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Listening to the Government: How Information Shapes Responsibility Attributions

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Abstract Assigning credit and blame in systems of multilevel government, such as federal states, requires information. This paper examines how voters respond to information about policy outcomes when attributing responsibility to multiple levels of government in a European context. Using an experimental design, we show that the responsibility attributions of British voters are affected by perceptual biases, notably their feelings about the government and the European Union (EU). But interestingly, we also find that voters, regardless of their predispositions, are only responsive to information they receive from their national government, whereas they ignore information provided by EU officials. These findings have implications not only for our understanding of attribution in systems of multiple levels of government, but also for how voters use information selectively depending on the credibility of the source.

Keywords Attribution · Information · Laboratory experiment · Partisanship · Responsibility · European Union

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Introduction

In democracies, citizens can hold governments to account by rewarding or punishing them in elections based on their performance (Key 1966). Yet, this task is more complicated in systems with multiple levels of government, since citizens need to be aware of which responsibilities pertain to different levels of government in order to sanction politicians for their performance (Bovens 1998; Cutler 2004; Arceneaux 2006; Johns 2010). To assess the quality of democratic accountability in multi-level government systems, it is therefore crucial to understand how voters attribute responsibility and evaluate policy outcomes when faced with divided authority. A key issue in such complex systems is that people lack sufficient information to accurately judge who is responsible for policy decisions at different levels of government. We thus expect that people will largely rely on informational shortcuts, or cues, in order to decide how to attribute responsibility (Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Sniderman 2000; Lau and Redlawsk 2001). This raises the fundamental question of how information and cues influence the way in which voters arrive at responsibility judgments. Specifically, this article asks two questions that arise from this: how and to what extent are responsibility attributions mediated by people's predispositions (*perceptual bias*) and by the credibility of the information provider (*source credibility*)?

First, we examine how predispositions influence responsibility attributions. While we expect individuals to be responsive to new information, their judgments are also likely to be mediated by their predispositions (Zaller 1992). The social psychology literature describes the concept of group-serving bias where individuals tend to give credit to the group they favor (e.g., a political party or nation state) for positive outcomes and to blame the rival group or an exogenous constraint for negative outcomes (Taylor and Fiske 1975, 1978; Miller and Ross 1975; Hewstone 1989). Political scientists have shown that partisanship influences how voters see the world in terms of the government's influence on outcomes in a variety of ways (Rudolph 2003, 2003a; Gomez and Wilson 2008; Maestas et al. 2008; Malhotra and Kuo 2008). In particular, partisans of governing parties may justify poor outcomes by asserting that the incumbent government is not responsible.

Second, if we want to understand how people respond to information, we must also investigate how they sort amongst the many cues that are available to them. More specifically, do their responses to information depend on the information provider, the *source* of that information? Studies on political communication have shown that the credibility of the source conditions the extent to which elites can manipulate public opinion (Hovland and Weiss 1951; Druckman 2001, 2001a; Lupia 2002). Building on that literature, we present two competing hypotheses concerning source credibility. The first is that people are more likely to accept information from sources that they like, for example due to partisanship. In that case, government partisans will respond more to information provided by the government. An alternative explanation is that credibility has more to do with perceived trustworthiness rather than likeability. Lupia and McCubbins (1998) argue that the key mechanisms that give credibility to a speaker are the possibility of verification, penalties for lying and costly effort. In a democracy, we expect that

politicians who face voters' judgment in regular elections have a greater incentive to be truthful, and hence will appear more credible, than politicians who do not. The alternative hypothesis is therefore that voters respond more to the information provided by elected politicians than to unelected officials.

These hypotheses are tested using an experimental design that allows us to vary both the information provided to participants about policy outcomes and the source of the information. This laboratory experiment thus tests the indirect persuasion effect of information: does providing information about policy performance interact with in-group predispositions in shaping attribution judgments? And, does this depend on the source of the information? The specific context of our investigation is British voters attributing responsibility to the national and the European Union (EU) level. The paper therefore proceeds as follows. First, we briefly review the literature on attribution in multilevel systems, and then we develop our specific hypotheses on perceptual bias and source credibility. Thereafter, we present our experimental design and turn to our methods and results. The final section discusses our findings.

Attribution in a System of Multi-level Government

There is a long-running debate on how to characterize the European Union: as a federation, an embryonic supranational state, a system of multi-level governance or something else? (Kohler-Koch 1996; Hooghe and Marks 2003). But there is broad agreement among scholars that the scope and depth of policy-making at the EU level has increased over time and that today it has many traits in common with a federal state. Voters in the EU consequently face considerable challenges when deciding whether policy outcomes are the responsibility of the national (or local) government or the EU level, just like they do in other federal states such as the US, Canada and Germany. Although the policy areas that are partly or wholly decided at the EU level have considerably expanded, there has been little research investigating whether citizens realize the degree to which policy decisions that affect their day-to-day lives are now determined in Brussels rather than at the national level. More importantly, we have a limited understanding of how citizens arrive at responsibility judgments in the context of divided authority in the EU.

While few studies have looked at how voters attribute responsibility in the European Union, scholars have examined this issue in other federal contexts, notably in North America. A number of scholars have argued that federalism, and other forms of multi-level government, blunts the accountability mechanism because voters do not know who to credit or blame for policy outcomes. This argument links to the extensive literature on 'clarity of responsibility' which has shown that institutional set-ups that blur lines of responsibility tend to weaken the link between government performance and vote choice. In the empirical literature, this argument has primarily been applied to demonstrate that voters are less likely to punish governments for poor economic performance in systems with a dispersion of executive power (see Powell and Whitten 1993; Anderson 2000; Nadeau et al. 2002; Whitten and Palmer 1999). Whereas most scholars focus on the 'horizontal'

dimension of clarity of responsibility, recent studies have also looked at the 'vertical' dimension, namely multiple levels of government (Anderson 2006).

To be able to effectively sanction governments in federal systems, the retrospective evaluations of voters must reflect the functions for which each level of government is responsible. Yet attributing responsibility correctly in multi-level systems is a daunting task (Cutler 2004, 2008; Johns 2010; León 2010). Not only do many voters have difficulty figuring out who is responsible for what, but politicians clearly also have an incentive to engage in blame shifting and credit taking that will further serve to undermine clear responsibility linkages. Anderson's (2006) comparative study of economic voting has shown that the existence of multi-level structures of governance slightly reduces the degree of economic voting. In the Canadian context, Cutler (Cutler 2004, 2008) has shown that voters do not strongly differentiate the roles of governments across issues, and that they are more likely to ignore issues in their vote calculations when the assignment of responsibility is unclear. These findings thus suggest that federalism may reduce the ability of voters to hold governments to account. Having said that, a number of other studies have reached more positive conclusions about whether voters are able to distinguish between the responsibility of different levels of government and hold candidates responsible for the policies assigned to their respective offices (Atkeson and Partin 1995, 1998; Niemi et al. 1995; Arceneaux 2006). Arceneaux (2006) finds that citizens appear capable of making distinctions in terms of what different levels of government do, and these distinctions structure how voters attribute credit or blame for policy outcomes. However, these distinctions only affect voting behavior at different levels within the federal system when the issue upon which voters are attributing responsibility is highly accessible and the level of government perceived to be functionally responsible for that issue coincides with the level of government that is actually responsible. Similarly Johns (2010) finds that voters in Ontario and Scotland can fairly accurately assign issues to different levels of government, but that attributions matter much less when they go to the ballot box.

This debate on the degree to which voters are able to hold representatives to account in multi-level systems begs the question of how voters arrive at an opinion on which level of government is functionally responsible. Most studies of attribution in federal settings seem to assume that information (or lack thereof) is at the heart of this issue, but nonetheless no studies have explicitly examined how voters process information about distribution of responsibilities and how 'perceptual biases' may have influenced how voters assign responsibility in a federal context. This is surprising since the social psychology literature and several recent studies in political science (Rudolph 2003, 2003a; Gomez and Wilson 2008; Maestas et al. 2008; Malhotra and Kuo 2008; Marsh and Tilley 2010; Tilley and Hobolt 2011) show that the question of who is responsible is not simply a question of objective fact. Instead, voters' evaluations of who is responsible are conditioned by their prior political beliefs, primarily their partisanship, as they seek to reconcile the information they receive with their political predispositions.

This article seeks to contribute to this extensive literature by examining how voters arrive at responsibility judgments in multi-level government settings,

focusing on how they respond to information and reconcile it with their predispositions. In the next section, we develop our theoretical propositions.

Perceptual Biases: Assigning Credit and Blame

Social psychologists have long argued that the way individuals assign credit and blame, their 'causal attribution', is marked by a number of errors and biases (Fiske and Taylor 2007). In the context of attribution of responsibility to governments, the most important type of perceptual bias is group serving bias (Brewer and Brown 1998). This refers to the tendency of in-group members to attribute positive actions committed by their own group to positive in-group qualities and negative actions by the favored group to external causes. When it comes to politics, partisanship is a powerful marker for who belongs to the in-group and who belongs to the out-group, which will influence attitudes towards elected politicians and their achievements or failures (Campbell et al. 1960). Recently, a number of studies have shown that partisanship shapes attribution of responsibility in the economic domain (Rudolph 2003a, 2006; Marsh and Tilley 2010; Tilley and Hobolt 2011) and for other policy outcomes, such as responses to Hurricane Katrina in 2008 (Gomez and Wilson 2008; Maestas et al. 2008; Malhotra and Kuo 2008). In all these articles, it is argued that partisanship has a great deal of influence over people's judgments of responsibility. We might also expect perceptual biases when individuals form judgments about who is responsible for policy outcomes in a system of multi-level government. The main difference in the context of a multi-level system is that when responsibility is assigned at more than one level, partisanship might not be the only meaningful in-group signal. At the national level, we would expect partisanship to be an important indicator conditioning whether or not voters decide to hold the government responsible for policy performance. But when it comes to the European Union level, partisanship is no longer the decisive factor, since the European Commission, that is the EU's mixed, collective executive, consists of delegates of different political persuasions from all member states.[1] Instead research has shown that the primary factor determining attitudes towards policies at the European level are general attitudes towards the EU, which in turn are largely driven by identity concerns (Carey 2002; McLaren 2006; Hooghe and Marks 2004, 2009). In other words, the 'nation' may be regarded as another important in-group. Of course, factors other than identity have also been shown to influence attitudes towards the EU,[2] but the important point is that general feelings about the EU have similarities with other political predispositions, such as partisanship. In other words, just like partisanship may influence how voters attribute credit and blame, attitudes towards the European Union may also shape attributions. We are not arguing that these are identical types of predispositions, but rather that

[1] The same applies if we describe the Union's executive as a *dual* executive consisting of both the Commission and the Council. The Council plays both a legislative and an executive role in the EU and is made up by members of national governments of different partisan persuasions.

[2] Notably utilitarian cost-benefit calculations concerned with whether individuals stand to gain from market integration have been shown to influence citizens' support for the EU (see Gabel 1998; McLaren 2006).

they may act in a similar way: people who are negatively disposed towards the EU as a level of government will be more likely to attribute responsibility to the EU when things are going badly, just like opposition partisans will be more likely to blame the domestic government for a crisis. We can thus formulate our first set of hypotheses about *perceptual biases* for the government and the EU.

H1: Supporters of a party in government are more likely to attribute responsibility to the government for a policy area when they receive positive information about policy performance and less likely when they receive negative information about policy performance.

H2: Supporters of the EU project are more likely to attribute responsibility to the EU for a policy area when they receive positive information about policy performance and less likely when they receive negative information about policy performance.

Perceptual biases become activated when individuals receive information about a certain event or outcome and seek to attribute responsibility. For example, people may be informed about rising unemployment and they may seek to infer the causes, i.e., blame something or someone for this occurrence. To the extent that group-serving bias is present, individuals will be more likely to pin the blame on an out-group (potentially the EU or the political parties that make up the domestic government) and absolve their in-group of blame (again potentially the EU or the domestic incumbent parties). However, if we want to understand how individuals respond to information to arrive at responsibility judgments, perceptual biases are not the only factor to consider. Another question is whether people choose to believe the information they receive in the first place. Individuals are presented with a barrage of information at all times, and they may choose to use some of that information to arrive at causal attribution, whereas other pieces of information will be rejected or ignored (Lupia 2002).

Source Credibility

Many studies in communication have shown than the effectiveness of elite communication is influenced by the attitude of the audience towards the messenger. Early communication research demonstrated that a key factor in determining the persuasiveness of the messenger is *credibility* (Hovland and Weiss 1951; Hovland et al. 1953). Key aspects of credibility are expertise (the amount of knowledge that a communicator is assumed to possess) and trustworthiness (the perceived intention of the communicator to deceive) (Lupia 2002). Recent research in the field of political communication has shown that the ability to persuade or prime the public is contingent on the credibility of the information source, since people are likely to reject the information they receive from non-credible sources (Petty and Wegener 1998; Druckman 2001, 2001a).

Scholars thus agree that credibility of the information provider, understood as the expertise and trustworthiness of a source, is a key factor in determining how individuals will respond to this information. By contrast, determining the credibility of different levels of government, as information providers, is not straightforward. Whereas

communication scholars often design experiments contrasting information from very trustworthy and very untrustworthy politicians or news outlets—such as Colin Powell versus Jerry Springer (Druckman 2001) or the *New England Journal of Biology and Medicine* versus 'a monthly pictorial magazine' (Hovland and Weiss 1951)—we are interested in contrasting different levels of government, where it is not immediately clear whether one level is inherently more trustworthy than another. Indeed, looking at public opinion polls, we often get the impression that voters generally find politicians inherently untrustworthy (Listhaug 1995). Thus, by comparing the responses to information from two levels of government, rather than a conspicuously trustworthy and untrustworthy source, our experiments are not only more conservative, they also make it more difficult to make clear-cut predictions about which source the individual voter will find more credible. Based on the literature, we therefore present two alternative hypotheses for how voters arrive at credibility judgments.

The first follows most directly from our discussion of perceptual biases above. According to this explanation, credibility of government actors depends again on group-serving biases, such as partisanship. Aggregate-level research has shown that the partisanship of political elites serves as an important mediating factor filtering the information the public receive about politics (Zaller 1992; Watts et al. 1999). Similarly, we might expect that voters are more likely to trust, and therefore respond to information, from a group that they identify with. Simply put, citizens who identify with a particular group, say a political party currently in government, will accept information from elites that they can identify as associated with their party (e.g., the government). In contrast, they will reject the information when the source is identified as belonging to the opposing group (e.g., the opposition) (see Domke et al. 2000). In the context of our multi-level government setting, this would imply that supporters of incumbent political parties will respond to information they receive from the national government, whereas information provided by EU sources will only be picked up by those who are supportive of the EU. We call this the *likeability hypothesis*:

H3: Supporters of a party in government are more likely to respond to information they receive from the national government and EU supporters are more likely to respond to information they receive from EU officials.

Alternatively, it might be argued that the trustworthiness of a source is most affected not by likeability, but rather by more general characteristics of that source, related to incentives for truth-telling. Most individuals sense that politicians may have the incentive to lie, since they are known to be driven by the desire to be re-elected, to hold office and to pursue policies (Strøm 1990). And it would be difficult to argue that truth-seeking is normally a characteristic attached to the political profession, which suggests that it might be most rational for voters to ignore the information they receive from politicians. Yet, Lupia and McCubbins (1998) have developed a model that describes the conditions under which individuals may be persuaded by someone even when it is not clear that he or she is trustworthy. They argue that '*external forces can substitute for character* and thus generate persuasion in contexts where it would not otherwise occur' (9, italics in original). They list three types of *external forces*: verification (threat that the voter

can discern a true signal from a false one), penalties for lying (size of penalty if deception is discovered), and observable and costly effort (costly effort by the messenger to be persuasive). External forces are inherent in common political institutions (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Yet in the context of the multi-level system of the European Union the political institutions clearly provide much stronger external forces at the national level than at the European level. After all, the EU's executive, the European Commission, is unelected and largely unaccountable to national electorates. It faces minimal scrutiny, and the penalties for lying are significantly reduced by the fact that it is national governments that determine the fate of individual commissioners, not the public. As Føllesdal and Hix (2006, p. 536) note in their discussion of the EU's democratic deficit: 'Institutionally, electoral control over the Council and the Commission is too removed… Psychologically, the EU is too different from the domestic democratic institutions that citizens are used to. As a result, citizens cannot understand the EU, and so will never be able to assess and regard it as a democratic system writ large'. Following the Lupia and McCubbins model, we therefore anticipate that the level of government with more pronounced external forces—what we might think of in this context as greater accountability—will appear more credible to voters, regardless of their in-group biases. We can thus formulate the *accountability hypothesis:*

H4: Individuals are more likely to respond to information they receive from national governments than from European Union officials.

Methods and Data

This paper uses a laboratory experimental design to test our hypotheses. The advantage of this is that we were able to control the information that individuals are exposed to by randomly assigning participants to different treatments (Morton and Williams 2010). This allows us to examine the effect of the direction of the information and the source of that information, and thereby assess the complex causal mechanisms described earlier. Given the nature of the perceptual biases that we are interested in, this is very important for it allows us to test 'what causes what', and removes the possibility of other confounding influences. A lab experiment is also preferable to a survey experimental design as it allows us the time to provide participants with information, in this case a news article, in a format that corresponds to something that they might encounter in their daily lives. Lab experiments are often criticized for the artificial environment, which may reduce the external validity of the findings (McDermott 2002). We have tried to minimize these problems by first giving participants source material that is almost identical to a news article that they might normally encounter[3]; second, attributing the

[3] The articles that we created were based on existing stories from national newspapers and pre-tested prior to their introduction in the lab using focus groups. The focus groups reported that they thought that the news articles were, in fact, real news stories from a legitimate source. The news stories resembled in format material from the BBC website, which is one of the most widely used online news sources in the UK.

information to sources that are real and well known (for example, the Secretary of State for Health); and finally, providing information on policy areas, the economy and healthcare, that are meaningful and salient issues to most people.

Another common criticism of lab experiments is their reliance on university students as the subject pool, and hence their lack of generalizability to the population. Although the evidence for this being a problem is mixed,[4] our study uses a diverse participant pool that includes university students, university staff, and participants with no university affiliation.

The Experimental Design

The experiment was conducted at the Centre for Experimental Social Science, Nuffield College, University of Oxford, between June 29 and July 21, 2009. In all, 222 participants were recruited for the experiment, a mixture of students (undergraduate and postgraduate) and non-students from the greater Oxford area in Britain.[5] As discussed, the substantive focus of the experiment was tied to the two issues of the state of the economy and the state of healthcare in Britain.[6] These two issues connect to the two main areas of 'valence politics': competent economic management and competent management of major public services. Both are salient in British politics and they also, to some extent, enable us to look at one issue that is largely under the remit of the British government, the NHS, and one issue where supranational actors like the EU play more of a role, the economy.

The experiment tests the influence of perceptual biases by examining how the policy performance information treatment conditions the impact of in-group predispositions (partisanship/EU attitudes) on attribution judgments. The experimental treatments are thus subtle *indirect* persuasion effects, since they do not seek to manipulate who is responsible for a given policy area, but merely provide (positive/negative) information about the performance in that area. Moreover, we are able to test whether the credibility of the source influences the effectiveness of the information by varying the information source (national government/EU official), while keeping everything else the same.

The participants were assigned at random to one of the conditions, the experimental design was single-shot, and participants were not allowed to participate in more than one session. Participants were given an in-take questionnaire that covered a variety of questions about their media consumption and

[4] See Mintz et al. (2006) for evidence against using students and Druckman and Kam (2011) for evidence in favour of using students.

[5] Participants had an average age of 29, but included people from 18 to 72. Slightly more women (59%) than men took part in the experiment. 36% of the participants were still in education, and among those no longer in education, the majority held some type of university degree (58%), making our sample considerably more educated than the British electorate. Our participants were also more middle class than the electorate, with around half of employed people working in professional or managerial jobs.

[6] The participants were informed that they were participating in a research study about contemporary issues in politics and the media. The general instructions informed participants that they would have to complete two questionnaires and read two news articles.

political attitudes. Our two key independent variables of incumbent party support[7] and support for the EU were captured using the following questions:

> On the whole, do you approve or disapprove of the government's record to date? Please indicate your views using a 0 to 10 scale. On this scale, 0 means 'strongly disapprove' and 10 means 'strongly approve'.
>
> Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using a 0 to 10 scale. On this scale, 0 means unification 'has already gone too far' and 10 means it 'should be pushed further'.

Following the completion of the intake questionnaire, participants read two news articles, the first about the economy and the second about healthcare, on the computer screen. The order of these news reports was fixed for all participants, the only difference being whether the information was positive or negative and the identity of the source across the experimental conditions.[8]

The first news story about the economy was either positive (so the economic downturn was portrayed as being less severe than previously thought) or negative (so the economic downturn was worse than expected). The source was then attributed to either the government (the Treasury and Alistair Darling, Chancellor of the Exchequer) or the European Union (the European Commission and Joaquin Almunia, the European Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs). We randomly assigned subjects to the direction (positive or negative) and the source (government or EU). Similarly for our second policy area of healthcare, we gave subjects a story that portrayed healthcare in Britain as either good and improving (specifically that life expectancy was relatively high compared to other EU countries and that hospital waiting lists were falling) or that it was poor and worsening (life expectancy was relatively low and waiting lists were increasing). Again subjects were randomly assigned to a government source for this information (the Department of Health and Alan Johnson, the Secretary of State for Health) or an EU source (the EU Commission and Androulla Vassiliou, the EU Health Commissioner). The full details of the articles provided and the experimental manipulation within them are included in the Appendix.

Finally, after reading the news articles, participants were given an exit questionnaire, which asked a number of questions about the articles' content,[9] to

[7] Conventional measures of partisanship would give us only around a quarter of the sample as government supporters; by using a 0–10 scale of government approval we are able to get a more nuanced guide to any individual's view of the government party. It also means that we have an analogous measure to the 0–10 EU support scale.

[8] For example, if a participant was given a positive report about the economic downtown and the source was the government, then the same positive direction of information and same government source were carried over to the status of healthcare report.

[9] Note that our subsequent analysis excludes the people (eight for the EU source treatment and eight for the government source treatment) who were unable to identify whether the treatment news article they received contained positive or negative information on the economy, and in total seven people (five for the EU source treatment and two for the government source treatment) that were unable to identify whether the treatment news article they received contained positive or negative information about healthcare. This is designed to eliminate subjects who simply did not pay any attention to the articles, and

assess the degree to which participants had paid attention to the news stories, as well as measures of our two key dependent variables:

> We would like to know how much responsibility you think the British government and the European Union have for different policy areas. Of course, you may think that neither is responsible.
>
> How responsible would you say the British government is for economic conditions in Britain? Please answer on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is 'no responsibility' and 10 is 'full responsibility'
>
> Now thinking about the European Union, how responsible is the EU for economic conditions in Britain? Please answer on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is 'no responsibility' and 10 is 'full responsibility'.[10]

Our design thus enables us to both examine how differences in the direction of information affect people's views of the degree of responsibility attributed to each actor for two different policy areas (hypotheses 1 and 2) and how differences in the source of that information affect who is thought responsible (hypotheses 3 and 4). In the next section we set out the results of our experiment.

Results

Before turning to the experimental results it is worth looking at the participants' general view of which level of government was more or less responsible for the policy areas of the economy and health. As Table 1 shows, people generally thought that the British government was more responsible for healthcare than the economy (high scores indicate more responsibility and low scores less responsibility). This makes sense given that the majority of healthcare via the National Health Service (NHS) is directly under the control of government whereas the economy is affected not just by national government decisions but also by international actors, both governmental and non-governmental (Hellwig 2001). Conversely, the EU is held more responsible for the economy than for healthcare, which also corresponds to the formal division of competences in the EU, where healthcare is decided mainly at the national level, whereas many policies concerning trade and the economy are either decided or coordinated at the EU level.[11] Finally, in both cases people attribute more responsibility to the British government than to the EU.

Footnote 9 continued
uses the question 'In your opinion, did the first article have a positive, negative, or neutral assessment of the economic situation in Britain? (Positive, Neutral, Negative, Don't know).

[10] These questions are designed to focus on 'functional responsibility' (or what some social psychologists call 'role responsibility'), which refers to the obligations that institutions or individuals are expected to fulfil. It is worth noting that we are not 'cueing' participants in any way by asking them to directly credit or blame anybody for good or bad conditions, but rather asking for a more 'objective' assessment of responsibility. This makes any estimates of perceptual bias effects more conservative.

[11] See *Consolidated versions of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*, Title 1, Articles 2–6 (Official Journal C 115 of 9 May 2008).

Table 1 Attributions of responsibility for economic conditions and health care to the national government and the EU

	Mean economy attribution score	Standard deviation for economy (N)	Mean health attribution score	Standard deviation for health (N)
National government	6.83	1.87 (222)	8.50	1.56 (222)
EU	4.59	1.89 (221)	3.51	2.32 (219)

Note: The dependent variable is attribution of responsibility to the different levels of government, measured on a 0–10 scale, where 0 = not at all responsible and 10 = completely responsible

Table 2 Linear regression models of attributions of responsibility to the government, by information source

	Source			
	Government		EU	
	B	SE	B	SE
A: The economy				
Government approval (0–10 scale)	−0.29**	0.11	−0.20†	0.12
Treatment (positive economic performance)	−.45†	0.76	0.35	0.70
Treatment*Government approval	0.41*	0.17	−0.07	0.17
Constant	7.60**	0.46	7.75**	0.48
N	100		103	
B: Healthcare				
Government approval (0–10 scale)	−0.10	0.09	−0.16	0.10
Treatment (positive healthcare performance)	−1.00	0.60	0.27	0.58
Treatment*Government approval	0.22†	0.13	−0.08	0.14
Constant	8.94**	0.38	9.23**	0.40
N	106		106	

† $P < 0.10$; * $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$

Note A: The dependent variable is attribution of responsibility to the British government for the economy, measured on a 0–10 scale, where 0 = not at all responsible and 10 = completely responsible. The reference group for treatment = negative economic performance

Note B: The dependent variable is attribution of responsibility to the British government for healthcare, measured on a 0-10 scale, where 0 = not at all responsible and 10 = completely responsible. The reference group for treatment = negative healthcare performance

These findings are thus reassuring, as they suggest that people are capable of making what appear to be reasonable judgments about which level of government is responsible for what. This raises the question of what happens when they are faced with more information about policy outcomes; to what extent will people adjust their opinions of responsibility, in line with the 'perceptual bias' hypotheses? Table 2 shows OLS regression models predicting the attributions of responsibility to the government for the economy and healthcare (A and B respectively). These

models aim to test hypothesis 1, modeling attributions as a function of government approval (measured on the 0–10 scale), the treatment type that subjects received, positive (coded 1) or negative (coded 0) information about the economy and healthcare, and an interaction between the two. If hypothesis 1 is correct, we should expect a positive and statistically significant interaction between government approval and treatment type. In essence, depending on someone's view of the government, they react differently to new information on performance due to partisan biases. Specifically, people that dislike the government should attribute more responsibility to the government when faced with bad news about the economy or healthcare than people that like the government, and therefore we should expect a positive interaction effect between government approval and the dummy variable for positive information.

Table 3 is almost exactly the same in format but tests hypothesis 2, namely that perceptual biases can be extended to include predispositions about support for the EU. In Table 3 we predict attribution of responsibility to the EU for the two policy areas as a function of support for the EU (measured on a 0–10 scale), the dummy variable for treatment (again 0 for negative performance and 1 for positive performance), and an interaction between the two. If hypothesis 2 holds we should expect a positive interaction effect, showing that positive news about the economy

Table 3 Linear regression models of attributions of responsibility to the EU, by information source

	Source			
	Government		EU	
	B	SE	B	SE
A: The economy				
EU support (0–10 scale)	−0.17†	0.10	−0.12	0.11
Treatment (positive economic performance)	−1.36	0.85	0.96	0.90
Treatment*EU support	0.31*	0.15	−0.05	0.16
Constant	5.07**	0.54	5.03**	0.60
N	98		103	
B: Healthcare				
EU support (0−10 scale)	−0.28*	0.13	0.05	0.14
Treatment (positive healthcare performance)	−1.75†	1.01	0.72	1.20
Treatment*EU support	0.35†	0.18	0.04	0.21
Constant	4.67**	0.65	2.99**	0.78
N	103		105	

† $P < 0.10$; * $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$

Note A: The dependent variable is attribution of responsibility to the EU for the economy, measured on a 0−10 scale, where 0 = not at all responsible and 10 = completely responsible. The reference group for treatment = negative economic performance

Note B: The dependent variable is attribution of responsibility to the EU for healthcare, measured on a 0–10 scale, where 0 = not at all responsible and 10 = completely responsible. The reference group for treatment = negative healthcare performance

or healthcare makes Europhiles attribute more responsibility to the EU than Euroskeptics.

Finally, these tables also test hypotheses 3 and 4 concerning source credibility, because we run the models separately by source of information. Recall that we presented two alternative hypotheses for the effect of source credibility: the *likeability hypothesis* (H3) and the *accountability hypothesis* (H4). On the one hand, if hypothesis 3 is correct then we would expect the interaction effects just discussed to be greater for the government source in Table 2 and for the EU source in Table 3, as government partisans are more inclined to trust government sources. On the other hand, if hypothesis 4 is correct then we would expect to see uniformly stronger effects for the government source than for the EU source, as the government is seen as a more accountable and hence more trustworthy source of information.

As hypothesized, Table 2 shows positive and statistically significant (at the 10% level at least) interaction effects between government approval and treatment for both healthcare and the economy, but crucially only if the source is the government. Our results therefore show strong support for hypothesis 1, by indicating that there is perceptual bias and responsibility attributions are driven in part by a combination of performance perceptions and existing feelings towards the government. These are non-trivial effects too. Figure 1 illustrates the size of these effects when the government is the source of the information. For the economy we would predict that someone who really disapproves of the government (scores 0 on the scale, about two standard deviations less than the mean) and receives the positive information treatment would score 6.2 on the 0–10 attribution scale, but this attribution score would increase to 7.6 if they received the negative information treatment. By contrast, for someone who is strongly wedded to the governing party (scores 8 on the scale, about two standard deviations greater than the mean), we would predict that positive information would give a score of 7.1 on the attribution scale, and

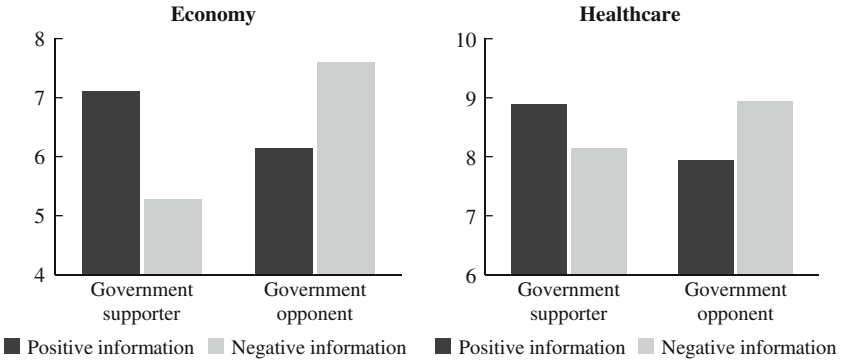

Fig. 1 Attributions of responsibility to government by treatment and government support, source of information is the government. *Note*: Government supporters are coded as scoring 8 (roughly two standard deviations above the mean) on the 0–10 government approval scale and government opponents as scoring 0 (roughly two standard deviations below the mean) on the 0–10 scale. The source of the information is the government

negative information would result in a much lower score of 5.3. As Fig. 1 shows, the effects for healthcare are very similar, albeit slightly weaker.

Thus, individuals who disapprove of the government will tend to blame it for poor performance, and not credit it for good performance, while governing party supporters will tend to credit it for good performance and absolve it of blame for poor performance. Our results are thus in line with the existing literature on partisan biases in the attribution of credit and blame (e.g. Rudolph 2003, 2003a; Tilley and Hobolt 2011). It is also clear, however, that the source makes a difference: the hypothesized effects are only found when the government is the source. When the source is the EU, there are no perceptual bias effects, or indeed main effects of the treatment. It thus appears the people do not use information from the EU to update their views of who is responsible for the economy or for healthcare. We return to this point later when we discuss hypotheses 3 and 4. But first we turn to hypothesis 2 concerning the perceptual biases rooted in attitudes towards the EU, rather than feelings about the governing party.

The pattern described above is replicated in Table 3. We see strong evidence for perceptual biases based around EU support, at least when the source is the government. The interaction term is positive for both the economy and healthcare, showing that the effects of the treatment differ depending on the degree to which the subject is a supporter or opponent of further EU integration. In that sense it appears that predispositions about the EU project do act in a relatively similar manner to partisan predispositions. In a similar way to partisan biases, we find that supporters of the EU will give credit to the EU when the information they receive is that things are going well, and people that are less supportive of the EU project will blame the EU when they are told that things are going badly.[12] Figure 2 illustrates the size of these effects when the source is the government. Similarly to before we contrast EU supporters (those that score 9 on the scale, about two standard deviations above the mean) with EU opponents (those that score 1 on the scale, about two standard deviations below the mean). As can be seen in Fig. 2, these effects are of a similar size to those that we find for attribution of responsibility to the government. Our findings thus corroborate our second hypothesis.

Finally turning to the effect of source credibility, the results lend support to the accountability hypothesis (H4) rather than the likeability hypothesis (H3). The fact that both tables show that it is only the information treatment with the government source that influences people suggests that it is the accountability of the source that is most important, rather than the likeability of that source. As an illustration of this, Fig. 3 shows the size of the treatment effects for government/EU supporters and government/EU opponents on attributions of responsibility to the government and the EU for the economy, when the source is EU officials. The treatment effects are of trivial size for all types of participants, and moreover are quite inconsistent. As the results in Tables 2 and 3 indicated this is also the case for healthcare (not illustrated). Our findings thus suggest that for responsibility attributions to both the

[12] Given EU support and (Labour) government support were potentially correlated, we also ran models predicting EU attributions of responsibility which additionally included the government support variable and an interaction between this and treatment. These interactions were not statistically significant, and the results we present here were not affected.

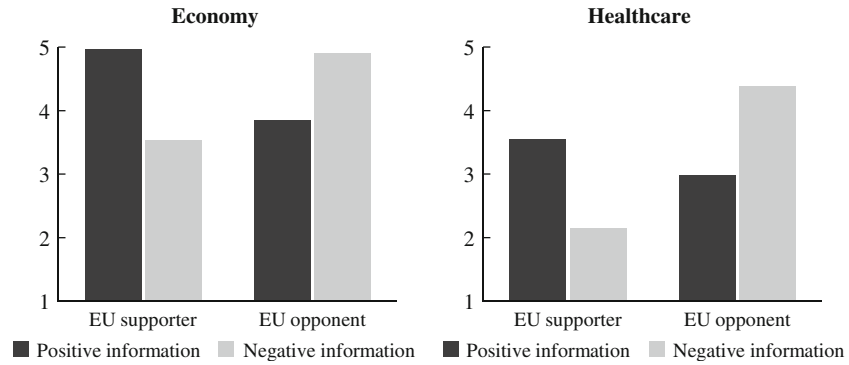

Fig. 2 Attributions of responsibility to the EU by treatment and EU support, source of information is the government. *Note*: EU supporters are coded as scoring 9 (roughly two standard deviations above the mean) on the 0–10 EU support scale and EU opponents as scoring 1 (roughly two standard deviations below the mean) on the 0–10 scale. The source of the information is the government

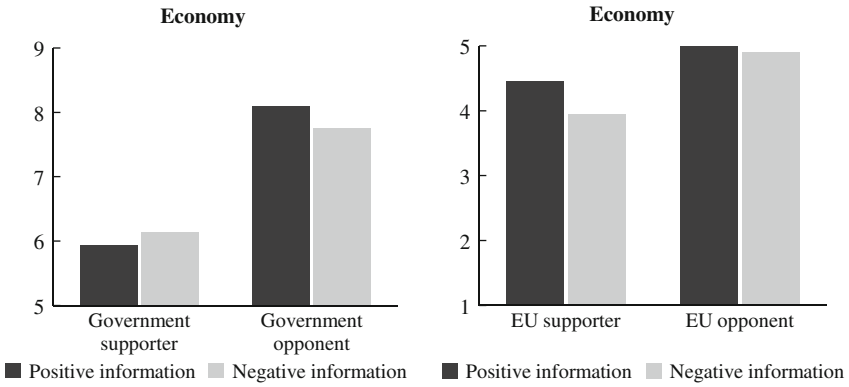

Fig. 3 Attributions of responsibility to the government and to the EU by treatment and government or EU support for the economy, source of information is the EU. *Note*: Government supporters are coded as scoring 8 (roughly two standard deviations above the mean) on the 0–10 government approval scale and government opponents as scoring 0 (roughly two standard deviations below the mean) on the 0–10 scale. EU supporters are coded as scoring 9 (roughly two standard deviations above the mean) on the 0–10 EU support scale and EU opponents as scoring 1 (roughly two standard deviations below the mean) on the 0–10 scale. The source of the information is the EU

EU and the British government, for both the economy and healthcare, it is only information on performance from a government source that matters. Information from an EU source makes no difference to those attributions. In other words, regardless of whether or not people like the EU, they are unlikely to take much notice of information attributed to EU officials, while most individuals, regardless of their partisan affiliations, will pay attention to information provided by the national government. These results are noteworthy as they suggest that while people are partisan when it comes to the assignment of responsibility, such affective

attachments matter less when it comes to choosing to accept that information from different sources.

Conclusion

In systems with multiple levels of governments, citizens face the challenge of not only evaluating the policy performance, but also assigning credit and blame to the appropriate level of government. This is a daunting task since most citizens have a limited knowledge of politics, and politicians at all levels of government have an incentive to manipulate the information they provide to citizens by engaging in blame shifting and credit taking. So how do citizens overcome these potential information shortfalls and assign responsibility to the 'correct' level of government?

This article has sought to address two aspects of this important question by first examining how perceptual biases influence responsibility attributions and second exploring whether the credibility of the information provider influences the extent to which individuals will update their views on who is responsible for specific policies. By using the experimental approach rather than relying on observational data we are able to examine the effect of randomly assigned information treatments, which differ both in terms of evaluation of policy performance and information source, on participants' responsibility attributions.

Interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly, the same logic does not seem to apply when it comes to deciding which information sources to pay attention to. That is, people do not seem to reconcile existing views by ignoring information from less favored sources and embracing information from favored sources. Instead, individuals appear to ignore information from less credible sources in general. At least this is one plausible explanation for why we find a strong effect of information provided by government representatives, but no effect when the same piece of information is provided by EU officials. Our interpretation is that the former information source is more credible to individuals, regardless of their partisan leanings, due to the strong external forces associated with elected national office. By contrast, the credibility of the unelected EU officials is much lower, as they are largely unaccountable, at least to the public, for their actions.

One caveat that we should make regarding these conclusions is that we do not know how far they may translate outside Britain and to other EU member states. After all, British citizens are more euroskeptic compared to most other Europeans and the EU issue is more contentious than in many other countries (De Vries 2007). This may mean that British people are more likely to use EU attitudes as perceptual biases, and are more likely to ignore information from the EU. Yet, while the British may generally be more skeptical about the EU, cross-national survey data suggest that when it comes to assigning responsibility to the national and the EU level they are very similar to other Europeans, and are no more likely to regard the domestic government as more important. When ranked by who thinks the national government is responsible for economic conditions

Britain lies 13th out of 27, and when asked a similar question about whether the EU is responsible for economic conditions Britain lies 20th out of 27 (EES 2009). To that extent, Britain does not look especially distinct from the other member states.

With that caveat in mind, our findings do nonetheless suggest that both types of perceptual bias color citizens' assignment of responsibility. Responsibility attributions are thus at least partially determined by a willingness to adopt views of responsibility that fit with how pre-existing opinions suggest performance should be and how performance is now perceived to be. Yet equally such biases play a lesser role when individuals decide on what information sources to trust in the first place. Our findings clearly suggest that information from the national government has an effect that information from the EU does not. With only two sources our explanation for this is somewhat speculative, but it does seem to fit with theoretical models that suggest that elected officials are a more credible source of information than unelected officials (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Other factors may, however, play a role. For example, as Lupia and McCubbins also point out, expertise could be important. If people perceive domestic political actors as better informed about the domestic economic and healthcare situation than supranational actors that are further removed from these spheres, then people will pay more attention to the former. By comparing unelected EU officials with elected domestic officials, we cannot decisively say whether it is expertise or electoral sanctioning that counts, but it is clear that at least one, or possibly both, do count. Yet no matter which of these two mechanisms is operating, these findings suggest that citizens consider credibility—whether driven by institutional forces or perceived expertise—when processing information about political performance.

These findings thus have implications for the broader debate on accountability in complex multi-level systems (see, e.g., Bovens 1998; Rudolph 2003a; Arceneaux 2006): first, they suggest that since citizens use their predispositions to navigate complex systems, their ability to hold politicians to account for their performance in such systems is potentially diminished by their reliance on such heuristics. Second, and more encouragingly, the results indicate that even if predispositions do mediate the effect of information, democratic institutions work in one particular way: they provide the necessary mechanisms (or 'external forces') to enable individuals to distinguish between credible and non-credible information providers. Hence, citizens are less likely to rely on the information provided by politicians that are not subject to democratic sanctioning. Further research is needed to examine whether this interpretation holds when replicated and extended to other settings, not least in other EU states, and to identify the more specific institutional characteristics that make some political actors more credible than others. But the preliminary suggestion is that whereas citizens might absolve their favored politicians of blame, it seems that likeability alone is not sufficient to ensure credibility.

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Appendix: News Articles Given to Participants

(Bold type indicates positive/negative frame, italic type indicates EU/government source)

Thank you for answering those questions. Next we would like you to read an article about the economic situation in Britain at the moment. Please read the report carefully.

1 June 2009

Economic downturn "less severe/more severe **than feared"** ***says the government/says the EU***

The economic downturn in Britain will be ***less/more*** *deep than previously forecast with unemployment* ***staying below 8/exceeding 12*** *per cent, according to* new government figures/new figures from the EU.

The Treasury/The European Commission has stated that Britain's economy will shrink by **less than 2/more than 4** per cent this year, a contraction that is **half/double** the level it estimated only 4 months ago. The *government/EU* said in January that it expected the British economy to shrink **3.9/2.1** per cent this year but its outlook is now much more **optimistic/pessimistic**. It also now expects a small **increase/decrease** in 2010 compared to its January forecast of **a 0.4 per cent contraction/0.4 per cent growth**.

Unemployment is expected to **remain below 8/exceed 12** per cent by the end of next year. *The government/EU* has forecast that **less than ½/more than 2** million jobs will be lost across Britain by the end of 2010, the ***government says/government admits****/EU says* that this means the British economy will have been one of the **least/most** affected in Europe by the global downturn.

Alistair Darling, Chancellor of the Exchequer,/Joaquin Almunia, European Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs, said: "The British economy is in the midst of its deepest and most widespread recession in the post-war era, **but/and** the measures taken in these exceptional circumstances **are expected to/may not** put a floor under the fall in economic activity this year and enable a recovery next year."

Mr Darling/Mr Almunia told a press conference that many **encouraging/discouraging** economic signals have recently emerged, pointing to both the turbulence on financial markets and new business confidence figures. "We may **no longer/still** be in free-fall", he said.

The government/the EU forecasts say "the likelihood that economic activity in 2010 will be **stronger/weaker** than previously envisaged" will **contain any/mean a** further deterioration in the public finances. The government previously announced an extra £700 billion in borrowing over the next 5 years to plug the gap in the public finances as tax receipts plunge and spending on unemployment benefits and stimulus measures rises. But the **higher/lower** than forecast tax take and **less sharp/sharper** than forecast decline in economic activity should **slow/speed up** the rise in the government's debts as a share of output, the *government/EU* report said.

Next we would like you to read an article about health care in Britain at the moment. Please read the report carefully.

1 June 2009

UK life expectancy "among the **worst/best** in Europe" *says/admits government/says EU* as waiting lists also **rise/fall**

The average life expectancy of men and women in Britain ranks alongside some of the poorest/richest countries in Europe, according to new *government figures/figures from the EU*.

Britain comes **21st/4th** out of 25 European countries in a new table of life expectancy published by the *Department for Health/European Commission* today. The figures place women's longevity in Britain **below/above** that of all major EU countries including France, Germany, Italy and Spain.

The figures were described as **"unacceptable"/"acceptable"** by opposition politicians, who pointed out that they don't factor in the wide variations in life expectancy within Britain. Doctors warn that people living in some parts of Glasgow can expect to live up to three decades less than those living in the Home Counties.

Although men's life expectancies were generally shorter than women's, they were **lower/higher** compared to other countries the *Department of Health/European Commission* reported. Norway and Denmark were named as the countries where men can expect to live the longest after the age of 50, and Denmark came top of the league table for women. At **79/86** years and 8 months the average life expectancy for women in Britain is considerably **shorter/longer** than the European average of 83 years and 6 months. Men fare slightly worse overall, with their average life span of 77 years and 6 months, **and/although** this was **below/above** the EU average by nearly 3 years.

This report comes less than a week after other *government/EU* figures showed that NHS waiting lists had **risen/fallen** over the last year. These *government/EU* statistics show the number of patients waiting to be admitted to NHS hospitals in England has risen/fallen 19.8% in the last year. *Alan Johnson, the Secretary of State for Health,/Androulla Vassiliou, the EU Health Commissioner*, said: "Waiting lists in the UK have **risen/fallen** significantly this year, and our prediction is for them to continue to **rise/fall** over the coming year".

He/She said: "Waiting for an appointment can be worrying for patients and reducing waiting times should be a priority. Patients who need urgent treatment need to get it and those who don't need to be informed and supported to avoid unnecessary anxiety."

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