Chapter 14
Is responsible political leadership possible in high-speed democratic societies?

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Introduction

In her classic book, *The concept of representation*, Hanna F. Pitkin (1967: 224) concludes that in a representative democracy, the representatives 'must look after the public interest and be responsive to public opinion, except insofar as non-responsiveness can be justified in terms of the public interest.' Politicians in contemporary democracies still face this dilemma: Elected politicians are expected to, at the same time, pursue policies that represent public opinion (Druckman and Jacobs, 2015) and serve 'the long-term needs of their people and countries', even if they have not 'been articulated as specific demands' from citizens (Bardi, Bartolini and Trechsel, 2014: 237). As key actors linking citizens and the political system, political parties are expected to pursue policies that are both responsive and responsible; parties are expected both to represent and to govern (Lefkofridi and Nezi, 2020; Mair, 2009).

Perhaps nowhere is the urgency and complexity of this tension between responsiveness and responsibility in contemporary European democracies expressed more clearly than in Kees van Kersbergen's recent work. Kees has defined a new research agenda around the tension between ever faster moving societal developments and slow-moving democratic decision-making. Ageing populations, changing economic structures and competition, new patterns of immigration, climate change, security threats and, not least, rapid technological advances raise enormous demands for political systems to decide on policies to solve societal problems. At the same time, democratic decision-making takes time to involve citizens and other interests to make the political system responsive to the public's demands. As Kees writes with Barbara Vis, 'We live in a high-speed society that is governed by a slow-motion democracy,' which likely escalates 'public disenchantment with the democratic political sys-

tem' (van Kersbergen and Vis, 2022: 1). How, and to what extent, are political parties and leaders able to cope with this tension between making policy decisions that are responsible while maintaining sufficient responsiveness to citizens' demands and expectations? This is a question about how parties can close 'representation gaps,' that is, following Pitkin (1967) as quoted above, make citizens see why parties represent them by justifying their policy in terms of the public interest.

In this chapter, we seek to contribute to Kees' fascinating new research agenda by addressing how political parties can close representation gaps. We propose a theoretical framework for analyzing how parties might cope with the tension between being both responsive and responsible as well as an evaluation of this theoretical framework in light of recent empirical work. We outline under what conditions it is possible for political parties and leaders to both communicate with citizens in a responsible manner and pursue responsible policies. We conclude that such responsible political leadership is possible through persuasion.

Theoretical framework: How to close 'representation gaps'

We begin by clarifying key terms. The tension between responsiveness and responsibility was highlighted by Mair (2009). Following Bardi, Bartolini and Trechsel (2014: 237), we define *responsiveness* as 'the tendency, and indeed the normative claim, that political parties and leaders (...) sympathetically respond to the short-term demands of voters, public opinion, interest groups, and the media.' Likewise, we follow their definition of *responsibility* as 'the necessity for those same parties and leaders to take into account (a) the long-term needs of their people and countries, which have not necessarily been articulated as specific demands, and which underlie and go beyond the short-term demands of those same people' as well as (b) the constraint imposed by other audiences, such as 'the international markets (...), and, in the European context in particular, the heavy transnational conditions of constraint that are the result of a common currency and common market' (Bardi, Bartolini and Trechsel, 2014: 237).

Some readers might rightfully wonder if this definition of 'responsibility' is not too functionalistic. Surely, not everybody agrees

on what the proper future policies ought to be, either because of ideological differences or because of legitimate disagreement over the facts. Nor does everybody agree on what constitutes reasonable constraints on policymaking. When is it reasonable to incur public debt to pay for government operations? What is a reasonable level of inequality in capitalist market economies? How much value do we place on the well-being of future generations compared to the present day? Yet, the representation gap does not hinge on there being one objectively correct long-term policy answer to these questions. Rather, it depends on decision-makers' *beliefs* about what is in the public's interest over the long term – and that the necessary policy solutions are at odds with being responsive to voters' short-term preferences.

If political parties' beliefs about citizens' short-term preferences and more long-term considerations of what is in the public interest contradict, how do political parties cope? In Table 1, we present our theoretical framework for answering this question. One distinction is between policy (what parties *do* to solve societal problems) and rhetoric (how parties *present* their policies to the public). Policies and rhetoric can be either responsive (giving citizens what they demand or telling them what they want to hear) or responsible (giving citizens what is in their interest or telling, and ultimately convincing, them *why* the policy is in their interest).

Table 1: How political parties close 'representation gaps'

		POLICY	
		Responsive	Responsible
RHETORIC	**Responsive**	Pandering	Manipulation
	Responsible	Window dressing	Persuasion

There is a long tradition in political science that views political parties as being highly short-term focused, or more precisely: having the eyes firmly fixed on the next election (e.g. Downs, 1957). In the context of Pitkin's dilemma of balancing responsiveness against responsibility, this line of argument comes down clearly on the side of responsiveness. Political parties will not only work hard to deliv-

er the policies favored by their voters (i.e., policy responsiveness) but also advertise their achievements to the public (i.e., rhetorical responsiveness). We label this scenario *pandering*, because the political parties are entirely driven by a wish to please the short-term desires of the voters.

Given the massive societal problems facing political parties in power – an ageing population, rising public costs, uncontrollable immigration flows, climate change – unpopular decisions sometimes need to be made. Even if the political parties, or certainly the office-seeking party elite, might prefer to avoid the difficult issues, activists, interest organizations, or government bureaucrats may nevertheless demand action. In this scenario, political parties may combine responsible policymaking with responsive rhetoric. Such *manipulation* of the electorate is well described in the literature (e.g. Pierson, 1994) and comes with the major advantage that long-term problems are being dealt with, at least to an extent. Yet, the downside clearly is the lack of honest conversation in the public domain about the real trade-offs facing society.

It is not the case, of course, that voters only care about their own pocketbook and current well-being. Many people today are concerned about issues that are long-term and hard to deal with. Most voters want a sound economy, an end to poverty in the less developed world, and strong answers to a changing climate. Yet, voters are also bounded rational. Most voters have little knowledge about the policies that need to be implemented to deal with these major problems and, for that matter, about the policy status quo (Chong, 2013). The problems, moreover, tend to be distant, in sharp contrast to classic 'short-term issues' – such as school closures, healthcare waiting lists, surging crime rates – that voters also care about. In this case, it will be tempting for political parties to engage in *window dressing*, that is, exhibit a high degree of rhetorical responsibility and a low degree of policy responsibility. This allows political parties to prioritize the short-term issues on which voters ultimately are most likely to base their vote choice, and at the same time signal that long-term problems are being dealt with.

Each of the three ways of closing the representation gap comes with clear normative downsides. It would appear normatively more desirable if political parties would engage in both policy and rhet-

oric that were responsible. Given the scarce resources available to deal with problems, this, alas, would appear suicidal since it implies downplaying voters' short-term concerns. Yet, such a bleak conclusion assumes that political parties cannot successfully engage in *persuasion*, seeking to explain and convince voters that their responsible policies are in the public interest. As we will illuminate, some research does suggest that persuasion is feasible, at least under some circumstances.

In the rest of the chapter, we address each of the four scenarios in turn. We draw on extant research that allows us to highlight specific elements and questions that are particularly relevant. We end the chapter by discussing our framework in the context of the tension between democracy and problem-solving in high-speed societies.

Pandering

At least since Downs' (1957: 28) dictum that politicians formulate policies to win elections, a key assumption in much political science has been that political parties are vote seeking and myopic. They act this way because they are forced to in a world where also voters are myopic. As observed by Pierson (1994), even political parties that care about making what is deemed the correct, long-term decisions still need to win the next election to be able to do all the right stuff.

Although voters are less one-dimensional than they are sometimes accused of (maybe most prominently by Achen and Bartels, 2016), it is a fundamental insight that voters are not rational. They do not have full – and often only very little – information on the relevant problems or policies (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Jensen and Zohlnhöfer, 2020). Voters also suffer from several biases, including cherishing short-term over long-term benefits (Jacobs and Matthews, 2012), and pay much more attention to what is done *against* them than what is done *for* them (Weaver, 1986; Soroka, 2014). Promoting some future good (say, less public debt for the grandchildren) at the price of current-day goods (say, reduced pension generosity) will consequently be considered unappealing by many voters.

In this electoral environment, political parties need to operate, and it is not surprising that many authors have converged on the expectation that political parties will *pander* to the voters. A substantial amount of research has studied, for instance, policy respon-

siveness; that is, how governments' policy changes track preferences of the public (Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson, 2002; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). It is important to note, though, that the behavior of political parties does not have to be a reaction to changing preferences. Political parties can anticipate how voters will respond to a new policy and let this expectation guide policymaking (e.g. Wenzelburger, 2014). It seems plausible that day-to-day politics is severely constrained by gut feelings among political parties of what is electorally feasible and what is not.

Pandering, however, implies not only that political parties take their cue from the voters, but also that they let the voters know about it. Such credit claiming is the bread-and-butter of incumbent governments trying to convince voters give them another turn in office, and research suggests that credit claiming despite voters' inherent negativity bias can work as an electoral strategy (e.g. Grimmer, Messing and Westwood, 2012).

Manipulation

Although pandering appears like a reasonable default expectation for political scientists adopting a bounded rational perspective on voters, this does not foreclose that responsible policies will ever be implemented. There are, in fact, good reasons to expect that political parties will try to act responsible when it comes to their policy choices – but maintain a rhetorical façade of responsiveness.

Party leaders may, for one thing, be motivated to pursue other objectives than simply vote or office maximization at the next election. Leaders may truly care about what they perceive to be the long-term interests of society, and although they still need to win the upcoming election, such beliefs about what is responsible can guide their actions. The members of the party as well as the backbenchers with little chance of winning a seat in government may also push for responsible policies, forcing the hands of party leaders.

This points to a second path to closing the representational gap: *manipulation*, that is, combining rhetorical responsiveness with policy responsibility. A literature has shown how certain blame avoidance strategies can be employed to this effect (Weaver, 1986; Vis and van Kersbergen, 2007; Vis, 2016).

Blame avoidance strategies vary in the extent to which they seek to hide the fact that a policy reform has even occurred. At one end of the spectrum, authors have argued that political parties can avoid blame for reforms that are well known to the public by engaging in strategic framing. Such framing may emphasize the urgent need for reform to sustain the economy (e.g. Cox, 2001; Green-Pedersen, 2002) or recipients' lack of deservingness (Slothuus, 2007). In this scenario, voters are manipulated to support a reform that they would not support without the specific framing.

At the other end of the spectrum, political parties have been shown to obfuscate reforms (Pierson, 1994; Jensen, 2014; Jensen et al., 2018). This can be done by lowering the visibility of policies and their effects on voters by using highly technical changes that are difficult for voters to comprehend. The logic is that if reforms are presented in a highly convoluted manner, voters will have a hard time deducing whether they are worse off, and if they believe they are, whom to punish.

Manipulation is widely used in politics – and not only because political parties want to implement responsible policies, but also because short-term responsiveness can be tricky if different voter groups want opposing things. Yet assuming that manipulation is used to achieve a greater good down the road that would not otherwise be politically feasible, surely such manipulation is an overall benefit for society?

There are two arguments against manipulation as a viable strategy for political parties. The first argument is practical. Blame avoidance strategies often require that policy reforms are a little less effective than they otherwise might have been, simply because very large reform effects are difficult to hide. The second argument against manipulation is normative. Voters' short-term and long-term interests are equally legitimate, and the logic of manipulation implies that parties speak to short-term interests when they obtain their electoral mandate. In the absence of an open discussion about the long-term needs of society, voters have a reasonable expectation that political parties promote short-term interests. Moreover, few crises with long-term ramifications occur entirely unforeseen, and this justifies that political parties throw whatever promises they made to their voters out the window. The structural problems of

the economy, climate change, severe poverty in the less-developed world, and so on, are well known.

Window dressing

The logic of manipulation, as noted, suggests that political parties can only win elections by catering to the short-term interests of voters. This would seem a simplification. Indeed, much would suggest that many voters care about outcomes that only turn up many years from now (Busemeyer, 2023). Recently, environmental protection and climate change have become major campaign issues in many European democracies, and concerns about fiscal responsibility have always been important for large segments of the electorate. It is, in short, possible to campaign on issues that are not immediately aligned with the short-term interests of voters.

The problems for the political parties do not end there, however. Voters remain bounded rational and, as such, victim to several biases that make it hard for parties to act responsible. One – very good – reason why voters discount the future is simply that they are more uncertain about policy effects that only occur many years from now than about policy effects that materialize right away (Jacobs and Matthews, 2012). Having only so many resources available, many opt for the safe bet of today rather than the risky bet of tomorrow. This means that political parties that advocate trading off current for future goods have to convince voters that they can deliver; something that is hard to do (though not impossible, see Jacobs and Matthews, 2017).

Voters' well-documented negativity bias amplifies this. Prioritizing the long term often means downplaying investment in the current day. In other words, losses are imposed immediately, but the gains come later. Even assuming that voters are not uncertain about future benefits, the fact that they must give up benefits at all can cause an electoral backlash, because losses weigh more heavily than gains (Weaver, 1986).

An additional observation, dating back all the way to Herbert Simon, is that individuals have a hard time ranking their priorities in a consistent way. Priorities may shift rapidly with the emphasis and framing of the news media and competing elite actors. Therefore, political parties cannot assume that voters who believed, say,

fighting climate change for the next generations was vital when they voted will not punish political parties for introducing policies that hurt their pocketbook today. Cutting public services, reducing the generosity of social benefits, and increasing taxes may be necessary to achieve the long-terms goals that the voters want – but still totally unacceptable to the very same voters.

In this situation, political parties can engage in *window dressing*. This way of closing the representational gap implies rhetorical responsibility combined with policy responsiveness. In most European countries, for instance, the mainstream parties have all embraced a pro-environmental profile, nudged on by vocal green parties and activist groups. One may speculate that one reason policy action is frequently trailing rhetorical commitment is exactly that political parties have to take voters' short-term interests into account.

Persuasion

Is there a way of combining responsible policy with responsible rhetoric? *Persuasion* is our answer. The literatures we have discussed so far typically assume that voters' political preferences are fixed, already given, and thus exogenous to politics. This would make it difficult to close representation gaps. Yet, in Pitkin's argument, it should be possible for political parties and leaders to 'justify' their policies 'in terms of the public interest,' making initially unpopular policies justified in the eyes of citizens. This way, political parties might persuade voters and mobilize support for, or at least minimize protest against, policy solutions that political leaders find are in the public interest and hence responsible.

A growing literature suggests that political parties do play a vital role in shaping public opinion through persuasion. As a crucial institutional feature of representative democracy, political parties both help define societal problems and point out policy solutions to them (Leeper and Slothuus, 2014: 131-133). Messages from party leaders influence voters' perceptions and opinions, at least when messages come from the voters' own party (Lenz, 2012; Zaller, 1992).

Some of the most direct evidence on how political party leaders may close representation gaps with arguments and rhetoric comes from a string of recent studies on welfare state issues in Denmark. In one study, messages from a governing party led voters to interpret

current levels of unemployment or public budget deficits as a problem to be dealt with (Bisgaard and Slothuus, 2018). Such changing interpretations of a problem can help justify what political leaders might consider 'responsible' policy change that would otherwise be unpopular. Indeed, if a broader coalition of political parties agree on how to define a problem, Bisgaard and Slothuus (2018: 467) conclude, 'political parties can encourage citizens of different partisan stripes to converge on a common interpretation of reality, hence creating a shared point of departure for debates about policy solutions to societal problems.'

Another study showed that party leaders could directly mobilize voter support for policies that were initially unpopular (Slothuus and Bisgaard, 2021a). When the major governing party suddenly reversed its position on two major welfare issues in Denmark – proposing a 50% reduction in a widely used unemployment insurance program and abolition of a popular early retirement program – voters from this party immediately, and durably, increased their support for cutting welfare. Such opinion change occurred even among voters where the new policy positions of their party went against their previously held views.

As a third example, Slothuus and Bisgaard (2021b) showed that political party leaders might even win public consent for policies that are directly at odds with citizens' (short-term) self-interest. They found that during a collective bargaining conflict over the salary and work rights for public employees in Denmark – where the self-interest of public employees was strongly mobilized – messages from party leaders led public employees to lower their demands. This success of parties to persuade their voters even when self-interest was clearly at stake revealed 'a previously underappreciated ability of parties to temper the pursuit of self-interest among citizens with the most extreme policy demands (...). Parties acted by moderating – not fueling – extreme opinion, potentially paving the way for compromise by making citizens' opinions less extreme' (Slothuus and Bisgaard, 2021b: 1095).

As these studies suggest, political parties and leaders appear to be able to define problems and justify their policies in ways that win public support, at least sometimes. This elite influence on public opinion is stronger if party leaders can reach a consensus and send

a unified message to voters (Zaller, 1992). Obviously, many questions remain to clarify, such as what types of justifications matter, or how well citizens are able to understand policy issues, before firm normative conclusions can be drawn about how much persuasion improves representation. Still, persuasion seems a viable strategy to close representation gaps in high-speed democratic societies.

Discussion: Political representation and problem solving in a high-speed society

Our point of departure was Kees van Kersbergen's visionary research agenda on how legitimate democratic decision-making is possible when the political system is confronted with ever accelerating problems in a high-speed society. Engaging an aspect of this research agenda, we proposed a theoretical framework for analyzing how political parties and leaders may close 'representation gaps' when there is a tension between making responsible policy decisions and maintaining sufficient responsiveness to citizens' demands and expectations. As our review of recent work suggested, political parties can successfully persuade voters to change their understanding of societal problems and to support policies that were initially unpopular. Political parties need not engage in less desirable behaviors – pandering, manipulation, or window dressing. Rather, it is feasible for leaders of political parties to persuade, allowing them to both pursue responsible policies and use responsible rhetoric.

There are no easy ways to overcome the 'new and worrying dilemma for democratic problem solving' stressed by van Kersbergen and Vis (2022: 1): 'Either the political system speeds up decision making at the cost of (slow) democracy (option 1), or it holds on to slow democracy at the cost of problem solving (option 2).' Yet, our theoretical framework presented in Table 1 highlights the potential of persuasion to lessen this dilemma. Persuasion might make it possible to speed up decision making without losing democratic legitimacy. At least under some conditions, and if they are willing to do so, politicians can engage in responsible rhetoric to help citizens understand and interpret the complex problems facing society. Moreover, political parties' rhetoric might provide arguments and mobilize policy support that can pave the way for responsible policy solutions.

Our conclusion that persuasion may enable political leaders to both govern and represent by justifying their policies to citizens has important implications. Perhaps not least if it reaches politicians who care about being re-elected in the next election. What such politicians believe about how voters respond to their policies matters. As V.O. Key (1966: 6) aptly argued in his book, *The responsible electorate*:

> If leaders believe the route to victory is by projection of images and cultivation of styles rather than by advocacy of policies to cope with the problems of the country, they will project images and cultivate styles to the neglect of the substance of politics. They will abdicate their prime function in a democratic system, which amounts, in essence, to the assumption of the risk of trying to persuade us to lift ourselves by our bootstraps.

We have emphasized persuasion as a way to pursue responsible problem solving and to ensure responsiveness. However, we are not blind to the potential normative problems of persuasion for democratic representation, as 'elected party elites may instill the very opinions to which they respond' (Druckman, 2014: 477). Still, we find persuasion to be the more appealing option given the very real dilemmas of the representational gap. In a high-speed society, politicians engaging in persuasion may be able to prevent 'public disenchantment with the democratic political system' (van Kersbergen and Vis, 2022: 1).

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