



## Coalition government and electoral accountability

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### A B S T R A C T

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Single-party governments are commonly thought to be more clearly responsible for government policy than coalition governments. One particular problem for voters evaluating coalition governments is how to assess whether all parties within a coalition should be held equally responsible for past performance. As a result, it is generally argued that voters are less likely to hold coalition governments to account for past performance. This article uses data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems project to assess whether and how the composition of coalition governments affects the way in which people use their votes to hold governments to account, and which parties within coalitions are more likely to be held to account for the government's past performance.

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### 1. Introduction

The ability of citizens to hold governments to account for their past actions is one of the pivotal functions of elections. Yet, beginning with Downs (1957), it has been argued that the complex political context of coalition governments provides a hindrance to accountability. Electoral accountability is said to exist when citizens can discern whether governments are acting in their best interest and can punish or reward them accordingly in elections.<sup>2</sup> That way, incumbents who perform well remain in office and those who do not are forced to leave (Key, 1966). According to this view of elections as a sanctioning mechanism, 'accountability is a retrospective mechanism, in that sense that the actions of rulers are judged *ex post* by the effects they have' (Cheibub and Przeworski, 1999: 225). Yet, electoral accountability requires citizens to make attributions of responsibility, and voters' ability to sanction governments

may be obscured by the blurred lines of responsibility within multi-party governments. Indeed, a number of studies have suggested that coalition governments create difficulties for the reward–punishment model of voting (see e.g. Anderson, 1995a,b, 2000; Dorussen and Taylor, 2001; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Powell, 2000; Powell and Whitten, 1993; Whitten and Palmer, 1999). The general expectation is therefore that 'voters would be likely to hold single-party governments more responsible for policies than multi-party coalitions' (Powell and Whitten, 1993: 401).

This paper examines the relationship between coalition governments and electoral accountability. We address two questions: are voters less likely to hold coalition governments to account compared with single-party governments? And do voters hold all types of coalitions and all parties within a coalition equally to account for past performance? While the effect of political context on electoral accountability has received a lot of scholarly attention in recent years, this study differs from the extant literature in a number of important ways. First, the issue of electoral accountability has been examined almost exclusively with respect to economic voting, that is the extent to which the electorate rewards and punishes a government for (perceived or actual) economic upswings and downturns. While the economy is undoubtedly a key element of

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<sup>2</sup> There are other forms of accountability outside the electoral arena, such as government accountability to legislatures and media scrutiny, but we do not discuss them here.

the government's remit, it is not the only way to think of electoral accountability, and in this paper we adopt a more general approach to the notion of 'government performance', namely voter assessments of how good a job the government has done. Second, this paper not only examines how electoral accountability varies across single-party and multi-party governments, but also how it varies *within* coalition governments. One particular problem for voters evaluating a coalition government is to assess whether all parties within the coalition should be held equally responsible. Hence, we address the question of whether all parties in the coalition are treated the same way by the electorate. We examine different factors that may explain why voters are more likely to hold some coalition partners responsible for the government's action. We find that the most important factor explaining differences between coalition partners in most of the countries under investigation is the head-of-government's party effect: in general, voters are more likely to hold the head-of-government's party accountable for the government's performance compared with other parties in the coalition. In our final analysis we consider whether lower levels of electoral accountability for coalitions as a whole can be explained by lower levels of accountability for certain parties within coalitions, particularly those who do not hold the office of head of government.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the existing literature on the effect of political context and coalition governments on economic voting and we present a series of testable hypotheses. Thereafter, these theoretical propositions are tested using data from the second module of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems.

## 2. Coalition government and electoral accountability

The standard model of how the accountability mechanism operates relies on 'retrospective voting'. In this view, voters evaluate the performance of the government on one or more issues, such as economic management. They vote to retain the incumbent only when the desired standard has been met, and governments wanting to be re-elected will make sure to satisfy voter expectations in anticipation of electoral sanction. The early models of electoral accountability were developed for, and relied on assumptions specific to, the (American) case of two-party competition with a unified executive (see e.g. Key, 1966; Fiorina, 1981). Yet, in a global context, over 70 per cent of proportional representation (PR) elections produce coalition governments (Katz, 1997: 162; see Hobolt and Karp, 2010). Even in the US context, divided government – where opposing political parties control the executive and the legislative branches – has been the rule rather than the exception in the post-war period. As a consequence a number of studies have emphasized that responsibility for performance is seldom as transparent as in the simple model of retrospective voting (Anderson, 1995a,b, 2000; Dorussen and Taylor, 2001; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Powell, 2000; Powell and Whitten, 1993; Whitten and Palmer, 1999). Indeed, clarity of responsibility is frequently obscured by power sharing in coalition governments and multiple levels of decision-making. The general contention

is that when voters are unsure about which parties are responsible for economic policymaking, their ability to use the vote to sanction politicians is compromised (Powell and Whitten, 1993; Whitten and Palmer, 1999; Anderson, 2000; Powell, 2000; Nadeau et al., 2002; Duch and Stevenson, 2005). In the context of economic voting models, this implies that voters are less likely to use the vote to sanction for past performance and the connection between the economic performance and vote choice is weakened.

The empirical studies of clarity of responsibility have often relied on general indices comprising a range of factors that can be said to compromise clarity of responsibility. Powell and Whitten (1993) and Whitten and Palmer (1999) consider the weak voting cohesion of the governing parties, a participatory and inclusive committee structure in which the roles of chair are distributed proportionately between the parties, an upper house controlled by the opposition, minority government, and coalition government all to be associated with lower clarity of responsibility.<sup>3</sup> Nadeau et al. (2002) further expand the measure of clarity of responsibility to include the proportion of the dominant party seats in government, the ideological cohesion of governing parties, the number of significant parties and, in some models, the age of the government. Division of powers, whether vertical or horizontal, also reduces clarity of responsibility, and hence both presidentialism and federalism make it more difficult for voters to attribute responsibility (see Arceneaux, 2006; Gélinau and Bélanger, 2005; Powell, 2000). The effects of these various institutional features on electoral accountability are often considered simultaneously in these empirical studies. As Powell and Whitten (1993: 406) note:

[M]any of the factors that contribute to lower clarity of responsibility go together. Systems with legislative institutional arrangements that guarantee opposition participation in policymaking tend to be those with proportional representation and more multiparty and minority governments. Thus we can fairly reasonably distinguish *systems* by their average clarity of responsibility, not having to worry too much about the weighting of the individual variables.

While Powell and Whitten argue that many of these institutional factors were highly correlated, this does not seem to be the case for our data and we cannot form a reliable scale for clarity of responsibility.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in order to analyze how exactly coalition government mediates electoral accountability we certainly need to separate out at least that factor from the standard additive index of

<sup>3</sup> Royed et al. (2000) have challenged the robustness of the Powell and Whitten's (1993) findings claiming that there is little support for the clarity of responsibility argument. They even claim that economic voting is higher for coalition as opposed to single-party governments. Their empirical analyses, however, have been criticized by Palmer and Whitten (2003).

<sup>4</sup> For our cases the average correlation between coalition government, bicameral opposition, weak party cohesion, opposition control of committee chairs and minority-government status was 0.02. No single correlation between any pair of these variables was greater than 0.26. Were we to form an additive scale from the variables in the way that Powell and Whitten (1993) do, the Cronbach's alpha would be 0.4 and so we could not have much confidence that the scale was measuring a single underlying phenomenon.

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