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Errors have been made, others will be blamed: Issue engagement and blame shifting in prime minister speeches during the economic crisis in Europe

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Abstract. This article investigates prime ministers' communication strategies during the most recent economic crisis in Europe. It argues that when electoral risk is high but governments' policy options are severely limited, prime ministers will use specific communication strategies to mitigate electoral risks. Two such communication strategies are analysed – *issue engagement* and *blame shifting* – by applying state-of-the-art quantitative text analysis methods on 5,553 speeches of prime ministers in nine European Union member states. Evidence is found for both strategies. Prime ministers talk about the economy more in response to both high (domestic) unemployment and low (domestic) gross domestic product growth. Furthermore, it is found that the (domestic) unemployment rate is the most consistent predictor of blame shifting: as the domestic unemployment rate goes up, this is followed by an increase in blame shifting towards banks, Greece and the Troika of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Keywords: economic crisis; party competition; prime minister speeches; quantitative text analysis

Introduction

In economic crises, such as the most recent one in Europe starting in 2007, government parties are often stuck between a rock and a hard place: voters punish them for poor economic performance but the austerity measures governments take to counter high unemployment or a shrinking economy are often unpopular too. Examples of this are: PASOK, the Greek Socialist Party, Labour in the United Kingdom in 2010, PSOE in Spain in 2011, CDA in the Netherlands in 2010 and Venstre in Denmark in 2011 – all suffered major electoral losses and lost control of the government. Several studies indeed demonstrate that voters have punished their governments for the economic crisis and its consequences (Anderson & Hecht 2012; Bellucci et al. 2012; Bartels 2014; Dassonneville & Lewis-Beck 2014). These findings fit into the larger framework of so-called 'economic voting'. The question that follows is how government parties deal with the imminent danger of losing an election in times of severe economic crises.

Typically, European governments responded to the economic crisis by taking austerity measures (Armingeon 2013). Spurred on by supranational institutions like the European Union (EU), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Central Bank (ECB) – but also by the German government – many governments made painful cuts in education, health care, pensions, child care, welfare benefits and other policies. Governments in EU countries had little choice but to implement these often unpopular measures since

their political choices were severely constrained by EU imposed budget constraints, and, in some cases, bail-out conditions. What governments could do is to try to avoid blame for the economic crisis in their communication to voters. But did they in fact do so and how? Did they meet economic issues head on, or did they seek to avoid them? And on whom did they try to shift the blame for the economic crisis: to other countries, to supranational institutions, or both? In this article we study how economic hardship influences communication strategies of European governments in times of economic crisis – especially the period 2007–2015.

To this end, we analyse the speeches of European prime ministers, since, as heads of government, they are uniquely placed to frame events and sell government policy.¹ We analyze their speeches in two parts. We first analyse *how much* prime ministers talked about the economy during the economic crisis. Second, we study *how* they talked about the economy. In particular, we analyse whether prime ministers tried to shift the blame to other actors (institutions or countries), such as ‘greedy’ bankers or ‘irresponsible’ and ‘corrupt’ Greek politicians, or perhaps the IMF or the EU for imposing unpopular policies (Armingeon 2012). Building on distinct literatures, we hypothesise that the worse the economic or political circumstances, the more these prime ministers will engage strategies of blame shifting.

Our analysis uses all 5,553 recorded public speeches of prime ministers in nine EU member states between 2007 and 2015 (Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom). This sample includes countries hit hardest by the crisis (e.g., Greece, Italy and Spain), a country barely affected by the crisis (Germany) and a number of intermediate cases. We use topic modeling and sentiment analysis to measure the prime ministers’ communication strategies. We then model issue engagement and blame shifting in separate analyses using publicly available economic indicators like the unemployment rate and gross domestic product (GDP) growth.

Our results demonstrate that economic hardship motivates prime ministers to engage with economic issues rather than to avoid them. In addition, we found them to engage in blame shifting. These findings add to our understanding of the political processes that precede political outcomes. An understudied component of these processes is how governments communicate with the public, when facing electoral defeat due to economic hardship and limited policy options to remedy the crisis. The analyses presented in this article provide a first attempt at systematically studying such communication patterns over time and across countries. What is more, our methods provide a more general framework for studying political communication which can help other researchers expand on these results by including, for example, other political actors or media reports (also see Sagarzazu & Klüver 2017). We will return to the theoretical and practical implications of our analyses at the end of this article.

Government communication strategy in economic crisis

Governing is costly. Government parties tend to lose votes in elections (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier 2007; Powell & Whitten 1993), and they lose more votes if the economy is performing poorly. Following the theory of retrospective economic voting, voters treat elections as referendums on government performance (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981; Van der Brug

et al. 2007; Duch & Stevenson 2008). Moreover, economic voting is especially likely to occur when the economy is a salient issue for voters (Fournier et al. 2003; Bélanger & Meguid 2008). Economic crises threaten the well-being of people, and they become better informed about the state of the economy (Krosnick & Kinder 1990; Miller & Krosnick 2000), which increases the salience of the economy for voters in general (Singer 2011, 2013; Traber et al. 2018), and specifically for their voting decision (Anderson 2007). Indeed, recent research confirms that economic voting took place during the recent economic crisis (Anderson & Hecht 2012; Bellucci et al. 2012; Bartels 2014; Dassonneville & Lewis-Beck 2014).

Assuming that governments anticipate the voters' discontent, how can governments counter the threat of electoral punishment during economic crises? We argue that given the policy constraints in times of crisis heads of government may choose to communicate strategically to avoid their popularity ratings from slipping. First, they may choose *when* to speak about the economy, and second, *which message* they want to convey.

Prime ministers deliver public speeches on a day-to-day basis at various occasions and wherever their duties may take them – at openings, at remembrances, at state visits, in parliament and on television, to name just a few – and given that they are usually among the most prominent individuals in the room, they are rather unconstrained in the topics they want to address. As such, these speeches form a perfect outlet for these politicians to pitch their case of why economic events are unfolding as they do. And if – as we argue they do – they anticipate adverse economic voting when GDP growth falters or unemployment goes through the roof, they have an incentive to use this platform to mitigate electoral risk by claiming – one way or another – that they are not to blame for the present state of the economy. In what follows, we discuss possible communication strategies: governments might strategically avoid an uncomfortable issue, or they may engage with it. They might also point to a scapegoat in order to shift blame for the poor state of the economy.

Issue avoidance versus issue engagement

How do governments communicate with the public in times of economic crisis? There has been a long debate in the literature regarding the issues that politicians emphasise and those that they avoid. According to one argument, as proposed by 'saliency' and 'issue ownership' theory, parties selectively emphasise issues on which they have a comparative advantage and downplay issues on which they are perceived as weak (Petrocik 1996; Bélanger & Meguid 2008; Budge & Farlie 1981). Accordingly, parties will highlight those policy issues on which they can credibly claim expertise (and success), irrespective of their policy position. The rationale is that by highlighting favourable issues, candidates increase the importance of these issues for the vote choice. Assuming that governments seek re-election, incumbents' communication with the public might follow the same logic. Thus, in times of economic crisis it may be better to avoid the issue of the economy as much as possible and instead focus on other topics, such as cultural issues. By doing so, incumbents might distract the voters from paying too much attention to the economic situation and instead highlight other problems for which they can credibly claim to have provided a solution.

Is it plausible that governments avoid the issue of the economy in a time of a massive, enduring and global economic crisis? We think not. With voters experiencing economic hardship, opposition parties have a strong incentive to mobilise discontent against

the government. At the same time, supranational institutions such as the EU, ECB or the IMF are quite active in signaling economic problems. If a government ignores the issue entirely, it is likely to be perceived as unresponsive or even irresponsible. Electoral punishment for such governments may only be harsher. Indeed, several theoretical and empirical contributions to the public policy literature show that governments who actively frame unpopular policies fare significantly better in elections than governments that obfuscate unpopular reforms (Elmelund-Præstekær & Emmenegger 2013; Davidsson & Emmenegger 2013; Elmelund-Præstekaer et al. 2015; Slothuus 2007).

Following a second strand of research, we expect that governments engage with the economy rather than avoid it, especially when economic performance is poor. As noted, poor economic performance makes the economy more salient and therefore governments may choose to ‘ride-the wave’ of public opinion in their communication with the public. Recent research on European parties provides evidence for parties’ attention to publicly salient issues in their press releases (Klüver & Sagarzazu 2016, see also Sagarzazu & Klüver 2017) and party manifestos (Wagner & Meyer 2014). Also, the literature on American political campaigns has, by and large, confirmed that public salience is a more important predictor of the candidates’ issue focus than issue ownership, and that issue trespassing and issue convergence are the norm (Sigelman & Buell 2004; Sides 2006; Druckman et al. 2010). Thus, following the model of ‘issue engagement’, and contrary to what we would expect following issue ownership theory, *all* parties and candidates – regardless of their partisanship and reputation for issue competence – address issues that are in the news since these are likely to be of highest concern to the public (Jerit 2008; Sigelman & Buell 2004; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen 2015; Meyer & Wagner 2016). By engaging with the issue, governments appear well-informed and in touch with what the public wants (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1994). Indeed, contrary to opposition parties, it is almost impossible for government parties to ignore salient issues (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen 2010).

More specifically, in line with this model of issue engagement recent comparative studies have shown that under worsening economic conditions political parties increase the importance of economic issues in their election manifesto, and that government parties do so more frequently than policy-seeking opposition parties (Williams et al. 2016; Traber et al. 2018). This leads us to expect that governments address the economy more in their speeches when the economy is in decline:

H1: Prime ministers are more likely to address economic topics when the domestic economy is in decline.

Alternatively, prime ministers may want to brag about good economic conditions and engage in ‘credit-claiming’. In other words, while not avoiding the issue in bad times, they might talk more about economic issues when the economy recovers and expands. Weaver (1986), however, has argued that officeholders seek to minimise blame rather than to maximise credit for policies enacted.² One prominent explanation for this is a general negativity bias among voters (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984; Soroka & McAdams 2015). Issues become salient and relevant for the voting decision when they are perceived as problems. In a similar vein, the literature on economic voting has shown that governments are more often punished for bad economic conditions than rewarded for positive economic trends

(Bloom & Price 1975; Soroka 2006). When the economy is back on track, the public's attention shifts to other issues and claiming credit for economic recovery will fail to have an impact. Moreover, with our focus in this article on the financial crisis, there was very little for governments to brag about. Even though only a number of countries have received bail-out loans from the EU, most national economies were affected in one way or another; governments decided on budget cuts and economic insecurities were widespread among the voters.

So far, we have argued that governments address economic issues more extensively when the national economy is in decline. But economic performance does not occur in a national vacuum: GDP growth, unemployment and other economic outcomes are influenced by factors – economic, political and social – that cross national borders. The international economic interdependence was of course an important factor in the European debt crisis: It started with the collapse of banks in the United States and then spread to Europe, where it led to seemingly endless negotiations at the European level, and a steady stream of bail-out packages.

When governments anticipate economic voting and communicate accordingly, they have to factor in that economic interdependence affects economic voting as well (Hansen et al. 2015). Evaluation of domestic economic indicators such as GDP growth and the unemployment rate forms a difficult task for voters as these indicators are inherently complex and may become politically contested during election campaigns (Hansen et al. 2015). To make their lives easier, voters may use a benchmark against which to evaluate domestic economic performance. The performance of neighbouring economies may serve such a benchmarking role: rather than evaluating whether domestic economic numbers are good enough, voters instead compare the domestic economy against a neighbouring economy. In a seminal paper that demonstrates the salience of cross-national comparisons, Kayser and Peress (2012) decompose GDP growth and unemployment into an international and a domestic component and demonstrate that voters hold incumbents more electorally accountable for the latter than for the former. In other words, 'voters in a wide variety of democracies benchmark national economic growth against that abroad, punishing (rewarding) incumbents for national outcomes that underperform (outperform) an international comparison' (Kayser & Peress 2012: 661). That voters benchmark national economic performance against performance of relevant other economies is also confirmed by experimental studies. For example, Hansen et al. (2015) find that Danish voters benchmark domestic economic performance against that of neighbouring Sweden. In sum, if their national economy is doing well when compared to other economies, voters may reward the incumbent government with re-election, even though absolute economic numbers lag behind. And vice versa: if the national economy is underperforming relative to this comparison group, this may hurt the incumbent, despite solid economic numbers.

Applying this logic to governments' strategic communication, we expect governments to anticipate how voters benchmark the national economy with other economies, and to engage more on economic issues when the national economic conditions are poor in relative terms.

H2: When the domestic economy is in decline relative to a salient comparison economy, prime ministers are more likely to address economic topics.

Blame shifting

The preceding discussion on issue avoidance, issue engagement and benchmarking dealt with the extent to which incumbents address economic issues. However, we have not yet addressed the topical content of their speeches. If governments are forced to talk about the economy, what exactly do they communicate to the public? What strategies do they use to avoid the blame and mitigate the electoral risk in times of crisis?

Many of the blame avoidance strategies examined in the literature concern the way policies are enacted (or not). The different strategies discussed involve, on the one hand, the choice of policies or procedures that minimise blame or the compensation of losers of retrenching reforms (policy strategies) and, on the other hand, change of institutional arrangements to delegate responsibility to different actors (agency strategies) (Weaver 1986; Pierson 1994; Hood 2002, 2010; Mortensen 2012; Vis 2016). However, in a context of crisis, neither agency strategies nor policy strategies are a likely option. Changing institutional procedures takes time, and policy choices are severely constrained since all governments are forced to implement budget cuts one way or another.³ In these ‘negative-sum’ policy situations (Weaver 1986), a third type of blame avoidance strategies – *presentational strategies* – becomes important (Hood 2002, 2010, Hood et al. 2016; Hinterleitner & Sager 2017; Hansson 2018).⁴

Such a presentational strategy might entail blame shifting to other countries or supranational institutions. McGraw (1990, 1991) distinguishes between horizontal and vertical ‘diffusion of responsibility’ – excuses used by political officials to mitigate blame for the present situation and/or political decisions by making others responsible for it.⁵ Weaver (1986: 385ff) discusses a similar strategy to ‘deflect blame by blaming others’, which he calls ‘scapegoating’.⁶ Blame shifting strategies are particularly relevant for the current case. At the start of the economic crisis a popular trope was that that ‘greedy’ bankers had abused the system. When the crisis blew over to Europe and morphed into a debt crisis, the Greeks, and to a lesser extent the Italians and the Spanish, were perceived as the new bad guys. At the same time, for the Greeks in particular, the EU, the Troika and Germany were increasingly portrayed as the enemy. With a slightly different logic – which alludes to the voters’ benchmarking considerations – governments could also shift responsibility to the EU by claiming that all national economies in it are connected in such a way that national governments have very little influence on the national economy. Indeed, recent research finds that economic voting is less prevalent if the EU is held responsible for national economic conditions (Costa Lobo & Lewis-Beck 2012). With the popularity of the EU dropping in the crisis period (Hobolt & De Vries 2016), blaming the EU for the crisis may be seen as a strategic response to maintain electoral support.

Thus, both specific countries and supranational institutions that force countries into unpopular reforms in times of economic crisis can be expected to be blamed. In sum, we expect more blame shifting the worse the state of the economy.

H3: Prime ministers engage more in blame shifting when the domestic economy is in decline.

Government ideology may moderate the relationships we hypothesised. Analyses of macroeconomic policy indicate that left-wing governments prioritise the reduction of

unemployment, while right-wing governments are more concerned with inflation (Hibbs 1987). However, more recent analyses indicate much more context-specific effects (Franzese & Jusko 2006). Rhetorically, left-wing and right-wing parties respond to changing economic conditions, although there is no consensus on how (Adams et al. 2009; Haupt 2010). Given these ambiguities in related research, we explore but do not hypothesise differences between left-wing and right-wing governments.

Data and methods

We use the same data and the same independent variables to test all three hypotheses. However, the construction of the dependent variable is different for *H1–H2* and *H3*, respectively. Therefore, we discuss the data and the independent variables in this section and discuss the construction of the dependent variables as well as the results for the analyses of *H1–H2* and *H3* in the following.

Selection of documents

For the analyses in this article, we use the EUSpeech dataset (Schumacher et al. 2016a, 2016b). EUSpeech consists of all publicly available speeches from the main European institutions plus the IMF and the speeches of prime ministers – or the President in the case of France – of ten EU countries for the period 2007–2015. From this dataset we selected the speeches of prime ministers in nine countries (dropping the Polish speeches because there were only four of them):⁷ Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Netherlands, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom and Portugal. We dropped the *interim* prime ministers and independents such as Papademos (Greek prime minister from November 2011 to May 2012) and Mario Monti (Italian prime minister from November 2011 to April 2013) because they were less likely to respond to electoral incentives. We also removed those speeches for which data for independent variables was not available. Table 1 provides an overview of the number of speeches, the relevant prime ministers (president) and the time period of the speeches under study. The countries in our sample cover important structural divisions within the EU: they are located in both the northern and the southern parts of Europe; there are old and new members; and there are Eurozone and non-Eurozone countries. What is more, these countries have weathered the economic crisis with different degrees of success: Germany has only seen its economy shrink in 2009, whereas the Greek economy contracted in every year but 2014. The other countries are in-between those two extremes of economic performance.

To compare speeches in different languages, we used *Google Translate* to translate all non-English texts to English, as this was the language of a large majority of speeches. De Vries et al. (2018) demonstrate that *Google Translate* can be used for our purposes. In particular, they compared the output of topic models – an automated text analysis technique – of a text corpus of European Parliament proceedings translated to English by professional translators to a text corpus of the same proceedings translated to English by *Google Translate*.

Table 1. Overview of speeches per country

Country	Number of speeches	Speakers	Time period	Number of topics
Czech Republic	255	Sobotka	9/2013–12/2015	30
France	1431	Chirac, Sarkozy & Hollande	1/2007–12/2015	65
Germany	572	Merkel	10/2008–12/2015	45
Greece	372	Papandreou, Samaras & Tsipras	10/2009–12/2015	45
Italy	178	Prodi, Berlusconi & Letta	1/2007–1/2015	40
Netherlands	358	Balkenende & Rutte	2/2007–12/2015	35
Portugal	135	Socrates, Passos Coelho & Costa	10/2009–12/2015	30
Spain	1453	Zapatero & Rajoy	1/2007–12/2015	65
United Kingdom	777	Blair, Brown & Cameron	3/2007–12/2015	55

Independent variables

The key independent variables are indicators for the economy. We use two measures: GDP growth and level of unemployment (both in the quarter previous to speech date; sources: Eurostat⁸ and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development⁹). Following Kayser and Peress (2012: 665), we separate the ‘domestic’ part of the economic indicators by subtracting the international (EU) measure of economic performance from the national measure of growth and unemployment (again, both in the previous quarter). The ‘domestic’ indicators are positive if the national economy is doing better compared to the EU economic performance, and negative if the state of the national economy is worse in a given country and quarter (see Table 3 in Online Appendix E for an overview of the independent variables). We also include a variable indicating the prime minister’s party ideology (0 = left, 1 = right).¹⁰ Our statistical models include random intercepts for quarters and fixed effects for countries to account for the nested data structure.

Study 1: Issue engagement

Measuring issue engagement in government speeches

First, to investigate *when* governments talk about the economy, we study issue engagement, or issue attention, by means of topic modeling. To measure the extent to which prime ministers address economic topics in their speeches, we ran latent dirichlet allocation (LDA) topic models (Blei et al. 2003)¹¹ for each country separately. In LDA topic modeling the researcher has to decide beforehand on the number of topics she expects to find in the documents. Thus, in a first step, we decided on the best fitting number of topics in

Table 2. Determinants of issue engagement

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
(Intercept)	19.39*** (1.14)	11.49*** (3.49)	19.13*** (1.18)	21.23*** (1.18)
Unemployment (national)	0.36*** (0.07)		0.19* (0.10)	
GDP growth (national)	-1.59*** (0.36)			-1.97*** (0.45)
Local unemployment (difference EU – national)		0.28*** (0.08)		
EU unemployment		1.15*** (0.34)		
Local GDP growth (difference EU – national)		-1.68*** (0.40)		
EU GDP growth		-1.60** (0.61)		
Unemployment (national) x Right-wing government			0.24** (0.08)	
GDP growth (national) x Right-wing government				0.66 (0.58)
Right-wing government (ref: Left)	-0.22 (0.53)	-0.03 (0.54)	-3.66** (1.17)	0.87 (0.48)
Country fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
AIC	45634.36	45631.70	45648.14	45651.49
BIC	45727.07	45737.65	45740.85	45744.20
Log likelihood	-22803.18	-22799.85	-22810.07	-22811.75
Number of observations	5553	5553	5553	5553
Number of groups: Quarter	36	36	36	36
Var: Quarter (intercept)	5.38	4.75	7.50	7.52
Var: Residual	214.57	214.55	214.63	215.03

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

each speech corpus based on the ‘harmonic means’ measure of the model fit (harmonic mean of the log-likelihood values of posterior draws) (Newton & Raftery 1994; Grün & Hornick 2011). Figure 1 shows, for four selected countries, the harmonic means for different numbers of topics (which we have varied in steps of five).¹² We chose the number of topics at the first inflection point (indicated by the dashed line) – that is, at the point where the model fit decreases. In a second step, we estimated the models again but now with the selected number of topics for each country and saved the estimated word probabilities for each topic as well as the estimated topic probabilities for each speech. The third step involved a manual coding procedure. By inspecting the words with the highest probabilities, we decided for each topic whether it was an economic topic or not (see the example in

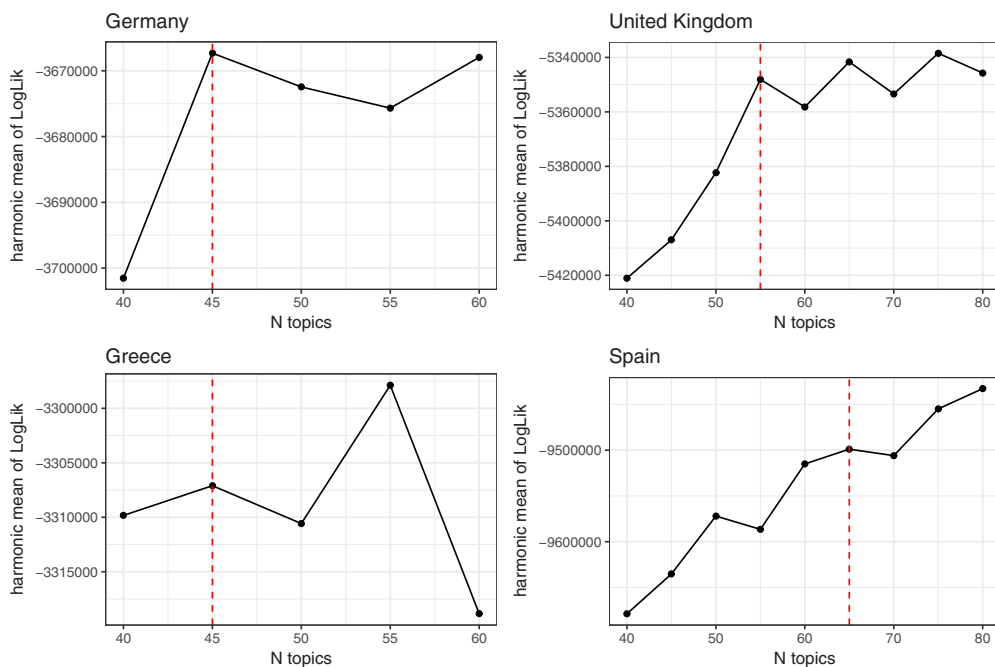


Figure 1. Harmonic means of models with different number of topics [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Online Appendix C).¹³ Finally, we calculated an aggregated measure of economic issue engagement for each speech by adding the topic per-document probabilities of all topics coded as economic topics in this speech, and multiplying this measure by 100. The dependent variable therefore is the total proportion of economic topics per speech, which varies between 1 and 87 per cent (see Figure 2 and Table 3 in Online Appendix E). The variable is skewed because prime ministers usually talk about many different issues, depending, for example, on the occasion of their speech. On average, about 20 per cent of words in the speeches are generated from economic topics. The average varies only minimally between the Central and Western European countries, but it is higher in Southern Europe, where prime ministers dedicated between 21 (Italy) and 41 (Portugal) per cent of their speeches to economic topics.¹⁴ Overall, these numbers might seem low – however, given that we model between 30 and 65 topics per country, they are indeed quite substantial.

Note that topic models are based on a ‘bag-of-words’ approach’: estimation of topic proportions is based on the frequency of words in a text, while the sentence structure – and hence the sequence of words – is neglected. While this allows us to measure the *extent* to which economic topics are covered in speeches, we cannot discuss how the *sequencing* of words may be used by prime ministers to construct specific interpretations of the economy. Unlike more interpretative methods, such as discourse analysis, that are interested in how words are combined to construct meaning, the automated approach we apply here searches for specific clusters of similar words – the topics – and we can estimate the proportion of a speech that is dedicated to a specific topic. We have done several tests by checking

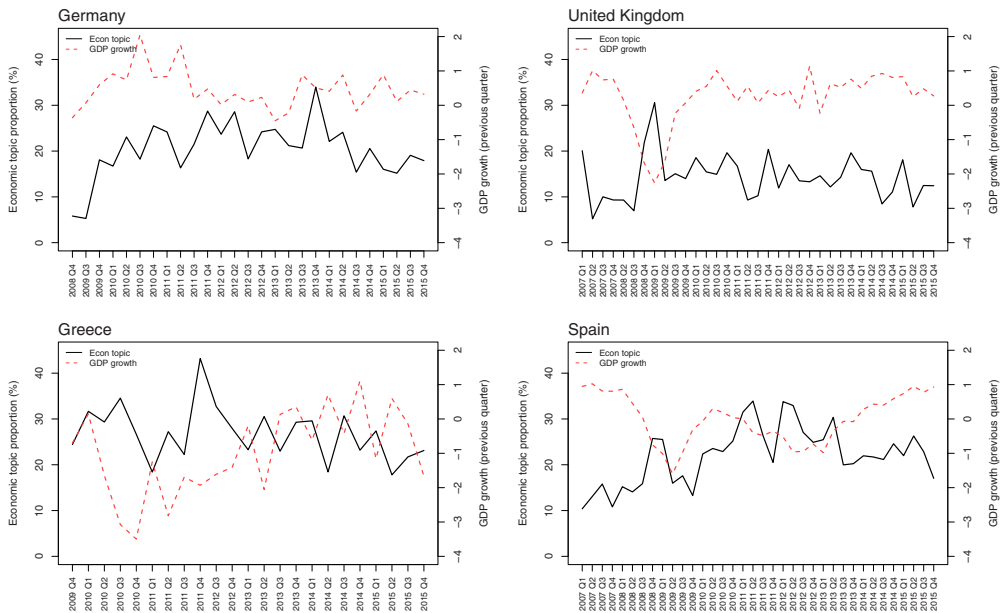


Figure 2. Economic topic proportions in speeches 2007-2015 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

speeches to ensure that the estimated proportions of economic topics indeed correspond to the sequences of words used by prime ministers to talk about the economy (see examples below).

Explaining issue engagement in government speeches

Figure 2 shows the economic topic proportions in speeches over time for four selected countries: Germany, the United Kingdom, Greece and Spain. More specifically, we plot the mean economic topic proportions of all speeches within a specific quarter and also include the level of national GDP growth (in the previous quarter).

In Germany, Prime Minister Angela Merkel addressed economic topics most extensively in the fourth quarter of 2013. In the United Kingdom speeches, the peak is right at the beginning of the financial crisis – at the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009, when the British government decided on a £500 billion bank rescue package. In Greece the periods during which the economic topic was most prominent in prime minister speeches are in summer 2010 (first bail-out), in 2011 (before the independent Papademos became prime minister), and at the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014.¹⁵ The peaks in all three countries at the end of 2013 coincide with the ECB's decision to cut the interest rates in November 2013. In the speeches of Spanish prime ministers, finally, the attention to economic topics increases steadily after 2009 and decreases after 2013. The peaks are in the first and second quarter of 2012, when the rescue package for the Spanish banks was decided.

We now model the determinants of economic speech in all nine countries. *H1* posits that prime ministers address economic issues more when the national economy is in decline.

Model 1 in Table 2 investigates this effect of the economy on speech topics with the coefficients indicating changes in the proportion of economic issues in a prime minister's speech. Further, since the economic indicators are measured on a quarterly basis, the models include random intercepts for quarters; finally, we include dummy variables for countries (not shown in the table).

We use two indicators for the state of the economy – GDP growth and unemployment rate – both at the quarter previous to the date of the speech. The level of unemployment and GDP growth have a significant effect on speech content: the worse the economic downturn, the more government leaders talk about it.¹⁶ In support of the descriptive plots in Figure 2, the regression results show that in times of negative economic growth and higher rates of unemployment, attention to economic issues increases. Specifically, the 18 percentage point increase in unemployment that Spain experienced between the first quarter of 2007 (8.2 per cent) and the first quarter of 2013 (26.2 per cent), for example, is associated with an increase of 6.5 percentage points in attention to the economy in prime minister speeches.¹⁷ This is a substantive contribution to the approximately 15 percentage point increase in attention to the economy in this period (see Figure 2). The 3.5 per cent decline in GDP that Greece experienced in the third quarter of 2010 is associated with an over 6.5 percentage point increase in attention to the economy in prime minister speeches – compared to times with moderate economic growth (e.g., 0.5 per cent GDP growth).¹⁸ More generally, between the lowest and the highest level of unemployment and GDP growth in the data, the results indicate an increase in economic issue engagement of about 9 percentage points, which is more than half a standard deviation of our dependent variable.

H2 states that prime ministers will compare the national economy with an international benchmark, so that they are more likely to address economic topics when the state of the economy is worsening *relative to a salient comparison economy*. Using country mentions as an indicator, we choose the EU as the most important reference economy for the countries in our sample (see Online Appendix D). The results are shown in Table 2, model 2. As in model 1, all economic variables are lagged to the quarter previous to the speech date. Interpretation of the coefficients follows the reasoning in Kayser and Peress (2012): if politicians engage in full benchmarking on GDP growth, we expect the coefficient on local GDP growth (difference between national and EU growth) to be negative and the coefficient on GDP growth in the EU to be zero. In this case, politicians would be responding to the extent to which domestic GDP growth outperforms or underperforms relative to the EU benchmark.¹⁹ If politicians partially benchmark, we expect the coefficient for the domestic economic indicator to be larger than the coefficient for EU economy. Finally, if the economic context does not matter, then we expect the coefficients on both domestic and EU economy to be zero.

We find evidence for partial benchmarking: if the national unemployment rate is higher than unemployment in the EU, government leaders talk more extensively about economic matters. Also, if national GDP growth is lower compared to overall EU growth, politicians talk about the economy more. Yet the same goes for the EU economy as a whole: both the EU-wide unemployment rate and GDP growth rate appear to have an independent effect on the inclination of government leaders to talk about the economy. Based on the size of the coefficients, it appears that EU unemployment is even more important for economic issue engagement than the relative domestic economy. In sum, politicians respond to changes in

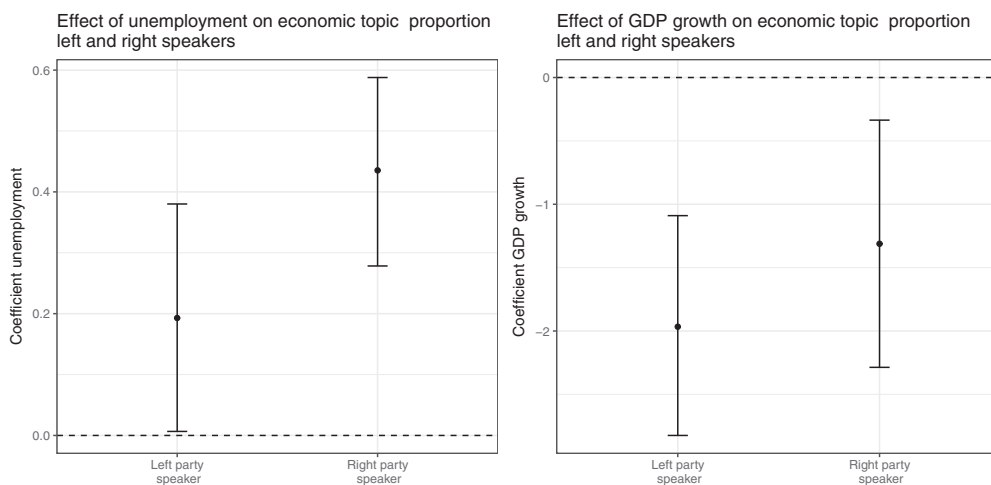


Figure 3. Estimated coefficients for economy: left and right speakers

both domestic and EU-wide economic numbers, addressing economic matters more when economic numbers weaken.

With regard to party differences, we do not find evidence that leaders of right-wing cabinets talk more about the economy than social-democratic prime ministers. As an additional test, we estimate interaction effects between economic indicators and government ideology in models 3 and 4. The results show that left and right governments do not respond in equal measures to changes in the economy: right-wing prime ministers respond more to changes in unemployment (the difference is not significant for GDP growth). The different effects are shown in Figure 3.²⁰ Although we would need more in-depth analyses to draw specific conclusions about the different drivers of economic issue attention of left and right prime ministers, the stronger response of right-wing governments to unemployment is in line with previous research that concluded that left-wing governments are penalised for increasing levels of unemployment (e.g., Powell & Whitten 1993).²¹

Study 2: Blame shifting

Measuring blame shifting in government speeches

To identify blame shifting, we conducted a ‘keyword-in-context’ analysis (*quanteda* package in R; Benoit et al. 2018). First, we decided on five ‘blame units’: the EU, the Troika (ECB, IMF and European Commission), banks, Germany and Greece. We chose these because we identified them as core actors in the European economic crisis. Second, we searched for these keywords in the speeches and saved each of their occurrences. Third, we saved the 15 words before and after these keywords in a separate corpus.²² Finally, we performed a sentiment analysis on these corpora to construct our dependent variable. Sentiment analysis is a dictionary-based text analysis method, whereby words – in our case, the words before and after our keywords – are compared to a dictionary of words with specific characteristics;

for our purposes, that is negative sentiment.²³ We aggregated this measure to the speech level. We did so in the following way: For each keyword, we first performed a sentiment analysis on the 30 surrounding words. If five of such words contain negative sentiment and if the blame unit is only mentioned once, the document score is 5 divided by 30 and then multiplied by 100. This gives the percentages of words with negative sentiment around the blame unit. To give an example, on 21 March 2013, Angela Merkel stated that ‘based on a banking model that is unsustainable with security. We all know that banks which have acted too risky working on a false basis, represent an imminent threat.’ ‘Banks’ is the keyword-in-context and ‘unsustainable’, ‘risky’, ‘false’, ‘imminent’ and ‘threat’ are words that contain negative sentiment. With these five negative words out of 30, this phrase contains 16.7 per cent negative sentiment. This particular speech by Merkel contains six more phrases with negative sentiment towards banks. In total these contain 5.6 per cent negative sentiment (total number of negative words, divided by total number of words surrounding the blame units), which is the score on the dependent variable for this Merkel speech.

In many speeches the blame units are not mentioned: banks are not mentioned in 70.1 per cent of the speeches, the EU in 26.9 per cent and the Troika in 78.8 per cent. Further, 74.2 per cent of the speeches do not mention Germany (excluding speeches by the German prime minister), and finally, Greece is not mentioned in 89 per cent of the cases (excluding speeches by Greek speakers). Because of this, the mean values of negative sentiment towards these blame units is rather low. This is to be expected because our corpus contains all prime minister speeches and there are many occasions where blaming another actor is simply not suitable or opportune. For this reason, we also analysed how often the blame units are mentioned depending on the economy.

Figure 4 plots the negative sentiment towards five blame units: banks, the EU, the Troika, Germany and Greece. The y-axis presents mean negative sentiment by year of all speeches in the countries under study (for quarterly data, see also Figure 3 in Online Appendix G). Negative sentiment towards banks is particularly high in Greece, Spain and the United Kingdom, compared to the rest of the countries.²⁴ For example, on 7 March 2013, David Cameron delivered a speech in which he describes the causes of the economic crisis in Britain: ‘Banks lent more than they could afford to, spurred on by an irresponsible banking culture that rewarded short-termism and unmanageable risk-taking.’ Also, he talks about the reforms his government initiated to address the crisis: ‘And we are supporting these reforms with what I call monetary activism, supporting this damaged banking system that would otherwise struggle and still does struggle.’ In the first sentence the words ‘irresponsible’, ‘short-term’, ‘unmanageable’ and ‘risk-taking’ are labeled as negative. In the second sentence words like ‘damaged’ and ‘struggle’ have negative connotations.

Negative sentiment towards the EU peaks around the European elections of 2009 and 2014. Negative sentiment towards Greece reaches its peak in 2011 and 2012, which coincides with the increasingly troubled negotiations between Greece and the Troika on economic reforms and bail-out packages. Not surprisingly, negative sentiment towards Greece jumps up again dramatically in 2015 at the end of our timeline. In this period the newly elected Tsipras government organised a referendum in which the conditions for the bail-out packages were rejected. Arguably, in this period Greece came closest to Grexit. Finally, negative sentiment towards the Troika is mostly observed in speeches by the

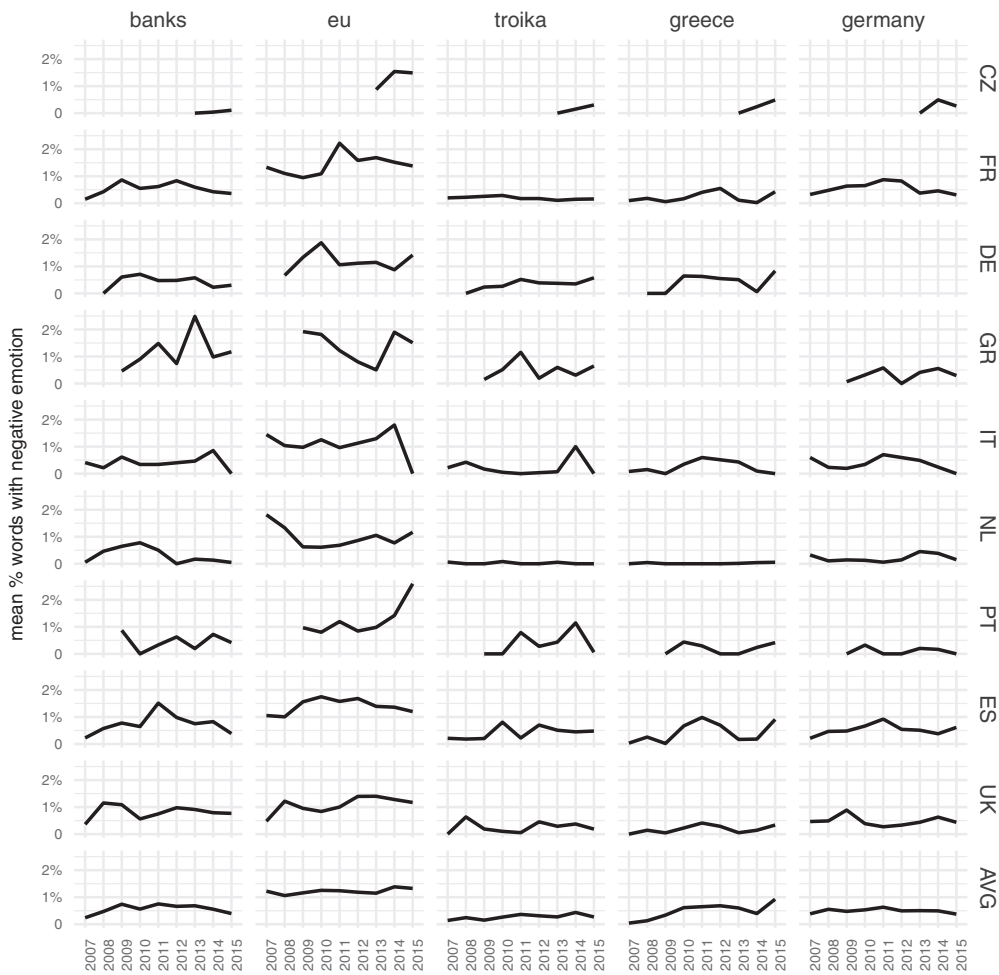


Figure 4. Negative sentiment by country and blame unit

Portuguese, Greek and Spanish prime ministers. This is to be expected as these countries saw the deepest involvement of the Troika partners.

Examining blame shifting in government speeches

H3 posits that prime ministers will use a blame shifting strategy in their communication with the public when the state of the economy is in decline during the crisis. More specifically, we anticipate that they will try to shift the blame for the state of the economy as well as the unpopular austerity measures either to the supranational level or to other European countries that supposedly caused or exacerbated the crisis (vertical and horizontal blame shifting, respectively). We measure blame shifting by analysing negative sentiment towards these blame units. We use the same regression models and independent variables as in Study 1, but in addition to the economic independent variables we also control for the length of speeches. Because prime ministers usually speak about many different things,

Table 3. Determinants of blame shifting (negative sentiment)

	Model 1 Banks	Model 2 EU	Model 3 Troika	Model 4 Greece	Model 5 Germany
(Intercept)	-2.38*** (0.29)	-1.20*** (0.35)	-0.79*** (0.24)	-1.43*** (0.35)	-1.50*** (0.29)
Local unemployment	0.03*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
EU unemployment	0.05* (0.02)	0.09** (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)	0.04 (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)
Local GDP growth	-0.14*** (0.04)	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.11*** (0.03)	0.03 (0.05)	0.02 (0.04)
EU GDP growth	-0.14*** (0.04)	-0.00 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.07 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.04)
Right-wing government	-0.08 (0.06)	-0.11 (0.07)	-0.00 (0.04)	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.05)
Speech length (log)	0.40*** (0.02)	0.33*** (0.03)	0.19*** (0.02)	0.24*** (0.02)	0.30*** (0.02)
Country fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
AIC	21002.91	22669.11	17180.34	16264.53	17237.64
BIC	21115.49	22781.69	17292.91	16369.31	17341.85
Log likelihood	-10484.45	-11317.55	-8573.17	-8116.27	-8602.82
Number of observations	5,553	5,553	5,553	5,159	4,981
Number of groups: Quarter	36	36	36	36	36
Var: Quarter (intercept)	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.05	0.01
Var: Residual	2.53	3.42	1.26	1.33	1.83

Notes: Models 4 and 5 exclude speeches of Greek and German prime ministers, respectively. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

longer speeches are more likely to contain more of the keywords – or blame units – and hence more negative sentiment. In separate analyses we also tested how often the blame units were mentioned depending on the state of the economy (again controlling for speech length). By looking at the number of mentions, we get a first impression of the importance of blame shifting as a communication strategy during the crisis. Indeed, we find that adverse economic conditions motivate prime ministers to talk more about banks, the EU, the Troika and Greece (see Table 5 in Online Appendix G).

Table 3 shows that such conditions also motivate the speakers to talk more negatively about them. Table 3 reports the regression effects of negative sentiment towards banks, the EU, the Troika, Greece and Germany. We find that higher domestic unemployment compared to levels of unemployment in the whole EU is associated with more negative sentiment towards banks, the Troika and Greece (for Germany, the relationship is significant at the 10 per cent level). Likewise, higher EU-wide unemployment leads to more negative sentiment towards banks and the EU. Local GDP decline predicts more negative sentiment

to banks and the Troika. And finally, EU-wide GDP decline is associated with more negative sentiment towards banks.²⁵ We find no difference between left- and right-wing governments in terms of blame shifting.

Overall, these results are in line with *H3*. When national economic conditions worsened during the economic crisis in Europe, governments tried to shift blame towards banks and the Troika. Conversely, they talked more negatively about the EU when EU-wide unemployment increased. Besides international institutions and banks, we were also interested whether governments would blame two countries that played a specific role in the discourse about the European crisis: Greece and Germany. While negative sentiment towards Greece increased with higher levels of unemployment, we found no clear evidence for a relationship between adverse economic conditions and blame shifting to Germany.

Conclusion

Economic crises put governments in a tight spot. With the economy in decline and the (often) necessary enactment of austerity measures, popular discontent with the government rises, yet budget constraints do not allow for new policies to compensate the most affected citizens. Governments have few other strategic options to prevent voter punishment at the next elections than to use strategic communication. In this article, we have explored strategic communication by prime ministers during the economic crisis in Europe. Analysing 5,553 speeches of government leaders in nine European countries between 2007 and 2015, we investigated *how much* and *how* prime ministers communicate with the public.

Our first study focused on strategic issue attention. By means of topic models, we measured the extent to which each individual speech addresses the economy and explored the determinants of this economic issue engagement. In this automated approach the degree of prime ministers' attention to economic topics is inductively assessed. The inductive approach is especially valuable for comparative analyses where the main focus is on context effects, since it allows for country-level differences in terms of topic definition and wording, whereas top-down approaches that use hand-coding of texts typically apply the same codebook to all countries.

Our results show that prime ministers speak more extensively about economic issues when the domestic economy is in decline and when the unemployment rate rises. These findings are in line with issue engagement theory (Sides 2006; Jerit 2008; Sigelman & Buell 2004; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen 2015; Meyer & Wagner 2016): instead of focusing on the issues they 'own', governments address topics that are publicly salient – in other words, they 'ride the wave' of public attention (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1994), thereby signaling that they are in touch with their voters' needs and concerns. Besides providing important signals for voters that officeholders do indeed care about their current worries, changing issue attention might also indicate a more substantial change in the policy agenda. While we cannot disentangle the two in the present analysis, we consider it an important question for future research to distinguish between different forms of strategic issue attention and the conditions under which governments choose a more superficial, symbolic and temporary issue focus or start developing a more substantial issue agenda in reaction to changing issue priorities among the public.

In our second study, we analysed the content of speeches. We expected governments to try to shift the blame for poor economic conditions to other countries and supranational institutions. During the economic crisis in Europe, supranational institutions such as the Troika played an important role by prescribing and imposing austerity measures – especially in those countries that received bail-out loans. Moreover, the economic integration of the Eurozone reached new levels, connecting national economies even more. Using sentiment analysis, we analysed the negativity of references to these ‘blame units’. Our findings indicate that, indeed, prime ministers try to shift the blame to banks, Greece and the Troika when the domestic unemployment rate increases. Moreover, unemployment in the EU overall leads to more negativity towards the European Union. In sum, the results of our analyses point to rising attention of governments towards economic conditions, but also increasing negativity and blame shifting during the economic crisis.

Our results speak to a broad literature about party competition, public policy and political communication. A core question in these literatures is how socioeconomic problems translate into policy changes. Political competition is an important intermediate factor in this translation process. If the status quo with economic problems is untenable, what are the alternative options in terms of policy and strategic framing of the situation? What reactions from the opposition and the voters are expected? There is a rich literature that combines these factors using case studies, but it remains hard to generalise from those. This study demonstrates how government communication can be studied systematically (also see Sagarzazu & Klüver, 2017). It sets the agenda for a more systematic evaluation of the interplay between economic problems, government communication, voter responses and policy changes.

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Online Appendix

Additional supporting information may be found in the Online Appendix section at the end of the article:

Appendix A: EUSpeech Dataset

Appendix B: Harmonic means of topic models per country

Appendix C: Topic coding

Appendix D: Selection of relevant benchmark

Appendix E: Descriptives

Appendix F: Study 1: Determinants of issue emphasis**Appendix G:** Study 2: Blame shifting**Notes**

1. While a large literature has studied individual-level determinants of economic perceptions and economic voting, research on the role of party discourse in shaping the voters' perceptions is still rare (but see Pardos-Prado & Sagarzazu 2016).
2. See Leong and Howlett (2017) for a recent overview of the credit claiming versus blame avoidance debate.
3. In a more general discussion of the literature, Hinterleitner and Sager (2017) distinguish between 'anticipatory' and 'reactive blame avoidance'. They argue that in a situation in which an event has become publicly visible and blameworthy, actors have to play the 'reactive blame game'. In reactive blame avoidance, policy and agency strategies are less likely since they cannot be credibly implemented in an *ad hoc* manner. Therefore, reactive blame avoidance – or blame *management* – essentially consists of presentational strategies (see also McGraw 1991). Hansson (2017, 2018), on the other hand, illustrates how government communication guidelines may as well serve as tools for 'anticipative blame avoidance' – i.e., by manipulating the perception of officeholders' agency for potentially negative outcomes in the future.
4. The welfare state literature usually refers to situations where governments have to mitigate the risk of unpopular policies; however, we argue that similar strategies are important with regard to the state of the economy in general. Actually, both perspectives are comparable since the economic voting literature argues that whether governments are punished for presiding over a bad economy depends on who is perceived as being responsible (Powell & Whitten 1993; Rudolph 2003).
5. More precisely, according to McGraw (1991: 1136), an excuse 'focuses on the causal link between the actor and outcome and involves a denial of partial or full responsibility (if the actor is not fully responsible, less or no blame is warranted)'.
6. Even though we acknowledge that 'scapegoating' and 'blame shifting' are similar concepts, we use the more general term 'blame shifting' in this article since we are not only interested in communication strategies to avoid blame for policy decisions, but also for the national economic situation more generally.
7. The number of speeches that is publicly available varies per country (see Table 1).
8. Percentage of active population, seasonally adjusted.
9. Growth rate compared to previous quarter, seasonally adjusted.
10. Prime ministers from parties in the liberal or conservative party families were coded 'right-wing', while those from parties in the socialist/social democratic party family were coded 'left-wing'. We used the Chapel Hill Expert Survey party family classifications (Polk et al. 2017). This means that Chirac, Sarkozy, Merkel, Samaras, Berlusconi, Balkenende, Rutte, Passos Coelho, Rajoy and Cameron were coded as right-wing; and Sobotka, Hollande, Papandreou, Tsipras, Letta, Socrates, Costa, Zapatero, Prodi, Blair and Brown were coded as left-wing.
11. Latent dirichlet allocation (LDA) is a generative topic model to find latent topics in a text corpus. The model assumes that each document contains a mixture of topics, and that words in the document are generated from those topics. All documents contain a particular set of topics, but the proportion of each topic in each document may be different. We used the *topicmodels*-package in R (Grün & Hornik 2011) to estimate the models.
12. See Online Appendix B for the other countries.
13. The three authors coded all topics on whether they were economic topics or not. If at least two of us scored a topic as being an economic topic we registered it as such.
14. Country averages of economic topic proportions in per cent: Czech Republic: 0.18; France: 0.15; Germany: 0.21; Greece: 0.27 (including Papademos); Italy: 0.21 (including Monti); Netherlands: 0.23; Portugal: 0.41; Spain: 0.22; United Kingdom: 0.15.
15. Note that we have excluded independent prime ministers and consequently Figure 2 shows no Greek data for the first two quarters of 2012. When including the speeches of the independent Prime Minister

Lucas Papademos, we find another peak at the beginning of 2012, when the second bail-out programme was ratified.

16. The results are almost identical when we analyse GDP growth and unemployment in separate models. See Table 4 in Online Appendix F for the estimated coefficients.
17. 18×0.36 (see model 1).
18. -4×-1.59 (see model 1).
19. The same logic applies to unemployment, but with opposite signs.
20. The results (Table 2) for the direct effects of unemployment and GDP growth are robust to excluding single countries, with one exception: Spain. When excluding Spain, the coefficients for GDP growth and for EU-wide unemployment remain significant, but the coefficient for national unemployment is not significant anymore. We believe that this result theoretically makes sense since Spain has had (besides Greece) by far the highest levels of unemployment during the crisis.
21. There is no difference in the average level of unemployment faced by left and right governments.
22. We have experimented with various window lengths (5–25) around the blame unit but our results are robust to these changes: these operations yield variables with a correlation of 0.9 or higher to the variable constructed with the 15-word window.
23. We used the Lexicoder sentiment dictionary, which is an established dictionary developed to capture the sentiment of political texts (Young & Soroka 2012).
24. Greece: mean = 1.16%, max = 16.67%; Spain: mean = 0.72%, max = 20%; United Kingdom: mean = 0.85%, max = 13.33%; Overall: mean = 0.62% (see also Table 3 in Online Appendix E).
25. The results for blame shifting towards banks are robust to excluding single countries. All other models are robust with two exceptions: when excluding Spain, the coefficients for local unemployment (models 3 and 4) are no longer significant and when excluding Greece, local GDP growth loses significance (model 3). Because these two countries had exceptional economic conditions during the crisis (high unemployment in Spain and highly negative GDP growth in Greece), these results of robustness tests are in line with our theoretical expectations.

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