

COMMON CAUSE BRIEFING

Governments can change people's values

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“We all know what we must do, but we do not know how to get re-elected after we have done it.”

Jean-Claude Juncker, former Luxembourg prime minister, 1954-)

Although Jean-Claude Juncker may not have had climate change or child poverty in mind when he said this, his reflection applies equally well to any so-called "bigger-than-self problems" that cannot be addressed by appeals to individual (or national) self-interest alone, like climate change or child poverty.

It is well established that values that prevail in society are used by political leaders to set policies. For example, welfare laws are stronger in countries where values such as justice and equality, are emphasised. In other words, there is a strong positive correlation between values of government and the electorate. How, then, does change come around? What is the direction of effects in the interaction between the electorate and government? Do the electorate's values change government's values – or the other way round?

Insights into this will be helpful to design strategies for how society's value priorities can be shifted towards the intrinsic values like justice and equality that are associated with pro-social, pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour that "bigger-than-self" problems require.

In a forthcoming article in the [European Journal of Government and Economics 3\(1\)](#) – *Collective action problems: Disentangling possible feedback loops between government policies and the public's value-change*, we (Anat Bardi, Eivind Hoff-Elimari, Simon Matti and Kristina Östman) attempt to address this question by comparing changes to the values expressed by governments and those of public opinion in six EU Member States in the period 2002-2012.

It finds that governments may have leeway to change the values of public opinion – perhaps even more so than the other way round.

METHOD

In order to explore and compare possible interactions between the values of government and those of the electorate, we first gathered data on public opinion's value orientations from the European Social Survey (ESS), which is conducted every second year since 2002 and covers most European countries. Each ESS round contains a 21 items questionnaire to situate respondents on universal value-types ("Schwartz value-types"), and we calculated national scores to place each country on the axis between so-called "self-transcendence" (also called intrinsic values, generally associated with altruism) and "self-enhancement" (also called extrinsic values, generally associated with egotism) values in the period 2002-2012. Most countries remained very stable on this axis, but others saw remarkable movements over time and we decided to look further into the six countries with the largest changes – the Czech Republic, Spain, Portugal, Sweden, Ireland and Greece.

To try to say something about the direction of "value interactions" between government and the electorate, we needed an indicator to rate governments on the same axis as we had for the electorate based on the ESS. In other words, how oriented were each of the governments in each of the six countries towards intrinsic v. extrinsic values over the time period?

Stefan Svallfors, one of few researchers who has investigated feedback mechanisms of public policies, has found that feedback may be independent of direct material experience of public policies: It matters not only *what* governments do (and don't), but also *how* they motivate their decisions. In other words, if a government motivates a renewable energy subsidy by a "jobs and growth" agenda, it may trigger other feedback than if it motivates the same subsidy with the need to mitigate climate change. In other words, what matters is the *sum* of what the public perceives of government action and inaction. Due to the lack of consistent opinion polls on these matters, we decided to approach academics in political science, whom we presumed would have followed national politics with interest since the first ESS round in 2002 whilst having relatively non-partisan views. We constructed a questionnaire (Political Scientists Survey – PSS) with 12 political goals representing typical government priorities that would be relevant across Europe over the last decade – and that we could all situate as either "intrinsic" (e.g. "publicly funded services" or "protection of the environment") or "extrinsic" (e.g. "competitiveness" or "respect for authority").

This questionnaire was sent to academics in political science in each of the six countries we had pre-identified. They were asked to rate each of their country's governments since 2002 on each of the 12 political goals. On that basis we calculated a score to situate each government on the "intrinsic-extrinsic values"

axis. The academics were in reasonable agreement in their ratings of 20 of the 24 governments in office over the time period (the exceptions were one government in Sweden, two in Portugal and one in Greece).

THE EVIDENCE

With our indicators, we only track the sequence of chronological changes to the value priorities of public opinion and of government. These two indicators are influenced by a range of other variables – such as cultural, social and economic changes or current events.

Our data do however provide some evidence that governments' values may affect the electorate – unless something unexpected happens. The data from Spain, Greece and Ireland fit with this.

Spain

Spain is particularly telling: It is the country where public opinion has turned the most towards intrinsic values during the period. From a relatively average score in 2002, it had by 2012 even surpassed Sweden's strong intrinsic values orientation. The period studied coincides with the end of the Aznar government and including the Zapatero governments 2004-2011. The Zapatero government's strong intrinsic value orientation contrasts with a strong extrinsic value orientation of the previous Aznar and Rajoy governments. The Spanish case may point to both the potential and limits of feedback loops between government and public opinion: Aznar's Partido Popular (PP) consistently led the opinion polls ahead of the elections on 14 March 2004. This changed with the 11 March 2004 Madrid train bombings, for which the government quickly blamed the Basque terrorist organisation ETA, despite evidence to the contrary. The government was seen to have tried to manipulate facts and the PP was consequently defeated by Zapatero's socialist party PSOE. In other words, it was a vote against the PP because of its handling of an exogenous event – not a vote for PSOE's political agenda and its underlying values. However, Zapatero went on to pursue a political agenda characterised by social liberalisation and tolerance, social justice and a stronger voice for environmental protection. He was re-elected in 2008, by an electorate that the ESS shows had moved significantly towards intrinsic values.

Why, then, did the feedback loop stop at the general elections in 2011, when the PP returned to government with a majority in parliament?

We believe this may be explained by the economic crisis in which Spain has been engulfed since 2008. With the recession, unemployment has soared. In none of the worst crisis-ridden euro-zone countries – Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and

Spain – have incumbents been re-elected after 2009. In other words, just like the exogenous event of the Madrid bombings may have triggered a policy feedback loop that took the Spanish public opinion's net self-transcendence score on an upward trend, another exogenous event – the economic crisis – may have put a halt to it.

We did not analyse ESS data from Spain after the 2011 elections – but our guess will be that Spain will have turned towards extrinsic values.

Greece and Ireland

Greece and Ireland are interesting examples of how exogenous shocks and government's influence on public opinion can produce contrasted trends: An acute economic crisis left incumbents defeated in elections in 2009 and 2011 respectively; the new Greek government of Papandreou had more *intrinsic* political goals compared to its predecessor, whereas the new Irish government of Kenny had more *extrinsic* political goals. In the ESS round carried out after these elections, public opinion in each country had moved in the same direction as its government. By comparing the latest two ESS rounds with opinion polls and other election results immediately before and after the ESS rounds, we conclude in both cases that public opinion's value change probably occurred *after* the shift in government. .

These cases also weaken the hypothesis that economic crises push people *necessarily* towards extrinsic values: At least in the first period of the crisis (Greek GDP started falling in 2008), the Greeks turned towards intrinsic values.

Czech Republic and Portugal

In both these cases, there are clear positive correlations between changes in the value priorities expressed in government policies and those of public opinion, but the data do not enable us to say anything about the direction of effects in the feedback loop (Czech Republic), or they point to effects in both directions (Portugal). The Czech case is, however, interesting in that it is the country with the highest increase in the purchasing power standard per inhabitant and the only one with a fall in the unemployment rate throughout the period of all the six countries studied, yet it is where public opinion has consistently and significantly turned towards *extrinsic* values. It confirms that economic trends do not determine the direction of change in public opinion value priorities.

Sweden

Swedish public opinion's intrinsic value priorities were remarkably high and stable 2002-2009 – and then further increased 2009-2011. The only change in government was in 2006, with the new government prioritising extrinsic values

higher than its predecessor. The correlation between the two variables is, in other words, negative, but it is unlikely that there is any causality, as the public opinion's values priorities remained stable for four years before and three years after the change of government.

CONCLUSIONS

The article in the [European Journal of Government and Economics 3\(1\)](#) is intended as a preliminary attempt to investigate the existence and possible directions of effects between value priorities of the government and those of public opinion. More research is clearly needed, especially to compare with countries with small movements of public opinion on the intrinsic-extrinsic values axis. There are now also newer ESS data (for 2012-2013) that will be interesting to consider, not least as four of the six countries studied are still in deep economic troubles. We also recognise that our survey to estimate governments' value priorities needs to be better validated.

With these caveats, we draw the cautious conclusion that there are indeed possible feedback loops between the value priorities of governments and of public opinion, and that sometimes the values expressed by governments can exert important influence on the value priorities of the public. This can have far-reaching implications for political strategies to solve bigger-than-self problems such as child poverty or climate change. Appeals to economic growth as an end in itself may undermine voters' willingness to finance welfare services to fight, for instance, child poverty. Arguing for investments in renewable energy primarily as a competitive necessity to prevent trading partners from "catching" future jobs could reduce voters' support for strong climate change policies in general.

If our conclusions are confirmed by others, it will also give more confidence to politicians who want to focus on bigger-than-self problems. The politicians' influence is not limited to the direct effect of policies adopted under their tenure; their rhetoric and their policies can make citizens more supportive of action to tackle such problems – even beyond the next election.

To answer Jean-Claude Juncker's dilemma, if you know what to do, just do it – and you may well be re-elected!

By 30 June, you can read the article "Collective action problems: Disentangling possible feedback loops between government policies and the public's value-change" in [European Journal of Government and Economics 3\(1\)](#) (open access)