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Fabio Franchino [a], Mark A. Kayser [b] and Christopher Wratil [c]

[a]Department of Social and Political Science, Università degli Studi di Milano, Milan, Italy; [b]Hertie School, Berlin, Germany; [c]Department of Government, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

ABSTRACT
Several studies have reported a relationship between governments' behaviour in the EU Council and public opinion. However, doubts remain about which mechanisms drive this relationship. We argue that governments align their behaviour with public opinion to forestall future electoral sanctions (*rational anticipation*). To test this, we deduce hitherto untested observable implications of rational anticipation which suggest that governments' responsiveness to public opinion depends on national-level electoral competitiveness. Using DEU modules I-III and an original empirical measure of electoral competitiveness, we ascertain whether governments adjust their responsiveness as: (1) the expected time period to upcoming elections decreases, and (2) the probability of losing their position in the party system in the next election changes. Our results provide evidence that government parties rationally anticipate risks related to their position in the party system but not to early elections. These findings have implications for our understanding of representation in the Council.

Introduction

A growing number of studies provide evidence that national governments pander to public opinion at home when they act at the European Union (EU) level (Hagemann et al., 2017; Hobolt & Wratil, 2020; Kleine & Minaudier, 2019; Schneider, 2018; Wratil, 2018). These works commonly argue that governments care about the public mood because they fear losing votes in the next national elections, as voters may hold them accountable for behaviour in EU institutions that is not in line with their preferences. To forestall such electoral sanctions, governments may respond to public opinion in the time between elections. They *rationally anticipate* the issues that become

important in these electoral contests and the potential vote losses they may incur (e.g., Stimson, MacKuen, & Erikson, 1995). Studies that focus on the observable implications of these rational anticipatory processes have demonstrated that when an EU issue is domestically more salient, and governments expect it to be salient in the next election, responsiveness increases (e.g., Wratil, 2018).

Here, we develop and test additional observable implications of rational anticipation that have yet to be investigated in studies of responsiveness in the Council or in other contexts. Specifically, we focus on electoral competitiveness – the factor that should influence potential electoral losses of governments most fundamentally – and conceptualise it in terms of electoral risk. We distinguish two dimensions of risk that government parties face: (1) a *time dimension* (when will the next national elections likely occur?) and (2) a *party system dimension* (what is the probability that a party will lose its privileged position in the party system?).

While some work on the time dimension has considered how responsiveness varies over the legislative term (Canes-Wrone & Shotts, 2004; Lindstädt & Vander Wielen, 2011), we extend this work by testing whether governments adjust their responsiveness to the risk of early elections and parliamentary dissolution. For this purpose, we employ a recently developed measure of the expected duration of a cabinet facing the risk of parliamentary dissolution (Fortunato & Loftis, 2018). Regarding the party system dimension, we develop a novel expectation of a curvilinear relationship between government responsiveness and electoral competitiveness. If government parties are either hopeless or comfortable in holding their privileged position in the next parliament, they do not have to be responsive, since their actions at the EU level are unlikely to 'turn the tide' for their national electoral fate. In constrast, if parties face a middling probability of holding on to a privileged position in the next parliament, their actions at the EU-level can make all the difference. To test this, we develop and validate a new, simplified measure of the probability that the plurality party will lose its seat plurality to the second largest party in the next election, based on the work of Kayser and Lindstädt (2015).

To analyse responsiveness, we use governments' positions on hundreds of legislative files from the 'Decision-Making in the European Union' (DEU) dataset (Thomson et al., 2012, 2006), rescale them on a left-right dimension and relate them to the national median voter's left-right position, which we obtain from the Eurobarometer survey series. Our results provide clear evidence that governments rationally anticipate the electoral competitiveness on the party system dimension and adjust their responsiveness accordingly. Responsiveness peaks at middling levels of the probability to lose the plurality party role but vanishes if plurality parties are either comparatively hopeless or comfortable in securing their role in the next elections. We also demonstrate that this effect is largely driven by cases in which the plurality

party is particularly influential in determining the government's EU policy. In contrast, government parties do not seem to anticipate and incorporate the electoral risk of early parliamentary dissolution when responding to public opinion. They rather plan their responsiveness according to the date of the next scheduled election.

Rational anticipation and government responsiveness in the Council

Recent studies suggest that government responsiveness to left-right and pro-anti EU public opinion at home influences Council politics at every stage of the legislative process, from position-taking (Schneider, 2018; Wratil, 2018) to negotiation rhetoric (Hobolt & Wratil, 2020) and final passage voting (Hagemann et al., 2017). Drawing on Stimson et al.'s (1995) mechanism of *rational anticipation*, they argue that responsiveness in the Council is mainly the result of governments anticipating their fate in future elections and trying to improve it through responding to voters' preferences. As there is always the chance that media, interest groups, or competitors raise voters' attention to the government's unresponsive behaviour, governments and their officials pre-emptively respond to public opinion when acting in the Council.

A key complication of improving one's future election outcome is a fundamental uncertainty of governments or politicians about 'who will be their opponents […] and […] what issues will be raised' (Stimson et al., 1995, p. 545). Moreover, voters' characteristics, preferences and wishes at the next election may change over time due to deliberation and manipulation by other politicians or exogenous events (Mansbridge, 2003, p. 519). A central, often implicit assumption is that politicians will have to rely on short-cuts or heuristics to form expectations about future election outcomes. Public opinion is one of such shortcuts. Politicians can use it as a signal of the direction in which voters' preferences are developing. As Stimson et al. (1995, p. 545) put it: 'Elected politicians, we believe, sense the mood of the moment, assess its trend, and anticipate its consequence for future elections. Changes in opinion, correctly perceived, will lead politicians to revise their beliefs about future election opportunities and hazards.'

The rational anticipation mechanism therefore predicts a systematic relationship between public opinion and governments' actions. More specifically, Wratil (2018) shows that government responsiveness to public opinion in the Council increases as the date of the next scheduled national elections approaches. He also demonstrates that responsiveness is stronger in majoritarian than in proportional electoral systems, since the former are usually characterised by a higher seats-votes elasticity.[1]

However, both regularly scheduled elections and the type of electoral system are error-prone heuristics for inferring risks about future electoral

contests. First, approximately one in three legislative elections held in Europe since the 1990s has been a snap election that occurred before the constitutionally mandated deadline. Between 1945 and 1998, of the western European governments leaving offices before this deadline, one in three faced an early election (Bergman, Müller, & Strøm, 2003). This figure is about one in five if we consider most European parliamentary democracies since the 1990s. Second, electoral systems are only one of several heuristics by which parties could assess the risk of losing an election. Importantly, government parties' electoral aims arguably vary across party systems. In two-party systems with majoritarian electoral rules, a government party will typically aim to win more votes than its main competitor to remain in office, but in multi-party systems with proportional representation, it is less straightforward what would constitute 'electoral defeat' (Stimson et al., 1995, p. 545). Kayser and Lindstädt (2015) argue that parties in all systems should care about retaining their seat plurality. They model this risk based on electoral volatility, inferred from past vote swings and seat margins. Altough we ultimately cannot know how sophisticated rational anticipation efforts by governments really are, this approach is more informative than simple electoral system heuristics.

In sum, our main aim is to explore additional implications of the rational anticipation mechanism, beyond existing work, by employing two sophisticated conceptualisations and measurements of electoral competitiveness.

Electoral competitiveness and government responsiveness

We investigate if government responsiveness – a correlation between the position of a government in the Council and its public opinion at home – reacts to the time and party system dimensions of electoral competitiveness. Our testable implications are based on government *expectations* with regard to (1) parliamentary dissolution and early elections, and (2) the plurality party losing its plurality status in the next election.

Time dimension

The prospect of pending elections looms large over policy-making in democracies, making 'time' a scarce commodity. Several studies demonstrate that governments pay considerable attention to the timing of their legislative and budgetary measures, trying to reward myopic voters before elections. Their actions are also affected by the prospects of early elections (e.g., Fortunato & Loftis, 2018; Martin, 2004).[2] In light of their relevance at the national level, we submit that electoral concerns should also matter for EU policy-making. We pay attention here to the time-dependent responsiveness to public opinion, as there is good evidence for this behaviour within the

Council (Wratil, 2018) and in other political systems (e.g., Canes-Wrone & Shotts, 2004; Lindstädt & Vander Wielen, 2011). However, we relax the assumption that the timing of national elections is fixed and known *ex ante* and, following Fortunato and Loftis (2018), explore if the *expected* duration of governments, i.e., the time until the next election, shapes responsiveness. Consequently, the competing risks model of government survival, which we use to produce our measure of duration, estimates the probability of an early termination of the legislature.[3] Since left-right is the most salient and stable dimension of contestation in domestic elections and voters tend to reward or sanction position-taking on such issues,[4] we hypothesise:

> H1: Governments will be more responsive to domestic public opinion on left-right issues as their expected duration to parliamentary dissolution is drawing to a close.

Party system dimension

Electoral competitiveness is a central concept in theories of democratic representation. If the largest and, hence, leading parties in government want to retain influence and office, they should be more motivated to implement popular policies when they face a risk of losing their position. Our second expectation is a direct extension of this simple claim. What is less simple, however, is conceptualising the form of electoral competitiveness, to which parties it applies, and how it matters. For reasons explained below, we will focus on the electoral security of the largest party in parliament.

In two-party systems, conceptualising electoral risk as the difference in votes or vote shares between the two largest parties is seemingly, but deceptively, straightforward. As early as Mayhew's (1974) observation about the 'vanishing marginals' in US congressional races, scholars have worried about the implications of declining electoral competitiveness on the responsiveness of the governing party, but the empirical foundation of these concerns was soon eroded by the insight that vote volatility, not only vote margins, matters. Expanding vote margins do not protect incumbents in a system in which vote share volatility is also increasing (Jacobson, 1987). Even in a two-party, majoritarian system, electoral competitiveness amounts to more than differences in votes.

In multi-party systems, few scholars have even tried to develop a party-level measure of electoral competitiveness, let alone one that would be valid across electoral and party systems. Important contributions have been made at the single-district level (e.g., Cox et al., 2020; Grofman & Selb, 2009) but few aggregate measures exist at the national level (see the review in Kayser & Lindstädt, 2015).

A key challenge in developing a cross-nationally valid measure of electoral risk is identifying an object that political parties seek to maximise regardless

of the party system or institutional setting. Kayser and Lindstädt (2015), addressing this problem, proposed the *plurality loss probability*, the probability of a party with the plurality of seats in parliament losing this status to the second largest party at the next election. Plurality status is of prime importance in both single-member district (majoritarian) and multi-member district (proportional) electoral systems. In single-member district systems, plurality status in parliament usually equates to single-party majority government. In multi-member district systems, which tend to have more parties and coalition governments, the party with the greatest number of seats is usually given the first opportunity to form a government. And, in both systems, the advantages of plurality status are not limited to advantages in government formation. Plurality parties, independent of their governing status, often receive enhanced access to the media, a prominent role in policy debates, the attention of voters and influence on administration of the parliament. The systems differ but a key objective for large parties with a chance of leading a government remains the same: securing the most seats.

In the analysis below, we use a simplified version of plurality loss probabilities (PLPR) that best fits our purpose. Unlike alternative metrics of electoral competitiveness at the party or party-district level, PLPR focuses on the electoral incentives of a single party at the national level that is most often that of the prime minister. Such a prime ministerial party is usually particularly influential in determining EU policy.[5]

How does the probability of the plurality party losing its status in the next election map onto electoral risk and, ultimately, EU position taking? A party with a low probability of losing control of the executive (through losing its seat plurality) is sufficiently secure to pursue its policy preferences regardless of its popularity with voters at home. Similarly, a party with a sufficiently high probability of losing its plurality is more likely to conclude that retaining office is not possible and focus on seizing rents or implementing its less popular policies while it still can. It is at middling levels of risk (and PLPR) that policy choices have a chance of influencing outcomes. Consequently, we predict a concave relationship:

> H2: Governments will be most responsive to domestic public opinion on left-right issues at middling levels of their plurality loss probability rather than at the extremes.

Data

Government positions and public opinion

We use the DEU I-III dataset (Thomson et al., 2012, 2006) to measure governments' positions in the Council, our dependent variable. We focus on a subset of controversies that relate to conflicts about left-right political issues (e.g., questions of business regulation, environmental and consumer protection),

since the left-right dimension is the dominant dimension of electoral competition in national elections throughout Europe (e.g., van der Brug et al., 2008).

To identify left-right issues from the DEU data, we use the coding scheme developed in Wratil (2018) and extend it to DEU III. Wherever necessary we rescaled the DEU scales with a predefined range of 0–100 so as to ensure that the most 'right' option advocated by any government in the estimation sample is represented by '100' and the most 'left' option by '0'.[6] In total, 192 of the 364 DEU issues are included in our analysis, as they deal with left-right issues and represented genuine intergovernmental conflicts.[7]

We also use a standard measure of *Public opinion* based on the left-right self-placement item from the Eurobarometer series. This item asks respondents to identify their own ideological position on a scale ranging from 1 (left) to 10 (right). Scholars have demonstrated that these self-placements are systematically related to attitudes on economic, cultural, and materialist versus post-materialist conflicts (see Online Appendix C.1). Therefore, these placements are a substantive measure of the public's left-right preferences. Specifically, we operationalise left-right opinion as the mean left-right self-placement in a member state (using poststratification weights). To fill periods between surveys, we linearly interpolate our estimates between the six-monthly Eurobarometer surveys. We use a six-month lag of opinion to reflect the causal ordering, in which governments first observe opinion and subsequently react to it.[8]

Expected duration of a government

The measurement of *Expected duration* of a government follows broadly the procedure employed by Fortunato and Loftis (2018). These scholars use Chiba, Martin, & Stevenson's (2015) model of government duration to estimate the number of days a given cabinet expects to remain in office. In replicating this procedure, we are confronted with three challenges: the creation of a dataset for the government survival model, the choice of government survival model, and the measurement of duration of caretaker governments. In Online Appendix C.2, we explain in detail how we have addressed these issues. In a nutshell, we have estimated Chiba et al.'s (2015) Weibull model of government duration employing a dataset of 350 governments formed across most European parliamentary democracies from the early 1990s to the late 2010s. We have then employed a nonparametric bootstrap to produce 1,000 survival times for each cabinet and derived mean estimates of duration from these distributions (for details see Fortunato & Loftis, 2018, p. 945).

Our measure of *Expected duration* is the remaining number of days for a cabinet from the day the Commission has tabled the proposal to when the government is expected to fall due to parliamentary dissolution. The measure turns negative if cabinets exceed their expected duration, while it

is trimmed back to the constitutionally mandated deadline for legislative elections if it exceeds such maximum duration. The last issue concerns the duration of caretaker governments, which are omitted from the survival model. The duration of these executives is plausibly short, but we cannot expect them to be more responsive to public opinion. We therefore set their expected duration to the number of days until the expiration of the constitutional inter-election period.

Plurality loss probability

We build on the work of Kayser and Lindstädt (2015) to generate a cross-nationally valid measure of electoral competitiveness. Specifically, we build on the core idea of their loss probability measure of electoral competitiveness – that the retention of plurality seat share status is the primary objective of all plurality parties, regardless of the party system and electoral system – but calculate *PLPR* in a simplified way. Rather than estimating the probability of a swing in vote share that, after conversion into seat shares, would be sufficiently large to cost the largest party in parliament its seat plurality, we simply calculate the probability of a sufficiently large seat share swing directly, using seat share data. Thus, differing patterns of party competition, seats-votes elasticities and institutional features are already 'baked into' the seat share data.[9]

Employing party and seat data from Döring and Manow (2019), we calculate PLPR in the following steps. For the top two parties in seat shares in parliament following each legislative election, we calculate the 'swing' in seat share with respect to the previous election. The key conceit is that the plurality party, which is usually the prime minister's party, will be most concerned about being displaced by the second largest party. The runner-up party's seat share swing, however, is not sufficient on its own to gauge the risk of a change in rank because the plurality party's seat share also changes between elections. Thus, we account for this by calculating a 'net seat share swing':

$$n = (b_t - b_{t-1}) - (a_t - a_{t-1}) \tag{1}$$

where n is the net seat share swing, b denotes the runner-up party, a the plurality seats party and t the election. Thus, for example, if a runner-up party were to see its seat share increase by seven points but the plurality party's seat share increased by three points, the net swing for the runner-up party would only be four points.

It is, of course, possible that parties ranked third or lower can also displace plurality parties, but this is rare and probably not as expected by the plurality party. Of greater concern – if not in the expectations of plurality parties, then simply empirically – is the rise of new parties that rank among the top two in their first parliamentary election. Although this is also relatively rare in Western Europe – but consider France's *La République En Marche!* in 2017

or Italy's *Movimento 5 Stelle* in 2013 – it is more frequent in the new democracies of Eastern Europe. A new plurality party emerged in the Latvian parliament in each of its first eight elections starting in 1990. Many new parties, however, stem from continuing political movements or groupings under a new name. We do not engage in this complexity and simply omit seat swings in which new parties rank in the top two from our seat swing distributions because it is impossible to calculate a seat share swing when we do not have a previous seat share. We do have a seat share gap, however, so are able to retain the election and calculate its PLPR, as explained below. What matters for plurality party behaviour, we argue, is how much electoral pressure politicians *think* they are under, and for this it is most likely that they focus on their nearest competitor. An implication of this simplification is that we omit several other sources of risk that could cost a party its plurality status (e.g., new parties, lower ranked parties).

After calculating net seat share swings for all elections in EU member states since 1990, we then calculate a critical z-score of the minimum necessary net seat share swing needed to cost the plurality party its rank as the largest party in parliament,

$$z'_{i,t} = \frac{n_{i,t} - \overline{n_i}}{\sigma_i} \tag{2}$$

where n, again, is the net seat share swing and i and t index EU member states and parliamentary elections, respectively, and σ_i is the standard deviation of n_t in a given i. Because the small number of elections limits the asymptotic properties of our net seat swing distributions, we include all elections from 1990 to the end of 2018 in each country without new parties in the top two in our net swing distributions and account for small sample sizes by using t-distributions. Thus, we calculate PLPR as

$$PLPR = \int_{z'}^{\infty} h(z)dz \tag{3}$$

where h() is a t distribution function and the degrees of freedom is one less than the number of elections since 1990 in our elections data for the given country. PLPR can be understood as the probability, given the seats share volatility in a given country over time, of a sufficiently large net seat share swing occurring in which the runner-up party would become the largest party. It is important to emphasise that PLPR only captures one particular threat to plurality parties – that of being displaced by the second largest party. Other threats, such as being displaced by an even smaller or even a newly formed party, matter as well, but we make the assumption that politicians focus most on their nearest rival. We validate our PLPR measure in detail in Online Appendix D.

Control variables

A systematic relationship between public opinion and governments' actions may emerge, not because the government is tracking public opinion, but because voters have chosen the government on the basis of preferences that may not have changed (much). This alternative mechanism sees politicians and parties as principled, largely sanction-insensitive agents that act according to their programmatic convictions, rather than engaging in rational anticipation. We deal with this observational equivalence by including a measure of government parties' left-right position at the time of the last national election from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) (Volkens et al., 2019). Specifically, we operationalise the seat-weighted mean position of the cabinet parties on the CMP's summative RILE (right-left) measure.

We also control for unemployment and inflation rates (taken from Eurostat). This ensures that our estimates on public opinion represent more than fluctuations in the economy that have the potential to move opinion (e.g., Stevenson, 2001). Relatedly, we control for a redistribution cleavage in the Council with a measure of countries' annual net receipts from the EU budget (% of GDP) (e.g., Bailer et al., 2015). Last, we capture the idea that member states may try to 'upload' their domestic policies to the European level (e.g., Börzel, 2002) with a measure of domestic economic freedom from the Fraser Institute's Economic Freedom of the World dataset (Gwartney et al., 2019). In general, our model specifications closely follow those used for the DEU data in Wratil (2018).

All data sources are linked on the date the Commission submitted the relevant proposal to the Council, or where this date was unavailable, the date the Commission published the proposal (usually a few days earlier). As our argument about PLPR presupposes that the plurality party is actually part of the government, we exclude all observations from our data, in which the plurality party is in opposition (6.7% of observations).[10]

Results

Our linear regression models employ the DEU positions as dependent variable, and public opinion, expected duration, and PLPR as the main independent variables. We use fixed effects for the DEU issues, which controls for policy-issue specific factors such as the Commission's or the European Parliament's positions on a proposal or the *status quo ante*. We also cluster standard errors at the country level. To test H1, we include an interaction term between the expected duration and public opinion. To test H2, we include a three-way interaction between PLPR, the quadratic term of PLPR, and public opinion, as we expect a concave, curvilinear relationship. The main results are reported in Table 1 and

alternative specifications to ascertain robustness and the direction of causality are in Online Appendices F and G.

Model 1 tests both of our hypotheses. The results provide no evidence for H1 that responsiveness of governments to public opinion increases when governments expect parliamentary dissolution and fresh elections to occur soon. The coefficient on the interaction term between the expected duration and public opinion is negative, as expected, but not significant at any conventional level ($p = 0.28$). This suggests that governments do not systematically engage in predicting parliamentary dissolution before the end of the constitutional inter-election period.[11] This finding is nevertheless important when contrasted with the result in Wratil (2018) that government responsiveness increases as the next scheduled election approaches.

We extended this latter measure to the time frame of DEU III and run Model 2 in Table 1 with an interaction between public opinion and the

Table 1. Governments' Responsiveness to their Publics' Left-Right Positions.

	Model 1	Model 2
Expected duration	3.985	
	(3.558)	
Public opinion	−3.229	0.579
	(7.255)	(6.267)
Expected duration x Public opinion	−0.727	
	(0.664)	
PLPR	−720.552	−716.730
	(373.168)	(350.548)
PLPR x PLPR	1566.793	1581.391
	(786.198)	(746.439)*
PLPR x Public opinion	146.956	146.465
	(71.751)	(67.480)*
PLPR x PLPR x Public opinion	−319.783	−322.941
	(152.547)*	(144.955)*
Government parties' position	0.226	0.241
	(0.084)*	(0.081)**
Unemployment rate	0.056	0.012
	(0.245)	(0.249)
Inflation rate	−0.445	−0.469
	(0.814)	(0.818)
Net receipts from EU budget	2.367	2.426
	(0.961)*	(0.958)*
Economic freedom	1.790	1.651
	(1.979)	(1.936)
Days to election		6.254
		(2.655)*
Days to election x Public opinion		−1.145
		(0.498)*
Constant	50.308	30.921
	(44.533)	(39.290)
FEs for issues	Yes	Yes
N	3,225	3,225

Notes: Linear regression models; Country-clustered robust standard errors in parentheses; Plurality loss probability (PLPR); $*p < 0.05$; $**p < 0.01$.

days to the next scheduled election (in 100 day units) to test whether this finding also holds using the extended DEU dataset. As expected, the results reveal a statistically significant negative interaction term. This suggests either that governments generally rely on the next scheduled election as a simple heuristic and do not engage in anticipating early elections, or alternatively, that their anticipation model is significantly different from the expected duration models developed in the discipline.

On the other hand, governments' behaviour appears to be shaped more systematically by electoral competitiveness on the party system dimension. Recall from H2 that responsiveness is expected to have a concave relationship with PLPR: the three-way interaction term between the squared term of PLPR and public opinion is negative and statistically significant in both models ($p < 0.05$), indicating a curvilinear, concave relationship.[12] The exact shape of this effect is hard to infer from Table 1. Hence, we plot the marginal effect of public opinion depending on different levels of PLPR in Figure 1 using the results from Model 2.

This provides clear support for concavity. When plurality parties face some medium risk of losing their position to the second largest party (e.g., between 0.12 and 0.29), governments engage most strongly in representing the public's left-right preferences at the EU level. In contrast, when PLPR is comparatively low or high, i.e., when plurality parties are relatively likely or unlikely to lose their status, governments are less systematic in their representation of public opinion. That the maximum marginal effect occurs at a seemingly low value of PLPR (0.23) is also consistent with expectations, given that we are measuring only one specific risk – the expected probability of the largest party being displaced by the runner-up – but not others that also matter.[13] This is substantial evidence that the major government party considers the electoral competitiveness in the party system at home when legislating in the Council. Note in particular that the null effect of public opinion at low levels of loss probability (e.g., *PLPR* ≤ 0.10) is not due to any lack of statistical power, as the histogram highlights a substantial part of the distribution being situated at these levels.

Recall that our argument about the relevance of PLPR rests on the assumption of plurality parties having a significant influence over government position-taking at the EU level.[14] However, such influence is likely to be a function of the relative size of the plurality party vis-à-vis potential coalition partners as well as institutional arrangements. One key institution in national coordination systems is the existence and location of a *central coordinator*, who oversees the coordination between national ministries and potentially can resolve conflicts authoritatively. The relevant key distinction empirically is whether the central coordinator is the prime ministerial office (PMO) or the ministry of foreign affairs (MFA) (Jensen, 2014). As cabinet plurality parties in almost all cases hold the PMO,[15] whereas the MFA usually goes
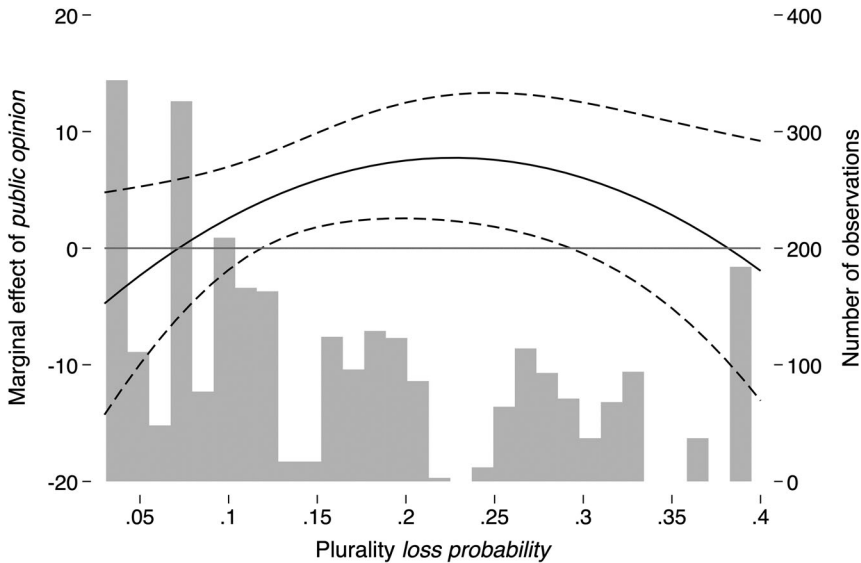
Figure 1. Effect of plurality loss probability on responsiveness.

Notes: Marginal effect estimates of public opinion on government positions at different levels of plurality loss probability; 95% confidence intervals as dashed lines; Histogram of observations as shaded areas.

to a coalition partner, the plurality party's power under coalition governments should depend strongly on the location of the central coordinator.

Based on these considerations we build a dummy variable to indicate scenarios in which we would expect the plurality party to be powerful in shaping EU-level policies. This variable is '0' if the plurality party is not the prime ministerial (PM) party, and '1' if the plurality party is dominant in government. A dominant plurality party holds the PMO *and* either at least 80% of governmental seats or can draw on institutions of central coordination of EU policy-making in the PMO. In turn, when the plurality party holds neither 80% of governmental seats nor coordinates EU policy, the dummy is also '0', indicating low influence of the plurality party over coordination. To identify the EU countries in which the central coordinator is the PMO, we rely on assessments by Jensen (2014), who conducted a survey with government officials across the EU. Importantly, he also provides assessments of the authority of the coordinator vis-à-vis ministries. According to his classification, the PMO is leading and authoritative in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Malta, and the United Kingdom.

To test whether PLPR matters more in situations where the plurality party is expected to be powerful in formulating EU-level policies, we estimate a model with an interaction between our dummy variable, the squared term of PLPR and public opinion that also includes all control variables. The results of the higher-order interaction model are reported in Online
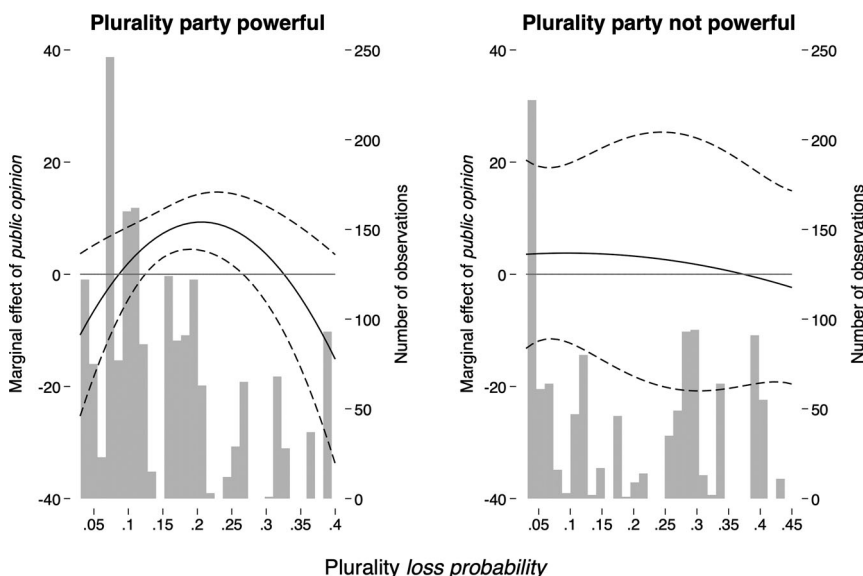
Figure 2. Effect of plurality loss probability on responsiveness by power of the plurality party. *Notes*: Marginal effect estimates of public opinion on government positions at different levels of plurality loss probability; 95% confidence intervals as dashed lines; Histogram of observations as shaded areas.

Appendix E. They reveal that the interaction is significant in the expected direction. In Figure 2 we plot the relationship between PLPR and the marginal effect of public opinion depending on whether the plurality party is powerful. This very clearly demonstrates that our results are largely driven by powerful plurality parties. They are able to adjust national policy positions advocated in the Council to public opinion and do so when they face a medium risk of losing their privileged position in the next election. In turn, when the plurality party is not the PM party or a PM party that lacks the ability to circumscribe the influence of coalition partners through central coordination by the PMO or dominance in size, the relationship between public opinion and governments' positions becomes insignificant and unrelated to PLPR.

Conclusion

Several current studies have reported a relationship between public opinion and governments' behaviour in the Council of the EU. But there remain doubts about the mechanisms that align governments' positions to public preferences. In this article, we have argued that governments engage in rational anticipation of future elections and systematically adapt their

behaviour to ensure the attainment of electoral aims by pandering to the public. First, we posited that all government parties should try to anticipate early elections and increase their efforts of responding to the public once elections become imminent. Second, specifically for the plurality party, we argued that it has a clear electoral aim of retaining this privileged position in the next election and will calculate the risk of losing it, adjusting its responsiveness efforts accordingly. Our results reveal no evidence that governments rationally anticipate the timing of early elections, but only orient their behaviour towards the constitutional inter-election period. Despite its not infrequent occurrence, early dissolution may be a risk that is too small to elicit an executive reaction, at least as far as EU position-taking is concerned. Fortunato and Loftis (2018)'s finding that governments incorporate the risk of early elections when choosing budget sizes does not seem to extend to their responsiveness efforts at the EU level. On the other hand, our results strongly suggest that plurality parties adjust the responsiveness of national ministers in the Council to public opinion where they have the power to do so and where it is rational given the risk of losing their privileged position in the party system in the next election.

In light of the increasing politicisation of EU politics, these results show how Council politics is no longer detached from politics at the domestic level but shaped by conflicts and competitiveness of national party systems. These results also contribute to the wider literature on politicians' responsiveness to public opinion, which rarely investigates the exact mechanisms that drive the relationship between public opinion and politicians' behaviour. From the perspective of (normative) democratic representation theory, it makes an important difference whether representatives are sensitive to electoral sanctions and actively seek to anticipate voters' demands to retain votes, or whether they are principled individuals that only follow their own convictions, irrespective of electoral sanctions – but by coincidence their preferences match those of their voters (e.g., Mansbridge, 2003). These are different modes of representation that imply different relations between and images of citizens and politicians. Our results highlight the sanction-sensitivity of plurality parties in government. They actively engage in representation when electoral sanctions loom but also shirk when they feel safe or hopeless.

Our study also develops, validates and makes available a novel measure of electoral competitiveness and demonstrates its empirical usefulness across a large set of democracies. The amount of cross-national empirical research on the effects of electoral competitiveness that does not resort to rough typologies, institutional proxies, correlated but conceptually distinct constructs such as democracy, or simple vote or seat margins is minuscule. The complexity of extant measures (cf., Kayser & Lindstädt, 2015) and their neglect of the role of postelection coalition bargaining in policy formation (Kayser et al., forthcoming) have limited their utility and adoption. Nevertheless, for

outcomes for which the plurality party is responsible or over which it is unlikely to compromise, measures such as PLPR should be strongly predictive. By providing a greatly simplified measure of plurality loss probabilities and demonstrating its utility, we hope to have set the cornerstones for future work employing such measures in various contexts.

Notes

1. Smaller vote losses translate into larger seat losses in comparison to proportional electoral systems, and hence governments should respond more strongly to the public to prevent electoral defeat.
2. Martin (2004) shows that governments prioritise highly salient bills at the beginning of the legislative term and they drop them from the agenda in the last year of a parliamentary term. Moreover, government submission of salient bills falls earlier on in the legislative term in countries that experience more snap elections. Fortunato and Loftis (2018) show that public spending and deficit decrease with the *expected* duration of a cabinet, i.e., governments take a more expansionary fiscal stance as their expectations of parliamentary dissolution increase.
3. We are only concerned about duration with regard to the risk of parliamentary dissolution. Cabinets can be replaced by other means, but we do not expect governments to heighten their responsiveness in preparation for such different modalities of replacement.
4. Note that many left-right issues at the EU level may not be inherently salient but risk being politicised by domestic competitors, media, or interest groups given their connection to the major dimension of party competition (Wratil, 2018).
5. Some plurality parties may not be part of the government (e.g. the 2006-2014 cabinets led by Reinfeldt in Sweden excluded the Swedish Social Democratic Party). Even if the plurality party is part of the government, its influence will vary depending on the type of government and the institutional setup. If plurality parties lead a single-party government or dominate a coalition, their power should be comprehensive in determining the country's EU-level policies (even if some minority cabinets may have to pander to the opposition). In turn, if plurality parties are part of a broad coalition government, their power in EU policymaking likely depends on institutions concerning the national coordination of EU policies (e.g. Kassim et al., 2000; Jensen, 2014; Franchino & Wratil, 2019). We will account for these considerations in the empirics below.
6. In line with previous practice, we exclude policy issues on which less than 1/3 of governments took a position. Note that rescaling removes issues on which all national governments in the sample agreed.
7. We do not focus on issue salience here, since its role for responsiveness in the EU has already been addressed elsewhere (Hobolt & Wratil, 2020; Wratil, 2019).
8. This is in line with previous work (Wratil, 2018; Hagemann et al., 2017) to ensure comparability. It also accounts for findings suggesting that EU policy output reacts to public opinion within one year (Toshkov, 2011), capturing that decision-makers should react faster (see Online Appendix F for a sensitivity analysis).
9. Although this strategy results in a smaller number of observations and a loss of district and electoral system context, it allows us to rapidly calculate approximate PLPRs.

10. Note that we face some missing values. Malta is excluded from all analyses, as its recent elections are not covered in the CMP. Moreover, we lack some data on economic variables, in particular, as the EU budget data for 2017 and 2018 is not available.
11. We do not find evidence for alternative implications for responsiveness that are based on strategic election timing (see Online Appendix F).
12. We do not find evidence of an interaction between the time and the party system dimensions (see Online Appendix F).
13. The *actual* probability of displacement is likely considerably higher since a plurality party facing a 0.23 probability of being displaced by the second largest party is simultaneously also facing a probability of being displaced by the third, fourth, etc. largest as well as by newly formed parties (see Online Appendix D).
14. This assumption is not relevant for H1 since *all* government parties face increased electoral risks from impending elections.
15. But think of exceptions like Charles Michel's cabinets in Belgium between 2014 and 2018.

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Notes on contributors

Fabio Franchino is Professor of Political Science at the University of Milan.

Mark A. Kayser is Professor of Applied Methods and Comparative Politics at the Hertie School, Berlin.

Christopher Wratil is Assistant Professor in Government at the University of Vienna, Department of Government, Rooseveltplatz 3/1, 1090 Vienna, Austria, christopher.wratil@univie.ac.at.

ORCID

Fabio Franchino 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8774-6494
Mark A. Kayser 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6195-405X
Christopher Wratil 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7339-9628

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