

## Chapter 8: Does Responsibility Matter?

*Democracy is the process by which people choose the man who'll get the blame.*

- Bertrand Russell

Part Four of this book examines the consequences of blame attribution for electoral democracy. Previous chapters have shown how voters, the media and politicians do, and do not, blame the EU for adverse policy outcomes, but we have said little about how blame and credit ultimately matter for democratic outcomes. The quotation above from Bertrand Russell suggests the process that allows voters to attribute blame and punish the culprit is at the very heart of democracy. In the classic tradition of democratic theory, elections are a sanctioning device in which voters reward or punish incumbents on the basis of past performance. However, this relies on the critical assumption that voters are able to assign responsibility for policy outcomes. Responsibility judgements are thus the principal mechanism by which citizens hold representatives to account for their actions, since it is those judgements that intervene between evaluations of policy outcomes and voting behaviour. In this chapter, we examine to what extent processes of electoral democracy in the European Union allow voters to punish policy-makers when things go wrong and reward them when things go well.

Elections to the European Parliament provide the primary mechanism of accountability in the EU, and we would therefore expect that voters sanction their EU representatives for the policy outcomes they are responsible for. Yet the task of assigning responsibility is by no means clear cut. As we have seen in previous chapters, voters find it difficult to assign responsibility to multiple levels of government. Complex institutions are not unique to the EU, of course. We know from the comparative literature on elections that national institutions that blur lines of responsibility make it more difficult for voters to use elections to punish and reward incumbents. Hence, this chapter examines how clarity of responsibility affects performance voting both at the national and the EU level.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, we briefly discuss the debate on democratic accountability in the European Union and the broader literature on how clarity of responsibility shapes electoral sanctioning. Second, we use cross-national survey data to examine empirically how responsibility matters in national elections, demonstrating that governments that are held responsible for poor outcomes perform worse than governments that manage to avoid blame. Importantly, we also show that this is conditioned by clarity of responsibility: ideologically cohesive single party governments are held to account by voters more successfully than broad coalition governments. Building on these findings, we then examine how blame attribution affects the quality of the electoral connection in the EU and more broadly how it affects trust in the EU institutions. While we find that trust in those institutions is related to the blame game, the effect on how citizens hold their representatives to account for performance in European Parliament elections is negligible. This suggests that European elections do not enable voters to hold EU policy-makers to account for their performance.

### **Accountability and European Parliament elections**

In the first decades after the European Community was established, European integration was regarded as a largely intergovernmental organization, run by national governments in the Council, who delegated power to and supervised the action of supranational executive institution, the Commission. However, as the scope and depth of policy-making at the EU level has increased, so has the recognition that EU policy-makers need to be more directly accountable to the European people. With the aim of strengthening democratic accountability at the European level, successive treaty reforms have transformed the European Parliament from a weak consultative assembly into a genuine directly elected parliament with co-legislative powers in the policy-making process (Rittberger 2005; Hix et al. 2007). As the only directly elected institutions, the European Parliament is thus the one institution that allows European citizens to hold EU institutions to account for their actions. The other branch of the EU's 'dual executive', the Council and European Council, is only indirectly accountable to citizens, through elections of national parliaments.

The European Parliament is an increasingly important law-making institution, with co-

decision between the Parliament and the Council in most areas of EU legislation (Hix et al. 2007). Moreover, the Commission and its President need Parliament's approval and can be dismissed by it. Treaty reforms have thus established procedural accountability in the EU similar to that of parliamentary democracies, since the executive (the Commission) is accountable to a majority of members in parliament and can be voted out of office by the latter, through a vote of no confidence (Strøm 2000).

Yet despite these reforms to enhance democratic accountability in the EU, questions have been raised about the quality of these processes, notably elections to the European Parliament. As Manin, Przeworski and Stokes have noted, accountability also requires that "voters can discern whether governments are acting in their interest and sanction them appropriately, so that those incumbents who act in their best interest win re-election" (1999:40). In other words, accountability requires that voters have enough information to reward and punish their representatives for their actions in elections and to ensure that the best candidates win.

Scholars have expressed doubts about whether the European Parliament and elections to the institutions provide a suitable mechanism for accountability and representation. The classic argument is that the Union suffers from a democratic deficit because powers are transferred from the national to the European level, but without the establishment of corresponding democratic control at the European level (Føllesdal and Hix, 2006). European integration has resulted in an increase in executive power and a decrease in national parliamentary control. Yet, the European Parliament has not succeeded in offering citizens the same democratic control as national parliaments. This is not only because the EP is still weak compared to the governments in the Council, but because the European parliamentarians do not have a proper European mandate due to the nature of EP elections (Hix et al. 2007; Føllesdal and Hix 2006)

The literature on EP elections has focused on their "second-order" nature, which fails to motivate public interest in the elections themselves, or in politics at the European level more broadly (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Marsh, 1998; De Vreese et al., 2006). The result is a low turnout at these elections and vote choices based on domestic, rather than European, policy concerns, which means that EU citizens' preferences on issues on the EU policy agenda have no direct influence on policy outcomes at the EU level (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). Most of the empirical work has examined the extent

to which domestic concerns (e.g. satisfaction with the incumbent national government) as opposed to European preferences (e.g. more or less European integration) matter to vote choices in the elections (Hix and Marsh 2008; Hobolt et al. 2009). The ‘European’ or ‘second-order’ nature of EP elections is an important issue for investigation, but a related, and equally significant, question is whether these elections allow voters to punish and reward their representatives for their actions. However, no studies have explicitly tested whether European Parliaments enable citizens to hold EU institutions to account for performance. To assess the quality of accountability in EP elections, it is essential to know whether the EU policy-makers are sanctioned by voters for policy outcomes they are deemed to be responsible for. This is the central question examined in this chapter. But before turning to the EU and accountability within the EU system of elections, it is worth considering the wider literature on how national governments are held accountable.

### **Government accountability and clarity of responsibility**

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

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<sup>1</sup> Some have also challenged the existing economic literature by arguing that the strong relationship between economic evaluations and vote choice has been overstated since people’s perceptions of policy performance are shaped by their political orientation, notably partisanship (Evans and Andersen 2006; Anderson et al. 2004; Evans and Pickup 2010; Ladner and Wlezien 2007; Tilley et al 2008). This has been questioned by others (see Lewis-Beck 2006; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008) but regardless of the merits of this case we are not primarily interested in the direct effect of performance evaluations on vote choice, but rather with how perceptions of responsibility, as well as political institutions and governments, mediate this relationship.

This variation has been related to the degree of responsibility that governments have for outcomes. In a path breaking article, Powell and Whitten (1993) claimed that the ‘clarity of responsibility’ of political institutions mediates the degree of economic voting. Their basic argument was that complex institutional set-ups blur lines of responsibility and thus make it hard for voters to assign responsibility to the government for economic performance: “The greater the perceived unified control of policymaking by the incumbent, the more likely is the citizen to assign responsibility for economic and policy outcomes to the incumbents” (1993: 398). If voters cannot say that the government is responsible for the outcome, they also cannot punish it for poor outcomes, or indeed reward it for good.

The clarity of responsibility index that Powell and Whitten developed<sup>2</sup> has become very influential and has been widely used to explain variation in performance voting (Anderson 2000; Bengtsson 2004; De Vries et al. 2011; Hellwig and Samuels 2008; Kiewiet 2000; Nadeau et al. 2002; Powell 2000; Samuels 2004; Whitten and Palmer 1999), and more broadly to explain the effect of institutions on other aspects of democracy, such as levels of corruption (Tavits 2007). The consensus in the literature is that political institutions that blur lines of responsibility do indeed restrict economic voting, and thus accountability.<sup>3</sup> More recently, however, the generality of the clarity of responsibility index has been called into question. The original index encompasses both formal institutional factors (bicameralism, legislative committee structure) and specific characteristics associated with the incumbent government (majority status, number of parties). Other studies have added various institutional and partisan factors to the index, including the proportion of seats held by the largest party (Anderson 2000; Nadeau et al. 2002); ideological cohesion of the governing coalition (Nadeau et al. 2002); longevity of the government (Nadeau et al. 2002; Bengtsson 2004); party system fractionalisation (Anderson 2000; Nadeau et al. 2002; Bengtsson 2004);

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<sup>2</sup> The index consists of five political variables that capture low clarity of responsibility: opposition control of committee chairs, weak party cohesion, politically significant bicameral opposition, minority government, and number of parties in government. On the basis of this index, they divide countries into less clear responsibility systems (e.g. Germany and Italy) and clearer responsibility systems (e.g. Britain and the United States).

<sup>3</sup> Duch and Stevenson (2005, 2008) have also argued that economic voting is weaker when power is dispersed, but in contrast to most of the economic voting literature they build on a selection model, rather than the traditional sanctioning model. They argue that a more equal distribution of responsibility weakens the signal that the previous economy provides about the competence of the incumbent parties. In other words, whereas the sanctioning model assumes that power-sharing makes it more difficult for voters to assign responsibility, Duch and Stevenson’s model assumes that voters have perfect knowledge of the distribution of responsibility, but argue that power-sharing leads voters to attribute more weight to exogenous factors.

and federalism (Anderson 2006). All of these measures conflate formal institutions and dynamic government characteristics however.<sup>4</sup>

In recent work, we have shown that clarity of responsibility matters to how voters hold governments accountable, but that in fact it is not primarily formal institutions that matter to voters, but rather the make-up of governments themselves (Hobolt et al, forthcoming). The argument is that while formal institutional rules are important, the ability of voters to hold governments to account depend to a larger extent on the ‘cohesiveness’ of the incumbent government. In other words, voters are not concerned with institutionally defined concentration of powers, but do need to be able to identify a cohesive political actor that they can assign responsibility to and sanction accordingly. There is evidence from the US case that voters can overcome institutional divisions of power (divided government and federalism) by attributing responsibility to a highly ‘cohesive’ incumbent, namely the president (Norpoth 2001). In parliamentary systems, it may be equally easy for voters to concentrate on one part of government, but it may be more difficult for them to identify a single party or individual that they can sanction in elections. In this context the ability to sanction will depend on whether the government is a single-party government or a coalition, and in the case of coalitions the dominance of a single party within the government (what Anderson (2000) refers to as “governing party target size”), as well as the ideological cohesion of the government. In other words, in a situation where voters face a single-party government, or an ideologically cohesive coalition dominated by one large party, voters will find it relatively easy to reward or punish that particular party. This is regardless of whether institutional power is shared with the opposition in legislative committees, upper chambers or lower levels of government, because voters will simply ignore that dispersion of power and concentrate on that national government as the most inviting target. In situations where there are multiple small parties in the government, with little in common ideologically, it becomes more difficult for voters to identify which party they should reward or punish.

We can thus think about voters' ability to use elections to hold governments to account as a

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<sup>4</sup> Anderson's (2000) study of economic voting in 13 democracies takes an important step towards disentangling the different ways in which the political context affects the relationship between economic perceptions and vote by distinguishing between 1) institutional clarity of responsibility, 2) governing party target size (size of the largest party in government) and 3) clarity of available alternatives (effective number of parties in the legislature). However, ‘institutional clarity of responsibility’ in this study is identical to the Powell and Whitten measure, and thus captures both formal institutional rules and dynamic traits of the incumbent.

two-step process. The first step is for voters to decide how responsible the government of the day is for specific policy outcomes (e.g. economic recession). In other words, do you blame the government, or some other actor or level institution? As shown in chapters 3 and 4, variation in individuals' assignment of responsibility might be due to institutional differences, information differences or even partisan biases.<sup>5</sup> The second step is for voters to be able to punish or reward the government in an election for policy outcomes they are responsible for. To achieve this the voter needs to know which parties are in government and which parties were responsible for which policy areas. Both of these steps are important. Assignment of credit and blame to governments is not sufficient information to punish a party at the polls, voters also need to know which party in government to vote for or against. This requires an identifiable government with a certain degree of cohesion. Our expectation is that performance voting is more pronounced when voters assign responsibility to the government (individual assignment of responsibility) and when it is easy to identify who is in government (clarity of government responsibility).

### **Examining performance voting in national elections**

To test these propositions at the national level, we use data the cross-national data from the European Election Studies (EES) 2009, described in Chapter 3. The dependent variable is support for the incumbent political parties at the time of the 2009 EP elections. Given that national elections were not held in most countries at the time of the 2009 EP elections, the dependent variable in the analyses is not the actual choice, but measures of the propensity to vote for each of the parties currently in government in a country (Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Van der Eijk 2002; Van der Eijk et al. 2006). This is measured by batteries of questions, which ask, for each parliamentary party, how likely it is (on a scale of 1 to 10) that a respondent will ever vote for it. These measures can be regarded for ease of exposition as preferences, but we know that voters make their choice in each election for the party they

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly we see little evidence that these assessments of national government responsibility are related to the cohesion of the government of the day. There is some evidence that they are related to formal institutional boundaries however. Increased horizontal and vertical divisions between government (due to federalism or strong parliamentary committee structures) do seem to somewhat reduce people's assessment of national government responsibility. For example, for the economy, moving from the most institutional clear countries to the least clear reduces people's average assessment of government responsibility by three quarters of a point on the 0-10 scale.

most prefer.<sup>6</sup> We focus on performance voting on the two key valence issues – the economy and healthcare – and the main independent variables are thus evaluations of performance on healthcare and the economy. We use two standard retrospective performance questions for the economy and health care. These are five point Likert scales with 1 representing a lot worse and 5 a lot better.<sup>7</sup> Figures 8.1 and 8.2 below show how performance evaluations on the economy and health care influence support for the government (average score for the incumbent parties in government), moderated by clarity of the system as well as individual assignment of responsibility.

Figure 8.1 demonstrate the effect of changing economic evaluations from poor to good for a hypothetical voter, while controlling for party identification. We group people by both their own views on government responsibility and the government context. To keep things simple, we either categorise people as thinking the government is more responsible (scoring 8, 9 or 10 on the 0-10 responsibility scale) or the government is less responsible (scoring 7 or less on the 0-10 responsibility scale). Similarly we group people into countries: separately modelling the effects of economic perceptions, and responsibility evaluations, in three different types of government context. We use the government clarity index (Hobolt et al forthcoming) to divide the 27 EU countries in 2009 into three equally sized groups.<sup>8</sup> At one extreme we have low government clarity of responsibility. These are places with governments that are large,

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<sup>6</sup> Given that the election people were voting in was not for a national government, but rather an EP election, we do not have national government vote choice, only vote intention *if* there were to be a national election. Given most systems within the EU also had coalition governments at the time, the measure we use here of party preference allows us to better capture support for, and against, a range of incumbent parties while disassociating the preference measure from the European context of the election. The exact wording of the question is: ‘We have a number of parties in [country] each of which would like to get your vote. How probable is it that you will ever vote for the following parties? Please specify your views on a scale where 0 means “not at all probable” and 10 means “very probable”.’ We take the mean of the governing party scores here, but using a weighted average (by legislative seat share or previous vote share) makes little difference to the substantive findings presented here.

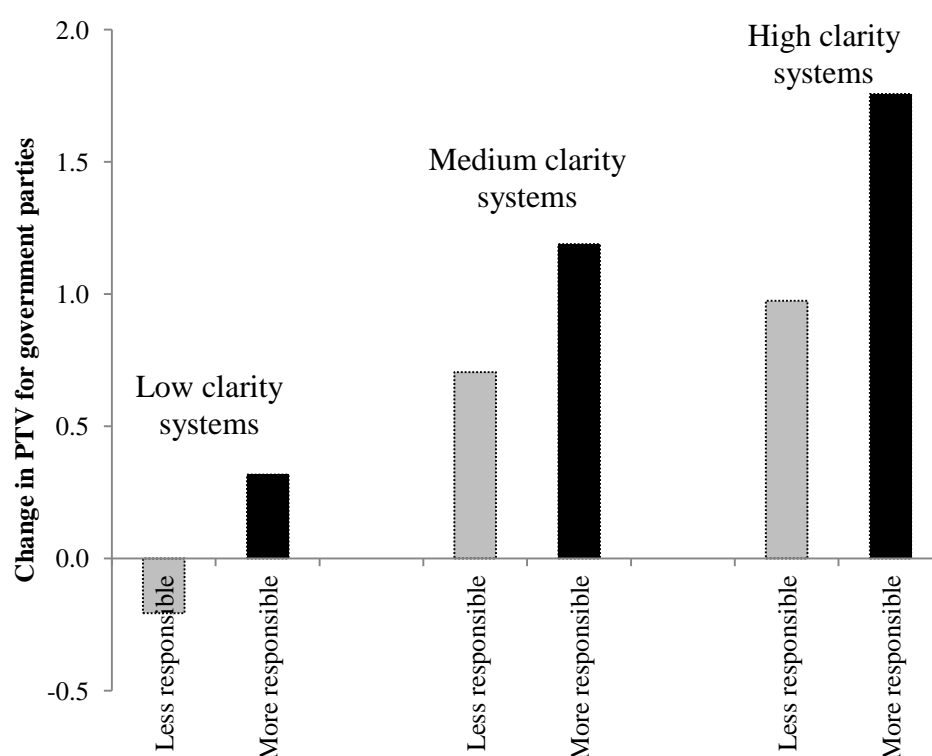
<sup>7</sup> For the economy, the question is: What do you think about the economy? Compared to 12 months ago, do you think that the general economic situation in [country] is a lot better, a little better, stayed the same, a little worse or, a lot worse?

<sup>8</sup> This includes a dummy for single party government (0 for coalition, 1 for single party), a dummy for no cohabitation within a semi-presidential system (0 for cohabitation, 1 for no cohabitation), a measure of the ideological cohesion of the government which takes the form of the proportion of seats held by parties in government that are of the same ideology as the dominant governing party (this varies from 0.49 to 1, and is rescaled it to run from 0 to 1), and finally the dominance of the main governing party which we operationalise as the head of government’s party’s share of cabinet posts (this varies from 0.26 to 1, and is rescaled to run from 0 to 1). The four items are added together and divided by four to produce an index that in principle could run from 0 to 1, and in 2009 for the 27 EU countries this runs from 0.24 (Finland) to 1 (for example, Spain).



sprawling, ideologically in cohesive coalitions (for example Romania and Austria). At the other extreme we have broadly single party governments (for example the UK and Spain). In between these two extremes we have the middle third of government types: typically coalitions with a small number of parties such as in Sweden or France.

FIGURE 8.1: *How changing economic perceptions influence support for governing parties, conditioned by assessments of government responsibility and clarity of responsibility*

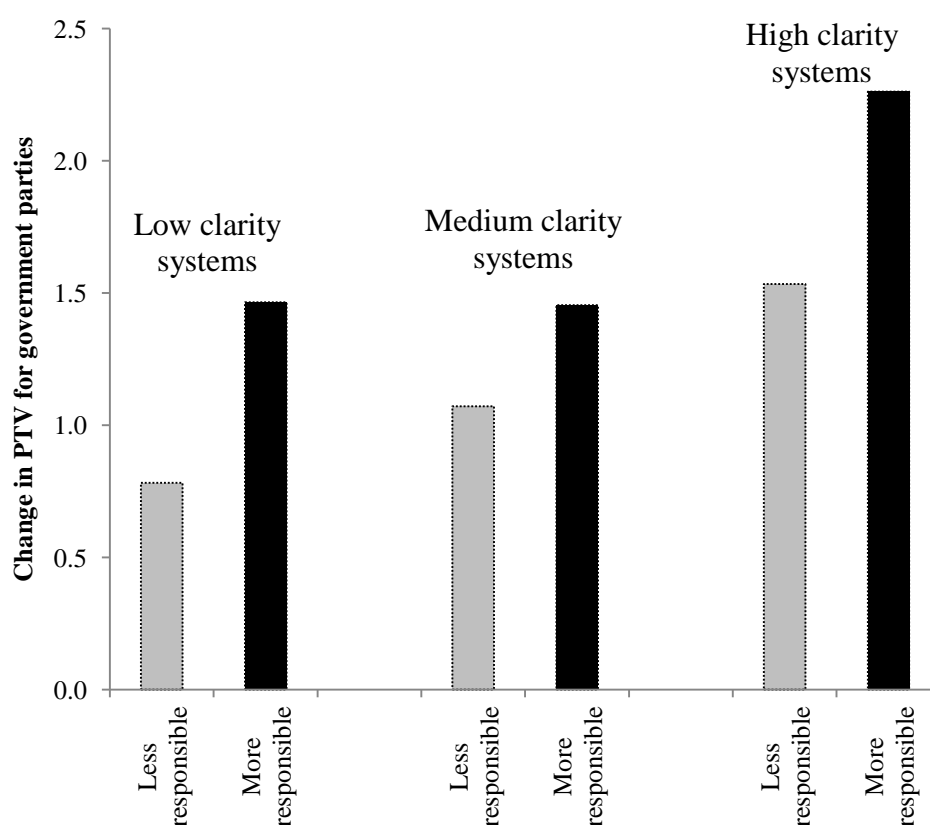


*Note:* This figure is based on three multilevel models predicting average support for incumbent governing parties on a 0-10 scale. The first model is for nine low government clarity systems, the second for nine medium clarity systems and the third model for nine high clarity systems. The main independent variables in the models are economic perceptions (1-5 scale), perceived government responsibility for the economy (dummy for more or less responsible), the interaction between economic perceptions and government responsibility for the economy, healthcare perceptions (1-5 scale), perceived government responsibility for healthcare (dummy for more or less responsible) and the interaction between healthcare perceptions and government responsibility for healthcare. Government partisanship is also included as a control variable. The figure above shows the result of a change in economic perceptions from bad to good with healthcare perceptions and partisanship held constant.

Figure 8.1 demonstrates that for government parties at the national level support is clearly conditional on economic success. The bars on the graph are almost all positive, showing that in most circumstances people that think the economy has got better, holding constant their party identification, are generally more likely to support government parties. Economic

voting at the national level was thus very pronounced in EU countries in 2009. Nonetheless it is also the case that the magnitude of the economic vote is much greater for some people, and much greater in some contexts.<sup>9</sup> People that held the government more responsible change their evaluations of that government more when economic conditions change than do people who held the government less responsible. Individual views of overall government responsibility matter. What also matters is the context that people are casting their vote in. The effects of the economy on vote decisions are clearly much greater when governments are very cohesive than when governments are composed of multiple disparate parties. The same is true for healthcare as figure 8.2 shows.

FIGURE 8.2: *How changing health perceptions influence support for governing parties, conditioned by assessments of government responsibility and clarity of responsibility*



<sup>9</sup> The main effects of economic and healthcare performance are statistically significant at the 5 per cent level for all three groups of countries apart from economic performance in low clarity countries which is not statistically significant even at the 10 per cent level. All the interaction terms between responsibility and performance are statistically significant at the 5 per cent level apart from the healthcare\*responsibility interaction in middling clarity countries which is statistically significant at the 10 per cent level.

*Note:* This figure is based on three multilevel models predicting average support for incumbent governing parties on a 0-10 scale. The first model is for nine low government clarity systems, the second for nine medium clarity systems and the third model for high clarity systems. The main independent variables in the models are economic perceptions (1-5 scale), perceived government responsibility for the economy (dummy for more or less responsible), the interaction between economic perceptions and government responsibility for the economy, healthcare perceptions (1-5 scale), perceived government responsibility for healthcare (dummy for more or less responsible) and the interaction between healthcare perceptions and government responsibility for healthcare. Government partisanship is also included as a control variable. The figure above shows the result of a change in healthcare perceptions from bad to good with economic perceptions and partisanship held constant.

Similar to Figure 8.1, Figure 8.2 demonstrates performance voting in the area of health care is highest when voters hold the government responsible, and vote in an election where it is easy to identify the party that is responsible. The ability of voters to hold governments to account is this conditioned by both individual voters and their views on national government responsibility and national political context. Thus we can think about performance voting as two-step process. The first step is the responsibility hurdle, is the government responsible? The second step is the clarity hurdle, which party in the government is responsible? The first is about individual assessments of responsibility, the second about a context in which responsible parties can be identified. What are the implications for accountability in European elections?

### **Accountability and clarity of responsibility in European elections**

Previous chapters have examined assignment of responsibility in the European Union, and established that while it is influenced by in-groups biases about the European Union, voters are able to make responsibility judgements across several levels of government, especially when the right type of information is available to them. However, it is not sufficient that voters can distinguish between that national and the European level when assigning responsibility to be able to hold EU policy-makers responsible in EP elections. They must also be able to identify who within the European Parliament take the executive decisions. The key problem is that while the European Parliament has been granted powers to approve and dismiss the Commission, there is no clear and identifiable government-opposition divide. Hence, even if citizens are able to assign responsibility to the EU for poor policy performance in an area, they will find it difficult to identify which parties within Parliament are linked with these policy-decisions, and should consequently be punished. In national parliamentary democracies, citizens can to a greater or lesser degree identify “governing” parties in parliament that support or are opposed to the incumbent government, and it is this crucial

distinction that allows them to hold governments to account for their actions (Manin 1997).

However, despite the formal powers of the EP over the approval and dismissal of the Commission, there is only a tenuous link between the political majority in the EP and the policies of the Commission. This is partly because the major parties of the EP do not present rival candidates for the post of Commission President in the way that major parties in national democracies have rival candidates of the premiership. The lack of an open battle for the Commission president, between candidates with competing policy agendas and different records, makes it difficult for voters to identify which parties are responsible for the current policy outcomes and which parties offer an alternative (Hix et al. 2007). Even if the major European political parties were to present rival candidates for the post of Commission President, the College of Commissioners will not be formed from a coalition of parties commanding a majority in the European Parliament, as they are appointed by national governments. Hence, despite formal procedures of accountability, government clarity of responsibility within the EU is largely absent

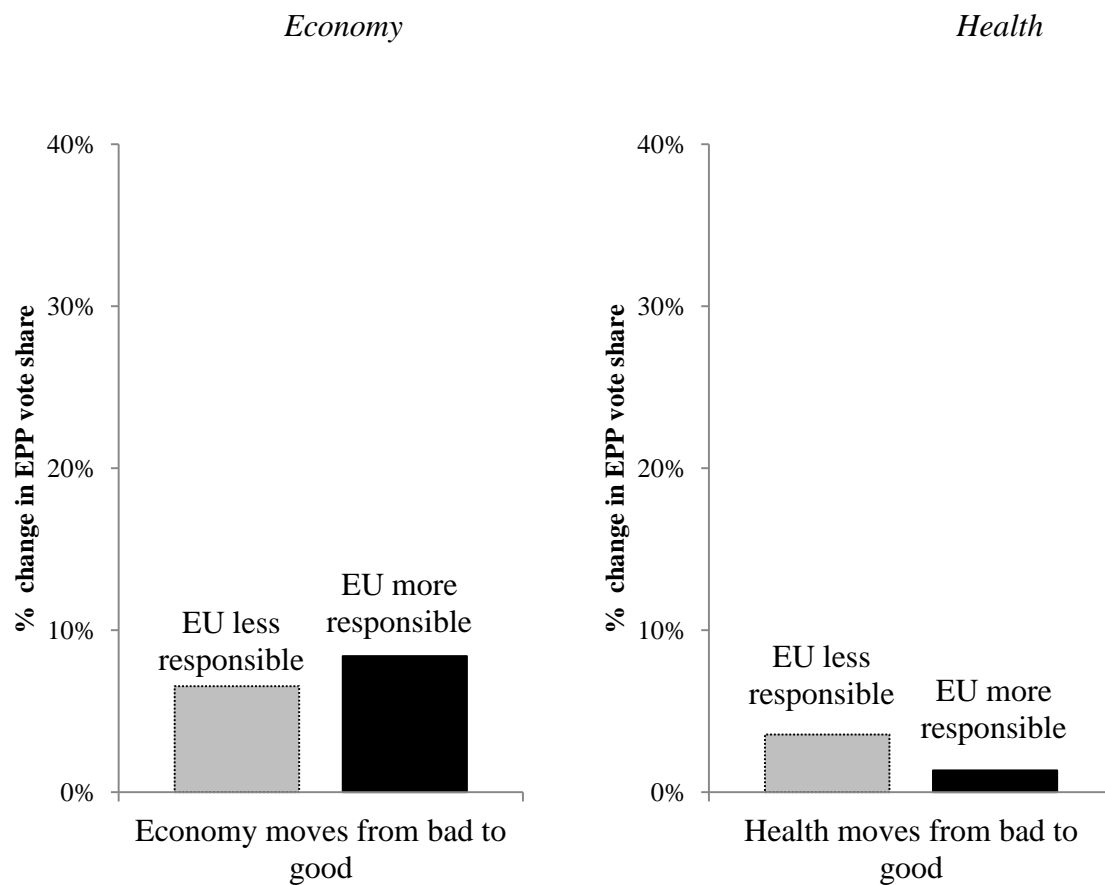
How can voters identify who to hold to account for performance in European Parliament elections? One solution for voters is to simply treat the largest political group in the European Parliament as the “governing party” to be held to account for policy outcomes. The largest political group is likely to have the greatest influence in the legislative process within the Parliament and when it comes to the approval of the Commission President. In 2009 the largest political group was the European People’s Party (EPP). The Commission President, Jose Manuel Barroso, also belonged to the EPP. The centre-right EPP is, however, a coalition of over 40 different parties from all but one of the 27 member states. Decision-making within the EP is generally characterized by broad-based consensus politics, often involving both the centre-right and centre-left party groups in the European Parliament, as well as of course co-decision with the Council (Hix et al. 2007). Given the issues of lack of a clear government-opposition politics in the European Parliament, the weak link between the political majority in parliament and the Commission as well as the complex policy-making procedures in the EU, it is thus extremely difficult for ordinary voters to link the policy outcomes with the punishment of individual parties in Parliament. Even when citizens are able to assign responsibility to the EU, we would not expect those responsibility evaluations to have an effect on vote choice in EP elections, since it is so difficult to identify the specific political party responsible for the outcomes.

Our analysis of the 2009 EP elections supports to this expectation. We find only a weak relationship between support for the EPP and people's perceptions of economic and healthcare changes. Figure 8.3 shows the results of a model that predicts vote for an EPP party. Similar to previous models of performance voting in national elections, we use health and economic performance perceptions, health and economic responsibility evaluations (people are deemed to hold the EU responsible if they scored it more than 7 on the 0-10 scale) and the two interaction terms between performance and responsibility. We also include controls for EU attitudes and whether the respondent was a partisan of an EPP party, a non-EPP party or no party at all. In contrast to the national models, neither of the interactions is statistically significant even at the 10 per cent level, and the difference between performance voting for those who think the EU is responsible and those who do not is very small.<sup>10</sup> Although better perceived performance appeared to marginally benefit the EPP parties in terms of votes cast at the EP election, these effects are rather small.

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<sup>10</sup> Neither of the main effects of healthcare and economic performance are statistically significant at the 5 per cent level, although the main effect of economic performance is at the 10 per cent level. The inclusion of the two control variables makes no real difference to the findings that we present here; removing partisanship decreases the effect of the economy even further and slightly increases the effect of healthcare perceptions.

FIGURE 8.3: *How changing policy evaluations shape the vote share of the EPP, split by individual assessment of EU responsibility*



*Note:* This figure is based on a multilevel model predicting votes cast at the 2009 EP election for parties that are members of the EPP group. The main independent variables in the model are economic perceptions (1-5 scale), perceived EU responsibility for the economy (dummy for more or less responsible), the interaction between economic perceptions and EU responsibility for the economy, healthcare perceptions (1-5 scale), perceived EU responsibility for healthcare (dummy for more or less responsible) and the interaction between healthcare perceptions and EU responsibility for healthcare. EPP partisanship is also included as a control variable. The figures above shows the result of a change in economic perceptions from bad to good (with healthcare perceptions and partisanship held constant) and the result of a change in healthcare perceptions from bad to good (with economic perceptions and partisanship held constant).

Given the low levels of clarity of responsibility in the European Parliament and EU policy making more generally we are not surprised by finding that the model of reward-and-punishment voting cannot be applied to EP elections. Of course, it could be argued that voters would be better able to hold MEPs to account if only they knew more about policy-making in the Union. Research shows that people's knowledge of the European Parliament is very limited. Shephard (1997) and Sinnott (1997, 2000) show that in the early 1990s only around a half of people were aware of the European Parliament's existence and less than a quarter of

people correctly identify the Council of Ministers as the decision making body. However, in other contexts lack of detailed institutional knowledge is not an insurmountable barrier. After all the US political system is very complex, but, as discussed earlier, a simple rule of thumb that US voters seem to use is to blame the presidential party when things go wrong. The problem is not that voters find it difficult to say which EU institution is the institution to blame; it is that the votes they cast in the European elections cannot be easily connected to a governing party and its performance. For example in 2007 the Eurobarometer asked citizens across the EU whether MEPs sit in the European Parliament on the basis of their nationality or their political affinities. Only a third realised it was the latter. Indeed, in that same survey in 2007 less than half were willing to say that MEPs were actually directly elected and only 1 in 10 knew that the next EP elections were in 2009. Few voters think that politics trumps national interest in the European Parliament anyway. Less than a quarter of people in 2007 thought that votes in the European Parliament were decided on the basis of party political choices by MEPs. Given the lack of a clear government-opposition divide in the EP this is perhaps unsurprising. It also implies that regardless of whether the electorate holds the EU responsible or not for policy outcomes, they cannot reward or punish the ‘governing’ coalition within the European Parliament.

### **The impact of responsibility beyond vote choices**

Accountability as discussed so far focuses on vote choice. How voters hold governments to account by rewarding them for success with their votes and punishing them for failure by withholding those votes. In the context of the EU we might well think about other types of voter responses to poor performance. Given that lack of a cohesive government, we expect that it is the institutions themselves, rather than the incumbent politicians and parties that are on trial. Ordinary citizens might not make the connections between the EU being responsible, policy failures and the dominant party bloc within the European Parliament, but they are likely to connect those policy failures and EU responsibility for them with the general set of EU institutions. In effect, voters trust the EU institutions less when things go badly and especially when things go badly which they think the EU is responsible for.

This is an idea that links to a large literature on democratic and institutional support and the sources of that support. Good performance in this context is a source of ‘regime’ support, or ‘output legitimacy’ (Scharpf 1999). Traditionally it has been argued that when governments

have presided over good times this has led to diffuse support for not just a particular government but for the institutions and practices of all governments (Easton 1975). In the EU context, others have argued that that broader support for democracy in the EU must rely almost exclusively on this kind of output-based legitimacy (Majone 1998, 2000). As Scharpf notes “the legitimacy of [the EU’s] institutional practices...is almost automatically judged, and found wanting, by reference to the conglomerate of input-and output-oriented criteria familiar from national debates” (Scharpf 1999:12). In other words, the argument is that the legitimacy of the EU institutions hinges almost exclusively on its performance (Scharpf 1999; Majone 2000). Building on this, we therefore test how performance and perceived responsibility for that performance affect trust in the EU institutions. Better performance should engender more trust, especially when that better performance is accompanied by a perception of responsibility for that change.

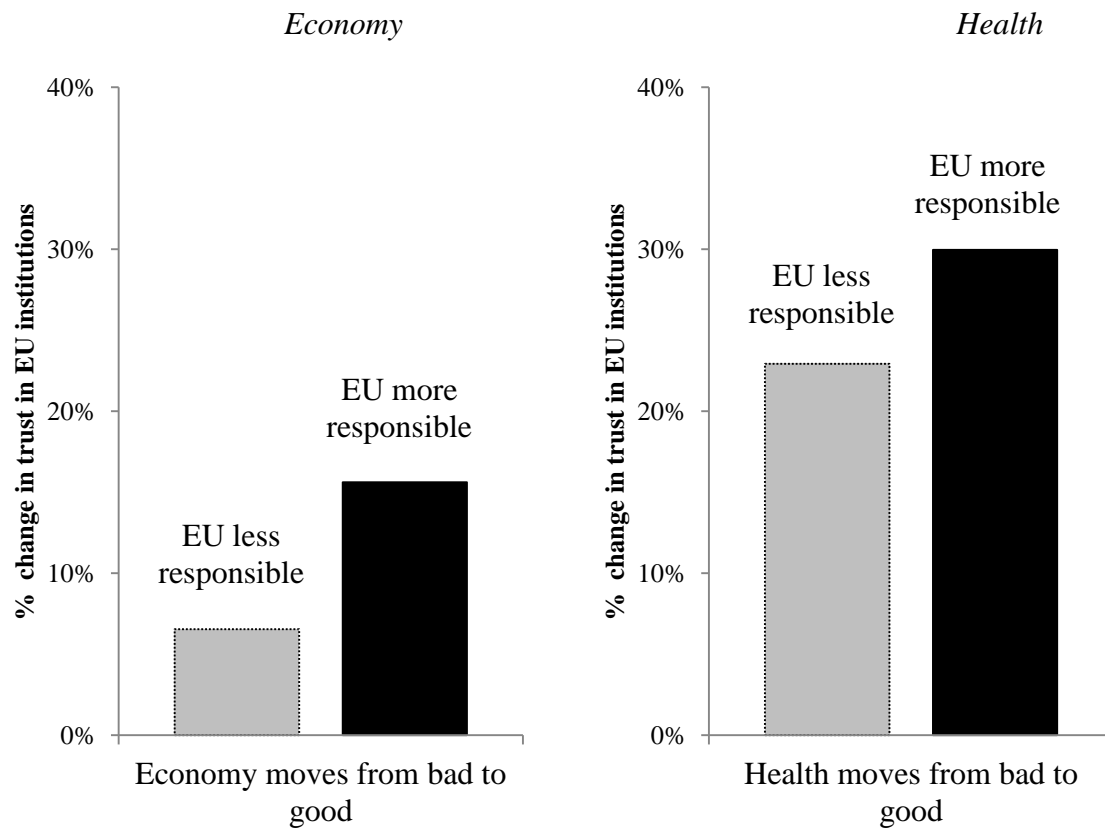
Figure 8.4 shows results from a model that predicts trust in the EU institutions.<sup>11</sup> This is a very similar model to those we have reported on earlier in the chapter. We predict trust using the two performance measures, the two responsibility measures (again people are deemed to hold the EU responsible if they scored it more than 7 on the 0-10 scale) and the interaction between them. We also control for generalised attitudes towards the EU. Figure 8.4 shows the effects of moving from poor performance to good performance for the economy and health on trust for people that hold the EU responsible and for those that do not hold the EU responsible.

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<sup>11</sup> Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement ‘You trust the institutions of the European Union’ on five point scale from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. Here we have recoded answers into those that said they agreed or strongly agreed, those that trust the institutions, and those that disagreed or neither agreed nor disagreed, those that did not trust the institutions.



FIGURE 8.4: *How changing perceptions (from bad to good) changes the level of trust in the EU, split by individual assessment of EU responsibility*



*Note:* This figure is based on a multilevel model predicting whether people agree that they trust EU institutions or not at the time of the 2009 EP election. The main independent variables in the model are economic perceptions (1-5 scale), perceived EU responsibility for the economy (dummy for more or less responsible), the interaction between economic perceptions and EU responsibility for the economy, healthcare perceptions (1-5 scale), perceived EU responsibility for healthcare (dummy for more or less responsible) and the interaction between healthcare perceptions and EU responsibility for healthcare. General support for EU integration (1-10 scale) is also included as a control variable. The figures above shows the result of a change in economic perceptions from bad to good (with healthcare perceptions and partisanship held constant) and the result of a change in healthcare perceptions from bad to good (with economic perceptions and partisanship held constant).

What is quite clear is that performance matters for trust: people who think things are going well are more trusting of the EU institutions. Importantly, responsibility assignment also matters: people who hold the EU responsible show a stronger relationship between performance and trust.<sup>12</sup> This implies that while political parties within the EU institutions remain unaccountable for performance regardless of their perceived responsibilities,

<sup>12</sup> The main effects of performance, for both the economy and healthcare are statistically significant at the 5 per cent level, as are the interaction effects between performance and responsibility for both the economy and healthcare.

‘governing’ parties are not punished in the way that we see in national elections, people do change their minds with regard to the institutions themselves. Poor performance leads to the institution itself becoming tarnished, and this is exacerbated when people hold those institutions responsible for the poor performance. While we should not exaggerate the size of these effects, it does appear that the legitimacy of EU institutions is dependent on performance and on the extent to which people credit or blame those institutions for good and bad performance.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the complex and dynamic nature of the EU, previous chapters have shown that European citizens do appear capable of making distinctions in terms of what different levels of governments do, and their responsibility judgments are shaped by the institutional context, especially when information is available. This raises the important question of accountability, namely how do these attributions matter in terms of determining vote choices at both the European and national level? This chapter has examined the extent to which parties both at the national and the European level are rewarded and punished for policy outcomes they are considered responsible for. At the national level, we find that performance voting is very pronounced, and that government who are thought to be responsible for the economy and health care are more likely to lose support conditions are worsening and win support when conditions are improving. Importantly, the degree of performance voting at the national level depends to a large degree on government cohesiveness. When there is a clearly identifiable governing party who can be blamed (or rewarded), voters are more likely to hold governments to account than when power is dispersed among multiple and diverse parties.

Given the absence of a cohesive government in the EU and the lack of parties in the European Parliament that clearly make up "the governing majority", our expectation is therefore that performance voting would be minimal in European Parliament elections, even in areas where voters assign responsibility to the EU. The findings in this chapter confirm this expectation. Unlike in national elections, performance evaluations have very little impact on support for the major party in the European Parliament, and this is not conditioned by the extent to which individuals hold the EU responsible for this policy area. In other words, the classic reward-and-punishment model cannot be applied to EP elections, as voters do not use these elections to hold their representatives responsible for their actions.

That is not to say that responsibility evaluations do not matter. This chapter has also shown that responsibility evaluations shape the individuals' trust in EU institutions more generally. In areas where citizens hold the EU responsible, poor performance evaluations are more likely to lead to lower levels of trust in the European Union as a whole. This is linked with the notion that the EU derives its legitimacy from its capacity, so-called output legitimacy (Scharpf 1999, see also Majone, 1998, 2000). This has important implications for the debate of legitimacy in the Union, since it implies that the legitimacy of the EU relies heavily on evaluations of performance, particularly economic performance (Citrin, 1974; Weatherford, 1991). In parliamentary democracies that enable voters to hold governments to account even a severe economic crises may not lead to a breakdown of trust in the political system as such, but rather a change of government and of political direction. In contrast the danger for the EU is that every time the system fails to deliver, the result is declining levels of trust and a crisis of confidence in the regime as a whole, because voters lack the opportunity to "throw out the rascals" and elect a new set of governors. In other words, the lack of a mechanism to hold EU policy-makers to account can lead to a more fundamental legitimacy crisis in the EU.

But the implications of these findings are not confined to democracy at the European level. The lack of clarity of responsibility in the EU also has the potential to impede accountability in national systems. As the findings in this chapter demonstrated, performance voting at the national level is conditioned by the extent to which voters hold national governments to account as well as their ability to identify a cohesive government. As powers are transferred to the European level, voters are increasingly likely to absolve national governments of blame. As a consequence, national governments are less likely to be held to account for poor performance, however, no 'government' at the European level has emerged that can be blamed (and rewarded) for policy outcomes. The next chapter discusses the wider policy implications as well as possible solutions to this accountability deficit in the European Union.

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