

Public Commitments as Signals of Responsiveness in the European Union

Christina J. Schneider, University of California, San Diego

Intergovernmental organizations play a vital role in democracies. Observers have become concerned about the extent to which government behavior in these organizations is responsive to their national constituents, but they find it difficult to identify responsiveness in these complex and nontransparent environments. This article analyzes how European governments use public commitments in Council negotiations to signal responsiveness to their electorates when they cooperate in the European Union. I test the theory using data on public commitments of 27 governments in European legislative negotiations and original data from a conjoint survey experiment. The findings suggest that governments defend positions that favor their domestic constituents when they face national elections. The results of an experiment with German citizens provides evidence that governments do so because voters respond favorably to public commitments, as long as these commitments are responsive to the respondent's own position on the policy issue.

The responsiveness of governments to the preferences of their citizens is a fundamental characteristic of democracy (Dahl 1973; Lijphart 1984). Elected officials at the national, the state, and the local level are responsive to the policy preferences of their electorates (e.g., Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004; Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2005; Lax and Phillips 2009; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014). As governments delegate more decision-making powers to international organizations (IOs), the pressure to demonstrate responsiveness at this level of governance has increased. The US State Department, for example, considered a democratization of IOs as one of its main goals to improve IOs' public legitimacy and viability already in the early 2000s.¹ But even though IOs play a vital role in national democratic governance, we

know very little about whether governments are responsive to the views of their citizens when they cooperate in IOs and, more importantly, how they communicate domestically that they cooperate in the interests of their citizens.

This question is particularly salient in the 28 member countries of the European Union (EU), arguably the most ambitious international integration project in the world. Many observers believe that the complexity of the EU's multilevel system, coupled with a lack of electoral accountability, has created an environment conducive to unresponsive government conduct.² This perception has contributed greatly to the EU's current legitimacy crisis.³ In 2013, only 33% of Europeans trusted the intergovernmental Council of the European Union, while over 44% of Europeans in the member states distrusted it. Europeans believe that their voice is not listened

Christina J. Schneider (cjschneider@ucsd.edu) is a professor in the Department of Political Science, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093.

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1. See statements by Kim R. Holmes, Assistant Secretary for International Organizations Affairs in 2004, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/io/rls/rm/2004/39496.htm> (accessed November 2017).

2. Other criticisms focus on the unaccountability of powerful bureaucratic elites, the relative weakness of the European Parliament, and the nonexistence of a European demos. Hix (2008) offers a concise summary of the theoretical debate of the "democratic deficit" in the EU, which spans across all these dimensions. While these dimensions are without doubt important, my focus is on the responsiveness of EU governments to their national electorates, a question that is central to an understanding of democratic governance in European democracies but has not received much attention in the scholarly literature.

3. Other IOs face very similar legitimacy crises. See, e.g., Dellmuth and Tallberg (2015) and Zaum (2013).

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to by their governments. Governments do not act in their citizens' interest when they decide (usually behind closed doors) policies in the EU. The perceived lack of responsiveness in European cooperation has not only led to a populist backlash in Europe; it is also highly problematic for the EU governments' own political survival. The ever deeper and wider penetration of the EU into domestic policy, coupled with the historical politicization of European affairs, has increased the likelihood that voters take their governments' conduct in European affairs into account when casting their votes at the ballot (de Vries 2007, 2010).

How do governments cope with these pressures? Even if they wanted to be responsive to their citizens, governments face serious constraints when navigating the web of European institutions. Not only are policy outcomes the consequence of the negotiations between currently 28 governments and a variety of institutions with oftentimes divergent policy preferences, but the complex and opaque decision-making process makes it very challenging for voters to attribute particular outcomes to the conduct of their own governments. Given these limitations, how can opportunistic governments signal that they act in the electorates' best interest when they cooperate at the EU level? I argue that governments use public commitments during the Council negotiations to signal that they are responsive to their national electorates. They take positions that are in their constituents' interest and defend these positions throughout the negotiation process, particularly before national elections, when voters are most likely to hold them accountable. Voters can attribute these commitments to individual governments more easily than bargaining outcomes. They are also more consequential for policy outcomes than initial position-taking strategies, and they are costly in the cooperative system of the EU in which governments regularly move away from their initial positions to foster compromise.

I test my theoretical argument in two steps. To scrutinize the main implications of my theory about public commitments, I first analyze data on the behavior of the 28 EU governments in European legislative negotiations between 1998 and 2012. The findings suggest that governments use public commitments before national elections to signal that they are responsive in Council negotiations. Whereas governments move away from their initial positions in almost two-thirds of cases in nonelection periods, they are significantly less willing to compromise before national elections and when they fear that issues will get politicized in the domestic political arena. The empirical implications of the theoretical argument are based on the assumption that voters reward public commitments of governments during Council negotiations, at least when the issues are politicized. To analyze how voters respond to these signals, I present the results of a conjoint experiment that I

conducted in a survey of about 2,500 German citizens in the fall of 2016. I asked respondents to evaluate various politicians who differ on their public commitments as well as other important characteristics of the politicians that typically affect vote choice. The findings indicate that respondents prefer politicians who defend their preferred policy position throughout the negotiations, and they punish politicians who either fail to defend the responsive positions or defend nonresponsive positions.

The findings shed light on the question of how governments cope with the increasing demands to act responsive in IOs. Despite the increasing delegation of decision-making powers to the EU, we still know very little about responsive conduct of governments in the EU (Hagemann, Hobolt, and Wratil 2016; Schneider 2019; Wratil 2018). In this setting, institutional constraints make it difficult for voters to assess the responsiveness of their governments. The analysis demonstrates that governments can use public commitments to signal responsiveness; the focus is on the politics of signaling responsiveness as a strategy to maximize voter support (rather than addressing whether governments are in fact responsive). The notion is quite similar to the idea of the political business cycle literature, where governments use various monetary and fiscal strategies to signal that they pursue competent economic policies when voters are not fully informed. These findings should also be of interest to the study of government strategies at the national level: in situations when attribution of responsibility is difficult, public commitments to responsive positions may function as credible signals of responsiveness. My research builds on the literature in comparative and American politics that has discussed the extent to which political repositioning threatens the political survival of politicians (summarized in Adams 2012) but further addresses the conditions under which repositioning may have positive or negative effects on government approval.

In addition, existing work demonstrates that domestic politics influences the ability of governments to receive greater benefits from international cooperation, either as a consequence of domestic constraints imposed by institutional veto players or as a strategy to satisfy organized interests at the domestic level (Milner 1997; Pervez 2015). The role of public opinion on the government's ability to get better deals (which may also serve as a signal of responsiveness under certain conditions) has been demonstrated in international bargaining environments where voters find it easy to attribute credit or blame (Caraway, Rickard, and Anner 2012; Dreher 2003; Dreher and Jensen 2007; Rickard and Caraway 2014; Schneider 2013, 2019; Schneider and Slantchev 2018).

My analysis builds on these insights and analyzes how governments can signal responsiveness to their voters in complex

and opaque bargaining environments where the attribution of credit is much more challenging. The results should be of interest to scholars of IOs more generally; they provide a parsimonious theory about why and how governments use strategic signals of responsiveness to cope with the rising public demand to increase responsiveness at the international level.

SIGNALING RESPONSIVENESS

Voters hold ideologically grounded policy positions. They want to elect politicians who best represent their policy interests in the EU and who appear competent and responsive to them. Incumbent governments are opportunistic and want to get reelected. To win elections, governments need to compete for aligned partisans and independent (or dealigned) voters simultaneously, and their choices reflect their decisions to appeal to these groups. In doing so, governments should have greater incentives to be responsive if voters care about the policy issues and are willing to hold governments accountable for their decisions.

Whereas it is widely accepted that voters care about many policy issues that are decided at the national level, policies decided at the European level were not always politicized in national political arenas. It was not the performance of the politicians at the EU level but national politics that explained voting outcomes in elections to the European Parliament (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Citizens' preferences over European integration also did not influence their vote choice in national elections. Voters were uninterested and uninformed, and European integration seemed to proceed in the shadow of a diffuse feeling of approval or a "permissive consensus" (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970, 249–50).

Why then would governments take the interests of their electorates into account when they cooperate in the EU? Voters increasingly care about policies decided at the EU level, which itself provides an important impetus for governments to act responsive in Council negotiations. Public opinion toward the EU is still characterized by a high degree of uncertainty, many issues are not politicized in the national political arena, and elections to the European Parliament are oftentimes second-order elections (de Vries and Steenbergen 2013). Yet, it is undeniable that the "sleeping giant" is waking up. European countries have experienced an "increase in polarization of opinions, interests, or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU" (de Wilde 2011, 566–67). Politicization of the EU began in earnest with the signing of the Single European Act in 1986. It created the Common Market and extended the range of European competences to include policy areas like environmental protection, safety at work, and consumer protection (Scharpf 2003, 6). The next spike was occasioned by

the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which broadened and deepened integration (Hooghe and Marks 2009). The effects of the European debt crisis are discernible as well (Cramme and Hobolt 2015), as is the recent decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU (de Vries 2018). And even though EU politicization varies in intensity, it has generally increased over time (Rauh 2016).

The politicization of European integration is particularly prevalent in the national electoral arena. In the elections to the European Parliament, voters are nowadays more likely to vote for parties that represent their own attitudes toward European integration (de Vries et al. 2011; Hobolt and Spoon 2012; Hobolt, Spoon, and Tilley 2008). Emerging evidence also points to an electoral connection between national parties' positions toward European integration and vote choice in national elections (de Vries 2007, 2010; Tillman 2004, 2012).⁴

If European issues have become politicized, governments have good reason to believe that voters care about their governments' responsiveness in European negotiations and that they might punish governments for nonresponsive behavior. Whereas the historical politicization of the EU should have increased demands on governments to act responsive at the EU level, the politicization potential for individual policies varies dramatically. For governments, it is oftentimes difficult to assess which of the many policy initiatives and outcomes will become politicized among the domestic electorate, even in the national political arena. To make matters worse, incumbents oftentimes do not have the time to wait until they have the information necessary to decide whether they should appear responsive in those negotiations (Mayhew 1974; Stimson et al. 1995). The uncertainty about which issues will be politicized poses a predicament; the wrong action or even inaction could be detrimental to the incumbent's electoral prospects.

As long as governments believe that their conduct in the EU could affect their public approval, they should try to appear responsive in European negotiations. This implies that politicians respond to changes in public policy preferences and that they implement policies that are in the interest of their domestic constituents (Dahl 1956). As straightforward as it seems, establishing responsiveness is a relatively complex process that relies on assumptions about the specific policy preferences held by citizens, citizens' voting behavior during

4. Consistent with the increasing importance of public attitudes toward the EU in national elections, scholars demonstrate that public attitudes toward the EU (i.e., the extent of Euroskepticism) affect the amount of legislative output (Toshkov 2015), governments' positions on the scope of European integration (Koenig-Archibugi 2004; König and Finke 2007; Wratil 2018), or the likelihood that governments dissent in Council negotiations (Hagemann et al. 2016).

elections, the selection of policy makers, and the formulation of policies (Powell 2004). Establishing these linkages is far from trivial even in the domestic realm. At the European level, it leaves governments with a serious dilemma. Even if they wanted to represent their electorates' interests, governments are severely constrained from achieving responsive policy outcomes. EU policy outcomes are the consequence of collective negotiations between currently 28 governments, as well as other important institutional actors (such as the European Commission and the European Parliament) with divergent preferences.⁵ The negotiations in the Council are characterized by a strong informal norm of consensus and compromise. Governments move away from initial policy positions frequently, in order to foster cooperation in the Council. And even if governments asserted themselves against other EU governments and the other European institutions to achieve more responsive policy outcomes, the complexity of the decision-making process would make it challenging for individual voters to assign credit (or blame) for particular EU policy outcomes.

Since it is next to impossible for voters to assess their government's actual responsiveness, opportunistic governments have incentives to signal that their conduct in Council negotiations is responsive to their voters' interests. To be credible, the signal has to be attributable to the government's own actions, and it has to be costly. While responsive policy outcomes are usually not attributable to the government (for the reasons discussed above, the outcome could have been responsive by chance), taking responsive policy positions at the start of the negotiations is not always costly (since governments can and do move away from them frequently during the negotiations).

To signal responsiveness more effectively, governments could take positions on issues that are in their constituency's interest and commit to these positions throughout the negotiations. These commitments do not rely on the governments having to signal any personal role in outcomes but rather on their willingness to support and defend a particular position that favors politically relevant groups. Taking clear positions signals that the government is "fighting the good fight" and acting in their best interest. The defense of initial positions can serve as a credible signal of responsiveness in the EU context, where it is the norm that governments frequently move away from initially stated positions throughout the negotiations.

5. To make matters worse for EU governments, there is strong pressure to increase the responsiveness of EU policies to the European citizens more generally in order to foster EU democracy. These pressures often times stand in direct conflict to the domestic pressures by their citizens who have the power to vote their government out of office.

Uncompromising negotiation tactics usually receive much attention in the European institutions and the national media. An illustrative example of this was the British government's decision to defend the British budget rebate in the negotiations to a new financial framework in 2004 when all other EU governments, the Commission, and the European Parliament wanted to get rid of it.⁶ The issue was highly publicized in the British media, and the British government's strategy gained it much needed public support before the general elections.

Public commitments are also costly because they affect the likelihood of adopting policies in the Council, and they have an influence on policy outcomes (which usually implies a redistribution of costs and benefits across EU member states). The British strategy was not only politically costly (it caused political fallout with other European leaders who stood to lose from Britain's preferred outcome); it also led to a breakdown of negotiations over the entire financial framework. And even though the British prime minister's true intention had been to agree to a removal of the rebate in the light of the EU's eastern enlargement, his preelectoral public commitments contributed to a final decision that only involved a substantial reduction of the rebate and imposed serious costs on the poorest countries in the EU.

Although public commitments can be quite costly politically, they are relatively easy to pursue because governments cannot be formally forced to compromise on their positions during the negotiations (they can only be overturned in the final voting stage, and the consensual norms ensure that EU members try very hard to find a compromise before they overturn any minorities). This makes public commitments a particularly attractive strategy to governments.

Despite their attractiveness, public commitments induce serious costs, and governments should have incentives to rely on public commitments only when they believe that these commitments matter. If they had perfect information, governments would defend their responsive positions when policy issues are politicized domestically and electorally relevant (i.e., when voters are most likely to find out about the governments' position taking and defending). And they would be more willing to compromise on their initial positions when policy issues are not politicized. But governments do not have perfect information, and they cannot always predict which issues will be relevant and which ones will not be. Since these commitments are public in that the media, opposition parties,

6. Even the British prime minister, Tony Blair, wanted to see it gone but publicly defended it because of its salience to the British public (Blair 2011, 527–30). Schneider (2019, chap. 6) provides a detailed discussion of this case.

interest groups, or even interested voters could dig up information on the government's behavior—even if the government did not publicize its stances actively—the government's main concern is that it might get punished by voters because it incorrectly believed that the issue would not become politicized domestically.

Governments should therefore err on the side of safety: they commit to defend their responsive positions whenever voters are both able and willing to sanction them. National elections serve as the most effective tool for European voters to hold their governments accountable, which should lead governments to signal responsiveness particularly before elections.⁷ Since the combination of an increased politicization of European affairs and a variation in the politicization of individual issues leaves governments with uncertainty about which issues may become relevant to their voters, they should commit to their responsive positions before elections even when they believe that the policy issues might not play a crucial role in the electoral campaigns. That is, they insure themselves against the possibility that they are wrong and that these issues do become politicized, which would make their bargaining stances public. One could interpret this to mean that governments generate unnecessary signals of responsiveness in the EU. But a more likely scenario is that this reflects prudential reasoning by governments that operate in a fluid domestic environment that makes it very difficult to forecast what issues might become salient and make a difference in competitive elections. The mere possibility that an EU policy might become electorally relevant domestically exports its politicking to the European level; a sort of politicization without foundation.

To summarize, EU governments want to signal responsiveness in European negotiations in the hope of garnering electoral support from voters back home, particularly when they believe that policy issues may become politicized. Governments believe that voters care about how well they represent their voters' interests in Council negotiations but that voters find it difficult to attribute credit and blame for bargaining outcomes in the complex and less than transparent system of the EU. Governments signal that they represent the interests of their electorates in the EU by committing to responsive positions throughout the Council negotiations. Because public commitments are costly, governments should be more likely to pursue these strategies before national elections (i.e., when voters are most likely to hold their governments accountable for responsive behavior in the Council) and when

politicization is likely (i.e., when voters are most likely to actually observe these commitments).

PUBLIC COMMITMENTS IN THE COUNCIL

The politicization of European affairs has increased incentives for EU governments to signal responsiveness to their voters before national elections. I use data on governments' bargaining positions in EU legislative negotiations to test whether governments are more likely to use public commitments as signals of responsiveness before national elections. The Decision Making in the European Union (DEU) data set provides information on the policy positions of the member states' representatives in the Council on over 125 important legislative proposals that were negotiated between 1999 and 2012 (Thomson et al. 2006, 2012). The data allow me to derive information on the bargaining strategies that governments use in European legislative negotiations.

The data are coded from 349 extensive, semistructured face-to-face expert interviews. The experts were recruited from the permanent representations of the member states, the European Commission, and the European Parliament.⁸ The interviewees were mainly civil servants who were responsible for representing their country in the Council discussions and monitored the legislative negotiations closely. The collection of data on government positions applies the spatial model of politics to specific controversies. For each policy issue (each policy proposal is divided into distinct policy issues), experts were asked to indicate the policy positions initially favored by each government after the introduction of the proposal before the Council formulated its common position, as well as the positions that the governments represented in the final stages of the legislative negotiations.

VARIABLE DESCRIPTIONS

To measure whether governments use public commitments to signal responsiveness during the Council negotiations, I focus on EU governments' refusal to move away from their initial policy positions during the legislative negotiations. *Public Commitment* is an indicator variable that takes the value 1 if the final position of the government on an issue is substantially the same as its initial position and the value 0 otherwise. On average, governments held the line in about 40% of cases. Another way of saying this is that compromise is more likely than not, an observation consistent with the collegial decision-making style of the Council.

7. During election periods, government conduct in the EU is also more likely to get politicized by the government itself (if it was responsive) or by the political opposition (if it was not).

8. On average, these interviews lasted 1 hour and 40 minutes. The face-to-face interviews also served to assess the expertise of interviewees (Thomson and Stokman 2006).

Ideally, one might want to estimate what the initial position is correlated with. Unfortunately, data limitations preclude an assessment of the correspondence between the initial position and the government's perception (or, rather, definition) of the national interest. Since there are no objective measures of national interests, governments tend to formulate specific definitions of these interests depending on the information provided to them by partisan and nonpartisan interest groups, as interpreted through the lens of the governing ideology and accounting for governance and electoral concerns. It is nearly impossible to unpack these types of considerations systematically for many governments and many policies over time. Some rough-and-ready methods could be used to calculate the congruence between public opinion and government position taking, but they require some fairly restrictive assumptions (e.g., that positions could be placed on a left-right or pro-anti EU dimension) that are inappropriate for many policies. It is also by no means certain (or even probable) that the governments or their constituents view the desired congruence in this manner.

At the end of the day, the governments are the ones who are highly motivated to get their positioning right. Instead of forcing policies to comply with an arbitrary ideological dimension to gauge whether they have done so, I assume that governments are aware of the preferences of politically relevant constituents that would be affected by the policy—these constituents have strong incentives to make their preferences known—and that the governments have their own reasons to decide how to incorporate conflicting preferences into their policy positions. Since much of this information is inaccessible to outsiders and because insiders are loath to share anything that might be potentially awkward if made public, we must perforce rely on the publicly adopted positions to make our inferences. There are three potential threats to these inferences, and fortunately none is particularly troublesome in this context.⁹ For these reasons, I will not attempt to discern just how the initial position is meant to reflect the preferences of relevant constituents—I will simply assume that it does.¹⁰

9. I provide an extended discussion of all three in app. A (apps. A–O are available online).

10. There is, in fact, empirical support for this assumption. Several studies find robust correlations between public opinion and government positions during European negotiations (Schmitt and Thomassen 1999, 2000; Thomassen and Schmitt 1997). When it comes to initial position taking, Thomson (2007, 2011) demonstrates that policy positions that are announced at the beginning of the negotiations generally provide a good representation of the national or ideological interest of the government. Wratil (2018) further demonstrates that governments' initial positions on proposals that can be placed on a left-right (pro-anti EU) dimension are affected by voters' self-placement on a left-right (pro-anti EU) dimension.

The analysis is meant to test the implications of that assumption in the context of my theory: governments should be more likely to defend their initial position when facing elections.

As I expect that electoral concerns should motivate governments to signal responsiveness with public commitments, the main explanatory variable is whether national elections occurred at any time during the negotiations over the issue. *Election Period* is an indicator variable that takes the value 1 if the government held an election while the issue was being negotiated and the value 0 otherwise. Data are from Döring and Manow (2015).

Figure 1 provides an overview of the frequency of commitment strategies for the issues in the data set, separated by periods in which the governments experienced an election while the issue was being negotiated (*light gray bars*) and periods in which they did not (*dark gray bars*).¹¹ The average rate of signaling through public commitments when no elections are held while the negotiations are ongoing is 39%, and it climbs to 47% on average when elections occur during the negotiations. In other words, the rate of compromise increases by 20% when governments do not have to face the polls. Almost two-thirds (14 of 22) of the governments that negotiated both in and out of electoral periods exhibit higher propensities to defend their positions when elections occur during the legislative bargaining process.

Of course, it could be that some omitted variable explains both the timing of elections and the reason for position defending, so in my analysis I control for several factors that might be relevant. First, the salience of the policy issue should matter. When governments believe that voters care more about the policy issues, they should be more likely to commit to responsive bargaining positions throughout the negotiations. Experts were asked to estimate the level of salience for each issue on a scale from 0 to 100, with 100 indicating that an issue is of the highest importance to a stakeholder (*Salience*).¹² *Distance from Commission* and *Distance from Parliament* measure the distance of an EU member's position to the position of the Commission and the European Parliament on each issue, respectively. *Distance from Council Mean* measures the absolute distance of an EU member's position to the average

11. Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta, and Spain held no national elections during the negotiations covered by the data set. (This does not mean that they held no elections during that decade. Spain, e.g., held general elections in 2000, 2004, and 2008.) These members do not appear in fig. 1, but they are included in the statistical estimations.

12. While it is intuitive that the salience a government attaches to an issue is influenced by the importance that its voters attach to it, Salience is arguably not a perfect measure for politicization as Salience could be affected by other factors as well. In app. C, I also use a measure that accounts for the politicization over time, with consistent results.

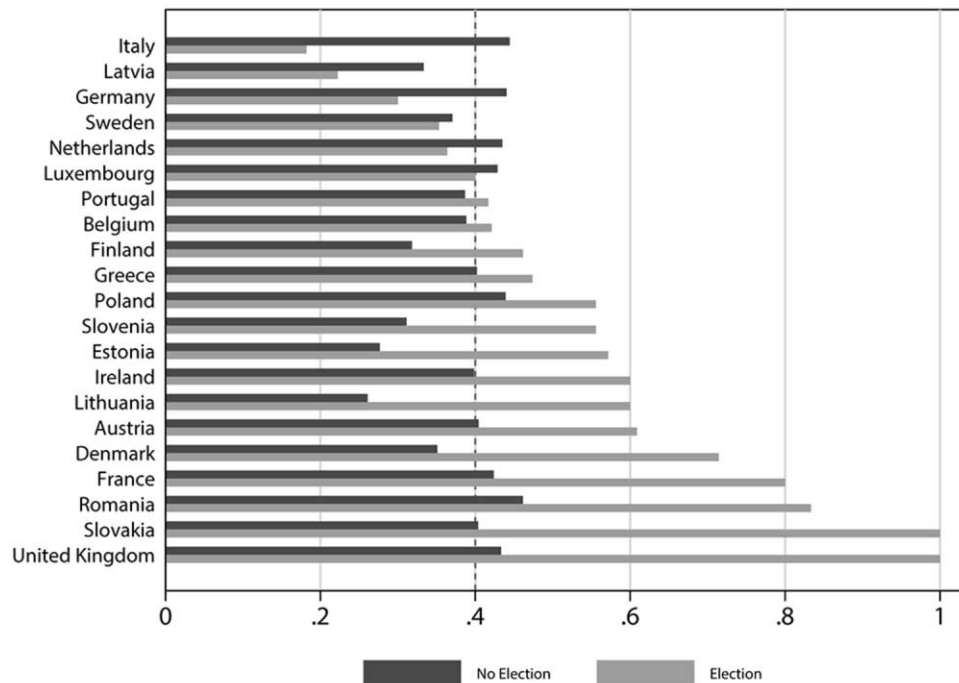


Figure 1. Average rates of Public Commitment for each EU member for DEU II policies between 1998 and 2008 during election years (*light gray*) and outside of election years (*dark gray*). Countries ranked by their median value of Public Commitment during election periods. Average Public Commitment across all member states and all issues indicated by dashed vertical line. Source: DEU II data set, Döring and Manow (2015), and author calculations.

position in the Council (excluding that government's position). *Multiple Issues* is a dichotomous variable that is coded 1 for proposals with more than one issue. The more issues a proposal has, the less costly compromise should be. *Qualified Majority* is a dichotomous variable that takes the value 1 if the voting on the proposal is based on qualified majority rule and 0 if the voting rule is unanimity. *Voting Power* measures the formal bargaining power of an EU member in the Council using the Shapley-Shubik index. Descriptive statistics are presented in appendix B.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Since the dependent variable is dichotomous and the policy issues are nested within their proposals, the appropriate estimator is a multilevel mixed effects probit with robust standard errors. The results are robust to the inclusion of country fixed effects, estimating a nonhierarchical probit estimation and controlling for different types of Council configurations, the economic importance of the member state, domestic coalition configurations, or the relative salience of issues (app. C).

Table 1 presents the estimation results for four specifications: the main model, which considers national elections that occur throughout the negotiations and which is used for interpreting the findings, a proposal-restricted model limited to proposals that were concluded within 36 months, an election-

restricted model limited to elections held before the Council vote, and a placebo model that changes the Election Period coding to 1 if the election occurs within six months after the final adoption of the proposal and 0 otherwise. The idea behind the placebo test is to check whether holding the line really is about signaling responsiveness through public commitments or simply the government digging in its heels on a policy it wants quite apart from electoral considerations. A significant coefficient for Election Period in the placebo model would be inconsistent with the electoral motivation and would constitute evidence that the argument about strategic public commitments is flawed.

The electoral effect is positive and statistically significant. Governments are significantly more likely to defend their initial policy positions before elections. The effect is substantively not very large (although a 16% increase in the probability of public commitment is not small either), which lends further support to the theoretical argument. Holding the line against the wishes of other member states is costly because it affects their willingness to reciprocate on other issues and because it goes against the consensual decision-making norm in the Council. As a result, governments would not be willing to do this unless they must. The analysis supplies evidence for this: the coefficients on the distance from Parliament and the Council mean are both significant and negative. The more discrepant a government's initial position is from the position

Table 1. Public Commitments in Council Negotiations, 1998–2008

	Main	Proposal Restricted	Election Restricted	Placebo
Election period	.224* (.118)	.232* (.130)	.216* (.115)	.087 (.072)
Salience	.007* (.004)	.006 (.005)	.007* (.004)	.007* (.004)
Multiple issues	−1.431** (.265)	−1.440** (.312)	−1.431** (.265)	−1.435** (.266)
Distance from Commission	.002 (.003)	.000 (.004)	.002 (.003)	.002 (.004)
Distance from Parliament	−.011** (.004)	−.011** (.004)	−.011** (.004)	−.011** (.004)
Distance from Council mean	−.018** (.007)	−.010 (.007)	−.018** (.007)	−.017** (.007)
Qualified majority	.299 (.446)	.287 (.482)	.297 (.446)	.287 (.441)
Voting power	.018 (.016)	.017 (.017)	.018 (.016)	.017 (.016)
Constant	.205 (.480)	.130 (.522)	.206 (.480)	.212 (.477)
Observations	2,073	1,797	2,073	2,073
Wald χ^2	65.19**	55.46**	65.22**	75.23**

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .10$.

** $p < .05$.

taken by Parliament and the average (excluding itself) in the Council, the less likely is it to refuse to compromise. In other words, the initial extremism does not persist throughout the negotiations. This is consistent with the notion that sometimes countries could stake out a relatively extreme claim for bargaining purposes, but the fact that Election Period is significant even after accounting for this possibility tells us the electoral motivation remains key.¹³

Proposal characteristics matter as well. As expected, governments are more likely to defend their positions if the issues are salient. The effect is significant but relatively small, which suggests that even though governments are more likely to commit to their positions when they believe that voters care about the policies, they are even more likely to signal responsiveness when voters have the means to punish them (i.e., during election periods).¹⁴ When the issue is part of a proposal that has other aspects over which members have con-

flicting preferences, it is less likely that governments would become recalcitrant on that issue. This makes sense: multiple dimensions allow for trade-offs that make compromises more likely (McKibben and Western 2014). Moreover, sticking to one's guns on one of the issues might make the other members quite unwilling to give in on the other issues, which increases the costs of public commitments. Hence, Multiple Issues is both negative and highly significant.

The strength of the consensus norm is also evident in the finding that the decision to defend one's position is unrelated to either the voting rule (qualified majority or unanimity) or to one's centrality to winning coalitions (voting power). The fact that Voting Power is insignificant provides some nuance to the interpretation of Election Period. Recall that Public Commitment is coded without reference to the final outcome of negotiations: it takes the value 1 for governments whose recalcitrance resulted in their remaining an outlier on the adopted policy (as clear an instance of a public commitment as one could hope for) but also for governments whose initial position was adopted. It could be the case that some member states are more pivotal: their positions tend to become final outcomes, and so there is no reason for them to alter their initial stance. If this were true, we would expect

13. The inverse relationship between initial extremism and tendency to compromise is consistent with other findings in the literature (Arregui 2008; Thomson et al. 2006).

14. I find similar effects when I use the year the proposal was adopted as a measure of politicization (on the assumption that politicization has increased over time). The results are presented in app. C.

Voting Power to pick it up. It does not, which suggests that we are looking at public commitments instead. Another possibility is that governments simply pick positions they expect to emerge as compromises. Unless it just so happens that for some reason governments facing elections are more likely to have preferences that coincide with those of the majority in the Council, the only reason to adopt such a stance is electoral: the government is backing what it believes would be the winning horse so it can signal responsiveness through committing to its initial position.

Overall, EU governments are significantly more likely to defend their positions to signal responsiveness to their constituents before national elections. Their conduct at the EU level corresponds well with the importance that voters attribute to signals of responsiveness, at least when policies are politicized at the domestic level. Taken together, the findings provide evidence that governments use public commitments during negotiations in order to signal that they negotiate in the interest of their national electorates because they expect that these signals may have political consequences.

PUBLIC COMMITMENTS AND VOTER SUPPORT

Governments have incentives to signal that they negotiate in the interest of their electorates because of their expectations about corresponding demands at the domestic level. Whereas not all issues are politicized at the national level, I expect that voters care about whether the government commits to responsive policies at least when those policies are salient. But even though the literature has made much progress in analyzing whether European voters are in favor of European integration and how this affects their vote choice in national elections, we know little about how voters would interpret the policy specific commitments of their government at the EU level. It is questionable even for highly salient European policies whether voters simply care about the negotiation outcomes (or use partisanship as information shortcut) or whether they also care about their governments' signals during the negotiations. Even worse, voters could punish governments for defending positions rather than rewarding them for these strategies. Since public commitments are costly, governments would only have incentives to use public commitments if they actually increase their public support at home.

Since this assumption is central to my theory, I now analyze how voters respond to public commitments as signals of responsiveness. According to my theory, voters only need to respond to these signals in politicized environments. Even if many issues will not reach a sufficient level of politicization to make a difference, the increasing likelihood that issues get politicized (and the uncertainty about which issues will be-

come politicized) can induce governments to change their bargaining behavior in the Council. To examine how voters respond to public commitments, and to assess the internal validity of the demand-side argument, I conducted a large-scale online survey about voter responses to public commitments in two policy areas—whether the EU should agree to another financial rescue package for Greece and whether the EU should allow for more immigration—in Germany. Both issues are highly politicized in Germany.

The survey was fielded in the fall of 2016. The sample includes 2,450 German adults who are eligible to vote in federal elections. Although Respondi uses various techniques to generate a sample that resembles the underlying population, online samples are never true probability samples.¹⁵ This particular sample skews toward younger and more educated male voters compared to the general voter population. To address this, I use entropy balancing to reweigh the data from the survey so that it matches the demographic margins from the voter population (I weigh on age groups, gender, and level of education).¹⁶

Before I delve deeper into the experimental design, I would like to discuss some of the advantages and disadvantages of the experimental strategy chosen. The focus of my study is to gain an understanding of how voters react to public commitments in EU negotiations when issues are highly politicized. As I argued above, voters do not always care, but the increasing likelihood that they might care should induce governments to signal responsiveness. The crucial assumption underlying my theory is that voters would punish governments for unresponsive conduct (and reward them for responsive conduct) when issues are politicized. If voters do not hold politicians accountable for those highly politicized issues (where intergovernmental negotiations predominate), I would not expect them to do so for other policies. I am interested in the internal validity for which the experimental design and the focus on politicized issues is appropriate.¹⁷

15. Respondi (<https://www.respondi.com>) is the company through which the survey was implemented. True probability samples are extremely difficult (if not impossible) to generate even with offline sampling methods, they come at considerable cost, and their benefits diminish with historically declining response rates.

16. Entropy balancing is a data preprocessing method to achieve covariate balance in observational studies with binary treatments (Hainmueller 2011). Appendix D shows the demographic margins of the voter population, the raw online sample, and the weighted online sample. The imbalances are relatively minor, and the results are robust when unweighted data are used (see app. H).

17. The experimental results will tell us neither whether voters hold their governments accountable for responsive conduct in the EU nor the

One potential disadvantage is that the nature of the experiment puts limitations on its external validity beyond the context of Germany. To the extent that the process that generates German voters' attitudes toward the policies differs from the process that generates individuals' attitudes toward these policies in other EU member states, it will not be possible to derive more general implications from the results. Whereas existing research on electoral accountability finds evidence for the two-dimensional space in all European countries, Otjes and Katsandidou (2016) find significant differences across the two dimensions for the poorer member states in southern Europe. At the very least, one would have to be cautious in making any inferences to those countries based on the results presented here. A focus on Germany is still warranted because the policies discussed in this article are driven by intergovernmental negotiations with a powerful influence of states that carry the largest burden. Germany has had important influence on policy formulation in these areas, and this influence merits a better understanding of potential domestic electoral causes for the policies that the government pursues.

DATA AND CONJOINT EXPERIMENT

I designed a fully randomized conjoint experiment to examine how voters assess different politicians on the basis of the possible multidimensionality of their public commitments to responsive policy positions. All respondents were instructed about the conjoint exercise and then exposed to comparisons between two politicians, each of whom varied along six different dimensions. My experimental design is modeled on previous experiments on political repositioning and voter behavior in American politics but altered to fit the EU context (Abrajano, Elmendorf, and Quinn 2017; Butler and Powell 2014; Houweling and Tomz 2016, forthcoming).

I proceeded in three steps. First, I asked respondents to indicate their opinions about the two issues under observation to establish a baseline on which they would judge the politicians' behavior. Respondents were presented with information on financial rescue packages to Greece and then asked whether they are for or against further financial aid to Greece. Respondents were also presented with information about the current situation on the immigration of refugees and asylum seekers and then asked whether they are in favor of accepting more or fewer refugees in the EU. Responses included strongly in favor, somewhat in favor, neither in favor nor against, somewhat against, and strongly against. Figure 2 indicates that Germans in the survey are slightly opposed to

conditions under which they are likely to do so. This is not the focus of this study, but it merits more analysis in future research.

providing another financial bailout and accepting more refugees, but the extent of support and opposition varies across policy fields.¹⁸

The second step in the experiment was to present respondents with the scenario for one of the policy areas. When participants were done answering questions for the first area, the survey returned to this step for the other area. The order of the policy areas was random. The scenario informed respondents that further positive action on the relevant policy would require more negotiations among EU members and that German politicians would be involved.¹⁹ Respondents could not proceed to the next page without spending at least 10 seconds on these instructions.

The third step in the experiment was to ask respondents to evaluate two sets of two hypothetical politicians who used different strategies to signal responsiveness in a policy area, choose which one they supported, and indicate how likely they would be to vote for each if elections were held next Sunday. Politicians were defined by three personal attributes (party affiliation, gender, and political experience), the initial position they took on the issue, their final vote, and the negotiation outcome. Table 2 lists all possible values of the variables for each of the policy areas.²⁰

Each respondent was presented with a pair of hypothetical politicians (politician A and politician B) within a fully randomized choice-based conjoint framework, wherein each politician varied along the six dimensions of each variant (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). This design permits the identification of causal effects nonparametrically and so does not require one to make assumptions about the function that maps signals of responsiveness to levels of support.

Respondents were then asked to choose between the two politicians. They had to select one, and only one, of the two. The forced-choice design allows me to analyze the correspondence between the signals of responsiveness and what a voter might actually do at the ballot box. For a somewhat more fine-grained analysis, I also included a continuous measure of the intensity of voter preferences for both politicians. The

18. Appendix E presents the exact wording of the questions.

19. Appendix F presents the wording of the scenario.

20. I discuss the possibility of implausible combinations in app. L. For party affiliation, I use parties that historically were part of the German government. One potential issue is that this excludes the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) whose voters tend to have extreme positions on both issues. Since those respondents are less likely to identify with any of the mainstream parties, they might discount the partisanship of the politician. This might artificially inflate the importance of the public commitment. In app. L, I estimate the main models without respondents who identify with the AfD. The results are consistent.

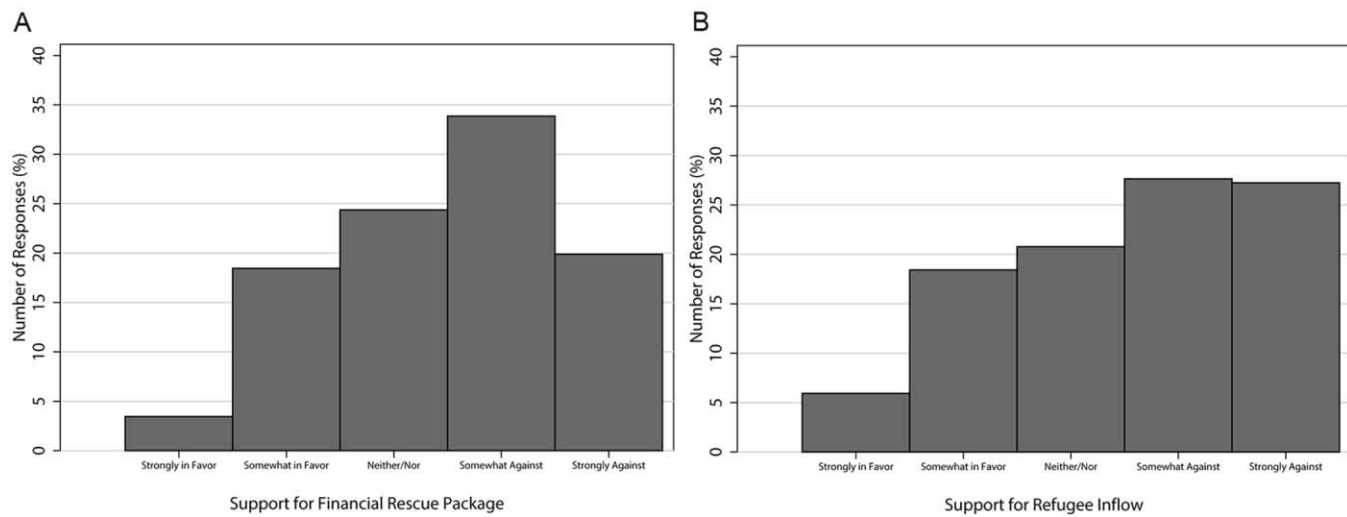


Figure 2. Support for a Greek bailout (A) and the inflow of refugees in Germany (B), 2016

respondents were asked, “If there was an election next Sunday how likely is it that you would vote for each of the politicians? Please give your answer on the following scale from highly unlikely (1) to highly likely (10).” Half of the respondents were randomly chosen to receive the scale in this order, and the other half received it in reverse order, from highly likely (1) to highly unlikely (10).

When respondents were finished with their selections, they were presented with a different hypothetical pair and asked to choose between them and to indicate the probability of voting for each (i.e., the step was repeated with two other randomly assigned politicians).

Table 3 shows the basic layout of the forced-choice-based conjoint in English.²¹ Values for each dimension in each politician’s profile were randomly assigned, and the ordering of the dimensions was also randomized. Each respondent was given two sets of these hypothetical politician pairs for each policy area, so they had to make a total of four forced choices. The analysis is based on the forced choices because these are what matters during elections. Estimations using the continuous measure of support intensity can be found in appendix I.²²

I measure a politician’s responsiveness signal with an indicator variable that takes the value 1 if the politician’s final vote is the same as the initial position and 0 otherwise (Public Commitment). To analyze the impact of responsive and nonresponsive public commitments, I split the sample be-

tween voters who share the politician’s initial position and those who do not. I expect that voters reward responsive commitments and punish nonresponsive commitments. All estimations share three controls. *Partisanship* is an indicator variable that takes the value 1 if the respondent and the politician affiliate with the same party and 0 otherwise. *Gender* is indicator variable that takes the value 1 if the respondent and the politician have the same gender and 0 otherwise. *Experience* measures the years of experience the politician has.

For the analysis, I estimate average marginal component-specific effects. I regress the dependent variable, a binary measure of whether the respondent voted for a particular politician or not, on a set of indicator variables that capture the specific values that the given scenario takes for each of the attributes. For each dimension, I omit one of the attribute values and use it as the baseline category. The regression coefficient for each dummy variable indicates the average marginal component-specific effect of that value of the dimension relative to the omitted value of that dimension. I report standard errors for these estimates clustered by respondent, to account for within-respondent correlations in responses. I estimate separate models for each of the two policy fields. The results are robust to accounting for the respondents’ political knowledge (app. J) and the respondents’ attention during the survey (app. K).²³

EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

Using this information, I can now assess the relative impact of public commitments on the respondents’ approval of

21. Appendix G shows a screen shot of the instructions that individuals received during the survey.

22. Although the uncertainty around the estimates increases somewhat for respondents’ whose position is different from the politician’s position, the results are remarkably robust to the results using the forced-choice question.

23. The findings for attention indicate that Public Commitment is more likely to matter for voters with policy positions similar to the politician’s initial position.

Table 2. Politician Attributes and Signals of Responsiveness

	Bailout	Refugees
Personal attribute:		
Party affiliation	CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, the Greens	CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, the Greens
Gender	Male, female	Male, female
Political experience (years)	0, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10	0, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10
Signal of responsiveness:		
Position taken	Favors more aid, opposes more aid	Favors more refugees, opposes more refugees
Final vote	Favors more aid, opposes more aid	Favors more refugees, opposes more refugees
Negotiation outcome	More aid, no more aid	More refugees, no more refugees

Note. CDU = Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands; CSU = Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern; FDP = Freie Demokratische Partei; SPD = Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands.

politicians. The sample is split into respondents whose ideal policy position is similar to the initial position of the politician (coefficient estimates marked with circles in fig. 3) and those whose ideal policy position is different from the initial position of the politician (marked with diamonds in fig. 3). In addition to Public Commitment, the estimations use the initial position taken by the politician, the policy she or he voted for, and the actual policy outcome.²⁴

The theoretical model expects that voters are more likely to favor politicians whose behavior consistently signals that they are working on behalf of the voters (they take positions favored by the voters and defend them throughout the negotiations). It also expects that voters view with disfavor politicians whose behavior consistently signals the opposite (they take positions the voters oppose and defend those positions throughout the negotiations). The experimental evidence is consistent with these expectations. Across both issue areas, voters who agree with the politician's initial position are more likely to reward the politician for defending that position, and voters who disagree with the politician's initial position are more likely to punish the politician for defending that position. There is no reward for political consistency unless it is about policies voters agree with.

The inclusion of Public Commitment all but wipes out the independent effect of position taking: the coefficients of initial position and final vote are mostly statistically indistinguishable from zero.²⁵ The theory can readily explain that. Taken separately, the initial position and the final vote are weaker signals of responsiveness than the consistency between them. What is the voter to infer if a politician stakes out

one position but then votes for another? One possibility is that the initial position was just cheap talk and the politician was never serious about it. Another possibility is that the politician meant it but was persuaded during the negotiations to change his or her mind. The first suggests that the politician might be a demagogue, while the second suggests that the politician might not be that competent (since the initial position was apparently wrong). In either case the voter has little reason to reward the politicians for inconsistency and perhaps even a slight incentive to punish them for it. Consistency, however, signals both commitment and competence and is duly rewarded when the voter agrees with the policies the politician doggedly pursues and is just as duly punished when the voter disagrees.²⁶

Having the same party affiliation as the politician remains the strongest predictor of voting choice, just like the many studies of voting patterns in Europe would lead one to expect. However, it is worth emphasizing that Public Commitment has a statistically discernible effect even when partisanship is taken into account.

The findings of the experimental analysis provide support to the demand side of my theoretical argument. Whereas the scope of the study limits its generalizability, it demonstrates that respondents, when provided with information about the negotiation conduct and outcomes of EU negotiations, take into account the politicians' bargaining commitments when

24. Appendix M presents the results in tabular form.

25. Appendix N shows that they are significant in models that exclude Public Commitment.

26. One could worry that voters might care more about governments being able to produce successful bargaining outcomes than about their commitments during the negotiations. While it is generally difficult to attribute bargaining outcomes to the government's responsiveness (see discussion above), the experimental setting allows me to take into account responsive bargaining outcomes as signals of responsiveness. I analyze the effect of bargaining success in app. O, where I find that bargaining success can increase voter support, but it does not affect the relationship between public commitments and voter support.

Table 3. Choice-Based Conjoint (English)

	Politician A	Politician B
Negotiation position in the EU	Opposes more aid	Supports more aid
Voting behavior in the EU	Opposes more aid	Opposes more aid
Negotiation outcome in the EU	More aid	No more aid
Party affiliation	FDP	CDU/CSU
Gender	Male	Female
Political experience (in years)	6	4

Your Choice	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
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Note. Ordering of the variables and their values is merely an example. In the experiment, both the order of the variables and their values were randomized. CDU = Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands; CSU = Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern; EU = European Union; FDP = Freie Demokratische Partei.

deciding who to vote for. Rather than simply focusing on the politician’s initial policy positions or the politician’s partisanship, voters appear to care about public commitments as signals of responsiveness. Consistent with the theory, public commitments do not always pay off: voters only reward politicians’ commitment to policies that are responsive; they pun-

ish them for switching positions to unresponsive positions but also for defending initial positions that are unresponsive to the respondents’ preferences.

CONCLUSION

European governments increasingly delegate important decisions to the EU, and their incentives to signal that they represent their electorates’ interests should have increased with the politicization of European affairs. I analyzed how governments can signal responsiveness to their electorates in political environments that are highly complex and opaque due to the number of actors who participate in the decision-making process and the lack of transparency in these negotiations. Since the complex and opaque political system of the EU makes it difficult for voters to attribute policy outcomes to the responsiveness of their government, opportunistic governments use public commitments as signals of responsiveness. Before elections, they take positions that are in their electorates’ interest and defend these positions during the negotiation process. Using observational and experimental evidence, I demonstrated that voters take these signals into account, especially when they are politicized, which in turn creates incentives for governments to signal responsiveness before national elections.

The increasing delegation of decision-making to international institutions coupled with the politicization of international cooperation makes this research agenda relevant beyond the EU. One could argue that the EU’s political system

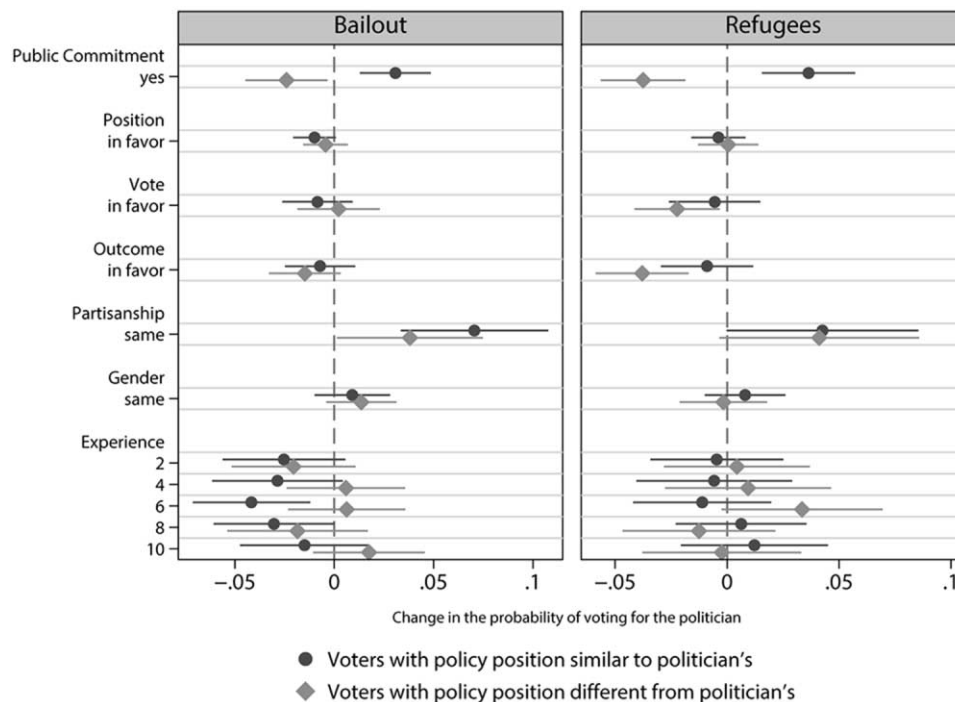


Figure 3. Public commitments and voter support. Marginal component-specific effects from a linear probability model. Bars denote 90% confidence intervals. Reference values for each variable omitted.

is too unique to provide an appropriate test case for a more general argument of responsive governance. I will not argue here that the EU is not unique; every political system is. The EU is arguably the most deeply integrated IO in the world, and the externalization of domestic electoral politics should therefore be most prevalent in this system. Nevertheless, the EU provides an ideal laboratory for analyzing these important events. The variation in the EU's electoral cycles allows for a much more in-depth test of the conditions under which electoral politics are (or will be) externalized to the European level to begin with. And whereas supranational institutions such as the European Commission and the European Parliament exert greater influence than supranational institutions in other IOs, many of the key decisions that are relevant in the context of responsive governance can still be understood by analyzing intergovernmental bargaining in the Council.

The findings offer guidance into some of the conditions under which we should observe responsive governance in international cooperation more generally. First, responsive governance requires that public interests are at stake. If political leaders do not believe that voters potentially learn and care about the policies decided at the international level, they have little reason to act responsive. This implies that policies with more diffuse benefits may be less politicized than policies that provide very clear benefits (or costs) to particular groups within society. For example, publics in developing societies may not pay much attention when their governments negotiate greater budget support from multilateral donors. However, project-based aid directly affects the local population and tends to be highly salient for that reason. Filipino mayors immediately put up huge billboards (with their faces prominently featured) to announce that they received one of the KALAHI-CIDDS grants (a flagship antipoverty program that is based on the principle of community-driven development), and citizens are well aware of whether their village received a grant (Cruz and Schneider 2017). Along similar lines, the big trade negotiation rounds of the World Trade Organization have been highly salient on the domestic level (Davis 2004; Hudec 1993).

Second, voters have to be willing to hold their governments accountable for responsive conduct at the international level. I focused on national elections as one important accountability mechanism, but institutional variations within democracies and autocracies in general can provide divergent incentives for government conduct as well. Finally, at least when they care, voters have to be able to identify information about public commitments correctly. This potentially poses a challenge in the International Monetary Fund, where loans are given to countries with economic difficulties, and the very existence of a program could also signal domestic economic in-

competence (Dreher and Vaubel 2004). In the example of the World Bank, Filipino villagers rewarded mayors for receiving grants by voting for them in local elections (and punished those that did not), even though the mayors had no influence on the distribution of project grants (Cruz and Schneider 2017). Similarly, Latin American governments often get punished for economic developments that are out of their control (such as a deteriorating world economy; Campello and Zucco 2016). These examples indicate that voters oftentimes attribute responsibility incorrectly, which may lead to both the removal of responsive governments and the survival of unresponsive governments.

For the democratic legitimacy of the EU, the findings are encouraging because they demonstrate that governments do have incentives to signal responsiveness, at least at the intergovernmental level. Yet, they pose a puzzle in themselves: If EU governments want to be responsive, as my results suggest, then why is the EU's legitimacy crisis worsening? Why have Euroskeptic political entrepreneurs, such as the AfD in Germany or the Lega Nord in Italy, been able to mobilize discontent with the governments' handling of EU affairs so easily? If EU governments are, in fact, responsive but voters still do not think that to be the case, then we should seek the explanation for that crisis not just in the institutions of the EU. One reason for the legitimacy crisis may also lie in the behavior of political actors at the domestic level themselves, where governments tend to use the EU as a scapegoat for bad policy outcomes, all the while claiming personal credit for the good outcomes (opposition parties also like to portray incumbent governments as beholden to Brussels rather than responsive to their own nationals).

The increasing challenges for political elites to formulate responsive policies in a union where different types of Euroskeptics across different contexts characterized by varying levels of economic performance and quality of government hold starkly different priorities and positions about what the EU should and could do already (de Vries 2018) can readily explain why Euroskeptic parties have been so successful. The silver lining is that the shock of a potential withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU has forced Europeans to think harder about the value of their Union and to realize that there is much more to it than faceless bureaucrats in Brussels twirling their thumbs or spending their time penning long memoranda about the size and shape of bananas. According to the Bertelsmann Foundation, which conducts surveys in the six most populous member states, in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, public approval of the EU has risen in all except Spain (Hoffman and de Vries 2016). And while before Brexit 41% of Danes and 49% of Austrians had favored holding referenda on continuing their membership, only 32% and 30%

did afterward (Noack 2016). It is painful to contemplate that it might have taken the self-immolation of one of the most valuable members of the union to awaken the nascent European demos from its complacent slumber. But this may be the only way to affect the current tide of popular attitudes toward the EU and its perceived democratic legitimacy.

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