



The Personal Sources of Responsiveness. Introduction to a Special Section

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Abstract: *Responsiveness is a core value in democratic politics. Individual legislators are important mechanisms for implementing this concern in real-world settings and thus facilitating responsive government. This introduction to the special section on this topic starts out by highlighting the special relevance of individual legislators in this regard and by sketching important theoretical considerations that emerge from the political science literature on this issue. In its main part, it summarizes the key findings of the contributions in relation to its main theme, namely the personal sources of responsiveness. We end with a short conclusion that reflects on possible tensions between responsiveness and the personalization of representative systems.*

KEYWORDS: Political Representation, Responsiveness, Legislative Behavior, Legislators, Personalization of Politics, Electoral Dealignment

Individual Legislators as Mechanisms for Responsive Government

Responsiveness is widely considered a core value in democratic politics. In its most essential reading, it expects public policy making to take the interest of citizens into account (Manin 1997; Pitkin 1967). The intriguing question is, how this unequivocally shared but abstract expectation can be brought to life, by what institutional features, and on the basis of which individual level behaviors and motivations. This is the question that this special section is concerned with.

The process of responsive policy-making involves a multitude of actors that perform a number of functions. In this special section, we explore the role of individual legislators as mechanisms for responsive government. In other words, we ask about whether and when legislators are inclined to respond, to what kind of constituents, by what type of activities. Ideally, this involves two distinct sets of activities. First, responsive legislators are said to listen to the public to inform themselves about demands and to be able to act upon them (Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Second, responsive legislators are assumed to take efforts to act upon public demands in formal decision-making but also to publicly convey their actions to either accommodate existing concerns and signal related activities or convince and mobilize constituents (Disch 2011). Advancing from these prescriptions, in this special section, we aim to further explore their behavioral and motivational embodiments in the context of European politics.

Why should we care about the responsiveness of legislators? This emphasis is motivated by two sets of issues that reconcile practical and scientific concerns in political science research. Our concern regarding responsiveness is on the one hand motivated by ongoing

processes of weakening partisanship in representative democracies across Europe and debates about how to reconnect citizens and the state under these conditions. It is motivated on the other by academic debates about the sources of individual level behavior in European party democracies and the extent to which electoral incentives might matter. In the following paragraphs, we briefly elaborate these two sets of issues before we then take steps to summarize the main contributions of the five papers that are part of this special section.

The fact that today fewer citizens identify with a distinct party (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000) provides a special challenge to the responsiveness of modern representative democracies. The delegation of decision-making authority in these systems from the many to the few facilitates the efficiency of public policy making but simultaneously raises the issue of linkage and thus how to connect citizens and the state and secure the responsiveness of government. During the course of the 20th century, national political parties functioned as most effective agents of democratic linkage. According to democratic theory parties competed for votes on the basis of party manifestos, voters choose the party they felt closest to, and winners implemented their program in disciplined ways in legislative contexts. In reality, party brands conveyed through social institutions provided cues to voters and political elites that functioned as informational short-cuts in low information environments (Campbell et al. 1960; Downs 1957; Kölln 2015). The weakening of partisanship in established democracies tips this equilibrium out of balance. It raises questions about the continued role of parties as the means for responsive government and about mechanisms that might supplement their appeals and functions. This concern spurred academic and public interest in the personalistic dimension of politics, and also in how individual politicians may help to appeal to citizens on the basis of what motivations, and with what effects for responsiveness (Balmas et al. 2014; Karvonen 2010). This special issue contributes to this debate by focusing on the behaviors of individual legislators.

Research about the responsiveness of individual legislators so far mostly has been confined to plurality systems, mostly the US-Congress, and mostly has stressed its electoral motivations. Specifically, the literature on personal vote-seeking argued that nominal modes of election in single member districts are most suited to facilitate personalized forms of accountability towards geographic constituents while proportional electoral systems provide disincentives in this regard (Cain et al. 1987; Carey 2007; Mayhew 1974; Powell 2004). This predominant perspective about the key role of the electoral connection raises questions at three levels of analysis that this special section touches upon. First, the simple distinction between plurality and proportional rules misses the much larger variation across electoral systems in established democracies and how this might affect the levels and forms of responsive behavior (Carey and Shugart 1995; Shugart 2005). Second, the continued role of strong party government in European democracies raises questions about the extent to which electoral incentives for individual level responsiveness may matter in these contexts and how they are mediated by party government (Martin 2014). Third, in-depth research on the backgrounds and behaviors of Members of Parliament (MPs) in European democracies emphasizes the behavioral implications of positional and biographical factors that need to be better integrated in future models of individual level responsiveness (Müller et al. 2001; Norton and Wood 1993; Patzelt 1993; Searing 1994). The contributions to this special section are not able to comprehensively speak to all aspects of these larger questions raised. They however provide pieces of evidence that aims to reflect upon these issues and motivate future research.

The next paragraphs briefly summarize the main findings of the contributions to this special section. We pursue this task in three steps. In a first step, we sketch the main descriptive findings with regard to the levels and forms of responsive behavior that are found in the contributions at hand. In a second step, we summarize findings about the factors that motivate individual responsiveness. We conclude in a third step by stressing the main themes that emerge from the contributions and also open questions and issues for future research.

The Levels and Forms of Responsive Behavior

What are the predominant behavioral patterns by which legislators may facilitate the responsiveness of democratic governance? Traditionally, roll calls are viewed as a key currency in this regard, where legislators take floor positions that aim to implement median preferences among (geographic) constituents (Mayhew 1974). Similarly, securing federal aid for geographic districts through committee work (pork) is considered to pay tribute to the infrastructural needs of constituents in legislative settings (Cain et al. 1987). Obviously, party government in Europe severely constrains the leeway of individual legislators to independently pursue policies in these regards and requires them to compromise with fellow partisans. This however does not render legislators to be negligible in their linkage role. The contributions to this special issue highlight strategies that legislators have at hand to facilitate individual responsiveness vis-à-vis geographic and social constituents without necessarily contradicting their parties and disrupting party unity.

Enrico Borghetto, José Santana-Pereira, and André Freire in their analysis on Portugal focus on written parliamentary questions as a means for individual legislators to independently voice constituency concerns in the legislative process. The authors find that district-specific problem pressures, measured as variation in crime and unemployment statistics, indeed are associated with a greater propensity among Portuguese legislators representing affected districts to table parliamentary questions on these issues. *Daniel Höhmann* in his longitudinal analysis on the behavior of male MPs in the German Bundestag corroborates the use of parliamentary questions as means for responsive behavior. He shows that male MPs use parliamentary questions to voice issues that are of concern for women when few women are in parliament and that they reduce their efforts with rising numbers of female legislators. Both contributions cannot contradict the minimal direct policy effects of parliamentary questions. They however demonstrate distinct behavioral patterns that indicate conscious efforts to publicly voice issues in the legislative arena that are of concern for distinct constituents. In the short run, this signals attention to affected constituents to either accommodate or mobilize concerns; in the long run, this might affect other MPs, media reports, and interest group activities, and thus have an effect on public policy (for similar findings see Martin 2011; Saalfeld and Bischof 2013; Zittel et al. 2019). Parliamentary questions generally are well suited to explore individual level responsiveness from a comparative perspective since most European national parliaments allow for this form of by and large unconstrained individual participation in the legislative process (Rozenberg and Martin 2017). However, it must be said that they also come with a grain of salt since in most European democracies they are mostly used by members of the opposition to control the government and thus provide biased results across the government opposition divide.

Independent of parliamentary questions, many European national parliaments provide additional opportunities for legislators to individually participate in the legislative process

and to thus give voice to the concerns of constituents. In this vein, *Julien Navarro and Abel François* in their analysis on the parliamentary work of French MPs focus not only on parliamentary questions but also on private member bills and on legislators' functions in parliamentary committees and policy-related working groups (chairs, vice-chairs, secretaries). The key finding in this analysis is that French MPs are able to increase their visibility among constituents, measured on the basis of name recall in election survey, by tabling written questions and private-member bills. Those MPs who are most active in this regard are more likely to be known among geographic constituents and thus better able to function as effective mechanisms for responsive government.

Ties to social organizations may further facilitate the extent to which individual legislators are able to mediate between citizens and the state. While such ties can be situational resulting from active lobby efforts (e.g. Giger and Klüver 2016), *Oliver Huwyler and Tomas Turner-Zwinkels* explore formalized ties among Swiss MPs defined as formal positions on the boards of social organizations. In their study, the authors are able to show that Swiss MPs are not only well connected to social organizations but that they also become more effective in this regard over the course of their legislative tenure. While, according to the original data presented in this analysis, the average Swiss legislator enters parliament with 3.4 ties, this number almost doubles to 6.4 ties after a tenure of ten years, which involves two and a half terms in the Swiss parliament. Taken at face value, this suggests that Swiss MPs are well equipped to function as mechanisms for responsive government.

In addition to observational approaches, individual level responsiveness can also be studied on the basis of survey data and in view of legislators' subjective role conceptions, meaning their subjective proclivity to act in responsive ways towards distinct constituents. International survey programs such as *PartiRep* (Deschouwer and Depauw 2014) or the *Comparative Candidate Survey Network* (CCS) (Zittel 2015) render this a suitable approach to study individual level responsiveness from a comparative perspective, despite backdrops with regard to objective and subjective response biases. Taking advantage of *PartiRep* data, *Nicolas Van de Voorde and Benjamin de Vet* explore the effects of dual mandate holding on legislators' role conceptions and reported behavior, where dual mandates indicate the simultaneous occupation of public office at local and upper levels of government. The descriptive part of their analysis shows relatively high levels of local orientations among legislators across 9 European democracies and 62 national and regional parliaments. For example, on a 7-point Likert scale, the average constituency focus across all 9 countries and all parliaments is found to range at 5.7, which is quite close to the "very important" extreme of the scale. Similarly, the surveyed legislators also indicate that a significant share of 20.6 percent of their overall legislative activities are inspired by direct citizen contact. Both findings convey high levels of responsiveness to the concerns of geographic constituents, independent of the partisan nature of the parliaments that were subject to this research.

What Motivates MPs to Behave in Responsive Ways?

The descriptive findings summarized above raise questions about the motivations of MPs to be individually responsive and the factors that might explain variance in this regard. As we already emphasized above, many accounts on this issue highlight the role of the electoral connection in explaining the quantity and quality of legislators' responsiveness. In this vein, recent research stressed developments in Post-War Europe that have increased

voters' opportunities to express preferences for candidates, especially in the 1990s and 2000s (Renwick and Pilet 2015). But to what extent are these developments relevant for the behaviors and motivations of MPs in European democracies? The contributions to this special issue redirect our attention to the crucial role of individual level factors such as legislators' career and social backgrounds. Their findings also raise the issue of agency and thus the role of party in securing individual level linkage vis-à-vis individual ambition and personal vote-seeking. In the following, we briefly summarize key findings on these issues.

The contribution by *Enrico Borghetto, José Santana-Pereira, and André Freire* on Portugal particularly emphasizes that individual responsiveness need not result from personal vote-seeking concerns and thus individual level electoral incentives. The political system of Portugal involves a closed list proportional system that provides none of the traditional incentives for individual responsiveness; legislators' activities nevertheless are found to respond to local problem pressures (For a similar finding on the Dutch case see Louwse and Otjes 2016). The analysis of the authors suggests that policy specialization plays a role in this case while overlapping with legislators' local contexts. Assignments to distinct committees that enjoy jurisdiction in areas that are of special concern to legislators' districts provide individual level motivation to raise distinct issues in parliamentary questions. In view of this finding, the analysis raises important questions about agency in the individual activities that it explores. Since committee assignments in Portugal, as in most European parliaments, are not entirely independent of the preferences of party leaderships, the Portuguese analysis potentially unveils localism as a strategy of political parties driven by their collective vote-seeking concerns rather than as personal vote-seeking efforts.

The social identities of legislators and their biographical backgrounds circumscribe a second set of factors that might motivate them to be responsive to distinct sets of constituents. Regarding the role of social identities, *Daniel Höhmann's* (counterintuitive) analysis on the behaviors of male MPs offers an important contribution to the debate on the responsiveness of legislative institutions to women's interests (e.g. Campbell et al. 2010; Kittilson 2008). His analysis suggests that social identities might matter contingent upon the social-structural make-up of representative assemblies. Male MPs might engage in "virtual representation", showing responsiveness to women's interests, as long as this group suffers from weak descriptive representation. This is found to change with increasing descriptive representation of women. One of the implications of this is that gender equal parliaments reinforce the behavioral impact of social identities, where women are responsive to the interests of women, but do not automatically result in more women-friendly legislation, since men become less inclined to speak up for the interests of women.

Regarding legislators' biographical backgrounds, *Nicolas Van de Voorde and Benjamin de Vet* highlight the important behavioral implications of legislators' localness as measured by dual mandate holding, meaning the simultaneous possession of local and upper-level public office. This resonates with a broader literature that envisions locally rooted legislators to be more inclined to be responsive to geographic interests (e.g. Tavits 2009; Zittel et al. 2019). The analysis offered by Van de Voorde and de Vet comes with a grain of salt in this regard since they only find attitudinal but no behavioral effects of dual mandates. However, we should not discard the larger relevance of legislators' subjective attention to local constituencies since this might result in intra-party lobbying which is less visible to standard forms of academic inquiry but which need not be without fewer effects (For an argument on the intra-party effects of individual responsiveness see Butler et al. 2017; Ohberg and Naurin 2016).

MPs might be more responsive to social constituents compared to geographic constituents contingent upon district magnitude, where social references matter more in large districts (Shugart et al. 2005). The analysis that is offered by *Oliver Huwyler and Tomas Turner-Zwinkels* on the social ties of Swiss MPs stresses the role of highly personalistic concerns to explain which MP pursues ties to which organization within a given electoral context (e.g. Giugni and Grasso 2019). They particularly find MPs representing conservative parties more likely to seek revenue by pursuing board positions within business firms. Compared to this, MPs representing parties from the left of the political spectrum are found to be more constrained by voter expectations and their own ideology and thus less likely to be responsive on the basis of revenue seeking motivations.

Conclusion

The contributions to this special section emphasize the multifaceted ways in which individual legislators respond to the concerns of candidate-centered constituents in European party democracies. This may take the form of individual level activities such as tabling parliamentary questions or private member bills that allow legislators to voice constituency concerns in subtle ways and without disrupting party unity. This furthermore may take the form of office-seeking behavior, where legislators pursue assignments that are instrumental in responding to distinct constituency interests. This also may take the form of subjective conceptions that can be measured via survey-based approaches and that may constitute intra-party heterogeneity and dynamics.

The contributions to this special issue not only contribute to debates about the nature of individual level responsiveness but also shed light on its personal sources such as legislators' social identities and biographical backgrounds. Clearly, traditions that portrayed legislators as single-minded vote seekers have always stimulated adverse reactions, especially in European contexts. The papers contributing to this section provide avenues to systematically advance from these concerns and to unveil what non-electoral factors matter to what extent and how. They show for example that the local rootedness of legislators matters for their responsiveness to geographic constituents, independent of electoral rules.

The interface between individual and aggregate level responsiveness remains an open question in this special section but also in the wider debate about democratic responsiveness (see e.g. Esaiasson and Wlezién 2017). The analysis offered by *Julien Navarro and Abel François* on the French case provides some indication that individual responsiveness matters to voters and to what they might know about and expect from politics. Less is known about the interface between individual responsiveness and public policy making and thus about the extent to which greater individual level responsiveness results in more responsive policies. This raises thorny questions about legislative organization that go beyond the concerns of this special section. They ask about ways how the interests of (responsive) individual legislators can be aggregated in the legislative process to facilitate policies that are responsive to majority or median voter interests. From an ad-hoc point of view, addressing this challenge requires parties and partisanship to continue to act as effective mechanisms for interest aggregation. In this vein, individual responsiveness must be viewed as a double-edged sword that can be both a mechanism for but also a curse to democracy. It presupposes striking a delicate balance between small scale concerns and collective responsibilities that is not a forgone conclusion but rather an open question that we end with.

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