The Matthew effect in electoral campaigns : increasing policy congruence inequality during the campaign

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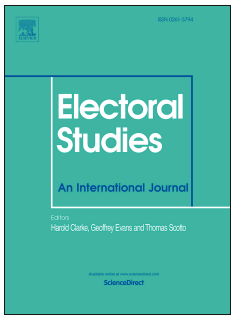


The Matthew effect in electoral campaigns: Increasing policy congruence inequality during the campaign

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# *The Matthew Effect in Electoral Campaigns:*

# *Increasing Opinion Congruence Inequality During the Campaign*

> *"For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath"* Matthew 25:29, King James Version

## *1. Introduction*

A key feature of mass democracy is representation: The elected are expected to represent the preferences of their electors. Pitkin (1969) coined the term "substantive" representation to refer to this mechanism that links the popular will and policy outputs. One way of empirically studying substantive representation is by examining the extent to which voters and their representatives share the same policy preferences. The underlying idea is simple: The more that voters and their representatives care about the same issues and prefer the same policies for addressing them, the higher the likelihood that these elected officials will effectively represent voters in their actual political decision-making (Dalton, 2014; Thomassen, 1994). High levels of citizen-elite agreement are considered positive for democracy, and therefore, policy congruence has become a key topic in political science research, with an impressive body of empirical work behind it. In fact, some even consider policy congruence to be the single most important indicator of democratic health (Diamond, Morlino, & American Political Science Association., 2005). This paper deals with one form of agreement between citizens and elites that has received ample attention, namely, *voter-party opinion congruence*. This factor assesses the extent to which voters' policy preferences correspond with those of

the political parties that win their support on election day.[1] More specifically, the present study assesses the extent to which individuals vote for the party with which they agree the most. Previous studies have indicated that voter-party opinion congruence is the result of both the policy options that parties provide to voters *and* the choices that voters make (Lesschaeve, 2017; Agnieszka Walczak, & Brug, 2013). This paper only focuses on the second determinant of voter-party opinion congruence, the degree to which citizens vote for the party with which they most strongly agree. Thus, parties' policy offerings were held constant within this study, with the focus on whether—and how—voters manage to vote for the party with the most congruent policy preferences.

Notwithstanding the impressive body of opinion congruence research, several critical questions remain. First, there are no studies that have investigated opinion congruence *during an electoral campaign* in a panel design. As far as we know, all existing research in this domain has relied on cross-sectional designs, with several analyses comparing aggregate policy congruence across several countries (e.g., Huber & Bingham-Powell, 1994; Rosema & de Vries, 2011a) or across parties (e.g., Belchior, 2010; Karyotis, Rüdig, & Judge, 2014). Note that some research has examined how parties—although not voters—change their policy positions between elections (for an overview, see: Adams, 2012), but whether and how voters update their preferences during a campaign is uncharted territory. Yet, in light of the fact that people's policy and party preferences do change over time, it is very likely that voters' opinion congruence levels vary during a campaign as well. A similar argument has been put forward by Dalton et al. (2011), who have stated that substantive representation is a dynamic process and that voters and parties mutually adjust over time. However, extant work has

[1] Note that this work often appears under different headings, such as "attitudinal congruence" (e.g., Morgan, 1973), "attitude congruence" (e.g., A. Walczak & van der Brug, 2013), "policy agreement" (e.g., Miller & Stokes, 1963), "ideological congruence" (e.g., Golder & Stramski, 2010), "collective or dyadic correspondence" (Dalton, 2014), and "correct voting" (Rosema & de Vries, 2011b). In some instances, additional measures such as competence are also taken into account (see Lau & Redlawsk, 1997). The predominantly U.S.-centered literature on "dyadic representation" is similar (Weissberg, 1978), although it mostly deals with actual policy outputs and not with representatives' preferences. See also Andeweg (2011).

examined opinion congruence as a static, rather than a dynamic, phenomenon, at least from the perspective of voters. From a dynamic point of view, as well as from a democratic perspective, elections are important moments: They offer citizens the opportunity to convey their preferences to decision-makers by picking the party/candidate that best matches their inclinations. Yet, while campaigns are information-dense moments, implying particularly frequent opinion congruence changes, in reality, evidence is sorely lacking on whether campaigns actually affect opinion congruence and if so, via which mechanisms.

Second, as most studies have not focused on individual voters, instead drawing on aggregate evidence dealing with countries or parties/candidates, it remains unclear how and to what extent opinion congruence varies across voters. More precisely, while the general research domain of *inequality* and representation is vast and expanding (e.g., Soroka & Wlezien, 2008), questions of inequality seem to have been almost entirely ignored by opinion congruence scholars (for two exceptions, see: Belchior, 2012; Walczak & van der Brug, 2013). This study specifically deals with education inequality. While there are other forms of inequality (e.g., income inequality; Bartels, 2008), we argue that education is intrinsically linked to the mechanisms of campaign learning and priming, which we, in turn, expect to affect opinion congruence. Moreover, education remains one of the key sources of inequality in most advanced democracies (Esping-Andersen, 2005). Are the better educated more likely than their less educated colleagues to vote for the party with which they agree the most? We hardly know the answer to that critical question, but the scant available work in that area has suggested that lower educated voters are, in effect, less well represented than are their higher educated counterparts (Walczak & van der Brug, 2013).

The study sets out to tackle these two questions regarding opinion congruence between voters and the parties that win their support on election day: Does opinion congruence change during a campaign, and are there differences across education levels in

terms of those congruence changes? To answer these questions, we draw on new data from Belgium, a small European country with a fragmented party system (Deschouwer, 2009). As in many other countries, Belgian citizens are represented by parties, and not by individual candidates or MPs (Dalton, 1985; Rose, 1974). Belgium is widely considered as an example of a "partitocracy" (Deschouwer, de Winter, & della Porta, 1996). Therefore, we study how congruent the policy positions of Belgian voters are with the policy positions of their political parties.

The data comes from two sources. First, the Belgian National Election Study of the May 2014 elections featured two waves of interviews, one before ballots were cast, and one directly afterwards. In both waves, the same 23 concrete policy position questions were posed, making it possible to calculate policy position changes and shifts in party preferences over the campaign. Our second source comprises of parties' official positions regarding these same 23 policies, with the data acquired via a vote advice application (VAA). In combination, these data allow us to compare opinion congruence over time and to assess *whether* individuals' opinion congruence evolves during an electoral campaign, *how* individual voters change their opinion congruence, and whether *social stratification* moderates the changes in opinion congruence.

We find that opinion congruence is indeed dynamic, as it changes over the course of the campaign; there is a campaign effect, albeit a weak one. As an election approaches, voters become more closely aligned with the party for which they will eventually vote. It is by switching parties, and not by switching positions, that people bring their policy views in line with those of their preferred party. Compared to their lower educated peers, people with a higher level of education exhibit more opinion congruence with their party, even before the campaign starts. More importantly, however, the highly educated increase their policy congruence during the campaign to a significantly greater degree. In other words, campaigns

may exacerbate opinion congruence inequalities. The reason is that the highly educated are less loyal to their initially preferred party and switch their allegiances more frequently during the campaign period. It is not the case that the lower educated, when they switch parties, are more likely to select the "wrong" party (i.e., a party further from their own policy preferences instead of closer); rather, they simply switch parties less often. Additionally, our evidence suggests that the higher educated are more sensitive to potential gains in opinion congruence to be realized by changing parties; more than the lower educated, they switch parties because such a switch may increase their opinion congruence. In sum, a campaign produces a Matthew effect. Those already enjoying higher levels of opinion congruence (the higher educated) further increase their congruence, while those with lower levels of opinion congruence at the outset (the lower educated) do not profit from the campaign. Thus, the inequality between educational groups increases, rather than decreases, during a campaign.

## *2. THEORY AND HYPOTHESES*

Starting from the earliest studies of campaigns in the U.S. (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1945), scholars have argued that campaigns may "activate" voters' preferences. Rather than changing people's attitudes or positions, campaigns make latent predispositions salient, thereby leading citizens to vote for the party they, in light of their policy preferences, already should have preferred before the campaign began (e.g., Finkel, 1993). On the one hand, campaigns are information-dense periods that can lead to policy *learning* on the part of voters (Alvarez, 1998). Citizens learn about their own policy preferences, the positions of the parties/candidates, and about the connections between the two. In short, campaigns shed light on whether a voter's preferred party is, in fact, the best fit for his or her beliefs. On the other hand, campaigns focusing on policy positions of parties/candidates *prime* these as constituting important criteria for judging these parties/candidates and making voting decisions (Claassen,

2011; Mendelsohn, 1996). As policies acquire more weight during the campaign, this could lead to a higher level of end-of-campaign opinion congruence. In short, campaigns increase voters' *ability* to make a congruent vote choice, and they likewise increase the importance of opinion congruence as a criterion in that vote choice.

Learning and priming can result in two types of behavior during a campaign: (1) voters deciding to change *party* preferences and (2) voters adopting new policy *positions* during a campaign. Both may have an effect on opinion congruence on election day. We deal with both in this study, although we start with more general expectations.

The literature on intra-campaign volatility suggests that in most countries, short-term party preference volatility has risen over the years (e.g., Blais, 2004; Granberg & Holmberg, 1991; Lachat, 2007; McAllister, 2002). If at least some of these party switches are based on voters' perceptions of their opinion congruence with their old and their new party choice, then, over the course of a campaign and all other factors being equal, switching parties should lead to higher levels of opinion congruence. Although party switching during a campaign affecting end-of-campaign opinion congruence may seem straightforward and even trivial, as far as we know, no studies have examined individual-level changes in opinion congruence during electoral campaigns. Still, a good deal of work in the activation tradition of campaign studies has suggested that at the end of a campaign, people's party preferences are more aligned with their (latent) policy preferences as compared to at the beginning of the campaign (e.g., Finkel, 1993; Gelman & King, 1993; Arceneaux, 2005; Peterson, 2009; also see Dalton et al., 2011; Lavine, 2001). These studies, however, have not directly measured opinion congruence in an empirical manner. Other studies as well are suggestive of positive campaign effects on opinion congruence. Dalton et al. (2011), for example, examined pre-election and post-election congruence and found that compared to the outgoing government, the new government's left-right position was more congruent with the public's aggregate left-right

position. That said, this work did not examine individuals, nor did it investigate the effects of the campaign itself. Rather, it considered slower changes during a full electoral cycle. Nonetheless, our baseline hypothesis reads: *Voter-party opinion congruence increases during a campaign (H1).*

Voters differ. A host of research has revealed that not all voters are equal and that campaigns have divergent effects on individual voters (Arceneaux, 2005; Claassen, 2011). More specifically, studies have found that the votes of people with fewer years of formal schooling are less aligned with their interests as compared to the ballots of those with a higher education level (Walczak & van der Brug, 2013; Walgrave & Lefevere, 2013). Hillygus (2005) has argued that formal education gives individuals the cognitive and intellectual skills to help them understand political institutions and political events. Previous work has found that higher educated voters are more capable of, for example, processing political information from the media (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000). As a consequence, we expect the highly educated to display higher levels of opinion congruence. Being more cognizant of their own preferences and better informed about parties' offerings before a campaign (e.g., Steenbergen, Edwards, & de Vries, 2007), the highly educated, as compared to the lower educated, should prefer parties more closely aligned with their preferences (e.g., Walgrave & Lefevere, 2013). Thus, the mere fact of having more years of formal schooling has a direct effect on people's ability to process information in general and political information in particular. In our opinion, the influence of education on people's opinion congruence is partially a direct effect. Of course, the education effect is likely mediated by a number of factors, such as political knowledge (Grönlund & Milner, 2006) and political interest (Lewis-Beck, Norpoth, Jacoby, & Weisberg, 2008), but this paper is concerned with the direct effect of education; all of the models in our study control for political interest. In light of the above considerations, our

second hypothesis reads: *Higher educated voters have a higher pre-campaign voter-party opinion congruence level than do lower educated voters (H2).*

Accepting the previous conjecture implies that the lower educated enter a campaign at a lower opinion congruence level, suggesting that greater opinion congruence gains are possible during the campaign. Some have stated that campaigns are so dense in information that they should reduce knowledge differences between high-and low-capacity groups: Even the less motivated and those with less-developed cognitive skills learn about issues and the policy positions of parties (e.g., Van Aelst, van der Meer, & Walter, 2015). There is indeed an extensive body of literature on who profits the most from electoral campaigns: Those with high levels of political awareness or those with low levels of political awareness (e.g., Claassen, 2011). Nevertheless, as far as we know, none of these studies have specifically dealt with opinion congruence and examined whether some voters manage to increase their congruence more than others during a campaign. In fact, the fact that the lower educated may increase their knowledge of party positions during a campaign does not mean that they will necessarily draw conclusions around those gains and change their own policy positions or party preferences, actions that are necessary for achieving a higher level of end-of-campaign opinion congruence. For example, the lower educated may gain more accurate knowledge of parties' positions but feel more uncertain than the higher educated that they do, in fact, possess reliable knowledge; as a consequence, they may not draw any behavioral conclusions on the basis of their increased knowledge. Additionally, we posit that the complexity of campaign information trumps the potential positive effect of its density. This complexity may actually wipe away, and even reverse, a campaign's potentially equalizing effect. Therefore, we argue that a campaign is more likely to acerbate than to attenuate differences in opinion congruence between education groups. Indeed, the information provided during campaigns regarding policy positions is often blurred, complex, and contradictory (van der Meer, Walter,

& Aelst, 2015). Parties often have an interest in obfuscating their actual positions (Franklin, 1991) or in talking about different topics instead of addressing the same issues and making their respective positions clear to voters (Sigelman & Buell, 2004). Research has demonstrated that when political information is complex, it increases—rather than decreases—the knowledge gap between the higher educated and the lower educated (Jerit, 2009; Nadeau, Nevitte, Gidengil, & Blais, 2008). The question is whether the political information provided to voters during a typical campaign is *more* complex than the political information provided to voters at other points in time. It is possible that outside of electoral campaigns, the information that voters receive is also complex, and that parties also try to hide their actual positions and address different issues.

We are unaware of any work comparing information complexity inside and outside of campaigns. While our study also does not provide such evidence, it is reasonable to argue that significantly *more* political information is available during election campaigns than in non-campaign periods and that parties have a greater stake in talking about different topics instead of addressing the same issues and *obfuscating* their positions right before an election than during more routine periods. We argue that on its own, the large amount of information available during campaigns leads to complex information, or at least to additional difficulties associated with sorting through the available data and making sense of them. Thus, as higher educated voters are more responsive to complex information, and as campaign information is arguably more complex than non-campaign information, we expect the higher educated to become more "enlightened" by a campaign than those with a lower education level (Arceneaux, 2005). Our second hypothesis on inequality therefore states: *Higher educated voters increase their voter-party opinion congruence to a greater degree during a campaign than do lower educated voters (H3).*

The first three hypotheses seek to answer the question of whether campaigns affect the differences in opinion congruence between lower and higher educated voters. The following hypotheses are aimed at explaining *why* this might be the case. In doing so, they are based on the assumption that hypothesis three is correct. The above discussion explained that there are two mechanisms through which voters can increase their opinion congruence during a campaign: changing parties and change positions (holding parties' positions constant). Furthermore, there are two ways in which each of these two mechanisms can lead to an increasing opinion congruence gap between lower and higher educated voters. First, higher educated voters might make use of these mechanisms *more often* than lower educated voters. Second, they might use them *more effectively* from an opinion congruence perspective.

In the case of party switching, the evidence regarding the effect of education appears to be mixed. On the one hand, one research stream, harking back to early work in the U.S. (Converse, 1962), has centered on the "floating voter hypothesis" and claims that the least-informed segment of the electorate is the group that switches its party allegiance most easily (e.g., Dobson & Angelo, 1975). Still, the main independent variable in most of these studies has been the degree of information acquisition, and not education, which is the variable of interest for us. On the other hand, recent comparative work has directly investigated the role of education, and the results have seemingly suggested that lower educated voters are less volatile and more loyal as compared to the higher educated (e.g., Dassonneville, 2013; Dassonneville, Blais, & Dejaeghere, 2015; Kuhn, 2009). This implies that higher educated voters increase their congruence to a greater degree during a campaign, because they simply change or update their party preferences at a higher frequency. This leads to the fourth hypothesis: *Higher educated voters switch parties more often during a campaign than do lower educated voters (H4).*

The second possibility is that rather than switching more frequently, higher educated voters switch parties *more effectively* than lower educated voters. As higher educated voters are, on average, more sensitive to party position cues and more aware of their own preferences (ideas underlying H2), they should be more able than lower educated voters to pick a party with more congruent views when switching. In contrast, we expect switches made by lower educated voters to have less of an effect on their party congruence. *When higher educated voters switch parties during a campaign, they increase their voter-party opinion congruence to a greater extent than when lower educated voters switch parties during a campaign (H5).*

In a similar way, we expect the *reasons* for party switching to be different for higher versus lower educated voters. Due to their higher cognitive capacity to perceive the (mis)match between their own positions and those of the parties and to recognize potential gains in congruence to be realized by switching, we anticipate that opinion congruence considerations would have a more pronounced influence on the party switching undertaken by higher educated voters than by lower educated voters (see also: Basinger & Lavine, 2005). In other words, we expect that the higher educated would more easily draw the conclusion that when gains in opinion congruence are possible, a party switch is in order. The higher educated are less tolerant of incongruence and more likely to see the solution in other parties' policy offerings. We thus hypothesize that: *Voter-party opinion congruence considerations have a greater effect on higher educated voters' party switching during a campaign than on lower educated voters' party switching during a campaign (H6).*

The previous three hypotheses are related to party switching, the first mechanism that voters can use to increase their opinion congruence with their ultimate party choice. The second mechanism is *position switching*: Voters change positions during a campaign, leading to a higher level of opinion congruence with the party that eventually wins their vote. In fact,

there is a sizeable body of literature suggesting that partisan identification and partisanship can encourage voters to adjust their policy positions to better match the party they feel close to (e.g., Lenz, 2009). As in the case of party switching, by adopting a different position, the higher educated might increase their opinion congruence to a greater degree than the lower educated as a result of more frequent and/or more effective position switches. However, in contrast, scholars have argued that higher educated voters are more likely to have stable policy positions, meaning that they change their policy preferences less frequently than lower educated voters (e.g., Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992). Lower educated voters' policy positions are more likely to change, simply because they are less likely to have a position to begin with, reflecting the randomness accompanying what Converse (1964) has labelled "nonattitudes." Hence, we do not formulate a hypothesis about the position switching frequencies of higher and lower educated voters, as previous work did not point us in a clear direction.[2]

Yet, it may still be the case that the higher educated switch positions *more effectively*, (i.e., leading to larger increases in their opinion congruence with the party that ultimately wins their vote). Our argument is similar to the logic spelled out above in the sense that the higher educated have more cognitive skills to make sense of whether and how their positions match (or do not match) their existing party preferences, implying that potential position changes bring their preferences more in line with their party allegiances. This leads to our final hypothesis: *When higher educated voters switch policy positions during a campaign, they increase their voter-party opinion congruence to a greater extent than when lower educated voters switch positions during a campaign (H7).*

[2] As it turns out, we tested this assumption in our dataset and confirmed that it was correct.

## *3. DATA AND METHODS*

The study tackles voter-party opinion congruence in Belgium during the 2014 electoral campaign. We are particularly interested in campaign learning effects. Campaigns often deal with concrete policy proposals. For instance, parties do not advertise their general ideological left-right placement; rather, they focus on their concrete policy preferences. Therefore, our choice to rely on concrete policies to measure opinion congruence shifts is appropriate. Although it is perfectly plausible that voters also move ideologically to the right or left during a campaign—and maybe even as a consequence of the campaign—our study rests on the argument that if voters learn anything during a campaign, it should mostly be about parties' (and their own) policy positions (van der Meer et al., 2015).

We draw on two integrated datasets to calculate pre- and post-campaign opinion congruence for each individual voter in our sample. The voter data come from the 2014 National Election Study in Belgium.[3] The study featured a panel design, with the first wave of face-to-face interviews lasting from March 20, 2014 to May 17, 2014.[4] Elections were held on May 25, 2014, and immediately after the ballots were cast, a second wave of telephone interviews continued until July 1, 2014. The interview modes differed between the first and the second waves—face-to-face versus telephone interviews—which may have affected the responses to some extent. Yet, in both waves, the interviews were conducted by interviewers, rather than being self-administered, thereby limiting possible mode effects. Additionally, it is

[3] The Belgian National Election Study in 2014 was carried out by the PARTIREP consortium. PARTIREP is an Interuniversity Attraction Pole (IAP) funded by the Belgian Science Policy. It involves the universities of Antwerp (Universiteit Antwerpen), Brussels (Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Université Libre de Bruxelles), Leiden (Universiteit Leiden), Leuven (KU Leuven), Louvain-La-Neuve (Université Catholique de Louvain), and Mannheim (Universität Mannheim).

[4] Note that while the wave-one interviews began (March 20, 2014) significantly in advance of the campaign's outset—Belgian campaigns take about four weeks to unfold—the actual end of the first wave surveying (May 17, 2014) occurred close to the election date (May 25, 2014) and admittedly in the middle of the campaign. This implies that some of our so-called pre-campaign interviews actually took place during the campaign. As a consequence, the data collection likely underestimated the extent of party and position changes during the campaign. We have no reasons to assume that this affected our results regarding the opinion congruence gap between higher and lower educated voters.

unlikely that this small mode difference affected the responses in the sense of exacerbating opinion congruence disparities between higher and lower educated voters before and after the campaign.

A total of 4,511 eligible voters were contacted for the first wave after being randomly drawn from the National Register; 2,019 participated, leading to a response rate of 45 per cent. In total, 1,532 of the first-wave respondents took part in the second wave as well—a response rate of 76 per cent for wave 2. We only use the respondents that participated in both waves.

As the survey questions were about politics, it is likely that participation in the survey skewed towards politically interested individuals. This pattern was probably even more pronounced in the second wave, after panel attrition. To compensate for this, we control for political interest (11-point scale) in all our analyses. While its inclusion in our models will reduce the predicted effect of education level on changes in voter-party opinion congruence—part of the effect of education on congruence runs *via* political interest—it is necessary to control for the composition of our sample of voters. Furthermore, including political interest only could have worked against our hypotheses, making our analyses more conservative tests of our expectations.

Finally, the data used in the analyses are weighted to accurately reflect the eligible voting population in Belgium in terms of region, gender, age, and education. In each wave, the same 23 concrete policy statements (see the appendix) were presented to the respondents, with the answer choices ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree,” with two moderate options in the middle (“agree” and “disagree”). To match the parties’ answers (see below), voters’ answers are recoded as a binary variable (“agree” or “disagree”). All 23 policy statements deal with national competences.

While the advantages of a panel design are clear—we are able to follow the same respondents over time and come closer to identifying causal effects—the main drawback is the so-called "instrument effect." The mere asking of a policy question in wave 1 might have affected exposure to information about that policy between the waves and thus influenced the wave 2 answers to the same policy question. We cannot rule out the possibility that such an effect impacted the results. One remedy for this issue is to make sure that the time period between the waves is not too short (Wlezien & Erikson, 2001). In this study, the average period of 52 days between the two waves (with a minimum of 9 and a maximum of 98 days) at least partially alleviates a potential instrument effect. We are unaware of any study providing evidence that the instrument effect is unequally distributed across education groups. In addition, we control for the time lag between interviews in the models below (the variable *Time between Waves* in the models).

Our second dataset consists of party position data originating from a VAA—an online system that helps people make their choice by comparing their own positions with those of political parties (Garzia & Marschall, 2014). The authors of this study built the Belgian VAA, called *Stemtest 2014,* and it was online during the 2014 election campaign. All major Belgian parties (n=11) collaborated and provided their official positions (agree/disagree) regarding all 23 policy statements. We only have one measure of the parties' positions, which we collected prior to the beginning of the campaign, and thus we could not observe parties' position changes through the campaign. This arrangement raises of the question of whether those parties might have changed their positions during that time period. It is possible, but highly unlikely. All parties in Belgium organize a members' conference before the start of a campaign to decide on their positions on a whole range of issues. The party manifesto has to be approved by party members by a majority vote, making is very difficult for the party leadership to change policy positions afterwards, during the campaign. The most those leaders

can do is *conceal* their position during the campaign; they can hardly change it. Since we consider parties' positions as fixed, our focus is entirely on voters' movements.

Similar to voters, party leaders could only respond to the policy statements with "agree" or "disagree." This was done deliberately, as previous research on the validity of party VAA responses has concluded that parties are more likely to give centrist answers to VAA statements (Gemenis & Ham, 2014; Wagner & Ruusuvirta, 2011). By doing so, they can reduce the maximum distance between themselves and potential voters. Therefore, in our case, parties were given only two options, "agree" or "disagree," thereby forcing them to choose a side instead of placing themselves in the middle. The answer format employed in the party survey made it more difficult for the parties to give strategic answers.

The next question that arises is whether the 23 policies constitute a representative sample of the universe of policy issues in Belgium in 2014. In most opinion congruence studies, questions are not even raised about the representativeness of the policy issue sample. First, we have a large number of statements per party. Second, the statements were carefully selected to map onto important policy domains, ensuring that no major area was ignored. In fact, certain key domains were covered by several statements.[5] Third, the policy statements attempted to grasp real-life current debates in the run-up to the 2014 election. They include many issues that had been widely discussed in the media and that could therefore be considered to "matter." All these considerations increase our confidence that we are dealing with real party positions.

The study focuses on a voter's opinion congruence with the party for which he or she planned to vote (wave 1) and for which he or she actually voted (wave 2). Calculating voter-party opinion congruence scores for each voter involved three steps. First, we calculated, for

[5] The 23 statements touch upon 11 policy domains: labor and economy, and consumer protect; finance and the budget; environment and energy; immigration and integration; mobility and public transportation; state reform & political institutions; foreign policy and development aid; social security; justice and law enforcement; healthcare, social welfare and family, and ethical themes.

each voter, the *percentage agreement* between that individual's positions and the positions of his or her preferred party. This simply entailed dividing the number of statements on which a voter and his or her party agree by the number of questions that voter answered. Second, to give more *weight* to statements that matter for the voter and to alleviate the effect of non-opinions on policies about which the voter does not care, each statement was assigned a specific weight for each voter. The weights are based on a series of issue salience questions asking voters about the importance (0-10) of 11 issue domains. Each policy statement was then weighed according to the importance the voter attributed to the related issue domain. Third, we corrected for the fact that a fully congruent party does not exist for most voters, given their preferences. It is highly unlikely that, even in a fragmented party system such as Belgium's, voters achieve 100% or perfect opinion congruence with their party choice, even when voting for the party most aligned with their preferences.

Differences in opinion congruence between lower and higher educated voters can have two fundamental causes (Lesschaeve, 2017). First, the policy positions of political parties are more attuned to the policy positions of the higher educated, due to the fact that politicians and candidates themselves are often higher educated. Second, higher educated voters, having more cognitive and intellectual skills, are more capable of making a congruent party choice. This study focuses on the second cause, and we want to keep the first factor constant. Therefore, when calculating the differences in opinion congruence between lower and higher educated voters, we seek to remove any differences between those voters attributable to the first factor, parties' offerings.

For instance, consider the following hypothetical example: A lower educated voter who agrees with his party choice 50% of the time and a higher educated voter agreeing with his party choice 60% of the time. However, considering the parties from which those voters could choose on election day, the former *could have* achieved a maximum of 70% opinion

congruence, while the latter could have achieved 80% opinion congruence. While it would thus appear as if the higher educated voter made a 10% more accurate party choice than did the lower educated voter, part of this difference is due to the 10% difference in the maximum opinion congruence, which represents the structural disadvantage facing the lower educated voter due to the fact that most parties consist of higher educated individuals.

To remove that from of the dependent variable, we divide the percentage of agreement between a voter and his or her party choice by the maximum opinion congruence score that voter could have achieved given his or her positions. In this way, we control for any disadvantage suffered by voters in seeking a congruent match among the available parties. In the above hypothetical example, instead of a 10% difference in party choice accuracy (50% versus 60%), there is, in fact, only a 4% difference (50%/70% = 71% versus 60%/80% = 75%). By taking the maximum opinion congruence into account, we avoid overestimating the opinion congruence gap between lower and higher educated voters. The result is a dependent variable that better fits the concept we want to measure and the question we want to answer. These concern the congruence of voters' party choices and the degree to which the campaign enabled those voters to find the party most closely aligned with their preferences. In sum, our measure of opinion congruence is *relative* to the maximum degree of opinion congruence a voter could achieve, represented by the opinion congruence score of the party demonstrating the greatest agreement with the positions of a particular voter.

One could argue, however, that an *absolute,* rather than a relative, measure of policy opinion congruence would have been better. Such a measure would not relate a voter's congruence to the maximum attainable congruence given his or her preferences; rather, it would simply measure the absolute distance between a voter and his or her party. Therefore, we ran all analyses reported below a second time using an absolute measure of opinion congruence as the dependent variable (reported in the appendix in Tables A2 to A5). These

analyses confirm the results presented below. Since we believe the relative measure is a more valid indicator of the concept that we are trying explain, the following sections only report the findings of those analyses drawing on the relative policy opinion congruence measure.

Belgium is a federal country, with separate Francophone and Dutch-speaking regions, and with separate parties catering to these two main regions.[6] As a result, Flemish voters cannot vote for Francophone parties, and Francophone voters cannot vote for Flemish parties. Of the 11 political parties in our sample, 6 are Dutch-speaking, and 5 are Francophone parties. Therefore, when calculating the maximum degree of opinion congruence that a voter could achieve, we only take into account the parties in a voter's region. Our final measure thus indicates how close voters come to their most congruent party: It demonstrates the weighted (on the basis of the policy statements' saliency for a voter) average agreement between voters and their party choices:

$$Opinion\ congruence = \left( \frac{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^{k} policy\ statement_i * salience\ of\ policy\ statement_i}{\sum_{i=1}^{k} salience\ of\ policy\ statement_i}}{\frac{k}{Maximum\ opinion\ congruence}} \right)$$

where *k* stands for the number of statements answered by a voter in a valid manner. Based on this procedure, we calculate the three dependent variables of the study: *W1 Opinion Congruence* (congruence with the party for which the voter was planning to vote before the campaign), *W2 Opinion Congruence* (congruence with the party that the voter actually selected on election day), and *W2-W1 Opinion Congruence Change* (the difference between the two previous measures, with positive scores pointing towards an increase in opinion congruence during the campaign).

[6] In the analyses below, we aggregate the data from both regions. We do so to ensure that the analyses preserve sufficient statistical power to avoid type II errors affecting our conclusions. Instead, as is further explained below, we control for voters' regions in all our analyses.

The *Party Change* variable reveals whether a voter changed his or her party choice during the campaign. We acquired policy statement responses from the 11 major parties with at least one representative in the national parliament prior to the elections (CD&V, CDH, Ecolo, FDF, Groen, MR, N-VA, Open VLD, PS, Sp.a, and Vlaams Belang). Only respondents opting for one of these parties in both waves are retained, which results in a final sample of 1,029 voters. This also means that undecided voters are excluded from the analyses. Only 5 per cent of the respondents who participated in both waves were undecided in the pre-electoral wave.

*Education* is our main independent variable. Voters were divided into three education categories. Lower education voters either have no education degree or only an elementary school degree. The middle education category consists of those voters who finished their secondary education. Higher educated voters are those who graduated from graduate school or who have a university degree. Our three education categories are thus structured to reflect increases in the number of years of formal education the participants has completed.

The sixth hypothesis predicts that potential gains in congruence would affect whether voters switch party preferences. We measure these potential gains through the *Maximum Congruence Increase* variable. It assesses the difference in opinion congruence between the preferred party in wave 1 and the maximally congruent party in wave 2[7], taking into account a voter's (potentially changed) wave 2 policy positions. In other words, this variable measures the size of the maximum leap forward in opinion congruence that a voter can achieve by switching parties.

All our analyses control for a voter's *age, gender, income, region, political interest, and partisanship* (whether a voter felt connected to a specific party). Finally, we include a

[7] Both measures of opinion congruence used here measure absolute opinion congruence.

dummy variable indicating whether a respondent has participated in the online VAA where the party positions where shown. **Table 1** presents descriptive statistics for all variables.

[Table 1 about here]

A final note about the 2014 Belgian election campaign is in order. The elections for the national, regional, and European parliaments coincided, and this led to a campaign with a lot of substantive policy information. Several VAAs were developed, drawing ample attention to parties' policy positions. Media outlets, along with university experts, made detailed calculations as to the exact costs and benefits of the respective party manifestos. The often-technical intricacies of the party programs were discussed at length in the newspapers. As this campaign was particularly focused on policies, it is a good case to examine whether policy information actually affects voters' behavior and inspires them to make more congruent party choices.

## *4. RESULTS*

Our first hypothesis holds that there would be changes in the level of average opinion congruence over time; due to a general information effect of the campaign, we expect voters to have moved closer to their most preferred party during the campaign. **Table 2** (below) presents the bivariate evidence, which confirms our expectation.

[Table 2 about here]

Across the board, voters moved closer to the best-fitting party. The effect is small, however; on average, voters moved only 0.9 percentage points closer to the most congruent party on offer, and the statistical significance of this change is marginal ($p \leq .10$). Thus, all other factors being equal, a campaign like the 2014 Belgian one does not seem to have boosted opinion congruence all that much. While the evidence lends some support to H1, we are only able to

confirm it with caution. However—and we come back to this below—the congruence benefits of the campaign were not evenly spread across education categories. Only the higher educated seem to have profited from the campaign information: They boosted their opinion congruence by 3.6 percentage points, while lower and middle educated voters did not experience significant opinion congruence shifts. As a side note, Table 2 suggests that overall, both before and after the 2014 Belgian campaign, opinion congruence levels were quite high, hovering around 80 per cent across the three education groups. Most voters planned to, and actually did, vote for a party that represented them fairly effectively.

Our second hypothesis predicts that the higher educated would display a higher degree of opinion congruence before the start of the campaign. **Table 3** presents the results of the two models predicting *W1 Opinion Congruence*. Controlling for *Political Interest* and other control variables, none of which are significant, the results for the second model confirm the existence of unequal opinion congruence levels before the campaign began. Although the initial opinion congruence difference between lower and higher educated voters is small (see Table 2 above: 78.5 per cent versus 82.7 per cent), it is statistically significant ($p \leq .05$). The disparities between lower and middle educated voters, and between middle and higher educated voters is not statistically significant (model not depicted in the table). Nonetheless, as the difference between lower and higher educated voters is significant, we conclude that H2 can be corroborated.

Note that a rather small congruence gap at the start of the campaign (see Table 2), combined with the slight increase in that gap during the campaign (see Table 3), suggests that in the long period *between* elections, the opinion congruence gap between higher and lower educated voters does not further increase; it fact, it may begin to decline. To test this hypothesis, however, longitudinal legislature-spanning panel data would be necessary.

[Table 3 about here]

We now examine whether in addition to their advantageous position before the campaign, the higher educated were also able to increase their congruence advantage during the campaign relative to lower educated voters. **Table 4** models the effect of schooling on changes in opinion congruence during the campaign. Our expectation that lower educated voters would see their relative position deteriorate during the campaign is supported by the analysis. Controlling for political interest and other control variables, none of which reach conventional levels of significance, the difference in opinion congruence between higher and lower educated voters further increased during the campaign; the gap grew by an average of 3.5 percentage points during the 2014 Belgian campaign. This effect seems small, but is statistically significant. The gap in the size of the opinion congruence increase widens even further when we look at middle educated voters. Here, the average difference with higher educated voters is 5.4 percentage points; we have no ready explanation for that finding. In sum, changes in opinion congruence during an electoral campaign may be subject to a Matthew effect: Those who already were more congruent before the campaign manage to further increase their congruence during the campaign. Thus, H3 can be maintained.

[Table 4 about here]

The next three hypotheses touch upon the role of education in party switching: Higher educated voters are expected to switch party more often (H4), to switch more effectively from a congruence perspective (H5), and to switch more often for congruence-enhancing reasons (H6). Therefore, the next analysis has a different dependent variable: *Party Change*. **Table 5** reports the results of a logistic regression predicting party switches during the campaign. That analysis examines whether the higher educated switched parties more frequently during the 2014 campaign than did the lower educated; thus, it compared these groups' loyalty to their initial party choices. This appears to be the case. The lower educated were more likely to maintain their initial party choice. Among the higher educated, 26 per cent switched their

party preference during the campaign, while this figure is only 20 per cent among middle educated voters and 16 per cent among lower educated voters. In addition, those voters with a high level of political interest switched parties less frequently, and the same applies to older voters and voters who feel connected to a specific party (*Partisanship*). Thus, H4 is supported by the data.

[Table 5 about here]

The next step consists of asking whether the higher educated were more likely than the lower educated to increase their opinion congruence when switching parties. In other words, we examine whether high educated voters were "better" party switchers, as H5 predicts. With H7, we rely on the same expectation for the position switch mechanism. This hypothesis predicts that higher educated voters do switch positions better; that positions shifts bring them closer to their preferred party. The evidence used to test both hypotheses is presented in **Table 6**, and neither receives support from the data.

The table contains three models predicting pre- versus post-campaign opinion congruence. The first model is a direct effects model including *Party Change* and *Position Change*. The next two models include terms for the interaction between *Party Change* and *Education*, and *Position Change* and *Education* (lower half of the table). A positive and significant interaction coefficient would have been proof that from an opinion congruence perspective, the higher educated utilize party (H5) or position switch (H7) mechanisms more successfully. With regards to the interaction between party switching and higher education (*Higher education*Party Change*), the coefficient (B=-5.53) in the second model is not significant. When we calculate the marginal effects, we find that both lower and higher educated voters increased their opinion congruence when changing parties (8% and 7%, respectively). As they both used party switching in a similar, congruence-enhancing way, party switching cannot explain why during the campaign, higher educated voters increased

their opinion congruence to a greater extent than did lower educated voters. Thus, we have to reject H5. It is *not* the case that the higher educated switched more frequently to more congruent parties as compared to lower educated voters. Rather, they simply switched *more*, not *better*. When higher educated and lower educated voters switch parties, they both get it right to about the same extent.

In model 3, we examine the interaction between education and position switching in order to test H7, and the results reveal that the coefficient for *Higher education*Position Change* (B=9.85) is positive but not significant. Therefore, we cannot conclude that the policy stance changes of the higher educated brought about larger congruence increases than did those of lower or middle educated voters. Consequently, H7 is likewise rejected. In sum, higher educated voters did not seem to have used the two mechanisms for increasing their opinion congruence more effectively.

[Table 6 about here]

Thus far, we have established that, first of all, electoral campaigns do not close the pre-campaign opinion congruence gap between lower and higher educated voters. Rather, they increase it. Second, this happens because higher educated voters change their party preferences more often. They do not, however, use the party change mechanism more effectively than do lower educated voters. The question remaining is consequently *why* the higher educated switch parties more often and how this is related to opinion congruence. Our sixth hypothesis states that higher educated voters switch parties more often exactly *because* they realize that their positions are not in line with those of their preferred party and because they think they can increase their congruence by switching allegiances. The models presented in **Table 7** (below) directly test this expectation. The dependent variable is *Party Change,* and the key independent variable in the two models is the *Maximum Congruence Increas*e (i.e., the maximum size of the leap forward in opinion congruence that a voter could realize by

switching parties during the campaign, keeping his or her preferences constant). If our hypothesis is correct, we would expect there to be a positive and significant interaction effect between the variables *Maximum Congruence Increase* and *Education* in the second model in Table 7.

[Table 7 about here]

The evidence confirms H6. The interaction coefficient for *Maximum Congruence Increase*Higher education* (B=0.06) is significant and has a significant effect on party switching. The higher educated were more sensitive to the potential gains in opinion congruence available to them, which led them to switch parties more often. A higher level of opinion congruence not only appeared to be a likely *consequence* of their more frequent party switching but also to *drive* their party switching. Figure 1 (below) represents the interaction effect in the form of predicted probabilities. The effect of education is strikingly clear. The higher educated (the dark grey, steeper upward-sloping line) are *much* more sensitive to potential gains in opinion congruence as compared to the lower educated and the middle educated (the flatter light grey and black lines, respectively).

[Figure 1 about here]

## *5. Conclusion*

By bringing together work on opinion congruence and campaign effects, we demonstrated for, as far as we know, the first time that opinion congruence actually evolves during a campaign, at least for the highly educated. Drawing on novel data covering numerous policy positions from the 2014 Belgian national election campaign, we found that the average voter, by switching parties in the course of the campaign, moved slightly closer to the party for which he or she eventually voted. Position switching during the campaign did not seem to matter; it

did not affect the degree of opinion congruence. During the campaign, some voters seemed to have learned about their own positions, those of the participating parties, and the match between both; some drew behavioral conclusions from that knowledge and changed their party preference. All in all, however, the campaign effect on opinion congruence was small.

We integrated a third literature strand, that addressing inequality in representation, and explored potential gaps in opinion congruence between lower and higher educated voters. The lower educated displayed a slightly lower level of opinion congruence as early as the beginning of the campaign, and the opinion congruence gap between lower and higher educated voters only widened as the campaign progressed. The aggregate increase in opinion congruence resulting from the campaign was explained by examining the higher educated voters; they were the only ones to profit from the campaign. The reason was that the lower educated were less volatile; they were more likely to remain loyal to their initially preferred party and thus missed the opportunity to further their opinion congruence by shifting to another party, as the higher educated did. The lower educated who *did* switch parties, however, managed to increase their congruence by an equally strong degree, and they were equally successful in picking a more congruent party. Nevertheless, since they switched less frequently, as a group, their average level of congruence, relative to that of the higher educated, diminished. Additionally, we presented evidence that the higher educated are much more sensitive to opinion *in*congruence cues than are the lower educated; the higher educated switched parties precisely to increase their congruence with the party for which they eventually cast a ballot. In sum, our results suggest a dynamic model of campaign effects, whereby the search to maximize one's party opinion fit motivates voter changes. However, this congruence-maximizing model of voter change only applies to the higher educated.

Our findings raise important normative questions. Is it a problem that in contrast to higher educated voters, lower educated voters' party preferences have a weaker relationship

with their policy preferences and that this trend does not change during a campaign? Knowing that the lower educated are probably also less informed, the answer may be "no." Yet, a potential consequence of the education gap in opinion congruence may be the skewing of public policy towards the preferences of higher educated voters. From a democratic perspective, our conclusion that an electoral campaign may exacerbate, rather than reduce, differences in opinion congruence is a rather pessimistic one (Dahl, 1989; Page & Shapiro, 1992). Others will argue that the underrepresentation of the preferences of the ill-informed—as far as we can equate the lower educated with the ill-informed—is not precarious for democracy if it means that voters' input into the political system comes primarily from better-informed voters. Yet, there is a wide consensus that politics should advance the general interest. It is, however, uncertain whether following the policy preferences of better-informed (higher educated) groups actually leads to the pursuit of the general interest, rather than to the pursuit of the interests of these specific social groups.

Still, some of our results suggest an optimistic outlook for democracy. For example, the finding that the lower educated, *when* changing parties, make similarly effective choices as do the higher educated, suggests that campaigns do indeed provide useful information for the lower educated (the only problem is that these voters are less likely to use that information to consider a party switch).

Although we think our evidence to be novel and our findings compelling, the study clearly has limitations. First, from a technical perspective, our study provided only a first glance at opinion congruence inequalities. We did not cluster our statements in broader dimensions, for example, nor did we examine whether our general findings were robust across dimensions. Additionally, we did not take into account the level of media attention for the different policy proposals, although the degree of media coverage could have partially explained differences across the 23 policies that we studied. In other words, utilizing more

refined analyses and disaggregating the evidence to the statement level may have led to additional insights. Our aim here was to look for the general pattern across policies. Furthermore, changes in opinion congruence during a campaign could also be moderated by party characteristics, while this study only examined voter characteristics. In addition, while the information made available during the campaign constitutes the most likely explanation for our findings—we spoke of a "campaign effect"—we did not find definitive proof of a causal relation.

Second, our models only explained a limited portion of the variance in our dependent variables. There are undoubtedly numerous other factors related to changes in opinion congruence and capable of explaining why voters change their party preferences and policy positions during a campaign. However, it was not the aim of this study to develop an encompassing model of these outcome variables. Instead, we focused on the role of a specific predictor variable: a voter's education level. We demonstrated that education mattered, but the effects were modest.

Third, and probably most importantly, we concentrated on a single election in a single country, raising the question of whether our results can be generalized to other countries and other campaigns. We are not sure that a study in another country would generate the exact same results, but we are confident that the approach proposed in this paper is widely applicable. The 2014 campaign in Belgium was particularly information-dense and technical, which may have caused the lower educated to lag behind and may have generated the identified Matthew effect. Yet, one could argue that most policy information is, by definition, complex—it is definitely more complicated and intellectually challenging than the more intuitive information concerning the personalities of candidates. As a consequence, the opinion congruence gap across education groups may grow (rather than shrink) during campaigns, and this may also be true for other countries and campaigns. Whether these

changes are larger or smaller in other countries remains to be seen and probably depends on both country- and campaign-specific features. For example, Belgium has a fragmented party system. This arrangement increases the average information cost for voters seeking to gain knowledge about the policy positions of the many parties on the ballot. This task may be more easily accomplished by lower educated voters in less complex and less crowded party systems. Furthermore, voting is compulsory in Belgium, leading to a relatively high level of electoral participation among the lower educated. In other countries, people experiencing high levels of opinion incongruence may decide to not participate in elections at all, which is less the case in Belgium. This factor also complicates attempts to generalize our results to other countries.

In conclusion, we do not claim that our exact results are simply generalizable to other contexts. Nonetheless, the approach and explanations suggested in this paper may offer a useful way to start thinking more systematically about opinion congruence dynamics during campaigns, as well as about the inequality this may entail. We believe that we have presented an approach that can contribute to our understanding of opinion congruence dynamics, campaign effects, and representational inequality.

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**Table 1: Descriptives of variables**

| | Mean | S.D. | Min. | Max. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| W1 Opinion Congruence (%) | 80.9 | 16 | 32.4 | 100 |
| W2 Opinion Congruence (%) | 81.8 | 16.8 | 24.1 | 100 |
| W2-W1 Opinion Congruence Change (%) | 0.9 | 18.2 | -54.2 | 61.9 |
| Party Change (no (0) – yes (1)) | 0.23 | 0.42 | 0 | 1 |
| Position Change (% of policy statements) | 0.24 | 0.11 | 0 | 0.71 |
| Education (low (1) – high (3)) | 2 | 0.8 | 1 | 3 |
| Gender (male (0) – female (1)) | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0 | 1 |
| Age (years) | 49.6 | 17 | 18 | 84 |
| Income (lowest decile (1) – highest decile (10)) | 5.6 | 2.5 | 1 | 10 |
| Region (Flanders (0) - Wallonia (1)) | 0.4 | 0.5 | 0 | 1 |
| Political Interest (low (0) – high (10)) | 5.2 | 2.8 | 0 | 10 |
| Maximum Congruence Increase (%) | 12.9 | 12.3 | 0 | 60.5 |
| Time between Waves (days) | 52 | 17.2 | 9 | 98 |
| VAA participation (no (0) – yes (1)) | 0.23 | 0.42 | 0 | 1 |
| Partisanship (no (0) – yes (1)) | 0.69 | 0.46 | 0 | 1 |

**Table 2: Changes in voter-party opinion congruence, by education level**

| | All voters | Lower education | Middle education | Higher education |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Before the campaign | 80.9% | 78.5% | 81.2% | 82.7% |
| On election day | 81.8% | 79.1% | 79.9% | 86.3% |
| Difference | 0.9% | 0.6% | -1.3% | 3.6% |
| N | 1,029 | 272 | 346 | 411 |
| Statistical significance | $p \leq 0.10$ | n.s. | n.s. | $p \leq 0.001$ |

**Table 3: Opinion congruence before the campaign and the effect of education**

| | | W1 Opinion Congruence (Bivariate model) | | | W1 Opinion Congruence (Full model) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | S.E. | Sig. | B | S.E. | Sig. |
| Education | Lower (ref. cat.) | — | | | — | | |
| | Middle | 2.63 | (1.39) | | 2.14 | (1.38) | |
| | Higher | 4.18 | (1.34) | ** | 3.32 | (1.44) | * |
| Gender | Men (ref. cat.) | | | | — | | |
| | Women | | | | -1.84 | (1.09) | |
| Age | | | | | 0.01 | (0.03) | |
| Income | | | | | 0.35 | (0.22) | |
| Region | Flanders (ref. cat.) | | | | — | | |
| | Wallonia | | | | -0.96 | (1.10) | |
| Political Interest | | | | | -0.06 | (0.20) | |
| Partisanship | | | | | 0.25 | (1.19) | |
| Constant | | 78.53 | (1.08) | *** | 80.94 | (3.39) | *** |
| N | | 1,029 | | | 1,029 | | |
| $R^2$ | | 1.13% | | | 1.80% | | |

Note: OLS regression; * = $p \leq .05$; ** = $p \leq .01$; ***= $p \leq .001$

**Table 4: Change in opinion congruence through the campaign and the effect of education**

| | | W2-W1 Opinion Congruence Change | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | S.E. | Sig. |
| Education | Lower (ref. cat.) | — | | |
| | Middle | -1.93 | (1.63) | |
| | Higher | 3.50 | (1.69) | * |
| Gender | Men (ref. cat.) | — | | |
| | Women | -0.38 | (1.20) | |
| Age | | -0.03 | (0.04) | |
| Income | | -0.44 | (0.26) | |
| Region | Flanders (ref. cat.) | — | | |
| | Wallonia | -2.01 | (1.31) | |
| Political Interest | | 0.49 | (0.25) | |
| Time between Waves | | 0.03 | (0.04) | |
| VAA participation | | -1.14 | (1.43) | |
| Partisanship | | -0.18 | (1.43) | |
| Constant | | 3.96 | (4.36) | |
| N | | | 1,029 | |
| Adj. $R^2$ | | | 2.32% | |

Note: OLS regression; * = $p \leq .05$; ** = $p \leq .01$; ***= $p \leq .001$

**Table 5: Party change and the effect of education**

| | | Party Change | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | S.E. | Sig. |
| Education | Lower (ref. cat.) | — | | |
| | Middle | 0.22 | (0.24) | |
| | Higher | 0.60 | (0.24) | * |
| Gender | Men (ref. cat.) | — | | |
| | Women | 0.17 | (0.17) | |
| Age | | -0.01 | (0.00) | ** |
| Income | | 0.02 | (0.03) | |
| Region | Flanders (ref. cat.) | — | | |
| | Wallonia | -0.20 | (0.17) | |
| Political Interest | | -0.08 | (0.03) | *** |
| Time between Waves | | 0.01 | (0.00) | |
| VAA participation | | -0.23 | (0.20) | |
| Partisanship | | -0.84 | (0.17) | *** |
| Constant | | -0.27 | (0.62) | |
| N | | 1,029 | | |
| pseudo $R^2$ | | 6.75% | | |

Note: Logistic regression; * = p ≤ .05; ** = p ≤ .01; ***= p ≤ .001

**Table 6: Change in opinion congruence through the campaign and the combined effect of education, position change and party change**

| | | Direct effects model | | | Interaction model (Party Change) | | | Interaction model (Position Change) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | S.E. | Sig. | B | S.E. | Sig. | B | S.E. | Sig. |
| Education | Lower (ref. cat.) | — | | | — | | | — | | |
| | Middle | -2.13 | (1.61) | | -0.33 | (1.64) | | -2.87 | (3.92) | |
| | Higher | 2.98 | (1.67) | | 3.88 | (1.68) | * | 0.69 | (3.77) | |
| Gender | Men (ref. cat.) | — | | | — | | | — | | |
| | Women | -0.46 | (1.20) | | -0.22 | (1.21) | | -0.43 | (1.20) | |
| Age | | -0.02 | (0.04) | | -0.02 | (0.04) | | -0.02 | (0.04) | |
| Income | | -0.47 | (0.27) | | -0.47 | (0.26) | | -0.47 | (0.27) | |
| Region | Flanders (ref. cat.) | — | | | — | | | — | | |
| | Wallonia | -1.83 | (1.30) | | -1.67 | (1.30) | | -1.84 | (1.30) | |
| Party Change | | 3.88 | (1.79) | * | 9.34 | (3.80) | * | 3.83 | (1.79) | |
| Position Change | | -3.57 | (6.27) | | -3.77 | (6.22) | | -7.29 | (12.39) | |
| Political Interest | | 0.54 | (0.25) | * | 0.54 | (0.24) | * | 0.53 | (0.25) | * |
| Time between Waves | | 0.03 | (0.04) | | 0.03 | (0.04) | | 0.03 | (0.04) | |
| VAA participation | | -1.01 | (1.44) | | -0.84 | (1.44) | | -0.94 | (1.42) | |
| Partisanship | | 0.40 | (1.43) | | 0.36 | (1.42) | | 0.42 | (1.42) | |
| Interaction terms: | | | | | | | | | | |
| Lower education*Party Change (ref.cat.) | | | | | — | | | | | |
| Middle education*Party Change | | | | | -9.27 | (4.82) | | | | |
| Higher education*Party Change | | | | | -5.53 | (4.66) | | | | |
| Lower education*Position Change (ref.cat.) | | | | | | | | — | | |
| Middle education*Position Change | | | | | | | | 2.61 | (15.29) | |
| Higher education*Position Change | | | | | | | | 9.85 | (15.43) | |
| Constant | | 3.16 | (4.73) | | 1.62 | (4.73) | | 4.08 | (5.40) | |
| N | | 1,029 | | | 1,029 | | | 1,029 | | |
| Adj. $R^2$ | | 3.10% | | | 3.78% | | | 3.16% | | |

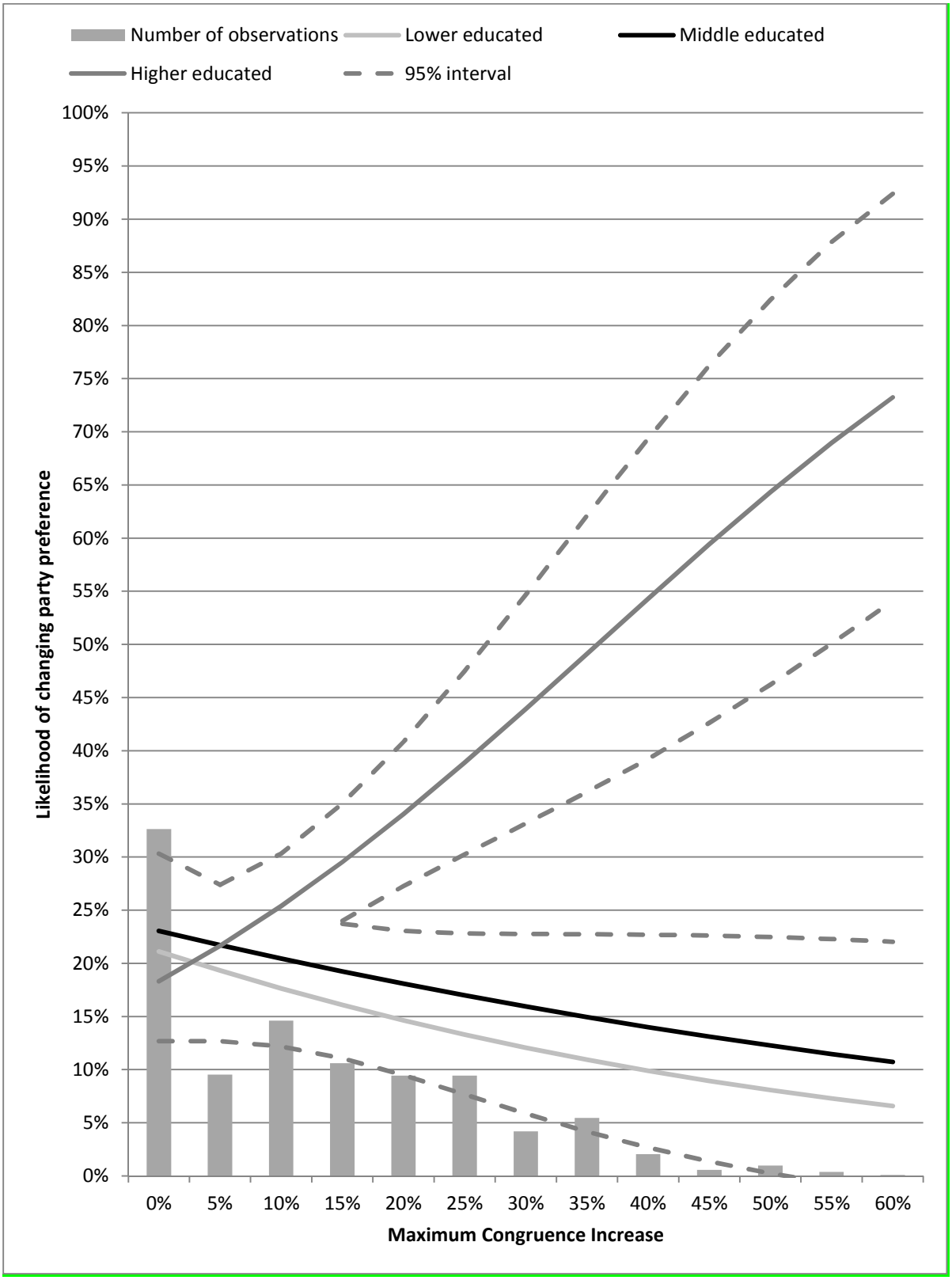
Note: OLS regression; * = p ≤ .05; ** = p ≤ .01; ***= p ≤ .001

**Table 7: Party change and the combined effect of education and maximum congruence increase**

| | | Direct effects model | | | Interaction effects model | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | S.E. | Sig. | B | S.E. | Sig. |
| Education | Lower (ref. cat.) | — | | | — | | |
| | Middle | 0.22 | (0.24) | | 0.11 | (0.33) | |
| | Higher | 0.61 | (0.24) | * | -0.18 | (0.32) | |
| Gender | Men (ref. cat.) | — | | | — | | |
| | Women | 0.17 | (0.17) | | 0.20 | (0.17) | |
| Age | | -0.01 | (0.01) | ** | -0.01 | (0.01) | ** |
| Income | | 0.02 | (0.04) | | 0.02 | (0.04) | |
| Region | Flanders (ref. cat.) | — | | | — | | |
| | Wallonia | -0.21 | (0.17) | | -0.16 | (0.17) | |
| Maximum Congruence Increase | | 0.00 | (0.01) | | -0.02 | (0.01) | |
| Maximum Congruence Increase*Lower education (ref. cat.) | | | | | — | | |
| Maximum Congruence Increase*Middle education | | | | | 0.01 | (0.02) | |
| Maximum Congruence Increase*Higher education | | | | | 0.06 | (0.02) | *** |
| Political Interest | | -0.08 | (0.03) | *** | -0.09 | (0.03) | *** |
| Time between Waves | | 0.01 | (0.00) | | 0.01 | (0.00) | |
| VAA participation | | -0.23 | (0.20) | | -0.29 | (0.20) | |
| Partisanship | | -0.85 | (0.17) | *** | -0.86 | (0.17) | *** |
| Constant | | -0.30 | (0.63) | | -0.03 | (0.63) | |
| N | | 1,029 | | | 1,029 | | |
| Pseudo $R^2$ | | 6.76% | | | 8.50% | | |

Note: logistic regression; * = $p \leq .05$; ** = $p \leq .01$; ***= $p \leq .001$

**Figure 1: Likelihood of party change and the combined effect of education and maximum congruence increase**



## Appendix

### Table A1: List of all policy statements

| Statement | % of lower educated voters congruent on the statement (W1) | % of higher educated voters congruent on the statement (W2) | % of lower educated voters congruent on the statement (W2) | % of higher educated voters congruent on the statement (W2) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The federal government should sell its shares in Belgacom | 54.34% | 48.20% | 53.82% | 61.09% |
| Big capital should be taxed more | 62.09% | 56.30% | 61.87% | 65.66% |
| The President of the European Commission should be directly elected by the European voters | 40.09% | 39.65% | 49.44% | 57.52% |
| Flanders should become an independent state | 81.67% | 73.16% | 84.36% | 82.70% |
| The voting age should be lowered to 16 years old | 64.69% | 63.66% | 51.27% | 56.18% |
| An asylum seeker who arrived as a minor cannot be sent back | 54.53% | 51.62% | 54.20% | 55.42% |
| The expenditure of the federal government should not increase in the coming years | 52.77% | 53.55% | 59.93% | 63.56% |
| The government should more fiscally encourage retirement savings | 38.92% | 43.66% | 44.20% | 51.63% |
| The speed limit on the Brussels ring road should be reduced to 100 km per hour | 37.09% | 34.33% | 48.23% | 48.07% |
| All nuclear weapons stored on Belgian territory should be removed | 69.13% | 71.64% | 59.27% | 62.93% |
| We should keep using nuclear power plants | 53.22% | 56.89% | 57.77% | 62.58% |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A mother must be able to anonymously give up her child for adoption | 49.48% | 49.11% | 51.31% | 51.71% |
| If the railways are on strike, there should be minimum service | 57.46% | 63.45% | 71.40% | 77.89% |
| Wages should be frozen if they are rising faster than in neighboring countries | 62.03% | 59.10% | 63.34% | 60.04% |
| The Belgian army must invest in a successor to the F-16 fighter | 43.05% | 49.85% | 46.20% | 51.46% |
| It should be legally prohibited for parents to spank their children | 49.38% | 52.94% | 49.91% | 51.41% |
| Illegal downloading is to be treated more harshly | 44.96% | 49.70% | 49.81% | 52.02% |
| All prisoners should serve their sentences in full | 46.22% | 56.85% | 58.70% | 65.19% |
| The minimum age for GAS fines should be higher than the current age of 14 | 45.70% | 44.87% | 55.66% | 50.50% |
| People who invest their money instead of saving it must be fiscally rewarded | 61.02% | 67.35% | 62.34% | 63.98% |
| Belgium should allow migrants from outside the EU to cope with labor shortages | 38.64% | 48.53% | 54.89% | 59.52% |
| Company vehicles must be taxed more heavily | 44.94% | 49.55% | 58.29% | 56.30% |
| Living wage beneficiaries should be required to perform community work | 53.81% | 61.99% | 65.28% | 65.53% |

**Table A2: Changes in absolute voter-party opinion congruence, by education level**

| | All voters | Lower education | Middle education | Higher education |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Before the campaign | 54.9% | 52.7% | 54.9% | 57.0% |
| On election day | 55.7% | 53.0% | 54.0% | 59.8% |
| Difference | 0.8% | 0.3% | -0.9% | 2.8% |
| N | 1,029 | 272 | 346 | 411 |
| Statistical significance | $p \leq 0.05$ | n.s. | n.s. | $p \leq 0.001$ |

**Table A3: Absolute opinion congruence before the campaign and the effect of education**

| | | W1 Opinion Congruence (Bivariate model) | | | W1 Opinion Congruence (Full model) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | S.E. | Sig. | B | S.E. | Sig. |
| Education | Lower (ref. cat.) | — | | | — | | |
| | Middle | 2.27 | (0.99) | * | 1.83 | (0.99) | |
| | Higher | 4.36 | (0.98) | *** | 3.47 | (1.06) | *** |
| Gender | Men (ref. cat.) | | | | — | | |
| | Women | | | | -0.48 | (0.80) | |
| Age | | | | | -0.01 | (0.02) | |
| Income | | | | | 0.24 | (0.16) | |
| Region | Flanders (ref. cat.) | | | | — | | |
| | Wallonia | | | | 0.43 | (0.82) | |
| Political Interest | | | | | 0.10 | (0.16) | |
| Partisanship | | | | | 0.16 | (0.87) | |
| Constant | | 52.65 | (0.76) | *** | 51.55 | (2.42) | *** |
| N | | | 1,029 | | | 1,029 | |
| $R^2$ | | | 2.18% | | | 2.57% | |

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

**Table A4: Change in absolute opinion congruence through the campaign and the effect of education**

| | | W2-W1 Opinion Congruence Change | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | S.E. | Sig. |
| Education | Lower (ref. cat.) | — | | |
| | Middle | -1.11 | (1.11) | |
| | Higher | 2.89 | (1.16) | * |
| Gender | Men (ref. cat.) | — | | |
| | Women | -1.47 | (0.83) | |
| Age | | 0.00 | (0.03) | |
| Income | | -0.19 | (0.18) | |
| Region | Flanders (ref. cat.) | — | | |
| | Wallonia | -0.46 | (0.89) | |
| Political Interest | | 0.19 | (0.18) | |
| Time between Waves | | 0.03 | (0.02) | |
| VAA participation | | -0.60 | (0.95) | |
| Partisanship | | -0.11 | (0.99) | |
| Constant | | 1.81 | (2.77) | |
| N | | 1,029 | | |
| Adj. $R^2$ | | 2.39% | | |

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

**Table A5: Change in opinion congruence through the campaign and the combined effect of education, position change and party change**

| | | Direct effects model | | | Interaction model (Party Change) | | | Interaction model (Position Change) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | B | S.E. | Sig. | B | S.E. | Sig. | B | S.E. | Sig. |
| Education | Lower (ref. cat.) | — | | | — | | | — | | |
| | Middle | -1.15 | (1.10) | | 0.12 | (1.12) | | -2.38 | (2.46) | |
| | Higher | 2.74 | (1.15) | * | 3.38 | (1.19) | ** | 0.76 | (2.34) | |
| Gender | Men (ref. cat.) | — | | | — | | | — | | |
| | Women | -1.55 | (0.83) | | -1.38 | (0.83) | | -1.51 | (0.83) | |
| Age | | 0.01 | (0.03) | | 0.01 | (0.03) | | 0.01 | (0.03) | |
| Income | | -0.19 | (0.18) | | -0.18 | (0.18) | | -0.18 | (0.18) | |
| Region | Flanders (ref. cat.) | — | | | — | | | — | | |
| | Wallonia | -0.41 | (0.89) | | -0.29 | (0.89) | | -0.40 | (0.90) | |
| Party Change | | 2.29 | (1.22) | | 6.13 | (2.31) | *** | 2.25 | (1.22) | |
| Position Change | | 1.57 | (3.94) | | 1.43 | (3.91) | | -2.40 | (6.84) | |
| Political Interest | | 0.22 | (0.18) | | 0.22 | (0.18) | | 0.21 | (0.18) | |
| Time between Waves | | 0.02 | (0.02) | | 0.02 | (0.02) | | 0.02 | (0.02) | |
| VAA participation | | -0.50 | (0.96) | | -0.38 | (0.95) | | -0.46 | (0.96) | |
| Partisanship | | 0.26 | (0.99) | | 0.22 | (0.99) | | 0.26 | (0.99) | |
| Interaction terms: | | | | | | | | | | |
| Lower education*Party Change (ref.cat.) | | | | | — | | | | | |
| Middle education*Party Change | | | | | -6.49 | (3.12) | * | | | |
| Higher education*Party Change | | | | | -3.91 | (2.95) | | | | |
| Lower education*Position Change (ref.cat.) | | | | | | | | — | | |
| Middle education*Position Change | | | | | | | | 4.71 | (9.70) | |
| Higher education*Position Change | | | | | | | | 8.30 | (9.42) | |
| Constant | | 0.49 | (3.03) | | -0.60 | (3.01) | | 1.43 | (3.25) | |
| N | | | 1,029 | | | 1,029 | | | 1,029 | |
| Adj. $R^2$ | | | 2.95% | | | 3.36% | | | 3.03% | |

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