selects Candidate Survey see chapter 3 of the [Online Appendix](#) and Tresch et al. (2020: 79 f.).

<sup>12</sup>Comprehensive descriptive statistics regarding the empirical analyses for all three hypotheses are reported in chapter 5 of the [Online Appendix](#) (see Tables B16, B17 and Figures B1–B4).

**TABLE 1** Mean Positions, Mean Distances to Centre Position and Many-to-Many Congruence Comparing Candidates and Voters

Overall	mean position candidates	mean position voters	difference	t-statistic	Elites more integrationist than voters (H1)?	mean distance to centre candidates	mean distance to centre position voters	difference	t-statistic	Elites more extreme than voters (H2)?	many-to-many congruence
Bilateral agreements vs. limits on immigration	1.19 (0.03)	0.42 (0.02)	0.78	19.81***	yes	1.81 (0.01)	1.42 (0.01)	0.40	31.35***	yes	0.67
Cohesion billion	0.36 (0.03)	0.05 (0.02)	0.30	7.59***	yes	1.50 (0.01)	1.36 (0.01)	0.14	10.64***	yes	0.25
Institutional agreement vs. accompanying measures	-0.25 (0.03)	-0.34 (0.02)	0.10	2.54*	yes	1.45 (0.01)	1.27 (0.01)	0.19	14.86***	yes	0.02
EU membership	-1.19 (0.03)	-0.72 (0.02)	-0.47	-14.26***	vice versa	1.70 (0.01)	1.16 (0.01)	0.54	31.11***	yes	0.29
<i>N</i>	2009-2082 3885-4009										
<b>Swiss People's Party (SVP)</b>											
Bilateral agreements vs. limits on immigration	-1.57 (0.06)	-0.85 (0.05)	-0.72	-7.00***	vice versa	1.73 (0.03)	1.47 (0.02)	0.26	6.39***	yes	0.37
Cohesion billion	-1.78 (0.04)	-1.07 (0.04)	-0.71	-8.68***	vice versa	1.81 (0.03)	1.47 (0.02)	0.33	8.76***	yes	0.65
Institutional agreement vs. accompanying measures	-1.66 (0.05)	-0.94 (0.04)	-0.72	-9.17***	vice versa	1.73 (0.03)	1.32 (0.02)	0.40	10.76***	yes	0.64
EU membership	-2.00 (0.00)	-1.51 (0.03)	-0.49	-9.22***	vice versa	2.00 (0.00)	1.55 (0.02)	0.45	9.76***	yes	0.70
<i>N</i>	175-204 660-679										
<b>Liberals (FDP)</b>											
Bilateral agreements vs. limits on immigration	1.61 (0.06)	0.74 (0.05)	0.88	9.59***	yes	1.77 (0.03)	1.36 (0.02)	0.41	11.11***	yes	0.74
Cohesion billion	0.28 (0.09)	0.13 (0.05)	0.15	1.35	no diff.	1.30 (0.03)	1.29 (0.02)	0.01	0.33	no diff.	0.10
Institutional agreement vs. accompanying measures	1.01 (0.08)	0.11 (0.05)	0.90	8.55***	yes	1.47 (0.03)	1.28 (0.02)	0.19	5.24***	yes	0.49

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Overall	mean position candidates	mean position voters	difference	t-statistic	Elites more integrationist than voters (H1)?	mean distance to centre candidates	mean distance to centre position voters	difference	t-statistic	Elites more extreme than voters (H2)?	many-to-many congruence
EU membership	-1.85 (0.04)	-0.80 (0.04)	-1.05	-14.04***	vice versa	1.91 (0.02)	1.11 (0.03)	0.80	16.32***	yes	0.74
<i>N</i>	208–214		630–652								
<b>Christian-Democratic Party (CVP)</b>											
Bilateral agreements vs. limits on immigration	1.56 (0.05)	0.55 (0.07)	1.01	12.07***	yes	1.71 (0.03)	1.30 (0.02)	0.41	11.90***	yes	0.82
Cohesion billion	0.41 (0.07)	0.32 (0.07)	0.09	0.98	no diff.	1.28 (0.02)	1.22 (0.02)	0.06	1.93 <sup>+</sup>	no diff.	0.08
Institutional agreement vs. accompanying measures	0.03 (0.07)	-0.14 (0.07)	0.17	1.71 <sup>+</sup>	no diff.	1.28 (0.02)	1.20 (0.02)	0.08	2.57 <sup>*</sup>	yes	0.07
EU membership	-1.66 (0.05)	-0.74 (0.05)	-0.91	-12.69***	vice versa	1.80 (0.02)	1.10 (0.03)	0.71	16.80***	yes	0.62
<i>N</i>	326–354		348–363								
<b>Green Liberal Party (GLP)</b>											
Bilateral agreements vs. limits on immigration	1.82 (0.04)	0.98 (0.06)	0.83	10.02***	yes	1.90 (0.02)	1.46 (0.02)	0.44	12.40***	yes	0.73
Cohesion billion	1.08 (0.07)	0.50 (0.06)	0.58	5.76***	yes	1.50 (0.03)	1.32 (0.02)	0.18	4.69***	yes	0.45
Institutional agreement vs. accompanying measures	1.27 (0.07)	0.30 (0.06)	0.97	10.01***	yes	1.59 (0.03)	1.23 (0.02)	0.37	10.15***	yes	0.49
EU membership	-0.99 (0.08)	-0.43 (0.05)	-0.56	-5.81***	vice versa	1.55 (0.03)	1.00 (0.03)	0.55	11.10***	yes	0.31
<i>N</i>	238–239		429–440								
<b>Social Democratic Party (SP)</b>											
Bilateral agreements vs. limits on immigration	1.94 (0.02)	1.21 (0.04)	0.73	12.90***	yes	1.95 (0.01)	1.47 (0.02)	0.48	16.06***	yes	0.72

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Overall	mean position candidates	mean position voters	difference	t-statistic	Elites more integrationist than voters (H1)?	mean distance to centre position candidates	mean distance to centre position voters	difference	t-statistic	Elites more extreme than voters (H2)?	many-to-many congruence
Cohesion billion	1.52 (0.05)	0.85 (0.04)	0.68	9.04***	yes	1.67 (0.03)	1.39 (0.02)	0.28	8.54***	yes	0.55
Institutional agreement vs. accompanying measures	-0.89 (0.07)	-0.24 (0.05)	-0.65	-7.32***	vice versa	1.46 (0.03)	1.28 (0.02)	0.19	5.99***	yes	0.49
EU membership	0.20 (0.08)	0.10 (0.04)	0.10	1.18	no diff.	1.38 (0.03)	0.94 (0.02)	0.44	10.60***	yes	0.10
<i>N</i>	304–310		757–772								
<b>Green Party (GPS)</b>											
Bilateral agreements vs. limits on immigration	1.86 (0.03)	1.06 (0.04)	0.79	11.13***	yes	1.92 (0.02)	1.44 (0.02)	0.48	14.68***	yes	0.73
Cohesion billion	1.46 (0.05)	0.74 (0.05)	0.72	8.75***	yes	1.59 (0.03)	1.35 (0.02)	0.24	6.84***	yes	0.56
Institutional agreement vs. accompanying measures	-0.67 (0.08)	-0.22 (0.05)	-0.44	-4.71***	vice versa	1.31 (0.03)	1.25 (0.02)	0.06	1.99*	yes	0.30
EU membership	-0.18 (0.09)	-0.21 (0.04)	0.03	0.34	no diff.	1.39 (0.03)	0.95 (0.02)	0.44	9.72***	yes	0.09
<i>N</i>	252–258		705–730								

Notes: For the mean positions, the scales range from -2 (complete disapproval of European integration policy) to +2 (complete approval). For the mean distances to the centre position, the scales range from 0 (centre position) to 2 (largest possible distance to centre position). Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Levels of statistical significance: \*\*\*p < 0.001, \*\*p < 0.01, \*p < 0.05, +p < 0.10. The lower the value for the many-to-many congruence index (last column), the greater the congruence between candidates and voters.

values indicating a situation in which the political elites are more EU-integrationist than voters and negative values indicating the opposite.

The same pattern appears for the questions on the trade-off between the bilateral agreements and limiting immigration and the general attitude towards the cohesion billion. Looking at both candidates and voters, the SVP clearly prefers to limit immigration and opposes the cohesion billion, whereas the FDP, CVP, GLP, SP, and GPS are overwhelmingly in favour of maintaining the bilateral agreements with the EU and support the cohesion billion, albeit to a lesser degree. The cohesion billion proves to be a more controversial topic for the two centrist parties FDP and CVP, but also among candidates and voters overall.

The trade-off between the institutional agreement and maintaining the accompanying measures for wage protection is the thorniest of the four European integration issues considered, with candidates of the pole parties on the Right (SVP) and the Left (SP and GPS) preferring to maintain current wage protection measures, and candidates of the two liberal centre parties FDP and GLP opting for the institutional agreement. The CVP, the third centrist party, is internally deeply divided on the matter. Looking at the mean voter positions, it becomes clear that all party electorates (except that of the SVP) are also deeply divided with average values that are very close to the centre position of 0. Overall, candidates and voters would rather maintain the accompanying measures than accept the institutional agreement. The findings on the two trade-off questions are closely related to those of Lauener et al. (in this Special Issue) who show that a majority of voters would choose international cooperation over sovereign immigration control, but sovereign social protection measures over international cooperation.<sup>13</sup>

EU membership, the most integrationist issue, finds support only among candidates and voters of the SP. The issue is however highly contested among the Social Democrats and among the Greens as the average position is only slightly positive or negative, respectively. The right-wing populist SVP is most clearly against an EU membership: not a single candidate responded other than with a clear “no”.<sup>14</sup> The average candidate and voter positions of the three centre parties – FDP, CVP and GLP – are also negative towards EU membership.

Moreover, [Table 1](#) demonstrates that candidates represent voters extremely well when it comes to positions on the four European integration questions. Neither overall nor across the parties do candidates' and voters' mean positions (i.e., support for or opposition to the European integration policy) diverge – except for one case: while CVP voters are on average in favour of maintaining the accompanying measures on the job market, CVP candidates are on average slightly in favour of accepting the institutional agreement. Simply put, candidates and voters are *practically always* “on the same side”.

In what follows, I explain the empirical results regarding the three hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 claimed that political elites are more EU-integrationist than voters. To test whether the mean position of candidates is statistically significantly different from the mean position of voters, I conducted a two-sample *t*-test. The fourth and fifth columns of [Table 1](#) report the *t*-statistic and significance level of this test as well as a response to whether H1 holds true. The “overall” results in [Table 1](#) show that political elites are significantly more EU-integrationist than their electorate when it comes to the trade-off between the bilateral agreements and limits on immigration, the cohesion billion and the trade-off between the institutional agreement and the accompanying measures. In the case of EU membership however, it is exactly

<sup>13</sup>Note that the findings in this article somehow contrast the results of opinion polls in 2019 and 2020 that showed that majorities of the sympathisers of the main six Swiss parties – except for the SVP – were in favour of the institutional framework agreement (e.g., Decadri et al., 2020; Walter, 2019). After the Federal Council withdrew from negotiations about the institutional agreement, a relative majority of voters however backed the government's decision (Lutz & Frenzel, 2021). Importantly, the exact formulation of the question matters: while citizens have long had a rather positive general attitude towards the institutional agreement, they are torn on the trade-off question about whether they prefer the accompanying measures or the institutional agreement (see Tresch et al. (2020: 72) for the general attitude on the institutional agreement and Lauener et al. (in this Special Issue) for the trade-off situation).

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Table B14 in the [Online Appendix](#).



the other way around: candidates are significantly *less* integrationist than voters. While H1 therefore finds strong empirical backing in three out of four cases, it is noteworthy that it cannot be corroborated for the most integrationist issue (EU membership).

At the level of parties, the general finding that candidates are more EU-integrationist than voters does not always hold, however: results on the positions of voters and candidates are very differentiated and depend on the political party and the specific issue at stake. Three findings are particularly noteworthy. First, SVP candidates are consistently for *even less* European integration compared to their voters, even though the latter also disapprove the four tested European integration policies. This finding is unsurprising as the right-wing populist SVP unflinchingly opposes any (further) European integration<sup>15</sup>: their candidates forcefully defend Swiss national sovereignty and independence from supranational organisations and campaign often on said issues (cf. Tresch et al., 2020). A second observation that goes against H1 concerns the centrist parties FDP, CVP and GLP, where candidates are markedly more strongly *against* EU membership than their voters, even though they are more EU-integrationist on all other issues.<sup>16</sup> Hence, EU membership seems to represent a “red line” that the elites of centrist parties do not cross. Third, because of the clear preference among political elites on the Left (SP and GPS) for maintaining the accompanying measures rather than accepting the institutional agreement (cf. chapter 1.4 in the [Online Appendix](#)), candidates have a more pronounced *anti*-integrationist stance than their voters in this specific case.

Hypothesis 2 postulated that candidates have more extreme opinions on European integration issues than voters. To shed light on the validity of this hypothesis, I calculated the mean distance to the centre position (0) across voters and across candidates and tested whether the two mean distances are statistically significantly different from each other by applying a two-sample *t*-test. [Table 1](#) reports the mean candidate and voter distances to the centre position, the difference between these two mean distances, the *t*-statistic with the significance level for the two-sample *t*-test as well as a response to whether H2 holds true in columns 6–10.

Comparing the mean distances to the centre position between all candidates and all voters, I find strong empirical evidence for H2. Indeed, the opinions of candidates are significantly more extreme, i.e., more pronounced, than those of voters. Moreover, voters not only have a lower distance to the centre position, thereby showing more moderation in their opinions, than the candidates *overall* but also across *all parties* and *all European integration questions*. Only two cases belie this trend, whereby the mean distance to the centre position of candidates is not significantly different from that of their electorate (cf. [Table 1](#)): the question on the cohesion billion within the FDP and the CVP. Notwithstanding, candidates tend to be more extreme in their opinions than voters even in these two cases because their mean distance to the centre position is slightly (but not significantly) greater.

Hypothesis 3 postulated that parties situated further away from the ideological centre on the political left–right dimension (SVP, SP, GPS) are less congruent with their voters than centrist parties (FDP, CVP, GLP). To test this hypothesis, I calculated congruence levels using a many-to-many measure that compares the areas under the cumulative distribution functions of the two groups, candidates and voters,<sup>17</sup> resulting in a value between 0 and 1 which indicates the absolute difference between the two areas (cf. Golder & Stramski, 2010). The lower the value of the congruence index, the more the distribution of candidates' opinions resembles that

<sup>15</sup>Cf. the ideological positioning of the main six Swiss parties on the European integration dimension (Table B15 in the [Online Appendix](#)).

<sup>16</sup>Note, however, that the positional difference between candidates and voters is not statistically significant for *all* of these other issues (cf. [Table 1](#)).

<sup>17</sup>See Figures B1–B4 in the [Online Appendix](#) for histograms and the cumulative distribution functions of voter and candidate opinions on the four European integration issues (overall and across the main six Swiss parties).

of voters, i.e., the more congruent the two groups. Many-to-many congruence levels are reported in the last column of [Table 1](#).

At first glance, the descriptive results for many-to-many congruence in [Table 1](#) do not fall into a clear pattern. There is only little support for H3, as congruence is only systematically higher (lower many-to-many congruence values) among centrist parties than among pole parties concerning the cohesion billion. The SVP, which holds the clearest position towards European integration – a pronounced anti-EU stance – is certainly not the party with the highest many-to-many congruence. This means that candidates do not represent the *variety* of voters' opinions well when comparing opinion distributions between the two groups. On this core SVP issue – the rejection of EU membership – many-to-many congruence is at its lowest level. This is no doubt due to the fact that every single SVP candidate answered a categoric “no” to the question of whether Switzerland should join the EU, while responses among SVP voters varied somewhat.<sup>18</sup>

The highest congruence between SVP candidates and voters occurs in the case of the trade-off question on the bilateral agreements versus limiting immigration, a result which makes sense in light of the direct-democratic experience on the matter. In the 2014 and 2020 popular votes on the “Mass Immigration Initiative” and the “Limitation Initiative” both seeking to impose limits on immigration (see chapter 1.1 in the [Online Appendix](#)), the SVP campaigned alone against all other major parties. It is hence plausible that SVP voters are very closely aligned with their candidates on this topic. For all other parties, congruence is substantially lower on this trade-off question; in fact, it is even the lowest among all European integration issues.

While the two centrist parties FDP and CVP score highest in terms of many-to-many congruence on the cohesion billion, the two leftist parties SP and GPS achieve the highest congruence level on EU membership. A noticeable pattern emerges for these two parties (and to some extent also for the GLP): the more integrationist the issue, the more congruence between candidates and their electorate.

To test the validity of H3 empirically, I use a two-sample *t*-test. This test is conducted on the *aggregate* level as the congruence measure is a difference in the areas of two cumulative distribution functions (cf. Golder & Stramski, 2010). The total number of observations is 24 (6 parties x 4 issues), which is split in two groups (centrist vs. pole parties) resulting in 12 observations per group. [Table 2](#) contains the mean many-to-many congruence values across all issues and all parties in the respective group, the difference between these two values, as well as the result of the two-sample *t*-test with *t*-statistic, *p*-value and an answer to H3.

The result of the two-sample *t*-test shows that congruence is not statistically significantly lower among pole parties when compared to centrist parties. In line with H3, there is nonetheless a tendency that congruence is lower (higher mean value for many-to-many congruence) among pole parties than among centrist ones.<sup>19</sup>

## CONCLUSION

When it comes to popular votes, European integration issues are frequently on the Swiss direct-democratic agenda. Moreover, these issues figure among the most recurrent political

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<sup>18</sup>Cf. Tables B7 and B14 in the [Online Appendix](#).

<sup>19</sup>Note that using a two-sample *t*-test on only 12 observations per group is very unlikely to yield a *p*-value under 0.1 or even 0.05, which presents a limitation to the way in which H3 is tested. Other scholars have used bootstrapping methods to test hypotheses about many-to-many congruence (e.g., Schakel and Hakhverdian, 2018). According to Efron and Tibshirani (1993), this method offers a way of estimating a confidence interval around a statistic when the conventional methods of doing so are inapplicable. However, looking at the proximity between the mean congruence values in [Table 2](#), it is very likely that, were a bootstrapping method to be applied, the confidence intervals around them would overlap. It is hence fair to assume that there is no statistically significant difference between the congruence levels comparing centrist to pole parties.

**TABLE 2** Mean Levels of Many-to-Many Congruence between Voters and Candidates (Centrist vs. Pole Parties)

	Centrist Parties (FDP, CVP, GLP)	Pole Parties (SVP, SP, GPS)	Difference	T-statistic	P-value	Pole parties less congruent than centrist parties (H3)?
Mean Congruence (Many-to- Many)	0.47 (0.08)	0.49 (0.07)	-0.02	-0.21	0.836	No
Observations (Parties X Issues)	12	12				

Notes: Lower many-to-many congruence values stand for greater voter-candidate congruence. Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

problems in the eyes of citizens during elections (Lutz, 2016; Tresch et al., 2020). This article aimed to probe the extent to which attitudes on European integration policies align between political elites and voters. More specifically, I investigated the positions of the two groups and the degree to which their opinions are congruent. Using data of the 2019 Swiss Election Study (Selects), I studied four European integration issues: 1) the trade-off between maintaining the bilateral agreements and limiting immigration, 2) the cohesion billion, 3) the trade-off between the institutional framework agreement and the accompanying measures, and 4) EU membership.

Drawing on congruence theory, I advanced three hypotheses: political elites are more EU-integrationist than voters (H1); elites have more extreme, i.e., more pronounced, opinions on European integration issues than voters (H2); and candidates of pole parties are less congruent with their voters than candidates of centrist parties (H3).

The empirical analyses revealed that, overall, the candidates represent voters extremely well with regard to positions on European integration politics. Within the main six Swiss parties, the mean candidates' positions correspond to the mean voters' positions: candidates are “on the same side” as their voters.

Nevertheless, there is strong empirical evidence to support the claim that political elites are more EU-integrationist than voters, in line with hypothesis 1. In the case of EU membership, however, elites are *less* EU-integrationist than voters. This issue seems to represent a “red line” in Swiss European politics for which the political elites have a very clear preference: staying outside of the EU. In the case of the other issues (bilateral treaties, cohesion billion, and institutional agreement), political elites generally prefer more integration than voters.

Apart from EU membership, the overall finding that Euroscepticism is rife among voters than among elites is not always true at the level of parties. Importantly, SVP candidates are consistently *even more* Eurosceptic than their voters. This very pronounced anti-EU stance reflects the SVP's political campaign strategy that emphasises national sovereignty and independence from supranational organisations. It is precisely this demarcation strategy that helped the SVP rapidly rise in the 1990s to become the largest party in the country (Kriesi, 2005). The anti-integrationist position is, so to speak, in the DNA of SVP candidates – much more so than among their voters.

While there is strong opposition to all European integration issues among candidates of the right-wing populist SVP, even candidates on the Left are found to be more *anti*-integrationist than their voters, but only in a very specific case: GPS and SP candidates have a strong preference for maintaining the current accompanying measures rather than adopting the institutional agreement, a preference much stronger than that of their electorates.

In line with the literature on other European countries (e.g., Mattila & Raunio, 2012; Rosset & Stecker, 2019; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1997), this article finds overwhelming empirical evidence that, in Switzerland too, candidates are more extreme in their views on European integration issues than voters. Voters' opinions on these matters are hence more moderate, corroborating hypothesis 2.

Finally, I studied congruence levels using Golder and Stramski's (2010) refined measure of many-to-many congruence, which compares the opinion distribution of political elites with that of voters. In particular, I tested the hypothesis that ideological centrism produces greater voter-party congruence than ideological extremism (cf. Belchior & Freire, 2013; Holmberg, 1989, 2000; Iversen, 1994). Accordingly, congruence between voters and candidates should be greater among the centrist parties FDP, CVP, and GLP than among the pole parties SVP, GPS, and SP. However, the statistical analysis showed that many-to-many congruence levels regarding the four European integration issues did not significantly diverge between centrist and pole parties. Hypothesis 3 could therefore not be corroborated. Rather, this study demonstrates that congruence levels vary widely across the different integration issues and parties.

The combination of issues and parties emerges as decisive in terms of congruence. For example, the right-wing populist SVP, which has a pronounced anti-EU stance, scores lowest on many-to-many congruence on one of its core issues, namely that Switzerland should stay outside of the EU. In this case, SVP candidates do not represent the variety of their voters' opinions very well. In contrast, SVP candidates are very congruent with their voters regarding an issue that Swiss citizens had the opportunity to vote on twice in the last decade thanks to popular initiatives the SVP had launched: the trade-off between maintaining the bilateral agreements and limiting immigration. Here, all other parties score extremely low on voter-candidate congruence.

Interestingly, in the case of the leftist SP and GPS, voter-candidate congruence accrues the more integrationist a European integration policy is: while congruence is lowest for the least integrationist issue (bilateral agreements vs. limits on immigration), it is highest for the most integrationist one (EU membership).

To summarize, the major Swiss parties from the Left to the Right represent their electorates extremely well with regard to *positions* on European integration questions: despite the fact that the candidates are on average more EU-integrationist and more extreme in their opinions than their voters, they are generally “on the same side” of an issue as their voters. Nonetheless, asking how well candidates represent the *variety* of voter opinions shows very mixed results.

This study comes with some limitations. The main aim of this article was to study policy positions and congruence in a very specific policy domain: European integration politics. The results obtained and discussed for the different parties might look very different for other policy areas. It would be enlightening to delve further into the drivers of congruence by setting up a comprehensive study that includes different levels of analysis, such as the voter, candidate, issue, or party level. Indeed, factors on all of these levels are likely to play their distinct and/or a joint role in explaining congruence between candidates and voters.

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## OPEN RESEARCH BADGES



This article has earned Open Data and Open Materials badges for making publicly available the digitally-shareable data necessary to reproduce the reported results. The replication syntax and materials are available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/7JRGDJ>

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in SWISSUBase at <https://doi.org/10.23662/FORS-DS-1184-1> and <https://doi.org/10.23662/FORS-DS-1186-1>.

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