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Responsiveness and Democratic Accountability: Observational Evidence from an Experiment in a Mixed-Member Proportional System

Electoral systems provide distinctive accountability mechanisms in democratic polities and thereby affect government responsiveness to citizens. In this article, we concentrate on the effects of proportional vis-à-vis majoritarian electoral rules. We expect members of parliament to be more responsive under majoritarian rule, because these MPs have a direct mandate from their local constituency, are less dependent on their party, and can be held directly accountable by voters. We exploit Germany's mixed-member system and test MP's responsiveness using behavioral data generated within a two-round field experiment. The experiment observes concrete interactions between voters and representatives. In the experiment, real voters sent emails about a policy issue to their MPs. We show that MPs who were elected via the majoritarian tier are almost twice as likely to respond to a voter request than MPs elected via PR. Our results deliver novel evidence that electoral institutions cause distinct behavioral responses from elected officials.

Electoral systems affect democratic competition and public policy. They influence the structure of party systems, determine the representation of demographic minorities, and provide distinctive accountability mechanisms for representatives. At the most basic level, the discussion focuses on proportional (PR) versus majoritarian (MR) electoral rules. Proponents of both systems still fight over which type is most appropriate under which circumstances (e.g., Carey and Hix 2011; Horowitz 2006). At the very least, scholars agree that majoritarian and PR systems provide different incentives for political actors and correspond to different democratic

goals (Cox 1997; Klingemann and Wessels 2001; Lijphart 1999). Proponents of majoritarian systems stress the local accountability mechanism of MPs as well as their independence from political parties in terms of career prospects and policy stance. Proponents of PR systems present similarly compelling and competing arguments. What both sides share is the conviction that MPs' behavioral patterns, especially their responsiveness to voters, are affected by electoral accountability. One important challenge for this research agenda consists in isolating the effect of electoral systems on responsiveness. In a political system where parties remain the central players, it is difficult to disentangle the relationship between citizens and representatives.

The present article offers additional evidence on the importance of electoral incentives for political responsiveness. As advocated by Grose (2014), we carry out a quantitative case study based on detailed knowledge. We examine the effect of PR and MR tiers within a single country—Germany, which has used a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system since 1949. Because some members in the legislature are elected via proportional rule and others under majoritarian rule, the use of the MMP system allows us to investigate the effect of being elected in the different tiers on individual MP behavior. While this is not the same thing as testing the relative effects of different electoral systems, we consider that MMPs provide an interesting way to look at the incentives produced by the proportional and the majoritarian electoral tiers. Our research design thus contributes to ongoing debates about the value of mixed-member systems and their effects on the behavior of individual MPs.

We devised a research design that allows us to detect how representatives respond to individual voter requests. Specifically, we employ data collected through an email experiment where MPs were contacted by real citizens. We examine MPs' responses as an indicator of responsiveness. While our treatment is not randomly assigned, our experiment allows us to measure individual responsiveness consistently across electoral tiers. We expect that MPs who are elected via the majoritarian tier are more responsive than MPs who are elected via the proportional tier. We first briefly discuss the existing literature on electoral systems and responsiveness. We then describe how citizens contacted their MPs, how we obtained their responses, and how we used our design to identify the effect of electoral rules. Our results show that MPs who were elected via the majoritarian tier are almost twice as likely to respond than

MPs who were elected via the proportional tier. The final section develops some broader implications beyond the German case.

Electoral Systems and Responsiveness

Electoral systems condition the degree and the type of politicians' responsiveness towards their voters. Responsiveness can be defined and investigated at several levels, however. Research on many-to-many relationships between parties and representatives voters (Miller and Stokes 1963; Powell 2000) has found that responsiveness is likely to be higher in countries with electoral systems based on proportional representation, as the mean party-voter distance will be lower. At the same time, PR is less likely to influence policy outputs (Soroka and Wlezien 2015).

These system-level considerations make assumptions about the collective behavior of MPs and party leaders, but they provide little information as to how we expect them to behave individually. There seems to be some degree of agreement concerning the objective interest for MPs in majoritarian systems to cultivate a personal vote (Carey and Shugart 1995; Crisp and Simoneau 2018; Fenno 1978). Many initial studies, however, are based on the United States. Most European countries feature stronger parties, limiting the possibility to cultivate a personal vote. This does not mean that legislators do not try (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1984). Incentives for cultivating a personal vote strongly depend on whether votes are awarded directly to individual candidates. Specifically, MPs in single-seat districts and MPs in PR systems with open lists (encouraging competition between candidates of one party) have higher incentives to provide constituency service to their voters than MPs in closed-list PR systems. In closed-list PR, the rank order of candidates is determined by the party, and an MP providing constituency service is unlikely to benefit electorally. These MPs may be more likely to engage in behavior that benefits a wider constituency than an individual voter. Studies using survey methods or fine-grained measures of district magnitude have not come to unambiguous conclusions so far (Bowler and Farrell 1993; Heitshusen, Young, and Wood 2005; Ingall and Crisp 2001). Much of this ambiguity is due to problems of multicollinearity and unobserved heterogeneity across countries.

One potential solution to these problems is to turn to mixed-member systems which combine proportional and plurality tiers and thereby assess electoral system effects within one single

context. While the two tiers do not represent fully fledged electoral systems, we believe that they produce individual incentives that are comparable to those produced by electoral systems. So far, empirical work on mixed-member systems has resorted to research designs that have not generated unambiguous conclusions about whether MPs from the two tiers behave differently. Most research naturally focuses on Germany, which features the longest experience of a mixed-member proportional system. Building on the comparative literature, several authors argue that the majoritarian tier is associated with higher responsiveness and stronger MP-voter linkages than the list (PR) tier (e.g., Klingemann and Wessels 2001; Stratmann and Baur 2002). In Germany, district MPs are clearly identified and distinguished from list MPs. We expect this to have durable and meaningful consequences for the relationship between MPs and voters. Voters will more readily turn to district MPs, and the latter will more readily respond than list MPs.

But results are often inconclusive concerning differences between the PR and the majority tiers across a number of outcomes (Crisp 2007; Sieberer 2015). The lack of differences between electoral tiers might be due to “contamination effects” (Ferrara, Herron, and Nishikawa 2005; Stoffel 2014b), as candidates may run in both tiers (Gschwend and Zittel 2016), leading to similar behavioral outcomes for both types of MPs.

We argue, however, that inconclusive evidence is at least partially due to inadequate measures of responsiveness. Vote defection, committee membership, parliamentary questions, or campaigning: there is, of course, good reasons to assume that voters are sensitive to representatives’ autonomy in those areas. At the same time, the first comparative studies in this area underlined that the party “leash” is shorter in Europe than in the United States (e.g., Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1984). We advocate that responsiveness has to be measured in those areas where the partisan leash is likely to be looser. We would expect representatives to be most active in those areas which are most visible to voters and least visible to party leadership. Eulau and Karps call this area “service responsiveness.” Service includes “non-legislative services that a representative actually performs for individuals or groups in his district” (Eulau and Karps 1977, 243). Responding to letters, meeting constituents, informing them, acting as mediator with the administration: these are examples of service responsiveness that may be perceived positively by voters and have broad reputational effects. At the same time, this type of responsiveness is unlikely

to be very costly at the party level, since it is unlikely to be visible nationally.

The originality of our contribution is thus twofold. First, we isolate the effect of electoral rules on the responsiveness of individual MPs to their constituency (Grose 2014). We distinguish responsiveness between MPs from the PR tier and the majoritarian tier as well as considering MPs who are candidates for both tiers. By doing so, we are able to provide evidence on the behavior of different types of MPs. Second, we concentrate on *service responsiveness*, that is, an area where we consider party scrutiny to be of lesser importance. Electoral incentives should play out more strongly here than they do for other forms of responsiveness. We test the following expectation: MPs who are elected via the majoritarian tier are more responsive than MPs who are elected via the proportional tier.

Research Design

Our research design relies on observational data gathered within a two-round field experiment with elected representatives to the national parliament in Germany carried out in 2016 and 2017.¹ Since 1953 about half of the seats in the *Bundestag*, the German lower chamber, have been assigned through direct elections in single-seat districts, the other half through party lists in 16 multimember districts which equal the 16 German states. The German political system presents two interesting features for our design. First, a high number of representatives (631 in the 18th German Parliament²) make it attractive for carrying out experimental designs. Second, all MPs receive the same budget for their office work and all MPs retain the same number of staff members. Differences in response rates between MPs are thus not driven by a shortage of staff and budget to deal with constituency requests.

Our research design is noticeably different from previous studies. We use a field experiment for eliciting behavioral responses from legislators, but our main variable of interest is the electoral tier of the MPs. Hence, our research design cannot randomly assign MPs to tiers: they are elected either as majority MPs or PR MPs. We therefore need to adjust for intervening factors in order to isolate the effect of the electoral system. We collected data on representatives' personal characteristics (electoral vulnerability, political experience, gender, age, double candidacies, party) and include it in the analysis. As an additional safeguard, we validate

our findings and check their reliability by running two rounds of the experiment. The remainder of this section first explains the study design in detail and discusses potential confounders.

Data

We use data gathered within a field experiment. All representatives of the German parliament (*Bundestag*) were contacted via email by real citizens to inquire about a randomly assigned policy issue. We measured a representative's responsiveness to citizen requests via response rates to these emails. Such email experiments have been successfully applied in studies on members of the US Congress and Senate, US state legislators, and in selected additional countries (Butler 2014; Butler, Karpowitz, and Pope 2012).

Set-Up and Randomization

Recruited voters sent emails on four political topics to their MPs. We assigned email topics randomly to MPs in both tiers using block randomization. We used four different topics in our e-mail requests to ensure that each MP receives a different email in the second round to avoid detection. All emails followed a similar set-up (see the text below).³ The text in brackets varied between emails. We formulated the emails as neutrally as possible, asking about potential solutions to a policy problem. The emails of the first round were sent in December 2016 and those of the second round at the beginning of the electoral campaign season in August 2017. In line with previous studies, we treated email addresses instead of individual representatives. We therefore also considered responses from staff members who acted on behalf of the representative.⁴

We recruited the senders with the help of an international survey company. During the field phase, they received a link to an Internet platform where they were instructed to fill in their personal information into a prewritten email, copy-paste it into their own email software, and send it to their assigned MP in the voter's district. A number of follow-up questions were asked to ensure that senders had sent the email. The company used reminders and, in some cases, recruited additional voters. This approach resulted in 95% successfully contacted representatives in both rounds. The senders were asked to forward every response they received to the survey company.

From: [Senders name]
 To: [representatives email address]
 Subject: Question about [topic]

Dear [title, representatives last name],

My name is [sender's name] and I live in [sender's place of residence]. I am writing you because I worry about the [topic adjective] development in Germany. [add topic sentence here]. What do you think about this?

I am looking forward to your response.

Best regards,

[sender's name]

Outcome

Our main outcome measures if an MP responds to the citizen request. We collected responses over a period of four weeks. A response is coded as one and a nonresponse as zero. We code responses by a member of the representative's staff, but not automatic responses. We have two types of information available to measure response. The actual response based on email content as well as survey information from the citizens who participated in the experiment. We rely on the actual response but obtain equivalent results for reported responses.

The full sample of 630 representatives was reduced to 588 and 566 representatives in the first and second round respectively, because some of the recruited panelists failed to send out their email or did not participate in the follow-up-survey. The contacted representatives are similar to missing representatives in terms of gender, experience, age, and party membership (see Table A2 in the online supporting information). Those who received an email were slightly less electorally vulnerable than those who were not contacted. Party differences are also small. As these differences are very small and the number of noncontacted MPs very low, we excluded noncontacted representatives from our sample. We also excluded MPs when the sender did not participate in the follow-up survey.

*Covariates*⁵

Our core interest is in the electoral tier in which an MP was elected. We distinguish between MPs elected in the PR versus the MR tier. As explained above, randomization of the electoral tier is not possible. Accordingly, we control for covariates which might affect MPs behavior beyond the electoral tier and differ between MR and PR MPs (see covariance balance in Table A3 in the online supporting information). We include gender, political experience, age, electoral vulnerability, the ethnic origin of the sender, and fixed effects for political party. We expect MPs to be more motivated to respond when they are electorally vulnerable. We measure electoral vulnerability according to Stoffel (2014a). He estimates incumbents' reelection probabilities based on the margin of victory at the preceding election and historical reelection probabilities. To do this, we rely on a distinction established by the survey firm distinguishing traditional German names and those of different-sounding origin.⁶ To measure MPs' partisan affiliation, age, political experience, and their type of candidacy, we rely on statistical information provided by the federal election office.

The online supporting information provides a number of robustness checks, including an alternative measure of responsiveness (Table B1), an assessment of attrition (Table B2), and an alternative measure of ethnic origin (Table B3). We also checked for the potential importance of policy expertise which we define as membership in parliamentary committees relevant to topic of the letter. The regressions listed in Appendix B do not show differences in response rates. We made another series of regressions including topic fixed effects (cf. Table B7). Importantly, we also distinguish pure list MPs and pure district MPs from MPs who contested the elections in both tiers to rule out contamination effects (Table B4).

Results

Overall 41% of the contacted MPs responded to the email request in the first round and 25% in the second round.⁷ The large difference in response rates is due to the timing of the experiment. While the first round was fielded during the regular sitting period of parliament, the second round was conducted during campaign season. The drop contradicts literature that suggests MPs

to be more responsive during election times when the benefits are more imminent. The sheer amount of other, more public, campaign work may lessen the capacity of responding to every email. A more detailed examination and discussion of the differences in the response rates for the two waves goes beyond the scope of this article.

More importantly, substantively large differences in response rates can be observed between directly elected and list MPs. MPs who were elected via the MR tier are almost twice as likely to respond to an email request sent by a voter than MPs who were elected via the PR tier. Figure 1 displays the differences between electoral tiers in each round. Of the directly elected MPs, 53% responded, but only 30% of the list MPs answered a constituent's email in the first round. In the second round, differences in response rates remained important: 34% from directly elected MPs and 18% from list MPs responded to an email request. The difference in response intensity across rounds does not affect our main results.

To ensure that differences in response rates between tiers are not driven by differences in individual characteristics of list

FIGURE 1
Differences in Response Rates for MPs in Majoritarian and Proportional Tiers

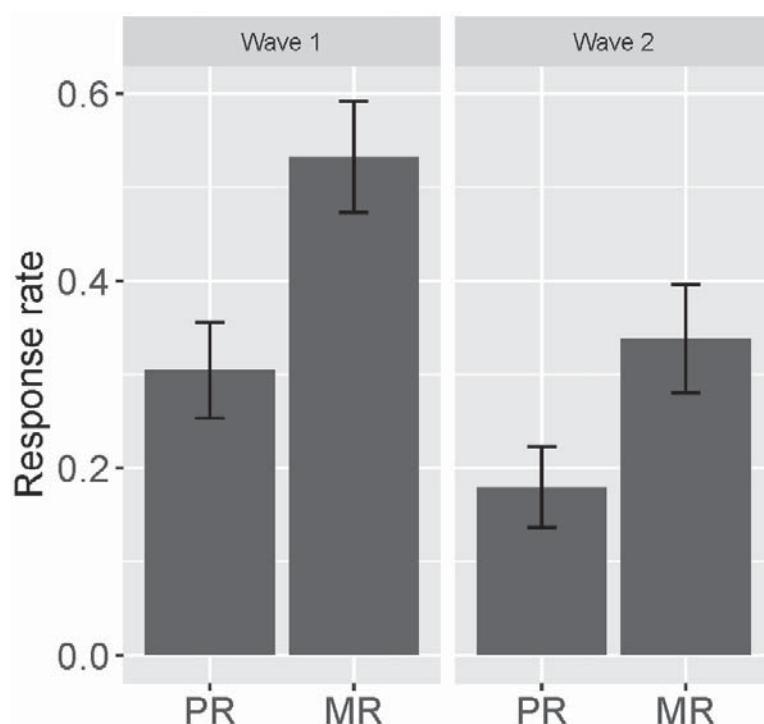
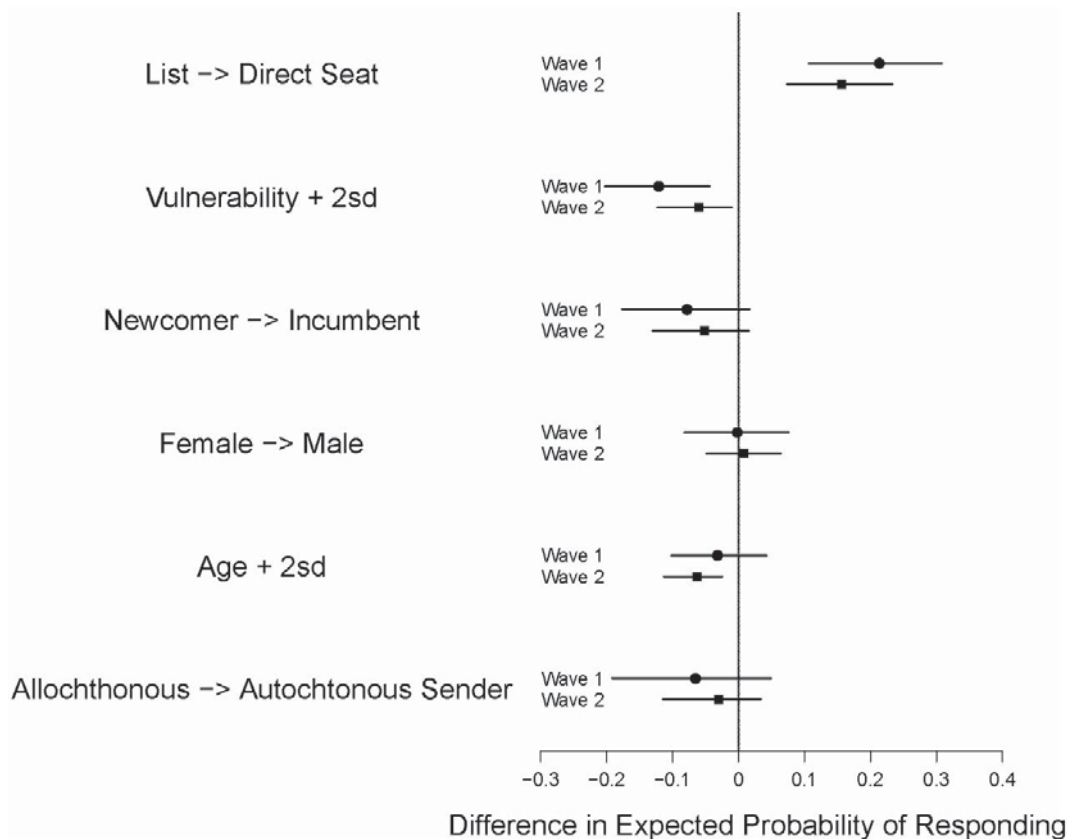


FIGURE 2

Conditional First Differences in Expected Probability of Responding for Each Estimated Counterfactual (based on logistic regression results presented in Table A4 in the online supporting information)



and district MPs we included a number of adjustment variables. Figure 2 (based on Table A4 in the online supporting information) summarizes the estimated effects of a logistic regression as a rope-ladder plot. The rope-ladder plot displays counterfactual expected probabilities for each covariate via simulation (Adolph 2019). The first line of the rope-ladder plot shows the counterfactual of moving from a list MP under PR to a directly elected MP under MR: it increases the probability of responding to a constituent by over 20% (in the first wave). The estimated effect is a bit smaller in the second wave but still significantly different from zero (i.e., the horizontal 95% confidence interval does not touch the vertical zero line). The key takeaway is that the estimated effect of the electoral tier remains statistically significant when other relevant covariates enter the model.

Most of the remaining covariates are neither substantively nor statistically significant. Only vulnerability is statistically significant from zero with more vulnerable MPs being less likely to respond to email requests. In the second round, older MPs are less likely to respond. Neither gender of MPs nor experience nor ethnic origin of sender affect the propensity of responding. We also include party fixed effects which do not alter our results. Per agreement with the survey firm, we are not able to report coefficients for actual political parties in order to protect the identity of respondents and political parties. While we cannot share those results, we can report that party differences are not significant. And these are not affected by the substantial differences of party samples in the two tiers.

We address the issue of contamination between tiers by distinguishing between pure list and district MPs and MPs who ran in both tiers. A vast majority of list MPs also ran as district candidates and vice versa. Only 15% of the MPs ran exclusively in the tier where they were eventually elected. This overlap may raise doubts about the difference of district and list MPs. In theory, these MPs may later behave as district candidates for their party although they were elected on the PR list and blur differences between tiers (or vice versa). We show that this is not the case. In Table B4 in the online supporting information, we distinguish between pure district MPs, district MPs who ran on a list, list MPs who ran in a district, and pure list MPs. Odds ratios derived from these models show that district MPs are four times as likely to respond to voters' email requests than pure list MPs. They are followed by district MPs that ran also as list candidates, who are more than twice as likely to respond. Pure list MPs are least likely to respond (see Figure B1 in the online supporting information). List MPs who also ran in a district are not statistically different from pure list MPs. Results for round 2 confirm these differences. It is thus clearly the fact of being a district or list MP that matters and not whether a candidate set out to be a district or list MP. If we account for the length of responses rather than their occurrence, our results remain stable (cf. Table B6 in the online supporting information).

In sum, our experiment reveals strong and persistent behavioral differences between MPs who are elected in distinct electoral tiers and their PR counterparts. The fact that legislators from the two tiers behave differently suggests that mixed-electoral systems may be able to combine the strengths of both worlds. At least in

our experiment, district MPs put more emphasis on personal links to their voters whereas MPs in the PR tier might ensure that multiple views are represented in parliament. In line with survey evidence provided by Klingemann and Wessels (2001), we find that district MPs value the trustee style of representation more and aim more often at representing all voters in a district regardless of their party affiliation than list MPs. A series of additional tests in the supporting online information underline the robustness of our findings.

Conclusion

The literature on electoral systems and their political consequences offers a rich set of theoretical expectations about how political competition transpires and how democracies work. Following a broad literature, we expect district MPs to be more responsive to requests than list MPs because they are more directly linked to voters and less dependent on their political party.

We conducted two rounds of field experiments where voters contacted their MPs with a policy concern. Using individual legislator's responses as an indicator of responsiveness, we found strong differences in behavior between MPs of the two tiers. Legislators elected under majoritarian rule are almost twice as likely to respond to citizen requests than their counterparts elected under PR.

Our findings have at least two important implications for research on electoral systems in general and mixed-member systems in particular. First, we provide strong evidence that electoral systems differ with regard to individual responsiveness and constituency service even if it comes to such simple tasks as responding to voter requests. Strong party discipline and considerable partisan influence over career trajectories of individual MPs might stymie behavioral differences among MPs from distinct tiers in parliament. Our finding suggests, however, that differences between tiers persist. Second, our results indicate that mixed-member systems may indeed combine the best of two worlds. In terms of constituency responsiveness, we find similar effects as those reported by comparable experiments in the United States (e.g., Butler 2014). In terms of representativeness of the electorate, Germany is comparable to other PR systems. Mixed-member systems may thus encourage a division of labor among MPs: some concentrate on collective responsiveness in parliament while others, namely MPs

in individual districts, respond to local demands via constituency service.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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NOTES

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1. Ethical considerations are explicated in Appendix C in the online supporting information.

2. Four of these seats are so-called overhang seats (*Überhangsmandate*) and 29 leveling seats (*Ausgleichsmandate*) to ensure a proper mapping of the proportionality of the election returns. At the time of the experiment, only 630 MPs were left in parliament.

3. The exact text for all emails can be found in the online supporting information.

4. We interviewed some staff members who explained that all responses are either explicitly approved by the MP or are so similar to earlier requests that they do not require approval.

5. Descriptives of all variables are in Table A1 in Appendix A in the online supporting information.

6. Names which the survey company did not categorize are counted as being of German background. Our findings are robust without this correction as well (Table B3).

7. Thirteen percent responded in both waves, 47% in none, and 40% in one of the waves.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s web site:

Appendix A: Descriptives and Regression Models

Table A1. Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Table A2. Balance Between Contacted and Non-Contacted MPs

Table A3. Covariate Balance for Both Electoral Tiers

Table A4. Main Regression Results. Estimates displayed in Figure 1

Appendix B: Robustness Checks

Table B1. Logistic Regression Results, DV: Reported Response

Table B2. Regression Results Controlling for Attrition of Respondents

Table B3. Logistic Regression Results, Alternative Operationalization of Autochthonous: Names without Information Set to Missing

Table B4. Regression Results Differentiating Between Different Types of Candidacy

Table B5. Logistic Regression Results, Including Policy Expertise

Table B6. Linear Regression Results, Alternative Operationalization of Dependent Variable: Length of Response in Number of Words

Figure B1. Differences in Response Rates By Candidacy

Table B7. Regression Results, Including . Estimates Displayed in Figure 1

Appendix C: Additional Ethical Considerations

Appendix D: Email Templates