

# A CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL APPROACH TO GOVERNMENTAL POLICY RESPONSIVENESS BETWEEN ELECTIONS<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Democratic governments are expected to be responsive to the preferences and demands of their citizens, at least to a certain degree. There is a vast and increasing scholarship in empirical political science that aims at establishing how much governments respond to the changes in opinion of the public. There is, however, less conceptual and theoretical elaboration on what responsiveness exactly is, when we should expect it — both from a normative and an empirical perspective —, how does it relate to the presence and absence of electoral mandates and pledges, and how can we analyse responsive dynamics between elections.

This paper contributes to the scholarship on representation and responsiveness by providing a conceptual and theoretical framework to the study of governmental policy responsiveness between elections. To this aim, the paper addresses the following questions: How often should we expect representative governments to respond to the public's wishes and in which circumstances? Who is the 'public' or the represented that governments should respond to? What is the (normative) relation between the existence of electoral mandates and pledges and the expectation of governmental responsiveness? Regardless of when governments *ought* to be responsive, when are they *likely* to be responsive?

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## INTRODUCTION

Democratic representative government requires responsiveness (Dahl 1971). In fact, Pitkin (1967) argued that representative government can be defined as such only when the institutional design ensures ‘a constant condition of responsiveness, of potential readiness to respond’ (p. 233). This is not to be confused, in Pitkin’s view, with a ‘deputy’ (or delegate) model of representation; yet, representing requires a substantive activity by which representatives are responsive to their constituents’ wishes — when expressed — unless there are good reasons in relation to the latter’s interests to the contrary (ch. 10).<sup>2</sup> Thus, democratic representative government requires ‘some’ degree of responsiveness to the demands and preferences expressed by the constituents (Urbinati and Warren 2008) and that governments are not systematically and persistently at odds with the wishes of the represented, even when one adheres to a view of representatives as ‘trustees’ of their constituents.<sup>3</sup>

The central role afforded to responsiveness in democratic political theory has been accompanied by a growing scholarship that studies responsiveness empirically and focuses on how representatives and policy making reflect the preferences and demands of the public. Although several key studies were conducted between the 1970s and 1990s (Schumaker 1975; Eulau and Karps 1977; Page and Shapiro 1983;

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<sup>2</sup> As this study focuses on the responsiveness of national governments, for simplification I will often refer to governments as the ‘representative’, even though Pitkin analyses the problem of representation for a wider range of situations and relations.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike what Rehfeld (2009) claims ‘empirical scholars’ do, I do not believe, or claim, that responsiveness is the only relevant aspect of representation. It is, however, the only aspect of the representation chain in which I am interested in this particular study.

Page et al. 1984; Wright, Erikson, and McIver 1987; Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1989; Bartels 1991; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Page 1994; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1994; Stimson 1995; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995; Wlezien 1995), the research in this field has considerably expanded since the early 2000s (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Manza, Cook, and Page 2002; Soroka 2002; Powell 2004a, 2004b; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2005; Brooks and Manza 2006; Canes-Wrone 2006; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Jennings 2009; Kang and Powell 2010; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Chaqués and Palau 2011; Arnold and Franklin 2012; Hakhverdian 2012; Lehrer 2012; Bardi, Bartolini, and Trechsel 2014; Morlino and Quaranta 2014; Thomassen and van Ham 2014).

Much of this research looks at the overall representation process and focuses on how the views and opinions of the public are reflected in policy making. Often, the approach to the topic entails looking at the medium- or long-term dynamics between public opinion and policymaking. Several steps in this chain are frequently the object of examination: how the opinions and preferences of the public are translated or aggregated by political parties and candidates, how electoral pledges are translated into policy making, how the preferences of the public around given policies before an election translate into public policy after the election, etc. Though the exact research questions, the substantive policy focus, and the methods vary considerably, much of the existing empirical research studies the representation and responsiveness cycles taking into account the mediation of the electoral process, in various variants of the party and median mandate approaches (Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge 1994; McDonald and Budge 2005): citizens/voters have a set of preferences; these preferences are (imperfectly) reflected in their electoral choices of parties and candidates in democratic elections; once elected, governments and representatives

pursue a number of policies, and if the latter match the initial preferences of the public they are considered congruent or responsive.

This standard view of the opinion-policy link is not, *per se*, problematic. Yet, the public does not refrain from expressing their preferences and demands between elections, and sometimes those preferences may even contradict the ones expressed before the elections. We still know very little about the process of political representation of the public's views between elections and about the dynamics of responsiveness during governmental terms (see Esaiasson and Narud 2013: for a rare exception). To what extent are democratic governments responsive to citizens' demands and preferences between elections? To which expressions of public opinion are they likely to respond?

This paper seeks to outline the key conceptual and theoretical issues involved in the study of governmental responsiveness between elections. It starts, in the first section, with a discussion of the concept of responsiveness and how we can distinguish it meaningfully from other related concepts, such as congruence. Often, the empirical study of responsiveness is not preceded by conceptual clarity on what exactly is meant with this term. Related to this conceptual discussion, the paper outlines the ways in which we can conceive of the multidimensional nature of governmental responsiveness and view it as a matter of degree that can be empirically approximated with an ordinal scale of responsiveness. The first section also discusses who is the public that governments should be responding to and how we conceive of the 'public opinion' given its inherent heterogeneity.

The next two sections aim at reconciling the normative and empirical debates around responsiveness. There are substantial bodies of scholarship in political theory

and in empirical political science that are approaching the same topic with different analytical lenses. While I will not aspire to resolve all the issues that divide the normative and empirical approaches to responsiveness, I will point to the key aspects that we need to tackle to fruitfully bridge both traditions of political analysis in the study of governmental responsiveness between elections. In order to do this, the second section outlines the key tensions implicit in any normative discussion of responsiveness—the autonomy of governments as representatives (the agent), the diversity of the constituents (the principal), and the expression and interpretation of the views of the constituents—and highlights how these normative tensions constitute key problems in any empirical study of governmental responsiveness. This section addresses, primarily, the question of when ought governments to be responsive to public opinion between elections. This is followed by a discussion of the central role of electoral mandates in our normative views about responsiveness, and a proposal to examine the distinction between, and relevance of, ‘mandated’ and ‘non-mandated’ policymaking situations in the empirical study of governmental responsiveness.

Drawing from this discussion of the key normative issues in the study of governmental responsiveness between elections, the third section focuses on the question of when do we expect governments to be responsive between elections, regardless of whether they ought to be responsive or not. The section summarises our current understanding of governmental reactions to the opinions expressed by multiple sectors of the public and outlines the incentives and constraints that governments face when making choices about whether to be responsive.

The final section summarises the key points made throughout the paper and outlines a number of hypotheses that can guide future empirical research on

governmental responsiveness between elections. It also proposes an empirical comparative approach to the study of governmental responsiveness between elections that focuses on the detailed and micro-level dynamics of preference and demands expressed by multiple sectors of the public in a number of issue-specific decision-making junctures. As I will argue, this approach considerably reduces—and, in some cases, eliminates—the difficulties relating to the aggregation of preferences in multiple dimensions, and the complexities intrinsic to knowing what the public really wants and of devising a single meaningful measurement of these policy preferences (Arrow 1950; Riker 1982).

#### WHAT IS RESPONSIVENESS?

If representation means ‘acting in the interested of the represented, in a manner responsive to them’ (Pitkin 1967: : 209), then it is quite central for the study of democratic political representation that we have a clear notion of what we mean when we refer to responsiveness. Yet, very rarely do we find a detailed discussion of what is meant by ‘responsiveness’ and how it differs from closely related concepts — often used interchangeably — such as ‘congruence’.

Pitkin, herself, did not define responsiveness in very precise ways.<sup>4</sup> The reason for this might be that she places interests, rather than preferences at the core of

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<sup>4</sup> In a sense, she views responsiveness as emerging, perhaps ‘naturally’, when the representative is authorized by the represented and when the former is accountable to the latter. This seems, implicitly, to be also the understanding of Urbinati and Warren (2008) in their discussion of when representation is democratic (p. 396).

her conceptualization of representation and, hence, of responsiveness. The agent needs to act with the interests of the principal in mind, but this may not coincide with the latter's preferences or demands necessarily. This choice complicates the conceptual discussion around responsiveness even further as it, ultimately, would make the distinction between 'responsible' governments and 'responsive' governments irrelevant.<sup>5</sup> Thus, throughout this piece I will assume that the interests of the represented are best known by the represented themselves, and that they are revealed when preferences or demands are privately or publicly formulated. Consequently, hereon, I discuss the conceptualization of responsiveness as relating to preferences and demands rather than to interests.

Powell (2004a) defines democratic responsiveness as 'what occurs when the democratic process induces the government to form and implement policies that the citizens want.' (p. 91) From this definition, the existence of correspondence or congruence between citizens' preferences and policies seems to be enough. Yet, Powell (2004a, 2004b) — unsatisfied with such a minimalist notion — adds that a coincidence of the two is not enough and that institutional arrangements that reliably connect citizens' preferences with outcomes are required for democratic responsiveness to be considered such. Nevertheless, once these institutional

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<sup>5</sup> See the special issue compiled by Bardi, Bartolini, and Trechsel (2014) for a summary of the tensions between responsive and responsible representation, both historically and in the view of political scientists. Nevertheless, this terminology is bound to create some confusion, as the 'responsible party model' refers to the median/party mandate model of representation that produces congruence/responsiveness through electoral turnover (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Arnold and Franklin 2012), rather than to a model of representation in which parties sometimes switch policies and break their promises in the 'common/public interest'.

arrangements are in place, correspondence between preferences and policies seems enough to describe responsiveness.

Similarly, oftentimes the scholarship on the opinion-policy link (cf. Kang and Powell 2010; Severs 2010; Arnold and Franklin 2012; Lax and Phillips 2012; Lax and Phillips 2009) seems to use interchangeably the concepts of congruence and responsiveness. Most recently Wlezien (2014), however, makes a distinction between congruence — whether people get what they want (and probably in the amount/level that they want it) — and responsiveness — whether changes in preferences/opinion and policies covary — often also referred to as dynamic representation (Page and Shapiro 1983, 1992). Thus, while not all forms of congruence constitute instances of responsiveness, directional congruence and responsiveness seem to be two ways of referring to the same phenomenon.<sup>6</sup>

The problems involved in identifying congruence with responsiveness were already identified and discussed by Eulau and Karps (1977). Congruence between the preferences of the constituents and the policy behaviour of a representative can be due to many processes. Congruence might happen because the constituents have chosen a representative that matches their own preferences on the given or all issues; because they have elected a representative who does not share their preferences but is constrained by other factors to follow a policy option that is consistent with the views of their constituents; because the representative has persuaded the constituents to

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<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Wlezien's discussion of the relationship between congruence and responsiveness is complex and seems to suggest as well that not all responsiveness is congruent, if the responsive policy change moves in the direction of the public's preferences but does not quite deliver the 'amount' of a given policy desired by the public.

share her views; because external factors have changed simultaneously the views and/or preferences of both the constituents and the representative (cf. Bartels 1991: 458); or because the representative chooses to adapt her policy-related behaviours to match the views of her constituents (for whatever reasons).

I argue here that only the latter situation leading to opinion-policy congruence should be defined as ‘responsiveness’. If the notion of responsiveness is not to be conceptually stretched to be of limited theoretical and empirical use, it is necessary to distinguish it from the concept of congruence. Accordingly, I argue, responsiveness is a form of congruence between constituents’ opinion and representative’s decision-making behaviour that requires the latter to adapt their positions and behaviours to the opinions of the former. This requires that two conditions are met: 1) that the views or preferences on the given issue differ between constituents and their representatives; and 2) that the representatives adapt or change their position or behaviour to reflect the diverging views and preferences of the constituents.

Thus, both, exogeneity and causality in the opinion-policy link is required (Page and Shapiro 1983). In most cases, the representative will hold an opinion and will have a preferred policy, thus responsiveness requires the representative to change her policy position and/or action. In some cases, the representative might not have strongly formed opinions or positions on the given issue, and responsiveness will thus require that the representative adopts a policy position that reflects the views and preferences of the constituents. This conception of responsiveness departs from Pitkin’s because it defines responsiveness not as a disposition or readiness to respond but as an actual behaviour that indicates response. It is also distinct from the prevailing dynamic representation concepts of responsiveness in that it requires the

representative to change policy course in a direction that she would otherwise not have taken.

#### A NEW PROPOSAL FOR MEASURING RESPONSIVENESS

Once the use of the concept of responsiveness has been clarified, a logical question that follows is: How do we tell that a government has responded to the preferences and demands of the public? In other words, how exactly can we measure governmental responsiveness?

Powell (2004a) highlights the difficulties inherent in measuring responsiveness. One key problem is establishing what he calls a ‘chain of causal mechanisms’. As outlined before, the conceptual and analytical model presented in this paper rests on the assumption that — most of the time — governments have a ‘preferred’ policy, and this is the one they would enact if free of constraints. Therefore, the interest lies, primarily, in the analysis of how governments react to public opposition to their preferred course of action. Do they stick to their initial policy position? Do they make symbolic concessions? Do they change their policy position somewhat? Do they make complete u-turns?

At this point, it is useful to bring back in the various understandings of governmental responsiveness that have been implicitly or explicitly proposed in the existing scholarship. A number of scholars have analysed governmental issue attention and rhetorical responsiveness as a key form of yielding to the wishes of the public that is also distinct to policy responsiveness (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2005, 2008; Jennings and John 2009). Governments signal their willingness to take into account the issues that the public view as a priority by talking about them and

including them in their statements about policy intentions. Admittedly, these speech-related reactions can be of limited real impact if discursive statements are not translated into policy changes; but speeches and symbolic recognitions of the importance of an issue is often a stepping-stone in the process towards policy change. After all, if the public (or a certain sector of the public) is able to shape the public agenda of the government this is a clear indicator of influence; and the government's willingness to incorporate or prioritize issues in the agenda as a reaction to public pressures is surely a form of responsiveness.

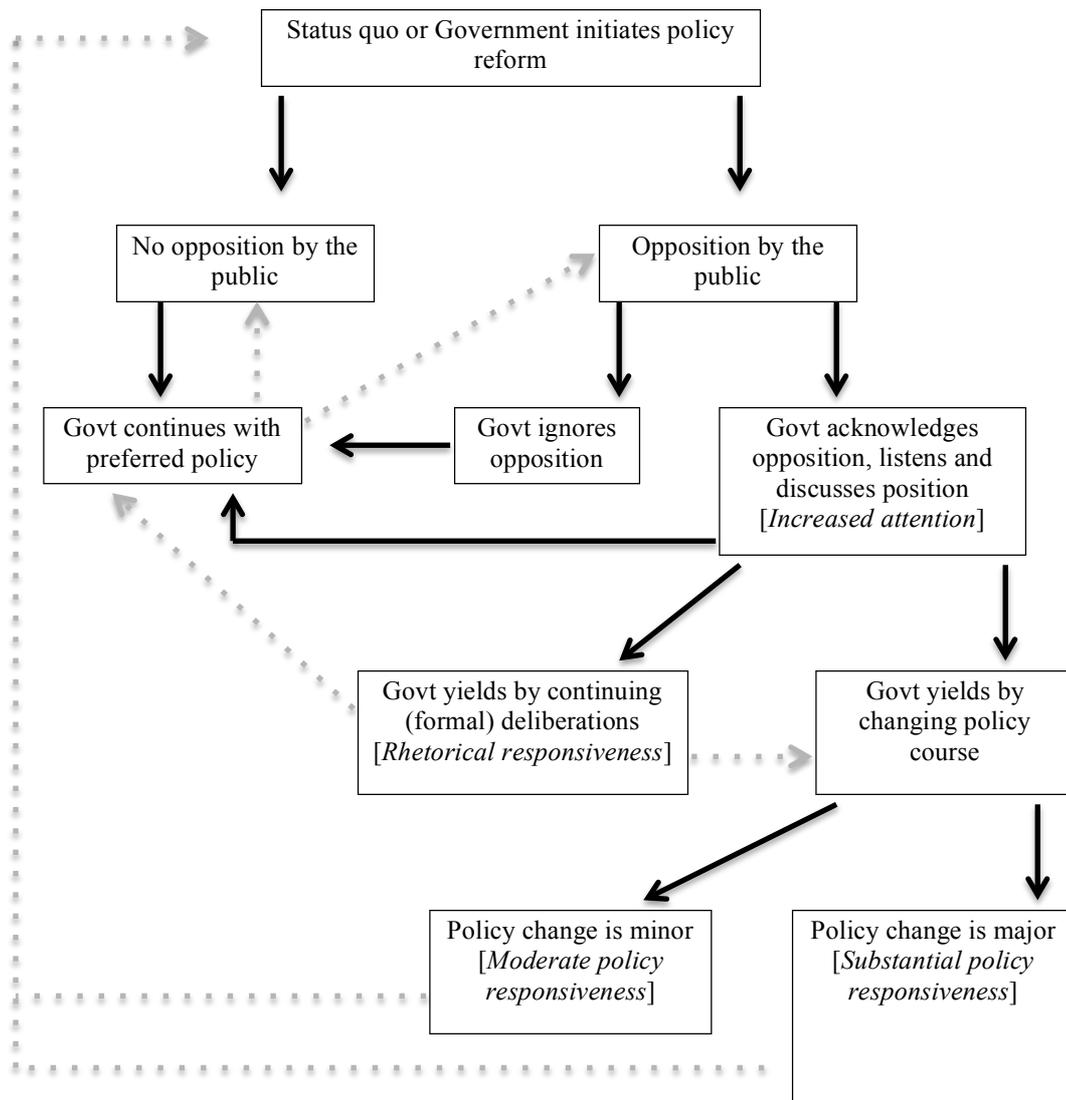
A minimal understanding of responsiveness is also found among political theorists advocating deliberative conceptions of democracy. For example, Urbinati and Warren (2008) define democracy as 'any set of arrangements that instantiates the principle that all affected by collective decisions should have an opportunity to influence the outcome' (p. 395), and oftentimes selecting those who make decisions and being able to shape public deliberations are considered sufficient to meet these minimal requirements. In this vein, Pitkin (1967) argued that, whenever a representative chooses not to follow the preferences of the represented in his decisions, the normative requirements of democratic representation are met if the former justifies the reasons for this departure on the basis of the represented's interests (p. 209-210 & 224).

One might question whether this acknowledgement of the public's preferences and its public debate and consideration by the representatives qualifies as democratic responsiveness. Esaiasson, Gilljam, and Persson (2013) argue that this is enough as a reasonable understanding of responsiveness between elections. Their argument is that 'representatives should take the views of the represented into account when they

decide common matters' (p.23), and thus communicative responsiveness — understood as the efforts made to publicly deliberate and communicate their reasons for their decisions — is a sufficient form of democratic responsiveness that fully legitimises the actions of the representatives. As long as representatives make an active effort to listen to the public and explain their reasons to make any given decision, they should not be expected to (always?) adapt their policies.

What this discussion shows is that both political theorists and empirical political scientists have conceived of responsiveness as taking several possible forms. I argue that what underlies these various ways of conceiving of responsiveness is a processual notion of democratic responsiveness; in other words, responsiveness is implicitly viewed as proceeding in steps or stages. These steps or stages can be thought of as the logical set of choices that representatives face when they encounter opposition to their preferred course of policy action (see Figure 1). When faced by public opposition to the status quo or to a policy reform that they want to implement, the government can choose to ignore the public or acknowledge their demands by listening and justifying their own positions. After that initial stage of reaction to the public, the government can choose to stick to their preferred policy, yield somewhat to the pressures of the public by deferring the decision and continue with deliberations, or yield more decisively to the pressures by changing their policy. In the latter case, the policy change adopted can be minor (a small adaptation to the policy) or considerable (a major modification or a complete u-turn). Certainly, at each of these stages, opposition can continue or can recede, and this will affect subsequent iterations of the dynamic process of interaction between the public and the government.

Figure 1. Democratic (governmental) responsiveness as a process



*Note:* The black arrows mark the main steps in the process that are of interest in a linear manner, whereas the grey arrows mark feedback loops that will reinitiate the interactive process between the public and the government.

*Source:* Author's own.

Following this processual and dynamic logic, I propose an ordinal conceptualisation and measurement of democratic governmental responsiveness that effectively reflects Pitkin's view that responsiveness is a matter of degree rather than an absolute condition of presence or absence, and which accommodates both minimalist (à la Esaiasson et al.) and maximalist views of democratic responsiveness. This conceptualisation adequately captures the degrees of responsiveness that governments want and can accommodate and recognises that the process of representation of the preferences and demands of the public often proceeds in various steps. The conceptual and empirical measurement proposed distinguishes five different states or degrees of responsiveness, from the absence of reaction to the demands of the public in opposition to the government's preferred policy, to substantial policy reaction, including u-turns:

0. No reaction, no change in attention or in position.
1. Increased attention to the issue by the government but no change in position
2. Rhetorical responsiveness: increased attention to the issue and some symbolic yielding to opposing actors (e.g. consultation process, setting up an expert panel, opening up deliberations in parliament or other bodies, etc.) without substantive change in policy.
3. Moderate policy responsiveness: substantive change in a (relatively) minor aspect of the policy (e.g. delay of a specific implementation, closure of a specific power plant but not all of them, increase in certain regulatory aspects, change in some non-core legislation, etc.).

4. Substantial policy responsiveness: in the case of major policy changes, u-turns in relation to initial policy positions or proposals, or when major legislation is enacted.

Having discussed the concept and measurement of responsiveness advocated in this paper, I now discuss the normative and empirical difficulties involved in the study of democratic governmental responsiveness.

#### WHEN OUGHT GOVERNMENTS TO BE RESPONSIVE BETWEEN ELECTIONS? THE NORMATIVE DEBATE

Pitkin's ground-breaking analysis of the conceptual, theoretical and normative tensions in the concept of representation illuminate many of the difficulties we face when we attempt an empirical analysis of the conditions and dynamics of governmental responsiveness to public opinion. She identifies at least four problems that also affect any empirical approach to the matter.

The first problem is determining who are the principals the representative ought to represent. This is less obvious than it might seem at first, as party democracies considerably complicate the principal-agent relationship by adding political parties as an intermediate principal and agent (Katz 2012). As a consequence, the understanding of the representative link (and thus the definition of the principal) varies considerably across countries and across types of parties, and not only in ways that are predictable by the structure of the electoral system. For example, in countries such as Portugal, Greece, Germany or France between 70 and 50 per cent

of MPs see themselves primarily as representatives of the citizens of their countries as a whole; instead, in a country such as Spain — with no single-member districts or any form of preferential voting in the lower chamber — only 45 per cent do (Cotta et al. 2013). Understandably, in countries like the UK (with single-member districts) MPs view themselves primarily as representatives of their constituencies (67 per cent) but even with such clear representative-constituency electoral links still more than 20 per cent viewed themselves as primarily representing their parties or the citizens of the country as a whole. To add further layers of complexity to the representation link, in some countries, a very sizeable minority of MPs view themselves as primarily representing their parties — e.g., 22 per cent in Belgium, 19 per cent in Spain, and 16 per cent in Italy — as well as a majority of Danish MPs (48 per cent).

Yet, this article focuses on national governments and their responsiveness between elections, and — by the very nature of the office — it is (more reasonably) to expect both normatively and empirically that they will represent (and view themselves as representing) the interests of the whole society/country (however defined) and the ‘common good’. In fact, the InTune survey data (Cotta et al. 2013) suggests that, in most countries, MPs of governmental parties are more likely to view themselves as representing the citizens of the country as a whole. Of course, it could still be argued that governments are likely to keep in mind more prominently the interests of those who voted for the government party or coalition. However, these arguments are not so forceful normatively as the arguments that dyadic representatives ought to represent their (district) constituents. Therefore, it is less problematic to assert that national governments *ought* to be representing citizens as a whole, rather than specific sectors of society, their voters or their parties.

A second major problem identified by Pitkin, in relation to the expectation of the actions of the representatives, is the mandate vs. independence controversy.<sup>7</sup> This controversy reflects the contrasting views of what representatives ought to do in their roles, which are well summarised in the opposite Madisonian (elected representatives are ‘delegates’ of their constituents) and Burkean (elected representatives are ‘trustees’ and follow their own judgement once elected) polar views around political representation. Whereas a ‘delegate’ vision of the role of democratic representatives requires always being responsive to the preferences of the constituents, a ‘trustee’ notion of political representation makes responsiveness conditional to (possibly haphazard?) congruence between the preferences of the representative and the constituents.

Rather than endorsing one view or the other, Pitkin only argues that responsiveness is required for democratic representative government to exist, but that it is also a matter of degree and not a constant activity. Yet, this middle-of-the-ground solution prompts the following question: how often should we, then, expect representative governments to respond to the public’s wishes, and in which circumstances? The debate in political theory has not, yet, resolved this question, and it is unlikely that it can ever be resolved. Empirical political science can illuminate somewhat this normative debate by offering additional information on what representatives and citizens, respectively, think the former ought to be doing in order to be good representatives.

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<sup>7</sup> We do not find Rehfeld’s (2009) distinction between the source of judgement and the degree of responsiveness very useful for our purposes of analysing governmental responsiveness to public opinion. We also find his discussion of illustrative examples and disregard for the role of legitimacy somewhat puzzling.

Survey data allow us to learn about the views of the public and national MPs about what representatives ought to do when the opinions/preferences of the public and the representatives are at odds. The 6<sup>th</sup> wave of the European Social Survey (ESS Round 6 2012) asked citizens across Europe what should a government do when there is disagreement between what the government thinks is best for the country and what most people think is best for the country. In all countries, a majority of respondents (on average 66 per cent) said that the government should change its planned policies in response to what most people think, though the size of that majority varies hugely between 47 per cent in Denmark and 75 per cent and above in Portugal, Switzerland and Spain.<sup>8</sup> Though in most European countries citizens seemed to be in agreement about their expectations of responsiveness, in some countries more than a fifth of respondents thought that the expectation should depend on the circumstances (e.g., Ireland and Hungary), or that the government should stick to its policies (Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden), with the latter option being supported by 42 per cent of the Danish respondents.

The PartiRep study surveyed national MPs in 14 European democracies and Israel and asked them a similar question: how should MPs vote if their opinion on an issue does not correspond with the opinion of their voters. The contrast is quite stark: on average, 72 per cent thought that the MP should behave independently and in most countries a large majority of MPs are of this view. Yet, there are some interesting cross-national differences, as a majority of Spanish MPs (58 per cent) thought they

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<sup>8</sup> Additionally, in all countries, those respondents who think the government should yield to the wishes of the public also think that whether they do change their planned policies is quite important for democracy (scores between 8 and 9 on a 0-10 scale).

should vote following the opinions of their voters, and sizeable minorities of above 35 per cent were of this same opinion in Hungary, Israel, Norway and Portugal.

All in all, and with few exceptions, the dilemma of mandated vs. independent representatives is bound to create problems for representative democracy and expectations of responsiveness, as most citizens think that their representative ought to be responsive to the public when their views are at odds, whereas most representatives think they ought to be independent.

A third problem raised by Pitkin is related to the definition of the constituents: who is the 'public' that the governments should respond to? Here the main difficulty is the diversity of the constituents: the multiplicity of views, preferences and interests. As Pitkin rightly points out, the analogy with the representation link and activity between two individuals cannot be extrapolated to the representative relation between a collective constituency and its agent, precisely because a collective constituency holds diverse interests and preferences that often cannot be accommodated at once. In other words, the 'principal' is never a single homogeneous actor and making the fiction that it is results in misleading assumptions and conclusions.<sup>9</sup> Given that the public is a heterogeneous group, to whom should governments pay attention? The section of the public who have voted for the government and who directly elected it as their representative? The public as a whole? When there are conflicting views among different sectors of the citizenry, to whom should governments respond? The majority? The most vocal — and, hence, with more formed views and stronger

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<sup>9</sup> An equally problematic assumption that Pitkin does not address fully is that the 'agent' or representative is also a single actor, or at least one with homogeneous interests and preferences. We will turn to this problem later on.

preferences? Aggregating a heterogeneous set of preferences into a ‘general’ will is highly problematic if not impossible

The final problem is related to the way in which the government is supposed to learn accurately about the views, interests and preferences of its constituents (Pitkin 1967: : 220). Pitkin points to the difficulties — at the time she was writing — to gain accurate information about the preferences of the public, pointing at the challenges involved in assuming that the views of those who petition or write letters to their representatives are indeed reflecting accurately the views of the constituents as a whole.

Admittedly, the technological changes that improve our information about the public views — and, especially, the widespread availability of surveys and similar devices to take a snapshot of the opinions of the public — reduce somewhat the magnitude of this problem. Yet, it does not make it go away fully (Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995). On the one hand, surveys are not omnipresent and they are certainly not infallible. There are many situations and issues for which no survey data is available; surveys are more useful when done recurrently (or several are done at a time) and the analysis of trends (or averages) can reduce the problems related to sampling and measurement error; and often surveys will capture non-attitudes and non-opinions if they force respondents to position themselves on issues to which they have not given much thought or about which they do not care much (Converse 1973; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

On the other hand, public opinion, or at least a segment of it, is also expressed through other means. Collective action – in its several forms – is another way for the public to voice their views, demands, and policy preferences. Those citizens who

bother to express their views through individual or collective action are likely to hold strong preferences and to be better informed about the issues than the average (passive) citizen (Schumaker 1975). Moreover, individual and collective action frequently is undertaken by pairs of opposing ‘camps’ (e.g. movements and counter-movements) with contrasting views on an issue.

The views expressed by the ‘median’ voter through surveys can, of course, coincide with those expressed by the ‘vocal’ voter (either due to public consensus around the issue among the public or because the two opposing views about it follow similar distributions among ‘median’ and ‘vocal’ voters); but in fact, very often we find that the views of the public expressed in opinion polls are at odds with the views voiced in the streets (or in the lobbies) through collective action and protest. What should governments do in these situations? We will discuss this problem at some length below.

### *Representation, responsiveness, mandates and ‘unexpected’ policy-making junctures*

Some scholars argue that governments should not be expected to be responsive to public opinion’s demands and preferences between elections, as citizens have their chance to influence policy-making through the electoral process (Schumpeter 1943; Mansbridge 2003).<sup>10</sup> In the *promissory* form of representation, politicians are

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<sup>10</sup> Pitkin (1967: footnote 35 to chapter 10) discusses at some length that the mere selection of representatives does not make a government representative in the absence of responsiveness. Her discussion of Rousseau’s stance on representation as the loss of freedom (cf. Pitkin 2004) suggests that responsiveness needs also to happen between elections and not just during the electoral process as such.

expected to reflect citizens' preferences in their electoral platforms because they want to win elections, and thus responsiveness in policy-making should emanate from elections if governments keep their promises. Following this logic, between elections this conception of representative government assumes that citizens have already attributed a representative mandate to elected legislators and governments and, hence, the latter do not need or require further 'instructions'. If a mandate exists – or, at the very least, if elites perceive a mandate to exist (see Peterson et al. 2003) – then, why should we expect governments to be responsive to public opinion's preferences and demands between elections?

Past research has discussed the complex relationship between electoral promises and mandates, policy switches, voters' information, responsiveness and representation (Stokes 1999a, 1999b). Sometimes, responsive policy decisions can be equated to populist and irresponsible governmental behaviour, and sometimes unresponsive policy decisions can be indicative of responsible political leadership. In any case, the process of democratic responsiveness is a complex and dynamic one, and there are multiple factors – many institutional<sup>11</sup> – that might result in a failure of responsiveness (Powell 2004a).

This relationship between mandates, representation and responsiveness is crucial from a democratic theory perspective. In the presence of electoral mandates, between-elections responsiveness might be detrimental to the process of democratic

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<sup>11</sup> This paper does not develop the role of institutional factors because of space and focus constraints.

This will be dealt with in future stages of this research agenda.

representation.<sup>12</sup> Mansbridge (2003) argues that *anticipatory* forms of democratic representation do not meet the criteria of accountability developed for the *promissory* forms. As she rightly points out, anticipatory forms of representation replace moral obligations with prudential incentives, aggregative functions with deliberative dynamics, and forces us to analyse the representative process from a systemic rather than a dyadic perspective. As Bartolini (1999: 448-449) argued, accountability is transformed into the need to respond. Thus, anticipatory forms of representation can pose substantial normative challenges in terms of its representative and democratic qualities, most importantly the dangers of political manipulation. Hence, even if we do not believe that responsiveness *per se* is necessarily always a measure of ‘good representation’ (Rehfeld 2009), we do not believe there are many normative or theoretical grounds to justify that it is necessarily a measure of ‘bad representation’ either. This normative judgement is too dependent on the specifics and the circumstances of each decision-making instance for a general statement to be of much value. In any case, both the normative and the empirical scholarship on the subject suggest that anticipatory forms of representation are quite common, and it is ultimately an empirical question whether anticipatory or promissory forms of representation dominate in contemporary politics, to what extent one or the other prevail and how well they are able to represent the constituents’ interests.

However, the existing normative debate does not reflect much on situations when elections cannot be thought of as providing a clear message about policy

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<sup>12</sup> In any case, responsiveness between elections is only desirable for ‘delegate’ models of representation, and undesirable for ‘trustee’ models of representation (see Pitkin 1967).

direction on a specific issue or matter.<sup>13</sup> What happens when no mandate on specific issues or policy-making junctures can be claimed? There are numerous occasions in which unexpected situations emerge or ‘external shocks’ happen that question the existence of a mandate even if the political parties in government might have previously (publicly) expressed their views on the issue. How should governments act (and how do they act) when unexpected situations or decision-making junctures emerge? In these situations, responsible governments have a choice between following their own policy preferences – as legitimate representatives of the citizenry – or following the public opinion – the responsive choice. Furthermore, when the policy issues become publicly contested at these unexpected junctures, governments must choose which side to take or how to balance contending views.

In this paper, I argue that the analysis of decision-making processes around such unexpected junctures – and its comparison with the ‘normal’ policy-making situations – constitutes a step forward in this research agenda. Analysing ‘unexpected’ or ‘shock-driven’ policymaking situations helps us reduce the normative problem of expectations of the autonomy of democratic governmental representatives — given that mandates are more difficult to claim —, at the same time that it also reduces the problems of endogeneity of public opinion with regard to policymaking. Unexpected

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<sup>13</sup> The nature and meaning of electoral ‘mandates’ deserves a separate and lengthy discussion that we cannot accommodate in this paper. Firstly, often, governments and legislators need to legislate on issues that cannot be thought of as counting with an electoral mandate because they were not discussed in electoral manifestos on the previous election because they were not salient enough. Secondly, it is questionable that an electoral vote gives a mandate on all and every policy proposal contained in the manifesto of the winning party or coalition parties. It is problematic to assume that votes express clear preferences — as opposed to opinions (Sartori 1973) — for specific individual policies (Dahl 1956).

junctures have the virtue of providing situations in which something closer to “true and independent” policy preferences emerge within public opinion. And they also limit the problems posed by politicians’ anticipation of public opinion (Jacobs and Shapiro 1996: 11).

*Responsive to whom? The median voter and the vocal voter*

The previous discussion has unpacked the complexities of dissecting the chain of representation and responsiveness, both theoretically and empirically. The internal diversity of the constituents or the ‘public’ to which democratic representative governments need to respond is such that governments often face a cacophony of voices and demands rather than a clear and unequivocal single message. Politicians then need to combine and weigh the different signals and pieces information into some sort of ‘index’, which is in itself difficult and problematic (Jones and Baumgartner 2005).

Lifting the assumption of a single homogeneous ‘public’ to a division of the public between the ‘median’ voter (as expressed by opinion polls) and the ‘vocal’ voter does not necessarily solve the problem. On the one hand, these two categories are still quite simplistic, in that they assume homogeneity within them. This is, obviously, a simplification, as a range of opinions is invariably expressed in surveys, and collective actors that choose to protest or lobby are also heterogeneous in their preferences and demands. Hence, if governments pay attention to the ‘median’ voter, they will pay attention to the sectors of the electorate that are closer to their voting base. Equally, if they pay attention to the ‘vocal’ voters they will consider the

multiple expressions of individual and collective action, mostly lobbying and protest from all sides of the spectrum.

On the other hand, beyond the intrinsic potential diversity of messages that governments might receive, this heterogeneity introduces a further problem for the aggregation of preferences that even responsive governments will strive to achieve: the clarity of the messages and of the content of the preferences they receive from the multiple sectors of the public is extremely different. While public opinion expressed through surveys is generally ambiguous, the public opinion expressed by collective action is usually more clear and specific – regardless of how representative the active few are of the inactive majority (cf. Schumaker 1975). This introduces important uncertainties about the real preferences of the ‘silent’ median voter. How much they care about the issue and how stable and formed their opinions are will be issues that governments will take into consideration when weighting the views expressed in surveys and with political action.

While heterogeneity in public demands presents a serious challenge in relation to developing normative expectations of governmental responsiveness, homogenous signals should contribute to more solid expectations of governmental reaction and responsiveness. In this regard, expectations about the impact of protesting minorities should probably be conditional on the views of the silent masses – the public opinion. As Agnone (2007: : 1597) suggested, changes in public opinion might have a stronger effect on governmental actions if they are accompanied by favourable protests, and vice versa. This is what he calls the ‘amplification’ mechanism. Thus, the silent masses might need the support of the ‘noisy’ protesters to make themselves heard, and certainly the reverse will also lead to expectations of greater responsiveness. In a

way, we could view the protesters as the vocal segment of an ‘issue public’ (Krosnick 1990). The amplification mechanism thus will depend on how large the issue public is to start with, and whether the public at large converges with the positions of the issue public and with the importance attributed to the issue.

Obviously – as Giugni (2004; 2007: 54) outlines – these ‘amplification mechanisms’ also depend on potential allies within the political arena. Such allies do not necessarily have to be in government, but might force the government to react in favour of the public claims due to their changing perception of vulnerability in future elections. As a result, studying in detail the interaction between different publicly expressed demands should be crucial for our understanding of governments’ responsiveness to its people.

## WHEN ARE GOVERNMENTS LIKELY TO BE RESPONSIVE BETWEEN ELECTIONS? THE EMPIRICAL DEBATE

Beyond the normative issues of when governments *ought* to be responsive or of when is it reasonable that we *expect* them to be so, the question remains of when are they *likely* to be responsive between elections. In other words, if in most cases governments will have a ‘preferred’ policy — the one formulated in their party manifestos or in their policy agreements — under what conditions are they likely to ditch it and follow the alternative path suggested by the public?

Multiple studies suggest that electoral competition and the risk of vote losses is crucial for politicians to adapt strategically to voters’ preferences and demands (Page 1978; Przeworski 1991; MacKuen, Stimson, and Erikson 2003; Hobolt and

Klemmensen 2008). Through Friedrich's mechanism of anticipated reactions (1963), politicians anticipate voters' electoral reactions to not providing the desired policies, and therefore, if parties/candidates are likely to lose office through electoral accountability, responsiveness will be more likely. These are Mansbridge's (2003) *anticipators*. Of course, this anticipating behaviour rests on the assumption that citizens vote retrospectively (Fiorina 1981), but in most cases parties are uncertain about the exact mix of retrospective and prospective considerations that voters will use when casting a ballot. Hence, governments are likely to decide on a situation-by-situation basis how likely are voters to punish them at election day for not having followed their (expressed) wishes on a given issue. This connects with Jones and Baumgartner's (2005) notion that the threshold at which policy-makers react to signals is contingent.

The anticipation of voters' electoral punishment is also closely related to the relevance of the issue or policy domain in citizens' minds (Soroka and Wlezien 2010): voters are more likely to punish unresponsive or poor performance in areas they really care about and will disregard the remaining policy issues. We should not expect governments to pay much attention to the public's demands on issues that they care little about (Page and Shapiro 1983). Accordingly, previous research shows that different policy issues foster different levels of responsiveness. For example, foreign policy is a domain where governments are far less responsive to citizens' preferences and demands than is usually the case with respect to domestic policy issues (Miller and Stokes 1963; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2005).

This is so, according to Soroka and Wlezien (2010), partly because citizens attribute more importance to certain policy areas than to others, and hence they are

not equally attentive to all. These differences in attention are, consequently, reflected on how much feedback or ‘signaling’ the public sends to politicians about their preferences with regards to policymaking in each domain. Using Soroka and Wlezien’s modelling metaphor, the public ‘thermostat’ is not equally sensitive to variations in policy ‘temperature’. The implications of this different signalling of preferences and demands are that politicians will have more incentives to follow or listen to the public in those policy areas for which citizens care the most and are, hence, more likely to take into account when casting their votes.

The ‘caring’ about the issue and the ‘signaling’ might be demonstrated in multiple ways. Citizens can verbalise this importance they attribute to certain issues when they are asked in surveys. Citizens can also signal their strong preference about an issue by organizing in collective or concerted action. The more people signal their interest one way or the other the clearer the signal that politicians perceive will be and clarity is of the essence as policy-makers receive many ambiguous signals. Therefore, if a given issue is constantly at the top of the public’s priorities (as expressed in opinion polls) or if large critical masses take it to the streets, then public demands that are divergent from the government’s positions should be expected to carry more weight in triggering a responsive move than in the absence of such salience or mobilization.

The electoral incentive is thus very important in bringing about a responsive dynamic. Adams et al. show that parties will respond when movements in the opinions of the public are in a direction that is electorally disadvantageous for the

party (Adams et al. 2004).<sup>14</sup> This means that, if pandering happens (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), we should expect it when the electoral loss produced by not being responsive is reasonably thought to be considerable, and also the closer to election day. Thus, the electoral vulnerability that both aspects (size of the opinion shift/position and closeness to elections) incorporate should be taken into account empirically.

Electoral incentives notwithstanding, governments are not always able or willing to defer to public demands. To start with, governments are not unconstrained in their capacity to change course. First, policy-making inertias, legislative constraints and various other factors limit the possibilities of immediate responsiveness to public demands even if governments were willing to react to them. Friction and punctuated equilibria characterise the policy-making process (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Baumgartner et al. 2009).

These are constraints inherent in the policymaking process. But a second set of constraints is related to external limits to responsive policy shifts imposed by the voters and other external political agents (e.g. foreign governments, international organisations or treaties, multinational corporations, etc.). Governments cannot always respond to public demands without reputation (or contractual) penalties, either imposed by the voters or by other external agents (Bernhardt and Ingerman 1985;

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<sup>14</sup> Both Adams et al.'s (2004) work and Jones and Baumgartner's (1993) imply a 'shift' in public views, opinions or images. We are not persuaded that the change in the views themselves is necessary as such, though it helps, it is probably enough that something else changes in terms of how the public behaves. If they give more weight to their views in a certain policy issue to make electoral choices or are more keen to take it to the streets, a change in the underlying views, images or opinions will not be necessary to propel (some) governments to react responsively.

Enelow and Munger 1993; Kartik and McAfee 2007; Jensen and Johnston 2011). Dramatic policy shifts are even less likely when a party owns an issue. Thus, often, governments are not completely free to change policy course or they need to balance the multiple costs of being responsive to public demands.

Finally, governments and the party/parties that form it also face a number of internal constraints. On the one hand, they may hold strong convictions about the policy issue and not be willing to react responsively no matter how strong the demands and how clear the signals. Thus, on matters where ideological views by the party/ies in government are very prominent we should expect less responsiveness. On the other hand, changing policy course can sometimes open up the Pandora box of internal dissent and factionalism within the party. These internal constraints have been illustrated in the study of the tensions facing Social Democratic parties and centre-right parties in relation to the immigration issue and the EU, particularly for British parties (Bale 2008; Bale et al. 2010; Smith 2012; Guinaudeau and Persico 2013). An equivalent logic needs to be applied to issues that can break up governmental coalitions. Hence, governments will be reluctant to respond to public pressures on issues that are divisive either for the (major) party in government or for the government coalition.

Following this discussion, we can point to a number of expectations that can guide future research and that can be summarised in the following hypotheses:

1. In the absence of protest (or with minimal protest in terms of frequency and following), governments will have no incentive to change their preferred (original) policy position.

2. If there is substantial protest (either in terms of frequency and/or following), but the protest is inconsistent with the majority position expressed in surveys, their reaction will be conditional on a number of additional factors. If it is a single party government, it will have little incentive to change their preferred (original) policy position unless the protestors views are in line with the majority views of its own core voters (2a). If it is a coalition government, it will be more likely to change its policy position in all cases (2b) and especially so if the views of the core electorate of any of the coalition partners are in line with the demands of the protestors (2c).

3. If there is substantial protest (either in terms of frequency and/or following), and the protest is consistent with the majority view expressed in surveys, governments will be much more likely to change their preferred (original) policy position.

4. The above conditions (1-3) will be expected to affect differently governmental responsiveness depending on how close election day is.

5. Equally, the effect of public opinion and protest pressures will depend on external (or contractual) constraints (5a) and on how divisive the issue is within the party/coalition (5b).

## A RESEARCH AGENDA ON GOVERNMENTAL RESPONSIVENESS

Having discussed in some detail the proposal for an ordinal conceptualization and measurement of democratic governmental responsiveness, as well as the normative and empirical challenges we need to face in its study, I briefly present a research

agenda that proposes to examine this topic from a slightly different perspective than previous empirical efforts.<sup>15</sup>

As discussed before, the congruence between public opinion and policy making is not necessarily indicative of responsiveness if public opinion is not exogenous to policy making or if there is no causal link between the former and the latter. Thus, the research strategy needs to be designed in such a way that it will allow us to rule out the problem of the endogeneity of public opinion or reverse causation. One way of confronting this problem is to move away from the study of responsiveness in multiple or multidimensional policy domains, and to focus on narrowly-defined policy-making junctures on a single policy issue. Another, complementary, option is to compare the dynamics of responsiveness of ‘normal’ decision-making instances with those that take place in ‘unexpected’ or ‘non-mandated’ decision-making junctures, such as unexpected external shocks, wars, riots, sudden immigration crises or sudden financial and economic crises.

This new way of approaching the subject, together with data collection procedures and modelling strategies that allow to analyze the decision-making process as an ‘event’ dynamic or history will contribute to reduce the problem of endogeneity as well as address Wlezien’s (2014) concerns about the difficulties of meaningfully capturing citizens’ preferences for specific policies in order to assess policy responsiveness.

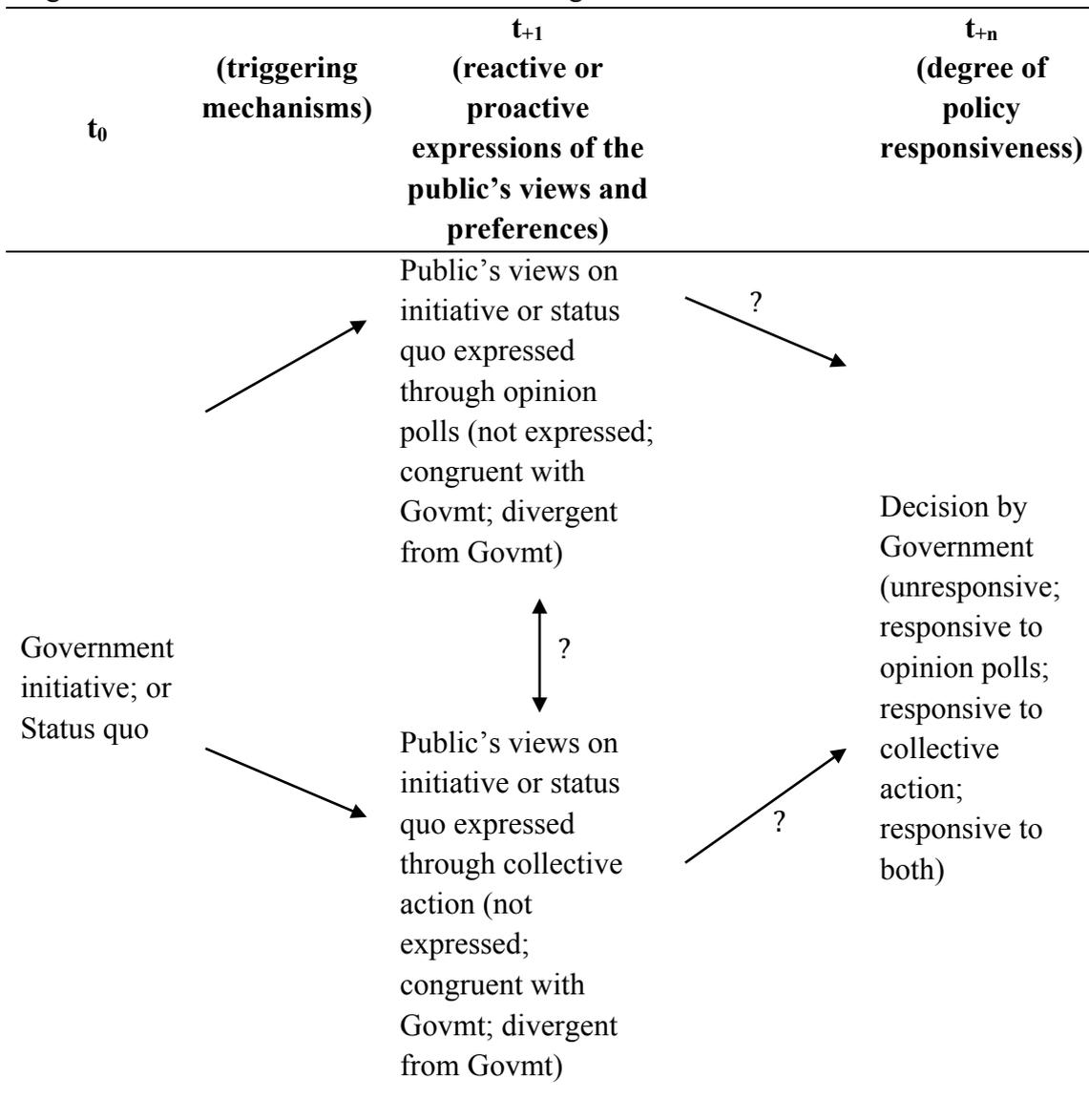
For this purpose, the research agenda will delineate a way of understanding policy responsiveness that is dynamic and depends on the expression of the public’s

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<sup>15</sup> This is the research agenda of the ResponsiveGov project funded by the ERC (see <http://www.responsivegov.eu/>).

views — those of the ‘median’ and of the ‘vocal’ voter — during the specific policy process. In essence, responsiveness will be defined relative to the reaction (or lack of it) from governments in situations that can be schematically simplified as following the structure described in Figure 2, where the initial time point of reference is  $t_0$  and the end point is  $t_{+n}$ , and the question marks are the relationships we will uncover.

Figure 2. A schematic view of the research agenda



## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

- Lack of clarity around conceptual issues
- Normative vs empirical debates not reconciled
- This paper proposes to bridge both scholarships in the study of governmental responsiveness between elections
- Empirical expectations informed by both scholarships & hypotheses for research
- Empirical approach to data collection.

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