



Christina J. Schneider. 2018. *The Responsive Union: National Elections and European Governance*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

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The recent waves of nationalist backlash against institutionalized international cooperation have revived debates about the democratic quality of policy making beyond the nation state. To what extent and under which conditions does international cooperation reflect the interests of the wider citizenry? Christina Schneider's book on strategic responsiveness in the European Union (EU) offers a timely, encompassing, and extremely compelling contribution to these debates.

The book starts from a decidedly intergovernmental perspective on policy making in the most developed governance system beyond the nation state. For Schneider the 'basic requirement for democratic legitimacy is that the member governments are responsive to their citizens when they cooperate in the EU' (9). This propels her to analyse the strategic situation these governments face. Based on encompassing descriptive evidence, Chapter 2 highlights increasing electoral volatility as well as increasing public politicization of EU affairs as key context conditions. Electoral volatility, on the one hand, incentivizes governments to engage in what Schneider calls 'electioneering,' i.e., visibly demonstrating policy responsiveness to their constituencies especially when elections are close – both in terms of time and in terms of outcome. EU politicization, on the other hand, incentivizes governments to employ electioneering in European decisions as well. Given that voters are increasingly aware of how the EU limits unilateral governmental action, electoral accountability concerns should also affect the EU's prime intergovernmental policy-making fora – the Council of Ministers and the European Council.

Schneider then develops her theoretical argument through a model of domestic political competition in which governments primarily care about the median voter of their coalition and possibly swing voters. This is combined with a model of intergovernmental negotiations that emphasizes structural power asymmetries in the Council, but also stresses a logic of repeated and thus cooperative bargaining. When elections are close, the argument suggests, governments would take a position mirroring the

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preferences of their key constituencies to then visibly defend this position throughout the intergovernmental bargaining process. The ultimate goal of these strategies is to reach a European policy that governments can claim credit for in front of their domestic audiences. If the distribution of preferences in the Council prohibits such an outcome, posturing or strategic delays into the post-election period become the second-best options. Notably, the model allows for ‘hidden cooperation’ in which like-minded governments may offer concessions or at least delays in return for similar favours in the future.

The book then triangulates this cascade of strategic options with an impressive amount of empirical information. Schneider initially validates a key assumption of her claims: a well-controlled conjoint survey experiment shows that voters would indeed reward position-taking, position-defending, and especially outcome responsiveness of European negotiations at the domestic ballot box. Two subsequent chapters then focus on budgetary decision-making in the EU. Quantitative time series analyses initially show that governments facing a domestic election receive a robustly higher share of the annual EU budget. This effect is amplified for governments under higher electoral pressure – as proxied by unemployment and electoral uncertainty – and is dampened by a limited scope of ‘hidden cooperation’ in the Council – as proxied by ideological divergence measures and the number of simultaneous elections in other countries. What is more, achieving higher budget shares has modest yet robustly positive effects on governments’ domestic approval rates. Complementing this aggregate picture, the book offers an in-depth process-tracing study of the negotiations about the EU’s multiannual financial framework 2007–13. The qualitative evidence on the interaction between Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder, later Angela Merkel, and Jacques Chirac reads like a diplomatic thriller and illustrates the position-taking, position-defending, and delay strategies extremely vividly.

Beyond budgetary policy – a most likely case for Schneider’s argument due to its zero-sum nature and its easy-to-communicate outcomes – the book pushes further to cover legislative bargaining as well. Chapter 7 exploits the 125 policies covered by the DEU data and shows that governments facing an election are much more likely to stick to their original position on individual issues during bargaining. Strikingly, these governments also tend to get better outcomes. Apparently, electoral pressures induce them to incur the costs of violating the consensus norm that usually prevails in Council negotiations. The final two empirical chapters then zoom in on strategic delays. Time-varying survival models of the duration of 14,396 legislative negotiations highlight that domestic elections significantly dampen the likelihood that a European law gets adopted. The throw of this ‘legislative tide’ also appears to be moderated by the electoral uncertainty that individual governments face. Chapter 9 contextualizes this aggregate pattern with a case study on the dramatically failed German attempts to delay the highly unpopular bailout measures for Greece. Here Schneider again vividly carves out the electoral costs of failing to signal responsiveness in intergovernmental negotiations.

In sum, Schneider’s encompassing work demonstrates that strategic signals of responsiveness are very important for understanding the products and processes of intergovernmental decision-making in the EU. Beyond this welcomed substantial contribution the book also features several more abstract qualities that deserve mentioning. Christina Schneider initially situates her work extremely well in

different literatures from comparative politics, EU studies, as well as international cooperation and bargaining theory – thus indicating the rather broad audiences for which this book is relevant. She skillfully combines core building blocks from these literatures into what is a prime example for parsimonious, elegant, and easy-to-follow deductive reasoning. The book then employs a very broad methodological repertoire to cover the causal chain as exhaustively as possible. Throughout these efforts, the reader receives useful primers on the intricacies of EU policy-making. Thus, the material is accessible also for non-EU experts and will be useful in the classroom. And Christina Schneider works through her dense empirical material without losing sight of her key arguments which are evaluated with a first class normative reflection in the end. What is otherwise a rather lofty blurb thus holds true for this book: this is modern political science at its best!

Like any work covering lots of ground, however, the book also provokes pressing follow-up questions. To me, it especially points to a conundrum which also other recent works on the responsiveness of the Council, but also of the European Parliament and the European Commission, have to face: If responsiveness considerations are so important in European cooperation, how can we explain that the narrative of a detached, technocratic, and thus unresponsive EU polity still unfolds so much mobilization potential in the present day and times? Even if one stays firmly within Schneider's theoretical cornerstones, the book offers at least three threads that should be picked up by future research in this regard.

First, it must be noted that *signalling* responsiveness does not necessarily equate responsiveness – in terms of congruence between citizens' preferences and policy substance. This holds especially for strategic delays which the book emphasizes throughout – a point that Schneider also picks up briefly in the final chapter. But it also holds for the triviality of some of the uncovered policy effects which Schneider stresses especially in her two chapters on European budgetary policy. The often implicit assumption that voters cannot see through these tactics is somewhat at odds with the high level of rationality that the theoretical model demands with regard to voters' ability to distinguish credible from incredible signals (Chapter 3). Yet, to the extent that voters repeatedly observe that delays are strategic and that governments forcefully claim credit for only small policy gains, the strategies that the book demonstrates so convincingly might also feed into the view of an unresponsive Union.

Second, the book's limits regarding inferences on the responsiveness of the EU as a whole should be acknowledged. The results indeed demonstrate responsiveness of governments acting within that Union – and by comparing the EU to federal states in the final chapter, Schneider makes a compelling case for why this is normatively important. But note that these governments strive for pleasing the preferences of very specific parts of their domestic constituency only. This means that citizens further away from the median voter of the domestic governing coalition will see their preferences hardly reflected in the strategies that the national government pursues at the European level. And even if all European governments are on average successful in pleasing their specific constituency, the aggregate EU-level outcome might still be systematically biased against the median voter in the European populace.

Third, the national public posturing that Schneider illustrates so vividly in the context of the position-taking and position-defending strategies might have adverse long-term effects for the societal legitimacy of the European integration

project as a whole. Voters repeatedly observing governmental posturing might perceive European cooperation only as a zero-sum game between states. This should induce demands for even more hard-nosed governmental stances in the future. This, in turn, could reduce the intergovernmental bargaining space and adversely affect the cooperative nature of Council negotiations.

These three notes of caution do not undermine Schneider's arguments and encompassing findings about governmental incentives in EU policy-making. But they question whether the feedback loop to citizen support of the EU works as easily as the discussion in the introduction and the 'European republic' chapter suggest. To understand whether the uncovered signals of responsiveness do not only enhance governmental but also the EU's approval rates, we need to learn more about the communication processes that Schneider's model implies. Empirical research could engage more strongly in charting the governmental supply of EU-related messages, their possibly biased reflection in public media (the book delivers thought-provoking anecdotes in this regard), and their effectiveness for public opinion under the condition that governments are not the only actors trying to frame European politics. As such, Schneider's work can be a starting point for a further-reaching research agenda on signalling responsiveness in multi-level governance.

Beyond these future tasks, however, it should be clear that anyone interested in EU politicization, in EU policy and politics, or in intergovernmental negotiations more generally can tremendously benefit from reading this book cover to cover.

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