



# Assessing the complex relationship between government alternation and ideological congruence

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**Alessandro Pellegata**  
Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy

## Abstract

This article analyses the impact of government alternation on ideological congruence, going beyond the traditional distinction between the majoritarian and proportional visions of democracy that characterises the literature. I postulate that the effects of alternation on congruence differ according to the concept of alternation adopted and the time frame considered. While the possibility of alternation has no significant effect on congruence, the actual levels of alternation do play an ambivalent role. Higher levels of alternation increase the distance between the median voter's and the government's preferences at the time of the election. However, in the long run, the level of alternation accumulated over time reduces the average level of ideological distance, compensating for gaps in one direction with opposing gaps in the other direction. Empirical analysis conducted on a sample of 32 democracies confirms all of the hypotheses advanced.

## Keywords

Comparative politics, electoral competition, government alternation, ideological congruence, responsiveness

## Introduction

Democratic theories claim that in representative democracies, the wishes or interests of the people should, to some degree, prevail in the decisions made by the government. Responsiveness implies that the preferences of the decision-makers converge to some extent with the preferences of the people. A broad literature has analysed how institutional arrangements that reliably connect citizens to those who make policies in their name affect ideological congruence. In particular, most of these studies have focused on the traditional distinction between the proportional and the majoritarian visions of democracy, aiming to assess which pattern of democracy is better equipped in terms of nurturing ideological congruence.

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### Corresponding author:

Alessandro Pellegata, Department of Social and Political Sciences, Università degli Studi di Milano, Via Conservatorio 7, Milano, 20122, Italy.  
Email: [alessandro.pellegata@unimi.it](mailto:alessandro.pellegata@unimi.it)

The present article aims to investigate the effects of government alternation, a phenomenon neglected by the literature, on the congruence between the preferences of the voters and their governments. Unlike previous research, which has stressed the importance of the institutional framework in determining the degree of ideological congruence, this study focuses, above all, on the outcome of elections and the following process of government formation. It has been argued that government alternation significantly affects the structure of inter-party competition and, especially, competition for government (Mair, 1996; Sartori, 1976). There are two main aspects of the concept of alternation that have an impact on ideological congruence. The 'possibility of alternation' is a systemic variable ascribed to the political-institutional framework present in a country (Kaiser et al., 2002). The higher the probability of alternation generated by majoritarian institutional frameworks, the higher the risk of removal from office. This threat should make politicians adopt policies that satisfy citizens' demands.

However, when governments fail to anticipate shifts in public preferences and responsively to change their intentions, voters may decide to replace the incumbents with opposition parties or coalitions. The actual occurrence of alternation constitutes the most important accountability mechanism with which voters can steer the course of the government. The relationship between the actual levels of alternation, understood in terms of ideological distance between succeeding governments, and the institutional structure of a country, is very weak. Even typical consensual democracies, characterised by a low probability of alternation, can present high levels of alternation if competition is aligned along two distinct blocks.

Contrary to the commonly accepted wisdom, in the present research I hypothesise that the possibility of alternation has no significant effect on ideological congruence. This is because the institutional features that determine the possibility of alternation, the configuration of the party system and electoral disproportionality, have contradictory effects on congruence that cancel each other out. Moreover, taking into account the dynamic character of democratic representation, I postulate that actual levels of alternation have different effects on congruence according to the time frame we consider. In the short run a greater ideological distance between two alternating governments increases the ideological distance between the median voter's and the government's preferences. In the long run, however, the higher the level of alternation accumulated by a country in a given period of time, the greater the reduction in the average ideological distance. High levels of alternation generate higher short-term ideological distances because, while the median voter generally moves around the centre of the left–right dimension, succeeding governments tend to fluctuate much more towards the extremes of this continuum (Warwick, 2010, 2011). However, over time, this institutionalised pattern of alternation compensates for gaps in one direction at a single moment in time, with gaps in the other direction.

The validity of these research hypotheses is tested with an empirical analysis conducted on a sample of 32 countries, including both Western consolidated democracies and the newly established democratic regimes of Eastern Europe, that spans more than half a century. The empirical results obtained confirm all of the hypotheses advanced. While the possibility of alternation has no significant impact on ideological congruence, the actual levels of alternation play an ambivalent role depending on the time frame considered. In the moment of an election, high levels of government alternation have a negative impact on congruence, but, at the same time, there is a cumulative effect that in the long run works to reduce the average level of ideological incongruence.

The next section offers a brief review of the literature on ideological congruence. The third section illustrates the multi-dimensional concept of government alternation and its main empirical referents, whilst the fourth section presents the theoretical framework of the study and the research hypotheses. The fifth section describes the data and the variables used in the empirical analysis, the

results of which are explained in the sixth section. Finally, the last section presents the concluding remarks.

## Literature on ideological congruence

Most of the studies that have investigated the institutional determinants of ideological congruence have primarily concentrated on exploring the difference between ideological congruence in majoritarian and proportional visions of democracy (Huber and Powell, 1994; Lijphart, 1999; Powell, 2000).

Downs' seminal study (1957) generated a theoretical bias in favour of majoritarian systems. The Downsian model of two-party competition under plurality electoral rule predicts, on a single issue dimension, that the two main parties will converge at the median voter's policy position. However, several authors have empirically tested the political and institutional characteristics that are expected to influence ideological congruence, with results showing lower degrees of congruence among majoritarian systems. More precisely, electoral systems based on single member districts (Powell, 2006), high levels of vote-seat disproportionality (Huber and Powell, 1994; Powell, 2000; Powell and Vanberg, 2000), high effective electoral thresholds (Powell and Vanberg, 2000) and a low number of effective parliamentary parties (Huber and Powell, 1994; Powell, 2000) generate less congruence between the median voter's and government's preferences.

However, more recent studies have emphasised a general lack of significant empirical differences between the two visions of democracies' capacities to foster ideological congruence. Blais and Bodet (2006) have shown that proportional representation (PR) electoral systems, typical of consensual democracies, have two contradictory political consequences. On the one hand, they offer more alternatives to voters, but parties are broadly dispersed along the entire ideological spectrum leading to distortions between voters' and representatives' preferences. On the other hand, the tendency of coalition governments in PR systems is to pull governments to the centre of the spectrum, decreasing ideological distance. The net overall impact of these two contradictory effects on congruence is nil. Kim et al. (2010) have demonstrated that the effect of the party system on ideological congruence is fairly similar both in majoritarian and consensual democracies. Empirical evidence has shown that once polarisation is taken into account, the effective number of parties has little or no effect on congruence. Powell (2009) has instead stressed that levels of representational congruence vary over time. When looking at decades, countries with PR electoral systems generally express a better performance in fostering representational congruence, but this advantage disappears if other time periods are considered. Golder and Stramski (2010) found no significant difference between proportional and majoritarian democracies in terms of their capacities to enhance congruence. Nevertheless, the two scholars did demonstrate that countries in which the electoral system accurately translates votes into legislative seats will also be characterised by a more accurate representation of citizens' preferences in parliament.

## Conceptualising government alternation

Government alternation is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that is particularly difficult to define.

Most democratic theories directly or indirectly refer to the concept of alternation as a 'possibility', stressing its beneficial effect on the accountability of democratic regimes (e.g. Przeworski, 1991; Riker, 1982). In the words of Bartolini (2000:52), the possibility of alternation signifies: 'the possibility for an incumbent government to be ousted and replaced or otherwise modified in its composition as a result of changes in voters' choices'.<sup>1</sup> This is intimately linked to the general idea of the uncertainty of electoral outcome. The result of an election is uncertain only if voters and

government members perceive the occurrence of alternation as a concrete possibility. Uncertainty may not result in turnover but can still supposedly provide a similar effect on the competitiveness of the political system by making elected officials more accountable to their voters (Sartori, 1976). Thus, the possibility of alternation is a systemic variable that depends on the political-institutional structure that regulates electoral competition, in particular the party system and the electoral system (Bartolini, 2000; Kaiser et al., 2002).

Another important, although less studied, aspect of government alternation relates to the actual occurrence of the phenomenon, namely the turnover of different parties or coalitions in government. As Mair (1996) has argued, the specific pattern of alternation present in a country affects the structure of interparty competition because the expectations of both voters and politicians about the possibility of alternation are inevitably influenced by how this phenomenon has occurred in the past. Several scholars have calculated the specific pattern of alternation present in different countries by measuring the frequency and the magnitude of the actual changes in the partisan composition of succeeding governments (Mair, 2006; Strøm, 1989). Nevertheless, other scholars are not only interested in understanding 'how' the new government is different, in terms of partisan composition, from its predecessor, but also 'how much' difference there is in terms of policy preferences (Horowitz et al., 2009; Pellegata, 2012; Tsebelis, 2002; Zucchini, 2011).

In this article, I look at alternation both as a 'possibility' and as an 'actual occurrence'. Following the argument of Kaiser et al. (2002), the possibility of alternation is maximised by political systems that present few parliamentary parties and have a highly disproportional electoral system. A low number of parliamentary parties favours the formation of identifiable single-party governments that help voters to monitor and sanction their activity, whilst high levels of vote-seat disproportionality instead tend to transform even small changes in voters' choices into large shifts at the legislative level.

To define the actual occurrence of an alternation, I analyse all government changes in a given period of time. I consider a government change to be an episode of alternation when there is at least a partial modification in the partisan composition of two succeeding governments. In these cases, I measure the distance, in terms of ideological preference, between the positions of the two governments. More precisely, the measurement strategy I have adopted is a variant of the most commonly used Tsebelis' (2002) indicator of alternation developed by Zucchini (2011: 761–762), which proposes to measure only those turnovers that lead to the formation of a government whose range does not encompass the position of its predecessor. The justification for this stems from an assumption of positive political theory: in a single-dimensional space, the range of a government coalition, defined by the distance between the positions of the two extreme parties of the coalition, represents the government's 'core' (Tsebelis, 2002). This means that all of the policy decisions included in the range cannot be defeated according to the unanimity rule. The ideological position of the government that is replaced can be considered a proxy for the 'status quo' that the new incumbents want to modify. Assuming unanimity as the decision rule inside the government, if the position of the previous government is contained in the range of the new executive, the latter will have a very low, if not non-existent, capacity for policy change (Tsebelis, 2002). Thus, we can hardly consider these circumstances as effective cases of alternation because the two succeeding governments do not present a significant difference.

## **The ambivalent effect of alternation on ideological congruence**

To disentangle the complex relationship between government alternation and ideological congruence, two caveats are needed. Firstly, we have to distinguish the different roles played by the possibility of alternation, and its actual occurrence. Secondly, we need to take into account the dynamic character of democratic representation (Budge et al., 2012; Stimson et al., 1995).

The idea of dynamic representation asks us to consider elections and governments not as single moments in time, but as related contextually contingent events occurring over time. As Stimson et al. (1995) argued, dynamic representation essentially means: ‘...that public opinion moves meaningfully over time, that government officials sense this movement, and that – for a set of motives – those officials alter their behaviour in response to the sensed movement’. Influential normative statements attribute a positive role to the manner in which the possibility of alternation connects governmental decisions to citizens’ preferences. When electoral results are uncertain and government alternation is a concrete possibility, in order to maximise their chances of re-election, office-seeking politicians anticipate voters’ intentions and try to satisfy their demands with sound policies. Thus, the consequence of high levels of competitiveness is ideological congruence between the median voter’s and government’s preferences (Downs, 1957).

The possibility of alternation depends on the degree of electoral disproportionality and the fractionalisation of party systems. However, as several authors have noticed (Blais and Bodet, 2006; McDonald and Budge, 2005), these features have contradictory effects on representational congruence. Multiparty systems allow voters to choose from among different alternatives, and this leads to a fairer distribution of voters’ preferences. Moreover, they favour the formation of coalition governments that usually consist of centrist parties, thereby excluding the extremes. Nevertheless, at the same time, a high number of parliamentary parties favours a broader dispersion along the left–right spectrum, and this increases the size of the gaps around the position of the median voter.

High levels of disproportionality, normally associated with single-member district electoral systems, favour larger parties while penalising smaller ones. This effect should lead to two-party competition and incentivise the two principal contenders to converge around the position of the median voter (Downs, 1957). However, this theoretical prediction is undermined by empirical reality, as high levels of vote–seat disproportionality tend to generate a distortion in translating the position of the median voter into the parliamentary median.<sup>2</sup> As McDonald and Budge (2005) and Blais and Bodet (2006) demonstrate, the contrasting theoretical expectations of ideological congruence associated with both the party system configuration and the degree of electoral disproportionality should cancel each other out. As a consequence, my first research hypothesis advances that:

H<sub>1</sub>: The possibility of alternation associated with a political system has no significant effect on ideological congruence in either the short or the long term.

Although the threat of removal from office should induce incumbents to maintain accountable behaviour, often they are unwilling, or unable to alter their decisions in response to shifts in public preference. In these cases the occurrence of government alternation, which sees the incumbents replaced by opposition parties, represents the most important accountability mechanism through which voters can steer the course of the government. However, even though the shift in governmental preferences resulting from a change of government is preceded by corresponding changes in the preferences of the median voter, this does not necessarily foster more ideological congruence.

There is abundant evidence that political competition in contemporary liberal democracies is composed of two sides, or blocks, competing for government (Sartori, 1976; Warwick, 2011). Bilateralism is an obvious interpretation of two-party systems, but it also represents (to a degree) the nature of competition in multiparty systems.<sup>3</sup> It is implicit in the bilateralist nature of party competition that the struggle for government power is structured around policy alternatives that are represented by different parties or coalitions, who are typically located well to the left or right of the median voter. In this sense, bilateralism is an important condition for the occurrence of government alternation, what Bartolini (2000) calls the ‘decidability of the political offer’. This definition basically means that voters have the ability to choose among meaningful policy alternatives.

Therefore, the dynamic of party competition in representative democracies is better characterised by the alternation at the governmental level of different policy alternatives than it is by the convergence towards the political centre (as is predicted by the Median Voter Theorem) (Downs, 1957).

If we exclude the peculiar consensual system of Switzerland, 64 per cent of my sample governments do not include the preference of the median voter in their range. To lend further weight to the bilateralist interpretation of party competition, we can consider the evidence presented by Warwick (2010, 2011), which shows that intended government policy varies more widely than voter medians. Warwick's analysis shows that, whilst the position of the median voter generally moves around the centre of the left–right political spectrum, the preferences of succeeding governments tend to fluctuate closer to the extremes of this continuum. This finding disproves the existence of a one-to-one relationship between the movements of median voters and governmental position (Warwick, 2010, 2011). At first glance my data distribution is consistent with a bilateralist style of competition. While the median voter's position ranges from  $-39.9$  to  $42.9$  with a standard deviation equal to  $13.7$ , the government's position varies between  $-61.4$  and  $64.4$  with a standard deviation equal to  $18.1$ . Thus, given this picture, my second research hypothesis states that:

$H_2$ : In a single point in time, the higher the level of alternation the larger the distance between the government's and the median voter's ideological positions.

However, expectations regarding the role of government alternation on ideological congruence change if we look at its cumulative effect from a long-run perspective. In line with recent theoretical contributions (Budge et al., 2012; Warwick, 2010, 2011), my third research hypothesis postulates the following:

$H_3$ : The higher the level of government alternation accumulated over time, the higher the long-run reduction of the average ideological distance.

If we do not consider single government changes as distinct moments, but rather as connected events, over time, the occurrence of succeeding cases of alternation is expected to compensate for gaps in one direction at a single point in time by creating gaps in the other direction, thus reducing the average level of ideological distance between the government's and the median voter's preferences. A higher level of reduction indicates that right-wing deviations from the median voter's position are approximately in balance with left-wing deviations. Considering my narrow definition of government alternation, which insists that the position of the previous government must not be included in the range of the new executive, a high level of accumulated alternation indicates that in a given political system, party competition is structured around two clear and identifiable policy alternatives. Alternatives which are, most of the time, placed to the left and right of the median voter. Contrary to the argument posited by McDonald and Budge (2005: 124–137), this long-run reduction effect of the average ideological distance could occur even if no single government ever advocated a policy close to the preferences of the median. What is necessary, as shown by Warwick (2011: 611–613), is that high levels of incongruence are associated with low levels of imbalance, which indicates that deviations in one direction of the ideological spectrum are counterbalanced by deviations in the opposite direction. These conditions are jointly present in countries that experience a significant level of alternation. However, while Warwick (2011: 614–617) suggested looking at the impact of electoral disproportionality, which assures a more concrete possibility of alternation, I suggest also considering the actual level of alternation experienced in a given period of time.

This long-run cumulative effect of government alternation in reducing ideological distance over time has an important normative role in what Przeworski (2010) defines as the realisation of ‘self-government in our times’. With this term, Przeworski is not referring to the 18th century idea of self-government based on the assumption that everyone has the same preferences about the legal order under which all want to live. He refers instead to a second-best notion of self-government, which is coherent with the heterogeneity of values and interests characterising modern representative democracies.

This idea of self-government is well represented by government alternation. While in representative democracies we cannot govern ourselves, we can be governed by different political parties that take turns in government. In this way, diverse political forces can advance the interests of different people at different times, enabling everybody to ‘rule’ and ‘be ruled’ in turn (Przeworski, 2010). The long-run beneficial role of government alternation is not due to a one-to-one alignment between governments’ and median voter’s positions, but rather to a mechanism that allows parties to adopt, in turn, policies preferred by different sectors of society.

## Methodology and data

The empirical analysis was conducted through a comparative research design with a sample of 32 countries, including both mature and newly established democracies.<sup>4</sup> The countries were analysed over a period that runs from the first democratic election held after 1945 to the mid-2000s. In total, I have considered 401 elections and 727 governments.<sup>5</sup>

To estimate the median voter’s and the governments’ positions, I adopted what is called the ‘manifesto-based approach’. This method relies on data regarding the left–right position of the parties that contested elections, and was collected by the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP, Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006). The position of different governments (GOV) is estimated by taking the position of the party in single-party governments, or the median point of the range in coalitions.<sup>6</sup>

The position of the median voter (MV) is estimated in an indirect way. Kim and Fording (1998: 79–80; 2003: 98–99) developed a method to estimate the median voter’s position from the policy preferences expressed in the manifestos of different parties, and the distribution of votes they obtained in various elections. As they are estimated from the score attributed to the different parliamentary parties, both the median voter’s and the government’s position potentially range from –100 (extreme left) to +100 (extreme right). This approach presents different shortcomings that can affect empirical results (Powell, 2009: 4–5). As Warwick and Zacharova (2013) demonstrated, the efficacy of Kim and Fording’s methodology is undermined if voters are not able to infer which is the party closest to their preferences, use more than one policy dimensions to make their electoral choice or base their choices on valence issues that are unrelated to voter–party distances.

However, the ‘manifesto-based approach’ also has important strengths. Citizens’ electoral choice is the behavioural manifestation of their policy preferences, and it can be seen as more authentic and valid than, for instance, a response to an abstract survey question. Moreover, this measurement strategy permits estimating voters’ preferences on the same scale used to measure governments’ position, thus increasing comparability across countries and time periods. Finally, it is the only measurement strategy that provides data on median voter positions for a large set of countries and over a long period of time, which is necessary to test the long-run effects of government alternation on distance reduction.

The dependent variable employed to test  $H_1$  and  $H_2$  is the DISTANCE, in absolute values, between the left–right positions of the median voter and the government. DISTANCE potentially varies between 0, indicating a perfect correspondence between the median voter’s and the

government's position, and 200. To test  $H_3$ , I needed a measure of the proportionate REDUCTION of the average ideological distance over time. Thus, following the suggestion of McDonald et al. (2004), McDonald and Budge (2005) and Warwick (2011), I first computed the arithmetic DIFFERENCE between the ideological positions of the median voter and the government.<sup>7</sup> By going beyond the absolute value of the distance between the median voter's and the government's preferences at a single point in time, and also taking into account the direction of the shifts in the ideological position of these actors, DIFFERENCE addresses mutual cancellations of the single ideological gaps over time.

The proportion of the reduction over time in the ideological distance accumulated in every single country is measured by one minus the average value of DIFFERENCE divided by the average value of DISTANCE. Being a proportion, REDUCTION ranges from 0, which indicates that there is no reduction in the ideological distance accumulated over time, to 1, which indicates a complete compensation, over time, for the gaps that accumulated in single moments in one direction of the left–right continuum, with gaps in the other direction at other moments. Figure A1 (available at: <http://ips.sagepub.com>) reports two graphs that show, respectively, the average values of DISTANCE and DIFFERENCE, and the level of REDUCTION for each sample country. These two graphs show a high variation among sample countries of both DISTANCE and REDUCTION levels.

Looking at the independent variables, the possibility of alternation is operationalised through combining Gallagher's (1991) index of vote–seat disproportionality (DISP) of the electoral system with the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP) according to the Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) formula. As expected, typical majoritarian systems, such as Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, express a more concrete possibility of alternation, displaying high levels of DISP and low levels of ENPP. In contrast, consensual democracies, such as Switzerland, Finland and most of the East European countries, show the opposite situation (see Table A1, available at: <http://ips.sagepub.com>).

As explained above, a government change is considered a case of alternation when two succeeding governments present at least partially different partisan compositions, and the position of the government that is replaced is not contained in the range of the new government. Once a government change has satisfied these conditions, the variable Alternation (ALT) measures the effective levels of alternation that occurred at a single point in time and is given by the distance, in absolute values, between the left–right positions of the incumbent government at time  $t$  and the government that was in office at time  $t-1$ .

Higher values of ALT mean larger shifts in the ideological preferences of two succeeding governments. To test the long-run effect of alternation hypothesised in  $H_3$  I needed to measure the effective level of alternation accumulated in a given period of time. Cumulative Alternation (CUMALT) is the sum of the succeeding levels of alternation accumulated over time divided by the number of years passed from the beginning of the period analysed (see Horowitz et al., 2009). Higher values of CUMALT are displayed by political systems that have experienced more frequent cases of alternation of a high magnitude over short time periods.

It is worth stressing that ALT and CUMALT are not significantly correlated with either DISP or ENPP, meaning that the possibility and the occurrence of government alternation are effectively two distinct dimensions of the concept. Therefore, countries that present higher mean and cumulative levels of alternation are not necessarily characterised by a political-institutional structure that increases the possibility of alternation.

Another potentially explanatory factor of representational congruence is tested as a control variable. Party system polarisation (POLAR) measures the dispersion of different parties on the left–right continuum by calculating the absolute distance between the two most extreme parties in the



**Table 1.** Short-run effects of alternation on ideological distance.

Dependent variable: DISTANCE	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
ALT		.1031*** (.0249)	.0873*** (.0258)	.1019*** (.0243)
DISP	-.1713 (.2576)		-.1155 (.2082)	-.1362 (.2246)
ENPP	.0673 (.8368)		-.6993 (.8103)	-.9146 (1.0692)
POLAR			.1613*** (.0329)	.1608*** (.0356)
Constant	11.1962** (4.3676)	9.8994*** (1.1420)	5.9450 3.6896	6.9292 (4.4949)
R <sup>2</sup>	.0035	.0196	.1312	.1326
N	692	692	692	622
Countries	32	32	32	22

Notes: robust standard errors clustered at the country level in parentheses. \*\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \* $p < .1$ .

parliament. Polarisation is supposed to have detrimental effects on ideological congruence because it increases the size of the parties' gaps around the position of the median voter, thus making it harder to form single-party governments close to the median, or to build coalitions across the median (Kim et al., 2010).

My analysis also includes a dummy variable for the newly established democracies of Eastern Europe (NEWDEM). I argue that recently formed democratic regimes should have a less stable partisan structure that favours fragmentation and dispersion along the left–right spectrum and that this configuration should produce less ideological congruence (more distance).

## Empirical results

Table 1 presents the results of four cross-sectional time-series regression models that test the effects of DISP, ENPP and ALT on DISTANCE. Model (1) regresses the dependent variable only on the indicators of the possibility of alternation, DISP and ENPP, while model (2) regresses DISTANCE just on ALT. Model (3) and (4) simultaneously test the effects of ALT, DISP and ENPP on DISTANCE. The effects of these different concepts of alternation are controlled for the impact of POLAR. While model (3) has been run on a sample of 692 cases corresponding to all of the succeeding governments in the 32 countries analysed, model (4) excludes the governments of the 10 young Eastern Europe democratic regimes from the analysis.

The regression coefficients of DISP and ENPP are never statistically significant, even though in model (1) their signs indicate a potential positive role of the possibility of alternation in reducing ideological distance. As expected, the contradictory effects played by both the level of vote–seat disproportionality and the effective number of parliamentary parties cancel each other out, producing no effect on ideological distance at a single moment in time. The political-institutional characteristics that guarantee a higher probability of alternation do not display a better level of congruence between the median voter's and the government's ideological positions.

On the contrary, the regression coefficient of ALT is positively and significantly associated with DISTANCE. As postulated in H<sub>2</sub>, higher levels of alternation generate greater ideological distance. In other words, the larger the ideological distance that separates a government from its predecessor,

**Table 2.** Long-run effects of alternation on reduction of the average ideological distance.

Dependent variable: REDUCTION	(5)	(6)
CUMALT	.2876*** (.0961)	.3310** (.1320)
DISP	.0151 (.0804)	.0077 (.0929)
ENPP	.3234 (.2955)	.2177 (.4393)
POLAR	-.0260 (.0181)	-.0278 (.0197)
NEWDEM	-2.2384*** (.5765)	
Constant	-.0372 (1.7227)	.3111 (2.2348)
Log pseudolikelihood	-14.4263	-9.8101
N	32	22

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \* $p < .1$ .

the higher the distance between the present government's and the median voter's preferences. This positive relationship between ALT and DISTANCE is present whether we analyse the entire sample of countries (model (3)), or just the consolidated democratic regimes (model (4)). In addition to ALT, POLAR also displays a positive and significant regression coefficient: the greater the dispersion of parties along the ideological continuum, the higher the ideological distance.

However, the theoretical framework proposed here suggests the need to consider the dynamic character of representation, which encompasses different moments over time. DISTANCE may increase due to two different reasons. On one hand, DISTANCE may increase because the shift of a government's position is preceded by a correspondent shift in median voter's preferences, but the former shift is larger than the latter; this is my central argument. On the other hand, DISTANCE may increase because the median voter's shift and the government's shift move in opposite directions. Even though in both situations DISTANCE increases, in the first one the government senses the change in public preferences and acts responsively by shifting its preferences in the same direction. In the second situation, instead, the government makes policy decisions contrary to the citizens' preferences. To test the validity of this argument I regress GOV on MV conditional to ALT.

The results (see Table A2 and Figure A2, available at: <http://ips.sagepub.com>) indicate that changes in the government's preferences are preceded by corresponding changes in the median voter's preferences. Nevertheless, while when there is no alternation (ALT = 0), governments' ideological shifts tend to be smaller than those of the median voter's; with levels of ALT higher than a threshold value around 35 those of the former become larger than those of the latter. In other words, DISTANCE increases only after high levels of alternation, which characterise approximately 20 per cent of the cases of alternation that occurred in my sample.

Table 2 presents the results of two other statistical models that test the impact of DISP, ENPP and CUMALT on REDUCTION. Given that the dependent variable is a proportion, I have employed a fractional logit model. Countries are analysed cross-sectionally over their entire period of analysis. Model (5) has been run on all of the 32 sample countries, while for model (6) I have excluded the 10 post-communist countries. As in the previous table, the coefficients of DISP and ENPP are never statistically significant. This result indicates that the possibility of alternation associated with the political institutions of a country does not play a significant role in reducing the average level of ideological distance through compensations over time.

While at single moments in time government alternation increases ideological distance, in the long term, it contributes to reducing the average level of distance by compensating for gaps in one direction with gaps in the opposite direction. In fact, the regression coefficient of CUMALT is positively and significantly associated with REDUCTION. The higher the level of alternation accumulated over time, the greater the reduction of ideological distance. The long-run cumulative effect of alternation is significant even when controlling for the presence of recently established democracies in the sample. Although these political systems present more or less the same levels of CUMALT as mature democracies, it is possible to presume that, given the higher levels of instability of their party systems, they have not yet institutionalised a stable pattern of government alternation. Obviously, in model (6), the effect of CUMALT remains significant after the exclusion of the 10 East European political regimes.

However, the reason for long-run reduction of ideological distance could be simply explained by the length of the period analysed, in which most of the countries experienced a high number of alternations. Furthermore, this result could be biased by the strategy adopted to measure the median voter's and governments' positions. To control for these potential biases, I introduced several robustness checks. Firstly, I subdivided all the periods of analysis of different sample countries into sub-periods of approximately 20 years. Thus, for instance, the United Kingdom, as well as the other consolidated democracies for which data are available from the mid-1940s, has been analysed in three periods (1945–1964; 1965–1984; 1985–2001). In the same way Greece, Portugal and Spain, which only became democratic after the mid-1970s, were analysed in two distinct periods (e.g. for Spain 1977–1989; 1990–2000), and the post-communist countries were analysed in a single period that goes from the early 1990s to the early 2000s. I replicated the empirical analysis reported in Table 2 on a sample composed of all of the country-periods gathered and clustering the errors for the different political systems. The results (reported in Table A3, models C, D and E, available at: <http://ips.sagepub.com>) indicate that the long-run cumulative effect of government alternation in reducing ideological distance also operates in periods of 15–20 years that contain three to five electoral cycles.

Secondly, given that the Kim and Fording's methodology (1998, 2003) has been highly criticised because it automatically generates more congruence (Powell, 2009; Warwick and Zakharova, 2013), I also estimated the median voter's position from a citizens' survey. The Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File allowed me to estimate the median voter's position for the left–right self-placement of voters in 15 European countries from 1973 to 2002 (see Schmitt and Scholz, 2005).<sup>8</sup> I converted the original 1–10 scale to the CMP scale (–100 +100) and I replicated the analysis reported in Table 2 for this sub-group of countries over the sub-period of analysis (results reported in Table A3, model F, available at: <http://ips.sagepub.com>). Despite the fact that the number of observations dramatically decreased, CUMALT still displayed a positive and significant effect on REDUCTION, suggesting that the long-run cumulative effect of alternation in reducing the average ideological distance is not dependent upon the measurement strategy adopted to estimate the median voter's position.

## Conclusions

This article investigates the degree of ideological congruence between the median voter's and government's preferences on the left–right spectrum. Whereas most recent studies on congruence have been developed along the distinction between the majoritarian and proportional visions of democracy (Powell, 2000), this study focuses on the role played by government alternation. As illustrated by the three research hypotheses advanced, I postulated an ambivalent effect of government alternation on ideological congruence, and that the effect depends upon the concept of alternation adopted and the time frame considered. The results, which were obtained from an empirical

analysis conducted on a sample of 32 democratic regimes, have confirmed all of the hypotheses advanced.

From these empirical results it is possible to draw two main conclusions that are worth discussing. The first relevant conclusion is that the political and institutional structure of a country is not related to ideological congruence. In order to operationalise the possibility of alternation, I have relied on two key institutional factors commonly used to determine different patterns of democracy: the configuration of the party system and the vote–seat disproportionality of the electoral system. I have found that an institutional design that favours a more concrete possibility of alternation is not a significant explanatory factor for the level of ideological congruence. Therefore, contrary to an established literature (Huber and Powell, 1994; Lijphart, 1999; Powell, 2000), institutional structures that promote the representation of different interests and consensual law-making do not outperform majoritarian systems in terms of enhancing ideological congruence.

The second and most important conclusion that emerges from the present study is that, unlike the institutional design adopted by a country, the distribution of the policy preferences of the main actors involved in the process of democratic representation does affect ideological congruence. The actual levels of alternation experienced in a given period of time play a significant role in relation to ideological congruence. However, we need to distinguish between the short-run negative effect on congruence, and the cumulative positive impact that can be observed in the long run. According to the bilateralist interpretation of party competition (Warwick, 2010, 2011), a high level of alternation, meaning that the ideological position of the new government is significantly distant from its predecessor, increases the distance between the median voter and the executive. However, taking into account the dynamic character of party representation, in the long run, the higher the level of alternation accumulated by a country in a given period of time, the higher the proportionate reduction in the average ideological distance due to the creation of gaps in opposing directions.

The idea stressed by the median mandate theory, that governments' policies should to some extent reflect the preferences of the median voter, seems to represent a normative criterion against which scholars ought to assess the actual functioning of representative democracies (Best et al., 2012; Budge et al., 2012). In line with this theoretical framework, the present study highlights the importance of time in evaluating party representation (Budge et al., 2012; McDonald and Budge, 2005). It is only once a dynamic perspective has been adopted that the beneficial role of government alternation on congruence is illuminated. However, alternation does not lead to a long-run alignment in a one-to-one relationship between the positions of the median voter and the government, but instead enhances congruence by letting different parties govern in turn (Przeworski, 2010). Government alternation allows various parties to advance, in turn, the interests of different sectors of society.

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## Notes

1. Bartolini (2000) defines what I call the possibility of alternation as ‘vulnerability’, but the meaning and effects on electoral competitiveness are essentially the same.
2. In the United Kingdom, for instance, for most of the post-war period, the Liberal Party (after 1988 the Liberal Democratic Party) was the party preferred by the British median voter. Nevertheless, the electoral system characterised by single member districts and a high level of vote–seat disproportionality manufactured Labour or Conservative majorities, and thereby made one of them the median party in the parliament. Not surprisingly, the Liberal Democratic Party has been constantly excluded from the government until 2010.
3. The countries of southern Europe, such as Greece, Portugal and Spain, and the Scandinavian political systems, such as Denmark, Norway and Sweden, are examples of multiparty systems in which competition is structured around two distinct parties or blocks. From the mid-1990s, Italy has also moved towards a pattern of bilateral competition. An evolution towards bilateralism is evident even in the more recent democracies of Eastern Europe (e.g. Bulgaria, Poland and Romania).
4. The sample of analysis includes the EU member states, with the exception of Cyprus and Malta, plus Australia, Canada, Iceland, Japan, New Zealand, Norway and Switzerland. Table A1 (available at: <http://ips.sagepub.com>) lists descriptive statistics of all the variables included in the analysis for each sample country.
5. While most of previous analyses of congruence focused only on after-election governments, I have also taken into consideration between-election governments. Using the same position data that I have adopted (CMP), Kim and Fording (2012) demonstrated that the vast majority of between-election governments have almost the same ideological preferences of the government formed immediately after the election. However, I also ran the empirical models that only consider post-election governments and I have obtained the same results.
6. In estimating the position of governments, I have followed the strategy adopted by Tsebelis (2002), which attributes the same political relevance to every party included in a coalition. However, I have also computed the position of governments by weighting the position of different government parties with the proportion of legislative seats they obtained in the last election. When employing this last type of measure in the empirical analysis, I still obtained the same results.
7. I use the terms distance and difference, instead of the more commonly used distortion and bias, because the latter imply that the norm should be the congruence between the median voter’s and the government’s positions.
8. Countries included in the Eurobarometer are the following: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom.

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### Author biography

Alessandro Pellegata is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Milan (Italy). His main research interests are comparative institutional analysis, the quality of democracy, political corruption and legislative studies.