Allocating Responsibility in Multilevel Government Systems:
Voter and Expert Attributions in the European Union

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Abstract

Systems of multilevel governance can blur lines of responsibility and leave voters uncertain about which level of government is responsible for policy outcomes. Democratic accountability requires that citizens can assign responsibility for policy outcomes, yet multilevel structures of government only serve to complicate this task. This paper examines the extent to which Europeans are able to navigate the complex and ever-changing divisions of responsibility between their national governments and the supranational European Union. Specifically, we compare citizen and expert responsibility attributions to evaluate if and how voters can correctly assign responsibility to the European Union. We argue that the key determinant of citizen competence is the extent to which they are motivated and able to seek information about EU policy-making. Using multilevel modeling to analyze survey and media data from 27 EU member states, we demonstrate that politically sophisticated voters and those who are motivated by pro-EU attitudes are better able to allocate responsibility correctly. At the contextual level, highly politicized environments result in more correct allocations of responsibility. A strong conditioning effect is also found: a political environment with messages that are contrary to an individual’s beliefs results in more accurate assignments of responsibility.

Keywords: multilevel governance, attribution, responsibility, polarization, knowledge, European Union
Introduction

*In general, it is irrational to be politically well-informed because the low returns from data simply do not justify their cost in time and other scarce resources.*

Downs (1957: 259)

Anthony Downs proposed that it is rational for most citizens to remain ignorant about political affairs due to the low marginal benefits of acquiring relevant political information, and the lack of political knowledge among citizens is well-documented (see e.g. Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991). Indeed, the level of citizen ignorance about politics have led some scholars to suggest that ‘the low level of political knowledge and the absence of ideological reasoning have lent credence to the charge that popular control of the government is illusory’ (Iyengar 1987: 816). Citizens living in systems of multi-level governance, such as the European Union (EU), face an even greater challenge when it comes to holding their representatives to account, since they have the additional task of differentiating between national and federal responsibility. Yet, if popular control is to be more than an illusion, then it is crucial that citizens have at least a basic understanding of the different levels of government responsibilities and are able to assess their performance. Unfortunately, it is not this straightforward in the EU given the overlapping and ever-changing structures of governance. This raises the question of whether European citizens are able to correctly differentiate responsibility between levels of national and supranational government. More fundamentally, it begs the question of why citizens would be motivated to seek out the relevant information that would enable them allocate responsibility correctly.

This paper examines individual attributions of responsibility to the European Union. To be able to assess the extent to which citizens allocate responsibility ‘correctly’, we compare citizen evaluations to expert judgments. We propose a theoretical framework that highlights the key factors that motivate individuals to seek information about policy-making in the EU and thus enable them to distinguish between the responsibilities of different levels of government. We find that at the individual level, political sophistication is a significant predictor of correct responsibility judgments. In addition, EU supporters, motivated by accuracy goals, are better able to allocate responsibility than are Euroskeptics. At the country-level, politicization of the EU creates an information environment that facilitates accurate responsibility assignment. The political context has a conditioning effect as well as direct effect: European attitudes interact with the political context so that Europhiles living in highly politicized environments are more competent in attributing responsibility.
This research extends the literature in several ways. First, it provides an analysis of how European citizens allocate responsibility to the European Union and their national governments for various policy areas. Second, we propose a theoretical framework that emphasizes the role of information at both the individual and contextual levels. This is a contribution because while previous studies on responsibility in multilevel government systems have considered the importance of institutional factors, they have often ignored the role of other contextual factors. We expect the political environment to play a major role, and the opportunity to assess twenty-eight different contexts provides a rich source of data that has not been exploited in single-country studies of federal governments. Finally, this study relies on three unique datasets: a survey of citizens in all 27 EU member states, a study of the media contexts, and a survey of experts in EU policy making.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we review the literature and present our theoretical model of attributions of responsibility in multilevel government systems, motivated information processing, and the role of political context. Next, we provide a descriptive summary of citizen and expert responsibility attributions to national governments and the European Union. A set of multilevel models test the hypotheses about the individual and country-level factors associated with correctly allocating responsibility to the European Union. Finally, we review the findings and provide suggestions for future research.

Attributing Responsibility in Multilevel Government Systems

For a number of reasons, multiple levels of government make it more difficult for individuals to correctly assign responsibility. The institutional arrangement is complex and responsibilities overlap on different levels. Individuals may not have the cognitive resources or motivation to learn about the division of responsibilities, or perhaps the information is not available or not salient in the context. In addition, politicians do not have incentives to make the system more clear. Complexity allows them to claim credit for successful policies and engage in blame shifting for undesirable outcomes. Finally, because policy responsibility may be shared between different levels, individuals may not know which government is more responsible for a particular outcome (Arceneaux 2006; Cutler 2004, 2008; Johns 2010; León 2010).

Recent developments in the economic voting literature have demonstrated the importance of attribution of responsibility as a moderator of voting behavior. According to the classic reward-punishment model, individuals vote for the incumbent when the economy is good, and for the opponent when times are bad (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981). However, this model has been shown not to work in all
contexts, so scholars have shifted their attention to issues of governmental responsibility for policy performance. An influential article by Powell and Whitten (1993) demonstrated that elections in countries where responsibility is most easily focused on a single government party are more likely to follow the reward-punishment model. Other studies also using cross-national data have supported the more general claim that economic voting is less prevalent when governments are weak and divided (e.g. minority and coalition governments) and legislatures are strong (e.g. strong committees and bicameral opposition) (Anderson 2000; Hellwig and Samuels 2008; Nadeau et al. 2002; Whitten and Palmer 1999). Most of these aggregate-level studies have focused on ‘horizontal’ institutional structures, such as coalition and divided government, and they have not directly examined voters’ views of who is responsible.

Recently more attention has turned to the ‘vertical’ institutional structures of federal government, mainly in the context of the federal systems of Canada and the US (Anderson 2000; Arceneaux 2006; Gomez & Wilson 2003; Cutler 2004, 2008; Johns 2010). These studies suggest that multiple levels of government make it challenging for voters to assign responsibility for policy outcomes as they find it difficult to know which level of government is responsible. Collectively, this work has sought to understand if 1) citizens attribute different levels of responsibility to different levels of government; 2) these attributions are correct; and 3) voters cast their ballot based on these perceptions of responsibility and assignment of credit or blame. Yet, the studies provide mixed evidence about the extent to which citizens are able to make distinctions between the responsibilities of different levels of government. Some studies suggest that elected representatives are held accountable for performance at their level of governance (Atkeson and Partin 1995), whereas others suggest that citizens have a difficult time distinguishing between different levels of government and do not differentiate responsibility (Cutler 2008) and that even when they are able to correctly distinguish it is unclear if this translates into greater accountability (Arceneaux 2006; Cutler 2004).

This work thus leaves open the question of the degree to which citizens are able to correctly assign responsibility to different levels of government in multilevel system, and more importantly what makes them able to do so. In this study, we argue that to understand when and why citizens can correctly attribute responsibility, we need to focus on the factors that motivate them to seek information about these complex structures of governance. At the individual-level, some people are more predisposed to seek information, because of their general political awareness or their specific positive predispositions towards the EU. At the contextual-level, some political environments provide more information about the European Union and make the issue more salient to citizens.
But before examining the role of motivating factors, we first need to address the issue of what we mean by “responsibility” and “correct” responsibility assignments. In the context of multilevel government, “responsibility” has been considered in various ways: functional responsibility, causal responsibility, or credit/blame for outcomes (see Hart 1968 for a discussion on the types of responsibility). Functional responsibility refers to the role and tasks for which the government is responsible, in other words, the areas over which it has policy-making duties. For example, the European Union has functional responsible for monetary policy in the Eurozone. Causal responsibility refers to the influence an actor had on bringing about a specific outcome; in other words, did the actor cause an event or outcome. Perceptions of causal responsibility can lead to attributions of credit for positive outcomes and blame for negative results. In this paper, we limit our analysis to the concept of role, or functional responsibility by analyzing if and how individuals understand the amount responsibility the EU has for various policy areas. We do not assess here individual perceptions of EU influence, success, or failure.

So how do we know when citizens are making “correct” attributions of responsibility, especially in light of the above discussion that multilevel government systems are complex and that frequently responsibilities overlap between different levels? We could review literature on the policy-making process and determine the “correct” answer. However, a better method is to obtain an expert consensus through a survey of European Union scholars. If we assume that EU experts are the most knowledgeable group about the European Union’s role, than averaging across expert evaluations provides a baseline judgment of EU responsibility. By comparing individual evaluations of responsibility to expert judgments, we can determine how close citizens are to making a “correct” allocation of responsibility. The next section presents our theoretical propositions about when and why individuals are capable of reaching attribution judgments of expert quality.

**Information Processing**

There is no doubt that it is difficult for individuals to attribute responsibility in federal or multilevel government systems. Even the experts in our study found it difficult to assign responsibility to the national and European levels of government across various policy areas. As discussed above, previous research has shown that sometimes citizens are able to differentiate governmental responsibility at various levels, and other times they are not able to. So when are individuals motivated and able to attribute responsibility in systems of multilevel governance? We theorize that ability and motivation to seek information about the complex institutional structures of the European Union depends on an individual’s cognitive ability and his individual predispositions towards the EU. Specifically, we build on
the “cognitive mediation model” of learning from the news media which posits that “(a) surveillance motivations influence information processing, (b) information processing influences knowledge, and (c) motivations influence knowledge… indirectly through information processing” (Eveland et al. 2003, p359). “Surveillance motivation” means that individuals monitor the information context to acquire knowledge about political news and events (Blumler 1979). We argue that high levels of political sophistication, positive attitudes towards European integration, and polarized political contexts each increase surveillance motivations, which then influences information seeking and processing. We argue that cognitive ability facilitates, while individual predispositions motivate information processing about the EU’s responsibilities. In turn, this increased processing of EU-related information will result in more knowledge about the European Union’s policy responsibilities and more correct allocations of responsibility.

Individuals vary considerably in their ability and motivation to understand political information. Some individuals have a higher cognitive ability, which manifests itself in higher levels of political sophistication. These citizens will have the cognitive capacity which facilitates the consumption and processing of complex information. Indeed, high knowledge citizens are better able to understand institutional complexity and divided lines of responsibility. Highly sophisticated voters are more capable of recognizing that responsibility is divided among multiple levels and of making diffuse responsibility attributions, whereas low sophisticates generally focus on one political actor (Cutler 2004; Gomez and Wilson 2003, 2008). High sophisticates are also more competent in processing political information and news stories, and in converting this information into stored knowledge (Zaller 1991). Moreover, an individual’s level of general political knowledge is a reliable predictor of news story recall, implying that there is general audience receptive to news stories (Price and Zaller 1993). Some individuals are generally interested in and more knowledgeable about a variety of political topics. In addition, highly informed citizens are more likely to perceive objective facts (Blais 2010). As high political sophisticates are better able to understand complex government structures, divided responsibility, and have the cognitive ability to process political news, we expect high political sophisticates to also be more knowledgeable about the European Union’s responsibility. This brings us to our first hypothesis:

**H1: High political sophisticates will make more correct responsibility assignments.**

Another way to measure cognitive ability is through educational attainment. While political knowledge and education are positively correlated, they are not the same concept. A person’s cognitive ability may not be reflected in her level of political knowledge for various reasons; some individuals are
just reluctant to answer factual political knowledge questions (Mondak and Davis 2001). Furthermore, studies on the relationship between cognitive ability and news information processing have focused on level of education as the key explanatory variable. Individuals with low and high educational attainment pay similar attention to news stories, but more highly educated individuals are better able to recall factual information. In addition, highly educated individuals more efficiently encode news stories; they pay more attention and devote more cognitive resources to the media content than individuals with low educational attainment (Grabe et al. 2000). This suggests that low education individuals learn less than high education individuals when presented with the same information. Therefore, the effects of educational attainment should be analyzed in addition to the effects of political sophistication. This leads to the second hypothesis:

**H2: The higher the educational attainment of an individual, the more accurate her attributions of responsibility.**

Even if we do expect individuals with higher levels of political sophistication and education to more correctly allocate responsibility, it is generally costly and irrational for citizens to be politically informed (Downs 1957). Indeed, we would not expect all individuals, even those of equal cognitive ability, to be equally knowledgeable about the European Union’s responsibilities; there must be an additional motivating factor. While individual cognitive ability and political sophistication facilitate information processing, individual predispositions motivate information processing. Political predispositions are “stable, individual-level traits that regulate the acceptance or non-acceptance of the political communications the person receives. Because the totality of the communications that one accepts determines one’s opinions… predispositions are the critical intervening variable between the communications people encounter in the mass media, on the one side, and their statements of political preferences, on the other” (Zaller 1991: 22). Attitudes towards the European Union represent a political predisposition that can motivate individuals seek out information about the EU’s responsibilities. These motivations could have different sources, including belonging to a European issue public or partisan motivations.

First, while it may be too costly for citizens to be informed about every political issue, citizens will spend the energy and effort to become knowledgeable about issues that are important to them personally (Converse 1964). “Issue publics” represent a set of individuals who are motivated to acquire information about a particular issue; however, citizens may not be well-informed of other topics outside their issue area (Converse 1964, Krosnick 1990). While Europhiles may be motivated to learn more
about European matters, individuals not belonging to an EU issue public do not have this same motivation and hence will be less knowledgeable about the EU’s role.

Second, support for European integration, as a political predisposition, is a type of partisanship or group membership. Research has shown that attitudes towards the EU are to a large extent shaped by identity concerns (McLaren 2006; Hooghe and Marks 2005, 2009). In other words, the ‘nation’ versus ‘Europe’ may be regarded as a salient in-group/out-group division in this context. Studies have shown that people who have more exclusive national identities are less likely to be in favor of EU integration (Carey 2002; Hooghe and Marks 2005; McLaren 2006). If the relative attachment to the European Union serves as a salient in-group, we would expect that feelings about the EU will affect responsibility judgments in a similar manner to partisanship. Predispositions can lead to biased information processing through group-serving biases, whereby individuals view their own group more favorably (Taylor and Fiske 1991), and through the use of heuristics. Partisanship is a much-used heuristic in political decision-making and information processing (Rahn 1993, Bartels 2000). An individual’s partisan predispositions affect his perceptions of the economy (Evans and Anderson 2006, Evans and Pickup 2010, Gerber and Huber 2010) and attributions of responsibility (Tilley and Hobolt 2011, Rudolph 2003, 2006), with citizens tending to see their own group in a positive light and blame problems on the out-group. However, while individuals are prone to a partisan bias, they are capable of making responsibility judgments in a “reasoned manner” (Rudolph 2003, p210) and the bias is most likely to occur when making judgments about policy outputs, not policy process (Rudolph 2006). Therefore, while EU attachments might introduce biased information processing of perceptions of EU outputs, we also expect that positive EU attitudes motivate individuals to acquire information about the European Union’s responsibilities.

In summary, EU supporters are motivated to seek out and process information on European Union matters. As the cognitive mediation model would indicate, this motivation leads to increased information processing and in turn higher levels of learning about the EU. Because of this, when questioned about the EU’s responsibility, EU supporters will have more information to draw from and be better able to allocate responsibility. On the other hand, Euroskeptics, for the most part, are not motivated to acquire additional information on European issues and will be less informed about the EU’s responsibilities.

**H3: Individuals who are positively disposed towards European integration are better able to assign responsibility correctly than Euroskeptics**
Moving away from determinants at the individual level, we now turn to the role of the information context. Citizens do not acquire information in a vacuum; they are affected by the type of information available in the contextual environment and the saliency of a given issue. The political context can motivate, provide information, and help even low informed citizens to gain knowledge (Kuklinski et al. 2001). Previous studies have shown that the knowledge gap between low and high sophisticates can shrink when more information is available in the political context, for example: when political news is made prominent through front-page coverage (Nicholson 2003), through media systems with more public service channels, resulting in increased levels of hard news coverage through public television (Iyengar et al. 2010), and by the provision of less in-depth news stories on television, which provide the largest gains to the least educated (Jerit and Barabas 2006). The question is what type of political environment provides information about complex structures of governance and motivates citizens to pay attention to this information?

We argue that that the politicization of the European issue plays an important role in determining not only the availability of information but also the salience of the issue to individual citizens. Recent work on political behavior in Europe has argued that the issue of European integration is becoming increasingly politicized as we are witnessing public contention over European matters in referendums, party competition and media reporting (de Vreese 2003; Tillman 2004; de Vries 2007; Kriesi et al. 2008; Hobolt 2009; Hooghe and Marks 2009). EU politicization refers to the increasing contentiousness of decision making in the process of European integration (Schmitter 1969). Hooghe and Marks posit that this politicization has changed both the content and the process of decision making (2009, 8). Importantly, however, the level of politicization of European issues varies considerably across countries. We know from studies of vote choice in referendums and elections that arena-specific voting - so-called ‘EU issue voting’ - is more pronounced when the European issue is politicized in the domestic sphere (Tillman 2004; de Vries 2007; Hobolt 2009). Equally, we would expect that the level of politicization of the European Union in a country affects the acquisition of information about the European Union’s responsibilities by increasing the amount of information available about the EU, making it a salient issue to more citizens, and motivating certain groups, specifically EU supporters, to obtain objective information.

Increased politicization of an issue results in more information being available for citizens of all sophistication levels to access and to make more informed decisions (Hobolt 2005, 2009). High levels of politicization on the EU dimension prime individuals to think about their EU preferences and make the
issue salient. The European Union could be politicized through the media by the tone of news stories, by political party polarization on the issue of European integration, and by the level of public attitudes towards the European Union. When Europe is a salient issue, we expect there will be more information available in the context, allowing individuals to update their beliefs and knowledge about the European Union. We focus on the direct effects of two key indicators of politicization: the negativity of media coverage of the European Union and party polarization on the EU issue.

Simply being visible in the news media does not make an issue salient; rather, it is the tone of the news stories that make an issue relevant to the public. Negativity makes issues salient: studies have uncovered a negativity bias whereby negative information stands out above positive information (Rozin and Royzman 2001), and a congruency bias which results in positive information about the preferred candidate/group and negative information about the opponent dominate (Meffert et al. 2006). One reason for this is that negative stories are more likely to capture an individual’s attention through physiological arousal. Negative arousal in particular is associated with retaining more information (Reeves et al. 1991, Lang et al. 1996). As individuals pay the most attention to negative stories, we expect that the EU is most salient in countries with more negative coverage of EU news. Individuals in negative media contexts may have increased learning about the European Union through two mechanisms: directly through the news stories since individuals pay more attention to and retain negative news information, or by an increased motivation to acquire additional information about the EU resulting from the salience of European issues.

\[H4: \text{The more negative the media tone is on stories about the European Union, the more correctly individuals will attribute responsibility.}\]

Negative coverage in the media is not the only way to make an area relevant to citizens. We would expect the EU to be salient in contexts where parties are polarized on the European integration issue. Issue salience to the public increases when political parties are polarized on that domain (Milazzo et. al 2010). When political parties move towards the center on a particular issue, it makes the issue less salient to voters. Therefore in contexts where there is little party polarization on the issue of European integration, the EU will not be a salient matter and there will be less information available than in highly polarized contexts. We theorize that in contexts where the European Union is highly politicized through the media or party polarization, there will be more information available to citizens and they will pay more attention due to the saliency of the topic.
H5: Individuals in contexts where parties are polarized along the European dimension will more correctly allocate responsibility.

Conditioning Effect of the Politicized Context

As just discussed, increased saliency in the political environment can motivate individuals to pay more attention and acquire more information than individuals in low-salience contexts. However, the cues provided by increased politicization do not motivate everyone similarly, but rather provide incentives for specific groups to acquire knowledge. The political context and group identification can separately increase the salience of an issue, but they can also interact for greater salience among certain groups in specific contexts (Hutchings 2001, 2003). In addition, in-group attitudes motivate individuals to dedicate more information processing and complex reasoning when information is, on the surface, negative towards the in-group (Schaller 1992). Along these lines, we expect that in contexts where the European dimension is highly politicized, this will serve as a cue to EU supporters to seek out additional information and that Europhiles in particular will be motivated to obtain factual information.

In the context of negative information about the EU, we theorize that information processing by EU supporters may be influenced by various motivations and consumption goals, including (dis)confirmation biases and accuracy goals. In a negative environment, Europhiles will find themselves in an atmosphere that is contrary to their predisposed beliefs. When an individual is confronted with information contrary to his beliefs, he may be motivated to argue against or discount the information so that his beliefs are not disconfirmed. This disconfirmation bias is particularly strong for the politically sophisticated and those with strong prior attitudes (Taber and Lodge 2006; Taber et al. 2009). Similarly, a confirmation bias occurs when, given a choice, people will preferentially seek out information that is non-threatening to their beliefs or congruent with their pre-existing attitudes. Therefore we would expect EU supporters to not only discount information that is contrary to their beliefs, but also to be prone to a confirmation bias whereby they seek out additional information that supports their pro-EU attitudes.

When seeking to acquire information, individuals are motivated by various consumption goals including: to gain information, form an evaluation, or just to pass time (Tewksbury 1999, Huang and Price 2001). Individuals who engage in an effortful search for information with the goal of forming accurate impressions were much more likely to report correct information or impressions than were individuals who did not have an accuracy goal (Huang and Price 2001, Biesanz and Human 2010). When individuals undertake reasoning driven by accuracy goals, they spend more time and effort in evaluating
the information and are much less reliant on several types of bias and heuristic shortcuts (cf. Kunda 1990). Therefore, we argue that to counteract the negative context, EU supporters will be motivated by accuracy goals to acquire accurate information about the European Union’s responsibilities. On the other hand, Euroskeptics may not have any motivation to learn about the EU at all, or they may be motivated to selectively acquire information in line with their beliefs, which may not add to their factual knowledge about the EU.

We envision three different politicized contexts that would potentially moderate EU attitudes: negative media tone and party polarization (discussed in the section above) as well as the general level of Euroskepticism in a country. If a large portion of citizens do not support European integration, this could create a climate where the European dimension is highly politicized. However, since this variable is an aggregate measure of individual attitudes, we would not expect to see a direct effect from the general level of EU support on individual attributions of responsibility. Nevertheless, while we do not anticipate a direct effect, our theory that increased politicization of an issue increases the salience more for certain individuals suggests an interactive effect between aggregate levels of EU support with individual EU attitudes. EU supporters living in a context of Euroskepticism may be motivated to acquire additional information about EU in ways that Europhiles living in neutral or positive contexts may not. This leads to our final hypothesis, which examines the interaction between context and political predispositions:

H6: In political contexts polarized along the European dimension, Europhiles will be closer to the expert evaluations than individuals with similar levels of EU support in less polarized contexts.

Descriptive Summary of the Data

To test our hypotheses of responsibility attributions, we rely on three separate datasets: the 2009 European Election Study Voter Survey (EES 2009; van Egmond et al. 2009) which included a module of responsibility questions (Hobolt et al. 2009), the EES Media Study (Schuck et al. 2010) and a survey of experts on EU policy making conducted by the authors. The voter survey was fielded during the four weeks immediately following the June 2009 European Parliament elections, with randomly-drawn samples of at least 1,000 respondents in each of the EU’s 27 Member States. The Media Study includes content analysis of news stories from two broadsheets and one tabloid as well as the main evening news broadcasts from each EU country. In total, 52,009 television and newspaper stories were coded. Finally, to ascertain “correct” evaluations of European Union responsibility, we designed a survey of experts on
European policy making. One hundred seventy-five potential expert respondents were sent a link to complete the survey online in February 2010 and the survey included the same responsibility questions as in the voter survey. We succeeded in obtaining at least two expert respondents per EU Member State and a total of 117 individuals responded (67% response rate). The goal was not to obtain a perfect distribution across countries, in particular since EU experts are not represented equally throughout the Member States, but rather to have enough variation to be able to average the responses to obtain an “expert evaluation” of European Union policy responsibility.¹

The question modules on attributions of responsibility in both voter and expert surveys probed respondents for their responsibility judgments in five policy areas. The questions were worded as:

*How responsible is the (country) government for economic conditions in (country)?*  
*Please indicate your views using any number on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means “no responsibility” and 10 means “full responsibility.”*

*And what about the European Union, how responsible is the EU for economic conditions in (country)?*

These questions are repeated, substituting the following policy areas:

- standard of health care
- levels of immigration
- setting interest rates
- dealing with climate change

A possible critique is that these questions do not specify which institution within the European Union – European Parliament, Commission, Central Bank, etc. is responsible. However, most citizens tend not distinguish between the myriad of European institutions (Karp et al. 2003).

Table 1 provides a summary of expert and citizen attributions of functional responsibility to their national governments and the European Union across five policy areas. Table 1 gives the mean and standard deviation for each group, and citizens are further divided into three groups based on their level of political sophistication, as well as Eurozone/non-Eurozone for the interest rate questions.² T-tests show

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¹ For the question on interest rates, experts were separated into two groups – Eurozone and non-Eurozone – before taking the expert average.

² Political sophistication is a summated scale created from the political knowledge questions (q92-98). Alpha score of .67. For the descriptive tables, we divided political sophistication into 3 groups: bottom 25% for low sophisticates; middle 50% for medium sophisticates, and top 25% for high sophisticates.
the difference between experts and citizens are statistically significant at the 99% level. On average, citizens attribute higher levels of responsibility to both the European Union (EU) and their national governments (NG) than do experts in all areas except two: Eurozone citizens attribute less responsibility than the experts do to the EU for interest rates, and citizens attribute less responsibility than the experts do to the national government for health care. However, the difference in NG health care evaluations is small, and both citizens and experts give the overall highest score to the NG government for health care. To be able to assess the extent to which citizens assign responsibility correctly, we compare the scores given by individuals in our voter survey with the scores of experts.

Before proceeding to the multivariate analysis, let us first examine how political sophistication facilitates correct responsibility attributions. As shown in Table 1, when dividing the respondents by political sophistication, there is more variation between sophistication groups in some policy areas than others, and that low sophisticates had more difficulty allocating responsibility to the European Union than they did to their national governments. Looking first at attributions to the national government, there is little difference between sophistication groups in attributions of responsibility for the economy, immigration, and climate change, and many of these differences are not statistically significant. Interestingly, the largest discrepancies between high and low sophisticates, each more than 1 point difference, are in the cases where lines of responsibility between the EU and national government are most clear: interest rates and health care. Low sophisticates over-attribute responsibility to their national governments in these areas. This supports the theory that high political sophisticates are better able to understand division of responsibility in complex governance systems.

When examining attributions of responsibility to the European Union, we see the number of low sophisticates responding to the question declines considerably. In the low sophisticates group, up to 10% fewer people responded to each responsibility question compared to the high sophisticates group. Low political sophisticates are much more likely to respond they “don’t know” rather than assign a responsibility score. This indicates the possibility of overestimating the low sophisticates’ accuracy; that if all low sophisticates had answered questions about EU responsibility, they may have been even farther from the expert evaluation. In addition, low sophisticates were much more likely to refuse to answer questions about EU responsibility but were willing to answer the national government questions in the same policy area. This indicates that low sophisticates feel comfortable assigning responsibility to their national governments but not to the European Union. This is another example of low sophisticates being
less knowledgeable about the European Union, and is further evidence that political sophistication facilitates attributions of responsibility in multilevel government systems.

While the high sophisticates are nearly always closer to the expert mean score than the medium or low sophisticates, it is clear that citizens of all sophistication levels had a more difficult time assigning responsibility to the European Union than to their national governments. Overall, citizens are more familiar and comfortable with the role of their national governments and are better able to correctly assign responsibility at this level. Therefore, the empirical analysis will focus only on assignment of responsibility to the EU and not to the national government. We turn now to the multivariate analysis of the individual-level and contextual-level factors to test our hypotheses about the role of ability, motivation, and politicization in correctly allocating responsibility to the European Union.

Methodology

The goal of this empirical study is to compare citizen and expert attributions of responsibility to the EU to examine the individual-level characteristics and contextual factors that help citizens correctly allocate responsibility. The outcome variable is a measure of how close a citizen’s assignment of responsibility is to the expert evaluation. To create our outcome variable, *closeness to the expert evaluation*, we first calculated the mean expert attribution of responsibility for each issue area. Next, we subtracted an individual’s attribution of responsibility from the expert mean and took the absolute value to find the distance from expert evaluation. Finally, we averaged across the five policy areas to create the outcome variable of closeness to expert evaluation. Similar to how a multi-item scale can correct for measurement error, by using the average across all policy areas, we obtain a more accurate picture of individual’s general understanding of EU responsibility.

The individual-level models estimate the importance of cognitive ability and information processing in making correct responsibility judgments. To test the hypotheses that cognitive ability facilitates correct responsibility attributions, *political knowledge* (described above) is included as an explanatory variable. The level of *educational attainment* is included as an additional measure of cognitive ability and is measured by the cross-country comparable ISCED coding. We also theorized that predispositions towards the European Union would motivate individuals to seek more information about

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3 We also ran models separately on each policy area with the same substantive conclusions. For space and presentation considerations, they are not presented here but are available from the authors upon request.
the EU, resulting in more accurate allocations of responsibility. The level of *support for the EU* is a standardized scale, with positive values being most supportive of the European Union.\(^4\) All individual level variables were grand-mean centered.

To test our hypotheses on the direct and conditioning effects of politicization, three contextual-level variables will be included in separate models. The first, *negative media tone*, is a measure of the tone of news stories about EU-related topics in television broadcasts and newspapers.\(^5\) The variable has been scaled so that higher numbers correspond to more negative tone on EU issues. While negative media tone is a content analysis of news stories from only the two weeks leading up to the EP elections, it should provide an accurate picture of the media context as these two weeks would be a salient time for European-related news stories across the 27 Member States. Second, *party polarization* is a measure of the political party system on the issue of European integration. It uses the voters’ placement of the parties in the EES voter survey and is calculated as the standard deviation of the mean party positions in each political system.\(^6\) Our third contextual-level indicator of politicization is the *average EU support* in a country. This is calculated by taking the mean of EU support among all respondents in a country.\(^7\) Finally, to test the moderating effects politicization, we include interaction terms of EU attitudes and our three politicization measures.

Multilevel models will be used to analyze both the individual-level and contextual-level variation in closeness to expert evaluations. A multilevel, or hierarchical, model allows for estimating the variance between individuals as well as the variance between countries to specifically correct for the clustered nature of the data. In addition, multilevel modeling is necessary for hierarchical data such as cross-national surveys to obtain correct standard errors (Snijders and Bosker 1999). A benefit of cross-national studies is that variation at the contextual, or country, level is analyzed to help explain why similar individuals in different countries may have different outcomes. At the individual level we have over

\(^4\) EU attitudes is a standardized item scale created from four equally weighted questions: q79, q80, q83, and q81; alpha score of .71. Please see appendix for question wording. These items were chosen for the scale of EU attitudes as they were highly correlated with each other and meet the monotone homogeneity assumption in item-rest tests. In addition, we model it as a one-dimensional construct, as we found strong unidimensionality in the responses. Furthermore Euroskepticism is normally modeled unidimensionally in the literature (see e.g. Hooghe and Marks 2005).

\(^5\) This is a measure from coding if stories evaluated the EU, and how they evaluated the EU: negative, rather negative, balanced/mixed, rather positive, positive.

\(^6\) Our findings are robust when we instead use the range of the parties’ positions in each system with the EES data.

\(^7\) The contextual variables represent 28 political systems: the 27 Member States, including two political systems in Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia). We will use “country” to describe the context instead of political system for ease of comprehension.
25,000 observations and therefore it poses no problem to include multiple individual-level predictor variables. However, at the country level we have just 28 observations which limits the degrees of freedom available and restricts the number of country-level independent variables that can be tested. We will therefore run three separate models with different contextual effects to check the robustness of our politicization theory.

**Results**

To test our hypotheses, we estimate three sets of models. Each model will include the same individual-level variables but different country-level variables to test the robustness of politicization as a predictor of accurate responsibility judgments. The results are shown in Table 2. Recall that the individual-level variables were grand mean centered, so the intercept can be interpreted as the effect for the *average* respondent. The coefficients are then an indication of increasing or decreasing from the average.

![TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE](image)

At the individual level, we proposed that cognitive abilities or predisposed EU attitudes would motivate individuals to seek information about the EU, which would lead to more correct responsibility attributions. First, we theorized that citizens with high levels of political knowledge are generally more aware of and able to process political topics and would therefore make attributions closer to expert evaluations. We find this hypothesis is supported: political knowledge is strongly associated with correct responsibility attributions. Similarly, individuals with higher levels of educational attainment generally have higher levels of cognitive ability. Therefore we hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between educational background and making more accurate responsibility judgments. This proposition was also supported in the models. These are not findings are not surprising, but they could not be assumed. Citizens usually have limited knowledge about the European Union governance, so it is important to confirm that political knowledge and educational background facilitate correct attributions of responsibility.

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8 The knowledge items from the survey included questions about the EU and national governments. In models testing them separately, both EU and national government knowledge were strongly and significantly associated with correct responsibility attributions.
For the third individual-level covariate, we examine how political predispositions motivate information processing. We theorized that EU supporters are motivated to learn about the European Union and are more receptive to information about it. Therefore, they will make responsibility judgments that are more accurate. On the other hand, Euroskeptics may not have the motivation to learn factual content about the EU, or they may ignore information about it completely. This hypothesis was strongly supported: Europhiles make more accurate responsibility judgments than do Euroskeptics.

At the country-level, we proposed that politicization would create an information-rich environment which allows citizens to more correctly assign responsibility across levels of government. In contexts where the EU is highly politicized, the European issue becomes more salient and more accessible for people to learn about it. We tested this theory with three different contextual-level variables: negative media tone, party polarization, and country support for the EU. First, we find mild support for the direct effects of negative tone in the media. The EU is more salient to individuals in countries where the news stories about the EU are primarily negative, and they are able to make more accurate responsibility judgments. While this effect is marginally significant, negative media tone strongly moderates the effect of EU attitudes. As shown in Figure 1, Europhiles in countries with high negative media tone make the most accurate responsibility attributions. When an individual’s attitudes are different from the media environment, they are motivated to think about the European Union and seek out additional information. Individuals in media environments that are congruent with their beliefs do not face any dissonance and do not undertake additional learning.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Our second politicization variable was party polarization. There are strong direct effects of party polarization on accurate responsibility judgments. We find the same effects as those with negative media tone on EU issues: individuals living in countries where political parties are polarized on the European integration dimension make more accurate responsibility evaluations. However, the interaction between party polarization and EU attitudes was not significant in this case.

Finally, we look at the average level of EU support in a country as a third measure of politicization of the EU. There is no evidence of a direct effect, but there is a strong interaction effect between the country average EU attitude and an individual’s EU attitudes. Figure 2 shows that the context of general EU attitudes moderates an individual’s EU attitudes.
In countries where the general sentiment is positive, such as Poland (.33), an individual with the most negative attitudes toward the EU has nearly the same score as an individual with the most positive EU attitudes. However, in countries such as Latvia where the average EU sentiment is negative (-.61), an individual with the most positive EU feelings is much more knowledgeable about the EU than someone with negative feelings; the Europhile’s responsibility attributions are one point closer to the experts compared to a Euroskeptic. Individuals in contexts that are contradictory to their beliefs are motivated to acquire additional information. In the case of negative media tone and the contextual level of support for the EU, highly politicized environments moderate individual EU attitudes. In these polarized environments, Europhiles make more correct responsibility judgments than do individuals with similar levels of EU support in less polarized contexts.

Conclusion

Citizens generally are uninformed about political affairs and are lacking in political knowledge. It is especially difficult for them to understand allocations of responsibility in complex institutional structures. Indeed, some scholars have argued that it is irrational for voters to spend the necessary time and energy to become well-informed. Yet it is crucial for democratic accountability that citizens have at least a basic understanding of governmental responsibility. To that end, this paper sought to answer if European citizens can correctly allocate responsibility to the national government and European Union. In addition, if becoming informed is costly, what motivates citizens to seek out information? We proposed a theory that took into account individual and contextual factors. At the individual level, the cognitive mediation model posits that motivated information processing leads to increased knowledge. Specifically, cognitive ability facilitates the acquisition and consumption of information, while support for European integration motivates individuals to seek out information about the EU’s responsibilities. At the contextual level, we theorized that politicization on the European issue would motivate individuals to acquire additional EU information. Finally, we expected the political environment to moderate individual EU attitudes.

The empirical study provided support for this theoretical model. First, high political sophisticates and individuals with high levels of educational attainment are more likely to correctly allocate responsibility than are low knowledge and low education citizens. Second, Europhiles, as an issue public
for European integration, are motivated to learn about the European Union, whereas Euroskeptics may not have these same motivations. This leads to EU supporters’ attributions of responsibility being closer to the expert evaluations than are the Euroskeptics’ attributions. As EU supporters, they have more incentive to make correct responsibility attributions.

At the contextual level, politicization of the European issue motivates individuals to seek additional information. We demonstrated the robustness of this finding by showing that three different types of politicization resulted in more correct responsibility attributions: negative media tone on EU stories, party polarization on European integration, and the general level of Euroskepticism in a country. In contexts where the EU is politicized, it becomes a salient topic for citizens. There was a direct effect of negative media tone and party polarization on more accurate responsibility judgments. We also found a strong conditioning effect of politicization. The negative media tone and country Euroskepticism both moderated individual EU attitudes. In environments that challenge an individual’s predispositions, the individual is motivated to seek out more information and is able to make better responsibility attributions. Contrary to what might be expected, highly politicized contexts lead to improved understanding of European Union functions. One might imagine that a Europhile from a pro-Europe country would be the most knowledgeable about the EU, but it’s actually the citizens living in politicized environments that are motivated to acquire additional information. In other words, a Europhile living in a context with high levels of EU makes more accurate evaluations than a Europhile living in a pro-European context.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of what facilitates and motivates individuals to learn about complex political matters. While cognitive ability is important, it is only one factor that motivates political learning. Individual interest or perceived group membership, as well as an information-rich context, make the issue salient and motivate individuals to seek out information. This enables them to make complex allocations of responsibility that approach expert evaluations. Increasing the salience of European issues is key to motivating individuals; future studies could explore what other ways there may be to increase the salience of the EU to promote learning. In addition, future studies in other multilevel or federal systems should examine the effect of contextual factors on responsibility attributions; the United States and Canadian provinces provide another rich source of contextual variation that could be exploited.
References


Table 1: Comparing Expert and Citizen Attributions of Responsibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Experts Mean (SD)</th>
<th>All Citizens Mean (SD)</th>
<th>High Sophisticates Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Medium Sophisticates Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Low Sophisticates Mean (SD)</th>
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<td>NG - Economy</td>
<td>5.88 (1.84)</td>
<td>7.19 (2.72)</td>
<td>7.09 (2.51)</td>
<td>7.23 (2.68)</td>
<td>7.19 (3.00)</td>
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<td>EU - Economy</td>
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<td>5.70 (2.70)</td>
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<td>6.00 (3.03)</td>
<td>5.71 (2.93)</td>
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Table 2: Multilevel Model of Closeness to Expert Evaluation

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<th>Model 2a</th>
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<td>-2.85</td>
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<td>0.08</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
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<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
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<td>(0.96)</td>
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<td>Media Tone*EU Attitudes</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td>**</td>
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*p<.1 *p<.05 **p<.01

Source: European Election Study 2009 and Expert Survey 2010
Figure 1: Negative Media Tone Moderates EU Attitudes

Figure 2: Mean Country Euroskepticism Moderates EU Attitudes
Appendix 1: Question Wording from EES Voter Survey

Political Knowledge

Q92. Switzerland is a member of the EU

Q93. The European Union has 25 member states

Q94. Every country in the EU elects the same number of representatives to the European Parliament.

Q95. Every six months, a different Member State becomes president of the Council of the European Union

Q96. The [Country] Minister of Education {or appropriate national title} is [Insert Name].

Q97. Individuals must be 25 or older to stand as candidates in [Country] general elections.

Q98. There are [actual number + 50%] members of the [Country] parliament.

EU Attitudes

Q79. Generally speaking, do you think that [Country's] membership of the European Union is a good thing, bad thing, or neither good nor bad?

Q80. Some say European Unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means unification ‘has already gone too far’ and 10 means it ‘should be pushed further’. What number on this scale best describes your position?

Q83. In general, do you think that enlargement of the European Union would be a good thing, bad thing, or neither good nor bad?

Q91. How much confidence do you have that decisions made by the European Union will be in the interest of (country)? A great deal of confidence, a fair amount, not very much, or no confidence at all.
## Appendix 2: Descriptive Statistics of Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
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<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
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