

Who's in Charge? How Voters Attribute Responsibility in the European Union

Comparative Political Studies

XX(X) 1–25

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0010414013488549

cps.sagepub.com



Sara B. Hobolt¹ and James Tilley²

Abstract

As an emerging federal system, the European Union (EU) divides decision-making powers between multiple levels of government. Yet little is known about how EU citizens attribute responsibility to the EU. In particular, do people hold the EU, rather than national governments, responsible for different policy outcomes, some of which are primarily decided at the EU level? This article investigates the extent to which institutional differences and individual biases influence citizens' attribution of responsibility in the EU. We rely on unique survey data collected in all 27 EU member states to explore how citizens attribute responsibility across five different policy areas. Using a multilevel model of responsibility judgments, our findings show that while citizens' evaluations correspond to the institutional context, group-serving biases, related to support for the EU, have a more important role in shaping attributions of responsibility in the EU.

Keywords

attribution, accountability, European Union, multilevel government, responsibility, voters

¹London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

²University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Corresponding Author:

Sara B. Hobolt, European Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, UK.

Email: s.b.hobolt@lse.ac.uk

Who's in charge? Who should citizens blame when things go wrong, and who should they credit when things go right? These are crucial questions in any democratic system, not least in systems of multilevel governance where it is particularly challenging to identify exactly which level of government is responsible. Yet, little is currently known about how voters attribute responsibility to different levels of government in multilevel systems, and almost nothing is known about responsibility judgments within the European Union (EU). The governance system of the EU presents a particularly difficult challenge to citizens, as the institutions and divisions of competences are continuously evolving and changing. This raises the question addressed in this article: How do citizens assign responsibility across levels of government in the EU? Our argument is that while the institutional context structures responsibility attributions to an extent, individuals' rely heavily on their own subjective biases when forming opinions on whether the EU or their national government is responsible for policy outcomes. Crucially, we identify an important "perceptual screen," namely, people's predispositions about the EU, which moderates individuals' responsibility attributions.

Numerous comparative studies have shown that complex institutional structures that blur lines of responsibility make it difficult for voters to hold governments to account (Anderson, 2000; De Vries, Edwards, & Tillman, 2011; Hellwig, 2001; Hellwig & Samuels, 2008; Powell, 2000; Powell & Whitten, 1993; Whitten & Palmer, 1999). Empirically, these studies have demonstrated that clarity of responsibility conditions the extent to which voters sanction governments on the basis of economic outcomes. Yet little of this work has directly examined voters' views of who is actually responsible. What recent work there is has focused on the federal systems of Canada and the United States (Arceneaux, 2006; Cutler, 2004, 2008; Rudolph, 2003a, 2003b), finding that the institutional context and individual-level predispositions, notably partisanship, shape citizens' responsibility judgments.

This article extends the existing literature by examining attribution of responsibility in a more comparative context, presenting the first comprehensive study of how people assign political responsibility in the EU. The EU provides the ideal "laboratory" for examining the impact of institutions on responsibility judgments. It is not only a context in which responsibilities are far from clear, but also allows us to examine citizens across 27 countries with considerable variation in national political institutions and in levels of federal (EU) power. This study analyzes a unique module of survey questions designed specifically to uncover citizens' opinions on responsibility, conducted in all 27 EU member states after the 2009 European Parliament elections. It makes a number of contributions to the literature. First, as a large-scale comparative study of responsibility judgments it enhances our understanding

of the role of institutions by demonstrating that the divisions of power between institutions do at least partially shape how voters assign responsibility. Second, unlike most studies of attribution and performance voting we move beyond simply the economy to examine responsibility judgments across a range of policy domains: the economy, monetary policy, health care, immigration, and climate change. Third, we demonstrate that partisanship is not the only “in-group” that moderates the effect of performance evaluations on attribution: Support for the EU also forms the basis of a group-serving attribution bias. Finally, and more generally, by examining a hitherto largely overlooked aspect of European integration, we hope to contribute to the understanding of evolving electoral democracy in the EU.

Who’s Responsible in Multilevel Systems?

In the classic reward–punishment model of electoral accountability, voters reelect incumbents who have performed well, but oust those who have performed badly (Key, 1966; Powell, 2000). Yet this claim of a clear link between policy performance and vote choice has been called into question by scholars focusing on how voters assign political responsibility. First, from an institutional perspective, studies have shown that institutional clarity of responsibility conditions voters’ ability to make judgments about who is responsible for policy outcomes, and to sanction incumbents accordingly. Second, from an individual-level perspective, scholars have argued that responsibility judgments are influenced by “group-serving attribution biases”, such as partisanship, which shape the link between policy evaluations, assignment of responsibility, and vote choices.

Both these points are relevant if we want to understand how people assign responsibility in multilevel systems of government. Starting with the institutional perspective, an extensive body of work suggests that the degree to which incumbents are held to account for economic performance (objective or subjective) is conditioned by a system’s institutional context. In their seminal article, Powell and Whitten (1993) demonstrate that elections in countries where responsibility is most easily focused on a single party are more likely to follow the reward–punishment model. Other comparative analyses of economic voting have supported the more general claim that economic voting is less prevalent when governments are weak and divided and legislatures are strong (Anderson, 2000; Duch & Stevenson, 2008; Hellwig & Samuels, 2008; Whitten & Palmer, 1999). Much of the most recent work has also focused on the “vertical” institutional structures of federal government, arguing that multiple levels of government make it difficult for voters to assign

responsibilities for the policy outcomes (Arceneaux, 2006; Cutler, 2004, 2008; Johns, 2011).

This “clarity of responsibility” extension to the simple reward–punishment model focuses on context-level differences, but other work has shifted the focus to the individual level and has criticized the portrayal of vote choice as a simple function of policy performance (e.g., Rudolph, 2003a). Instead, it has been argued that voters’ responsibility judgments are conditioned by their prior political beliefs, primarily their partisanship.¹ This idea builds on the social psychology notion of “group-serving attribution bias”, which refers to the tendency of in-group members to attribute positive actions committed by their own group to positive in-group qualities and negative actions by the favored group to external causes (Fiske & Taylor, 2007; Hewstone, 1989; Pettigrew, 1979). This in-group bias has been found in a number of contexts, and in the political science literature, studies have looked at how partisanship influences political attitudes generally, and attributions of responsibility specifically (Abramowitz, Lanoue, & Ramesh, 1988; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Feldman, 1982; Lewis-Beck, 1997; Peffley, 1984; Sigelman & Knight, 1985). Rudolph has shown that partisanship is a significant driver of who is thought responsible for the economy and such responsibility judgments in turn act as an important moderator of economic evaluations in predicting vote choices (Rudolph, 2003a, 2003b). The importance of partisanship in shaping citizens’ responsibility judgments has also been demonstrated in work on the economy and public services in Britain and Ireland (Marsh & Tilley, 2010; Tilley & Hobolt, 2011) and on assignment of responsibility for the response to Hurricane Katrina in 2008 (Gomez & Wilson, 2008; Maestas, Atkeson, Croom, & Bryant, 2008; Malhotra & Kuo, 2008). The next section extends this literature by developing a set of theoretical expectations about how individual-level and contextual-level factors shape attribution of responsibility in the EU.

Who’s Responsible in the EU?

Over the past decades, the scope and depth of policy making in the multilevel EU has increased to the point that it has many traits in common with a federal state (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Kohler-Koch, 1996). European voters consequently face considerable challenges when deciding whether policy outcomes are the responsibility of the national (or indeed local) government or the EU institutions, just as they do in more established federal states such as the United States and Canada. Yet despite the increasingly federal nature of the EU, there has been little research investigating whether citizens realize

the degree to which policy decisions that affect their day-to-day lives are now taken in Brussels. More importantly, we also have a very limited understanding of how citizens arrive at responsibility judgments in the context of divided authority within the EU.

Attributing responsibility correctly in multilevel systems is a daunting task. Not only may voters have difficulty figuring out who is responsible for what, but politicians will have strong incentives to engage in blame shifting and credit taking that will further serve to undermine clear responsibility linkages. Cutler (2004, 2008) has shown that voters do not strongly differentiate between the government roles across issues in Canada. Similarly León (2011) demonstrates that citizens in Spanish regions with a more intertwined distribution of power find it most difficult to assign responsibility correctly. At the same time, Johns (2011) has shown that voters in Ontario and Scotland can fairly accurately assign issues to different levels of government, and a number of studies in the United States have reached more optimistic conclusions about voters' ability to distinguish between the responsibility of different levels of government (Arceneaux, 2006; Atkeson & Partin, 1995, 1998; Niemi, Stanley, & Vogel, 1995). For example, Arceneaux (2006) finds that, at least for salient and accessible issues, people are capable of making distinctions between different levels of government and that those distinctions structure how voters attribute credit or blame for policy outcomes. This raises the question of whether European citizens incorporate information about divisions of power between the national and the European level into their attribution of responsibility, or whether these judgments are insensitive to the institutional context.

Impact of the Institutional Context

Responsibility for most policy outcomes in the EU is shared between national and EU institutions (as well of course by other governmental and nongovernmental actors) and policy outcomes may thus legitimately be attributed to either level. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to argue that there are certain features of national and EU institutions that make attribution of responsibility to either level of government more or less likely. The EU's Lisbon Treaty, ratified in December 2009, made an attempt to clarify divisions of power in the EU by distinguishing between exclusive, shared, and complementary competences of the EU.² To the extent that people's perceptions of power correspond to these divisions, we would expect that they attribute greater responsibility to the EU in areas of exclusive competences³ (e.g., monetary policy and competition policy) than in areas of complementary competences (e.g., health policy and foreign policy). But even for policy areas within the

same broad category, there is still considerable variation in actual policy activities and most competences are overlapping and evolving over time.

The influence of EU institutions varies not only across policy domains but also across member states in systematic ways. Not all member states have transferred equal powers to the EU. The most obvious example is the EU's Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), which established a currency union (the Eurozone) in 1999, and currently contains 17 of the EU's 28 members.⁴ Because the European Central Bank (ECB) has exclusive competence over monetary policy in Eurozone countries, with the EU's Council setting fiscal guidelines,⁵ we would expect that citizens in Eurozone countries would attribute greater responsibility to the EU in the area of economic policy making, and particularly monetary policy. Differentiated, or flexible, integration has become an important feature of European integration since the 1990s, and there are various examples of "opt-outs" granted to specific countries in policy domains (see Holzinger & Schimmelfenig, 2012).⁶ Generally, we would expect that citizens in countries with such opt-outs would attribute less responsibility to the EU in the relevant policy domain. This leads to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1a: People in countries with an opt-out from an EU policy domain attribute relatively less responsibility to the EU in that domain than people in countries without an opt-out.

However, to understand how institutions shape attribution in this multi-level system, it is not sufficient to focus on the EU's decision-making ability. We also need to explore variation in the national institutional context. After all, there are significant differences across the EU in the role that national governments play. For example, some countries have large government-funded health care systems, whereas others have largely private insurance-based systems. All things being equal, we would expect that citizens in the former would attribute more responsibility to national governments and relatively less responsibility to the EU for policy outcomes in health care policy. In general, we would therefore expect that higher levels of national government activity in a particular policy area would lead to greater attribution of responsibility to national governments relative to the EU level.

Hypothesis 1b: People in countries with higher levels of government activity in a policy domain attribute relatively less responsibility to the EU for policy outcomes in that domain compared with people in countries with lower levels of national government activity.

Next, we turn to the question of how individuals' predispositions shape their attribution of responsibility.

Impact of Group-Serving Biases

Few studies have explicitly examined how perceptual biases may influence the way in which people assign responsibility in a federal context. Exceptions are studies by Rudolph (2003a) and Brown (2010), which show that for American voters, partisanship is an important moderator of the effect of evaluations of performance on attribution of responsibility. That is, people appear to engage in partisan rationalization when they attribute responsibility for fiscal conditions in states, with partisans of the governor's party more likely to attribute responsibility to the governor for, say, improving economic conditions. We expect similar group-serving attribution biases to influence how voters assign responsibility in the EU. The main difference in the context of the EU is that when responsibility is assigned to more than one level, partisanship might not be the only in-group of importance.

At the national level, we would expect partisanship to be a factor conditioning whether or not voters decide to hold the government responsible for policy performance. But when it comes to the EU level, partisanship is not expected to be a decisive factor, as the EU has a mixed, collective executive consisting of delegates of different political persuasions from all member states. It is therefore very difficult to identify a specific "partisan" affiliation of the Council, or even the Commission (Føllesdal & Hix, 2006). Instead, research has shown that the primary factor determining attitudes toward policies at the European level is general attitudes toward the EU, which in turn are largely driven by identity concerns (Hooghe & Marks, 2005, 2009; McLaren, 2006). In other words, the "nation" versus "Europe" may be regarded as a salient in-group/out-group division in this context. Typically people who have more exclusive national identities are less likely to be in favor of European integration (Carey, 2002; Hooghe & Marks, 2005; McLaren, 2006).⁷ In that sense, support for or opposition to the EU is seen as deeply rooted in people's conceptions of their own (national) identity. That means that we would expect that feelings about the EU will affect responsibility judgments in a similar manner to partisanship. Partisanship and EU support are not identical types of predispositions, but they may well act in a similar way. People who are negatively disposed toward the EU as a level of government will be more likely to attribute responsibility to the EU when things are going badly, just like opposition partisans will be more likely to blame the domestic government for a crisis.

Hypothesis 2: Regardless of partisanship, people who support the EU project are more likely to attribute responsibility to the EU when conditions are improving and less likely when conditions are deteriorating.

The next section discusses how we test these hypotheses empirically.

Data and Method

To examine responsibility judgments in the EU, we designed a module of questions on attribution of responsibility, conducted as a part of the European Election Studies (EES) 2009 (see Van Egmond, Sapir, van der Brug, Hobolt, & Franklin, 2010). The EES is a cross-national survey of all 27 EU member states in 2009, with a nationally representative sample of around 1,000 respondents in each country. The dependent variable in our analysis is the degree to which respondents assign responsibility to the EU over the national level government for a particular policy domain, with five policy areas in total. Because our objective is to examine how voters assign responsibility to different levels of government in a multilevel system, we measure attribution of responsibility to the EU level of government *relative* to the attribution of responsibility to the national level government. We refer to this as *net EU attribution*. The question wording can be illustrated with these questions asked to British respondents about the economy:

Now I would like to ask you some questions about how much responsibility the British government and the European Union have for some of the things going on in Britain. Of course, you may think that neither is responsible. First, thinking about the economy, how responsible is the British government for economic conditions in Britain? Please indicate your views using any number on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means “no responsibility” and 10 means “full responsibility.”

And what about the European Union, how responsible is the EU for economic conditions in Britain?

Each dependent variable has been operationalized as a net EU attribution score—that is, the “EU attribution score” minus “national government attribution score”—as we are interested in capturing the relative level of responsibility that people attribute to each level of government. This means that in principle, the net EU attribution score runs from -10 to $+10$ for each policy area, where $+10$ indicates that only the EU is responsible and -10 that only the national government is responsible, although in practice around three quarters of respondents score within a range three points higher and three

Table 1. Attribution of Responsibility Across Policy Domains and Levels of Government.

	National government attribution	SD	EU attribution	SD	Net EU attribution	SD	<i>n</i>
Climate change	6.25	3.10	6.22	3.03	-0.04	2.56	23,918
Interest rates	6.30	3.17	5.88	3.08	-0.40	3.75	22,253
Immigration	7.23	2.81	6.00	3.03	-1.25	3.29	23,788
Economy	7.19	2.72	5.70	2.70	-1.50	3.08	25,043
Health	7.80	2.70	4.72	3.00	-3.16	3.46	24,044

Source: EES 2009.

points lower than the mean.⁸ Similar questions were asked for four other policy areas: interest rates, health care, immigration, and climate change. These five policy areas provide variation on several dimensions of interest. First, in the areas of the economy, interest rates, and immigration, there is variation in the degree to which the EU has influence over member states due to the opt-out provisions described above. Second, whereas interest rates can be characterized as an exclusive competence of the EU for Eurozone members, health care and most aspects of immigration and climate change fit more squarely within the category of complementary competences. Finally, there is considerable variation in member state activity in individual policy domains, such as health care and climate change.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for three scales (National Government Attribution, EU Attribution, and Net EU Attribution) across policy domains for all respondents. The table also reports standard deviations, which are similar across the National and EU Attribution Scales. As we would expect people tend to attribute more responsibility to the EU in policy areas where the EU has exclusive competences than in areas where they have only complementary/coordination competences. The highest responsibility attributions for national governments and the lowest responsibility attributions for the EU are for health care, in contrast to climate change and interest rates where the two levels of governments, on average, are perceived to be almost equally responsible. Overall national governments are seen as more responsible in all five areas, although only marginally so in the case of climate change.⁹

This ranking of net EU attribution is in line with expectations, and thus, these descriptive statistics lend some support to the expectation that institutional context has an impact on EU attribution. The next step is to specify a statistical model that can be estimated to explain variation in net EU attribution within countries and across countries. Because individual respondents

are nested within national surveys, we estimate multilevel (random effects) models. As discussed, we are interested not only in the individual-level correlates of EU attribution but also in how the institutional context, at the EU and national level, shapes responsibility judgments. To test Hypotheses 1a and 1b, we include variables that capture the variation of EU involvement across member states for some policy areas, and national government control for other policy areas. To measure the degree of EU involvement in the economy, and particularly monetary policy, we include a dummy for all Eurozone outsiders. The degree of EU involvement in the area of immigration is captured by a dummy for those countries who do not participate in the border-free Schengen zone (UK and Ireland) or who have another opt-out relating to common immigration policy (Denmark). The EU's influence in the areas of health care and climate change does not vary across countries; however, we capture variation in the policy-specific institutional context by measuring the varying levels of activity by national governments. To measure the level of government involvement in health care, we include a measure of national government spending on health care (as a percentage of all spending). To measure the level of government involvement in efforts to deal with climate change, we include a dummy for countries that have adopted National Adaptation Strategies (NAS) on climate change, which is a detailed strategy for how to deal with climate change at the national level.

Finally, we control for the size of the economy, as it may be argued that larger economies and richer countries have more powerful national institutions relative to the EU,¹⁰ and also for the quality of national institutions as people may assign less responsibility to poorer quality national institutions (Rohrschneider, 2002). The first is measured by total gross domestic product (GDP) of the country in trillions of U.S. dollars, and the second is measured using an additive scale (Cronbach's α , .96) of the World Bank's five governance indicators on voice and accountability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption (see Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2009).

At the individual level, we hypothesized that net EU attribution will be influenced by support for the EU, which is operationalized as an additive scale, based on four questions tapping into respondents' feelings about the EU and the European integration project.¹¹ To test Hypothesis 2, concerning group-serving attribution bias, it is necessary to evaluate whether EU support conditions the effect of performance on attribution. Retrospective performance evaluations were measured separately for each of the five policy areas on a 1 to 5 scale with 1 representing *a lot worse* and 5, *a lot better*. We control for partisanship, which is measured by a dummy for government partisans, that is, respondents who say they feel closer to one of the national

government parties.¹² To assess the moderating effect of both types of attribution bias, we include two interaction terms in our models: one between EU support and policy evaluation and one between partisanship and policy evaluation. We also control for political knowledge at the individual level, because more politically knowledgeable people might be expected to be better able to distinguish between the responsibilities of different levels of government.¹³ Political knowledge was measured as an additive scale using a set of seven factual knowledge questions relating to national governments and the EU and is group-mean centered. (All question wordings and descriptive statistics can be found in the appendix.)

Results

Across each of the five policy areas, we run a hierarchical linear regression model to test our propositions. This model contains both contextual variables to test the effects of the EU (Hypothesis 1a) and national context (Hypothesis 1b), as well as individual-level predictors to test the group-serving attribution bias (Hypothesis 2). Table 2 shows this model run separately for each of the five different issue areas.

First, the impact of the national and EU institutional context on net EU attribution is clear. Policy-specific institutions influence net EU attribution as Hypothesis 1a suggested. Unsurprisingly, we see a large effect for Eurozone outsiders, as citizens in countries not belonging to the Eurozone attribute significantly less responsibility to the EU than citizens within the Eurozone. For the economy, being outside the Eurozone subtracts nearly one point from the average EU net attribution score. As we would expect given that Eurozone membership has a greater effect on monetary policy than fiscal policy at the time of the survey, this effect is even more pronounced for the policy domain of interest rates. On average,¹⁴ people living in countries outside the Eurozone attribute more responsibility to their national governments than the EU (scoring -1.5 on our scale), whereas people living in Eurozone countries attribute more responsibility to the EU than their national government (scoring 0.3 on our scale). By contrast, we find no significant effect of living in one of the countries with an immigration related opt-out (Denmark, Ireland, and the UK) on attributed responsibility in the field of immigration. This may be because a common immigration policy has yet to be fully established at the EU level.

Turning to policy-specific institutions at the national level, we also find support for our hypothesis that higher levels of national government activity in a policy domain lead to a lower net EU responsibility attribution (Hypothesis 1b). In particular, a larger government-funded health care sector

Table 2. Individual and contextual determinants of responsibility attributions.

	Economy		Interest rates		Immigration		Health care		Climate change		
	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	
<i>Individual-level</i>											
Intercept	-0.74	0.26	***	0.44	***	0.39	0.19	0.94	0.35	0.21	
EU support	-0.37	0.21	*	-0.46	0.32	-1.08	0.36	***	-1.20	0.33	***
Government partisan	0.45	0.09	***	0.50	0.13	0.90	0.15	***	0.17	0.14	***
Performance evaluation	0.05	0.06	***	0.08	0.05	*	-0.13	0.06	***	0.06	***
Political awareness	-0.10	0.01	***	0.17	0.01	***	-0.05	0.01	***	0.01	***
Support x evaluation	0.31	0.11	**	0.33	0.11	***	0.44	0.13	***	0.74	0.12
Partisan x evaluation	-0.03	0.04	***	-0.10	0.04	***	-0.23	0.05	***	-0.01	0.05
<i>Context level</i>											
Size of the economy	0.09	0.10	***	-0.13	0.18	0.07	0.15	0.01	0.16	0.08	0.08
Quality of national institutions	-0.13	0.04	***	0.02	0.07	-0.12	0.06	**	-0.12	0.06	**
Issue-specific context ^a	-0.95	0.21	***	-1.76	0.37	***	-0.05	0.50	-0.03	0.01	**
Intercept variance	0.24			0.78		0.55		0.57	0.12		
Intraclass correlation	0.03			0.06		0.05		0.05	0.02		
Intercept variance explained	55%			51%		5%		35%	35%		
Deviance	125779			114304		110823		125354	112415		
Akaike Information Criterion	125803			114328		110847		125378	112439		
N (group, individual)	27, 25027			27, 21331		27, 21436		27, 24018	27, 23831		

Note: Hierarchical linear model with net EU attribution as the dependent variable. ***p < .01 **p < .05 *p < .10, two-tailed test.

^aIssue-specific context: Eurozone outsider (Economy, Interest rates); opt-out related to immigration (Immigration); national government expenditure on health (Health care); National Adaptation Strategy (Climate change).

leads to lower net EU responsibility attribution for health care and NAS for climate change lead to a lower net EU responsibility attribution for climate change. These effects are not quite as big as those for Eurozone membership, but they are not trivial. In countries where the proportion of public spending on health care is one standard deviation below the mean (e.g., Greece or Latvia) the average net EU responsibility attribution is around 0.75 of a point higher than in countries where the proportion of state spending on health care is one standard deviation above the mean (e.g., the Netherlands or Sweden). A national adaptation strategy for climate change similarly moves attributed responsibility away from the EU toward the national government, in this case by 0.4 of a point.

These institutional effects are important, but people's responsibility attributions are not simply a product of the way in which real institutions vary. Table 2 also shows that they depend on the perceptual screens that people view the world through. First, as shown in the extant literature, there is some evidence that partisanship matters, because government partisans are more likely to absolve their own governments of responsibility and shift the blame to the EU level by attributing relatively more responsibility to the EU as they perceive conditions to worsen. Yet, we only find this conditioning relationship to be statistically significant in two of the five policy domains of monetary policy and immigration. For the economy and health care there appears little effect of partisanship, and in fact, for climate change, the effect of partisanship is signed in the opposite direction to that which we would expect. Second, the control variable of political awareness has a significant impact on EU attribution in all of the models. The direction of this effect differs depending on the policy domain; politically aware citizens are more likely to attribute responsibility to the EU for interest rates and, to some extent, climate change, and are less likely to attribute responsibility to the EU for the economy, health care, and immigration.¹⁵

Of most interest are the interactions between EU support and evaluation. These are statistically significant across all policy areas except climate change and strongly support Hypothesis 2. People who champion the EU project are more likely to attribute responsibility to the EU when conditions are improving and less likely when conditions are worsening. To illustrate how EU support conditions the effect of performance evaluations on EU attribution, we graph the marginal effect of performance evaluation on net EU attribution changes across different levels of EU support in Figures 1a to 1d (based on estimates from Table 2).

The solid sloping line (with 95% confidence intervals around the line) in each of the figures indicates how the marginal effect of performance evaluations on net EU attribution changes across levels of EU support. Figure 1c

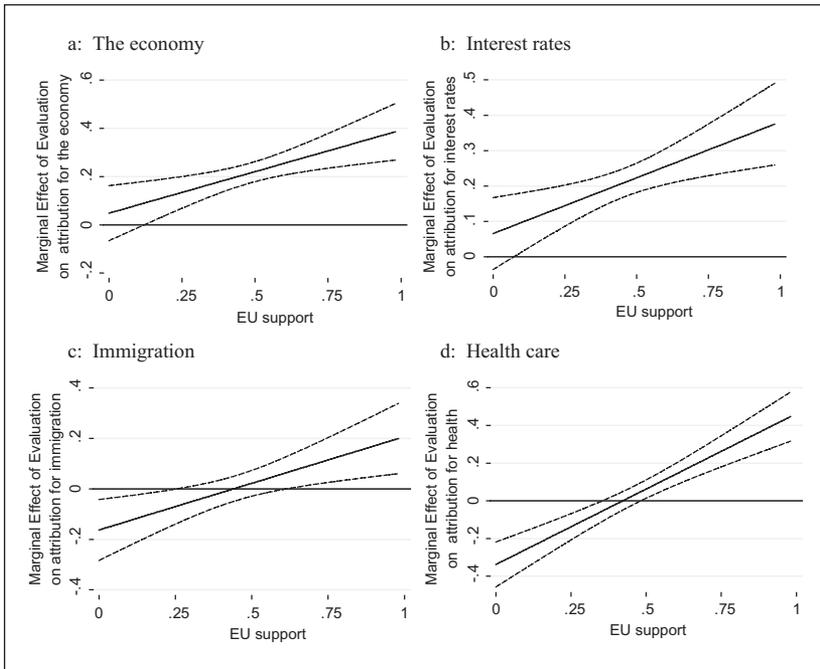


Figure 1. Marginal effect of performance evaluation on net EU attribution, by levels of EU support (with 95% confidence intervals).

(immigration) and Figure 1d (health care) show the strongest support for Hypothesis 2. These graphs clearly illustrate that the effect of performance evaluation on net EU attribution is moderated by levels of EU support: The marginal effect is positive for EU supporters and negative for Euroskeptics, as we would expect. We also find a conditioning impact of EU support on the effect of performance evaluation on attribution in the two economic policy domains, the economy (Figure 1a) and interest rates (Figure 1b). But surprisingly, for Euroskeptics, there is no negative effect on net attribution when they perceive economic conditions to be improving. Rather, it is just those who like the EU who increasingly attribute responsibility to the EU as conditions improve.

These effects are of comparable magnitude and generally of greater magnitude than the effects of different institutions that we saw earlier. For example, for an individual who strongly supports the EU (scoring 1 on our scale),

the effect of moving from the worst to best economic outlook reduces his net responsibility score by 1.3 points, yet for someone else who is opposed to the EU (scoring 0 on our scale) economic conditions make almost no difference. There are similarly sized effects for interest rates and slightly larger ones for immigration. For health care, these effects are even greater. For EU enthusiasts (again scoring 1), moving from worst to best performance evaluation makes people 1.7 points *more likely* to claim the EU is responsible. For EU opponents (again scoring 0), the opposite effect is found. Moving from worst to best conditions makes people 1.2 points *less likely* to claim the EU is responsible. Overall, therefore we find strong support for Hypothesis 2, and if anything, these findings suggest that “EU” versus “the nation” not only acts as a stronger in-group/out-group distinction in the context of attribution across levels of governance in the EU than partisanship but may be more important than real institutional differences between countries.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined how citizens assign responsibility to different levels of government in the EU. Despite the complex and dynamic nature of the EU, European citizens appear capable of making distinctions in terms of what different levels of governments do, and their responsibility judgments are shaped by the institutional context. We have demonstrated here that not only can citizens distinguish between the EU’s degree of responsibility across policy domains, they are also responsive to the institutional context at the national and the EU level of government. It is evident that citizens in countries outside the Eurozone attribute less responsibility to the EU for the economy in general and monetary policy making in particular. We also find that citizens in countries with an active involvement in specific policy areas, in particular large government-funded health care sectors and national strategies to deal with climate change, attribute less responsibility to the EU relative to their national government in these policy domains. These findings suggest that when the division of responsibilities is clear, citizens’ perceptions of political responsibility are at least partially influenced by the institutional context.

However, while the institutional context helps to structure responsibility judgments in the EU, we also find that group-serving biases are a powerful driver of people’s assignments of responsibility. Whereas the extant literature has focused almost exclusively on the role of partisanship (e.g., Gomez & Wilson, 2008; Maestas et al., 2008; Rudolph, 2003a, Tilley & Hobolt, 2011), we highlight another type of in-group/out-group distinction that is particularly salient in the EU. This is the distinction between those

individuals who feel exclusively attached to their nation, and do not want to surrender sovereignty to the EU level of government, and those who feel more positive toward European integration. Our results show that this distinction serves as a powerful moderator of responsibility judgments: EU enthusiasts are more likely to attribute responsibility to the EU when conditions are improving, whereas Euroskeptics tend to deny the EU any responsibility for positive outcomes. This demonstrates that even in complex systems of governance lacking a federal-level partisan executive, citizens still rely on political predispositions when assigning responsibility. The difference here is that these political predispositions are not related to political parties, but rather feelings toward the institutions themselves. This study thus contributes to the extant literature on citizen attribution in complex institutional environments that has either ignored in-group biases, or focused exclusively on the role of partisanship.

What are the normative implications of these findings? Previous literature has emphasized the usefulness of heuristics, such as prior political attachments, in overcoming informational shortfalls and navigating complex democratic processes (McElvey & Ordeshook, 1989; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). However, the impact of group-serving attribution biases identified in this study should be viewed as a potential threat to democratic accountability in the EU, rather than as a means of overcoming voter ignorance. The reliance of prior predispositions about the EU to navigate the complex structures of governance in the EU can lead to grave “attribution errors” (Pettigrew, 1979), as Euroskeptics are more likely to absolve their national governments of any responsibility for poor performance, even in instances where they are to blame, and equally pro-Europeans are prone to credit the EU with improving policy conditions even in cases where the responsibility lies almost exclusively at the national level. A prevalent effect of in-group biases thus casts into doubt the ability of voters to hold politicians to account for the policy outcomes that they are responsible for in this multilevel government context.

This potentially has serious implications for democratic processes in the EU at the national and at the EU level. First, politicians at both levels may exploit the existence of complex institutions and in-group biases to seek to attach credit to their own institutions and shift blame to other institutions. Second, the classic reward–punishment model of elections as a means of voters punishing politicians for poor performance and crediting them for favorable conditions only functions to the extent that citizens can attribute responsibility correctly and rely on these attributions when casting their ballot. While examining the influence of responsibility evaluations on vote choice is beyond the scope of this article, our findings have highlighted that

responsibility evaluations are only partially a reflection of actual divisions of responsibilities and are significantly shaped by people’s feelings about that EU. This suggests that standard notions of electoral accountability based on performance voting are potentially threatened by the complexity and fluidity of the EU’s multilevel system of government.

Appendix

Descriptive Statistics and Variable Description

Table A1. Descriptive Statistics.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
Individual-level variables				
EU support	0.45	0.19	0	1
Government partisan	0.30	0.46	0	1
Performance evaluations (economy)	1.86	0.95	1	5
Performance evaluations (health care)	2.58	0.97	1	5
Performance evaluations (immigration)	2.71	0.91	1	5
Performance evaluations (interest rates)	2.75	1.22	1	5
Performance evaluations (climate change)	2.59	0.87	1	5
Political knowledge (group-mean centered)	0	1.79	-4.8	4.5
Context-level variables				
Quality of national institutions	5.34	2.52	0.5	9.5
Size of the economy (GDP)	0.58	0.97	0	3.7
Eurozone outsider	0.41	0.49	0	1
Immigration-related opt-out	0.11	0.31	0	1
Government spending on health care	72.81	11.88	44.9	93.1
NAS	0.41	0.49	0	1

GDP = gross domestic product; NAS = National Adaptation Strategies.

Individual-Level Variables

Support for the European Union. Additive scale (0-1) based on the following four questions:

- How satisfied are you, on the whole, with the way democracy works in the European Union?
- Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion?
- How much confidence do you have that decisions made by the European Union will be in the interest of (country)?
- Do you trust the institutions of the European Union?

Government partisan. Dummy variable based on the following questions (1 = respondents who said yes to the question and mentioned a party in national government):

- Do you consider yourself to be close to any particular party? If so, which party do you feel close to?

Performance evaluation. Five-point Likert-type scale for each of the five policy areas measured using the following questions:

- What do you think about the economy? Compared to 12 months ago, do you think that the general economic situation in Britain is a lot better, a little better, stayed the same, a little worse or, a lot worse?
- And over the last 12 months, has the standard of health care in Britain got a lot better, a little better, stayed about the same, got a little worse or got a lot worse?
- And over the last 12 months, has immigration in Britain increased a lot, increased a little, stayed the same, decreased a little, or decreased a lot? *Followed by:* In your opinion, is this a change for the better or the worse?
- And over the last 12 months, have interest rates in Britain increased a lot, increased a little, stayed the same, decreased a little or decreased a lot? *Followed by:* In your opinion, is this a change for the better or the worse?
- Finally, over the last 12 months, has climate change in Britain become a lot more of a problem, a little more of a problem, is about the same, has become a little less of a problem or a lot less of a problem?

Political awareness. Scale based on seven factual knowledge questions about national and European politics. “Don’t know” and refused to answer were treated as incorrect answers. Example of factual knowledge questions asked in the British survey:

- Switzerland is a member of the EU.
- The European Union has 25 member states.
- Every country in the EU elects the same number of representatives to the European Parliament.
- Every six months, a different Member State becomes president of the Council of the European Union.
- The British Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families is Ed Balls.

- Individuals must be 25 or older to stand as candidates in British general elections.
- There are 969 members of the British House of Commons.

Context-Level Variables

Size of the economy: Gross domestic product (PPP), trillions of euro, 2009. Source: Eurostat

National government expenditure on health care: General government expenditure on health as a percent of total government expenditure, 2008. Source: WHO

Quality of national institutions: World Bank Governance indicators 2008. Additive scale capturing the quality and effectiveness of national political institutions (Cronbach's alpha, .96):

- *Voice and Accountability (VA)*—capturing perceptions of the extent to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and a free media.
- *Government Effectiveness (GE)*—capturing perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies.
- *Regulatory Quality (RQ)*—capturing perceptions of the ability of the government to formulate and implement sound policies and regulations that permit and promote private sector development.
- *Rule of Law (RL)*—capturing perceptions of the extent to which agents have confidence in and abide by the rules of society, and in particular, the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, the police, and the courts, as well as the likelihood of crime and violence.
- *Control of Corruption (CC)*—capturing perceptions of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, including petty and grand forms of corruption, as well as “capture” of the state by elites and private interests.

Authors' Note

The design of the survey benefited from expert advice from Susan Banducci, Wouter van der Brug, Cees van der Eijk, Geoff Evans, and Michael Marsh. Previous versions of the article were presented at workshops at the University of Michigan, the University of Colorado, Indiana University, and the University of Mannheim. We are

grateful for the insightful comments from the participants at these workshops, in particular Nathalie Giger, Tim Hellwig, Joe Jupille, Sandra Leon, Patrick O'Mahen, and Chuck Shipan, as well as from the CPS reviewers. We would also like to thank Alisa Voznaya and Traci Wilson for excellent research assistance.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This project was generously supported by the United Kingdom's Economic Social and Research Council (RES-062-23-1622), and it would not have been possible without the collaboration with the EU's 7th Framework Programme project, PIREDEU (Providing an Infrastructure for Research on Electoral Democracy in the European Union).

Notes

1. Other scholars have focused on how partisanship shapes economic evaluations directly. It has been argued that the causal arrow runs in the opposite direction to that posited in the classic economic voting model (Evans & Andersen, 2006; Wlezien, Franklin, & Twiggs, 1997), although others have disputed this (Lewis-Beck, Nadeau, & Elias, 2008). This article does not enter this debate, but focuses instead on how group-serving biases affect the attribution of responsibility.
2. See consolidated versions of the Treaty on European Union (EU) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, Title 1, Articles 2-6 (Official Journal C 115 of 9 May 2008).
3. In areas of exclusive competences, the EU can make directives and conclude international agreements. In areas of shared competences, member states cannot exercise competence in areas where the EU has already done so. Finally, in areas of complementary competences, the EU's powers are limited to actions to support, coordinate, or supplement member states' actions.
4. Two countries, Denmark and the UK, have opt-outs from joining the Eurozone and Sweden has a de facto opt-out. At the time our survey was collected in 2009, seven other member states were obligated to join the Eurozone once they fulfilled the entry (convergence) criteria.
5. The competency of the EU in the area of fiscal policy has expanded over time. In response to the EU's sovereign debt crisis beginning in 2010, several measures have been adopted to reform the Eurozone's Stability and Growth Pact, and the economic governance of the Eurozone more generally, to ensure greater macro-economic coordination at the European level.

6. Some member states have negotiated certain opt-outs from legislation or treaties of the EU, meaning they do not have to fully participate in certain policy areas. Currently, five states have such opt-outs: Denmark (four opt-outs), Ireland (two opt-outs), Poland (one opt-out), Sweden (de facto opt-out from the Eurozone), and the United Kingdom (four opt-outs).
7. Other factors, specifically utilitarian cost–benefit calculations, have also been shown to influence citizens’ support for the EU (see Gabel, 1998; McLaren, 2006).
8. There are other ways in which the dependent variable could be operationalized. The most obvious is to simply use the EU attribution scale (0-10) as the dependent variable. To check the robustness of our results, we also estimated our models using this alternative specification. The substantive results produced when estimating the models below with this dependent variable are similar (and available from the authors upon request). In the article, we have chosen to use the “net EU attribution” operationalization as our dependent variable as it most accurately captures the theoretical construct of attribution in a multilevel system of governance.
9. This is an opinion that voters share with experts in EU policy making. In an expert survey, conducted by the authors with identical survey items, 119 EU experts from across the EU also ranked climate change as the policy area with highest (outside the Eurozone) or second highest (within the Eurozone, where interest rate policy is ranked higher) net EU attribution level.
10. Previous models also included a range of other context-level controls that could have an impact on attribution: gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, age of democracy, EU accession year, a new member state dummy, clarity of responsibility at the national level, and Freedom House scores. None of these variables were statistically significant or changed the findings shown here.
11. These items form a single dimension with a Cronbach’s alpha of .72. See the appendix for details on question wording.
12. We find no differences to our substantive results, if we instead divide the variable into three groups: government partisan, opposition partisan, and respondents with no partisanship. Hence, in our models we simply include a dummy for government partisan (coded 1) versus everyone else (coded 0).
13. Other individual-level controls, such as age, class, income, gender, and left-right ideology, were included in previous models, but they made no difference to the results presented here.
14. To keep things simple, we just hold all other variables at their mean, including partisanship, which strictly speaking can only hold the value of zero or one.
15. One explanation of this political sophistication effect is that it is simply magnifying the differences between issue areas that we see in Table 1. For the economy, immigration, and health care, the average person thinks that national governments are more important than the EU, but this gap is even bigger for the most politically sophisticated people. For interest rates, the political sophistication effect is positive, but in fact, this is heavily mediated by being in the Eurozone

or not. For people living in Eurozone countries, political sophistication has a positive effect on net EU attribution, and for those living in non-Eurozone countries, political sophistication generally has a negative effect. Finally, although the effect of political knowledge on perceived climate change responsibility is positive, it is also very small in comparison with the other effects.

References

- Abramowitz, A. I., Lanoue, D. J., & Ramesh, S. (1988). Economic conditions, causal attributions, and political evaluations in the 1984 presidential election. *The Journal of Politics*, 50, 848-863.
- Anderson, C. J. (2000). Economic voting and political context: A comparative perspective. *Electoral Studies*, 19, 151-170.
- Arceneaux, K. (2006). The federal face of voting: Are elected officials held accountable for the functions relevant to their office? *Political Psychology*, 27, 731-745.
- Atkeson, L. R., & Partin, R. W. (1995). Economic and referendum voting: A comparison of gubernatorial and senatorial elections. *American Political Science Review*, 89(1), 99-107.
- Atkeson, L. R., & Partin, R. W. (1998). Economic and referendum voting and the problem of data choice: A reply. *American Journal of Political Science*, 42, 1003-1007.
- Brown, A. R. (2010). Are governors responsible for the state economy? Partisanship, blame, and divided federalism. *The Journal of Politics*, 72, 605-615.
- Campbell, A., Converse, P., Miller, W., & Stokes, D. E. (1960). *The American voter*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Carey, S. (2002). Undivided loyalties: Is national identity an obstacle to European integration? *European Union Politics*, 3(4), 387-413.
- Cutler, F. (2004). Government responsibility and electoral accountability in federations. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 34, 19-38.
- Cutler, F. (2008). Whodunnit? Voters and responsibility in Canadian federalism. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 41, 627-654.
- De Vries, C., Edwards, E. E., & Tillman, E. R. (2011). Clarity of responsibility beyond the pocketbook: How political institutions condition EU issue voting. *Comparative Political Studies*, 44(3), 339-363.
- Duch, R. M., & Stevenson, R. (2008). *The economic vote: How political and economic institutions condition election results*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- EES. (2009). *European Parliament Election Study 2009, voter study* (Advance Release, 01/05/2010). Available from www.piredeu.eu
- Evans, G., & Andersen, R. (2006). The political conditioning of economic perceptions: Evidence from the 1992-97 British electoral cycle. *The Journal of Politics*, 68, 194-207.
- Feldman, S. (1982). Economic self-interest and political behavior. *American Journal of Political Science*, 26, 446-466.

- Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (2007). *Social cognition: From brains to culture*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Føllesdal, A., & Hix, S. (2006). Why there is a democratic deficit in the EU: A response to Majone and Moravcsik. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 44(3), 533-562.
- Gabel, M. J. (1998). *Interest and integration. Market liberalization, public opinion and European Union*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Gomez, B. T., & Wilson, J. M. (2008). Political sophistication and attributions of blame in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. *Publius*, 38, 633-650.
- Hellwig, T. T. (2001). Interdependence, government constraints, and economic voting. *The Journal of Politics*, 63, 1141-1162.
- Hellwig, T. T., & Samuels, D. (2008). Electoral accountability and the variety of democratic regime. *British Journal of Political Science*, 38, 65-90.
- Hewstone, M. (1989). *Causal attribution: From cognitive processes to collective beliefs*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Holzinger, K., & Schimmelfennig, F. (2012). Differentiated integration in the European Union: Manu concepts, sparse theory, few data. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 19(2), 292-305.
- Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2003). Unraveling the central state, but how? Types of multi-level governance. *American Political Science Review*, 97(2), 233-243.
- Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2005). Community, calculation and cues. *European Union Politics*, 6(4), 421-445.
- Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2009). A postfunctionalist theory of European integration: From permissive consensus to constraining dissensus. *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(1), 1-23.
- Johns, R. (2011). Credit where it's due? Valence politics, attributions of responsibility, and multi-level elections. *Political Behavior*, 33(1), 53-77.
- Kaufmann, D., Kraay, A., & Mastruzzi, M. (2009). *Governance matters VIII: Governance indicators for 1996-2008* (World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 4978). Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- Key, V. O. (1966). *The responsible electorate*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Kohler-Koch, B. (1996). Catching up with change: The transformation of governance in the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 3(3), 359-380.
- León, S. (2011). Who is responsible for what? Clarity of responsibilities in multilevel states: The case of Spain. *European Journal of Political Research*, 50(1), 80-109.
- Lewis-Beck, M. S. (1997). Who's the chef? Economic voting under a dual executive. *European Journal of Political Research*, 31, 315-326.
- Lewis-Beck, M. S., Nadeau, R., & Elias, A. (2008). Economics, party, and the vote: Causality issues and panel data. *American Journal of Political Science*, 52, 84-95.
- Lupia, A., & McCubbins, M. D. (1998). *The democratic dilemma: Can citizens learn what they need to know?* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Maestas, C. D., Atkeson, L. R., Croom, T., & Bryant, L. A. (2008). Shifting the blame: Federalism, media, and public assignment of blame following Hurricane Katrina. *Publius*, 38, 609-632.

- Malhotra, N., & Kuo, A. G. (2008). Attributing blame: The public's response to Hurricane Katrina. *The Journal of Politics*, *70*, 120-135.
- Marsh, M., & Tilley, J. (2010). The attribution of credit and blame to governments and its impact on vote choice. *British Journal of Political Science*, *40*(1), 115-134.
- McElvey, R., & Ordeshook, P. (1986). Information, electoral equilibria and the democratic ideal. *The Journal of Politics*, *48*, 909-937.
- McLaren, L. (2006). *Identity, interests and attitudes to European integration*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Niemi, R. G., Stanley, H. W., & Vogel, R. J. (1995). State economies and state taxes: Do voters hold governors accountable? *American Journal of Political Science*, *39*(4), 936-957.
- Peffley, M. (1984). The voter as juror: Attributing responsibility for economic problems. *Political Behavior*, *6*, 275-294.
- Pettigrew, T. F. (1979). The ultimate attribution error: Extending Allport's cognitive analysis of prejudice. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *5*, 461-476.
- Powell, G. B. (2000). *Elections as instruments of democracy: Majoritarian and proportional visions*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Powell, G. B., & Whitten, G. D. (1993). A cross-national analysis of economic voting: Taking account of the political context. *American Journal of Political Science*, *37*, 391-414.
- Rohrschneider, R. (2002). The democracy deficit and mass support for an EU-wide government. *American Journal of Political Science*, *46*(2), 463-475.
- Rudolph, T. J. (2003a). Institutional context and the assignment of political responsibility. *The Journal of Politics*, *65*, 190-215.
- Rudolph, T. J. (2003b). Who's responsible for the economy? The formation and consequences of responsibility attributions. *American Journal of Political Science*, *47*, 698-713.
- Sigelman, L., & Knight, K. (1985). Public opinion and presidential responsibility for the economy: Understanding personalization. *Political Behavior*, *7*, 167-191.
- Tilley, J., & Hobolt, S. B. (2011). Is the government to blame? An experimental test of how partisanship shapes perceptions of performance and responsibility. *The Journal of Politics*, *73*, 316-330.
- Van Egmond, M. H., Sapir, E., van der Brug, W., Hobolt, S. B., & Franklin, M. N. (2010). *EES 2009 Voter Study* (Advance Release Notes). Amsterdam, Netherlands: University of Amsterdam.
- Whitten, G. D., & Palmer, H. D. (1999). Cross-national analyses of economic voting. *Electoral Studies*, *18*, 49-67.
- Wlezien, C., Franklin, M., & Twigg, D. (1997). Economic perceptions and vote choice: Disentangling the endogeneity. *Political Behavior*, *19*, 7-17.

Author Biographies

Sara B. Hobolt is Sutherland Chair in European Institutions and professor at the European Institute at the London School of Economics. Previously, she has held posts at the University of Oxford and the University of Michigan. She has published more than 25 articles in peer-reviewed political science journals on comparative politics, elections and referendums, and public opinion. Her book *Europe in Question: Referendums on European Integration* (Oxford University Press, 2009) was awarded the Best Book prize by the European Union Studies Association in 2010.

James Tilley is a lecturer in the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford and a fellow of Jesus College, Oxford. He has published extensively in political science journals, including *Journal of Politics*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Political Behavior*, and the *European Journal of Political Research*, mainly about voting behavior in Britain, Northern Ireland, and Europe.