

## **Retrospective voting, accountability and party instability in European elections\***

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An ongoing puzzle for political scientists is why electoral accountability is fulfilled only in some elections (Anderson and Hecht 2011; Paldam 1991; G. B. Powell and Whitten 1993; Whitten and Palmer 1999). Why are voters sometimes able to sanction incumbent parties for policy and economic outputs but fail to do so in other elections? Answers to this question have ranged from citizens' demonstrated tendency to form skewed perceptions of systemic outputs and government performance (Nadeau, Blais, Nevitte, and Gidengil 2000; Nadeau, Niemi, Fan, and Amato 1999; Sanders and Gavin 2004) to their displayed difficulty gauging which political actors should be held responsible for systemic outputs under complex institutional setups (G. B. Powell and Whitten 1993; Whitten and Palmer 1999). Despite these great leaps in our knowledge of the mechanisms of accountability, considerable inter-election variation remains unexplained.<sup>1</sup>

Accounts of retrospective voting have consistently neglected the function of political parties, which are the mediators between citizens and policy-makers and as such have a central role in the process of electoral representation. At elections, political parties have incentives to obfuscate their record of governance and political expertise in order to escape responsibility for poor performance or to claim credit for policy and economic successes. Hence, parties may bring down an incompetent leader and replace him with a better liked politician; they may form electoral alliances with parties enjoying a favorable record of governance; or a faction may split from the party to distance itself from a poor governing record. Indeed, such changes in party organizations (termed hereafter, *party instability*) are a common phenomenon in European

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<sup>1</sup>Whitten and Palmer (1999) report considerable variation in inter-election accountability (as do Lewis-Beck 1988 and Paldam 1991). However, static institutional theories do not make clear why, for example, voters have been able to sanction parties for poor performance in Denmark since 1973 but not before or why accountability works only in some elections in Germany (Anderson 1995; Nadeau, Niemi, and Yoshinaka 2002; Rattinger and Kramer 1998). The limitations of present theories are also reflected in the “striking failures of large-district PR rules to generate proportional outcomes in a number of new democracies of Eastern Europe,” despite what low-threshold PR rules would predict (G. B. Powell 2004, 279).

elections (Mair, Muller, and Plasser 2004; Tavits 2005). By taking into account changes in party organizations, this study affords political parties the agency to influence voters' perceptions of parties' governing expertise. As such, it moves away from static models of retrospective voting, in which incumbent and opposition parties are merely the recipients of voters' evaluations and responsibility attributions.

Party instability may have detrimental effects on the availability and clarity of informational cues in elections and, consequently, on the ability of voters to incorporate retrospective evaluations of government into vote decision. Repeated changes in parties reduce the value of the voting cues normally provided by party labels. After an instance of party change, voters' prior information on parties' records in office and political competence may no longer be a reliable indicator of a party's continued performance. Consequently, voters may be reluctant to rely on information about parties' prior record of governance in their electoral calculus. Very high party instability may even make it difficult for voters to keep track of the incumbent and opposition status of parties. As a result of these dynamics, voters are less likely to rely on retrospective policy and economic evaluations in their electoral decision-making, and electoral accountability may in turn be undermined.

By shifting from systemic, institutional explanations to dynamics in party organizations, as predictors of the variation in the rate of retrospective voting across elections, this study focuses on a previously neglected stage of electoral decision-making – the electoral phase most proximate to casting a ballot. To situate this study in the extant literature, I begin by reviewing our current knowledge of the stages of retrospective voting and electoral decision-making. I then elaborate on the mechanisms, by which party instability (such as mergers and splits, name and leader changes, and changes in electoral alliances) can hinder electoral decision-making based on

retrospective evaluations of government performance. I test the empirical implications of my argument with an original dataset on party instability in Central and East European, as well as West European, democracies, and survey data from two waves of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). In line with expectations, I find that party instability defies the logic of retrospective voting: as incumbent and opposition parties undergo changes between elections, voters' evaluations of government performance become poor predictors of vote choice for the incumbent. The findings highlight the influential role of political parties in the process of electoral accountability.

### **Stages of retrospective voting**

The basic logic of retrospective voting is as follows: if policy outputs are desirable, citizens reelect the incumbent government; otherwise, they cast a ballot for the opposition. Researchers have tested this logic mainly for economic performance, or how levels of inflation, unemployment and economic growth affect electoral support for the incumbent government (Anderson 2000, 2007; Bengtsson 2004; Lewis-Beck 1988; Nadeau, Niemi, and Yoshinaka 2002; G. B. Powell and Whitten 1993; Samuels and Hellwig 2010). In addition to economic indicators, recent research has tested the logic of retrospective voting for other national and EU-level policy outputs, including corruption, social policy and EU enlargement (Armingeon and Giger 2008; Fournier, Blais, Nadeau, Gidengil, et al. 2003; Giger 2010; Tavits 2007; de Vries, Edwards, and Tillman 2011). The findings have been mixed, with some studies showing a moderate to strong relationship between government performance and the vote, and others finding a weak correlation at best (Anderson 2007; Bengtsson 2004; McDonald and Budge 2005; Lewis-Beck 1988; Cheibub and Przeworski 1999; Van der Brug, Van Der Eijk, and Franklin 2007).

Due to these inconsistency in empirical results, over the past twenty years, the literature

has focused on the contingencies of retrospective voting, and particularly how contextual differences across elections moderate the presence and strength of retrospective voting (for a recent review see Anderson (2007)). This turn in the literature is attributed to Paldam (1991) who documented strong retrospective voting for economic performance in some countries and time periods yet lack of such effects in many other elections (26). Some of the variation can be attributed to cross-national institutional differences that either clarify or obscure to voters which political actors are responsible for economic conditions (G. B. Powell and Whitten 1993). Powell and Whitten (1993) find that retrospective voting is magnified when majority governments are in power and opposition parties have few power-sharing mechanisms. The findings of their widely cited study have been supported in subsequent research (Anderson 2000; Van der Brug, Van Der Eijk, and Franklin 2007; Lewis-Beck and Mitchell 1993; Nadeau, Niemi, and Yoshinaka 2002; Norpoth 2002; G. B. Powell 2000a; Whitten and Palmer 1999). Scholars have since added a number of contextual indicators to the list of institutional variables, which “clarify” responsibility for policy outputs: the availability of viable replacements of the incumbent, length of time the incumbent spent in office, the ideological cohesion of coalition governments and others (See Anderson 2000, Bengtsson 2004, Nadeau, Niemi, and Yoshinaka 2002).

Due to the nearly exclusive focus on the “clarity of responsibility” afforded by institutional and political conditions, this recent wave of literature often equates the assignment of responsibility for economic and policy performance with electoral accountability itself (Anderson 2007, 282). Correct attributions for policy outputs are a necessary but *insufficient* condition for electoral accountability, as the correct assignment of responsibility for policy outputs is just one of several necessary stages in holding elected representatives accountable for performance in office. In reviewing existing research, the process of electoral accountability may

be divided into at least four distinct but iterative stages, during which macro-economic and policy outputs are translated into a voting decision for or against the incumbent.

In the first stage of electoral accountability, voters form impressions of economic and social conditions based on their own experiences as well as reports from the media. Indeed, policy outputs do not directly translate into voter assessments of government performance. Several studies have shown that citizens' evaluations of economic conditions track the media's representation of the economy rather than objective economic indicators (Nadeau, Blais, Neviite, and Gidengil 2000; Nadeau, Niemi, Fan, and Amato 1999; Sanders and Gavin 2004). In addition, impressions of government performance have been shown endogeneously connected to voters' prior support for the incumbents (Anderson, Mendes, and Tverdova 2004; Evans 1999; Evans and Andersen 2006; Wilcox and Wlezien 1993; Wlezien, Franklin, and Twiggs 1997). Hence, the first obstacle to the process of electoral accountability is the formation of biased evaluations of economic and policy performance.

The second stage can be described as voter assignment of responsibility for policy and economic outputs. It has been this stage of electoral accountability that has received the greatest attention in recent literature. Here, voters attribute responsibility for economic and policy performance to political actors. Institutional and political features, which produce tight control of policy outputs by the government, result in stronger responsibility attributions to the government; conversely, the dispersion of policy-making power among multiple political actors makes it difficult for citizens to ascertain who is responsible for policy outcomes, as indicated by a lower tendency to sanction incumbents for poor performance. Thus, the second path, by which electoral accountability may be undermined, is by an institutional and/or political set-up that allows parties to escape responsibility for their performance in office.

The third stage of retrospective voting is the most proximate to casting a ballot. After forming impressions of economic and policy outputs and assigning responsibility to government, voters are presented with a “menu” of electoral alternatives, which they can either accept or reject. To sanction the incumbent, voters need to identify and assess the incumbent who stands for reelection and any viable replacements of the incumbent from the opposition. Evaluating incumbent and opposition parties may be a relatively simple task in some elections but a much more complex one in others. In some elections, the incumbent may run for reelection unchanged while in other elections, the party may change leaders or split in two or more parties to escape blame or better claim credit for policy performance. Likewise, the opposition may be easily evaluated by voters if it consists of a handful of long-standing parties that are familiar to voters. However, when the opposition is comprised of many, new or changed parties, as is often the case in young democracies, it becomes more difficult for voters to assess the viability of each alternative. Hence, the third possible obstacle to electoral accountability is the electoral context within which voters assess electoral alternatives.

It is worth noting that scholars have not always made a clear distinction between the second and third stages of accountability in elections – namely, the attribution of responsibility for policy outputs and the assessment of electoral alternatives on the ballot. This can be seen in work by Anderson (2000) and Bengtsson (2004) who study the effect of “clarity of available alternatives” – the availability of credible parties to replace the incumbent – on retrospective voting. Anderson (2000) and Bengtsson (2004) argue that fragmented party systems make it less clear to voters what an alternative future government would be. While the availability of viable replacements of the incumbent has a strong effect on electoral accountability, this effect has little to do with responsibility attribution. That is, voters may correctly attribute poor economic and

policy outputs to the incumbent, but, due to a lack of credible electoral alternatives, they may intentionally not sanction the incumbent for poor performance. Hence, electoral accountability is undermined due to the characteristics of the electoral space rather than the clarity of responsibility afforded by institutions.

The final stage of accountability in elections is the vote itself. It is important to recognize that a number of considerations influence the vote choice, regardless of government performance. Voters select parties on class, religious and ideological considerations, which may contradict the purely retrospective logic of voting (Lewis-Beck 1988).

Students of retrospective voting have devoted relatively little attention to how voters make sense of the electoral context as they try to sanction incumbents and considerably more attention to the formation of performance evaluations and the attribution of responsibility; yet all three processes are necessary conditions for retrospective voting and electoral representation. Difficulty in identifying and assessing electoral alternatives can impede the sanctioning of incumbent governments and political accountability itself. Therefore, understanding how the electoral context shapes retrospective voting can be as illuminating of the pitfalls of electoral representation as understanding how voters form impressions about policy outputs or how they attribute responsibility to political actors. Given the scarce attention paid to the third stage of accountability, the remainder of this paper explores how features of the electoral context, and particularly instability in party organizations, affect retrospective voting.

### **Party instability and retrospective voting**

Past research has begun to explore how some features of the electoral context moderate the rate of retrospective voting. Namely, Anderson (2000) and Bengtsson (2004) find that fragmented party systems, operationalized as elections with a large effective number of electoral

parties (ENEP), make it more difficult for voters to identify a clear alternative to the incumbent government. A large number of opposition parties introduces uncertainty about the shape of a future government because the likely replacements of the incumbent are not as easily predictable. Consequently, voters are less likely to throw the incumbents out of office for poor performance, and retrospective voting and accountability are undermined. Both Anderson (2000) and Bengtsson (2004) find strong retrospective economic voting in elections with a low effective number of parties.

ENEP is only a rough estimate of how easily identifiable future governments are because it conveys no information on how electoral alternatives change between elections. A better measure would take into account not only the number of electoral alternatives but also their stability between elections, as drastic and repeated changes in the electoral menu can potentially impede the identification of an alternative government. Furthermore, a good estimate of how easily voters can identify electoral alternatives ought to be measured at the level of political parties, rather than party systems, as the electoral alternatives presented to voters are not in the aggregate party system but at the level of political parties. To account for this empirical gap in the literature, this study conceptualizes and measures the degree of instability in political parties, both incumbent and opposition parties, between elections.

Instability in political parties can have a detrimental impact on retrospective voting by hindering the ability of voters to evaluate and assess electoral alternatives. Ideally, positive evaluations of government performance should translate into electoral support for the incumbent while a ballot cast for the opposition should follow from unfavorable evaluations of government performance.<sup>2</sup> However, party instability introduces uncertainty about the trajectory of parties,

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<sup>2</sup>'Evaluations of government performance' combines the two preceding stages of retrospective voting – the

such that voters may doubt that future performance will reflect parties' past record in office, and/or voters may be uncertain of the governing competence of opposition parties. Moreover, in elections of very high party instability, voters may even have difficulty identifying which parties stand for reelection and which are in opposition. Hence, the assessment and identification of electoral alternatives on the ballot may be conditioned on the degree of instability in incumbent and opposition parties. I discuss each of these processes in turn.

In order to vote retrospectively, voters assess the viability of electoral alternatives.<sup>3</sup> Voters form expectations about the future performance of parties, relying on their knowledge of parties' past record of governance and expertise.<sup>4</sup> Having a general idea of parties' governing competence helps voters form expectations about the future trajectory of parties; that is, if a party has a favorable record in office, voters may reasonably expect that it continue performing well, and vice versa. However, instability in party organizations introduces uncertainty about the expected trajectory of a party. Voters were likely uncertain about how the replacement of Helmut Kohl by Wolfgang Schäuble would affect the performance of the Christian Democratic Union in Germany after 1998. Similarly, the numerous splits in the Polish incumbent party, Solidarity, before the 2001 election may have left many voters uncertain of what these changes would mean for the continued performance trajectory of Solidarity. Clearly, when parties change between electoral cycles, voters have good reasons to doubt that their prior knowledge of parties is a reasonably

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formation of impressions of policy and economic outputs and the attribution of responsibility for outputs to government. Because the focus of this study is not on either of the two preceding stages of retrospective voting, voter evaluations of government performance are taken as exogenous. I do not investigate how impressions of policy and economic outputs are formed or when these evaluations and responsibility attributions are correct.

<sup>3</sup>Voters must evaluate all alternatives, not only the opposition parties (Anderson 2000, Bengtsson 2004).

<sup>4</sup>While retrospective voting is based on evaluations of past performance, the vote is ultimately about which party will govern *in the future*. Therefore, part of the electoral calculus of voters includes judgment of whether or not evaluations of past performance are a reasonable predictor of continued performance in a future government. For a critique of models of retrospective voting for failing to incorporate considerations about the future shape of government, see Maravall (2006).

good predictor of continued performance. Party instability therefore introduces considerable uncertainty about the future trajectory of parties, such that retrospective voting is no longer a reasonable mechanism of selecting a party on the ballot. As a result, we can expect lower rates of retrospective voting in elections of high party instability.

Moreover, simply *identifying* the incumbent and opposition parties in an electoral campaign can be a taxing task when parties undergo numerous transformations between elections. Take as an example the 1996 parliamentary election in Romania where the incumbent party underwent considerable instability between the 1992 and 1996 elections. The ruling Democratic National Salvation Front not only changed its name to the Romanian Party of Social Democracy (PSDR), but it also merged with three smaller parties, which did not form part of the ruling coalition (the Socialist Democratic Party of Romania, the Cooperative Party, and the Republican Party). To correctly identify the incumbent party at the voting booth in 1996, Romanians ought to have paid attention to public affairs and to changes in political parties in particular. An electoral space characterized by unstable party organizations places higher cognitive demands on voters than an electoral space of relative party stability. Due to its high opportunity and transaction costs, attention is scarce in the political system (Holyoak et al. 1989; Kandel, Schwartz, and Jessell 1995). Given these cognitive constraints, we can expect that identification of the incumbent and challenger parties may be a somewhat more difficult task when parties undergo organizational discontinuities and other changes than when parties remain stable between elections. If unable to identify the incumbent or challengers on the ballot, voters would be less likely to sanction the incumbents for their performance in office. Consequently, we can expect weaker retrospective voting in elections characterized by high party instability.

The empirical implications of these processes can be tested with two hypotheses. The first

hypothesis examines whether instability in incumbent and opposition parties, respectively, has a similar impact on retrospective voting. Based on the identification and assessment processes described above, we expect that instability in incumbent, as well as opposition parties, has a negative impact on retrospective voting. Hypothesis 2 differentiates between types of instability in parties – organizational discontinuities, name changes and leader changes. We have little prior knowledge to hypothesize effects of varying magnitude for each type of party instability, and therefore we hypothesize that name changes, leader changes and organizational discontinuities would equally lower the tendency of citizens to vote retrospectively.

*Hypothesis 1:* Citizens are less likely to vote retrospectively in elections characterized by high party instability in incumbent and opposition parties.

*Hypothesis 2:* Citizens are less likely to vote retrospectively when political parties change names or party leaders, or undergo organizational discontinuities.

Testing these hypotheses introduces agency into models of retrospective voting, as the maneuvering of parties is central to the theoretical mechanism. In a recent review of the literature, Maravall (2006) is particularly critical of the passive role ascribed to opposition parties in models of retrospective voting. Current models are based on the likely false assumption that opposition parties do not attempt to influence voters' perceptions of government performance or to boost their own reputation of competence (Maravall 2006). Similarly, present research fails to empower incumbent parties with the agency to distance themselves from a poor record in office, or to claim credit for policy and economic successes. The two hypotheses outlined above take into account one possible venue of strategic maneuvering for incumbent and opposition parties – their ability to change leaders and names, alter the party organization, and enter or leave electoral alliances. Testing these hypotheses ought to enrich our knowledge of the role of political parties

in the process of electoral representation. Future research should explore the tendency of parties to shift economic and policy positions as another possible mechanism of party maneuvering, and its cognitive effects on electoral decision-making and retrospective voting.

### **Data and method**

Understanding how changes in electoral spaces influences the decision-making of voters calls for a comparative analysis. Based on results from a prior comparative study of total electoral volatility, I test my theoretical expectations with cases from one relatively stable region and one electorally volatile region: Western Europe and post-socialist Europe, respectively (Bielasiak 2002). My aim in doing so is to ensure sufficient variation in party instability. I use available survey data from twenty-five parliamentary elections, between 2000 and 2007, by merging the second and third modules of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES).<sup>5</sup> The data collected on instability in party organizations matches available survey years. Unless otherwise indicated, all variables come from the CSES.

### ***Instability in party organizations: concept and measurement***

Party instability has been traditionally conceptualized and measured as part of electoral volatility, or the overall change in the number of parties and in the relative distribution of electoral strength among competing parties between subsequent elections (Ascher and Tarrow 1975; Pedersen 1983, 31). Electoral volatility captures the net changes in election results caused by both (a) parties' entry into and exit from the political scene and (b) volatility among stable parties. The latter is traced to the changing preferences of voters; the former is not. As long as voter preferences form part of current measures of party instability, the dynamics of party change and

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<sup>5</sup> The question about government performance (the dependent variable) was not included in the first module of the CSES.

voter decision-making cannot be empirically disentangled (C. J. Anderson 1998; Bengtsson 2004; Madrid 2005; Mainwaring and Torcal 2006; Rico 2010).

In recognizing the conflation of these two distinct sources of change in election results, recent scholarship has attempted to partition electoral volatility *ex post facto* into its two component parts (Birch 2001; E. N. Powell and Tucker 2008). By deriving party instability from electoral volatility, scholars are able to approximate what part of the swings in election results are due to party instability rather than changes in voter preferences. Consequently, these new measures record the *effects* of party instability on election results rather than the sheer prevalence of instability in party organizations, regardless of electoral outcomes. A further concern regarding the partitioning of electoral volatility *ex post facto* is the necessary but likely false assumption of independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA).

To illustrate, imagine an election, in which some parties remain unchanged (say, parties A and B) while other parties change attributes (say, party C dissolves), and still other parties are new to the ballot (say, party D). Changes in party C or the entrance of party D can alter the probability of voting for one of the stable parties (party A or B). Hence what seems to be electoral volatility caused by the changing preferences of citizens to vote for existing party A or B may in fact be traced to instability in party C or D. Therefore, deriving the interdependent parts of electoral volatility *ex post facto* can be highly problematic.<sup>6</sup>

Party instability is measured here independently of election results in order to reduce

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<sup>6</sup> Another concern regarding these new measures is the ambiguity of coding party mergers, splits and name changes, all of which are common to the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. Some party name changes, mergers and splits are considered party stability so long as the preexisting parties continued to compete, in one shape or another, in a subsequent election (Powell and Tucker 2008, 7-10). Not recording these changes can significantly underestimate the degree of party instability. My measure of party instability correlates positively with Powell and Tucker's (2008) Type A volatility, which is the component of total volatility attributed to party entry and exit ( $r=0.47$ ). The correlation with total electoral volatility is  $r=0.66$ .

measurement error and limit the conflation of interdependent sources of instability. To do so, I record the number of changes each party organization underwent between two elections. For parties that received at least one percent of the vote in lower-house parliamentary elections, I code name changes, leader changes, party mergers and splinters, new party formations, disbanded parties, and the entrance and exit of parties from pre-electoral coalitions and/or joint lists, as described in the Appendix (Golder 2006; Janda 1980, 19–26). The dataset comprises of 251 parties from twenty-five European elections, 1996-2008 (146 parties from thirty-three West European (WE) elections, 20 from six South European (SE) elections and 85 from thirteen CEE elections). The average number of changes per party is 1.13, with 0.31 in SE, 1.0 in WE and 1.6 in CEE. Ninety-five percent of parties in the dataset underwent three or fewer changes per election, and half of the nineteen cases with more than three changes were part of the 2006 Italian election. The average number of changes *per election* is 12, with 2.3 in SE, 10 in WE and 21 in CEE. In CEE, the average number of parties experiencing at least one change per election is 11 while in WE it is 5.4.

In nearly all categories of instability, CEE parties undergo more changes, but there are exceptions. First, the number of leader changes between elections is roughly comparable in the East and West (0.56 vs. 0.48, and 0.24 in SE). Second, the rate of forming and abandoning pre-electoral coalitions is twice as high in WE than in CEE (0.07 vs. 0.03). Name changes, mergers, splinters, changes in joint lists and the formation and disbanding of party organizations are much more frequent in the new democracies. Across the two regions, leader changes are most frequent (occurring in 49% of parties), followed by entrances in joint lists (15%), mergers (10%) and name changes (11%). Opposition parties were no more likely to undergo instability than were

incumbent parties regardless of region ( $p < 0.263$ ,  $df = 506$ ).

To create a measure of party instability, I use two strategies. First, I sum the total number of party changes for all parties in a given election. This indicator measures *party instability* (PI) regardless of the electoral strength of individual parties. The advantage of PI is that it does not rely on the independence of irrelevant alternatives assumption. Instability in a small- or medium-sized party may affect the probability of selecting other, larger parties on the electoral menu. To reflect this, PI treats instances of party instability as equal and not weighted by the electoral strength of the party. The disadvantage of PI is that it may give undue weight to instability in small parties that are less visible and have a possibly smaller impact on voters than instability in large parties. Therefore, I estimate a second indicator, which weighs the total number of party changes in each party by the party's electoral strength. *Weighted party instability* (WPI) is the sum of the weighted measures for each election. PI and WPI are highly correlated ( $r = 0.91$ ). All analyses were performed with both measures, and the results were consistent. Here, I report results with the PI measure only. In addition, the hypotheses are tested with each of the component categories of party instability.<sup>7</sup> Figure 1 displays the total number of party changes per election.

### ***Variables and method of analysis***

The dependent variable is binary, coded 1 if the respondent cast a ballot for the incumbent and 0 if she cast a ballot for the opposition. Following previous research, I use two different operationalizations: (a) the incumbent as the prime minister's party, and (b) the incumbent as all the parties in government (Anderson 2000). The hypotheses were tested with both dependent

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<sup>7</sup> In addition, I estimate a measure of PI weighted by the total number of parties, and the results were consistent.

variables, and all differences are reported in the text.

The principal independent variable of interest is respondents' evaluations of government performance in office.<sup>8</sup> The advantage of using voters' direct evaluations of government performance instead of macro-level indicators of policy outputs is that individual evaluations incorporate both the formation of impressions of policy and economic outputs and the attribution of responsibility for outputs to government. The focus of this study is not on the first stages of retrospective voting, and therefore this paper does not investigate how impressions of policy and economic outputs are formed or when these impressions and corresponding responsibility attributions are correct. In other words, voter evaluations of government performance are taken as exogenous. Respondents were asked, "Now thinking about the performance of the government in [CAPITAL] in general, how good or bad a job do you think the government has done over the past [NUMBER] years? Has it done a very good job? A good job? A bad job? A very bad job?" "Very bad" is coded as 1 while "very good" is coded as 4. A high value of the independent variable should be associated with increased likelihood of voting for the incumbent. Of interest is the sign of the interaction between evaluations of government performance and party instability; a negative sign would lend support to H1 and H2, as it would indicate that high party instability weakens the positive relationship between economic evaluations and voting for the incumbent.

A number of individual and contextual control variables are included in the analysis. To control for ideological differences between respondents and the incumbent, I measure the left-right distance between the respondent and the incumbent. To estimate the distance between voter

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<sup>8</sup>This study focuses on evaluations of overall government performance rather than evaluations based solely on economic performance because not all voters consider the economy an important, let alone the most important, indicator of government performance. Voters pay more attention to some issues than they do to others (Converse 1975; Hutchings 2001; McGraw and Pinney 1990; McGraw, Lodge, and Stroh 1990). Therefore, responsibility attributions for various issues likely affect the vote choice.

and party positions, I take the absolute difference between (1) respondents' self-reported left-right placement and (2) the placement of the prime minister's party on the left-right ideological continuum by national political experts. Increasing left-right distance between voters and the incumbent should be associated with a declining probability of voting for the incumbent. Age, gender, education and income are included as individual-level control variables. The fragmentation of the party systems, measured as the effective number of electoral parties, is included as a contextual-level control variable. Finally, the empirical analyses include control variables for region (both for Central and Eastern Europe, and for Southern Europe).

Formally, the model may be expressed as

$$\text{logit}[Pr(VI_{ij}=1 | X_{ij}, \zeta_j)] = \beta_0 + \beta_1 PI_j + \beta_2 PI_j E_i + \beta_3 E_i + \gamma X_{ij} + \zeta_j,$$

where  $VI_{ij}$  indicates whether individual  $i$  in election  $j$  voted for the incumbent;  $PI_j$  is party instability in election  $j$ ,  $E_i$  is the respondent's evaluation of government performance,  $X_{ij}$  is a vector of individual and election-specific control variables,  $\gamma$  is a vector of slopes of the explanatory variables, and  $\zeta_j$  constitutes the election-specific factors not accounted for by the covariates that may affect the likelihood of electing an ideologically representative party (Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2008; Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). To take account of the nested data structure and the binary dependent variable, I fit a mixed-effects logistic regression via maximum likelihood estimation (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002).<sup>9</sup>

## **Empirical results and discussion**

Tables 1-3 present results from several model specifications, testing H1 and H2. Overall, the results offer evidence that party instability has a strong, negative effect on retrospective voting:

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<sup>9</sup>The analyses were performed in Stata 11 with the `.xtmelogit` command and its post-estimation options.

in elections of high instability in party organizations, voters are less likely to sanction incumbents for their performance in office. In support of the first hypothesis, instability in both incumbent and challenger parties weakens retrospective voting, though the magnitude of the effect is stronger when opposition parties experience instability. In support of the second hypothesis, changes in party leaders, names and organizational discontinuities weaken the rate of retrospective voting; name changes have the strongest negative impact of the three types of instability. Party instability does not have a direct effect on vote choice for the incumbent. The results are discussed in greater detail below.

The estimated residuals of the empty model without predictors (not shown) demonstrate substantial between-election variance in retrospective voting, which is confirmed empirically by the likelihood ratio test that the random-effects intercept equals zero ( $p < 0.001$ ). The baseline model includes individual-level predictors only (not shown). Education and positive evaluation of government performance increase the probability of voting for the incumbent while left-right distance lowers said probability. The predicted probability of the 'average' citizen in each election to vote for the incumbent is quite wide : between 0.14 and 0.90 for any incumbent party, and between 0.14 and 0.75 for the prime minister's party.<sup>10</sup> Given this strong between-election variation, I proceed to include election-level characteristics.

Tables 1-2 show evidence in support of Hypothesis 1. Instability in party organizations, within both incumbent and challenger parties as well as total party instability, weakens the effect of evaluations of government performance on the vote choice. The effect is consistently negative and statistically significant when voting for the incumbent is operationalized either as all

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<sup>10</sup>The log-odds of voting for the incumbent range from around -1.8 to 2.2 at the mean of 0. This translates into a range in probabilities of  $\exp(-1.8)/(1+\exp(-1.8)) = 0.14$  and  $\exp(2.2)/(1+\exp(2.2))=0.90$ . The log odds of voting for the prime minister's party are -2.3 and 1.1, respectively.

incumbent parties or as the prime minister's party alone. The effect of instability in opposition parties is consistently stronger than instability in the incumbent. To understand these effects, it is helpful to examine graphically the interaction between evaluations of government performance and vote choice. Figure 2<sup>11</sup> shows that when party instability is low, voters behave as we would expect: those who believe the government did a “very bad job” are considerably less likely to vote for the incumbent than those who believe the government performed very well. However, as party instability increases, these trends no longer hold. Voters who reported unfavorable evaluations of government performance become increasingly likely to vote for the incumbent, despite their negative evaluations. Moreover, when party instability is moderately high, the 95% confidence intervals indicate that the probability of voting for the incumbent is statistically indistinguishable based on differences in retrospective evaluations of government performance.

Table 3 offers support for Hypothesis 2. The three types of party instability – organizational discontinuities, name changes and leader changes – all weaken retrospective voting. However, this effect is statistically significant only when the dependent variable is operationalized as support for incumbent parties. Name changes have the strongest effect while leader changes and organizational discontinuities have a comparable effect in magnitude. These findings suggest that voters may have trouble both assessing and identifying electoral alternatives when party organizations are unstable. While leader replacements and organizational discontinuities send strong signals about changes in the governing expertise of parties, name changes likely pose difficulties for the identification of parties on the electoral ballot. As all three types of changes have a negative impact on retrospective voting, party instability likely hinders

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<sup>11</sup>Figure 2 displays the probability of voting for the prime minister's party as a function of evaluations of government performance and instability in opposition parties. Figures of the other types of party instability show similar trends and for brevity purposes are not displayed.

not only the assessment of electoral alternatives but also the identification of competing parties.

In all models, I include important control variables and perform robustness checks. I control for cross-regional differences and the number of parties competing in elections. The regional binary variables do not reach statistical significance, save for one model, and therefore systematic regional effects are not evident. ENEP, too, has an inconsistent effect on voting for the incumbent. To test the robustness of coefficient estimates to outliers, I predicted the empirical Bayes random effects. Upon examination of the random effects for the intercept, several potential outliers stood out. I excluded the outliers from the analysis and re-estimated the models. The coefficient estimates closely match those reported in Tables 1-3. Therefore, I am confident that influential outliers are not driving the results reported here and that the estimates are robust across elections.

## **Conclusion**

These findings have important implications for electoral decision-making and the process of democratic representation. They illustrate the importance of stable political parties for the ability of voters to use electoral information, sanction incumbents for their performance in office and to elect viable challengers from the opposition. When political parties undergo organizational changes between elections, when new parties appear on the ballot while existing ones disappear altogether or when parties enter and then abandon electoral coalitions, voters are less capable of assessing the performance and viability of competing parties, and consequently citizens vote retrospectively at lower rates. The empirical results demonstrate that in elections characterized by party instability, voters fail to sanction incumbents for their performance in office.

These results bring to light the important role of political parties in the process of electoral representation. Unlike previous models of retrospective voting, this study does not assume that parties have a passive role in this process. Rather, political elites have incentives to distance themselves from a poor governance record and to claim credit for policy and economic successes. To do so, parties may shift policy positions, bring down unpopular leaders or restructure party organizations. This study examines how changes in party organizations, as well as leader and name changes, affect retrospective voting. The empirical results confirm that political elites can affect the degree to which citizens can sanction incumbents for their performance in office by manipulating the availability and clarity of electoral information and party cues. Future research should study alternative ways in which party organizations may seek to affect the ability of citizens to vote retrospectively – namely, the tendency of party elites to shift policy positions as well as the framing and agenda-setting powers of political parties.

**Table 1: Vote for all Incumbent Parties**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age	0.008*** 0.000	0.008*** 0.000	0.008*** 0.000
Male	-0.017 0.611	-0.016 0.626	-0.017 0.608
Bachelor's degree	-0.018 0.665	-0.018 0.665	-0.018 0.662
Income	0.005 0.694	0.004 0.744	0.005 0.704
L-R distance	-0.273*** 0.000	-0.277*** 0.000	-0.272*** 0.000
Govt performance	1.279*** 0.000	1.300*** 0.000	1.282*** 0.000
<i>x Party Instability</i>	-0.031*** 0.000		
<i>x P.I. in opposition</i>		-0.075*** 0.000	
<i>x P.I. in PM's party</i>			-0.036*** 0.000
Party Instability	-0.032 0.66		
P.I. in opposition		0.153 0.053	
P.I. in PM's party			-0.024 0.742
ENEP, log	0.697 0.527	-0.468 0.664	0.626 0.562
CEE	-0.346 0.703	-1.398* 0.017	-0.452 0.600
S. Europe	-0.523 0.491	-1.040 0.169	-0.584 0.439
Constant	-1.000 0.588	1.039 0.551	-0.860 0.631
Random intercept	0.907	0.814	0.917
Standard Error	0.260	0.233	0.263
Log-likelihood	-11437.106	-11422.482	-11434.369
AIC	22900.212	22870.963	22894.738
N	22251.000	22251.000	22251.000

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Table 2: Vote for the Prime Minister's party**

	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Age	0.007***	0.007***	0.007***
	0.000	0.000	0.000
Male	-0.028	-0.030	-0.027
	0.424	0.388	0.430
Bachelor's degree	-0.368***	-0.367***	-0.368***
	0.000	0.000	0.000
Income	-0.043**	-0.044**	-0.043**
	0.001	0.001	0.001
L-R distance	-0.346***	-0.352***	-0.346***
	0.000	0.000	0.000
Govt performance	1.146***	1.163***	1.150***
	0.000	0.000	0.000
<i>x Party Instability</i>	-0.017*		
	0.02		
<i>x P.I. in opposition</i>		-0.101***	
		0.000	
<i>x P.I. in PM's party</i>			-0.014†
			0.059
Party Instability	-0.037		
	0.467		
P.I. in opposition		0.082	
		0.159	
P.I. in PM's party			-0.004
			0.943
ENEP, log	-1.669*	-2.318**	-1.899*
	0.030	0.003	0.013
CEE	0.038	-0.644	-0.332
	0.953	0.137	0.584
S. Europe	-0.603	-0.871	-0.672
	0.256	0.117	0.206
Constant	2.015	3.195*	2.468
	0.119	0.013	0.051
Random intercept	0.437	0.440	0.450
Standard error	0.129	0.128	0.133
Log-likelihood	-10336.054	-10298.728	-10337.419
AIC	20698.108	20623.457	20700.838
N	22251.000	22251.000	22251.000

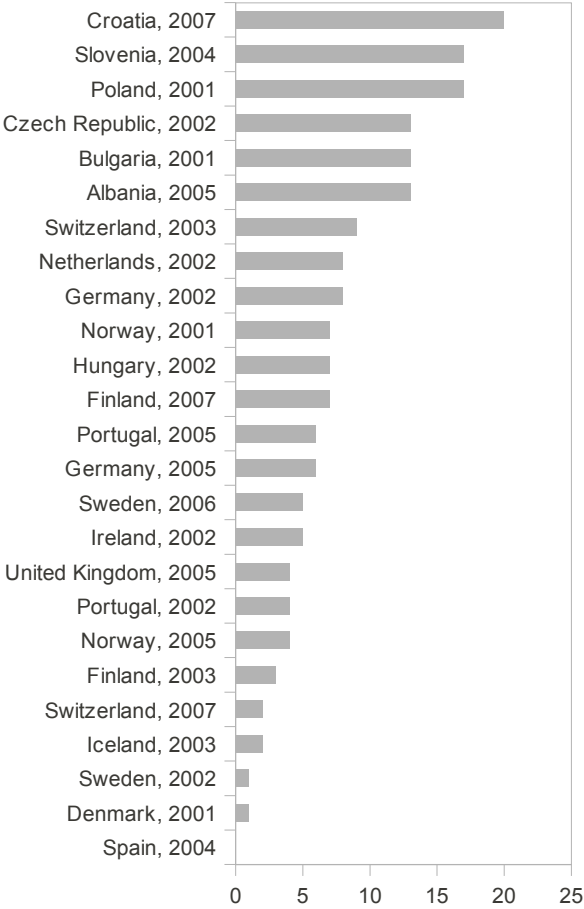
†  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Table 3: Vote for the Incumbent Parties by Types of Party Instability**

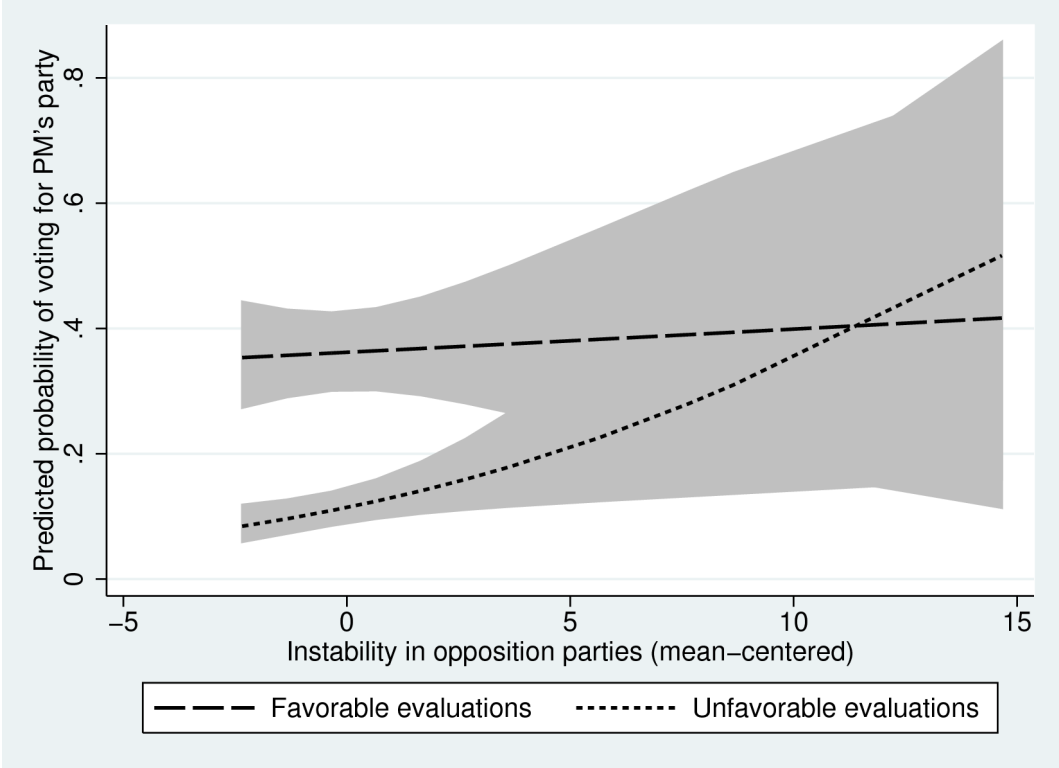
	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Age	0.008*** 0.000	0.008*** 0.000	0.008*** 0.000
Male	-0.017 0.594	-0.017 0.594	-0.016 0.628
Bachelor's degree	-0.018 0.659	-0.018 0.659	-0.019 0.650
Income	0.006 0.665	0.006 0.665	0.005 0.721
L-R distance	-0.271*** 0.000	-0.271*** 0.000	-0.274*** 0.000
Govt performance	1.274*** 0.000	1.314*** 0.000	1.275*** 0.000
x Organizational discontinuities	-0.034*** 0.000		
x Leader change		-0.034*** 0.000	
x Name change			-0.085* 0.036
Organizational discontinuities	-0.035 0.686		
Leader change		-0.035 0.686	
Name change			-0.355 0.343
ENEP, log	0.543 0.591	0.543 0.591	1.110 0.354
CEE	-0.349 0.716	-0.349 0.716	-0.086 0.917
S. Europe	-0.591 0.430	-0.591 0.430	-0.333 0.671
Constant	-0.772 0.644	-0.731 0.656	-1.751 0.387
Random Intercept	0.907	0.907	0.893
Standard error	0.260	0.260	0.256
Log-likelihood	-11433.946	-11433.946	-11444.194
AIC	22893.891	22893.891	22914.389
N	22251.000	22251.000	22251

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Figure 1: Party Instability by Election**



**Figure 2: Predicted probability of retrospective voting conditioned by instability in opposition parties.**



## **Appendix: Codebook for Party Instability Categories**

*Name Change*: 1 if party name is not the same at elections  $t-1$  and  $t$ ; 0 otherwise.

*Leader Change*: 1 if party leader is not the same at elections  $t-1$  and  $t$ ; 0 otherwise.

*New Party*: 1 if party at  $t$  did not compete at  $t-1$ ; 0 otherwise. Parties that originate from mergers, splits or joint lists of existing parties at  $t-1$  are not coded as new party formations.

*Disbanded Party*: 1 if party at  $t-1$  did not appear for reelection at  $t$ ; 0 otherwise. Parties that appear for reelection at  $t$  as mergers, splinters or on joint lists are not considered disbanded.

*Merger*: 1 if party at  $t-1$  officially merged with another party at  $t$ ; 0 otherwise. Defections of party members from one party to another are not considered mergers between two parties.

*Splinter*: 1 if party at  $t$  is a new formation that split off from an existing party; 0 otherwise. Defections of party members that did not originate in a party at  $t$  are not considered splinters.

*Joint lists (entry and exit)*: 1 if party at  $t-1$  appears at  $t$  on an electoral ballot with at least one other party; 1 if party at  $t$  no longer appears on a joint list; 0 otherwise.

*Pre-electoral coalition (entry and exit)*: 1 if party at  $t-1$  made an explicit agreement at  $t$  to cooperate after the election with at least one other party (commonly to form a government or coordinate opposition efforts); 1 if party at  $t$  had abandoned a pre-electoral coalition from election  $t$ ; 0 otherwise.

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