

Intra-government democracy and policy responsiveness to public opinion

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Abstract

Does the internal organization of governmental parties influence their ability to respond to shifts in public opinion? We argue that *intra-government democracy*, defined as the average internal democracy of governmental parties, explains variation in responsiveness. Intra-government democracy has positive features such as promoting internal deliberation and it encourages attention to core supporters' preferences. However, deliberation limits policy changes, and responding to supporters may distract governing parties from the median voter. Thus, we expect that internally democratic governments will be less responsive to changes in the median voter position. We test this expectation using three different estimation strategies for time-series cross-national data on public opinion and governmental policies since the 1970s, and these analyses support our argument. This finding has important implications for our understanding of how intra-party institutions influence substantive responsiveness to public opinion.

Keywords

political representation, policy responsiveness, welfare state generosity, intra-government democracy, party organization

Policy responsiveness to public opinion is a central aspect of liberal democracy (Erikson et al., 2002; Page and Shapiro 1992; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). A defining feature of political representation is “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (Pitkin 1967: 209), and responsiveness to public opinion rates as “one of the justifications for democracy itself” (Powell 2004: 91). Several studies evaluate whether governments are responsive to public demand, and many of these report optimistic conclusions (e.g., Bromley-Trujillo and Poe, 2020; Budge et al., 2012; Canes-Wrone, 2006; Erikson et al., 2002; Kang and Powell, 2010; Klüver and Spoon, 2016; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010; Spoon and Klüver, 2014; but see Achen and Bartels 2016; Giger et al. 2012; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

Although theories of government responsiveness necessarily emphasize the influence of public opinion, there are several additional factors that condition policy responsiveness. For instance, economic performance affects how elites respond to citizens, with diminished responsiveness being a feature of poorly performing economies (Clements et al., 2018; Ezrow et al., 2020). There are also larger gaps between the issue priorities of masses and elites that are associated with economic downturns (Traber et al., 2018). Moreover, existing levels of taxes, interest rates, social spending, or pension reforms have been linked to whether governments are responsive to their citizens (e.g., Budge

et al., 2012; Elsässer and Haffert, 2022; Häusermann, 2010; Kang and Powell, 2010). Finally, political institutions, including electoral rules, federalism, bicameralism, and multi-level governance, also shape policy responsiveness (Ezrow et al., 2024; Rasmussen et al., 2019; Soroka and Wlezien 2010).

Yet, while *country-level political institutions* figure prominently in our understanding of how representative democracy works, studies of the opinion-policy linkage have paid little attention to how *party-level institutions for parties in government* influence policy responsiveness (but see Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018).¹ Political parties employ a wide variety of rules for how membership is linked to leadership and vice versa (Hazan and Rahat 2010), which also affects the way parties compete in elections (Lehrer 2012; Marini 2025; Schumacher et al., 2013). In the Central and Eastern European context, Chiru (2025) has shown that clientelism is associated with internally undemocratic party organizations. Similarly, we focus on the distinction between internally democratic and undemocratic

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organizations. Internally democratic parties feature large “selectorates” in the selection of their leadership (e.g., Lehrer 2012; Schumacher et al., 2013; Bischof and Wagner 2017; Ignazi 2020; for overviews, see Poguntke et al., 2016; Borz and Janda 2020) and allow for broad member participation in policy decisions (Schumacher and Giger 2017; Von dem Berge et al., 2013). For example, parties may grant their members the right to elect the party leader, to choose candidates for general elections, or to hold referenda on coalition agreements. In light of this, the defining features of intra-party democracy are decentralized and inclusive decision-making, which enable the membership to hold the leadership accountable because they can block their way to office. Poguntke et al. (2016: 670; see also Scarrow 2015) define intra-party democracy as the maximization of the “involvement of party members in the decisions that are central to a party’s political life, including program writing, and personnel selection and other intraorganizational decision-making.”²

Our research explores *intra-government democracy*, i.e., whether a governing party or coalition is internally democratic, and asks whether and how it matters for policy responsiveness. Intuitively, governments comprised of parties that are internally democratic should be more responsive to the public. By virtue of their “democratic” definition, we might expect that internally democratic governing parties have effective institutions for channeling the median citizen’s policy preference up to their leadership. Contrary to this expectation, however, on closer inspection the claim emerges that intra-government democracy is less strongly associated with policy responsiveness.

Our expectation is based on two interrelated mechanisms. First, internally democratic governments are oriented towards their supporters’ policy preferences instead of the general public. That is, even if the institutions are effective at representing ordinary citizens’ preferences, they will most likely be geared towards party supporters (Lehrer 2012; see also Schumacher and Giger 2018). Some have argued that opening the leadership selection within parties invites more extreme and intense activists into the fold and empowers these factions (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018). Conversely, to maintain electoral popularity, “undemocratic” parties in government will more easily enact policy change that is directed toward the median voter (Lehrer 2012). Hence, governments comprising parties that are internally less democratic will be more responsive to the public.

Second, by empowering more party members, internally democratic governments’ deliberative processes will be more well developed and constrain or slow down policy change, compared to internally undemocratic governments (Meyer 2013; Marini 2025; see also Schumacher and Giger 2018). Furthermore, slow policy change has been

associated with reduced overall policy responsiveness (Ezrow et al., 2024).

Our empirical analysis is based on the Combined Generosity Index of the latest version of the Comparative Welfare Entitlements Dataset by Scruggs and Tafoya, 2022. We merge these data with information on public preferences from the Eurobarometer (Schmitt et al., 2008) and on governmental parties’ internal structure from the Varieties of Party Identity and Organization data (V-Party; Lührmann et al., 2022). Our final dataset comprises sixteen established European democracies between 1973 and 2018. We employ three different estimation strategies, i.e., two-way fixed effects models, the within-between estimator by Bell and Jones (2015), and a general error correction model (Tromborg, 2014), to show that policy responsiveness is weaker for governments that feature intra-party democracy. In additional analyses below and in the Supporting Information (SI), we present corroborating evidence of our theory that the basis of lower policy responsiveness is due to constraints on policy change that exist for internally democratic governments. Responsiveness may vary according to issue area (Koedam 2022) and we examine the robustness of our results on the salient issue of immigration policy (see Böhmelt 2021).

Our research makes several important contributions. With respect to the study of political parties, existing works examine the effects of intra-party institutions on how parties respond to shifts in the electorate’s policy preferences (Lehrer 2012; Marini 2025; Schumacher et al., 2013), on perceptions of parties’ policy positions (Lin and Lehrer 2021), and on shaping rival parties’ policies (Lehrer et al., 2017). We contribute to this literature on party organization (see also Müller and Strøm 1999) by showing that parties’ internal structure matters for *how they govern*, and specifically how they respond to public opinion.

By implication, we also contribute to the literature on political representation by demonstrating that intra-government democracy is a crucial factor for understanding how public opinion affects policy. Previous works see public preferences over policy as a starting point for understanding government policymaking. The role of the public, i.e., the median voter, is central to shaping parties’ election strategies and policymaking (Budge et al., 2012; Giger et al. 2012; Powell 2000; Klüver and Spoon 2016; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Spoon and Klüver 2014; see also Bartels, 2008; Bernauer et al., 2015; Gilens, 2012; Gilens and Page, 2014; Rosset et al., 2013). However, specific circumstances condition how public opinion shapes policy. As noted, economic performance and country-level political institutions, like federalism or electoral systems, are among these circumstances that influence policy responsiveness (Ezrow et al., 2020; Kang and Powell, 2010; Rasmussen et al., 2019). Our contribution to this literature is to emphasize the role of intra-government democracy in explaining policy responsiveness.

Policy responsiveness and intra-government democracy: Theoretical mechanisms

Responding to Party Supporters versus the General Public

We extend the work on party competition, which provides compelling evidence that intra-party democracy leads political parties to be more responsive to their supporters than the median voter (Lehrer 2012; Schumacher et al., 2013). Furthermore, there is empirical evidence for the other side of this relationship that undemocratic parties are less apt at representing their supporters (Giger and Schumacher 2020; see also Koedam 2022). We argue that the rationale behind these patterns extends to governing parties: those executives composed of undemocratic parties will have more leeway to respond to the median voter, because they are less focused on their supporters. On the other hand, governments consisting of political parties with internally democratic structures will be less responsive to demands of the wider public due to the stronger policy links between their supporters and leadership.

Governmental parties have office-seeking incentives to respond to the median voter. This mirrors the predictions of classical spatial theory (e.g., Cox 1990; Roemer 2001), and empirical studies corroborate this expectation (Adams et al., 2004, 2006): parties seeking to do well in elections and those platforms that have assumed power are indeed responsive to the median (Budge et al., 2012; Kang and Powell, 2010; Maedgen and Wlezien, 2024; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010; but see Achen and Bartels 2016; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

However, party responsiveness to the general public is conditional. Ezrow and Hellwig, 2014, 2015, for example, contend that parties may be less responsive to the public in countries with high levels of economic globalization or corporatism. Lehrer (2012) or Schumacher et al. (2013) argue that the internal organization of political parties tends to condition how they respond to public opinion, which follows from the literature that identifies “party type” as instrumental for understanding parties’ election strategies (Meguid 2008; De Vries and Hobolt 2020; Bergman and Hjermitslev 2025; Ibenskas and Polk 2022a, 2022b; Adams et al., 2006). Specifically, political parties are *more responsive to their core supporters* when their internal organization is *democratic*. Undemocratic parties tend to be less receptive to their supporters’ positions – especially when they conflict with the position of the median (Lehrer 2012; Schumacher et al., 2013). This is because internally democratic parties’ policy positions reflect members’ interests, as they have the opportunity to actually influence the leadership and policy of their platforms. Undemocratic parties’ policies instead reflect party elite interests (Cross

and Katz 2013; Lehrer 2012; Müller and Strøm 1999; Schumacher et al., 2013).

Ultimately, the theoretical and empirical literature strongly suggests that governing democratic parties should be less responsive to the median, especially when the preferences of the median and government supporters diverge, because they are influenced more heavily by their core supporters (Müller and Strøm 1999; Lehrer 2012; Schumacher et al., 2013; Cross and Katz 2013; but see Ibenskas and Polk 2026; Lehmann 2026).

In their innovative studies, Ibenskas and Polk (2022a,b, 2026) and Lehmann (2026) argue that parties respond to the ideological shifts of their core supporters, but also maintain “congruence” to the median voter. That is, they seek to minimize their policy distance to the median voter. In this instance, there is a much weaker tradeoff between representing supporters and the median. It is not straightforward to address this point empirically because we analyze policy (as opposed to party positions), and the scales on which the electorate and policy are measured are different. Nevertheless, the research of Ibenskas and Polk (2022a,b, 2026) and Lehmann (2026) has important implications for our study, because they strengthen the logic for the “deliberation” mechanism (discussed below). If all governing parties can respond to their supporters while maintaining congruence with the median, then the focus would be on internal deliberation for reducing policy responsiveness. At the same time, considering the arguments around party organization (e.g., Lehrer 2012), internally democratic parties are still *relatively* more responsive to their supporters (even if both sets of parties are responsive to supporters in absolute terms).

Intra-government democracy and the rate of policy change

A second mechanism for why internally democratic governmental parties respond less strongly to the median is because they will be slower to change their policy positions (Marini 2025; Meyer 2013; Schumacher and Giger 2018). Their orientation towards representing supporters through democratic and *deliberative* channels not only diverts responsiveness from the median, but it also delays policy change.³ Furthermore, slow policy change itself has been linked to less policy responsiveness to the median (Ezrow et al., 2024).

Parties operate under uncertainty as they do not have full knowledge of, e.g., how voters and other parties will respond to a new policy position (Budge 1994; see also Lindvall et al. 2023). In multi-party systems, which are our empirical focus, there are even higher levels of uncertainty about election outcomes and government formation due to the larger number of competitors. To cope with this uncertainty, party elites – in internally democratic

and undemocratic parties alike – interested in winning elections and participating in government (Cross and Blais, 2012; Robertson, 1976: 143) seek *information* on how voters (and rival parties) might respond to alternative policy positions they could adopt.

To overcome uncertainty and to obtain information on voters' responses to alternative policy positions, parties may present their ideas to a sample of voters in polls, surveys, or focus groups. These voters report their feelings and beliefs about alternative policies, and parties then make inferences about the prospective policies' electoral implications.⁴ There are also cases of party elites relying on private conversations between several parties' elites, where parties' goals, bliss points, and potential concessions leaders are willing to make to form a government are laid out.⁵ By possessing this information, party elites are able to make informed decisions because they can assess alternative policy positions' electoral consequences and implications for government formation (see also Cross and Blais, 2012: 150).

By contrast, members may not have access to similar information from polls, surveys, focus groups, or elites' coordination across party platforms (Cross and Blais, 2012: 150). Instead, they act on more public information from the media and from discussing policy with others. Even if members did have the same information as the party leadership, they may have different priorities: they may be less office-seeking and more policy-oriented (Müller and Strøm 1999: 18).⁶ Furthermore, a number of studies emphasize the role of deliberation for how members affect leadership and hold it accountable in internally democratic parties (see Bohman 1998; Fung 2003; Goodin 2008; Goodin and Dryzek 2006; Niemeyer 2011; Rosenberg 2007). On the other hand, if the party leadership is chosen by party elites, their selectorate is relatively small and undemocratic, and leadership can more swiftly implement their private information that they anticipate will help them in the next election.

Thus, party elites can set the policy position in internally undemocratic parties without membership constraints. By contrast, members effectively set the policy position in internally democratic parties, because they can *constrain* leaders by holding them accountable. These constraints are key to our argument, because they suggest that it takes time for democratic parties to make changes to their policies. Democratically organized parties are associated with more *deliberation* as it moves party leadership campaigns from the party backroom, where party elites with similar preferences for office and votes debate policies, to the public sphere (Cross and Blais, 2012: 136). Hence, our discussion suggests that in a more democratically organized government, characterized by open and deliberative decision-making, policy change will be incremental, and supporters' preferences will be favored over the median voter.

The 2017 French Presidential Election exemplifies how intra-party democracy influences the constituencies to which democratic and undemocratic parties might cater. Macron's En Marche! party was internally undemocratic, efficient, and mass-based, while the incumbent Socialist Party (PS) featured internal democracy that empowered their leftist supporters. The Socialist Party led by François Hollande had been governing since 2012, and the party held primary elections to replace him, with Manuel Valls (former Prime Minister) and Benoît Hamon, reaching the second round. Hamon won this contest and campaigned for President with a "hard left" program for the party.⁷ By contrast, Emmanuel Macron ran for President as the strong leader of the newly created En Marche! (renamed "Renaissance"). The party is characterized as internally undemocratic with Macron as a very strong leader.⁸ Their policy platform, heading into the 2017 election, was informed by using a mass-based (i.e., median voter based) approach which involved 5000 volunteers holding separate 45-min interviews with 25,000 people across France. Furthermore, they were more efficient than the other parties because they were characterized by "independence from the bureaucracy and internal politics of established party structures," which meant they "could make quicker, more fluid campaign decisions."⁹

To summarize the discussion above, we focus on two mechanisms, i.e., responsiveness to party supporters versus the public, and the rate of policy change. Considering the formulation of these mechanisms (see Table 1), their influences should materialize jointly. Hence, and as both factors are linked to intra-government democracy, the aggregate effect should be that intra-government democracy is associated with less policy responsiveness.

Data, variables, and estimation strategies

Using the best available data for our core concepts of interest, we created a time-series cross-section dataset with the country-year as the unit of analysis. Our final dataset comprises 16 established European democracies in 1973–2018.¹⁰ The dependent variable is welfare state generosity, and observations are from the Combined Generosity Index of the latest version of the Comparative Welfare Entitlements Dataset by Scruggs and Tafoya, 2022.¹¹ The index combines a range of social insurance benefits, including employment insurance, sick pay insurance, and public pensions. Ultimately, it comprises the sum of the subindices for unemployment and sick pay insurance and pension generosity. Country-year values are standardized using z-scores normalized on the cross-sectional mean and standard deviation in 1980 (Scruggs 2014). Our final variable ranges from 21.37 to 47.80 with a mean value of 33.70 (standard deviation of 5.85; N = 529). Higher values on the index indicate a more extensive social welfare policy regime and, thus, a more generous welfare state. Proponents

Table 1. Summary of mechanisms and hypothesis.

Relevant factors	Mechanism
Party supporters vs. the general public	Governments that are not democratic internally will have more leeway to respond to the median voter, while internally democratic governments are less responsive to demands of the wider public.
Rate of policy change	Governments that are not democratic internally will respond more quickly to the median because they are more flexible than internally democratic governments to change their policy positions.
Hypothesis	<i>Intra-government democracy hypothesis:</i> Intra-government democracy reduces policy responsiveness to the median voter.

of the Combined Generosity Index contend that it is a better measure of government policy than social welfare spending because the latter is influenced by unemployment rates and the population of pensioners, which cause welfare spending to vary even if entitlement policies remain unchanged (see Ezrow et al., 2024).

Our explanatory variables center on three components: an item on the median left-right policy preference, a variable on government parties' degree of intra-party democracy, and an interaction variable comprising these two variables. To capture public demand for social policy and to maximize comparability, reliability, and the spatio-temporal coverage of our data, we use the Eurobarometer Trend File from 1978 to 2002 (Schmitt et al., 2008) and all available Eurobarometer Surveys between 2003 and 2018. This information is based on the Eurobarometer's item on individuals' positions on the left-right scale from 1 (left) to 10 (right). We first aggregate the individual-level data to the country level using Tukey's (1977) approach and then establish the variable's final value by calculating the average value across all available Eurobarometer surveys per country-year. The variable *Median Voter* has an average value of 5.23 (standard deviation of 0.31) and ranges between 4.41 and 6.18 (N = 529). This measure is appropriate for these analyses because data that directly measures redistributive attitudes are far more limited than the scope of this analysis. Furthermore, existing research provides evidence of a strong relationship between redistributive attitudes and left-right self-placements (Benoit and Laver 2006; Hellwig 2015; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012).

We operationalize intra-party democracy of the governing parties via the Varieties of Party Identity and Organization (V-Party; Lüthmann et al., 2022) dataset. These data comprise variables on candidate nomination and on party personalization (see also Böhmelt et al. 2022). The former is captured by the question: "which of the following options best describes the process by which the party decides on candidates for the national legislative elections?" and values are assigned between 0 (party leader unilaterally decides on which candidates will run for the party in national legislative elections) and 4 (all registered voters decide on which candidates will run for the party in national legislative elections in primaries/caucuses). The latter variable is based on the question: "to what extent is this

party a vehicle for the personal will and priorities of one individual leader?" with answers ranging between 0 (party is not focused on the personal will and priorities of one individual leader) and 4 (party is solely focused on the personal will and priorities of one individual party leader).¹²

We rescaled the personalization item so that higher values signify greater intra-democracy and then calculated the mean of it and the candidate-nomination variable across all governing parties using the government-support data in the V-Party data. Parties are coded as being part of the government if they are represented by at least one cabinet minister. Opposition parties and those platforms tolerating the government without being represented in it are not considered. To facilitate the substantive interpretation of results and to lower the risk for bias stemming from measurement error, we use a dichotomous variant of this variable (Thomas and Bond 2015): a value of 1 for internally democratic governments is assigned when the personalization-nomination index has values larger than its mean. In our dataset of 529 country-years, 70.5% are characterized as internally democratic governments, which leaves nearly 30% of our sample being coded as internally undemocratic governments.¹³

To test the *Intra-Government Democracy Hypothesis*, the core parameter estimates of our analysis are of the multiplicative interaction of the median-voter and intra-government democracy variables. Given the coding of the median-voter item and the dependent variable, a *negative coefficient indicates policy responsiveness*: if the median voter is moving right and increasing in value, welfare state generosity should decrease. Hence, our theoretical argument on the conditioning influence of intra-party organization points to a positive effect for the interaction effect of *Median Voter* and *Intra-Government Democracy*, because this would show that internally democratic governments are less responsive to public opinion.

The empirical models are based on three different modeling approaches, including two-way fixed effects OLS regressions, a within-between estimator, and a general error correction model. First, the fixed effects in the first set of regression models (OLS) are located at the level of countries and years, respectively, and thus control for unobserved (time-invariant unit-level) influences and common temporal shocks. Second, while the approach of a

Table 2. Policy responsiveness and intra-government democracy – TWFE models.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Lagged Dependent Variable	0.922*** (0.016)	0.921*** (0.016)	0.922*** (0.016)
Median Voter	0.002 (0.199)	0.032 (0.205)	−0.474* (0.275)
Intra-Government Democracy		0.077 (0.117)	−4.035*** (1.510)
Median Voter × Intra-Government Democracy			0.810*** (0.297)
Constant	3.383*** (1.192)	3.192*** (1.227)	5.641*** (1.513)
Observations	529	529	529
Year and Country Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Prob. > F	0.000	0.000	0.000

Notes. Table entries are coefficients; standard errors in parentheses; year and country fixed effects included in all models, but omitted from presentation. * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

two-way fixed effects setup has many advantages, Imai and Kim (2021) propose several alternatives. We thus consider the results of a within-between random effects model (Bell and Jones 2015), which comprises variables both in their time-varying form and their over-time average. This allows us to differentiate within-country over-time effects from the between-country effects, i.e., the latter of which addresses differences in policy responsiveness between states, which are usually “controlled away” in two-way fixed effects models. For the within-between estimator, each explanatory variable enters the models in two forms: demeaned (time-varying) for the within-country effect and as a country-average, which captures the between-country effect. Third, we present the results from a general error correction model. This estimation procedure is extremely flexible as we can assess both the immediate and long-term impact of a shock for an explanatory variable on policy responsiveness. The dependent variable in this setup is based on shifts (not levels) in welfare state generosity, which addresses potential issues of nonrandom error structures (Tromborg 2014). Moreover, as the core explanatory variables enter the estimation as shifts and temporally lagged variants, we directly identify the contemporaneous impact of a shock to an explanatory variable as well as its cumulative impact (De Boef and Keele 2008). The error correction model also includes year and country fixed effects. In the SI, we explore three other alternative estimation approaches (fixed effects with clustered standard errors, random-effects models, and Prais-Winsten regression). The broad range of estimation strategies discussed here and in the SI are important as, on their own, each approach has certain drawbacks and cannot fully address concerns over causal influences. However, considering the estimation strategies together provides us with a high degree of confidence in the findings.

Empirical analysis

The results of the two-way fixed effects models are reported in Table 2. Due to the inclusion of fixed effects for countries

and years, these models capture within-country effects, i.e., how does responsiveness change within a state if the governmental parties “switch” from an undemocratic to a democratic organizational structure. Models 1–3 clearly show that significant and substantive results only emerge when considering the multiplicative interaction between *Median Voter* and *Intra-Government Democracy*. Before that, path dependencies are mostly responsible for shaping welfare policies as demonstrated by the positive and significant estimate of the lagged dependent variable. As soon as *Median Voter * Intra-Government Democracy* is incorporated, however, significant and substantively important findings emerge that are consistent with our expectations: the interaction effect is positively signed and statistically significant, which suggests that policy responsiveness declines with an internally democratic government.

This result is further substantiated when calculating the predicted values of *Welfare State Generosity* for several values of the median-voter item, while changing *Intra-Government Democracy* from 1 to 0 (from an internally democratic structure to a non-democratic one). Holding *Median Voter* constant at 3, which is a left-wing position, is associated with a predicted value of 32.995 of *Welfare State Generosity* when the government comprises parties that are internally democratic. However, changing the value of *Intra-Government Democracy* to 0 (non-democratic) is associated with a responsiveness increase as the predicted value of *Welfare State Generosity* is now 34.601. These two estimates are statistically significantly different from each other. We also followed King et al. (2000) and simulated the interaction coefficient 1000 times. The mean value of the simulated interaction coefficients (0.779) is close to what we report in Model 3 (0.810). Out of the 1000 simulations, only 4 (0.4%) of them are negatively signed. Hence, 99.6% of our simulations produce a positively signed coefficient for *Median Voter * Intra-Government Democracy*. In sum, the results summarized in Table 2 and the simulation based on it consistently and robustly point to the conclusion that policy responsiveness declines with internally democratic

Table 3. Policy responsiveness and intra-government democracy – within-between estimator.

	Model 4
Lagged Dependent Variable (Within)	0.917*** (0.016)
Lagged Dependent Variable (Between)	0.998*** (0.009)
Median Voter (Within)	−0.057 (0.201)
Median Voter (Between)	−0.191 (0.398)
Intra-Government Democracy (Within)	0.077 (0.116)
Intra-Government Democracy (Between)	−1.719 (2.787)
Median Voter × Intra-Government Democracy (Within)	2.045*** (0.558)
Median Voter × Intra-Government Democracy (Between)	0.293 (0.532)
Constant	1.897 (2.159)
Observations	529
Year and Country Fixed Effects	Yes
Log Likelihood	−582.654

Notes. Table entries are coefficients; standard errors in parentheses; year and country fixed effects included, but omitted from presentation.

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

governments. The identified effect is both statistically significant and substantially important. Having said that, although the two-way fixed effects models underlying these results provide conservative estimates, they cannot assess the between-country effects, i.e., the differences in policy responsiveness between countries.

We thus continue with Table 3 (Model 4), which summarizes the findings of a within-between random effects model (Bell and Jones 2015). This approach considers variables both in their time-varying form and their over-time average. We thus differentiate within-country over-time effects and between-country effects. To this end, each explanatory variable enters the model in a demeaned (time-varying) form for the within-country effect and as a country-average, which captures the between-country effect. Examining Table 3, we obtain evidence for a within-effect, which mirrors the results of Table 2. The effect size is more strongly pronounced than in Models 1–3, however, as we model between-effects and within-effects jointly: the marginal effect of the interaction term is 2.045 in Model 4 (vs 0.810 in Model 3). Following Bell and Jones (2015), we can also calculate the variance partition coefficient from the two variance terms: 99.32% of the variance in the dependent variable occurs at the within-country-level, which is captured by the two-way fixed effects model of Table 2. Only 0.68% of the higher-level variation of the dependent variable is not captured by Model 3. But as shown in Table 3, jointly modeling between-country effects is not essential in our context as *the within-country effect is dominant* for policy responsiveness and intra-government democracy.

Given the results in Tables 2–3, we conclude that intra-government democracy lowers policy responsiveness, and this effect predominantly occurs within countries. In Table 4, we

summarize the results of a general error correction model to temporally disaggregate the within-country effect. That is, the dependent variable of Model 5 captures shifts in *Welfare State Generosity*, while the variable *Median Voter* enters the estimation in two forms: as an inter-annual shift in public opinion and as a temporally lagged indicator. Either variable is then interacted with *Intra-Government Democracy*, thereby uncovering both the immediate and the long-term impact of governmental parties' organizational structure. According to Model 5, we obtain evidence for a short-term (contemporaneous) and a long-term effect. The short-term marginal effect of the interaction is estimated at 1.233 (statistically significant at 5%), while the long-term marginal effect is calculated at 0.805 (statistically significant at 1%). The latter result mirrors Table 2 Model 3 above in both substantive importance and statistical significance.

Figure 1 leverages the dynamics of the error correction model to plot the effects of public opinion on policy change over time. The graph is based on Table 4, Model 5, which controls for time-invariant country-specific effects. That is, other factors that could potentially influence policy responsiveness, for example, bicameralism (see Ezrow et al., 2024) are held constant. If other factors were able to vary, it is possible (though less likely) that internally democratic governments would be responsive to changes in the median voter position. Model 5 provides the baseline for the calculations to display a forecast of welfare state generosity when the median voter position shifts one standard deviation to the left. As predicted, a leftward opinion shift increases the values of *Welfare State Generosity* steadily over time when governmental parties are internally non-democratic. However, when executive parties are internally democratic, positions of the median voter position are associated with almost no effect on *Welfare State Generosity*.

Additional analyses

We performed several analyses to assess the robustness of our core finding. We present the most important results across Tables 5–7. Several other estimations are presented in the SI. For Table 5, we consider a number of socio-economic control variables as both citizens' policy preferences and government social welfare policy outputs likely respond to economic conditions. The starting point is Model 3 of Table 2. We have compiled data on four socio-economic controls that are taken from the Comparative Political Data Set (Armingeon et al., 2024) and added to this baseline model. First, there is population (in thousands and log-transformed). Second, we include *Unemployment*, which is measured in percentage of the civilian labor force of a country. Third, we build-in the growth of real GDP (in percent change from the previous year) and the log-transformed item *Trade Openness*, which captures the openness of the economy. This is measured as total trade (sum of imports and exports) as a percentage of GDP. *Intra-*

Table 4. Policy responsiveness and intra-government democracy – general error correction model.

	Model 5
Lagged Dependent Variable	−0.099*** (0.017)
Δ Median Voter	−0.654 (0.501)
Intra-Government Democracy	−4.012** (1.591)
Δ Median Voter × Intra-Government Democracy	1.233** (0.608)
Lagged Median Voter	−0.355 (0.294)
Lagged Median Voter × Intra-Government Democracy	0.805*** (0.313)
Constant	4.043** (1.616)
Observations	496
Year and Country Fixed Effects	Yes
Prob. > F	0.000

Notes. Table entries are coefficients; standard errors in parentheses; year and country fixed effects included, but omitted from presentation. * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Government Democracy × *Median Voter* remains positively signed and statistically significant when including the socio-economic controls.

To further assess the robustness of our core finding, we use a five-fold cross-validation quasi-experimental setup that was repeated 30 times using the main model. We refer the interested reader to Ward et al. (2010: 370) who describe this approach in more detail, but to summarize the main points: cross-validation randomly divides our sample we employ for the main model into five segments. We use four segments to estimate the parameters, while the fifth segment is left out and not considered for the estimation of the model. Therefore, we use only randomly selected 80% of the data to build the model. The remaining (randomly chosen) 20% of the sample are not considered for estimating the model. After having estimated the model using this approach, we repeat these steps 30 times and examine the frequency of significant and insignificant interaction terms of *Intra-Government Democracy* × *Median Voter*. Table 6 summarizes the results of the cross-validation exercise. In 30 model runs, with each model being based on a sample of 80% randomly selected cases of the data, only two coefficients are associated with insignificant estimates. This corresponds to less than 7% of the total number of estimations, which is somewhat higher than in the case of the simulation exercise above (0.4% of the simulations are

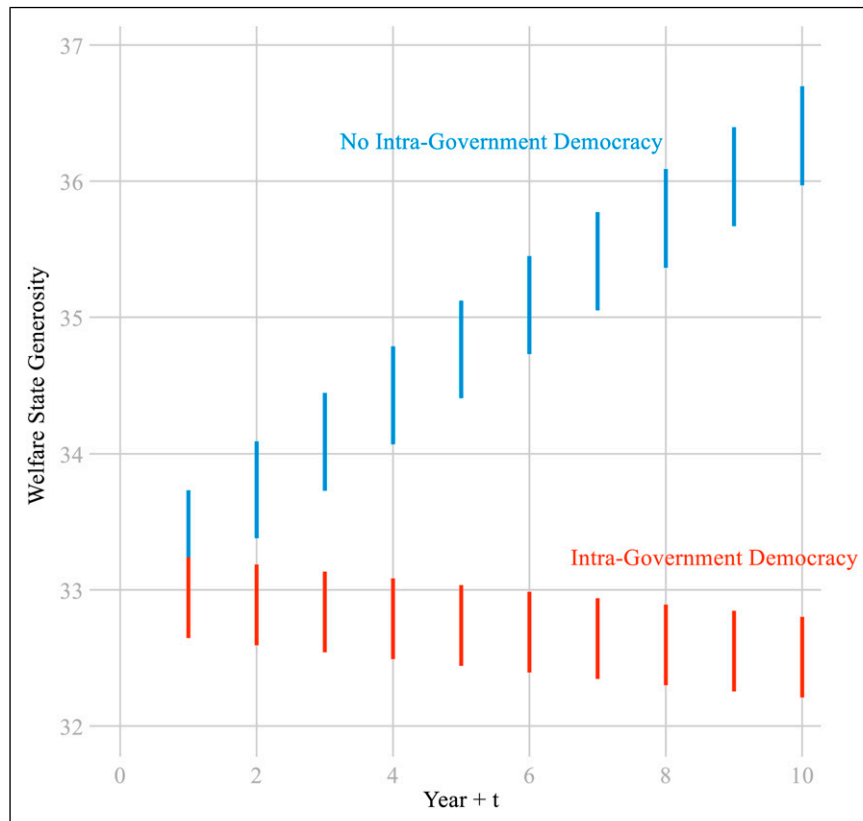


Figure 1. Dynamic Simulation of Policy Responsiveness for Intra-Party Democracy. Notes. Graph displays expected values of *Welfare State Generosity* when the median voter position is set to one standard deviation to the left of its in-sample mean. Estimates are based on Model 5 (N = 1000 simulations). The initial value for *Welfare State Generosity* is set to 33. Vertical bars report 95% confidence intervals.

Table 5. Policy responsiveness and intra-government democracy – socio-economic controls.

	Model 6
Lagged Dependent Variable	0.917*** (0.017)
Median Voter	−0.528* (0.273)
Intra-Government Democracy	−5.004*** (1.541)
Median Voter × Intra-Government Democracy	0.987*** (0.302)
Population	−0.041 (1.258)
Unemployment	−0.048*** (0.014)
GDP Growth	−0.006 (0.020)
Trade Openness	0.485 (0.436)
Constant	4.794 (12.226)
Observations	529
Year and Country Fixed Effects	Yes
Prob. > F	0.000

Notes. Table entries are coefficients; standard errors in parentheses; year and country fixed effects included in all models, but omitted from presentation.

*p < 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

negatively signed or insignificant). That said, in 28 out of 30 estimations of the cross-validation, *Intra-Government Democracy* × *Median Voter* is positively signed and statistically significant.

We also assess the robustness of our finding in another policy field: immigration. Immigration has consistently been ranked as among the most important issues in Europe over the past decades (Böhmelt et al., 2020), making it one of the most salient policy issues of our time (see, e.g., Böhmelt 2021; Böhmelt and Mehrl 2022), while it captures a dimension of issue contestation that is not coterminous with welfare state, left-right issues (Allen and Knight-Finley 2019; Ezrow et al., 2024). Models 7 and 8 are based on the main models in and data of Böhmelt (2021). As a result, the dependent variable, *Immigration Policy*, is a measure of national immigration policies, provided by the Immigration Policies in Comparison (IMPIC) database (Helbling et al., 2017). Higher values stand for more restrictive policies. For the public-opinion variable, we use an item provided in Böhmelt (2021), which is based on the European Social Survey (ESS). Specifically, there is the question “[i]s [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?” Responses appear on a 0-10 scale, which we invert so that higher values represent less favorable attitudes. In light of this, a positive effect of the public-demand item stands for policy responsiveness. Our country-year level variable is based on the average value across individual respondents per year and state. The measure for intra-governmental democracy is the one we introduce in the main text. Model 7 employs a linear time trend, while Model 8 incorporates year fixed effects. The negatively signed interactions of *Public Opinion* × *Median Voter* suggest that

policy responsiveness is weaker with governments that are internally democratic. Due to the less extensive coverage of countries and years ($N = 135$), however, the analyses of responsiveness to immigration must be taken as suggestive rather than definitive (see also Ezrow et al., 2024). The pattern we identify is nonetheless consistent with what we report above and in the main text.

In the SI, we present numerous additional analyses, and the results from these continue to support our main findings presented here. First, we disaggregate the intra-party democracy measure by candidate nomination and leader personalization. We also use these individual components to create a new intra-party democracy variable for which governments are only coded as democratic if both candidate nomination and leader personalization are strongly democratic. Second, our models in the main text focus on the core variables of interest and some controls, but we present estimations in the SI when considering institutional controls such as countries’ membership in the EU, their degree of federalization, their electoral system, whether there is a unicameral or bicameral structure, and the influence of the

Table 6. Five-fold cross-validation.

	Coefficient estimate	$P > t $
Cross-validation 1	1.133	0.003
Cross-validation 2	0.670	0.058
Cross-validation 3	0.776	0.027
Cross-validation 4	1.006	0.002
Cross-validation 5	0.687	0.045
Cross-validation 6	0.867	0.009
Cross-validation 7	0.697	0.059
Cross-validation 8	1.082	0.004
Cross-validation 9	0.797	0.010
Cross-validation 10	0.824	0.025
Cross-validation 11	0.648	0.058
Cross-validation 12	0.561	0.088
Cross-validation 13	1.061	0.004
Cross-validation 14	1.114	0.001
Cross-validation 15	0.857	0.019
Cross-validation 16	0.663	0.061
Cross-validation 17	0.896	0.007
Cross-validation 18	0.794	0.023
Cross-validation 19	0.948	0.009
Cross-validation 20	0.795	0.025
Cross-validation 21	0.938	0.007
Cross-validation 22	0.910	0.006
Cross-validation 23	0.803	0.024
Cross-validation 24	0.596	0.130
Cross-validation 25	0.950	0.004
Cross-validation 26	0.912	0.007
Cross-validation 27	1.074	0.004
Cross-validation 28	0.411	0.227
Cross-validation 29	0.870	0.015
Cross-validation 30	0.894	0.009

Table 7. Policy responsiveness and intra-government democracy – immigration policy.

	Model 7	Model 8
Lagged Dependent Variable	1.022*** (0.091)	1.021*** (0.096)
Public Opinion	0.014 (0.009)	0.019 (0.011)
Intra-Government Democracy	0.062* (0.030)	0.080* (0.039)
Public Opinion × Intra-Government Democracy	−0.012* (0.006)	−0.015* (0.008)
Year Trend	0.001 (0.001)	
Constant	−1.301 (1.448)	−0.105 (0.088)
Observations	135	135
Prob. > F	0.000	0.000

Notes. Table entries are coefficients; standard errors in parentheses; year and country fixed effects included in all models, but omitted from presentation. * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

judiciary (Table A2); In Table A3, we focus on the statistically significant control variables and re-estimate the two-way fixed effects model when using an index variable for intra-party democracy. We also distinguish between types of government: single-party majority governments and coalition governments in Table A4. In Table A5, we focus on government popularity as measured by the seat share of all parties in power; in doing so, we examine the influence of the support for (far-) right governments. In addition, we alter the estimation strategy by considering two-way fixed effects with clustered standard errors, random-effects models, and Prais-Winsten regression with panel-level heteroskedasticity-corrected standard errors (Table A6).

Underlying our *Intra-Government Democracy Hypothesis* is the assumption that governments characterized by high (low) levels of intra-party democracy will be associated with less (more) policy change. In Table A7, we report analyses showing that absolute policy change conditions policy responsiveness, i.e., years that have large policy changes are indeed associated with responsive policy changes compared to years with smaller changes. These findings are at odds with existing research by Böhmelt et al. (2022) and Böhmelt and Ezrow (2024). The former study identifies populist parties as internally undemocratic, and the latter argues that these parties have a much more difficult time passing their preferred policies through the legislature when they govern. We suggest that populist governments should be more effective – not less – because they are internally undemocratic. The previous works emphasize the nature of populist ideology, primarily its anti-elitism, that renders these governments ineffective at passing their preferred policies. We explore this tension between our findings and previous results in Table A8 that controls for populist governments (Model A18) and an estimation that omits them (Model A19). These analyses of policy responsiveness suggest that populist ideology is unique, and is weighted more than internal party organization: they support previous conclusions of Böhmelt et al. (2022) and Böhmelt and Ezrow (2024) by showing that

estimates for internally undemocratic governments' responsiveness increase when populist parties are omitted.

Conclusion

How government policy responds to public opinion is one of the most important measures by which we can evaluate democracy. A consensus has emerged that the quality of democracy is influenced by political institutions (Ferland, 2020; Hooghe et al., 2019; Kang and Powell, 2010; Soroka and Wlezién, 2010). In this article, we have evaluated government responsiveness to public opinion, paying particular attention to a previously overlooked aspect of governments, the internal structure of their political parties, as they are primarily responsible for channeling public preferences into policy proposals. We empirically analyze data from 16 democracies on government welfare state generosity since 1973. Using three different estimation strategies, we provide evidence for the *Intra-Government Democracy Hypothesis* that policy responsiveness to public opinion is stronger with governments composed of undemocratic parties than those composed of internally democratic parties.

These central findings corroborate arguments of Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018). According to their theory, allowing citizens more control over leadership through internal democratic reforms – such as through the primary elections in the US – has weakened political parties by allowing more extreme and intense citizens control over these parties' policies. This, in turn, makes it more difficult for them to put forward policies that are in the general interest, namely, that cater to the most citizens. Our analysis supports this interpretation insofar as democratic parties, when they take office, are not responsive to the public. Like Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018), our theory suggests that internal democratic reforms make parties more responsive to narrower interests, i.e., their supporters. We add a critical piece to this puzzle by evaluating absolute policy change and show that increased deliberation within

democratic parties leads to policy sclerosis, which also decreases responsiveness to the median voter.

In demonstrating how the internal structure of governing parties matters for government responsiveness, this study lays a path for new research on how the views of the public are reflected in policy. Follow-up research should take up the question of responsiveness “to whom” by examining whether intra-government democracy means governments are more sensitive to the preferences of some *sub-constituencies* – such as the affluent, well educated, or politically active – over others (see Bartels, 2008; Bernauer et al., 2015; Dingler et al., 2019; Elkjær and Iversen, 2020; Elkjær and Klitgaard, 2024; Giger et al., 2012; Gilens and Page, 2014; Griffin and Newman, 2005; Homola, 2019; Persson et al., 2024; Peters and Ensink, 2015; Reher, 2018). One possibility, for example, is that internally undemocratic governments, if it is easier for external influences to target their leadership that are unconstrained by their supporters, may be more responsive to the affluent (e.g., Gilens 2012).

Future research will also provide more detailed, qualitative assessments of how intra-party politics is influencing government responsiveness. Studies that seek to open the “black box” of party politics are particularly welcome to further elucidate the causal paths, relating to party supporters and internal deliberation, that are highlighted in this study (see also Bolleyer and Kölln 2025; Kölln and Polk 2023).

A final direction of future study is based on recent research that examines party responsiveness in the context of “congruence” (Ibenskas and Polk 2022a, 2022b, 2026; Lehmann 2026), i.e., in terms of minimizing policy distances between parties and voters. From this “responsiveness-congruence” perspective, there is less of a tension for parties when responding to the median voter or to their supporters: a party can respond to its supporters while reducing its policy distance to the median, and vice-versa. Future research will apply this framework for explaining party positions to the domain of government policy action.

The normative implications of our findings are worth reflecting upon. On the one hand, by slowing the process of law-making, governments comprised of parties with high levels of internal democracy may exhibit slow responsiveness to the median voter. On the other hand, these governments will be more internally deliberative and more sensitive to the political preferences of their supporters, which are arguably positive outcomes for democracy. Indeed, in Riker’s (1992) defense of bicameralism, these characteristics of internally democratic governments – slow lawmaking and not being overly responsive to majorities -- were also seen as positive features. However one interprets the central findings, we identify the tradeoff that when internally democratic governments have been more deliberative in passing legislation, they have also been less responsive to changing preferences in the electorate.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. An important exception is Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018), which we discuss in the conclusion.
2. Internally democratic parties thus “are founded on principles of participation, competition, representation, responsiveness, and transparency” (Rahat and Shapira 2017: 88). What matters primarily is whether party members can influence decision-making, internal debate is possible (and the party leadership does not rule this out), and procedures are inclusive of various factions and organizational layers within a party (Meijers and Zaslove 2021; Rahat and Shapira 2017; Scarrow 2015). This implies that personalized leadership is less strongly pronounced in more internally democratic parties.
3. Lehrer et al. (2017) argue that democratic parties are more deliberative, and they examine implications for how intra-party organization influences the transmission of policy positions between political parties. Here, the focus is on governing parties and their responsiveness to the mean voter.
4. There is anecdotal evidence for how focus groups influence party policy as reported by news sources in Ireland (Sheahan 2016), Germany (Lehmann 2016), Austria (ORF 2014), and the UK (BBC 2014).
5. One example is a series of dinners by young parliamentarians of the CDU and German Greens at an Italian restaurant in the mid-1990s, which was referred to as the German “pizza connection” (Finger and Lerch 2011). The information presented at the meetings led attendees to agree on joint policy positions even, in some circumstances, if these did not align with their own parties’ positions (Fischer 2008).
6. Müller and Strøm (1999: 18) argue that a democratic leadership’s selectorate “may promote policy orientation at the expense of office benefits, since leaders must show greater concern for the policy preferences of their followers” (see also Bäck 2008; Lehrer 2012; Meyer 2013; Schumacher et al., 2013).
7. See online at: <https://tinyurl.com/bpay4y26>.

8. See online at: <https://tinyurl.com/5cn4szua>.
9. See online at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdddnv9n>.
10. These are (with varying years of coverage): Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.
11. The data are available at: <https://www.cwep.us/>.
12. Collection for the V-Party data set only commenced in 2020 when about 700 experts began discussing and coding the policy positions and organizational capacity of political parties across a large number of elections and countries. Hence, the V-Party information is given by retrospective expert placements. Since our observation period begins in the 1970s, this might induce bias due to overly stable placements by experts. Having said that, in terms of intra-party democracy and our particular focus on intra-government democracy, we are fairly confident to conclude that this is not a challenge. First, as discussed in Giger and Schumacher (2020: 700), party organization is generally “unlikely to change dramatically over time,” which suggests that intra-party democracy measures are expected to be fairly stable over time. Second, this assessment is also supported by other available data sets on intra-party democracy: Brause and Poguntke, 2026 have coded intra-party democracy on a global scale, and in a *time invariant* fashion precisely due to the reason stated in Giger and Schumacher (2020: 700). The same applies to the Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA) data set used by, for example, Böhmelt et al. (2022). Third, the V-Party data employ rigorous coding practices to exclude the possibility of bias. Specifically, at least four coders provide their assessment per observation, and data are ultimately aggregated via the Bayesian Item Response Theory measurement model of the more general V-Dem data (Pemstein et al., 2020). Finally, also note that we do not introduce the data at the party level – the country-level is our unit of analysis. Thus, we first combine the V-Party information into a party-level index, then calculate the average value of that index across government parties, before dichotomizing it. As a result, we do have over-time variation in our intra-government indicator through the variation in government composition and (even if less so) parties’ over-time variation in intra-party democracy using the V-Party data.
13. We examined yearly absolute policy change as reflected by the Combined Generosity Index, for internally democratic governments and for undemocratic governments. The estimated levels of policy change are consistent with our argument and the postulated mechanism: the mean value of annual absolute change in *Welfare State Generosity* is 0.580 for government parties that are not democratically organized, and 0.519 for internally democratic governing parties. We return to this in the SI.

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