Does Electoral Competition Affect
Government Responsiveness?
An Empirical Analysis in Advanced Democracies

Luca Bernardi
Department of Politics and International Relations
University of Leicester
lb276@le.ac.uk

Abstract. Does electoral competition matter for responsiveness of governments to citizens’ preferences? Although substantive part of contemporary democratic theory underlines that competition is good for democracy, it is very disputed whether competition has an impact on responsiveness on the empirical ground. Empirical analyses linking dynamic representation and political institutions are still rare and only a few studies introduce the institutional component to dynamic models. Similarly, if the studies on dyadic and collective representation are included, it is shown that competition is mostly conceived as competitiveness. Yet electoral competitiveness is not the unique element of electoral competition that might affect responsiveness. This paper builds on the theoretical framework on electoral competition developed by Bartolini (1999, 2000). This framework represents the state of the art in the study of the concept of competition in politics and breaks it up into four components: (1) electoral contestability, (2) electoral availability, (3) decidability of the offer, and (4) incumbent vulnerability. Nevertheless, it still remains a theoretical framework hence the aim of the paper is twofold. On the one hand, the paper provides an empirical application of this framework; on the other hand, its interest is in testing whether these components have an impact on government responsiveness, where responsiveness is defined as the correspondence between citizens’ preferences and government activity.

Paper prepared for the ECPR General Conference, Bordeaux 4-7 September 2013

Please do not cite without permission of the author.
Comments more than welcome.
Introduction

Does electoral competition matter for the responsiveness of governments to citizens’ preferences? This is the research question at the basis of this paper and it is clearly an empirical question. However, the starting point is a normative one linking democratic procedures to democratic substance. It actually stems on the normative statement that competition is good for democracy or that the former might have beneficial effects for the latter. This unintended responsive effect of competition is achieved by introducing Friedrich’s (1963) ‘mechanism of anticipated reactions’. Only if politicians are worried about the reactions of voters will they be ‘constantly piloted by the anticipation of those reactions’ (Sartori, 1977, p. 350). A theory of democracy based on the representative’s anticipation of reward and punishment ‘orients government responsiveness toward fundamental needs and values of the people rather than toward ephemeral or weakly held policy preferences’ (Page 1978, 221-2). Yet this mechanism of democracy is an indirect mechanism since ‘there is no sense in which the people’s will is translated directly into law’ (Miller, 1983, p. 134). Therefore, politicians are ‘obliged to respond to the electorate’s preferences by anticipation’ (Miller 1983, p. 134), and this is the key for understanding why competition is relevant. If politicians want to improve their chance of reelection, they are led to sympathetically respond to their potential voters’ demands. This proposition is considered by part of the contemporary democratic theory (Dahl 1956, 1971; Downs 1957; Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 1999; Pitkin 1967; Powell 2000; Sartori 1987). Yet, though at a theoretical level there is an agreement that competition is important for responsiveness, it is very disputed whether competition has an impact on responsiveness on empirical grounds. We know that, in reality, politics is not only led according to competitive behaviours of the political elites, but also, and perhaps especially, by collusive behaviours among these elites. More than that, the latter seem to be much more common than the former, at the expense of the responsiveness to citizens’ preferences. Therefore, this is the first reason why it is worth to assess empirically this relationship.

A second motivation lies in the fact that empirical studies linking responsiveness and electoral competition are still rare. This paper conceives responsiveness as a relationship between public opinion and the government. Thus responsiveness occurs when the correspondence between what the citizens want and what the government does appears. Although it is far from being a one-way relationship, this research assumes that opinion may influence government action. Responsiveness has been widely studied within the US politics (for an overview see Manza and

---

1 Some scholars look at responsiveness as a result dimension of the quality of democracy (Diamond and Morlino 2004; Lijphart 1999; Morlino, Piana, and Raniolo 2013; Morlino 2011; Powell 2004; Roberts 2010); in this literature satisfaction with the way democracy works, confidence in (public) institutions and government popularity become proxy of responsiveness. However, such proxies have serious limitations, as they are not as much indicators of responsiveness but rather consequences of it and, moreover, they seem to be more related to the output side of the democratic process and to accountability.
Cook 2002). However, case studies or comparative analysis outside the American context are still rare; such works have been conducted in Canada, Britain, Denmark, and Spain. These examples take into account budgetary priorities (Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008), government expenditures (Bartle, Dellepiane-Avellaneda, and Stimson 2010; Soroka and Wlezien 2005, 2010), speeches coding on a single ideological dimension (Hakhverdian 2009, 2010, 2012), legislative priorities (Penner, Blidook, and Soroka 2006), legislative effectiveness (Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011; Pickup and Hobolt 2011), and policy/bureaucratic outputs on a policy domain (Jennings 2009). Nevertheless, only few of them study the relationship between these two concepts, so the agenda is increasingly open and what is still lacking is a medium-large N comparison.

A third reason is based on the following question: what dimensions of competition really matter for responsiveness? On the one hand, very often competition is approached in terms of competitiveness, conceived as a quantity to be maximized; in other words, as ‘more’ or ‘less’ competition. The controversial significance of the so-called ‘marginality hypothesis’ (for the debate see Griffin 2006) – according to which Congress representatives would be more responsive in the marginal districts – provides a clear example, though related to dyadic representation. However, electoral competitiveness is not the only element that might affect responsiveness. On the other hand, when other components of competition are considered, they are faced in a fragmented way. Therefore, the end is not to study how parties compete or which is the best theory of party competition; the aim is rather to identify a framework of competition that takes account of the multidimensionality of this concept and selects its relevant dimensions for explaining responsiveness.

Building on the rare studies conceiving electoral competition in a multidimensional perspective (Bartolini 1999, 2000; Strøm 1989, 1992), I develop an empirical framework of competition for responsiveness. This framework defines responsiveness as the correspondence between citizens’ preferences and government outputs and aims to investigate whether responsiveness occurs behind some competitive incentives, in particular those ones produced by two core dimensions of competition, i.e. incumbent vulnerability and decidability of the political offer.

**Electoral Competition and Dynamic Representation**

Responsiveness in politics is a relationship-wise concept, i.e. it implies a connection between citizens and politicians. This connection has been fundamentally studied under three perspectives: as (1) dyadic representation, (2) collective representation, and (3) dynamic representation. In this section I will concentrate only on the third approach. Studies linking
dynamic representation and electoral competition (or, to put it broadly, institutional components) are extremely rare.

Stimson, Mackuen and Erikson’s (1995; see also Erikson, Mackuen, and Stimson, 2002) seminal work can be acknowledged as the first effort to introduce a dynamic feature in the study of representation and responsiveness. Public opinion moves meaningfully over time, government officials sense this movement, those officials alter their behaviour in response to the sensed movement (ibid.). Here policy responsiveness acts through two mechanisms: (1) elections change the government’s political composition, which is then reflected in new policy (electoral turnover) and (2) policymakers calculate future (mainly electoral) implications of current public views and act accordingly (rational anticipation). The advantage is that there are two avenues, one acts through parties (partisanship of government) while the other is a dynamic direct component. Public opinion influences election outcomes and both have an impact on public policy.

When political institutions are added to dynamic representation the picture becomes extremely complex. Only a few studies introduce the institutional component to dynamic models. In their comparative study on Denmark, the UK and the US, Hobolt and Klemmensen (2008) are interested in those factors that might have an impact on government responsiveness. The authors classify responsiveness as rhetorical, when analysing speeches, and effective, when dealing with government expenditures. Citizens’ preferences are captured using the so-called ‘most important problem’ (MIP) question. Assuming that issue salience is a key component of political competition, Hobolt and Klemmensen select two main institutional factors.

On the one hand, they use a different conceptualisation of competition where electoral contestability is defined as the uncertainty facing the executive in electoral contexts. This way of approaching competition is somehow problematic as it brings to a kind of conceptual stretching, for contestability and incumbent uncertainty mean two distinct things. The former is the potential or opportunity to take part in competitive interactions; the latter is more related to the electoral vulnerability perceived by the incumbent. The mistake is that a concept is defined by using another concept, which means something else.

On the other hand, executive discretion refers to the constraints faced by the executive in the legislative process. Institutional features such as direct election of the executive, whether the electoral system is plurality or proportional, whether separation of powers occurs, and whether a conflict of interest between the executive and the legislature is present are tested in their hypotheses. However, the most interesting hypothesis is the one regarding the electoral uncertainty: the greater the uncertainty about future electoral contests, the higher the responsiveness of the executive (Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008, p. 314).

More recently, Wlezien and Soroka (2012) introduced the institutional component in the connection between their thermostatic model and three kinds of institutions: (1) the
parliamentary/presidential dimension, (2) the central/federal dimension, and (3) the proportional/majoritarian dimension of the electoral system. According to this approach, a responsive public behaves much like a thermostat (Wlezien 1995), that is, the public adjusts its preferences for ‘more’ or ‘less’ policy in response to what policymakers do. When policy increases (decreases), the preference for more policy decreases (increases) (Franklin and Wlezien, 1997; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010; Wlezien, 2004). Here, ‘the opinion-policy relationship suggests not just that policymakers respond to the public, but that the public adjusts its preferences over time in reaction to policy change’ (Soroka and Wlezien, 2004). Although they find a moderating effect of institutions, however, in line with Golder and Stramski (2010), they seem to agree that we do not actually know today which is the best electoral system for representation/responsiveness and this constitutes a real challenge for future research. However, beyond the dichotomous competition between plurality/proportional electoral systems, on one side, and majoritarian/proportional vision of democracy, on the other, only a few studies are focused on the relationship between electoral competition and government responsiveness and this is exactly the gap this study is interested in.

A Framework for Responsiveness

This paper essentially builds on the contributions of Strøm (1989, 1992) and Bartolini (1999, 2000) to develop an empirical framework of competition for responsiveness. Table 1 shows the four dimensions of competition pinpointed by Bartolini and how and if they are linked to responsiveness. As we can see, only some dimensions are conditions for responsiveness.

Table 1. Dimensions of electoral competition and status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contestability</td>
<td>Necessary condition for Pluralism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability</td>
<td>Necessary condition for Decidability and Vulnerability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decidability</td>
<td>Necessary condition for Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td>Necessary condition for Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Bartolini (2000, 56).
Contestability, for instance, is not a condition for responsiveness. The link between the two might be given by the fact that any actual barrier is an incentive to collusion among the incumbents, therefore, an opportunity for reducing responsiveness. In general, 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. However, low barriers may allow excessive fragmentation of the political offer and the party system and possibly lead to political chaos. More than that, an increase in representation does not necessarily mean an increase in responsiveness too. Certainly, the barriers created by the electoral system seem to be the most relevant in relation to responsiveness. This finds confirmation through the huge amount of studies on how electoral institutions influence electoral outcomes. However, scholars disagree whether proportional or majoritarian systems provide a stronger link between public preferences and public policy in elections (see as latest Powell 2013). For this reason, aspects such as the vote-seat disproportionality will be included as controls in the analysis.

Electoral availability as well as electoral contestability seems not to influence responsiveness directly. However, it is a necessary but not sufficient condition of both decidability and vulnerability. In respect to the former, the availability-decidability interaction is given by the fact that available voters are motivated by the differentiation of the political offer (and the consequent perception of different potential outcomes). Electoral volatility will be used as a control variable for electoral availability.

Now, what matters to me are the incentives provided by facing future elections. Thus, electoral competition is not relevant per se for producing responsiveness, but what is crucial is the worry behind losing elections. Therefore, the attention has to be focused on those competitive incentives that might matter to increasing the likelihood of responsiveness. These competitive incentives, which are then conditions for responsiveness, can be captured by two concepts: incumbent vulnerability and decidability of the political offer. The former is defined as the electoral uncertainty governments are subject to in between elections. The latter means how clear, visible and differentiated the political offer is; the clearer, more visible and more differentiated the political offer, the more decidable it is for voters. If incumbent vulnerability is crucial for responsiveness, decidability of the political offer acts as a signalling factor facilitating the process of responsiveness.

---

2 Of course, reelection is not the unique goal of politicians, as Strøm (1990), for instance, recalls. Nonetheless, politicians could not achieve other goals unless they are able to remain in office. This is particularly true for legislators (Mayhew 1974; Sulkin 2005), but the same logic can be easily applied to the incumbent government as well.
Figure 1. An empirical framework of electoral competition for responsiveness

Figure 1 simplifies these expectations in a more understandable way. Responsiveness is given by the relationship between citizens’ preferences and government output. I assume that such a relationship can be influenced by the incentives generated by electoral competition, hence the interaction between vulnerability and decidability with public preferences. Although the relationship of responsiveness might imply a twofold direction, in this work the attention is drawn on the influence of citizens’ preferences on government activity through the competitive incentives.

The issue with decidability is to disentangle what kind of electoral offer really means. If we conceive the electoral offer as the number of parties competing at the elections or the number of parties present in parliament we end up considering a kind of fragmentation of the political offer, which is a way of addressing the question. However, we would not be able to see whether the offer is differentiated or not and we would end up reasoning in terms of electoral contestability rather than electoral decidability. Hence, the question would be not ‘how many parties’ but ‘what do parties offer’. Nevertheless, in the analysis I will also control for a measure of bipartitism.

Decidability matters to the extent it behaves as condition facilitating responsiveness, that is, performing the function of making intelligible to the incumbents the reactions of voters. If the political offer is not decidable, i.e. it is not clear and distinguishable, and parties competing can confuse their policy positions, then voters will not be able to choose among the offers rationally in line with their preferences. Greater awareness of the positions of parties will reduce uncertainty about the consequences of electing a party rather than another (Downs 1957). Alternatively, phenomena of ideological identification or elements of sympathy and personal competence, or other ad hoc factors can occur. In such cases, the choice of voters will not be the result of the political offer or, at least, not only of that. The key here is that if the choice of voters is successfully deviated from the policy choice, then for parties becomes no longer strictly necessary to respond sympathetically to their voters’ preferences. In this case, it is really
hard to identify responsiveness following from clear policy alternatives which voters decided upon. In other words, if parties collude successfully deviating the attention upon other issues, the choice of voters cannot be interpreted as response to the political offer and, consequently, parties evade from responding to something precise. In conclusion, if the political offer is clear and differentiated parties can rationally interpret how voters respond to it; conversely, if the political offer is less clear and differentiated parties are free to interpret a signal that will inevitably be less clear and differentiated.

The main hypothesis involving decidability will have the following form:

*Decidability Hypothesis.* The more differentiated the electoral offer, the higher the likelihood of government responsiveness to the citizens’ preferences.

Incumbent vulnerability is at the core of the connection between responsiveness and competition and a hypothesis concerning this property of competition is usually the most frequent in such studies (Hakhverdian, 2010; Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008). If the mechanism of democracy stems from the potential electoral sanctions or, in other words, on the will of being reelected, if the incumbent aims to achieve this goal he will need to anticipate sympathetically voters’ preferences. This mechanism will perform better if the incumbent perceives himself vulnerable. An actual measure of vulnerability would adopt an indicator of electoral uncertainty in terms of closeness of electoral result. Therefore, a vulnerability hypothesis will be:

*Vulnerability Hypothesis.* The more uncertain the electoral result, the more likely the government will be responsive to its citizens’ preferences.

**Data and Method**

The hypotheses presented in the previous section will be tested in six advanced democracies: Canada (1988-2004), Germany (1987-2009), Spain (1986-2009), Sweden (1988-2009), the United Kingdom (1988-2009), and the United States (1980-2004). Case selection is due to mainly two reasons. On one side, these countries vary in the type of electoral system. Although there is a kind of disagreement, Germany is considered by most scholars a mixed-member system (see the volume edited by Shugart and Wattenberg, 2001, but also Chiaramonte, 2005 and Massicotte and Blais, 1999). Canada, the UK and the US are a majoritarian electoral system while Spain and Sweden are both proportional, but they differ in the electoral formula. Including the US in the sample can be an unacceptable solution for many comparativists due to the fact that it is not a parliamentary democracy and is often seen as an exceptional case.
However, this paper looks at government responsiveness and the US has already been included in these studies (see Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008 and Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). On the other side, dynamic representation requires several points in time under which analysing responsiveness, defined as the correspondence between citizens’ preferences and government activity. To capture the former I use the ‘most important problem/issue’ survey question (MIP/MII). Unfortunately, if for the US long time-series are not difficult to collect, for the European countries the problem exists, and it is evident when dealing with electoral competition. Eurobarometer data are available for all European countries, however they are provided from 2003 only. For this reason, I rely on national polling institutes providing this question for the six countries in the sample. Canada, Germany, Sweden and the US provide only the first most important problem/issue spot by respondents, while the UK and Spain provide the two and three most important problems/issues combined, respectively. In this case we cannot disentangle the first from the second/third choice. To partly solve this issue, I turned the values of the MIP/MII in these two countries into percentage values so that at the end the sum of the MIP/MII answers for every year becomes 100, as it is in the other countries in which only the first answer is reported separately. This correction will make the MIP/MII values more comparable across countries.

Besides their big advantage in terms of availability and comparability, the MIP and MII questions might be problematic for other reasons\(^3\). While comparing MIP and MII responses, it has to be clear that they mean the same for respondents. Jennings and Wlezien (2011, p. 548) find that MIP and MII series ‘capture many of the same things, both at particular points in time and over time’. What they cannot rule out is the connection between problem status and importance, however both may indicate public ‘attention’ (Jennings and Wlezien, 2011, pp. 554-555). In my case, for the sake of comparability the same policy domains must be chosen in advance for all the countries included in the analysis, at the expense of lower saliency of an issue in a country in comparison to other countries.

A more serious limitation of the MIP/MII question is the lack of directionality. Respondents are asked only to tell which is the most relevant issue for them. So, for instance, if one says that taxes are her most important problem, she is not given the opportunity to say whether she wants more taxes or less taxes, or if she prefers higher taxes for the rich or lower taxes for the poor. Unfortunately, this is a problem that will find no solution.

To measure government activity I look at the government expenditure by policy function. The effect of electoral competition on government spending is still ambiguous (Barrilleaux, Holbrook, and Langer, 2002; Boyne, 1998; Carmines, 1974), hence it might be interesting to test it. Data on government expenditure suffer from two main disadvantages. One is their flatness, as they do not register huge changes over time, though it still might be curious to see

\(^3\) For a larger discussion of the problems related to the MIP/MII question I refer to Wlezien (2005).
whether this change is due to a change in citizens’ preferences or to something else. The other drawback is that sometimes government expenditures only tell how much money the government spends for each policy category, but it is unclear how they are distributed and redistributed (moreover, they cover a limited type of policy, for they include basically distributive and redistributive policies). This is an insurmountable limit that these data have in common with the MIP/MII question.

Data on government expenditure are available from IMF and Eurostat for a quite reasonable period of time, however the datasets present a lot of missing values over time and across countries. Unfortunately, the two sources cannot be easily integrated one another, for variables are constructed differently. For this reason, I rely on the OECD social expenditure dataset providing expenditures in the social protection and welfare policy categories from 1980 onwards. Since some countries may spend more than others just because of their size, as a unit I use expenditures as a percentage of GDP (as also suggested by Garrett and Mitchell, 2001). This choice is also helpful while interpreting the coefficients especially because also MIP/MII data are in percentage values. To match expenditures with citizens’ preferences I consider the policy category social protection and welfare.

The competitive incentives are measured as follows. If we are interested in incumbent vulnerability on the basis of past records, then a measure of closeness of electoral result should take into account the existence of government coalitions in European countries. If the government is a single-party government, as usually happens in Canada, Spain, the UK and the US (in some cases in Spain there is a single-party minority government), the measure will be the difference in votes share between the party in government and the biggest party in opposition. When a coalition government occurs, the measure will compute the difference between the post-election incumbent government and the biggest party in opposition. On these bases, Sweden and Germany are trickier than the others.

The Swedish party system can be divided into two blocs: a socialist bloc, including Social Democrats and the Left Party, and a non-socialist or bourgeois bloc, containing the agrarian-based Centre Party, the Liberals and the conservative Moderates. The Greens in 1988 and the Christian Democrats in 1991 enter the system and join the two blocs later (Aylott and Bolin, 2007, p. 623). According to the Party Government Data Set (Woldendorp, Keman, and Budge 2011), considering our period of reference and only post-election governments, Sweden faces four Social Democrats minority governments, one multi-party minority government led by the Moderates, and one minimal winning coalition government led by the Moderates as well. So, if the government is a single-party minority government, the closeness between the party in government and its main challenger will be computed. In case of a coalition government, as occurs in Sweden in 2006, the closeness will be the difference between the parties in the

---

4 Social protection and welfare is the sum of the following categories: old age, survivors, incapacity related, family, active labour market programmes, unemployment, housing, and other social policy areas.
coalition government and the parties in the main opposing electoral coalition (in this case Alliance for Sweden and Red-Greens).

The gross coalition in Germany represents the major drawback while calculating a measure of closeness. If, on one side, it is true that CDU and SPD ideally embody the main right-wing and left-wing parties, on the other side, we are interested in the incumbent government. Therefore, if both are in the same government, they should be considered incumbent in the same way. However, one might also look at the strength relationships between the two. An alternative theoretical argument should be that both parties dislike gross coalition. First, one of them will most likely lose electoral support, for one is still perceived as the smaller and weaker part of the coalition. Second, even if one is the stronger part in the coalition, such a situation will force it to compromise more than in a minimal willing coalition. Therefore, even the stronger part looks towards a different coalition government after the next election. According to this argument, coalition partners still perceive each other as the strongest contenders and, for this reason, measuring the closeness between the two has sense.

What matters for electoral decidability is essentially the differentiation of the political offer across policy categories. As a measure of differentiation of the electoral offer I compute the standard deviation from the mean of all the party positions provided for each election using the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) data (Volkens et al. 2012) in social protection and welfare. The idea is the higher the standard deviation the more differentiated the electoral offer among parties (the data are shown in the appendix).

As I anticipated above, the presence of bipolarism or bipartitism can be seen as an indicator of clarity of the political offer. If most of the votes are channelled into the two major coalitions or parties, this can be understood as a distinctness of the party system. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that the electoral offer is differentiated among the two major coalitions or parties. Nevertheless, that is an aspect I will control for in the analysis. Other controls are represented by the disproportionality of electoral system using Gallagher’s (1991) least squares index (LSq) for capturing electoral contestability and the ‘total volatility’ developed by Bartolini and Mair (1990) as a measure of electoral availability. Finally, I control for the election year dummy, for government might be more responsive during the election year than elsewhere (e.g. see Persson and Tabellini, 2000), and for the unemployment rate as percentage of civilian labour force (OECD), since a change in the expenditure in social protection and welfare can be due to the level of unemployment. Variables are centred (or standardized) in order to be better comparable.

---

5 Following the CMP codebook, what I call ‘social protection and welfare’ corresponds to the subtraction of the statements of variable ‘welfare positive’ (per504) from the statements of variable ‘welfare negative’ (per505).

6 In the US, the index is computed also for mid-term elections. This applies as well to the total volatility index, the bipartitism index and the electoral closeness, but not for the differentiation of the electoral offer for which CMP data are used. For Germany the measures are computed on the basis of the first vote.
In order to model responsiveness I use an OLS model with first differences, since a change in the independent variable (citizens’ preferences) might have an impact on a change in the dependent variable (government expenditure) from one year to another. The dependent variable is public expenditure in social protection and welfare. The first necessary specification is to include in the model the lag of the dependent variable (Beck and Katz, 1996). Lagging dependent variables lies on two reasons, one methodological and one theoretical. The methodological reason is to deal with autocorrelation, for observation at time $t$ can depend on observation at time $t-1$. In other words, there is no time independence and this is a common issue with all time-series data. This is especially true for expenditure data considered as path dependent (Garrett and Mitchell, 2001). The other reason is theoretical and is related to causality. Lagging a variable is important to establish the time order. Following the same logic, also citizens’ preferences at time $t-1$ might have an influence on expenditures at time $t$. For this reason, as also Soroka and Wlezien (2005) suggest, I use the lag variable for the MIP/MII as the citizens side of the responsiveness relationship. To capture the effect of electoral competition on responsiveness I create an interaction term between the two directly related components of competition (the differentiation of the political offer and the closeness of electoral results) and the citizens’ preferences. Results are presented in the following section.

**Results**

Findings are reported in Table 2. The table presents four different model specifications and results are quite stable across the models. Citizens’ preferences seem to have a positive impact on government expenditure in social protection and welfare, though small. The most powerful factor in the model is the lag variable of expenditure, which is highly significant meaning that the biggest factor predicting today’s spending are decisions made in previous years (in this case, in the previous year). This is a really interesting point because it poses the question of whether government expenditures are a good predictor of responsiveness, challenging Soroka and Wlezien’s work in the following way. If we change the way of measuring citizens’ preferences, which is different from preferences in spending, expenditures are no longer a strong predicting factor of responsiveness. This has sense for they are strongly path dependent and, as the results show here, they are dependent on past expenditures.
Table 2. Electoral competition and responsiveness in social protection and welfare

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specification</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependent Variable</td>
<td>Changes in Public Expenditure on Social Protection and Welfare</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lagged Expenditure Social Protection</td>
<td>0.528***</td>
<td>0.529***</td>
<td>0.528***</td>
<td>0.515***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0999)</td>
<td>(0.101)</td>
<td>(0.101)</td>
<td>(0.106)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lagged MIP Social Protection</td>
<td>0.0513*</td>
<td>0.0515*</td>
<td>0.0502*</td>
<td>0.0523*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0230)</td>
<td>(0.0232)</td>
<td>(0.0234)</td>
<td>(0.0245)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation Political Offer</td>
<td>-0.0210</td>
<td>-0.0304</td>
<td>-0.0330</td>
<td>-0.0279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0392)</td>
<td>(0.0427)</td>
<td>(0.0430)</td>
<td>(0.0481)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIPxDifferentiation</td>
<td>-0.0156**</td>
<td>-0.0159**</td>
<td>-0.0156**</td>
<td>-0.0158**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00521)</td>
<td>(0.00530)</td>
<td>(0.00533)</td>
<td>(0.00563)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral Closeness</td>
<td>-0.0201*</td>
<td>-0.0250*</td>
<td>-0.0278*</td>
<td>-0.0262*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00905)</td>
<td>(0.0107)</td>
<td>(0.0116)</td>
<td>(0.0133)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIPxCloseness</td>
<td>-0.00198</td>
<td>-0.00211</td>
<td>-0.00197</td>
<td>-0.00190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00125)</td>
<td>(0.00127)</td>
<td>(0.00129)</td>
<td>(0.00133)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>0.00301</td>
<td>-0.0000616</td>
<td>0.000793</td>
<td>-0.0151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0168)</td>
<td>(0.0173)</td>
<td>(0.0174)</td>
<td>(0.0262)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election Year</td>
<td>-0.0207</td>
<td>-0.0146</td>
<td>0.00474</td>
<td>0.0205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.131)</td>
<td>(0.133)</td>
<td>(0.136)</td>
<td>(0.141)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disproportionality ES</td>
<td>0.000470</td>
<td>-0.000368</td>
<td>-0.0184</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0118)</td>
<td>(0.0119)</td>
<td>(0.0475)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Volatility</td>
<td>0.00814</td>
<td>0.00485</td>
<td>0.00492</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00951)</td>
<td>(0.0107)</td>
<td>(0.0124)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bipartitism (v)</td>
<td>-0.00457</td>
<td>0.00500</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00671)</td>
<td>(0.0205)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>-0.238</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.479)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>-0.0275</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.442)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>-0.161</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.575)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>0.00865</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.396)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>-0.512</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.659)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.0967</td>
<td>0.151</td>
<td>0.150</td>
<td>0.420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.221)</td>
<td>(0.239)</td>
<td>(0.240)</td>
<td>(0.459)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.356</td>
<td>0.360</td>
<td>0.363</td>
<td>0.372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-squared</td>
<td>0.305</td>
<td>0.296</td>
<td>0.292</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: OLS regression with first differences. Standard errors in parentheses. * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001.
The hypotheses in the paper are narrowed down to the dimensions of competition that matter most for responsiveness, that is, incumbent vulnerability and electoral decidability. What we were expecting was a positive impact of vulnerability on government responsiveness, meaning the more uncertain the electoral result, the more likely the government will be responsive to its citizens’ preferences. One of the main findings of the paper is actually that the interaction between vulnerability, in its actual dimension of electoral closeness, and the citizens’ preferences captured by the MIP/MII question has no impact at all on government expenditure. In other words, while electoral closeness has a negative and significant effect on expenditure in social protection, it seems not to matter for responsiveness.

The other hypothesis was referring to the decidability of the political offer: the more differentiated the offer, the more likely responsiveness will be achieved. What I find is rather the opposite, meaning that a clearer and more differentiated political offer is more likely to lead to lower responsiveness of governments in social protection and welfare. This result is shown in Figure 2, where the effect of the interaction between citizens’ preferences and decidability is reported.

![Figure 2](image.png)

Figure 2. Conditioning effect of the differentiation of the political offer on responsiveness

Note: The predicted values are calculated on the basis of Model 3.

Model 2 includes the disproportionality of electoral system and the total volatility while Model 3 adds a measure of bipartitism to see whether the electoral offer in terms of parties matters and
Model 4 controls for country fixed effects. Such controls are not significant and do not change the results for the main variables.

**Conclusions**

Does electoral competition matter for government responsiveness to citizens’ preferences? This was the starting question at the basis of this paper. The answer is it depends on how both concepts are measured. The paper looks at electoral competition in a multidimensional perspective and focuses the attention on the dimensions of competition that are more related to responsiveness. Responsiveness is defined as the correspondence between citizens’ preferences and government activity. While the former is captured by the ‘most important problem/issue’ question, the latter is measured as public expenditure on social protection and welfare – in six advanced democracies in the last 25 years: Canada, Germany, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and the US.

The analysis shows four main findings that can be summarised as follows. First, due to their path dependent component, government expenditures are not a great predictor of responsiveness. Rather, present expenditures are well explained by past expenditures. Second, and related to the previous point, citizens’ preferences have a small impact on government expenditures. However, as the level of responsiveness differs among policy categories, it might be the case that citizens’ preferences will have a better influence on other kinds of expenditures. Third, electoral competitiveness as closeness of electoral result does not matter at all for responsiveness and this is relevant for the debate around the so-called ‘marginality hypothesis’ (see Griffin, 2006). Nevertheless, I could not consider in this paper the potential aspect of incumbent vulnerability, which might be much more relevant than its actual component. Fourth, contrary to the expectations, the differentiation of the political offer has a negative effect on responsiveness on social protection and welfare.

What this paper tells is that citizens’ preferences alone seem not to have a strong impact on government expenditure, rather they matter when certain competitive incentives occur, i.e. the differentiation of the political offer. This contributes to the debate around responsiveness as dynamic representation and challenges the findings obtained by Soroka and Wlezien (2010).

For future research, interesting developments go in two directions. On one side, the relationship between electoral competition and government responsiveness requires long time-series, especially for citizen’s preferences, for two reasons. One is that the effect of competition may perform better with a reasonably high number of elections; the other reason lies in the dynamic component of responsiveness itself. Beyond the drawback of finding long time-series data, we also need variance across countries and hence the number of cases should be increased. On the
other side, measurement matters. Competition might have a stronger impact on responsiveness when its potential components are also taken into account and when responsiveness is measured looking at government activities other than public expenditures as some recent studies are starting to show (Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011; Hakhverdian 2009, 2010; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Penner, Blidook, and Soroka 2006).

References


Appendix Responsiveness Sources

‘Most Important Problem/Issue Question’

*Canada*
Environics Focus Canada (Canadian Opinion Research Archive)

*Germany*
Politbarometer (GESIS)

*Spain*
Barómetros de Opinion (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas)

*Sweden*
National-SOM (Swedish National Data Service)

*United Kingdom*
Long Term Trends: The Most Important Issue Facing Britain Today (Ipsos MORI)

*United States*
Gallup’s Most Important Problem (Policy Agendas Project)

‘Government Expenditure’

OECD Social Expenditure Database

Appendix Tables and Figures

*Descriptive statistics of responsiveness variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Obs</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expenditure in health</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>6.24</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expenditure in social protection and welfare</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>15.31</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizens’ preferences in health</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>9.19</td>
<td>7.95</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>34.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizens’ preferences in social protection and welfare</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>26.02</td>
<td>18.59</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>82.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* See Appendix responsiveness sources.
Systemic components of electoral competition (1986-2009)

Disproportionality of electoral system (LSq index)

Total volatility (votes)
Source: own calculations from official election results, except for the differentiation of political offer for which CMP data are used (Volkens et al. 2012).