

## Clarity of responsibility: How government cohesion conditions performance voting

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**Abstract.** Recent literature has shown that the long established link between economic performance and electoral outcomes is conditioned by a country's institutions and government, what is often termed 'clarity of responsibility'. In this article two distinct dimensions of the clarity of the political context are identified: *institutional* and *government clarity*. The first captures the formal dispersion of government power, both horizontally and vertically. The second captures the cohesion of the incumbent government. Analysing survey data from 27 European countries, it is shown that voters' ability to hold governments to account, for both the economy and management of public services, is primarily influenced by the extent to which there is an identifiable and cohesive incumbent, whereas formal institutional rules have no direct impact on performance voting.

**Keywords:** clarity of responsibility; performance voting; economic voting

Elections offer an opportunity for citizens to act as a 'rational god of vengeance and reward' (Key 1966: 568) and thereby hold governments to account for their actions. Indeed, this idea of elections as a sanctioning mechanism is at the very heart of electoral accountability. The voter calculus is deceptively simple: '[I]f the performance of the incumbent party is satisfactory . . . retain the incumbent in office, while if the government's performance is not "satisfactory" . . . vote against the incumbent' (Kramer 1971: 134). A vast literature has shown that this reward–punishment model seems to work in the area of the economy; voters are more likely to re-elect the incumbent when the economy is improving but 'throw the rascals out' when economic conditions are getting worse (see, e.g., Nannestad & Paldam 1994; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier 2000). Yet studies have also found great variation in the degree of economic voting across time and countries (Paldam 1991).

In a seminal article, Powell and Whitten (1993) offer a persuasive explanation for this 'instability paradox' by demonstrating that economic voting is conditioned by the 'clarity of responsibility' of political institutions. More specifically, they argue that complex institutional and governmental structures blur lines of responsibility and make it more difficult for voters to assign

responsibility and sanction governments on the basis of their performance. In subsequent work, scholars have extended the original Powell and Whitten index and have moved towards a more dynamic understanding of how clarity of responsibility matters (e.g., Whitten & Palmer 1999; Anderson 2000; Nadeau et al. 2002). Nonetheless, the main discovery of the original study has been broadly corroborated: greater clarity of responsibility facilitates economic voting and therefore electoral accountability.

This is an important finding, but it does not allow us to identify the specific characteristics of the political context that shape performance voting. This is because the concept of ‘clarity of responsibility’ employed in the extant literature conflates formal institutional rules and traits specific to the incumbent government. We argue that it is crucial to distinguish between two separate dimensions of the moderating political context: first, the degree to which institutional power is concentrated, what we term ‘institutional clarity’; and second, the degree to which the government is cohesive, what we term ‘government clarity’. Whereas the first of these focuses on the formal dispersion of power between the executive, the legislature and different levels of government, the second captures the cohesion of the particular incumbent government of the day. The key finding of this article is that when it comes to assigning responsibility and holding governments to account, voters are less concerned with identifying which part of the political system is responsible than with identifying a single political party that they can reward or punish.

Moreover, the Powell and Whitten article and subsequent studies focus almost exclusively on the economy as *the* measure of performance, not least because it is difficult to measure performance in other areas at the aggregate level. In this article, we use individual-level data from a cross-section of countries which enables us to look at not just heterogeneity across countries, but also across issues. This extends the literature on performance voting in several ways. Our main contribution is to distinguish between two ways in which the political context may influence voters’ ability to hold governments to account and show that government clarity is of primary importance. Unlike much of the literature on the effect of political context on performance voting, we also employ individual-level survey data across different countries to test how individual performance perceptions and voting behaviour are shaped by these two types of political context. Finally the empirical analyses also go beyond the exclusive focus on the economy and examine the moderating effect of institutions on performance voting in two policy domains: the economy and healthcare.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we briefly review the literature on economic voting and clarity of responsibility. Thereafter, we present our theoretical propositions concerning the effects of political context at the country

level and issue variation at the individual level. We test these propositions using multilevel analysis of survey data from 27 European countries. The results show that voters' ability to hold governments to account is only influenced by the specific political context of the current government rather than formal institutional rules. Our results also demonstrate that the moderating impact of the political context on electoral accountability is similar for both policy domains of the economy and healthcare. The conclusion discusses the wider implications of these findings.

### **Economic voting and clarity of responsibility**

An extensive literature has examined the link between economic performance and electoral outcomes, or so-called 'economic voting'. At the heart of this research agenda is the notion that economic voting is an essential component of democratic accountability. This follows the classic tradition of democratic theory, which understands elections as a sanctioning device in which voters reward or punish incumbents on the basis of past performance (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981; Manin 1997; Powell 2000). In the economic domain this implies that 'the citizen votes for the government if the economy is doing all right; otherwise, the vote is against' (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier 2000: 183). Numerous studies have shown a link between the economy and electoral outcomes, using both objective indicators of a country's economic situation and public perceptions of economic conditions (see Nannestad and Paldam (1994) and Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2000) for overviews). Yet comparative research has also demonstrated that the strength of this link varies considerably across countries (Paldam 1991; Anderson 2007).<sup>1</sup>

Motivated by this 'instability paradox', scholars have examined how the political context influences the extent to which voters hold incumbents to account for economic performance. In a path-breaking article, Powell and Whitten (1993) posit that the 'clarity of responsibility' of political institutions moderates the degree of economic voting. Their basic argument is that complex institutional set-ups blur lines of responsibility and thus make it hard for voters to assign responsibility to the government for economic performance: 'The greater the perceived unified control of policymaking by the incumbent, the more likely is the citizen to assign responsibility for economic and policy outcomes to the incumbents' (Powell & Whitten 1993: 398).

To test this proposition, Powell and Whitten create an index labelled 'clarity of responsibility'. The index consists of five political variables that capture low clarity of responsibility: opposition control of committee chairs, weak party cohesion, politically significant bicameral opposition, minority government

and number of parties in government. On the basis of this index, they divide countries into less clear responsibility systems (e.g., Germany and Italy) and clearer responsibility systems (e.g., Britain and the United States). The authors' justification for using this dichotomous classification is that:

[M]any of the factors that contribute to lower clarity of responsibility go together. Systems with legislative institutional arrangements that guarantee opposition participation in policymaking tend to be those with proportional representation and more multiparty and minority governments. Thus we can fairly reasonably distinguish systems by their average clarity of responsibility, not having to worry too much about the weighting of the individual variables. (Powell & Whitten 1993: 406)

This clarity of responsibility index has become very influential in political science and has been widely used to explain variation in performance voting (Whitten & Palmer 1999; Anderson 2000; Kiewiet 2000; Powell 2000; Nadeau et al. 2002; Bengtsson 2004; Samuels 2004; Hellwig & Samuels 2008; De Vries et al. 2011), and more broadly to explain the effect of institutions on other aspects of democracy, such as levels of corruption (Tavits 2007). The consensus in the literature is that political institutions that blur lines of responsibility do indeed restrict economic voting, and thus electoral accountability.<sup>2</sup> This is a significant finding not only because it helps us understand why economic voting is more pronounced in some countries and some elections than others, but also because it may have normative implications for how we evaluate different institutional designs.

However, when it comes to the lessons that we can draw from this literature to evaluate the impact of specific political institutions on democratic accountability, the generality of the clarity of responsibility index may be a hindrance rather than a help. Since the clarity of responsibility index encompasses both formal institutional factors (bicameralism, legislative committee structure) and specific characteristics associated with the incumbent government (majority status, number of parties), it is difficult to identify the exact mechanisms that facilitate democratic accountability. Several studies building on the Powell and Whitten (1993) argument have sought to improve the index in various ways. Notably, Whitten and Palmer (1999) and Anderson (2000) have introduced a dynamic 'clarity of responsibility' index that varies not only across countries, but also over time within countries. Other studies have added various institutional and partisan factors to the index, including the proportion of seats held by the largest party (Anderson 2000; Nadeau et al. 2002); ideological cohesion of the governing coalition (Nadeau et al. 2002); longevity of the government (Nadeau et al. 2002; Bengtsson 2004); party system fraction-

alisation (Anderson 2000; Nadeau et al. 2002; Bengtsson 2004); and federalism (Anderson 2006). By extending the measure of clarity of responsibility, these studies highlight a number of additional important institutional features that may influence the ability of voters to assign responsibility and hold governments to account. However, as these indices conflate formal institutions and dynamic government characteristics, they do not help us much in trying to pinpoint whether some institutional or governmental factors play a more important role than others and why.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, it is not immediately obvious that the various factors that contribute to lower clarity of responsibility in fact do ‘go together’, as Powell and Whitten argue in the above quote, especially if we expand the index to include factors such as federalism. A country can have a low institutional concentration of power, but a highly unified executive (such as the United States with federalism and significant bicameralism, but a one-party executive). This raises the question of whether it is the formal institutional division of power or the cohesion of the incumbent that matters to voters when it comes to holding the government to account. To address this issue, this article adopts a different approach to the study of how political institutions condition performance voting. We explicitly distinguish between two dimensions of the political context: *institutional clarity* (how power is dispersed) and *government clarity* (whether the government of the day is cohesive or not).<sup>4</sup>

### **Institutional versus government clarity**

How do political institutions facilitate or impede the ability of voters to hold governments to account for their performance in democratic elections? To answer this question, we first need to establish the tasks that voters face when holding governments to account. First, they need to be able to assign responsibility to particular political actors within the system for policy conditions, such as the state of the economy or public services. Second, they need to be able to use their ballot to punish (or reward) the incumbent government on the basis of unsatisfactory (or satisfactory) policy outcomes. Assignment of responsibility is a necessary condition for accountability, but the reverse does not necessarily hold (Anderson 2007; Hellwig & Samuels 2008). When we study vote choice (rather than analysing responsibility evaluations directly: Rudolph 2003; Marsh & Tilley 2010; Johns 2011; Tilley & Hobolt 2011; Hobolt & Tilley 2014), we are inevitably observing the influence of institutions on both stages of the process.<sup>5</sup> Clarity of responsibility can be expected to influence both assignment and sanctioning: if lines of responsibility are blurred it is more difficult for voters to establish who is responsible for outcomes and equally it is more difficult to use the ballot box to punish the government.

As mentioned, we distinguish between two distinct dimensions of the political context: formal institutional divisions of powers and the level of cohesion of the government of the day. It is important to note that these dimensions are theoretically derived, on the basis that they capture distinct ways in which the political context can affect voters' ability to hold governments to account, rather than empirically on the basis of the scalability of the items included to measure the dimensions. Below we discuss the separate logics of how institutional clarity and government clarity can be expected to condition voting behaviour.

The *institutional clarity* dimension is about the institutional concentration of power. This captures the formal division of powers both horizontally between the executive and the legislature, and vertically between different levels of government. Both types of 'divided government' lead to a dispersion of executive power, and it is easy to see why this might weaken performance voting. First, when institutional rules shift power either horizontally between the executive and the legislature (such as in presidential systems with the division of power between the president and the legislature, or in parliamentary systems with a strong legislative committee system with opposition chairs) or vertically between different levels of government (as in federal systems), it is difficult for voters to assign responsibility for policy outcomes because power is dispersed across many political actors (Hobolt & Tilley 2014). Second, a vote to sanction the incumbent is less likely to punish the actual culprit when power is dispersed, and that may lower incentives to vote on the basis of performance. In Powell and Whitten's (1993) original index, formal institutional divisions of power were captured using measures of strong committees and significant bicameralism, and subsequent work has extended this to include division of powers in presidential and semi-presidential systems (Samuels 2004; Hellwig & Samuels 2008) and in systems of multilevel governance (Arceneaux 2004; Cutler 2004, 2008; Anderson 2006). According to the institutional clarity approach, the primary contextual factors facilitating, or impeding, performance voting are the formal 'rules of the game'. These rules differ considerably between countries, but do not vary much within countries over time. Here we operationalise this system-level context as an additive index containing the type of parliamentary committee structures, federalism, semi-presidentialism and bicameralism. Below is our *institutional clarity* hypothesis:

*H1: Voters are less likely to vote on the basis of performance evaluations in political systems with greater formal institutional divisions of power.*

By contrast to the institutional clarity dimension, the *government clarity* dimension is not directly concerned with formal institutional rules, but rather the 'cohesiveness' of the incumbent government at a particular given time.

This alternative argument posits that voters largely ignore which part or level of government is responsible for outcomes and take the short cut of blaming, or more rarely crediting, the most obvious actor. This is likely to be the governing party, or coalition, in the national legislature. That still leaves them with the problem of identifying which party in that government is to blame, however, and therefore which party should be sanctioned. Thus according to this approach, voters are not concerned with institutionally defined concentration of powers, but do need to be able to identify a cohesive political actor that they can assign responsibility to and sanction accordingly. There is evidence from the American case that voters can overcome institutional divisions of power (divided government and federalism) by attributing responsibility to a highly 'cohesive' incumbent – namely the President. Norpoth (2001: 420) argues that American voters solve the challenge of divided government 'by simply holding one of the branches responsible for the economy and absolving (ignoring) the other. The President provides a most inviting target for this exercise in responsibility.' He concludes that divided government poses no obstacle to the ability of voters in the United States to reward and punish the government for economic performance since voting decisions follow the premise that responsibility lies with the President – not with Congress (Norpoth 2001: 433).<sup>6</sup>

This argument works slightly differently beyond the American presidential context. In parliamentary systems, it may be equally easy for voters to concentrate on one part of government, but it may be more difficult for them to identify a single party or individual that they can sanction in elections. In this context, the ability to sanction will depend on whether the government is a single-party government or a coalition, and in the case of coalitions the dominance of a single party within the government (what Anderson (2000) refers to as 'governing party target size'), as well as the ideological cohesion of the government. In semi-presidential systems, government cohesion is also conditioned by whether or not the prime minister and the president belong to the same party. In other words, in a situation where voters face a single-party government, or an ideologically cohesive coalition dominated by one large party, voters will find it relatively easy to reward or punish that particular party. In situations where there are multiple small parties in the government, with little in common ideologically, it becomes more difficult for voters to identify which party they should reward or punish. This is regardless of whether institutional power is shared with the opposition in legislative committees, upper chambers or lower levels of government because voters will simply ignore that dispersion of power and concentrate on that national government as the most inviting target. This leads to our *government clarity* hypothesis:

*H2*: Voters are less likely to vote on the basis of performance evaluations in political systems with lower levels of government cohesion.

To test the relative moderating effect of institutional clarity and government clarity on performance voting we develop two separate indices. Table 1 summarises which measures are included in the original Powell–Whitten index and our two new proposed indices. It is worth noting that two of the original Powell–Whitten measures are not included in our new indices: party cohesion and majority government. Neither of these measures captures formal institutional division of powers. We have also refrained from including them in the government clarity index since the party cohesion measure typically refers to all parties in the party system (rather than specifically the government party/parties) and because majority government captures government *control* rather than government *cohesion*.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the indices used in this article are only made up by factors capturing formal institutional divisions of power and government cohesion, respectively, as outlined in Table 1.

Our argument is that to understand how the political system shapes performance voting, and thus the ability of voters to hold governments to account, it is important to distinguish between these two dimensions of clarity of responsibility. Institutional clarity and government clarity are two distinct aspects of the political context. While there are reasons to believe that both dimensions of clarity of responsibility may account for differences in performance voting across countries, we expect that the presence of a cohesive incumbent government is of greater importance for voters to be able to administer ‘vengeance or reward’ to elected officials, whereas the complexity of

Table 1. Clarity of responsibility measures

Powell-Whitten index	Institutional clarity	Government clarity
Weak committees	Weak committees	
Strong party cohesion		
No bicameral opposition*	Unicameralism	
Majority government		Dominance of one party
Single-party government		Single-party government
	Absence of federalism	
	Parliamentary system	
		Absence of cohabitation
		Ideological cohesion of government

Note: \* No cases in the EU-27 in 2009, so not included in the index used here.



formal institutional structures, of which many voters may be blissfully unaware, is likely to be far less important.

Testing the type of clarity that matters is important, but so is testing how the political context matters across issues. Past empirical assessments of performance voting have focused almost exclusively on the economy. Such a focus can be justified by arguing that ‘the economy is always an important issue to voters’ (Wlezien 2005: 556) and that ‘judging economic performance is more straightforward for average citizens than judging other areas of government performance’ (Anderson 2007: 277). The state of the economy is undoubtedly a crucial aspect of a government’s performance, but that does not make it the only aspect of policy performance that voters care about.<sup>8</sup> Several studies have shown that the public agenda has become more diversified in both the United States and Europe, and that economic issues are less dominant (McCombs & Zhu 1995; Hobolt & Klemmensen 2005; Green-Pedersen 2007). Moreover, the focus on economic voting for assessing electoral accountability may also be problematic in an increasingly globalised world where government control over the economy is constrained by exogenous factors to varying degrees (Hellwig 2001, 2010). Indeed, in a European context, monetary policy is determined by the European Central Bank for the 17 members of the eurozone (and even to a large extent for many of the eurozone outsiders), and this may influence voters’ assignment of responsibility for the economy. Hence, to provide a more comprehensive examination of the influence of political institutions on electoral accountability, we analyse the link between performance evaluation and vote choice not only in the area of economy, but also in the area of healthcare provision. Since national governments in general have more exclusive control over healthcare provision than over many aspects of economic policy making,<sup>9</sup> we would expect that performance voting is more pronounced in this policy domain.

*H3:* Government clarity has a greater impact on performance voting for policies over which governments have more control. Specifically, where there is clarity of responsibility there will be greater healthcare performance voting than economic performance voting.

## Methods and measures

To test our theoretical propositions, we use individual-level data from the 2009 European Election Study (EES), which is a cross-national survey of all EU-27 countries immediately following the June 2009 European Parliament (EP) elections (Van Egmond et al. 2010). The sample size was almost exactly 1,000 respondents in all countries, giving a total sample size of 27,069. Since identical

questions were asked in all countries during the same time period, the EES offers an excellent opportunity to examine how cross-national variation in the political context shapes individual-level voting behaviour.

Our dependent variable is a measure of national vote intention, using the following standard formulation: 'If there was a general election tomorrow which party would you vote for?' We use national vote intention rather than EP vote choice since the former, unlike the latter, allows for both assignment of responsibility and the sanctioning of an incumbent.<sup>10</sup> It also enables us to include respondents who did not vote in the EP election (where turnout was only 43 per cent), but would be likely to vote in a national election. Our dependent variable captures incumbent vote choice by dividing party preferences into governing and opposition parties.<sup>11</sup> Respondents are roughly evenly divided between government party voters (45 per cent of voters) and opposition party voters (55 per cent of voters). Our models set opposition voters as the reference category.

Our key independent variables are measures of economic and healthcare evaluations and measures of system clarity of responsibility. For the first we use a standard question on the economy and a similarly worded question about healthcare as set out below. We have recoded these two variables so that 'a lot worse' is coded -2, 'a little worse' -1, 'stayed the same' 0, 'a little better' 1 and 'a lot better' 2.<sup>12</sup>

'What do you think about the economy? Compared to 12 months ago, do you think the general economic situation in [country] has got a lot better, a little better, has stayed the same, has got a little worse or has got a lot worse?'

'And over the last 12 months, has the standard of health care in [country] got a lot better, a little better, stayed about the same, got a little worse or got a lot worse?'

As discussed above, we use three main measures of clarity of responsibility (see Table 1). The first measure is a close approximation of the Powell and Whitten (1993) and Whitten and Palmer (1999) indices. This scale includes all the measures that the former authors include: no bicameral opposition (0 for bicameral opposition, 1 for no bicameral opposition), weak committee structures (0 for strong, 1 for weak),<sup>13</sup> majority government (0 for minority, 1 for majority), strong party cohesion (0 for weak party cohesion across the party system, 1 for strong party cohesion)<sup>14</sup> and single-party government (0 for coalition government, 1 for single-party government). As there were no cases of bicameral opposition in the EU-27 in June 2009, this item has not been

included, and we have divided the other four items by four, to give an index that in principle runs from 0 to 1. The index has an observed minimum of 0.25 and an observed maximum of 1 (see the Appendix).

In essence, the approach originally adopted by Powell and Whitten (1993) uses both measures of formal institutional- or system-level variables that reduce clarity – in particular, strong committees and bicameralism – and government cohesion variables that reduce clarity (see Table 1). We explicitly produce separate indices measuring both dimensions that reflect the key elements of both of those dimensions. This allows us to examine the extent to which institutional clarity (*H1*) and government clarity (*H2*) can account for differences in performance voting across systems. Our measure of institutional clarity, the degree to which power is concentrated institutionally, includes a dummy variable for weak committee structures (0 for strong committees, 1 for weak), a variable measuring the degree to which a country is a unitary state (0 for most federal, 1 for most unitary),<sup>15</sup> a dummy variable for parliamentary systems (0 for semi-presidential, 1 for parliamentary)<sup>16</sup> and a dummy variable for unicameralism (0 for bicameralism, 1 for unicameralism).<sup>17</sup> These four items are summed and divided by 4. In principle this index therefore runs from 0 to 1, although in practice in our data we see a minimum of 0.16 (Romania) and a maximum of 1 (e.g., Malta).

Our final index is the measure of government clarity, of how cohesive the government of the day is. This includes a dummy for single-party government (0 for coalition, 1 for single-party), a dummy for no cohabitation within a semi-presidential system (0 for cohabitation, 1 for no cohabitation), a measure of the ideological cohesion of the government which takes the form of the proportion of seats held by parties in government that are of the same ideology as the dominant governing party (this varies from 0.49 to 1, and we have rescaled it to run from 0 to 1),<sup>18</sup> and finally the dominance of the main governing party which we operationalise as the head of government's party's share of cabinet posts (this varies from 0.26 to 1, and has been rescaled to run from 0 to 1: see Anderson 2000). Again, we simply add these four items together and divide by four to produce an index that in principle could run from 0 to 1, and in practice runs from 0.24 (Finland) to 1 (e.g., Greece).

There is a degree of spread across the EU-27 in how government and institutional clarity vary, and the Appendix shows the individual country scores for all three indices. Unsurprisingly, some countries score highly on both (such as Britain) or low on both (such as Germany), but there are other cases where government clarity is high but institutional clarity is not (Portugal) or where institutional clarity is high, but government clarity is not so high (such as Latvia). The correlation of 0.37 between the two measures is not trivial, but

also shows the degree to which these two factors are separable from one another. It is also interesting to note how the two indices change over time. The institutional index is essentially fixed over the medium term. If we compare the institutional indices in 2009 for our 27 countries with the same index ten years earlier before the 1999 EP elections the correlation is above 0.99. While there is also continuity in the government index, there is less than for the institutional index. The equivalent correlation for the government clarity index over ten years is 0.59.

## Results

Due to the multilevel nature of our data, we cannot simply pool the EES national surveys and ignore that individuals are nested within a national context, and so we employ a hierarchical model in our analysis. Table 2 contains five multilevel models with a logit link (due to the binary dependent variable) – all of which predict incumbent vote intention relative to opposition vote intention. The first model estimates performance voting in the two policy domains, the second examines the moderating effect of the Powell–Whitten (PW) index, the third examines the moderating effect of institutional clarity (*H1*) and the fourth the moderating effect of government (*H2*). The final model explicitly tests *H1* and *H2* side by side by including both the moderating effects of institutional and government clarity, as well as allowing us to test *H3*.

In Model 1, we simply include the two variables relating to government performance, evaluations of healthcare and evaluations of the economy. These are modelled with random effects on both variables as we expect their impact to vary across countries. Both measures of performance are positive and highly statistically significant. People with rosier views of the economy and healthcare performance are more likely to be incumbent government voters, with very similar effects of both evaluations.<sup>19</sup> There therefore appears to be little initial support here for *H3*; voters seem to use both economic and healthcare performance evaluations in similar ways.

Model 2 introduces the PW index and interactions between this index and the two performance evaluations. Although the main effect of the index is rather small and the interaction terms are not statistically significant, the interaction terms are in the expected direction. In systems in which there is a greater clarity of responsibility, as measured by the PW index, there is tentative evidence that economic evaluations and healthcare evaluations are better predictors of support for the incumbent government. There is a suggestion here, therefore, although clearly no strong evidence, that clarity of

Table 2. Multilevel logistic regression models of incumbent vote intention

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Economic evaluation (-2 to +2)	0.37** (0.06)	0.13 (0.17)	0.11 (0.15)	-0.13 (0.10)	-0.17 (0.12)
Healthcare evaluation (-2 to +2)	0.38** (0.05)	0.20 (0.15)	0.27* (0.14)	-0.01 (0.11)	0.01 (0.13)
Powell Whitten clarity (0-1, 1 = maximum clarity)		-0.23 (0.46)			
PW clarity*economic evaluation		0.41 (0.27)			
PW clarity*health evaluation		0.30 (0.24)			
Institutional clarity (0-1, 1 = maximum clarity)			-0.35 (0.40)		-0.07 (0.38)
Institutional clarity*economic evaluation			0.43 (0.23)		0.10 (0.18)
Institutional clarity*health evaluation			0.18 (0.21)		-0.06 (0.18)
Government clarity (0-1, 1 = maximum clarity)				-0.93** (0.35)	-0.90* (0.38)
Government clarity*economic evaluation				0.86** (0.17)	0.82** (0.18)
Government clarity*health evaluation				0.69** (0.18)	0.72** (0.19)
Intercept	0.29* (0.10)	0.43 (0.28)	0.50* (0.25)	0.81** (0.22)	0.84** (0.26)
Variance (intercept)	0.24	0.24	0.24	0.17	0.17
Variance (economic evaluation)	0.09	0.08	0.07	0.03	0.03
Variance (health evaluation)	0.07	0.06	0.07	0.04	0.04
Log likelihood	-10,811	-10,809	-10,809	-10,793	-10,792
AIC	21,634	21,636	21,636	21,603	21,609
Number of countries	27	27	27	27	27
Number of individuals	17,531	17,531	17,531	17,531	17,531

Notes: Coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .  
Source: 2009 European Election Study.

responsibility matters for individuals and how they make their vote choices. Moreover, that suggestion seems equally appropriate for healthcare as it does for the economy. Nonetheless, these effects are not statistically significant, and also leave out any consideration of how the cohesion of the government has a separate moderating effect on performance voting from the formal institutional concentration of power.

Model 3 includes the main and moderating effects of institutional clarity. Similarly to model 2 the interaction terms are in the direction we might expect: more clarity leads to more performance voting, but neither are statistically significant. This contrasts with model 4, which includes the main and moderating effects of government clarity. Here we see large, and statistically significant, interaction terms. When both government and institutional clarity are included as in model 5, the effects of government clarity remain. There is no moderating effect of institutional clarity on performance evaluations, but there is a large, and highly statistically significant interaction between those evaluations and government clarity. High levels of government cohesion reduce support for the government generally, but increase the impact of that government's performance as *H2* suggested. *H1*, by contrast, receives very little support, for the institutional concentration of power has no impact on how performance affects support for the government.

Figures 1 and 2 show how the predicted probabilities of intending to vote for an incumbent party (on the y-axis) vary with voters' views of performance on healthcare and the economy (holding the other evaluation constant at its mean). Figure 1 illustrates the probabilities if there is a maximum amount of government clarity (a score of 1 on our scale) and a minimum observed amount of government clarity (a score of 0.24 on our scale), holding institutional clarity at its mean. The weak impact of evaluations when governments are not cohesive is striking, as is the very strong impact of evaluations when governments are cohesive. Moreover, this holds, in a very similar fashion, for both healthcare and economic evaluations. On the flip side, Figure 2 shows the degree to which institutional clarity makes no difference. Again the y-axis represents the probability of a government party vote intention, and the x-axis the evaluation for healthcare and the economy, this time holding government clarity constant at its mean. When we separately plot those probabilities for voters in the most institutionally opaque systems, we find exactly the same results as for those voters in the most institutionally clear systems. So, overall there appears very weak support for *H1* and very strong support for *H2*: the type of clarity of responsibility matters a lot and it is government cohesion that matters. Finally and interestingly, there appears little support for *H3* from any of the models presented here. The type of evaluation does not appear to matter. Evaluations of healthcare and the economy have similar effects on

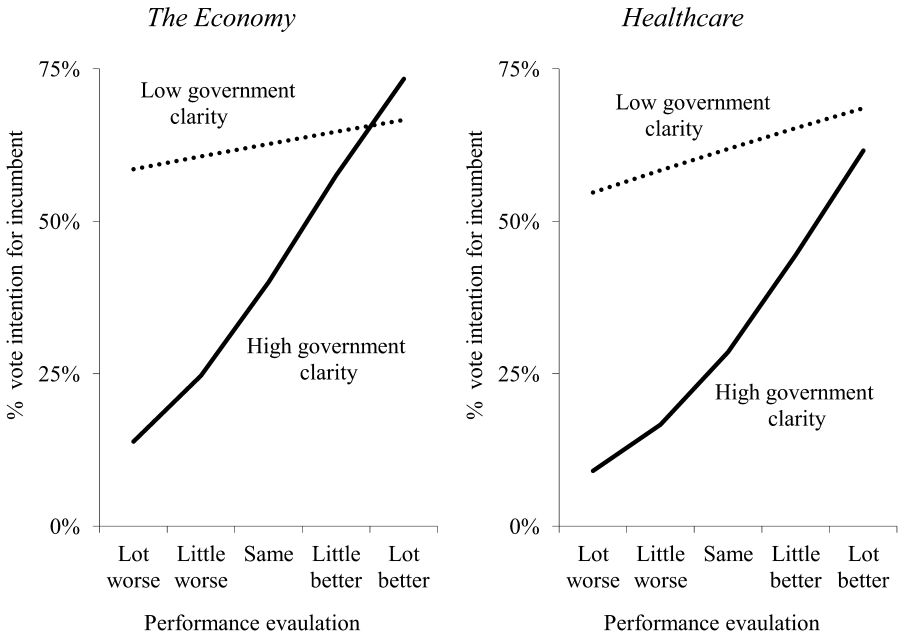


Figure 1. Predicted probability of an incumbent vote intention by performance evaluation from model 5 for opaque and clear responsibilities as measured by the government clarity index.

Notes: For economic evaluations, health care evaluations are held at the mean ( $-0.44$ ), and for health care evaluations, economic evaluations are similarly held at the mean ( $-1.44$ ). The measure of institutional clarity is held constant at the mean level of 0.60. The high level of government clarity is the maximum observed in the data of 1, and the low level of government clarity in the data is the minimum observed of 0.24.

incumbent vote intention, and are mediated in very similar ways by the two different dimensions of clarity.

## Discussion

A large body of literature has shown that the political context influences the degree of electoral accountability we find in individual countries and elections. More specifically, it has been demonstrated in repeated studies that 'high clarity' countries have more pronounced levels of economic voting than countries with more blurred lines of responsibility. Our study corroborates this general finding, but we have also sought to advance the literature by examining

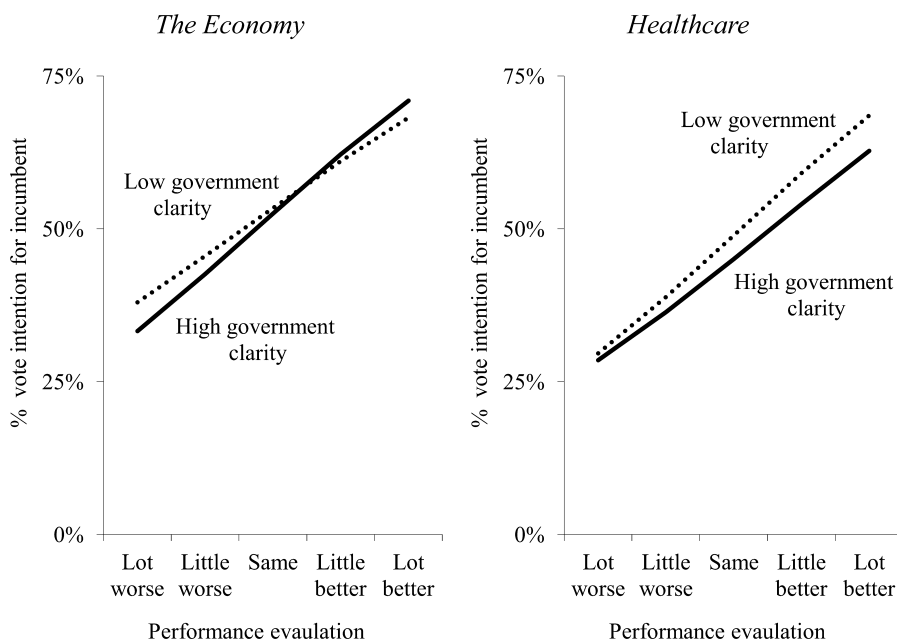


Figure 2. Predicted probability of an incumbent vote intention by performance evaluation from model 5 for opaque and clear responsibilities as measured by the institutional clarity index.

Notes: For economic evaluations, health care evaluations are held at the mean ( $-0.44$ ), and for health care evaluations, economic evaluations are similarly held at the mean ( $-1.44$ ). The measure of government clarity is held constant at the mean level of 0.57. The high level of institutional clarity is the maximum observed in the data of 1, and the low level of institutional clarity in the data is the minimum observed of 0.16.

which specific aspects of the political context make individuals unable, or unwilling, to vote on the basis of performance and whether this solely applies to economic outcomes. This article thus focuses on two key types of difference that may affect reward–punishment models: differences in types of clarity of responsibility between countries and differences between policy areas.

We have argued that to understand how institutions condition the ability of voters to hold government to account for their performance it is important to distinguish between two separate dimensions of institutional and government clarity, rather than employing a general measure of ‘clarity of responsibility’ that encompasses both aspects, as has been done in most of the extant literature. Our findings show that ‘government clarity’ has a greater impact on the degree of performance voting in a country than institutional clarity. In other



words, it is the clarity of the incumbent government, its cohesion, which matters more to voters' ability to hold governments to account rather than formal institutional divisions of power. This suggests that as long as voters face a cohesive incumbent (e.g., a single-party government or an ideologically cohesive coalition dominated by one large party), they will be able to reward or punish the party in power, regardless of whether institutional power is shared with the opposition in legislative committees or in upper chambers or in lower levels of government. In effect, voters do not care about which part of government is responsible; they simply blame/credit the national government executive, but if this is composed of several parties then they find it difficult to appropriately sanction those politicians.

While the empirical literature on electoral accountability has focused almost exclusively on economic voting, we found that our results were also robust across two policy domains: the economy and healthcare. This indicates that the moderating effect of the political context affects electoral accountability more generally than just in the area of the economy. However, we did not find that this effect was *greater* for healthcare than the economy, even though governments generally have more autonomous control over healthcare than the economy. Instead, we found almost identical effects in the two policy domains. It may be, of course, that two factors are at play here, with the first being the relative control of the government over a policy area (and thus the assignment of responsibility for performance) and the second being the relative salience of that policy area to voters (and thus their likelihood to vote on that basis). We can speculate that while voters may be aware that governments have less control over the economy, they also place greater weight on performance in this policy area, so these factors may to some extent cancel each other out.

These findings potentially have important implications for the study of institutions and electoral accountability since they suggest at first glance that formal institutional divisions might matter less than previously thought. Of course, it would be unwise to conclude that formal institutions do not matter at all. After all, many of those institutions are likely to play an important role in determining the cohesiveness of governments. It is not that institutions are irrelevant; it is rather that those institutions have an indirect effect by shaping the likelihood of single-party government. Nonetheless, it does suggest that more work should be done to disentangle the specific mechanisms that impede or facilitate the extent to which voters hold governments to account for their performance. Our study only examines the impact of institutions in 27 different European political systems, and it would be worthwhile to see whether our findings can be replicated in a broader sample of contexts.

**Appendix. Clarity of responsibility indices**

Country	Powell-Whitten index	Institutional clarity	Government clarity
Austria	0.50	0.35	0.35
Belgium	0.50	0.26	0.40
Britain	1.00	0.92	1.00
Bulgaria	0.50	0.74	0.33
Cyprus	0.50	0.50	0.46
Czech Republic	0.25	0.69	0.55
Denmark	0.25	0.66	0.64
Estonia	0.75	1.00	0.51
Finland	0.75	0.69	0.24
France	0.75	0.36	0.62
Germany	0.50	0.25	0.32
Greece	0.75	0.66	1.00
Hungary	0.25	0.66	1.00
Ireland	0.75	0.70	0.63
Italy	0.50	0.56	0.69
Latvia	0.75	1.00	0.42
Lithuania	0.75	0.72	0.58
Luxembourg	0.75	1.00	0.43
Malta	1.00	1.00	1.00
Netherlands	0.50	0.38	0.38
Poland	0.25	0.18	0.36
Portugal	0.75	0.47	0.75
Romania	0.25	0.16	0.33
Slovakia	0.50	0.45	0.44
Slovenia	0.50	0.50	0.39
Spain	0.75	0.56	1.00
Sweden	0.50	0.66	0.58
Total	0.58	0.60	0.57
Standard deviation	0.22	0.25	0.24

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## Notes

1. Some have also challenged the existing economic literature by arguing that the strong relationship between economic evaluations and vote choice has been overstated since people's perceptions of policy performance are shaped by their political orientation – notably partisanship (Anderson et al. 2004; Evans & Andersen 2006; Ladner & Wlezien 2007; Evans & Pickup 2010). This has been questioned by others (see Lewis-Beck 2006; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008), but regardless of the merits of this case we are not primarily interested in the direct effect of performance evaluations on vote choice, but rather with how political institutions mediate this relationship.
2. Duch and Stevenson (2005, 2008) have also argued that economic voting is weaker when power is dispersed, but in contrast to most of the economic voting literature, they build on a selection model rather than the traditional sanctioning model. They argue that a more equal distribution of responsibility weakens the signal that the previous economy provides about the competence of the incumbent parties. In other words, whereas the sanctioning model assumes that power-sharing makes it more difficult for voters to assign responsibility, Duch and Stevenson's model assumes that voters have perfect knowledge of the distribution of responsibility, but argue that power-sharing leads voters to attribute more weight to exogenous factors.
3. Anderson's (2000) study of economic voting in 13 democracies takes an important step towards disentangling the different ways in which the political context affects the relationship between economic perceptions and vote by distinguishing between (1) institutional clarity of responsibility, (2) governing party target size (size of the largest party in government) and (3) clarity of available alternatives (effective number of parties in the legislature). However, 'institutional clarity of responsibility' in this study is identical to the Powell and Whitten measure, and thus captures both formal institutional rules and dynamic traits of the incumbent.
4. This distinction is not dissimilar to the one Rudolph (2003) makes between partisan control of state governments ('balance of partisan power') and statutory or constitutional control state governors in the United States have over the budgetary process ('balance of budgetary power'). His findings indicate that under unified partisan governments citizens can better attribute responsibility to the governor and his party in the legislature, but when the governor controls the budget process, this increases the ability of citizens to attribute responsibility to the governor alone.
5. In their study of economic voting in different democratic regimes, Hellwig and Samuels (2008) make a strong case for separating voters' ability to assign responsibility from their ability to use the vote to act on the basis of that assignment. They identify three factors that they argue are exclusively associated with the latter: separate executive and legislative elections (as in (semi-)presidential systems); concurrence of elections in such systems; and the possibility of cohabitation. We would argue that divisions of powers between the executive and the legislature (as in presidential and semi-presidential systems) and within the executive (as with cohabitation) may also affect the way in which voters *assign* responsibility. Moreover, since Hellwig and Samuels' hypotheses concern a rather specific combination of institutional features, it has unfortunately not been possible for us to test them using our data.
6. The social psychology literature has referred to this phenomenon as 'personalising' attribution, where attribution of responsibility to the president is a cognitive simplifica-

tion strategy that allows voters to assign credit and blame for outcomes, despite complex institutional structures (see Tyler 1982; Sigelman & Knight 1985).

7. These omissions are noteworthy, since Powell (2000: 65) has argued that 'my judgment is that our best overview of clarity of responsibility will be strongly based on the government majority status at the time of the election, taking further account of the cohesion of the government party'. Empirically, we do not find strong support for this in our dataset since including this variable only serves to weaken the moderating effect of 'government clarity' and if we include majority government as a separate variable, we do not find any evidence of a moderating effect on performance voting.
8. This suggests that the saliency of an issue might moderate the degree of performance voting. The economy is generally a salient issue to voters. In our survey, conducted in 2009, around 60 per cent of respondents cite the economy (whether generally or more specifically such as saying unemployment) as the 'most important problem' facing their country and 90 per cent cite the economy as one of the most important problems. Interestingly, we find no real differences in the impact of performance evaluations for those who cited the economy or healthcare as one of the most important problems. This is not necessarily strong evidence against the saliency argument, however. Relying on the survey question that asks about the most important problem facing the nation has been shown in previous research to conflate two different characteristics of saliency: the importance of issues and the degree to which issues are a problem (Wlezien 2005). Given that the survey was carried out during the financial crisis, it is not surprising that almost everyone thought some aspect of economic conditions was important, but this makes it difficult to empirically assess the moderating impact of saliency on performance voting.
9. In an expert survey conducted in February 2010, 117 policy experts from all EU Member States were asked 'how responsible the national government is' for various policy areas (economy, interest rates, climate change, immigration and healthcare), on a scale from 0 to 10. Healthcare was the policy area for which national governments were assigned most responsibility (an average of 7.9, compared to 5.8 for the economy) of the five policy areas (see Hobolt & Tilley, forthcoming). Clearly national government control over healthcare provision varies across national contexts, not least because some healthcare functions are devolved to subnational jurisdictions. Nonetheless, in all EU countries experts rated the national government as more responsible for healthcare than the economy.
10. Vote intention in national elections is commonly used as the dependent variable in studies of economic voting (see Anderson 2000; Nadeau et al. 2002; Duch & Stevenson 2008).
11. We thus exclude non-voters from our analysis; 24 per cent of the total sample said that they would either not vote, would cast a spoiled/blank ballot or did not know who they would vote for, and a further 9 per cent declined to answer this question.
12. Given the economic circumstances of 2009, the answers to the question about the economy were unsurprisingly biased towards the 'worse' options: the mean is -1.44. Recoding the variable to a three category choice, with 'stayed the same', 'got a little better' and 'got a lot better' responses in one category, gives very similar results to those shown here, however, and keeping it as a five-category variable allows a more direct comparison with the healthcare measure.
13. This is measured using Whitten and Palmer's (1999) method of identifying systems in which the opposition is given proportional control of politically significant committee chairs within the legislature.

14. This refers to the internal cohesion in terms of parties' legislative behaviour. Where possible, we have relied on Whitten and Palmer data (1999) on strong party cohesion. For Central and Eastern Europe, we relied on local party expert evaluations and MP surveys (e.g., Borz 2006).
15. This measure is the Regional Authority Index (RAI) used by Hooghe et al. (2010) which runs from 0 to 29.3 (Germany in our dataset) and has been rescaled to run from 0 to 1. Our results are unchanged if we use the 1–5 measure of federalism developed by Lijphart (1999).
16. We use Elgie's institutional definition of 'semi-presidentialism' as characterised by 'a popularly elected, fixed term president [who] exists alongside a prime minister and cabinet who are responsible to parliament' (Elgie 1999: 13).
17. This is measured using Lijphart's (1999) four-point scale, which we have reduced to two groups. The first unicameral group are systems with only one chamber, or with two chambers that are asymmetrical and congruent. These score 1–2 on the Lijphart scale. The second bicameral group are systems with asymmetric and incongruent chambers or symmetric and incongruent chambers. These score 3–4 on the Lijphart scale.
18. To achieve a comparable cross-national measure of the ideology of the parties in government, we use the European Parliament party groupings to divide parties into left and right. Research has shown that these party groups consist of national parties sharing similar policy positions (McElroy & Benoit 2010). The European United Left–Nordic Green Left, Progressive Alliance of Socialist and Democrats and Greens–European Free Alliance are coded as leftist parties and all other parties as rightist.
19. Note that as we are predicting incumbent vote intention across multiple countries, standard control variables of education, income and so on make little sense here as some incumbent governments will be leftist and some rightist. With only 27 cases it is also difficult to introduce any controls at the country level, although we did test the impact of the two obvious extra independent variables of time from last election and post-communist status. These made no difference to the results that we present here.

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