

# Social policy responsiveness in multilevel contexts: How vertical diffusion of competences affects the opinion-policy link

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**Funding information**

Bergens Forskningsstiftelse, Grant/Award  
Number: 811309

**Abstract**

Do multilevel structures of governance affect representation? This study examines how regionalization and globalization are related to social policy responsiveness. It has been argued that the interests of nonpopular actors, such as international organizations or private corporations, have gained importance in determining public policies. Moreover, national governments have delegated decision-making capabilities down to sub-national authorities. These developments might constrain governments in their policymaking, leading them to be less responsive to their citizens' preferences. I investigate whether the relation between public opinion and welfare state effort is affected by globalization and decentralization. To examine these relations and possible explanations, I analyze data from the European Social Survey (2002–2012) and from Eurostat using a time-series cross-sectional approach. Consistent with the expectations set out in this study, I find that decentralization facilitates, while globalization hinders, the responsiveness of welfare spending to public preferences.

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The question of whether democracies are responsive to their citizens' preferences regarding social policies is important within the field of comparative welfare state research. Indeed, this question touches upon different key areas within social and political science. For one, responsiveness is a core democratic criterion. Further, examining the impact of public opinion helps to illuminate how social, political, and institutional change can occur, addressing one of the key questions within political science. In addition, a focus on welfare state policies is important for the study of political inequality since social and economic inequalities tend to partly determine *who* gets what they want politically, that is, inequality in representation (Carnes & Lupu, 2015; Gilens, 2012; Peters, 2018a; Rosset, 2013), which is another critical component of democracy (Dahl, 1998).

Over the last few decades, scholars have made important contributions to social policy and comparative welfare state research by examining the link between popular preferences on welfare state effort and policy output. Brooks and Manza (2006a, 2006b) directly assess this connection by looking at what effect public preferences have on welfare state effort, and why, consequently, welfare states persist. Huber and Stephens (2001) also study the relation between people's expressions of preferences and welfare, though in a somewhat more indirect way: They, in part, examine in what way political parties affect how welfare states develop and survive. Such findings of representation of interests in social policies are generally echoed by studies that examine responsiveness in general terms (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008; Lax & Phillips, 2012; Stimson, MacKuen, & Erikson, 1995; Wlezien, 1995).

In addition, scholars have studied the retrenchment of the welfare state (Pierson, 1996). Here, scholars have increasingly asked how governments were able to cut back on welfare programs so significantly given their popular support. Immergut and Abou-Chadi (2014) show that (unpopular) pension reforms are less likely to occur in corporatist systems when governments are more electorally vulnerable. Moreover, Abou-Chadi and Orłowski (2016) explicitly show that parties adapt their policy positions according to the expected degree of electoral competition—and that the type of their adaptation in part depends on their size. Generally, in other words, governments are able to make unpopular decisions when they are less likely to feel the electoral consequences of such decisions—a finding that again emphasizes the importance of the public in policymaking.

In this contribution, I aim to explore the opinion-policy link within the field of welfare policy studies by further examining the conditioning factors for the relationship between public opinion and policy. The development of the welfare state has occurred at a time when changes in the structure of the political system have happened as well. Over recent decades, democracies have experienced several changes. From thorough implementation of new public management policies to the institutionalization of direct democracy in many European countries to multilevel delegation of public tasks, these changes have affected how democracy is structured (Hooghe & Marks, 2003) and how it functions (Peters & Tatham, 2016). Some of these developments may facilitate responsiveness, making governments more effective in delivering what people want and thus more responsive. Other developments may have rather caused stagnation in how responsive governments are to public opinion. More specifically, this study addresses the way that the multilevel diffusion of government competences has affected social policy responsiveness. I examine how regionalization and globalization aid or hinder democratic representation. By analyzing data for 23 European democracies between 2002 and 2012, this study finds that decentralization—especially of the shared-rule

“delegation” type—tends to make governments more responsive, while globalization tends to undermine this responsiveness.

## 2 | SOCIAL POLICY RESPONSIVENESS

Representation is central to contemporary democracies, as it structures the organization of policy formation by articulating the link between citizens and the government. It has consequently been studied extensively. In 1963, Miller and Stokes investigated to what extent citizens' and elected officials' views align and whether people's preferences translate into corresponding legislative behavior. More recently, scholars have started looking at how public policy follows public opinion between elections, focusing on so-called “dynamic” or “anticipatory” representation (Erikson, MacKuen, & Stimson, 2002; Mansbridge, 2003; Stimson et al., 1995). Moreover, in developing such ideas of dynamic responsiveness, studies have shown that the relation between public opinion and policy output is reciprocal. It is true not only that policies respond to people's preferences but also that people adjust or update their opinions according to changing policies (Soroka & Wlezien, 2004, 2005; Wlezien, 1995, 2004). In general, it seems that what people want is fairly congruent with what representatives do.<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that representatives are necessarily equally responsive to all citizens. Indeed, several studies have shown that some people are more likely to get what they want (Gilens, 2012; Peters & Ensink, 2015; Rosset, Giger, & Bernauer, 2013). My main focus here, however, is on overall responsiveness.

Preferences for welfare policies tend to vary between countries, something that is in part caused by economic and labor constellations within countries: Rehm, Hacker, and Schlesinger (2012) find, for example, that when economic insecurity and economic disadvantage correlate within countries, there is a smaller base of support for welfare policies. In regard to responsiveness in the more specific area of welfare policy, scholars have found a general relationship between preferences and policies. For one, Brooks and Manza (2006a, 2008) examine why welfare states still persist, even if there are incentives to break it down. They find that, in addition to a number of economic and demographic factors, public opinion helps to determine welfare state effort. Additionally, Kang and Powell (2010) find a general relationship between people's left–right orientation and welfare spending, suggesting an impact of people's preferences on welfare policies. Further, Huber and Stephens (2001) examine the role of political parties in determining government welfare policies. The existence and translation into policies of these welfare preferences is consequential, as it has been shown that generous social policy also helps to democratically include people who otherwise would not be included (Shore, 2019).

Scholars have only recently started to investigate the effects that the political system, that is, the setup of the institutional political structure, may have on responsiveness. The process of representation is institutionalized in different ways in different countries. This, in turn, influences how representation works in practice and how responsive governments may be. Some institutions may simply encourage representation in the sense that public opinion is reflected in policies, while others may rather hinder representation (Powell Jr., 2000; Wlezien & Soroka, 2012). I here examine the multilevel diffusion of government competences and the way in which such diffusion may impact responsiveness at the national level. A focus on responsiveness related to the issue of social policy will be particularly fruitful in this respect. Social programs make up a large part of government spending in many European countries and are closely related to people's wellbeing. This means (a) that most people have a general idea about what they want in terms of social policy, and (b) that they care about it—both important

aspects of achieving representation in a decentralized context (Wrátil, 2019). Thus, one would expect representatives to care about their citizens' opinions on social policy issues; decentralization and globalization may then either help or hinder politicians' aims to represent people.

It is important to note, however, that public opinion should not be expected to be the sole determinant of welfare state effort, here operationalized as social benefits [%gross domestic product (GDP)]. One important short-term determinant is pressure from socioeconomic problems, where certain structural situations require a response in terms of spending (e.g., the share of elderly people). Another important determinant is who is in power and makes policies, with left-leaning parties generally more in favor of spending, for example. Furthermore, the institutional setup of a country can affect the extent to which changes in policies can be made and to which the welfare state has become consolidated (Castles & Obinger, 2007 for an overview of the possible sources of social spending). Some of these explanations will also be included empirically here. Moreover, social spending is just one way in which welfare state effort can be expressed. Governments might also respond to public opinion with actions other than social spending. They might, for instance, change tax rates or regulate welfare in other ways. Social spending captures an important part of welfare state effort but is not synonymous with it.

### 3 | HOW VERTICAL DIFFUSION OF COMPETENCES AFFECTS RESPONSIVENESS

Governments that are democratically elected have various incentives to be responsive or not. Moreover, they operate in environments that allow them to be responsive to different degrees: some institutional setups facilitate policy responsiveness while others impede it (Rasmussen, Reher, & Toshkov, 2019; Wlezien & Soroka, 2012, 2015). The diffusion of decision-making competences could in a similar fashion be seen as an institutional structure that adds further hurdles for governments to be responsive. In addition, the institutional composition can affect governments' incentive structures. When a national government shares its policymaking responsibilities with other authorities, these authorities restrict the range and extent to which decisions can be made solely by that government—also limiting its ability to be responsive. Thus, when competences are reallocated upward and downward, we might generally expect policy responsiveness to diminish.

Furthermore, Wlezien and Soroka (2012) argue that when government competences are decentralized, it becomes increasingly confusing for people to understand which level of administration is responsible for what and, consequently, citizens find it increasingly difficult to express informed preferences to the correct actor. This then makes it more difficult for governments to be responsive not only because public preferences are less clear but also because there are fewer incentives for governments to respond to those preferences as the clarity of responsibility is blurred (John, Bevan, & Jennings, 2011). Indeed, Leon (2011) finds that clarity of responsibility declines with higher degrees of decentralization. This is particularly the case with a “medium” degree of decentralization. When decentralization is either very limited or extensive, this clarity is heightened again. Regarding the delegation of responsibilities upward to actors beyond the state, there are numerous additional actors, all with their own preferences. This should lead to more extensive compromises and a watering down of policy decisions. Consequently, it is less likely that decisions are responsive to the citizens of any one country. Examining the effect of public support for various policies over time and the likelihood of them being adopted, Rasmussen et al. (2019) find that neither federalism nor being a member of the

European Union (EU) affect policy responsiveness. They argue that the different dynamics within the setup of political systems also have different effects, that is, both positive and negative, resulting in effects that cancel each other out. In all, we might thus expect that multilevel diffusion of competences leads to a reduced level of responsiveness.

**Hypothesis 1** *The more competences that are delegated upward and downward, the less responsive welfare policies are to people's preferences.*

At the same time, there are good reasons to expect decentralization and globalization to have different effects in regard to welfare policy responsiveness.

### 3.1 | Decentralization

While it may be true that clarity of policy responsibility is diminished in (moderately) decentralized contexts, decentralization brings with it certain structures that allow governments to be *more* responsive, not less. For one, countries with more federalized structures often also include a form of explicit regional representation at the national level through an upper chamber, forcing a certain level of regional inclusion. In addition, decentralized governance structures often include elected representatives from constituencies of different levels. The downward delegation of competences thus results in both (a) a closer relation between citizens and their local or regional representatives, allowing for the more accurate aggregation of preferences at that level, and (b) more explicit representation of these local or regional preferences at the national level. In other words, decentralization allows representatives to know better what people want *and* to better translate these preferences into policies at both the national and local or regional levels. The political units that are closer to the people and that are supposed to better understand what is going on in their respective parts of the country can actively represent citizens in a national setting. Hence, greater decentralization may enhance responsiveness.

Examining the territorial representation of the EU, Wratil (2019) finds that in states where preferences are crystallized and where people also care about those preferences (which is likely the case for social policies), representation of those preferences is better than in states where citizens are more divided and care less. The reason, he argues, is that regional representatives fight harder in negotiations over policies to obtain what their constituencies want when citizens' preferences are clear and the issue is salient. Representatives are more likely to give in on issues where people are more divided (and aggregate preferences are less clear) or about which people do not seem to care as much. Following this argument, we might expect that the national aggregate measure of responsiveness is also higher when groups of citizens with strong and clear preferences are more likely to get what they want. When preferences within a region are not crystallized or very strong, the mean preference of that region is unlikely to pull a policy in any given direction, as the aggregate preference will be a relatively moderate one. However, those regions with clear and strong preferences will give a clearer signal as to which direction a policy must move: peoples preferences will be clustered around one point with a smaller standard deviation. The aggregate preferences of those regions will thus weigh more heavily on the total policy outcome.

Taking these arguments together, I consequently expect that general decentralization leads to more responsiveness.

**Hypothesis 2** *The more decentralized the governance of a country is, the more responsive welfare policies are to people's preferences.*

Decentralization, however, can take different forms. Hooghe et al. (2016) distinguish two dimensions of decentralization. The first concerns increases in a region's capacity to shape policy processes within its own territory. These authors call this "self-rule." The second concerns increases in a region's capacity to shape policy processes as a whole within the state in which it is embedded. They call this "shared rule." If decentralization brings government and hence the policy-shaping process closer to the people, then one can expect that self-rule will increase national responsiveness as it provides an opportunity to citizens to express at the regional level clear policy preferences (including through the direct election of regional representatives) that can then be echoed—or at the very least taken into account—at the national level. However, following the same logic, one would expect shared rule to further increase national responsiveness. Indeed, shared rule implies that regional representatives have *formal* input into national policymaking, for example, through an upper chamber or intergovernmental meetings. Clearly, self-rule and shared rule tend to covary. Moreover, in practice, only regions with a certain level of self-rule can aspire to shared rule. However, the extent to which both dimensions of decentralization enhance responsiveness should differ in the sense that the effect of self-rule will be diffuse and indirect (functioning, for example, through party structures, or as a consequence of multilevel elections), while that of shared rule will be direct and institutionalized as it formalizes a region's influence over national policymaking. In sum, I expect that decentralization will increase national responsiveness but that such an effect will be more marked in the case of shared rule than it is in the case of self-rule.

**Hypothesis 3** *A higher degree of shared rule affects welfare policy responsiveness more than a higher level of self-rule.*

### 3.2 | Globalization

On the other hand, globalization imposes a number of restrictions on the freedom governments have to make policies. International agreements can offer stability with regard to the (free) movement of goods and people. However, such stability imposes limitations on which policies governments can pursue. While citizens may call for trade barriers to protect their economies or demand more spending from their government, international agreements can make responding to such policy demands difficult and costly. Moreover, governments must also abide by the agreements that have been made by previous governments, making it increasingly difficult to follow their own promises and to be responsive. Indeed, Dahl and Tufte (1973) observe that in larger jurisdictions, each citizen has less say with regard to policies, suggesting that policy responsiveness is reduced. At the same time, however, it may be argued that larger political units are needed to effectively deal with problems that arise from extranational interaction and provide a community with control of its fate. This situation poses something of a democratic dilemma, with responsiveness traded off against responsibility. Especially with the increase in international agreements over the last decades in Europe, "external" mandates limit the ways in which national governments can be responsive, even if such mandates may sometimes make governments more responsible (Mair, 2009, 2013).

These issues play out in particular over social policies. With the free movement of goods and labor, some countries become attractive for firms to produce in because of cheap labor, while others become attractive for workers to work in because of high wages. This mismatch in the market encourages the lowering of wages or standards of employment regulation, a possible increase in demand for welfare provisions (protection), and/or the cutting of taxes to attract firms to produce goods. Taken together, these dynamics of globalization encourage demand for welfare provision while at the same time lowering the tax base through which welfare spending can be provided, increasing the gap between public opinion and social spending. Studies that examine the impact of globalization and welfare spending indeed find, for example, that increased openness is negatively related to spending (Busemeyer, 2009) and that growth in healthcare spending is stifled by globalization (Fervers, Oser, & Picot, 2016). Moreover, Ezrow and Hellwig (2014) show that many market actors have quite different views from those of the median voter on what policies are important and in which direction policy should go. Together, these tendencies make it increasingly difficult for governments to navigate between a more left-wing electorate and a more right-wing international and economic arena. Globalization therefore makes it more difficult to respond to citizens.

**Hypothesis 4** *The more globalized a country is, the less responsive welfare policies are to people's preferences.*

## 4 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA

To test the expectation that the delegation of the government's competences affects welfare policy responsiveness, I use the European Social Survey (ESS waves 1–6; 2002–2012) as a source for public opinion on economic redistribution. These data allow for the inclusion of many European countries at different points in time, so there is substantial variation in the extent to which governments delegated competences upward or downward. The ESS is then supplemented with country-level data on policy output, multilevel diffusion of competences, and several relevant control variables. In total, there are 23 democracies that can be included in the analysis: Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, and Slovenia.

### 4.1 | Measuring responsiveness

I consider the policy responsiveness variable to effectively represent the relationship between people's preferences and some policy output (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). I here focus on social policies in terms of social spending and economic inequality. More specifically, I examine the relation between people's preferences for changes in income redistribution and how much more/less the state spends on welfare. To measure changes in spending on social benefits and transfers, I use data provided by Eurostat,<sup>2</sup> expressed as the amount of spending on social benefits as a percentage of GDP. The change in this percentage from one year to another constitutes the dependent variable of this study.

Concerning people's preferences, I employ the first six waves of the ESS (2002–2012). The surveys ask people to what extent they agree with the following statement: “*The government*

should take measures to reduce differences in income levels,” with answers ranging from “disagree strongly” (−2) to “agree strongly” (2) on a five-point scale (recoded from the original). While this question does not explicitly ask whether people want more or less spending, it can be interpreted as a proxy for this preference. When respondents answer that they agree with the statement, they indicate that the government should make some kind of effort to reduce income differences, and this can practically be expressed by more social spending by the government. Figure S1 in the Online Supplement presents the development of this preference measure over time and by country. To match the question about whether people want change in the differences in income, I use the *difference* in spending on social benefits from one year to another. This implies that the preference variable is not differenced while the spending variable is. The reason for this is that the question on redistribution asks about a preference for a departure from the current situation, that is, for a change in itself. More information about these indicators can be found in Table 1 below.

Policy responsiveness is then the expression of the relationship between the difference in social spending and people’s preferences for more or less redistribution. This part of the model captures the effect of the preference for change on change. In this way, this expression of responsiveness emphasizes a temporal response, not—as in Brooks and Manza (2006a)—a type of representation that emphasizes a connection between a preference for a certain spending level or policy and a matching output. Nonetheless, the approach to examining representation here largely follows that of Brooks and Manza, including in the controls that are used.

## 4.2 | Conditional variables

The main aim here is to determine how responsiveness is affected by the vertical diffusion of competences. To indicate levels of downward delegation, the Regional Authority Index (RAI—aggregate score) is used. The RAI was calculated on the basis of the extent to which regions have self-rule and/or shared rule with the national government, initially for 42 countries over the period between 1950 and 2006 (Hooghe, Schakel, & Marks, 2008). These data have since been updated and expanded (Hooghe et al., 2010; Hooghe et al., 2016). The three national-level indicators (the combined measure of the RAI, the self-rule index, and the shared rule index) are included here.

The globalization indicator is taken from the KOF index of globalization, which provides data for all countries over a substantial period of time. Globalization here is defined as the processes that erode national boundaries; integrate economies, technologies, governance and cultures; and create relations of mutual interdependence (Dreher, 2006; Dreher et al., 2008). The index includes measures of political, economic, and social globalization, each composed of various indicators. For example, the indicator for economic globalization comprises *Actual Flows* (50% of the indicator total) (including trade (percent of GDP) (22% of the *Actual Flows* indicator); foreign direct investment, stocks (percent of GDP) (27%); portfolio investment (percent of GDP) (24%); and income payments to foreign nationals (percent of GDP) (27%)) and *Restrictions* (50%) (including hidden import barriers (23% of the *Restrictions* indicator); mean tariff rate (28%); taxes on international trade (percent of current revenue) (26%); and capital account restrictions (23%)).<sup>3</sup> I test the effects of general, political, and economic globalization separately to see whether any effect is driven by either political or economic globalization. Table 1 provides further information on the measurement of these variables. Because responsiveness is operationalized here as the relationship between preferences and the change in spending, I



TABLE 1 Description and univariate statistics of included variables

Variables	Description	Mean (SD)	Source
Dependent variable			
▲Social benefits%	Difference in social benefits between 2 years; data are used so that all independent variables (except for growth and unemployment) lag this dependent measure by 1 year. In % of GDP spent on social benefits	-0.010 (0.500)	Eurostat
Public opinion			
Preference ▲ redistribution	Country/year interpolated median of rescaled responses to the item “ <i>The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels</i> ”: -2. “Disagree strongly”; -1. “Disagree”; 0. “Neither agree nor disagree”; 1. “Agree”; 2 “agree strongly” (recoded from original)	0.868 (0.335)	ESS 2002–2012; six waves
Economic factors			
Growth GDP	Change in GDP between 2 years	2.157 (2.529)	World Bank
Unemployment	Unemployed persons as % of work force	8.008 (3.959)	World Bank
Per capita PPP	Per capita PPP, in thousands	32.229 (11.112)	World Bank
Economic crisis	Dummy variable to indicate recession periods (=contraction of real GDP for at least two consecutive quarters)	0.255 (0.438)	OECD QNA dataset
Partisan control of government			
Right party government control	Share of seats held by secular conservative government parties (Not included in the analyses shown)	27.276 (22.382)	PARLGOV <sup>a</sup> ; cross-checked using CWSD <sup>b</sup>
Religious party government control	Share of seats held by Christian democratic/Catholic government parties	7.051 (12.344)	PARLGOV <sup>a</sup> ; cross-checked using CWSD <sup>b</sup>
Left party government control	Share of seats held by labor/social-democratic/socialist/communist government parties	19.880 (21.376)	PARLGOV <sup>a</sup> ; cross-checked using CWSD <sup>b</sup>
Election	Dummy variable indicating whether an election took place the year following the spending measurement	0.220 (0.416)	Parlgov <sup>a</sup>

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Variables	Description	Mean (SD)	Source
Demographic factors			
Aged population	Percentage of the population of age 65 and over	15.815 (2.643)	OECD labor force statistics
Women's labor force participation	Percent women (of all women) in labor force	66.506 (7.432)	OECD labor force statistics
Decentralization factors			
Regional authority index	Regional authority index	12.610 (10.825)	HMS <sup>c</sup>
Self rule	Regional authority index; self-rule component	10.211 (7.447)	HMS <sup>c</sup>
Shared rule	Regional authority index; shared rule component	2.399 (4.189)	HMS <sup>c</sup>
Globalization factors			
KOF globalization index	Index of general levels of globalization, with an index between 0 and 100	83.868 (5.354)	Dreher; DGM <sup>d</sup>
Economic globalization	Index of levels of globalization, the economic component, with an index between 0 and 100	81.283 (8.241)	Dreher; DGM <sup>d</sup>
Political globalization	Index of levels of globalization, the political component, with an index between 0 and 100	88.098 (9.551)	Dreher; DGM <sup>d</sup>

Abbreviations: CWSO, Comparative Welfare States Dataset; DGM, Dreher, Gaston, & Martens; ESS, European Social Survey; GDP, Gross Domestic Product; HMS, Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel; OECD QNA, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Quarterly National Accounts Dataset; PARLGOV, Parliaments and Governments Database; PPP, purchasing power parity.

<sup>a</sup><http://www.parlgov.org>.

<sup>b</sup>The Comparative Welfare States Dataset of Huber, Ragin, Stephens, Brady, and Beckfield (2004).

<sup>c</sup>Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel (2010); Hooghe et al. (2016).

<sup>d</sup>Dreher, 2006; Dreher, Gaston, & Martens (DGM), 2008; see <https://www.kof.ethz.ch/en>.

consider decentralization and globalization as conditioning concepts. They are therefore interacted with public opinion in the models to see how they affect the relation between public opinion and spending. Figures S2 and S3 in the Online Supplement present the development of these indicators over time and by country.

### 4.3 | Control variables

Because the dependent variable in the analysis (change in spending on social benefits) is a relative measure to GDP, the change in GDP needs to be taken into account as a control variable. The amount of social spending can change, but it also fluctuates according to the level and changes in levels of GDP—when policies linked to social spending remain stable but GDP increases (decreases), the share of social benefits is automatically smaller (larger). I control for this type of mechanical fluctuation of social benefit spending as a proportion of GDP by including growth in GDP as a control variable (Kang & Powell, 2010; Wlezien & Soroka, 2012).

Further, the analyses include several of the control variables that Brooks and Manza (2006a) include. These variables are relevant in particular to the main dependent variable, social benefits spending. Brooks and Manza highlight that such spending is in part dependent on economic and demographic factors, as well as partisan control over policymaking. Following these authors' approach, the analyses here also include the unemployment rate, purchasing power parity (PPP) per capita, left and religious party governance, percentage of people over age 65, and the percentage of women in the labor force. In addition, to control for the economic crisis, I add a variable that indicates the period in which the Great Recession took place. Another possible factor that may impact spending is whether an election is coming up, when governments may pay special attention to the economic situation. While it is important to control for these indicators, they are not the main interest in this study. I therefore do not discuss the results of these regressions, but the findings are presented in full in Online Supplement. Table 1 provides further information on the indicators included in the analyses.

### 4.4 | Method and robustness checks

The data are structured over time and across countries, requiring a time-series cross-sectional approach. The analyses use ordinary least squares and take the structure of the data into account: to correct for panel heteroskedasticity and some minor serial correlation, an autoregressive model is estimated with panel-corrected standard errors (Beck, 2008; Beck & Katz, 1995). The results from these analyses are presented here as marginal effect plots so that the effect of vertical diffusion of competences on welfare responsiveness can be shown and fully interpreted. The full results are included in the Supporting Information Table S1.

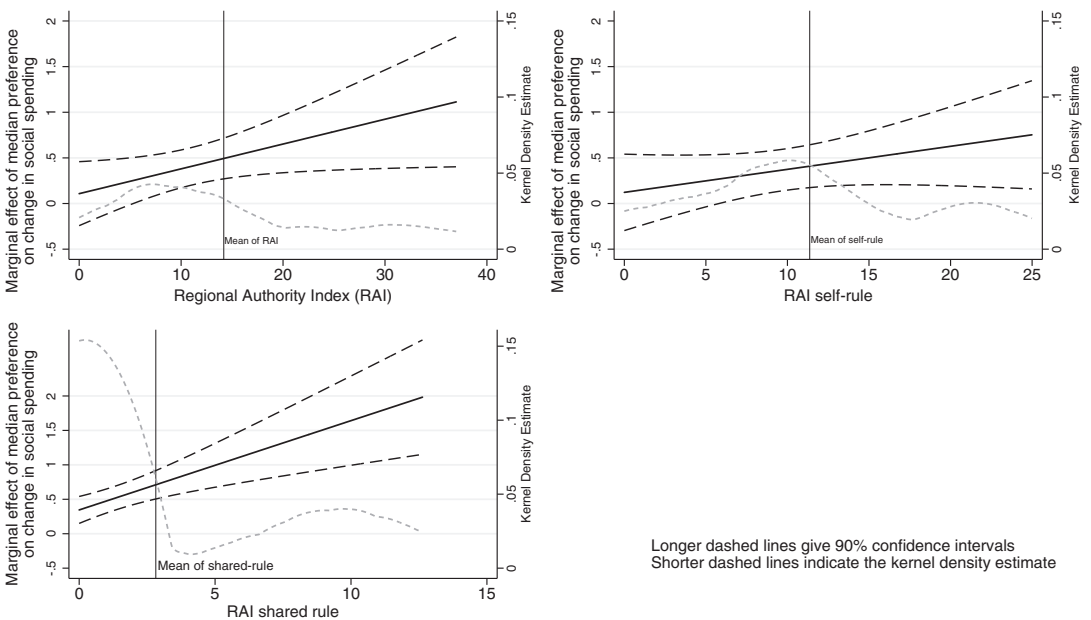
Estimations of alternative models that include different constellations of variables and that use different statistical methods further allow us to assess the robustness of the main results. For one, the mean of preferences is used as an alternative to the interpolated median measurement of preferences in Table S2 in the Online Supplement. This model also includes an alternative (dummy) economic crisis measure in which the countries that are often said to have been hit worst by the crisis (Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain) receive a score of 1. Furthermore, Table S3 in the Supporting Information presents a replication of the main model excluding the population with an age of over 65 and share of women in the labor force. These variables cause

the models to have a fair number of missing values. Table S4 includes a lagged dependent variable to address the serial correlation in the models. The inclusion of such a variable may also be thought of as absorbing effects of the lagged independent variables, leading to a more complex interpretation of the results. However, the inclusion of this variable does correct for serial correlation and is often used as a solution. Table S4 shows that the use of the lagged dependent variable leads to similar results to those of the model using the Prais-Winsten correction.

The dependent variable, social benefits, is a broad measure of government effort to correct for income inequality. However, preferences for redistribution may have different effects on different types of spending, for example, one might expect a larger effect on spending targeted at the working-age population than on spending targeted at the older-age population. Therefore, I include two additional sets of models (Tables S5 and S6) using different social spending schemes as a dependent variable: old-age social expenditure and working-age social expenditure. These indicators are based on the two distinct dimensions that Kuitto (2011) identifies.<sup>4</sup> Last, I include two sets of results (Tables S7 and S8) where the data are analyzed using models with somewhat different specifications. These include generalized least squares with country-clustered standard errors (Table S7) and maximum likelihood estimation with time set as nested in countries and random intercepts (Table S8). All these models are presented in Tables S2–S5, and the results align with the models presented and discussed here.

## 5 | RESULTS

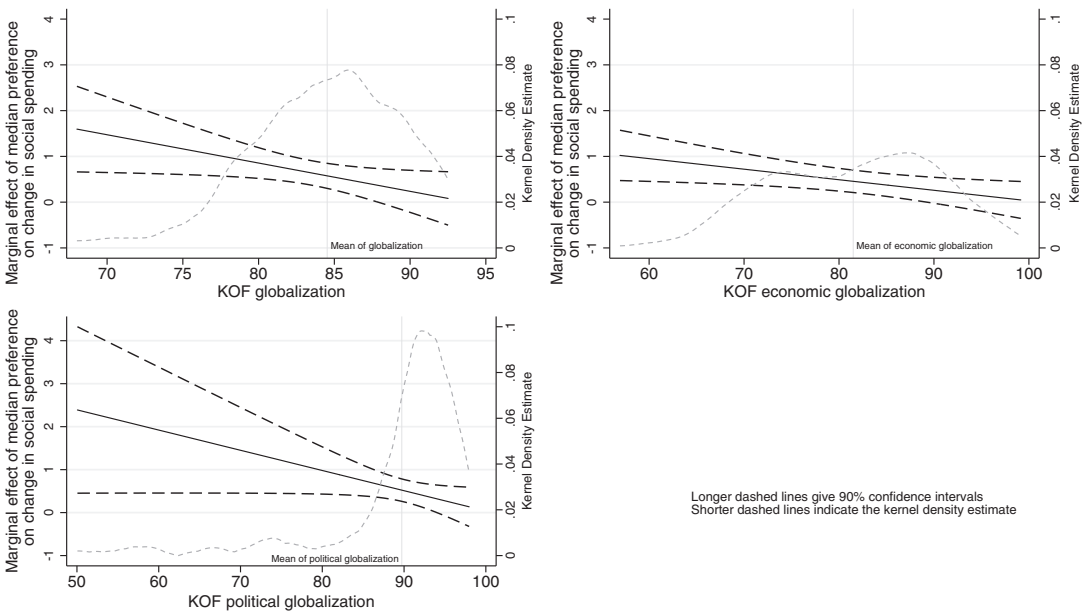
Figure 1 below shows the results of the analyses of the effects of decentralization on welfare responsiveness. The graphs show the extent to which the effect of public opinion changes according to a change in the level of decentralization. For each of the indicators—RAI, RAI



**FIGURE 1** The effects of decentralization on responsiveness (DV = change in spending on social benefits)

self-rule, and RAI shared rule—the effect of opinion on welfare spending increases with the level of decentralization. Moreover, the graphs show that contexts that are highly centralized tend to not be very responsive, since the effect is close to zero and not statistically significant. The general RAI indicator has a moderately significant effect (90% confidence) on welfare responsiveness (see Table S1 in the Supporting Information for more details) and increases the level of responsiveness by 0.027 per index unit. This implies that, per unit RAI increase, there is an extra 0.027% of spending on social benefits per unit change in public opinion. This means, for example, that if a country would implement a change in its decentralization structure going from no decentralization (0) to full shared rule (approximately 12) and opinion shifts one unit (from agree to strongly agree, for instance), spending would increase by approximately 0.33% of GDP. Thus, countries with more extensive decentralization structures tend to be more responsive to welfare preferences. Overall, these results provide support for Hypothesis 2, which outlined that decentralization would be likely to facilitate responsiveness.

When the concept of the RAI is disaggregated, Figure 1 further shows that the two components, self-rule and shared rule, have similar positive effects. Shared rule, in particular, appears important here; its interaction coefficient is positive and significant (95% confidence) and is triple the size of the interaction coefficient for self-rule (see Supporting Information for detailed results). Figure 1 shows that countries that have some level of shared rule (lower left panel) are more quickly responsive than those without any shared rule. These results seem to indicate that this component of decentralization is indeed particularly important, consequently providing evidence for Hypothesis 3. While decentralization is generally argued to bring governments closer to the people, allowing them to be more responsive, this increased responsiveness is enhanced at the regional level when regions obtain more autonomy (Wratil (2019)). When cooperation between governments and regions is institutionalized, regional representation can therefore help responsiveness at the national level.



**FIGURE 2** The effects of globalization on responsiveness (DV = change in spending on social benefits)

When we look at the upward delegation of competences, Figure 2 shows that globalization tends to have the opposite effect. However, this effect is somewhat weaker than that of decentralization and appears to impact responsiveness with a smaller magnitude; only for the general indicator for globalization, including all components, is the interaction term with public opinion significant (with 90% confidence). Nevertheless, the graphs in Figure 2 suggest that countries with a somewhat lower level of globalization tend to be somewhat more responsive than those that are more globalized. The upper-left panel shows that governments are generally still rather responsive, even when they have a fairly high degree of globalization. Only after a globalization score of approximately 85 (out of 100) do governments fail to be responsive to the redistributive preferences of people. The results presented in Supporting Information suggest that the reverse is also true: the more people support more welfare, the smaller the positive effect of globalization on spending. Globalization seems to interfere with responsiveness more than it facilitates it, providing some support for Hypothesis 4. It must be noted that the effects are not always statistically significant. It is possible that the effects of globalization are not as straightforward or linear as hypothesized and that, for example, only very high levels of globalization interfere with responsiveness, while increases otherwise have little impact.

The results presented here are thus weaker than those found by Ezrow and Hellwig (2014), though this might not be surprising. While these authors examined the effects of economic globalization on the responsiveness of left–right position of parties, I examined the effect of globalization on the opinion–outcome relation (with the change in spending on social benefits as the outcome variable). Considering the results from Ezrow and Hellwig as well as those presented here, it seems that globalization tends to affect responsiveness negatively. We might see a weaker relation with regard to the opinion–outcome relation since outcomes occur further along in the decision-making process. The effect may be somewhat watered down throughout the process.

Moreover, the results suggest that the effect of globalization is not due to either economic or political globalization in particular. Both interaction terms that include these indicators are negative, but neither is significant (see the Supporting information for detailed results). Figure 2 illustrates that economic globalization is somewhat more important than political globalization in terms of restraining government policies. The results point to a negative effect on responsiveness, aligning with Hypothesis 4 as well as with previous findings, though in all, the effects of globalization presented here are not very strong.

When the results of vertical diffusion of competences are combined, there is little support for Hypothesis 1, however. While upward diffusion does indeed seem to be related to less responsiveness, decentralization appears to boost responsiveness. This result implies that vertical diffusion does not have a uniform effect on representation, aligning with previous findings regarding political participation (Peters, 2018b), but its effects need to be disentangled.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

That what people want is reflected in what they obtain from their governments is one key aspect of democracy. While studies have examined the extent to which congruence or responsiveness exists, we do not know as much about what facilitates responsiveness. Building on existing research, this study aimed to further explore the effects of institutional structures on how representative democracy works. Moreover, the exploration involved a policy field that is again related to another important aspect of democracy: welfare spending. It has been argued that

more generous welfare provision allows more people to be better included in political life and thereby fosters political equality. The current study is thus at the heart of research on democracy and aims to contribute to gaining further insights into how democratic politics work—and may work better.

More specifically, this study examined how the vertical diffusion of competences affects government responsiveness on welfare spending. I argued that while a delegation of responsibility may be interpreted as an automatic barrier to national governments being responsive, decentralization and globalization should in fact have opposite effects. Decentralization facilitates responsiveness because the related institutional structures allow for the inclusion of regional interests in various ways such that national governments are made aware of and forced to care about the preferences of regions. In turn, national governments are able to be more responsive. Moreover, because regional representatives care about their positions, they also have more incentives to push for their constituents' wishes when those wishes are clear. This dynamic would be particularly relevant under structures of shared rule. On the other hand, globalization gives each citizen a smaller voice, and governments are increasingly involved in watered-down compromises that are less likely to reflect their citizens' preferences. Multilevel diffusion of decision-making powers was thus expected to have contradictory effects. These expectations were supported by the findings presented in this study.

While the results presented here largely align with those of Ezrow and Hellwig (2014) and in a way also with those of Wrátil (2019), they diverge somewhat from those found by (Rasmussen et al., 2019). These authors find that vertical divisions of power, that is, federalism and being a member of the EU, does not tend to affect policy responsiveness. The different setups of our studies may in part explain this: while they both examine responsiveness, the studies look at it from different angles. Rasmussen et al. (2019) combine data on preferences over specific policy proposals and whether those proposals were implemented, while I here look at whether government spending behavior responds to people's wishes. Rasmussen et al. (2019) also have different measures of vertical diffusion of power. Moreover, while they include a variety of issues with varying levels of saliency, I focus solely on welfare. This issue is fairly important, and it may even align to some extent with the left–right dimension in Europe. The current study may therefore be seen as a study that examines welfare responsiveness broadly, whereas Rasmussen et al. (2019) examine government responses to people's expressed preferences on a wider variety of specific issues.

The somewhat different findings suggest that it is important to recognize that governments may be responsive in different ways—they may react to the “mood” of the public (Stimson et al., 1995); they may govern in ways congruent with and/or responsive to the preferences of people (Blais & Bodet, 2006; Kang & Powell, 2010; Lax & Phillips, 2012); they can be responsive in terms of implementing the exact policies that citizens want (Gilens, 2012; Rasmussen et al., 2019); and they might be responsive in terms of putting issues important to citizens on the political agenda (Alexandrova, Rasmussen, & Toshkov, 2016; Reher, 2015). The factors that influence these various ways of looking at representation may consequently also vary. Future research could further emphasize these differences and aim to map exactly which factors influence what, so that the overall scope of the effects of institutional setups becomes clear.

An extension of this point concerns the specific policy field and accompanying characteristics of the field. My research shows that responsiveness in the area of social policy is partly dependent on multilevel structures. My expectation is that the exact topic *as such* might not matter for these results but it can be expected that the effects may vary depending on, for

example, the salience of the specific issue, as well as the extent to which the issue is subject to political conflict. It would be useful to learn more about the specific conditions related to various policy issues that allow representation to happen and how certain factors may differentially affect the level of such representation.

One area that would be worth examining more thoroughly, especially in the context of the effects of decentralized structures on policy responsiveness, is the way that various regions are reflected in public policies. Regions throughout Europe vary greatly in terms of size, wealth, and ambition to be represented explicitly at the national level, with the influence of regions in some policy areas at the national and international levels increasing over time (Tatham, 2018). Regions' impact on final policies may vary disproportionately, possibly driven, in part, by the salience and crystallization of the preference factors that Wratil (2019) points out. Moreover, it is important that future research, in addition to teasing out which regions are more powerful or are more likely to get what they want, examine the effects of multilevel structures on the equality of responsiveness. It has been shown that governments are not equally responsive to all citizens. For one, studies have shown that governments are more responsive to wealthy citizens (Gilens, 2012) and to voters (Griffin & Newman, 2005). Another interesting perspective would be to find out whether people participating in politics in other ways or social groups with other characteristics might have similar advantages. Future research also needs to determine whether decentralization and globalization have mitigating or aggravating effects on these inequalities.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Marc Debus, Lawrence Ezrow, Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Michaël Tatham for their helpful comments on earlier drafts, as well the reviewers for their constructive feedback. She would like to acknowledge financial support from the Trond Mohn Foundation (grant no. 811309). The usual disclaimers apply.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Replication material for this article can be found at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/XEELVR>.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This has been shown in several cases specifically, most notably the United States (Stimson et al., 1995; Wleziën, 1995), Canada (Soroka & Wleziën, 2004), and the United Kingdom (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008; Soroka & Wleziën, 2005); but also in more comparative studies (Brooks & Manza, 2006a; Kang & Powell, 2010; Wleziën & Soroka, 2012). It needs to be emphasized that responsiveness is often limited to a number of (more or less salient) policy areas and is not evident with regards to all issues (Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996; Miller & Stokes, 1963; Wleziën, 2004) or toward all public (Bolzendahl & Brooks, 2007; Gilens, 2012; Griffin & Newman, 2007; Reynolds, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Eurostat uses the following definition: “% of GDP Social benefits (other than social transfers in kind) paid by government (ESA 2010 code D.62) are transfers to households, in cash or in kind, intended to relieve them from financial burden of a number of risks or needs (by convention: sickness, invalidity, disability, occupational accident or disease, old age, survivors, maternity, family, promotion of employment, unemployment, housing, education and general neediness), made through collective schemes, or outside such schemes by government units.”

<sup>3</sup> See for more information <https://www.kof.ethz.ch/en>.

<sup>4</sup> The results for working-age social spending are overall very similar to the ones presented in the main text, although the effects are a little weaker. The slopes are somewhat flatter, and the confidence intervals larger (mostly for globalization, less so for decentralization). The results for old-age social spending also point in the



same direction, and effects are again somewhat weaker. The greatest difference from the main results is that the effects of shared rule and of political globalization almost disappear. The results of both analyses lead to similar conclusions as those reached here. Overall, globalization and regionalization have a slightly larger effect on spending targeted toward the working-age than on spending targeted toward the old-age population.

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**How to cite this article:** Peters Y. Social policy responsiveness in multilevel contexts: How vertical diffusion of competences affects the opinion-policy link. *Governance*. 2021; 34:687–705. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12482>