

**ERC Starting Grant
Summary of Research proposal**

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**Democratic Responsiveness in Comparative Perspective: How Do
Democratic Governments Respond to Different Expressions of Public
Opinion?**

RESPONSIVEGOV

Duration: 60 months

Proposal summary (half page)

To what extent are democratic governments responsive to citizens' demands and preferences between elections? Are governments more likely to be responsive to the interpretation of public opinion through surveys or to collective and publicly expressed opinion –generally in the form of protests? When does one or the other type of expression prevail as a mechanism to foster governmental responsiveness? What happens when both forms of expression of the public mood are in clear contradiction? Are certain institutional and political configurations more likely to make governments more responsive to citizens' views between elections? And are certain political configurations more conducive to governments paying attention to opinion polls while others make them more receptive to collective action claims-making? This project will aim to answer these questions by developing a comparative study of governmental responsiveness in established democracies between 1980 and 2010. To this purpose, we will discuss the relevant definitions of 'governmental responsiveness' and 'public opinion', and analyse data from various sources: (i) public opinion surveys, (ii) datasets with information on protest events, (iii) news reports on public moods, collective action, and governmental activity and decision-making, and (iv) comparative indicators on institutional attributes of democratic systems. In terms of the research strategy, the project will combine the analysis of a large number of cases (20 established democracies) with a more detailed study of a set of up to 7 cases. With this design, the project aims at providing substantial insight into the relative performance of different democratic institutions and configurations. This study will provide a highly innovative approach to the representative link between citizens and governments by comparing the dynamics of democratic representation in decision-making junctures in the periods between elections for which governments cannot invoke an electoral mandate, with the dynamics that emerge in 'normal' policy-making situations. This innovative perspective allows to better ascertain the dynamics of responsiveness, while limiting the normative objections that can be raised around the desirability of governmental responsiveness between elections in representative democracies.

The project lies at the intersection of various fields of political science and sociology and will be of interest to analysts and scholars of democratic theory, public opinion, citizen politics, social movements, political sociology, political institutions, and comparative politics.

Introduction and Objectives

To what extent are democratic governments responsive to citizens' demands and preferences between elections? Are governments more likely to be responsive to the expression of public opinion through surveys or to collective and publicly voiced opinion – generally in the form of protests? When does one or the other type of expression prevail as a mechanism to foster governmental responsiveness? What happens when both forms of expression of the public mood are in clear contradiction? Are certain institutional and political configurations more likely to make governments more responsive to citizens' views between elections? And are certain political configurations more conducive to governments paying attention to opinion polls while others make them more receptive to collective action claims-making?

The proposed research project outlines a long-term research effort that will aim at adequately answering these research questions. These are still open questions that remain largely unanswered, and they are crucial for democratic theory and for properly understanding how contemporary governments and politics work. Consequently, this project seeks to contribute in an innovative way to the study of democratic politics by paying close and careful attention to the dynamics of governmental responsiveness (or lack of it) to the views and preferences that the public expresses in two very different forms: through public opinion surveys and through collective action (protest, petitions, advocacy, etc.). Until now, scholars – mostly political scientists and sociologists – have 'sat at separate tables' when it comes to studying the governmental reactions to opinion polls or the general 'public mood', on the one hand, and to collective action, on the other. A large and increasing body of scholarship has developed in political science that focuses on how much attention governments pay to opinion polls and to the public mood expressed through surveys. A parallel body of research, primarily conducted by sociologists, has concentrated on studying the effect of social movements – and collective action more generally – on policy making. At present, there has been no systematic and comprehensive attempt to connect these two areas of research that look at similar phenomena from different angles and theoretical lenses. Partly, this has been due to the methodological schism that exists between these two fields, but also because increasing specialisation and the abundance of scholarly production makes interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation very difficult. With this project, I intend to start bridging the gap between two areas of research that have tended to ignore each other by providing innovative theoretical lenses, as well as the analytical and methodological tools, that will make cross-fertilisation fruitful.

In order to develop this research agenda fully, comparative work is essential. Comparative analyses of how citizens' demands and preferences shape policy-making are scarce and partial.¹ Interestingly enough, the few studies that have considered countries other than the US do not support optimistic conclusions about governmental responsiveness to general expressions of public opinion or 'opinion moods' (Brooks 1985; but see Soroka and Wlezien 2010). While governments, Congress, and politicians in the US seem to be fairly responsive to – or, at least, congruent with – their citizenry's preferences and demands as measured by public opinion polls (see Page and Shapiro 1992; Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson 1995; Geer

¹ In relation to how public opinion shapes policy making, Brooks (1985) studies Great Britain, Canada, the US and France. Soroka and Wlezien (2010) focus on the Anglo-Saxon democracies (Canada, the US and the UK). Binzer Hobolt and Klemmensen (2005) analyse the British and Danish cases. More generally, Baumgartner et al. (2009) analyse patterns of change in outputs of governmental processes in Belgium, Denmark and the US and conclude that change dynamics are highly punctuated and are driven by institutional friction, but they do not explicitly address the relation between public opinion shifts and governmental outputs.

1996; Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002; but see Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), analyses focusing on other countries are much less conclusive, partly because they are few in number. In turn, though the effects of collective or ‘loud voiced’ expressions of public opinion on policy making have been the object of study of social movement scholars (Giugni, McAdam and Tilly 1999, Meyer, Jenness and Ingram 2005), it is one of the least researched facets in this field and one that is rarely undertaken in comparative perspective and where case studies of the US dominate (see Tarrow 1994, Kriesi et al. 1995, Giugni 2004 for an exception). Nevertheless, a common conclusion of both strands of scholarship is that the degree to which policy making reflects the public’s expressed views substantially varies across different contexts. Hence, if governments are not equally responsive in all democracies, it is fundamental that we understand which institutional and political system factors foster or hinder democratic responsiveness.

Indeed, several scholars have claimed that institutional models and designs make a substantial difference to the process of preference representation in democratic systems. The major elements that define democratic forms of political organisation have been found to shape the outcomes of democratic representation (Lijphart 1999, Powell 2000, 2004, Soroka and Wlezien 2010), but aspects such as electoral contestation or political party models are also thought to be important. In the social movements scholarship, the set of institutional configurations that foster or hinder policy responsiveness to expressions of collective action are captured by the overarching notion of political opportunity structures (POS). Commonly, the degree of decentralization of the state – which determines the accessibility to decision makers at various levels of government – and the complexities of the divisions of power both horizontally and vertically – which determine state capacity – are highlighted as primary drivers of the success in achieving the desired policy outcomes (see Kriesi et al. 1995). Yet, the POS approach broadens the focus of attention by emphasising the importance of elite fragmentation, and of the political alliances that can be forged between collective action challengers and political parties in government and opposition. Thus, an overview of the existing scholarship both in political science and in sociology suggests that a comparative study of the linkage between different ways of expressing the public’s preferences and demands and governmental policy-making will cast new light into the internal workings, dynamics and mechanisms of democratic representation in contemporary democracies, and will allow us to ascertain the impact of institutional designs on this process of representation.

Consequently, the main objective of this project is to study the dynamics by which governments become more or less responsive to different expressions of public opinion and to citizens’ expressed preferences and demands between elections. Hence, the project primarily aims at analysing the linkage between the public’s opinions, preferences and demands (as expressed in opinion polls and through collective action) on the one hand, and governmental decision-making and policy-making on the other. A second, but closely related, objective is to ascertain whether certain institutional and systemic factors make governments more inclined to respond to the public’s mood, or to certain expressions of that mood.

Key Concepts and Analytical Framework

If we are to analyse how the process of democratic responsiveness works, we need to define first what we mean by responsiveness and to what exactly should democratic governments respond. Thus, in order to address the main research questions presented above, the proposed research will address the following definitional and operational questions: What is responsiveness? How do we tell that a Government has responded to public opinion’s preferences and demands? What do we mean by public opinion? How do we measure citizens’ preferences and demands?

How to define the public's opinions, preferences and demands can only be tentatively addressed at the research proposal stage. Given the innovative nature of the project, it is inevitable that some elements of the research design remain underspecified, and it will be part of the research process itself to develop adequate theoretical, analytical and methodological strategies which are suited to provide answers for the questions raised. Nevertheless, this project will draw from one of the most commonly used definitions of public opinion, provided by Stimson (1995: 181): "what the public believes and what it wants from government". The main problem we face, however, is how to specify and measure those beliefs, and what expressions of preference should we take into account. These difficulties are related to the fact that the term 'public opinion' encapsulates a wide range of subsectors of the population, a multiplicity of preferences and a wealth of forms of expression. The "voice of the people" is rarely clear and distinct, it is more often a cacophony of multiple voices from which it is in most cases complicated to extract a single message. The issue, hence, when we approach this topic empirically is to establish an adequate way of identifying those voices.

The traditional approach in political science has been to measure or approximate public opinion through the beliefs and preferences expressed in representative surveys, notably through the use of survey items such as the 'most-important-problem' one (see Binzer Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008), questions about preferences for 'more' or 'less' spending in certain policy areas (Soroka and Wlezien), or a myriad of survey indicators about specific policy preferences (see Manza, Cook and Page 2002). Nevertheless, public opinion, or at least a segment of it, is also expressed through other means. Collective action – in its several forms – is another way for the public to voice their views, demands, and policy preferences. While sociologists and, especially, social movement scholars have paid attention to the impact that collective and, in particular, social movement action have on policy making, little or no research has been done that aims to analyse the varying weights that politicians give to these two different forms of expression of public opinion. And, yet, these distinct ways to voice demands and preferences are very likely to produce very different inputs to the policy process. In fact, very often we find that the views of the public expressed in opinion polls are at odds with the views voiced in the streets (or in the lobbies) through collective action and protest. In this context, this project will focus not only in discerning whether governments respond or not to public opinion, but to which sectors they respond, or how they balance competing views and preferences. Thus, in essence, I intend to employ Stimson's approach to the definition of public opinion, but an important innovative aspect of this research project is that it will use radically different measurement strategies for identifying how public opinion is expressed than is standard in traditional public opinion research.

Another key conceptual development that the project will address entails refining the notion of governmental responsiveness and proposing a theoretical discussion of under what circumstances we should expect responsiveness to occur. From the perspective of democratic political theory we should not expect politicians and governments to be responsive to citizens' demands in all situations. In fact, some would argue that a core premise of representative governments is that – since politicians are accountable to citizens at election time – they should not be constantly paying attention or pandering to citizens' demands between elections. Politicians are expected to anticipate and reflect citizens' preferences in their electoral platforms, and thus responsiveness should emerge during elections. There are clearly contested views of how much politicians should listen to the public when they govern, and this project will address the competing views and reflect on the role of responsiveness for democratic representation in the different situations in which electoral 'mandates' can and cannot be claimed by elected representatives. This relationship between mandates, representation and responsiveness is crucial from a democratic theory perspective. In the presence of electoral mandates, between-elections responsiveness might be detrimental to the process of democratic representation. However, what happens when no mandate on specific issues or policy-making junctures can be claimed? How should governments act (and how do they act) when unexpected situations or decision-making junctures emerge?

Further to the normative debate, an important and related issue is to define responsiveness itself; in other words, what counts as responsiveness? A first difficulty in defining responsiveness in a univocal way is that sometimes it will be predicated upon the congruence between the public's views and preferences and decision- and policy-making; whereas in other cases, responsive governments are those that change their course of action to reflect the desired policy orientation of the public (or parts of the public). In fact, the project will delineate a way of understanding responsiveness that is dynamic and depends on the expression of the public's views during the policy process. In this regard, the notion of responsiveness that will guide the theoretical formulation of this project is closely related to Schumaker's (1975: 493ff.) proposed definition: the relationship between the articulated preferences and demands of the public and the corresponding decisions made by government (or the governmental coalition) in the form of policy or legislation. Hence, in his distinction between access responsiveness, agenda responsiveness, policy responsiveness, outcome responsiveness and impact responsiveness, this project will focus primarily on policy responsiveness.

This brings up the issue of the exogeneity of public opinion, and of the causal relationship between public opinion and governmental or elite action. The congruence between public opinion and policy making is not necessarily indicative of responsiveness if public opinion is not exogenous to policy making or if there is no causal link between the former and the latter.

Thus, the research strategy will be designed in such a way that it will allow us to rule out the problem of the endogeneity of public opinion or reverse causation. As I will discuss in more detail in the research design section, one way of confronting this potential problem is to compare the dynamics of responsiveness of 'normal' decision-making instances with those that take place in 'unexpected' and 'non-mandated' decision-making junctures. This analytical approach to policy responsiveness is one of the major innovations of this project, as how governments respond in such situations, and whether they respond differently to collective action and public opinion changes is a largely unexplored field of research. Whereas most of the extant literature focuses on either policy promises or policy output, I propose to pay special attention to what could be described as situations of 'executive crisis management' such as unexpected wars, riots, sudden immigration crises or sudden financial and economic crises. This novel approach, together with other modelling strategies that allow to model the decision-making juncture as an 'event' dynamic or history will also contribute to reduce the problem of endogeneity.

Furthermore, there is the question of who should "respond". There are various types of collective or individual decision-makers that could be studied to scrutinise their levels of responsiveness. This research project is primarily interested in the Executive branch, but greater consideration will be required during the course of the project as to whether in parliamentary systems it makes much sense to restrict the notion of responsiveness to the Executive alone. To the extent that actions by the Executive branch of government are more bound by the Legislative branch than in presidential systems, it might not be advisable to artificially differentiate between Executive and Legislative responsiveness in parliamentary systems.

Research Design and Methods

The research design and methods of this project builds upon the conviction that using multiple methods is the most appropriate approach for the study of democratic responsiveness, and hence it will combine a number of **quantitative and qualitative** strategies to answer the key research questions. Although the exact details of the research design of this project will have to be developed fully at the first stage of the research process

itself, what follows is the general overview of the methodological approach. A first aspect that will have to be decided at the stage of the research design is the selection of the issue or policy domains in which both ‘normal’ and ‘unexpected’ decision-making junctures will be chosen for analysis. Previous research indicates that different policy issues promote different levels of responsiveness. In this regard, different policy domains will be selected according to the dynamics of political competition they spur (e.g. position vs valence models of party competition, distributional vs moral or identitarian conflict, etc.), as these different dynamics are likely to have consequences on governmental responsiveness. Preliminary policy areas that have been identified as suitable include labour and welfare policies, immigration-related policies, socio-moral policies (e.g. abortion, divorce, gay marriage, etc.), environmental/energy-related policies, and international affairs.

Following this preliminary research design stage, the research project will be divided into **three data collection and analysis phases** that will employ varying methodological perspectives. The **first phase** of the project will focus on conceptual and theoretical elaboration. In addition to expanding the conceptual discussion already outlined around the notions of responsiveness and public opinion, this first phase will be devoted to delineating a formal agent-based model of the dynamics of interaction between governments, different expressions of the public opinion and the institutional setting.

The **second phase** of the study will require selecting a large number of such decision-making events for a medium-size number of western democracies (around 18) between 1980 and 2010, and merging different types of information into a single pooled dataset that will measure for each instance of ‘policy-making juncture’ the following aspects: (1) public opinion reactions through opinion polls (extracted from newspaper reports of polls and from existing survey archives around Europe and the US), (2) public reactions through different forms of protest (extracted from readily-available protest event datasets and newspapers), (3) institutional and systemic properties (extracted from existing comparative politics databases), and (4) the final governmental decisions made (which is the dependent or outcome variable of interest of this project). The countries studied have been chosen as to maximise variability on the crucial institutional variables (form of government, party system characteristics, executive-legislative relations, electoral system, and division of power): Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Various strategies of data analysis will be employed: event data analysis, event history analysis, and Fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis. This analytical and methodological approach to the topic of governmental responsiveness will be an extremely novel and important contribution of this research project.

The **third phase** will focus on a selection of countries (up to of 5) to study in depth the processes of responsiveness, and will pay special attention to systemically describe how exactly do institutional factors play an important role in fostering or hindering governmental responsiveness to citizens’ demands and preferences. The selection of these cases will be made according to the various systemic and institutional factors that will emerge as relevant in the previous phase. In this phase we will employ qualitative and interpretative methods: interviews with key actors and governmental officials, content analysis of governmental statements, detailed legislative histories, extensive content analysis of media coverage, etc..

Finally, the **data sources** that will be employed in the study will be varied and multiple. No primary data collection is contemplated, and all information will come from secondary sources: opinion polls will be used to measure the general ‘mood’ of the public over the specific issues; newspaper and news agencies reports will be used to measure collective action, protest, lobbying and advocacy activities that are publicly recorded, but also to track published opinion poll results; existing protest event data sets will complement the

information obtained through our own scanning of newspapers; compiled datasets of institutional indicators will be used to measure the relevant properties of the political system.

Resources and Research Environment

The **research team** – consisting of the PI, a post-doctoral research fellow (RF) and two PhD students that will provide research assistance – will be responsible for data collection, processing and analysis during the five years of duration of the project. The PI will be responsible for the overall research design, the theoretical development of the first stage of the project, and for providing the leadership and direction of data collection in all stages of the study. The PI will also actively contribute to data collection for some of the cases in stages 2 and 3 of the project, and will be leading data analysis. The RF will perform various tasks related to data gathering and processing, as well as participate in data analysis, dissemination and publications; while the PhD students will assist in data collection tasks that will also be of use for their own dissertations. Additionally, an administrative assistant will help with management and administrative tasks (50% FTE), and an advisory board of up to five expert scholars will be appointed to provide scientific guidance at different stages of the development of the project. A small budget has also been allocated to statistical consultancy and for editorial assistance in the publication of results in international journals and monographs. Overall, staff-related costs constitute the bulk (around 75%) of the requested grant (€1,440,622), but a sufficient amount of funding is sought for non-staff related costs: fieldwork trips, training, dissemination events and conference attendance, web site development, data subscriptions and purchase, etc.

The **research environment** provided by the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Leicester is a good setting to conduct this project. The Department of Politics and International Relations of the University of Leicester is a dynamic and expanding department. The Department is one of the most popular in the UK in terms of student satisfaction. The Department currently has 16 full-time academic staff - including two professors, a reader and five senior lecturers – as well as two emeritus professors and five administrative staff. All academic staff are active researchers and experts in their respective fields. Research within the Department is organised around the broad themes of global ethics and human rights and comparative party politics, with particular staff expertise in areas such as: human rights; animal rights; children and social justice; the politics of property; ‘victimhood’; security and military intervention; intelligence; migration; post-communist democratisation in eastern Europe; US government and politics; US foreign policy; South African politics; the Conservative Party; the centre-right in British politics; the politics of Northern Ireland; the question of Europe in British politics; and the European Parliament. The Department of Politics and International Relations is part of the College of Social Sciences. The College is committed to pursuing excellence in teaching and learning, research and enterprise. The College shares the University’s ambition to become one of the top 150 universities in the world and seeks to align its activities with the pursuit of that ambition. The College’s nine departments cover a wide range of social science disciplines as well as supporting interdisciplinary work. Conducting my research with a European Research Council grant in this environment will enable me and my team to benefit from the wide range of expertise and scholarly support networks available within the wider University, which will serve to facilitate my transition to that of a fully independent research leader and to consolidate my academic contribution as a world-class researcher.

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