Unsuccessful Success? Failed No-Confidence Motions, Competence Signals, and Electoral Support

Laron K. Williams[1]

Abstract

If no-confidence motions are primarily motivated by bringing down governments, why do only approximately 5% of no-confidence motions in advanced parliamentary democracies from 1960 result in the termination of government? In this project the author addresses this puzzle by developing a formal model of the electoral benefits of no-confidence motions and tests these hypotheses with the use of an original data set. No-confidence motions represent highly visible opportunities for opposition parties to highlight their strength or ability compared to the government in the hopes of improving their vote shares. The author finds support for the signal-based theory on a sample of 20 advanced parliamentary democracies from 1960 to 2008. Although no-confidence motions result in decreases for the government parties, the opposition parties that propose the motion experience boosts in vote share. This relationship is even stronger when the proposing party is an alternative governing possibility—illustrated by the conditioning impacts of the number of parliamentary parties and the opposition party's ideological extremism. This provides an explanation as to why opposition parties would continue to challenge the government even though the motions are likely to fail.

[1]Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, USA

Corresponding Author:
Laron K. Williams, Department of Political Science, Texas Tech University,
Holden Hall 113, Box 41015, Lubbock, TX 79409-1015
Email: laron.williams@ttu.edu

No-confidence motions (NCMs) can be a valuable tool for the opposition to hold the government accountable for its policy performance.[1] Scholars have identified the government's responsibility to parliament as the defining feature of parliamentary regimes (Lijphart, 1999). Understandably, scholars have focused their attention on the immediate effects of NCMs in terms of bringing down the government. This is certainly important, but the empirical record suggests that potential success is only one of a variety of motivations for challenging the government. In fact, only approximately 5% of NCMs in advanced parliamentary democracies from 1960 result in the termination of government. In proposing these motions, opposition lawmakers usually have a reasonable expectation as to whether the motion will pass. Yet in 95% of the cases, opposition lawmakers face likely defeat but still decide to try their luck.

This project addresses this puzzle with the development of a formal model. I theorize that opposition parties receive an electoral benefit from challenging the government. The government's true abilities and performance in office are unobserved, so voters (and other parties) must rely on observing policy outcomes to formulate their perceptions of the government's competence. NCMs represent highly visible opportunities for opposition parties to highlight the government's (in)competence either generally or in salient policy areas. In doing so, they also gain the opportunity to improve the public's perception of their competence or policy performance vis-à-vis the government in the contentious issue. The public then uses this updated perception of the government's strength in its vote calculation. The empirical results support this theory. With the use of an original data set, I find that unsuccessful NCMs result in shifts in electoral support *away* from the government parties and *toward* the opposition parties that proposed the motion. I therefore provide an explanation for the occurrence of NCMs in the face of probable failure.

A key observation of the formal model is that the credibility of the signal—the NCM—is directly related to the costs of proposing NCMs. The model suggests that the larger the "credibility penalty"—the cost of overusing NCMs against a capable government—the greater the information sent by the signal. The empirical results confirm this expectation, as opposition parties that are viable governing alternatives have more to lose from challenging so their signals are more influential. Indeed, ideologically moderate opposition parties that propose NCMs in systems with fewer parties experience magnified electoral boosts.

A second benefit of this project is a contribution to the literature on vote choice in parliamentary democracies. Although a number of theories form the basis of our understanding of electoral support (i.e., Downs's proximity theory, Rabinowitz and Macdonald's directional theory, among others), empirical tests of these theories are often motivated by the theory of economic voting. Unfortunately, an overemphasis on economic performance has indirectly stunted our understanding of electoral support. Because of scholars' desires to make economic voting produce generalized claims with a parsimonious theory, economic voting studies have minimized the importance of noneconomic policy outcomes. In almost every election, scholars can identify a noneconomic policy issue that had a substantively important effect on the election outcome. Economic voting models cannot fully explain these election outcomes. This project offers a possible improvement in the literature on vote choice. NCMs represent ways for opposition parties to not only hold the government accountable but also highlight the government's failure (or incompetence) on a salient policy. These are policies that, because they may not deal with the economy directly, would not be incorporated into a typical vote choice model. By including NCMs in models of vote choice, we can indirectly capture the government's performance in salient areas such as defense policy and scandals, in addition to economic policy. These results cause us to rethink the general observation that opposition parties are largely unable to influence their level of electoral support.

In the following section I briefly review the literature on vote choice and then highlight the areas where this project offers improvements over previous studies. The third section introduces a formal model of a theory of NCMs and electoral support. I then describe the operationalization of key variables and the empirical model. In the fifth section I test the hypotheses and conduct a number of robustness checks. Finally, I conclude and offer implications for the study of vote choice.

Theoretical Foundation

The notion that voters hold their leaders accountable for policies that are not in accordance with their preferences is key for democratic governance. In an effort to maximize votes, parties modify their strategies to appeal to as large a number of voters as possible. Consequently, to understand the positions that parties claim or their overall strategies, one must first examine how voters hold parties accountable through elections. The proximity theory suggests that voters receive the highest utility for supporting parties that are closer to them on an ideological scale (Downs, 1957), but parties' policy promises may be

discounted depending on their likelihood of coming to pass (Grofman, 1985). Some criticize the proximity model for ignoring the tendency of voters to have preferences of varying intensity (Merrill & Grofman, 1999) and instead posit that voters consider how closely the party compares to the voter's preferred direction of policy change. Unlike the proximity model, the directional model incorporates the intensity of preferences and the salience of the issues (e.g., Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989). Empirically, the evidence is mixed in favor of the predictions from the proximity model that parties will converge or that parties will instead diverge (for a review, see Kedar, 2009). This has prompted other scholars to propose theories that incorporate elements of both theories yet depart in meaningful ways (e.g., Kedar, 2009; Merrill & Grofman, 1999).

Central to these theories of representation is the notion that voters hold the government accountable for policy performance. Economic voting models theorize that voters hold the government accountable for economic outcomes in that election cycle. In strong economic times, the government parties are rewarded in an election. Yet there are a number of individual- and societal-level constraints called "contingency dilemmas" that weaken this relationship (Anderson, 2007). Contingency dilemmas are the result of either institutions that cloud accountability or individual characteristics that prevent voters from being able to hold the government accountable. At the individual level, the ability for voters to hold the government accountable differs according to information, media exposure, political attitudes, and so on (Duch, Palmer, & Anderson, 2000). At the societal level, Powell and Whitten (1993) highlight the importance of having government actors clearly accountable for the economic policy. If there are multiple actors influencing policy, then it becomes difficult for voters to hold the governing parties accountable (e.g., Duch & Stevenson, 2008; Hellwig & Samuels, 2007).

The number of studies devoted to analyzing economic voting is quite large, and the theory's explanatory power is impressive given its simplicity. Having said that, there are still two areas within the study of vote choice that warrant additional attention. First, because the theory of economic voting explains government support, it is unable to explain support for opposition parties. It is useful to know why voters choose whether or not to support government parties, but it would be even better to understand why voters shift their support to opposition parties. This is a question that is often addressed in country- or election-specific studies yet largely ignored in large-*N* cross-national studies. Moreover, are opposition parties able to influence their own vote shares through signaling to the electorate?

Second, there are a wide variety of policy performance-based reasons for voting for or against the government, yet studies of vote choice focus primarily on economic indicators. Indeed, "terminal events"—such as national security events, scandals, and public opinion shocks—can have profound impacts on electoral support (e.g., Narud & Valen, 2008; Williams, Brule, & Koch, in press). Certainly, although the economy is most frequently cited as the most salient issue for voters, it is not the only salient issue (Singer 2011). Rather, the issues that are salient in elections vary across voters and political contexts, making their inclusion in aggregate studies of vote choice difficult. It is crucial to examine the salience of these issues since issue ownership theory (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996) suggests that parties emphasize the issues with which they are perceived as more competent or in which they have a relative advantage. At the aggregate level, evidence suggests that voters hold accountable parties that are uniquely competent in salient policy issues (e.g., Narud, 1996). A potential solution that I offer is the inclusion of NCMs as indirect proxies for these meaningful economic and noneconomic policy indicators. In the next section I expand on this improvement.

Theory

For all but the most rare cases, it is reasonable to suggest that legislators know the outcome of an NCM before the vote actually occurs. Therefore, in most cases the opposition parties know beyond a shadow of a doubt whether the motion will bring down the government.

Take, for example, the case of a New Democracy (ND) NCM against the majority PASOK (Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement) government in 1989 in Greece. In early 1989, an auditing of the Bank of Crete revealed that the owner, George Koskotas, had robbed the bank's funds of millions of dollars. While he was in a U.S. prison awaiting extradition to Greece, he revealed a "a series of allegations implicating the top PASOK leadership, including [Prime Minister Andreas] Papandreou, in bribes of billions of drachmas" in exchange for favorable legislation (Dimitras, 1989). ND seized the opportunity to propose an NCM that faced an uphill battle for passage. Although the motion was predictably defeated (by a vote of 123-155), it was accompanied by increased coverage of the scandal by the Greek media. Surveys at this time identified a substantial drop in the percentage intending to vote for PASOK from around 30% in mid-1988 to around 20% during the scandal (Dimitras, 1989). The scandal went on to dominate the June 1989 election campaign; "the political parties and their affiliated newspapers treated [the scandal] as a near exclusive

salient issue concentrating their themes and headlines on it and neglecting the country's other equally pressing problems" (Dimitras, 1989, p. 274). This strategy succeeded in boosting ND's vote shares (compared to the 1985 election) by 3.44%, whereas PASOK's vote shares declined by 6.69% (Budge, Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, & Tanenbaum, 2001).

Rather than being motivated by bringing down the government, this NCM was aimed at shoring up public support for the long term. This example shows that whether by illustrating to the electorate that they best represent their preferences or by demonstrating the government's incompetence, opposition parties can propose NCMs to gain a long-term electoral benefit. This example is one in which the NCM was not effective in bringing about a termination of government. It does, however, show that the insurmountable odds that opposition parties often face in passing an NCM are not enough to discourage the opposition from proposing them. NCMs reflect salient and well-publicized issues (often unrelated to economic conditions) that opposition parties can use to influence voters' evaluations of parties and their choices in elections.

Opposition parties may be drawn to the lure of NCMs because of the media coverage that accompanies their claims. For example, in 2002 the Irish Fianna Fail government was facing a scandal, so the opposition Fine Gael decided to "embarrass the Government" with an NCM (Brennock, 2002, p. 8). The NCM was intended the expose the government's weakness, and it drew considerable media attention:

> No confidence motions have the effect of galvanizing the Government parties. This one brought out the Taoiseach and Tanaiste to deliver colorful and carefully scripted speeches that had enough soundbites to ensure clips from them were broadcast on radio and television stations and quoted in the press. The motion gave the Opposition a platform, but gave the Government one too. (Brennock, 2002, p. 8)

Since Fianna Fail had 50 more seats in the Dail than Fine Gael, the NCMs were obviously a "stunt designed for public consumption rather than an event with any parliamentary meaning" (Brennock, 2002, p. 8).[2]

If opposition parties were principally motivated by potential success, then *unsuccessful* NCMs would be quite rare. In anticipation of an unsuccessful vote most opposition parties would forgo the possible embarrassment of losing a motion and would rescind the motion before it fails. We know that unsuccessful NCMs occur quite often, so there must be some other

motivation for challenging the government that is unrelated to immediate success. I argue that proposing NCMs can reward the opposition party at the next election by influencing the electorate's perception of the opposition party's ability to govern relative to the current government. Opposition parties often respond to policy shocks—such as poor economic conditions, scandals or conflict—by proposing NCMs. The content of the signal can vary according to whether the opposition party's purpose is to raise the public's awareness of a policy failure, shift the issues on the government's agenda, identify the parties responsible for a failure, or question the government's overall competence. As the institutional environment changes and policy shocks come and go, the opposition may either refrain or continue to challenge the government to reflect these changing dynamics. Since opposition parties are strategic, they will refrain from challenging unless the policy shock means trouble for the government and opportunity for the opposition. Regardless of the content of the signal, they are intended to sway the voters as viewing the opposition party as a more effective governing alternative than the current cabinet. We further explore the consequences of these signals in the Formal Model section.

Inasmuch as challenging the government sends a signal to voters that the government is incompetent, challenges are likely to affect which parties are held accountable and which parties voters choose to support. An incompetent government, or one that has possibly experienced multiple challenges, is likely to be punished in the election as voters shift to more competent parties. Even though the NCM is initially rejected by the parliament, the signal sent by the opposition party of the government's competence influences the capturable voter into voting *against* the government and *for* the opposition. This would suggest that the opposition parties experience an electoral gain from tabling the motion, whereas the government experiences a decline in votes following a challenge (whether it passes or fails).

Recall that the primary puzzle that this article addresses is why opposition parties propose NCMs that are doomed to fail. To address the possible electoral motivations for proposing NCMs, one approach is to remove the legislative motivations from the analysis so that we can determine whether there are still incentives—nonlegislative—for challenging government. Since the NCM is not related to success, the opposition is not trying to change the date of the election—just the outcome of the election. In the formal model that follows, I expand on the electoral motivation for the opposition to challenge the government based on signals.

Formal Model

In this game I model the interactions between an opposition party and a key voter. All actors observe a policy shock (e.g., Lupia & Strom, 1995) that provides new information about the quality of governing offered by the government relative to the opposition. Based on whether the opposition party is a better governing alternative than the government, the opposition party decides whether or not to challenge the government. In the next election, the voter either votes for or against the government. An *opposition party* is defined as any political party that is not included in the government, or any party that does not possess cabinet portfolios. We call the key voter in the electorate the *capturable voter*. In a majoritarian system, this voter is most likely the median voter whose support would provide the government with a majority in the parliament. In a system with proportional representation, the capturable voter is a voter outside of the party's "winning coalition," but within ideological proximity to the party. Thus, the capturable voter in a proportional representation system is simply a voter who would expand the party's support base and ultimately widen its control of parliamentary seats.

The key component of this model is that an opposition party can use the NCM to signal to the capturable voter that it is a better governing alternative. These signals can be based on perceptions of policy performance or can be related to valence issues, such as competence or integrity. To simplify, we will denote whether the opposition is a better or worse alternative to the government.[3] The decision to propose an NCM provides information for the capturable voter, in that it changes the payoffs associated with the capturable voter's decision to vote for or against the government. This is because the opposition has an informational advantage over the electorate in assessing the government's competence and performance in office. Even if the public is knowledgeable of the government's policies, it is likely that it cannot determine to what extent the government is actually responsible for policy outcomes. This is especially the case in contexts with multiple non–electorally accountable actors making decisions that affect the policy outcomes (Duch & Stevenson, 2008). Thus, I assume that the opposition party has an informational advantage over the capturable voter and can use this advantage to signal to the capturable voter. I present the formal model of these interactions in Figure 1.

The sequence of the game is as follows. Nature (*N*) independently chooses the opposition party's "relative governing strength" compared to the government, either worse (*W*) or better (*B*), with common prior *p* and *1−p*, respectively. After Nature chooses the type, an opposition party responds to a policy
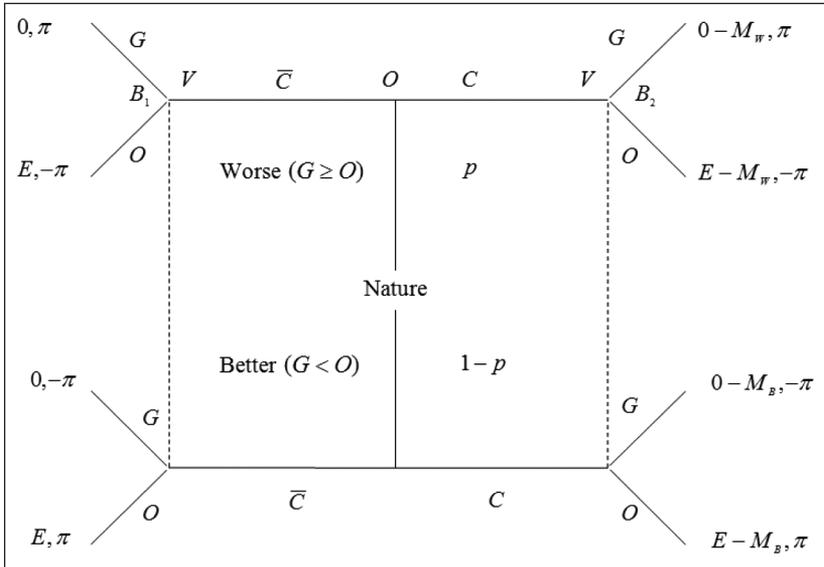
Figure 1. Signaling game of electoral success

shock by either challenging the government (C) or not challenging the government ($\overline{C}$) with an NCM. The action set for the opposition party (O) is $A_0 = \{C, \overline{C}\}$. The strategy set for the opposition party contains two elements, one action for each state of the world (i.e., $\overline{C}$, C, or not challenge given a worse type but challenge a better type).

The opposition party is aware of the government's type when it makes its decision whether or not to challenge. After the opposition party makes its decision, an election occurs later in the electoral cycle. During the election, the capturable voter chooses to vote either for the government (G), or for the opposition party that proposes the NCM (O). A vote against the government is an outcome that improves the proposing party's electoral fortunes. The capturable voter (V) is unaware of the government's type, so she or he does not know whether she or he is at the top or bottom of the formal model (denoted with the dashed lines, or information sets). The action set for the capturable voter is $A_v = \{G, O\}$. The strategy set for the capturable voter must specify the action at each of the two information sets given in Figure 1 (e.g., $O|C, G|\overline{C}$, which means vote for the opposition if an NCM occurs and with the government otherwise).

I now consider both actors' payoffs in greater detail. I assume that the opposition party is primarily office-seeking.[4] After the election, the opposition party receives the benefits of the postelection governing arrangement, which is either E if the voter (V) votes for the opposition (O) or 0 if the voter votes for the government (G). If the opposition party wants to send a signal to the capturable voter, it must pay the motion costs which depend on the government's type, M_t [0,1], where t = {*Worse, Better*}. These costs can include the transaction costs of challenging in addition to the unobservable costs associated with upsetting future possible coalition partners, publicly committing to the content of the NCMs, and losing the support of the party's supporters. These costs differ across states as the institutional obstacles to proposing challenges vary in magnitude.

Additional costs that opposition parties must consider include a "credibility penalty." This is the idea that voters quickly tire of the overuse of NCMs by opposition parties that are in a worse position (type W) relative to the government. The credibility penalty is most likely a function of how much the party stands to lose from upsetting the voters or possible governing partners by challenging when it is in a worse position. To capture this dynamic, I assume that the costs of challenging a worse type (B) are higher than a better type (W) because of the "credibility penalty," or $M_W > M_B$. If a party faces a higher credibility penalty, then it will produce a more credible signal that clearly differentiates opposition parties who are in a worse position compared to those in a better position. In essence, this penalty is a combination of many characteristics, most notably the possibility that the opposition party is ideologically moderate and/or one of few alternative governing possibilities.

The capturable voter prefers to correctly place the opposition party in office when it is a better type and keep the government in office if the opposition is a worse type. By correctly matching types, the voter gets a payoff in the form of greater public goods, π. If she or he incorrectly matches the type to the vote choice, she or he receives a payoff of $-\pi$.

I solve the model by finding the sequential equilibria of the game with the incentive compatibility restriction. The sequence provides the moves of the opposition party and capturable voter, in addition to the capturable voter's updated beliefs regarding the government's type. There are four pure-strategy perfect Bayesian equilibria to the game described above.[5] I first briefly describe the four equilibria:

1. No NCMs and the capturable voter votes for the government. The equilibrium strategy profile is $[(\overline{C},\overline{C}),(G,G)]$. The voter's beliefs are $\beta_1 = p$, $\beta_2 = p$, where $p > .5$.

2. No NCMs and the capturable voter votes for the opposition party. The equilibrium strategy profile is $[(\overline{C},\overline{C}),(O,O)]$. The voter's beliefs are , $\beta_1 = p$, $\beta_2 = p$, where $p < .5$.

3. Opposition party challenges when it is in a better position, refrains otherwise. The voter is able to correctly match the type to her or his vote choice based on the informative signal. The equilibrium strategy profile is $[(\overline{C},C),(G,O)]$. The voter's beliefs are $\beta_1 = 0$, $\beta_2 = 1$.

4. Opposition party never challenges if it is in a worse position. If it is in a better position, it mixes and does not challenge with probability q^*. The capturable voter votes for the opposition if she observes a challenge, but otherwise mixes and votes for the government with probability r_*. The equilibrium strategy profile is $[(\overline{C},C \text{ with } q^*),(G,C \text{ with } r^*)]$. The voter's beliefs are $\beta_1 = \dfrac{p}{p + q(1-p)}$, $\beta_1 = 0$, $q^* = \dfrac{2\pi p}{2\pi (1-p)}$, $r^* = \dfrac{M_B}{E}$, where $p < .5$.

I describe each equilibrium in turn. This article addresses the electoral motivations for NCMs, so I focus my attention on the third and fourth equilibria. Equilibria 1 and 2 are mutually exclusive (because of the *p* restriction) and are consistent with traditional vote choice models where voters vote based on their prior conception of which parties are better governing possibilities. I therefore focus my attention on the equilibria that illuminate the puzzling behavior that drives this research.

In Equilibrium 3, the opposition party engages in "fully separating" behavior by challenging when it is in a better position and refraining when it is in a worse position. The capturable voter will always vote for the government when the opposition party does not challenge the government. Since the capturable voter's payoffs are solely determined by correctly matching the government's type to whether they are in office, the capturable voter uses the signal of the opposition party's challenge to determine the government's type. In other words, since it is informed of the opposition party's strategy, it updates its prior belief to be 100% certain whether the opposition is a worse or better governing possibility. In equilibrium, the capturable voter always votes against the government if it observes a challenge.[6] Thus, we can derive the general observation from the formal model that proposing an NCM will increase the vote share of the opposition party that proposed it at the expense of the government.

We can also use the observations of the formal model to highlight the motivations of the opposition party. The opposition party chooses to not challenge

a worse type when the costs of challenging exceed the benefits, or $M_W > E$. Likewise, the opposition party will propose a motion when it is in a better position (i.e., type B) if the benefits exceed the motion costs, or $E > M_B$. Since the credibility penalty assumes that $M_W > M_B$, we can propose that the separating behavior occurs when $M_W > E > M_B$. This suggests that the credibility penalty has a large influence on the informational qualities of the signal. As the credibility penalty increases, the opposition is more likely to separate, further improving the credibility of the signal.

Yet it is perhaps unrealistic to assume that the voter supports the government every time the opposition party chooses not to challenge it. Equilibrium 4 identifies "semiseparating" equilibrium. If the type is opposition party is in a worse position (type W), the opposition party is deterred from challenging because of the high motion costs. If the type is better, the opposition party makes the capturable voter indifferent by mixing and choosing not to challenge ($\overline{C}$) with probability q^*. Likewise, the capturable voter mixes and votes for government (G) with probability r^* to make the opposition party indifferent between not challenging and challenging. If the voter does not observe a challenge, there is no signal and the voter must choose based on her or his prior belief that the opposition is a worse alternative to the government ($G \geq O$), which is likely to be a function of partisanship, ideology, perceptions of policy performance, and valence issues. When an NCM occurs, the voter knows it is a better type because of the separating behavior and uses this information to vote for the opposition.

There are two main implications of this equilibrium. First, opposition parties are strategic and determine when to challenge the government based on their relative strength. The costs associated with challenging vary across systems and are higher when the opposition is in a worse position. The high costs are enough to deter challenges to worse types and even sometimes with better types. This explains the relative rarity of NCMs even though there are electoral incentives to challenge the government. We also find further support for the electoral motivations of NCMs since the voter sides with the opposition party if she observes an NCM. From this discussion, I derive two hypotheses, which are described in the next section before introducing the empirical model.

Hypotheses

I expect to find that there are both direct and indirect influences of NCMs on vote choice. The formal model suggests that there is a direct influence because of the signal that is sent by the opposition to the electorate. The opposition

views a policy shock of some kind and then decides whether or not to challenge the government and send a signal. Without the NCM, it is possible that the capturable voter would still shift her or his vote from the government to the opposition. In fact, Equilibrium 2 demonstrates that this occurs when the policy shock shifts the capturable voter's prior probability that the opposition is worse than the government to below 0.5. However, it is my contention that the NCM draws attention to the policy shock and offers an alternative to the government by illustrating its abilities vis-à-vis the opposition. I therefore hypothesize that the governing parties will experience declines in vote share following opposition challenges.

> *Hypothesis 1:* Government parties that have experienced NCMs will see a decrease in vote share in the following election.

Yet there are costs associated with tabling NCMs, including motion costs because of institutional hurdles, making public commitments to policy positions, and burning bridges with potential coalition partners. Since the opposition party that proposes the motion must pay these costs, it makes sure that it presents itself—rather than other possible opposition parties—as the more capable alternative to the government on that particular issue. The proposing opposition party has the opportunity to set the policy agenda, voice its displeasure with the government, and show that it can better address the nation's problems. I therefore expect to find that the opposition party that proposes the NCM experiences an electoral boost.[7]

> *Hypothesis 2:* Opposition parties that have proposed NCMs will see an increase in vote share in the following election.

Data and Method

The goal of this project is to identify the role of NCMs on electoral support for government and opposition parties. Since I am principally concerned with NCMs, only advanced parliamentary democracies where the government is responsible to the parliament are included in the sample. This definition of parliamentary government is consistent with Muller, Bergman, and Strom (2006) and includes semipresidential systems like France and excludes states like Switzerland. This produces a sample of 20 countries for a total of 1,099 observations.[8]

I have developed two hypotheses concerning the influence of challenges on vote choice. I utilize a simple research design that uses a number of control

variables to predict the degree of change in vote shares for both government and opposition parties in advanced parliamentary democracies. The dependent variable is thus the *change in vote share* (V) for each party from the previous election ($V_{\tau-1}$) to the current election (V_{τ}). This is preferable to using the vote share as the dependent variable as this approach controls for the traditional strength of larger parties. I also control for the *previous vote share* because government parties tend to lose votes in office (Samuels, 2004).

Central to any analysis of vote choice is the state of the economy. There are a number of different economic conditions that have been shown to influence vote share, including unemployment and inflation (Powell & Whitten, 1993) and consumer confidence (MacKuen, Erikson, & Stimson, 1992). Since my theory focuses on overall policy performance, I choose an indicator that is general enough to capture broad economic conditions (i.e., real GDP per capita) that concern voters of all ideological varieties.[9] Moreover, this approach has considerable advantages over other economic indicators (i.e., unemployment), one of which is that data are available for the early part of the sample (1960s). I use the *change in real GDP per capita* (Penn World Tables, Version 6.2) over the previous year as my primary indicator of economic outcomes (Heston, Summers, & Aten, 2006). For elections occurring in the first 6 months of the year, I utilize the lagged value of *change in real GDP per capita*.

This analysis is more general than previous research because it attempts to identify changes in electoral support for both government and opposition parties. I create two dichotomous variables to identify those parties that are a part of *government* and the *prime minister's party*.[10] These variables reflect the attributes of the last noncaretaker government prior to the election. It has been shown that incumbent parties lose 2% to 3% of voter support independent of performance in office (Nannestad & Paldam, 2002). Thus, I expect that governing parties lose support from the previous election. As two additional controls, I include a binary variable indicating whether the government has a *majority* of seats in the parliament and a count of *the number of government parties*. These are taken from Woldendorp, Keman, and Budge (2000).

I hypothesized that NCMs would affect vote shares in two ways: Government parties that were challenged would experience a decrease, whereas opposition parties that challenged the government would experience a boost in vote share. I create two variables: *number of NCMs against that government* and *number of NCMs by that party*. The first variable counts the number of separate NCMs directed against the current government in that election cycle.[11] The other variable is a count of the number of NCMs proposed by that opposition party against the current government in that election cycle.[12] This variable includes only those motions in which the opposition party *proposed* the

motion, which is distinct from those situations where the opposition party merely votes against the government. These data are collected primarily through the use of *Keesing's World Archives*, parliamentary archives, and secondary sources. For each NCM, I collect the date, the proposing party (or parties), proximate catalyst, and the outcome. In the following section I describe the estimation techniques used to model the consequences of NCMs.

Results

I first estimate an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression that predicts vote change for the sample of government parties. To correct for heteroscedasticity, I produce robust standard errors clustered around the country. The results testing the first hypothesis with an OLS regression are presented in the first column of Table 1.

The first hypothesis is that government parties that have experienced challenges will see their vote share decrease in the following election. To test this hypothesis, I estimate an OLS regression on a sample of only government parties. Although the adjusted R2 in Model 1 is somewhat small (.074), it is a reasonably strong fit for a model of vote change.[13] The key theoretical variable counts the number of NCMs against the current government. In Model 1, this coefficient is negative and statistically significant, indicating that NCMs reduce vote share. For each additional NCM, government parties' vote shares decrease by 0.11%.[14] The second hypothesis is that the party that proposes the motion will be rewarded at the polls. I test this hypothesis by estimating the same model as before (Model 1) on a sample of opposition parties but including the variable counting the number of NCMs proposed by that party (Model 2). The variable that counts the number of NCMs proposed by that party is statistically significant and positive, which supports Hypothesis 2. For each additional challenge against the government, the proposing party's vote share increases by 0.283%. This is consistent with my theory that NCMs are motivated by a long-term electoral benefit to the opposition. By signaling its relative governing strength to the electorate, the opposition can increase its vote share at the expense of the governing parties. Figure 2 illustrates this dynamic.

Figure 2 provides the predicted change in vote share (and 95% confidence intervals) across the range of number of NCMs in an election cycle for two scenarios.[15] The first scenario is for the prime minister's party and the second scenario is for an opposition party that proposes the NCMs. We can glean two primary inferences from this figure. First, NCMs produce statistically significant changes in vote share for both the government as well as the opposition party. This is because we can reject the null hypothesis of no vote change for

Table 1. Regression Results of the Effects of No-Confidence Motions (NCMs) on Parties' Change in Vote Share (Vote$_\tau$ − Vote$_{\tau-1}$)

	Model 1: Govt. parties	Model 2: Opposition parties	Model 3: Opposition parties	Model 4: Opposition parties
No. of NCMs against govt.	−0.107** (0.046)	−0.102** (0.050)	−0.487*** (0.210)	−0.198** (0.081)
No. of NCMs by that party		0.283*** (0.103)	0.900** (0.424)	0.717** (0.309)
Real GDP per capita growth	0.130** (0.064)	−0.131** (0.053)	−0.136** (0.052)	−0.129** (0.053)
Majority govt.	−1.461** (0.823)	0.670** (0.252)	0.728** (0.268)	0.650** (0.263)
No. of govt. parties	0.165 (0.186)	−0.071 (0.091)	−0.118 (0.108)	−0.046 (0.092)
Prime minister's party	1.436** (0.689)			
Lagged vote share	−0.096*** (0.025)	0.015* (0.008)	0.015** (0.008)	0.013* (0.008)
Effective no. of parties			0.049 (0.109)	
Eff. Parties × Govt. NCMs			0.095** (0.046)	
Eff. Parties × Party NCMs			−0.159** (0.091)	
Ideological extremism				−0.006 (0.009)
Extremism × Govt. NCMs				0.004** (0.002)
Extremism × Party NCMs				−0.020** (0.011)
Constant	0.927 (1.084)	0.473** (0.214)	0.399 (0.465)	0.588*** (0.302)
N	406	693	693	693
Adjusted R^2	.074	.020	.018	.022

Standard errors in parentheses.
*p < .10, one-tailed. **p < .05, one-tailed. ***p < .01, one-tailed.
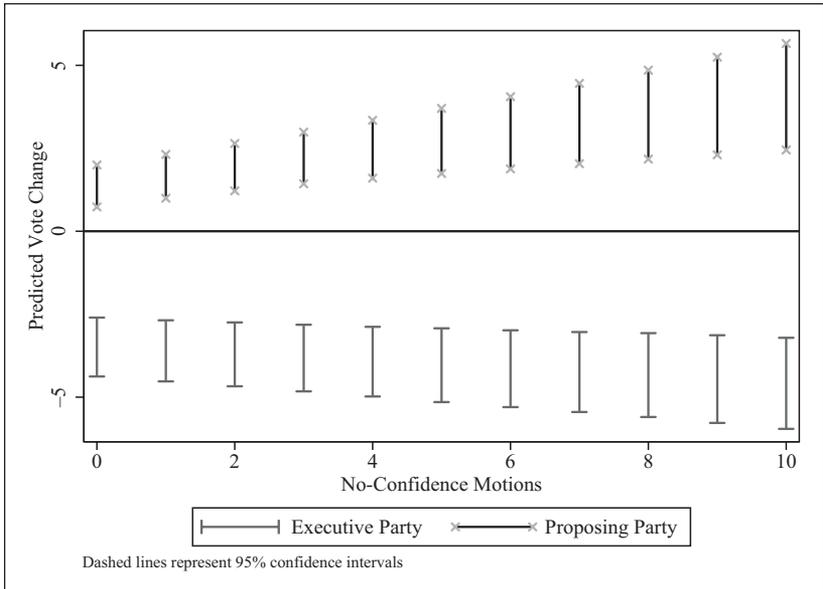
16

Figure 2. The effects of no-confidence motions on the vote change of the prime minister's party and the proposing opposition party

both scenarios (because the confidence intervals do not overlap 0). Second, NCMs create statistically different predicted vote changes for the government and opposition party. As the proposing party experiences a boost in electoral support because of the motion, the government experiences a decline. Since the two confidence intervals do not overlap at any number of NCMs, we can predict that the two parties would have statistically different vote changes. The results from Model 2 also indicate that those opposition parties not proposing NCMs experience declines in vote share ($\beta = -.10$). These findings help illustrate the incentives that opposition parties have to challenge the government, even in the face of the motion's likely legislative defeat.

When we examine the results of the two models together, we see support for a simple retrospective economic voting theory, as *real GDP per capita* increases the vote share of government parties (Model 1: $\beta = .13$) and reduces the vote share of opposition parties (Model 2: $\beta = -.13$). We can also see that it is easier for voters to hold their governments accountable when there is a clear line of accountability. If the government parties are part of a majority or single-party government, then their vote share decreases. This is consistent

with the previous findings that majority governments are more likely to lose votes than are minority governments (Strom, 1990). The relationship is exactly the opposite for opposition parties, which benefit because of the government's clear responsibility.

The empirical results thus far have lent support to the theory. The credible mechanism linking challenges to electoral support is the idea that the opposition party is highlighting the government's incompetence or weaknesses at the same time as it is advertising its own ability. This signal explains why we observe voters shifting their support away from the government and toward the opposition. The primary catalyst for the separating behavior is the credibility penalty, which causes opposition parties to challenge the government when they are a better governing alternative. We also observed that the propensity for the capturable voter to throw her or his support behind the opposition party is directly related to how the costs of challenging the government compare relative to the benefits. As the costliness of the signal increases, so does its credibility.

We can view the consequences of the credibility penalty in practice by observing how two characteristics condition the effects of NCMs on vote share: effective number of parties and ideological extremism. An implication of the theory is that this dynamic will be stronger in those situations where an opposition party represents a clear alternative to the governing arrangement. For those parties that are likely alternative governing possibilities, the credibility penalty will be higher as they have more to lose. The credibility of the signal that is sent is proportional to the increased costs associated with sending it. We should therefore expect that the signaling impact on the voter should be magnified in those situations with high credibility penalties. For example, in a system with only two major parties, having the opposition party challenge the government is likely to directly increase that party's vote share. On the other hand, in a consociational democracy with a large number of parties, it will be more difficult to predict which opposition parties will receive the voters' shifting support. Since the credibility penalty in these states is lower, the signal will produce a smaller effect.

To test this expectation, I estimate Model 3, which is similar to Model 2 except for the inclusion of the *effective number of parties* and interactions between the effective number of parties and the number of motions proposed by that party (*Effective Parties × Party NCMs*) and the number of motions against that government (*Effective Parties × Government NCMs*). This is a simple test of whether the positive impacts from challenging the government are more favorable to the proposing party when there are few alternative governing arrangements (i.e., when the *effective number of parties* is low). All the
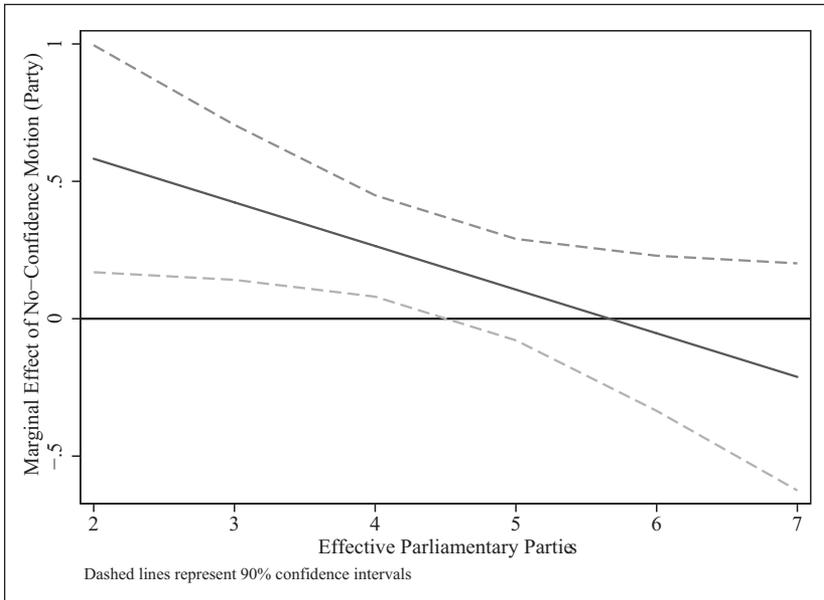
Figure 3. Marginal effect of a no-confidence motion by that party on vote change across effective number of parliamentary parties (Model 3)

control variables are of similar magnitude and correctly signed. The *effective number of parties* is statistically significant, but the hypothesis tests of single interaction coefficients are rather limited. Instead, it is more informative to view the substantive effects of NCMs on vote choice with a figure illustrating the marginal effects (Brambor, Clark, & Golder, 2006).

Figure 3 shows that the marginal effect for the number of NCMs proposed by that party is statistically significant and positive in multiparty systems when there are clear alternatives to the current government (i.e., when there are fewer than five effective parties). As the effective number of parties increases (to more than five effective parties), the beneficial electoral impacts of NCMs disappear. When there are multiple opposition and government parties, NCMs are not as informationally productive because opposition parties pay fewer costs to propose them. When opposition parties are the likely governing alternative (i.e., with few parties), the credibility penalty is much higher, which strengthens the credibility of the NCM signal.

Another characteristic that determines the likelihood of the opposition being rewarded for challenging the government is the party's ideological moderation

or extremism. For the signals to influence vote change by the capturable voter, the opposition party must present itself as a credible coalition partner. Moderate parties are in a better bargaining position because they typically occupy the median position in the system and are therefore featured in more coalition alternatives. This is because the party that occupies the median position "cannot be dislodged by any contiguous bloc of opposition parties either on its left or its right" (Narud & Valen, 2008, p. 377). I thus expect that ideologically moderate opposition parties will be able to sway the capturable voter easier than extreme parties. Ideologically moderate parties will send more credible signals because the costs of sending the wrong signal are higher. To examine this proposition, I first create the absolute value of the party's ideological left–right score from the Comparative Manifesto Project's *rile* variable (Budge et al., 2001). Lower values indicate that ideological positions closer to 0 (and presumably closer to the ideological center and perhaps the median voter), whereas higher values indicate parties with more extremist views. I interact this variable (*ideological extremism*) with the number of NCMs proposed by that party.

I present Model 4 in Table 1. The marginal effects (and 90% confidence intervals) of the number of NCMs by that party across *ideological extremism* are shown in Figure 4. For ideologically moderate parties (those with absolute ideology scores lower than 30), proposing NCMs increases their vote shares by as much as 0.75%. These marginal effects are statistically significant at the 90% confidence level. However, as the proposing party's ideology becomes more extreme and farther from the median voter, the beneficial impacts of NCMs are eliminated because voters view these signals as "cheap talk." For parties located 30 or more points from the center, proposing NCMs have no significant effect on vote choice. This supports the notion that the capturable voter will change her or his vote to viable government alternatives only based on credible signals.

Conclusion and Implications

This project produces an explanation for the prevalence of NCMs in the face of almost overwhelming failure rates. I theorize that opposition parties can send signals to the electorate of their strengths relative to the government, which will produce electoral boosts in support later on. This finding is counterintuitive and contradicts some of our prior conceptions of challenges. NCMs are not simply a sign of polarization or electoral instability with multiple small parties all voicing their displeasure for the current government. Rather, opposition parties challenge the government to receive
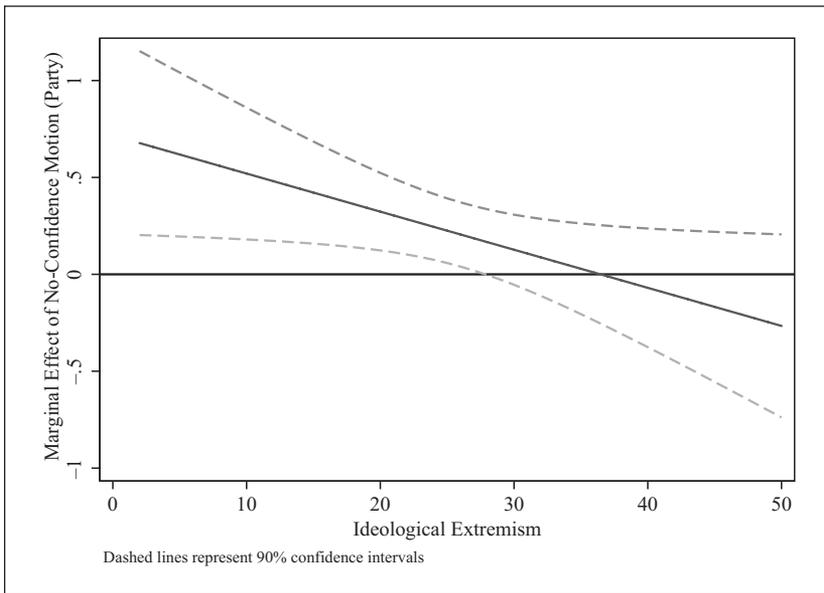
Figure 4. Marginal effect of a no-confidence motion by that party on vote change across ideological extremism (Model 4)

a long-term electoral benefit. I find that government parties' vote shares decrease about 0.11% for every time that the opposition challenges them; proposing parties, on the other hand, are rewarded with a 0.28% increase. The beneficial impact of an NCM is even greater when the credibility penalty is high. NCMs in a two-party system boost the proposing party's vote share by 0.67%, whereas those with ideological scores closer to 0 get a boost of 0.76%. When one considers that there were multiple NCMs in 51 of the 97 of the elections reported in Table 1, the true impact of NCMs is magnified many times over. NCMs can therefore cause substantively large shifts in vote share, potentially changing the distribution of seats and the composition of government.

This finding is robust to a series of additional empirical models.[16] For example, the theory states that voters will receive the competence signal and will shift their votes from the government to the proposing party. Central to this is the idea that the opposition party represents a more competent party to deal with the state's current problems. If the opposition party cannot be viewed as a reasonable governing alternative to the current government, then

proposing NCMs is unlikely to improve its position. The results support this assertion, as opposition parties derive the most electoral benefit from challenging the government in states with few viable alternative governing arrangements. This is counterintuitive since majoritarian, Westminster-style countries are those where NCMs have the lowest probability of passing. Though opposition parties in these states experience very little immediate success, their presence as the primary governing alternative means that they gain a long-term electoral benefit from challenging the government. This is an explanation for the occurrence of NCMs in situations with a very small chance of passage. Opposition parties in non-Westminster-style regimes therefore have an incentive to challenge the government because of the possibility of influencing voters in the next election. Moreover, ideologically moderate parties are more likely to gain from proposing NCMs, as they are hypothesized to be more credible governing alternatives. This finding lends additional support to the empirical regularity that voters can exercise greater accountability when there are fewer alternative governing choices (Anderson, 2000).

Finally, this project illustrates the importance of NCMs in the context of vote choice models. By incorporating NCMs into empirical models of vote choice, we boost the explanatory power of our models in two ways. First, there is a disconnect between the reasons for voters voting in individual elections (i.e., scandals or policy failures unrelated to economic conditions) and the reasons found in systematic cross-national studies of vote choice. Although economic conditions certainly play a large role in the majority of elections, the quest for a large-N quantitative study necessarily limits the types of accountability that can be assessed. It is difficult to produce a valid operationalization of political scandals that can be utilized in a cross-national fashion. Second the types of policy areas that are salient vary over time, from country to country, and across elections. This makes it difficult to create a realistic portrayal of policy failures in a parsimonious model such as economic voting. Together, these inabilities have limited the already powerful predictive power of contemporary vote choice models. This project's findings suggest that a possible solution is to use NCMs as indirect measures that reflect policy performance. By doing so, we can improve the generality of vote choice models while still maintaining their parsimony by including the number of NCMs.

Acknowledgments

European Union Center for Excellence, Texas A&M University, July 28–29, 2008, and at the 2009 Summer Institute in Empirical Implications of Theoretical Models, University of Michigan.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. Additional materials and replication materials are available at webpages.acs.ttu .edu/larwilli.
2. The opposition Fine Gael increased its vote percentage in the following election (in May 2007) by 4.8%, whereas Fianna Fail maintained its position (+0.1%).
3. At times I refer to this difference as the "government's type," but it is important to note that the type characterizes the relative governing ability of the opposition compared to the government.
4. Although parties may also be vote or policy seeking (Muller & Strom, 1999), I assume that winning office is the best way to achieve these other goals.
5. This game is a variation of the traditional signaling game, so I exclude the derivations of the equilibria.
6. This does not necessarily mean that the party that proposes the no-confidence motion (NCM) is always returned to office following the election. In fact, this is the prediction only in the two-party system, where the capturable voter represents the median voter. In multiparty systems, the capturable voter is simply an additional voter outside of the opposition party's winning coalition. It does, however, mean that the electoral and/or governing prospects for the proposing party are improved by challenging.
7. The formal model does not produce expectations about the effects of NCMs on opposition parties that do not propose the NCM. One possibility is that if the NCMs simply reflect the government's performance in office, then one might expect that all opposition parties would benefit from the unsuccessful government. On the other hand, if the NCM conveys information about the proposing party's strength relative to the government, we might expect that the proposing party would siphon off votes from the other opposition parties as well.
8. Sample countries include Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands,

New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden. There are 236 elections, 97 of which experience NCMs.

9. In addition, there are strong expectations by voters about real GDP per capita growth, whereas "it is unclear whether voters respond to the level or direction of inflation" (Samuels, 2004, p. 428).

10. Following the coding convention of Woldendorp, Keman, and Budge (2000), government parties are those parties that control a cabinet ministry.

11. NCMs are deemed as separate if there are distinct votes (or divisions) for each motion. If the current government is a caretaker government, then I count the number of NCMs against the previous government.

12. There are a few instances when a member of the governing coalition proposes an NCM; since these parties typically leave the coalition prior to proposing the NCM, these are coded as challenges by the opposition.

13. A possible method of increasing the explanatory power of the model is to estimate essentially the same model on the level of vote share and include a lagged dependent variable. Although this increases the R^2 substantially (ranging from .92 to .94), the coefficient on the lagged dependent variable indicates that the series is nonstationary (since it overlaps 1) and indicates that the change model is appropriate.

14. In the Conclusion and Implications section I explore the substantive effects of NCMs on changes in vote shares.

15. To calculate predicted values, I use the Clarify program (King, Tomz, & Wittenberg, 2000). The top scenario uses Model 1, and the bottom scenario uses Model 2.

16. The key empirical results are robust to models excluding those observations where successful NCMs occurred as well as models controlling for the proximity of the last NCM to the election. These results are available in the additional materials at webpages.acs.ttu.edu/larwilli.

References

Anderson, C. J. (2000). Economic voting and political context: A comparative perspective. *Electoral Studies*, *19*, 151-170.

Anderson, C. J. (2007). The end of economic voting? Contingency dilemmas and the limits of democratic accountability. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *10*, 271-296.

Brambor, T., Clark, W., & Golder, M. (2006). Understanding interaction models: Improving empirical analyses. *Political Analysis*, *14*, 63-82.

Brennock, M. (2002, November 14). A double-edged sword for opposition. *Irish Times*, p. 8.

Budge, I., & Farlie, D. J. (1983). *Explaining and predicting elections: Issue effects and party strategies in twenty-three democracies*. London, UK: Allen & Unwin.

Budge, I., Klingemann, H.-D., Volkens, A., Bara, J., & Tanenbaum, E. (2001). *Mapping policy preferences: Estimates for parties*, *electors and governments 1945-1988*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Dimitras, P. E. (1989). Greece. *Electoral Studies*, *8*, 270-280.

Downs, A. (1957). *An economic theory of democracy*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Duch, R. M., Palmer, H. D., & Anderson, C. (2000). Heterogeneity in perceptions of national economic conditions. *American Journal of Political Science*, *44*, 635-652.

Duch, R. M., & Stevenson, R. (2008). *Voting in context: How political and economic institutions condition the economic vote*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Grofman, B. (1985). The neglected role of the status quo in models of issue voting. *Journal of Politics*, *47*, 230-237.

Hellwig, T., & Samuels, D. (2007). Voting in open economies: The electoral consequences of globalization. *Comparative Political Studies*, *40*, 283-306.

Heston, A., Summers, R., & Aten, B. (2006). *Penn World Tables* (Version 6.2). Philadelphia, PA: Center for International Comparisons of Production.

Kedar, O. (2009). *Voting for policy*, *not parties: How voters compensate for power sharing*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

King, G., Tomz, M., & Wittenberg, J. (2000). Making the most of statistical analyses: Improving interpretation and presentation. *American Journal of Political Science*, *44*, 347-361.

Lijphart, A. (1999). *Patterns of democracy: Government forms and performance in 36 countries*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Lupia, A. W., & Strom, K. (1995). Coalition termination and the strategic timing of parliamentary elections. *American Political Science Review*, *89*, 648-665.

MacKuen, M. B., Erikson, R. S., & Stimson, J. A. (1992). Peasants or bankers? The American electorate and the US economy. *American Political Science Review*, *86*, 597-611.

Merrill, S., III, & Grofman, B. (1999). *A unified theory of voting: Directional and proximity spatial models*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Muller, W. C., Bergman, T., & Strom, K. (2006). Parliamentary democracy: Promise and problems. In W. C. Muller, K. Strom, & T. Bergman (Eds.), *Delegation and accountability in parliamentary democracies* (pp. 3-33). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Muller, W. C., & Strom, K. (1999). *Policy*, *office or votes? How political parties in Western Europe make hard decisions*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Nannestad, P., & Paldam, M. (2002). The cost of ruling. In H. Dorussen & M. Taylor (Eds.), *Economic voting* (pp. 17-44). London, UK: Routledge.

Narud, H. M. (1996). Party politics and government accountability: A comparison between the Netherlands and Norway. *Party Politics*, *2*, 479-507.

Narud, H. M., & Valen, H. (2008). Coalition membership and electoral performance. In K. Strom, W. C. Muller, & T. Bergman (Eds.), *Cabinets and coalition bargaining* (pp. 369-402). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Petrocik, J. R. (1996). Issue ownership in presidential elections with a 1980 case study. *American Journal of Political Science*, *40*, 825-835.

Powell, G. B., & Whitten, G. D. (1993). A cross-national analysis of economic voting: Taking account of the political context. *American Journal of Political Science*, *37*, 391-414.

Rabinowitz, G., & Macdonald, S. E. (1989). A directional theory of issue voting. *American Political Science Review*, *83*, 93-121.

Samuels, D. (2004). Presidentialism and accountability for the economy in comparative perspective. *American Political Science Review*, *98*, 425-436.

Singer, M. M. (IN PRESS). Who says "it's the economy?" Cross-national and cross individual variation in the salience of economic performance. *Comparative Political Studies*.

Strom, K. (1990). A behavioral theory of competitive political parties. *American Journal of Political Science*, *34*, 565-598.

Williams, L. K., Brule, D. J. & Koch, M. T. (2010). War Voting: Interstate Disputes, the Economy, and Electoral Outcomes. *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 27, 442-460.

Woldendorp, J., Keman, H., & Budge, I. (2000). *Party government in 48 democracies (1945–1998)*. London, UK: Kluwer.

Bio

Laron K. Williams is an assistant professor of political science at Texas Tech University. His current research interests focus on the role of parliamentary oppositions on policy making and accountability.