RESEARCH NOTE

A research note on accountability and institutional clarity: how two dimensions of clarity of responsibility moderate accountability mechanisms

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Abstract

Studies of economic voting have demonstrated that the relationship between citizens' satisfaction with the economy and their support for government parties is conditional on the so-called 'institutional clarity of responsibility' of a country. So far, scholars have predominantly focused on power diffusion within a single level of government to study the role of (horizontal) institutional clarity. Yet, countries also differ substantially in the extent to which power is diffused between government levels. In this article, we argue that this vertical dimension of power diffusion can be expected to be an equally strong moderator of accountability mechanisms. Our findings show that performance-based support for governing parties is conditioned by both the horizontal and vertical diffusion of government power within a country and that the moderating influence of power diffusion on electoral accountability varies per policy area.

Keywords Democratic accountability · Multilevel governance · Economic voting · Clarity of responsibility

Introduction

The core assumption of the economic voting (EV) literature is that economic conditions affect support for government parties. While there is ample empirical support for this effect, it has been shown to be conditional on the clarity of responsibility in a country (Powell and Whitten 1993). In countries where it is very clear who

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is responsible for policies, voters generally reward or punish governing parties at elections for economic conditions, but in countries where the responsibility is more diffuse, such reward-punishment mechanisms are weaker, or may not exist (e.g., Anderson 2007; van der Brug et al. 2007).

EV scholars have predominantly focused on one aspect of clarity of responsibility, which we refer to as the *horizontal dimension*. This describes power diffusion *within* the government. Yet, countries also differ substantially in the extent to which power is diffused *between* government levels: local, regional, national and transnational. We argue and demonstrate that this *vertical dimension* of power diffusion is an equally strong moderator of the effect of policy evaluations on support for incumbent parties. While the moderating effect of vertical and horizontal clarity of responsibility has been studied before, we are not aware of research that studies both in combination. Moreover, the role of vertical clarity has predominantly been demonstrated in the United States. We take the European Union as a case for testing the two-dimensionality of clarity of responsibility, which allows us to also incorporate supranational power diffusion.

Taken together, we make two (empirical) contributions to the literature. First, we demonstrate that electoral accountability is conditioned by both dimensions of clarity of responsibility, and that this varies per policy area (likely driven by citizens' actual responsibility attributions). And second, our focus on the European Union allows us to extend the original measurement of vertical measurement to include supranational power diffusion.

Our analyses of data from 27 EU member states demonstrate that horizontal power diffusion moderates the relationship between government performance evaluations and government support in the areas of economic as well as health care policies. Vertical power diffusion, however, only moderates this relationship in the case of economic policies. In the case of these economic policies, the relationship is moderated just as much by horizontal as by vertical power diffusion. This is an important finding, particularly since the economic voting literature focuses almost exclusively on the horizontal dimension, even though the two dimensions are hardly correlated.

Theory & hypotheses

A key component of electoral accountability presumes that citizens evaluate incumbent parties on the basis of their performance over the past electoral period. Empirically, numerous studies have shown that incumbent popularity is linked to one visible indicator of performance: the state of the economy (for an overview, see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000). In practice, the strength of this relationship varies across countries and over time (Duch and Stevenson 2008). Powell and Whitten (1993) argued that this variation can be largely explained by the complexity of how government institutions are organized, as this is likely to influence the ease with which citizens hold the incumbents accountable. The 'clarity of responsibility' refers to institutional arrangements that determine the extent to which power is either concentrated in the hands of a single governing party (in which there is high

clarity) or dispersed among many different types of actors (in which case there is low clarity).

Original accounts of the clarity of responsibility argument focus primarily on the diffusion of power among multiple actors *within* the national government, so-called horizontal clarity of responsibility. Here, clarity of responsibility is low when power is dispersed as a result of coalition and/or minority governments, bicameral opposition and a lack of cohesion of major governing parties (Powell and Whitten 1993). Such power-sharing hampers democratic accountability by blurring partisan accountability for specific policies (de Vries et al. 2011). Recent publications suggest that clarity of responsibility also influences prospective voting by clouding voters' views of party positions (Russo et al. 2020). When there are numerous parties involved in policy-making, it is difficult for citizens to hold a single party accountable for the government's policies. This dimension of power diffusion is most likely to affect evaluations of policy areas that are predominantly conceived within the domain of the national government, and where government power is rarely displaced to other government levels, such as health care and social insurance.[1]

Since its introduction, the clarity of responsibility hypothesis has been well established in the EV literature (Whitten and Palmer 1999; van der Brug et al. 2007). Recent research shows that accountability mechanisms apply also in other policy areas, and that the effects are equally contingent upon institutional power diffusion (cf. Tavits 2007; de Vries et al. 2011; Hobolt et al. 2013). Scholars have also advanced the clarity of responsibility hypothesis. For example, Hobolt et al. (2013) distinguish between two 'dimensions' of clarity of responsibility, institutional and governmental clarity (cf. Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck 2017). They find that government clarity, rather than institutional clarity, affects electoral accountability on economic issues and the management of public services. This somewhat unexpected finding could, however, be the result of their measurement of institutional clarity which combines items of power diffusion within the national government (e.g., bicameralism) and items on power diffusion between levels of governments (e.g., federalism) (Hobolt et al. 2013). As argued below, this second dimension has unique consequences for economic voting. Hence, unpacking these two dimensions provides greater insight into how different aspects of power diffusion affect accountability mechanisms.[2]

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[1] As demonstrated by Hobolt and Tilley (2014b), compared to other policy areas, responsibility for health care is most exclusively attributed to the nation state.

[2] Despite its long tradition within the economic voting literature, the concept of 'clarity of responsibility' is somewhat ambiguous. The label 'clarity' suggests that the concept refers to the ease with which citizens can connect policy outputs to those responsible for these outputs within the government. Yet, the concept itself and its measurement in particular, reflect the formal responsibilities that the national government holds, and the degree to which government power is diffused (cf. Lijphart 1999). The measures of clarity of responsibility tap into the institutional complexity resulting from power diffusion. Scholars then assume that these institutional complexities make government responsibility less clear for average citizens, but they do not measure citizens' perceptions. So, in some ways it would be more accurate to speak of 'power concentration', or its reverse 'power diffusion', instead of 'clarity of responsibility'. In view of the fact that the concept of clarity of responsibility is widely used within the economic voting literature, we will continue to use the term, interchangeably with institutional power diffusion.

The two-dimensionality of governmental power diffusion

Lijphart (1999) introduced the idea of power diffusion/concentration as a two-dimensional construct. He classifies democratic systems along two dimensions of power dispersion: one pertaining to the separation of power *within* the same political institutions (the executive-parties dimension), and one describing the diffusion of power *between* different institutions and government levels (the federal-unitary dimension). Since then, however, empirical studies on EV have predominantly studied power diffusion (or clarity of responsibility) along the horizontal dimension, i.e., the diffusion of power within the national government. Only a handful of studies have explored the effect of vertical power diffusion, i.e., the distribution of power between different levels of government, on performance voting or public responsiveness (Anderson 2006; and to some extent: Arceneaux 2006; Cutler 2008; Soroka and Wlezien 2012).

Vertical clarity of responsibility is defined as the division of government power *between* different levels of government, local, regional, national and transnational (Anderson 2006). Multilevel governance implies that the responsibility for policymaking is spread across different government levels, rendering it difficult for citizens to know 'which government is doing what' (Cutler 2008; Johns 2011; Hobolt and Tilley 2014a). As such, vertical power diffusion is most likely to play a role in policy areas for which different levels of government share responsibility, such as the economy and the environment (cf. the responsibility attributions presented by Hobolt and Tilley 2014b).

Anderson (2006) designed an index to measure vertical clarity of responsibility, similar to Powell and Whitten (1993), including seven items on multilevel governance: the existence of federal institutions, having elections for regional levels of government, the degree of territorial autonomy, and four types of fiscal decentralization. With this index, he finds that economic effects in national elections are weakened by the presence of multilevel governance. In line with Anderson (2006), some recent studies on responsibility attributions show that the diffusion of power across different levels of government increases information costs for voters when deciding who to blame/praise for policy outputs, making it more difficult for voters to 'point the finger' (e.g., Cutler 2008; Johns 2011; Hobolt and Tilley 2014a; León et al. 2018; de Blok et al. 2020). These responsibility attributions, in turn, moderate the reward-punishment mechanism driving incumbent popularity and the degree to which the responsible actors are held accountable. Furthermore, multilevel governance structures can also create incentives for politicians to participate in blame-shifting between different levels of government, thereby blurring responsibility even more. In their study of the US, UK and Canada, Soroka and Wlezien (2012) even find that vertical clarity more strongly affects public responsiveness compared to horizontal clarity.

We build on the insights obtained from the extant literature. So far, existing research on economic voting focuses either on 'horizontal' or on 'vertical' power diffusion. There are some studies on accountability more generally, which include them both (e.g., Soroka and Wlezien 2012), but these studies tend to be limited to a few countries. We include both dimensions and we expect them to exist largely

independent from each other (see also Lijphart 1999, pp. 240–243). Our guiding hypothesis is that both dimensions of power diffusion hamper citizens' abilities to monitor, evaluate, and punish/reward government parties for their performance. Therefore, power diffusion between levels of government (the vertical dimension of power diffusion) is expected to have the same conditioning effect as power diffusion within the national government (the horizontal dimension) for the relationship between policy evaluation and incumbent popularity. This can only be assessed by including them both in one analysis, particularly if the two dimensions are (weakly) correlated. Our hypotheses are as follows:

H1 The positive relationship between performance evaluations and incumbent support increases in strength with increases in horizontal clarity of responsibility.

H2 The positive relationship between performance evaluations and incumbent support increases in strength with increases in vertical clarity of responsibility.

We test our hypotheses on the (formerly) 27-member states of the EU. The European Union marks a particular interesting case for investigating the role of vertical power diffusion (in addition to horizontal diffusion) as it allows us to extend Anderson's original index to also include supranational integration. Existing research highlights the problems of accountability in such a complicated multinational system (Hix and Follesdal 2006) and the prominence of blame-shifting strategies when multiple levels of government are involved in policy-making (Heinkelmann-Wild and Zangl 2020). Moreover, significant variation exists between these member states in, for example, the size and type of (national) government and the degree of party cohesion, thereby making the EU a good testing ground for the consequences of horizontal power diffusion too.

By focusing on these 27 countries, we unfortunately do not have enough statistical power to test the higher order interaction (additional moderation by the combination of vertical and horizontal power diffusion).[3] We test our hypotheses across two different policy areas: the economy and health care provisions. As discussed above, we expect that the conditioning effect of each dimension on electoral accountability varies per policy issue. Based on responsibility attributions among the EU public (cf. Hobolt and Tilley 2014b), we expect horizontal clarity to be particularly important for policy issues that are predominantly attributed to the nation state, such as health care. Alternatively, in a policy area such as the economy where (according also to the citizens) responsibility is shared by different levels of government, we expect the conditioning effect of vertical clarity to be stronger. As such, we build and extend upon the valuable work of Hobolt et al. (2013), who employed the same individual level data set to answer similar research questions but who ignored the separation of horizontal and vertical dimension of power diffusion.

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[3] We tested the higher order interaction, but it was not significant, likely because of a lack of power. We did, however, run a separate analysis for each country (see Online Appendix F).

Data and methods

Our study employs data at the individual and at the country level. Individual-level data are obtained from the European Election Voter Study (EES) of 2009, a cross-national survey of 27 EU member states (van Egmond et al. 2013).[4]

Dependent variable

To measure *party support*, we rely upon respondents' propensity to vote (PTV) for a political party.[5] For each party surveyed, respondents were asked how likely it was that they would ever vote for that party (on a scale from 0 to 10). As such, we are interested in respondents' general voting propensities, but we investigate whether the effects of our main predictor variables (on policy performance and clarity of responsibility) differ for government and opposition parties by interacting these predictor variables with a dummy on whether the specific party is in government (see research design for more information).

Independent variables

Performance evaluation is operationalized using two questions. First, regarding the economy, respondents were asked to evaluate the country's economic situation over the past 12 months on a 5-point scale. Second, respondents were also asked to evaluate the standard of health care in their country on a 5-point scale. For both items, a higher score means a more positive evaluation.[6]

Contextual variables

To measure *horizontal clarity of responsibility* we rely on the classical index of Powell and Whitten including four different indicators (see Table 1). Since there were no cases among the 27 European countries in our sample with a bicameral opposition,[7] we excluded this measure from the index. Countries score a 1 or a 0 on each indicator. The sum of these scores is divided by four, resulting in a horizontal

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[4] More recent waves of the EES do not contain the key variables.

[5] We also estimated our models using a binary vote intention variable, this yielded similar results in terms of size and direction (see Online Appendix A). However, as this dependent variable has considerably less variance than the propensity to vote variable (which has information on all parties within a country), the coefficients do not reach significance. It is important to emphasize that our dependent variable government support does not only manifest itself through a behavioral intention, but also by a (strongly related) attitude.

[6] The EES also includes respondent evaluations of immigration, interest rates and climate change. The patterns for these three issues are similar, albeit less clear, to those for health care and the economy. These other issues have a positional component, which makes the results somewhat more difficult to compare. For this reason, we decided to focus on the latter two issues in the main text of this paper, although the results were in a similar direction (see Online Appendix B).

[7] A bicameral system in which a non-governing party dominates the second chamber.

Table 1 Composition of horizontal and vertical clarity of responsibility indices (0–1)

Horizontal clarity of responsibility	Vertical clarity of responsibility
Weak committees (0/1)	Absence local elections (0/1/2)
Strong party cohesion (0/1)	Local tax revenue (0–1)
No bicameral opposition (0/1)	Local expenditure (0–1)
Majority government (0/1)	European Monetary Union member (0/1/2)
Single-party government (0/1)	

clarity of responsibility index ranging from 0 to 1. A high score means a high degree of institutional clarity of government responsibility.

To measure *vertical clarity of responsibility,* we employ an index including three indicators of decentralization (cf. Anderson 2006) and one indicator of supranationalization. We include two measures of fiscal decentralization: local tax revenue and local expenditure as a percentage of the government's total tax revenue or expenditure. These two measures are standardized. In addition, a categorical variable on the presence of local elections is included (0 neither the local executive nor the local legislature is locally elected; 1 local executive is appointed, but the legislature elected; 2 both are locally elected). Furthermore, to account for power diffusion to the supranational level, we include a variable for membership to the European Monetary Union (0 no member; 1 member with opt-out; 2 member in 2009). To create a summary index, these indicators are added and then normalized to form a scale ranging from 0 to 1. Similar to the horizontal clarity index, a high score on the vertical clarity index means high centralization of power and therefore high clarity of responsibility.

Figure 1 portrays the distribution of the 27 EU member states along the two dimensions of clarity of government responsibility. Countries with a high degree of horizontal clarity of responsibility (e.g., Spain) do not necessarily have a high degree of vertical clarity too, or vice versa. The correlation coefficient is low ($r = 0.24$), meaning that the two dimensions only have 5.8 percent shared variance. This indicates clearly that the two indices capture different aspects of institutional designs of countries.

Control variables

To account for rival explanations of incumbent popularity, we control for ideological (left–right) distance to a political party,[8] gender, age (centered), years of educations

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[8] Each respondent was asked to indicate his/her position on a left–right scale, and to position each political party within that country on a left–right scale. Our ideological distance variable is the absolute difference between these two. When respondents were unable to place a party on the left–right scale, we instead used the country mean placement of that party. Respondents who did not indicate their own left–right placement, are coded as missing.
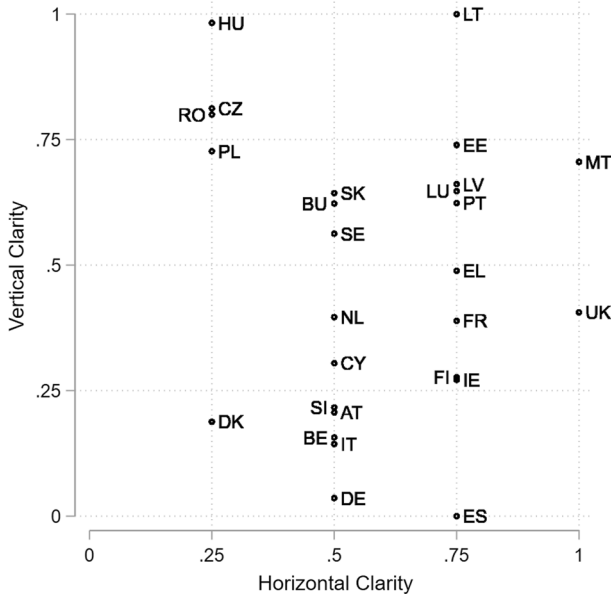
Fig. 1 The two-dimensionality of Clarity of Responsibility. *Source* EES 2009

(centered), and political knowledge[9] at the individual level.[10] See the Online Appendix C for an overview of all variables considered.

Research design[11]

To study support for parties in government, we generated a "stacked" data matrix where the records represent respondent*party combinations (for more details, see van der Eijk et al. 2006). Consequently, the dependent variable of the stacked data matrix is the observed propensity to support the various parties in the country. Our focus on stacked utilities has two advantages over an analysis of party choice. First, because the dependent variable is a scale, it has the advantage that we can observe small effects of policy evaluations, also among those voters for whom the effect is not large enough to generate a vote switch away from their preferred party. Second, it allows us to investigate independently how policy evaluations affect support for governing parties *and* support for opposition parties. An analysis of vote choice

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[9] Measured using a scale of seven items, including both European and country-specific political knowledge questions (Cronbach's alpha is 0.69).

[10] For the first part of the analyses, focusing on PTV, we followed the procedure proposed by van der Eijk et al. (2006): we ran separate regressions on the PTV for each party including the control variables. The predicted values (*y*-hats) of these individual regressions were saved and centered within parties. As such, the *y*-hats encapsulate all explanatory power of our control variables, while controlling for differences between parties in average popularity.

[11] For an extensive specification of our models, see Online Appendix D.

does not enable us to do this, because vote choice is by default a zero-sum game: voting for a government party implies that one cannot vote for an opposition party and vice versa.

Since the data are hierarchically structured, we rely on multilevel linear regression modeling (using the 'xtreg' command in Stata 13). Our models identify two levels of analysis: country of residence (level 2, k), and the respondent (level 1, j). For our first model, we are interested in support for government parties (government support). The dependent variable of this model, however, captures one's likelihood to vote for a party within a country. To test the effect of policy evaluations on governing parties, we include a dummy variable specifying whether the party was in government at that time (coded 1) or in opposition (coded 0). This binary variable is then interacted with our performance measures to model the difference in effect size of these performance evaluations for government and opposition parties. To test our hypotheses on power diffusion, we will assess whether the strength of this interaction depends on the horizontal and vertical clarity of responsibility. These tests are therefore second-order cross-level interactions between policy evaluations and government party (at the individual level) and clarity of responsibility (at the country level).

Results

For each level of satisfaction, the predicted levels of political support for a government party and an opposition party are depicted in Fig. 2 (for the full regression tables, see the Online Appendix E). In line with the EV hypothesis, we find that increased satisfaction on a policy issue enhances support for the incumbent government. Here, evaluations of health care seem to have an even stronger effect on support for a government party than evaluations of the economy, across all countries. Moreover, performance voting seems to follow a zero-sum game. Enhanced satisfaction with policies increases support for governing parties grows while it decreases support for opposition parties.

Moving to the moderating influence of the two dimensions of clarity of responsibility, Fig. 3 graphs the second-order interactions (*Evaluation * Government party * Horizontal or Vertical Clarity of Responsibility*), four in total. The findings strongly suggest that both dimensions of institutional power diffusion condition the degree to which evaluations of the economy affect support for government parties. Hypotheses 1 and 2 are thus both supported. The relationship between health care evaluations and government support is, however, particularly conditioned by power diffusion within the national government (horizontal clarity). The interaction with vertical power diffusion is not statistically significant. This is in line with our expectation that vertical clarity matters less for policy areas that are predominantly attributed to the nation state. Alternatively, for democratic accountability within the economic realm, both horizontal and vertical clarity of responsibility play a key role in moderating performance voting.

To get some sense of the interplay between the two dimensions, we grouped the countries on the basis of their level of horizontal and vertical clarity (see Online
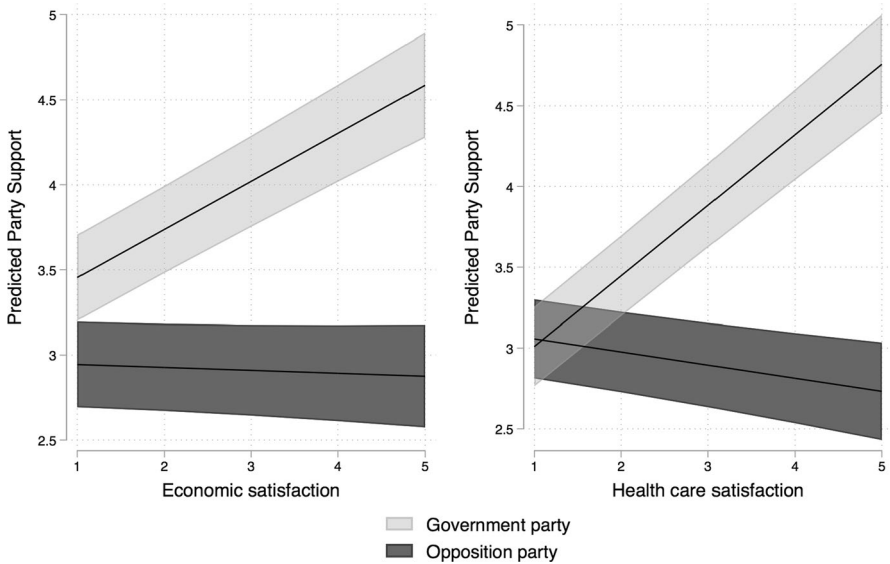
Fig. 2 Predicted party support for government and opposition party per level of satisfaction (95% CI). *Source* EES 2009
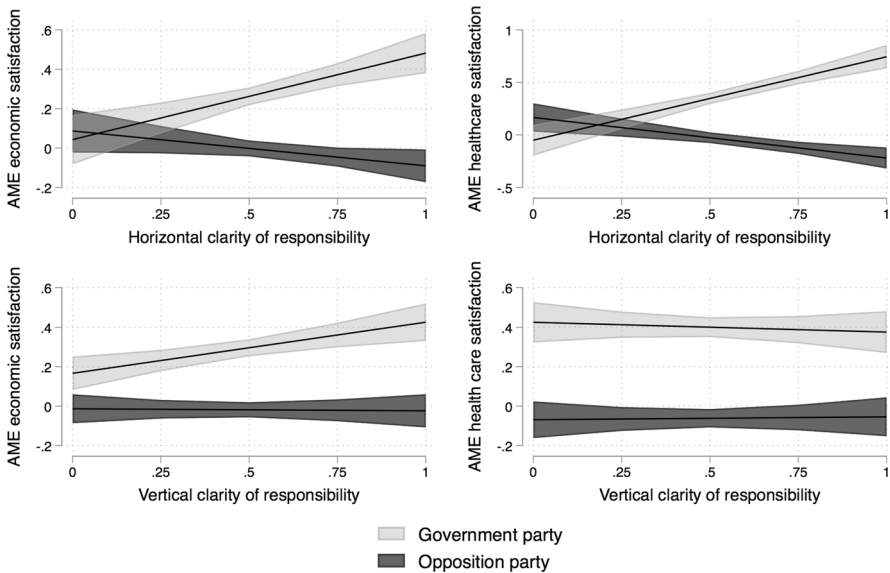

Fig. 3 Marginal effects plots of economic & health care evaluations on propensity to vote, per type of party, for different degrees of horizontal and vertical clarity of responsibility (95% CI). *Source* EES 2009

Appendix F). What became clear is that, in line with our analysis, electoral account-ability is most absent in countries with low clarity on both dimensions. Electoral accountability functions best when both dimensions are high. When vertical clarity increases, but horizontal clarity remains low, electoral accountability remains lim-ited. As such, it appears that horizontal clarity is a prerequisite for (some degree of) punishment and reward of government parties on the basis of performance per-ceptions. Yet, the optimal conditions for electoral accountability in general is when power is neither diffused within government and between levels of governance. Last, there appear to be some exceptions on the basis of issue salience, i.e., there can be electoral accountability on a policy area in a low clarity environment if it is an issue that is salient to the public. The opposite also appears to hold: even if conditions for electoral accountability are optimal because power is not diffused, punishment/reward is unlikely to happen on an issue that does not matter for citizens (cf. Downs 1957, p. 141).

Discussion and conclusion

Previous research has shown that the popularity of governing parties depends upon evaluations of policies, particularly when the governing party (or parties) are clearly responsible for those policies. When conceptualizing the clarity of responsibility, researchers have mainly focused on horizontal power diffusion (*within* the national government). However, we would theoretically expect vertical power diffusion (*between* different government levels) to be just as important as a moderator as hori-zontal clarity (e.g., Anderson 2006). As far as we are aware, our study is the first to simultaneously test the moderating effect of both dimensions. We demonstrate that both dimensions do indeed condition the effect of policy evaluations on support for governing parties. While horizontal clarity moderates the relationship of both eco-nomic and health care satisfaction and support for governing parties, vertical clarity particularly conditions the effect of economic satisfaction on such support.

Since we provide independent estimations of the effects of policy evaluations on support for governing and opposition parties, we were also able to establish how support for opposition parties is affected by the evaluations of policies for which they are not responsible. In low clarity countries we find no effect of policy evalua-tions on the support for opposition parties. However, in high clarity systems policy evaluations exert a negative effect on support for opposition parties. When voters are satisfied with the policies, they evaluate opposition parties more negatively, while the support for opposition parties increases when their assessment of policies is more negative. So, in these kinds of systems, it seems that voters conceive of demo-cratic accountability as a zero-sum game. If government performance is evaluated positively, one is more likely to support government parties, while opposition par-ties become less attractive.

Our study has three limitations. Like most studies in this field, we are likely to overestimate the effect of retrospective policy evaluations on incumbent party sup-port, due to obvious and well-known endogeneity problems between performance perceptions and government party support (Duch et al. 2000). However, while the

strength of the relationship between these perceptions and government support are likely to be overestimated, we see no reason why this would also be the case for the moderating effect of power diffusion, which is our main focus in this study. Second, our analyses only capture a small component of the dispersion of government power to the supranational level. Following the important work of Hellwig and Samuels (2007), we believe that degrees of globalization to be another important dimension of transnational power diffusion that affects perceived government responsibility. As such, we urge future research to build on and extend our index on vertical clarity of responsibility by encompassing a broader range of transnational power diffusion.

Third, our data did not allow us to test the interaction between the two dimensions. Our country-specific analysis suggested that while horizontal clarity appears to be a prerequisite for electoral accountability in general, punishment and reward mechanisms function best when both dimensions of clarity are high. In addition, there may be a role for issue salience which help citizens overcome the informational costs within low clarity systems in order to hold the respective party accountable. Future research could provide more insight into the interplay between both dimensions of clarity and the possible role of issue salience in navigating conditions of unclear political responsibility.

Our findings are particularly relevant for the European continent, where EU integration focuses predominantly on economic issues. Transferring responsibilities to the EU level has diffused political responsibility and hampers electoral accountability at the national level (see also e.g., Hobolt and Tilly 2014a; b; Johns 2011), *especially* when power is also shared between actors at the national level. Further integration in this 'ever-closing union', including possible differentiated integration and collaboration on other policy areas, will likely affect the quality of national politics by hampering democratic accountability. Recent studies even suggest that more supranational integration results in higher levels of polarization at the national level, thereby reducing the horizontal clarity of responsibility (Konstantinidis et al. 2019). In sum, more insight is needed into the role of multilevel governance for electoral accountability, including an investigation of the causal mechanisms. This avenue of research is not only important for our scientific understanding, it is also necessary to determine the consequences of the next step in EU integration for national democracy.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organiza-

tion or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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