

Responsive Government? Public Opinion and Government Policy Preferences in Britain and Denmark

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The ability of a political system to respond to the preferences of its citizens is central to democratic theory and practice; yet most empirical research on government responsiveness has concentrated on the United States. As a result, we know very little about the nature of government policy responsiveness in Europe and we have a poor understanding of the conditions that affect cross-national variations. This comparative study examines the relationship between public opinion and policy preferences in the United Kingdom and Denmark during the past three decades. We address two key questions: First, are the government's policy intentions driven by public opinion or vice versa? Second, do political institutions influence the level of government responsiveness? We suggest that public opinion tends to drive the government's policy intentions due to the threat of electoral sanction, and that this is more pronounced in proportional systems than in majoritarian democracies.

The relationship between mass public opinion and public policy is at the heart of normative democratic theory. Government responsiveness to mass preferences is fundamental to most conceptions of democracy (Lijphart, 1984; Dahl, 1967). Yet, in spite of the importance of this issue, most empirical research on the nexus between mass opinion and governmental policy has concentrated on the United States (see for example Monroe, 1995; Page and Shapiro, 1983, 1992). In a European setting, existing research has focused on whether institutional changes within countries have any effects on responsiveness and on whether the ideology of governments has consequences for the extent to which governments are responsive (see for example Brooks, 1987; Brettschneider, 1996). Recent studies have examined the temporal dimension of representation (Wlezien, 2004; Soroka and Wlezien, 2003). However, little attention has been given to the way in which institutional variation between countries influences the level of responsiveness (Weakliem, 2003, pp. 56–7).

In this comparative study of government policy responsiveness in Britain and Denmark, we examine whether the results generated by previous research are robust when tested in a longitudinal cross-national design. Moreover, our choice of cases enables us to assess how differences in institutional set-up affect the level of policy responsiveness. We thus address two key questions: first, are the government's policy intentions driven by the public's attitudes towards political issues

or vice versa? Second, is the level of policy responsiveness higher in majoritarian democracies or in proportional democracies? We suggest that although the question of causality is inherently ambiguous, public opinion tends to drive policy-making rather than vice versa. Furthermore, we argue that policy responsiveness is more pronounced in proportional democracies compared with majoritarian democracies, because the higher degree of party competition and government vulnerability in proportional democracies makes the executive more responsive to public preferences. We have chosen to test these propositions in an analysis of the relationship between public opinion and public policy in Denmark and the United Kingdom, because these countries are apposite examples of highly proportional (Denmark) and highly majoritarian (UK) democracies. Our model of policy responsiveness is evaluated using data on policy preferences expressed by the public in national surveys and data on governmental policy priorities outlined in the government's opening speeches in parliament in the period between 1970 and 2002. Before developing and evaluating these propositions, we begin by reviewing the existing literature in the field.

Exploring the Opinion-Policy Link

There is a vast literature on the issue of policy responsiveness, that is, the congruence of collective public attitudes towards political issues with the policy preferences and actions of elected representatives. Policy responsiveness is generally assumed, since elected politicians are expected to respond to public preferences due to the threat of electoral sanction. This expectation is evident throughout the literature on democratic politics, and there is a large body of research that demonstrates a correspondence between public opinion and policy behaviour (Page and Shapiro, 1983, 1992; Wlezien, 1995, 1997; Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson, 1995). However, any empirical investigation of policy responsiveness is complicated by the fact that the role of mass public opinion *vis-à-vis* public policy is a very complex and contested issue. First, it cannot be taken for granted that congruence between public opinion and public policy is the same as government responsiveness. The 'counterfeit consensus' school argues that mass public opinion is non-autonomous in nature, and therefore largely a creation of the ruling elites. As a consequence, the consensus between opinion and policy may be 'counterfeit' as it does not derive from genuinely independent mass opinion, but is the result of a manipulative process (Brooks 1985, 1990). Second, even when it is assumed that public opinion is autonomous and capable of influencing the political process, it is very difficult to establish empirically whether correspondence between public opinion and policy is the result of public opinion influencing policy or vice versa, or a mixture of reciprocal processes; or, indeed, whether an outside factor, by affecting both, has produced a spurious relationship. No analytical technique has been entirely successful in addressing these problems of causal inference.

The empirical studies of the relationship between public opinion and public policy can be distinguished in terms of both the level of the analysis (macro- or micro-level) and the temporal focus (static or dynamic studies). The pioneering study by Miller and Stokes (1963) employs a static micro-level research design, examining

the consistency between the votes of individual legislators and the preferences of their constituencies. Yet, micro-level studies are limited in their ability to measure the actual extent of correspondence between public opinion and public policy on the aggregate level. In macro-level studies public opinion is compared to the responsiveness of governments or political systems. The studies of Brooks (1985, 1986, 1990) and Monroe (1979, 1995) are typical of studies at the macro-level using a static perspective. These studies analyse the consistency of public opinion and policy, yet the exclusively static design does not reveal causal relationships. Consistency may result from politicians responding to public opinion, but political decisions may equally influence the public's preferences. Consequently, the investigation of causal relationships demands a dynamic design. The most extensive dynamic macro-level congruence study is that of Page and Shapiro (1983), who examine over 300 issues drawn from surveys taken between 1935 and 1979. They adopt a congruence approach comparing direction of change in opinion with direction of change in policy and find that changes in collective opinion are followed within a year or so by congruent changes in policy. But their method does not conclusively rule out earlier parallel movement of policy and the bivariate analysis takes no account of factors that may have affected both opinion and policy, producing spurious relationships between the two (Page, 1994). Hence, the studies employing longitudinal data allow for detecting causation through time asymmetries, yet, even in these studies the question of causality can only be answered imperfectly. More recent advances in the field include most notably time-series analysis of government responsiveness. The time-series analysis conducted by Wlezien (1996) on defence suggests that the US Congress and the President are indeed responsive to changes in public opinion. The study convincingly shows that in the American case there is a strict representation of voters' preferences on defence spending over time (Wlezien, 1996, p. 98). Moreover, Wlezien's 'thermostatic model' of the opinion-policy nexus indicates that there is a reciprocal link between public opinion and the actions of politicians (Wlezien, 1995, 1996, 2004; Soroka and Wlezien, 2003). When more money is spent on defence and other policy areas, the public reacts by demanding less spending.

The main finding in the longitudinal literature on the relationship between public preferences and public policy is therefore that politicians are responsive to changes in the preferences of the electorate. These studies, however, do not test this proposition within different institutional settings, and they are thus unable to assess the effects of institutions on the levels of responsiveness by elected elites. Although there have been recent attempts to compare longitudinal responsiveness in Anglo-Saxon countries (Soroka and Wlezien, 2003) these cases do not provide sufficient institutional variation to assess the potential impact of institutional factors, such as differences in electoral systems.

In this article we focus on two main issues. First, we examine the issue of causality by analysing time-series data from Britain and Denmark. This macro-level dynamic study design enables us to compare the level of congruence between public opinion and policy behaviour using different time lags. We examine whether the congruence between policy behaviour in year T and public opinion in year $T-1$ is higher than congruence between public opinion in year T and policy

behaviour in year $T-1$. If that is the case, we have an indication that public opinion drives policy-making. Second, this study addresses a question that is rarely examined in the macro-level studies of policy responsiveness; how do political institutions affect the level of policy responsiveness? More specifically, this study presents an empirical analysis of the degree of congruence between the governments' policy intentions and the majority preferences in the general public in two different types of democracies, a majoritarian democracy and a proportional democracy. This article thereby contributes to the field by examining policy responsiveness in a European context, focusing specifically on the impact of institutional factors.

Theory and Hypotheses

This section addresses two main questions: first, we discuss the issue of causality in the relationship between public opinion and policy. Second, we examine how political institutions can be expected to affect the level of policy responsiveness in a country.

Causality

As noted above, the issue of causal inference in the study of the opinion-policy nexus has been vexed with problems. Nevertheless, it is an issue of great importance to democratic theory and practice (Pateman, 1970; Dahl, 1967; Sullivan, 1974). One of the most uncontroversial tenets of modern democratic theory is the belief that citizens should be able to influence the policies that govern their lives. Hence, from a normative standpoint, we would hope that the public has an impact on the policy decisions made by their elected representatives. In other words, we would assume that the executives govern in accordance with the people's preferences – or at least a majority of the people. Empirical studies have also shown that public opinion influences policy behaviour in modern democratic polities, and some scholars have even asserted that this influence is increasing due to the evolution of polling technology (Geer, 1996). Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson (1995) make the strongest recent claim that politicians relentlessly follow public opinion. Their analysis of 'dynamic representation' uses time-series econometrics to investigate the relationship of the public mood to a variety of summary indicators of policy decisions. They find evidence of a 'strong and resilient link between public and policy'. However, one cannot simply assume that the process is entirely one way, but must consider the possibility of a reciprocal or interactive relationship between opinion and policy (Soroka and Wlezien, 2003; Wlezien, 1996, 2004). Indeed, Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) have asserted that public opinion is not driving policy opinions as it did in the past. Instead, politicians' own policy goals are increasingly steering major policy decisions. Monroe (1995) has also found that the political process has become less efficient at responding to public opinion, partly due to a 'bias against change', which has become prominent since the early 1980s. Hence, in reality the issue of governments' responsiveness to public opinion is complex and defies classification into the polar extremes of either persistent responsiveness or complete unresponsiveness and elite manipulation. In this article, however, we suggest that although the opinion-policy relationship may be characterised by reciprocal links, public opinion is likely to have a *greater* influence

on policy than vice versa. We thus argue that because governments aim to be re-elected, they will have strong incentives to respond to the policy preferences of the electorate, and this feedback mechanism is more pronounced than the reverse mechanism of governments shaping public preferences. Hence, we suggest that, as a general rule, governments will be responsive to public opinion and that the opening speeches of parliament therefore reflect the public's policy priorities. Following this logic, we can formulate the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Public opinion has greater influence on the government's policy intentions than government policies have on public preferences.

Hypothesis 1 expresses a general expectation about the relationship between public opinion and policy behaviour. But it seems reasonable to argue that different types of political institutions may create different incentives for politicians and governments to respond to public preferences, and consequently produce variations in the level of policy responsiveness.

Do Institutions Matter?

According to the approach of 'new institutionalism', institutions shape and constrain the behaviour of political actors.¹ Thus, we would expect that differences in institutional set-ups result in different behavioural patterns of the executive. In this section, we look at whether variations in electoral systems and decision-making structures in parliament have any consequences for the policy responsiveness of government in parliamentary democracies.

The comparative politics literature tends to distinguish between two ideal types of democracy: the proportional and the majoritarian (Lijphart, 1984; Powell, 2000). Powell (2000, p. 21) employs two variables to determine whether a democracy is either proportionate or majoritarian. First, the extent to which the electoral system produces disproportional results is crucial in determining which interests will gain representation. Powell argues that the more disproportional results an electoral system produce, the more likely it is to be majoritarian. Second, the decision-making rules in parliament have to be taken into account if we want to assess whether a democracy is proportional or majoritarian, since the power concentration in the hands of the government can impede an otherwise proportional electoral system (Powell, 2000, p. 39). The critical variable Powell uses to determine the extent to which the systems are proportional or not at the governmental level is the degree of opposition influence on policy. According to Powell's analysis, Denmark is a purely proportional democracy whereas the UK is purely majoritarian. There are two reasons for this. First, the electoral systems in the two countries are different. In the case of Denmark proportional representation is used, whereas the UK uses a plurality system. Second, the rules governing the legislative process differ in the two countries.

With regard to responsiveness to the public, it has been argued that the plurality system used in the UK ('first-past-the-post') is superior to a proportional system, because the plurality system creates a direct link between the voter and the elected representative. This link ensures that the constituencies are directly represented and hence that the government can be held accountable (Austen-Smith and Banks,

1988). Yet, Mitchell (2000, p. 346) contends that the ability of voters to monitor the responsiveness of parliamentarians and punish these in case of shirking depends on the choices open to the electorate. In this regard, proportional representation (PR) has an advantage in terms of sanctions because there are more candidates in each constituency with a reasonable chance of gaining representation (Lijphart, 1999, p. 162). Since no 'safe' seats exist in PR systems, candidates always have an incentive to point out shirking on the part of the incumbent. The lower level of 'disproportionality' in PR also entails that a wider range of policy preferences can be represented in parliament. Mitchell thus argues that there is a correlation between the number of candidates presenting themselves at the constituency level and the accountability and thus responsiveness that could be expected across different electoral systems. Further, in the British case the electoral system creates the government by producing a parliamentary majority of a single party, whereas in proportional systems parties generally have to negotiate over government participation. Moreover, the governing party in a majoritarian system does not necessarily need to win 50 percent of the votes to gain governmental power. These differences entail that the responsiveness of the British government is expected to be directed towards the voters of the governing party alone, whereas the Danish government must pay attention to preferences of the coalition or support parties' voters.

The second institutional feature that may influence the responsiveness of government is the rules governing legislative decision-making (Strøm, 1990). These rules determine the extent to which the opposition can expect to gain influence on policy and hence the legislative rules can enhance or impede the effects of the electoral system. In this regard, our two cases differ as well. In the Danish legislature, the opposition is granted influence over policy through the proportionally assigned committee membership. To this should be added that the high frequency of minority governments makes it more likely that the opposition plays a role in policy making. In the British case, the government dominates the parliamentary committees, making it difficult for the opposition to get influence on policy outcomes (Powell, 2000, p. 39). As a highly proportional and a highly majoritarian democracy, Denmark and the United Kingdom are therefore ideal cases to when the aim is to examine the impact of political institutions on the level of policy responsiveness.

This article suggests that the majoritarian and the proportional models differ in the effects they have on the responsiveness of governments, because political institutions influence the incentives of the political elites to respond to public preferences. Proportional electoral systems tend to create multi-party systems and coalition governments with either small majorities (minimum winning coalitions) or no majority at all (minority governments).² The high frequencies of minimum winning coalitions and minority governments in these systems produce relatively vulnerable governments that consequently are likely to be more responsive to public mood swings and preferences, as they otherwise risk losing power at the next election (or even during their parliamentary term, since the opposition may attempt overthrow the government if it senses that it can win an election).³ Moreover, the fragmented multi-party systems tend to create intense electoral competition among

parties on several policy dimensions, and increased electoral competition is conducive to elite responsiveness to public opinion. In the majoritarian model, on the other hand, we often find one-party governments with a large parliamentary majority. This strong parliamentary position makes the governments less vulnerable to public pressure during its term in office, and consequently less responsive to public mood swings and preferences than a government in a proportional system. The two-party system may also produce a situation where the government face little opposition at election time, because the opposition party is deemed to be 'unelectable',⁴ and this will create even less incentive for the government to be responsive to public preferences. Moreover, large parties can survive significant reversals of voter approval in the plurality system, as long as no majority forms to remove them (which is often highly unlikely in so-called 'safe' constituencies). Hence, the electoral removal sanction becomes less credible as the size (and majority) of the governing party increases in a majoritarian democracy and governments will tend not to be preoccupied with opinion change before it reaches a level where the opposition is in a position to threaten the government. Consequently, parties and governments in majoritarian democracies are more insulated from voter pressure than their counterparts in proportional democracies.

We can therefore formulate the second hypothesis about the expected relative policy responsiveness in a proportional and a majoritarian system:

Hypothesis 2: Policy responsiveness is higher in a proportional parliamentary democracy than in a majoritarian parliamentary democracy.

Following this logic, we argue that as the Danish system is proportional and the British system is majoritarian, there should be a higher level of policy responsiveness in Denmark compared with Britain. In the next section, the data and methodology are discussed.

Data and Methodology

In the remainder of the article, we aim to test the propositions regarding policy responsiveness using two time-series of data from the Britain and Denmark: a time-series of the public's policy preferences and a time-series of the government's policy intentions.

Data

The public opinion time-series have been obtained by analysing national public opinion surveys in which respondents are asked how they would rank different policy areas in terms of importance (see Appendix 3 on data sources). In this 'most-important-problem-facing-the-nation' question, respondents are asked to mention which policy problem they see as the most important. The open-ended responses have been re-coded into 10 policy categories (see Appendix 2). Calculating the percentages of respondents choosing each of the 10 categories as the most important political issue in a particular year produces the public policy preference time-series

covering the period 1970 to 2002.⁵ The most-important-problem (MIP) question is routinely used in the literature on issue salience to estimate the relative importance of issues to voters and it is regarded as an appropriate measure of public policy preferences (see for example Burden and Sanberg, 2003; Bara, 2001; MacKuen and Coombs, 1981; McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Moreover, the MIP question is the only policy priority question that has been asked consistently over the past three decades in national surveys and since the British and Danish surveys adopt a similar wording for this issue salience question, it enables us to make both cross-temporal and cross-national comparisons. Hence, the MIP question provides an adequate estimate of the public's relative concerns with different policy areas and it allows us to measure variations in publicly perceived issue salience between countries and over time.⁶

The second time-series of the governments' policy intentions was obtained by conducting content analysis of the annual opening speeches in parliament. In Britain, these speeches are delivered by the Queen and are thus referred to as the 'Queen's Speech' even though the content of the speeches is entirely drawn up by the Government and approved by the Cabinet. In Denmark, the opening speech of parliament is written and delivered by the prime minister, and is therefore named the 'Prime Minister's opening speech'. The two speeches are very similar in format and style and they both set out the legislation that the government would like to see passed in the forthcoming parliamentary session. Party documents, particularly manifestos, are the most common source for identifying the policy priorities of the executive (Laver, 2001; Budge, 1993). Yet, for our purposes, there are several advantages of using parliamentary speeches as the source of executive policy preferences rather than party election manifestos. First, these high-profile speeches provide us with annual data on policy priorities that can be compared with annual survey data. Second, these speeches are required to outline the government's legislative priorities for the parliamentary session.⁷ This requirement gives us the opportunity to investigate how the government prioritises different policy areas by analysing the emphasis given to each policy area. The content of these speeches represents actual policy *intentions* of parties in government rather than merely partisan policy *promises* directed at the electorate in elections campaigns, and they thus give us indication of the extent to which governments intend to keep their election promises and how this intention reflects changes in public moods. Finally, the speeches give us information on the policy intentions of the *government* as opposed to the priorities of single parties (this is particularly relevant in countries with coalition governments). We analyse the speeches in the period from 1970 to 2002, because this enables us to compare with the public opinion data, which are sparse prior to the early 1970s. The parliamentary opening speeches thus provide valuable data to test our hypotheses by comparing the policy-weighting of the speeches with the policy-ranking in the public opinion survey data.

We have employed computer-aided content analysis of the speeches to get reliable estimates of the governments' policy preferences.⁸ This quantitative method of content analysis is often used when large amounts of textual data are processed and when the interest lies primarily in manifest rather than latent content. It has for example been used in the Comparative Manifesto Project's analysis of party manifestos (Laver, 2001). Studies have shown that this technique is suitable for

generating both valid and reliable estimates of policy positions (Garry, 2001; Laver and Garry, 2000; Bara, 2001). In our analysis, the policy preference time-series was obtained by calculating the relative frequency of all coded words and quasi-sentences, corresponding to the 10 policy categories in a 'dictionary' file (see Appendix 2). Computer-aided coding has been chosen, because it is far more reliable than expert coding in that it ensures perfect stability and reproducibility of the coding procedure (Krippendorff, 1980). Moreover, computer-aided techniques may also have certain advantages with regard to validity, since the coding process is mechanical and thus unbiased by any prior knowledge or opinions of an expert coder (Laver and Garry, 2000; Garry, 2001). However, there are also potential problems associated with this technique. The approach is generally vulnerable to the problem of *homography*, that is individual words may have multiple literal meanings, and the problem of *context*: the theoretical meaning of a word may be altered by the presence or absence of other words. Ambiguous words and contextualisation may therefore distort the results. To alleviate these problems, keywords in the dictionary have been 'disambiguated' by using word strings and alternative signifiers to aid in contextualisation. For example, the concept of 'rights' has been differentiated by including word strings, such as 'human rights' and 'welfare rights'. Clearly, the design of a good dictionary is a vital part of computer-aided content analysis. Our dictionary consists of words, word sequences and character strings that describe the 10 policy categories, corresponding to the main categories of the public opinion data. The dictionary is validated by means of the keyword-in-context (KWIC) procedure, which highlights keywords within the context in which they are used. By locating keywords in the text file the most appropriate category is determined and ambiguous words are excluded or disambiguated. Moreover, to enhance the validity of the analysis, the dictionary has been cross-validated with the public opinion dictionary used for the analysis reported in Bara (2001).⁹ The ten coding categories were created so they were mutually exclusive and exhaustive and no word or word string was allocated to more than one coding category. Two separate dictionaries, in English and in Danish, have been created for each series of speeches, and they only vary to the extent it was necessary in order to capture variations in the political context.

By coding all the manifest policy terms used in the speeches (for example inflation, unemployment, drugs), this analysis captures the relative weighting given to each category as a percentage of the overall frequency of policy terms. Since the government is required to outline its policy intentions in these speeches, a content analysis of the speeches is a good proxy of the government's policy priorities. Several studies have shown that quantitative content analysis is an appropriate method of capturing policy priorities, since politicians tend to express their policy priorities in speeches and manifestoes by emphasising certain policies over others rather than endorsing particular policy stands and commitments (Budge, 1993; Hofferbert and Budge, 1992). This measure of the relative emphasis given to different policy categories in a speech is, however, not identical to the measure of public preferences. Whereas the former measures the relative weight given to different policies, the latter explicitly measures a ranking of policy areas. Yet, although these measures are not identical, they still enable us to measure the policy responsiveness of a system. If the public is very concerned with unemployment at a

particular time, this would be reflected in the survey data, and – assuming policy responsiveness – the government would emphasise unemployment relatively more than other policy areas in the opening speech. In other words, if policy responsiveness exists, we would expect a correlation between the two measures. The next section presents a model based on these measures of public opinion and policy intentions.

Model

Using these two time-series of data, we aim to test our hypotheses concerning the relationship between public opinion and policy behaviour. In hypothesis 1, we suggested that the policy preferences of the government are dependent on public opinion. Thus, in our model, the dependent variable is the percentage weighting of the policy content in the opening speech and the independent variable is the policy-ranking percentage in the survey data. The specification and estimation of the model is described in Appendix 1. This model assumes that the government's policy preferences in a given policy category and year can be explained by the policy preferences of the public. Yet, this process is not expected to be instantaneous, and thus a time lag factor of t year is incorporated into the model. The actual time period will of course vary, however, if our causality statement is to be affirmed, t must be larger than zero and probably smaller than say 3. Since our data is annual, the most appropriate estimation is that t is approximately 1, that is we assume that there is a one-year time lag between the date of the opinion survey and the policy priorities expressed in the speech. If t is equal to zero then there is a chance that an external factor, by affecting both, has produced a spurious relationship. If t is less than zero then public opinion is in fact driven by policy-behaviour, as discussed earlier, and our causality hypothesis has been falsified. Most studies on policy responsiveness utilises a one-year time lag as a reasonable time interval (see for example Page and Shapiro, 1983; Brooks, 1990). Yet, there is a good reason to test whether 1 is actually the most appropriate value for t because, by testing the fit of the model with different values of t , we are also implicitly testing the causality hypothesis. If 1 provides a better fit for the model than any other value of t then it is reasonable to assume that public opinion explains policy behaviour, whereas if a negative value of t maximises the likelihood then the causal arrow will appear to be pointing in the other direction. In other words, in order to test the causality proposition, we compare our model (see equation 1 in appendix 1 where t is positive) with an alternative model, where the policy behaviour of the government drives public policy preferences (t is negative; see equation 2, Appendix 1). If a negative t maximises the likelihood in our test, then the alternative model is more likely to be correct than our model. We expect that a positive value of t will maximise the likelihood and that the variance will be lower in a proportional system (Denmark) compared with a majoritarian system (United Kingdom).

Findings

In this section, we test the model and hypotheses derived above. First, we describe the distribution of and development in public and executive policy preferences in

Denmark and Britain. Thereafter, we estimate the models presented above in order to evaluate the causal links as well as the impact of political institutions.

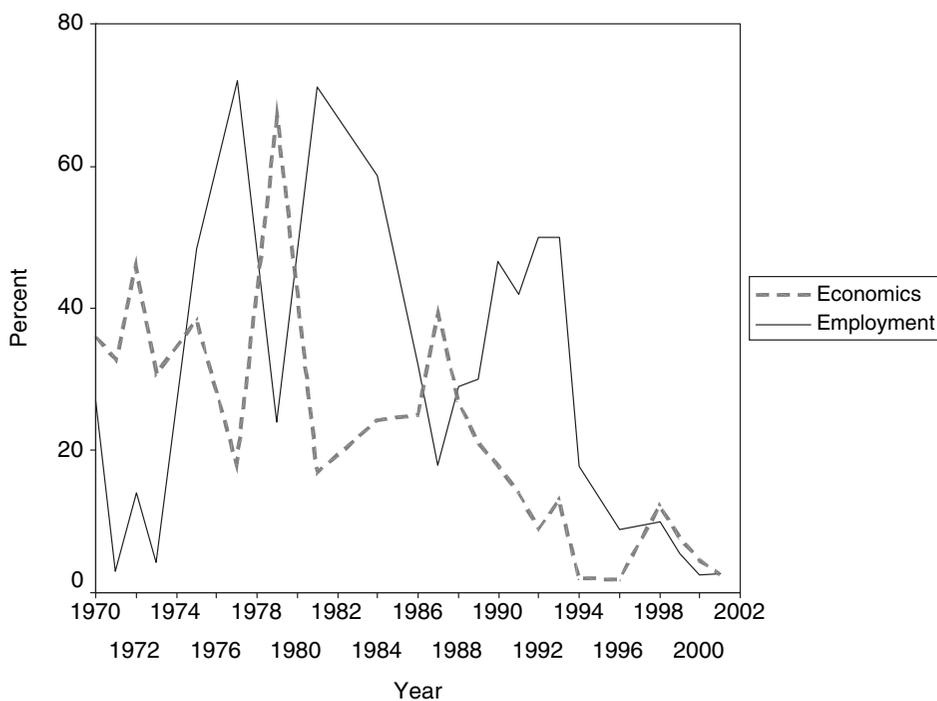
Policy Priorities in Britain and Denmark

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the British and Danish time-series of public opinion. In this table, the mean therefore expresses the average percentage of people ranking a particular policy category as the ‘most important’ during the past three decades. The highest mean value across the 10 policy categories is *employment* in both Britain and Denmark. Yet, the standard deviation of this category is also very high, indicating that the public concern with (un)employment issues fluctuates greatly. The second most important problem to the public in our two cases is macro-economic issues, and the standard deviation for this policy concern is also high. Figure 1 overleaf illustrates the development in the public attitudes towards economic and employment issues over the last three decades in Denmark. It shows that public concern with unemployment and economics vary significantly over time (between 3 and 72 and 2 and 67 percent respectively) and that there tends to be a ‘trade-off’ between public concern with these policy areas (this is also due to the normalisation effect). Moreover, it suggests that high public interest in employment issues correlates with periods of economic recession and high unemployment (such as in the mid- to late-1970s, the early 1980s and early 1990s), whereas public concern with economic issues (such as inflation) is higher when unemployment levels are low, such as from the mid-1990s onwards.

Table 1: The Public’s Policy Concerns in Britain and Denmark, 1970–2002 (%)

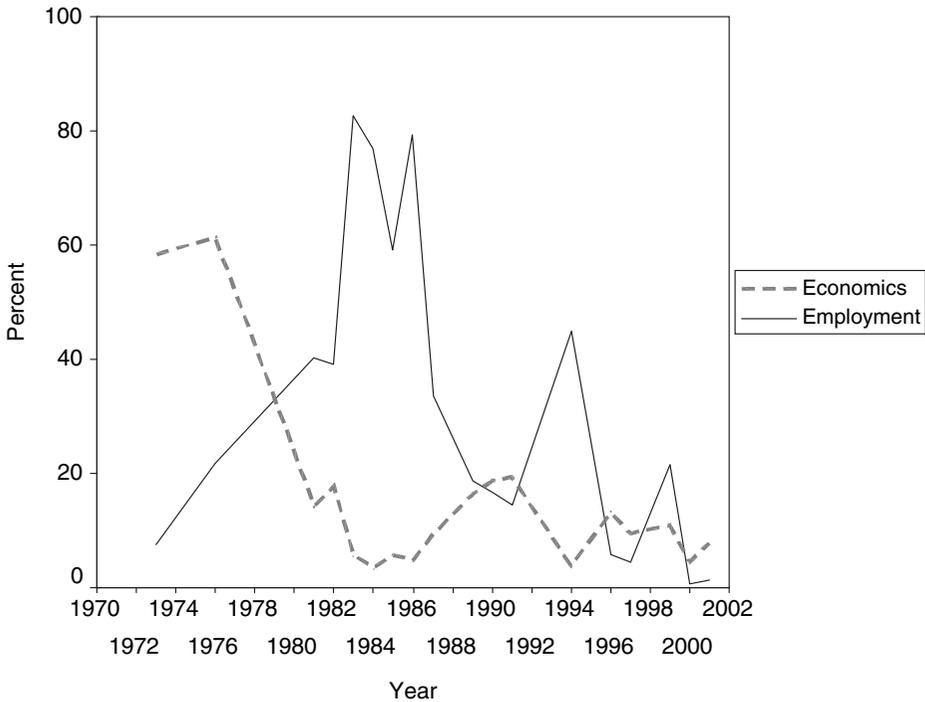
<i>Category</i>	<i>Denmark</i>		<i>UK</i>	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>STD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>STD</i>
Employment	29	22	32	27
Economics	22	16	16	17
Social problems	12	12	10	6
Environment	10	7	2	3
Foreign affairs	7	8	12	8
Immigration	6	7	2	3
Taxation	6	8	5	4
Health and housing	5	6	14	13
Constitutional issues	2	3	3	3
Education	1	2	6	9

Note: The mean shows the average percentage of people ranking a policy category as the most important from 1970 to 2002. See endnote 5 for information on data points.

Figure 1: Public Concern with Economics and Employment in Denmark

Unsurprisingly, it is the major policy questions, such as unemployment and inflation, which are important to the public during most of the past three decades. Yet, Figure 1 also shows that public concern with both of these policy areas have declined significantly since the mid-1990s. The public interest in macroeconomics and unemployment has been replaced by an increasing concern with social problems and immigration in the Danish case. Figure 2 shows a similar almost a constant-sum relationship between public concern with employment issues (mainly unemployment) and concern with economic issues (mainly inflation) in Britain. Again, this figure indicates that the public is more concerned with employment issues in periods with economic recession and high unemployment than in boom periods. High public concern with unemployment coincides with the post-war peak of 13 percent unemployment in 1986, and the increase in unemployment in the early 1990s. Figure 2 also indicates that an aggregate concern with economics and employment issues has diminished significantly since the mid-1990s. It has been replaced by an increasing public interest in the national health care system and education.

The results of the content analysis of the speeches are shown in Table 2. In these data series, the highest priority is given to economic issues (Denmark) and foreign affairs (UK). This emphasis on foreign affairs is also partly dictated by the format of the opening speech where it is customary to mention the membership of inter-

Figure 2: Public Concern with Economics and Employment in Britain

national organisations, such as NATO and the EU as well as relations with other countries. This potential bias should not, however, affect the measurement of the opinion-policy correlation in other policy areas.

As Tables 1 and 2 indicate, the British and the Danish data are very comparable. The public policy priorities in both countries vary significantly over time (average standard deviation of 9 percentage points in both countries); yet, (un)employment is on average the greatest cause of concern. The priorities of the Danish and British executives fluctuate less and economics and foreign affairs are given the greatest prominence in the speeches. The data tell us an interesting story about public and executive policy priorities; yet, they cannot disclose to us whether there is any correlation between the governments' policy preferences and public opinion. In order to evaluate the hypotheses presented above, we test our model of policy responsiveness.

Evaluating Policy Responsiveness

In the model of policy responsiveness presented in equation 1 in Appendix 1, the dependent variable is the content of the opening speeches and the independent variable is the policy ranking in the public opinion survey, indicating that public opinion drives policy. We also presented an alternative model (equation 2 in

Table 2: Policy Intentions of the Government, 1970–2002 (%)

<i>Category</i>	<i>Denmark</i>		<i>UK</i>	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>STD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>STD</i>
Economics	28	10	22	6
Foreign affairs	17	9	30	9
Employment	13	6	5	3
Taxation	12	6	3	2
Education	8	4	7	5
Social problems	8	6	16	5
Health and housing	6	4	5	4
Environment	4	3	7	4
Constitutional issues	1	1	3	2
Immigration	1	2	0	1

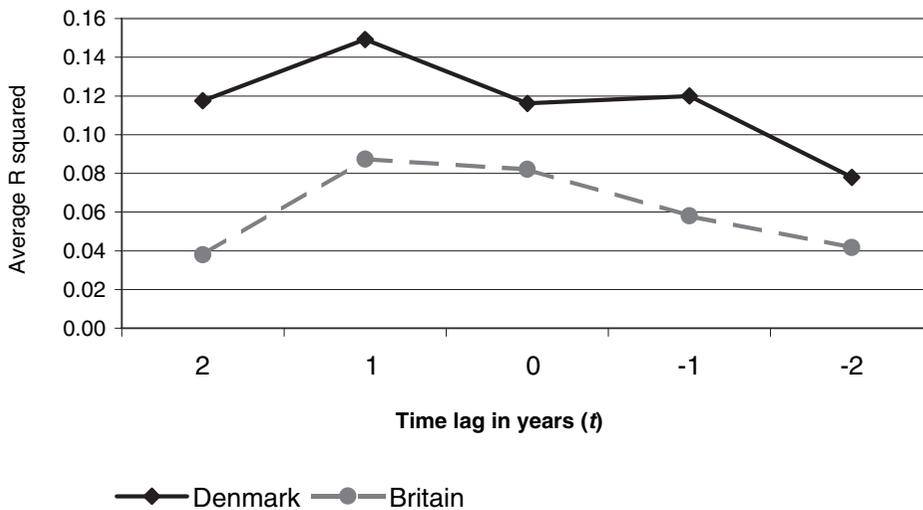
Note: This table shows the mean aggregate public concern with each policy area during the period 1970–2002 as well as the standard deviation (STD) from this mean.

Appendix 1), where public opinion is the dependent variable explained by policy behaviour. We argued that by testing both models with different values of t (the time lag between the two variables), we would be able to get an indication of the direction of the causal arrow. Figure 3 illustrates the overall findings using OLS to estimate the fit of the models with different time lags. Model 1 is used for positive and zero t , whereas model 2 is used for negative t . As predicted, t equals 1 maximises the likelihood both for the Danish and the British data sets. This implies that public opinion influences policy preferences more than vice versa. The R square values are clearly diminished when t has a negative value – that is, when policy behaviour explains public opinion (model 2). Moreover, the average R square value is slightly lower when there is no time lag ($t = 0$) compared with a one-year time lag, and that could suggest that the relationship between the opinion and policy data is real, rather than induced by an external factor (although both can be operating simultaneously, of course). Hence, the data in Figure 3 seem to support our first hypothesis, since they indicate that public opinion drives policy behaviour more than vice versa. Moreover, Figure 3 shows a clear difference between the level of opinion-policy correlation in the Danish and the British data sets. The correlation between the content of the speeches and the priorities of the public is consistently higher in Denmark compared with Britain. This supports our second hypothesis, namely that policy responsiveness is higher in proportional democracies (Denmark) than it is in majoritarian democracies (Britain).

In the theory section, we argued that the lower level of policy responsiveness in majoritarian systems was partly due to the large parliamentary majorities of the governments in these systems, which insulated them from voter pressure. Hence, we would expect this effect to be less pronounced when the parliamentary majority of the government is small. When we estimated model 1 using only the British data from the years where the government majority was small (less than 50

seats),¹⁰ we found that the fit of the model improved to an average R square value of .16, which is slightly higher than the corresponding R square value for periods with larger parliamentary majorities. This result thus corroborates our proposition. Moreover, we have estimated the model separately for left-wing and right-wing governments to evaluate whether ideology has an impact on the level of policy responsiveness. As expected, the model fit for these two types of government was almost identical, and ideology therefore does not seem to have a significant impact on responsiveness.

Figure 3: Model Fit for Different Time Lags



Thus, the results presented in figure 3 substantiate both of our hypotheses. Yet, the average R square values do not seem impressively high, even when using 1 as the value of t . It is therefore important also to look at variations of policy responsiveness across policy categories, rather than just the average fit of the model. Tables 3 and 4 present the variation in policy responsiveness across the ten policy categories in Denmark and Britain. In these OLS estimations of equation 1, the value of t is 1.

Table 3 presents the variations in responsiveness across policy areas in Denmark. The explanatory value of public opinion is statistically significant in the policy areas of social problems, immigration, economics and constitutional issues. In the remaining categories, the relationship between policy statements and public preferences is weak; however, it is still stronger than for other variables of t , which suggests that our causality hypothesis is in fact plausible.

Comparing with the British data in Table 4, it is evident that the correlation between the government's policy statements and public opinion is weaker in Britain. In the British data, the coefficients are only statistically significant in the

Table 3: The Impact of Public Opinion on Policy Intentions in Denmark, 1970–2002

<i>Category</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Constant</i>	<i>R</i> ²
Social problems	0.34**	0.04**	0.37
Immigration	0.15**	0.01**	0.31
Economics	0.32**	0.19**	0.25
Constitutional issues	0.16*	0.02**	0.11
Foreign affairs	0.32	0.17**	0.09
Health and housing	0.22	0.05**	0.09
Education	0.83	0.07**	0.08
Environment	0.13	0.04**	0.08
Taxation	0.21	0.11**	0.07
Employment	0.05	0.12**	0.06

Notes: $N = 230$, *significant at 0.1, **significant at 0.05. In this OLS estimation $t = 1$.

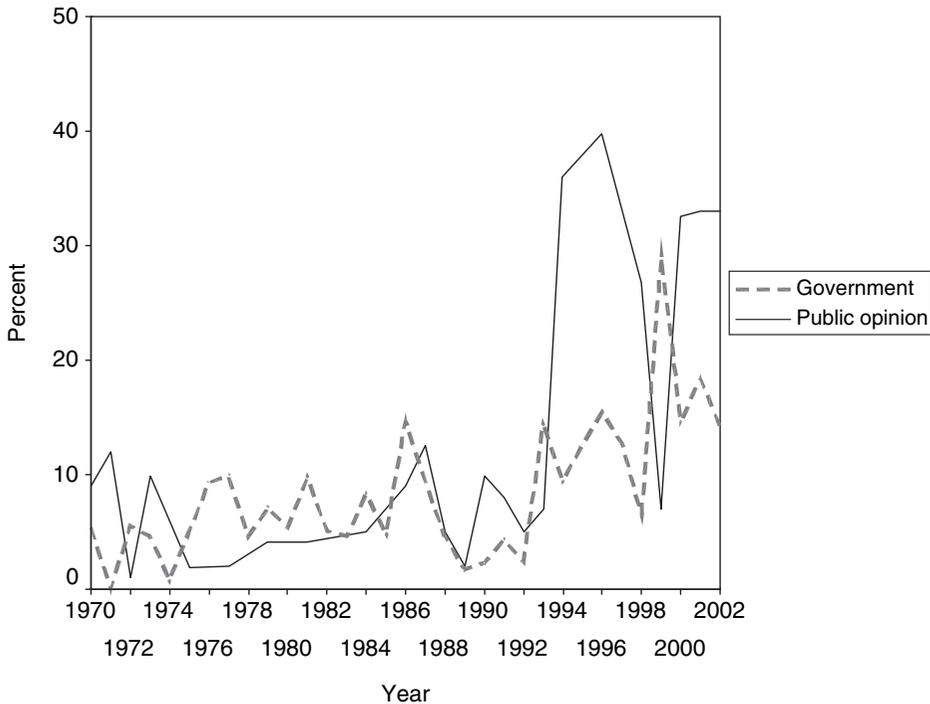
Table 4: The Impact of Public Opinion on Policy Intentions in Britain, 1970–2002

<i>Category</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Constant</i>	<i>R</i> ²
Foreign affairs	0.18**	0.03**	0.35
Economics	0.05**	0.03**	0.28
Education	0.37	0.13**	0.12
Constitutional issues	-0.14	0.04**	0.04
Environment	-0.17	0.34**	0.02
Immigration	0.05	0.20**	0.02
Social problems	-0.08	0.03**	0.02
Employment	0.00	0.00**	0.01
Taxation	0.07	0.08**	0.01
Health and housing	-0.06	0.07**	0.00

Notes: $N = 180$, **significant at 0.05. In this OLS estimation $t = 1$.

policy areas of employment and social problems, and the overall 'goodness-of-fit' is significantly lower, as was illustrated in Figure 3. Hence, as expected, this implies that proportional democracies are more responsive to public opinion than majoritarian democracies.

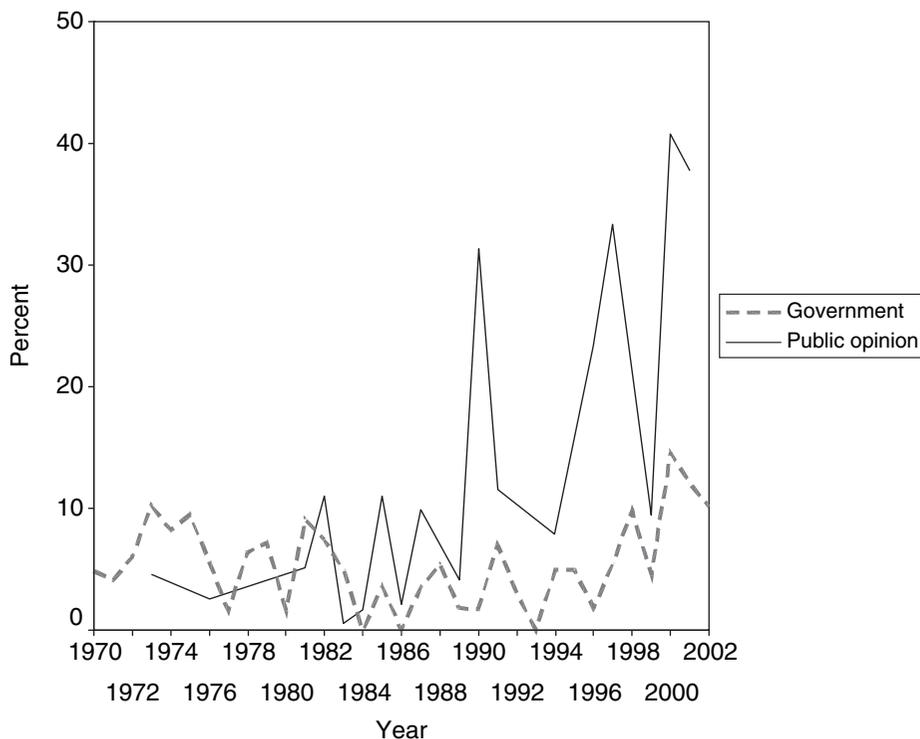
The variations in responsiveness across policy area presented in Tables 3 and 4 could give important insights into the structure of the opinion-policy relationship; however, they are not straightforward to interpret. The policy responsiveness in foreign affairs generally seems lower than in domestic policy areas, and this would support the literature that suggests that politicians act more independently of public

Figure 4: The Salience of Social Problems in Denmark

opinion in the foreign policy area than in domestic policy-making (see for example Miller and Stokes, 1963). It is noteworthy that responsiveness in the Danish data is highest in the 'new' policy areas – immigration and social problems – that have increased dramatically in public salience since the mid-1990s. Figure 4 illustrates the development in public and executive concern with social problems in Denmark during the past three decades.

Figure 4 visibly demonstrates an increase in the salience of social problems since the early 1990s. This high level of responsiveness to immigration and social problems in the Danish system could indicate that governments in proportional democracies are quick to legislate in 'new' policy areas if a large proportion of the voters are concerned about certain issues. This may support our proposition that the executives in proportional democracies are less insulated from public pressure than their counterparts in majoritarian democracies. However, although Table 4 shows that policy responsiveness is lower in Britain compared with Denmark, the British government has also been responsive to the increased salience of health care policy during the last decade. This is illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5 shows a noticeable (delayed) correlation between the health care concerns of the public and the emphasis on health care policy in the Queen's Speeches.

Figure 5: The Salience of Health Care Issues in Britain

Hence, although the aggregate policy responsiveness in Britain is significantly lower than it is in Denmark, this figure implies that the British government can still respond to public concerns in certain policy areas.

In sum, the data presented in this section seem to support our hypotheses. Public policy preferences can explain policy behaviour more than vice versa, and this is especially true for policy areas that have increased in salience during the last decade. Moreover, policy responsiveness is higher in the proportional Danish system than it is in the majoritarian British system.

Conclusion

This article has presented a comparative study of the relationship between public opinion and policy preferences in the United Kingdom and Denmark. This comparative framework has enabled us to assess the impact of institutions on policy responsiveness, as well as to address the issue of causality in the relationship between public opinion and policy behaviour. We hypothesised that public opinion would influence the policy intentions of the government, and that the level of

policy responsiveness would be more pronounced in proportional democracies compared with majoritarian democracies, where large parliamentary majorities make the governments more insulated from public pressure. By analysing a model of policy responsiveness, we found that public opinion influencing policy intentions with a one-year time lag is the most likely responsiveness-model. Moreover, our findings showed that policy responsiveness is generally higher in Denmark than in Britain, thus supporting our hypothesis on the impact of political institutions. Hence, our results are promising, though more research is needed to investigate these issues further. One major concern is that this study examines the policy *intentions* expressed in the opening speeches rather than the actual policy *behaviour*. Thus, it would be worthwhile to examine the extent to which policy behaviour matches policy intentions, and how this affects the level of policy responsiveness. One reasonable expectation is that governments in proportional democracies are less efficient in terms of delivering the policies than their majoritarian counterpart. This may imply a paradoxical situation where governments in proportional systems are more responsive to public opinion, but less capable of delivering the demanded policies.

Also, our proposition that proportional democracies are more responsive than majoritarian democracies is highly controversial, and it could be evaluated using more cases than just the British and the Danish. Critics may argue that the Danish system is peculiar, because of the frequent occurrence of minority governments. This might suggest that a critical variable in the study of the responsiveness of governments is the size of the governing coalition and hence only indirectly the institutional variation between proportional and majoritarian systems. There is thus considerable scope for more comparative research on policy responsiveness to examine how and why the nature of representation varies between different types of political systems.

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Appendix 1: Model of Government Policy Responsiveness

Adopting a probabilistic framework, our model of government responsiveness can be formulated as follows:

$$P(C_{m,T}|S_{m,T-t}) = N(C_{m,T}|\alpha_m + \beta_m S_{m,T-t}, \sigma_m^2) \quad (1)$$

This equation states that the conditional probability distribution of the policy content of the speech $C_{m,T}$ for a specific category m in year T given the ranking in the survey data $S_{m,T-t}$ for the m^{th} policy category t years earlier is a normal distribution. The dependent variable $C_{m,T}$ is normally distributed around the linear

prediction, or conditional expectation of $C_{m,T}$ given $S_{m,T-t}$, which is $\alpha_m + \beta_m S_{m,T-t}$. The maximum likelihood estimation of this model thus involves picking the parameters (α_m and β_m and σ_m^2) that make the observed $C_{m,T}$ most likely to have occurred given the corresponding observations of $S_{m,T-t}$ that occurred in the sample. The lower the variance σ_m^2 , the more the content of the speeches can be explained by the public preferences, as predicted in hypothesis 1. In the alternative model can be specified to estimate whether the government's policy preferences is driving changes in public opinion. If a negative t maximizes the likelihood in our test, then equation 2 more is likely to be correct the model presented in equation 1.

This can be formulated as:

$$P(S_{m,T-t}|C_{m,T}) = N(S_{m,T}|\hat{\alpha}_m + \hat{\beta}_m C_{m,T+t}, \hat{\sigma}_m^2) \quad (2)$$

Due to the normality assumption of this model, we can maximise the likelihood of this function using a simple Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) estimation. Before using OLS we also need to ensure that the time-series are stationary. If the variables are non-stationary, this may result in 'spurious regressions' where the null hypotheses are rejected even though the data generation processes for the variables are wholly independent (Clarke *et al.*, 1997; Granger and Newbold, 1974). We have therefore employed the Box-Jenkins methodology to estimate empirically the nature and extent of autocorrelation in time series prior to analysis (Clarke *et al.*, 1998; Clarke and Granato, 2004). The Dickey-Fuller unit root tests as well as the autocorrelation functions and partial autocorrelation functions of the time series indicate that they are stationary and that they can consequently be analysed in their original level form.¹¹ Hence, in this paper the maximum likelihood (ML) parameters of the model are estimated using OLS.

Appendix 2: Policy Categories

This study employed ten policy categories in the analysis of the open-ended survey answers as well as in the content analysis of the opening speeches. These categories were made of a group of words and word-strings with similar meaning and connotations, and the categories were created to be mutually exclusive and exhaustive. This appendix provides a brief description of the content of each policy category. The actual coding dictionaries used in the content analysis of the speeches can be obtained from the authors upon request.

Constitutional issues: electoral rules, credibility of politicians, devolution etc.

Economics: inflation, interest rates, trade, growth, competitiveness etc.

Employment: unemployment, wages, working hours etc.

Taxation: taxes, VAT, public expenditure, budget etc.

Health and housing: National Health Service (NHS), housing etc.

Environment: environment, pollution, energy problems etc.

Social problems: crime, drugs, violence, elderly people, other social problems etc.

Foreign affairs: EU, NATO, UN, defence, Middle East, development aid, war etc.

Education: education, schools, university, students, research etc.

Immigration: immigrants, guest workers, asylum seekers etc.

Appendix 3: List of Data Sources

The analyses in the present article are based on data from the speeches and surveys referenced below. We are grateful to the Danish Data Archive for making the Danish surveys available together with the relevant documentation. We would also like to thank Professor Jørgen Goul Andersen and Jane Reeve (AIM Nielsen, Denmark) for sharing the follow-up electoral surveys with us. The UK Data Archive kindly provided the British survey data. The responsibility for the analyses and interpretations presented in this article rests solely with the authors.

Opening Speeches of Parliament

UK: The Queen's Speech at the state opening of Parliament 1970–2002

Denmark: The Prime Minister's opening speech in Parliament (*Statsministerens Åbningstale*) 1970–2002

Public Opinion Data

United Kingdom:

Selected British Gallup Opinion Polls 1958–1991 (UKDA 3803)

European Election Studies 1989, 1994 and 1999

British Election Panel Study, 1983, 1986 and 1987 (UKDA 4000)

British General Election Study, Campaign Panel 1996–1997 (UKDA 3890)

British General Election Study, 2001 (UKDA 4621)

Denmark:

Danish Election Studies 1971–1981 (DDA 0658)

Danish Election Studies 1984, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2001

Danish Midway Election Studies 1996, 2000, 2001

European Election Study, 1999

EEC-survey, 1972 (DDA 195)

Danish Gallup Omnibus Data, 1970, Omnibus no. 10 (DDA 1323)

Danish Gallup Omnibus Data, 1986, Omnibus no. 01 (DDA 1405)

European Parliament Election Study, 1989 (DDA 1495)

Danish Gallup Omnibus Data, 1991 no. 15 (DDA 1732)

Danish Gallup pre-Maastricht referendum interviews 1992 (DDA 1835)

Danish Gallup post-Maastricht referendum interviews 1993 (DDA 1839)

Notes

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- 1 The phrase ‘new institutionalism’ was coined by March and Olsen (1984) in their seminal article. For an overview of new institutionalism see Hall and Taylor (1996, 1992); Immergut (1998) and March and Olsen (1989).
- 2 Although approximately 30% of Western European governments in the post-war period have had ‘surplus majority’.
- 3 According to Strøm (1997), 88% of all governments in Denmark were minority governments in the period from 1945 to 1987. Since then 7 out of 8 Danish governments have been minority governments controlling on average 68 seats or approximately 40% of the seats in the Danish parliament.
- 4 Many commentators have, for example, argued that the British Labour Party was ‘unelectable’ in the 1980s during the period of Margaret Thatcher’s premiership due to its old-fashioned left-wing economic policies, and that consequently there was no real opposition to the Conservative government.
- 5 Unfortunately, it has not been possible to find appropriate survey data for every single year in this period, so the Danish time-series consist of 23 years and the British time series contain data on 18 years, with a maximum time lag of three years between each survey.
- 6 See Wlezien (2003) for a critique of the most-important-problem question.
- 7 See for example the Danish Constitution, §38.
- 8 The software programme *TEXTPACK 7.5* was used in our content analysis of the speeches.
- 9 We would like to thank Judith Bara for sharing this dictionary with us as a basis for our codebook.
- 10 During the past three decades, the British governments had small parliamentary majorities (less than 50 seats) in the following years: 1970–1983; 1992–1997.
- 11 When examining the autocorrelation functions and partial autocorrelation functions, two of the twenty data series did not pass the strict test of stationarity (the Danish executive economics series and the British executive foreign policy series). Both behave as autoregressive first order processes AR(1). To avoid making mistaken inferences when analysing these two series, we have run a similar analysis with the two series first differenced, and the results were comparable.

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