

Who is to blame?

Public responsibility attributions for austerity measures under EU conditionality

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Abstract

During the Euro crisis, extensive austerity measures were introduced in those countries that were hit hardest by the crisis and either received financial assistance from the European Union (EU), such as Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and Cyprus; or were in danger of entering a lending agreement, such as Italy. Despite the unprecedented influence of the EU on domestic policy in the crisis countries, we know little about how the public has reflected upon policy making in the Euro crisis and how it attributed responsibility for austerity measures introduced to conform with EU conditionality. This paper develops from the literatures on economic voting, responsibility attributions and the Euro crisis three, partially competing hypothesis on how the public assigns responsibility for austerity reforms in crisis contexts. Focusing on the contextual factors that impact decisions on responsibility attributions, first, I analyse the decision-making authority – responsibility link established by the literature on responsibility attributions. Subsequently, I develop two alternative and complementary conjectures that take into account the broader policy-making process in situations of complex decision making, highlighting, respectively, the role of proposing actors and the relative influence of negotiation partners on policy negotiations in highly salient policy making contexts.

1. Introduction

“Since 2008, an international economic crisis has plagued the democratic world” (Lewis-Beck and Lobo 2017: 606). In the course of the Eurozone crisis, triggered by the collapse of the US subprime mortgage markets and the ensuing global financial crisis, extensive austerity measures were introduced in those European countries that were hit hardest by the crisis. The countries, that received financial assistance from the European Union (EU), such as Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Cyprus, clearly stand out in this regard. Yet, while the EU’s intrusiveness was certainly most pronounced in cases of conditional lending under the EU’s Economic Adjustment Programmes (EAP), “those states wishing to remain in the markets have also had to engage in budgetary consolidation and structural reform” (Laffan 2014: 271): Italy had to introduce far-reaching reforms and budget cuts in order to avoid entering an official lending agreement with the EU. As remaining outside of official lending arrangements was dependent on support from the EU, specifically on bond purchases through the ECB, EU institutions had significant influence on national reform trajectories through a more informal type of conditionality (Cioffi and Dubin 2016: 427; Pavolini *et al.* 2015: 4; Sacchi 2015: 89). Under EU surveillance, all crisis countries implemented a similar policy mix to relieve fiscal pressures (Armingeon and Baccaro 2012: 264/265; La Porte and Heins 2015: 4; Lewis-Beck and Lobo 2017: 609).

Scholars are actively debating the degree of the EU’s influence on domestic policy making in the crisis countries and the room for manoeuvre national governments possessed under formal or informal EU conditionality.¹ Yet, we know little about whom the general public has made responsible for reforms and budget cuts. Retrenchment politics are generally unpopular with the public and for national politicians with an interest in re-election, the possibility to shift the blame for austerity politics onto others, is especially attractive (Moury and Standring 2017; Pierson 1996). The unprecedented influence of the EU on domestic policy provided ideal conditions to deny the responsibility for the introduced austerity measures and shift it to EU institutions. This blame-shifting strategy of national politicians has been documented both in the context of the use of the EU as an external constraint (Blavoukos and Pagoulatos 2008; Bolukbasi 2009; Dyson and Featherstone 1996; Featherstone 2014: 297; Moravcsik 1994), as well as in cases of IMF conditional lending (see Drazen 2001; Dreher 2009; Vreeland 2003). Yet, it is unclear whether the responsibility for the austerity measures was indeed attributed to European Institutions by the crisis countries’ general public. Citizens in the crisis countries have protested against the EU institutions, as well as their own governments.² What is more, while support for the EU decreased significantly in the countries affected by the EU’s austerity politics, the public also punished

¹ Some scholars argue that the dictate of the creditor institutions led to the borrowing countries’ loss of the ability to choose among policy alternatives; see: Armingeon and Baccaro (2012); Afonso *et al.* (2014); Moreira *et al.* (2015); Petmesidou and Glatzer (2015); Dukelow (2015); Theodoropoulou (2015). Others highlight the leeway national governments retained during the negotiation and implementation of EU conditionality; see: Hick (2018); Moury and Standring (2017); Moury and Freire (2013); Cioffi and Dubin, (2016).

² For example <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/12/15/greece.strikes/index.html>; see also: Hobolt and Tiley (2014) and Moury and Gago (2018).

the governments at the ballots (Laffan 2014: 272). “Indeed, the year 2011 witnessed the ousting of the incumbents of all four countries of ‘core’ Southern Europe [...], as well as Ireland.” (Lewis-Beck and Lobo 2017: 610). The patterns of responsibility attribution for reforms and budget cuts introduced under formal or informal EU conditionality in the crisis countries are thus still unknown and we still lack a systematic analysis thereof. I therefore ask: *Which factors influence the direction of public responsibility attributions for the budget cuts and reforms in the countries affected by EU conditionality?*

Constituting one part of my dissertation project, this paper is theoretical in focus. I develop from the literatures on responsibility attributions and on the Euro crisis different, partially competing hypothesis on how the public assigns responsibility for austerity reforms in crisis contexts, whose explanatory power will be tested in a media analysis at a later stage of the project. Specifically, I focus on the contextual factors that impact decisions on responsibility attributions. First, I derive from the literature on responsibility attributions a baseline hypothesis focusing on the link between decision-making authority and responsibility. Subsequently, I develop two alternative and complementary conjectures that take into account the broader policy-making process in situations of complex decision making. While the second hypothesis highlights the role of the proposing actors, the third draws attention to the role of policy negotiations and the relative influence of negotiation partners in highly salient policy making context.

The project aims at making a two-fold contribution to the literatures on responsibility attribution and on Euroscepticism. The project contributes to a growing strand of research that investigates responsibility attributions in the context of the EU’s multilevel structure. While parts of the literature suggest that the institutional complexity of the EU system makes it difficult for the public to point out the causal responsibility of EU institutions (Gerhards *et al.* 2009; Hobolt and Tilley 2014), others hold that “correct” attributions of responsibility to decision making actors are possible for clearly supranational or intergovernmental policy decisions (Heinkelmann-Wild *et al.* 2018; Rittberger *et al.* 2017). I examine which assumptions about the role of complexity hold in the context of highly contested austerity policies in the crisis countries. In addition, I add to the literature two conjectures suggesting alternative heuristics for responsibility decisions for highly salient policies. The Eurozone crisis can be considered “a milestone in the decade-long history of European integration, as the measures taken in its aftermath considerably widen the spheres of competence of European institutions” (Lobo and Karremans 2018: 59). While the EU’s intrusiveness was certainly most pronounced in cases of EU conditionality, the influence of the EU on national politics was generally extended with the introduction the Six-Pack, Two-Pack, and the Fiscal Compact (La Porte and Heins 2015; Lobo and Karremans 2018: 61). Findings on the responsibility attributions for conditionality-induced reforms may thus have broader applicability in the post-crisis context where “citizens have now become more aware of how governments’ hands are now more tied than in the past” (Lobo and Karremans 2018: 59).

Beyond the responsibility nexus, the question of responsibility for budget cuts and reforms implemented during the EU's financial assistance programmes additionally has implications for research on Euroscepticism and declining support for EU membership in the Euro crisis. Hobolt and Tilley (2014) highlight that when responsibility for negative developments is attributed to EU institutions, yet it is not possible to hold these institutions accountable, trust in EU institutions is likely to decline (Hobolt and Tilley 2014: 135). If the public thus finds that EU institutions are responsible for the budget cuts and reforms required by conditionality, but has no opportunity to hold these institutions accountable, trust in EU institutions may consequently decline and levels of Euroscepticism increase in the affected countries. Indeed, Armingeon and Ceka (2014) and Serriccho *et al.* (2013) both find that the decline in support for EU membership between 2007 and 2011 was especially pronounced in the countries that received financial assistance. Yet, their results also show opinions on the EU to be strongly associated with trust in the national government and the state of the national economy. This, therefore, tells us little about whether support for the EU has indeed declined because the public holds EU institutions responsible for the budget cuts and reforms, or rather because overall support for the government has declined (in consequence of an economic downturn). Looking more closely at the patterns of responsibility attributions in the affected countries can thus contribute to strengthen the theorized causal link between responsibility attributions and EU support in the crisis countries.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The second section focuses on the concept of interest, responsibility, and introduces two types of responsibility that are central for responsibility attributions in the political realm: causal responsibility and functional, or role responsibility. The subsequent third section develops from the literature three hypotheses on the direction of the responsibility attributions for austerity measures introduced under EU conditionality. The fourth section concludes by presenting an outlook on how the developed conjectures can be tested by means of a media analysis.

2. Responsibility: causality and obligation

Questions of responsibility are prevalent in politics, just as they are in our everyday life. They constitute an important aspect of sense-making for events taking place around us. When something bad (or good) happens, we have an inherent need to explain this event and find out what, or who caused it (Shaver 1985). As such, “[r]esponsibility is a core concept of social life. Like other core concepts, it is difficult to define adequately and even trickier to study appropriately” (Hamilton 1978: 326). Different considerations can lead to the decision to assign responsibility to an actor. The literature on social psychology generally understands responsibility as referring to “a decision about liability for sanctions” (Hamilton 1978: 316) and has highlighted two aspects, that are considered central for the decision to attribute responsibility: causality and obligation (Arceneaux 2006; Hamilton 1978; Iyengar 1994).

Attributions of causal responsibility are based on the perception that a person's action has been instrumental to the occurrence of an outcome (Arceneaux 2006: 736; see also: Gerhard *et al.* 2007; Iyengar 1994). As such, they draw a direct connection between a specific subject, such as a policy outcome, and an actor who is claimed to have caused it through a specific action. Yet, actors are not only held responsible for what they do, but also for what they do not do. Arceneaux (2006) points out that for responsibility to be assigned to the government, for instance, “[v]oters need only believe that government policy could have done more to avert a problem even if it was caused by something else” (Arceneaux 2006: 736). This is the consequence of the role that office holders are assigned in society: they are obliged to fulfil specific tasks and are held responsible if they fail to do so. Attributions of functional, or role responsibility are the result of obligations actors are expected to fulfil because of the social or institutional role they occupy (Arceneaux 2006: 733; Hobolt and Tilley 2014: 9–10). Take, for instance, the Eurozone crisis: while the economic and fiscal problems developed as a result of the collapse of US subprime mortgage markets and the ensuing global financial crisis, European governments were also made responsible for the crisis as they did not take precautions against fiscal imbalances and failed to introduce sufficient banking regulation prior to the financial crisis. Summing up, responsibility judgements are made “on the basis of causality (what was done) and expectations (what should have been done)” (Hamilton 1978: 316).

3. What shapes responsibility attributions?

The attribution of responsibility for political decisions and outcomes is of central importance in democratic systems. If elections serve as a tool to punish or reward governments for their performance during their last term (see, for instance, Fiorina 1981; Hobolt and Tilley 2014; Powell 2000), then the question of which policies the government is responsible for is central. “The ability of voters to correctly assign responsibility is *conditio sine qua non* for holding government accountable for action and outcomes and then to make them representative.” (Cordero and Lago 2016: 165) In this way, question of responsibility have been addressed by the literature on economic voting. While the traditional reward-punishment model, first developed by Key (1966), portrays a “naïve electorate who administers electoral sanctions on the basis of economic fluctuations” and thus assumes an automatic link between economic performance and electoral outcomes, scholars have since highlighted empirical variation in the performance-outcome link and have underlined the conditioning role of responsibility (Arceneaux 2006; Peffley 1984; Rudolph 2003a; Rudolph and Grant 2002). Peffley holds that

“the attribution of responsibility is a crucial step in the decision-making process of economic voting. Before economic discontents take on political significance, people must believe either that the government produced them or that it is the government's job to remedy them. These beliefs revolve around issues of responsibility. The attribution of blame thus comes close to constituting a necessary condition for the subsequent politicization of economic events, in that

the impact of economic perceptions on political behavior is mediated by judgments of accountability.” (Peffely 1985: 280)

The link between authority, responsibility and accountability thus leads us to expect that only if the electorate believes that a policy-making actor has made decisions that led to a specific policy outcome, they should hold her accountable. As such, questions of how the general public assigns responsibility for policy outcomes have emerged from the literature on economic voting.

Building on this literature, in this chapter I develop different, partially competing hypothesis on how the general public assigns responsibility for the reforms and budget cuts that were introduced in the crisis countries under some form of EU conditionality. The first subsection derives from the literature on responsibility attributions what I consider to be the baseline expectation for the pattern of public responsibility attributions. In the two subsequent subsections, I argue that the predominant focus of the literature on decision-making processes is too narrow and that a broader focus on the policymaking process may be necessary to understand the pattern of public responsibility attributions in the context of EU conditionality. I develop two complementary hypotheses about the role of the agenda setting actor and the role of the process of policy negotiation.³

a. The authority-responsibility link

Focusing on the national level, the literature on responsibility attributions that has emerged from the studies of economic voting investigates the link between decision-making authority and responsibility. The ability to attribute responsibility “correctly”, that is to decision-making actors, has been found to depend on the clarity of responsibility (Anderson 2000; Hobolt *et al.* 2013; Powell and Whitten 1993; Rudolph 2003a). This literature suggests that in national political systems, voters’ ability to assign responsibility to the government, depends on institutional factors, such as bicameralism and the degree of legislative influence on decision making, as well as on characteristics of the government, such as majority status and the composition of the government (for an overview, see Hobolt *et al.* 2013). The more complex decision-making processes are, the more difficult it becomes for voters to assign responsibility for policy outcomes to the decision-making actors and attributions thus become diffuse.

Similar arguments have been advanced for horizontal divisions of power. Yet the empirical evidence on responsibility attributions in decentralized political systems is inconclusive. While some studies find that voters have significant difficulties in assigning responsibility for policy outcomes to different governance levels (Anderson 2006; Cutler 2004, 2008), other research on federal systems has found some evidence that voters are able to assign responsibility to different levels of government according

³ Not that this paper is interested in the responsibility attributions by the general public. Therefore, the discussion of the literature focuses on the contextual factors that influence responsibility attributions on the aggregate level and, by choice, forgoes a detailed discussion of the numerous contributions that focus on motivational factors or political sophistication that impact individual decisions about responsibility. See, for example, Bisgaard (2015); Rudolph (2003b); Gomez and Wilson (2003); Sirin and Villalobos (2011).

to their role in decision-making (Arceneaux 2006; Atkeson and Partin 1995; Johns 2011; Niemi *et al.* 1995; Rudolph 2003a).

Léon (2010) provides a possible explanation for divergent findings by suggesting a U-shaped relationship between decentralization and the public's ability to attribute responsibility. Investigating responsibility attributions in the Spanish federal system, she finds that the clarity of responsibility depends on

“the balance of powers between central and subnational units. When powers and authority are concentrated at one level of government, the distribution of power is more likely to resemble a layer cake model, and clarity of responsibility is enhanced. If decentralisation follows a cooperative model and decisions over expenditures and revenues are highly intertwined, clarity of responsibility is hampered and the conditions to make accountability an effective control mechanism are undermined.” (Léon 2010, 81)

Compared to the literature on clarity of responsibility in national systems, the multilevel structure of the EU has received less scholarly attention so far. In a pioneering study, Hobolt and Tilley (2014) find that while the level of integration of a policy field has some impact on the responsibility assigned to the EU for policy outcomes in this field, the institutional complexity of the EU multilevel system makes it difficult for the public as well as experts to point out the causal responsibility of EU institutions. In a similar vein, as Gerhards *et al.* (2009) find that complex decision-making processes in the EU's multilevel system blur responsibilities (Gerhards *et al.* 2009: 5).

In contrast, Rittberger *et al.* (2017) and Heinkelmann-Wild *et al.* (2018) assume that the public possess sufficient information to assign the responsibility for policy failures decided upon in a clearly intergovernmental or supranational setup “correctly”, that is, to the member state governments or EU institutions respectively. This argument follows a similar logic as Léon (2010) in that it assumes that responsibility attributions are facilitated when authority is centred on one actor. In general, these conjectures would lead us to expect that *depending on the complexity of the decision-making process, the general public's responsibility attributions should be predominantly targeted either at the decision maker or remain diffuse*. What can these conjectures tell us specifically about the pattern of responsibility attributions in the context of EU conditionality?

First, the decision-making process by which financial assistance was granted was clearly intergovernmental and similar for all cases euro area-lending under the ad hoc Greek Loan Facility, the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) and European Financial Stability Mechanism (EFSM), and finally under the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). The financial assistance programmes were voted on unanimously by (a part of) the EU member states: In case of the EFSM, the decision to award financial assistance was made by the Council, whereas the Euro group was in charge of lending decisions for the Greek Loan Facility and the ESFS. Decisions on ESM lending are determined by the facility's Board of Governors, “a body comprised by the Ministers of the euro-area countries, in effect also the

Eurogroup” (Ioannidis 2014: 13). All decisions are accompanied by a Council Implementing Decision. Following Rittberger *et al.* (2017) and Heinkelmann-Wild *et al.* (2018), the intergovernmental nature of the decision-making process should enable the public to assign responsibility to the decision-making actor. Taking this conjecture as a baseline, we should thus expect responsibility attributions to be predominantly directed at the member states in all cases of EU EAPs. As the member state asking for financial assistance has no voting right, *responsibility attributions should be predominantly directed at the lending member states in cases of EU lending conditionality.*

Second, in more informal settings, such as the case of indirect conditionality addressed to Italy, decision making processes are supranational. Sacchi (2015) shows that a letter sent to the Italian government by ECB President Trichet in August 2011 included specific requirements, such as the presentation of a balanced budget from 2013 and measures regarding growth, competition and liberalization, as well as changes in the pension system, as a precondition for the ECB to buy Italian sovereign bonds on the secondary market (see also Armingeon and Baccaro 2012: 266). While no official lending programme was set up for Italy, the ECB had thus developed in its letter clear policy requirements for the Italian government. Following Rittberger *et al.* (2017) and Heinkelmann-Wild *et al.* (2018), the supranational nature of the decision-making process should enable the public to assign responsibility to the decision-making actor. Taking this conjecture as a baseline, we should thus expect *responsibility attributions to be predominantly directed at the ECB in the case of Italy.*

b. The proposal heuristic

The last section assumed that either in a clearly intergovernmental or supranational setup facilitates responsibility attributions and thus enables the public to assign responsibility to the decision-making actor. Yet, the policy-making process and the decision-making process was complex in all cases of EU conditionality. For instance, before a country submits an official request to enter a financial assistance programme, the European Commission prepared an initial draft programme describing the country’s macroeconomic situation and outlining the policies deemed necessary to address the crisis. This draft then served as the basis for the subsequent negotiations between the EU institutions (the European Commission and the ECB) and the borrowing country’s government.⁴ Upon approval, the decision to disburse individual credit tranches depended on timely compliance, which is monitored regularly by the EU institutions (Ioannidis 2014: 9–14; Pisani-Ferry *et al.* 2013: 20–23). The interactions between the EU institutions and the borrowing government thus played an important role not just in the implementation phase of the financial assistance programmes, but also during the negotiations of programme conditionality. At least in the case of the EAPs, the complexity of the policy-making process

⁴ Lending programmes were carried out by the troika, consisting of the European Commission, the ECB and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). While the negotiations took place between the borrowing governments and all three troika institutions, separate programme documents were prepared by the European institutions and the IMF. In the following I focus on the processes taking place within the EU.

may well have led to the breakdown of the link between decision-making authority and responsibility attribution.

This raises the question what shapes the public 's attribution behaviour when the clarity of responsibility is low. The literature on economic voting, which is primarily focuses on the link between the economy and electoral outcomes for the government, does not explicitly discuss this issue. Some scholars argue that a decrease of responsibility attributed to one actor merely signifies that the responsibility is assigned to other actors – either on other levels of governance or to nongovernmental actors whom the public identifies as responsible for a policy outcome (Rudolph 2003a: 700; Rudolph and Grant 2002: 80). Rudolph and Grant (2002) argue, for instance, that responsibility for the economic situation in the US may be attributed to either of three actors: the President, Congress, or the Federal Reserve (Rudolph and Grant 2002, 80). It is thus possible that competing attributions of responsibility arise in the public realm and the observed pattern of responsibility attributions is therefore diffuse.

A look at the broader policy-making process suggests a different hypothesis however. Rittberger *et al.* (2017) and Heinkelmann-Wild *et al.* (2018) propose that in the absence of clarity of responsibility, an alternative heuristic is employed by the public to attribute responsibility. The authors argue that the institutional complexity of the decision-making process shifts the attention of the public to the actor that is most visible in the policy cycle.

The argument that the public employs cost-effective shortcuts to facilitate making decisions about responsibility is not new. Peffley (1984) argues for the realm of economic policy that “tracing complex connections between the polity and the economy to decide who is responsible would entail astronomical information costs and decision-making costs” (Peffley 1984: 276–77) and therefore suggests that voters attempt to minimize the cost of deciding who is responsibility by relying on prior knowledge from their everyday life and prior experiences (Peffley 1984: 287). Similarly, Duch *et al.* (2015) argue that because the public frequently has to make responsibility judgements, it has developed strategies to facilitate the attribution process. They find that, in experimental settings, respondents assign responsibility for collective decisions according to a largest party and a proposal heuristic. Drawing on experimental psychology, the authors suggest that “individuals bias to favor omissions over commissions that cause harm” (Duch *et al.* 2015: 386) and thus assign responsibility to the most “active” actor in the decision-making process: the proposer.

Additional support for the attribution of responsibility to an alternative target can be found in the literature. Not only is the visibility of the decision-making actor decreased in a multilevel system, which increases the informational costs for the public, but the lack of clarity of responsibility also is an incentive for decision-making actors to further blur responsibilities.

“In addition to the myriad information demands put upon citizens by multilevel governance, the actions of multiple levels of governments themselves can undermine clear responsibility linkages for economic conditions. In particular, multilevel institutions can encourage

governments to engage in blame shifting and credit taking for economic conditions as well as more political outcomes.” (Anderson 2006: 450; see also: Cutler 2004; Lago-Peñas and Lago-Peñas 2010; Rudolph and Grant 2002)

This conjecture is shared by scholars analysing responsibility attributions in the EU’s multilevel system (Gerhards *et al.* 2009; Roose *et al.* 2018). Yet, Roose *et al.* (2018) highlight that while the EU’s multilevel system offers ample opportunity to attribute responsibility to actors that are involved with a policy, responsibility attributions need to remain plausible (Roose *et al.* 2018: 48). This suggest that political actor shift blame to targets that are actively involved in the policy making process and thus highly visible to the public. This should reinforce a proposal heuristic already applied by the public.

The role of proposing, or agenda setting actors has been highlighted in other contexts as well. International pressures during crisis can serve as a justification to introduce measures that are unpopular with the public and face domestic opposition. The use of external constraints not only makes sense from a bargaining point of view, but also facilitates blame avoidance on the side of decision makers. Retrenchment politics are generally unpopular and for national politicians with an interest in re-election, the possibility to shift the blame for budget cuts and far-reaching reforms onto others, is especially attractive (Moury and Standring 2017; Pierson 1996). The literature on IMF lending shows that countries borrowing from international institutions can use the conditions attached to loans as an external constraint (Drazen 2001; Dreher 2009; Vreeland 2003). The blame for the reforms and their consequences in then primarily attributed to the international lenders, as protests against the IMF show (Babb and Carruthers 2008; Nelson 2009; Pop-Eleches 2008). The notion that external constraint can empower domestic actors to overcome reform opposition is well established in the context of the EU as well (Blavoukos and Pagoulatos 2008; Bolukbasi 2009; Dyson and Featherstone 1996; Featherstone 2014; Moravcsik 1994). Blavoukos and Pagoulatos (2008) remark that in the context of EMU accession, “[i]nvolving domestically a ‘tied hands’ policy approach and shifting blame to the supra-national level, aspirant members are able [...] to engineer otherwise elusive domestic reforms.” (Blavoukos and Pagoulatos 2008: 232–33). These observations are compatible with the proposal heuristic: when the public perceives – because politicians can plausibly claim - that reform plans were drawn up at the European level, European institutions will be the target of responsibility attributions for said policies rather than the national politicians who enact the reforms domestically.⁵ In general, these conjectures would lead us to expect that *the general public’s responsibility attributions should be predominantly targeted at the proposing actor.*

How do these considerations translate to the reforms introduced in the crisis countries? Combining the literatures on shortcuts to responsibility, blame shifting and external constraints leads to the expectation,

⁵ Note that this paper makes no assumptions on whether blame shifting is in fact taking place or, if so, whether it is successful. These considerations merely highlight that the documented use of blame shifting strategies is compatible and strengthens the conjecture that responsibility is attributed to a proposing, or agenda setting actor.

that, at least in the countries that received EAPs, the public holds those actors responsible for the reforms and budget cuts introduced under EU conditionality, who proposed the required policies. First, as pointed out previously, in all cases of EU lending conditionality, the European Commission prepared an initial draft programme describing the country's macroeconomic situation and outlining the policies deemed necessary to address the crisis. This draft then served as the basis for the subsequent negotiations between the troika institutions (the European Commission, The ECB and the IMF) and the borrowing country's government. This would lead us to expect *that responsibility attributions to be predominantly directed at the Commission and the ECB, in their role as proposing actors.*

c. The role of policy negotiations for high salience issues

The last section implicitly assumed that, with agenda setting power located on the European level, national governments were confronted with conditionality as “a matter of ‘sink or swim’ (Kreuder-Sonnen 2016: 1355). Yet, a number of recent publications show that when it came to the negotiation of the content of EU conditionality, at least some borrowing member states played an active part in the negotiations and were able to influence on the design of lending conditionality. For instance, Hick (2018) argues that the Irish government had identified even prior to the financial assistance programme a need for social security reform and the troika did not dictate specific reforms but rather presented a possibility to avoid blame for social sector reforms: “While fiscal consolidation was inevitable, however, there remained space for non-trivial policy choices within what was an extremely restrictive fiscal climate. Ireland could have chosen a different balance between tax rises and spending cuts in order to achieve the deficit targets agreed with the Troika” (Hick 2018: 16). Similar evidence has been found for Portugal, where the EAP opened a window of opportunity for the Portuguese government to pursue reforms which were domestically unpopular (Moury and Freire 2013; Moury and Standing 2017). Yet, the representatives of the main parties did not just agree with the reform plans proposed by the troika institutions, but actively advanced reform propositions to be included in the programmes (Moury and Freire 2013: 43). In consequence, when it came to the reform of the health care sector, “the large majority of measures were negotiated, or proposed, by the government itself.” (Moury and Freire 2013: 46). While these observations can certainly not be extended to all crisis countries and all aspects of conditionality, “it would be a mistake to conclude that the crisis reduced EU member state governments, even in the debtor countries, to mere transmission belts pursuing legislation and fiscal retrenchment in the name of the Troika” (Cioffi and Dubin 2016: 424).

This raises the question whether such differences in the bargaining position of the domestic governments registered with the public. The last two sections highlighted that the collection of information on the decision making process is costly for the public, as information is generally scarce. Yet, the availability of information may not be constant over time. Recent studies have shown that in times of crisis, when the salience of reforms and budget cuts is high, the public is more knowledgeable about policy making processes. Cordero and Lago (2016) call this “the bright side of the economic crisis” (Cordero and Lago

2016: 153). Analysing the accuracy of citizens' responsibility attributions to different governance levels in Spain during the recent economic crisis, the authors observe that "individuals have a better understanding of responsibility in 2012 in unemployment than some years ago. This is clearly the consequence of the very different saliency of a policy area in two moments in time" (Cordero and Lago: 165, see also Herrero-Alcalde *et al.* 2018).

The public can be assumed to take into account any information available on the political actors involved in an event when they shape their responsibility attributions. I argue that in the context of the austerity measures introduced under EU conditionality, the informational aspect is particularly relevant. In light of the high level of contestation of the EU conditionality in the crisis countries, as well as the enormous consequences of the required budget cuts and reforms for the public, the processes of conditionality design should be well known and documented in the affected countries. In general, these conjectures would lead us to expect that *the relative influence of negotiation partners on the process of policy negotiation should be reflected in the direction of the general public's responsibility attributions in the context of the highly salient Euro crisis.*

How do these considerations translate to the reforms introduced in the crisis countries? These considerations do not challenge the assumption that voters rely on a proposal heuristic when making decisions about responsibility. Rather they suggest that, at least in the countries that received EAPs, voters may use information on the negotiations of EU conditionality and their government's bargaining position to vary their responsibility attributions for reforms introduced under EU conditionality. Where national governments brought to the negotiation table reform plans they wanted to have included in the conditionality, or where they were free to decide on the specific measures employed to reach a policy goal, the public should assign more responsibility to them. ⁶

There are significant differences in the influence national governments had during the negotiation of EU conditionality - both across countries and between policy fields. In Portugal, for instance, reforms in the healthcare system were the included in the conditionality at the government's proposal. *Responsibility for healthcare reforms should thus be predominantly directed at the Portuguese government, or the Portuguese government should at least be held more responsible than for other reforms.* Contrariwise, the liberalization of restricted professions, which was an aspect of conditionality included in all financial assistance programme, was a demand of the Commission, which aimed at the convergence of professional regulation across the EU. In this case, *the general public's responsibility attributions should thus be predominantly directed at the Commission, or the EU in general.*

⁶ Note that this theoretical expectation is agnostic regarding the governments' use of blame shifting: The public may hold the government responsible because it sees through the formers blame-shifting strategy or, alternatively, the government, being a proponent of the negotiated conditionality, may not engage in blame shifting in the first place. This is, in the end, an empirical question.

Similarly, *responsibility for the liberalization of restricted professions should be attributed to the EU in Ireland*, where as for *social services reform, which was planned by the government and introduced in the financial assistance programme, responsibility attributions should thus be directed predominantly – or at least more frequently - at the Irish government*. In contrast to Portugal and Ireland, there is no evidence that the Cypriot and the Greek government were similarly involved in the programme negotiations.⁷ Yet, these examples show that case-specific expectations need to be derived from the third hypothesis, differentiating not just between the crisis countries, but also between policy fields.

4. How can we measure responsibility attributions?

In this paper, I have developed from the literature on responsibility attributions three hypotheses on the direction of the public's responsibility attributions for austerity reforms under EU conditionality. Taking into account the authority-responsibility link highlighted by the literature on responsibility attributions, I have, first, developed a baseline hypothesis that suggests that responsibility for the reforms and budget cuts introduced under EU conditionality should be attributed to the decision-making actors. Secondly, I have developed two alternative and complementary conjectures that take into account the broader policy-making process in the complex decision making context of EU conditionality. While the second hypothesis focused on the role of the proposing actor, the third suggested that the role of policy negotiations and the relative influence of negotiation partners should be taken into account in highly salient policy making contexts. The paper is part of my dissertation project, which aims to make a two-fold contribution. First, it adds to the literatures on responsibility attribution by further investigating existing expectations on the role of complexity for attribution decisions and extends the focus from decision-making processes to include the broader policy making process, including the role of the agenda setting, and policy negotiations. Second, it adds to the literature on Euroscepticism by providing an important link in the causal chain between policy-making in the Euro crisis and the observed decrease of support for the European project in the public. I conclude this paper with an outlook on how responsibility attributions can be adequately studied.

Each theorized hypothesis comes with a distinct pattern of responsibility attributions. In order to test the proposed hypothesis, in a next step of this project, case comparisons are constructed to approximate a most-similar case design (Beach and Pedersen 2016: 238–39). I not only differentiate among the various crisis countries, but also between policy fields. This case selection strategy holds constant the context of the Euro crisis across cases, whereas decision-making processes, the proposing actors and the relative influence of negotiators on the policy negotiations can vary across the cases. In the selected cases, a media analysis will be conducted.

⁷ This observation has been confirmed in background interviews conducted at the European Commission in Brussels in December 2018.

Mass media is considered to play a “central role of intermediation between citizens and the state” (Hutter *et al.* 2016: 42) and provides extensive information on policy making and conflicts among political actors. What is more, Gerhards *et al.* (2009) point out that “in modern societies, the process of attribution of political responsibility is taking place primarily in the mass media public” (Gerhards *et al.* 2009: 106; see also Roose *et al.* 2017: 47). As such, media reporting is a suitable source for the study of public responsibility attributions. My focus is on quality newspapers, which, despite declining circulation, “still serve as a major channel for public debates and as important agenda setters” (Hutter *et al.* 2016: 45) and tend to cover important political issues in greater detail than tabloids and television news (see also Gerhards *et al.* 2009).

To conduct a content analysis of newspaper reporting, two newspapers are selected per analysed country from the media outlets used by Vreese *et al.* (2006) to investigate news coverage of the 2004 EP elections, based on availability for the period of analysis.⁸ Articles covering the relevant reforms and budget cuts are collected by searching the respective newspapers on Factiva.⁹

A responsibility attribution in the public can be understood as a statement that draws a connection between a specific policy outcome and an actor who is claimed to have been instrumental for the outcome because of her action or inaction. These statements can be both positive (credit statements) or negative (blame statements). Using the content analysis software Max QDA, I analyse both positive and negative statements that assign responsibility for the budget cuts and reforms or their consequences. Following established coding schemes (Gerhards *et al.* 2009; Heinkelmann-Wild *et al.* 2018; Rittberger *et al.* 2017), responsibility attributions are considered to consist of three necessary parts: (i) the sender, who makes a statement, in which (ii) responsibility for a specific policy is assigned to (iii) a specific target.

⁸ Previous studies have found one quality newspaper to be sufficient as a proxy for media reporting in a country, see: Vliegthart *et al.* (2008: 421–22); Hutter *et al.* (2016: 45–46). I opt for the selection of two news outlets per country to avoid potential partisan biases in reporting.

⁹ Automated translation can be used to compensate rudimentary language proficiency. Recent studies have shown that automated translations by Google Translate can be used for quantitative “bag-of-words” topic modelling (Vries *et al.* (2018)), and for sentiment analyses (Traber *et al.* (2018)). While coding responsibility attributions is admittedly more complex than “bag of words” approaches, the use of automated translations is still feasible as the envisioned analysis aims at quantifying statements rather than at executing a discourse analysis. What is more, the coder serves as a check of the quality of the translations, which means that the confidence in the results should be even higher than in unsupervised, quantitative analyses.

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