

‘Responsive vs Responsible? Party-Democracy in Times of Crisis’

Paper Accepted for publication in Party Politics, as Introduction to the special issue featured in Vol 26(3), May 2020.

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ABSTRACT

This essay introduces a collection of papers dealing with the responsive–responsible dilemma of party-government. The political developments surrounding the Eurozone crisis attest that the duties of government and the demands of political representation may at times be in sharp contrast with one another. In such contexts, it becomes hard for parties in government to combine responsiveness with responsible policy-making. Late Peter Mair theorized this phenomenon as the increasing bifurcation between the growing complexity of governing in a world of interdependence and the need to respond to often polarizing electoral demands. The key question is whether and how in such contexts parties find the balance between their representative and governing duties. The papers included in this special issue deal with this question in the context of the Eurozone crisis, and present evidence about parties’ behavior, rhetoric and policy outputs. In introducing the contributions here, we illustrate how this collective endeavor helps advance the debate on the major challenges to contemporary representative democracy. More specifically, we first discuss how the framework of the responsive–responsible dilemma helps understanding contemporary political developments. We then critically reflect on the distinction between responsiveness and responsibility. Finally, we present how each individual contribution approaches the question of how parties manage the tension between electoral incentives and governmental duties.

Keywords: Eurozone crisis, party-democracy, public policy, representation, responsiveness.

1. Introduction

Recent political developments in Europe attest to the fact that the duties of government and the demands of democratic representation may, at times, be in sharp contrast with one another. One dramatic example is Greece, when, during the summer of 2015, international commitments forced the cabinet of Prime Minister Tsipras to denounce its electoral mandate and defy strong popular demands for an end to austerity. Another example that recently dominated the news is the British referendum on European Union (EU) membership. Called in response to an increasingly Eurosceptic British electorate and Conservative Party backbenchers, it now endangers the UK's territorial unity and economic stability. These episodes are, in our view, indicative of a more general trend towards the bifurcation of national politics. On the one hand, there is the growing complexity of governing in a world of powerful international institutions; on the other, the need to respond to—often polarizing—electoral demands.

Since 2010, the successive adoption of harsh austerity policies by various European governments has provided new fuel to the debate about the (limited) room for democratic responsiveness under the conditions of international economic integration (e.g. Schäfer and Streeck 2013). A key theoretical contribution to this debate from the party politics literature has been the argument that, under the current conditions of globalization and European integration, political parties are no longer capable or willing to combine representation of citizens' preferences with the institutional duties of government (Mair 2013; 2014). This argument is constructed upon the theoretical framework of the 'responsive-responsible' dilemma of party-government (Sartori 1976: 18–24), according to which the most fundamental task of parties in the democratic cycle is the combination of political representation and government.

Despite theoretical attention to these serious challenges facing representative government, we know surprisingly little about whether, how, and why governing parties (do not) manage to find the balance, in the practice of government, between being responsive *and* responsible. These questions are cast into sharp relief at present, not least because this reading of current political developments has gained considerable popularity in public debates (e.g. Washington Post 2015; The Telegraph 2014). Their resonance comes to the surface particularly when the rise of new populist parties is interpreted as a reaction to the unpopular decisions imposed on governments by unelected institutions (e.g. Piketty 2016: 106–110).

The party politics literature dealing with these questions has focused mainly on governments' responsiveness and party–voter congruence. Indeed, important progress has been made in empirically analyzing responsiveness (e.g. Esaiasson and Wlezien 2017; Peters and Ensink 2015), party–voter congruence and the representation of citizens' preferences via parties and party systems (e.g. Belchior 2013; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012; Lefkofridi and Casado 2013). However, when it comes to empirical analysis of how parties deal with responsibility, there is far too little traffic between research on political parties and the literatures on political economy and public policy. This is largely due to limited comprehension of how the interactions between democratic inputs and external factors shape policy outputs. This, in turn, limits both our understanding of the central concepts of 'responsiveness' and 'responsibility' (and how they relate), and our capability to reliably assess whether and when governing parties do—or do not—represent (Enroth 2017).

To be sure, two special issues on this very theme appeared recently in prominent outlets of party literature (Bardi et al 2014a; Bardi et al 2014b). These not only offer an extensive overview of the general state of party-democracy, but come up with very valuable 'minimal common definitions' of responsiveness and responsibility that help advance this debate (see

below). However, both supporters and critics tend to approach Mair's (2014; 2013) argument from a narrow perspective, focusing on individual stages of the democratic cycle, such as party membership figures (Van Biezen and Poguntke 2014) or issue congruence between voters and parties (e.g. Kitschelt and Rehm 2015). Mair's argument, however, pointed towards a more encompassing view of the democratic cycle, suggesting that the system as a whole is currently failing. Hence, to evaluate his propositions, it is necessary to analyze parties at different stages of the democratic cycle, and to assess how the representation of political preferences interacts with public policy and vice versa. This is the challenge the present collective endeavor tries to meet.

By paying special attention to governing parties, the papers analyze party behavior from both an electoral and a non-electoral perspective. In this introductory piece, we discuss how the former perspective relates to democratic responsiveness and the latter to governmental responsibility. Our point of departure, therefore, is that the tension between responsiveness and responsibility arises from different expectations about what governments—and thereby parties—are supposed to do. This tension, we believe, becomes particularly clear in times of economic crisis, wherein governments are strongly pressured to follow non-electoral logics, and thereby to deliver unpopular policies. Here, we focus on parties during the recent Eurozone crisis, thus closely following Mair (2013), whose analysis of the responsive–responsible dilemma's dynamics made explicit reference to an episode of the Irish bailout crisis.

To contextualize the present set of papers, in this introductory piece we first delineate the trajectory that led us to view contemporary political developments through the lens of the responsive–responsible dilemma. Next, we delve into the semantics, namely the distinction between responsiveness and responsibility; we discuss the different meanings of these concepts as well as why and how this special issue as a whole provides an evaluation of their explanatory

leverage. We conclude with a brief presentation of the contributions, highlighting the different perspectives from which each piece looks at the democratic cycle.

2. Responsive vs Responsible: Understanding Parties Before *and* After Election Day

Peter Mair's¹ insights into the growing bifurcation between responsibility and responsiveness derived from his research on the changing organizational structures of political parties. From the 1980s the 'party-in-public-office' became increasingly strengthened, while the ties between mainstream party organizations and the electorate were weakening (Katz and Mair 1995; Mair 1995). In essence, the mainstream parties that alternated in government were losing touch with the society they sought to reflect. This development gradually led to a representative vacuum that became observable through shrinking party membership and declining electoral turnout (Van Biezen and Poguntke 2014; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). During the 2000s, this vacuum was filled by the rise and growth of populist parties all over the continent—e.g. the Front National in France, the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs in Austria, or the United Kingdom Independence Party in Britain—which all proposed to end (or substantially renegotiate) international commitments (e.g. EU membership). This development led Peter Mair to theorize about a bifurcation in European party systems, in which the traditional mainstream parties would assume the mantle of responsible governing actors and populist opposition parties would focus on responding to the electorate's (shifting) demands. The traditional responsive–

¹ This special issue is, in many ways, a tribute to the work of late Peter Mair, a very *European* Irishman, who taught at Leiden University in the Netherlands and at the European University Institute (EUI) in Italy, organized international summer schools and forged networks among young European party scholars from different countries. Mair passed away soon after his country of origin signed a Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with the EU – this was a shocking event for a party scholar of Mair's standing, and it indeed did trigger his pen. Though Mair left us before other countries followed suite in saving banks at the expense of citizens, his observations relate to all countries in the EU, and especially those with fragile economics.

responsible dilemma in party-government (Sartori 1976: 18–24) would thereby be ‘solved’ through a division of labour between governing and opposition parties.

This pessimistic view of European democracies, however, has not gone unchallenged. There is wide disagreement among party scholars about the extent to which political parties are indeed failing to represent and/or be responsive to voter preferences (e.g. Kitschelt and Rehm 2015; Thomassen and Van Ham 2014). A key challenger to Mair’s argument is the re-alignment theory, according to which parties are now in a process of adapting to the changing preferences of voters (Dalton et al 2011; Enyedi 2014). According to this view, declining voter turnout and increasing popular dissatisfaction indicate only a temporary difficulty for parties, which will resolve itself once they recalibrate their political supply to the changing political demand. The long-term development they observe is that parties are eventually succeeding in this process of adaptation and that voters are re-aligning. Moreover, this side of the debate criticizes Mair’s argument also with the observation that, over the years, the so-called populist parties have sometimes assumed government responsibility—e.g. in Austria (McDonnell and Newell 2011). A shortcoming of this body of work, however, is that it tends to stop at Election Day, in the sense that it often fails to explore how the representation of (changing) voters’ preferences translates into policy outputs. Hence, the question of whether and to what extent external pressures leave room for political responsiveness remains unanswered.

The growing weight of institutional commitments

In two of his last writings, Peter Mair (2013; 2014) advanced his theory about the current democratic malaise one step further, by shifting the focus of attention towards what parties (can) do when they are in government. Mair (2007) argued prior to the outbreak of the crisis that EU law, policies and institutions are increasingly limiting the policy space and instruments at the disposal of national party-governments. This suggests that regional integration ‘ties’ the

hands of member state governments. Due to the supremacy of EU law, when incumbent parties take EU-level policy decisions, subsequent alternation of parties in government at the national level cannot cancel or reverse them. Within an ever-closer Union, thus, the policies pursued by any national party government in areas of supranational competence not only have national implications, but also bear consequences for international partners. As a result, a legal framework is established according to which party-governments must adhere to specific norms and procedures in certain key policy areas of EU competence. In this context, ‘responsible’ government within the EU polity means respect for EU legislation and prior commitments to EU partners.

The system of economic governance that has been emerging in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis induces governments to emphasize even more the responsible side of policy-making (Laffan 2014). Particularly within the budgetary and fiscal policy fields, the decision-making process is increasingly ‘pooled’ (Laffan 2014: 281) at the supranational level. Here, the ‘six-pack’—which came into force in December 2011—has considerably reinforced the Growth and Stability Pact established in the late 1990s. The new regulatory framework not only indicates clearer expenditure and debt benchmarks, but also introduces a ‘corrective arm’—the Excessive Deficit Procedure—whereby member states are given strict deadlines to comply with their European commitments. Thereby, the new rules introduced since 2010 strongly emphasize how responsible member states are to the common Euro area. This increasing weight on responsibility, Mair (2013; 2014) argued, is expected to reduce the scope for responsiveness and thus to further increase the tension between the two.

With this extra step in the thought process, Mair leaves us standing with one foot in the world of party politics and the other in the realm of political economy, facing one of the most basic—and most difficult—questions in the study of representative democracy: ‘when do parties

matter?’ (Schmidt 1996). With the establishment of new entities such as the EU, we are required to re-think the process linking citizens to policy outputs, starting from its very foundations. While this is certainly too great an endeavour for a small collection of interrelated yet distinct papers, this special issue aims to keep this discussion alive, presenting different empirical studies analyzing the democratic cycle in different ways and from different perspectives. The shared understanding that the papers have—building on Sartori (1976) and Mair (2013; 2014)—is that representative democracy is founded upon responsiveness *and* responsibility. If a malaise exists in the functioning of contemporary democracy, it should originate in the balance between these two.

Analyzing the balance (or lack thereof) between responsiveness and responsibility requires constructing a clear distinction between them. This is no easy task, considering that over the past decades the functioning of Western democracies has relied on the constant interaction between the two. Empirically speaking, we may observe overlaps between citizens’ preferences and the public policy outputs that established legal frameworks at the national or international level demand of governments. However, there are two distinct theoretical drivers behind the expectations that parties and governments need to fulfil in parliamentary democracies. In the next section, we build on and extend previous work to try—theoretically and empirically—to disentangle these two drivers, which we link to the ideas of responsiveness and responsibility.

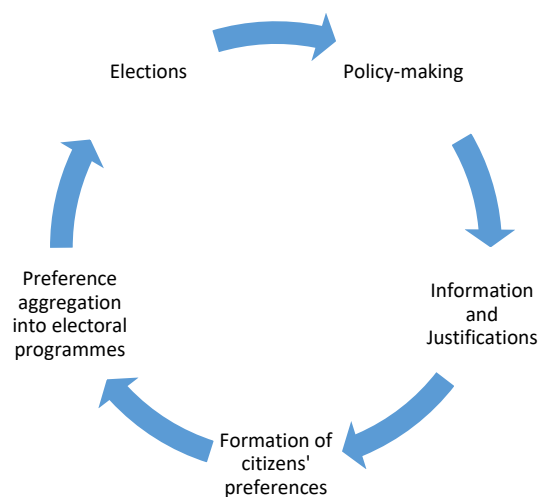
3. The distinction between responsiveness and responsibility

Bardi et. al. (2014b: 237) recognize that defining responsiveness and responsibility is an exercise that does not easily bring agreement among scholars. The editorial choice they made for their special issue was to identify a minimal common definition shared by all contributions, wherein *responsiveness* is understood as the normative claim that parties should ‘sympathetically respond to the short-term demands of voters, public opinion, interest groups,

and the media' (Bardi et al 2014b: 237). *Responsibility*, by contrast, is conceived as the necessity to take into account '(a) the long-term needs of their people and countries' and '(b) the claims of audiences other than the national electoral audience' (ibid.). These definitions boil down to two distinctions: one the one hand, there is short-term versus a long-term approach to the needs of the electorate; and on the other hand, there is the electorate versus other actors.

In the present issue these minimal definitions constitute our point of departure, leaving the freedom to further build on them to the individual contributions. While all articles in the issue share these minimal definitions, they also add to them the idea of the circularity of the democratic cycle. While for definitional purposes it is indeed important to grasp the distinction, when analyzing empirical reality it is crucial to bear in mind that democracy functions upon the constant interaction of political representation and the practice of government. The constant interaction happens through the circular process that connects citizens to policy outputs, as visualized in Figure 1.

Figure 1- The democratic cycle



The scheme, which—in this form or another—is very well known to party scholars, summarizes the key tasks that parties must fulfil to make democracy work:

- aggregate citizens' preferences about policies at national and EU levels (aggregation of preferences)
- acquire the power and responsibility to provide collective goods (policy-making)
- explain the actions for which they are accountable in office and be prepared to be voted in or out of office (information, justification, evaluation)

Throughout this process, there are two main driving factors: the representation of citizens' preferences and the provision of the public good. The former leads to the alternation in public office of parties representing different sets of preferences, whereas the latter requires institutional continuity between the alternating executives. These two forces are the engines behind the chain linking citizens to public policies and the creation of norms regulating government activity respectively. As such, they also provide the fuel for the tension between responsiveness and responsibility, making it an intrinsic feature of representative democracy. In what follows, we outline how responsiveness and responsibility relate to two clearly distinct sets of expectations with regards to the actions of party-government.

Democratic responsiveness

The definition of responsiveness put forward by Bardi et al (2014b: 237) points to different understandings of the term. Responding to the demands of 'voters, public opinion, interest groups, and the media' has very diverse empirical implications. The fact that such a definition can generate different research trajectories is not a problem *per se*. Quite the contrary; it may, in fact, enrich our view about how different sections of the public are connected to public policy. However, it may also generate confusion about what is responsiveness and what is not, rendering it more difficult to 'distinguish between parties that represent and parties that do not' (Enroth 2017: 132). Consequently, the definition by Bardi et al (2014b) calls for more

reflection on how democratic responsiveness is distinguished from governmental responsibility.

The question about how increasing international economic integration affects parties' responsiveness has indeed generated a great variety of empirical studies (e.g. Kriesi et al 2012; Haupt 2010), featuring considerable heterogeneity in how democratic responsiveness is conceived (Arnold and Franklin 2012). One of the main uncertainties emerging from these studies is whether responsiveness is about reacting to general public preferences (Ezrow and Hellwig 2014; Ward et al 2011; Wlezien and Soroka 2012) or fulfilling to the party mandate (e.g. Thomassen and Schmitt 1997; Louwerse 2012; Damhuis and Karremans 2017). This uncertainty is largely related to the question of how popular demand should be represented when making public policy.

The competition among political parties for the representation of *different* sections of society is the historical answer to this question (Manin 1997; Dalton et al 2011). Modern representative democracy, as we know it, is in fact a historical solution to the challenge of bringing public preferences into the political arena. It was in this sense founded on the tension between meeting the demands of various 'parts' and those of the 'whole' (Sartori 1976: 4, 18–24). Under this light, therefore, the post-war shift from mass to catch-all parties—and subsequently to cartel parties (Katz and Mair 1995)—can also be seen as an effort to move from the representation of particular interests (for example, of a particular social class) to more general interests. Consequently, 'the modes of representation' have also considerably changed over time (Saward 2008), and different parties may have different incentives to respond to either the median voter or party supporters (Ezrow et al 2010).

Different understandings notwithstanding, the distinctive characteristic of democratic responsiveness is that it is about linking society to public policy through the mediation of

political parties. Democratic responsiveness is thereby a complex the system of actions, communications and perceptions linking policy makers to civil society (Esaiasson and Wlezien 2017; Powell 2004). Responsiveness may therefore take different forms and have different meanings for different actors. These different understandings generate different normative expectations regarding how parties should behave. In turn, parties' strategies to achieve their main goals impact the kind of responsiveness provided (Lefkofridi et al. in this issue).

The shared idea behind these different understandings of responsiveness, however, is that in democracies there must be a representative link between voters and public policy—which is provided by parties—and that responsiveness is about the provision and maintenance of this link. Responsiveness, thereby, is strictly related to the electoral cycle, as elections are the main instrument that voters have to indicate their policy preferences. A key distinguishing characteristic of responsiveness therefore is that it is closely linked to electoral logics: a party in government pursues a certain policy because it thinks/perceives that by doing so it wins/maintains the support of certain voters. It is precisely on this point that we distinguish it from responsibility, which, in our view, relates to the non-electoral forces behind governments' activities.

Governmental responsibility

One of the reasons that Mair's idea regarding the tension between responsiveness and responsibility finds its echo in public debates is probably that policy makers have on many occasions relied on their 'sense of responsibility' when promoting austerity measures. In September 2012, for instance, when presenting the government's budget towards to the Bundestag, the finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble addressed the criticisms coming from the opposition with the words:

You also have a responsibility towards the economy and full employment. We have lived up to this responsibility with our policy.²

Similarly, in November 2011, when taking office as the leader of a technocratic cabinet, Mario Monti called upon the sense of responsibility of the Italian parliament to receive their support for the planned austerity measures (Vegetti et al 2013). These are examples of how *responsibility* constituted an important referential concept for European policy makers during the Eurozone crisis. Yet, what exactly does it mean for a party-government to act responsibly?

If political science has one thing to teach about this concept is that it can be understood in different ways, creating consequently a variety of misunderstandings regarding what governments are expected to do. The ‘responsible party model’ (e.g. Adams 2001), for instance, uses the term to indicate that parties are responsible for implementing their democratic mandate. In this sense, the meaning of responsibility coincides with the meaning of responsiveness towards party supporters. To build his argument, consequently, Mair highlights how in the literature responsibility has been intended variously as accountability (e.g. Sartori 1976; APSA 1950), as predictability and consistency (e.g. Downs 1957) or as efficient and effective actions (e.g. Rieselbach 1977). At the same time, following a more common use of the term, responsibility can also be intended as acting ‘prudently and consistently’ (Birch 1964). It is upon this latter understanding that Mair constructs his idea about the tension between responsiveness and responsibility.

The different uses of the term in the literature point to the different *responsibilities* that governments have. The provision of the collective goods requires governments to not only act

² Wolfgang Schäuble, Bundestag, 11 September 2012.

effectively and prudently, but also to inform the parliament and voters about the underlying criteria and objectives of their actions. This relates to another expectation that governments must fulfil, namely to act within the boundaries of existing norms and procedures. This latter aspect of governments' action has substantially changed, becoming arguably more complex. In fact, not only have the international rules to which executives must abide considerably grown, but governmental tasks have also become increasingly delegated to independent agencies, who often spell out the details of legislation (e.g. Heritier et al 2013).

Against this background, Bardi et al's (2014b) definition of responsibility points towards an important predictor of party-behaviour in office, namely the recognition and acceptance that in certain circumstances the government's hands are tied. Consequently, the failed implementation of electoral programmes may have 'legitimate justifications' which would in turn refer to the responsibilities of the government for the nation's long-term interests (Powell 2004: 99; Goetz 2014; Karremans and Damhuis in this issue). Party scholars are thereby well aware that the extent to which 'parties matter' (Schmidt 1996) is considerably shaped by the duties and the institutional framework within which an executive operates. The developments surrounding the Eurozone crisis, however, force us to reflect upon the extent to which these limits allow for the proper functioning of the democratic cycle and when they may in fact hinder it, endangering thereby the legitimacy of national democracies (e.g. Armingeon and Guthmann 2014).

This special issue's shared understanding of the distinction between responsiveness and responsibility is that the former relates to policy preferences originating from civil society, whereas the latter relates to the more technical considerations regarding government agreements and the long term national interest. By reading current political developments through the lens of this binary distinction, the present selection of papers tries to offer different

insights into how political parties try to combine social demands with mounting international institutional pressures, and whether and why they fail or succeed. In the next section, we will present the contributions to this issue by highlighting the different perspectives from which they look at the democratic cycle.

4. Five analyses of the responsive–responsible dilemma during the Eurozone crisis

The present selection of papers—two large-N, quantitative studies and three qualitative comparative case studies—presents five different ways of looking at whether and how governing parties manage the tension between their electoral incentives and the non-electoral considerations when making policy. Despite their diverse approaches, all contributions concentrate on the interaction between these two forces but look at the different aspects of party government activity.

With a comparative analysis of fiscal policy trajectories through the framework of the responsive–responsible dilemma, in the first contribution Zbigniew Truchlewski offers a political economy perspective to what political parties can do in office in redistributive terms. By comparatively looking at fiscal policy in France and the UK between the 1970s and 2015, Truchlewski argues that the policy choices available to governing parties are considerably shaped by the pre-existing tax-structures. Consequently, the extent to which left- and right-wing parties can be responsive to the electoral demands for greater or less redistribution needs to be assessed against the background of the national tax system. As such, this study brings debates on fiscal democracy with those on party competition closer together.

The second contribution introduces an innovative idea regarding the interaction between electoral and non-electoral incentives in democratic policy making: responsiveness and responsibility are not necessarily conflicting democratic values. Yvette Peters and Jonas Linde

argue that when governments act responsively towards voters, they generate a ‘reservoir of goodwill’ that allows them to subsequently implement (unpopular) ‘responsible’ decisions that are, in turn, more easily accepted by citizens. In other words, by acting responsively governments win the trust of citizens, who then in turn will trust more in them taking care of the country’s long-term interests. While this is certainly not an easy argument to test, the authors make an interesting attempt by analyzing data on citizens’ perception of government behaviour. By doing so, they strongly build on the idea of the circularity of the democratic process, by conceiving it as a constant interaction of perceptions between governments, parties and voters.

The third paper—by Johannes Karremans and Koen Damhuis—builds on previous work (Damhuis and Karremans 2017) and compares how the responsibility of French left-oriented governments has changed between the 1980s and the 2010s. It does so by comparing the justifications given by finance ministers under the first Mitterrand presidency (1981–85) and the recent Hollande presidency (2012–16). Thereby, the authors focus on the accountability stage of the democratic cycle and provide evidence for how contemporary finance ministers tend to speak on behalf of international webs of institutions, while in the 1980s governments took full credit for both popular and unpopular decisions. This development, the authors argue, has significant implications for the accountability between governments, parliaments and voters. As the references to supranational commitments are regularly associated with restrictive budgetary policies, the discourse of contemporary governments seems to betray a growing dispersion of political authority, raising thereby the question of who is actually in charge of the national budget.

Ruben Ruiz-Rufino and Sonia Alonso explore this theme in more detail in the fourth paper, by analyzing the costs of adopting supra-nationally imposed policies for the national political

establishment. More specifically, the authors investigate two hypotheses. The first is that the impact of the crisis on the electoral stability of establishment parties is dependent on whether the country has been subject to external financial intervention. The second is that the electoral costs of adopting externally imposed austerity measures is greater for the political Left than the Right. The findings presented in the paper confirm these hypotheses, providing even more evidence for the claim that citizens tend to lose trust in the political establishment when economic policies remain unchanged despite government alternation. Consequently, citizens will tend to move towards political offers coming from outside the traditional governing parties. Among mainstream parties, the Left tends to be the biggest loser from this dynamic.

The last paper—by Zoe Lefkofridi and Roula Nezi—picks up directly from Peter Mair’s final legacy, whose thesis did not address potential sources of variation in how parties experience the dilemma between responsiveness and responsibility or how they manage it. In tackling these lacunae, the authors refine and extend Mair’s work in a number of ways. First, they refine responsiveness, by distinguishing between public opinion and partisans. This enables them to advance varied responsive-responsible scenarios that range from perfect equilibrium (no gap) to the highest possible gap facing by party leaders. Second, they consider how domestic institutional factors may generate pressures for different types of responsiveness, and thus elucidate what each variant of the RR dilemma implies for party behavior under specific institutional conditions (proportionality of electoral systems; leadership autonomy from party organizations). Third, they identify possible ways of managing the dilemma in the context of multidimensional issue competition. They conclude by applying some of their propositions to Greece, where we witness the dilemma *par excellence*. In sum, this contribution helps evaluate how Mair’s (refined) theory explains how increasing supranational transfers of political authority may or may not affect the very nature of party democracy.

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