Finding inequality in an unlikely place: differences in collective congruence between social groups in Belgium

Christophe Lesschaeve

University of Antwerp

Research group M²P

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Introduction

One of the keystones of a functioning democracy is the proper representation of the preferences of voters by their representatives in parliament. Piktin (1967) called this ‘substantive representation’, representatives making present the policy positions of the public. When voters and their representatives share the same positions on public policy, it increase the chance of those policy positions to become a policy reality. This agreement between voters and representatives is seen an indicator of a healthy democracy (Diamond & Morlino, 2005) and has therefore received much attention in the field of political science, usually under what we will call ‘policy congruence’. However, many scholars claim that legislatures often deviate from this normative ideal. What is more, there appears to be a systematic bias towards the preferences of privileged social groups, usually consisting of the higher educated or higher income strata of society (Winters & Page, 2009). As a result, it is claimed that privileged and underprivileged groups are unequally represented in politics. Inequality in policy congruence has received much attention, especially in the United States (Giger, Rosset, & Bernauer, 2012). Amidst growing societal inequality, there is an increasing concern that the preferences of wealthy or affluent citizens receive more weight than those of other voters, and there is growing evidence for a representational skew (APSA Task Force, 2004; Bartels, 2008; Flavin, 2012; Rigby & Wright, 2010). Martin Gilens (2005) found that, based on a dataset containing almost 2000 U.S. Federal policy questions that, when different income groups differ in policy preference, policy outcomes are more likely to reflect the preferences of groups with higher income levels. Furthermore, Jacobs and Page (2005) found that the foreign policy preferences of member of the U.S. Congress related much more to the preferences of business leader than those of experts or public opinion. In addition, scholars have given attention to some of the main potential causes of this inequality in policy congruence (see for instance Winters & Page, 2009): lobbying activities are dominated by business organization, political donations allow only approved by the wealthy to run for office, and inequality in turn-out makes underprivileged voters less important for a party or candidate to get (re)elected.

However, despite scholars elsewhere having picked up the idea of inequality in policy congruence (Lefkofridi, Giger, & Kissau, 2012), there has been no attempt to study to what extent inequality in policy congruence in a context which is not characterized by one-sided lobbying, political donations and inequality in turn-out. This is the question this paper seeks to answer: to what extent are privileged and underprivileged groups, in terms of education and income, unequally congruent with a legislature in a political system in which inequality in policy congruence is least likely to occur? This paper studies the case of Belgium, a country in which business organizations and trade unions equally participate in defining policy, a country where parties receive their financial means primarily from state subsidies and where donations are strictly regulated or even prohibited, and a country where compulsory voting has equalized turn-out during elections. The political context is such that inequality in policy congruence is far less likely, at least institutionally inequality in policy congruence. By institutional inequality in policy congruence, we mean the degree to which a legislature is biased towards or against the preferences of certain social groups, regardless of how these groups contribute themselves to this bias by voting in discord with their own preferences.

In the first part of the paper, we provide an overview of the literature on the three aforementioned causes of inequality in policy congruence in the United States, after which we take a look at the situation in Belgium. We then examine inequality in policy congruence in Belgium by using an extensive integrated dataset containing the policy positions of voters and political parties in Belgium on 229 concrete policy statement. Through the policy positions of parties and the seats they possess in parliament, we calculate the policy position of parliament as a whole and match those with the policy positions of privileged and underprivileged groups. We find that, despite the institutional safeguards, inequality in policy congruence between higher and lower educated and incomes is still present. When privileged and underprivileged groups differ in policy positions (the only cases where inequality in policy congruence is possible), parliament is likely to side with the preferences of the higher educated or higher incomes. The results thus point to a certain pervasiveness of inequality in policy congruence. In the conclusion, we discuss the normative implication of these results.

Factors that induce inequality in representation in the United States

Previous studies focusing on the US identify at least 4 factors of a political system through which privileged social groups exert their influence in the decision-making process: on-sided business lobbying, financial contributions and voter turnout. Many scholars in the field of inequality in policy congruence and representation have pointed to lobbying as an important mechanism for influence (Domhoff, 2002; Jacobs & Page, 2005; Lindblom, 1982; Winters & Page, 2009). Lobbyist, representing an certain interest group, seek to establish shared perspectives with politicians trough socializing, friendship networks, revolving-door employment, working out detailed policy positions through think tanks and even drafting the legislation for politicians themselves (Winters & Page, 2009, p. 740). The presence of lobbyists is by no means excusive to the United States, as the research on lobbying in the EU has shown (Woll, 2006), nor is it problematic per se. Studies often categorize the United States as a country with a pluralist interest group system. Such a system is often characterized by many small interest groups, non-existent or weak peak organizations, and little or no consultation or agreements between representatives of labor and business organizations (Lijphart, 1999). From a pluralist perspective, there exists a balance of competing interest groups, and new interest groups will automatically form when certain interest are unorganized (Moe, 1981). If opposing interest groups equally pull a policy-maker to their preferred position, they cancel out each other's influence. However, a study of Schlozman and Burch (2009) found that the business community accounted for 55% of all interest groups in Washington D.C. in 2001, compared to 10% for organization advancing the interests of underprivileged social groups such as trade unions or LGTB organizations, and trade unions alone only for 1%. Though the impact of lobbying is difficult to study, in part due to its secretive nature, several studies have tacitly shown, primarily regarding changes in the tax code, that organized interest can exert considerable influence on policy outcomes (e.g. Johnston, 2005).

The second potential cause of inequality in policy congruence is financial contributions. An enormous amount of money is poured into US elections. For instance, the website www.opensecrets.org reports that the 2014 congressional elections cost, in total, nearly 3.7 billion dollars. Again this does not need to be problematic per se. Financial contribution can be seen, and often are, as another means to lobby politicians. However, the mechanism of influence through donations is different from classic lobbying and therefore deserves to be discussed separately. First, financial donations to politicians and political candidates come from a selective groups of people. While 51% of eligible voters turned out on election day, less than 2% of voters donated more than $200 or more to a candidate. At the same time, these donations make up two thirds of the donations of a candidate (Overton, 2004). In other words, less than 2% of voters give two thirds of all donations. Furthermore, those voters come primarily from the privileged strata of society (*ibid.*).

Some scholars, however, have questioned whether these donation actually have an impact. For instance, Ansolabehere et al. (2003) found that, when trying to explain the roll-call vote of legislators on an issue, that the amount of political action committee (PAC) contributions did not have a significant effect. They conclude that "legislators' votes depend almost entirely on their own beliefs and the preferences of their voters and their party" (p. 116). However, others predict that, rather than seeking to change the voting behavior of legislators, donors give contributions to legislators and political candidates who intrinsically have the same values and preferences, in what has been called the 'ideological sorting'-hypothesis. Bronars and Lott (1997), for instance, found that legislators did note vote differently in their second to last and their last term in office. If the voting behavior is indeed 'bought' by donations, then their voting behavior should deviate from their contributors preferences in their last term, as the risk of losing future campaign contributions does not apply anymore. Their results suggest that donors give money and try to get into office those who already share their points of view. Thomas Ferguson (1995) also described this 'ideological sorting' in his investment theory. He claims that candidates of both major parties in the United States heavily rely on the financial contributions of wealthy donors. Indeed, research has shown that money is almost a *conditio sine qua non* to get elected (Abramowitz, 1988; Jacobson, 1978, 1990). In order to fund a campaign organization, expensive adds to reach voters, candidates (though challengers more than incumbents) need the support of the fairly homogeneous donor class (Winters & Page, 2009). As a result, voters may only be able to choose from candidates already approved by the donor class. In other words, campaign donations rig the game in favor of privileged groups by preventing those unable to garner sufficient funds to compete in an election. Whoever wins, their (key) preferences are likely to be congruent with those of wealthy donors.

Money is an important, but not sufficient, condition to get elected. Money can make a candidate known to the public, but he or she will still need votes to win. And votes require voters to turn out on election day. However, research has consistently shown a social bias in terms of income and education in turnout (Leighley & Nagler, 1992). The causal mechanisms are difficult to disentangle, but it is usually connected to the level of formal education. Hillygus (2005) found that the content of formal education gives individuals the skills and information that make political participation easier. In order to vote, people need a minimum understanding of how political institution work, and need to "realize the relation between political action and the preservation of the political system" (p. 27). These skills and knowledge make voting less costly to voters. In addition to helping people understand what is going on, formal education instills in individuals a sense of civic duty. Lewis-Beck et al. (2008) argue that with more formal education comes a "stronger interest in politics, a greater concern with elections, greater confidence in playing one's role as a citizen, and a deeper commitment to the norm of being a good citizen" (p. 102)[1].

Does the exclusion of underprivileged groups matter? Arguably, assuming that politicians seek re-election, citizens that cannot contribute to that re-election by not going out to vote could be considered

[1] Scholars such as Powell (1986) have argued that the registration requirement before voting, is an additional cause of the socio-economic skew in turnout in the United States. However, research on the effects of voter registration requirements and the composition of the electorate have found this relation to be non-existent (Highton 2009; Mitchell and Wlezien 1995; Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978) or at least not the main reason why turnout in the United States is skewed towards privileged social groups (Highton, 1997).

irrelevant for political candidates. Adhering to the preferences of groups who are unlikely to vote, possibly alienating groups who are more likely to vote, is simply not a rational strategy if a candidate wants to win an election. Yet, some scholars argue that this does not need to be problematic as long as privileged and underprivileged voters share the same policy preferences. If there is a large consensus among voters regarding the future direction of public policy, then underprivileged voters are as likely to as privileged voters to have their preferences represented, despite the former not participating in the electoral process. In fact, if policy preferences do not differ between social groups, inequality in policy congruence between those groups is mathematically impossible. Soroka and Wlezien (2008) found that, except in the area of social welfare, there are only small differences between groups in what they want from government. However, their study was criticized by Martin Gilens (2009) for taking into account only eight items, all of which focused on government spending instead of regulatory or other policy actions. Furthermore, their survey items were about broad policy domain-wide preferences, which might obscure differences in policy preferences within a certain policy domain. In addition, Gilens (*ibid.*) found that, based on a dataset with more than 1,700 survey items about more specific policy issues, that there are substantial differences between the policy preferences of low and high income or education respondents. It is therefore highly likely that the social bias in turnout increases inequality in policy congruence.

The case of Belgium

Belgium is small consociational federation is Western Europe. It consists of regions, Flanders and Wallonia and language communities, a Flemish and Francophone community. However, the region of Flanders and the Flemish language community, and Wallonia and the Francophone language community overlap to a substantial degree. Therefore, one could say that Belgium consists of two parts, each with a separate party and media system. Though its political systems is by no means a perfect democracy, it does possess characteristics that arguably reduce the likelihood of inequality in policy congruence between social groups. First is the mechanism of lobbying and the bias towards business interest groups. Belgium is often described as a country with a corporatist interest group system (Lijphart, 1999; Siaroff, 1999). Such a system is often characterized with small number of relatively large interest groups, which are further coordinated into national peak organizations. Furthermore, the leaders of these peak organizations, especially those of labor and business regularly meet, to negotiate comprehensive agreements that are binding to both. Despite some scholars suggesting a declining effectiveness of corporatism in Belgium (Baccaro & Lim, 2007), other scholars point to the persistence of interprofessional agreements, agreements on the changes in wages for the next two years (Devos & Sinardet, 2012), or collective bargaining agreements, both developed in the so-called 'Group van 10', meetings between key representative of the most important labor and business organizations (each with 5 representatives) (van Gerven & Beckers, 2009).

Furthermore, one of the factors that could give rise to a decline in the corporatist system of interest groups is the declining power of trade union trough their declining membership. This decreases the ability of trade union to act as representatives of workers. Indeed, there is a general trend of declining trade union membership in industrialized countries (Jelle Visser, 2006). However, those same studies show Belgium to be one of the exceptions in this regard (Pieter Liagre, 2012; Rie, Marx, & Horemans, 2011). They indicate that absolute union membership and union density (proportion of unionized wage and salary earners) have both increased. This increasing strength of trade unions in Belgium makes it more likely that trade unions continue to play a key role in (socio-economic) policy-making in Belgium, advocating redistributive policies and policies aimed at the protection of underprivileged social groups. This too stands in contrast with the United States where, as discussed earlier, lobbying activities are dominated by business interests, and where, in addition, trade union membership has a steady decline (Jelle Visser, 2006).

Second, Belgium has strict party and campaign finance laws (Weekers, Maddens, & Noppe, 2009). Until the 1990's, donations to political parties in Belgium was hardly regulated. On the contrary, it was even encouraged through tax deductibles. Gradually, however, restrictions were put into place, and donations ceased to be tax deductible and donations from both corporations and trade unions were banned. Since 1999, only natural persons may donate money to political parties. However, there is a 2000€ donation limit per person, and parties may not receive more than 500€ from the same person. In other words, if someone wants to reach his donation limit, then that person must divide his donations over at least 4 different political parties. These restrictions reduced the financial means available to parties and were therefore compensated by subsidies from the state. From the '70s onward, all recognized political parties received a fixed allowance and a variable amount per MP, and in addition, since the 1990's, they received direct state subsidies from the federal government and the regional governments.

In addition to regulating the overall financing of parties, the 1990's also saw the birth of campaign spending regulations. Since 1993, parties cannot spend more 1 million€ regardless of coinciding elections (such was for example the case in 2009 and 2014). On top of the money spend by parties, candidates may spend money of their own. These limited are determined by the size of the constituency in which they run for office and their place on the party list. However, in reality there is no clear distinction between the spending of parties and the spending of candidates. Parties often demand of candidates to set aside some part of the money they can spend for party spending (Maddens & Smulders, 2014). Furthermore, third party spending in favor of a certain party or certain candidates is considered to be spending by the party or candidates themselves, unless they explicitly demand the third party to stop their campaigning (Weekers et al., 2009). Finally, parties may not, in the three month preceding an election, broadcast commercials on TV, radio or in movie theatres, nor are they allowed to use commercial billboards, distribute gadgets or set up of telephone campaign. Parties are allowed to use non-commercial billboards, set up specifically for an electoral campaign, and broadcast a limited number of free commercials on the public television and radio. As a result of these regulations, there are only small discrepancies between the spending limits of parties in Belgium. In the last election in Belgium, for the regional, federal and European parliament, spending limits ranged from 5.3 million€ to 3.0 million€[2]. Given the restriction on how parties can raise money, how much they can spend and on what they can spend it, it makes nearly impossible for a donor class to pre-select parties or candidates in an election.

Finally, Belgium also has compulsory voting. Instituted in 1897, with the introduction of plural voting, it is the main cause why turnout has been consistently high in Belgium. Turnout has been around 90% or more since WOII[3]. Not only is turnout larger than in other, comparable, countries, turnout has been far more equal. Studies have found no relation between education level and likelihood to vote (De Winter & Ackaert, 1993; De Winter & Johan Ackaert, 1994). However, abolishing compulsory voting in Belgium would decrease turnout to about 60% and would lead to an overrepresentation of higher educated citizens in the voting public (Hooghe & Pelleriaux, 1998). Nevertheless, some scholars doubt that compulsory voting matters in the end. Selb and Lachat (2009) found that, when excluding voters who indicate they would not vote were it not compulsory, that the electoral result would still be the same. They conclude that, while compulsory voting equalizes turnout, it does not equalize how well everyone votes in accordance with their policy preferences.

Yet, there may be consequences of abolishing compulsory voting that cannot be explored through a self-reporting question in an election survey (Jensen & Spoon, 2011). The thesis of Selb and Lachat (2009), in that compulsory voting makes little difference, assumes that parties would not adjust to this 30-40% drop in turnout if compulsory voting would be abolished. Arguably, parties, all of them, would adapt to

[2] There were parties with lower spending limits, but this is because they do not have candidates in all districts or do not have candidates for all parliaments. To have comparable parties, we excluded these parties.
[3] http://www.ibzdgip.fgov.be/result/nl/main.html

this change by taking positions that are closer to the preferences of voters that would still turn out to vote, at least possibly moving away from voters that would abstain. Conversely, when otherwise abstaining voters would be including in the voting public through compulsory voting, all parties would want an as large as possible share of those voters to vote for them. To this end, they would probably take at least some policy positions that are congruent with the preferences of these voters. It is therefore possible that compulsory voting does not change the balance of power between parties dramatically, but that it can bring the a party system as a whole closer or further away from the preferences of groups who are less likely to vote without compulsory voting. As Giger et al. (2012) explain it, "the gap in the participation rate of different income groups might affect the strategic positioning of [all] parties" (p.50). We are therefore not so quick to dismiss the potential contributions of compulsory voting to the equal representation of policy positions. If lower educated voters are as likely to vote as higher educated voters due to compulsory voting, it would be a rational strategy for parties to adhere equally to the preference of both groups of voters.

On the three major factors that scholars have identified as leading to a representational bias in favor fo the policy preferences of privileged social groups in the United States, Belgium has the opposite features: instead of an overrepresentation of business in lobby activities, Belgium has institutionalized negotiations between labor and business; instead of a dependence on a donor class for funds, Belgium has banned corporate sponsorship and strongly regulated the conduct of parties and candidates during an electoral campaign; instead of voluntary voting, Belgium has compulsory voting, effectively eliminating the socio-economic skew in turnout. Scholars that study inequality in policy congruence in the United States often point to these characteristics as the causes of inequality in policy congruence. If true, a political system without these characteristics should be able to severely reduce or even render non-existent the (institutionally caused) differences in policy congruence between privileged and underprivileged social groups. Instead of often favoring the policy positions of higher educated or higher income voters, legislatures in Belgium should be equally congruent with privileged and underprivileged groups. This paper seeks to test this argument. In an institutional environment least likely to give rise to an unequal policy congruence of various social groups, to what extent do we still find inequality in policy congruence? This is the research this paper seeks to answer:

> *RQ: To what extent is parliament in Belgium more congruent with privileged groups (higher educated, higher income voters) than with underprivileged groups (lower educated, lower income voters)?*

Data and method

While many studies focus on 'dyadic policy congruence', the congruence between voters and a specific party or representative (Belchior, 2012; Giger et al., 2012; Walgrave & Lefevere, 2013), Pitkin herself emphasized the normative ideal of having a legislature that reflects the will of the people. In this 'collective policy congruence'-view, elections are seen as the mechanisms through which voters ensure that a legislature as a whole is a proper reflection of the public in terms of policy preferences (Andeweg, 2011; Golder & Stramski, 2010; Weissberg, 1978). Instead of measuring how congruent voters are with a party, this 'collective' perspective focuses on how the distribution of preferences in a legislature match the distribution of preferences in a population (Andeweg, 2011; Golder & Stramski, 2010). In addition, as inequality is usually defined as the extent to which political elites as a whole or political institutions favor the preferences of certain groups above those of others (Giger et al., 2012; Jacobs & Page, 2005; Lefkofridi et al., 2012), a collective approach seems to fit the research question best. Some studies focus on governments, as this comes closer to actual policy (Giger et al., 2012). However, government formation is ruled by its own dynamics (Martin & Stevenson, 2001), and a preference bias in a legislature as a whole makes it more likely that any government, supported by a legislative majority, will be biased towards those same preferences as well. To study inequality in policy congruence, we therefore take the collective approach. According to the conceptualization of collective policy congruence of Golder and Stramski (2010) proper collective policy congruence is achieved when the distribution of preferences in a legislature matches the distribution of preferences in the voting population:

$$collective\ congruence = 1 - \left[\sum_{i=1}^{k-1} |F_i^*(parliament) - F_i^*(voters)|\right]$$

where 'k' stands for the number of categories in an opinion measure and 'F*' for the relative cumulative frequencies[4]. For a given measure of policy preference, be it an 11-point scale or a 5-point Likert scale, they subtract the relative cumulative frequency of each category (except the last) of the measure on the voter side from the relative cumulative frequencies of the measure on the legislature's side, than take the absolute value of the outcome and finally sum all the outcomes. The result can be considered the distance between the two distributions. Here, we apply this same formula, but instead of calculating policy congruence between a legislature and the entire voting population, we calculate policy congruence between the legislature and different social groups:

[4] In addition, we subtract the formula of Golder and Stramski (2010) of 1 as to have high values reflect high levels of congruence and low values reflect low levels of congruence.

$$collective\ congruence = 1 - \left[\sum_{i=1}^{k-1} |F_i^*(parliament) - F_i^*(social\ group)|\right]$$

While this measure indicates absolute levels of policy congruence, inequality in policy congruence refers to a relative difference between the policy congruence of various social groups. Therefore, we require an additional measure to indicate whether one social group is more congruent than the other. To do so, we subtract the collective policy congruence of a privileged social group from the collective policy congruence of a underprivileged social group :

$$Inequality\ in\ c.congruence = c.congruence\ (priviliged\ group) - c.congruence\ (underpriveliged\ group)$$

When comparing the collective policy congruence of two social groups, there are three possibilities: 1) the privileged group is more congruent than the underprivileged group, 2) the underprivileged group is more congruent than the privileged group, and 3) the privileged and underprivileged group are equally congruent with the legislature. By subtracting the collective policy congruence of the underprivileged group from the collective policy congruence of the underprivileged group, our measure of inequality in collective policy congruence is positive when privileged groups are more congruent with a legislature than underprivileged groups, negative when privileged groups are less congruent with a legislature than underprivileged groups, and zero when collective policy congruence is equal. The three mechanisms that can make a legislature biased towards certain policy preferences are likely to affect education and income groups. Therefore, we calculate 1) the inequality in collective policy congruence between lower[5] and higher educated voters[6] and 2) the inequality in collective policy congruence between the lowest two income deciles and the highest two income deciles. These are the dependent variables in our analyses.

We use two sets of data. The first is a representative online voter survey of 2080 eligible Belgian voters, taken in March 2014, in the run-up to elections of May 25th 2014 for the Flemish and Walloon regional parliaments, the national parliament. In the voter survey, respondents were asked to answer 106 (Flanders) to 113 (Wallonia) statements containing policy proposals. These statements will be our unit of analyses. Voters could either 'agree' or 'disagree' with a statement. In order to avoid respondent fatigue, the survey was split up into two waves. Studies have shown that when surveys take more than 20

[5] Voters who have no or only an elementary school degree
[6] Voters who graduated from graduate school or have a university degree or higher

minutes to complete, the quality of the responses begins to decrease (Galesic & Bosnjak, 2009). Due to the two-wave strategy, the average length of a survey wave was only 15min. The survey also contains social background factors such education and income. The response rate of the survey, across both waves, was on average 17%. However, due to quota sampling, the composition of the sample accurately reflects the Belgian population in terms of gender, age, and education. The survey was conducted by TNS Dimarso.

The second data set is a party survey. The same statements presented to voters in the online survey were also presented to all political parties in Belgium who had at least one representative sitting in either the regional, federal (n = 11). The Belgium party landscape is split along the Flemish/Francophone linguistic divide (De Winter, Swyngedouw, & Dumont, 2006). There are 6 Flemish and 5 Francophone parties in our sample. As was the case for voters, parties could only answer the statements with 'agree' or 'disagree'. While one position for an entire party would be a tenuous assumption in political contexts where parties are not very important, research has shown that there is almost perfect party cohesion in Belgium (Depauw, 2003). When MPs have to vote on a piece of legislation, they do so according to the party line. Deviations from the party line are not impossible, but rather the exceptions that proves the validity of the general rule. These party positions were used to calculate the distribution of policy preferences in the parliament. The proportion of the parliament that 'agrees' or 'disagrees' with a policy statement equals the sum of the seats of all parties that agree or disagree with that policy statement. For example, in a parliament with 100 seats, if 3 parties agree with a policy statement, with respectively 10, 15 and 20 seats, then the proportion of the parliament that agrees with that policy statement is (10+15+20)/100 = 45%. As there are two possible answers to a policy statement, it follows that 55% of the parliament disagrees with that policy statement.

The 106 or 113 statements contain statements regarding regional and federal policies. The statements on regional policies are different for Flemish (50 statements) and Francophone (56 statements) voters and parties, and are tailored to reflect the regional differences in relevant policy issues. The statements regarding federal policy issues (61 statements) were identical for both Flemish and Francophone voters. However, Belgium has a separate Flemish and Francophone party and media system, even at the federal level. Party competition for seats in the federal parliament happens in each region separately. Furthermore, the federal parliament is subdivided in a Flemish and Francophone language group, with a fixed seat distribution for each group. In other words, the Belgian federal parliament can be considered to consist of a 'Flemish federal parliament' and a 'Francophone federal parliament'. Logically, each language group in the federal parliament should, collectively, represent its language community. Therefore, for federal policy statements, we measure how congruent each language group is with various social groups *within* its own language community. Though the statements touch upon the same federal policy issue, the separate party and media landscape make them independent cases in which to study inequality in policy congruence. Furthermore, the institutional arrangements that make Belgium as least likely case to find inequality in policy congruence apply to both the federal parliament and the regional parliaments. In addition, elections for both the federal parliament and the regional parliaments can be considered first-ordered elections (Deschouwer, 2012). Therefore, both federal and regional policy statements are regarded as independent cases in which to study inequality in policy congruence. This brings the total number of policy statements to 229[7]. For every statements, we use the aforementioned formula to measure inequality in policy congruence, our dependent variable.

An important question to answer with regards to inequality in representation is what happens when opinions diverge. It is obvious that privileged and underprivileged groups are equally congruent when they have the same position on policy (Soroka & Wlezien, 2008). Their collective policy congruence might be poor or great, but it will at least be equal. Our main independent variable is the *difference in policy position* between the privileged and underprivileged group. More specifically, as our statements are dichotomous in nature, difference in policy position is the absolute difference between percentage of voters who agreed with a policy statements within a privileged and an underprivileged social group.

In our analyses, we also control for language group (Flemish or Francophone), the legislature (regional or federal) and issue salience. Voters were asked to indicate how important each policy domain is on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (not important at all) to 100 (very important). Each statement was assigned to one or two policy domains, depending on the multifaceted nature of the statement. Saliency is measured as the importance voters[8] attach to the policy domain of a statement. For the statements with two policy domains, we took the average. In addition, we look at how inequality in collective policy congruence varies across issue domains. We test whether inequality is smaller or larger in 2 policy domains: economic policy and social security. Both domains touch upon the material interests of either privileged groups, underprivileged groups or both. In the sample of 229 policy statements, there are 86 statements covering an economic policy issue (e.g. “Wages should be frozen if they are rising faster than in

[7] A list of all the statements can be requested from the author.
[8] We took the average importance of all voters as there were little to no difference between education or income groups in this regard.

neighboring countries") and 65 statements on social security (e.g. "The retirement age should not rise"). We created 2 dichotomous values indicating whether a statements belongs to a certain policy domain (1) or not (0). The variables are not mutually exclusive; a statement can belong to one or both policy domains.

Finally, we control for the extent to which social groups vote correctly. As mentioned before, the focus of this paper is on institutional inequality in policy congruence, not how inequality is self-inflicted by voting against your own policy positions. Previous studies have found that privileged voters are more congruent with the party they vote for (Lau, Andersen, & Redlawsk, 2008; Lau & Redlawsk, 1997; Lesschaeve & Meulewaeter, 2015). Higher educated or higher incomes voters simply choose more correctly than other voters in the polling booth. On an aggregated level, this may cause a legislature to be generally more congruent with the preferences of the group that voted correctly. To control for differences in correct voting, we calculate, within each social group, how often voters were congruent with their preferred party on a policy statement. This gives us a percentage of correct voting for each statement for each social group. Then, we deducted the percentage of correct voting in the underprivileged group from the percentage of correct voting in the privileged group. The result is a measure of inequality in correct voting. This variable is positive when higher educated or incomes voted more correctly than lower educated or incomes, or negative when lower educated or incomes voted more correctly than higher educated or incomes. Table 1 gives an overview of all the variables.

Table 1: Descriptives of all the variables

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.
Collective policy congruence – lower educated voters (%)	69.23	20.90	16.54	99.83
Collective policy congruence – higher educated voters (%)	72.82	18.07	22.26	99.96
Collective policy congruence – lower income voters (%)	70.12	20.48	14.77	100.00
Collective policy congruence – higher income voters (%)	73.34	18.31	18.99	99.84
Inequality in collective policy congruence (education) (%)	3.59	10.39	-27.17	31.42
Inequality in collective policy congruence (income) (%)	3.22	14.40	-41.32	43.27
Difference in policy position (education) (%)	8.79	6.95	0.18	31.42
Difference in policy position (income) (%)	12.48	9.72	0.00	43.27
Language group (Flemish (1) – Wallonia (2))	1.52	0.50	1	2
Legislature (Federal (1) – regional (2)	1.47	0.50	1	2
Saliency	7.09	0.82	5.31	8.17
Economic policy (yes (1) – no (0))	0.38	0.49	0	1
Social security (yes (1) – no (0))	0.28	0.45	0	1
Inequality in correct voting (education)	0.01	0.11	-0.32	0.30
Inequality in correct voting (income)	0.01	0.15	-0.45	0.39

Results

We want to analyze how often, based on a sample of 229 policy statements, privileged groups (higher educated or higher income voters) are more congruent the legislature in Belgium than underprivileged groups (lower educated or lower income voters. For each of the statements, we calculated whether the distribution of policy positions in parliament is more congruent with the distribution of policy positions among higher educated or income voters or lower educated or income voters. Table 2 provides an summary of the collective policy congruence of higher and lower educated voters and higher and lower incomes across the 229 statements.

Table 2: Collective policy congruence for and higher and lower educated voters and lower and higher incomes

	Collective policy congruence			Collective policy congruence	
Lower educated	69.23%		Lower income deciles	70.12%	
Higher educated	72.82%		Higher income deciles	73.34%	
Difference	2.43%		Difference	3.22%	
T-value	Df.	Sig.	T-value	Df.	Sig.
6.01	228	P<0.001	3.38	228	P<0.001

The average collective policy congruence of lower educated voters is just more than 69%. This means that the distribution of preferences of lower educated voters and the distribution of preferences in parliament overlap for more than two thirds. For lower incomes, this overlap is a little over 70%. For both education and income however, the overlap with parliament is higher for the privileged group: +2.43% for higher educated voters and +3.22% for higher incomes. While small, both differences in collective policy congruence are highly significant. Figure 1 and 2 visualizes the differences in collective policy congruence for each individual policy statement. Every bar represents one policy statement, and the size of the bar represents the margin by which each social group is more congruent with parliament than the other (*inequality in collective policy congruence*). The statements are placed in order of decreasing difference in collective policy congruence, and the x-axis indicates the relative rank order of a policy statement (rank order divided by the total number of policy statements (229)). Both figures show that, when counting the number of statements on which they are more congruent with parliament, privileged groups are more often more congruent with parliament than underprivileged groups, both for education and income. Specifically, higher educated voters are more congruent with parliament than lower educated voters in 63% of the policy statements, and higher incomes are more congruent with parliament than lower incomes in 59% of the policy statements.

Figure 1: Inequality in collective policy congruence for higher and lower educated voters

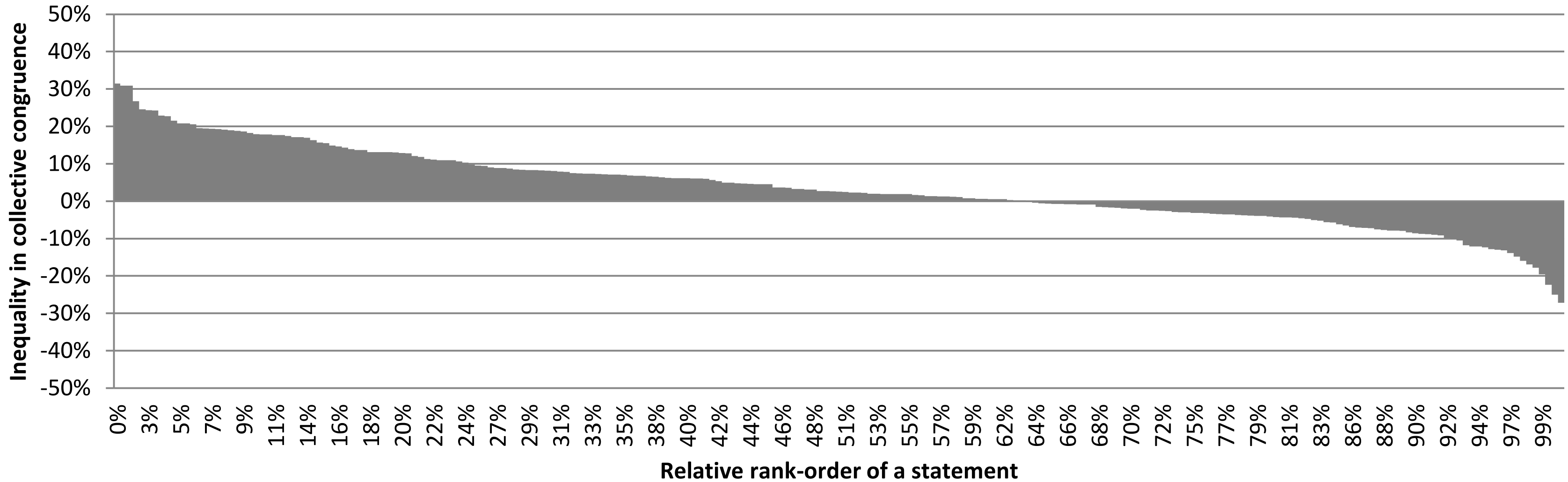
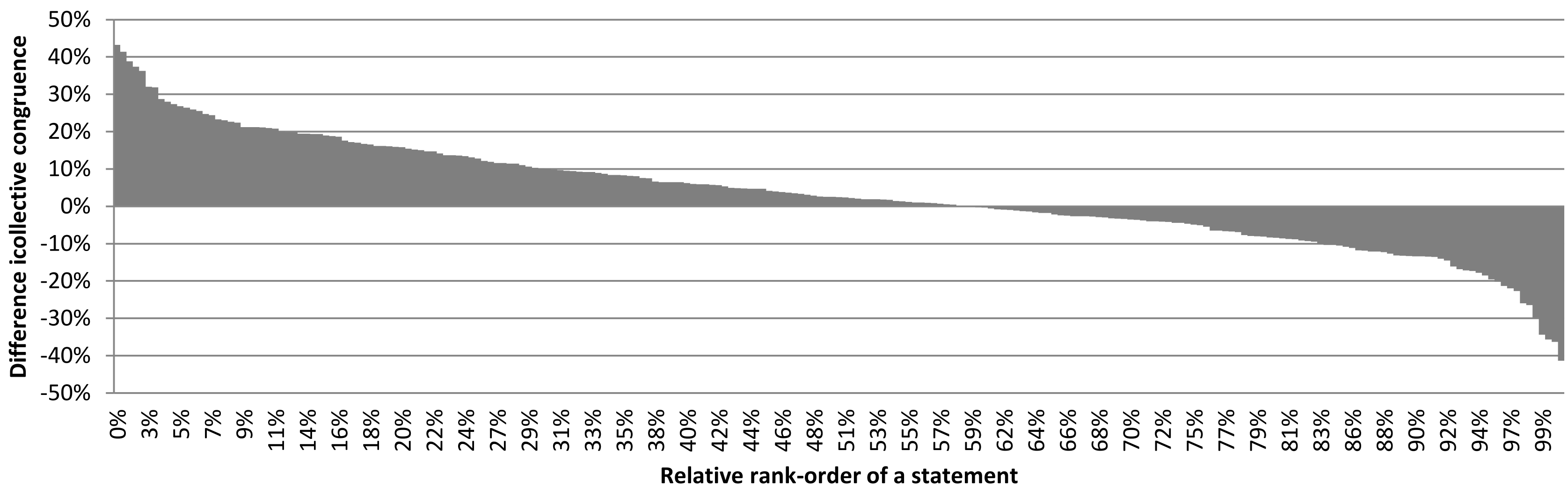


Figure 1: Inequality in collective policy congruence for higher and lower incomes



As discussed above, when privileged and underprivileged groups have similar preferences, then the lack of inequality in collective policy congruence is a certainty. To further gauge the extent to which parliament in Belgium is biased toward the preferences of certain social groups, it is important to see whose positions are preferred when positions diverge. In the analyses below, we seek to explain the difference in collective policy congruence between lower and higher educated and between low and high income voters by the difference in opinion between those groups.

Table 3 shows the results of the multivariate analyses. Unsurprisingly, the difference in opinion between social groups is the strongest predictor of the difference in collective policy congruence, reaching conventional levels of statistical significance for both differences between lower and higher educated and lower and higher incomes. More importantly, however, is the sign of the coefficient, which is also always positive, indicating that large difference in opinions correlate to large, positive differences in collective policy congruence. As positive values indicate that higher educated or high income voters are more congruent with parliament than their underprivileged counterparts, the results suggest that, when opinions diverge, privileged groups are more likely to draw the longest straw. Furthermore, the difference in policy positions is significant while controlling for the degree to which groups vote correctly and contribute to their own inequality in collective congruence (*inequality in correct voting*), which also relates significantly to inequality in collective policy congruence. In other words, regardless of how correctly lower educated or lower incomes vote, the legislature has an bias towards the preferences of the well-off.

The type of legislature (*regional or federal*) only plays a role in explaining inequality in collective policy congruence between the lower and higher educated: regional parliaments seem to be more biased towards higher educated than the federal parliament. Region, on the other hand, only appears does have an effect on inequality in collective policy congruence between higher and lower incomes. In Wallonia, the inequality between income groups is significantly lower. Finally, the inequality in collective policy congruence appears to be lower on policy statements regarding social security. On such policy statements, lower educated voters are about 3% more congruent with parliament than on other issues. While this is in accordance with previous research, the effect is not confirmed in the model on the differences between lower and higher incomes and the size of the effect is rather small (2.9%).

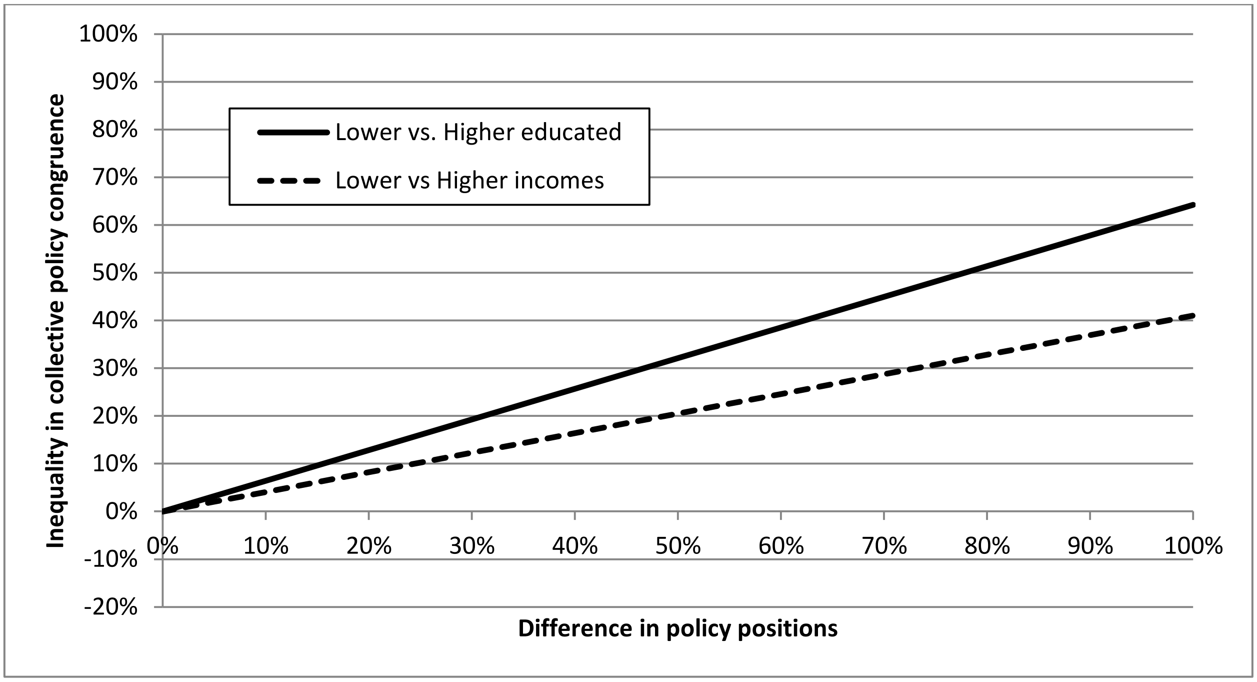
Table 3: explaining inequality in collective policy congruence

	Model 1: Education			Model 2: Income		
	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.
Difference in policy positions	0.64	0.10	***	0.41	0.13	***
Inequality in correct voting	0.40	0.08	***	0.29	0.08	***
Flanders (ref. cat.)						
Wallonia	-1.68	1.07		-4.65	1.72	**
Federal parliament (ref. cat)						
Regional parliament	3.86	1.14	***	2.99	1.76	
Saliency	0.07	0.72		-1.21	1.29	
Economic policy	1.38	1.22		2.19	2.01	
Social security	-2.90	1.41	*	-1.72	2.28	
Constant	-5.88	5.24		8.65	8.84	
Adj. R^2	41.97%			20.19%		
N	229			229		

OLS regression; * = p ≤ .05; ** = p ≤ .01; ***= p ≤ .001

The model as a whole also appears to be working better in explaining the differences in collective policy congruence between education group than it is in explaining the differences in income groups. It explains over 40% of the differences in collective policy congruence for education groups, while this is 20% for income groups. This suggests that education might be a more relevant to inequality in collective congruence in the Belgian case. Figure 2 represents the relation between difference in opinion and inequality in collective policy congruence, both for education and income, in the form of the predicted values, based on the models in table 3. All other variables are kept at their mean value. It shows that when the policy preferences of privileged and underprivileged diverge, the inequality in collective policy congruence steadily increases, up to respectively a difference of 64% and 41% for education and income groups when there is total polarization. It increases in favor of the positions of higher educated and higher income voters, as shown by the positive predictive values of inequality in collective policy congruence.

Figure 2: The relation between differences in policy positions and inequality in collective policy congruence



Conclusion

This paper studied to what extent privileged groups (higher educated and higher incomes) are more congruent with legislatures in Belgium than underprivileged groups (lower educated and lower incomes). Previous studies found inequality in policy congruence between social groups in the United States and scholars identified at least three major potential institutional causes of this inequality: one-sided business lobbying, political donations and a social skew in electoral turnout. Belgium, on the contrary, has largely equalized business and labor lobbying, has strictly regulated or even prohibited financial donations to parties and candidates, and has eliminated the social skew in turnout through compulsory voting. However, despite these institutional safeguards, our results suggest that privileged groups are still more congruent with legislatures than underprivileged groups. When social groups differ in policy positions, legislatures is more likely to be in line with the preferences of the privileged groups than with those of underprivileged groups. This finding holds even when controlling for differences in the degree to which groups vote for parties that share their policy positions.

On the one hand, as Belgium is, through its institutional safeguards, a least likely case to find inequality in policy congruence between social groups, inequality is likely to found in other countries as well and to a higher degree. On the other hand, because we still find inequality in policy congruence, even in a least likely case, this points to the limits of political institutions to eliminate inequality in policy congruence. The results of this study to not suggest that political institutions do not have an impact on inequality in policy congruence, but to indicate that even in an ideal context, inequality remains. One possible explanation for the remaining inequality in policy congruence could be the descriptive overrepresentation of upper-class individuals in parliament in Belgium (Wauters, 2011). However, to our knowledge, no political system has been able to reduce this overrepresentation.

Our results also raise normative questions. Is the policy congruence bias towards the preferences of higher educated or higher incomes problematic? Research has shown these groups to be the most informed and interested in politics (Hillygus, 2005). Our findings might thus sound pessimistic in the ears of adherent to democratic theory, which emphasizes an equal representation of policy preferences (Dahl, 1989; Page & Shapiro, 1992) but could sound encouraging for those who consider large portions of the public, predominantly from lower strata of society, to be ill-informed (Lippmann, 1955). However, it is uncertain whether an adherence to the policy preferences of the well-off will lead to the pursuit of the general interest, rather than the pursuit of the interests of a specific social group.

This study, is not without its shortcomings. First, the data collection on the policy preferences of voters were collected before the electoral campaign. Campaigns are known to be dense information moments, which can lead to policy learning (Alvarez, 1998). However, research has suggested that campaigns are more likely to benefit already knowledgeable voters (usually higher educated or higher incomes) instead of voters who stand to benefit most from the information disseminated in a campaign (Lesschaeve & Meulewaeter, 2015). Second, our study represents only a first step in assessing the role institutions play in the equal representation of preferences. We examined a case that is in many ways institutionally least likely to induce inequality in policy congruence. However, this approach does not allow us to assess the precise relation between lobbying, donations, turnout and inequality in policy congruence. It might be possible that, while the institutional safeguards in Belgium have not been able to eliminate inequality in policy congruence, they have managed to reduce this to a great extent. Future research should therefore attempt to incorporate more countries in order to study representation inequality in a comparative perspective.

In conclusion, we do not claim that our research constitutes a comparative study of how institutions affect inequality in policy congruence. However, it does show that inequality is perhaps more pervasive than initially assumed and that there are limits to what political institutions can do. At the same time, we believe to have presented an approach that may contribute to our understanding of inequality in preference representation. We therefore believe that this study can serve as a springboard for truly comparative studies and a further inquiry into the causes of the representational bias towards society's privileged.

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