

Perceptual Biases of Responsibility Attributions in Multi-level Contexts

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A basic tenet of economic voting and related policy-based models of voting, attributions of responsibility have been found to be systematically influenced by citizens' political predispositions, so that individuals tend to credit positive outcomes to members of their own social group and blame the outgroup for negative outcomes. Voters' ability to hold politicians accountable for their performance is further obscured in contexts of multi-level governance, such as federal states and other decentralized systems, where credit or blame for policy outcomes may be assigned to more than one level of government within the same polity. Although the effects of both political predispositions and multi-level governance have been subject to considerable study, much less is known about how these factors interact to shape responsibility judgments. In this paper we examine the interplay between the vertical dispersion of political authority and the effects of group-serving biases on attributions of responsibility. Our analysis focuses on the Spanish State of Autonomies, a decentralized system displaying substantial regional differences in the pace and intensity of devolution. Drawing on a unique set of country-specific questions included in the Spanish sample of the European Social Survey (Round 4) and an experiment embedded in a national online survey, we analyze how attributions of regional versus central government responsibility in different policy areas are influenced by partisan rationalizations under different institutional contexts (levels of decentralization and unified/divided party control). We also examine likely perceptual biases based on the role of group memberships other than partisanship, such as regional versus national territorial identities.