

Asymmetric Accountability: A Causal Test of Multidimensional Legislative Responsiveness in Five European Democracies

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Abstract

This study examines how citizens in five European democracies (France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, and Poland) evaluate multidimensional legislative responsiveness. Utilizing a conjoint experiment with nationally representative samples, the research causally identifies the electoral impact of policy, allocation, service, and symbolic responsiveness. The analysis reveals a robust pattern of asymmetric accountability: voters consistently penalize underperformance relative to peer legislators more severely than they reward equivalent overperformance. This finding provides strong empirical support for a loss-aversion mechanism in electoral politics, where voters experience representational shortfalls as losses compared to a neutral reference point. While all four dimensions influence vote choice, substantive efforts—particularly policy and resource allocation—exert greater influence than symbolic actions. These results hold across diverse electoral systems, suggesting that asymmetric evaluation is a general feature of voter behavior rather than an institutional artifact. The findings indicate that legislators face powerful incentives to prioritize risk minimization and the avoidance of failure over the pursuit of exceptional performance, as the electoral rewards for the latter are comparatively modest and occasionally statistically insignificant.

Keywords

Legislative responsiveness; Electoral accountability; Loss aversion; Conjoint experiment; Comparative politics

Introduction

Legislators devote substantial time and resources to demonstrating responsiveness to their constituents – shaping policy, securing funds, solving individual problems, and maintaining a visible local presence. Yet electoral returns to these efforts are highly uneven. Exceptional performance often yields only modest political rewards, while perceived failures can trigger severe electoral punishment. This asymmetry raises a fundamental question for democratic accountability: how do voters evaluate different forms of legislative responsiveness, and why do negative deviations appear to matter more than positive ones?

Existing research offers valuable but fragmented insights. Studies typically examine isolated activities – such as roll-call voting (e.g. Cayton 2017), distributive spending (e.g. Levitt and Snyder 1997), or constituency casework (e.g. Serra and Moon 1994) – treating them as analytically separate. As a result, causal evidence remains limited on how citizens integrate multiple forms into a single judgment, trade them off, or react asymmetrically to good versus bad performance.

This asymmetry is rooted in foundational psychological principles of *reference-dependent preferences* and *loss aversion*, derived from prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979), as well as the cognitive mechanisms of the *negativity bias*. Prospect theory posits that individuals do not evaluate outcomes in isolation, but rather as gains or losses relative to a neutral reference point. Because losses are weighed more heavily than equivalent gains, outcomes that fall below this reference point evoke stronger reactions than equivalent positive deviations above it. Consequently, underperformance generates severe electoral punishment, whereas overperformance yields diminishing marginal returns.

This study adopts a multidimensional conception of legislative responsiveness rooted in Eulau and Karps' (1977) classic framework, which distinguishes four core dimensions: policy responsiveness (advocating the district's interests in law-making), allocation responsiveness (securing material resources), service responsiveness (assisting individuals through casework), and symbolic responsiveness (cultivating visibility and emotional connection). Rather than examining these dimensions in isolation, the study analyses how voters evaluate them jointly and comparatively. Empirically, a conjoint experiment is fielded in five European democracies – France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, and Poland. The design enables causal identification of the electoral effects of each responsiveness dimension while holding constant candidate demographics and party affiliation.

The paper makes four main contributions. First, it provides a causal ranking of the electoral value of policy, allocation, service, and symbolic responsiveness within a unified experimental framework. Second, it advances a theoretical account of asymmetric accountability, arguing that voters evaluate legislators relative to a minimum peer-based performance threshold and react more strongly to shortfalls than to equivalent improvements. Third, it provides direct empirical evidence of asymmetric accountability: voters consistently penalize legislators for below-average responsiveness far more than they reward above-average effort across responsiveness dimensions and national contexts. Finally, by demonstrating that this pattern holds across diverse electoral systems and political contexts, the study shows that asymmetric evaluation is a general feature of voter behaviour rather than an artefact of any single institutional setting.

The results indicate that all four forms of responsiveness influence vote choice, but not equally. Substantive efforts carry greater weight than symbolic activities. More importantly, however, the direction of performance is decisive. Falling short of peer legislators produces large and reliable electoral penalties, whereas exceeding them yields small and occasionally statistically insignificant gains. The resulting incentive structure is therefore defensive: representatives are rewarded primarily for avoiding failure rather than for achieving exceptional performance.

Theoretical framework

Constituency Service: The Multidimensional Puzzle

Constituency service refers to the activities and efforts that elected officials – typically members of a legislature – undertake to assist and respond to the needs of their constituents. Constituency service takes multiple forms, each reflecting a different way in which legislators respond to the needs and expectations of their constituents. This study conceptualizes constituency service as *different forms of responsiveness* distinguishing between policy, allocation, service, and symbolic responsiveness (Eulau and Karps 1977). The four forms of responsiveness illustrate the multifaceted nature of constituency service, encompassing both practical assistance and broader political representation.

While macro-theories of European representation often focus on collective party mandates (Andeweg and Thomassen 2005) or broader normative models like promissory representation (Mansbridge 2003), Eulau and Karps' (1977) multidimensional taxonomy provides a complementary behavioral foundation focused at the individual level. In European parliamentary systems, executive dominance and tight party discipline make collective policy outcomes structurally difficult to attribute to a single legislator. Because citizens cannot easily trace final outcomes back to their specific representative, they evaluate representation by shifting their focus to the individual, agentic effort they can actually observe. Eulau and Karps' framework remains uniquely relevant because its four distinct dimensions capture the exact behavioral currencies that citizens rely on as informational proxies. Disaggregating responsiveness this way allows us to analyze how voters systematically audit these individual behavioral inputs when collective institutional outputs are obscured.

To evaluate how voters audit representative performance, this study disaggregates constituency service into Eulau and Karps' (1977) four conceptual dimensions of responsiveness. Policy responsiveness involves actions aimed at shaping laws or regulations to benefit the constituency as a whole, focusing on collective outcomes rather than individual grievances. While US scholarship emphasizes roll-call voting as the primary mechanism for signaling policy alignment (e.g. Cayton 2017; Kuklinski and Elling 1977), European legislators utilize a broader parliamentary repertoire – including oral questions (Borghetto, Santana-Pereira, and Freire 2020; Martin 2011), committee work (Raymond and Holt 2019; Stratmann and Baur 2002), bill sponsorship (Arter 2011), and legislative speeches (Hill and Hurley 2002) – to signal responsiveness and secure electoral returns (Ansolabehere and Jones 2010; Bussing et al. 2020; Fowler, Douglass, and Clark 1980; Marcinkiewicz and Stegmaier 2019).

Allocation responsiveness focuses on securing tangible, localized public resources or infrastructure investments that directly improve district welfare. An extensive comparative literature confirms that distributive “pork-barrel” politics yields reliable electoral premiums for incumbents globally, with documented positive voting returns spanning the United States

(Levitt and Snyder 1997; Pedron and Wessel 2025), Australia (Leigh 2008), Portugal (Veiga and Veiga 2013), Hungary (Papp 2019), Slovakia (Spáč 2021), and England (Lattmann 2024).

Service responsiveness concerns individual casework, where legislators or their staff directly assist citizens in navigating bureaucratic obstacles, obtaining benefits, or resolving administrative disputes. While substantial US evidence demonstrates that intensive casework boosts state and federal vote shares (Serra and Moon 1994; Serra and Pinney 2004), European evidence is more limited; cross-national findings indicate that European MPs frequently prioritize collective district advocacy over individualized "welfare officer" roles (André, Gallagher, and Sandri 2014).

Finally, symbolic responsiveness comprises psychological rather than transactional gestures to cultivate emotional or identity-based connections with constituents. This includes attending local events, meeting community groups, celebrating regional milestones, and deploying empathetic communication strategies to frame the MP as attentive to local values (Blidook and Koop 2024; Koop, Bastedo, and Blidook 2018; Petter 2025). Though crucial for building trust, symbolic efforts remain difficult to measure systematically and often overlap with policy activities; in legislatures where opposition lawmakers face rigid institutional barriers to policymaking, ostensible policy tools like bill initiation or parliamentary questions often function primarily as symbolic representations of constituent concern.

Despite the depth and breadth of scholarship on constituency service, several gaps remain. First, existing research typically examines the four forms of responsiveness in isolation, generating fragmented insights about activities that citizens often perceive as part of a single representative role. This piecemeal approach makes it difficult to assess how voters trade off different types of responsiveness, or whether some forms matter more than others in shaping political evaluations. Second, most studies rely on observational or self-reported data, which complicates causal inference because legislators choose their own activity portfolios and citizens' exposure to these activities is uneven and often unobservable. As a result, prior findings cannot disentangle whether voter reactions reflect true responsiveness or correlated features of legislators and districts. Finally, while classic theories emphasize that voters may react more strongly to failures than to successes, empirical research has rarely tested this asymmetry across multiple forms of responsiveness or political environments.

The present study addresses these limitations through a unified, experimentally grounded approach. By simultaneously manipulating four types of responsiveness in a conjoint experiment fielded in five diverse European countries, the analysis isolates the causal effects of policy, allocation, service, and symbolic efforts within a single framework. This design enables direct comparison across responsiveness types, reveals how voters integrate multiple cues when forming evaluations, and allows for systematic testing of whether positive and negative deviations from expected legislative effort carry symmetrical or asymmetrical weight. The comparative scope further makes it possible to assess whether these patterns hold across distinct electoral systems and representational traditions. Taken together, *the study offers a comprehensive, cross-national causal test of multidimensional responsiveness, advancing our understanding of how citizens judge their representatives and how different facets of constituency service translate into political support.*

Asymmetric Sensitivity to Under- versus Overperformance

This study's framework builds on the idea that voters evaluate legislators across multiple dimensions of responsiveness each corresponding to a core function of democratic representation. Crucially, it posits that failures in responsiveness tend to be more politically consequential than successes, and that this asymmetry reflects voters' stronger sensitivity to negative performance. The theoretical framework synthesizes three interconnected mechanisms: (1) the asymmetric evaluation of loss aversion, (2) the foundational benchmarking of reference dependence, and (3) the cognitive amplification of the negativity bias.

First, the asymmetry between punishment and reward in electoral politics builds on *prospect theory's* core concepts of *reference dependence* and *loss aversion* (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Levy 2003; McDermott 2004; Patty 2006). Drawing on prospect theory, voters experience losses far more intensely than equivalent gains. When an MP falls short of expectations – fails to provide assistance, neglects policy responsibilities, or reduces district visibility – citizens perceive these shortfalls as losses relative to a baseline standard of representation (the neutral reference point). Such losses elicit stronger emotional and evaluative reactions than comparable gains would, resulting in harsher punishment for underperformance than reward for exceeding expectations. This disproportionate negative impact stems from the fundamental insight that the psychological pain of losing something is subjectively greater than the pleasure derived from gaining that same item.

This psychological mechanism closely mirrors dynamics identified in macro-level research on executive accountability and the “cost of governing”. Specifically, Naurin, Soroka, and Markwat (2019) find a pattern of “asymmetric accountability” in government performance, demonstrating that voters' evaluations respond far more strongly to broken election pledges than to fulfilled ones. While that literature focuses on executive outcomes and programmatic promises at the party level, the same cognitive architecture applies to individual legislative representation. By shifting the analytical focus from macro-level policy outcomes to individual, multi-dimensional legislative effort, this study tests whether asymmetric accountability operates as a foundational feature of micro-level voter evaluations across distinct behavioral domains.

Second, citizens, facing high uncertainty and lacking objective benchmarks for legislative performance, default to relative evaluation rather than absolute standards (Festinger 1954). This approach aligns with organizational psychology, which confirms that evaluations are rarely absolute but are instead anchored to a normative peer standard for the task (Murphy and Cleveland 1995), often relying on comparisons with others rather than objective evidence (Epitropaki and Martin 2005). The political context thus establishes a *minimum performance threshold* – the behavioural reference point that activates voters' underlying psychological biases – which the study operationalizes, drawing on reference dependence (Kahneman and Tversky 1979), as ‘similar effort to other MPs’.

This operationalization does not imply that voters rely on a single or universal benchmark when judging representatives. Alternative reference points are both plausible and well supported in the literature, including incumbents' past performance, campaign promises, partisan standards, or abstract norms of ‘good representation’. In practice, citizens are likely to draw on multiple benchmarks simultaneously. The present framework therefore does not claim to identify the reference point of electoral accountability, but rather to test one theoretically grounded and empirically tractable standard: comparative evaluation relative to other representatives performing the same role. Social comparison theory suggests that such peer-based benchmarks

are especially salient under conditions of uncertainty and limited information – precisely the environment in which most voters evaluate legislative behaviour (Festinger 1954). The experiment thus examines whether asymmetric punishment emerges when performance is framed relative to a commonly available comparative standard, not whether this benchmark exhausts all forms of voter expectation. This asymmetry is reinforced by the fact that responsiveness is often evaluated through observable effort rather than policy outcomes. In parliamentary systems, concrete outcomes are difficult to attribute to individual legislators, whereas behaviours such as constituency visits, parliamentary questions, or accessibility are clearly identifiable and personally attributable. As a result, failures of responsiveness are especially salient to voters and become potent triggers of blame and electoral punishment.

The reliance on relative, baseline-driven evaluations conceptually mirrors prominent observational approaches in the study of legislative politics. For instance, Volden and Wiseman (2014) assess legislative effectiveness relative to institutional constraints such as seniority, majority status, and positions of power, rather than treating observed performance in absolute terms. While their framework focuses on legislative productivity in the United States Congress, it reflects a similar analytical premise: political performance is most meaningfully assessed relative to contextually grounded expectations. This study applies that benchmark logic to the evaluation of multi-dimensional legislative effort, emphasizing deviations from an expected baseline rather than absolute levels of activity.

Third, these core psychological mechanisms are amplified by the *negativity bias* – an independent cognitive tendency for individuals to give far greater weight, attention, and importance to negative outcomes than to positive ones of equal magnitude (Baumeister et al. 2001). Supported by neurological evidence showing that negative stimuli capture attention more quickly and create more durable memories (Ito et al. 1998; Rozin and Royzman 2001), this bias ensures that negative information remains more salient to voters. It thus provides the cognitive foundation for loss aversion, leading individuals to react more intensely to performance shortfalls than to equivalent gains (Hood 2011; Weaver 1986). In any evaluative context – from professional reviews to electoral judgments – this translates into failures being inherently more visible and impactful than successes. Furthermore, political failures (mistakes, losses, criticisms) are often easily and clearly attributed to a specific agent or decision, fitting the psychological need for causal closure. Conversely, political successes are frequently complex, incremental, and difficult to credit solely to one individual or action, often being attributed instead to external luck or institutional factors (Weiner 1985). The combination of the human mind's wiring to prioritize negative cues and this attribution asymmetry means that failure clearly stands out, while success often fades into the background.

Together, these mechanisms help explain why underperformance may generate stronger and more consistent electoral punishment, whereas overperformance yields comparatively modest, and occasionally statistically insignificant, rewards. The result is an asymmetric relationship in which voters are more responsive to the costs of poor representation than to the benefits of excellent representation. Based on the above, the hypothesis tested in this study is as follows.

Hypothesis: Voters penalize legislators for falling below expected levels of responsiveness more strongly than they reward legislators for exceeding those expectations; underperformance will have a larger and more consistent negative effect on voter evaluations than overperformance will have a positive effect.

Countries in the Study

The study draws on a survey experiment carried out in five European countries – France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, and Poland – chosen to capture substantial variation in political systems, party competition, and traditions of constituency service. These countries differ markedly in their electoral rules: from majoritarian arrangements (France’s two-round runoff) through mixed-member systems (Hungary’s mixed-member majoritarian and Italy’s mixed-member proportional) to proportional electoral systems (Ireland’s single transferable vote and Poland’s party-list PR). Such differences structure MPs’ incentives to cultivate personal reputations and shape voters’ expectations of responsiveness (Carey and Shugart 1995; Karvonen 2009). They also vary in party organizational strength and the degree of localism in political culture, with Ireland’s traditionally personalized constituency politics (Farrell, Field, and Martin 2025) and Italy’s tradition of clientelism (Di Mascio 2012) standing in contrast to the more programmatic orientations of France and Poland (Poyet 2021). Finally, the five countries exhibit diverse patterns of government–opposition relations – from Hungary’s centralized single-party dominance (with the long-term dominance of Fidesz-KDNP) to more competitive forms of multipartism in Italy, Ireland, France, and Poland. These contextual contrasts test whether patterns hold across diverse electoral and party systems.

While the baseline experimental items utilize standardized terminology, the institutional and psychological meaning of ‘district’ and ‘constituent’ varies across these five cases. In highly localized, candidate-centric systems like Ireland’s STV, these items directly evoke individual geographic representation; conversely, in party-list systems like Poland or large multi-member arrangements like Italy, they likely capture broader regional or partisan reference groups. Including cases with this degree of structural heterogeneity provides a demanding test of the broader argument, allowing us to examine whether patterns of asymmetric accountability travel across diverse representational contexts despite variation in how constituencies are institutionally defined.

Study Design and Data

The study relies on a conjoint experiment, a design that makes it possible to evaluate several causal relationships within a single framework (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). The experiment exposed respondents to paired comparisons of two hypothetical legislators – labelled Legislator A and Legislator B – who were described using a set of experimentally manipulated features. In conjoint terminology, these manipulated features are ‘attributes’, and the specific values they take are the ‘attribute levels’. The central attributes captured four types of legislative responsiveness, complemented by additional descriptors such as party affiliation, gender, age, and local residency as shown by Table 1.

In line with the theoretical framework, which posits that voter evaluations are determined by performance relative to a peer standard, all four dimensions of responsiveness were operationalized based on the legislator’s effort compared to that of ‘other MPs’. The four core experimental attributes and their definitions, as presented to survey respondents, were: *policy responsiveness*, defined as the legislator’s effort ‘to represent the policy views (education, health care, agriculture etc.) of their district’; *allocation responsiveness*, defined as the legislator’s effort ‘to attract funding into the district (in the form of projects, investments etc.)’;

service responsiveness, defined as the legislator's effort 'assisting constituents in solving their individual problems'; and *symbolic responsiveness*, defined as the legislator's effort 'attends community events in their constituency more often than other MPs'.

The vignettes in this study prioritize *reported levels of effort* over final policy or distributive outcomes to isolate the legislator's agentic behavior from confounding external factors such as government funding decisions, bureaucratic responsiveness, or party leadership. In contemporary democracies, citizens rarely observe the internal work of parliament or the complex mechanics through which policy outcomes are produced. Instead, evaluations are typically formed through visible signals of activity – such as parliamentary questions, bill initiations, constituency visits, media appearances, or the accessibility of constituency offices (Fenno 1978; Mayhew 1974). In this sense, the phrase 'spends effort' functions as an aggregate experimental proxy for these distinct behavioral inputs, capturing a representative's perceived willingness to devote time, attention, and resources on behalf of constituents, independent of whether particular outcomes are ultimately realized.

This broader formulation was deliberately chosen over alternative outcome-oriented phrasings considered during the design phase. Alternatives – such as 'achieves results', 'passes legislation', or 'secures projects' – were rejected because they imply successful outcomes that are often shaped by institutional constraints, executive dominance, or collective decision-making processes beyond an individual lawmaker's control. Focusing on effort rather than final outcomes ensures that variation in performance can be interpreted as personally attributable responsiveness or neglect without conflating it with these external institutional contingencies. Furthermore, by utilizing 'effort' as an open baseline metric rather than anchoring the treatment to a single, specific tactic (e.g., specifying 'office hours' or 'parliamentary questions'), the design isolates the underlying dimension of responsiveness without introducing unwanted noise regarding a respondent's idiosyncratic preferences for particular legislative tools.

For each of the four dimensions, the performance level was systematically varied to create three distinct treatments. These treatments included *underperformance* (loss), where the legislator is described as demonstrating 'less effort than other MPs' (a performance below the neutral reference point); *meeting the threshold* (neutral), where the legislator is described as demonstrating 'similar effort to other MPs' (the neutral reference point); and *overperformance* (gain), where the legislator is described as demonstrating 'more effort than other MPs' (a performance above the neutral reference point).

Adopting an experimental design necessarily abstracts from the informational environment of real-world politics. In naturalistic settings, information about multi-dimensional legislative responsiveness is unevenly distributed, selectively encountered, and heavily mediated by both the contemporary media ecosystem and partisan cues. This is particularly true in parliamentary systems, where party affiliation often structures how individual legislators are perceived. At the same time, a growing literature on digital legislative communication – including official newsletters, social media, and targeted advertising – shows that legislators actively and strategically publicize these same behavioral signals to cultivate personal reputations (e.g. Butler et al. 2023; Grimmer 2013; Hunt and Miler 2025). The purpose of the experimental design is therefore not to reproduce the full complexity of the voter information environment, nor to assume equal exposure to all dimensions of responsiveness. Rather, by presenting these attributes explicitly within a unified framework, the study isolates the independent evaluative weight voters attach to distinct facets of representation when such information becomes

available. This provides a baseline estimate of how citizens respond to representational signals under conditions of observability, while leaving open that the frequency, salience, and partisan interpretation of these signals will vary in real-world political settings.

After examining each pair of profiles, respondents indicated which of the two candidates they would be more likely to vote for. Each respondent completed this task sequence five times, with newly randomized profile combinations in every round. Thus, participants evaluated ten profiles altogether. Because no information was available regarding the real-world distribution of responsiveness types, attribute levels were assigned with equal probability. Before beginning the conjoint tasks, respondents completed a short survey covering sociodemographic characteristics, political attitudes and affiliations, views about democracy and political representation.

Randomization occurred at two levels. First, for every task, attribute levels were independently and randomly assigned to each profile. Second, the order in which attributes were displayed in the profile tables was individually randomized for each participant. One constraint followed earlier recommendations by Hainmueller et al. (2014): although attribute order was randomized at the respondent level, it remained fixed for that respondent across all tasks. This decision reduced cognitive burden and ensured a consistent reading experience.

The survey, including the conjoint tasks, was initially drafted in English. Native-speaker team members translated the instrument into French, Hungarian, Italian, and Polish, ensuring linguistic precision and cultural appropriateness. For Ireland, the generic label ‘MP (Member of Parliament)’ was replaced with the locally used ‘TD (Teachta Dála)’ to improve contextual relevance. Pilot tests were conducted in Hungary and Ireland, and no major modifications were required.

Data collection relied on quota sampling for age and gender in each of the five countries, with a target of 500 completed interviews per country. Quotas followed Eurostat¹ 2024 population distributions across five age groups (18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60+) and gender (male, female). The fieldwork took place simultaneously in all countries between 31 July and 13 August 2025. After applying all quality controls (such as failures on attention checks and post-hoc removal of speeders), the final sample sizes were: France 506; Hungary 504; Ireland 499; Italy 508; Poland 496. The experimental design achieves a statistical power of 88% to detect an effect size of 0.05 (Lukac and Stefanelli 2020).

The full study protocol underwent ethical review by the [*deducted for anonymity*]. All participants provided informed and explicit consent. The experiment was pre-registered at OSF.

¹ Eurostat (2024). Population by age and sex - custom table.
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/DEMO_PJAN_custom_17327900/default/table?lang=en,
Accessed: 17 November 2025.

Table 1 Attributes and attribute levels in the experiment

Attributes	Attribute levels	France	Hungary	Ireland	Italy	Poland
Policy responsiveness	1 The legislator – compared to other MPs – spends more effort to represent the policy views (education, health care, agriculture etc.) of their district.	1683	1661	1,649	1619	1682
	2 The legislator spends as much effort to represent the policy views (education, health care, agriculture etc.) of the district as other MPs.	1664	1728	1,674	1742	1627
	3 The legislator – compared to other MPs – spends less effort to represent the policy views (education, health care, agriculture etc.) of their district.	1713	1651	1,667	1719	1651
Allocation responsiveness	1 The legislator – compared to other MPs – spends more effort to attract funding into the district (in the form of projects, investments etc.).	1714	1656	1639	1707	1659
	2 The legislator spends as much effort to attract funding into the district (in the form of projects, investments etc.) as other MPs.	1647	1671	1657	1685	1646

	3 The legislator – compared to other MPs – spends less effort to attract funding into the district (in the form of projects, investments etc.).	1699	1713	1694	1688	1655
Service responsiveness	1 The legislator – compared to other MPs – spends more effort assisting constituents in solving their individual problems.	1639	1628	1639	1635	1684
	2 The legislator spends as much effort to assist constituents in solving their individual problems as other MPs.	1670	1702	1646	1772	1603
	3 The legislator – compared to other MPs – spends less effort assisting constituents in solving their individual problems.	1751	1710	1705	1673	1673
Symbolic responsiveness	1 The legislator attends community events in their constituency more often than other MPs.	1702	1668	1673	1646	1680
	2 The legislator attends as many community events in their constituency as other MPs.	1684	1689	1681	1690	1648
	3 The legislator attends fewer community events in their constituency than other MPs.	1674	1683	1636	1744	1632

Political affiliation	1 Government	2528	2444	2511	2526	2448
	2 Opposition	2532	2596	2479	2554	2512
Local background of the candidate	1 The legislator lives in the constituency	2542	2596	2524	2555	2442
	2 The legislator does not live in the constituency	2518	2444	2466	2525	2518
Age of the candidate	1 25 y.o.	1689	1726	1585	1733	1647
	2 45 y.o.	1691	1647	1698	1678	1690
	3 65 y.o.	1680	1667	1707	1669	1623
Gender of the candidate	1 Male	2572	2510	2495	2584	2489
	2 Female	2488	2530	2495	2496	2471
Number of respondents		506	504	499	508	496
Number of evaluated profiles (per respondent)		10	10	10	10	10
Number of evaluated profiles (total)		5060	5040	4990	5080	4960
Number of possible unique profiles		1944	1944	1944	1944	1944
Number of unique profiles		1793	1804	1797	1798	1792

Results

Responsiveness and Vote Choice

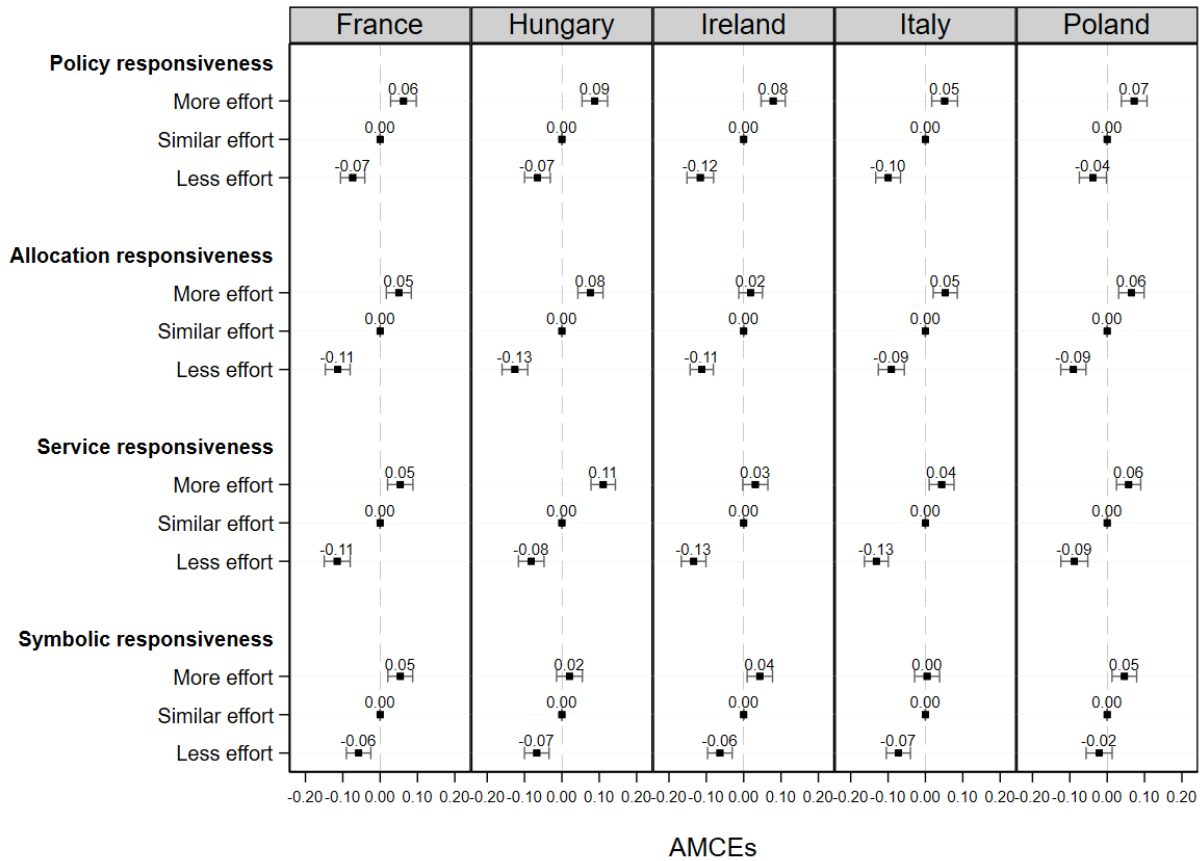
To estimate the effects of candidate attributes, this study employs ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with standard errors clustered by respondents. In all models, the control category of the responsiveness attributes assumes that the legislator is performing the same amount of effort as their peers. Figure 1 presents the Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCE) from the five country-models, standing for the average change in the probability of choosing a profile when one attribute level is changed while all other attributes are randomly varied.

Across all five country-models, the results support the core prediction of asymmetric accountability. The AMCEs demonstrate a consistent and statistically significant pattern: negative effects are larger than positive effects across every country and across almost all four dimensions of responsiveness. The most salient exceptions to this pattern were observed selectively in Hungary² and Poland³. Furthermore, the data reveal that rewards are not only smaller, but are occasionally statistically insignificant. Specifically, the positive effects (overperformance) were found to be not statistically significant (i.e. not statistically different from the neutral baseline) for service and allocation responsiveness in Ireland and symbolic responsiveness in Hungary and Italy.

Figure 1 Responsiveness attribute effects (AMCE) on vote choice (95 % CI)

² Policy responsiveness: AMCE_{More effort} = 0.088; SE_{More effort} = 0.017; AMCE_{Less effort} = -0.065; SE_{Less effort} = 0.017; Service responsiveness: AMCE_{More effort} = 0.111; SE_{More effort} = 0.017; AMCE_{Less effort} = -0.082; SE_{Less effort} = 0.017.

³ Policy responsiveness: AMCE_{More effort} = 0.072; SE_{More effort} = 0.017; AMCE_{Less effort} = -0.038; SE_{Less effort} = 0.01; Symbolic responsiveness: AMCE_{More effort} = 0.046; SE_{More effort} = 0.017; AMCE_{Less effort} = -0.021; SE_{Less effort} = 0.018.



Marginal Means – The Probability of Voting for the Candidate

Marginal Means (MMs) complement the AMCE analysis by showing absolute vote probabilities for each attribute level. In a candidate–choice conjoint experiment, MMs represent the average probability that a candidate with a given attribute level is chosen, averaging over all possible combinations of the other attributes. In other words, MMs indicate how likely respondents are to vote for a candidate with that specific attribute level. An MM of 0.5 suggests that the attribute level does not systematically affect the probability of being chosen. Values below 0.5 indicate that respondents are less likely than chance (50%) to select a candidate with that attribute level, while values above 0.5 indicate a preference for candidates with that attribute level.

Figure 1 plots the marginal means of the four types of responsiveness across the five countries in the study. Overall, responses are highly consistent across countries, with marginal means clustering closely and indicating a broadly similar pattern of voter reactions. In all cases, increased effort in any form of responsiveness raises the probability that a candidate is chosen in the forced-choice task, while below-average effort reduces it. For high effort conditions, marginal means range from 0.56–0.59 for policy, 0.55–0.59 for allocation, 0.57–0.60 for service, and 0.53–0.55 for symbolic responsiveness. For below-average effort, marginal means range from 0.39–0.45 for policy, 0.40–0.42 for service, 0.39–0.42 for allocation, and 0.44–0.47 for symbolic responsiveness, with all effects straddling the 0.5 benchmark.

Turning to differences across responsiveness types, the absolute distance between underperformance and overperformance conditions reveals systematic variation in electoral

sensitivity. This swing is consistently largest – or second largest – for service responsiveness across all five countries, indicating that voters are especially responsive to variation in legislators' effort in this domain. By contrast, symbolic responsiveness consistently produces the smallest overall swing, reflecting more compressed gains and penalties and therefore lower electoral sensitivity to effort variation in this dimension.

At the intermediate baseline (average effort), patterns vary somewhat across countries: average allocation responsiveness is rewarded in Ireland ($MM > 0.5$), service responsiveness yields positive effects in France, Ireland, and Italy, symbolic responsiveness is positively evaluated in Italy, while average policy responsiveness does not meaningfully affect candidate choice in any country ($MM \approx 0.5$).

Figure 2 Marginal means of candidate choice across the four types of responsiveness and countries in the study

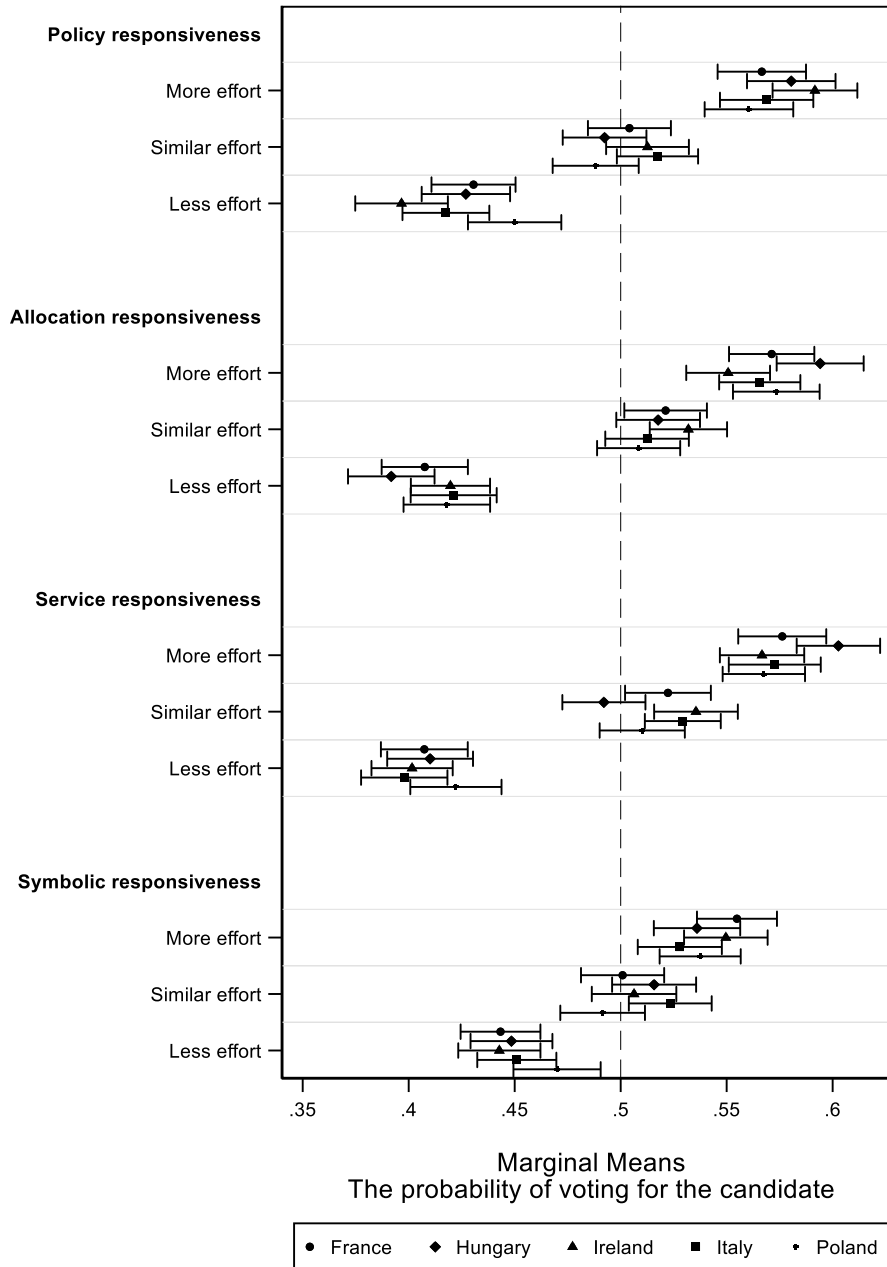


Table 2 presents three combined responsiveness profiles: ‘worst performance’ (low on all four dimensions), ‘peer-average performance’ (matches peer average across all four), and ‘exceptional performance’ (high on all four). In Hungary and Poland, peer-average performance across all attributes is not sufficient to increase the likelihood of receiving a vote compared to chance. In contrast, in the other countries, candidates performing at the average level are more likely to be chosen in the experiment (i.e. the choice probabilities are significantly above 0.5). At the same time, Hungarian respondents reward above-average performance more strongly than others, making candidates who exceed the mean more likely to receive votes compared to above-average candidates in other countries. The reward for exceptional performance is smallest in Poland. Conversely, the harshest penalty for very poor performance is observed in Ireland, while Poland punishes poor performance the least.

Table 2 Marginal means (probability of vote) of three cases of combined responsiveness

	Worst performance			Peer-average performance			Exceptional performance		
	MM	SE	N	MM	SE	N	MM	SE	N
France	0.179	0.020	72	0.553 ^a	0.199	54	0.757	0.020	66
Hungary	0.175	0.020	66	0.514	0.019	64	0.806	0.021	50
Ireland	0.166	0.020	50	0.584 ^a	0.019	63	0.758	0.019	85
Italy	0.178	0.020	79	0.585 ^a	0.020	61	0.743	0.021	52
Poland	0.258	0.022	63	0.496	0.020	52	0.732	0.020	66

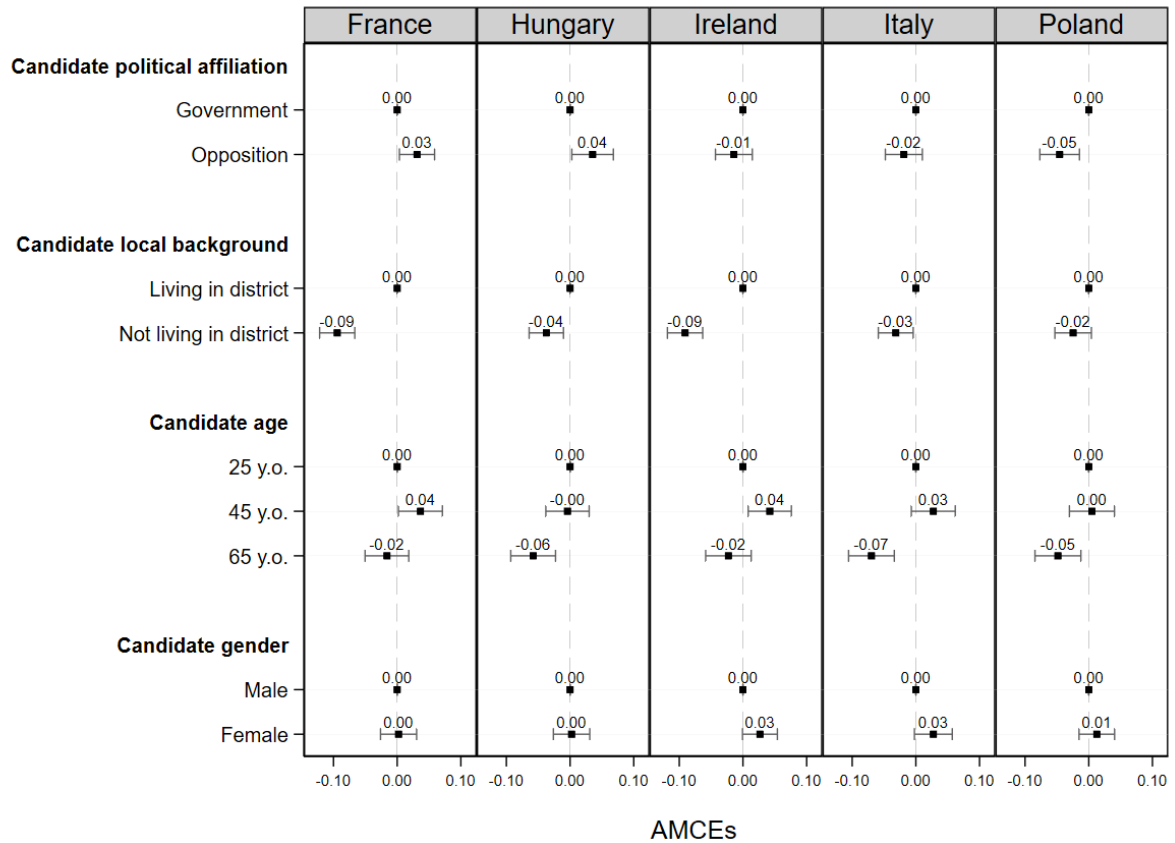
a MM is significantly above 0.5

All MMs are significant at a standard 95 % level. These specific multi-dimensional profiles were explicitly presented to and evaluated by respondents during the survey tasks as part of the randomized conjoint design.

The Effects of Candidate Age, Gender, and Local Residency

The experiment included party affiliation, local residency, age, and gender to enhance external validity by reflecting realistic candidate traits (Figure 3). Responsiveness attributes consistently outweigh these demographic factors across all countries. Local residency carries a significant electoral premium in France, Hungary, Ireland, and Italy. Older candidates (65 y.o.) face penalties in Hungary, Italy, and Poland, while gender effects are insignificant everywhere.

Figure 3 Other attribute effects (AMCE) on vote choice (95 % CI)



Party affiliation effects are conditional on respondent partisanship (government vs. opposition). The interaction reveals robust in-group favouritism across all countries except France⁴. Specifically, the sign of the interaction coefficient (negative) reveals an asymmetric partisan hostility: while both groups prefer their own, government voters consistently exhibit a significantly stronger ‘out-group penalty’. They punish opposition candidates more severely than opposition voters punish government candidates. This trend reached its peak in the Hungarian sample, which exhibited the highest levels of partisan rejection across both government and opposition camps.

In addition to the primary analysis, the internal validity of the experiment was rigorously tested by estimating task and profile order effects. These tests demonstrate highly robust results across all five countries, confirming that the sequence of choice tasks and the physical positioning of candidates did not systematically bias respondent behaviour. Furthermore, comprehensive subgroup analyses were carried out using interaction terms to explore how preferences vary across different demographic and political segments of the electorate (such as age, level of education, income, political affiliation, and political interest). The data reveals that the moderation of responsiveness is highly idiosyncratic. While political affiliation consistently drives asymmetric evaluations – with opposition voters in Hungary and Italy acting as more ‘discriminating’ evaluators of effort – demographic moderators like age show no universal directionality. Instead, we see a bifurcation: older voters in France and Italy prioritize the

⁴ AMCE_{France} = -0.063 (SE = 0.036, p = 0.088), AMCE_{Hungary} = -0.322 (SE = 0.037, p = 0.000), AMCE_{Ireland} = -0.117 (SE = 0.033, p = 0.000), AMCE_{Italy} = -0.119 (SE = 0.034, p = 0.000), AMCE_{Poland} = -0.182 (SE = 0.033, p = 0.000)

neutral baseline ('similar effort'), whereas their counterparts in Hungary and Ireland reward ambition ('more effort'). Finally, the consistent lack of differentiation among low-education cohorts highlights a recurring challenge in cross-national surveys: the difficulty of achieving sufficient statistical power within marginalized sub-groups. Full results for these diagnostic tests and conditional models are available in the Online Appendix.

Discussion

The results of this cross-national conjoint experiment offer two primary theoretical contributions to legislative accountability. First, the analysis provides causal evidence on the relative importance of the four responsiveness dimensions (Eulau and Karps 1977), demonstrating how voters trade off distinct dimensions of legislative effort when forming overall candidate preferences. Second, the findings provide robust evidence consistent with asymmetric accountability driven by loss avoidance.

The consistent finding that negative effects substantially exceed positive effects across nearly all countries and responsiveness types evidence consistent with prospect theory applied to political behaviour (Kahneman and Tversky 1979). As hypothesized, voters treat underperformance – the failure to meet the 'similar effort' peer benchmark – as an electorally costly loss, generating disproportionately harsh penalties consistent with loss aversion (Weaver 1986). This punishment-centric dynamic encourages legislators toward risk-averse strategies: avoiding blame proves more electorally valuable than pursuing high-risk, high-reward success.

Notable exceptions in Hungary (policy, service responsiveness) and Poland (policy, symbolic responsiveness) highlight boundary conditions where low expectations or partisan dynamics may attenuate asymmetry. Rewards for overperformance remain consistently smaller and occasionally statistically insignificant (service/allocation in Ireland; symbolic in Hungary/Italy), illustrating diminishing marginal returns above the peer threshold. This underscores why legislators rationally prioritize risk minimization over reward maximization.

Beyond asymmetry, the study establishes a consistent ordering among responsiveness types. Substantive dimensions (policy, allocation, service) generate larger effects than symbolic responsiveness, suggesting that voters prioritize demonstrable resource delivery and policy congruence over visibility (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Serra and Moon 1994; Stein and Bickers 1994). While all four dimensions contribute to overall judgments, concrete representation appears to carry the greatest electoral weight.

A key strength lies in the comparative scope across five countries with diverse electoral systems, political traditions, and party structures. The core asymmetry holds robustly across aggregate country analyses despite these differences. Rather than indicating that psychological mechanisms override institutional context, the results suggest that loss aversion and reference-dependent evaluations are stable across institutional environments. Psychological mechanisms – loss aversion and relative benchmarks – appear to operate consistently across contexts, with only limited evidence of systematic moderation by institutional variation within the countries studied. Even in proportional representation systems where electoral incentives for constituency service theoretically diverge, the asymmetry persists. The Hungary/Poland exceptions reveal theoretically meaningful boundary conditions where polarization or systemic failure may alter or dampen loss aversion effects. This cross-national pattern challenges strongly institutionally deterministic accounts of legislative accountability, suggesting that institutional design alone

may not fully explain variation in voter evaluations. Ultimately, what is learned from this experiment is that individual-level psychological heuristics – specifically loss aversion and reference-dependent evaluations – may represent a general mechanism shaping accountability judgments across diverse democratic settings, operating alongside institutional variation that typically dominates comparative political science frameworks.

Moving forward, this study highlights several avenues for future research. First, the experimental design operationalized each responsiveness type using abstract, macro-level effort descriptions rather than explicit tactical examples. While this effectively isolates the causal effects of the underlying dimensions of responsiveness without introducing idiosyncratic noise, it leaves the specific mechanisms unobserved. Future work could explore a richer set of explicit behavioral instruments across different domains (such as directly comparing the electoral returns of submitting parliamentary questions versus delivering legislative speeches) to test whether these asymmetric effects hold across different concrete manifestations of legislative effort. Second, the presentation of performance metrics as uncredited, objective facts abstracts away from low-information environments and the source-driven skepticism that characterizes naturalistic political consumption, where partisan cues or media trust might filter these responsiveness signals.

Furthermore, several of the design choices serve as valuable points of departure for future extensions rather than structural flaws. While the relative performance benchmark ("other MPs") successfully activated reference-dependent preferences, it cannot capture scenarios where all peers perform poorly; future research should combine relative and absolute standards to test how voters anchor expectations. Similarly, while the focus on observable legislative effort effectively isolated agentic behavior from external institutional constraints, directly testing whether this reward/punishment asymmetry holds true for tangible outcomes (such as passing legislation or securing funding) represents a natural next step. Finally, a promising extension of this framework would apply the logic of loss aversion to collective political accountability at the party level, exploring how a party's relative power in government – whether structured by majority status, coalition dynamics, or seat share – moderates voter sensitivity to underperformance.

In sum, voters act as asymmetric auditors, punishing underperformance far more severely than they reward overperformance. This fundamental dynamic drives representatives toward caution and status quo maintenance rather than ambitious initiatives, offering a powerful psychological lens for understanding electoral accountability across diverse systems. These results suggest that electoral evaluation is systematically loss-framed, shaping representative incentives toward risk avoidance rather than reward maximization.

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