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# Speech is silver, silence is golden? Policy agenda, responsiveness, and competitive incentives

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## Abstract

Do governments (de-)emphasise certain issues in their policy agendas under some specific incentives coming from party competition? Under what circumstances are government agendas more responsive to public priorities? In order to address these questions, this paper presents a theoretical framework in which government vulnerability, issue competence and electoral proximity are the main competitive incentives for rhetorical responsiveness. Using time-series cross-sectional data where executive speeches are the dependent variable, this paper produces evidence that has implications for both the policy agenda of governments and government responsiveness to citizens' priorities. Competitive incentives matter: on the one hand, governments tend to emphasise more those issues that are salient to the public, when they are vulnerable; on the other hand, governments tend to emphasise more those issues they are perceived as competent on, when they are safe. The paper finds no evidence that government responsiveness to public opinion is higher when elections are approaching.

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## 1. Introduction

Democratic governments need to talk about issues, they are reactors to their environment. They cannot leave the public agenda open to the media and the opposition (Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). Democratic governments also seek reelection (Downs 1957; Bartolini 1999). But, what do they do when they are vulnerable? Governments face a puzzle: they can either focus on those issues that are salient to the public or they can emphasise those issues which they have a good reputation on. If the issue is salient to the public and the government has an advantage on the issue there is no divergence. But when this is not the case, which of the two strategies is more risky for governments who are unpopular and interested in being reelected? Do they respond in line with the public concerns and priorities or do they go for their own issues? This puzzling question has implications for both the policy agendas of governments and for responsiveness. Are governments more likely to respond to public opinion when they are safe or when they are vulnerable? In other words, is electoral vulnerability really an incentive for responsiveness, as theories of competitive democracy suggest? One story is that, then, vulnerable governments will emphasise, in their policy agendas, those issues that are salient for the public and de-emphasise the issues they own or have a good reputation on. However, a different scenario is also thinkable. Popular governments are perceived to be competent on several issues therefore they will be more likely to respond to the public because they are freer from electoral pressures and constraints. Unpopular governments, instead, will invest on their own issues in order to climb again the ladder of popularity. This paper aims at testing these competing scenarios.

The theoretical assumption in this paper is that governing parties are reelection seekers. Since governing parties are interested in reelection, they will be more likely to achieve this goal if they respond sympathetically to public preferences and concerns (Bartolini 1999). This is, in turn, more likely if governments are electorally vulnerable. However, the effect of vulnerability on government responsiveness can also be mediated by the competence or reputation governing parties have on issues. Since this paper seeks to explain governmental agenda responsiveness, I define responsiveness in the following way: when the importance of an issue for the public increases and the level of attention in the government agenda on that issue increases consequently, then a responsive move occurs. Some scholars call it *dynamic agenda representation* (Bevan and Jennings 2014), but I prefer to use the term *rhetorical responsiveness*, in line with other studies (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008), to distinguish it from policy responsiveness. It appears, thus, clear that rhetorical responsiveness is a relationship-wise concept linking citizens' priorities (public issue salience) and government activity (policy agenda).

Note that agenda responsiveness is not simply an increase in government attention to citizens' priorities since it can be translated into policy. In fact, there is evidence for agenda responsiveness in the U.S. (Edwards and Wood 1999), consistency between executive agendas and legislative outputs in the U.K. (Bara 2005; Bevan, John, and Jennings 2011), and comparative evidence of congruence between party rhetorics and party policy outputs in parliament (Bischof 2014). The issue of whether responsiveness can be found also in executive speeches is highly controversial in the discipline. While policy agenda scholars are open to talk in terms of policy-opinion responsiveness (see Bevan and Jennings 2010; John, Bevan, and Jennings 2011), students of responsiveness/representation are, instead, more conservative narrowing responsiveness to policy only (Powell 2004; Soroka and Wleziem 2010).

This paper produces the following findings. Competitive incentives matter: on the one hand, governments tend to emphasise more those issues that are salient to the public, when they are vulnerable; on the other hand, governments tend to emphasise more those issues they are perceived as competent on, when they are safe. The paper finds no evidence that government responsiveness to public opinion is higher when elec-

tions are approaching.

## 2. Electoral Vulnerability, Issue Salience, and Issue Ownership

Substantial part of democratic theory suggests that electoral competition is good and beneficial for democracy and responsiveness (Downs 1957; Dahl 1971; Sartori 1977; Miller 1983; Strom 1992; Bartolini 1999). In particular, there is one condition of competition that is said to be essential for responsiveness to be achieved. This dimension of competition is called electoral vulnerability (Mayhew 1974; Fenno 1977; Bartolini 1999, 2000; Orłowski 2013; Immergut and Abou-Chadi 2014; André, Depauw, and Martin 2014)<sup>1</sup>. The unintended responsive effect of competition is achieved by introducing Friedrich's (1963) "mechanism of anticipated reactions". Only if politicians are worried about the reactions of voters will they be "constantly piloted by the anticipation of those reactions" (Sartori 1977: 350). This mechanism occurs in-between elections and is similar to the mechanism of rational anticipation identified by Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson (1995). Here, the anticipatory pressure from the upcoming election should bring governments to formulate policies in line with what voters expressed through the previous election outcome. If the mechanism of democracy stems from the potential electoral sanctions (or on the will of being reelected), if the incumbent government aims to achieve this goal, it will need to anticipate sympathetically the voters' needs. This mechanism will perform better if the incumbent government perceives itself vulnerable (Bartolini 1999), therefore vulnerability is related to the potential uncertainty of electoral result. Vulnerability then acts as a relevant electoral incentive for governments to respond to public opinion. In fact, when governing parties are safe such an incentive would not occur, leaving room for possible unresponsive behaviours.

Empirical evidence does not give a clear answer. On the one hand, literature from the U.S. provides mixed results. For instance, some studies report no particular impact of presidential popularity on responsiveness to public concern (Cohen 1995) and that "unpopular presidents are not more likely than popular ones to support positions endorsed by majority opinion" (Canes-Wrone 2004: 487)<sup>2</sup>, while other studies show that more popular presidents do feel less pressure to promote policies in line with the public (for a review, see Manza and Cook 2002) or find support for a nonmonotonic relationship, that is, when the next election is approaching the probability of policy congruence increases as the president's popularity shifts from low to average, but decreases as popularity shifts from average to high (Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004).

On the other hand, outside the American context, the hypothesis that electoral pressure increases government responsiveness to citizens' preferences and priorities finds confirmation in both case studies and comparative research (Hakhverdian 2010; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008). Using vote intentions for the government as a proxy for incumbent vulnerability, Hobolt and Klemmensen (2008) find that its interaction with public priorities matters in some policy domains (but not in others), in the expected direction: the greater the uncertainty about future electoral contests, the higher the responsiveness of the executive. Collapsing government speeches into a single left-right policy dimension, the same hypothesis has also been tested for Britain by Hakhverdian (2010), who finds that the marginal effect of public preferences on government policy increases as electoral pressures rise.

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<sup>1</sup>While, in the U.S. literature, scholars tend to prefer the term presidential popularity (e.g. Cohen 1997; Canes-Wrone, Herron, and Shotts 2001; Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004), other authors refer to the concept of vulnerability but they call it differently (for a discussion, see Strom 1989, 1992; Bartolini 2000).

<sup>2</sup>Of course, under certain circumstances, an executive can also increase his probability of reelection by choosing an unpopular policy that is in the public interest or even contrary to voters' interests (see, e.g. Canes-Wrone, Herron, and Shotts 2001). Nonetheless, the eternal trade-off between responsiveness and responsibility will not be addressed here since beyond the scope of this paper.

Yet this is only one part of the story. Other research building on issue ownership/issue competence theories says that parties give priority only to those issues for which they have a historically good reputation for competence (Petrocik 1996). Parties who own the issue and have a good reputation on it will be more likely to emphasise that issue in their political agenda. Conversely, parties are more likely to avoid those issues they do not own and for which their reputation is bad in order to avoid electoral harm (Green and Hobolt 2008; van der Brug 2004)<sup>3</sup>. Parties tend to increase the salience of an issue they hold an advantageous position on and ignore or try to mute those issues that do not benefit them (Rovny 2012, 2013), simply because they will not be credible in the eyes of voters and this would only be a safe road to an electoral defeat. In contrast with the literature on issue ownership, cases of “issue trespassing” and “issue convergence” are well documented in the U.S. (see Damore 2004, 2005; Sigelman and Buell 2004) and it seems plausible that issue overlap is more frequent in multi-party rather than two-party systems given the crowdedness of the political space (Tresch, Lefevre, and Walgrave 2013). In this case, the government will try to challenge its main competitor on an issue it has not a good reputation on in order to desperately attempt to gain votes and improve its popularity in opinion polls. The latter strategy is surely more risky than the former but still finds empirical evidence in cases of issue convergence and issue trespassing<sup>4</sup>.

More interestingly, issue ownership effects on governing policy agendas are moderated by party popularity (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Green 2011; Green and Jennings 2012a): popular parties have a wide range of issues on which they are rated positively therefore they are freer to respond to public concerns; unpopular parties, instead, tend to focus on the issues they own in order to gain electoral support. According to Green and Jennings (2012a), governing parties would behave in the way suggested by issue ownership theories, highlighting the issues they own or have a good reputation on. This strategy is, however, mediated by the salience of those issues prioritised by the public and the government popularity. Using both executive speeches and legislative outputs in the U.K. and the U.S., the authors conclude that theories of party competition applied to policy agendas of government raise exciting prospects but they also remark that findings cannot be generalised across policy domains and different institutional contexts, confirming the existence of an issue-specific pattern. When the hypothesis of issue ownership effects mediated by party popularity is considered, the interaction between issue ownership and popularity is more encouraging for legislative outputs than executive speeches in the direction hypothesised by the authors, that is, issue ownership evaluations on governing policy agendas will be attenuated by the electoral popularity of the governing party, suggesting that “an issue ownership strategy is particularly likely for parties with relatively weak electoral support” (Green and Jennings 2012a: 10).

Issue salience and issue ownership are interconnected. From studies on issue salience and issue ownership we know that, on one side, voters are better informed about party positions when dealing with issues they care of (Iyengar et al. 2008; Krosnick 1990); on the other side, party issue ownership helps voters to distinguish parties from each other and parties become owners of an issue because the issue is salient to the party (Walgrave and De Swert 2007; Bélanger and Meguid 2008). So, when an issue is salient to a party, this means that such

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<sup>3</sup>This is essentially in line with the saliency theory (Budge and Farlie 1983; Budge, Robertson, and Hearl 1987; Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge 1994), according to which parties emphasise and de-emphasise issues based on the developments of electoral competition. What matters is not the party position as expressed in the Downsian theory, but the importance a party gives to those issues raised in the campaign. For a slightly different argument emphasising the importance of issue competition (Carmines and Stimson 1993), meaning competition for the issues that should dominate the party political agenda, see Green-Pedersen (2007).

<sup>4</sup>Nevertheless, it is important noticing that only the competence dimension of issue ownership can be stolen from a party by another party while the associative dimension of issue ownership (i.e. voters associate a certain issue to a certain party) is much more stable over time (Walgrave, Lefevre, and Tresch 2012; Tresch, Lefevre, and Walgrave 2013).

an issue is important for that party and for its voters, too (Walgrave and De Swert 2007; Walgrave and Lefevere 2013). If the issue is salient for the voters and, consequently, becomes salient for the party too, then a responsive move occurs. As previous research has widely outlined, responsiveness is more likely to occur for those issues that are salient to the public (Miller and Stokes 1963; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2005; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Jennings and John 2009). Evidence from Belgium reveals that incongruence between parties and voters decreases when a party owns an issue and that the effect on congruence is even greater when interacting party ownership and voter salience (Walgrave and Lefevere 2013). Yet it is less clear from an empirical standpoint whether issue ownership has a positive effect on responsiveness.

### 3. The Safety/Vulnerability Dilemma

Previous research on government agendas tells us that, given the complexity and the amount of public demands, attention is a scarce good and this has consequences for agenda representation (Kingdon 1995; Jones and Baumgartner 2004; Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson 2009). Governments cannot pay attention to any issue the public is concerned about therefore they will select those issues that are salient for the public (Mortensen et al. 2011) and avoid those ones the public is less concerned about. If an issue is salient to the public and the government has a good reputation on the issue there is no problem of selection. But what happens when the government is under electoral pressure? In that case, governments face a policy agenda dilemma: do they respond to public concerns and priorities or do they choose to emphasise those issues they have a good reputation on? More importantly, are these competing scenarios more likely to occur when governments are electorally safe or when they are vulnerable?

Given the premises outlined in the previous section, two competing hypotheses should be tested. The *vulnerability thesis*, in line with that part of democratic theory suggesting a beneficial effect of electoral competition on responsiveness and that find some support in different institutional arrangements (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Hakhverdian 2010), states that electoral pressure or uncertainty is a powerful incentive increasing government responsiveness to citizens' preferences and priorities. If this is true, one can expect that when the government is safe it would devote more attention to the issues in which is perceived to be competent on. This is also reasonable, given that opposition parties are freer than government parties to focus on the issues they have an advantage on (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). In contrast, the *safety thesis*, introducing issue ownership/competence effects into the picture, suggests that this relationship between electoral vulnerability and responsiveness is mediated by whether the party has an advantage on the issue (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Green and Jennings 2012a). Safe governments, because they are safe and do not feel the electoral pressure, will be more likely to devote their attention on those issues the public is concerned about at the expense of those issues they are associated to. Vulnerable governments, instead, will go for to safe option and emphasise those issues they have a good reputation on in order to reacquire popularity. To put it formally:

*Hypothesis 1a.* Vulnerable governments will be more likely to emphasise those issues the public is more concerned about.

*Hypothesis 1b.* Safe governments will be more likely to emphasise those issues they have a good reputation on.

As discussed in the previous section, there is, on the one hand, a tendency for issues to receive more attention the government when the government does well on that issue and when the public cares about it

(Walgrave and De Swert 2007; Walgrave and Lefevere 2013). There is, on the other hand, a tendency for this relationship to be enhanced when the government is under pressure. Therefore, a second hypothesis will take the following form:

*Hypothesis 2.* Responsiveness of government policy agenda on public priorities is more likely on those issues for which the government is perceived to be more competent on and the public is concerned about them, and this can be enhanced by electoral vulnerability.

Responsiveness can also be a function of an additional electoral incentive: electoral proximity. This can be the case since, when elections are approaching, politicians interested in reelection will find it faster and less risky to respond to public opinion rather than to attempt to change it (see, e.g. Jacobs and Shapiro 2000) or just because voters are unlikely to observe the outcome of a policy choice made shortly before an election and, for this reason, presidents are more likely to cater current opinion as the next election is coming (Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004: 693). The electoral proximity hypothesis finds confirmation in the American context where reelection-seeking presidents are more likely to endorse popular policies in the second half of the term (Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004). Yet evidence from Spain reveals that policymakers are more responsive to public priorities immediately after elections and when the executive governs without a majority (Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011). This might suggest that the relationship between responsiveness and the electoral cycle is not linear but curvilinear, with responsiveness higher in the first year after elections, probably in line with the so-called honeymoon effect, but decreasing during the legislative term and increasing again in the election year. Despite the form of such a relationship, in line with the literature I expect responsiveness to be higher when the election is imminent:

*Hypothesis 3.* Responsiveness of government policy agenda on public priorities is higher the sooner is the next election.

One last reflection is devoted to the causal direction between vulnerability or, better, safety and responsiveness: are governments responsive because they are safe or they are safe because they are responsive? What drives what? The intuition of this paper is that it is electoral vulnerability, as a competitive incentive, that drives responsiveness. However, part of the presidency literature finds also support for the reverse causal link, that is, presidential responsiveness to public opinion may boost presidential popularity, at least in the longer run (for an overview, see Cohen 1997: 165-6). Even more importantly for this paper, other research finds that presidential popularity increases due to speech-making (Ragsdale 1984) and that public issue salience directly affects the public's evaluation of the president (Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995). The paper addresses this issue in the analysis, but it requires special care that will be devoted in future versions where endogeneity tests will be run.

#### 4. *Data and Measures*

Rhetorical responsiveness on the government side is measured using data on executive speeches as collected by the Comparative Agendas Project following the codebook created by the Policy Agendas Project<sup>5</sup>. The policy

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<sup>5</sup>For the U.S., the data used here were originally collected by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, with the support of National Science Foundation grant numbers SBR 9320922 and 0111611, and were distributed through the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. Neither NSF nor the original collectors of the data bear any responsibility for the analysis reported

content of these speeches is divided into quasi-sentences, with each quasi-sentence assigned a single unique topic code<sup>6</sup>. The dependent variable is then the number of quasi-sentences assigned to each macro topic in a series of policy domains (see Table 1)<sup>7</sup> in four advanced democracies: Germany (1987-2004), Spain (1982-2007), the United Kingdom (1970-2010), and the United States (1970-2012). The head of state or head of government, depending on the political system, delivers an annual formal statement on behalf of the executive, setting out the government agenda for the year ahead (Cohen 1995; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2005, 2008; Jennings, Bevan, and John 2011; Bevan, John, and Jennings 2011). Executive speeches have then a prospective function communicating the government’s general priorities as well as more specific measures that the executive intends to address in the following year. For this reason, speeches are a costly signal and “create future potential costs for the prime minister and the government, if the priorities in the speech are not followed by policy outputs” (Bevan, John, and Jennings 2011).

Table 1: Policy Agendas Project major topic codes

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2. Civil Rights, Minorities, Migration and Civil Liberties
3. Health
6. Education
7. Environment
12. Law, Crime and Family Issues
13. Social Welfare
14. Community Development, Planning and Housing Issues
16/19. Defence, International Affairs and Foreign Aid

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Source: UK Policy Agendas Topic Codebook, see [www.policyagendas.org.uk](http://www.policyagendas.org.uk)

Public issue salience is measured using the most important problem/issue (MIP/MII) question, which gives citizens the opportunity to state their priorities. While some surveys ask respondents to spot the most important *problem* their country is facing, other surveys ask them to spot the most important *issue*. Though the MIP/MII question is widely used as indicator of public opinion, such a question has been harshly criticised for several reasons, especially for the conceptual fuzziness between importance and salience, on the one hand, and issues and problems, on the other hand (see Wlezien 2005; Jennings and Wlezien 2011). Nevertheless, when comparing MIP and MII, Jennings and Wlezien (2011) find that, though for some issues some variation does exist, they essentially mean the same for respondents. While the MIP/MII question might be more problematic when associated to indicators of government activity that contain policy directionality (for instance, more or less spending on a given issue), it matches quite well with government priorities and is frequently used in studies on dynamic agenda representation (Jones and Baumgartner 2004; John, Bevan, and Jennings 2011; Bevan and Jennings 2014). Data on citizens’ priorities have been recoded in line with the Policy Agendas Project codebook to make them more comparable<sup>8</sup>.

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here. See Jennings, Bevan, and John (2011) for the British data, Chaqués Bonafont, Palau, and Muñoz (2014) for the Spanish data, and Breunig (2014) for the German data.

<sup>6</sup>For a critical evaluation of this assignment, see Dowding, Hindmoor, and Martin (2013).

<sup>7</sup>I decided to exclude the Macroeconomics major topic from the analysis for parties are not perceived as competent or not competent over the whole macroeconomic topic, but they are rated differently on issues such as unemployment, inflation, economic situation, taxation, and this is highly problematic for the measure of issue competence adopted in this paper.

<sup>8</sup>Since time-series of MIP/MII in the U.K. and Spain are available from Gallup/Ipsos-MORI and the CIS Barometer, respectively, in more than one data point per year (depending in which months the question has been asked) and polling institutes in these countries provide the two and three most important problems/issues combined, respectively, responses are then averaged on a yearly basis and standardised to total 100 percent to make them comparable to the Politbarometer’s MIP series in Germany and the Gallup’s MIP series in the U.S. Since data for the Gallup’s MIP question in the U.K. are not available after 2001, Ipsos-MORI’s

#### 4. Data and Measures

Electoral vulnerability represents the most relevant incentive of electoral competition for responsiveness. Often in the literature measures of electoral competitiveness, closeness of electoral result, frequency of turnover are used to capture this concept. However, such measures suffer from a major issue: they are based on aggregate electoral data; in other words they measure *actual* vulnerability. What is rather needed is a measure of *potential* vulnerability. The reason is twofold, both theoretical and methodological. First, responsiveness occurs in-between elections (Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 1999; Narud and Esaiasson 2013) therefore we need a measure that covers vulnerability diachronically and not only at the election time. Second, such measures of actual vulnerability are time invariant, meaning that they keep the same value for the whole election cycle, consequently depressing the variance of the explanatory variable. A measure of government vulnerability is then proposed using data on vote intentions.

Government's electoral vulnerability is computed subtracting for each year the vote intentions for the government parties to the vote intentions for the relevant opposition parties. By relevant opposition I mean those parties receiving vote intentions the government might be vulnerable from, including those who are not direct rivals in the competition for government but that might still be able to change the electoral result to the detriment of the government. For the U.S., data on presidential approvals are used. Although being approved is not necessarily the same as being popular (Stimson 1976), presidential approvals can be used as a reliable indicator of government popularity (Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004). In this case, approvals for the governing party are subtracted from the approvals for the opposition party. My measure of vulnerability differs from the one implemented in other works linking electoral competition to responsiveness (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Hakhverdian 2010; Green and Jennings 2012a), where vote intentions for the government as such are taken. The strategy followed by these studies assumes that governing parties do not care about how good or bad their main competitors are doing at the polls. What they only care about is their own popularity. However, the concept of vulnerability implies that a party is vulnerable in relation to another party, while, if a party is unpopular, it does not necessarily mean that its main opponent is popular. From a conceptual point of view, less vote intentions for the government do not necessarily end up in more vote intentions for the opposition. This is the reason why I propose a more fine-grained measure of government electoral vulnerability that directly takes into account the threat caused by the relevant opposition parties.

Since the Liberals (FDP) played a pivotal role in Germany almost in all Christian Democrats (CDU-CSU) and Social Democrats (SDP) coalition governments until the 1998 election (Mair 1997: 208), they are also included when in opposition. In Spain, beyond the main competition for government between the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the People's Alliance/People's Party (AP/PP), the threat for PSOE comes not only from its main competitor but also from the Communist Party of Spain (PCE), before, and the United Left (IU), after. The creation of the IU mostly lies in the electoral incentive felt by the leaders of PCE, who considered the PSOE no longer a left party, given the moderate policies the Socialist Party was promoting in government (Ramiro-Fernández 2004). For this reason, PCE and IU are included when the Socialist Party is in government. The measure for the U.K. always includes the Liberals/Alliance/LibDem since they increase the electoral vulnerability of both Conservative and Labour governments. A clear example is given when in combination with the Social Democratic Party, born from a rib of the Labour Party, the Liberals attracted more support in the opinion polls than either of its two big rivals in the two years before 1983 election (Butler and Kavanagh 1984: 3). Figure 1 plots the measure of vulnerability showing considerable cross-time and cross-country variation.

Government's relative advantage on issues represents the other main electoral incentive that this paper

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MII data are also used. When overlapping in the period 1980-2000, the two series are combined and averaged.



#### 4. Data and Measures

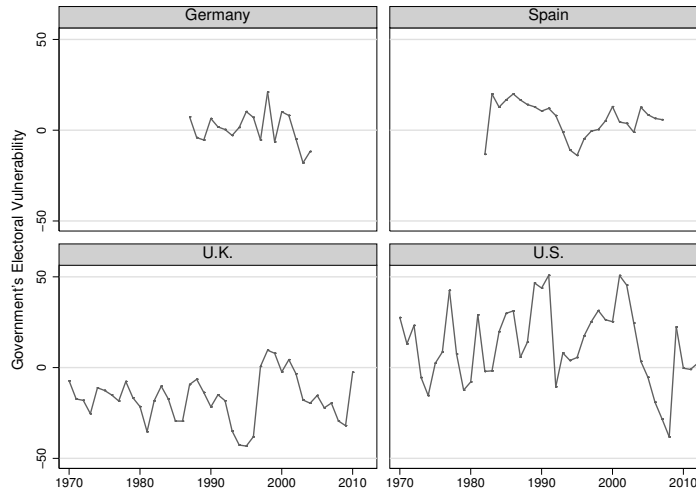


Figure 1: A measure of government's electoral vulnerability.

considers. The measure used here is strongly dependent on data constraints. In fact, it is really hard to find survey data across countries and over time such as to build a reasonably long time-series of issue competence. For this reason, I lean to Petrocik's (1996) definition of issue ownership emphasising in my measure the importance of the citizens' perception of party issue competence from a *historical* perspective rather than focusing on how such a perception changes from an election to another. Since the question wording in the surveys differs across and within countries, only the questions asking to rate both the government and the main opposition party are considered. The measure is then constructed averaging competence on a given issue (issues have been recoded in line with the major topics used for the dependent variable) by decade. Given that opinion polls may contain some measurement error, the party leading the government is considered as competent if the difference with the main opposition party is higher than 3 percent. A dummy variable for issue competence is then constructed to capture whether the government has an advantage on the issue compared to its main opponent. I am aware of the existence of more elegant and sophisticated measures of issue competence (see, for instance, the ones recently proposed by Green and Jennings 2012a,b), but the inclusion of a dummy variable capturing a party's historical advantage on the issues by decade gives an idea of whether the government is perceived as competent over time (see Pope and Woon 2009; Egan 2013).

The data suggest that there is synchronic and diachronic variation in issue competence. In the U.K., for instance, some issues that were closer to the Conservative Party in the 1970s - such as health, education or housing - became dominion of the Labour Party in the subsequent decades. However, there are also changeable issues such as crime and environment or stable issues such as defence, which has always been associated to the Conservative Party. Issue stability seems to be more evident in the U.S., where some issues are quite stable over time and they are never stolen. For instance, education, health, environment and welfare have always been associated to the Democratic Party and the same can be said for the Republican Party in issues such as defence and crime. According to the data at my disposal, Spain registers high issue instability over decades as well as Germany, though less, in which only very few issues are closer to one of the two major parties over time.

To test whether responsiveness to citizens' priorities increases during the election year, I created two dummy variables, one including the executive speeches made up to 6 months before the general elections and another one including those speeches made up to 12 months before the elections take place. This variable accounts for

the issue that the election year differs from country to country and from election to election. In fact, a dummy variable for the election year would not work well since some speeches are made right after the elections.

## 5. Method

This paper aims at addressing the puzzle described in the previous sections using time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) data. Instead of estimating issue-specific models, as done in other research on responsiveness and dynamic representation, to test my hypotheses I reshape the data and I stack them in terms of issues as well. This might lead to more robust results increasing the number of cases and the variance in salience (not just over time, but across issues). To estimate TSCS models, pure OLS is problematic (Beck and Katz 1995) because it assumes errors to have the same variance (homoskedasticity) and errors to be independent of each other over time (no serial correlation) and across unit (no spatial correlation). For these reasons, a TSCS AR(1) model is estimated<sup>9</sup>. The pooled models are estimated with panel corrected standard errors (Beck and Katz 1995), which controls for panel heteroscedasticity and contemporaneous correlations of the errors and fitted with the Prais-Winsten method to test for serial correlation (Plümper, Troeger, and Manow 2005: 342). The assumption is that, within panels, there is first-order autocorrelation (AR1) and that, as robustness check, the coefficient of the AR(1) process is specific to each panel. TSCS data are seldom independent along the time dimension within units and the Prais-Winsten estimator is one way to deal with serial correlation in the data and is suggested for small samples (Fortin-Rittberger N.d.)<sup>10</sup>. I follow Green and Jennings (2012a) who chose panel-corrected standard errors with the Prais-Winsten method using the same data on the dependent variable. This choice is preferred by Plümper, Troeger, and Manow (2005: 342-3), as “the elimination of serial correlation by inclusion of the lagged residuals gives more appropriate coefficients than the inclusion of a lagged dependent variable”, which would also absorb more time-series dynamics leaving less variance for the substantive explanatory variables (see also Achen 2000).

To test Hypothesis 1 - whether governments devote more attention to the issues the public is concerned about or to the issues they have an advantage on, depending on the level of their vulnerability - I first propose two models. One model includes an interaction term between public issue salience and vulnerability while another model includes an interaction between issue competence and vulnerability. In fact, government responsiveness to citizens’ policy priorities is a function of issue competence, public issue salience, and electoral pressure. These are not purely additive effects, they are interactive. I would characterize the relationship for unit  $i$ , and time  $t$  as:

$$Speech_{it} = \alpha_{it} + (\beta_1 Saliency_{it} \times \beta_3 Vulnerability_{it}) + \beta_2 Competence_{it} + \epsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

$$Speech_{it} = \alpha_{it} + \beta_1 Saliency_{it} + (\beta_2 Competence_{it} \times \beta_3 Vulnerability_{it}) + \epsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

<sup>9</sup>Before modelling the data, the dependent variable was tested for stationarity using the Augmented Dickey-Fuller test and in all instances rejected the presence of unit root at the 95 per cent confidence level.

<sup>10</sup>Other studies modeling executive speeches (in the U.K. and the U.S.) use an error correction model (De Boef and Keele 2008) in order to account for both short-term and long-term effects on the government policy agenda (Jennings and John 2009; Bevan and Jennings 2014). I chose not to implement this model because my research question is different and such models imply the loss of additional observations not well suitable with already small samples.

## 5. Method

I also approach the question in a different fashion splitting the sample into two groups: when the government is vulnerable and when the government is not vulnerable (I recall that my measure of vulnerability goes from negative to positive and it seems reasonable to establish a threshold of 5 percent to discriminate vulnerable governments from safe governments; see Figure 1). Thus the basic model would be the following:

$$Speech_{it} = \alpha_{it} + \beta_1 Saliency_{it} + \beta_2 Competence_{it} + \epsilon_{it}, if Vulnerability \leq 5 \quad (3)$$

$$Speech_{it} = \alpha_{it} + \beta_1 Saliency_{it} + \beta_2 Competence_{it} + \epsilon_{it}, if Vulnerability \geq 5 \quad (4)$$

In light of the discussion justifying Hypothesis 2, a model is required such as dealing with the possibility that vulnerability matters differently for issues on which the government is not associated (that is, where the competence is low). Therefore, a model theorising the relationship between competitive incentives should require the following adjustment:

$$Speech_{it} = \alpha_{it} + (\beta_1 Saliency_{it}^C \times \beta_3 Vulnerability_{it}) + (\beta_1 Saliency_{it}^{NC} \times \beta_3 Vulnerability_{it}) + \epsilon_{it} \quad (5)$$

where  $C$  are those issues for which the government is viewed as competent, and  $NC$  are those issues for which the government is not viewed as especially competent. So, there is some cutoff in the range of competency distinguishing the two sets of issues, that is:

$$\begin{aligned} Saliency_{it}^C &= Saliency_{it}, if Competence_{it} > \delta | Saliency_{it}^{NC} = 0 \\ Saliency_{it}^{NC} &= Saliency_{it}, if Competence_{it} < \delta | Saliency_{it}^C = 0 \end{aligned} \quad (6)$$

Following equation 5, an interaction is created between vulnerability and public issue salience when the government is perceived as competent and when the government is, instead, perceived as not competent.

At last, to test if electoral proximity matters for responsiveness (Hypothesis 3), I also create an interaction between public issue salience and the variable controlling for whether the speech is made 6 or 12 months before the elections. The basic model would then take this shape:

$$Speech_{it} = \alpha_{it} + (\beta_1 Saliency_{it} \times \beta_4 ElectoralProximity_{it}) + \epsilon_{it} \quad (7)$$

In light of the debate on whether public opinion should be considered at its current value or at its lagged value, all models are estimated with and without one year lag of public priorities. It is indeed common practice in the studies of responsiveness to lag citizens' preferences/priorities to establish causal relations (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Soroka and Wlezien 2010), since citizens' priorities of the past year (time  $t-1$ ) are supposed to influence government activity at the present year (time  $t$ ). However, it can also be the case that governments are interested in what the public wants today therefore both model specifications are presented. The two competitive incentives are included in the equation at time  $t$ , since it is the current electoral vulnerability and the current perception of issue competence I expect to have an influence on the executive speeches. Finally,

I also add standard controls for unemployment rate, GDP growth and a dummy variable for the electoral system (1 for PR systems, zero otherwise), since responsiveness can differ across electoral institutions (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Wlezién and Soroka 2012).

## 6. Results

Table 2 addresses the first competing hypothesis: when governments are vulnerable/safe, do they emphasise those issues salient to the public or the ones they have a good reputation on? On the one hand, part of the literature supports the *vulnerability thesis*, meaning that, when vulnerable, governments have the electoral incentive to respond to the public; on the other hand, the *safety thesis* points to another direction, that is, safe governments are more willing to respond to public concerns because they are safe and free from electoral pressures. The interaction between vulnerability and competence in Model 2 is positive and significant, suggesting that the safer the government, the more it is likely to emphasise the issues on which is perceived to be competent. Models 1a and 1b look, instead, at whether the impact of public opinion on the level of attention in executive speeches is mediated by government vulnerability. Neither the interaction with the contemporaneous nor the interaction with the lagged variable for public opinion do have a significant effect, though the negative sign seems to be in line with the vulnerability thesis.

The first models seem to go in support of the vulnerability thesis, yet the effect of vulnerability on responsiveness was not significant. For this reason, an alternative strategy is followed. In the next step I split the sample depending on the level of vulnerability. Model 3 shows the cases when the government is vulnerable while Model 4 includes those cases when the government is not vulnerable. According to the results of Model 3a, governments would respond to current public opinion but not to their own issues. However, when the lag of public opinion is included (Model 3b) issue competence seems to matter, too. What seems to be clearer is that safe governments (Models 4a and 4b) tend to prioritise much more the issues they are competent on in comparison to those ones the public cares about – in Model 4a the coefficient for issue competence is six times larger than the coefficient for public issue salience – though governments still respond to the public as well.

Though of not primary interest, these models tell us that governments tend to talk more when they are safe rather than vulnerable and that they both find room for the issues the public is concerned about and those ones they are perceived as competent on. When the mediating effect of electoral vulnerability is taken into account, these preliminary results show that governments tend to emphasise the issues the public cares about when the electoral pressure grows. Governments tend, instead, to emphasise the issues they have an advantage on when the electoral incentive does not occur.

Table 2: Hypothesis 1

Dependent Variable: Executive Speeches							
	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 2	Model 3a	Model 3b	Model 4a	Model 4b
MIP	1.101*** (0.387)		1.733*** (0.395)	2.305*** (0.387)		0.971** (0.389)	
MIP (lag)		1.843*** (0.353)			1.945*** (0.496)		1.406*** (0.300)
Issue Competence	5.990** (2.645)	3.893 (2.534)	4.532* (2.444)	2.973 (2.187)	4.298* (2.424)	7.175** (3.649)	5.537* (3.167)
Vulnerability	0.126* (0.073)	0.154** (0.073)	-0.022 (0.077)				
MIP * Vulnerability	-0.008 (0.015)						
MIP (lag) * Vulnerability		-0.003 (0.014)					
Vulnerability * Issue Competence = 1			0.249* (0.130)				
Unemployment	-0.553 (0.413)	-0.104 (0.431)	-0.624 (0.392)	-0.985** (0.416)	-0.838* (0.468)	-0.562 (0.590)	0.280 (0.623)
GDP Growth	0.520 (0.465)	0.720 (0.472)	0.262 (0.447)	-0.290 (0.282)	0.262 (0.318)	0.708 (0.931)	1.414* (0.814)
Electoral System Dummy	5.259 (4.386)	2.386 (4.024)	7.815* (4.040)	15.73*** (4.074)	17.40*** (4.754)	6.108 (4.225)	5.349 (3.807)
Constant	14.20*** (3.849)	8.069** (3.957)	10.05*** (3.524)	5.965* (3.145)	4.034 (3.496)	10.44* (5.989)	-0.330 (5.557)
Observations	729	679	729	461	440	268	239
$R^2$	0.135	0.196	0.196	0.402	0.355	0.140	0.250

Panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ 

AR1 autocorrelation structure

Table 3: Hypothesis 2

Dependent Variable: Executive Speeches				
	Model 5a	Model 5b	Model 6a	Model 6b
Saliency C	1.807*** (0.516)			
Saliency C (lag)		2.568*** (0.493)		
Vulnerability	0.129 (0.123)	0.129 (0.146)	0.184** (0.076)	0.142*** (0.043)
Saliency C * Vulnerability	0.011 (0.032)			
Saliency C (lag) * Vulnerability		0.005 (0.026)		
Saliency NC			1.088*** (0.242)	
Saliency NC (lag)				0.577*** (0.206)
Saliency NC * Vulnerability			-0.033*** (0.010)	
Saliency NC (lag) * Vulnerability				-0.006 (0.007)
Unemployment	-1.753** (0.801)	-0.287 (0.707)	-0.493 (0.364)	-0.288 (0.358)
GDP Growth	-0.066 (0.984)	-0.238 (0.701)	0.431 (0.445)	0.395 (0.337)
Electoral System Dummy	15.72** (6.991)	5.390 (5.818)	1.161 (3.768)	2.756 (2.231)
Constant	22.96*** (7.122)	12.33** (5.628)	12.64*** (3.076)	9.441*** (3.090)
Observations	365	355	364	356
$R^2$	0.207	0.314	0.226	0.218

Panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ 

AR1 autocorrelation structure

## 6. Results

What this paper aims to test is also the possibility that vulnerability matters differently for issues the government is not associated to. It is reasonable to expect issues to receive more attention when the government does well on those issues and the public cares about them, as some literature on issue ownership already states. What this paper argues is that this can be enhanced by electoral vulnerability. In order to test this hypothesis, I distinguish those issues the public is concerned about and the government is perceived as competent on (named as Saliency C) from those issues the public cares about but on which the government has not a good reputation on (named as Saliency NC). Results are shown in Table 3. What Models 5a and 5b reveal is that for those issues that are salient for the public and the government is competent on vulnerability seems not to have any impact. In such cases, the electoral incentive simply seems not to occur. What is rather interesting is that vulnerability does have an effect in support of the vulnerability thesis when the issue is salient to the public but on which the government has no advantage. This result corroborates what has been previously found in Model 2, that is, governments tend to emphasise the issues they have a good reputation on when they are safe. The marginal effects of the interaction in Model 6a are plotted in Figure 2. The figure shows that the less the government becomes vulnerable, the less it tends to respond to the public when it is not competent on the issue.

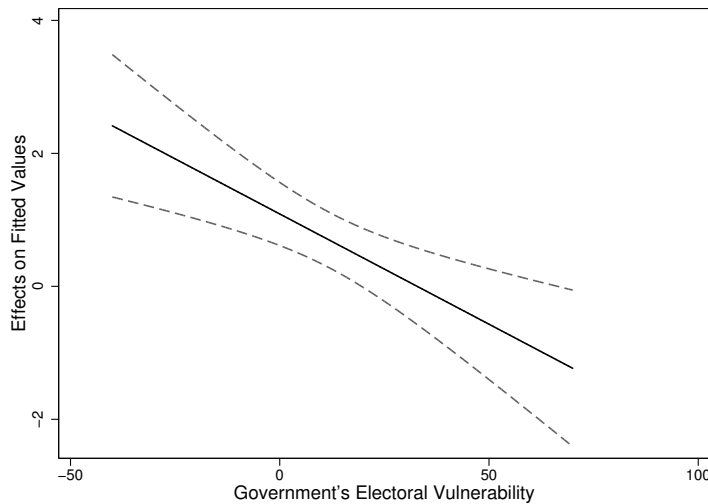


Figure 2: Marginal effects of government vulnerability on responsiveness when the government is not competent (based on Model 6a). Dashed lines are 95 percent confidence interval.

The last hypothesis this paper is interested in is an old fashioned one in the empirical research, but still subject to confusing answers: is government responsiveness higher when the elections are approaching? To test this hypothesis I have created two variables that disentangle the speeches made under electoral campaign from the ones made when the electoral campaign has not started yet. One variable captures the speeches made up to 6 months before the general elections, while the other also includes those ones made up to 12 months before the general elections. According to what Table 4 suggests, governments seem not to care about public priorities when the election is not that close (Models 8a and 8b). What Model 7b shows is that governments tend to be slightly less responsive to public opinion when the elections are imminent. Marginal effects are plotted in Figure 3. The slope of the coefficient when the dummy equals one is still positive but declining. This result is in line with the finding already obtained for Spain (Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011), which

## 6. Results

suggests that responsiveness is not higher during the election year but rather right after the elections<sup>11</sup>.

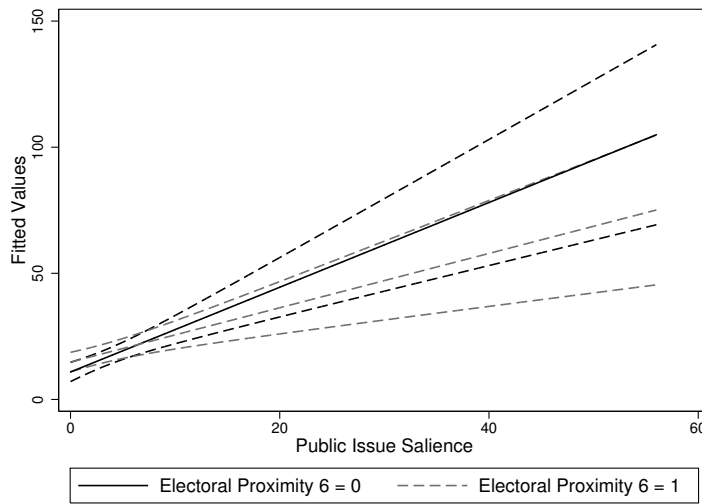


Figure 3: Marginal effects of electoral proximity on responsiveness (based on Model 7b). Dashed lines are 95 percent confidence interval.

<sup>11</sup>I also looked at public opinion during each year of the legislative period and I found that the coefficient for public issue salience is highest in the first year after the election confirming the result mentioned above for the Spanish case.



Table 4: Hypothesis 3

Dependent Variable: Executive Speeches				
	Model 7a	Model 7b	Model 8a	Model 8b
MIP	0.834** (0.350)		0.561* (0.306)	
MIP (lag)		1.680*** (0.343)		1.288*** (0.328)
Electoral Proximity 6	0.729 (1.201)	3.934** (1.575)		
MIP * Electoral Proximity 6 = 1	-0.165 (0.134)			
MIP (lag) * Electoral Proximity 6 = 1		-0.603*** (0.204)		
Electoral Proximity 12			-2.699 (2.015)	-2.888 (2.033)
MIP * Electoral Proximity 12 = 1			0.418 (0.422)	
MIP (lag) * Electoral Proximity 12 = 1				0.502 (0.425)
Unemployment	-0.760 (0.471)	-0.265 (0.428)	-0.888* (0.497)	-0.345 (0.445)
GDP Growth	0.588 (0.495)	0.788 (0.490)	0.534 (0.447)	0.764* (0.451)
Electoral System Dummy	10.10* (5.646)	5.366 (5.512)	11.53** (5.873)	6.691 (5.638)
Constant	17.48*** (4.030)	9.966** (3.902)	20.38*** (4.203)	12.91*** (4.064)
Observations	626	614	626	614
$R^2$	0.093	0.164	0.101	0.166

Panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ 

AR1 autocorrelation structure (Germany excluded)

## 7. Conclusion and Discussion

This paper has reported empirical analysis on the linkages between government's policy agenda, public opinion, and incentives from party competition. The puzzle at the very heart of the paper stems from the following question: what do governments do when they are electorally vulnerable? Do they tend to respond to those issues the public is concerned about or do they tend to emphasise those issues they have a good reputation on? The question is addressed using pooled time-series cross-sectional data from four advanced democracies.

From an empirical standpoint, this paper contributes to the existent literature on dynamic agenda representation/rhetorical responsiveness (Bevan and Jennings 2010; John, Bevan, and Jennings 2011; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Hakhverdian 2010; Green and Jennings 2012a). My preliminary findings present additional evidence for the influence of public priorities on the policy agenda of governments and find support for the role played by competitive incentives, that is, electoral vulnerability, issue competence and electoral proximity. As general comments, governments talk more when they are electorally safe and do emphasise, in their executive speeches, both issues that are salient to the public and issues they are competent on.

However, and this is the major finding, this paper finds evidence suggesting that, when governments are vulnerable, they tend to emphasise more those issues the public cares about. Conversely, governments tend to emphasise the issues they have a good reputation on when they are safe. This is also supported by additional findings that account for the fact that the effect of government's electoral vulnerability might differ when the issue is salient to the public and the government is competent compared to when the issue is salient to the public but the government is not competent. In fact, government responsiveness (to the lag of public opinion) declines the more the government becomes safer, when it does not have an advantage on the issue. These results are more inclined to support what has been called the *vulnerability thesis*, meaning that electoral pressure matters for responsiveness, especially when the government is not competent on the issue. When the government is safe, instead, it tends to emphasise those issues it is competent on. The paper finds no support for the hypothesis that vulnerability enhances responsiveness on the issues that are salient to the public and where the government has a good reputation on.

At last, in line with another research on the Spanish policy agenda (Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011), this paper finds no evidence that government responsiveness to public opinion increases when the election is approaching; rather, there is still responsiveness but slightly less than in other periods of the legislative cycle.

Speech is silver, silence is golden? The aphorism is certainly true in politics and, as this paper suggested, it differs according to the strategies politicians implement to pursue their interests and to the incentives driving these strategies.

## A. Appendix

### A.1. Data Sources

#### A.1.1. Most Important Problem/Issue

Germany: Politbarometer

Spain: CIS Barometer

United Kingdom: Gallup; Ipsos-MORI (UK Policy Agendas Project)

United States: Gallup (Roper Center)

#### A.1.2. Vote Intentions

Germany: Politbarometer

Spain: CIS Barometer

United Kingdom: WJFFP dataset (see Wlezien et al. 2013; Green and Jennings 2012*b*)

#### A.1.3. Issue Competence

Germany: Politbarometer (1978-2004); Gesis Election Study (1987, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002); EES (1989, 1994, 1999, 2004)

Spain: CIS Barometer (2006-2007); EES (1989, 1994, 1999, 2004)

United Kingdom: Ipsos-MORI (1977-2010); EES (1989, 1994, 1999, 2004)

United States: ANES (1972-2002), Sides (2006); Pope and Woon (2009); Egan (2013)

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics

Variable		Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Observations
Executive Speeches	overall	14.340	28.707	0	461	N = 1006
	between		21.555	1.610	96.333	n = 31
	within		21.000	-81.993	402.805	T-bar = 32.452
Public Issue Salience	overall	5.863	7.187	0	56.060	N = 758
	between		4.539	.273	16.480	n = 32
	within		5.759	-6.172	50.660	T-bar = 23.688
Issue Competence	overall	.489	.500	0	1	N = 758
	between		.190	0	.889	n = 32
	within		.472	-.399	1.299	T-bar = 23.688
Vulnerability	overall	.137	19.541	-43.224	50.818	N = 1024
	between		11.156	-16.980	12.556	n = 32
	within		15.125	-50.568	38.399	T-bar = 32
Electoral Proximity 6	overall	.073	.260	0	1	N = 880
	between		.094	0	.195	n = 24
	within		.242	-.122	.878	T-bar = 36.667
Electoral Proximity 12	overall	.245	.431	0	1	N = 880
	between		.034	.192	.268	n = 24
	within		.430	-.023	1.053	T-bar = 36.667
Unemployment	overall	8.802	4.958	2.084	24.171	N = 1024
	between		4.348	6.384	16.778	n = 32
	within		2.854	.317	16.195	T-bar = 32
GDP Growth	overall	2.647	2.034	-5.170	7.259	N = 1008
	between		.451	2.003	3.141	n = 32
	within		1.995	-4.885	7.530	T-bar = 31.5
Electoral System Dummy	overall	.344	.475	0	1	N = 1024
	between		.508	0	1	n = 32
	within		0	.344	.344	T-bar = 32

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