



# Pivotality and responsibility attribution in sequential voting<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes responsibility attributions for outcomes of collective decision making processes. In particular, we ask if decision makers are blamed for being pivotal if they implement an unpopular outcome in a sequential voting process. We conduct an experimental voting game in which decision makers vote about the allocation of money between themselves and recipients without voting rights. We measure responsibility attributions for voting decisions by eliciting the monetary punishment that recipients assign to individual decision makers. We find that pivotal decision makers are punished significantly more for an unpopular voting outcome than non-pivotal decision makers. Our data also suggest that some voters avoid being pivotal by voting strategically in order to delegate the pivotal vote to subsequent decision makers.

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*“As soon as a majority has voted for it, it is declared passed, and the member who voted last is given credit for having passed it.”—Shapley and Shubik<sup>1</sup>*

## 1. Introduction

Many economic and political decisions are taken collectively. For example, boards commonly make decisions about business strategies in firms, committees of experts decide on interest rate policies in central banks, and coalition governments often enact laws in democratic countries. This paper analyzes how people affected by a collective decision,

such as workers, shareholders, or electorates, attribute responsibility for the decision outcome to individual members of the collective decision making entity. Understanding responsibility attribution for collective decisions is of relevance because it can, for example, affect shareholders' willingness to extend a manager's contract or influence a political party's prospects of reelection.

Collective decisions are often reached by a vote among the decision makers and the voting process is often transparent. For example, the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee reveals its members' voting decisions and explicitly states that the “decision goes to the majority and there is no attempt to arrive at a consensus: members are individually accountable for their decisions” (see also [Bank of England, 2005](#)). The minutes of the U.S. Federal Reserve Open Market Committee are published as well ([Levy, 2007](#)).<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, we focus on analyzing responsibility attribution for outcomes of collective decisions reached by a transparent voting process. In particular, we ask if decision makers are blamed for being *pivotal*

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<sup>1</sup> Shapley and Shubik (1954), p. 788.

<sup>2</sup> Both the Monetary Policy Committee and the Federal Reserve Open Market Committee publish individual votes, and the latter also reveal the order of votes, namely: first chairman, then vice chairman, then the other members in alphabetical order (see also [Gerlach-Kristen and Meade, 2011](#)).

if they implement an unpopular outcome in a *sequential voting process*. This question is of interest also in light of the above quotation from [Shapley and Shubik \(1954\)](#) who introduced the idea that the pivotal voter in a collective decision making process “is given credit,” i.e., is held responsible for having passed the decision. Hence, our paper can also be seen as a test of their proposition.

We employ an incentivized laboratory experiment to address our research question. In the experiment, there are groups of six subjects. Three subjects have voting rights and decide sequentially and observably whether to implement an equal or an unequal allocation of money among themselves and the other three subjects, who have no voting rights. The equal allocation gives the same amount of money to all subjects, whereas the unequal allocation increases the monetary payoff of the subjects with voting rights at the expense of those without voting rights. A simple majority rule applies. After the vote, subjects without voting rights can assign costly punishment points to the voters. We interpret the assignment of punishment points as a measure of responsibility attribution.

Our main finding is that subjects attribute significantly more responsibility to the pivotal voter than to the other voters. The result holds even if we control for standard punishment motives such as outcome based fairness (e.g., [Fehr and Schmidt, 1999](#); [Bolton and Ockenfels, 2000](#)), unkind intentions (e.g., [Rabin, 1993](#); [Dufwenberg and Kirchsteiger, 2004](#)), or the interaction of outcomes and intentions ([Falk and Fischbacher, 2006](#)). Our data further suggest that about one-fifth of those voters who reveal their preference for the unequal allocation when their vote as the last voter is decisive vote for the equal allocation if it is possible to “delegate” the pivotal vote to the subsequent voter.<sup>3</sup>

Our study is closely related to recent experimental work in political science by [Duch et al. \(2015\)](#), who also examine responsibility attributions for collective decisions. They consider a setting that, like ours, is akin to a collective dictator game with punishment. Their design, however, is different in two important ways. First, they consider a simultaneous voting procedure, while we focus on sequential voting. Second, one decision maker has proposal power and decision makers have weighted votes in their design, while the voters in our design are symmetric (apart from the sequential order of voting). [Duch et al.](#)'s main finding is that the decision maker with proposal power and the one with the largest voting share incur the most punishment in case of an unequal allocation. The sequential voting procedure in our experiment renders the role of pivotality more salient. Our work thus complements [Duch et al.](#)'s findings by revealing the importance of the pivotal vote for responsibility attribution in collective decision making.

Our paper also contributes to the political science literature that does not focus on collective decision making in particular but on responsibility attribution in general. In this literature, the attribution of credit or blame has been related to the power of a decision maker (see e.g. [Banzhaf, 1964](#); [Penrose, 1946](#); [Shapley and Shubik, 1954](#)), the number of veto players ([Tsebelis, 2011](#)) and governing party size (see e.g. [Anderson, 1995](#); [Lewis-Beck, 1990](#)), and to the extent to which unified control of policymaking by incumbent governments is possible ([Powell and Whitten, 1993](#)). Similarly, [Finer \(1975\)](#), [Alesina \(1997\)](#), [Lijphart \(2012\)](#), and [Franzese \(2002\)](#) argue that coalition governments provide less potential for electoral accountability than single party governments, and [Duch and Stevenson \(2008\)](#) report that voters are more likely to attribute economic outcomes to single-party majority cabinets than to coalition governments.

Finally, the results of our study contribute to the economics literature on the importance of pivotality in markets and organizations (see e.g. [Falk and Szech, 2013](#)), as well as to the literature on delegation of unpopular decisions (e.g., [Hamman et al., 2010](#); [Coffman, 2011](#); [Bartling and Fischbacher, 2012](#)). [Falk and Szech \(2013\)](#) analyze how

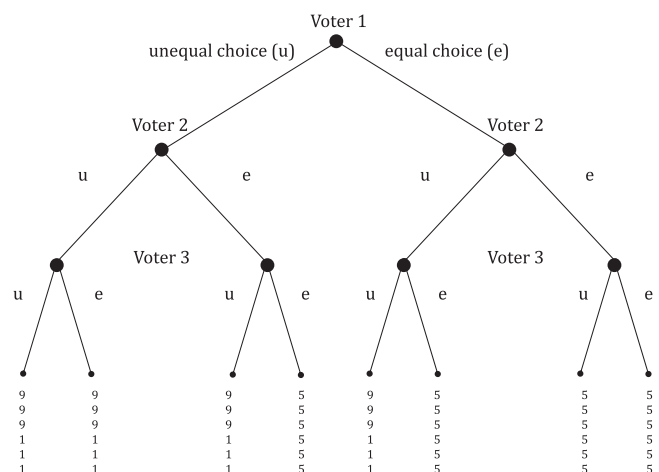
the decision maker's perception of her own pivotality affects the likelihood of taking an immoral decision (the decision to kill a mouse) in a trading environment. They find that the likelihood of killing the mouse is higher if a decision maker's perception of being pivotal is lower and that on the aggregate level, many more mice are killed in a treatment where pivotality is diffused. Our study shows that not only the perception of the pivotality of the own decision matters for choice. We show that more responsibility and blame are attributed to pivotal than to non-pivotal decision makers, which in turn can affect the decision makers' choices. [Bartling and Fischbacher \(2012\)](#) demonstrate that it is possible to shift the blame for an unpopular decision by delegating the choice to another person, and that many people do so. The main result of our current paper shows that it is also possible in the context of collective decision making to shift some blame by “delegating” the pivotal vote, and the data suggest that some voters make use of that option.

The remainder of our paper is organized as follows. [Section 2](#) explains the experimental design and procedures. We discuss the punishment predictions of standard social preference models in economics, as well as the role of pivotality for punishment in [Section 3](#). [Section 4](#) reports our experimental results. [Section 5](#) concludes.

## 2. Experimental design

We implemented a sequential voting game with punishment. Three “voters” and three “receivers” form a group. The voters decide on the allocation of a total of 30 points among the six group members, using a simple majority rule. There are two possible allocations. The unequal allocation gives 9 points to each of the voters and only 1 point to each of the receivers (9,9,9;1,1,1). The equal allocation distributes the 30 points evenly among the six group members (5,5,5;5,5,5). Importantly, the voters cast their votes sequentially. The other voters and receivers of the group are able to observe both the sequence of the decisions and the decisions themselves. First, Voter 1 votes for one of the two allocations. Then Voter 2 observes Voter 1's action and votes herself. Finally, Voter 3 casts her vote, knowing the choices of Voters 1 and 2. Abstentions are not possible. [Fig. 1](#) illustrates the decision tree.

The three receivers first observe the sequence of the votes and thus also the voting outcome. One randomly selected receiver then has the option to punish individual voters by deducting points. Punishing is costly for the receivers. A receiver incurs a fixed cost of one point to be able to deduct up to seven points from the voters. The seven punishment points can be assigned to a single voter or they can be distributed among two or all three voters, but it is not possible to reduce a voter's payoff below zero.



**Fig. 1.** Voters' choices and resulting allocations for voters and receivers.

<sup>3</sup> A vote by the third voter is decisive if the first two voters fail to reach a majority.

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