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The impact of opposition criticism on the public's evaluation of government competence

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Abstract. An impressive literature examines how voters evaluate government performance based on its record. Yet, this literature rarely studies the role of party communication for how voters use social problems to evaluate a government. In response, this paper studies the importance of party communication. Using British monthly data from 2004 to 2013 across four issues, the analysis shows that social problems such as growing unemployment increasingly undermine voters' approvals of government competence on this issue when opposition criticism intensifies. In fact, social problems do not systematically influence voters' evaluations of government competence unless opposition criticism is taken into account. This suggests an important role of opposition communication in representative democracy where the opposition helps voters hold the government to account.

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The government is responsible for policy and therefore held to account by the voters[ii] for its performance on social problems such as crime rates or hospital waiting lists.[iii] Its performance is critical to its re-election. Hence, studying voters' evaluation of the government is vital in order to understand the feedback mechanism of representative democracy, and this avenue of research is among the most prominent in political science. Yet, it offers little on the role of parties for how voters evaluate the government. This is changing though, and scholars are starting to show interest in the influence of party communication.

Recent studies by Hart (2013) and Hellwig (2012) emphasize what the incumbents can do. Their studies show how the government averts electoral punishment for bad economic performance through its non-emphasis of the economy or its position change on the economic issue. While making important contributions on how party communication matters to voters' evaluations, these studies have more to say on the incumbent party than the opposition party. This rather one-sided focus on the government is undesirable because it leaves a partial account of the basis on which voters evaluate the government: while the government mostly defends its record in order to secure re-election, the opposition portrays the government as incompetent in order to replace the government. With such radically different focus, opposition communication is at least as central to how voters evaluate the government as government communication.

Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu (2014) are among the first to take up the often overlooked opposition and they demonstrate how their communication affects voters' government evaluations. While path breaking, this study analyses only the Spanish economy and therefore leaves much to be done in terms of generalization. Moreover, even if it is hard to imagine that the rival party can simply criticize the government and undermine its public approval irrespective of whether, for example, the unemployment rate rockets or plummets, Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu (2014) spend

little time on how party communication and social problems interact in influencing government support.

The purpose of this paper is to study this joint effect of opposition criticism and social problems on voters' government evaluations. Drawing on the logic of political agenda-setting (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014), the paper argues that the opposition party's criticism of the government on an issue is important in deciding if a social problem becomes subject to voters' government evaluations. The opposition helps voters connect the dots. With its vocal criticism of the government in parliament and in the media, as well as its interest in replacing the government (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011), the opposition is central in making voters holding the government to account for bad performance (Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu 2014). Through its criticism of the government, the opposition draws voters' attention to an issue and encourages them to evaluate the government on this issue. The government does not have the same interest in politicizing such an issue (Thesen 2013), and it may even try to divert attention away from it (Hart 2013). Hence, in the absence of opposition criticism on an issue, information about social problems may simply go unnoticed by voters. In this sense, the opposition is central for facilitating the feedback mechanism of representative democracy.

At the same time, this paper argues that the influence of such opposition criticism depends on the social problems. Opposition criticism on the issue of unemployment, for instance, has less impact if unemployment decreases. Therefore, the influence of social problems and opposition criticism on voters' evaluations of government competence is best understood in combination. This is not to neglect the role of the media (McCombs and Shaw 1972); there is no doubt that party communication and media coverage is tightly connected (Hopmann et al. 2012), a point which the analysis also addresses.

Novel data in Britain have been collected to shed light on this dynamic in four policy areas: economy, health, crime, and asylum/immigration. Surveys of voters' government evaluations at monthly intervals from 2004 to 2013 from the British Election Study (CMS, 2016) are combined with extensive coding of questions posed by the opposition to the Prime Minister, and a plethora of social problem indicators.

Social problems and opposition criticism are critical constraints on the government

The party of government faces two major constraints that can cause voters to vote it out of office: the opposition and social problems.[iv] While each of these constraints is important, this paper argues that they need to be studied together in order to understand their influence on voters' government evaluations. To make this argument, the relevance of each of these constraints for how voters evaluate the government is first briefly discussed.

In terms of social problems, extant work on economic voting finds a strong link between economic indicators and government support. If unemployment soars, the government is likely to be replaced (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000). The argument for this connection is that the government has policy responsibility and voters, hence, expect it to tackle problems (Rose 1990; Seeberg 2017a). Thus, a social problem such as a rise in the unemployment rate may lead voters to blame the government and evaluate it more poorly even if the government is not able to do much to change the conditions (Sulkin 2005; Marsh and Tilley 2009; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). According to this classic account of the reward-punishment model (Fiorina 1981), voters are rational and have enough information to evaluate the government regardless of, e.g., media attention or party communication (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000: 186).

The opposition party, as the other critical constraint on the government, presents to the voters an alternative to the governing party and seeks to replace the incumbents (Kaiser 2008). To get there, the opposition party tirelessly questions the government's initiatives and uses parliamentary activities to hold the government to account on its policy record while publicly criticizing the government's policy and presenting an alternative (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011; Green-Pedersen 2010). This works to expose the government's shortcomings to the voters in terms of its policy management and to direct voters' attention to the government's failures in handling problems. This is a constraint on the government because such criticism and exposure of its policy may keep the government from pursuing its policy promises (Jensen and Seeberg 2015) or even push the government to legislate only to defend its issue-handling reputation in the eyes of the voters (Seeberg 2013). Eventually, the government might also lose its majority due to this pressure.

From an agenda-setting perspective, this opposition behavior is consequential. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) find that the opposition party sets the political agenda more than the governing party, and as the political agenda influences the public agenda according to other agenda-setting studies (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Soroka 2002; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014), the opposition party presumably is important in informing which issues are on voters' minds. This mechanism probably works through media coverage, as the voters are unlikely on their own to stay updated on e.g. the opposition's questions to the minister in the parliament. Since research shows a close link between news coverage and party behavior (Hopmann et al. 2012), this mechanism seems to apply. Schattschneider (1960) describes this agenda-setting process through which the opposition party becomes relevant to voters' evaluations of the government. In short, the contagion of an issue from the political to the public agenda takes place as a controversy

on an issue – the likely result of the opposition's attack on the government – gets news coverage and draws the attention of a wider audience and expands the public reach of the issue (see also Baumgartner and Jones 2009). As recent research identifies issue saliency as a central condition for performance voting (Lenz 2012), opposition criticism is a factor to take into account in understanding the sources of performance voting. Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu (2014) identify such a link in a pioneering study of the Spanish economy.

Clearly, social problems and opposition criticism are constraints on the government. Yet, it is necessary to see them in combination in order to understand how they influence how voters evaluate the government.

The joint impact of social problems and opposition criticism on voters' government evaulations

Even if opposition criticism invites voters to express dissatisfaction with the government's issue-handling competence, it is arguably more difficult for the opposition to orchestrate bad government evaluations by the voters on the economy for instance the stronger the GDP-growth gets. As previous work finds, social problems fuel the opposition's criticism (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011; Seeberg 2013). Hence, in such situation, the opposition avoids drawing voters' attention to the prosperous economy and instead directs voters' attention to downstream problems such as green house gas emission, which a booming economy brings. Surely, the opposition can question exactly how fast and persistent the economy is growing. Yet, by portraying the influence of opposition criticism on voters' government evaluations as if it happened in a vacuum by omitting the social problems to the equation (Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu 2014), the power of the loser is probably overestimated.

This creates a conditional influence of opposition criticism on voters' government evaluations depending on the development in social problems: The worse (better) the social problems on an issue (e.g., the faster the unemployment rate increases), the stronger (weaker) is the influence of opposition criticism on voters' government evaluations.

At the same time, the impact of social problems on voters' government evaluations probably increases with the size of opposition criticism. The idea that the influence of social problems on government support is conditional is not new. Since Paldam (1991) in the early 1990s pointed to the instability in economic voting across time and space, scholars have looked for moderators. In the past two decades, this search has for good reasons focused on the individual and institutional levels (Anderson 2007). While advancing knowledge on performance voting significantly, such personal and institutional features are almost by definition rather persistent across time and therefore ill-suited to accounting for temporal fluctuations (Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu 2014: 2).

Even if there is no perfect correspondence between the development in social problems and voters' government evaluations, voters use of party communication to apply social problems to evaluate the government has only been scarcely examined. However, the existence of such link is highly plausible: The opposition may not only prime voters to attend to a social problem – it is in the nature of the challenger's criticism of the incumbents to connect such problem to a lack of government competence and thereby invite voters to blame and punish the government (Sulkin 2005). Hence, worsening social problems generate more negative voter evaluations the more the opposition criticizes the government on this issue.

This does not mean that opposition criticism simply can be taken for granted. For instance, center-left and center-right parties may differ in their motivation to criticize the government on an

issue depending on the issue ownership. If a party has issue ownership on an issue, it is more inclined to draw attention to it. Moreover, the greater credibility of the party on this issue in the eyes of the voters, that comes with the reputation entailed in the issue ownership, can also be expected to enhance the influence of opposition criticism on voters' evaluations (Seeberg 2013). Moreover, like any other decision-maker, the opposition has limited attention (Baumgartner and Jones 2005) and therefore sometimes ends up neglecting a social problem because the opposition has its attention on another issue. Hence, opposition criticism needs to be explicitly modelled as a moderator of the influence of social problems on voters' government evaluations.

From an agenda-setting perspective, such presentation of an issue by the opposition to the voters is crucial because social problems never present themselves in a neutral way. The definition of a problem can as Rochefort and Cobb (1994: 8) put it "never be a purely technical exercise". The controversy in how to interpret a social problem surely varies across countries, and even on for instance the unemployment issue with a well-established and easily accessible problem indicator, a semi-high unemployment rate of, say, six or seven percent may be just ideal for some and highly concerning for others. Without the opposition, the voters may not punish the government for a social problem – a messenger is required.

In sum, neither social problems nor opposition criticism influence on their own voters' evaluations of the government's competence in any discernible way. Rather, the influence of the former depends on the latter, and vice versa. This is the expectation to be tested.

Data and Method

To investigate how opposition criticism moderates the influence of social problems on voters' evaluations of the government's competence, data have been compiled at a monthly level across

four issues in Britain from April 2004 to April 2013. This amounts to 106 observations per issue and 424 in total.

The issues are: the economy, health, crime, and asylum/immigration, and the selection, therefore ensures a broad compilation of issues including but also moving beyond the economy, the issue which is typically used to study voters' government evaluations. From 2004-2013, these issues have been highly prominent in British politics with unemployment and immigration being the most salient (see Table A1 in the appendix). Britain is selected because it comes close to a two-party system and therefore provides a simple context for testing the argument without too much of the inter-party dynamics between coalition partners which is characteristic of multiparty systems and which may add complexity to the argument to be tested (but see the conclusion). Britain may even qualify as a hard case to test the argument. As discussed, factors at the institutional level such as 'clarity of responsibility' has been identified as a moderator of performance voting (Anderson 2007; Powell and Whitten 1993), and the single-party, majority governments typical of Britain (or the clear dominance of one party 2010-2015) should make it particularly easy for British voters to hold the government to account. Hence, opposition criticism should be less relevant to British voters compared to other continental European countries with bicameralism or coalition governments.

The British case is useful also for data reasons. The theorized political dynamic is quite fine-grained and the test of the argument therefore requires an extensive and consistent series of data at a disaggregated time unit of analysis. Whereas such data are rarely compiled, especially on voters' government evaluations, the British Election Study makes an exception with its monthly observations. With data from 2004 to 2013, the time period also ensures variation in the governing party, with Labour in office until May 2010 and the Conservatives leading a majority coalition

with the Liberal Democrats afterwards. Even if the monthly data appear as the most appropriate level of analysis, the analysis is also conducted with the data aggregated to the quarterly level simply to demonstrate the robustness of the results. Moreover, even if Britain for several reasons appears as an appropriate case of analysis, data from Denmark and Australia with different electoral and party systems are also analyzed (See the Supplementary Materials) in order to investigate if the findings apply beyond the British case.

For the dependent variable on voters' competence evaluations of the government, the monthly cross-section public opinion data from the Continuous Monitoring Survey (CMS 2016) compiled by the British Election Studies is used.[v] It contains a survey with an average of 1,171 respondents for each month asked the following question: "How well do you think the present government has handled [the crime situation in Britain/the number of asylum-seekers[vi] coming to Britain/the National Health Service]?"[vii], where respondents are asked to retrospectively evaluate the government's competence on a five-point scale ranging from very badly to very well. For each month on each issue, the dependent variable is the aggregate of all individual answers, where the five-point scale has been rescaled to 0-1. The mean aggregate evaluation across all months and issues is 0.32 with a standard deviation of 0.08 (see also descriptive statistics in the Appendix).

This question is not available for the economy, so an alternative from the same source is used instead: "If Britain were in economic difficulties, which party do you think could handle the problem best – the Conservative Party or the Labour Party?" Though not identical, it is useful to compare this latter question to the questions about the other issues because it also specifically asks about a party's capacity to handle a given issue; in this case, the economy. Although the question is phrased in a hypothetical way, the vivid experiences from the economic downturn that characterized Britain in most of the period of investigation mean that voters would probably use it

to retrospectively evaluate the government in a similar manner to when responding to the other questions. It is also important to note that the government's handling of the issue is in focus in both types of questions. Voters are not asked to evaluate the policy development as such, or the extent to which the government is actually responsible for the policy development, but rather the government's handling of the issue. With a soaring unemployment rate being a major concern on the issue of the economy at the time of investigation, it can be expected that voters' evaluations of the government – also on the economic question – is influenced by information about the actual policy development, in this case the unemployment rate, and the opposition's criticism of the government on this issue. This question about the economy is also aggregated from all answers in the survey and the analysis relies on the proportion of the respondents in each month that name the Prime Minister party (Labour before May 2010 and the Conservatives after). The mean aggregate proportion is 0.33 with a standard deviation of 0.05 (the scale is 0-1). To fit the operationalization of the independent variables, the government evaluation variable is measured through changes.

Opposition criticism is measured at a monthly interval as the percentage of questions on each of the four issues that the opposition parties ask the Prime Minister (i.e., every party except Labour before the 2010 election, and every party except the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats after the election). Often reported in the press, Prime Minister's question time is a key moment for the opposition to criticize the government (Bevan and John 2015), and these questions are often used as an indicator of opposition criticism (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). The questions have been accessed from the British parliament archive and issue coded by the author according to the codebook from the Comparative Agenda Project (Baumgartner *et al.* 2011) to fit the dependent variable.[viii] To ease interpretation of the model, the variable is standardized 0-1.

Since the argument on the effect on voters' government evaluations emphasizes the importance of voters being exposed to heightened attention to an issue by the opposition, the variable is measured by changes rather than levels, and as a three month moving average. The variable enters the model with one lag (a month) to ensure that social problems and opposition criticism realistically reach the voters. It might first of all take a week or two until the media reports on the changes to the social problems or opposition criticism, but also a week or two until the voters have digested the media reports, discussed the new information with friends or family, and updated their government evaluations. Hence, a one-month lag appears appropriate.

To analyze how social problems influence voters' evaluations of the government, indicators at a short time interval similar to the other variables of the analysis are required. Such data are rarely available over an extended period. However, some fine-grained indicators are available, mostly for the latter part of the period of analysis. Although these indicators are not perfect reflections of the actual policy development, which can be multidimensional, they are probably the closest we will get; they are often referred to in the public and political debates on the policy development on each of the issues.

For the issue of the economy, the monthly unemployment rate covering the entire period since 2004 is used (EuroStat 2016). While the unemployment rate is hardly disputed as the typical indicator on the issue of the economy, the choice of indicators on the remaining issues is more open.

For immigration, the arrival number for immigrant workers (UK Government 2016) since March 2007 is used. This is measured as the number of applications for permission to work in Britain from Bulgarian and Romanian nationals (UK Government 2016). This indicator is used

because the arrival of Eastern-European workers, especially from Romania and Bulgaria, has arguably been a large part of the immigration debate in Britain since the EU-enlargement in 2004.

For crime, the monthly level of reported offenses with a knife since December 2007 is used (UK Government 2016). For health, the monthly NHS waiting time for cancer treatment[ix] (NHS 2016) since March 2009 is used. This is calculated as the percentage of patients that do not receive the first cancer consultant appointment within the standard time; that is, within two weeks from urgent GP referral.

Like the indicator of immigration, violence and cancer treatment are probably the main concerns of the public and the politicians alike on the issues of crime and health respectively, and therefore the indicators applied in the main analysis. However, as a robustness check, extra analyses use the reported violence and the reported number of burglaries, robberies, and crimes related to vehicles for the issue of crime, and the waiting time to MR and CT scanning for the issue of health. As a broader category of immigration, the number of asylum seekers is also analyzed. Other measures beyond these indicators with fine-grained observations at a monthly interval are not publicly available, to the author's knowledge. Studies of the political importance of actual social problems across several diverse issue areas are rather rare, and we can at least see this analysis as a first step to understanding how they influence voters' evaluations of the government.

Note that the time period for the analysis varies across issues due to the availability of social problem indicators: the longest period is on the issue of the economy (back to April 2004) and the shortest is on the issue of health (starting in March 2009). The shortened time intervals are not ideal but will, if anything, only make it harder to identify a consistent pattern in voters' government evaluations. The empirical analysis provides results with each issue excluded and

results from separate analysis for each issue, in order to rule out that the general findings are dependent on any one issue.

For all indicators, changes are used rather than levels to reflect – in adherence with the agenda-setting logic – that new information is what matters (and the aim is to measure a development as discussed above; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Like the variable on opposition criticism, the variables are standardized 0-1 and a three-month moving average is employed. In terms of analyzing if (and how) these social indicators combine with opposition criticism to influence voters' government evaluations, it is worth noting that even if it is likely that social problems and opposition criticism are related according to the correlation matrix in Table A2 in the appendix, especially on the issue of economy, they are far from just two sides of the same coin. Hence, there are reasons to study the impact of their interaction.

A number of controls are added to the analysis. This includes a set of dummies that separate the Blair (before 2007), Brown (2007 to the 2010 election), and Cameron (after the 2010 election) governments to take systematic differences between them into account. A set of month dummies are introduced to control for seasonal fluctuations. The government's overall approval rating is included in order to avoid the possibility that general pressure on the government through a weak approval rating invites voters to be more critical towards the government and makes the opposition more aggressive towards the government. As a control for issue saliency, the model also includes a measure of the proportion of voters that consider the issue among the most important problems for society.[x] Together with the government's approval rating[xi], this measure is aggregated from the monthly CMS-surveys like the dependent variable. Controlling for issue saliency in this way is necessary because voters might be more attentive to opposition criticism and the government's performance on issues, which they already find particularly important.

The model also controls for media attention to each of the issues. Media attention is included because it may be a confounder if the opposition and the voters only pay attention to issues high on the media's agenda. Following John et al. (2013: 80–85), the "Times of London" is used as a source. A time series from 2004-2013 of the proportion of media attention to each issue is gathered through key word searches[xii] in the headlines of stories in the first section of the "Times of London" and accessed through Lexis Nexis. While a keyword search is not as ideal as a true content coding, it does reflect the actual media agenda. The approval rating, public saliency, and media attention are measured on 0-1 scales and enter the model as changes and with a two-month lag in order to rule out the possibility that they decide both opposition criticism and government evaluations.

Figure 1 offers a visual overview of the data depicting the development in the social problem indicators (thin black line), the opposition criticism (dotted line), and voters' government evaluations (thick black line) over time for each issue. It reveals great variation in the variables for analysis and clear examples of the predicted pattern. For instance, on the issue of the economy, the repercussions of the accelerating unemployment in the wake of the onset of the financial crisis do not really have an impact on voters' evaluations of government competence until the opposition vocally targets this issue in early 2009. Interestingly, the evaluations slowly but safely recover to former levels despite the persistently high level of unemployment. However, this only lasts until the beginning of 2012, when the Labour opposition directs heavy criticism at the government causing a drop again in the government evaluations. Another example of the stipulated dynamic is on the issue of health where the evaluations experience one of their most significant declines during a sharp increase in both waiting times and opposition criticism in Spring 2011. Even if the crime rate is generally decreasing throughout the period of analysis, the decline is not smooth and

when each regressive move is accompanied by an increase in opposition criticism – as in the summers of 2010 and 2011 – the evaluations drop visibly. This is also the case on the issue of asylum/immigration where in 2010, the incoming Conservative government experiences an almost two-year slide in competence evaluations as the rate of immigration reaching a five-year high combines with a moderate but persistent level of opposition criticism. This cursory examination not only brings face validity to the analysis but also provides important first evidence that drops in government evaluations across issues appear to be related to increases in social problems and the level of opposition criticism in combination. Statistical testing will bring further evidence to evaluate the argument.

[Figure 1]

In the test of the effect of opposition criticism on government evaluation across all issues, a first order autoregressive, AR(1) model with panel-corrected standard errors and fixed effects is estimated. The panels are the four issue areas. Diagnostic tests indicate some autocorrelation in the data and a lagged dependent variable is therefore included.[xiii] With all variables specified as changes, diagnostic tests show that the data are stationary and therefore not further transformed. This model-specification adheres to the standards used in macro-studies of parties and voters (see, e.g., Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009). A two-way interaction term tests the contingent effect between opposition criticism and information about social problems on the competence evaluations.

Analysis

Implicit in the argument that social problems and opposition criticism in conjuncture influence how voters evaluate the government is the expectation that the two factors on their own do not

impact voters' evaluations in any discernible way. Hence, before analyzing the joint influence, their independent influence on the four issues in Britain is briefly examined.

The results in Table 1 offer no sign of a strong and general automatic response by the electorate to social problems. The influence of social problems on voters' government evaluations is statistically insignificant. This conclusion also applies for the independent influence of opposition criticism: the analysis in Table 1 provides no supportive evidence. Importantly, this does not have to imply that opposition criticism and social problems are irrelevant to voters' government evaluations. Rather, the relevance may only become clear when analyzing the two factors in combination.

[Table 1]

Table 1 also tests the joint influence on voters' evaluations of government. The statistically significant, two-way interaction term (A x B) in the fifth column indicates that the association between social problems and the evaluations of government competence systematically depends on opposition criticism on this issue area (and vice versa). In accordance with the expectations, the negative interaction coefficient indicates that greater social problems increasingly lead to lower government competence ratings by voters when opposition criticism on the issue intensifies. Importantly, the result in the sixth column in Table 1 reveals that this relationship is not simply due to media attention or public salience – it also persists when including controls for these factors. Moreover, the result is unaffected by including dummies for the cabinets in the period of analysis and the government's approval rating (columns seven and eight in Table 1). Hence, the result suggests that opposition criticism draws attention to the issue and invites voters to use information about social problems to evaluate the government.

Figure 2 visualizes the association between opposition criticism and government evaluations by plotting the marginal influence of social problems on government evaluations at increasing levels of opposition criticism. The negative slope of the line reflects how a one-unit change in social problems has an increasingly undermining impact on voters' government approval as opposition criticism intensifies. The influence is nothing but trivial. An equal change to the level of social problems decreases voters' government evaluations by about 0.4 point more on the 0-1 scale when opposition criticism increases the most (about 0.3 point or three standard deviations). With an average change in voters' government evaluations between two months of only -0.0002 across the four issues, this reveals how important opposition criticism can be.

With the line above the horizontal zero-line to the left of the plot when opposition criticism decreases, the plot also reveals that when the opposition is less vocal on the issue, it probably leaves more room for an influence of government communication, which most likely aims to dampen voters' concern with a social problem (Thesen 2013). Insofar as the government is able to convince voters that there is nothing to worry about (Seeberg 2017a), voters' evaluations might even improve according to the plot.

[Figures 2 and 3]

To elaborate on the influence of opposition criticism on the impact of social problems on voters' government evaluations, the ninth column of Table 1 reports a three-way interaction between social problems, opposition criticism, and whether the opposition has issue ownership on the issue (dummy = 1).[xiv] The three-way interaction term is negative, which indicates that the slope in Figure 2 is steeper when the opposition has issue ownership. Absent issue ownership in contrast, the coefficient for A x B is still negative, but much weaker than in the model which did not take issue ownership into account. This difference borders statistical significance (p < .135). The contrast

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between having and not having issue ownership comes out clearly in Figure 3, which plots the marginal effects. The line is much steeper in the right panel where the opposition has issue ownership. In line with previous research (Seeberg 2013), this indicates that the opposition has a greater impact on the influence of social problems on voters' government evaluations on an issue on which it has issue ownership.

[Figure 4]

As discussed, the influence of opposition criticism on voters' government evaluations most likely takes place through news coverage (Hopmann et al. 2012). Hence, in order to extend on the mechanism, additional analysis tests if the influence of opposition criticism increases with media attention to the issue area. Figure 4 visualizes the result (see Table A8 in the appendix). The decreasing line below the horizontal zero-line in most of the interval suggests – in correspondence with the argument – that opposition criticism increasingly generate lower competence evaluations of the government as the media attention to the issue grows.

This influence of opposition criticism and social problems on government evaluations is robust to a number of alternative specifications. As discussed, it is difficult to select the social indicators in a non-arbitrary manner, especially on multi-dimensional issue areas. However, reassuringly, the results from Table 1 do not hinge on any specific indicator. The result does not change when applying alternative social indicators on each of the issues (see Table A4 in the Appendix). Moreover, it would be a concern if the identified mechanism only applied to one specific issue area. This does not appear to be the case as the results are unchanged when removing one issue area at a time from the analysis (see Table A5 in the Appendix). Even when estimating the model on each issue at a time, the results to a large extend apply (see Table A6 in the Appendix). When analyzed separately, each issue except immigration fits the general pattern

identified in Table 1. For the issues of health, crime, and economy, the evaluations of government competence consistently drop when opposition criticism and social problems increase.

The result does not depend on the unit of analysis. Analyses on data aggregated to the quarterly level yield very similar results (see Table A7 in the appendix). Moreover, in terms of generalizability, additional analyses in the Supplementary Materials indicate that the finding travels beyond the British case. Using data from Denmark and Australia with different electoral and party systems generate equivalent results. In total, this list of additional analyses suggest that the result is rather robust, and it therefore underscores the key finding that social problems and opposition criticism matter in combination to voters' government evaluations.

Conclusion

This paper takes up a major topic in the study of the mass-elite linkage; namely, how voters evaluate the government's competence across issues. Most work on voters' evaluations of government competence across issues leave the impression that social problems almost automatically undermine voters' evaluations of government competence irrespective of party communication. However, from an agenda-setting perspective, a messenger is usually required not only to direct voters' attention to the issue, but also to make the voters connect the social problems to their government evaluations. Accordingly, this paper argues that opposition criticism is central in order to understand the influence of social problems on voters' government evaluations.

Using British data across four issues at a monthly interval from 2004 to 2013, the paper finds that social problems do not have an effect on the evaluation of government competence independent of opposition criticism. However, the analysis suggests that social problems have a considerable influence if the opposition is very vocal on the issue and in particular if the opposition

has issue ownership on the issue. This result is rather robust to alternative specifications and applies to four issues with varying media coverage and public saliency. Moreover, it even applies when analyzing data from Denmark and Australia.

The implications for the mass-elite linkage are important. The study suggests that voters rely substantively on communication from the opposition in order to hold the government to account for its record. When the opposition party directs voters' attention to an issue, the voters appear to be able to judge the government quite accurately on the actual new information on this issue. In this sense, representative democracy is alive and well: voters do listen to the parties and in this process, follow what is actually going on across policy domains. Hence, parties – not only the government, but also the opposition – play an important role in representative democracy by assisting voters to provide input to the political system based on the current state of social affairs.

Since no government escapes policy problems and most political systems offer procedures for the opposition to politicize problems and hold the government to account in parliament – such as the right to hold hearings, ask questions, etc. – it is hard to imagine that the dynamic identified in Britain only applies in this political system. Indeed, additional analyses of data from Denmark and Australia with different electoral and party systems yield similar results. While this limits concerns for the generalizability of the results, it also draws attention to cross-country variation in opposition influence on government evaluations. For instance, in countries with coalition governments such as in Scandinavia, bicameralism like in Germany, or presidentialism like in France, and hence less 'clarity of responsibility' (Powell and Whitten 1993), voters may rely more on the messenger than in Britain to connect social problems to government competence, and the importance of the opposition may therefore be larger. It will be up to future studies to shed more light on such variation in this important mechanism of democratic responsiveness.

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Figure 1. The development in social problems, opposition criticism, and the voters' government evaluations on four issues in Britain 2004 to 2013.
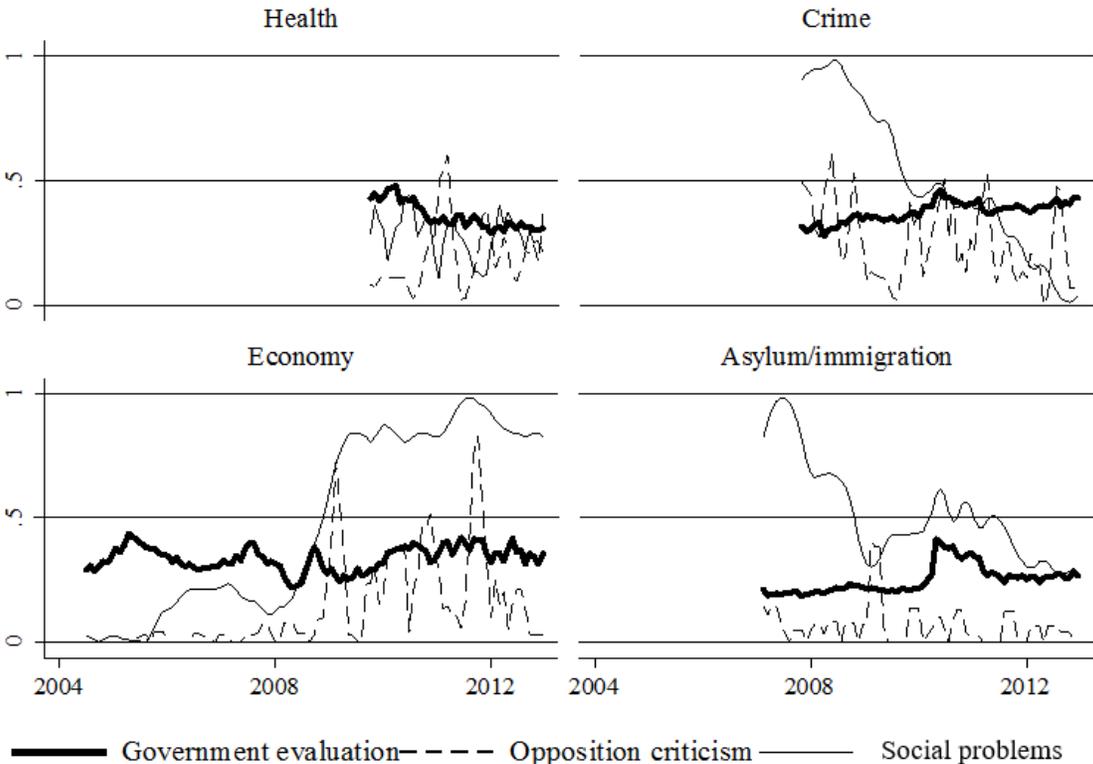
Figure 2. The marginal effect of changes to social problems on government evaluation when opposition criticism changes across four issues in the Britain.
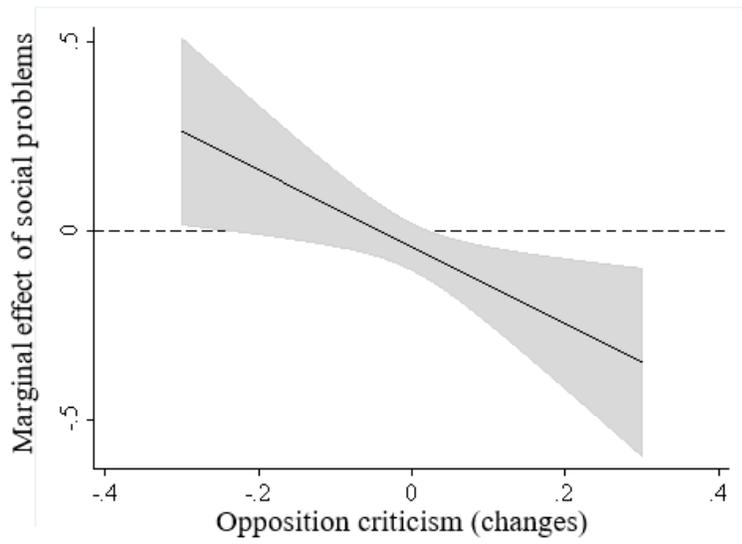
Note. The plot is based on the model in column six in Table 1.

Figure 3. The marginal effect of changes to social problems on voters' government evaluations when opposition criticism changes across four issues in Britain.
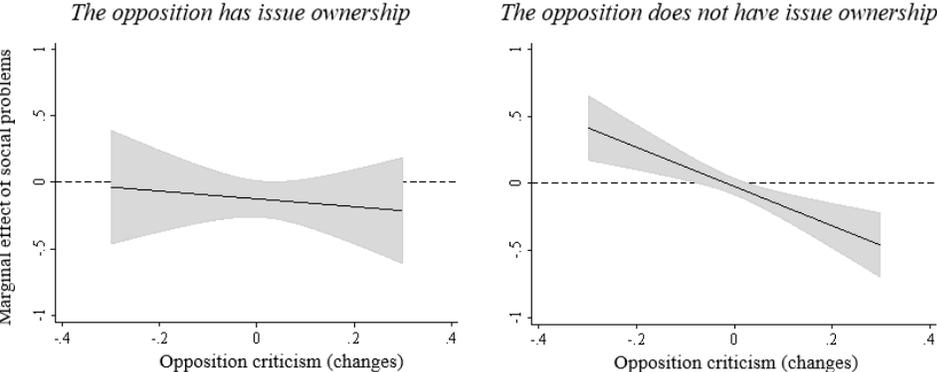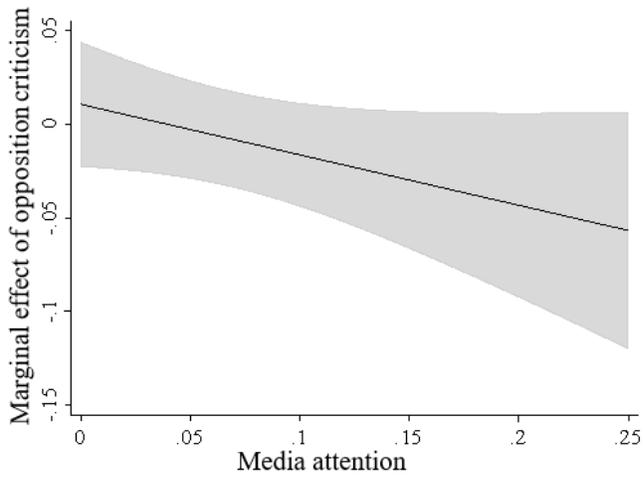

Note. The plot is based on the model in column nine in Table 1.

Figure 4. The marginal effect of changes to opposition criticism on government evaluation when media attention changes across four issues in Britain.

Note. The plot is based on Table A8 in the appendix.

Table A1. Descriptive statistics.

Health	Obs.	Mean	Std. d.	Min	Max
Government Evaluation	40	.36	.05	.29	.48
Opposition Criticism	38	.20	.14	.02	.60
Social problems	40	.28	.09	.11	.44
Media attention	40	.03	.02	.01	.06
Public salience	38	.14	.06	.05	.24
Government approval	38	.46	.19	.10	.90
Crime					
Government Evaluation	64	.37	.04	.28	.46
Opposition Criticism	62	.25	.16	.00	.61
Social problems	64	.50	.30	.01	.98
Media attention	64	.06	.07	.01	.30
Public salience	62	.19	.19	.01	.66
Government approval	62	.35	.21	.03	.90
Unemployment					
Government Evaluation	98	.34	.05	.22	.44
Opposition Criticism	98	.13	.18	.00	.83
Social problems	98	.49	.36	.00	.98
Media attention	98	.09	.12	.00	.47
Public salience	98	.41	.29	.03	.89
Government approval	98	.36	.18	.03	.90
Asylum/immigration					
Government Evaluation	73	.25	.06	.18	.41
Opposition Criticism	71	.07	.08	.00	.40
Social problems	73	.52	.20	.28	.98
Media attention	73	.03	.05	.00	.22
Public salience	71	.32	.21	.03	.93
Government approval	71	.36	.20	.03	.90
Total					
Government Evaluation	275	.32	.07	.18	.48
Opposition Criticism	269	.15	.16	.00	.83
Social problems	275	.47	.29	.00	.98
Media attention	275	.06	.09	.00	.47
Public salience	269	.30	.25	.01	.93
Government approval	269	.37	.20	.03	.90

All variables are measured on a 0-1 scale.

Table A2. Correlation matrix for all observations as well as for each issue.

Health	ΔGovernment Evaluation	ΔOpposition Criticism	ΔSocial problems	ΔMedia attention	ΔPublic salience
ΔOpposition Criticism	-0.20				
ΔSocial problems	0.06	-0.20			
ΔMedia attention	0.15	0.07	-0.01		
ΔPublic salience	-0.34**	0.50***	-0.07	-0.22	
ΔGovernment approval	0.19	-0.03	0.11	-0.10	0.07
Crime					
ΔOpposition Criticism	-0.12				
ΔSocial problems	0.03	-0.15			
ΔMedia attention	0.04	0.04	0.15		
ΔPublic salience	-0.29**	0.03	0.12	0.53***	
ΔGovernment approval	0.41***	-0.02	-0.21	-0.26**	-0.24*
Unemployment					
ΔOpposition Criticism	0.04				
ΔSocial problems	-0.02	0.07			
ΔMedia attention	-0.02	-0.06	0.01		
ΔPublic salience	0.07	0.15	0.26**	-0.17*	
ΔGovernment approval	0.42***	0.05	0.02	-0.07	0.13
Asylum/immigration					
ΔOpposition Criticism	-0.02				
ΔSocial problems	0.17	-0.14			
ΔMedia attention	0.03	0.15	0.25**		
ΔPublic salience	-0.13	-0.05	0.12	-0.05	
ΔGovernment approval	0.05	-0.06	0.02	0.16	0.34
Total					
ΔOpposition Criticism	-0.04				
ΔSocial problems	0.05	-0.07			
ΔMedia attention	0.00	-0.00	0.07		
ΔPublic salience	-0.06	0.11*	0.12**	-0.07	
ΔGovernment approval	0.30***	-0.00	0.02	-0.04	0.12*

Table A3. The search strings for media attention to each of the issues.

Health	Health* OR NHS OR Hospital* OR "Waiting list" OR GP* OR Nurse* OR Cancer* OR Patient* OR Medicin* OR Medical* OR Disease* OR Doctor* OR Dentist* OR Midwife* OR health* OR nhs OR hospital* OR "waiting list" OR gp* OR nurse* OR cancer* OR patient* OR medicin* OR medical* OR disease* OR doctor* OR dentist* OR midwife*
Crime	crime* OR criminal* OR anti-social* OR violen* OR drug* OR police* OR Crime* OR Criminal* OR Anti-Social* OR Violen* OR Drug* OR Police*
Unemployment	unemploy* OR employ* OR job* OR Unemploy* OR Employ* OR Job*
Asylum/Immigration	immigrant* OR immigration* OR refugee* OR asylum* OR detention* OR deportation* OR Immigrant* OR Immigration* OR Refugee* OR Asylum* OR Detention* OR Deportation*)
Total number of articles (the denominator)	a* OR A* OR In* OR in* OR of* OR NEWS OR at* OR on OR under

Table A4. The effect of opposition criticism and social problems on the government's competence evaluation across four issues in Britain. Alternative social indicators.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(A) ΔSocial problems $_{i,t-1}$	-0.003	-0.012	-0.009	-0.002
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)
(B) ΔOpposition criticism $_{i,t-1}$	-0.032	-0.032	-0.024	-0.018
	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.05)
A x B	-1.350***	-0.484*	-0.460*	-1.031**
	(0.44)	(0.30)	(0.28)	(0.46)
Y $_{i,t-1}$	-0.120***	-0.111***	-0.115***	-0.087***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)
Constant	0.038***	0.040***	0.039***	0.027***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Alternative indicator for:	Immigration[1]	Crime[2]	Crime[3]	Health[4]
Observations	217	216	216	289

Note. The dependent variable is the voters' government evaluations. Standard errors are in the parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. A first order autoregressive AR(1) model with panel-corrected standard errors and fixed effects is used. The panels are issues in countries.[1]Number of asylum seekers. [2]Reported violence. [3]Reported number of burglaries, robberies, and crimes related to vehicles. [4]Waiting time to MR and CT scanning.

Table A5. The effect of opposition criticism and social problems on the government's competence evaluation across four issues in Britain. One issue excluded at a time.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(A) ΔSocial problems $_{i,t-1}$	0.000	0.001	-0.004	-0.015
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)
(B) ΔOpposition criticism $_{i,t-1}$	-0.038	-0.046	-0.036	-0.012
	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.03)
A x B	-0.891*	-1.045**	-1.401***	-1.204***
	(0.50)	(0.48)	(0.46)	(0.35)
Y $_{i,t-1}$	-0.114***	-0.111***	-0.125***	-0.082***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.02)
Constant	0.018**	0.040***	0.030*	0.018**
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Issue excluded	Health	Crime	Immigration	Unempl.
Observations	215	191	182	159

Note. The dependent variable is the voters' government evaluations. Standard errors are in the parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. A first order autoregressive AR(1) model with panel-corrected standard errors and fixed effects is used. The panels are issues in countries.

Table A6. The effect of opposition criticism and social problems on the government's competence evaluation across four issues in Britain. One issue at a time.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(A) ΔSocial problems $_{i,t-1}$	-0.008	-0.026	0.008	0.012
	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)
(B) ΔOpposition criticism $_{i,t-1}$	0.023	-0.004	0.105**	-0.139
	(0.06)	(0.11)	(0.04)	(0.14)
A x B	-2.116**	-1.723*	0.963*	-1.719*
	(1.04)	(0.97)	(0.59)	(1.02)
Y $_{i,t-1}$	-0.010	-0.105***	-0.083***	-0.191***
	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.02)	(0.07)
Constant	-0.004	0.038**	0.028***	0.079***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)
Issue included	Health	Crime	Immigration	Unempl.
Observations	34	58	67	90

Note. The dependent variable is the voters' government evaluations. Standard errors are in the parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. A first order autoregressive AR(1) model with panel-corrected standard errors and fixed effects is used. The panels are issues in countries.

Table A7. The effect of opposition criticism and social problems on the government's competence evaluation across four issues in Britain at the quarterly level of analysis.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(A) ΔSocial problems $_{i,t-1}$	0.022	0.026		0.001	0.054	0.023
	(0.05)	(0.05)		(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)
(B) ΔOpposition criticism $_{i,t-1}$		0.032	0.031	0.045**	0.008	0.025
		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
A x B					-0.876**	-0.688[1]
					(0.43)	(0.44)
ΔMedia attention $_{i,t-2}$				-0.062*		-0.053*
				(0.03)		(0.03)
ΔPublic Saliency $_{i,t-2}$				0.033		0.034
				(0.03)		(0.03)
Y $_{i,t-1}$	-0.321***	-0.313***	-0.311***	-0.303***	-0.294***	-0.289***
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.06)
Constant	0.100***	0.096***	0.096***	0.092***	0.090***	0.118***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Observations	85	85	85	84	85	84

The dependent variable is the voters' government evaluations. Standard errors are in the parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. A first order autoregressive AR(1) model with panel-corrected standard errors and fixed effects is used. The panels are issues in countries. Unit of analysis: quarters across years. [1] $p < 0.12$.

Table A8. The effect of opposition criticism and media attention on the government's competence evaluation across four issues in Britain.

	(1)
(A) ΔOpposition criticism $_{i,t-1}$	-0.006
	(0.01)
(B) Media attention $_{i,t-1}$	-0.008
	(0.01)
A x B	-0.129*
	(0.07)
Y $_{i,t-1}$	-0.090***
	(0.02)
Constant	0.020***
	(0.01)
Observations	360

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. A first order autoregressive AR(1) model with panel-corrected standard errors and fixed effects is used. The panels are issues in countries. The model includes controls for social problems and a variable that counts the distance to the next election. In the analysis, media attention is lagged one month (like opposition criticism) to test if media attention related to opposition criticism (i.e. at the same time) influence government evaluations.

Supplementary Materials

To test if the argument applies beyond the UK, I analyze data from Denmark and Australia with very different electoral and party systems. In the Danish proportional electoral system, multiple parties are in parliament. Hence, this provides a very clear contrast case to the British. Australia is in between with a majoritarian electoral system, but more parties usually present in parliament than in the UK even if the Liberal party and Labour dominates in terms of seats. Together, Denmark and Australia represent a party system with more than two large parties which is quite typical for many Western democracies.

Testing the argument on cases with more parties is important because multiple parties in opposition may produce a more ambiguous message to the voters in terms of which social problems voters should pay attention to and how or to what extent voters should hold the government to account. Rivalry between opposition parties would make such situation hard to escape. At the same time, the larger number of parties typically also in government in these countries may lower the 'clarify or responsibility' (Powell and Whitten 1993), and hence, increase the importance of the opposition as the messenger that makes voters aware of the government's responsibility for social problems.

Getting comparable data on several issues across countries and over time on opposition criticism, government evaluations, and developments in social problems is very hard. Hence, the access to data is also a motivation for the case selection. The Danish Policy Agendas Projects (Green-Pedersen 2005) as well as the Australian counterpart (Dowding and Martin 2017) have kindly shared data on questions to the minister as an indicator of opposition criticism.[1] The main analysis of the UK uses the same indicator. Government

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[1] Such data is also available for Belgium, but the lack of data on government evaluations prevents further analysis.

evaluations with the same question wording as in the UK analysis are difficult to muster on many issues over time, and the analysis therefore relies on issue ownership data. This is a good substitute because issue ownership also is concerned with how voters evaluate the government's performance on an issue. The main difference to the government evaluations used in the UK analysis is that with issue ownership data, voters choose a party among the alternatives. Hence, if a low proportion of voters pick the incumbent party, this is a clear sign of bad evaluations (for details, see AUTHOR).

As the issue ownership data stems from national election studies, observations come for each election in the two countries since the early 1990s (see Table S1 for an overview). Opposition criticism and social problems are measured prior to each of these elections to ensure a short distance between the dependent variable and the independent variables. This leaves a very different data structure than the UK main analysis with far fewer observations over time and far less temporal detail. Moreover, the data leaves only 29 observations for the analysis providing a weak basis for reaching statistical significant results. In that sense, the extra analysis provides a conservative test of argument as it becomes harder to identify the same patterns.

The analysis covers almost the same issues as the UK test: unemployment, immigration, and health. As data is available also on the economy, it is included. Issue ownership data is not available on law and order in Australia, so this issue is not included. The social indicators are largely comparable and include the unemployment rate for the issue of unemployment, the number of asylum seekers per 1,000 population for the issue of immigration, and the number of cancer patients per 1,000 population for the issue of health (OECD 2016). GDP growth is used for the issue of the economy. With only 29 observations in total across countries and including all issues, I pool the data and use fixed effects with issues and countries as panels in the estimation. Like the UK analysis, the estimation uses

moving averages for opposition criticism and social problems across the three years immediately prior to each of the issue ownership observations.

Importantly, the estimation across Denmark and Australia repeats the finding from the UK analysis: when the opposition criticizes the government during rising social problems, government evaluations systematically deteriorate. This is evident from the negative and statistically significant coefficient for the interaction between opposition criticism and social problems in the second column of Table S2. Again, social problems and opposition criticism do not operate separately, but only in concert as the statistically insignificant coefficients in the first column show. Hence, this data suggest that the results from the more elaborate analysis of the UK apply beyond this case and at least to two countries with different party systems.

Table S1. Overview of data in Denmark and Australia.

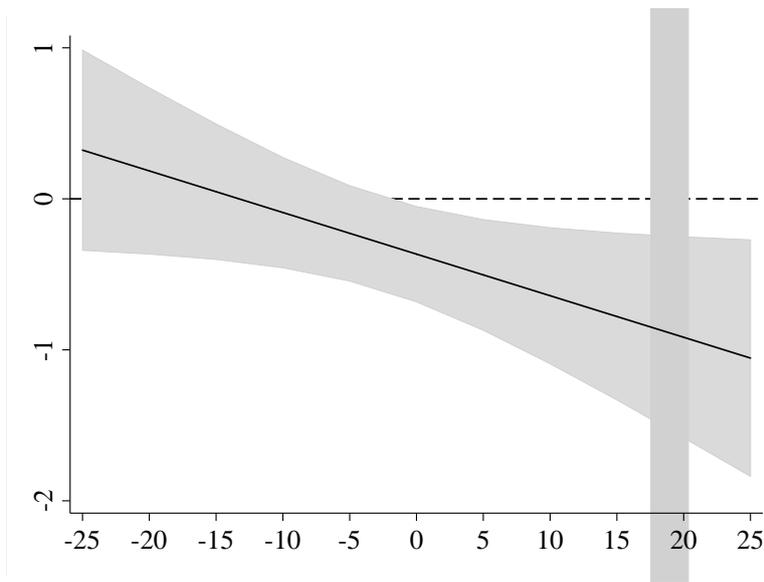|	Denmark	Australia
Economy	1990-2011 (7)	1993-2013 (3)
Health	1998-2011 (5)	2001-2013 (5)
Unemployment	1990-2011 (4)	1990-2007 (6)
Immigration	1998-2011 (5)	1996-2013 (6)

Note: Cell entries are the time interval in which data are available for the country on that issue. The parentheses report a count of the time points for analysis.

Table S2. The effect of social problems and opposition criticism on voters' government evaluations in Denmark and Australia on three issues.

	(1)	(2)
(A) ΔSocial problems$_{i,t}$	-0.31	-0.37**
	(0.19)	(0.18)
(B) ΔOpposition criticism$_{i,t}$	0.05	0.03
	(0.10)	(0.10)
A x B		-0.03*
		(0.01)
$Y_{i,t-1}$	0.03	0.02
	(0.21)	(0.20)
Constant	47.39***	47.08***
	(10.86)	(10.19)
Observations	29	29

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. $^{*}p < 0.10$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{***}p < 0.01$. The estimation uses fixed effects with issues and countries as panels. The dependent variable is voters' government evaluations.

Figure S1. The marginal effect of social problems and opposition criticism on voters'
government evaluations in Denmark and Australia on three issues.

Note: The Figure is based on the results in Table S1.

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Powell, Bingham, and Guy Whitten (1993). 'A Cross-National Analysis of Economic Voting: Taking Account of the Political Context', *American Journal of Political Science*, 37:2, 391–414.

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[ii] I use "voters" and "the public" interchangeably to refer to the electorate.

[iii] In line with the literature on voters' government evaluations (Marsh and Tilley 2009, Seeberg 2017), I refer to 'social problems' as opposed to problems that are more political in nature (but probably equally important to voters' government evaluations) such as Ministers' private scandals.

[iv] This is not to neglect other constraints like for instance the media (see above), but only to emphasize that the opposition and social problems are central constraints of the government.

[v] Documentation and more information on the CMS can be found at http://bes2009-10.org/.

[vi] The question is on asylum seekers before May 2010, and on immigration after. Hence, a dummy separating the two periods would be required to account for this breakpoint. This is introduced below when distinguishing the Cameron cabinet from the cabinets of Blair and Brown.

[vii] The survey also contains a similar question on the education issue, but this is not included in the analysis due to a lack of a monthly social indicator on this issue.

[viii] To test the reliability of the coding, it is compared for the data from 2005 to 2008 (192 observations in total across the five issues) to similar content coding of the questions per month using the same codebook by John et al. (2013). Comparing the proportion of questions identified for each month for each of the five issue categories, the correlation is 0.94 ($p < 0.000$). Without the opportunity to identify each question uniquely and conduct a

Krippendorff's alpha test, this is the best indication that the coding of the questions is reliable.

[ix] This is calculated as the percentage that was outside the standard of the two-week wait from GP urgent referral to the first consultant appointment on cancer and reported as a three-month moving average.

[x] Using the survey question: "What do you think is the most important problem facing the country at the present time?".

[xi] Using the survey question: "Do you approve or disapprove of the Government's record to date?".

[xii] See the search string in Table A3 in the Appendix.

[xiii] It is debated if a lagged dependent variable should be included (Keele and Kelly 2006). If the models are estimated without it, almost identical results are generated albeit with a little higher p-values.

[xiv] To indicate opposition issue ownership, the dummy draws on prior research on issue ownership Seeberg (2017b) and takes the value 1 for issue ownership on the issue of health and economy when Labour is in opposition (after 2010) and on the issues of crime and immigration when Conservatives are in opposition (before 2010). Whereas the issue ownership on the economy is more open (Seeberg 2017b), I code it as an issue on which Labour has issue ownership because the social problem in the analysis is concerned with unemployment, which is an issue on which Labour has issue ownership.