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INTRODUCTION



Understanding responsiveness in European Union politics: introducing the debate

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ABSTRACT

The extent to which a government's policies mirror the preferences of its citizens is often deemed a key feature of a representative democracy. While research on this topic has traditionally been done at the national level, scholars have also increasingly been examining the European Union (EU). This debate section takes stock of the research done in this area and includes contributions by authors who have different, but complementary suggestions for how to move forward. Whereas all contributions seek to elucidate the mechanisms behind responsiveness in the EU, they adopt different perspectives that focus on institutional actors, processes of absorbing and communicating policy-relevant information and implementation outcomes.

KEYWORDS European integration; European Union; policy representation; responsiveness

The extent to which a government's policies mirror the preferences of its citizens is often deemed a key feature of a representative democracy (e.g., Dahl 1971: 1). An important question for empirical research on democracy is thus whether a correspondence between policy and citizens' preferences can be found in various contexts. While research on this topic has traditionally been done at the national level, scholars have also increasingly been examining the European Union (EU). This debate section takes stock of the research done in this area so far and includes contributions by authors who have different, but complementary suggestions for how to move forward.

The literature examining whether public policies correspond to public preferences have two important strands. One has considered whether electoral systems produce governments and parliaments whose composition reflects public preferences along salient dimensions – which is often referred to as congruence and examined using cross-sectional analyses (Golder and Stramski 2010; McDonald *et al.* 2004; Powell 2000). Another line of research

has employed time-series data and examined whether changes in public opinion causes changes in public policy, which is referred to as ‘dynamic representation’ or policy responsiveness. The focus of this debate section is on the latter kind of research in the context of EU policy-making.

The use of time-series models to study policy responsiveness was pioneered by Stimson and colleagues (Erikson *et al.* 2002; Stimson 1991; Stimson *et al.* 1995). According to these authors responsiveness is brought about by two mechanisms: (1) electoral replacement of political representatives (the ‘turnover mechanism’), and (2) representatives trying to please their electorate in order to win future elections (‘rational anticipation’). This form of responsiveness has been found in a number of studies, examining a diverse set of political systems, although the US and other Anglo-American systems have received the most attention (Erikson *et al.* 2002; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Wlezien and Soroka 2012).

‘Systemic responsiveness’ in the EU

While the model of policy responsiveness was developed in the US, it has increasingly also been applied to other political systems, including the EU. An interesting observation in this regard is that the accountability mechanisms originally thought to produce responsiveness may only partly apply to the EU: The European Commission has for most of its history not been electorally accountable, and the Council of the EU is only accountable in national elections that typically do not center on EU politics. These are some of the reasons that the EU has been claimed to have a ‘democratic deficit’, and may appear an unlikely case for finding responsiveness (e.g., Follesdal and Hix 2006).

Yet, the first empirical studies on this topic suggest the EU may be more responsive than typically assumed. Some of these studies (e.g., Bølstad 2015; Toshkov 2011) adopt a *systemic* approach to studying responsiveness in the EU: the relationship between public preferences and policy outputs at the most abstract (systemic) level.

The systemic approach has several arguments in its favor: It is parsimonious and typically straightforward to apply in empirical research. Furthermore, it is theory-driven, deriving its key questions from models developed in the American context. As the studies cited above illustrate, systemic models have also received considerable empirical support – even in federal and multi-level systems like the US and the EU, respectively. Finally, the answers that this approach provides are highly relevant from a normative perspective – as the case of the EU also illustrates. The notion of a democratic deficit in the EU partly revolves around the extent to which there is responsiveness at the systemic level, and evidence of such responsiveness may provide important counterarguments to the most critical observers.

However, the studies taking a systemic approach to assess responsiveness in the EU also have a few shortcomings. Importantly, they are unable to conclude in favor of a causal relationship. As Bølstad (2015) notes, a particular challenge is the possibility that elites could be driving the trends in both public opinion and public policy, creating a spurious relationship between the two. Without high quality time series of elite preferences to match the other series, it is hard to rule out this possibility.¹ This makes it particularly pertinent to examine the causal mechanisms that could produce policy responsiveness, but such mechanisms have received limited attention in these studies.

Put differently, even if we accept that existing empirical findings capture how the EU system reacts to public opinion, there is limited understanding of the relevant *causal mechanisms* that drive policy responsiveness in the EU. First, systemic policy responsiveness requires that public opinion not only reaches the relevant EU institutions, but that it is also systemically processed to inform the EU policy-making process. However, existing models of policy responsiveness are yet to consider the process through which the EU institutions absorb and digest information from the public.

Second, systemic approaches to responsiveness disregard that EU policies are the result of the joint efforts of EU institutional actors with different competences and targeting different publics. Whereas the Commission prepares proposals for EU legislation, the Council and the Parliament often introduce changes to the Commission proposals before they agree to adopt them. It is unclear whether the systemic model assumes that the Commission, the Parliament and the Council synchronously adapt their preferences to public opinion or that some EU institutions are more reactive than others. Only few studies have empirically investigated the legislative behavior of national governments in the Council (e.g., Hagemann *et al.* 2017; Wratil 2018) and members of the European Parliament (EP) (Lo 2013) in response to public opinion. Wratil's work (2018) explicitly tests the micro foundations of the systemic model of responsiveness by investigating the level of congruence between government positions and public opinion. His findings suggest that governments do not systematically respond to citizens pro/anti EU integration stances, casting doubt on general assumptions that all EU institutions respond to public opinion on EU integration.

Third, existing models of responsiveness have predominantly focused on EU policy adoption. However, even if EU policy outputs do not fully reflect public opinion at the legislative stage, domestic institutions could implement them in ways that conform to citizen demands. Conversely, it is possible that national and local authorities modify the EU policies that make them (even) less responsive to target publics. Thus, the national context mediates the relation between EU policies and public opinion. Research on public opinion has shown that citizens often perceive the impact of the EU indirectly

through citizen assessments of government performance (Hobolt and de Vries 2016). However, there is limited knowledge of how citizens experience the impact of EU policies in domestic contexts. Research on the responsiveness of EU policy implementation promises to fill this gap by illuminating the role of domestic politics and public administration in delivering EU policies to citizens.

Existing research has increasingly recognized the need for adopting a non-systemic approach to the study of EU responsiveness. Different studies have analyzed the extent to which the EU Commission responds to public opinion (Rauh 2016; van der Veer and Haverland 2018) and member states' propensity to signal responsiveness to their publics (Hagemann *et al.* 2017; Schneider 2019a, 2019b). In a similar vein, some research has argued that responsiveness could occur at different stages of the policy-making process such as agenda-setting (Alexandrova *et al.* 2016) and in the timing of transposition of EU directives (Williams 2018). These studies, however, generally focus on single EU actors and often fail to account for the mechanisms underlying processes of responsiveness.

Introducing the debate: taking actors, publics and mechanisms seriously

The main purpose of this JEPP debate section is to trigger academic discussion about the existing gaps in the systemic model of responsiveness and provide recommendations for possible ways to address them. As a result, the debate section seeks to *complement* existing research on EU policy responsiveness. Arguably, the systemic model offers important insights of the relationship between EU policy outputs and aggregate levels of public opinion. However, the different contributions emphasize the importance of furthering our understanding of the mechanisms that drive policy responsiveness in the EU. This endeavor requires that new studies address more specific research questions about the relevant EU actors and their publics, the process through which EU actors acquire and digest public opinion and the levels at which responsiveness can be best achieved. Another goal of this debate section is to provide avenues for future research in terms of empirical strategies that could help scholars disentangle the causal mechanisms driving responsiveness in the EU. Existing research on systemic responsiveness has acknowledged the problems of identifying the relevant causal mechanisms when studying aggregate policy outputs and public opinion (Bølstad 2015; Toshkov 2011). Many of the encountered problems are driven by lack of appropriate data to analyze policy-specific preferences of societal and political actors in relation to EU policies.

All three articles discuss distinct ways that add to the literature on EU responsiveness. The first contribution adopts an *actor-oriented* perspective

on responsiveness and specifically focuses on the input side of the EU policy-making process (i.e., input responsiveness). In particular, different actors can be responsive to specific subgroups of the European citizenry on different issues (Meijers *et al.* 2019). The complexities associated with the multi-actor perspective have been ignored by existing studies that focus on one EU institution (Hagemann *et al.* 2017; Rauh 2018; Williams 2018). However, aggregate policy outputs are the result of continuous interactions between multiple actors with different competences. The actor-oriented perspective offers to complement the systemic model of responsiveness by specifying which actors are relevant for translating public opinion into policy outputs. Future research should shed more light on whether the adoption EU legislation is driven by increased Commission activism or government incentives to transfer more competences to the EU. Consequently, models of responsiveness should pay more attention to specific policy preferences of EU actors including the policy positions of relevant DGs in the Commission, the rapporteurs amending Commission proposals as well as member states' preferences expressed during Council negotiations.

De Wilde and Rauh (2019) propose a different approach to complement the existing literature on responsiveness by adopting a *procedural* perspective. Unlike the first contribution, their main argument is not centered on the question 'who responds to whom' in EU politics (see Meijers *et al.* 2019), but on how information about public opinion is perceived, processed, and communicated back to the public. The authors of this piece challenge the systemic model on the premises that it relies on electoral accountability as the key mechanism triggering EU responsiveness to public opinion. The systemic model fails to account for (1) the increased relevance of non-majoritarian institutions in EU policy-making, (2) differentiated politicization of EU integration across issue-areas and member states and (3) the role of medialization in shaping public opinion. To overcome these hurdles, De Wilde and Rauh (2019) argue that future research should focus on the process rather than the outcome of responsiveness. The procedural perspective thus addresses the need for understanding how EU officials learn about public opinion, which public issues are considered important at different stages of EU policy making, whether and how policy choices are justified through professionalized communication channels.

Finally, Steunenberg (2019) adopts an *outcome-oriented* perspective to responsiveness. This contribution posits that the EU policy-making process does not end with the adoption of EU legislation, but EU policies need to be implemented by the relevant domestic institutions. Various studies of EU policy-making and implementation have shown that member states enjoy and use their discretion to reshape EU policy outputs during the implementation process in order to better fit them to national and local contexts (Dimirova and Steunenberg 2000; Franchino 2007; Thomann and Zhelyazkova

2017). As a result, the adoption of legislation by the EU may not be the most relevant level at which responsiveness should be studied. Steunenberg (2019) discusses how implementation outcomes can meet public demands even when EU policy outputs are not congruent with the wishes of their domestic target publics. Conversely, failure to implement publicly desirable policies diminishes EU responsiveness.

All contributions share the premise that established research does not provide sufficient theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence for a causal relation between citizen demands and EU policy outputs. They also share the expectation that any supporting evidence for EU responsiveness should result in higher diversity in the actions undertaken by different EU institutions (Meijers *et al.* 2019), the issue areas politicized in different member states (De Wilde and Rauh 2019), and in the implementation outcomes meeting different societal demands (Steunenberg 2019). However, each contribution emphasizes the importance of a distinct research gap on responsiveness and proposes a different solution to increasing scholarly understanding of the phenomenon. Hence, the contributions disagree in their proposed avenues for future research. In particular, the outcome-oriented perspective (Steunenberg 2019) posits that citizen experiences with EU policies are more relevant for understanding EU responsiveness than the actions taken by EU institutions (Meijers *et al.* 2019) or processes of absorbing and influencing public opinion through communication (De Wilde and Rauh 2019).

There are also inherent trade-offs between actor-oriented and outcome-oriented perspectives on responsiveness. On the one hand, outcome-oriented models dilute accountability ties between EU institutions and their respective publics because implementation outcomes are shaped by multiple actors, contextual factors and external events. On the other hand, the actor-oriented perspective may deemphasize the importance of substantive policy outcomes that are relevant for citizens because individual EU institutions are only partially responsible for the adoption and implementation of EU legislation. In a similar vein, the procedural perspective elucidates the mechanisms in which EU institutions select and absorb information about public opinion (De Wilde and Rauh 2019). However, this perspective is silent about the final products that reflect whether responsiveness actually takes place in terms of the behavior of political actors (Meijers *et al.* 2019) and implementation outcomes (Steunenberg 2019).

In sum, all contributions of the debate emphasize the importance of explicitly examining the role of actors, processes and citizens in EU responsiveness research. Arguably, each of these approaches would require collecting data that is not easily available. At the same time, more detailed empirical sources are key to unravelling the complexities in the relation between EU politics and national publics.

Note

1. Using manifesto data, for instance, would typically provide new data only at national elections, which is more rarely than relevant time series on public opinion and policy, thus potentially forcing the researcher to engage in a much cruder analysis.

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