



# The conditionality of the trade-off between government responsiveness and effectiveness: The impact of minority status and polls in the Canadian House of Commons



Mark Pickup<sup>a, \*</sup>, Sara B. Hobolt<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Simon Fraser University, Canada

<sup>b</sup> London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 3 July 2015

Accepted 14 July 2015

Available online 8 August 2015

### Keywords:

Minority governments

Representation

Polls

Responsiveness

Effectiveness

Canada

## ABSTRACT

There is an extensive literature on the relative virtues of different electoral systems in producing more responsive and effective governments, but far less attention has been paid to role of dynamic factors. This article examines how government minority/majority status and popularity shape the trade-off between government responsiveness and effectiveness. We argue that minority governments face legislative constraints that incentivize them to be responsive to the public, but that this comes at the expense of legislative effectiveness. This trade-off between responsiveness and effectiveness is, however, conditioned by the government's standing in the polls. The more popular a minority government is in the polls, the less responsive and the more effective it becomes. These propositions are tested using original time-series data on public policy preferences, government popularity, legislative output and public expenditures in Canada from 1958 to 2009. Our findings demonstrate that minority governments are more responsive to the median voter but less legislatively effective than majority governments, and that these effects are moderated by the popularity of the government.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

The relative merits of consensus and majoritarian democracies have been debated extensively (see e.g. Lijphart, 1999; Powell, 2000; Rogowski and Kayser, 2002). A key element of this debate is the argument that consensus democracies with institutions of proportional representation tend to create greater incentives for responsiveness than majoritarian systems with plurality electoral systems (e.g. Powell, 2000), while at the same time reducing the government's legislative effectiveness (e.g. Lowell, 1896). Conversely, majoritarian systems are considered more effective but provide fewer incentives for responsiveness. This suggests a trade-off between responsiveness and effectiveness. Others disagree that such a trade-off exists, either arguing that majoritarian systems provide greater incentives for responsiveness (Persson and Tabellini, 2004; Norris, 1997) or that proportional systems do not necessarily hinder effectiveness (Lijphart, 1999; Powell, 2000).

Hence, disagreement persists in the literature as to how institutions conditions government responsiveness and effectiveness. Moreover, most studies have focused on differences *between* different electoral systems and neglected variation in responsiveness and effectiveness *within* systems.

This article contributes to this debate on the trade-off between responsiveness and legislative effectiveness by examining the role of *dynamic* institutions, notably the government's minority/majority status and popularity. Hence, in contrast to most of the existing literature, we examine the effect of contextual factors that change regularly on government responsiveness and effectiveness. We argue that a government's incentives and abilities to respond to citizens' preferences and enact legislation in parliamentary systems are crucially determined by whether it currently holds a majority in the legislature as well as its prospects of controlling a legislative majority after the next election. Minority governments are expected to be more responsive to the median voter than majority governments, as they need to appeal to the median voter and the median legislator, in order pass legislation in parliament. At the same time, though, minority governments will be less effective at passing legislation. However, this trade-off between effectiveness and responsiveness is conditioned by the government's standing in

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [mark.pickup@sfu.ca](mailto:mark.pickup@sfu.ca) (M. Pickup), [s.b.hobolt@lse.ac.uk](mailto:s.b.hobolt@lse.ac.uk) (S.B. Hobolt).

the polls. The more popular a minority government is in the polls, the less responsive and the more effective it becomes, until it behaves much like a majority government. In fact, that point occurs once a minority government's standing in the polls suggests it could form a majority if an election were held.

These propositions are tested using unique time-series data from Canada in the period from 1958 to 2009. Canada makes an excellent case to test our propositions for three reasons. First, minority governments are common in Canada at the federal level. Almost half of the sessions of the Canadian Federal Parliament over the last half-century have had minority governments. Second, the lack of coalition governments in Canada simplifies the analysis by allowing for a clear distinction between majorities with full control and minorities that are dependent on the house at large, with no intermediate category that relies on more complex coalitional logic. Third, Canada is considered to have one of the most majoritarian electoral systems (Lijphart, 1999). It thus provides a test of the trade-off between responsiveness and legislative effectiveness under extreme circumstances.

Our analysis of government responsiveness and effectiveness in the post-war period in Canada makes a number of contributions to the literature. First, we are focusing on the conditioning influence of dynamic factors rather than static ones. We can appropriately study their influence on responsiveness and effectiveness over time within a single country and thereby avoid making erroneous inferences due to confounding factors in a static cross-national study. Second, we utilize a new measure of the preferences of the governing party's electoral base, so that we can estimate the responsiveness of the government to the median voter relative to their party base. Third, we go further than past studies on responsiveness in modeling the equilibrium between public opinion and government policy, allowing us to estimate both long-term and short-term responsiveness.

This article proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the literature on responsiveness and effectiveness, with a specific focus on the conditions that lead to variation in both. Thereafter, we present a simple theoretical model of why government minority/majority status and popularity shape responsiveness and legislative effectiveness and derive our hypotheses. We then examine whether the levels of social policy implemented by governments over time reflect the changing salience of social policy in the electorate (*policy responsiveness*) and the government's ability to pass into legislation the bills it tables in Parliament (*legislative effectiveness*), and how this is moderated by government status and standing in the polls. We find support for our propositions concerning the effect of government status and standing in the polls. The concluding section discusses the implications of our results.

## 2. Government responsiveness and effectiveness

In an ideal world, we would design institutions that ensure that governments are both responsive to the preferences of citizens and effective in implementing their policy programme. Scholars have long debated whether consensus democracies, characterized by proportional representation (PR) and power-sharing executives, are preferable to majoritarian democracies characterized by plurality electoral rule and concentration of executive power (Lijphart, 1999; Powell, 2000). Much of the debate has focused on how relatively static institutions, notably electoral rules (Lijphart, 1999; Powell, 2000; Rogowski and Kayser, 2002), shape government effectiveness and responsiveness. It is commonly argued that there is a trade-off between the government effectiveness that characterizes single-party majority governments produced by plurality elections, and representation of voters' views and preferences seen in systems with proportional representation (Lijphart, 1999: 258).

However, the extant literature presents rather mixed evidence about the effect of electoral institutions.

Looking first at government effectiveness, it is conventional wisdom that the majoritarian model with its emphasis on majority rule and concentration of power produces more effective governments. For proponents of the majoritarian model, a key virtue of this system is that it tends to produce "strong" single-party governments, with a majority of parliamentary seats, which are able to implement their manifesto policies without the need to engage in post-election negotiations with coalition partners. Election results are decisive for government formation. Cabinet government can pass whatever legislation they feel is necessary during their term of office, so long as they can carry their own parliamentarians with them. Legislative effectiveness is enhanced by the exaggerative bias in the electoral system which rewards the winner with a bonus of seats. A "manufactured majority" is created by translating a relatively small lead in votes into a larger lead of seats in parliament (see Norris, 1997).

Some have argued that the effectiveness of governments in majoritarian systems comes at the expense of responsive government, and proportional systems and coalition governments provide higher ideological congruence between the public and governments (Lijphart 1984, 1999; Powell, 2000). In other words, there is a trade-off between the two virtues of government. Others argue that plurality systems and majoritarian governments promote the link between the preferences of voters and the positions and policies of governments (see Austen Smith and Banks 1988; Cox, 1997; Persson and Tabellini, 2004). Generally, there has been conflicting arguments and evidence about whether majoritarian or proportional systems results in the most responsive governments.

On the one hand, majoritarian systems, such as first-past-the-post, have been argued to be highly responsiveness to voter preferences, since in a competitive two-party system a small swing in the popular vote is sufficient to bring the opposition into office. In such a system, where a relatively modest change in electoral preferences produces disproportionate changes in power, governments should be highly responsive to voter preferences (Norris, 1997; Austen Smith and Banks, 1988; Cox, 1997; Persson and Tabellini, 2004). Because shifts in public preferences have bigger consequences on election day in plurality systems, governments are likely to pay closer attention to changes in public opinion. There should also be greater incentive for constituency service in single-member districts than in large multi-member constituencies. Furthermore, scholars examining the effect of institutions on the degree of responsiveness in between elections have argued that majoritarian systems with strong governments enhance clarity of responsibility. This makes it easier for voters to identify politicians that shirk and this should encourage governments to be more responsive to public preferences (Anderson 2000; Powell and Whitten, 1993). If clarity of responsibility conditions the extent to which voters can sanction governments, then such institutions should also be an important moderator of responsiveness, since governments that are held more to account should be more motivated to adjust policies in line with public preferences. As Soroka and Wlezién (2010: 48) note 'during the periods between elections, there are good reasons to think that governments in majoritarian systems actually are more responsive'.

On the other hand, proponents of proportional systems have argued that such systems are more conducive to representative and responsive government (Lijphart, 1999; Powell, 2000). Evidence suggests that proportional systems produce governments with positions closer to the median voter (see e.g. Powell, 2000). According to Powell (2000, 2004) a balanced nationally-oriented party system where parties win roughly consistent vote shares from one contest to the next provides information helpful in

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7464022>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7464022>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)