Vox Populi Vox Dei?
Electoral Competition and Government Responsiveness in Advanced Democracies

Luca Bernardi

University of Leicester

April 2013

Research Question

➢ How does electoral competition have an impact on government responsiveness to citizens' preferences?

Motivation (1)

➢ Although theoretically a consistent part of democratic theory (Dahl 1956, 1971; Downs 1957; Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 1999; Pitkin 1967; Powell 2000) agrees that electoral competition matters for responsiveness, it is very debated whether it is true on the empirical ground.

➢ Electoral competitiveness is not the only element of competition that might affect responsiveness: also other components can be relevant (for competition studied in multidimensional perspective see Bartolini 1999, 2000 and Strøm 1989, 1992).

Motivation (2)

➢ Responsiveness is largely studied in the US but less in Europe:

- budgetary priorities (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008)

- government expenditures (Bartle, Dellepiane-Avellaneda, and Stimson 2010; Soroka and Wlezien 2005, 2010)

- policy domains categories (Penner, Blidook, and Soroka 2006; Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995)

- speeches coding on a single ideological dimension (Hakhverdian 2009, 2010)

- legislative effectiveness (Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011; Pickup and Hobolt 2011)

What is still missing is a medium-large N comparison.

Definition of the Core Variables

- *Government Responsiveness*

Correspondence between citizens' preferences and government activity.

- *Electoral Competition*

A social relationship characterized by a system of interaction among consciously rival autonomous actors (Bartolini 1999, 438), i.e. *individual interests*, *similar goals*, no strength against the adversary, prize at stake, *unintended and beneficial consequences* to third parties.

The Framework of Competition

Following Bartolini (1999, 450-4), in order to maximize responsiveness to citizens' preferences, there are four necessary conditions of competition, working backward from responsiveness: (1) contestability of the elections, (2) electoral availability, (3) decidability of the offer, and (4) incumbent vulnerability. If electoral sanctions are what drive politicians to respond to the electors, the more the incumbents perceive themselves vulnerable the better such a mechanism will perform. In turn, the necessary condition of incumbents' vulnerability is that voters are willing to punish and reward, that is, to modify their electoral choice. What motivates the available voters to act for or against the incumbent is the differentiation of the offer and the consequent perception of different outcomes. So, if products are not differentiated or their difference is not perceived, voters can punish or reward at random and no responsiveness will be achieved (ibid.).

Dimensions and Status

Dimension	Status
Contestability	Necessary condition of Pluralism
Availability	Necessary condition of Decidability and Vulnerability
Decidability	Necessary condition of Responsiveness
Vulnerability	Necessary condition of Responsiveness

Contestability

- Registration barriers

- Recognition barriers

- Representation barriers

Availability

- Electoral volatility

- Party propensity to vote (PTV question)

Decidability

DECIDABILITY

Party Choice	Issue	
	Divisive	Non-divisive
Clear	A	B
Unclear	C	D

Source: Schneider 1974; Bartolini 2000.

Vulnerability

- Measures of competitiveness (e.g. closeness of electoral results)

- A measure of potential vulnerability based on voting intentions

- The ratio of majority surplus and parties in government

Hypotheses (1)

- *Contestability Hypothesis (a)*. High barriers may discourage new entries, this may also instil a perception of safeness among the incumbent political elite and lead to engage in collusive behaviour at the expense of responsiveness.

- *Contestability Hypothesis (b)*. Low barriers may allow excessive fragmentation of the political offer and the party system possibly leading to political chaos at the expense of responsiveness.

Hypotheses (2)

- *Availability Hypothesis (a)*. The more electors are willing to modify their electoral choice (i.e. high levels of electoral availability), the more likely responsiveness might be (indirectly) affected in a positive way, for availability is a necessary condition for incumbent vulnerability.

- *Availability Hypothesis (b)*. The more identified the electors (i.e. low levels of electoral availability), the more stable will be the parties' political offer (for availability is also a necessary condition for electoral decidability) and this might have an indirect effect on responsiveness in a positive way.

Hypotheses (3)

- *Decidability Hypothesis*. The more clear and differentiated the political offer, the more easily higher responsiveness will be achieved.

- *Vulnerability Hypothesis*. The more incumbents perceive their own electoral vulnerability, the more likely they will be led to respond sympathetically to their electors.

Plan of the Thesis

- Introduction
- Chapter 1. Literature review competition and responsiveness (alternatively, two different chapters)
- Chapter 2. Research design
- Chapter 3. Responsiveness (preferences in spending & government expenditure by policy function)
- Chapter 4. Responsiveness (MIP/MII question & laws)
- Chapter 5. Responsiveness (ResponsiveGov data)
- Conclusions