

# Matching expectations: how issue congruence drives satisfaction with democracy

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## Abstract:

*This study investigates how issue congruence between citizens and political parties affects satisfaction with democracy (SWD) in France, Germany and Italy. Using data from the 2019 European Election Study and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, the analysis focuses on three key policy domains, economy, immigration and the environment, and tests whether higher positional alignment within party–citizen dyads is associated with greater democratic satisfaction. Findings from ordered logistic regression (OLR) models show that issue congruence is positively associated with SWD, particularly on identity-related and transnational issues such as immigration and the environment. The study also introduces an original salience index which combines party-level issue emphasis with citizens' media exposure to examine whether issue salience moderates this relationship. Results indicate that, when an issue is highly salient, the positive effect of congruence weakens, suggesting that heightened attention may raise citizens' expectations and make representational gaps more visible. These findings highlight the contextual and issue-specific dynamics underlying democratic satisfaction in European multiparty systems.*

## Keywords:

Responsiveness, public opinion, satisfaction with democracy, representation, salience

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## INTRODUCTION

Satisfaction with democracy (SWD) is a key aspect of political science research because it serves as a crucial indicator of democratic legitimacy and stability (Dalton, 2003; Linde & Ekman, 2003; Norris, 1999). In the literature, SWD is commonly viewed as a reflection of political support and the overall political well-functioning of a democratic society (Aarts and Thomassen 2008; Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Reher, 2015). Research on SWD has developed considerably to include the examining of both institutional and individual-level determinants that shape citizens' evaluations of their democratic systems (Cutler et al., 2023; Valgarðsson & Devine, 2022). A considerable amount of SWD research has focused on institutional factors, such as electoral systems, government effectiveness and democratic performance (Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014; Dalton, 2004; Magalhaes, 2014; Singh & Mayne, 2024; Torcal & Trechsel, 2016; van Houwelingen & Dekker, 2021).

At the individual level, research has shown that SWD is influenced by a variety of factors, including voting for government parties and the winner-loser effect, individuals' economic conditions, political interest, education and overall satisfaction (Hobolt, 2012; Hobolt et al., 2021; Kim, 2009; Loveless & Binelli, 2020; Ridge, 2023; Rohrschneider, 2005; Valgarðsson & Devine, 2022). Moreover, SWD acts as an explanatory factor that affects political participation, trust in democratic institutions and the quality of representation (Curini et al., 2012; Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2011; Kim, 2009; Reher, 2015).

Empirical research has also shown that citizen's satisfaction with democracy is improved when there is "alignment" between the public and political parties (Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017). Research has shown that individuals who perceive greater congruence with representatives tend to express higher levels of democratic satisfaction (Ferland 2021; Reher 2015). The concept of congruence (Miller & Stokes 1963; Verba & Nie 1972; Whalke 1971) has been examined along several dimensions, including ideological or positional alignment (Arnold & Franklin 2012; Golder & Stramski 2010; Powell 2009), priority congruence (Giger & Lefkofridi, 2014; Hobolt et al., 2021; Reher, 2015), policy congruence (Carrieri & Morini, 2022; Ferland 2021), and multidimensional citizen-government agreement (Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016). These studies share a common emphasis on political issues as dimensions along which citizen preferences are formed, expressed, and ultimately represented (Downs 1957; Stokes 1963). Moreover, they identify congruence between parties positions and citizens' preferences as a central factor in understanding satisfaction with democracy (Ferrin & Kriesi, 2025).

This study contributes to this growing body of work by focusing on issue congruence – defined as the alignment between citizens' preferences and party positions on policy issues – as a crucial explanatory variable for SWD. Building on existing research, we examine how issue congruence shapes SWD across three policy domains, the economy, immigration and the environment, in France, Germany and Italy. Using data from the 2019 European Election Study and the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey, the study tests the hypothesis that higher issue congruence on specific issues corresponds to higher SWD. It also examines how salience moderates this effect, so further refining our understanding of democratic satisfaction in a comparative

European context. The results show that the effect of issue congruence on SWD varies according to the characteristics of the issues and the national context.

The paper is structured as follows: the Introduction reviews previous research on the determinants of SWD. The second section examines the literature on the influence of issue congruence on SWD and the relevance of issue salience, so presenting the hypotheses. The third section outlines the data and methods used in the study. The fourth section presents the results while the fifth section interprets the findings and draws conclusions.

### *Can issue congruence affect satisfaction with democracy?*

Despite general and persistent disillusionment with the functioning of democracies in Western countries (Dahlberg et al., 2015, Singh, 2018, Webb, 2013), research has shown that citizens' satisfaction with democracy depends on the quality of representation: the closer citizens' preferences are to those of parties and governments, the greater their satisfaction (Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2011; Hobolt et al., 2021).

Issue congruence has emerged as a particularly salient factor in the study of SWD, as citizens are more likely to express satisfaction when they perceive that their views are reflected in party positions, so indicating ideological congruence (Ferland, 2021; Reher, 2015). When political parties adopt positions on key issues that are in line with public opinion, citizens tend to feel better represented and consequently more satisfied with democracy (André & Depauw, 2017; Kim, 2009). This effect has been shown to be particularly relevant when issue congruence is assessed within specific policy domains, where the alignment between citizens' and parties' positions becomes more concrete and politically meaningful (Giger & Lefkofridi, 2014). However, discrepancies between citizens' preferences and policy outcomes can lead to disillusionment and undermine democratic legitimacy (Dahlberg et al., 2015; Tsai & Tan, 2023). Misperceptions of congruence also play a critical role as individuals who mistakenly believe their views are underrepresented may exhibit lower levels of SWD, regardless of actual policy alignment (Carroll et al., 2024).

Based on this literature, we expect a positive relationship between issue congruence and satisfaction with democracy across different party-citizen pairings:

**H1.** *Within party-citizen dyads, higher levels of positional issue congruence are positively associated with the likelihood of greater satisfaction with democracy.*

In addition to this general trend, cross-national studies show that the effect of issue congruence on satisfaction with democracy is often issue-specific (Hobolt et al, 2021; Reher, 2015). For example, the nature and characteristics of the issue at hand play a crucial role in determining the strength of this relationship (Leiter and Clark, 2015; Vasilopoulou & Zur, 2024). According to the literature, valence issues, such as the economy, tend to generate consensus on desired goals (e.g., economic growth or stability), but divergent views on how to achieve them complicate the relationship between issue congruence and democratic satisfaction (Abney et al. 2011; Cox & Béland, 2012; Evrenk, 2018). In contrast, positional issues, such as immigration, are

characterized by clear ideological cleavages, meaning that the alignment between citizens and political parties on such issues is more easily discernible and often stronger (Hutter & Kriesi, 2022). Similarly, issues with high electoral potential, such as environmental policies, may drive a different dynamic as they often focus on long-term goals with significant public support (De Sio & Weber, 2020, Halla et al., 2013; Wagner & Schnieder, 2006).

These variations suggest that the relationship identified in H1 is not constant across domains, but instead contingent on the political and cognitive attributes of each issue. To capture this heterogeneity, we formulate a second hypothesis:

**H2.** *The strength of the effect of positional issue congruence and satisfaction with democracy varies across policy domains (immigration, economy, environment) as a consequence of the characteristics of the issue.*

In addition, existing scholarship highlights that the broader context of political representation can shape how party-citizen issue congruence relates to satisfaction with democracy. We anticipate cross-national variation in this relationship, as the effects of issue alignment are contingent on country-specific political, economic, and social factors (Cutler et al., 2023).

From a political perspective, countries differ in how party systems function and how policy preferences are aggregated. In systems characterised by party stability and policy continuity, such as Germany, the link between issue alignment and democratic satisfaction may be more consistent and predictable. In contrast, in more fragmented or volatile systems like Italy, the perceived instability of the political offer may weaken the connection between congruence and satisfaction, especially when citizens experience frequent shifts in party positions or government coalitions (Martini & Quaranta, 2020). These differences also reflect broader systemic logics: in consensual democracies with proportional representation and coalition governments, party-citizen congruence may be less directly translated into policy outcomes, potentially weakening its effect on satisfaction. In more majoritarian systems, by contrast, the visibility of programmatic competition and the concentration of power may strengthen the symbolic and evaluative role of congruence (Torcal & Trechsel, 2016). Semi-presidential systems like France may instead highlight individual leadership and programmatic clarity, increasing the perceived relevance of party-citizen alignment.

Economic conditions also play a role. In relatively prosperous contexts, such as Germany, issue congruence may contribute positively to democratic evaluations, as citizens feel both represented and materially secure (van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016). In contrast, in countries experiencing economic stagnation or inequality, such as Italy, broader dissatisfaction with performance may overshadow representational considerations (Magalhães, 2014).

Socially, the nature and salience of public debates can influence how issue alignment is experienced. In countries where polarisation is high or where identity issues dominate the agenda—such as immigration in France or in Italy—alignment on specific issues may have a stronger impact on satisfaction, because it taps into core values or long-term concerns (Hutter & Kriesi, 2022; Reher, 2015).

These observations suggest that the relationship between issue congruence and satisfaction with democracy is not uniform across countries. Rather, it is embedded in national contexts that shape both the availability of congruence and its interpretive weight for citizens. Political institutions, economic performance, and the structure of public discourse jointly influence how representational alignment is perceived and evaluated (De Vries & Tillman, 2011; Wells & Kriekhaus, 2006). Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H3.** *The effect of positional issue congruence on satisfaction with democracy varies across countries due to contextual differences in political systems and representational dynamics.*

#### *The role of salience and media exposure*

Citizens care not only about which policies are enacted, but also about which issues are prioritized in the political debate. Issue salience theories suggest that parties strategically mobilize voters by selectively emphasizing certain issues, knowing that the weight voters attach to these issues shapes their voting behaviour (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; Dennison, 2019). For citizens' policy preferences to meaningfully influence their political attitudes, the issues they deem important must first enter the political agenda (Giger & Lefkofridi, 2014; Walgrave & Lefevere, 2013). This has led to a proliferation of studies on the "priority congruence" between citizens and parties, in which scholars are interested in understanding the closeness (or distance) between the two, not only on the left-right ideological axis (in terms of policies), but also in the very perception of the relevance of certain issues in the public debate (Gunderson, 2024; Reher, 2015; Vasilopoulou & Zur, 2024). Such studies have also focused on the "rivalry" between priorities and ideological positions in influencing support, voting behaviour and perceptions of the quality of democracy (Walgrave et al., 2020). More recently, studies have explored the relevance of salience in shaping parliamentary ability to respond to citizens' demands through the category of issue responsiveness (Cavalieri et al., 2025). However, while issue salience has been widely studied as an outcome or explanatory variable of voting behaviour and political attitudes, few have considered its potential moderating role in the relationship between positional opinion congruence and satisfaction with democracy.

In this sense, media exposure is also relevant, not only for understanding how issues are framed, but also for assessing citizens' actual reception of party communication – especially during campaigns – as it fosters political interest, enhances efficacy, strengthens preference-democracy links, and positively affects confidence in political institutions as well as satisfaction with democracy (Chang, 2017; Ceron & Memoli, 2015; Hollander, 2014). Indeed, extensive media exposure – particularly in polarized and conflictual contexts – may reinforce perceptions of a mismatch between citizens' expectations and political outcomes, thereby negatively affecting democratic satisfaction (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010; Stroud, 2008; Richter & Stier, 2022).

While one could also expect salience and information to increase awareness of political alignment and thus strengthen the effect of congruence, we argue that this dynamic depends on how clearly parties communicate their positions and how contested the issue is. In high-salience contexts, particularly on polarising or

ambiguous issues, citizens who are more exposed to political information may become more sensitive to inconsistencies, strategic ambiguity, or shifts in party stances. Rather than simply reinforcing alignment, increased exposure can highlight complexity or divergence that would remain unnoticed under lower-salience conditions. Moreover, the assumption that higher salience always improves clarity may not hold uniformly. Parties often avoid taking unpopular or divisive positions explicitly, especially in public campaigns. As a result, even highly informed citizens may be confronted with conflicting signals or incomplete cues, making it more likely for them to notice discrepancies rather than consistency (Walgrave et al., 2020). Even when explicit party positions are absent or softened, informed citizens may still detect gaps between their expectations and party messaging, especially when issue salience is high and framing is contested.

By building on these considerations, the present study argues that positional congruence between parties and citizens will have a weaker positive effect on satisfaction with democracy when the issue is highly salient and citizens are more exposed to political information. This interaction may reduce the evaluative power of congruence by increasing the visibility of gaps, inconsistencies, or absences in party positioning.

Accordingly, we formulate the following hypothesis:

**H4.** *The effect of positional issue congruence on satisfaction with democracy weakens when issue salience and citizens' exposure to political information are high.*

## DATA AND METHODS

To test our hypotheses, we primarily used two datasets: the European Election Study (EES) dataset (Schmitt et al., 2022) and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Bakker et al., 2020). For the demand-side EES, we used data on citizen positions regarding the economy (state control), immigration, and the environment from the 2019 Voter-Study. The primary advantage of the EES data lies in its cross-national nature as the same questions were generally posed to respondents a few months after the elections. The EES project is particularly important for our study because it collects data on citizens' satisfaction with democracy and various indicators that allow the congruence of opinions between parties and citizens on several issues to be measured. The dataset contains crucial information on the preferences of European citizens from 28 democracies, from which we selected cases from Italy, France and Germany.

The choice of France, Germany and Italy as comparative cases is justified by both theoretical and empirical considerations and is particularly appropriate for a most different system design. While sharing key structural similarities as consolidated European democracies characterized by comparable socio-economic attributes, including population size, territorial size and economic development, these countries simultaneously present distinct institutional architectures and historical trajectories, thus offering significant analytical leverage. Specifically, France's semi-presidential and highly centralized political system has generated distinct patterns of democratic satisfaction, often influenced by leadership styles, frequent government reshuffles and centralist traditions rooted in historical and administrative legacies (Bedock & Panel, 2017; Elgie, 2011). Germany, on

the other hand, exemplifies a stable federal parliamentary democracy based on cooperative federalism, proportional representation and consensual governance, often associated with consistently high levels of citizen satisfaction with democracy, although challenged by regional inequalities after reunification (Welsh, 2022). Italy, on the other hand, illustrates another variant as it is a parliamentary democracy that has been historically characterized by political fragmentation, chronic instability and significant institutional changes following the political upheavals of the 1990s, which have resulted in persistent public dissatisfaction with democratic performance (Morlino et al., 2013; Bellucci et al., 2021). It is precisely these institutional and historical divergences, combined with their common exposure to transnational policy challenges, such as migration, economic governance and environmental sustainability, that make France, Germany, and Italy ideal cases for studying how democratic satisfaction varies across different political systems and cultural contexts within Europe (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019).

The survey targeted the resident population aged 18 and over in the respective countries of the EU member states and consisted of responses to post-election questions conducted in the aftermath of the 2019 European Parliament elections.

The questions addressed to the sample cover a wide range of topics, including voting orientations, trust in institutions and the governance system, preferences on leaders and parties, and ideological positioning on a set of ten issues (including those of our interest). Respondents were asked to position themselves on these issues along a scale ranging from 0 to 10.

For the supply-side, data from the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) provided party positioning scales on the same issues. When combined with individual-level scales, this allowed us to develop variables measuring the party-voter distance. This was possible because the issue questions are posed in the same way in both datasets and the measurement scales are expressed within the same 0-10 intensity range, from “totally in favor” to “totally against” (with the exception of the immigration issue in CHES, which required a scale inversion recoding).

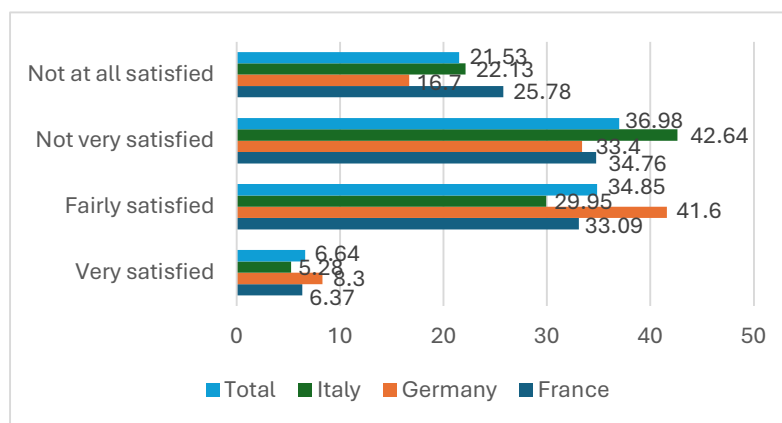
### **The dependent variable: SWD**

The SWD level for citizens in the three countries was evaluated through the following question: “Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in your country? Are you... 1 very satisfied; 2 fairly satisfied; 3 not very satisfied; 4 not at all satisfied.” To ensure that higher values of the dependent variable correspond to higher levels of satisfaction with democracy, we recoded the original variable so that: 1 = not at all satisfied, 2 = not very satisfied, 3 = fairly satisfied, and 4 = very satisfied. This recoded version of the SWD variable is used consistently in all statistical models and graphical outputs presented in the paper. Figure 1 shows the distribution of SWD responses across France, Germany and Italy in 2019. A comparative examination reveals significant differences in democratic satisfaction across the three

countries. Citizens in Germany reported higher levels of satisfaction, with 41.6% choosing "fairly satisfied" and 8.3% "very satisfied," which suggests a relatively strong legitimacy perception.

Conversely, respondents in Italy and France expressed lower satisfaction levels. Indeed, 42.64% of citizens in Italy indicated they were "not very satisfied," which exceeds both France (34.76%) and Germany (33.4%). France reported the highest proportion of citizens who were "not at all satisfied" (25.78%), reflecting notable democratic discontent. These cross-national variations underline the importance of contextualizing SWD within specific institutional and socio-political settings, so supporting the use of this measure as a valuable comparative tool to capture nuances in citizens' evaluations of democratic performance.

**Figure 1. SWD in Italy, France and Germany (2019)**



Source: European Election Study 2019 – Voter Study

### **The independent variables: party-citizen dyads issue congruence (positional)**

To test our hypotheses about the effect of issue congruence on SWD, we developed a set of party-citizen distance variables. These distance measures are based on the multidimensional approach proposed by Stecker and Tausendpfund (2016), whose results suggest that citizen-elite congruence on the left-right ideological scale has a larger effect on citizens' satisfaction with democracy than other political dimensions. However, Ferland (2021) cautions about the precision of this method and notes that researchers cannot be sure that a given position in the citizen survey represents the same substantive position in the expert survey, so raising concerns about differential item functioning. In our case, the identical wording of the questions and the precise overlap between the measurement scales lead us to believe that the dyadic variables we have derived are sufficiently precise.

The empirical goal here is to understand whether, and by how much, a set of issue-congruence variables can influence citizens' perceptions of the functioning of democracy in their country.

Regarding the distance variables on the economy, the EES surveys capture individual positions on a pro/anti state control scale ranging from 0 (entirely in favour of control) to 10 (entirely against state control of the economy) while CHES uses a 0-10 scale of party positions on general state intervention policies in the national



economy. For the immigration distance variable, EES provides for citizen positions on a pro/anti-immigration scale from 0 (completely in favour of restrictive immigration policies) to 10 (completely against restrictive immigration policies) and CHES provides for party positions on the same scale (but inverted in intensity, hence the recoding). Finally, for the environmental opinion distance variable, both EES and CHES provide for positions on environmental sustainability, even at the expense of economic growth, expressed on an eleven-point scale from 0 (“Environmental protection should always have priority, even at the expense of economic growth”) to 10 (“Economic growth should always have priority, even at the expense of environmental protection”).

To make the positional scales congruent at the individual and party levels, they were standardized to obtain distance variables ranging from 0 to 1. Therefore, the Economy, Immigration and Environment congruence variables allowed us to identify the positional congruence between voters and parties, providing for all existing combinations in the positional distance between voter-party dyads. The thematic congruence variables derived are thus expressed as:

$$\text{Issue Congruence} = \text{abs}(\text{Citizen position} - \text{Party position}) / 10$$

It is worth noting that the three congruence variables - economic congruence, immigration congruence and environmental congruence - are weakly correlated, which justified their selection after consideration of demand-side salience.

**Table 1. Matrix of correlations**

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)
(1) Congruence on Immigration	1.000		
(2) Congruence on Economy	0.018	1.000	
(3) Congruence on Environment	0.036	0.093	1.000

Once all the independent congruence variables were created<sup>1</sup>, we reshaped our dataset into a vertically concatenated data matrix (by party), which allowed us to simultaneously test the impact of our independent variables on SWD for a large number of parties (see Appendix 2 for the full list of parties). Each respondent was multiplied by the number of parties under analysis (single respondent  $\times$  number of parties), so transforming

<sup>1</sup>In addition to the three issue-specific positional congruence variables (economy, immigration and environment), we constructed a pooled congruence measure to serve as a robustness check. This variable is calculated as the mean of the three individual congruence scores and captures the overall alignment between citizens and parties across the selected policy domains. The pooled congruence variable retains the same 0–1 scale as the original measures, where higher values indicate greater issue congruence. Results from the pooled model are consistent with those from the disaggregated models and are reported in the Appendix 1.A.

the unit of analysis into the party-voter dyad. Finally, we included the variables in ordered logistic regression (OLR) models using the following formula:

$$SWD_{icp} = \alpha + \beta_1 econcongr_{icp} + \beta_2 immcongr_{icp} + \beta_3 envcongr_{icp} + 6X_{ic} + \varepsilon$$

where SWD is a categorical variable ranging from 1 to 4 (“not at all satisfied”, “not very satisfied”, “fairly satisfied”, “very satisfied”);  $\beta$  is an independent variable constructed as the distance between citizen and party opinions on an issue, varying by individual, country, and party;  $X_{ic}$  is a vector of individual characteristics, including control variables, that varies by individual and country; and  $\varepsilon$  is the stochastic error.

To capture transnational variations in the impact of the distance variables, we ran the regression models separately for each country, including the same control variables from the base model (see Models 3, 4, and 5) and adding the interaction effects present in Model 2. The direct effects of the three congruence variables and the most significant interaction effects are graphically represented and this allows us to present and discuss the results for the analyzed countries.

#### **The control variables: retrospective economic evaluation, political interest and media exposure**

Several control variables were included in the models following the principles of multivariate analysis, which emphasize the importance of controlling for potential confounding ('third') variables that could influence the observed relationships. Specifically, the model controlled for several socio-demographic variables (age, sex, education and social class) and other perception-related factors such as retrospective economic evaluations, political interest and media exposure during the campaign. Citizens' retrospective evaluations of socio-economic performance are widely recognized as strong predictors of satisfaction with democracy (SWD), often outperforming other economic indicators (Dalton, 2004; Quaranta & Martini, 2016; Christmann, 2018; Kölln & Aarts, 2021). Furthermore, political interest is considered as a relevant explanatory factor for democratic (dis)satisfaction, as politically interested individuals generally show clearer perceptions of policy positions and government performance (Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016; Mauk, 2021). Finally, media exposure during campaigns can enhance people's political knowledge and engagement, positively influencing satisfaction with democracy (Jerit et al., 2006; Strömbäck et al., 2016). A detailed operationalization of all control variables can be found in Appendix 6.

#### **The moderator: salience index**

A separate methodological discussion is necessary regarding the construction and operationalization of the moderator used in this study: the salience index. We constructed this index in two distinct steps. First, for each of the three selected policy domains, immigration, environment and economy, we multiplied party-level issue salience by individual-level media exposure (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics and Appendix 3 for detailed

party salience data). It is worth noting that the choice of three policy domains was neither instrumental nor pre-determined, but rather derived from the “Most important problem” for the demand-side (Wlezien 2005). We therefore carried out a manual coding of over three thousand open-ended responses to the question: “What do you think is the most important problem facing your country today?”, as the 2019 EES does not include precoding of responses to this question, unlike the 2009 and 2014 versions. This process produced around seventy categories from which the first three most important issues for citizens in the three countries (pooled) were identified (see Appendix): the economy (35.47%), immigration (15.77%) and the environment (14.08%).

Party-level issue salience was measured by using the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) data, in which experts assessed how much emphasis each party placed on specific issues on a 0–10 scale. Individual-level media exposure was captured through respondents’ answers to the question: “How closely did you follow the campaign ahead of the European Parliament elections in the media or on social media? Please indicate any number on an 11-point scale,” with “0” meaning “not at all” and “10” meaning “very closely”.

This item combines general media exposure with explicit references to media sources (traditional and social), placing respondents within today's media environment (where influences and preference formation follow a cyclical rather than linear pattern. (Druckman & Lupia, 2000; Richter & Stier, 2022; Messner & Distaso, 2008).

The same 'multilevel' logic guides the construction of our salience index, which effectively integrates the party dimension (party salience) with the individual dimension (media exposure), so providing a synthetic indicator which is suitable for analyzing effects within party-citizen dyads. In a second step, we introduced this salience index into a “super-interaction”<sup>2</sup>, multiplying it by positional issue congruence variables (again separately for immigration, environment and economy).

This approach enabled us to test explicitly whether the impact of positional congruence on satisfaction with democracy varies depending on the combined salience of party-driven issue emphasis and citizens' media exposure.

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Bruno Cautrès for suggesting the term “super-interaction”, to describe the statistical construction of the index used here capturing the interaction between the initial salience index (party salience  $\times$  media exposure) and its further interaction with issue congruence variables. For similar approaches in related social science disciplines, see Jiang (2024); Zhao et al. (2023).

**Table 2. Descriptive statistics of media exposure (EES 2019) and issue salience in the party arena (CHES 2019)**

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
<b>Media exposure</b>	2941	5.90	2.90	0	10
<b>Issue salience (parties)</b>					
Europe integration	–	6.65	1.34	4	8.83
Gal/Tan	–	6.57	1.45	3.57	9.42
Multiculturalism	–	6.43	1.75	3	9.50
Economy	–	6.32	1.80	2.2	9.28
Immigration	–	6.30	2.12	2.87	9.94
Redistribution	–	5.89	2.10	1	9.20
Antielitism	–	5.14	3.17	0.75	10
Environment	–	5.12	2.43	1	10
Corruption	–	3.86	2.07	0	9.33

**Note:** *Media exposure* measured at the individual level (citizens) (EES 2019). *Issue salience* (parties) reflects party emphasis on issues according to CHES expert survey data (2019).

## RESULTS

The analysis assesses the impact of issue congruence on satisfaction with democracy (SWD) across economic, immigration and environmental domains by using a most different systems design that compares France, Germany and Italy. Table 3 presents the results of the ordered logistic regression models. In Model 1, congruence variables for immigration (0.338\*\*\*) and the environment (0.257\*\*) significantly predict higher SWD, so providing support for Hypothesis 1, which posits that higher levels of issue congruence between citizens and parties are associated with greater satisfaction with democracy. In contrast, economic congruence has no significant effect. This suggests that, across the three countries analyzed, congruence between party and citizen preferences on immigration and environmental issues plays a more decisive role in shaping democratic satisfaction than congruence on economic issues.

**Table 3. Determinants of SWD in Italy, France and Germany 2019 (Ordered Logistic Regression)**

VARIABLES	Model1	Model2	Model3 Italy	Model4 France	Model5 Germany
Congruence on Immigration (citizens-party)	0.338*** (0.066)	0.697*** (0.160)	-0.112 (0.257)	0.630** (0.286)	1.284*** (0.268)
Congruence on Environment (citizens-party)	0.257** (0.126)	0.491** (0.214)	0.759** (0.363)	0.710* (0.365)	-0.029 (0.420)
Congruence on Economy (citizens-party)	0.034 (0.117)	0.476** (0.231)	0.323 (0.574)	0.513 (0.403)	0.647** (0.317)
Imm Salience Index	-0.001** (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	-0.003 (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)	0.006** (0.003)
Env Salience Index	-0.000 (0.000)	0.002 (0.002)	0.005 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)	-0.000 (0.002)
Econ Salience Index	0.001 (0.001)	0.004*** (0.002)	0.003 (0.003)	0.006* (0.003)	0.006*** (0.002)
Superinteraction Immigration		-0.008*** (0.003)	0.002 (0.004)	-0.009 (0.007)	-0.013*** (0.005)
Superinteraction Environment		-0.008 (0.005)	-0.007 (0.009)	-0.005 (0.009)	-0.004 (0.008)
Superinteraction Economy		-0.010** (0.004)	-0.010 (0.011)	-0.012 (0.008)	-0.011** (0.005)
Media Exposure	0.044 (0.042)	0.044 (0.042)	-0.130*** (0.036)	-0.046 (0.030)	-0.041 (0.030)
Female	1.111** (0.522)	1.113** (0.522)	1.762* (0.981)	0.383 (1.224)	1.279* (0.704)
Age	0.644 (1.700)	0.476 (1.699)	-3.904 (4.285)	3.269 (2.205)	-7.047* (4.051)
Education	3.928 (2.781)	3.873 (2.779)	13.325 (15.411)	5.128 (17.326)	1.671 (2.866)
Social class	1.384*** (0.338)	1.381*** (0.336)	1.798* (1.045)	1.198*** (0.445)	2.035*** (0.655)
Economic retrospection	2.495*** (0.120)	2.486*** (0.120)	2.470*** (0.260)	2.572*** (0.178)	2.557*** (0.245)
Political interest	1.098*** (0.415)	1.121*** (0.415)	0.953 (0.600)	1.313* (0.755)	1.262 (0.941)
Germany	-0.598*** (0.104)	-0.596*** (0.104)			
Italy	-0.104 (0.101)	-0.108 (0.101)			
/cut1	-2.914*** (0.255)	-2.581*** (0.270)	-3.732*** (0.332)	-3.164*** (0.289)	-2.255*** (0.299)
/cut2	-0.181 (0.244)	0.156 (0.260)	-1.178*** (0.315)	-0.211 (0.247)	0.467 (0.286)
/cut3	1.867*** (0.247)	2.205*** (0.263)	1.025*** (0.316)	1.910*** (0.256)	2.331*** (0.294)
Observations	19,048	19,048	5,838	6,786	6,424

Robust standard errors in parentheses

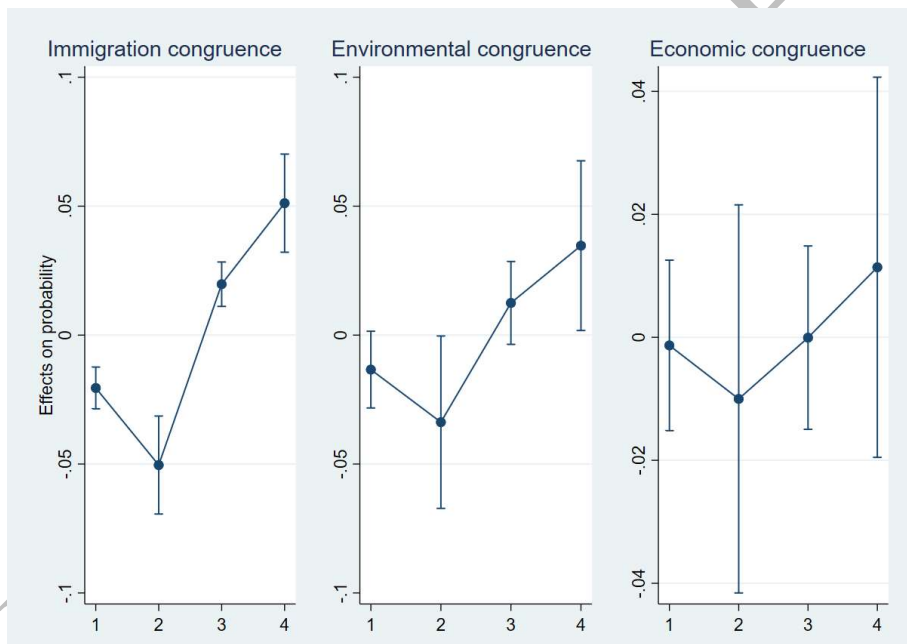
\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Regarding salience index controls in Model 1, higher immigration salience has a significant negative effect on SWD (-0.001\*\*, p<0.05), indicating that higher values of the salience index - constructed as party-level issue salience multiplied by individual-level media exposure - are associated with lower satisfaction with

democracy. Although the magnitude of this coefficient is small, the effect is noteworthy given the large sample size ( $N=19,048$ ). The salience indices for the environment and the economy do not show significant effects in the baseline model. Among the controls, campaign media exposure is only significant in the Italian case and shows a negative effect, suggesting a country-specific dynamic that will be explored in the following section. Among the socio-demographic variables, gender is weakly significant, while education and age do not show robust effects.

Model 2 introduces interaction terms between issue congruence and their respective salience indices. This model tests whether the strength of the relationship between issue congruence and SWD depends on the salience of the issue, as perceived through the interaction of party emphasis and citizen media exposure. The interaction between immigration congruence and its salience is negative and highly significant ( $-0.008^{***}$ ), so reinforcing the result found in the direct effect. This supports Hypothesis 4, which argues that the positive effect of issue congruence on satisfaction with democracy weakens when the issue becomes highly salient. A similar negative and significant interaction is found for the economy ( $-0.010^{**}$ ), while the interaction for environmental congruence is not significant. These variations across issues provide support for Hypothesis 2, which posits that the strength of the congruence-SWD relationship depends on the nature of the issue.

**Figure 2. Marginal effects of Issue Congruence on SWD (pooled)**



Note: Average marginal effects of Issue Congruence on SWD (overall) with 95% Cis. Higher values of SWD indicate greater satisfaction with democracy (recoded scale).

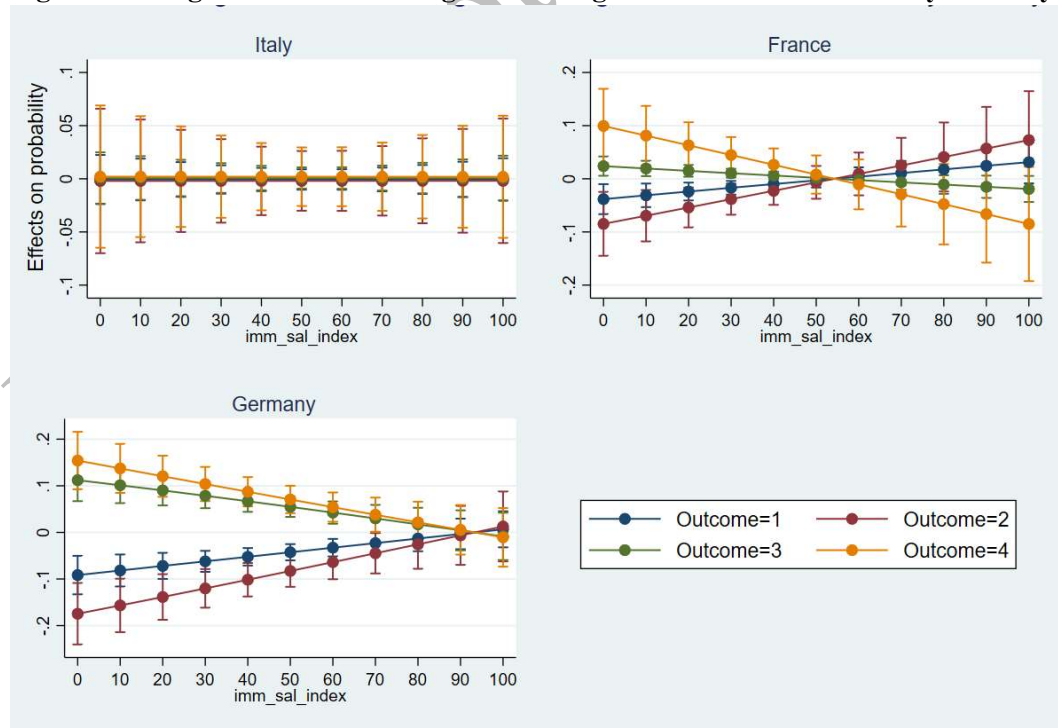
Figure 2 displays the average marginal effects of issue-specific congruence on the predicted probability of selecting each of the four SWD categories (1 = "not at all satisfied", 4 = "very satisfied"). The results show that immigration and environmental congruence have consistent and significant effects on democratic satisfaction. In particular, higher congruence on these issues is associated with an increased likelihood of being

“very satisfied” (category 4) and a decreased likelihood of being “not at all satisfied” (category 1), suggesting a strong evaluative impact. The effect of economic congruence, by contrast, appears weaker and statistically less robust, with wider confidence intervals and no clear pattern across satisfaction levels. This finding supports the idea that issue alignment on symbolic or identity-based issues may have a greater impact on citizens’ democratic evaluations than alignment on economic matters.

Country-specific models (Models 3–5) reveal further distinctions. In Italy (Model 3), only environmental congruence significantly predicts SWD ( $p < 0.05$ ), so making the environment the strongest domain of congruence. This result stands out in light of the lack of effect for immigration and economic congruence. In France (Model 4), both immigration ( $0.630^{**}$ ) and environmental ( $0.710^{*}$ ) congruence are significant predictors, indicating that French voters associate democratic satisfaction with alignment on both issues. In Germany (Model 5), immigration ( $1.284^{***}$ ) and economic ( $0.647^{**}$ ) congruence have the strongest effects, while environmental congruence is not significant. Additionally, only Germany shows significant and positive effects of issue salience indices ( $0.006^{**}$ ), while salience moderators (immigration:  $-0.013^{***}$ ; economy:  $-0.011^{**}$ ) show a significant and negative impact, again in line with Hypothesis 4. The variation in effects across countries offers evidence in support of Hypothesis 3, which expects contextual variation in the congruence-SWD relationship due to the different national political systems and representational dynamics.

These cross-national variations are further illustrated in Figures 3–5, which display the marginal effects of issue-specific congruence at varying levels of salience index, separately for immigration, environment, and economy.

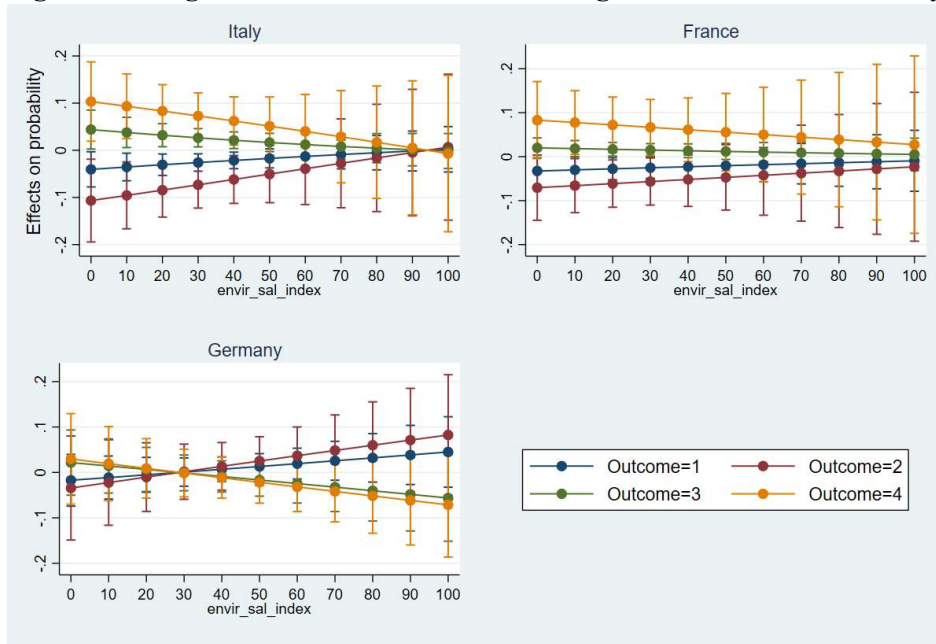
**Figure 3: Marginal Effects – Immigration Congruence x Salience Index by Country**



Note: Average marginal effects of Issue Congruence by Salience Indices with 95% Cis. Higher values of SWD indicate greater satisfaction with democracy (recoded scale).

Figure 3 shows the interaction between immigration congruence and immigration salience index. In Germany, where the effect of immigration congruence on satisfaction with democracy is the strongest (Model 5), the figure reveals a clear negative interaction: the positive effect of congruence declines significantly as salience index increases. In France, the effect is weaker but still positive and stable across salience levels, in line with the moderate significance found in Model 4. In Italy, the curve is flat, confirming the lack of any substantial relationship between immigration congruence and SWD (Model 3).

**Figure 4: Marginal Effects – Environment Congruence x Salience Index by Country**

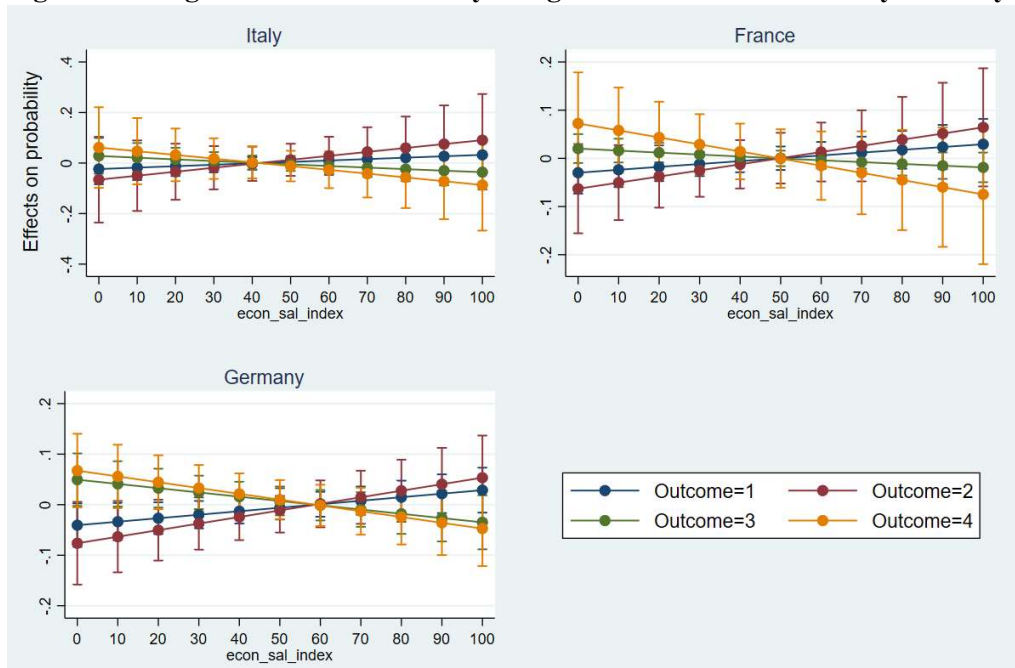


Note: Average marginal effects of Issue Congruence by Salience Indices with 95% CIs. Higher values of SWD indicate greater satisfaction with democracy (recoded scale).

Figure 4 examines environmental congruence. Here, Italy stands out: the marginal effect of congruence is positive and stable across the salience range, confirming that the environment is the only issue where congruence significantly predicts satisfaction with democracy (Model 3). In France, the effect is again modestly positive and slightly decreasing as salience increases, suggesting a similar but weaker pattern. In Germany, no consistent relationship emerges, echoing the non-significant coefficients in the country-specific model (Model 5).



**Figure 5: Marginal Effects – Economy Congruence x Salience Index by Country**



Note: Average marginal effects of Issue Congruence by Salience Indices with 95% Cis. Higher values of SWD indicate greater satisfaction with democracy (recoded scale).

Figure 5 reports the results for economic congruence. The most pronounced effect is again in Germany, where the positive association between congruence and SWD decreases significantly with increasing salience index—mirroring the pattern found for immigration. In Italy and France, the marginal effects remain flat, consistent with the lack of significance found in the respective models.

## DISCUSSION

The findings support the general expectation of Hypothesis 1: higher levels of issue congruence between citizens and political parties are associated with greater satisfaction with democracy (SWD). This is consistent with proximity-based models of political evaluation, whereby voters feel better represented when parties adopt positions closer to their own preferences (Downs, 1957). However, the data clearly show that this relationship is not uniform. It varies across policy domains (H2), national contexts (H3), and depending on the salience of issues and citizen's media exposure (H4). To explore these variations more precisely, the discussion is organized around each policy issue, followed by comparative reflections on single countries.

### *Immigration*

Immigration congruence emerges as the most robust and symbolically charged predictor of SWD, especially in Germany and France. In line with H2 and previous research on identity-driven issues (Colomer & Beale, 2020), this confirms that immigration is not just about policy positions, but about identity, visibility,

and symbolic alignment. In Germany, the effect of immigration congruence is particularly strong, yet – as shown in Figure 3 – it significantly declines at higher levels of salience. This supports Hypothesis 4, suggesting that when the issue becomes highly salient, congruence may no longer suffice to generate satisfaction. Instead, salience appears to sharpen expectations and evaluative standards, thereby exposing even aligned citizens to doubt, disillusionment, or perception of policy inefficacy (Lenz, 2009; Ciuk & Yost, 2016).

This paradox – where the strongest congruence effect also shows the sharpest negative interaction – confirms findings on the polarizing potential of salience in fragmented media environments (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). In France, immigration congruence also has a positive effect on SWD, though it is more modest and stable across salience levels, indicating a different relationship between party competition and media dynamics. In Italy, by contrast, immigration congruence has no observable impact on SWD, and the effect remains flat regardless of the interaction with salience index – suggesting either lower perceived party differentiation or a more diffuse public opinion structure on this issue (Hallin & Mancini, 2017).

### *Environment*

Environmental congruence reveals a different picture. As seen in Figure 4, Italy stands out as the only country where environmental congruence significantly increases SWD. This finding is notable and aligns with the idea that ecological issues<sup>3</sup>, while not always highly salient, can carry strong normative weight and symbolic value (Halla et al., 2013). In Italy, where partisan divides have long been volatile and trust in institutions relatively low, environmental congruence may offer an alternative channel for political resonance that transcends traditional party structures. It is important to clarify that environmental congruence does not indicate environmentalism per se, but rather the perceived alignment between citizens and parties on environmental priorities. Disaggregated results (see Appendix 1.C) show that the Lega exhibits the highest level of environmental congruence among Italian parties. With a score of 7.7 on the environmental issue (Appendix 2), the party supports economic growth even at the expense of environmental protection, a position that appears to align closely with the preferences of a significant share of the electorate. This finding is particularly notable given that the Lega also secured the highest vote share in the 2019 European elections (34%). This suggests that environmental congruence may contribute not only to citizens' democratic satisfaction, but potentially also to electoral outcomes, especially when parties manage to align with public preferences on symbolically charged issues.

In France, environmental congruence has a positive but weaker effect on SWD, which declines slightly as salience increases. This pattern again reflects the idea that salience does not uniformly reinforce representation effects. In Germany, where the Green Party has long been integrated into the party system and environmental

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<sup>3</sup> This analysis relies on data from the 2019 European Parliament elections, during which environmental issues gained substantial visibility—largely due to transnational mobilizations such as *Fridays for Future* in 2018. Concern for climate change has only intensified since: Eurobarometer data (EB 99.3) show that 77% of EU citizens consider climate change a very serious problem, while Istat data from 2024 indicate that 58.1% of Italians express strong concern.

policy is broadly mainstreamed, no significant effect is observed. This may reflect a loss of representational distinctiveness: when all major parties endorse similar ecological positions, environmental congruence may no longer serve as a clear basis for party-voter alignment.

### *Economy*

While economic issues are typically viewed as central to political evaluations – due to their valence nature and citizens' broad agreement on goals such as growth or employment (Abney et al., 2011; Cox & Béland, 2012) – our findings suggest that these shared priorities do not necessarily translate into higher satisfaction when the representational link lacks credibility or programmatic clarity. As shown in Figure 5, the economy only matters in Germany, where congruence on this issue is associated with SWD – but this effect diminishes with increasing salience, in line with H4 and considering the different characteristics of the political-media systems in the different countries, as discussed above. In Italy and France, economic congruence shows no significant impact, and marginal effects remain flat. This may help explain why economic congruence only yields an effect in Germany, where the stability of the party system and the structured competition around economic competence may allow congruence to retain evaluative meaning. By contrast, in Italy and France, where trust in parties is lower and economic policymaking is often perceived as technocratic or externally constrained (Hobolt et al., 2021), congruence on economic positions may appear less politically meaningful. Here, retrospective or outcome-based evaluations may outweigh programmatic alignment (van der Brug et al., 2007; Evrenk, 2018). This means that citizens may judge parties not on whether they share their economic preferences, but on whether they deliver tangible outcomes. In this light, congruence may appear politically neutral if it is not accompanied by visible policy success. Moreover, the technical complexity and elite-driven nature of economic policymaking may reduce the symbolic value of congruence in favour of output-based accountability (Kitschelt, 2000; Thomassen, 2005).

This contrasts with positional issues like immigration or transnational concerns like the environment, where congruence may be perceived as recognition, moral alignment, or affirmation of voice in the political process (Hutter & Kriesi, 2022; Simon, 2024). These issues are more likely to trigger symbolic responses, intensify identity cues, and influence perceived satisfaction beyond programmatic terms. The findings thus lend support to critiques of economic determinism in political behaviour (Inglehart & Norris, 2019) and highlight the importance of symbolic and identity-based dimensions of political representation (Hobolt et al., 2021).

### *Salience, media exposure and the interpretation of H4*

The moderating role of salience, as posited in Hypothesis 4, is only partially confirmed. While Germany provides clear evidence that high salience reduces the positive effect of congruence – particularly on contested issues such as immigration and the economy – this pattern does not emerge in Italy or France. This suggests that salience does not operate uniformly across contexts, but rather interacts with specific features of national media systems, political cultures, and patterns of party competition. For instance, in Italy, general media

exposure has a significant and negative association with SWD, independently of specific issues<sup>4</sup>. This may reflect enduring characteristics of the Italian media environment, such as the polarized pluralist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2017), where greater exposure may reinforce political cynicism or disengagement.

While salience can theoretically make both agreement and disagreement more visible, our findings indicate that under conditions of polarized discourse and heightened media exposure, it more often acts as a catalyst for critical evaluation. Even when party positions align with citizen preferences, high salience may sharpen evaluative standards and draw attention to discrepancies between political discourse and perceived outcomes (Lenz, 2009; Bartels, 1993; Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011). In this sense, salience amplifies not only awareness of representation, but also sensitivity to inconsistency, ambiguity, or perceived insincerity, particularly when mediated by intense media exposure (Luebke & Englemann, 2022).

## CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to the understanding of democratic satisfaction by examining how issue-specific party-citizen congruence interacts with party salience and citizens' media exposure across different national contexts. The findings indicate that congruence matters, but its effects are not uniform. Not all issues weigh equally in citizens' evaluations: symbolically charged and identity-related domains, such as immigration and the environment, have a stronger impact on SWD than economic congruence.

This suggests that citizens respond more to alignment on issues reflecting values, identity, or moral priorities, rather than on broadly shared economic goals (Colomer & Beale, 2020; Hobolt et al., 2021). In this light, SWD is not merely a reaction to policy agreement, but a judgement shaped by issue salience, perceived meaning, and political recognition.

The effect of congruence also varies by national context. In Germany, a stable party system and clearer programmatic competition on economic issues may explain why congruence has stronger effects – particularly when salience remains moderate. In Italy and France, by contrast, alignment appears less relevant, particularly on valence issues like the economy – possibly reflecting a broader disconnection between citizens and political institutions that weakens the evaluative weight of policy congruence. Environmental congruence is politically meaningful only in Italy, where ecological concerns are less structured by partisan identities and often framed in moral or territorial terms (Carrieri & Morini, 2022). This may render them accessible across ideological lines. In a context of persistent distrust, alignment on environmental issues may serve as an alternative evaluative lens, signalling attentiveness to citizen priorities in a domain often perceived as neglected or symbolically charged (Halla et al., 2013).

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<sup>4</sup> In this regard, it is worth noting that the model presented in Appendix 1A – which uses pooled congruence variables – shows a significantly *positive* coefficient for media exposure on SWD. However, this result should not be interpreted substantively: the variable used in the model includes  $\hat{y}$  predictions and is intended solely as a baseline control specification. The coefficient should be treated similarly to a  $\hat{y}$  socio-demographic covariate (Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016), and not as a test of the theoretical assumptions concerning salience index effects.

The findings also partially support Hypothesis 4, which anticipated a negative moderating effect of salience—that is, high salience and media exposure reduce the positive effect of congruence. In Germany, this is evident: higher salience diminishes the impact of congruence, especially on immigration and economic issues. Increased visibility appears to raise expectations and intensify scrutiny, exposing gaps between party rhetoric and perceived outcomes (Lenz, 2009; Bartels, 1993; Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011). This pattern does not emerge in France or Italy, suggesting that the impact of salience is mediated by national media systems and political discourse. Rather than amplifying clarity, salience often acts as a filter, shaping how citizens interpret alignment – sometimes reinforcing dissatisfaction when expectations are unmet (Luebke & Englemann, 2022).

Taken together, these findings reinforce the importance of issue-specific dynamics and national contexts in shaping how citizens evaluate democratic performance. They also suggest that congruence effects are not simply additive: the meaning and impact of party-citizen alignment depend on how salient an issue is and how that salience is mediated by both party emphasis and media exposure. Future research should extend this analysis across more countries and time points while incorporating a wider range of issues and potentially including experimental designs to test causality. By disentangling the role of issue congruence and salience interactions, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of what drives satisfaction with democracy and how citizens perceive representation in contemporary democracies.

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