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Perceived constraints from European and international integration: citizens' feeling of being represented and turnout

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ABSTRACT

A burgeoning literature suggests that the loss of autonomy of national representatives induced by supranational integration – i.e. European integration and globalization, ultimately depresses turnout. However, few studies have theorized, and tested, the mechanisms underlying this relationship at the individual level. In this article, we test the representational linkage mechanism which contends that the loss of autonomy fosters abstention by acting upon citizens' feeling of being represented. We put this proposition to the test using an original cross-national dataset combining perceptions of constraints with measures of feelings of being represented. Our results indicate a negative correlation between perceived constraints and feelings of being represented. Interestingly, our analysis shows that perceived constraints from globalization have a stronger downward effect on feelings of being represented compared to perceptions of EU constraints. Most importantly, we find that perceiving constraints decrease the positive effect of the feeling of being represented on electoral participation.

KEYWORDS

Democracy; representation; turnout; European Union; globalization; supranationalization

Introduction

In post-industrial societies, the interdependence of nation states increasingly challenges democratic legitimacy. A key political issue is that the growing influence of external actors on political choice – beyond national political representatives – may result in the hollowing out of democratic procedures (Mair 2013; Rodrik 2011; Schäfer and Streeck 2013). Some even argue that we live now in a 'democracy without choice' (Sánchez-Cuenca 2017). As European and international integration limit the autonomy of national governments in decision-making, they reason, one of the most important components of democratic legitimacy: electoral participation, is ultimately weakened (Frank and Martínez i Coma 2021; Karp and Milazzo 2016, Beesley and Bastiaens, 2022; Marshall and Fisher 2015; Steiner 2010, 2016; Steiner and Martin 2012). This finding, however, has

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been recently contested by Kostelka and Blais (2021) who report that the deepening of economic globalisation has not been associated with a decrease of turnout in the long run. In addition, the scholarship is still unclear about the mechanisms linking European and international integration to the individual inclination to cast a ballot. The ‘room to manoeuvre’ (RTM) theory assumes that external constraints imposed by international integration can reduce individual turnout by decreasing the instrumental benefit of voting (Marshall and Fisher 2015; Steiner 2010, 2016), and/or by dismantling linkages between voters and their representatives (Hellwig 2014, 2020; Steiner and Martin 2012). However, neither suggested mechanisms is backed up by fully compelling empirical evidence. Specifically, the second mechanism has only been assessed by one study based on aggregate level data (Steiner and Martin 2012). The issue is that this evidence does not cover the arguably long causal chain that the representational linkage mechanism rests upon. We are left wary of its explanatory contribution to the analysis of how European and international integration influence voter turnout.

In this article, we contribute to these debates on: *how do European and international integration impact on voter turnout?* by focusing on the *representational linkage mechanism* of the RTM theory and providing an empirical test using individual level data. We investigate two key implications of this mechanism, namely that with perceptions of ever constrained room to manoeuvre, voters not only feel less represented by their representatives but are also less likely to turn out to vote. Most importantly, we expect that feelings of being represented will moderate the effects of perceived constraints on electoral participation. We further elaborate on the theory and put it to the test using a unique dataset that include individual-level data on subjective perceptions of constraints, feelings of being represented and inclination to cast a ballot in seven European countries in 2014, the Comparative Electoral Dynamics CED-EU14 (Sauger et al. 2014).

In doing so, we make several contributions. First, we provide a novel empirical test of a core mechanism of the RTM theory: we assess the link between international integration and turnout by focusing on subjective measures of representational linkages, rather than proxy indicators (Steiner and Martin 2012). Second, we supplement existing studies, which demonstrate that external constraints stemming from international integration decrease turnout at the aggregate level (Frank and Martínez i Coma 2021; Karp and Milazzo 2016; Marshall and Fisher 2015; Steiner 2010; Steiner and Martin 2012), by analysing the individual level mechanism which has been less systematically investigated (but see Devine 2021; Le Gall 2018; Steiner 2016; Turnbull-Dugarte 2020). We do so because methodological problems of observational equivalence and ecological fallacy that can arise in aggregate studies (Hobolt and Wittrock 2011) can be circumvented by studying the association between the loss of governmental autonomy and electoral participation at the individual level, in the thoughts and actions of voters. We thereby anchor our study in a body of research that considers subjectivity to be a decisive locus to understand political behaviour (Görtz and Dahl 2021; Thomas and Thomas 1928). Fourth, we also enrich the literature on the effects of external constraints on political attitudes, which is still limited to a few aspects related to perceptions of political efficacy, like the meaningfulness of elections (see, for instance, Steiner 2016; Vowles 2008), satisfaction with democracy and institutional trust (Devine 2021; Devine and Turnbull-Dugarte 2023; Turnbull-Dugarte and Devine 2022), or citizens’ perceptions

of political actors' responsiveness and responsibility (Dupuy and Van Ingelgom 2023). Fifth, we do not only focus on the effects of globalization on turnout, but also look at the effects of European integration, which has been overlooked in the RTM literature (but see Devine 2021; Le Gall 2018; Turnbull-Dugarte 2020). More broadly, we further contribute to a strand of work which suggests that democratic (dis)affection can be accounted for by the supply-side of political systems (Hay 2007; Mair 2013).

Our results, first, indicate a negative correlation between perceived external constraints and beliefs that national representatives take into consideration citizens' interests. Second, we find that perceived constraints and feelings of being represented interact with each other to explain electoral participation. Even though the size of the effects is small in magnitude, perceptions of constraints reduce turnout conditional upon the level of feeling of being represented. We thereby partially confirm a core assumption of the RTM theory: that international integration decreases turnout through its effect on representational linkages. We do so by empirically substantiating the individual-level mechanism at play. However, our results also show that perceived external constraints do not have a strong effect on voting behaviour (Devine 2021; Le Gall and Devine 2022), and those other structural variables, such as generational cohorts, impact electoral participation more strongly.

Overall, these results depict a worrisome picture of the democratic outcomes of the deepening of European and international integration. Besides weakening accountability (Kosmidis 2018) and fostering political alienation (Steiner 2010, 2016), further European and international integration appears to also alter citizens' linkages with their representatives (see Dupuy and Van Ingelgom 2023; Hellwig 2014, 2020), an outcome that is not likely to vanish anytime soon as integration is expected to further deepen (see Gygli et al. 2019).

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. In the next section, we review the existing studies on the effects of the loss of room-to-manoeuvre stemming from European and international integration on electoral participation. The third section presents our theoretical expectations on the mechanism linking external constraints, feeling of being represented and voter turnout. In the fourth section, data and the empirical strategy are introduced. The fifth section is dedicated to our models and the results, which are confirmed by robustness checks. The final section discusses the results.

International (economic) integration, political representation, and turnout

Since the eighties, with the deepening of international integration and the establishment of the Single European market, European democracies have become increasingly integrated. According to the room-to-manoeuvre (RTM) theory, greater integration has limited the ability of representatives to design (economic) policies autonomously (Heimberger 2021; Leibrecht and Hochgatterer 2012; Zohlnhöfer, Engler, and Dümig 2018), eventually decreasing the extent to which policies and party platforms reflect citizens' preferences (Ezrow and Hellwig 2014; Hellwig 2020; Schäfer and Streeck 2013; Tober and Busemeyer 2022). These changes have yielded far-reaching consequences for democratic politics (Hellwig 2014, 2020; Le Gall 2017), especially on political

representation (Hellwig 2014, 2020), and electoral participation (Marshall and Fisher 2015; Steiner 2010, 2016). We examine them in turn.

International (economic) integration, room-to-manoevre, and political representation

The RTM theory builds on the literature which contends that international (economic) integration weakens governmental autonomy because international competition ushers a 'race to the best location' (Heimberger 2021). This race to the bottom is not only argued to alter the capacity of governments to tax at their preferred rate, but also to incentivize them to lower the level of social expenditures and regulatory standards because of greater capital mobility and trade interdependence. In such an environment of competitiveness, investors are considered to have extended powers over governments because they can punish the former when they increase deficit spending by selling government bonds (Streeck 2014). Empirically, supporting evidence is mixed, but leans toward a negative effect of international (economic) integration on governmental autonomy (Heimberger 2021; Zohlnhöfer, Engler, and Dümig 2018). Recent meta-analyses suggest that countries respond to tax policy changes in other countries in a competitive manner, that is, by decreasing their corporate and capital tax rate. In addition, globalization is reported to exert small-to-moderate downward pressure on government spending for social protection (Heimberger 2021; Zohlnhöfer, Engler, and Dümig 2018).

In the case of European integration, the effects on the loss of governmental autonomy are, on paper, straightforward: the coordination of monetary and fiscal policies in the European framework entails a pooling of sovereignty that, *de facto*, limits the autonomy of national legislative bodies (Crespy, Moreira Ramalho, and Schmidt 2024). The introduction of a set of fiscal rules obliging EU member states to meet convergence criteria, including annual budget deficit and debt limits, arguably restricts governments' autonomous decision-making. Besides, European economic integration is sometimes deemed as an 'intense case of globalization' because, not unlike integration within world markets, it fosters the abolishment of barriers to liberalization over the establishment of new regulations (Ward et al. 2015). Empirically, studies indicate that European integration indeed limits governments' autonomy (Filippin and Nunziata 2019; Koehler and König 2015). For instance, there is evidence that EU countries would have spent more if the Euro had not been put in place (Koehler and König 2015), while social spending decreased in most of the euro-adopting countries compared to non-adopting EU member states (Filippin and Nunziata 2019). Overall, existing research thus suggests that processes of integration, whether European or international, strongly constraint governments' and elected politicians' decision-making.

Building on this body of work, research indicates that party behaviour has been affected. Specifically, political parties respond to the deepening of economic integration by decreasing the importance of economic issues in their programmes (Ward et al. 2015), thereby anticipating the related constraints on policymaking, and by proposing similar political offers across the political spectrum (Haupt 2010; Steiner and Martin 2012). Empirical evidence supports this convergence of party platforms due to globalization (Haupt 2010; Sen and Barry 2020; Steiner and Martin 2012) and European integration

(Nanou and Dorussen 2013), although not unequivocally (Devine and Ibenskas 2021) as party convergence is not uniform across Western European countries (Evans and De Graaf 2013).

In addition, research illuminates another political consequence of the loss of governmental autonomy entailed by European and international integration: the decoupling between citizen preferences and governments policymaking and, thereby, governments' lower responsiveness to voters (Ezrow and Hellwig 2014; Damhuis and Karremans 2017; Tober and Bussemeyer 2022; but see: Devine and Ibenskas 2021). It is in line with the analysis of the dilemma between responsiveness and responsibility (Crespy, Moreira Ramalho, and Schmidt 2024; Karremans and Lekkofridi 2020; Lekkofridi and Nezi 2020; Mair 2013). In their cross-national longitudinal analysis, Ezrow and Hellwig (2014) indicate that parties respond to left–right shifts in the mean voter position only when the national economy is not integrated in a significant fashion. Recently, in a study on the effects of European integration on the responsiveness of parties on social policies, Tober and Bussemeyer (2022) suggest that the more a country is integrated in the EU, the less the government responds to increases in demand for social policy, while they also find a positive relationship between economic integration and support for social policy. This negative association between external constraints and governmental responsiveness was also reported in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the Eurozone crisis (Clements, Nanou, and Real-Dato 2018; Traber, Giger, and Häusermann 2018). Note, however, that Devine and Ibenskas (2021) recently found little evidence that integration into the European Union reduces responsiveness – measured as a congruence between the public and the national party system, government, or legislature, either ideologically or across issue areas.

Overall, there is evidence that international integration has transformed representational linkages over the years by limiting governments' room to manoeuvre in terms of policymaking (Hellwig 2014, 2020), and impacting on party platforms and governments' responsiveness to voters' preferences. However, existing research mainly focuses on the supply-side, either political parties or governments, and overlooks citizens' perspective on the constraints stemming from European and international integration and how they impact the operation of political representation. This gap limits our understanding of the exact extent to which external constraints stemming from globalization and European integration affect domestic politics (for works on political support, see Devine 2021, for work on citizens' understanding of responsiveness and responsibility, see; Dupuy and Van Ingelgom 2023).

International (economic) integration, room-to-manoevr, and electoral participation

Existing scholarship offers analyses of another aspect of the political consequences ushered by European and international integration: voter turnout. Based on RTM theory, external constraints negatively affect electoral participation¹ (Beesley and Bastiaens 2022; Frank and Martínez i Coma 2021; Marshall and Fisher 2015; Karp and Milazzo 2016; Kostelka and Blais 2021 but see: Steiner 2010). Steiner suggests that this is because the loss of governments' autonomy decreases the instrumental benefit that voters consider when calculating the costs and benefits associated to the act of voting (2010). His

empirical analysis of the relationship between globalization and turnout in 23 countries over the 1965–2006 period corroborates the hypothesis that economic globalization decreases electoral turnout. This result holds regardless of the measure of economic integration considered (e.g. the sum of exports and imports as a share of the gross domestic product; the sum of all in- and out flows of gross private capital; and the KOF index). The negative impact of international integration on turnout has later been confirmed by Marshall and Fisher (2015) who offer a specification of the general argument by hypothesizing that foreign ownership, rather than international trade, should alter electoral turnout because the latter are less mobile and sensitive to government actions than the former. They find that the most flexible flows have a significant negative impact on turnout, whereas variation of international trade has no clear effect. Recently, this result was further corroborated in a meta-analysis, which demonstrated that economic globalization is robustly and negatively associated with voter turnout in 579 elections in 80 democracies from 1945 to 2014 (Frank and Martínez i Coma 2021). By contrast, Kostelka and Blais (2021) suggest that generational change and the increase in election frequency – and the voter fatigue it brings about – account for most of the decline in voter turnout. These studies look at turnout at the aggregate level. Looking at turnout with individual-level data, research confirms that subjective perceptions of international (economic) constraints are correlated with the individual inclination to go cast a ballot. However, these analyses are either limited to a single case-study, like the 2001 British election (Steiner 2016), or they use proxy measures that are imperfect to grasp perceptions of constraints (Le Gall 2018).

While the existing literature provides evidence of a negative relationship between international integration and turnout levels, the theoretical mechanisms underlined by the RTM theory have not received much attention thus far, and the empirical evidence supporting it are scarce. The RTM theory assumes that international integration can affect turnout via two mechanisms: either by diminishing the instrumental benefit of the calculus of voting (Marshall and Fisher 2015; Steiner 2010, 2016) and/or by weakening representational linkages between citizens and elected officials (Hellwig 2014, 2020; Steiner and Martin 2012). Other factors could moderate these relationships: for instance, the politicization of constraints by certain political actors – notably by those which could benefit from politicizing external constraints, i.e. radical right or left parties – could also mitigate the representational linkage in the sense that it could mobilize those who care about these issues (Huber and Ruth 2017; Leininger and Meijers 2021) but the RTM literature is circumscribed to these two mechanisms so far. While the first mechanism has never been directly tested because of a lack of data on meanings of voting (Plescia et al. 2024), the representational linkage mechanism has been only tested once by Steiner and Martin (2012). In their study, they show that international integration decreases electoral participation by forcing parties to display similar positions, eventually limiting political choice. In a first step, their findings rely on a two-step correlational aggregate analysis between economic integration and party polarisation as measured on an economic left – right dimension and, in a second step, a correlational aggregate analysis between party polarisation and turnout. Steiner and Martin (2012) only test an association between two ends of what is arguably a long causal chain. Therefore, there is only indirect evidence that representational linkages might play a role.

Considering this, we submit that further investigation of this mechanism is needed at the individual level. Indeed, current studies do not allow to conclude that the external constraints affect the propensity to cast a ballot via its effect on political representation. Most importantly, a branch in political science considers that voting behaviour is rooted in subjective perceptions of a phenomenon more so than on objective indicators (Görtz and Dahl 2021; Thomas and Thomas 1928). In other words, if the theory is correct, we should find that is embedded in the structure of individual beliefs, and not only visible in the association between aggregate indicators. These observations drive our own research.

Perceived constraints, feelings of being represented and voter turnout: theoretical expectations

Taken together, the above-mentioned studies indicate that external constraints severely weaken the ability of representatives and governments to respond to citizens' preferences and they imply that external constraints should impact citizens' beliefs about the operation of political representation. However, from a citizen or individual level perspective, we know little about the effects of constraints from European and international integration on their feelings of being represented (for an exception based on qualitative data, see Dupuy and Van Ingelgom 2023) and how that relates to electoral participation. Only with such an analysis could we fully account for how European and international constraints shape representational linkages between citizens and their representatives.

A few studies only analyse the effects of constraints on political attitudes, and they offer conflicting evidence: Vowles reports that levels of economic globalization have no effects on the belief that 'who's in power makes a difference' (2008), while Steiner finds a negative correlation between perceptions of constraints from globalization and the belief that a national election can produce meaningful differences in the 2001 UK general election (2016). More recently, Devine (2021) found no evidence that those who perceive a reduced level of autonomy have lower levels of political support, i.e. satisfaction with democracy and trust in the country's parliament, while other studies found the opposite (Devine and Turnbull-Dugarte 2023; Turnbull-Dugarte 2020). In contrast, fewer studies have looked at the association between constraints stemming from either globalization or European integration and satisfaction with democracy, but they have reached similar conclusions while putting forward the same argument.

Based on this, we hypothesize the following:

H1 (constraint/representation hypothesis): A higher level of perceived constraints should decrease voters' feeling of being represented.

Current studies indicate that there are two channels through which international integration can foster abstention. First, European or international integration can weaken the inclination to cast a ballot by reducing the political offer available to voters (Steiner and Martin 2012). Alternatively, it has also been argued that further integration can lower the perceived benefits of voting by simply reducing the stake of elections and ultimately reducing benefits from voting (Marshall and Fisher 2015; Steiner 2010, 2016). We thus

hypothesize that perceptions of external constraints will enhance the inclination to abstain in elections.

H2 (constraint/participation hypothesis): A higher level of perceived constraints should decrease voters' inclination to cast a ballot in elections.

Turning to the inclination to cast a ballot, the literature on the matter first demonstrates that voters perceive whether a candidate or a party match with their ideologies or represent their views and interests (Holmberg 2014, 2020). Most importantly, there is evidence suggesting that feelings of being represented increases the probability to cast a ballot. Blais, Singh, and Dumitrescu (2014) indicate that perceiving that there exists a party representing their own views strongly predicts individual turnout, while Reher (2014) finds that voters are more prone to vote if candidates and parties address their issue concerns in the election campaign. In turn, we hypothesize the following:

H3 (representation/participation hypothesis): Feeling represented should increase voters' inclination to cast a ballot in elections.

Combining these lines of argument, we finally make the hypothesis that the effects of feeling represented on turnout should decrease particularly for those who perceive that their representatives are constrained by European and international integration:

H4 (interaction hypothesis): A higher level of perceived constraints should decrease the effects of beliefs of feeling represented on electoral participation.

Figure 1 summarizes our theoretical expectations.

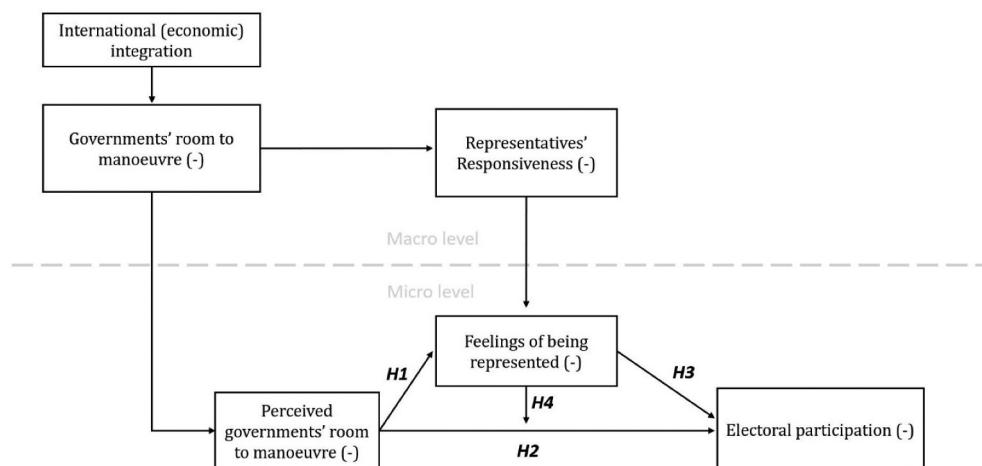


Figure 1. Theoretical expectations.²

Research design

Dataset

To test these hypotheses, we rely on an original dataset fielded during the 2014 European parliamentary elections, the Comparative Electoral Dynamics (CED-EU14) (Sauger, Dehousse, and Gougou 2015). The CED-EU14 is an original online survey conducted after the 2014 European elections in seven EU member states: France, Germany, Austria, Portugal, Spain, Greece, and Italy. Overall, 22,072 individuals responded to this questionnaire. The CED-EU14 arguably constitutes a valuable dataset to analyse the effects of perceived constraints on turnout for several reasons. First, it is the only existing cross-national survey that includes, in the same dataset, questions on perceptions of constraints stemming from both European integration and globalization and an original question on perceptions of political representation, along precise socio-demographic information and political attitudes. Second, the data was collected at the occasion of the first EU elections in the aftermath of the sovereign debt crisis, during which Greece, Italy and Spain had to implement austerity measures and structural reforms at the request of European institutions, with Greece and Portugal even signing a Memoranda of Understanding (MoU). We expect that external constraints were salient during the elections and, thereby, we consider that they are a crucial case to analyse perceptions of constraints and their potential impact on political attitudes and electoral behaviour. Besides, the country case selection offers sufficient variation as countries differ across levels of integration within world markets and along levels of EU intervention. Despite lacking some of the most integrated countries in the world economy, i.e. Belgium, Ireland, Luxemburg and Netherlands, our sample includes countries on the first quartile of globalized economies in the EU, i.e. Austria and Germany, as well as middle-ground integrated economies, i.e. France and the lowest globalized economies, i.e. Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, according to the KOF index (Gygli et al. 2019). Most importantly, it includes both countries that have been facing tough EU intervention, i.e. Greece and Portugal, and some that did not, i.e. France, Germany and Austria.

Dependent variables

To operationalise the individual inclination to cast a ballot, we use two traditional measures of electoral turnout. Respondents are asked about their reported participation in their country's last general election and in the 2014 European elections. The variables are binary where 1 corresponds to respondents who declare that they voted in the last general election (respectively, European election), while 0 gathers respondents who declare they did not vote in the last general election (respectively, last European elections). Note that the value 0 gathers respondents who declare they did not vote; thought about voting but didn't; and usually vote but didn't this time. The results to both questions must be taken with caution for multiple reasons. Most notably, vote reports face problems of over-reporting of voter participation. In our sample, the average reported turnout in general elections is 86.75%, while the official turnout equals 70.1%. The difference between real and reported turnouts might stem from individuals giving wrong information, through a mechanism of social desirability, and sample selection

effects. However, as we are interested in the relationships between perceptions of constraints and individual turnout, rather than in the effects of objective constraints on the act of voting, this overestimation is not a major issue.

Representation refers to the extent to which governments and representatives advocate on behalf of citizens' interests (Pitkin 1967). Consequently, most studies have used objective indicators of (substantive) representation such as the introduction of new minority rights; policy congruence or membership in committees to analyse this phenomenon (Kroeber 2018). In this article, we are interested, instead, on individual perceptions of representation. Following Aarts et al. (2014), we take advantage of a question that precisely grasps how citizens feel that members of their parliament represent them, which is worded as follows: "For each of the following statements, please indicate whether you agree or disagree. 'The [country] Parliament takes into consideration the concerns of [country] citizens.'³ This variable is an ordinal categorical variable where 0 gathers individuals who fully disagree with this statement, while 10 gathers individuals who fully agree with it. Note here that even though the RTM theory mainly focuses on governments as units of analysis, we make the case that parliaments can also be considered as having to deal with constraints because governments are – most often than not – responsible towards parliaments in our sample.

Independent variables

To measure external constraints from international and European integration, we use two questions, which are formulated as statements. First, we use a standard question used to measure external constraints from international integration or globalization (for instance, see Le Gall and Devine 2022; Steiner 2016) which is worded as follows: 'Globalization decreases a lot the power of national governments' on which respondents must take position. Original values range from 1 (fully disagree) to 11 (fully agree). Second, we take advantage of an original question that asks respondents about their perceptions of the weight of the European Union in the domestic policymaking, which is worded as follows: 'Most of the important decisions in [country] are imposed by the European Union.' Values range from 1 (fully disagree) to 11 (fully agree). As of now, studies analysing the effects of external constraints on political behaviour mainly use (relative) responsibility attributions (e.g. Costa Lobo and Lewis-Beck 2012; Devine 2021), while only one study uses perceived EU constraints (Le Gall and Devine 2022). Note, however, that this question can be subject to what Hobolt and Tilley (2014) label group-serving bias. Indeed, the core independent variable (EU constraints) might be capturing a latent Euroscepticism measure. Spearman correlations between attitudes towards European integration and perceptions of EU constraints show that they are not highly correlated ($\rho = -0.1243$, $p < 0.001$), which provides additional support for the use of this measure of external constraints from the EU. The distribution of these variables is available in the appendix (see Figures SA). Descriptive statistics indicate that older generations, men and politically interested respondents are the most likely to perceive constraints from both globalization and EU with the effect appearing to be linear. Also, note that the richest respondents perceive less (alternatively, more) constraints from globalization (from the EU) than

the poorest. Based on these questions, we can study the extent to which respondents perceive that both processes of integration – European and global – affect the autonomy of their government.

Control variables

Studies on the determinants of feelings of being represented are scarce (but see De Mulder 2022; Holmberg 2014, 2020). Consequently, we have few information regarding the alternative explanations of feelings of being represented. Following studies on turnout (Blais and Daoust 2020), we include several individual-level determinants to control for alternative explanations of turnout. Specifically, we add variables pertaining to attitudes and judgments that affect electoral motivation (Blais and Daoust 2020; Smets and Van Ham 2013), in addition to sociodemographic controls that impact on turnout based on the resource model (Brady et al. 1995). First, we include satisfaction with the government record as a control variable. We do so because being content with the government's work generally enhances both feelings of being represented and the likelihood to cast a ballot. In a similar vein, we include measures of economic performance to control for the potential effects of economic satisfaction on turning out, even though the effects are not straightforward (see, for instance, Blais 2006). Third, we use political interest to capture voters' motivations to participate in elections. According to Blais and Daoust (2020), political interest acts as a strong and enduring predisposition that enhances the likelihood to participate based on the simple idea that those who like politics will be more prone to participate than those who dislike politics. The indicator is an eleven-point scale where 0 means 'not interested at all' and 10 means 'a great deal of interest.' Based on the resource model (Brady et al. 1995), we also include sociodemographic controls like education, age and income because they provide resources likely to enhance the probability to participate in politics. First, education develops the civic skills and knowledge that foster political participation in general, and the inclination to vote in particular (Tenn 2007). We include a categorical variable measuring the level of education, which is coded as follows: Early education (0); Primary education (1); Lower secondary (2); Upper secondary (3); Post-secondary (4); Short tertiary (5); Bachelor degree (6); and Master degree (7). In addition, high-income citizens are more prone to vote because they have lower costs associated with voting and are generally better informed about the benefit of voting (Matsubayashi and Sakaiya 2021). Furthermore, there is also evidence that different generational cohorts do not engage in voting at a similar rate. Specifically, baby-boomers tend to vote more than generations X or Z (Kostelka and Blais 2021; Tiberj 2017). So, we create variables capturing generational cohorts, which we coded in four categories: born after 1990 (0); born 1975–1989 (1); born 1960–1974 (2); and born before 1959 (3). Moreover, we also add gender as a control. We do so because women long voted less than men, even though the gap is shrinking, because of social norms, structural and situational factors, or women's late enfranchisement (Dassonneville and Kostelka 2021; Durovic 2017; Durovic and Mayer 2022; Kostelka, Blais, and Gidengil 2019). Finally, we also include variables grasping support for EU integration, because those attitudes act as group-serving biases and shape attributions of responsibility in the EU (Hobolt and Tilley 2014), while they also enhance the probability to vote in EU elections (De Vries et al. 2011).

Results

Following our theoretical model, we first analyse the validity of our hypothesis linking perceived external constraints and feelings of being represented. Second, we study our three other hypotheses that account for voter turnout.

Perceived constraints and feeling of being represented

To identify the variables that increase feelings of being represented, we estimated OLS regressions (see Figure 9A to 11A in appendix). Full models are included in the appendix (see table 1A). We also ran ordered-logistic regression and multilevel models as robustness checks. The effects differ across countries and, therefore, we decided to include country-fixed effects in OLS regressions. We ran multilevel regressions in the appendix based on the assumption that multilevel models can be ran even in small-n settings (Stegmueller 2013). Note that the OLS estimations include robust standard errors. Overall, control variables go in the expected direction and confirm the validity of our models.

The average marginal effects (AMEs) of the effects of constraints on feelings of being represented are displayed in Figure 2. It describes the expected probability of believing that the parliament takes into consideration citizens’ concerns for a change in the chosen predictor, in this case: perceived constraints from globalization and European integration. The results broadly support H1 since we find a negative correlation between perceptions of constraints from globalization as well as from European integration and the feeling of being represented. More precisely, our estimations indicate that when considering that globalization decreases a lot the power of national governments increases by 1 unit, the likelihood to

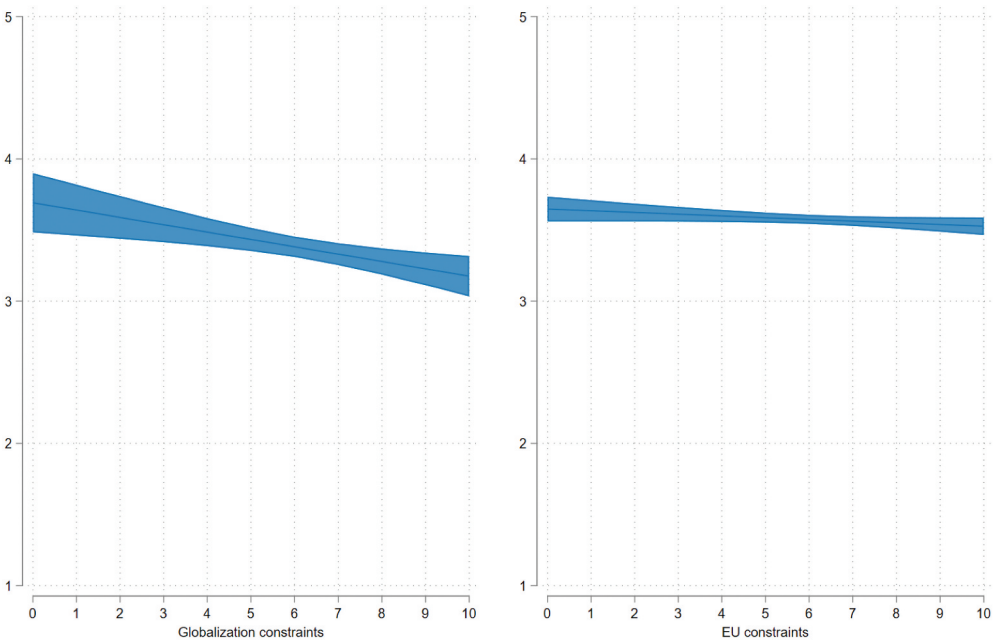


Figure 2. Effects of perceived constraints from globalization and European integration on the feeling of being represented.

believe that the national parliament takes into consideration the concerns of citizens decreases, in average, by 0.02 units with the effect being statistically significant at $p < 0.01$. The relationship between perceived EU constraints and feelings of being represented is also negative, but the coefficient is less important, and the threshold of significance does not reach $p < 0.05$. These results suggest that perceived constraints from globalization have a stronger negative effect on feelings of being represented compared to perceptions of EU constraints. One potential reason for such a difference might be found in the fact that national representatives have less control over the regulation of global markets than they have over decisions made at the level EU institutions, given the intergovernmental structure of European integration. In turn, citizens might judge the work of parliamentarians in a more negative light when it comes to addressing challenges related to globalization, since they arguably have fewer leverages to counter possible constraints. This difference could also reflect the wording of our independent variables which capture slightly different aspects of constraints: direct imposition of policies from the EU vs. reduction of power from globalization. The former is most likely to affect a specific range of countries in our dataset, i.e. Greece, Spain and Italy, whereas the latter is relevant for a wider range of countries. Descriptive statistics provide supporting evidence as perceived constraints from globalization are both more homogenous across countries and, on average, more frequent than perceived constraints from the EU. In this case, the dataset shows a large variation between

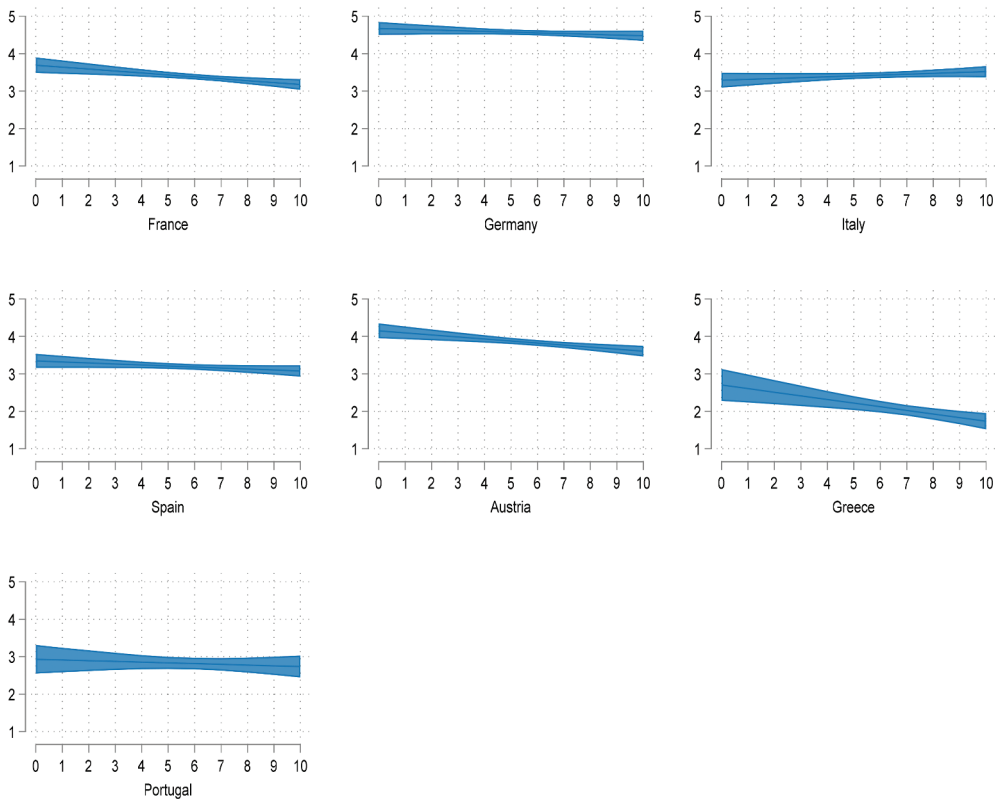


Figure 3. Effects of constraints from globalization on the feeling of being represented, country by country.

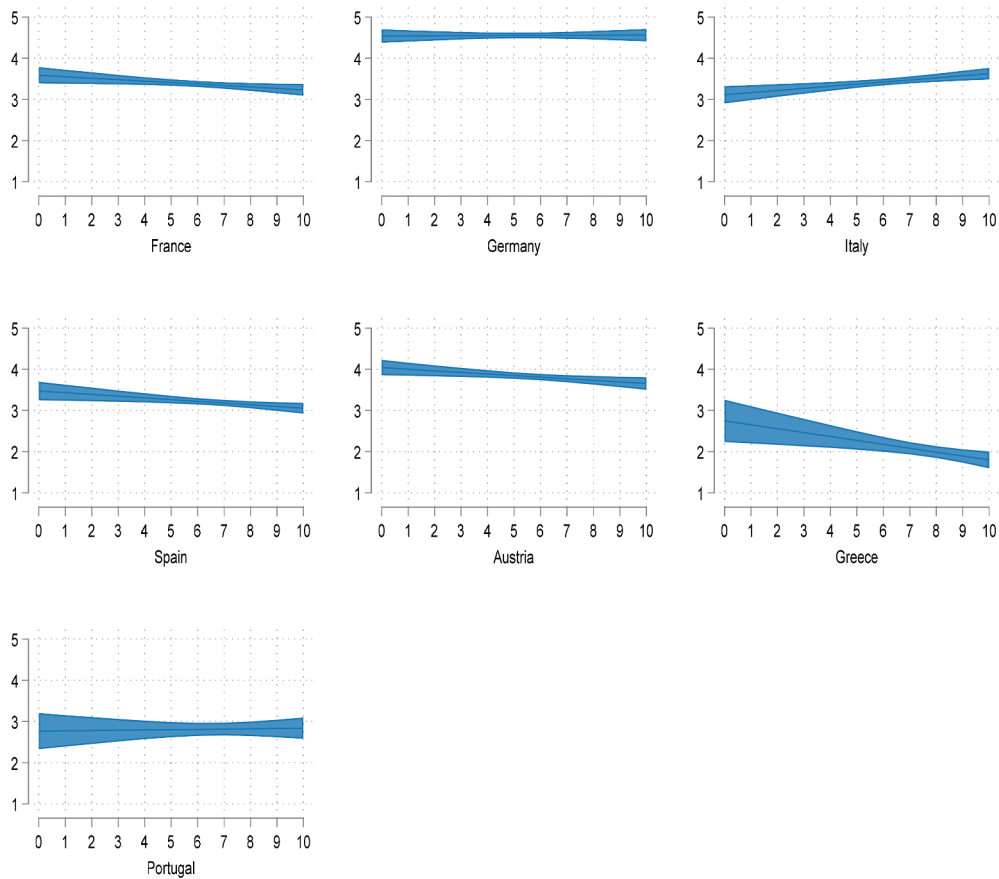


Figure 4. Effects of constraints from EU integration on the feeling of being represented in the full model without interaction, country by country.

countries with a large difference between the two extreme cases, i.e. Germany and Greece (see Figure 1(a) in appendix). To further explore the country-specific effects of external constraints on feelings of being represented, we performed marginal effects at the country level (see Figures 3 and 4).

Starting with perceived constraints from globalization (see Figure 3), the analyses further corroborate the existence of a negative correlation between these perceived constraints perceptions of constraints from globalization and feelings of being represented across countries, except for Italy. Indeed, the negative association holds for France (**), Germany (NS), Spain (NS), Austria (**), Greece (***) and Portugal (NS). The lowest levels of feeling represented are observed at the extreme values of perceived constraints from globalization in Greece and Portugal. It suggests that respondents in countries which are the most vulnerable to global markets, due to their relatively weaker economic structure, may be less likely to feel that representatives can take into consideration their preferences into account because of their higher dependence to global trade combined with their economic fragility (Katzenstein 1985). Overall, there is evidence that perceptions of constraints from globalization decrease the individual likelihood to consider that the national parliament takes into consideration citizens' concerns. Whilst perceived constraints have

the strongest effect in Greece and Portugal, they also influence the feeling of being represented in other European states apart from Italy. Here, the Italian case is of particular interest because it is the only country where the association between perceived constraints and feelings of being represented is positive. The explanation for such a positive correlation might lie in the fact that Italian domestic politics are suffering from internal democratic issues that may supersede external pressures (Papp et al. 2024) or – alternatively – because there are many populist parties in the Italian parliament voicing their concerns over external pressures and thus representing well those who believe that constraints are important, i.e. individuals with radical ideologies (Huber and Ruth 2017; Leininger and Meijers 2021).

Turning to perceived constraints from the EU, estimations displayed in Figure 4 also confirm the existence of a negative relationship between them and the feeling of being represented across countries, here also except for Italy. The negative association holds for France (***), Spain (***), Austria (***), and Greece (***). The pattern found for constraints from globalization thus holds for the EU, but these results further imply that the effects of external constraints are not unidimensional and context dependent. This is in line with Hübscher et al. (2021) who show – with experimental evidence – that external intervention does not necessarily lead to disapproval towards governmental action regarding fiscal adjustment and that this can be contingent upon country's institutional or economic characteristics. This is further corroborated by the positive correlation between perceived constraints from the EU and feelings of being represented in Germany and, more surprisingly, in Portugal, given that Portuguese representatives signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) – although it was at their own proposition. All in all, there is thus some evidence that perceiving constraints is negatively associated with feelings of being represented, hence supporting H1. This cross-country variation gives credit to the idea of a south-north divide, whereby constraints are perceived to be more acute in the south due to systemic economic divergence and increased intervention from external actors. That said, our cross-national analysis also suggests some important variations, thus suggesting that various domestic factors such as party politicization might moderate the relationship between perceived constraints and feelings of being represented.

Perceived constraints, feeling of being represented and electoral participation

Perceptions of constraints from international and European integration are correlated with feelings of being represented. We now explore the potential impact of these variables on turnout and present the models analysing the effects of perceived constraints, feelings of being represented and their interaction effect on electoral participation in national elections and in EU elections. The full models are included in the appendix in tables 2A (national elections) and 3A (European elections) Figure 5.

Our estimations with interactions show that feeling that the parliament takes into consideration the concerns of citizens enhances the likelihood to take part in both national and EU elections. When perceptions of feeling of represented increase by 1 unit, the likelihood to participate in national elections (respectively, in EU elections) increases, in average, by around 0.005–0.007 units (respectively, 0.11–0.12 units) with the effect being statistically significant. H3 is thereby confirmed. In contrast, we find

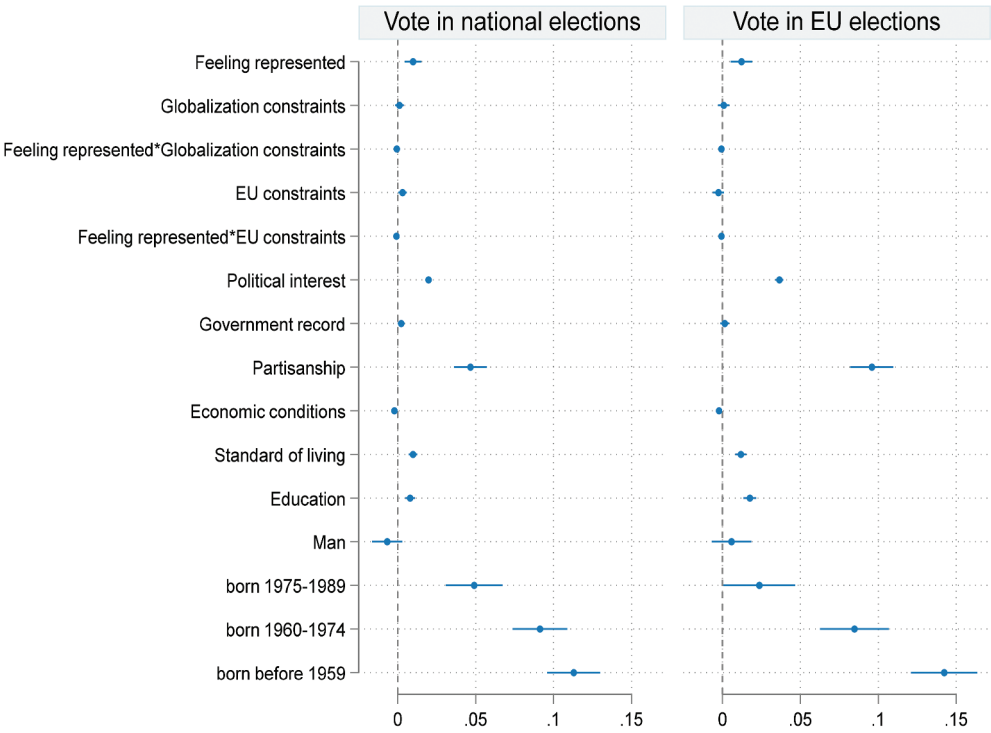


Figure 5. Effects of perceived constraints from globalization and perceived EU constraints interacted with perceived representation on electoral participation in national and EU elections (OLS regressions).

no evidence suggesting that perceived constraints either from globalization or the EU decrease electoral participation in the European and national elections: respondents who perceive constraints are not less prone to report to have shown up in elections. Therefore, H2 is rejected. Interestingly, our estimations indicate that perceiving that decisions are imposed by the European Union increase individual turnout in national elections. This finding lends credence to a Rodrik (2011), which contends that constraints can foster participation in elections to counterbalance the effects of international integration. We further tested the implication of this counterintuitive result by looking at estimations country by country to see whether these results might be driven by contextual factors but did not find any major national discrepancy (Figures 15A and 16A). However, we find that perceiving constraints reduce turnout when interacted with perceptions of being represented. The effects are statistically significant at $p < 0.01$. Specifically, individuals' inclination to vote declines when they report low levels of feelings of being represented and high levels of perceived constraints. While the size of the effects is small in magnitude, our test nonetheless empirically lends some credence to the existence of the *representational linkage* at the individual level. H4 is thus partially confirmed. That said, socio-demographic variables such as generational cohorts and gender, and political variables like support for EU integration and assessment of governmental record, are systematically stronger predictors of electoral participation. This suggests that structural variables are decisive to explain the inclination to cast a ballot, more so than perceived constraints from

international and European integration and feelings of being represented. Finally, we ran further estimations across subsamples to see whether the representational linkage hypothesis could be dependent upon other factors. Interestingly, we found no differences between socio-economic groups, but found a difference between radicals and moderates in line with findings in the literature on populism (Huber and Ruth 2017; Leininger and Meijers 2021). This further suggests that context-specific factors could actually influence this relationship.

Conclusion

The integration of nation states is said to affect the dynamics of political representation in post-industrial societies. In this article, we analysed the effect of international and European interdependence on individual voter turnout at the individual level. Specifically, we studied how voters' feeling of being represented interacts with perceived external constraints from globalization and EU integration to account for their inclination to cast a ballot. We thereby extend the literature on the impact of international integration on voting behaviour at the individual level by testing one of the core assumptions of the room-to-manoeuvre theory: the *representational linkage mechanism*. The mechanism suggests that under conditions of constraint, voters, knowingly or otherwise, are less likely to believe that their governments will represent them, which decreases their willingness to cast a ballot. We argued that there are theoretical reasons to support the mechanism, and we tested it empirically based on the Comparative Electoral Dynamics dataset which provides direct measures of perceptions of constraint from both globalisation and European integration (Sauger, Dehousse, and Gougou 2015).

First, we report evidence that empirically supports the representational linkage mechanism – even though the size of the effects is small in magnitude in comparison with other variables. Feelings of being represented decrease with greater perceived constraints from globalisation or the EU. Interestingly, our analysis shows that perceived constraints from globalization have a stronger downward effect on feelings of being represented compared to perceptions of EU constraints. This might suggest that respondents perceive that national representatives have less control over the regulation of global markets than they have over decisions made at the level EU institutions.

Second, we do not find any correlation between perceived constraints and voter turnout. In contrast, and importantly, we report that the effect of perceptions of constraints on electoral participation is conditional upon feelings of being represented. In line with the results of aggregate level studies (Ezrow and Hellwig 2014), but drawing on individual level data, we therefore confirm that the depressing impacts of international and European integration on electoral participation are mediated by respondents' subjective views on the operation of political representation and, specifically, their feelings of being represented. In that regard, our results shed light on the hollowing out of representative democracies from a citizen perspective (Mair 2013). We show that citizens continue to go to the ballot box because they feel represented by their representatives. They are more likely to abstain from casting their vote when they perceive that external actors infringe on their representatives' autonomy. In that respect, we suggest that the link between citizens and their representatives – the feeling of being represented – is broken only when constraints from the EU and international integration are perceived.

These results have important normative implications for the state of representative democracy in the EU. The ongoing transformations of governance linked to international integration are embedded in a legitimacy crisis whereby the weak linkage between citizens and their representatives has long been problematic. Against this background, the way in which citizens articulate their perceptions of international constraints and their feeling of being represented is too often overlooked in the existing research (but see Dupuy and Van Ingelgom 2023). We argue that the implications of Mair's thesis of growing institutional constraints (2013), and the related constriction of the policy space (Schäfer and Streeck 2013), need to also be addressed at the level of citizens. According to Peter Mair, and the strand of research that emerged from his book *Ruling the Void* (2013), changes in governance in the recent decades have resulted in a widening gap between political leaders' 'responsiveness' towards their electorate, on the one hand, and their 'responsibility' stemming from commitments linked to the international integration amongst nation-states on the other. Recent research suggests that this dilemma may be historically contingent, as concerns for responsiveness are integrated into how governments define responsible decision-making (Crespy, Moreira Ramalho, and Schmidt 2024). In any case, from a citizen's perspective, our results point at the crucial role of responsiveness and citizens' feeling of being represented to account for the representational linkage between voters and representatives and citizens' electoral participation.

Despite its originality, our research design still faces some limitations. It is undeniable that our cross-country sample cannot fully generalize to every country setting and that it might be contextually circumscribed. However, it is one of the first attempts to comprehend individual causal mechanisms underlying the RTM theory (but see Devine 2021) and definitely calls for more research on the matter since there is still no consensus as to when, how, where and which constraints influence political attitudes and political behaviour. A promising avenue of research is to be found in political predispositions and politicization of these constraints from a citizen perspective (Dupuy and Van Ingelgom 2019) since many studies show that this is what drives mobilization and substantive representation (Huber and Ruth 2017; Leininger and Meijers 2021). This article thus hopes that new projects will create more data to tackle these issues.

Notes

1. In addition to performance voting (Hellwig 2001, 2008, 2014; Costa Lobo and Lewis-Beck 2012; Giuliani 2019; Jensen and Rosas 2020; Pannico and Lobo 2022; but see: Le Gall and Devine 2022).
2. Note that this figure is adapted from Devine (2021).
3. Other measures of the feeling of being represented exist in the literature. For example, since 2001, the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) includes a question to measure whether or not citizens feel that a party represents their views reasonably well. Very recently, De Mulder (2022) has developed an innovative multidimensional measure of feeling represented. As stimulating this new measure is, it was however unfortunately not used in the CED2014 dataset on which we rely here.

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