

Do Voter Preferences Matter between Elections? Democratic Performance in Western Democracies

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Abstract

Over the years, several studies have examined government responsiveness and congruence in Western democracies by examining the relationship between the ideological positions of voters and governments. Although these studies generally find high levels of responsiveness and congruence, this research is limited by the fact that it has focused exclusively on governments that formed immediately after an election, thus implicitly ignoring governments that form between elections. This is an important omission, we argue, due to both the number of governments that form between elections (nearly half in our sample of Western democracies) and theoretical expectations which suggest that responsiveness and congruence may look quite different in the absence of an election. In this paper, we reassess levels of democratic performance across 22 Western democracies utilizing data for all governments that have formed during the postwar period. For governments which form immediately after an election, we confirm the results of past studies which find high levels of congruence and responsiveness. However, after extending the analysis to governments that form between elections, the level of government responsiveness appears to diminish over time with each new government. Our findings concerning levels of voter-government congruence are mixed, yet we do find some evidence of declining congruence as well. In sum, since many studies of postwar governments in Western democracies have been based on elections and the resulting governments, our analysis demonstrates the need to include those governments that form between elections.

Introduction

Over the years, scholars have utilized several criteria to evaluate how well democracy is functioning in a political system. These criteria include the presence of basic conditions of democracy (political rights, civil liberties, and rule of law); the linkage between citizens' votes and representation in legislatures and governments; correspondence between the imputed preferences of the electorate and government policy; general welfare policies; and citizens' own perception of and satisfaction with the working of democracy in their respective countries, among others (see Powell 2005 for a detailed review). Of these different criteria, perhaps the most understudied area of democratic performance is the extent to which citizen preferences are translated into government action (e.g., Powell 2000; McDonald, Mendes, and Budge 2004; Kim, Powell, and Fording 2006.)

Many scholars have studied this question by examining the correspondence between voter preferences and government preferences across established Western democracies. Generally speaking, the most recent of these studies find a high degree of voter-government correspondence (variously measured) and conclude that modern democracies display high levels of democratic performance (e.g., Huber and Powell 1994; Powell 2000; Powell and Vanberg 2001; McDonald, Mendes, and Budge 2004). Despite the strength and consistency of these findings, there is reason to think that there may be more to the story.

Due to the emphasis on elections and resulting government formation in Western democracies, past studies have focused exclusively on governments formed in the aftermath of an election. Yet, in the vast majority of democracies, it is quite common for new governments to form in the absence of an election. As a result, we have surprisingly little understanding of the governments formed between elections and the extent to which these governments reliably reflect the preferences of the median voter. This is alarming considering the fact that there is good theoretical reason to believe that in the absence of an election, representatives may have less motivation to form a government that reflects the preferences of the electorate. In this paper, we therefore provide a more comprehensive analysis of democratic performance by reexamining the relationship between the ideological positions of voters and governments across all types of governments, including those formed immediately after, as well as subsequent to an election.

Evaluating Democratic Performance: Congruence and Responsiveness

Since comparable measures of policy outputs are not commonly available, past studies of democratic performance have generally measured correspondence by examining the relationship between the preferences of the voters and the composition of the parliament or government (e.g., Huber and Powell 1994; Powell 2000, Powell and Vanberg 2001; McDonald, Mendes, and Budge 2004). Thus, the measurement of the “preferences” of each democratic actor in this process (i.e. voters, parliament, government) becomes an extremely important task in the study of democratic performance. It has been well established in the political science literature that left-right ideology adequately captures the existing cleavage structure in Western democracies (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976; Blais, Blake, and Dion 1993; Warwick 1992; Laver and Schofield 1990, 248; Fuchs and Klingemann 1990). Therefore, in their efforts to assess democratic performance, past studies have often relied on measures which reflect the ideological tendencies of the electorate, parliament, and government.

As a proxy for voter ideology in a given country, various measures of median voter ideology positions have been used. The position of the median is normatively privileged because it is the only policy position that cannot be defeated by another position in a head-on vote. The further from the citizen median that a given policy position is located, the larger the citizen majority that would prefer an alternative. With this in mind, scholars have generally conceptualized democratic performance as the degree to which correspondence exists between the median voter ideology position and the ideological tendencies of the parliament and government. However, scholars have measured correspondence in two very different ways. *Congruence* is intended to reflect the degree to which the median voter position and the parliament’s/government’s ideological position resemble one another at any given point in time (Huber and Powell 1994; Kim and Fording 2005). Some scholars have used the term “distortion” to describe the lack of congruence, which is operationalized as the absolute value of the difference between the representative (that is, the parliament or the government) left-right position and the left-right position of the median voter at the preceding election (McDonald, Mendes and Budge 2004; Kim, Powell, and Fording 2006). So,

congruence/distortion is measured by the absolute distance between the median voter and the representative. Perfect congruence in a one-dimensional space expects the median voter and the representative to be at the same position on the left-right scale. The greater the distance between the median voter and the representative, the poorer the congruence (the greater the distortion) in representation.

Responsiveness is dynamic correspondence between changes in voter positions and representative positions. Perfect responsiveness takes place when the median voter and the representative change by exactly the same amount and in the same direction (to left or right) between two elections. (see McDonald, Mendes and Budge 2004; Kim and Fording 2005; Kim, Powell, and Fording 2006). Although we do not distinguish between congruence and responsiveness in our theoretical discussion below, it is important to recognize that as measures of democratic performance, responsiveness and congruence are conceptually distinct. Distortion is intended to reflect the degree to which the median voter position and the government's ideological position resemble one another at any given point in time. In this sense, it is a static measure of democratic performance. Responsiveness captures the dynamic correspondence between changes in voter positions and the government positions. High levels of responsiveness may do little to improve congruence if the level of congruence is low to begin with, and in fact could even increase the level of distortion depending on the direction of the "error" in the government response. We will return to this point again in the last section of this paper.

Previous Studies of Congruence and Responsiveness

Different sets of scholars have studied the degree of congruence between the ideology of the electorate and the government (Huber and Powell 1994; Powell 2000; Powell 2004) and between the electorate and the parliament (Powell and Vanberg 2001; Powell 2004). These studies tend to confirm, among other things, that the electoral institutions of the proportional representation (PR) systems tend to do a better job of translating citizen preferences into those of the parliaments and governments than the single-member district plurality (SMD) systems. Kim, Powell, and Fording (2006) expand on this early work and investigate the impacts of

party system features, the effective number of parties, and polarization on congruence between voters and parliaments/governments.

McDonald, Mendes, and Budge (2004, MMB hereafter) investigate correspondence between the ideology of the electorate and the parliament, and then between the ideology of the parliament and the government (and thus indirectly compare the electorate and the government). They advance a theory of democracy that they term the “median mandate thesis,” in which “the median elector chooses the pivotal party in parliament, which then translates his or her preferences into public policy” (p.1). They argue that elections designate a “median party,” which they define as the party preferred by the median voter and that the median party is strategically advantaged in the coalition bargaining process due to its ideological location. For this reason, they conclude, the median party is almost assured of being included in any governing coalition.

Clearly, for a democracy to be functioning well, a relatively low level of distortion (i.e. high congruence) must be present. However, it is important to note that low scores on this measure do not provide assurance that democratic institutions are functioning as they are intended. That is, in democracies voter preferences are “translated” into government policy through elections. In other words, elections must play a *causal* role in the correspondence between voter and government preferences, and a measure of congruence cannot provide sufficient evidence of this fact. This seems to be the thinking of MMB when they note that a low level of distortion would “go for nil, or very nearly so as far as the median mandate thesis is concerned, if the close average correspondences were not much tied to elections” (p. 20). In light of this issue, they examine responsiveness, which they define as “the degree to which movement in the median elector position is matched by similar movement in the parliamentary policy [and eventually government ideological; this bracket added] position” (p. 20). Based on a comprehensive analysis of voter, parliament, and government ideological positions across 20 democracies, MMB conclude that there is the near one-to-one correspondence in responsiveness in almost all countries, although they also find PR generally more congruent and more reliably responsive than SMD systems.

Until recently, studies of democratic performance had been limited to cross-sectional studies of congruence, as reliable measures of voter, parliament, and government ideology over an extended time period

were unavailable. Over the last few years, political scientists have increasingly taken advantage of the party manifesto data compiled and updated by the Comparative Manifestos Project group (Budge 1992; Volkens 1995; Budge, et al. 2001). These data have been creatively used to construct measures of party, voter, parliament and government ideology, all of which are measured on a comparable scale (Budge, et al. 2001; Kim and Fording 1998, 2003; Laver and Budge 1993; see below). Due to the availability of these manifesto-based measures, the study of democratic performance has grown with renewed rigor (McDonald, Mendes, and Budge 2004; McDonald and Budge 2005; Kim and Fording 2005; Kim, Powell, and Fording 2006).

Governments between Elections

To a large extent, the study of political science can be characterized as the study of governments. Our studies of political culture and socialization, interest articulation, interest aggregation, political parties, policymaking, and the impact of public policy all deal with how we perceive government, how we elect its members, how we try to affect its decision-making, and how its decisions affect us. Therefore, various aspects of government have been extensively studied by political scientists, with much attention given to the politics of the established democracies of North America and Western Europe.

Within this literature, scholars have devoted a significant amount of attention to the study of elections, and the impact that elections have on government formation. Because of this focus on elections and electoral systems, we often neglect the fact that governments in these countries can form without elections. As a result, we have surprisingly little understanding of the process by which they are formed. This is somewhat surprising considering how many such governments exist in the real world. This fact is clearly demonstrated by Table 1, which displays information on the 22 industrialized democracies we study in this paper. Out of 633 total postwar governments in our sample, 322 (51%) were formed immediately after an election. Thus, 49% of the postwar governments in these democracies were formed in the absence of an election.¹ In addition, Table 1 indicates that while there is some variation on the frequency of government formation

¹ This information is based on Woldendorp, Keman, Budge 2000. We discuss their definition of “government” below.

between elections, this is a common feature of these countries. For example, Italy, France, and Switzerland average at least two governments formed in the absence of an election during each election cycle. Alternatively, in Spain and Portugal government formation in the absence of an election is a relatively rare event. Nevertheless, all of the countries in our sample have experienced at least one government that formed without the mandate of an election.

(Table 1 about here)

While unelected governments appear to occur with great frequency, it is not obvious that they differ in any politically meaningful way from the elected governments that they replace. The answer to this question is partially provided in Figure 1. Using Kim and Fording's (2002) measure of government ideology (0=most right-leaning, 100=most left-leaning), for each unelected government in our sample, we calculated the difference between that government's left-right ideology score and the ideology score of the most recently elected government. As calculated, positive values therefore denote unelected governments that were more left-leaning than the elected government, while negative values represent unelected governments that were more conservative than the elected government. In Figure 1, we present the frequency distribution of these values for our sample of unelected governments described in Table 1. As can be seen, the majority of ideological differences are small in magnitude. However, for a significant minority of the unelected governments in our sample, the ideological differences were more significant, and in some cases these differences were substantial. The largest leftward shift after an unelected government replaced an elected government occurred in France (May, 1988). It was primarily caused by a shift of control from Gaullists (RPR) and Union for French Democracy to the Socialist Party, which formed a new government again following an election a month later. The largest rightward shift happened in Australia (November, 1975) and was caused by a shift of power from the Labor Party to the Liberal Party and Country Party. The mean of the distribution of ideological differences is near 0 at -1.37, suggesting that there is no systematic tendency for unelected governments to stray to the left or the right.

(Figure 1 about here)

In sum, both the sheer numbers of unelected governments across these countries and our lack of knowledge about them call for a better understanding of their features and behavior. Yet, all of the previous studies of voter-government congruence and responsiveness have limited their attention to the correspondence between the ideological tendencies of the electorate on the one hand, and those of governments formed immediately after an election, on the other. Therefore, the degree of correspondence between voter preferences and the ideology of governments formed in the absence of elections remains unexplored, and as a leading scholar in this area once lamented, “we have no empirical research to guide us on this question” (Powell 2000, 218).² Below, we provide a comprehensive analysis of democratic performance – congruence and responsiveness -- by reexamining the relationship between the ideological positions of voters and governments among governments formed both immediately following and subsequent to an election.

Theory and Hypotheses

We generally agree with the analytical methods used in previous studies to estimate congruence/distortion and responsiveness. Our contention, rather, is that they are incomplete due to the fact that they limit their sample to the first government formed after an election. The question to be answered, then, is what happens to voter-government responsiveness and congruence when there is no election immediately preceding the government formation process? Does the median party continue to enjoy the same strategic advantage that it does immediately following the election, or does this advantage weaken by the passage of time? The answer to this question has significant implications not only for the validity of MMB’s median mandate thesis, but for the functioning of democratic institutions more generally.

As we discussed above, there is no study that we are aware of that specifically deals with the issue of governments’ policy correspondence between elections. Therefore, our hypotheses will be based on our

² Powell looks at seven governments formed without elections and concludes, “[o]n balance, the changes are slightly helpful” to congruence (Powell, 2000, 218). Powell himself cautions about his own results given the limited number of observations.

observation of a limited number of cases as well as our intuition.³ On the one hand, one might expect that party leaders do not change their behavior during the government formation process, despite the passage of time. In other words, the party with the support of the median voter continues to exercise a strategic advantage in the process of government formation not only immediately after an election, but across subsequent governments formed between elections as well. If this is the case, the relationship between the median voter and the government ideological position would be insensitive to the passage of time. Alternatively, one could imagine that the relationship between voter and government ideology strengthens over time with each successive government prior to the next election, especially when the government formed immediately after an election does not result in a very good match between the median voter and government position. The bargaining environment for government formation may be more open and self-determined as one moves away from the commitments of the elections, and one or more extreme parties can be dropped from the governing coalition (e.g., France 1981), moderate parties can be added (e.g., New Zealand 1993), or a near grand coalition may be formed (Belgium 1978) (see Powell 2000).

As plausible as these possibilities might seem, for a variety of theoretical reasons, we expect voter-government correspondence to weaken across successive governments formed after an election. A large literature in political science has found that government leaders are more responsive to the interests of the average citizen in the presence of electoral incentives. This logic has been applied to comparisons between nondemocracies and democracies, where the presence of elections has been linked to greater policy responsiveness to the average citizen in democratic countries. A similar effect has been attributed to the timing of elections within democratic countries. Indeed, research examining the political business cycle, among others, has shown that political parties are most attentive to citizen preferences at or near elections

³ There have been only a handful of studies of which we are aware that consider how parties' policy behaviour is mediated by the length of time that has elapsed since the last election. However, none of these studies directly deal with the representation question. Budge (1994) takes up the issue of uncertainty created by the passage of time since last election and how parties use ideology as an approximation of potential party positions. Nagel (2001) looks at the impact of the passage of time on center party strength and major party polarization in Britain. Somer-Topcu (2007) shows how past election results affect the magnitude of parties' policy shifts in the current election, and how the time lag since the last election mediates this relationship by affecting uncertainty about public preferences.

(Nordhaus 1975, Tufte 1978, Williams 1990, among others). If this behavior also applies to the government formation process, we might therefore expect parties to pay close attention to the median voter position in the immediate aftermath of an election. This could be due to the salience of the mandate as expressed in the recent election, or simply the fear that there will be a decline in government legitimacy among voters if the government ideology position is noticeably different from the median voter position. As time passes, however, voter attention wanes and these concerns by party leaders may become less important in the formation of subsequent governments. Indeed, governments often fall for reasons unrelated to citizen preferences, such as elite negotiations and manipulations of issues and agendas (Powell 2000). In the absence of an election to guide negotiations, such factors may also be more likely to influence party negotiations during the formation of new governments as well, with the likely result that parties form governments that are less likely to be attentive to the median voter. This suggests the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The responsiveness of government ideology will be stronger for governments formed immediately after an election than for governments formed in the absence of an election

Hypothesis 2: The congruence between voter ideology and government ideology will be stronger for governments formed immediately after an election than for governments formed in the absence of an election

We also consider the possibility that the relationships discussed above may be mediated by a country's electoral system. As we already noted, previous studies of democratic performance have generally concluded that PR systems tend to do a better job of translating voter preferences into government action than SMD systems. This difference has been largely attributed to the smaller number of parties and higher vote-seat disproportionality in SMD systems (Huber and Powell 1994, Powell 2000, McDonald, Mendes, and Budge 2004, Powell 2004, and Kim, Powell, and Fording 2006). Although these forces may result in a significant difference in the level of responsiveness and congruence at the time of the election, we do not have an a priori reason to believe that the pattern of change in responsiveness and congruence will differ across

SMD and PR systems as new governments form without elections. This observation leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3: The pattern of change in responsiveness of government ideology is not systematically mediated by the type of electoral system.

Hypothesis 4: The pattern of change in congruence is not systematically mediated by the type of electoral system.

Research Design and Model Specification

Our sample consists of all governments formed immediately after an election, and those governments formed in the absence of an election, across the 22 Western democracies listed in Table 1. We rely on government data reported by Woldendorp, Keman, and Budge (2000). They define ‘government’ such that “it encompasses any administration that is formed after an election and continues in the absence of: (a) a change of Prime Minister; (b) a change in the party composition of the Cabinet; or (c) resignation in an inter-election period followed by re-formation of the government with the same Prime Minister and party composition” (p.10). In other words, when one or more of (a) – (c) occurs, they assume a new government has formed.⁴ The time period for our analysis varies somewhat across countries, but for the vast majority of countries spans most of the postwar period through the late-1990s.^{5, 6}

⁴ According to the authors, this definition is “stricter than most others are,... [y]et makes sense ...since a resignation generally changes the political situation in some significant aspects.” They also add that the differences in the number of governments between theirs and another, often cited source of government data, Von Beyme, Paloheimo and Lane et al, are small (p.10).

⁵ Our data include caretaker and nonpartisan governments. To see if our results are sensitive to the inclusion of such governments., we relied on data from McDonald and Mendes to identify both caretaker and nonpartisan governments. After excluding 29 such governments from the sample used for our primary analyses of government responsiveness and distortion, we reach the same substantive conclusions as reported below.

⁶ The criteria for “government” used by Woldendorp, Keman, and Budge (2000) count some governments as “new” even if there was no change in party representation in the government. In our dataset, we find that 16% (48) of 302 unelected governments experienced no change in party composition. To test for the sensitivity of our analyses to

Perhaps the most important task in our analysis is the measurement of the median voter position, as well as the ideological position of the government. There are two different approaches to measuring citizen ideological tendencies in Western democracies: (i) utilizing survey respondents' Left-Right self-placement scores (e.g. Eurobarometer, World Values Survey); and (ii) imputing the median voter position by utilizing party ideological scores based on the CMP data, in combination with the vote share of the parties (e.g. Kim and Fording 1998; McDonald and Budge 2005). While survey data have obvious advantages, relying on Eurobarometer data would impose significant limitations on the sample size for our analyses. Indeed, these data are not even available prior to the early 1970s, and for many years the survey included a relatively limited number of countries. By our estimation, our sample of unelected governments described in Table 1 would be reduced by more than 50%, which would significantly limit our ability to test our hypotheses.

As we mentioned above, party manifesto data have been creatively used to construct measures of party, voter, and government ideology, and display several advantages. First, these data are available for over 20 countries during the entire postwar period. Second, these measures have the advantage of being measured on a comparable scale for both voter and government ideology (see Laver and Budge 1993, Kim and Fording 1998 and McDonald and Budge 2005). Third, and most importantly, several independent analyses of these measures confirm that they display high levels of validity (Gabel and Huber 2000; Kim and Fording 1998, 2002; McDonald and Budge 2005; Stevenson 2001).⁷ In this paper, we therefore use manifesto-based

their inclusion, we re-estimated our primary models of government responsiveness and distortion reported below and found that even after excluding these governments from the sample, the results were almost exactly the same.

⁷ Those scholars who have adopted measures based on both Eurobarometer data and the Kim-Fording approach report very similar substance results (e.g., Kim and Fording 1998, Stevenson 2001). Most telling, perhaps, are remarks by an anonymous reviewer of McDonald and Budge's 2005 book, *Elections, Parties, Democracy: Conferring the Median Mandate*. Faced with a book manuscript adopting the Kim-Fording measure, the reviewer actually performed their own comparative analysis of Eurobarometer surveys and the Kim-Fording measure. The reviewer concludes, "[t]he dynamic correlation ... is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. What this result states is that in situations where the Kim-Fording method registers that the median Left-Right voter position in a country has shifted, there is a strong tendency for the Eurobarometer surveys to register an ideological shift in the same direction. To me this suggests that the authors' central conclusion, that over time Western democracies tend to faithfully translate the preferences of the median voter into government policy, would likely have been unchanged, had the authors employed survey data to measure shifts in voters' ideologies..." (pp.198-202). McDonald and Budge inserted these remarks in their book with the reviewer's permission. We thank an anonymous reviewer of the *BJPS* for bringing these remarks to our attention.

measures of voter and government ideology for all of our analyses of congruence and responsiveness. For each government, we begin by collecting data for each of the following three variables:

Voter Ideology, $VI_i(t)$: We measure voter ideology for each country, i , and election t , where $t = \{1, 2, \dots, m\}$ simply denotes the country's sequence of elections. We rely on an interval measure of the (left-right) median voter position created by Kim and Fording (1998, 2003), derived from treating elections as preference polls and locating the positions of parties according to the coding of their election manifestos. The measure takes on a possible range of 0-100, where higher scores reflect relatively left-leaning electorates.

g_i : We operationalize this variable in two different ways. First, we treat it as a simple government counter variable, which designates the order of government formation for all governments formed *between elections* in country i , such that $g_i = \{0, 1, 2, \dots, n\}$. A value of 0 designates a government formed immediately after an election, 1 denotes the first government formed in the absence of an election, 2 denotes the second government, and so on. Second, we treat it as a continuous time variable, which designates the amount of time elapsed since the first government formed after an election in country i . A value of 0 designates a government formed immediately after an election. A value of 2.5 designates the government formed (in the absence of an election) two and a half years after the first government formed after the last election, and so on.

Government Ideology, $GI_i(g)$: We measure government ideology for each country i , and series of governments g_i that form after an election, and prior to the next election. We use the measure of left-right government ideology created by Kim and Fording (2002), which is a weighted mean of the ideology of the parties in government (based on party ideology scores created from manifesto data) weighted by the number of cabinet portfolios each party controls.⁸ The measure takes on a possible range of 0-100, where higher scores reflect relatively left-leaning governments.

⁸ The party ideology values used for each government ideology score remain constant between elections. Thus, change in the values of government ideology across different governments between elections is due solely to changes in party control. This is a minor modification of the original government ideology scores developed by Kim and Fording (2002).

Responsiveness

To investigate government responsiveness, we take a similar approach to that of MMB in our analysis. Specifically, we assess responsiveness by using regression analysis to examine the relationship between voter ideology and government ideology. However, our regression strategy differs from that of MMB in two important ways. First, as stated above, we assess responsiveness across governments formed both immediately after, and subsequent to, each election. Second, we examine *changes* in voter and government ideology, rather than levels (which MMB examined in their analysis of responsiveness). The logic of this choice is provided by MMB themselves. As they recognize, the two ideology series (government and voter) may move in the same general direction over time simply because voters and parties within the same country respond to the same influences. As they argue, “[o]ne might imagine that a good deal of the congruence is a matter of parties and voters in the same country sharing a somewhat similar policy space, even if the two are not co-ordinated with one another by elections” (p.20). Thus, by simply looking at the relationship between levels of ideology, we cannot distinguish between two series simply sharing a common long term trend, and what is really meant by responsiveness – that change in the median voter position, as reflected in an election outcome, is immediately translated into a similar change in the ideological position of the government.⁹

For each of the ideology measures, we compute measures of the change in ideology as follows:

Change in voter ideology, $\Delta VI_i(t) = VI_i(t) - VI_i(t-1)$.

Change in government ideology, $\Delta GI_i(t, g) = GI_i(t, g) - GI_i(t-1, 0)$.

As measured, ΔVI captures the change in the median voter position over elections $t-1$ and t . In other words, it measures the change in voter ideology across the last two elections. Note that this value is constant

⁹ We replicated all of our analyses of responsiveness we report in Tables 2 - 4 by using levels of voter and government ideology in our regression analyses. Despite the substantive differences between the two approaches, we found almost identical results – all independent variables found statistically significant in our analyses are also significant in this replication and retain the same sign.

across g_i in our data.¹⁰ Our measure of ΔGI measures the difference between the ideological position of the current government, $GI_i(t, g)$, and the ideological position of the first government formed after the previous election, $GI_i(t-1, 0)$. The logic of this strategy is simple. For cases where $g_i = 0$ for the current government, then a regression of ΔGI on ΔVI allows us to examine the degree to which changes in the median voter position are matched by changes in government ideology across governments that were formed immediately after the election. When $g_i > 0$ for the current government, a regression of ΔGI on ΔVI allows us to examine how changes in government ideology caused by the formation of new governments between elections may affect the baseline level of responsiveness observed at $g_i = 0$.

A simple example can serve to illustrate the logic of this analysis. Let us assume that we analyze two particular elections in country i , and after each election a series of governments form as follows:

<u>Election $t-1$</u>	<u>Voter Ideology</u>	<u>Government Ideology</u>
$g_i = 0$	40	40
$g_i = 1$		(irrelevant)
$g_i = 2$		(irrelevant)

<u>Election t</u>	<u>Voter Ideology</u>	<u>Government Ideology</u>
$g_i = 0$	50	60
$g_i = 1$		50
$g_i = 2$		40

In this example, our measure of the change in voter ideology, $\Delta VI_i(t) = VI_i(t) - VI_i(t-1) = 50 - 40 = 10$. In other words, from election $t-1$ to election t , the median voter position increased by 10 points. Our measure of the change in government ideology, $\Delta GI_i(t, g) = GI_i(t, 0) - GI_i(t-1, 0) = 60 - 40 = 20$ for the first government formed after election t . This suggests that while the median voter position increased by 10 points from election $t-1$ to election t , the ideology of the government increased by 20 points, which exceeds the observed shift in the median voter by 10 points. For the next government (i.e. the first government formed without an election, and thus $g_i = 1$), $\Delta GI_i(t, g) = 50 - 40 = 10$. Thus, $g_i = 1$ reflects a 10 point increase in government ideology, matching the change in the median voter position in a perfect one-to-one

¹⁰ We relax this assumption in two supplemental analyses that are presented below, in each case corroborating the results from our primary analyses.

fashion. So, government responsiveness improved with the formation of the new government in this example. For $g_i = 2$, since there was no change in government ideology ($40 - 40 = 0$), government responsiveness decreases compared to the previous government. In this simple example, therefore, we would conclude that the level of responsiveness changed with each new government.

Congruence

Perfect congruence in a one-dimensional space expects the median voter and the government to be at the same position on the left-right scale. The greater the distance between these two actors, the poorer the congruence in representation. Since congruence is essentially concerned with the distance between the median voter and the government at a given point in time, several scholars have utilized a measure which they term “distortion,” defined as the lack of congruence, and which is operationalized as the absolute value of the difference between the representative left-right position and the left-right position of the median voter (McDonald, Mendes and Budge 2004, Kim, Powell, and Fording 2006). We adopt the same strategy and utilize a measure of distortion to study congruence between the electorate and the government. Thus, we define government distortion as follows:

$$GD_i(t, g) = \text{ABS} (GI_i(t, g) - VI_i(t)).$$

As measured, $GD_i(t, g)$ captures the absolute distance between the ideology of each government and the median voter position in the most recent election, t .

Responsiveness Analysis and Results

We begin with the results of our analyses of responsiveness. As we indicated above, our strategy for estimating responsiveness is based on a regression analysis of ΔGI on ΔVI . The primary statistic of interest is the slope from this regression. In a perfectly responsive democratic system, government ideology should, on average, respond to movement in voter ideology in a one-to-one fashion, resulting in a slope coefficient of 1.0

for ΔVI . A slope value that deviates from 1.0 is indicative of a less responsive system. We begin by estimating the coefficients for equations 1 and 2 below for all governments formed immediately after an election (i.e. $g_i = 0$).

$$\Delta GI_i(t, 0) = \alpha + \beta \Delta VI_i(t) + \mu_i \quad [1]$$

$$\Delta GI_i(t, 0) = \alpha + \beta_1 \Delta VI_i(t) + \beta_2 SMD + \beta_3 \Delta VI_i(t) * SMD + \mu_i \quad [2]$$

Equation 1 estimates the level of responsiveness across all countries, while equation 2 tests for stability in that relationship across electoral systems. Both models are estimated as a panel regression model using OLS, where μ is assumed to be a random error term satisfying OLS assumptions.¹¹

(Table 2 about here)

The coefficient estimates for equations 1 and 2 are displayed in Table 2. For the sample of governments formed immediately after the election, we find evidence of high levels of responsiveness. The slope for ΔVI is near 1.0 at .84, suggesting that in the wake of the election, changes in government ideology match changes in the median voter position in a near one-to-one fashion. In addition, we find very little difference in the level of responsiveness across different types of electoral systems.

We now move to test Hypotheses 1, which suggests that responsiveness declines as new governments form between elections. To do so, we estimate a modified version of equation 1 that is estimated for the entire sample of governments, including those which formed in the absence of an election. This equation is presented below as equation 3:

$$\Delta GI_i(t, g) = \alpha + \beta_1 \Delta VI_i(t) + \beta_2 g_i + \beta_3 \Delta VI_i(t) * g_i + \mu_i \quad [3]$$

¹¹ Diagnostic tests indicated an absence of serial correlation and a lack of significant country fixed effects. This is not surprising due to the fact that our measures of voter and government ideology are based on changes, rather than levels.

Equation 3 models an interaction between the change in voter ideology and the order of government formation between elections (g_i). As we discussed above, we estimate two versions of this equation, based on alternative definitions of g_i . First, we estimate a model for which g_i is measured as an interval variable such that $g_i = 0$ denotes the first government formed after the election, and $g_i = 1, 2, 3$, etc., denote successive governments formed in the absence of an election. The coefficients for this regression are displayed in the second column of Table 3. The coefficients from this regression suggest that as before, the slope of the relationship between ΔVI and ΔGI is near one for governments formed after the election ($\beta_1=.88$). The coefficient for the interaction term is negative and statistically significant, and suggests that the slope of the relationship between changes in voter and government ideology decreases by .18 with each new government formed between elections. These results lend support to Hypothesis 1 above.

(Table 3 about here)

Although this result is compelling, one may object to the fact that this analysis presumes that the decline in responsiveness should occur in a simple linear fashion with each successive government, regardless of the amount of time that each government has been in power. Therefore, we adopt an alternative operationalization, where g_i is measured as the amount of time (in years) elapsed between the formation of the first government (formed immediately after the last election) and the formation of the current government. The results of this regression analysis are displayed in the third column of Table 3 and are nearly identical to our previous analysis. Thus, these results lend additional support to Hypothesis 1.

To better appreciate the implications of this finding, we present Figure 2, which presents a graphical display of the declining relationship between changes in voter ideology and government ideology across successive governments formed between elections. Figure 2 presents two types of estimates. The line in the figure represents the predicted slope values for ΔVI , for each value of g_i , based on the regression results presented in Table 3. The points in the figure represent the effect (i.e. slope value) of ΔVI on ΔGI from a series of separate bivariate regressions estimated in the form of equation 1 for each value of g_i (where $g_i = 0,1,2,\dots,n$). Both sets of estimates are consistent in their implications. The level of responsiveness is

extremely high among governments formed after the election, but responsiveness consistently declines with the formation of each new government until the next election.

(Figure 2 about here)

In Table 4, we further explore the relationship between the order of government formation and responsiveness by examining whether the decline in responsiveness is mediated by the electoral system in place. That is, we test Hypothesis 3. Rather than complicating the analysis by attempting to model a three-way interaction, we test for stability in the coefficients of equation 3 across electoral system types by estimating equation 3 (using our primary measure of g) separately for countries with SMD systems and PR systems. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 4. The results for PR systems are nearly identical to the results for the full sample reported in Table 3. Specifically, the level of responsiveness is very high for governments that form immediately after an election ($\beta_1 = .90$), but declines by .19 with each government that forms prior to the next election. The results for SMD countries are similar in that responsiveness is also high for the first government, and based on the sign of the coefficient for β_3 , the expected level of responsiveness also declines across successive governments prior to the next election. However, unlike the coefficient for β_3 in the PR sample, the coefficient is not statistically significant in the SMD sample ($p=.40$, two-tailed). Given the similarity in the magnitude and direction of the coefficients for β_3 across the two samples, along with the small number of SMD countries in our 22-country sample (5), we hesitate to make too much of this lack of statistical significance. Instead, we consider this analysis to be largely inconclusive.

(Table 4 about here)

Relaxing Our Assumptions Concerning Changes in the Median Voter Position

Up until now, we have assumed that voter ideology is fixed between elections. In other words, our analysis assumes that new governments that form between elections are either moving closer to, or away from some fixed target that is defined by the outcome of the last election. If we assume that the median voter position can move between elections, and more importantly that party leaders can accurately estimate such movements, then we are left with an alternative explanation for our findings. That is, party leaders may be

sensing shifts in voter ideology and trying to follow a moving voter ideology position, thus explaining the diminishing relationship between changes in voter ideology (as we measure it) and government ideology with each successive government. The difficulty in testing this possibility, of course, is that a measure of the median voter position is not available between elections. However, if this is indeed what is happening, we can provide a test of this alternative explanation for diminishing responsiveness by conducting a modified version of our analysis which takes this data limitation into account. Keeping with our emphasis on measuring changes in ideology, we first constructed two variables as follows:

$$\Delta VI_i(t) = VI_i(t+1) - VI_i(t)$$

$$\Delta CGI_i(t, g) = \sum_{g=1}^n \{GI_i(t, g) - GI_i(t, g-1)\}$$

The measure of voter ideology measures the change (simple difference) in the median voter position between two successive elections held at periods t and t+1. However, the new measure of government ideological change, $\Delta CGI_i(t, g)$, is quite different from the change measure used in the analyses presented thus far. The measure of change in government ideology now measures the *cumulative* change in government ideology across all *unelected governments* that formed between the same two elections (t and t+1). We then use these variables to estimate equation 4:

$$\Delta CGI_i(t, g) = \alpha + \beta \Delta VI_i(t) + \mu_i \quad [4]$$

We estimate the coefficients for equation 4 using only the periods between elections during which unelected governments were formed. The logic of the test is straightforward. If party leaders truly attempt to follow a “moving” median voter, then the cumulative government-to-government changes in government ideology should track reasonably well with the change in the median voter position that was occurring during this period. As plausible as this may be, the slope estimate for equation 4 suggests that there is little

correspondence between the direction of change in the median voter position, and the observed changes in the ideological position of the government ($\beta = -.051$, $p = 0.451$).

We also conducted a second alternative analysis which approaches this question in a somewhat different way, yet reaches a similar conclusion. In this analysis, we first estimated voter ideology scores between elections by using linear interpolation (i.e. thus assuming constant changes in all years between observed voter ideology scores). Then, we re-estimated our model of responsiveness by constructing two variables:

Change in government ideology, $\Delta GI_t = GI_t - GI_{t-1}$

Change in voter ideology, $\Delta VI_t = VI_t - VI_{t-1}$,

where $t = \{1, 2, \dots, n\}$ simply denotes the country's sequence of governments (both elected and unelected) during our sample period for each country.

The change in government ideology is now measured as the simple government-to-government change in government ideology, while the change in voter ideology is the corresponding government-to-government change in voter ideology (with median voter positions between elections estimated through linear interpolation). Based on these new data, we replicated our responsiveness model reported in Table 3 above by estimating equation 5 (where g_i is defined as before):

$$\Delta GI_t = \alpha + \beta_1 \Delta VI_t + \beta_2 g_i + \beta_3 \Delta VI_t * g_i + \mu_i \quad [5]$$

Despite this very different approach to testing our responsiveness hypothesis, the coefficient estimates are extremely similar to the results presented in Table 3, and therefore do not change our substantive conclusions. As before, we find evidence of near perfect responsiveness for governments formed in the aftermath of an election ($\beta_1 = 1.02$, $p < .01$), but responsiveness declines with each subsequent government

formed in the absence of an election ($\beta_3 = -.54, p < .01$).¹² Thus, as new governments form, party leaders do not appear to be anticipating changes in the median voter position that will ultimately be manifested in the results of the next election. Rather, changes in government ideology that occur after the formation of the first government appear to be driven by the simple passage of time.

Distortion Analysis and Results

We now present the results of our analysis of distortion. As we described earlier, government distortion, $GD_i(t, g)$, captures the absolute distance between the ideology of the government and the median voter position in the most recent election, t . Unlike responsiveness, distortion does not compare ideology across elections. In a perfectly congruent system, government ideology should equal median voter ideology, on average, resulting in a value of 0 for $GD_i(t, g)$. A $GD_i(t, g)$ value that deviates from 0 is indicative of a less congruent system.

We begin by testing Hypotheses 2, which predicts increasing distortion as new governments form between elections. To do so, we estimate equation 6 for the entire sample of governments, including those which formed in the absence of an election. Due to the presence of several outliers in our measure of distortion, we rely on the natural log of our distortion measure in our regressions reported below.

$$\ln [GD_i(t, g)] = \alpha_i + \beta g_i + \mu_i \quad [6]$$

Again, we estimate this equation in two different ways. We first estimate a version of equation 6 which relies on the interval version of g_i , such that $g_i = 0$ denotes the first government formed after the election, and $g_i = 1, 2, 3$, etc., denote successive governments formed in the absence of an election. Next we estimate a version of equation 6 in which values of g_i represent time elapsed from the first government formed after the last election. As with the analysis of responsiveness, we estimate the effect of the order of

¹² These results are based on a model in which g_i is measured as a simple counter variable (0,1,2,3, etc.). We obtain very similar results using our alternative measure of g_i based on the passage of time.

government formation/time elapsed from the first government on distortion across the entire 22 country sample, and then separately for countries with SMD and PR systems, which allows us to test Hypothesis 4. The results for these various versions of equation 6 are presented in Table 5.

(Table 5 about here)

The results presented in Table 5 are consistent in that regardless of our measure of g_i , and regardless of electoral system, the level of voter-government distortion does not appear to change in a systematic fashion between elections. None of the coefficients for g_i come close to statistical significance in any of the versions of equation 6.

Relaxing Our Assumptions Concerning Changes in the Median Voter Position

Thus far, our analyses of distortion have relied on a measure of distortion which assumes that the median voter position remains constant between elections. We now relax this assumption, as we did for our responsiveness analysis, and conduct an alternative test of our distortion hypotheses which allows the median voter position to vary between elections. To accomplish this task we rely on a new measure of distortion that is based on interpolated voter ideology scores for distortion scores observed between elections. We then re-estimate equation 6 using the new measure for both versions of g_i . These results are displayed in Table 6.

(Table 6 about here)

Unlike the replication of our responsiveness model, which displayed nearly identical results, the results of our new distortion analysis are less similar to our original analyses and our conclusions now depend upon the measure of government order that we use. Recall that based on the original distortion analysis, we found no evidence that voter-government distortion changed in any systematic (i.e. linear) fashion between elections. In our alternative analysis reported in Table 6, we now find that in both the full sample and in the subset of PR countries, voter-government distortion increases when our measure of government order (g) is based on the amount of time that has elapsed since the election. However, we find much less conclusive evidence using our simple counter measure of government order, as the slope is insignificant for the full sample and only marginally significant ($p=.07$) for PR countries.

Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout this paper, we have maintained that, due to the emphasis on elections and resulting government formation in Western democracies, we often neglect the fact that governments can form without elections in these countries. As a result, we have surprisingly little understanding of the governments formed between elections, which as we have noted account for almost half of the postwar governments in these countries. The sheer numbers of these types of governments and our lack of knowledge call for a better understanding of their features and behavior.

Since it is not feasible to study all aspects of these types of governments in a single paper, we focused our attention on one aspect of them – the extent to which citizen preferences are translated into government policy. We argued that virtually all of the past studies of democratic performance failed to distinguish, either theoretically or empirically, between governments formed in the aftermath of an election, and subsequent changes in governments that occur in the absence of an election. Therefore, the question of correspondence between voter preferences and the ideology of governments in the absence of elections remains unexplored. In this paper, we provide a comprehensive analysis of government responsiveness to the median voter as well as congruence between the two, by reexamining the relationship between the ideological positions of voters and governments. Unlike past studies, we examine governments formed both immediately following and subsequent to an election.

For the sample of governments formed immediately after the election, we find evidence of high levels of responsiveness. In the wake of the election, changes in government ideology match changes in the median voter position in a near one-to-one fashion. In addition, we find very little difference in the level of responsiveness across different types of electoral systems. However, among the sample of governments that form between elections, the relationship between changes in voter ideology and changes in government ideology appears to diminish over time with each new government. In our analysis of congruence/distortion, we found mixed results, depending upon the assumptions one is willing to make about the movement of the median voter position between elections, and the choice of the measure to model the passage of time between elections.

At first, these results may seem contradictory: we find strong evidence that responsiveness diminishes over time with each new government between elections, while we find only modest support for a similar deterioration of congruence. As we emphasized above, however, these need not be conflicting results. Indeed, responsiveness and congruence are conceptually distinct and as such may not necessarily move in the same direction. Distortion is intended to reflect the degree to which the median voter position and the government's ideological position resemble one another at the preceding election. Responsiveness is correspondence between changes in voter positions and the government positions across two election cycles. Since one is static and the other is dynamic, they may or may not behave in a similar fashion.

Our results provide strong evidence that democratic performance may deteriorate in the absence of elections. At the same time, a caveat applies here: our unit of analysis in this paper is the government, and we therefore implicitly ignore the amount of time that governments remain in office. A close inspection of our data reveals that unelected governments, on average, remain in office for less than half the average duration of elected governments. This suggests that to the extent that declining responsiveness and congruence serve to move government policies away from the median voter's preferred position, this impact may be less than it would seem given the frequency of unelected governments reported in Table 1. Nevertheless, we are hesitant to say exactly how much this minimizes the impact of declining responsiveness or congruence. Even though some governments may only be in office for a short period of time, the policy choices they make may have long-lasting impacts that are unaffected by the governments that replace them.

Obviously, more research is necessary to sort out all of these potential effects. At the very least, since many studies of the postwar governments in Western democracies have been based on elections and the resulting governments, our analysis shows the need to include those governments that form between elections in future studies. Consequently, we consider our work in this paper a small step toward a better understanding of governments formed in the absence of elections and governments in Western democracies in general.

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Table 1. Governments Formed in 22 Democracies, by Proximity to Election

Country	Governments Formed after an Election	Governments Formed without an Election	Average Number of Governments between Elections	Period of Analysis
Australia	22	7	.30	1946-96
Austria	15	6	.35	1949-95
Belgium	17	18	.95	1946-95
Canada	17	4	.22	1945-97
Denmark	22	10	.43	1945-94
Finland	15	28	1.76	1945-95
France	14	38	2.60	1946-97
Germany	14	13	.87	1949-94
Great Britain	15	5	.31	1945-97
Iceland	16	6	.33	1949-91
Ireland	16	5	.39	1948-97
Israel	14	28	2.00	1950-96
Italy	14	39	2.67	1949-96
Luxembourg	12	5	.38	1946-96
Netherlands	17	7	.39	1960-96
New Zealand	18	5	.25	1945-94
Norway	14	12	.80	1946-94
Portugal	9	2	.45	1946-96
Spain	7	1	.13	1945-97
Sweden	17	7	.39	1976-95
Switzerland	13	36	2.4	1979-96
Turkey	12	22	1.57	1950-97
All Countries	322	311	0.97	---

Source: Woldendorp, Keman, Budge. 2000.

Table 2. Government Responsiveness across Elected Governments, 1945-1997

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Equation 1</i>	<i>Equation 2</i>
<i>ΔVI</i>	.84** (.07)	.84** (.08)
<i>ΔVI * SMD</i>	---	-.01 (.18)
<i>SMD</i>	---	-.65 (2.34)
<i>Constant</i>	.11 (1.02)	.27 (1.20)
<i>Adj. R²</i>	.30	.29
<i>N</i>	298	298

Note: Cell entries are OLS slope coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses.
*p<.05, **p<.01

Table 3. Government Responsiveness across Elected and Unelected Governments, 1945-1997

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Equation 3</i> ($g_i = 0, 1, 2, \dots, n$)	<i>Equation 3</i> ($g_i =$ Time elapsed from formation)
ΔVI	.88** (.06)	.93** (.07)
$\Delta VI * g_i$	-.18** (.05)	-.20** (.05)
g_i	.25 (.65)	.32 (.61)
<i>Constant</i>	.89 (.89)	.63 (.95)
R^2	.26	.26
N	574	574

Note: Cell entries are OLS slope coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 4. Government Responsiveness across Elected and Unelected Governments, by Type of Electoral System, 1945-1997

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>PR</i>	<i>SMD</i>
ΔVI	.90** (.07)	.80** (.17)
$\Delta VI * g_i$	-.19** (.05)	-.20 (.23)
g_i	.12 (.65)	1.65 (3.11)
<i>Constant</i>	1.15 (.98)	-.15 (2.18)
R^2	.28	.17
N	459	115

Note: Cell entries are OLS slope coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. All models utilize the interval measure of g (i.e. $g_i = 0,1,2,\dots,n$).

*p<.05, **p<.01

Table 5. Government Distortion across Elected and Unelected Governments, by Type of Electoral System, 1945-1997

<i>Independent Variables</i>	$g_i (0,1,2,\dots n)$			$g_i (Time\ elapsed)$		
	<i>Full Sample</i>	<i>SMD</i>	<i>PR</i>	<i>Full Sample</i>	<i>SMD</i>	<i>PR</i>
g_i	-.02 (.05)	.03 (.14)	.03 (.05)	.01 (.04)	.05 (.07)	.00 (.05)
<i>Constant</i>	1.55** (.06)	2.16** (.11)	1.34** (.07)	1.52** (.06)	2.13** (.11)	1.36** (.07)
N	602	115	486	602	115	486

Note: The cell entries are slope coefficients. The dependent variable for each of these regressions is the natural log of the current level of distortion, defined as the absolute value of (voter ideology – government ideology). All regressions include country fixed effects and corrections for autocorrelation (using the xtregar procedure in Stata 10.0).

*p<.05, **p<.01

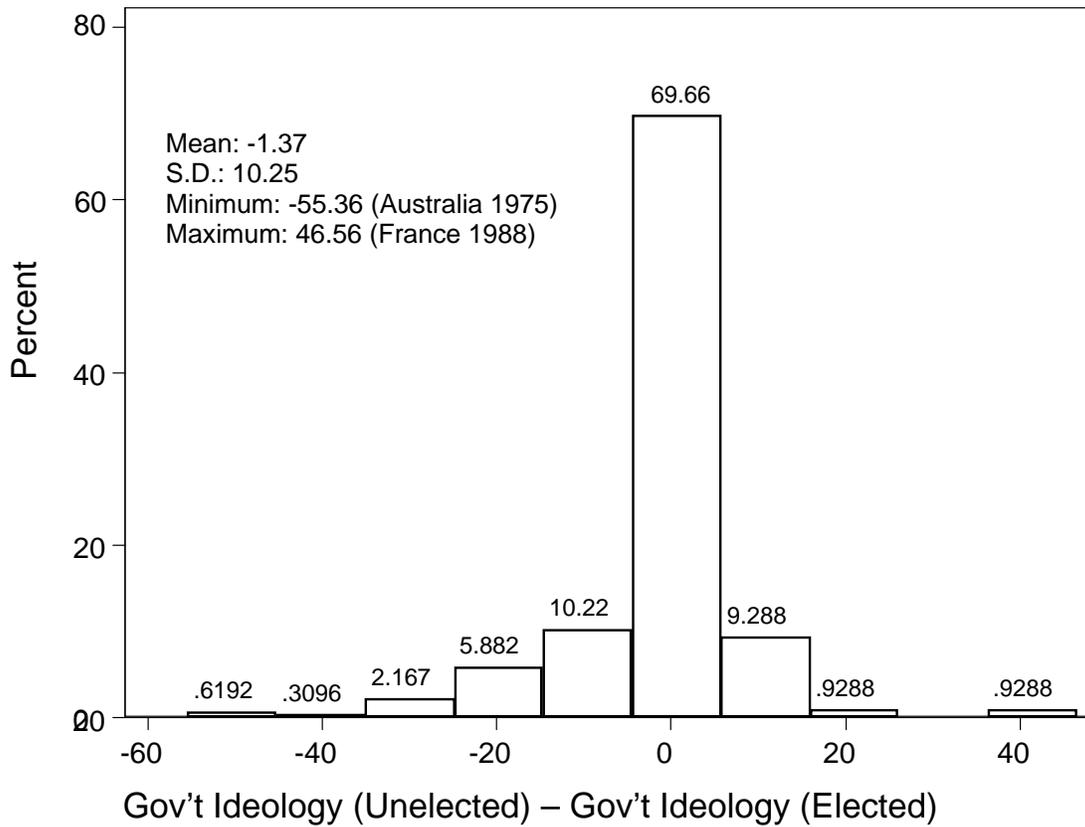
Table 6. Government Distortion across Elected and Unelected Governments, by Type of Electoral System, 1945-1997 (Alternative Measure of Distortion)

<i>Independent Variables</i>	g_i (0,1,2,...n)			g_i (Time elapsed)		
	<i>Full Sample</i>	<i>SMD</i>	<i>PR</i>	<i>Full Sample</i>	<i>SMD</i>	<i>PR</i>
g_i	-.02 (.04)	-.23 ⁺ (.12)	.08 ⁺ (.04)	.08* (.04)	-.02 (.06)	.12** (.04)
<i>Constant</i>	1.68** (.05)	2.23** (.09)	1.51** (.05)	1.61** (.05)	2.15** (.10)	1.46** (.06)
N	602	115	487	602	115	487

Note: The cell entries are slope coefficients. The dependent variable for each of these regressions is the natural log of the current level of distortion, defined as the absolute value of (voter ideology – government ideology), and where voter ideology scores between elections are estimated by linear interpolation. All regressions include country fixed effects and corrections for autocorrelation (using the xtregar procedure in Stata 10.0).

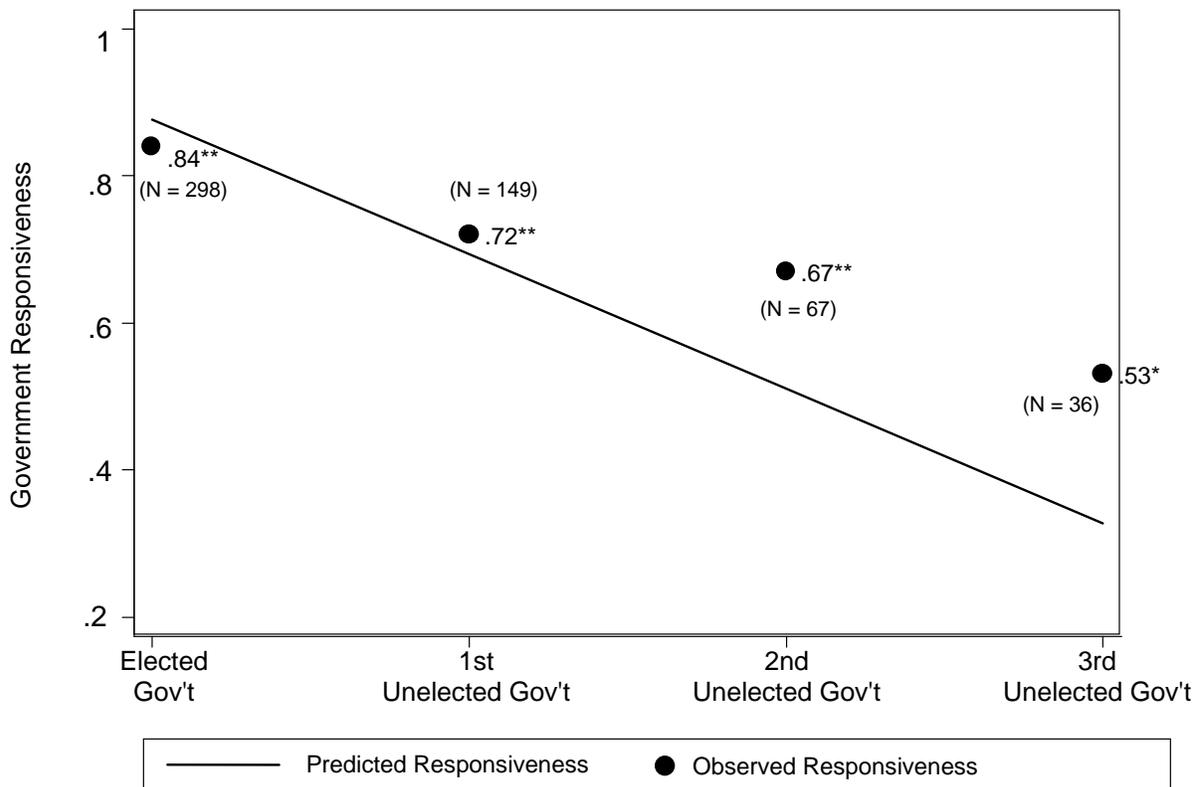
*p<.05, **p<.01, +p<.10

Figure 1. Frequency Distribution of Differences between the Ideology of Elected Governments and Subsequent Unelected Governments that Formed Prior to the Next Election



Note: This histogram is based on a sample of 311 unelected governments that formed in the 22 countries listed in Table 1. For each of these unelected governments, the values reflected in the distribution were calculated by subtracting the ideology of the most recently elected government from the ideology of the unelected government. As calculated, positive values denote unelected governments that are more left-leaning than the most recent elected government, while negative values represent unelected governments that are more conservative than the most recent elected government. Values above each bin represent the percentage of observations within each interval.

Figure 2. Observed and Predicted Levels of Government Responsiveness across Elected and Unelected Governments



Note: The responsive values labeled “observed responsiveness” are based on a series of separate bivariate regressions for each type of government represented along the horizontal axis. Predicted responsiveness is based on the interactive model estimated for the entire sample of governments, and is calculated from the slope estimates reported in column 2 of Table 3.