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ABSTRACT
The European Union (EU) is an unlikely case for responsive policy-making. Yet, in recent years scholars have found that the EU's overall decision-making output is correlated with the average preferences of the European citizens toward European integration. Despite recognizing the value of this systemic approach, we argue in this contribution that studies of EU responsiveness should explicitly acknowledge the multi-dimensionality of responsiveness in the EU by addressing the multiplicity of actors, institutions and publics involved. This *actor-oriented* perspective directs the focus of responsiveness research to the input stage of EU policy-making. This contribution calls for research that a) theoretically situates the responsiveness of actors in specific institutional venues in a broader perspective of multi-dimensional EU responsiveness and that b) empirically links different forms of input responsiveness to one another and to policy outputs.

Introduction

Responsiveness refers to the ability and willingness of political (and bureaucratic) actors to reflect changes in public opinion in their policy-making behaviour (Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Stimson 1991; Stimson *et al*. 1995). While instances of policy responsiveness have been widely established in studies of domestic politics, the European Union (EU) has always been an unlikely case to find responsiveness (Zhelyazkova *et al*. 2019). From the outset, European integration was designed as an elite-driven process shielded from mass politics in order to foster European cooperation on issues that would have been difficult to find agreement on in the context of mass contestation. As such, responding to changing public preferences did not necessarily take precedence in EU policy-making.

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Yet, in recent years scholars have focused on the responsiveness of the EU's overall decision-making output to the average preferences of the European citizens toward European integration (Bølstad 2015; Toshkov 2011). The value of this *systemic approach* lies in its capacity to address questions of democratic responsiveness in a parsimonious way as it directly analyses the extent to which public preferences and policy outcomes are aligned; which is how most observers would intuitively think about responsiveness.

Whereas we see the value of the systemic approach, in this contribution we argue that future research should explicitly acknowledge the multi-dimensionality of responsiveness in the EU by focusing on the multiplicity of actors, institutions, and publics. This focus on specific actors involved in the policy-making process directs our attention to the *input stage of EU policy-making*, both in theoretical and empirical terms (Schneider 2020; Tomz and Van Houweling 2008). Decisions in the European Union are the consequence of the negotiations between various (oftentimes collective) actors on the European and the national level with conflicting preferences over multiple issues. One cannot understand responsiveness in this complex system by treating the EU as a unitary system and the EU's public as a unitary public. The increasing scholarship that focuses on the responsiveness of individual institutions and actors readily demonstrates that responsiveness at the input stage of policy-making may look different from each institutional angle and for each actor (e.g., Hagemann *et al.* 2017; Schneider 2019; van der Veer and Haverland 2018). At the same time, it is important to recognize that the responsiveness of specific actors involved in the EU's policy-making process remains always partial. We argue that studies of responsiveness in the EU should situate the responsiveness of specific actors and institutions and their relations, both theoretically and empirically.

Patterns of responsiveness at the national level also tend to vary by institutional context and by the actors involved (e.g., Binder 1999; Coleman 1999; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Stimson *et al.* 1995; Toshkov *et al.* 2018). Yet, given that the EU's multi-level system is characterized by multiple publics as well as multiple types of actors from a plurality of countries active in different institutional venues, the task of specifying the publics addressed and the actors involved is especially pertinent in the EU context.

There is much to be gained by studying the dynamic relationship between public opinion and crucial political actors in the EU's multi-level system – both at the supranational and the national level – by focusing on input responsiveness in an integrated way. The benefit of the input responsiveness perspective is that it can illuminate the extent to which different policy processes at work in EU decision-making are informed by public preferences. This contribution lays out the dimensions

of responsiveness in EU politics at the input stage of policy-making and calls for research that a) theoretically situates the responsiveness of specific actors in specific institutional venues in a broader perspective of multi-dimensional EU responsiveness and b) empirically links different forms of input responsiveness to one another and to policy outputs. Whereas multiple studies discuss the behaviour of specific EU actors in relation to public preferences, we call for research on the inter-links between different forms of input responsiveness and with policy outputs.

Input responsiveness in the EU: studying actor-public linkages

Responsiveness is a dynamic process in which both political and bureau-cratic actors *actively* attempt to address public concerns and preferences. Yet, in the EU's multi-level system (as in domestic political systems), key actors rarely have the discretion to unilaterally shape policy outputs and its consequences on citizens. EU policy-making is the product of debate and contestation at various levels in different – and sometimes competing – institutions. To solely define responsiveness as a public opinion-policy output nexus is to disregard the complexity of EU policy-making. Respon-siveness in EU politics is also a process in which one's behaviour responds to public demands at the input stage (Schneider 2020). Input responsive-ness refers to actions taken by relevant actors *during* the EU decision-making process that respond to public preferences. Input responsiveness is a broad concept encompassing various actions that can be attributed to specific actors or institutions in relation to the process of formulating and adopting EU legislation. In theory, input responsiveness can be apparent in a variety of actions taken during the policy-making process – from the Commission's agenda-setting with legislative proposals, the rapporteur's report to the European Parliament (EP), to Council voting on legislative pro-posals. Oftentimes, actions taken in the input stage have the function to pub-licly *signal* commitment to public preferences. The concept of signalling responsiveness subsumes both various communicative forms of responsive-ness – i.e., rhetorical responsiveness (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008) – but also includes behavioural forms of responsiveness in the decision-making process short of the final decision-making output, such as how an actor votes. Signals of responsiveness can take the form of position-taking or pos-ition-defending in the voting process or through public statements and com-mitments (Hagemann *et al.* 2017; Schneider 2019, 2020; Wratil 2018). Such communicative forms of responsiveness are not just 'cheap talk,' but actors' positions are generally supported by credible commitments to meet citizen demands. Actors can also demonstrate willingness to address citizen concerns by publicly increasing the salience of certain issues

through legislative agenda-setting attempts or public statements (Meijers and Rauh 2016; Rauh and De Wilde 2018).

Who is responsive to whom in the EU policy-making process?

Our actor-oriented approach to policy responsiveness stipulates that opportunities for responsiveness in the EU's multi-level system exist on multiple dimensions that can be studied in a common research agenda. To understand different dimensions of responsiveness in the EU policy formulation process, and how they interact, scholars should distinguish between the relevant actors (who are supposed to be responsive), the publics (to whom the actors are responsive), and the venues (in which the actors interact). Figure 1 provides a parsimonious illustration to help resolve questions about which level of aggregation is appropriate with respect to political actors and publics. The figure shows that the concept of policy responsiveness varies across different actors, depending on whom they are accountable to and how.[1]
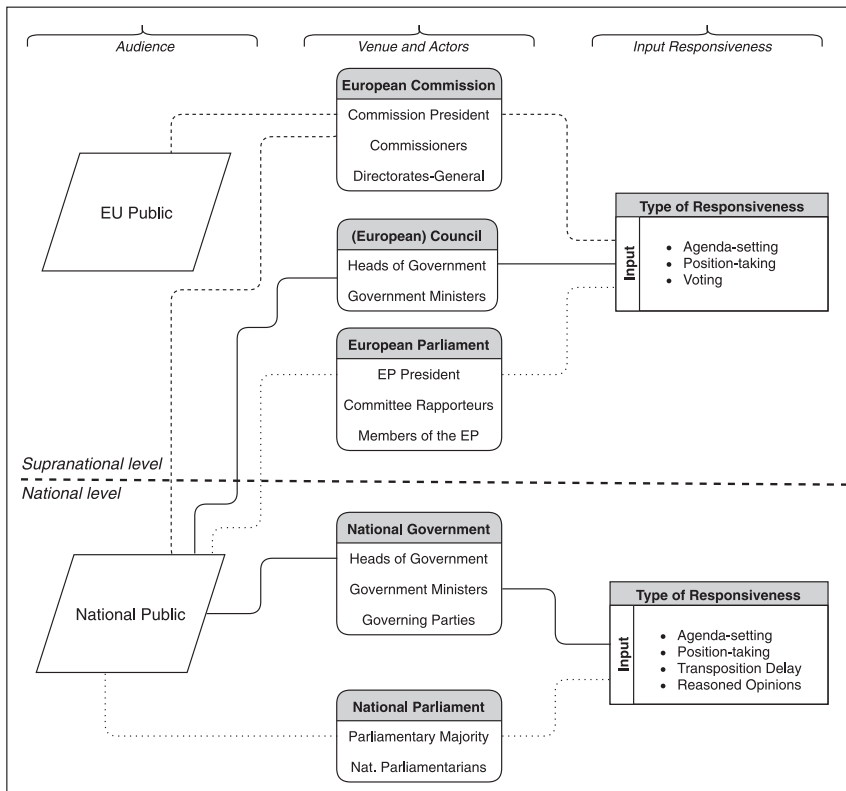

Figure 1. Political responsiveness in the EU: Actors, Venues, and dimensions of responsiveness.

The European Commission

The European Commission is a contentious case for responsiveness. As a technocratic institution, the Commission is not principally steered by public preferences. Despite the fact that the Commission has a highly political agenda-setting task (Christiansen 1997), the expert-led mode of decision-making has de-emphasized the centrality of public input for a long time. Yet, as European integration affairs are increasingly politicized, the Commission might be more prone to take public sentiments more seriously and incorporate public demands into its legislative agenda, as De Wilde and Rauh (this issue) also highlight (see also Haverland *et al.* 2018; Rauh 2016). As the Commission's role is to propose legislation, its Directorates-General (DGs) have, in theory, the ability to signal responsiveness to public preferences at the agenda-setting stage. The extent to which Commissioners are steered by public pressure from EU member states is not well understood. Rauh (2016) argues and finds that DGs are responsive to public demands when the issue is particularly salient and European integration is politicized in key member states (see also De Bruycker 2017). Research on the Commission's public consultations stress that such stakeholder involvement also offers opportunities to respond and address citizens' policy preferences (e.g., Bunea 2017; Van Ballaert 2017). In theory, Commissioners and DGs can also be responsive to public demands through public statements and speeches. Yet, Rauh *et al.* (2019) find that Commissioners respond to average Euroscepticism in their home countries by *increasing* the number of positive statements about European integration – the logical opposite of responsiveness.

European Parliament

Studies on the extent to which Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are responsive to domestic preferences are very limited (but see De Bruycker 2017; Schmitt and Thomassen 2000; Williams and Spoon 2015). Notwithstanding this lacuna, MEPs do have a number of tools to be responsive to domestic demands in the policy-making process. Despite the fact that the EP has co-decision powers with the Council for most legislation under the ordinary legislative procedure, national parties' discrete leverage over decision-making is very limited. MEPs functioning as rapporteurs on controversial legislative proposals are an exception to this rule, as they have an important stake in agenda-setting (Finke 2016; Thierse 2018). Using parliamentary questions and (televised) plenary speeches, MEPs can also communicate directly with their public audiences (Meijers and van der Veer 2019a; Proksch and Slapin 2010). In addition, MEPs can use roll-call votes to communicate their positions (Høyland 2010; Meijers and van der Veer 2019b).

Council and European Council

Studies on responsiveness in the Council and the European Council show that member-state governments are arguably best equipped to signal responsiveness to their domestic audiences. In the Council, governments can signal policy responsiveness through their negotiation positions (Schneider 2020; Wratil 2018), public commitments (Schneider 2019), 'negative votes' against legislative proposals (Hagemann *et al*. 2017), or through public statements in the media (Rauh *et al*. 2019). This form of input responsiveness is likely to be the most politically salient form of responsiveness in the EU's decision-making process as the intergovernmental arena is the most visible venue in the EU decision-making process, and the final approval for the adoption of legislative acts happens in the Council.

National governments

It has been argued that governments can respond to public opinion at the national level by delaying the policy process of transposing EU legislation into national law. Evidence on this matter is mixed, however (Toshkov 2010; Williams 2018). As Steunenberg (in this issue) discusses, national and local governments also have considerable leeway regarding *how* EU legislation is transposed into national law and how EU policy is *implemented* to produce outcomes that are responsive to national and local demands. Nevertheless, our input responsiveness perspective diverges from the outcome-centred responsiveness proposed by Steunenberg (this issue). We contend that an important aspect of responsiveness is that it should be possible to relate responsiveness to specific actors that are involved the policy-making process. Policy outcomes cannot always be clearly attributed to the behaviour of specific politicians or bureaucrats, however. As a result, this outcome-centred view of responsiveness might dilute the accountability link between political actors and citizens.

National parties and parliaments

Political parties have a number of options to signal responsiveness at the domestic level – both in and beyond the parliamentary arena. In national parliament, parties and their parliamentarians can cooperate to submit a reasoned opinion on draft legislative acts to the EP Presidents, the Council, and the Commission when they believe that EU actors overstepped the subsidiarity principle. Research has established that such reasoned opinions are issued for political reasons (Gattermann and Hefftler 2015), such as changes in public Euroscepticism (Meijers 2017; Williams 2016). As European integration has become subject to domestic mass politics (Hooghe and Marks 2018; Hutter *et al*. 2016), parties can be responsive to their electorates

through party manifestos (Williams and Spoon 2015), media statements (Hutter *et al.* 2016; Meijers and Rauh 2016) or parliamentary communication (Rauh and De Wilde 2018).

Identifying relevant publics

A shortcoming of most applications of the systemic approach to EU responsiveness is that these conveive of a European-wide public measured through averaged public opinion. As studies questioning the existence of a single European demos also suggest (e.g., Fabbrini 2019), this perspective is not able to convincingly show that such EU-wide public opinion averages yield insight into true public preferences of European citizens. Equally, this perspective fails to identify the ways in which the relevant actors in the policy-making process take public opinion into account (see also De Wilde and Rauh, this issue). Arguably, then, for responsiveness to take place, the actors in question must have specific publics in mind whose policy preferences they attempt to represent in the EU policy-making process.

Actors in EU policy-making are differently disposed to establishing linkages to a particular public depending on the strength of accountability links. At the European level, national government officials acting in the European Council and the Council (of the EU) have a clear sense about the relevant public. They are accountable to their national constituents and depend on their respective party electorates for re-election. If a national party in government is to be responsive, it is responsive to national public opinion or to the dominant position of its own electorate. Similarly, forms of input responsiveness at the national level imply that actors cater to clearly defined nation-wide or party specific electorates.

In the context of the European Parliament, national parties in the EP can be responsive to their national electorates on salient issues, since MEPs depend on national parties for their re-election (Hix *et al.* 2007). European party groups in the EP, on the other hand, are an unlikely actor of EU responsiveness as its constituent national parties hardly share a meaningful common public (Costello *et al.* 2012).

The extent to which the Commission targets a specific public in its pursuit of policy is an unsettled question. Future research should do more to understand the processes through which the Commission perceives and digests public preferences, as De Wilde and Rauh (this issue) suggest. As the EU's supranational institution *par excellence* it could be argued that it is most prone to taking average EU-wide public opinion seriously. Some authors examine the effect of average EU public opinion on the Commission's policy behaviour (Williams and Bevan 2019). Similarly, Rauh (2019) examines the effects of politicization and issue salience on the nature of the Commission's policy initiatives by measuring salience through a sample of news

outlets that aims to reflect the European media landscape as a whole. At the same time, Commissioners may act out of national interest – potentially responding to the domestic public preferences of their home country (Wonka 2008). Empirical work, however, does not bear out that this is the case (van der Veer and Haverland 2018). A study by Haverland *et al.* (2018) shows that the Commission is selective in capturing public preferences on certain policy issues – suggesting that the extent to which the Commission takes public opinion into consideration varies.

Ways ahead for EU responsiveness research

Integrating different actors

EU actors have distinct competences and play diverse roles in the adoption and implementation of EU public policy, which structures the ways in which political actors are incentivized to accommodate public opinion. Existing research studies the responsiveness of political actors in isolation, but it is likely that the (observed) responsiveness of given EU institutions and national governments is influenced by the behaviour of other actors involved in the policy-making process. For example, MEPs or national representatives in the Council are likely to signal their responsiveness to their publics in speeches or voting behaviour, when the Council's common position diverges from relevant public preferences. In a similar vein, the Commission' legislative proposal incentivizes MEPs and Council members to push EU legislation in the direction of the public preferences they represent. Without a Commission proposal, voting records in the Council or the Parliament are not relevant aspects of input responsiveness. In other words, the level and type of responsiveness of one political actor is not fully independent from the behaviour of other actors in the policy-making process and future research on responsiveness in EU politics should address this lacuna.

Integrating actors and publics

The actor-oriented perspective directs our empirical attention to collecting survey data that more accurately measures citizens' preferences on specific policy issues discussed at the supranational level. Whereas existing surveys often include information about the most important problems that need to be tackled by governments and the EU, additional surveys should provide information about the most preferred policy solutions supported by citizens for issues subjected to supranational competencies (e.g., fiscal policy coordination, or proportional distribution of refugees, etc.). Rather than relying on imprecise proxies for voters' broad ideological preferences, such policy-

specific measures render it possible to more explicitly examine the extent to which citizens' specific policy preferences guide the behaviour of the relevant actors in the EU policy-making cycle. In addition, as Soroka and Wlezien (2010) emphasize, the extent to which the public can digest changes in policy-making and attribute those to specific actors is also an important component in policy representation. Public opinion surveys should assess more explicitly which actors at which level these publics see as responsible for certain policy-making processes.

Consequently, scholars could trace the policy-specific behaviour of governments, national parliamentarians, MEPs and the Commissioners in relation to the preferences expressed by their relevant publics. At the EU level, document or text analysis of Commission policy proposals and the subsequent EP policy amendments could shed light on the Commission and the EP's alignment with the policy solutions supported by the majority of EU citizens on salient issues. This data should be further complemented and compared with information about roll-call votes in the European Parliament to distinguish between institutional (i.e., EP legislative amendments) and individual aspects (i.e., MEPs' positions) of input responsiveness on specific policy issues. At the national level, we need more specific information about policy-specific preferences of political actors (governments and parliamentarians) with respect to EU issues that go beyond the general left-right and EU dimensions included in most manifesto- or expert-based party positing data. This could be achieved through expert surveys of party positions on policy-specific solutions to publicly salient issue, text analysis of party statements and press releases, as well as minutes and voting records of the Council meetings (see Wratil and Hobolt 2019).

Once available, policy-specific information about actors' positions and behaviour could serve two important purposes. First, it would enable scholars to compare signals of responsiveness with actual behaviour designed to change policy outputs (EP amendments, Commission proposal). Second, data on actors' policy positions and behaviour could complement output-oriented models of responsiveness. In particular, the actor-based policy specific data could shed light on the extent to which systemic responsiveness is driven by MEPs' voting behaviour, Commission proposals, or simply by national governments signalling responsiveness to national publics. Thus, we need information about the level of responsiveness of different EU and national actors (i.e., input responsiveness) in order to understand whether and why (not) EU policies reflect the preferences of EU publics.

Future research

It is important to note that the actor-oriented perspective of responsiveness could be expanded to other actors not discussed in this paper. Decisions

about policies in are increasingly made outside the European and national legislative arena through regulatory agencies that could signal responsiveness in EU policy-making and implementation (Abbott *et al.* 2017). On the one hand, it is an open question to which publics regulatory agencies respond. On the other hand, regulatory agencies are believed to be responsible rather than responsive to changing public demands. Moreover, while political actors should be sympathetically responsive to their supporters and to public opinion, at the same time they should act responsibly toward the internal and international systemic constraints and compatibilities (Bardi *et al.* 2014). The actor-oriented perspective allows scholars to distinguish responsibility and responsiveness in the behaviour of specific actors.

Notes

1. Accountability is an important component of democratic representation (Powell 2004). If citizens cannot hold political actors accountable for their actions, there may be little incentive for those actors to be responsive. Accountability includes the ability to attribute responsibility to political actors for particular policies (which partially depends on the deliberation and politicization of European affairs in Europe) and the ability to reward or sanction political actors for their behaviour. Due to space constraints, we will not expand on this important topic in this paper.

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