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Perceptions of (Unequal) Responsiveness and their Consequences for Electoral Participation

Jan Rosset (University of Geneva)
Jan.Rosset@unige.ch



ABSTRACT:

Research on a variety of advanced democracies has shown that there is a link between mass preferences and public policy. It has also documented that when there are differences in preferences between income groups, public policy tend to be more responsive to the preferences of richer citizens. We know little, however, about citizens' perceptions of responsiveness as well as of unequal responsiveness and their consequences for electoral participation. This is relevant as citizens' perceptions of their influence on policy directly factors in the perception of the utility of voting. If citizens do not feel that they have an influence on political outcomes they might get discouraged from going to the voting booth, which in turn lowers the incentives for political actors to take their views into consideration. This manuscript addresses this issue by analysing citizens' perceptions of policy responsiveness and of unequal policy responsiveness, the extent to which these perceptions vary by income as well as the effect of those perception on turnout across various income groups. Using data from an original survey conducted in 12 west European countries and the United States in 2019 as well as data from the European Social Survey of 2012, the analyses reveal that there is little variation in responsiveness perceptions across income groups: a majority of citizens from all income groups are sceptical about their own influence on policy and perceive a bias in policy making that favours the rich. These perceptions are associated with lower levels of participation, especially among low-income groups. Overall, results show that evaluations of responsiveness matter for political participation, but these evaluations cannot explain differences in participation between income groups since all groups have very similar perceptions of responsiveness as well as of inequality in responsiveness.

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Introduction

One of the normatively desired features of democracy is that there should be a close correspondence between the preferences of citizens and the policies under which they are ruled¹. As a result, policy responsiveness, that is the extent to which policy changes reflect public preferences, is one of the concepts used in empirical political science to gauge the quality of democracy (Morlino 2004, Sabl 2015) .

The literature on responsiveness of public policy to citizens' demands has mainly focused on two broad research questions: what is the degree of policy responsiveness in democracies? And to whose preferences are policies responsive? (see e.g. Erikson 2015) Both questions have triggered a large literature. These debates are far from being settled, but, overall, research shows that there is at least some policy responsiveness in western democracies (see e.g. Burstein 2003, Soroka and Wlezién 2010). However, there is also research documenting that when there is disagreement between advantaged and disadvantaged groups in societies, the former tend to have more influence on public policy than the latter (Gilens 2012, Schakel 2019, Elsässer, Hense and Schäfer 2017, 2020)².

Research has almost exclusively focused on objective measures of policy responsiveness and we know very little about citizens' evaluations of responsiveness in general and even less about their perceptions of economically rooted inequalities in responsiveness. Yet, these perceptions are important for at least two reasons. First, given the centrality of citizens' preferences in democracy, it is simply of interest to know what the principals in democratic rule think about how democracy works (see e.g. Esaiasson and Wlezién 2017). Recent research has shown that satisfaction with democracy is a multifaceted phenomenon and that analysing citizens' evaluations of specific features of democracy is a clear plus for understanding its determinants (Ferrin and Kriesi 2016). Second, these perceptions might matter for the political behaviour of citizens themselves and thus have an influence on actual policy responsiveness. Indeed, if citizens who perceive a lack of policy responsiveness or some form of biased responsiveness as a result decide to abstain from participating in politics or, on the contrary, get mobilized, responsiveness perception itself might play role for actual policy responsiveness. Indeed, electoral participation has been identified as one of the mechanisms allowing citizens to get represented (see e.g. Griffin and Newman 2005, Peters and Ensink 2015, Dassonneville et al. 2020). At the same time, the proximity of citizens' policy preferences with the stances of existing institutional actors, such as political parties, positively influences their participation (Kurella and Rosset 2018). If citizens who perceive that the policies by which they are ruled do not match with their wishes, there might be a danger of a vicious cycle in which lack of responsiveness towards certain groups might discourage them from participating which, in turn, would negatively affect policy responsiveness towards them. Key for understanding such a phenomenon are both the perceptions of citizens of the way they are represented and the link between those perceptions and participation.

This paper thus seeks to advance our knowledge about citizens' evaluations of responsiveness and the impact of these evaluations on turnout. To do so, it assesses the extent to which citizens feel that the preferences of the majority of citizens are attended to by policies and the extent to which they perceive a bias in responsiveness favouring the rich and it analyses the effects of various responsiveness evaluations on electoral participation.

¹ There are of course exceptions to this general presumption notably in relation to minority protection.

² See however Elkje and Iversen (2020) as well as Käppner et al. (2021) who do not find a clear association between economic status and influence.

The empirical analysis relies on data from the « Inequality and Politics » survey that was carried out in thirteen West European countries as well as the United States during the summer of 2019 (Pontusson et al. 2020). It shows that citizens have in general mixed views in relation to responsiveness, that a large majority of citizens perceive bias in policy responsiveness towards the rich and that there is little polarization between income groups in relation to these questions. Regarding the effects of responsiveness evaluations on political behaviour, the analyses reveal that negative evaluations of responsiveness to the preferences of the majority of citizens as well as the perception that the rich have more influence on public policy than other citizens both depress electoral participation. While the effect is similar for all income groups regarding responsiveness to the preferences of the majority, perceiving that the rich have more influence on policy only negatively affects the propensity to vote of low and middle income citizens and not those belonging to the top income deciles. Robustness checks performed using data from the European Social Survey 2012 confirm that there is limited polarization by income with regard to overall responsiveness evaluations and that although income groups clearly differ in their participation rates, perceptions of responsiveness cannot account for these differences.

Theory

Over the past decades, the literature has mainly focused on actual responsiveness and how it comes about. It has put little emphasis on citizens' preferences and reactions to responsiveness (see Esaiasson and Wlezien 2017). The rare studies taking that perspective have notably shown that citizens care about responsiveness and value it as a normative goal (see e.g. Bowler 2017, Rosset, Giger and Bernauer 2017), that the proximity between the policy preferences of citizens and the stances of their representatives on these policies improves citizens evaluations' of democracy (Stecker and Tausendpfund 2016, Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017) and that the way politicians explain their decisions matters for citizens evaluations of responsiveness (Esaiasson, Gilljam and Persson 2017). Some studies have also looked at political efficacy (Rennwald and Pontusson 2022) or the feeling of being represented by a party (Rosset 2016) as imperfect proxies to measure evaluations of political representation in general³. However, there is no study, to the best of my knowledge, that focuses specifically on citizens' evaluations of policy responsiveness.

This contrasts with the large body of literature focusing on actual responsiveness (see e.g. Burstein 2003, Wlezien and Soroka 2016 for literature reviews). It is a stretch of course to assume that citizens' evaluations of responsiveness match with objective measures of responsiveness. However, given the lack of previous studies, basing expectations with regard to perceived responsiveness on what studies of actual responsiveness have found seems like a good starting point. It relies on the assumption that there is a connection between actual and perceived responsiveness.

So what do we know about actual responsiveness? First, research has documented that there is some level of policy responsiveness in western democracies (Burstein 2003, Wlezien and Soroka 2016). Most studies find a positive relationship between citizens' preferences and the adoption of specific policies (Lax and Philips 2009, 2012) or more aggregate measures of policy such as the level

³ One of the main differences between the instruments used in this paper compared to what has been used in those earlier works is that the novel items presented here do not make direct reference to the individual respondent in the wording of the questions but rather ask about a general evaluation of policy responsiveness and unequal policy responsiveness in a polity. To give an example Rennwald and Pontusson (2022) use the item "people like me don't have any say about what the government does" whereas the item used in this paper is "public policies generally reflect the preferences of the majority of citizens". While the first statement includes an assessment of the individuals' influence, the latter is more about the outcomes of the political system as a whole.

of spending in specific areas (Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Importantly for perceptions of responsiveness, citizens do seem to notice these policy changes and adapt their preferences to the new status quo (Wlezien 1995, Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Although there is consensus on the fact that there is some policy responsiveness, there are debates about whether the level of policy responsiveness is sufficient (Burstein 2010).

Second, there is a rapidly growing literature on the effects of economic inequality for policy responsiveness. It seeks to analyse the extent to which the unequal distribution of economic resources results in an unequal distribution of influence in western democracies. Initiated by Martin Gilens (2005, 2012) with a focus on the United States this research strand has typically analysed the correlation between levels of support for a certain policy proposal among various income groups and the adoption of this policy in the following years (see e.g. Schakel 2019, Elsässer, Hense and Schäfer 2017, 2020) or changes in overall levels of redistribution, social spending or welfare generosity (Peters and Ensink 2014; Schakel, Burgoon and Hakhverdian 2020). The bulk of the studies using this research design have found bias in policy responsiveness in the sense that the effect of policy preferences rich citizens, typically those located at the 90th percentile or above, on policy is greater than that of the preferences of the median income earner (see e.g. Gilens 2005, 2012). Importantly, this phenomenon was observed in various contexts and it matches with results measuring unequal influence by looking at policy congruence between citizens and the stances of their elected representatives (Lupu and Warner 2020) or their governments (Rosset, Giger and Bernauer 2013, Rosset and Stecker 2019) on those policies.

These two perspectives on responsiveness highlight the existence of at least two conceptualizations of responsiveness. One that is concerned with the extent to which the preferences of the majority of citizens or residents are taken into account. From that perspective, what matters is the median position within the population and a single indicator is sufficient to capture it. The second conceptualization is concerned with the characteristics that might help individuals or groups to be more or less influential compared to other groups. It therefore requires considering the preferences of multiple subgroups within a constituency. Given the importance of economic cleavages, most of the research has focused on the differential influence of income groups. Those two conceptualizations can be transposed to perceptions of responsiveness which can be either overall assessment of responsiveness (perception that policies are responsive to the majority) or perception of a systematic bias in responsiveness in the sense that some specific groups have on average more influence on policy (perception that rich have more influence on policies). It is important to note that both beliefs are not mutually exclusive.

Based on what we know about actual responsiveness, we can expect that, overall, citizens perceive some degree of responsiveness of public policy to the wishes of the majority and to their own preferences, but that they also perceive an economically based bias in responsiveness. This is something we will be able to describe based on the survey items analysed.

It is also important to consider whether assessments of responsiveness systematically differ by income groups. On the one hand, research on satisfaction with democracy shows that there is a social gradient the way individuals belonging to different socio-economic groups express satisfaction with various aspects of democracy (see e.g. Schäfer 2010). It has been argued for instance that privileged groups are generally more satisfied with democratic performance because they generally have strong incentives for a status quo (Ceka and Magalhães 2020).

However, on the other hand, the perceptions of responsiveness we are interested in are perceptions that are not directly linked to citizens' level of satisfaction. They are general assessments of the

situation without reference to what would be the more desirable outcome. Also, as will be made clear when the instruments measuring those perceptions will be presented in the next sections, perceptions of responsiveness to the majority and the greater influence of the rich rather than the poor are both general statements that make no reference to the individual answering the survey questions. For those reasons, it is less likely that respondents will systematically vary in their perceptions of responsiveness.

Regarding the consequences of responsiveness evaluations, one would expect that they have an impact on political participation. Theoretically at least, feeling represented is associated with the perceived utility of voting. Indeed, from a functionalist perspective, voting makes much more sense if one believes that citizens' preferences matter for policy than if policy in general would be independent of what citizens want. For instance, the literature on external political efficacy, that is one's belief that one has a say in what the government does, shows that high levels of political efficacy are associated with higher levels of political participation (e.g. Finkel 1985). Similar arguments have been put forward in the literature on the effects of macro-level economic inequality on political participation showing that greater economic imbalance reduces participation among poor voters arguably due to their perception that the political system does not cater to their demands (Goodin and Dryzek 1980, Solt 2010, Anderson and Beramendi 2012). Based on these arguments, I formulate the following hypothesis:

H1 : Citizens' favourable evaluations of responsiveness are positively associated with their electoral participation.

Assuming that the effect of perceptions of responsiveness on electoral participation is linked to individuals' assessment of their utility of voting, there are no reasons to expect differences between income groups regarding the magnitude of this effect for respondents' perception of responsiveness to the majority of citizens. There are, however, reasons to believe that the effect of perceptions of unequal responsiveness is mediated by individuals' assessment of their own economic situation. Believing that public policy is biased in favour of the rich actually reflects a high assessment of the utility of voting for those citizens who are (or perceive to be) rich. Being part of the group towards which responsiveness is biased, rich respondents have no incentive to abstain based on their negative assessment of unequal responsiveness. However, the opposite is true for less affluent respondents. Perceiving that public policy is biased towards the rich indicates that they themselves have little influence on political outcomes and therefore have little incentive to turn out. For those reasons, I hypothesise that:

H2: The negative effect of the perception of unequal responsiveness on political participation decreases with individual income.

Data and research design

The data analysed comes from the Politics and Inequality survey, an online survey conducted in the summer of 2019 in the following countries : Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States (see Pontusson et al. 2020). In those countries, a series of questions regarding individuals' evaluations of inequality and political matters were asked to a representative sample of the population aged 16-74⁴.

⁴ Note that the original survey was also conducted in Sweden, but that country is not included in the analysis due to translation issues for the questions regarding perceptions of responsiveness. The survey also includes an oversampling of union members in Germany, Sweden and the UK which is not considered in the analyses presented below as they focus on the general population.

The survey questions used in the analysis were developed specifically to gauge evaluations of responsiveness. They allow to shed some light on the public assessment of responsiveness measured as the extent to which public policy reflects the preferences of various groups. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement regarding the following statements:

- Public policies generally reflect the preferences of the majority of citizens.
- Rich citizens have more influence over public policies than other citizens.

The five response categories range from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The first item that focuses on the preferences of the majority of citizens can be considered as measuring sociotropic evaluations of responsiveness. The item on the disproportional influence of the rich on public policy measures respondents’ perceptions of economically based inequality in policy responsiveness.

In order to analyse polarization in the extent to which citizens from different income groups perceive unequal responsiveness, two different operationalizations are employed. An obvious way to measure polarization of perceptions in unequal representation is to use the item on the influence of rich citizens and analyse differences across income groups. This straightforward approach could, however, be criticized given the rather upfront wording of this question and, as will be shown in the analysis section, the fact that the variable is highly skewed with very large shares of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. Therefore, I also use an alternative operationalization which relies on the statement on the extent to which public policies reflect the preferences of the majority of citizens.

For both dependent variables, a regression model is run with country fixed effects and clustered standard errors to account for the shared variance at the country-level. Given the nature of the variables, an ordered logistic regression is estimated for the variable both variables.

The independent variable of interest in these models is income. Respondents were asked about their household income and were presented a series of income brackets. This income variable has been recoded so that it corresponds to country-specific income deciles, i.e. each respondent was assigned a value between 1 and 10 corresponding to which income decile this individual is located. This income variable is treated as a continuous variable. In order to grasp potentially non-linear effects of income it is introduced in combination with its squared and cubic terms in the models. Further specifications of the models include control variables that have been found to impact democratic evaluations including gender, age and interest in politics.

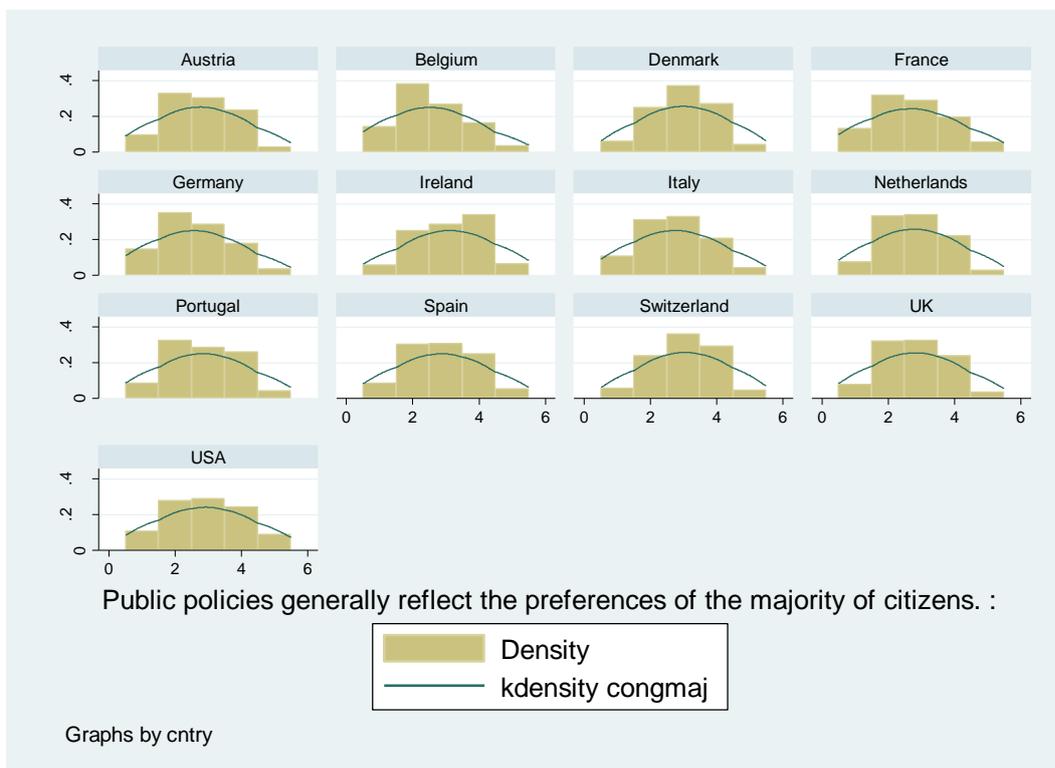
The third step of the analysis concerns electoral participation. To measure turnout a question regarding the participation in the last election is used⁵. This variable is used as a dependent variable in the models. Given its binary nature, a logistic regression is used in this set of analyses. Three separate models are run each including one of the perceived responsiveness measures as an independent variable. These variables are interacted with income in order to allow the effect of perceived responsiveness on participation to vary across levels of income. The same set of control variables as in the previous analyses – gender, age and interest in politics – as well as country fixed effects and clustered standard errors are included in these models.

⁵ The exact wording of the question used is “For one reason or another, people often don’t vote. Did you vote in the last national election?” with the following response categories: “Yes, I voted”, “I’m not eligible to vote” “I thought about voting but eventually decided not to do so”, “I did not vote, for other reasons”, “I do not recall”. Respondents not eligible to vote and who did not recall were excluded from the analysis. The other respondents were coded 1 if they stated they voted and 0 otherwise.

Empirical Analysis

The first step of the analysis aims at getting an overview of individuals' perceptions of policy responsiveness. Figures 1 and 2 summarize the response patterns in the 13 countries under investigation. It appears that respondents in all countries have mixed feelings about sociotropic responsiveness, i.e. the extent to which public policies match with the preferences of the majority of citizens. Only in two countries -- Ireland and Switzerland -- there are more respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement than those who disagree (or strongly disagree) with it. In all other countries, the distribution is skewed to the right. For instance, in France, Germany, the UK and the United States only about one third of respondents agree that there is responsiveness to the preference of the majority. However, the share of individuals strongly disagreeing with the statement is hardly above the 10% mark showing that many respondents perceive at least some degree of policy responsiveness.

Figure 1. Degree of agreement with the statement “Public policies generally reflect the preferences of the majority of citizens” by country (scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree)

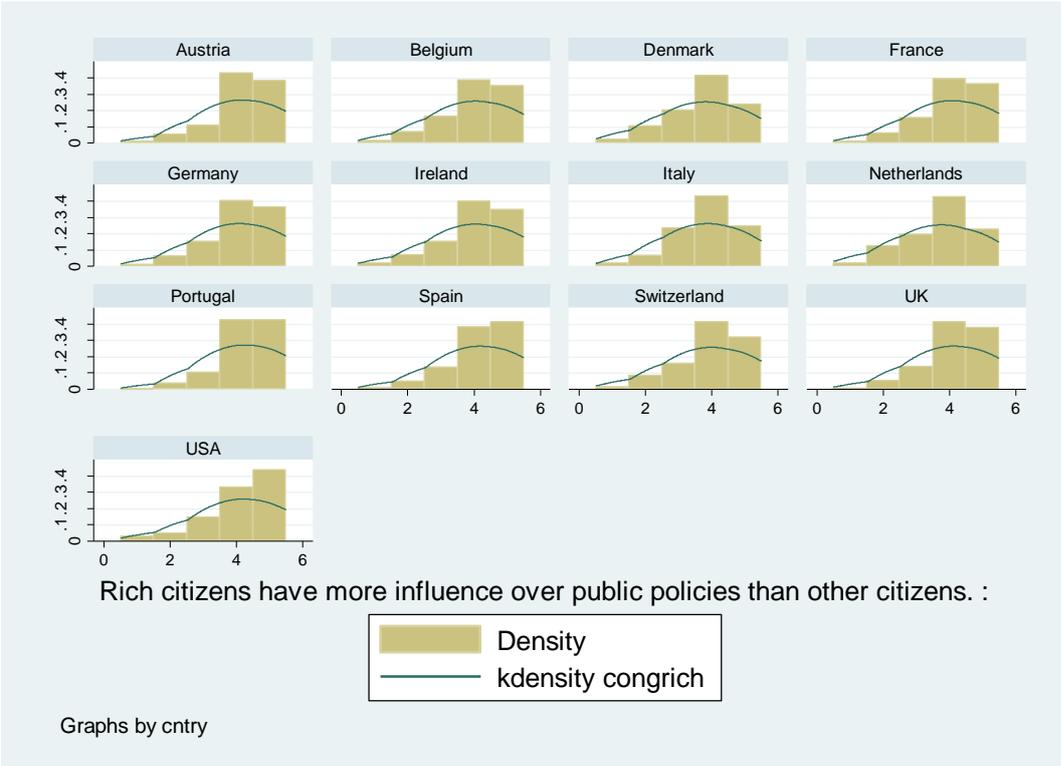


Regarding the question on the unequal influence of income groups (see Figure 2), the pattern is much clearer. In all countries a large majority of citizens agrees or strongly agrees with the statement that rich citizens have more influence on public policy than other citizens. There are notable cross-country differences, however. The modal answer to this question is “strongly agree” in the USA, Spain and Portugal. In contrast, the share of respondents strongly agreeing with the statement is smaller in Denmark, the Netherlands and Italy where larger proportions of individuals simply agree with the statement.

All in all, although there is no benchmark to which one could compare the pattern of responses observed, it appears that on the aggregate level the public perceives responsiveness in a manner that

is very similar to what studies on actual responsiveness have found : citizens perceive some responsiveness to the preferences of the majority of citizens, but also consider that responsiveness is biased in favour of richer citizens.

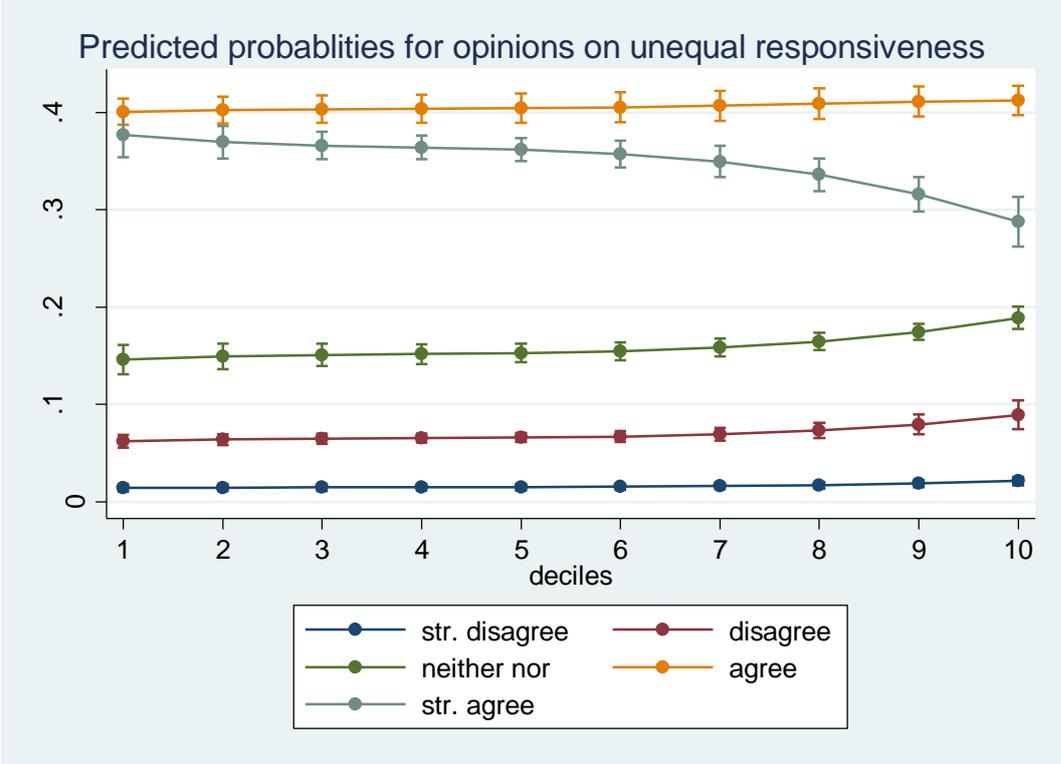
Figure 2. Degree of agreement with the statement “Rich citizens have more influence over public policy than other citizens” by country (scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree)



But what about individual level variations in the perceptions of responsiveness and unequal responsiveness? Is there some polarization by income with regard to perceptions those perceptions?

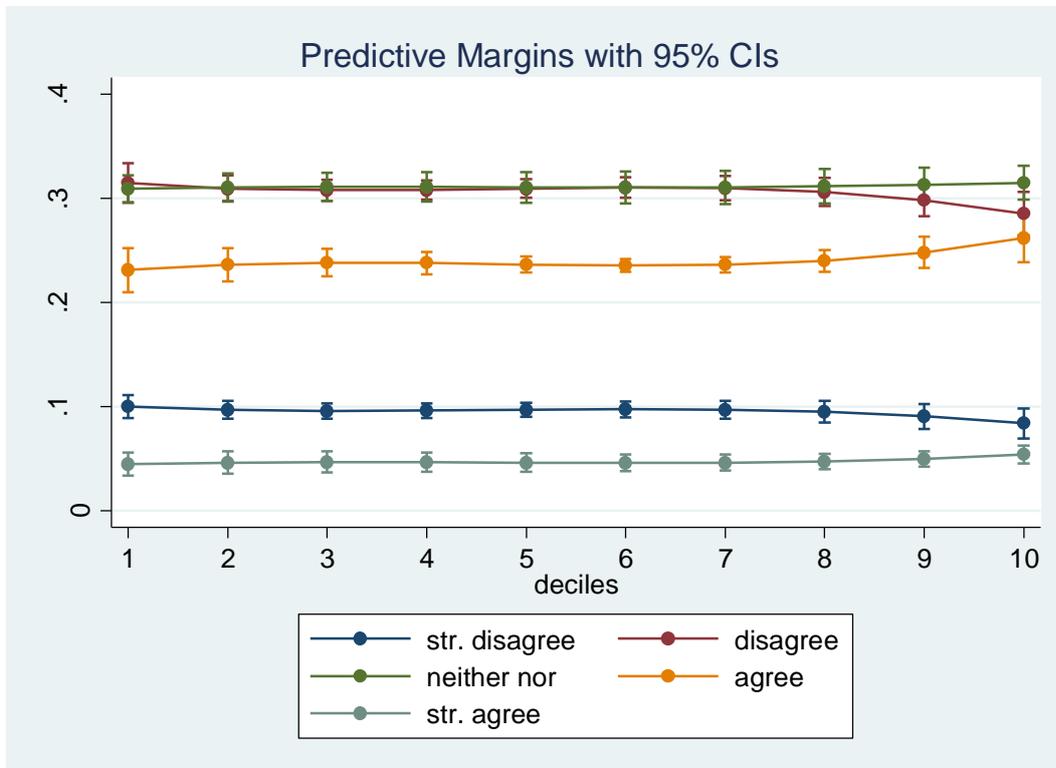
Figure 3 summarizes the results regarding the evaluations of unequal representation by income groups. It shows the predicted probabilities of the 5 answer categories for the item “rich have more influence on public policy than other citizens” based on Model 1 presented in table A1 in the appendix. The graph shows a great deal of stability in the evaluations of unequal representation by income groups. The ranking of answers is the same across all income groups with the highest share of respondents agreeing with the statement, followed by the answer category strongly agree. The only variation concerns the top three income deciles which are less likely to strongly agree with the statement and slightly more likely to disagree or have no opinion.

Figure 3. Predicted probabilities for response categories regarding the statement “Rich citizens have more influence on public policy than other citizens” by income



Using the alternative operationalization (i.e. measuring perceptions of responsiveness to the majority) results in a very similar pattern. There is actually even less variation across income groups as the predicted probability for individuals in all income categories ranges between 0,28 and 0,30 (see Figure 4 based on model 2 in Appendix A1).

Figure 4. Predicted probabilities of degrees of agreement with the statement “Public policies generally reflect the preferences of the majority of citizens” by income (scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree)



These results clearly show that there is little polarization with regard to evaluations of responsiveness. All income groups, on average, agree that there is some unequal representation and that the rich have more influence on public policy. Individuals from different income groups also do not differ systematically in the extent to which they feel the preferences of the majority are attended to. In sum, the analyses lend support for the hypothesis that overall evaluations of responsiveness and of unequal responsiveness are not polarized by income.

The next step of the analysis concerns political participation. Figures 5 and 6 present the predicted probabilities of declaring having voted in the last election based on the models presented in appendix A2. The graphs display predicted probabilities for different values of the income and the evaluations of responsiveness variables with all other variables kept at their observed values. Two separate models are run, each including one of the responsiveness evaluation variables. In these models, the income and the evaluations of responsiveness variables (responsiveness to the majority and unequal responsiveness) are interacted. Both models show a positive relationship between income and political participation. On average, the predicted probability of declaring having voted is about ten percentage point higher for respondents in the top income decile as compared to the bottom income decile which matches with previous research on the social gradient in political participation. The graphs regarding responsiveness to the majority (Figure 5) also show that there is a direct effect of responsiveness evaluations. In all income groups, agreeing with positive statements regarding policy responsiveness is associated with higher propensity to vote. The magnitude of the effect is, however, rather limited and the difference between the two extremes (those who strongly agree vs those who strongly disagree with the statement) is only about 5 percentage points.

In the case of the variable measuring the evaluation of unequal responsiveness (rich citizens have more influence on public policy), its effect is moderated by income. Agreeing with the statement has a clear negative effect on the political participation of relatively poor citizens. This effect becomes weaker as respondents' income increases and disappears completely for the top income groups. This result matches well with the idea that participation does not simply reflect evaluations of the quality of democracy (i.e. that the political system can be trusted in general), but also depends on individuals self-interested perceptions of what this political system can provide for themselves.

Figure 5. Predicted probability of declared turnout for various levels of agreement with the statement that policy reflect the preferences of the majority of citizens and various levels of income.

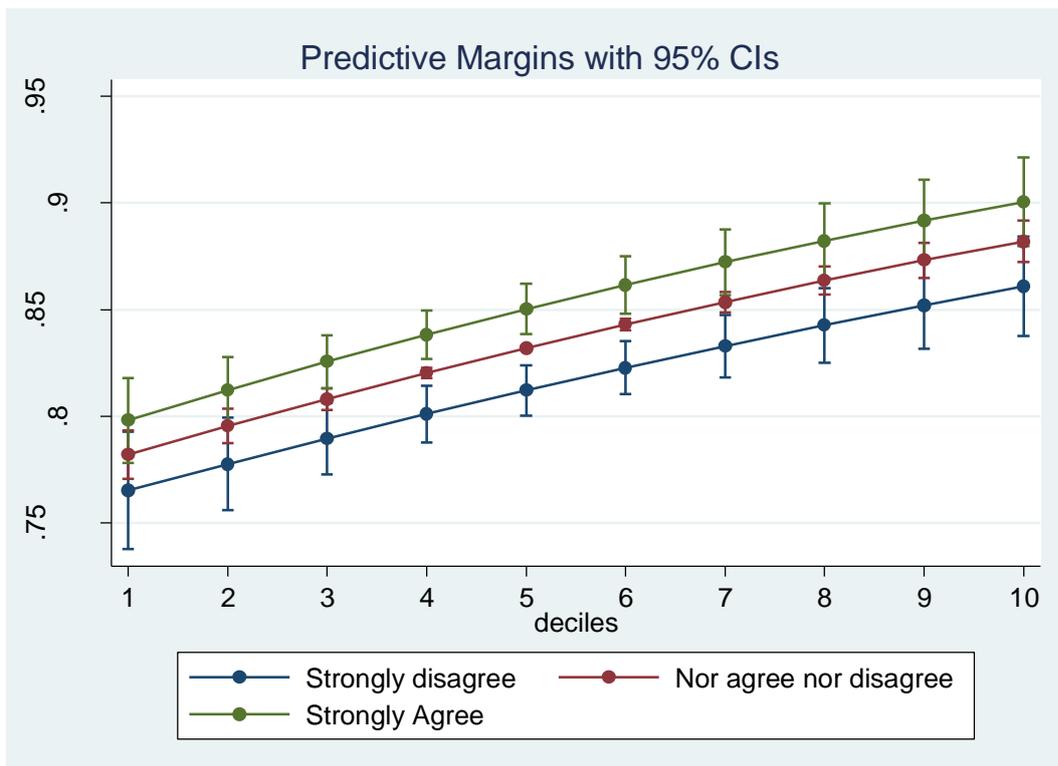
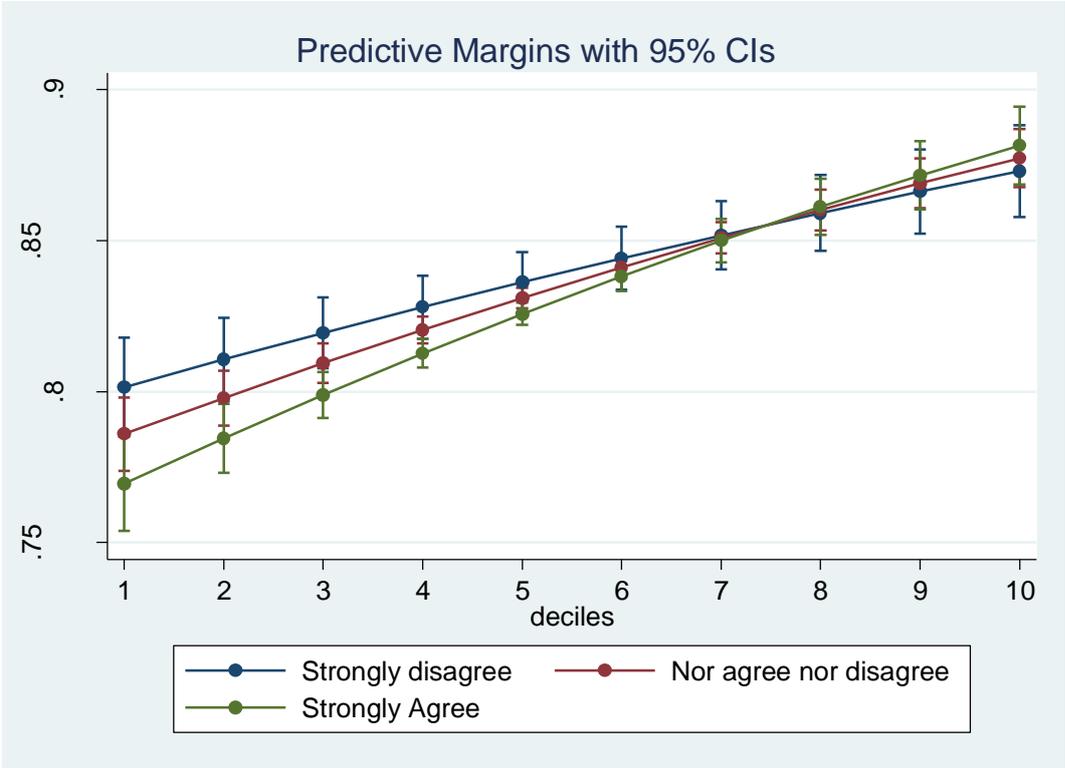


Figure 6. Predicted probability of declared turnout for various levels of agreement with the statement that policy reflect the preferences of the rich and various levels of income.



All in all, the analysis only provides partial support for the existence of a vicious cycle in which poor citizens would perceive little policy responsiveness which would in turn limit their participation. Indeed, negative evaluations of the match between public policy and the preferences of the majority (sociotropic evaluations of responsiveness) as well as perceptions that there are economically rooted inequalities in representation both clearly depress electoral participation. In the case of perceptions of unequal representation, this negative effect is specifically concentrated among respondents located in the lower half of the income distribution. In that sense there is evidence that the low evaluations of responsiveness among the poor could explain part of the participation gap between income groups. The analysis, however, also documents that the low evaluations of responsiveness are not specific to the poor and that all income groups perceive similar levels of responsiveness to the preferences of the majority and economically based inequalities in responsiveness. Therefore, differences in participation must have other roots than perceptions of representation such as resources themselves, time at disposal or social network.

Additional analyses

There are two caveats with the current analysis. First, while the overall pattern regarding the association between income and perception of responsiveness and the impact of the latter on political participation is quite clear, the analysis presented does not allow drawing conclusions regarding specific country cases. Second, the current analysis relies on one dataset that has been gathered at a specific point in time (summer of 2019). Although different operationalizations of responsiveness perception were used, it would still be helpful to analyse whether the lack of association between income and perceptions of responsiveness holds when analysing other datasets even if these are maybe less ideally suited for this purpose. In order to address these potential issues

a series of robustness checks have been performed. For sake of brevity the results are reported in the appendix.

The first set of robustness checks regarding cross-country differences replicates the analysis presented in Figure 3. This analysis shows that the level of polarization by income indeed differs from country to country (see Figure A3 in the appendix). There is a group of diverse countries including Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the United States in which there is no association between income and perception of unequal responsiveness whatsoever. Other countries including Austria, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland and the United Kingdom display overall a very similar relationship between income and perceptions of unequal responsiveness to the one that emerges from the overall analysis: there is a slight tendency for the rich to be less likely to perceive representation as biased. Importantly, in all countries a majority of all income groups believes that policy making is biased in favour of the rich.

The country specific analysis of the effect of perception of unequal responsiveness on turnout is presented in Figure A4 in the appendix. It shows that generally the overall pattern that has been identified in the pooled analysis, i.e. perceptions of unequal responsiveness tend to slightly lower turnout among the poor but not among the rich, is also present in majority of cases. There are four exceptions to this pattern. First, in the USA and Switzerland perceptions of unequal responsiveness are hardly associated with turnout. In Italy, instead of lowering turnout among the poor, negative evaluations of unequal responsiveness appear to boost turnout among the relatively rich. Finally, France is the only country in which negative evaluations of unequal responsiveness is associated with lower levels of participation among the high income groups.

The second set of robustness checks is related to the replicability regarding the lack of association between income and perceptions of responsiveness with other datasets. To the best of my knowledge there is only one publicly available survey containing questions on perceptions of responsiveness; it is the European Social Survey round 6 which was conducted in 2012 and 2013. The supplementary analysis concerns the 15 west European countries in which the survey was carried out⁶. The question regarding evaluations of responsiveness in that survey is a general question which captures sociotropic evaluations of responsiveness. It has been asked in two versions depending on whether respondents considered that it is important that the government changes its planned policies regardless of what most people think or whether it should stick to its planned policies in response to the preferences of the majority. For the former group the question reads: “please tell me how often you think the government in [country] today changes its planned policies in response to what most people think?”. For the latter, the wording was: “please tell me how often you think the government in [country] today sticks to its planned policies regardless of what most people think?”. In both cases, answer categories were on a 0 to 10 scale and the scale has been reverted for the second group so that positive values are associated with higher assessments of responsiveness (see e.g. Goubin 2020 for a similar procedure). An OLS regression with country fixed effects, this variable as a dependent variable and household income and household income square as well as gender age and political interest as predictors shows no association between income and evaluations of responsiveness (see Figure A5 in the appendix), which is consistent with the pattern found in the main analysis (see Figures 3 and 4).

⁶ The countries included are : Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK.

Conclusion

While the literature on actual policy responsiveness has boomed in recent years, we know relatively little about citizens' perceptions of policy responsiveness. In particular, it remains unclear whether citizens perceive responsiveness, whether they believe responsiveness is biased towards certain groups, whether there is polarization with regard to responsiveness perceptions and finally how evaluations of responsiveness affect electoral participation.

Relying on the "Inequality and Politics" survey (Pontusson et al. 2020), a comparative dataset including items measuring perceptions of policy responsiveness, this paper sought to shed light on those questions. The analyses show that on average citizens in western countries perceive some policy responsiveness, but that they also perceive economically based inequalities in responsiveness. Results regarding individual-level determinants of these perceptions show that there is only limited polarization by income with regard to those questions. A majority of poor and rich alike evaluate responsiveness to be unequal. Individuals belonging to all income groups have also a similar propensity to believe that policies reflect the preferences of the majority of citizens. Furthermore, the analysis has shown that perceptions of policy responsiveness to the preferences of the majority of citizens as well as perceptions of unequal responsiveness both influence electoral participation with more negative evaluations being associated with lower propensity to turn out to vote. Regarding perceptions of unequal responsiveness its negative impact on participation is only identified for low and middle income groups with individuals belonging to the top income deciles not being affected in their decision to turn out by negative evaluations of responsiveness.

The results regarding the effect of citizens' perceptions on their electoral behaviour are significant in the sense that they show that responsiveness perceptions can feed back the policy process by affecting turnout and thus ultimately electoral results. These effects of responsiveness perception on electoral decisions show the importance of a dynamic perspective of policy responsiveness taking into account the whole chain looking at the association between actual responsiveness and its perception, the effect of these perceptions on electoral decisions and ultimately the impact of the latter on policy changes.

The lack of polarization with regard to responsiveness evaluations might come as a surprise given, on the one hand, the documented social gradient in relation to satisfaction with democracy in general and, on the other, the fact that studies on actual responsiveness tend to show substantial inequalities in relation to income groups' influence over public policy. However, it is consistent with the fact that inequality is not really high on most citizens' political agenda (Pontusson et al. 2020) and that political actors' actively seek to keep issues that might be disagreeable to marginalized groups off the agenda creating what Weber coins "discreet inequality" (Weber 2020). More generally, it fits well with the fact that conventional wisdom about democracy has more to do about ideals than facts (Achen and Bartels 2017). Therefore, lack of polarization in relation to responsiveness evaluations might simply be the result of the fact that the issue of unequal responsiveness is hardly addressed in the public sphere. However, despite the lack of public debate about unequal responsiveness this study hints that rising awareness around this issue would probably not solve it. Based on the results presented here one would expect that higher awareness of the problem would depress participation among the low and middle income groups but would have little influence on the participation of the rich. It would thus contribute to increase rather than decrease the participation gap between income groups providing electoral incentives for political actors to follow the preferences of advantaged groups.

Future research should address some of the elements that would enhance our understanding of a dynamic perspective on responsiveness. In particular, it should analyse the link between actual and perceived responsiveness and also have a closer look at non electoral participation as individuals who are dissatisfied with the level of policy responsiveness might turn to other forms of political participation than elections which they might find not very effective given their dissatisfaction with responsiveness.

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Appendix

Table A1. Evaluations of unequal responsiveness

	Rich have more influence on public policy	Public policies reflect the preferences of the majority
Age	0.012*** (0.002)	-0.014*** (0.001)
Male	0.114*** (0.036)	0.114*** (0.032)
Political interest	0.158*** (0.021)	0.014 (0.023)
Income decile	-0.069 (0.059)	0.085 (0.058)
Income decile ²	0.016 (0.013)	-0.020 (0.012)
Income decile ³	-0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Constant cut1	-3.415*** (0.209)	-2.607*** (0,156)
Constant cut2	-1.658*** (0.142)	- 0.716*** (0.154)
Constant cut3	-0.389*** (0.139)	0,630** (0.166)
Constant cut4	1.436*** (0.119)	2,753*** (0,219)
Country fixed effects	YES	YES
N	25,201	24,890

Note: results from ordered logistic regression (rich have more influence), clustered standard errors (country), standard errors in parenthesis, *= $p < 0.05$, **= $p < 0.01$, ***= $p < 0.001$.

Table A2: (Declared) electoral participation

	voted	voted
Age	0.022*** (0.002)	0.022*** (0.002)
Male	-0.018 (0.045)	-0.010 (0.045)
Political interest	0.731*** (0.026)	0.737*** (0.027)
Income deciles	0.078*** (0.029)	0.060*** (0.015)
Perception of responsiveness to majority	0.052 (0.044)	
Income * Perception of responsiveness to majority	0.006 (0.009)	
Perception of unequal responsiveness		-0.065*** (0.022)
Income * Perception of unequal responsiveness		0.009* (0.004)
Constant	-1.889*** (0.165)	-1.508*** (0.122)
Country fixed effectsd	Yes	Yes
N	23,756	24,040

Note: results from logistic regressions, clustered standard errors (country), standard errors in parenthesis, *=p <.0,05, **=p<0.01, ***=p<0.001.

Figure A3 Predicted probabilities for response categories regarding the statement “Rich citizens have more influence on public policy than other citizens” by income and country



Figure A4 Predicted probability of declared turnout for various levels of agreement with the statement that policy reflect the preferences of the rich and various levels of income, by country.

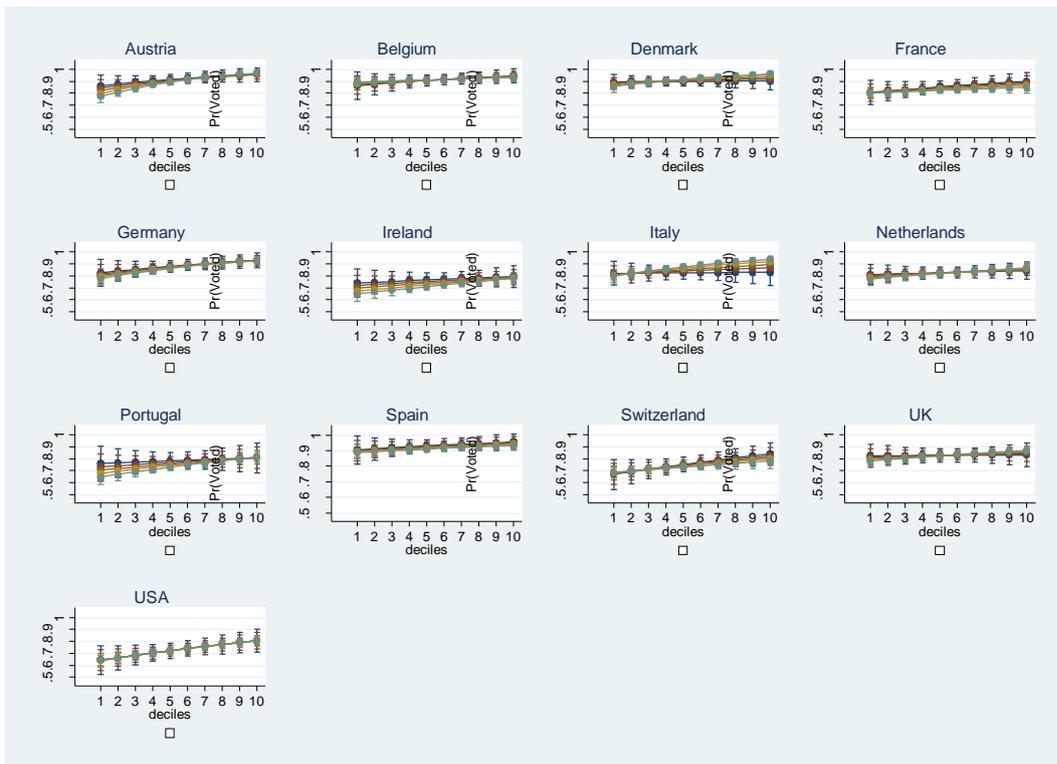


Figure A5 Predictions of sociotropic evaluations of responsiveness by income (based on ESS round 6 data)

