

# Signals of Responsiveness in the European Union

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## **Abstract**

Intergovernmental organizations play a vital role in countries around the world, but little is known about the extent to which government behavior in these IOs is responsive to their national constituents. This paper analyzes how European governments signal responsiveness to their national electorates when they cooperate in the European Union. I test the empirical implications of my theory using data on the bargaining behavior and negotiation success of the 28 EU members in European legislative negotiations, and original data from a survey experiment in Germany. The findings suggest that EU governments are more likely to defend positions that favor their domestic constituents, and they will bargain harder to achieve successful negotiation outcomes, especially prior to national elections. Voters respond favorably to these signals of responsiveness. They prefer politicians who take their favored positions on policy issues, defend these positions, and who shift the final outcomes closer to the favored position.

*Keywords:* European Union, national elections, responsive government, international cooperation, democratic governance

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Intergovernmental organizations (IOs) play a vital role in countries around the world. Governments increasingly delegate decision-making powers to these organizations in areas that directly affect their sovereign autonomy, and it is commonly believed that IO membership offers important benefits. As IOs have increasingly involved themselves in the domestic affairs of their member states, so has the criticism that decisions are taken out of voters' hands and passed onto distant and sometimes even unelected political elites. Many believe that international organizations suffer from a "democratic deficit" (Dahl, 1999). This legitimacy crisis has afflicted many international integration projects around the world and the pressure to democratize them has increased. The U.S. State Department considered a democratization of international organizations as one of its main goals to improve their legitimacy and viability already in the early 2000s.<sup>1</sup>

Nowhere has this debate been more salient than in the EU, where several dramatic setbacks in the past decade added fuel to the fire. The Council of the European Union, which is the EU's main intergovernmental decision-making body, finds itself at the center of this crisis. In 2013, only 33% of Europeans trusted the Council, while over 44% of Europeans in the 28 EU member states distrusted it.<sup>2</sup> Europeans feel that their voice is not listened to by their governments. Governments do not act in their citizens' interest when they decide (usually behind closed doors) over policies in the EU. The perceived lack of democratic responsiveness in European cooperation has not only led to a populist backlash in Europe; it is also highly problematic for the EU governments' own political survival. The ever deeper and wider penetration of the EU into domestic policy, coupled with the historical politicization of European affairs, have increased the likelihood that voters take their governments' conduct in European affairs into account when casting their votes at the ballot (de Vries, 2007, 2010).

The politicization of European affairs, in turn, should have increased the incentives for opportunistic governments to signal that they represent the interests of their electorates in the EU. But even if politicians wanted to signal that they achieve bargaining outcomes that are in the interests of their electorates, they are limited in doing so. To achieve more favorable bargaining outcomes, they have to assert themselves against other EU governments and navigate the web of European institutions. The complex and opaque decision-making process also renders it very challenging for voters to at-

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, statements by Kim R. Holmes, Assistant Secretary for International Organizations Affairs in 2003 and 2004. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/io/rls/rm/2003/26949.htm> and <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/io/rls/rm/2004/39496.htm>, last accessed: November 2016.

<sup>2</sup>In 2007, 47% of Europeans still trusted the Council. Data from the Interactive Eurobarometer.

tribute particular outcomes to the conduct of their own governments. Given these limitations, how can opportunistic governments signal that they act in the electorates' best interest when they negotiate at the EU level? I argue that rather than purely focusing on the achievement of favorable policy outcomes, governments can use public commitments during the Council negotiations to signal that they negotiate responsively. They take positions that are in the constituencies' interest and defend these positions throughout the negotiation process, particularly before national elections, when voters are most likely to hold them accountable for their conduct. Opportunistic governments should be particularly drawn to public commitments as signals of responsiveness because they can pursue them unilaterally (i.e., governments cannot be formally forced to compromise on their positions during the negotiations). This also allows voters to attribute responsibility to their governments more easily. Of course, governments only want to use public commitments when they believe that these signals matter in national elections, and many European issues are still not politicized in the domestic arena. Nevertheless, the likelihood that issues may become politicized has increased incentives for governments to signal responsiveness in the EU even for issues that are only marginally salient domestically.

I test my theoretical argument in two steps. First, the empirical implications of the theoretical argument are based on the assumption that voters reward public commitments of governments during EU negotiations, at least when the issues are politicized. To analyze whether voters respond to these signals, rather than simply relying on partisanship clues or bargaining outcomes, I present the results of a conjoint experiment that I conducted in a survey of about 2,500 Germans in the fall of 2016. I asked respondents to evaluate various politicians who differ on a set of responsiveness signals that correspond to the dimensions of theoretical interest as well as other important characteristics of the politicians. I find that voters' responses to government signals closely mirror the theoretical expectations. Respondents indeed prefer politicians who are successful in achieving their preferred policy outcome, but they also reward politicians who defend their preferred policy position throughout the negotiations. This, in turn, should provide ample incentives for governments to use public commitments in EU Council negotiations. To test this claim, I analyze data on the behavior of the 27 EU governments in European legislative negotiations between 1998 and 2012. The findings suggest that governments use public commitments to signal that they are responsive when they cooperate in the Council. Governments that face elections are less likely to move from their initial bargaining position and they are more likely to achieve more favorable policy outcomes.

The findings shed light on the question of how governments cope with

the increasing demands to act responsively when they cooperate internationally. Existing research in American and European politics shows that elected officials at the national (Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson, 1995; Canes-Wrone and Shotts, 2004; Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2005), the state (Erikson, Wright and McIver, 1993; Lax and Phillips, 2009), and even the local levels (Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2014) are responsive to the policy preferences of their electorates. But despite the increasing delegation of decision-making powers to the EU, we still know very little about responsive conduct of governments in the EU.<sup>3</sup> In the EU, institutional and other constraints make it difficult for voters to assess the congruence of public opinion and government policy in many situations. The analysis shows that governments cope with these challenges by using public commitments during the negotiations as signals of responsiveness. Even though this should not be equated with responsiveness in the classical sense, the findings indicate that public commitments during the negotiations likely lead to decision-making outcomes that are in fact more responsive to a government's constituency.

The results also cast more light on the domestic politics of international cooperation. Existing work demonstrates that domestic politics oftentimes influences the ability of governments to receive greater benefits from international cooperation, either as a consequence of domestic constraints imposed by institutional veto players or as a strategy to satisfy organized interests at the domestic level (Moravcsik, 1991; Milner, 1997; Milner and Rosendorff, 1997; Pervez, 2015). The role of public opinion on governments' ability to get better deals has been demonstrated in international bargaining environments where voters find it easy to attribute credit or blame (Dreher, 2003; Dreher and Vaubel, 2004; Dreher and Jensen, 2007; Caraway, Rickard and Anner, 2012; Rickard and Caraway, 2014; Schneider, 2013).<sup>4</sup> For example, Rickard and Caraway (2014) show that a government that experiences an economic crisis is more likely to negotiate more

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<sup>3</sup>For studies of the responsiveness of the European Commission or the European Parliament see, for example, Thomassen and Schmitt (1997), Proksch and Slapin (2010), and Rauh (2016).

<sup>4</sup>Other work focuses on the effects of public opinion on government compliance with international agreements (Dai, 2005; Chadoin, 2014). Much of this work is based on the idea of the two-level games (Putnam, 1988). The so-called Schelling conjecture implies that an executive can use the prospect of ratification failure to extract concessions from the other side. Ratification failures occur when the legislature or other domestic veto players do not ratify a given international agreement. Even though national elections are no domestic constraints in the strict sense of the Schelling conjecture (in contrast to domestic legislatures, voters cannot veto the agreement), they may increase a government's bargaining power if the government is expected to lose public support before elections under a given agreement. However, the formal literature has detected only very few conditions under which national veto players affect bargaining outcomes, and the empirical evidence is mixed (Tarar (2005) provides a summary).

favorable labor conditionality with the IMF before national elections. My analysis builds on these insights, and analyzes how governments can signal responsiveness to their voters in more complex bargaining environments where the attribution of credit is much more challenging.

## **The Politicization of European Cooperation**

Why do governments have incentives to take into account the interests of their electorates when they cooperate in international organizations, such as the European Union? This is not an idle question. From its inception, the EU, like many other international organizations, was an elitist, strategically depoliticized, operation. The idea was to speed up the integration process by minimizing the politicization of negotiations at the European level. Jean Monnet even used an “information obstruction policy,” and asked news agencies not to cover the Community because he was worried that domestic politicization would derail further integration (Atikcan, 2015).<sup>5</sup> The EU was not politicized domestically, which also meant that voters’ preferences on European issues did not influence their vote choice in national elections.

But whereas European cooperation proceeded relatively unobstructed by public opinion at the domestic opinion in the early states of European integration, many observers note that the ‘sleeping giant’ woke up (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004). European countries have experienced an “increase in polarization of opinions, interests, or values and the extent to which they are publicly advanced towards the process of policy formulation within the EU” (De Wilde, 2011, 566f.). Historically, European integration became politicized with the signing of the Single European Act in 1986, which created the Common Market, because it expanded the range of European competencies to include policy areas like environmental protection, safety at work, and consumer protection. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 further accelerated the politicization of European integration (Scharpf, 2003; Hooghe and Marks, 2009), as did the European debt crisis (Cramme and Hobolt, 2015; Kriesi and Grande, 2016). Overall, the proliferation of referenda on EU matters, the rise of Euroskeptic parties, and the politicization of EU issues in national and European elections, has moved public opinion from the “permissive consensus” of the early period of European integration toward a “constraining dissensus” today (Hooghe and Marks, 2009).

The politicization of European integration is particularly prevalent in the national electoral arena. In the elections to the European Parliament, vot-

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<sup>5</sup>It is generally accepted in the literature that the insulation of decision-making in international organizations from domestic politics can be beneficial because it prevents sub-optimal and short-sighted policy outcomes that governments pursue in highly politicized environments (Pollack, 1997; Abbott and Snidal, 1998; Hawkins et al., 2006).

ers are nowadays more likely to vote for parties that represent their own attitudes toward European integration (de Vries et al., 2011; Hobolt and Spoon, 2012), and the effect is particularly pronounced for Eurosceptic voters (Hobolt, Spoon and Tilley, 2008). Emerging evidence also points to an electoral connection between national parties' positions toward European integration and vote choice in national elections (Tillman, 2004, 2012; de Vries, 2007, 2010), but evidence about the effect of government responsiveness to the specific policy preferences of their electorates is still scarce.<sup>6</sup> This politicization of European affairs and the likelihood that their conduct in European cooperation matters at the ballot box should have increased the pressures and incentives for governments to signal that they pursue EU policies, which are in line with the specific policy preferences of their electorates. In the following, I develop a theory to explain how opportunistic governments can signal that they negotiate in the interests of their electorates when they cooperate in the Council of the European Union.

## **Signaling Responsiveness in the EU**

My theory relies on the assumption that voters have ideologically grounded policy positions. They want to elect politicians who best represent their policy interests in the EU, and who appear competent and responsive to them. Their government's conduct in EU negotiations likely affects their vote choice in national elections, particularly when the issues are politicized. Incumbent governments are opportunistic and want to get reelected. This implies that even though governments may not want to be responsive in international negotiations (i.e., to pursue goals that might favor domestic constituents in the long-term), the politicization of European affairs induces them to signal responsiveness to their voters in order to maximize their chances to get reelected. They want to signal that they represent the preferences of politically relevant groups at the national level, at least when they believe that their conduct in EU negotiations may become electorally relevant domestically.

To win elections, governments need to compete for aligned partisans and independent (or dealigned) voters simultaneously and their choices reflect their decisions to appeal to these groups. If European issues are politicized, incumbents believe that voters also care about how responsive they bargain in European negotiations and what type of policy outcomes they can

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<sup>6</sup>Consistent with the increasing importance of public attitudes toward the EU in national elections, scholars demonstrate that public attitudes toward the EU affect the amount of legislative output (Toshkov, 2015), governments' positions on the scope of European integration (Koenig-Archibugi, 2004; König and Finke, 2007), or the likelihood that they dissent in Council negotiations (Hagemann, Hobolt and Wratwil, 2016).

achieve. But incumbents find it extraordinarily difficult to assess which of the many policy initiatives and outcomes will become politicized amongst the domestic electorate, even in the national political arena. To make matters worse, incumbents oftentimes do not have the time to wait until they have the information necessary to decide whether they should appear responsive in those negotiations (Mayhew, 1974; Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson, 1995). The uncertainty about which issues will be politicized poses a predicament to opportunistic incumbents; the wrong action or even inaction could be detrimental to their electoral prospects.

It follows that as long as incumbent governments believe that their conduct in the EU could have an electoral effect they should try to signal responsiveness in European negotiations. But what is “democratic responsiveness,” and how can governments signal that they are responsive in EU negotiations? At the highest level of abstraction, democratic responsiveness implies that politicians respond to changes in public policy preferences and that they implement policies that are in the interest of their domestic constituents (Dahl, 1956). As straightforward as the concept of responsiveness seems, Powell (2004) reminds us that responsiveness happens to be a relatively complex process of different chains that are causally connected. The process has at least four stages, which begins with the specific policy preferences held by citizens, and continues with the citizens’ voting behavior during elections, the selection of policy makers at the EU level, and ends with the formulation of EU policies. Establishing these linkages is far from trivial even in the domestic realm. At the European level, it leaves governments with a serious dilemma. Even if they wanted to represent their electorates’ interests, governments are severely constrained from achieving policy outcomes that are responsive; EU policy outcomes are the consequence of collective negotiations between now 28 governments, and other assorted institutional actors. And even if governments assert themselves against other EU governments and successfully navigate the web of European institutions to achieve more responsive policy outcomes, the complexity of the decision-making process would make it exquisitely challenging for individual voters to assign credit (or blame) for particular EU policy outcomes (even more so because Council negotiations tend to take place behind closed doors).

Since it is next to impossible for voters to observe and assess government responsiveness in European cooperation using policy outcomes, opportunistic governments have incentives to use alternative ways to signal that their conduct in Council negotiations is responsive to their voters’ interests. Governments could try to claim credit for successfully negotiating EU policies that benefit their politically relevant constituents. This would mean that the government pulls a particular policy closer to the position it committed to at the beginning of the negotiations (particularly if the

position is also favored by its electorate). The ability of EU governments to signal that they can achieve successful negotiation outcomes hinges on their leverage in the decision-making process, particularly at the Council stage. Governments that have greater bargaining leverage – either formally or informally – should be more likely to assert themselves throughout the negotiations, thereby allowing them to signal that they negotiate in the interest of their electorates. For example, governments with more votes, or greater outside options, are more likely to push through their policies or at least avert unfavorable policies in Council negotiations.<sup>7</sup>

Opportunistic governments could also signal responsiveness during the negotiations by taking positions on issues that are in their constituency's interest, and defending these positions throughout the negotiations. Position defending strategies do not rely on the governments having to signal any personal role in outcomes, but rather on their willingness to support a particular position that favors politically relevant groups (in the EU sometimes portrayed as standing firm in the national interest). Taking clear positions signals that the government is “fighting the good fight,” and acting in their best interest. A credible signal of responsiveness implies that governments make their positions public and defend these positions throughout the Council negotiations. Defending initial positions can provide particularly clear signals of responsiveness in the EU context, where it is the norm that governments move away from initially stated positions throughout the negotiations in order to foster compromise. Uncompromising negotiation tactics usually receive a lot of attention in the European institutions and the national media, which makes them particularly newsworthy. At the same time, position defending strategies are also easier to pursue than credit claiming strategies because governments cannot be formally forced to compromise on their positions during the negotiations (but they can be outvoted in the voting process).

To summarize, European cooperation takes place in the shadow of national elections. EU governments want to signal responsiveness in European negotiations in the hope of garnering electoral support from voters back home, particularly when they believe that policy issues are electorally relevant. Governments believe that voters care about how well they repre-

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<sup>7</sup>As long as elections do not occur simultaneously across the EU member states, governments could also “scratch the back” of someone who is facing re-election in this particular period in the expectation that they would return the favor in the future period when one's own political future is on the line. That is, EU member governments might secretly allow a struggling fellow government to signal responsiveness to boost its electoral prospects. When elections are sufficiently staggered temporarily (or if negotiations occur often enough between elections), then it would be possible to create a regime where governments engage in hidden reciprocal cooperation with each other.



sent their voters' interests in Council negotiations, and about the success they have in these negotiations to secure extraordinary deals for their country. Before elections, when issues are often more politicized and voters most likely to hold their governments accountable, governments have incentives to signal that they represent the interests of their electorates in EU cooperation by defending their positions more fiercely during the Council negotiations, and by trying to achieve policy outcomes that are in the electorate's interest.

### **Responsiveness Signals and Voter Responses. Evidence from a Conjoint Experiment in Germany**

The theory assumes that governments have incentives to signal that they negotiate in the interest of their electorates because they have particular expectations about corresponding demands at the domestic level. Whereas not all issues are politicized at the national level, I would expect that voters care about the different signals of responsiveness at least when those policies are salient. But even though the literature has made much progress in analyzing whether European voters are in favor of European integration (see literature above), we have no knowledge how voters would interpret the policy specific commitments of their government at the EU level. It is questionable even for highly salient European policies whether voters simply care about the negotiation outcomes (or use partisanship as information shortcuts) or if they also care about their governments' signals during the negotiations. Since these signals do not necessarily imply that the government is responsive in the classical sense, governments would only have incentives to use public commitments if they actually increase their public support at home.

Since this assumption is central to my theory, I now analyze how voters respond to different signals of responsiveness when policies are salient. As discussed above, I would expect that voters respond to signals of responsiveness only when policies are politicized; even if many issues will not reach a sufficient level of politicization to make a difference, the increasing likelihood that issues get politicized (and the uncertainty about which issues will become politicized) can induce opportunistic governments to change their bargaining behavior in the Council even for issues that are only marginally salient domestically. To examine how voters respond to different signals of responsiveness, and to assess the internal validity of the demand-side argument, I conducted a large-scale online survey about voter responses to public commitments in two policy areas – whether the EU should agree to another financial rescue package for Greece and whether

the EU should allow for more immigration – in Germany. Both issues are currently discussed in the EU, and are not only highly politicized in Europe, but particularly in Germany, which shoulders the largest share of the burden on both financial rescues and immigration.

The survey was fielded in the fall of 2016. The sample includes 2450 German adults who are eligible to vote in federal elections. Although the focus of my survey experiment is on internal validity, the online sample was somewhat skewed towards younger, more educated, and male voters compared to the total voter population. To address this issue, I use entropy balancing to re-weight the data from the survey such that it matches the demographic margins from the voter population.<sup>8</sup> The details of the survey and the conjoint experiment are described in the appendix, but I provide a brief overview in the next section.

### Data and Conjoint Experiment

I designed a fully randomized conjoint experiment to examine *how* voters assess different politicians based on the possible multidimensionality of their position defending strategies and their bargaining success. All respondents were instructed about the conjoint exercise and then exposed to comparisons between two politicians, each of whom varied along six different dimensions. My experimental design is modeled on previous experiments on political repositioning and voter behavior in American politics (Butler and Powell, 2014; Houweling and Tomz, 2016a,b).

I proceeded in three steps. First, I asked respondents to indicate their opinions about the two issues under observation to establish a baseline on which they would judge the politicians' behavior. Respondents were presented with information on financial rescue packages to Greece, and then asked whether they are for or against further financial aid to Greece.<sup>9</sup> Respondents were also presented with information about the current situation on the immigration of refugees and asylum seekers, and then asked whether they are in favor of accepting more or fewer refugees in the EU.

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<sup>8</sup>The survey was implemented by *Respondi* on samples of the adult vote-eligible Germans. Although Respondi uses various techniques to generate a sample that resembles the underlying population, online samples are never true probability samples. True probability samples are extremely difficult (if not impossible) to generate even with offline sampling methods, they come at considerable costs, and their benefits diminish with historically declining response rates. Since my focus is on internal validity, I opted for an online survey, and weighted the data by important demographic characteristics. Overall, the imbalances are relatively minor and the results are robust when I use the unweighted data. Results for unweighted data are presented in the appendix.

<sup>9</sup>In the survey, I exclusively used the term “financial rescue package” (*Finanzhilfe*) because the term “bailout” tends to carry negative connotations.

Responses varied from strongly in favor, somewhat in favor, neither in favor nor against, somewhat against, and strongly against. Figure 1 provides information on the respondents' attitudes toward providing another financial aid package to Greece (a) and toward accepting more refugees in the European Union (b). Overall, Germans in the survey are slightly opposed to both, providing another financial bailout and accepting more refugees, but the extent of support and opposition varies across policy fields.

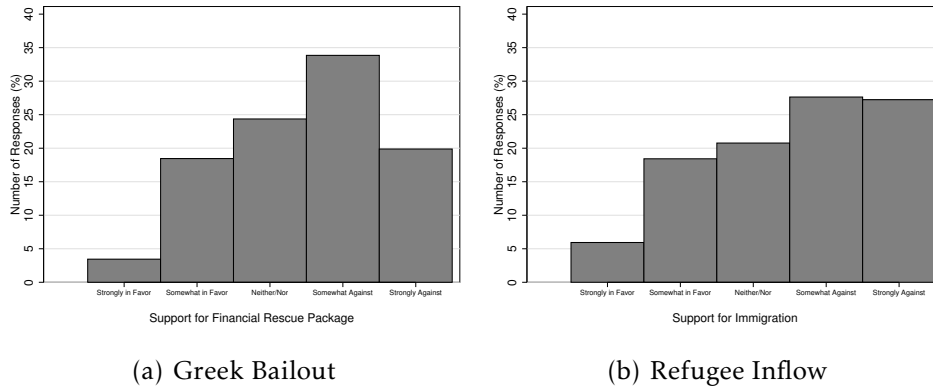


Figure 1: Support for a Greek Bailout and the Inflow of Refugees in Germany, 2016.

Second, after I measured the respondents' preferences on each of the two issues, for each policy issue, I presented them with two politicians (Politician A and Politician B) who varied randomly on their demographic attributes as well as their negotiation behavior during the negotiations. Survey participants were informed that further positive action on the policy would require negotiations between EU members, and that German politicians would partake in any such negotiations. Respondents were prepared that they would see examples of different negotiation behaviors by German politicians, including the (i) the position that the politician represented at the start of negotiations, (ii) the position for which the politician voted at the end of the negotiations, and (iii) the final decision-making outcome. I instructed all respondents that they would have to compare two politicians who varied on these dimensions, and to pick the politician they would prefer if there was an election next Sunday.

Table 1 presents the basic layout of this comparison. All values were randomly assigned to each dimension based on the list of values in Table 2 (the order of categories was also randomized). In addition to the dimensions of interest, I added dimensions that have been shown to affect voter choice (Houweling and Tomz, 2016a,b). Aside from the politician's gender and her or his political experience, whether the politician's partisanship is similar

	<b>Politician A</b>	<b>Politician B</b>
Negotiation Position in the EU		
Voting Behavior in the EU		
Negotiation Outcome in the EU		
Partisan Affiliation		
Gender		
Political Experience (in years)		
<b>Your Choice</b>	○	○

Table 1: Conjoint Experimental Design

to the respondent’s partisanship should play a crucial role in respondents’ vote choice, particularly in the European setting (Dalton, 1985). Partisanship is oftentimes used as an information shortcut to assess a government’s policy preferences. The conjoint design therefore allows me to provide a tougher test for the conditions under which public commitments matter for vote choice; and especially, which signals matter.

Each respondent made two evaluations for each of the two policy issues, totaling four evaluations for each respondent. In addition to the forced choice between politicians, I gave respondents the opportunity to rate each politician independently in respect to how likely they would vote for them in an upcoming election (the scale ranged from 1 [highly unlikely] to 10 [highly likely]). In the main regressions, I use the relative vote choice because it more closely corresponds with actual decisions voters have to make at the ballot box. It also provides a tougher test of the theory because respondents could more easily fall back on ideology, gender, or experience of the politician. Results for the estimations using absolute (continuous) vote choice as a dependent variable are presented in the appendix.

### Experimental Results

Based on this information, I can now assess the relative impact of position defending strategies and bargaining success on voter approval of politicians, respectively.<sup>10</sup> Since I fully randomized the attributes of the politicians under consideration, I can nonparametrically compare levels of support across attribute levels for any given dimension of a politician to determine the average causal effect of a given attribute on the support for the

<sup>10</sup>The online appendix also provides results on the effects of position taking strategies on respondent support.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Possible Values</b>	
	<b>Financial Package</b>	<b>Refugees</b>
<i>Negotiation Position in the EU</i>	In favor of financial aid Against financial aid	In favor of more refugees Against more refugees
<i>Voting Behavior in the EU</i>	In favor of financial aid Against financial aid	In favor of more refugees Against more refugees
<i>Negotiation Outcome in the EU</i>	More financial aid No more financial aid	More refugees No more Refugees
<i>Partisan Affiliation</i>	CDU/CSU SPD FDP The Greens	CDU/CSU SPD FDP The Greens
<i>Gender</i>	Male Female	Male Female
<i>Political Experience (in years)</i>	0 2 4 6 8 10	0 2 4 6 8 10

Table 2: Dimensions and Values for the Conjoint Experiment

politician. I estimate the average marginal component specific effect (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014), that is, I regress the variable *Politician Support* on a set of dummy variables for each value of each dimension, excluding one value in each dimension as the baseline. The regression coefficient for each dummy variable indicates the average marginal component specific effect of that value of the dimension relative to the omitted value of that dimension. I report standard errors for these estimates clustered by respondent to account for within respondent correlations in responses.<sup>11</sup>

I first analyze whether respondents favor politicians who defend their initial positions throughout EU negotiations. To measure whether politicians defend their initial policy positions, I use *Defense*, which is a dummy variable that takes the value 1 if the politician's position is similar to her or his final vote choice, and zero otherwise. Theoretically, respondents should only reward position defending behavior if the politician's initial position is responsive to the respondent's position. Accordingly, I split the sample by respondents whose position was similar to the politician's position (*Responsive Behavior*), and those whose position was different from the politician's position (*Nonresponsive Behavior*). Figure 2 shows that respondents who share the policy preferences of the politician are likely to reward the politician for defending their initial policy position throughout the negotiations until the final vote. A politician's support increases significantly if he or she commits to a particular policy position throughout the negotiations. Politicians do not receive unconditional support for defending their positions, however. The results indicate that respondents who do not share the politician's initial position are likely to blame the politician for defending it. This result is in line with my theoretical discussion on the incentives of EU governments to signal responsiveness to electorally relevant groups. Supporters of the opposition, who might have very different policy preferences, are not likely to reward governments for position defending behavior, because it is not in their interest.

The findings are encouraging; voters could have simply based their evaluation of the politician on the observation of the final outcome of the negotiations. In fact, respondents do blame politicians for outcomes that are not in their favor (independent on the politician's involvement).<sup>12</sup> Yet, respon-

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<sup>11</sup>I use weighted data for the main results, but in the appendix I present results of estimations that use data which was not weighted. The results are substantively similar. The results are also robust (and even stronger) if I estimate the effects using a logit model instead of OLS. Finally, the results hold if I take into account (a) the respondents' political knowledge and (b) the respondents' attention during the survey. The results available upon request.

<sup>12</sup>Note, however, the effect does not exist when the final outcome is in line with the respondent's preference.

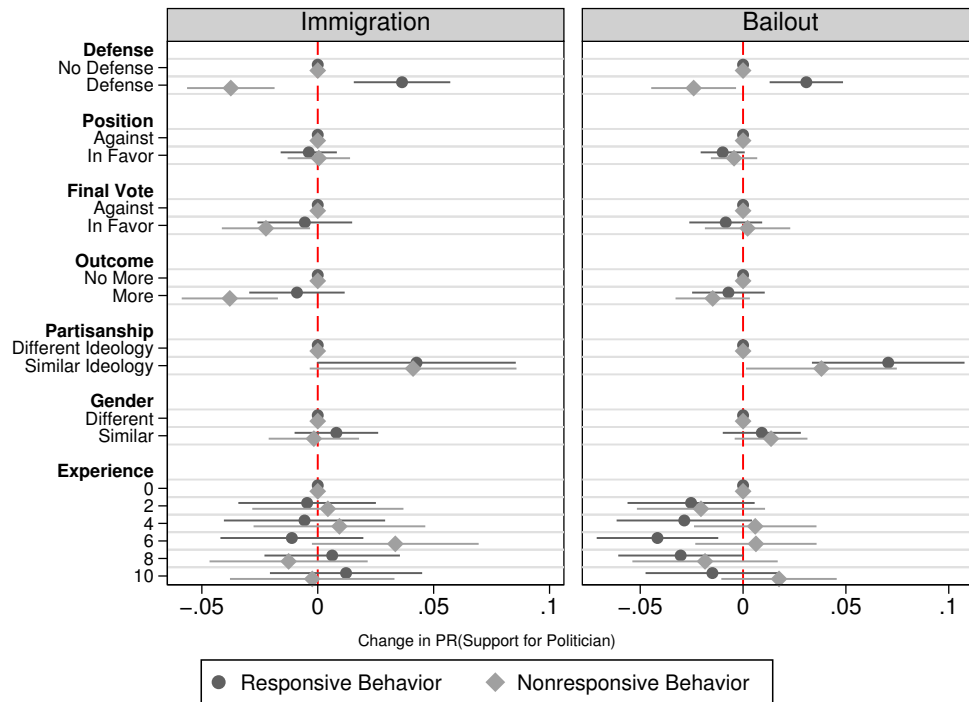


Figure 2: Public Commitments and Voter Support. The graph displays the results of a linear probability model where I regress the support for a politician on a number of index variables. The left hand side graph represents the results for the EU policy on refugees; the right-hand side graph presents the results for the EU policy on financial aid for Greece. The y-axis presents all included variables. The x-axis displays the marginal effect sizes for the probability that respondents would vote for the politician. The coefficients are displayed with dark-grey circles (for respondents who share the policy preferences of the politician) and light-grey diamonds (for respondents who do not share the policy preferences of the politician). The bars mark 90% confidence intervals. The circles/diamonds without bars indicate the reference category for a given dimension. The red vertical line represents the value 0.

dents also attribute importance to the government's public commitment during the negotiations. The politician's commitment matters even if I control for whether the outcome was in the respondent's interest, whether or not the respondent shares the politician's partisanship, whether the politician and the respondent share the same gender, or the politician's experience.<sup>13</sup> As expected, respondents significantly increase their support for politicians who share their ideology. But even though the effects are strong, they do not diminish the effects of the politician's commitment on whether respondents attribute credit or blame to the politician.

Figure 3 further demonstrates that the politician's bargaining success impacts her or his ability to attract votes. *Success* is a dummy variable that takes the value 1 if the politician's vote choice is similar to the final outcome of the negotiation, and zero otherwise. Respondents are more likely to vote for the politician if the politician was able to achieve his or her favored policy, but only if that policy is also preferred by the respondent. For immigration policies, politicians even get punished if they are successful, but not responsive to the respondent's preferences. This finding is important, because it indicates that bargaining success in the EU at least in the setting of this survey is not simply a question of defending the national interest against the interest of other nations (or the ability to achieve successful outcomes in general). Rather, respondents only reward politicians for successes that are in line with their particular interests. EU governments can only improve their approval ratings when their success implies policy outcomes that are in favor of their electorally relevant groups.

The findings of the experimental analysis provide support to the demand side of my theoretical argument. Whereas the scope of the study – the survey was conducted in Germany and asked about two salient policy fields in an online sample – limits its generalizability, it demonstrates that respondents, when provided with information about the negotiation conduct and outcomes of EU negotiations, take into account the politicians' bargaining strategies and their bargaining success when deciding who to vote for. Rather than simply focusing on final policy outcomes or the politician's partisanship, voters appear to care about public commitments as signals of responsiveness. That voters were presented only with indirect information on position defending strategies and bargaining success is valuable in this respect because it demonstrates that they process the information that is available to them in line with the theoretical expectations. In addition to the indirect approach to signals of responsive governance, I included a number of dimensions on which voters tend to make their choices. For ex-

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<sup>13</sup>The main results are the same if I control for the actual gender or partisanship of the politician.



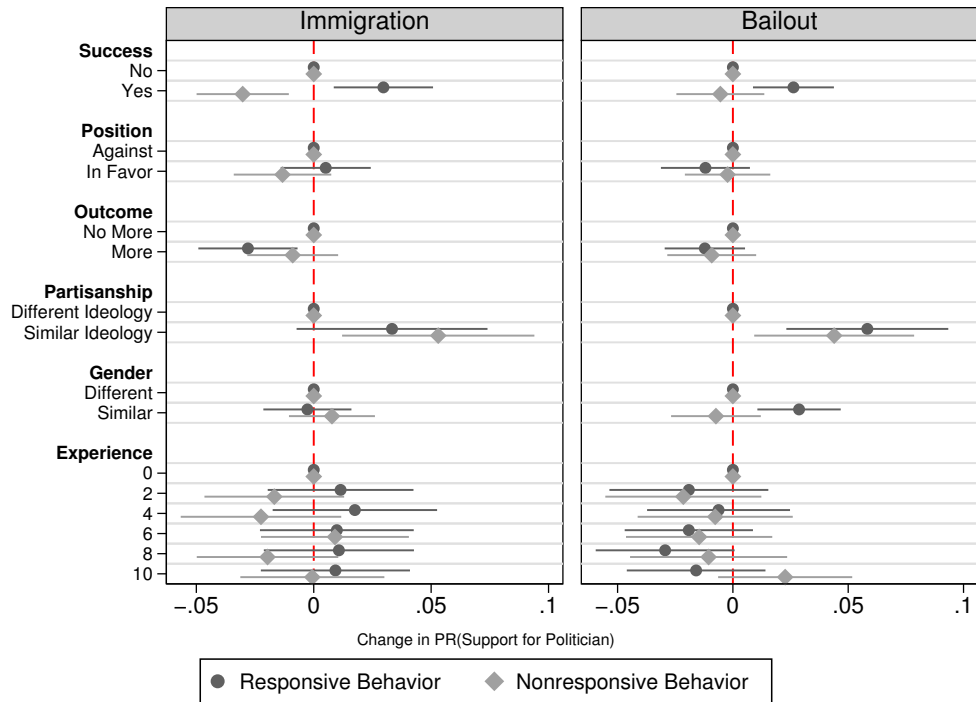


Figure 3: Bargaining Success and Voter Support. The graph displays the results of a linear probability model where I regress the support for a politician on a number of index variables. The left hand side graph represents the results for the EU policy on refugees; the right-hand side graph presents the results for the EU policy on financial aid for Greece. The y-axis presents all included variables. The x-axis displays the marginal effect sizes for the probability that respondents would vote for the politician. The coefficients are displayed with dark-grey circles (for respondents who share the policy preferences of the politician) and light-grey diamonds (for respondents who do not share the policy preferences of the politician). The bars mark 90% confidence intervals. The circles/diamonds without bars indicate the reference category for a given dimension. The red vertical line represents the value 0.

ample, respondents could have easily picked the politician who shared their ideology. But even controlling for these important dimensions, respondents reacted to changes in the responsiveness signals of politicians the way one would expect theoretically. The findings therefore contribute to an understanding of governments' incentives to signal responsiveness. These signals matter when policies are salient; if governments face any uncertainty about whether policies will become salient (and therefore electorally relevant), they should have incentives to signal responsiveness even in areas that will not become politicized.

## **Signaling Responsiveness in the Council Negotiations**

The experimental analysis provides information about how voters respond to public commitments of their governments during EU negotiations, especially when policies are highly politicized. Of course, not all EU policies experience similar levels of politicization, and voters do not always hold governments accountable. But the uncertainty about which issues could become electorally relevant should give ample incentives to governments to signal responsiveness in EU negotiations even for less salient policies. In this section, I use data on the bargaining positions and outcomes in EU legislative negotiations in order to test whether governments are more likely to make these types of public commitments before national elections. The "Decision Making in the European Union" (DEU) data set provides information on the policy positions of the member states' representatives in the Council on over 125 important legislative proposals that were negotiated between 1999 and 2012 (Thomson et al., 2006; Thomson, 2011; Thomson et al., 2012). The data allow me to derive information on the bargaining strategies that governments use in European legislative negotiations as well as the ability of governments to assert their positions at the end of the negotiations.

To receive the necessary information, the researchers conducted 349 extensive, semi-structured face-to-face expert interviews. These experts were recruited from the permanent representations of the member states, the European Commission, and the European Parliament.<sup>14</sup> They were mainly civil servants who were responsible for representing their country in the Council discussions and monitored the legislative negotiations closely. The collection of data on governments' positions applies the spatial model of politics to specific controversies. For each policy issue (each policy proposal is divided into policy issues), experts were asked to indicate the pol-

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<sup>14</sup>On average, these interviews lasted 1 hour and 40 minutes. The face-to-face interviews also served to assess the expertise of interviewees (Thomson and Stokman, 2006).

icy positions initially favored by each government after the introduction of the proposal before the Council formulated its common position, as well as the positions that the governments represented in the final stages of the legislative negotiations.

### Variable Descriptions

To measure whether governments signal responsiveness during the Council negotiations, I focus on EU governments' willingness to move away from their initial policy positions during the legislative negotiations. *Position Defense* is a binary variable that takes the value 1 if governments consistently represent their initial position on a policy issue throughout the negotiations, and 0 if they are willing to compromise by changing their position on the policy issue before the final decision is taken.<sup>15</sup> This approach assumes that governments' initial positions are relatively responsive to domestic ideological concerns. This view is supported by empirical analyses on the general congruence between public opinion and government positions in European negotiations across a set of policies (Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999, 2000). For example, Thomson (2007, 2011) demonstrates that the policy positions that are announced at the beginning of the negotiations generally provide a good representation of the national or ideological interest of the government. Wrátil (2016) further demonstrates that governments' initial positions on proposals that can be placed on a left-right (pro-anti EU) dimension are affected by voters' self-placement on a left-right (pro-anti EU) dimension.<sup>16</sup> Opportunistic politicians who face elections at home should be more likely to posture in the Council by declining to move from their initially stated policy position. *Election Period* is coded as 1 if an EU member has domestic legislative elections during the period of which the issue is negotiated, and 0 if not.

To measure whether governments can claim credit for successful policy outcomes as a signal of responsiveness, I use the inverse of the absolute distance between a member state's initial policy position and the final outcome on each legislative issue. *Bargaining Success* takes values between 0 and 100, whereby larger values imply greater bargaining success on a leg-

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<sup>15</sup>The final position refers to the policy alternative the EU government defends on each issue just before a final decision is taken.

<sup>16</sup>Even if we did not have this previous evidence, the findings on position defending strategies during election periods are difficult to explain outside of the responsiveness framework. Whereas interest groups likely bias government policies, voters' influence is the greatest during election periods. If governments are on average less likely to move away from their initial positions before elections, the most straightforward explanation is that their conduct is influenced by domestic electoral concerns; if they want to get reelected then they should want to signal that they negotiate in the interest of their voters.

islative issue. Are governments able to improve their bargaining success before national elections? I am particularly concerned with elections that take place after the adoption of the proposals, that is, when the bargaining success of a government is revealed. *Election Period* is a dichotomous variable that takes the value of 1 if an election occurs within six months from the day of the adoption of the proposal, and 0 if not (the results are robust to taking into account elections within a year of the adoption). If governments expect to face elections shortly after the conclusion of negotiations they should be more likely to achieve better bargaining outcomes.

In my estimations, I control for a number of explanatory variables that may confound the effect of national elections on bargaining choices. My choice of control variables is based on the existing analyses in the literature. First, the salience of the policy issue should matter. To measure the salience of policy issues, experts were asked to estimate the level of salience for each issue on a scale from 0 to 100, with 100 indicating that an issue is of the highest importance to a stakeholder (*Salience*). *Distance from Commission* and *Distance from EP* measure the distance of an EU member's position to the position of the Commission and the European Parliament on each issue, respectively. *Position Extremity* measures the absolute distance of an EU member's position to the average position in the Council. For each EU government, I calculated the average position in the Council without the position of that government. Larger values on the variable indicate that the EU member has a more extreme position on the legislative issue than the average EU member in the Council. *Multidimensionality* is a dichotomous variable that is coded 1 for proposals with more than one issue. The more issues a proposal has the less costly should be compromise on one issue. *QMV* is a dichotomous variables that takes the value 1 if the voting on the proposal is based on qualified majority rule, and 0 if the voting rule is unanimity. Finally, I include *Voting Power (%)*, which measures the formal bargaining power of an EU member in the Council using the Shapley-Shubik index (SSI).

Descriptive statistics are presented in the online appendix.

## **Empirical Results**

Table 3 provides a summary of the estimation results. Model 1 focuses on *Position Defense*. Since *Position Defense* is measured as a dichotomous variable, and issues are nested within different proposals, I estimate the model using a multilevel mixed-effects probit estimator with robust standard errors. Model 2 focuses on *Bargaining Success*. I estimate the model using a multilevel mixed-effects linear regression model with Huber-White robust standard errors. In the online appendix, I show that the results are robust

to a number of different model specifications. In particular, the main results hold when (a) using country fixed effects, (b) controlling for different types of Council configurations, (c) controlling for the EU country's economic size, and (c) using a measure of relative salience. I also estimate non-hierarchical models for both specifications, use different operationalizations of the main explanatory variable, and conduct placebo tests.<sup>17</sup>

The models fit the data well, and I can reject the null hypothesis that jointly the coefficients are equal to zero for both models. Turning to the substantive findings, the results indicate that EU governments signal responsiveness to their voters before elections. EU governments that face an election during legislative negotiations are significantly less likely to compromise on their initial bargaining position (Model 1). Similarly, EU governments are significantly more likely to achieve successful outcomes when legislative issues were adopted in election periods (Model 2). Since their initial positions tend to be responsive to the interests of their electorates, the findings imply that governments use public commitments during Council negotiations to signal that they cooperate in their electorate's interest. In addition to the direct effect of elections on *Bargaining Success*, I find strong support for an indirect influence of elections on bargaining performance. Governments that defend their positions during the legislative negotiations (oftentimes because of national elections) are significantly more successful in legislative negotiations.<sup>18</sup> To the extent that initial positions are responsive, this implies that government's efforts to signal responsiveness during

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<sup>17</sup>One potential concern is omitted variable bias (OVB), where factors that drive the bargaining success of governments could also explain the timing of national elections. For example, governments may have incentives to delay elections if they fear that they might not be successful in the EU negotiations. This is not very likely the case. The politicization of European affairs has not proceeded to a point where such a behavior has been detected. In fact, most evidence indicates that governments sometimes delay the conclusion of negotiations until after elections, rather than the other way around (Kleine and Minaudier, 2017). In addition, the length of the decision making process varies dramatically, and it is sometimes difficult to forecast when the negotiations will conclude. Finally, an analysis of the likely effect that OVB would have shows that there is little reason to worry. Oster (2017) suggested a test to quantify how large the selection on unobservables must be to overturn the estimated effects, under the assumption of proportional selection between observables and unobservables. Under reasonable assumptions ( $\delta = 1$ ;  $R_{max} = 1.3 * R^2$ ) the coefficient estimate of *Election Period* increases only slightly by less than a unit point.

<sup>18</sup>Note that position defense implies that governments do not change their position from their initial pre-negotiation position to their final position shortly before the final decision is taken. While they might still represent their initial position, they could be outvoted in the Council, which would imply a final outcome further away from their position. Since *Bargaining Success* is calculated on the basis of the final outcome, *Position Defense* therefore does not determine a better negotiation outcome. The positive outcome therefore rather speaks to the importance of cooperative and consensual bargaining where governments try to accommodate each others' interests in the final outcome.

	(1)	(2)
	Position Defense	Bargaining Success
Election Year	0.224*	1.893*
	(0.118)	(1.014)
Saliency	0.007*	0.050
	(0.004)	(0.053)
Voting Power (%)	0.018	-0.1115
	(0.016)	(0.232)
Distance from EP	-0.011**	-0.102
	(0.004)	(0.094)
Distance from Commission	0.002	-0.180*
	(0.003)	(0.093)
Position Extremity	-0.018**	-0.449**
	(0.007)	(0.133)
Multidimensional	-1.431**	
	(0.265)	
QMV	0.299	
	(0.446)	
Position Defense		20.879**
		(4.713)
Distance from Status Quo		0.180*
		(0.093)
Constant	0.205	69.290**
	(0.480)	(10.351)
Observations	2073	1506
Wald Test	65.190**	138.493**

DVs: Position Defense (1) and Bargaining Success (2)

Specification: Multilevel Mixed-Effects Models

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05

Table 3: National Elections and Signals of Responsivess.

the negotiations actually induce more responsive policy outcomes in European cooperation.

The findings for the other control variables have interesting implications as well. If issues are salient for EU governments, they are more likely to defend their initial positions on these issues.<sup>19</sup> EU members that take extreme positions relative to the average position in the Council (*Position Extremity*) are not only less likely to be able to defend their positions throughout the decision-making process, but they also tend to be less successful overall. The further the country's position from the European Parliament (*Distance from EP*), the less likely it will defend its position during the negotiations (I do not find an effect on bargaining success). Positions that are further away from the Commission's preferred policy are less likely to be successful. These results are in line with much of the literature on decision-making in the Council (Thomson et al., 2006; Arregui, 2008).

Overall, the findings of the quantitative analysis provide evidence that EU governments are more likely both to defend their initial positions and to achieve more favorable negotiation outcomes to signal responsiveness to their constituents before national elections. Their conduct at the EU level corresponds well with the importance that voters attribute to signals of responsiveness, at least when policies are salient at the domestic level. Taken together, the findings provide evidence that governments use public commitments during negotiations in order to signal that they negotiate in the interest of their national electorates because they expect that these signals may often have electoral consequences. As the indirect effect of position defending strategies on bargaining success shows, these public commitments can induce more responsive policy outcomes (even if these were not intended by the government).

## Discussion

Governments increasingly delegate sovereignty to international organizations, and their incentives to signal that they represent their electorates' interests should have increased with the politicization of these organizations. This paper analyzed how opportunistic governments can signal responsiveness to their electorates in political environments that are highly complex and opaque due to the number of actors that participate and the lack of transparency in the negotiations. I argued that EU governments want to signal to domestic audiences that they competently negotiate in

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<sup>19</sup>Governments are not more successful if issues are salient. Nevertheless, and in line with my theoretical argument I find that issue salience leads to greater success during election periods. The results are available upon request.

their electorates' interest and that they achieve outcomes that benefit politically relevant groups at home. Since the complex and opaque political system of the EU makes it difficult for voters to attribute policy outcomes to the responsiveness of their government, opportunistic governments use public commitments as signals of responsiveness. Before elections, they take positions that are in their electorates' interest and defend these positions more fiercely during the negotiation process than what they would do outside of the electoral cycle. In addition to burnishing their populist credentials through their public stances, governments will try to pull the European policy toward positions that clearly favor domestic interests so that they can claim credit for it. Using experimental and quantitative evidence, I provided evidence that voters take these signals into account, especially when they are politicized, which in turn creates incentives for governments to signal responsiveness before national elections.

The paper therefore provides a mechanism through which governments can use public commitments to signal responsiveness, and thereby to address the legitimacy problem in international cooperation. Analyzing signals of responsiveness is a key to understanding the crisis of democratic legitimacy that many integration projects face today. This legitimacy crisis has afflicted many international integration projects around the world. The implicit assumption has been that there is can be no responsiveness without electoral accountability. The complex decision-making process inherent in many of these IOs makes it difficult for individuals to hold their governments accountable for responsive policy outcomes. Nonetheless, they care about responsiveness, which poses a dilemma for opportunistic governments. In the paper, I show that opportunistic governments solve this problem by using public commitments as signals of responsiveness. The findings thereby contribute to how governments can signal responsiveness in complex political environments. They also increase our understanding about the domestic sources of European cooperation. Whereas most work has focused on the role of domestic institutions or interest groups on international cooperation, I show that electoral concerns are likely to induce governments to use EU negotiations to signal to their electorates that they negotiate in their interest.

My analysis is a first step to analyze signals of responsiveness in the EU. One important avenue for future research is to assess the conditions under which governments are likely to signal responsiveness (i.e., when electoral pressure is very large or when they have greater bargaining leverage) and to further scrutinize the mechanisms of my argument. And whereas my analysis focused on signals of responsiveness, future work should analyze whether these signals translate in actual responsive policy outcomes. In addition, whereas it was out of the scope of this study to provide a more



in depth analysis of the demand side of political responsiveness, future research should analyze whether the findings of the survey experiment hold in other EU countries, and further test the conditions under which voters take signals of political responsiveness into account. This also calls for an analysis of voter responsiveness in policy areas that are not politicized domestically. Given the increasing delegation of decision-making to international institutions, such a research agenda will also be relevant for other international institutions. The politicization of international cooperation is a significant event not only for scholars of the European Union, but also for readers who want to understand the linkages between domestic electoral politics and international cooperation in the contemporary world.

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