



# Holding *parties* responsible at election time: Multi-level, multi-party government and electoral accountability



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## ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the crucial role played by party-specific responsibility attributions in performance-based voting. Three models of electoral accountability, which make distinct assumptions regarding citizens' ability to attribute responsibility to distinct governing parties, are tested in the challenging Northern Ireland context – an exemplar case of multi-level multi-party government in which expectations of performance based voting are low. The paper demonstrates the operation of party-attribution based electoral accountability, using data from the 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly Election Study. However, the findings are asymmetric: accountability operates in the Protestant/unionist bloc but not in the Catholic/nationalist bloc. This asymmetry may be explained by the absence of clear ethno-national ideological distinctions between the unionist parties (hence providing political space for performance based accountability to operate) but the continued relevance in the nationalist bloc of ethno-national difference (which limits the scope for performance politics). The implications of the findings for our understanding of the role of party-specific responsibility attribution in performance based models of voting, and for our evaluation of the quality of democracy in post-conflict consociational polities, are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

A simple model of citizens holding governments to account assumes a two-party system (one governing party and one opposition party), very clear lines of responsibility (the government is responsible for life getting better or worse) and reward/punishment based voting behaviour (voters support the government if they think life has got better and they support the opposition party if they think life has got worse) (Key, 1966; Fiorina, 1981). This clear picture of democratic accountability in action is, however, blurred by a number of institutional factors (Powell and Whitten, 1993; Whitten and Palmer, 1999; Nadeau et al., 2002; Hobolt et al., 2012). For example, multi-level government can lead to a lack of clarity about what exactly the national level government (as opposed to sub-national or supra-national level of government) is responsible for

(Wilson and Hobolt, 2010; Johns, 2011; Cutler, 2004, 2008; Arceneaux, 2006). Also, coalition governments in multi-party systems undermine the simple government-opposition dichotomy and beg the question: which particular governing party should be punished if life has got worse (and which particular opposition party should be rewarded) (Anderson, 2000; Duch and Stevenson, 2008; Fisher and Hobolt, 2010)?

Most governments are coalition governments (Hobolt and Karp, 2010) and most of these operate, to varying degrees of significance, in a multi-level government context (Hooghe and Marks, 2001; Hooghe et al., 2010). Thus, citizens are faced with the vertical (multi-level government) and horizontal (coalition government) blurring of the lines of political responsibility and must confront the very daunting challenge of identifying which particular political actor should be held to account at election time. In order to explain how citizens respond to this challenge, I elaborate and test three models of electoral accountability, based on

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distinct assumptions about the ability of citizens to attribute political responsibility.

The first model makes quite limited assumptions about citizens' ability to engage in responsibility attribution and performance based voting. The model assumes that citizens assess the *overall performance* of a coalition government and distinguish between strongly influential and weakly influential parties in the coalition (perhaps on the basis of which party holds the prime minister position or which party has most cabinet seats). The powerful parties in the coalition are rewarded by voters if the government performed well and are punished if the government performed badly. Parties that are not perceived to be powerful in the coalition are not judged on the basis of government performance because they did not do much to influence that performance. Accordingly, citizens' choice between different coalition parties is driven by overall evaluation of coalition performance, conditional upon the attribution of relative responsibility for governing performance to the different coalition parties.

The second model makes much more onerous demands on voters. The model assumes that citizens attribute responsibility – across a *range* of issue areas – to the appropriate level of government *and* to specific governing parties. The model assumes that voters reflecting on the performance of a coalition government in a national election must ask the following questions. In relation to a particular issue domain (such as the economy, health services, the environment, crime and security and so on), has life got better or worse? Was the national level coalition government actually responsible for this? If it was responsible, which particular governing party, if any, was *most* responsible? Performance-based electoral accountability may then operate if responsibility, for this issue domain, is attributed not only to the government but also to a specific governing party and voters reward or punish the party accordingly.

A third model is also tested which assumes that it is simply too difficult for citizens to attribute responsibility. The model assumes that voters become so confused and frustrated by the challenge of attributing responsibility that they simply do not bother to vote at all. This model sees the vertical distribution of power and the horizontal sharing of power as contributing to citizen apathy and abstention by making political life so much more complicated than the 'simple' operation of a two party system in a unitary state.

I test these models on an extremely challenging case: an all-inclusive coalition government in a devolved setting in which expectations of performance based voting are low. Specifically, I focus on performance-based voting at the 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly election. This election to the devolved Assembly occurred at the end of a period of 'grand coalition' government involving all of the five political parties in the system.

In the next section, I elaborate – in the context of the relevant literature – the three models of accountability and voting. In subsequent sections, I outline the usefulness of the Northern Ireland case for testing these models, describe the data and report the results. Finally, I discuss a/the general implications of the findings for our understanding of electoral accountability in the complex contemporary

world where multi-level multi-party government poses significant challenges to citizens in terms of holding decision makers to account at election time, and b/the specific implications of the findings for the operation of democratic accountability in the context of powersharing government in deeply divided places.

## 2. Models

### 2.1. Model 1: overall evaluation and accountability

Much of the previous work on performance based voting in the coalition context has focused on demonstrating that performance models work less well in the coalition context than the single party context, given the higher clarity of responsibility associated with single party government and the difficulty for citizens in identifying who the responsible actors are in a complicated multi-party government setting (Lewis-Beck, 1988; Paldam, 1991; Fisher and Hobolt, 2010). Further research has tried to distinguish between different *types* of coalitions rather than simply comparing coalition government to single party government. 'Complex' coalitions are those which include many rather than few parties and in which power is quite dispersed rather than concentrated in one dominant coalition party. The more complex (or less 'cohesive') the coalition, the less likely performance based voting is (Lewis-Beck, 1988; Anderson, 2000; Duch and Stevenson, 2008; Hobolt et al., 2012).

Very few previous studies have addressed the question as to whether the *different parties* in the coalition government are assessed differently by voters. Anderson (2000) and Duch and Stevenson (2008) suggest that some coalition parties are obviously more influential than others and voters are more likely to hold the powerful governing coalition parties to account (via retrospective economic voting) than the non-powerful coalition parties. Two institutional factors in particular are likely to signal to voters which parties are particularly important: the party that holds the prime ministership and parties that hold relatively large numbers of cabinet portfolios (Anderson, 2000; Duch and Stevenson, 2008). Fisher and Hobolt (2010) focus on citizens' overall evaluation of government performance, rather than narrowly focusing on the economic issue domain, and find that retrospective performance based voting is indeed stronger for those coalition parties that hold the premiership but there is no additional 'party size' effect. This suggests that citizens' perceptions of the relative power of different coalition parties is driven by knowledge of which party the prime minister is from: this party is then clearly punished or rewarded depending on the performance of the government (and the other coalition parties are essentially absolved of responsibility, being neither rewarded nor punished because of their uninfluential status in the government).

Here, in tandem with Fisher and Hobolt (2010), voters are assumed to come to an overall evaluation as to whether the coalition government has performed well or not. Voters are also assumed to identify differences in the overall level of influence on the government that each party had. However, in contrast to previous research that has *inferred*

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