Political Expectations and Responsibility Attribution

1) Summary

Is blame for unpopular or failed policies attributed differently depending on who is responsible for these policies? Do voters attribute more blame to parties for unsuccessful policies that are the party's 'trade-mark' policies than for failing or unpopular policies which voters would not have expected the party to pursue? This project – conducted in cooperation with Raanan Sulitzeanu-Kenan, D.Phil. (Oxford), Assistant Professor at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem – will systematically investigate the relationship between voters' expectations about a policy-maker and the degree of public blame they attribute to that policy-maker for his failed or unpopular policies. This will be done by means of online survey experiments conducted in Germany and Israel – a research design that is still only rarely used in political science. The findings of this study are expected to improve our understanding of an often unavoidable tension between democratic accountability and the need of elected officials to adopt unpopular policies.

2) State of Research

There is a rich literature on the relationship between government performance and citizens' attitudes and vote choice but to our knowledge no research has been done on the mediating effect of expectations about policy actors on this relationship. A different strand of the literature suggests that parties 'own' certain policies in the sense that they are being seen as most competent by voters in this field and regarded to be its natural defender. The core policies associated with a party tend to be stable over several decades, leading voters to develop deep-seated partisan policy-associations. Empirically, a number of authors have argued that parties take advantage of their ownership of certain policies. Thus, Ross (2000), Green-Pedersen (2002) and Zohlnhöfer et al. (2012) demonstrate that left parties implemented deeper cuts to different aspects of the welfare state than their competitors while Zohlnhöfer (2007) found similar results for budget consolidation. The core argument of these studies is that left parties have more leeway for unpopular reforms precisely because voters do not expect them to adopt a right wing policy like welfare retrenchment. This logic even travels to non-socio-economic issues as hawkish (e.g. Likud led) governments in Israel are found to be more likely to offer security concessions in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (e.g. Berrebi/Klor 2006).

As can be seen from this review, the author has made important contributions to this literature. Nonetheless, a key limitation of this literature (including the applicant's contributions) is that it assumes rather than proves a relationship between partisan policy expectations and public blame. For example, when the studies cited above find that left parties retrench the welfare state more than right parties, the authors simply presume that this is the case because left parties believe that voters will not blame them – but none of the authors has ever tested whether this assumption holds empirically. Therefore, our project is the first to experimentally study the causal effect of voters' expectations on blame attribution for unpopular or unsuccessful policies.

3) Research design and plan of procedure

In order to test the causal relationship between partisan policy expectations and responsibility attribution we employ a survey embedded experimental design. This method enables to attain strong internal validity by randomly assigning the experimental treatment (policy that is congruent or non-congruent to partisan expectations), as well as strong external validity, by eliciting the attitudes of a representative sample of respondents towards actual political actors and parties. Moreover, our research design also includes two countries in the analysis – Germany and Israel – which allows us to study this relationship in different political conditions, and explore potential country variations. The most important difference between these two countries is the principle dimension of political competition. While in Germany political competition centers around socio-economic issues, the main policy dimension in Israel is national security (Benoit & Laver 2006). Given that these two policy fields could affect political competition and blame attribution differently, studying these two countries will allow us to test whether the effects we find are general or conditional on policy-domain.

Table 1: The basic experimental design

		Political actor	
		Left	*Right*
Policy	*Left*	(1) A left-wing party/politician initiating a left-wing policy	(2) A right-wing party/politician initiating a left-wing policy
	Right	(3) A left-wing party/politician initiating a right-wing policy	(4) A right-wing party/politician initiating a right-wing policy

The experimental treatment of policy-to-partisan expectations congruence is to be conducted by presenting respondents with either congruent or incongruent scenarios. These scenarios are based on different combinations of left versus right parties/politicians, and left versus right policies. These combinations can be presented in a simple two-by-two matrix, as shown in table 1. Cells (1) and (4) represent two situations in which policies are as can be expected from the relevant political actor (party or politician), while cells (2) and (3) provide 'surprising' situations in which policies are not those that are typically expected from the relevant political actor. We expect that voters attribute more blame to actors for failing or unpopular policies in the congruent cases (cells 1 and 4) than in the non-congruent cases (cells 2 and 3).

In preparing for this project we have conducted a pilot survey experiment in Israel that provides promising indications for this research's potential. The experiment included six experimental groups which offered 'expected' and 'surprising' combinations of policy actions in the central domain dividing right and left wing supporters in Israel, namely the approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and political actors. The two policies – a 'dovish' policy and a 'hawkish' one – both led to identical undesirable consequences in the scenarios. Each scenario was presented in three versions with politicians as prime ministers that were expected to be seen either as dovish or as hawkish (see appendix 2 for details). Following the scenario, respondents were asked to rate the level of responsibility they attribute to the prime minister for the consequences of the policy. Additionally, in order to check the effectiveness of the experimental treatment, respondents were asked to estimate the chance that the particular political actor would have adopted this policy. The results of this study indicate that the experimental treatments were successful in eliciting systematically different expectations from respondents in the different scenarios. Furthermore, the experimental treatments resulted in varying responsibility attributions in line with our hypothesis.

In the next step, we intend to conduct pilot studies for the German case. In these pilot studies, we will test two scenarios, namely tax policy (left-wing version: tax increases, right-wing version: tax cuts) and employment policy (left-wing version: more employment protection, right-wing version: labor market liberalization). Moreover, we will test whether it makes a difference in the German context if political actors are presented in the experiment as parties or political leaders. Afterwards, a full survey experiment will be fielded. The German as well as the Israeli experiment will then be replicated after the next general elections in these countries which are scheduled to take place in fall and spring 2013, respectively. All experiments will be web-based and conducted by commercial companies that can approximate sample representativeness.

References

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Appendix: The scenarios used in the Israeli study

The 'Dovish' scenario

"In order to avoid a Palestinian unilateral declaration of the establishment of an independent state, Israeli government and the Palestinian authority (PA) conducted covert negotiations, in which the parties agreed to take mutual trust-building steps. As part of this agreement, the prime minister [Netanyahu/Livni/Liberman] decided to evacuate 7 Israeli settlements in the north of Someria, in which a total of 1,500 people reside. The delegates of the PA agreed to postpone, for now, their initiative to submit an application for statehood to the UN Security Council. The 7 settlements were evacuated within two months of the agreement, and control of these areas was transferred to the PA.

A week following the transfer of the evacuated areas, a string of terrorist attacks were launched by Hammas activists, from these areas in the North Someria on the road leading from Afula to Beit-She'an. In these attacks 7 Israeli citizens were killed. Two weeks after these incidents, a group of terrorists from a village in North Someria entered an Israeli village near Afula, and murdered a 60 year-old couple."

The 'Hawkish' scenario

"On its weekly meeting, in which the government discussed the possibility of a Palestinian unilateral declaration of statehood with Jerusalem as its capital, The prime minister [Netanyahu/Livni/Liberman] announced his intention to actively promote a preemptive unilateral step of annexation of the main clusters of Israeli settlements in the west bank, Ma'ale Edomim, Gush Ezion and Ariel.

In the week following the prime minister's announcement riots have erupted in the west bank. In these attacks 7 Israeli citizens were killed. Two weeks after these incidents, a group of terrorists entered a house in Kochav Yair, and murdered a 60 year-old couple."

Livni was chosen as the most dovish political actor, which also had a realistic chance of becoming prime minister at the time of the survey. Liberman was chosen as the most hawkish political actor with realistic chance of being prime minister. Nethanyahu as current prime minister was seen in an intermediate position.