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Communicating the Rift: Voter Perceptions of Intraparty Dissent in Parliaments

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Members of Parliament (MPs) who vote against their party can improve their public standing. But how do MPs explain and frame their rebellious behavior to maximize their appeal? And what can party leaders do to mitigate the damage done by intraparty dissent? Using a vignette survey experiment fielded in four European democracies, we study how statements that MPs and party leaders make about rebellion affect voter evaluations of MPs and leaders. We find that MPs benefit from explaining rebellion in terms of their responsiveness to voters, whereas strategies that highlight the importance of the MP's own personal convictions are only effective with respondents who share the rebel's opinion. In turn, party leaders fare best if they welcome an MP's rebellious behavior irrespective of how that MP explains the vote. MP explanations that focus on the substance of a vote and critical responses from party leaders garner substantially less public support.

Mounting observational and survey-experimental evidence suggests that voters value members of Parliament (MPs) who are willing to defy their own party on parliamentary votes. Voters express support for these dissident members in the United States (Carson et al. 2010), in the United Kingdom (Campbell et al. 2019; Vivyan and Wagner 2012), and even in countries such as Austria, Denmark, and Germany, where voting against the party line is infrequent and rarely results in an electoral reward (Bøggild 2020; Bøggild and Pedersen 2020; Wagner, Vivyan, and Glinitzer 2020). But MPs can defy their parties for different reasons, offering various explanations for their rebelliousness. And party leaders can react differently to dissent within their

ranks. Under certain conditions, leaders may even welcome a variety of views to help them cast a wide net for voters and portray the party as a “big tent” (Crisp et al. 2013; Lehrer and Lin 2020; Müller 2013; Somer-Topcu 2015). How MPs explain their acts of rebellion and how party leaders react to them may affect how voters view rebellion, the MPs engaging in it, and the parties that these MPs belong to.

While much recent literature has examined voter support for dissent and posited reasons why voters may express a preference for it (e.g., Bøggild and Pedersen 2020; Campbell et al. 2019; Vivyan and Wagner 2012), the impacts of differing vote explanations and party leader reactions to defiance have not received the same attention. While MPs can

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attempt to connect with voters and send messages at any time, explaining defection is particularly important. In party-centered systems, voters generally expect MPs to agree with their parties; thus it is deviation, rather than agreement, that requires explanation. Can MPs affect how voters view them or their party leaders through the explanations they offer when voting against their party? Can the party leadership mitigate potential damage or alter public attitudes by engaging with rebellious MPs in a particular manner? The literature on intraparty dissent offers explanations for when and why dissent occurs (Benedetto and Hix 2007; Carey 2007; Ceron 2015; Cowley 2002; Kam 2009; Kirkland and Slapin 2019; Slapin et al. 2018), but it does not examine the impacts that different strategies—employed by MPs and parties and portrayed in the media—have on voters' views.¹ Recent research demonstrates that different party messages in the media can affect voters' perceptions of parties (Somer-Topcu, Tavits, and Baumann 2020), suggesting these strategies may affect voters' assessments. Nevertheless, we do not know exactly how voters perceive these key explanations of public acts of dissent or whether they have different consequences in different contexts.

Here, we present a survey experiment in which respondents from nationally representative online samples in Germany, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom ($N = 14,000$) are given short vignettes in which an MP has cast a vote against the majority of the MP's parliamentary party. In deviation from previous literature, we therefore do not vary rebellion but focus on the consequences of different communications about rebellion. The MPs vary in how they explain their vote to citizens, and party leaders vary in their reactions to the MP's dissidence.

We find that these vote explanations and reactions affect the extent to which voters support the MP and the party leadership. Whether voters agree or disagree with the position of the MP, they are particularly supportive of rebels who justify their vote by saying that they followed the view of their voters. Voters also express strong support for MPs who explain their rebellion in terms of the MP's own personal convictions, but only if those personal convictions are in line with the voter's own views. Voters who disagree with the position of the MP, in contrast, express very little support for MPs who couch their rebellion in terms of personal convictions. In contrast to existing literature, we specifically inves-

tigate how voters evaluate party leaders rather than the party as whole and how leaders' responses to rebellious behavior affect voters' views of both the rebellious MPs and the leaders. Party leaders can increase voter support for themselves by welcoming the dissidents, but such accommodating strategies may also increase support for certain types of rebellious MPs—possibly a (long-run) liability for the party leadership.

These findings have implications for theories of representation, our understanding of how parties and MPs communicate with voters, and how parties manage internal party dynamics. They speak to an array of literature on whether people prefer representatives who claim to respond to voters' wishes or to their personal convictions (e.g., Bengtsson and Wass 2010; Bøggild 2020; Bowler 2017; Campbell et al. 2019; Patterson, Hedlund, and Boynton 1975; Wolak 2017) by showing that, for the specific case of rebellion, voters prefer MPs who explain their behavior with reference to their constituents. Moreover, they demonstrate that to preserve party support in the face of parliamentary dissent, party leaders need to carefully tune their responses to those of MPs. Leaders may face a trade-off between garnering short-term support with respect to how they handle dissent and long-term erosion of party unity.

INTRAPARTY DISSENT, REPRESENTATION, AND VOTERS' REACTIONS

Intraparty dissent, defined as public disagreement between parliamentary backbenchers or candidates running for office and the party leadership, occurs in campaigns (Somer-Topcu 2015), in party conferences (Greene and Haber 2016), during legislative debates (Proksch and Slapin 2012, 2015), and in legislative voting (Carey 2009; Kam 2009; Sieberer 2006; Willumsen and Öhberg 2017). Typically, dissent involves interactions between a prominent party member or group of members and the party leaders in the public realm. MPs may vote against the party line and then explain their vote in the media, and party leaders may publicly react to the dissent. Such high-profile instances of dissent are likely to shape voters' perceptions of intraparty dissent. An important recent literature has tried to shed light on these micro-foundations by studying how voters react to single MPs who rebel (Bøggild 2020; Bøggild and Pedersen 2020; Campbell et al. 2019; Carson et al. 2010; Vivyan and Wagner 2012; Wagner et al. 2020). These studies highlight that MPs face incentives from the voters to defect from the party line to improve their public standing. Rebellion might clarify for the voter whether MPs, for example, in contrast to the MP's party leadership, promote policies congruent with voters' preferences (Vivyan and Wagner 2012). But this literature does not address the actual nature of public communication

1. Of course, ordinary voters are only one audience for such explanations, which could also be tailored to appeal to party activists, interest groups, or other actors. Nonetheless, voters are an important group, and even if MPs' messages were meant for other audiences, they will still reach voters if covered in mass media.

about rebellion and its consequences. How do politicians justify their defection from the party? How does the leadership react? And what does this do to voters' perceptions of rebels and party leaders?

In fact, little is known about how voters react to different explanations of rebellion by MPs, to the responses of the leadership, and whether their reactions vary across contexts and countries. Several researchers have looked at official "explanations of votes" in the German Bundestag (Bhattacharya and Papageorgiou 2019; Sieberer 2015; Zittel and Nyhuis 2019). These explanations are included in the plenary protocol when MPs cast a vote that runs contrary to the perceived wishes of their voters or dissents from the party line. However, the studies do not examine how voters react to the content of these explanations. In the US context, there has been work on how voters respond to different messages that politicians send. Grose, Malhotra, and Van Houweling (2015) find that US senators tailor their explanations of votes to particular audiences, and the tailoring of their message has a significant impact on voters' views of the senator, particularly among voters who disagree with the senator's position. However, this research does not examine the interaction of individual legislators and party leaders, clearly a key dynamic in European parliamentary democracies where parties exert more control. Nor does it focus on acts of rebellion, which are more dramatic and salient events in parliamentary systems where party unity is generally higher.

The MP: Communicating dissent as an act of representation

The degree to which politicians distance themselves from their party, in the extremes by presenting themselves to voters as either an independent individual or a party soldier, can be conceptualized as a key dimension of political representation, namely, the personalization dimension (Wolkenstein and Wrtil 2021). But the explanations given for rebellion can connect to other dimensions of representation that voters may also value. We follow this conceptual framework, building on the findings in the literature that voters, on average, wish representatives will show some degree of independence from their party, and consider how other dimensions of representation play into the explanations for rebellion.

First, Rehfeld (2009) has argued that a key dimension of representation is whether representatives aim to promote the greater good (*republican aims*) or the welfare of more narrow groups (*pluralist aims*) with their actions. If we reject the idea that we can objectively judge whether an action serves the interests of society or of smaller groups, this dimension is about how representatives justify their actions (i.e., their claims about their aims; White and Ypi 2011; Wolkenstein

and Wrtil 2021). Do rebels justify their defiance of the party line by appealing to broader societal concerns or by referring to the interest of particular groups they claim to represent? A straightforward expectation is that if rebels appeal to the common good, they can garner more support in the broad public than by appealing to the welfare of narrower groups. This should be particularly true in parliamentary democracies with strong party systems, where voters are used to parties integrating a variety of pluralist aims into one social democratic, Christian democratic, liberal, or another interpretation of society's common good (White and Ypi 2011). The very few empirical studies that we have on the issue suggest that, in parliamentary systems, voters expect MPs and parties to focus on the preferences of all citizens (Méndez-Lago and Martínez 2002) or to prioritize the common good over previous promises (Werner 2019). While these findings are not directly about explanations for rebellion, we expect:

H1a. MPs receive particularly strong approval from voters if they explain their rebellion with reference to republican aims.

Second, some work has recently argued for the existence of a "technocratic form of political representation" (Caramani 2017). In this model, political decisions are justified by basing them on the advice of experts, who are assumed to possess superior epistemic abilities to recognize what is in society's general interest. MPs could make use of this and argue that their rebellion against the party is in line with expert opinion. That such an explanation could win minds is suggested by cross-national survey data that have demonstrated the generally strong appeal of technocratic governance and decision-making to citizens (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017). Technocratic explanations are also closely related to theoretical explanations invoking republican aims, as their appeal to citizens is based on the assumption that experts will aim to advance the common good. This is supported by studies showing that corruption—the notional antagonist to the common good—is associated with increased citizen support for technocracy (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017; Chiru and Enyedi 2021). Given this strand of literature, we consider the technocratic explanation as a standalone hypothesis:

H1b. MPs receive particularly strong approval from voters if they explain their rebellion with reference to expert opinion.

Third, we can also think of MPs' explanations for dissent in terms of the influential distinction between *trustee* and *delegate* representatives (e.g., Rehfeld 2009). Whereas trustees

are self-reliant in their judgment and less responsive to electoral sanctions, delegates are reliant on their voters' judgment and are sensitive to the threat of electoral replacement.² Rebels may highlight that they defected from the party line either because a bill was against their personal convictions (trustee) or because their voters were opposed to the bill (delegate). Both kinds of explanations have been found to be more popular with voters to justify policy stances than party-based explanations (e.g., Bøggild 2020). While results are mixed (e.g., Bengtsson and Wass 2010; Patterson et al. 1975), most studies have found that when comparing delegate and trustee explanations directly, voters prefer aspects of the delegate over the trustee model of representation (e.g., Bowler 2017; Carman 2006, 2007; McMurray and Parsons 1965; Wolak 2017). Delegate behavior is particularly favored for legislators compared to executives (Sigelman, Sigelman, and Walkosz 1992). In turn, political trust leads to more demand for trustee representation (e.g., Carman 2007). These results suggest that MPs, who may lack trust compared to key executives (e.g., presidents), fare better by justifying their rebellion with delegate explanations. Focusing on MPs' dissent, Campbell et al. (2019) also find delegate representation to be preferred by voters, but the authors do not directly formulate the appeal as an explanation of the MP's dissent:

H1c. MPs receive more approval from voters if they explain their rebellion by following voters rather than their personal convictions.

Fourth, from the perspective of substantive representation (e.g., Pitkin 1967), rebels could justify their dissent purely on the basis of policy. They may question whether a bill moves policy in the right direction or whether it is sufficiently ambitious in its aims. Many dissidents have, indeed, explained their votes against a bill by arguing that they deemed it to be insufficient with respect to how far it moves policy (Slapin et al. 2018). The inherent problem with this explanation for appealing to a broad base of voters is that rebellion itself may already act as a signal that an MP holds extreme policy positions, as MPs situated at the fringes of a party tend to rebel more frequently (e.g., Benedetto and Hix 2007; Cowley 2002; Kam 2009). Stressing policy incongruence in public explanations of dissent may provide a further cue to voters that the MP has extreme positions and that the MP is far removed from the voter's own position. Hence, this policy incongruence explanation may lead to lower average approval and may

2. Note that Rehfeld (2009) conceives the trustee to also focus on republican, and the delegate on pluralist aims. We have already considered this distinction above.

instead be targeted at certain segments of party voters with more extreme preferences or at intraparty audiences:

H1d. MPs receive particularly weak approval from voters if they explain their rebellion by arguing that a bill does not go far enough in terms of policy.

The party leadership: Balancing party and individual incentives

Party leaders can react to instances of intraparty dissent. Significant work has considered the incentives they face with regard to the utility of the party as a group actor. Much literature argues that party leaders must somehow sanction dissent to ensure cohesiveness, which protects the party label, appeals to voters, and enables electoral success (Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004; Greene and Haber 2015; Kam 2009; Müller 2000). In contrast, other work suggests that parties may actually tolerate, welcome, or even strategically orchestrate dissent to blur their policy positions, which allows them to appeal to a wider variety of voters with diverging views (Bräuninger and Giger 2018; Lehrer and Lin 2020; Lo, Proksch, and Slapin 2016; Rovny 2012; Somer-Topcu 2015). Here, we do not focus on the incentives related to the party as a group actor but the personal incentives of party leaders, who seek approval by the public (e.g., for their own personal career prospects in executive office). While a popular leadership will undoubtedly help the party, leaders can be more or less popular than their party and likely have independent payoffs from their personal popularity (e.g., it may also strengthen their standing within the party).

On a most basic level, leaders can welcome or criticize the rebel's behavior in the public sphere.³ In terms of the Big Five dimensions of personality, criticizing or welcoming the disagreement by a fellow party MP relates to the trait of Agreeableness, which is marked by concerns for social harmony, sensitivity for others and their views, seeking consensus and compromise, trust and altruism. By criticizing a rebel MP, rejecting their view and switching to attack mode, leaders signal lower Agreeableness than if they welcome, appreciate, or integrate rebels' views. Importantly, Agreeableness has been found to be a primary "anchor" for how voters evaluate politicians (Caprara, Barbaranelli, and Zimbardo 2002), and Klingler, Hollibaugh, and Ramey (2019) find that more agreeable US Congress members receive more approval from voters. Caprara et al. (2003) even find that politicians score higher on Agreeableness in personality questionnaires than the general public. This suggests that by welcoming the

3. Leaders' reactions can be deliberately public (e.g., via interviews), or they may reach the media as insider information.

rebellion in their reaction, party leaders could improve their standing with voters by appearing sensitive to others and seeking compromise. Additionally, by welcoming the defection instead of attacking the rebel, party leaders can create a more united image of the party, which is assumed to be appreciated by voters. Of course, such accommodation may also incentivize further rebellion and therefore endanger unity in the long run. But for a specific case of rebellion, we expect:⁴

H2a. Party leaders receive more approval from voters if they welcome the rebel MP's behavior than if they criticize it.

But the party leadership's reaction may also affect voters' perceptions of the rebel MP. The cue-taking and endorsement literature shows that voters partially rely on the opinion of elites when judging political issues or candidates (e.g., Bullock 2020). Cues from parties and their leadership are particularly strong. In our case, voters could take the stance of the leadership regarding the MP's behavior as a cue about the MP's valence characteristics (e.g., trustworthiness, integrity):

H2b. MPs receive more approval from voters if the party leadership welcomes the rebel MP's behavior than if it criticizes it.

EXAMPLES OF COMMUNICATION ABOUT REBELLION

These different types of explanation of dissent and party responses to them occur in real-world parliamentary politics. The following examples, both from Germany, highlight that MPs communicate their dissent and justify rebellion using different arguments and that party leaders can respond positively or negatively to such dissent.

The first example relates to the parliamentary approval of the evacuation of local support staff by the German military in Afghanistan in August 2021. In anticipation of the withdrawal of US troops, the German government had withdrawn most of its own troops by the summer of 2021. However, the government had failed to evacuate local support staff in time. These were Afghans who had worked for the German military and who faced possible punishment or death at the hands of the Taliban. Caught by surprise by the Taliban's sudden capture of the capital, Kabul, in August 2021, the German government decided to dispatch special forces and set up an airlift to Kabul airport to evacuate as many support staff as possible ahead of a deadline set by the Taliban. On

August 25, 2021, the German government sought retroactive parliamentary approval for this military rescue mission. The decision was approved overwhelmingly in parliament, but the leadership of the far-left party Die Linke recommended to its members that they abstain, stating that the government mandate did not exclude the use of military force by the German military during the rescue mission. One Linke MP and member of the defense committee, Matthias Höhn, voiced his opposition to his party's vote recommendation. He decided to vote for the government mandate and issued a lengthy explanation of his voting decision on Twitter (Höhn 2021). He explained that his approval of the military action was due to his personal conviction that as many lives as possible should be saved. The response of the party leadership was conciliatory. When asked about the party rebellion in an interview with the German public radio station Deutschlandfunk, Dietmar Bartsch, the leader of Die Linke group in the Bundestag, took a placatory tone and stated that there were also many reasons to agree with the government decision (Deutschlandfunk 2021). Thus, the party leadership did not condemn the decision of the rebel in public and, in fact, expressed an understanding for it.

Another case underlines strong negative reactions of a party leadership toward parliamentary rebels. In summer 2015, the German government sought parliamentary approval for a controversial financial bailout package for Greece during the government debt crisis. Several members of the governing Christian Democratic Union (CDU) decided to vote against the deal. One of the rebels, Veronika Bellmann, mentioned in an explanation of her vote that she did not believe that Greece would ever be able to pay back the loans and that the decision for or against a bailout needed to be justified to German citizens, European taxpayers, and future generations (Bellmann 2015). In an interview with the weekly *Welt am Sonntag* on August 9, 2015, the parliamentary group leader of the CDU, Volker Kauder, vehemently condemned the rebels, pointing out the expectation of party discipline and that rebels could no longer serve in relevant committees on the subject, such as the finance committee or the European affairs committee (Die Welt 2015). Bellmann strongly spoke out against this threat and pointed out that sanctions were not part of the standing orders of the parliamentary group. She added that if all naysayers were always sidelined in that way, the CDU/Christian Social Union would soon have a staffing problem (Die Zeit 2015).

These examples highlight that MPs vary in their explanations for rebellion, and party leaders, in their responses to those rebels. The constructed interactions we explore in our survey vignettes are similar to these actual interactions between elected MPs and party leaders, but they also

4. We preregistered the following hypotheses: voters support for rebellion varies with type of explanation, and voters support rebels more when the leadership is more tolerant of it.

demonstrate why it is essential that we examine them in a controlled experimental setting for several reasons. First, explanations by the MP as well as reactions by the parties, on the one hand, and other attributes, for example, policy positions, on the other hand, are often correlated, making it hard to identify those two sets of drivers of voters' approval decisions separately using observational data only. Second, when respondents in our survey are presented with hypothetical scenarios, even though doing so diminishes the significance of their behavior, we can present any reasonable combination of attributes completely eliciting their preferences regarding rebel MPs and parties. Finally, assessing how voters behave in a choice situation that is rare—the evaluation of a rebel—is particularly difficult when building on observational data. Regular, standard population surveys virtually never include direct questions on rebellion but, at most, general approval ratings of a limited set of high-profile politicians, which may not be those that rebel, leaving little leeway to learn about communicating rebel behavior.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We conduct a vignette experiment to explore voters' attitudes toward rebels and their party leaders on nationally representative samples of the electorate in France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. By running the experiment in these four different European democracies, we are able to test the robustness of our results across different contexts and settings. Across countries, MPs may vary in (1) the level of importance that they place on supporting their party (Van Vonna et al. 2014), (2) how much party unity they believe there should be (Willumsen 2017), and (3) the degree of unity that they actually display (Depauw and Martin 2008; Sieberer 2006). Additionally, leaders can vary in how often and how strictly they use the whip (Bailer 2018). These different views and behaviors among political elites could shape how voters respond to explanations of disunity when it occurs. Thus, it is important to determine how voters react across a variety of settings.

The four countries we choose differ in several ways. On roll call votes, France and the United Kingdom have tended to have quite high levels of party unity, while Germany and Italy have experienced somewhat lower levels (see Depauw and Martin 2008). German and British MPs are more likely to say that MPs should vote with their party even when they disagree with the party position than are their French and Italian counterparts (Van Vonna et al. 2014). And UK party leaders are, on average, more willing to use disciplinary measures than are German leaders (Bailer 2018).

These countries also vary institutionally with respect to their electoral systems, which research has suggested may

affect how voters view rebellion (Wagner et al. 2020). In systems that emphasize a personal vote, such as the single-member-district systems of France and the United Kingdom, voters may expect MPs to rebel more and engage in more personalist explanations of rebellion, and they may place greater emphasis on the representation of one particular constituency, rather than society as a whole. They may also expect party leaders to take an accommodating stance toward dissent, regardless of whether they actually do. In systems that prize party loyalty, voters may be more open to party responses that are critical of rebellious MPs. And they may expect MPs, and therefore rebels, to consider society as a whole when engaging in rebellion.⁵

In addition to examining reactions to explanations for rebellion across countries, we examine reactions across several policies. We can thereby gauge policy agreement between voters and the dissenting MPs. Importantly, the vignette design and the definition of issues is identical across countries. This provides for comparable scenarios to investigate the robustness of our experimental results on rebel MP behavior and party leadership communications across democracies and issues.

The vignettes are designed to test how various kinds of communications by an MP or her party leadership about a rebellious vote causally affect voters' attitudes toward the MP and the leadership. The vignettes randomize features of hypothetical MPs, the explanations of their votes, the reaction of their party leadership, the nature of bills concerned, and the implications of the rebellion. To represent rebellion, the MP always votes against her party leadership, who is said to have introduced the bill in parliament. In contrast to studies that explore the impact of rebellion compared with loyalty (Bøggild 2020; Campbell et al. 2019), our study focuses on reactions to explanations of rebellion that can only logically occur after rebellion—rebellion creates the opportunity for communication.

Respondents rate a total of five single-profile vignettes. In each case, they provide their approval of the MP as well as the MP's party leadership. The vignettes correspond to five different substantive bills drawn in random order without replacement. Specifically, the five bills are about (1) removing or establishing environmental regulations for business,

5. Wagner et al. (2020) suggest that voters may appreciate rebellion more as a signal of independence in systems where dissent is more costly. However, it is not immediately clear how more appreciation and support for rebels translates into support for particular explanations for that rebellion. We do not attempt to test theories about the particular effects of different institutions, as we only have four country cases. Instead, by examining effects across countries, we hope to show that our findings have broader applicability.

(2) increasing or decreasing the range of areas in which the European Union can make policy, (3) strengthening or weakening of ties with the European Union, (4) making it easier or harder for foreigners to immigrate, and (5) increasing or decreasing the level of social spending financed by taxation. The substantive direction of the bills is randomized.⁶ To increase the ecological validity of our findings, the bills relate to a diverse set of ideological issues typically salient in European party systems. Our approach allows us to generalize across a large variety of situations in which rebellion can occur in reality, and also discover potential conditioning factors.

Our main stimulus materials are short text vignettes that present information about a vote in parliament. Respondents first read a short introduction: “You will now see five hypothetical situations in which a party’s leadership introduces different bills in Parliament. The bills are either rejected or adopted by Members of Parliament (MPs). One of these MPs is described more in detail. We would like you to think about each situation separately when responding to the questions.” They are given information that includes variation on a list of attributes. Then, the MP offers an explanation for the rebellious vote, and the party leadership provides a reaction. Finally, we elicit outcome measures.

Here, we present one sample version of the text that a respondent might see for one of the five vignettes. Attribute levels, which vary randomly, are displayed here in bold (but they were not in boldface when shown to respondents).

Vignette Example. In Parliament, the leadership of a party that is currently in **government** introduced a bill that **increases social spending by increasing taxes**. The majority of the public was **against** the bill. Think about the following Member of Parliament (MP) that belongs to this party. **She** was **one of several MPs** from **her** party that voted against the bill. **Because of her vote, the bill did not pass**. This is **her third** term in Parliament.

She explained **her** vote in the following way: “**My voters were against this bill. I will always defend my voters’ interests**. So I voted against the bill.”

The leadership of **her** party **criticised her** behaviour and said: “**We should act as a unified party. MPs should be loyal to their party leadership**.”

Table 1 shows all of the attributes and attribute levels that appear in the vignettes.

6. The wording for each bill and its corresponding policy area are shown in table A.1.

To elicit respondents’ agreement with the rebellious politician on an issue, we surveyed their positions on the substantive bills before answering the experimental vignettes. This allows us to investigate whether the effectiveness of rebels’ explanations for their defiant vote is conditional on whether the respondent likes the rebel’s opinion on the bill. As the role of policy proximity for rebel politics is an issue of contention in the literature (e.g., see the discussion in Campbell et al. [2019]), it is important to account for it in our design. However, one problem of eliciting respondents’ policy preferences pretreatment is that this may heighten respondents’ attention to policy congruence, although this arguably emulates contexts outside the survey-experimental setting, where mass communications about rebellion will also put emphasis on the policy substance of a bill. Most importantly, our main interest is in identifying the effects of different MP explanations of rebellious votes. If policy congruence is an important determinant of rebel evaluations, the effect of explanations could be artificially diminished by making policy congruence salient. Hence, our estimates for different explanations may be comparatively conservative as a result of this design choice.

In addition to topic and direction, we control for public opinion toward the bill, whether the MP was supported in her rebellion by other party MPs, as well as whether the MP’s rebellion was consequential for the outcome of the vote. Controlling for these contextual factors is important, as respondents may use rebellion as a cue to make inferences about these factors, which could—at the same time—influence their approval of the MP or the leadership and make some explanations more or less effective and credible. For instance, respondents may assume that rebels vote against the party leadership in order to be responsive to majority opinion. This may not only make them more approving of the rebellious MP but also render an MP’s explanation that she voted against the bill because it was bad for society or not endorsed by voters more effective. By providing information that respondents might otherwise infer, we are able to isolate the effect of explanations marginalizing over a uniform distribution of these attributes (e.g., the effect of claiming voters were against the bill, although overall public opinion was sometimes in favor).⁷

7. We also include the MP’s gender, as this renders the language used in the vignettes more straightforward. Moreover, we include tenure, as much of the literature suggests that this variable affects the likelihood of rebellion (e.g., Benedetto and Hix 2007). We omit partisan labels in our vignettes, as similar studies have done (Franchino and Zucchini 2015; Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014; Neuner and Wratil 2022), because they also pose a significant challenge for experimental designs. In some cases, the shown issue congruence in combination with a particular party membership, for example, a candidate from a conservative party

Table 1. Design of Vignettes: Attributes and Attribute Levels

Attribute	Values	No. of Values
Incumbency	In parliament, the leadership of a party that is currently in [government/opposition] . . .	2
Bill direction	introduced a bill that [increases social spending by increasing taxes/decreases social spending in order to cut taxes/increases the number of areas in which the European Union can make policy/decreases the number of areas in which the European Union can make policy/strengthens [country’s] ties to the European Union/weakens [country’s] ties to the European Union/establishes new environmental regulations, imposing costs on businesses, but helping the fight against climate change/removes existing environmental regulations, helping businesses generate economic growth but hindering the fight against climate change/makes it easier for foreigners to immigrate to [country]/makes it harder for foreigners to immigrate to [country]].	2
Public opinion	The majority of the public was [for/against] the bill.	2
Gender of MP	Think about the following Member of Parliament (MP) that belongs to this party. [She/He] . . .	2
Degree of rebellion	was [one of several MPs/the only MP] from [her/his] party that voted against the bill.	2
Pivotal	[Because of [her/his] vote, the bill did not pass./In spite of [her/his] vote, the bill passed.]	2
MP term	This is [her/his] [first/third] term in Parliament.	2
Rebel explanation	[She/He] explained [her/his] vote in the following way: “[This bill is bad for our society. It only benefits a few./My voters were against this bill. I will always defend my voters’ interests./My party’s leadership has failed to draft a good bill./I personally do not think we should [bill as above]. I cannot cast a vote that goes against my personal convictions./In general, I think we should [bill as above]. But this bill does not go far enough./Many experts are against this bill. I trust what the experts say.] So I voted against this bill.”	6
Leadership response	[The leadership of [her/his] party criticised [her/his] behaviour./The leadership of [her/his] party criticised [her/his] behaviour and said: “You do not get things done if people do not compromise.”/The leadership of [her/his] party criticised [her/his] behaviour and said: “We should be unified for the good of society.”/The leadership of [her/his] party criticised [her/his] behaviour and said: “We should act as a unified party. MPs should be loyal to their party leadership.”/The leadership of [her/his] party welcomed [her/his] behaviour./The leadership of [her/his] party welcomed [her/his] behaviour and said: “We respect [her/his] decision. It is important that different opinions are heard.”]	6

Note. Every respondent saw each bill once in random order. We also randomly assigned the policy direction of each bill.

Below the display of the vignette, we present two outcome measures: (1) an approval rating of the rebelling MP solicited by asking “How much do you approve or disapprove of this MP?” (1 = strongly disapprove, 7 = strongly approve; Approval of MP) and (2) an approval rating of the rebelling MP’s party leadership solicited by asking “How much do you approve or disapprove of this party leadership?” (1 = strongly disapprove, 7 = strongly approve; Approval of leadership).⁸

who strongly disagrees with reducing immigration, will seem unreasonable to the respondent. In this way, the respondent’s preference regarding rebellious MPs’ behavior we elicit would be a biased measure of their true preference given the confusion that such a candidate profile provides.

8. Figure B.2 shows the distribution of our two outcome measures by country.

Linking theory and hypotheses

Table 2 presents each of our hypotheses again and links them to specific empirical tests comparing the average of our outcome measures given different attribute levels that are operationalizations of theoretical concepts referenced in the hypotheses. When respondents express higher support for the MP or the party leadership, respectively, after seeing a particular attribute level, we say that a hypothesis is supported empirically.

Sampling and empirical strategy

Our surveys were implemented on nationally representative samples in France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom by the survey company YouGov. The sample size is 3,500 per country. The vignette experiment is embedded in a larger political attitudes survey, which also includes a second

Table 2. Summary of Empirical Tests for Main Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Empirical Test: Approval Higher For
H1a: Republicanism	“This bill is bad for our society” vs. any other explanation
H1b: Expert appeal	“Many experts are against this bill” vs. any other explanation
H1c: Trustee vs. delegate	“I cannot cast a vote that goes against my personal convictions” vs. “my voters were against this bill”
H1d: Insufficient legislation	Any other explanation vs. “this bill does not go far enough”
H2a, H2b: Welcoming vs. critical	“The leadership of her/his party welcomed” vs. “the leadership of her/his party criticised”

vignette experiment preceding our experiment in the survey flow.⁹

In order to identify the effect of a given attribute on attitudes toward the MP and the MP’s party on the outcome measures, we estimate the marginal mean of a specific attribute category by computing the mean for each outcome measure variable given that the attribute level was shown and marginalizing over all of the other attributes. For example, the marginal mean of the outcome measure approval of a female MP is the value of the outcome measure averaged over all profile realizations with the MP gender set to female. The identification of the marginal mean of the outcome measure for any attribute rests on two assumptions (Hainmueller et al. 2014). First, the potential outcomes must remain stable across choice tasks (i.e., vignettes), and respondents’ choices on earlier tasks should not influence their choice on later tasks (i.e., no carryover effects).¹⁰ Second, the randomization of attribute levels needs to be carried out in such a way that potential outcomes are statistically independent of the vignette assignment (i.e., randomization of the profiles, accomplished by randomization within the survey software).

RESULTS

We begin by examining the results of our experiment for the set of hypotheses regarding the impact of rebel explanations on respondent support for the MP (hypothesis 1). Then we move on to examine the effects of the reaction from the party leadership (hypothesis 2). Finally, we explore whether there are any interactions between MP explanations and leadership reactions. We find that voters’ approval of the rebellious MPs varies substantially with the explanation the MP gives for deviating from the party line, as well as with the reaction of the party leadership. However, exactly how these explanations and reactions matter often depends on whether the respondent and the MP share

a policy stance. The first part of this section examines the results pooled across countries. We then examine robustness with respect to country-level variation. Whenever we report a statistical test, we label the result as *statistically significant* when we are able to reject the null hypothesis at $\alpha = .05$.¹¹

The main results from our vignette experiment are reported in figure 1. In order to focus on our hypotheses, it displays the marginal means for the rebel MP’s explanations for her actions as well as the party leadership’s responses but omits other “control” attributes shown to respondents on the survey vignette.¹² Figure 1 displays the marginal means with respect to both outcomes: the lighter marker indicates the approval of the MP, whereas the darker marker denotes the approval of the party leadership. In line with hypothesis 2, we pool the different forms of how the leadership can respond to the MP, only distinguishing between critical and welcoming responses. Moreover, we separate marginal means by whether the MP and the voter had the same policy position on an issue (i.e., whether the MP voted against a bill liked by the respondent), as we know that this starkly influences the approval of the MP (compare the lighter markers in the right vs. the left panels). On average, the approval of the MP is 4.05 if the MP’s and the respondent’s policy positions differ and 4.54 if they concur; the difference is statistically significant.

Rebel Explanation

We first consider the hypotheses relating to the rebel MP’s approval. Overall, we can see that, in each of the four quadrants in figure 1, rebels fare best with respondents if they

9. A pretest confirmed that the order of the experiments has no substantial effect on the response behavior in our experiment.

10. We test this assumption in app. sec. 1.2 and demonstrate that it holds for our main results.

11. More specifically, whenever we report a significant difference between marginal means, we find a significant coefficient at $\alpha = .05$ on the attribute level of interest in a regression of the outcome measure on all fully factorized attributes, controlling for vignette order and country fixed effects (standard errors clustered at the respondent level); full regression results are shown in app. sec. 2.2.

12. We consider these other attributes in figs. B.3 and B.4. In fig. 1, we denote 95% confidence intervals of the marginal means as horizontal lines. The confidence intervals are based on standard errors of the marginal means clustered at the respondent level.

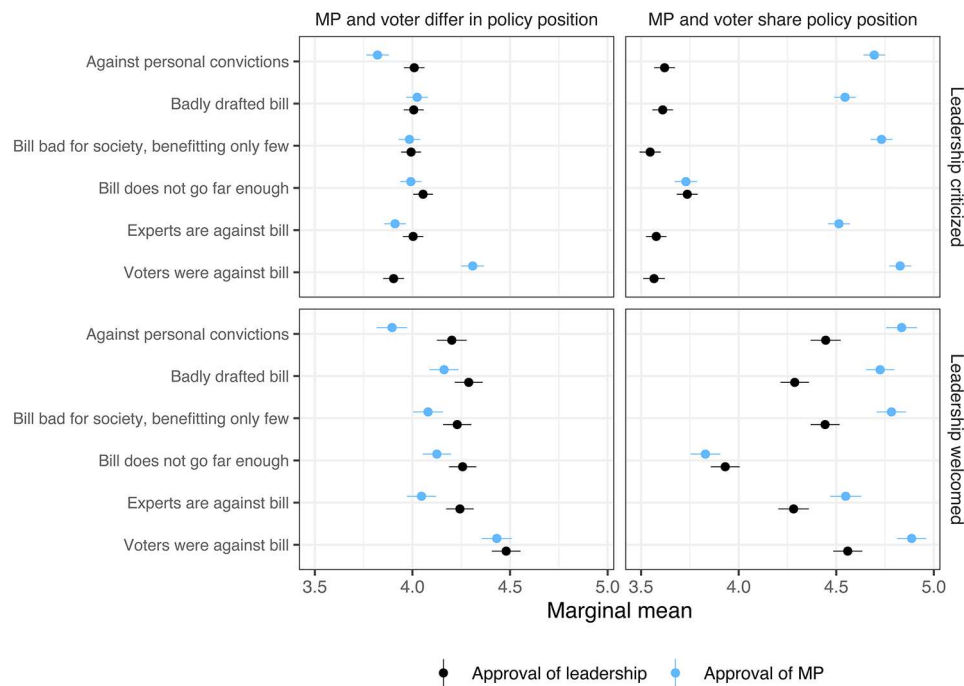


Figure 1. Marginal means of outcome variables approval of MP (lighter markers) and approval of leadership (black markers) by whether the leadership welcomed or criticizes the rebellion, the rebel MP’s explanation for his or her rebellion, and whether the MP and voter share policy positions.

explain their rebellious behavior by alluding to the opposition of their voters. The marginal means of all other attribute levels are lower under all circumstances. However, the lead of “Voters were against bill” vis-à-vis other attribute levels is larger if the MP and the respondent differ in their policy positions (left panels) than if they concur (right panels). If they concur, most other vote explanations also fare relatively well. Only the “Bill does not go far enough” is an exception, with by far the lowest marginal means. If the MP and the voter have different policy positions, the MP gathers the least approval if she claims that the bill was “Against personal convictions”—an explanation that yields powerful support if the MP and the voter share the same position on the policy. Having gained this overview, we next consider evidence for each hypothesis in detail.

First, hypothesis 1a is concerned with whether voters value whether MPs portray themselves as pursuing republican aims in explaining their vote. We focus on “Bill bad for society, benefitting only few” as a clear republican appeal and contrast it with other appeals. The more pluralist appeal of responsiveness (i.e., “Voters were against bill”) yields higher marginal means than the republican appeal in all four scenarios. However, when the MP and the respondent share the same policy position (fig. 1 right panels), the republican appeal to society as a whole fares relatively well. Here it gives higher MP approval than the expert explanation, MP’s claim that the bill is drafted badly, as well as the one of insufficient legislation. Comparing the republican explanation to the most effective

“Voters were against bill” explanation (in the right panels), the significant difference between the marginal means is .10 (when leadership criticized) and .11 (when leadership welcomed the behavior of the MP), whereas it is statistically significant at .36 and .32, respectively, when the respondent disliked the expressed policy position of the MP (in the left panels). When the MP and respondent do not share the same policy position, the explanation “Bill bad for society, benefitting only few” only outperforms explanations pointing to MP’s personal convictions and loses out substantially against the appeal stressing responsiveness to voters.

Similar to the appeal to the trustee model of representation (see below), this reveals that the appeal of republican justifications may be partially conditional on substantive policy agreement with the rebel MP. For those parts of the public that agree with the rebel on policy, stressing republican aims is a comparatively effective explanation for the rebel to improve her approval, but it is not with those parts of the public that disagree with the rebel on policy.

Second, we consider the appeal of vote explanations that rely on expert opinion on a bill (hypothesis 1b). Specifically, we compare the “Experts are against bill” explanation against all other explanations. We find a very limited appeal of this explanation to voters, on average. In all four quadrants in figure 1 the reference to expert opinion yields the second lowest marginal means of all explanations. If the respondent’s and the MP’s positions differ, only the trustee

appeal to the bill being “Against personal convictions” fares worse, and if the MP rebels in line with the respondent’s opinion, only the “Bill does not go far enough” explanation leads to even less approval of the rebel. Hence, we find little evidence that technocratic appeals are effective in maintaining a rebel MP’s standing with the public.¹³

Third, hypothesis 1c stipulates that voters will differ in their approval of a rebel MP depending on whether the MP uses the “Against personal convictions” explanation related to a trustee model of representation or the “Voters were against bill” explanation signaling a delegate relationship. We find that when MPs vote against a bill liked by the respondents (fig. 1 left panels), they always attain a better standing with the respondent if they explain their vote in terms of a delegate as opposed to a trustee role, irrespective of how the party leadership reacts to the explanation. In the case of the leadership criticizing the MP, the marginal means are 3.82 (“Against personal convictions”) versus 4.31 (“Voters were against bill”), a statistically significant difference of .49. If the leadership welcomed the behavior of the MP, the same figures are 3.90 versus 4.43, respectively, yielding a statistically significant difference of .53. Hence, voters prefer delegate over trustee explanations of rebellious behavior if they disagree with the MP’s position on substance. The picture changes if we consider situations in which respondents share the rebel MP’s policy position (right panels). The reaction of the leadership still plays little role, but the difference in marginal means between the two explanations almost entirely vanishes. The difference is statistically significant when the leadership criticizes (4.69 vs. 4.83) but not when the leadership welcomes (4.83 vs. 4.89). This highlights that trustee explanations for rebel votes only garner approval among the part of the electorate that agrees with the rebel on substance but are strongly rejected among those that disagree with the rebel (see the similar result on the republican explanation above). In turn, delegate explanations have rather universal appeal, suggesting that people are swayed by the idea of MPs being responsive to voters, irrespective of their own position.

13. Voters may also interpret the explanation of a “Badly drafted bill” as a technocratic explanation. They might assume that the rebel MP has sympathies for the substantive content of the bill but voted against it because of a technocratic problem with the bill. In this interpretation, the explanation may not imply policy congruence as suggested. Nevertheless, we do not think that this interpretation is dominant among respondents. The difference in marginal means in the top-right and top-left panels of fig. 1 is much larger than the differences within the panels across attributes levels, which suggests that even if some respondents use this technocratic interpretation, the more influential associations triggered by the “Badly drafted bill” attribute level in respondents are linked to policy congruence.

Fourth, we also test whether voters prefer rebel MPs who claim to truly represent their substantive interests by fighting against legislation that is not going far enough (hypothesis 1d). We find that the “Bill does not go far enough” level yields the lowest approval of the MP among all attributes if the MP and the voter share the same policy position (right panels in fig. 1). It is associated with middling levels of approval if the MP and the voter differ in their policy position. In all cases, rebels gather significantly lower support with this vote explanation than if they claim to be responsive delegates that just implement the voters’ will. This powerfully illustrates that voters—on average—do not value MPs who try to fight for more extreme policy changes in their desired direction, and it raises questions about why some MPs in reality use such vote explanations. By claiming that the bill was not sufficiently far-reaching in the desired ideological direction, the MP suggests that she may better judge whether the bill is in the “true” interests of the voters, a view not appreciated by the voter.

We summarize our findings on how rebel explanations affect approval in the following result:

Result 1. Voters approve of rebels the most when rebels explain their behavior in terms of being a good delegate, responsive to voters’ opinions. Rebels are also relatively highly appreciated for republican and trustee-like explanations when the MP and the voter share policy positions but not if they disagree. Explanations that feature expert advice or insufficient legislation as a justification for the rebel MP’s actions do not boost rebel approval.

Party Leadership Reaction

Next we consider hypothesis 2a, which claims that the party leadership will fare better with voters if it welcomes rather than criticizes the rebel MP’s behavior. Voters’ approval of the party leadership (darker markers in fig. 1) follows a clear-cut pattern: voters indeed like the party leadership significantly more when it welcomes the rebel’s behavior. This is true across the board, regardless of the explanation that the rebel gives for deviating from the party line (compare marginal means in left and right upper vs. lower quadrants). In particular, averaging over all rebel explanations and whether the rebel’s act is in line with or opposes voters’ policy preference, the marginal mean of party leadership approval is 4.31 when it welcomed the MP’s rebellion but only 3.80 when it criticized the dissent.

It is worth noting that the leadership receives a significantly higher boost in support from welcoming rebellion when the rebellious MP and the voter share a policy stance.

Criticizing a rebel whose policy stance is supported by a significant part of the public or her own voters is therefore particularly damaging for the leadership. But even if the voter disagrees with the policy position of the MP, the leadership still receives a slight boost by welcoming the dissent, suggesting that voters are looking for “big tent” appeals. Ostracizing those with deviant opinions, even if they may find very little support among voters, is still a liability for the leadership with voters. The dominant strategy for the party leadership—when only considering their public standing in the short run—is clearly endorsement of the rebel’s behavior.

With respect to the leadership’s response on approval for the rebel MP (hypothesis 2b), we find a smaller bump of a welcoming message than on the approval of the leadership itself. The statistically significant differences in marginal mean of MP approval between a tolerant and a critical leadership is .12 when voter and MP differ in their policy position and 0.10 when they concur in preferences.

Our second main finding is thus as follows:

Result 2. The party leadership strongly benefits from welcoming instead of criticizing rebellious votes; the rebellious MP, to a lesser degree.

Robustness and additional analyses

Our results are robust to particular choices we made in our survey and experimental design as well as to country-level variation. We further note that the welcoming and criticizing responses by the party leadership influence the effect of the rebels’ explanations on MP and leadership approval. When the leadership welcomes the rebellion, the variance in the marginal means for different rebel explanations (both for MP and leadership approval) is larger.

Given that we elicit respondents’ policy positions before the experimental vignette, we may have primed them to pay more attention to policy congruence than they normally would. However, we do not find differences in our results conditional on the salience that respondents ascribe to a policy issue, which would indicate that more attention to particular policy positions affects estimates (see fig. B.5). Further, even though we omitted party labels in our vignettes, respondents may still infer partisanship of the MP from other attributes. Yet, we find no substantial deviations in results conditional on respondents’ reported partisanship, which suggests that the influence of partisanship on the effectiveness of rebel explanations should be limited.¹⁴

Figure 1 also reveals that in some instances, contingent on explanation and policy position, support for the rebel is moderately higher when the party leadership welcomes dissent rather than criticizes it. Among voters who share the policy position of the dissenting MP, support for MPs rises when the leadership welcomes their dissent if they explain dissent in terms of their own personal convictions or they accuse the party leadership of poorly drafting the bill. This is also true for MPs using the “Badly drafted bill” explanation even among voters who take a different policy stance. In other words, the leadership’s decision to welcome rebellion can reinforce the appeal of MPs in some circumstances. In these circumstances, the leadership may face a trade-off. They may wish to increase their own appeal by being accepting of dissent, but that may further increase support for the rebel. If they place higher value on dissuading rebellion, above and beyond garnering support for themselves, welcoming dissent may be counterproductive in these instances.

There appear to be fewer instances in which the explanation of the MP affects voter support for the leadership. The most notable instance of this type of interaction occurs among voters who disagree with the policy stance of the rebellious MP. When MPs explain their defection in terms of voters being against the bill, these voters dislike critical leaders somewhat more compared with when the MP uses other explanations. Similarly, the same voters like leaders more who welcome the MP’s dissent explained in terms of voters’ interests compared with other explanations the MP might give. But, when thinking solely of voters’ support for the leadership, the leadership is always better off by welcoming dissent rather than criticizing it.

By and large, our country-specific results reveal a high consistency and robustness of effects to contextual factors. In all countries, the delegate explanation that “Voters were against the bill” creates either the highest or one of the highest levels of approval of the MP irrespective of whether the leadership welcomes or criticizes the behavior. The trustee explanation that a bill was “Against personal convictions” also works relatively well with voters who agree with the MP on the bill’s substance and poorly with those who do not share the MP’s policy position. Further, in each country, we find that—no matter the vote explanation used by the rebel—the leadership can improve its standing with the public by welcoming the MP’s rebellious behavior. This holds in all countries for almost all vote explanations irrespective of whether the voter and the MP agree in their policy positions.¹⁵ We also find that the leadership’s boost from

14. See fig. B.6 for explanation and results of this robustness check.

15. To be precise, the effect of welcoming the rebel’s actions by the leadership over criticizing is strictly positive for all explanations and

welcoming the behavior of the MP is significantly stronger if the MP and the rebel have the same policy position—in all countries.¹⁶ This suggests that how voters process and evaluate rebellious behavior may be highly universal.

Some country variation arises nevertheless. UK respondents rate MPs particularly negatively when they disagree with the MP on policy and the MP uses the “Against personal convictions” explanation in justifying rebellion. This may indicate that UK voters care more about substantive representation by MPs and may be especially unwilling to approve of MPs that deviate from this form, compared to voters in other countries.

We also find that the effect of congruence between the policy positions of the MP and the respondent on the MP’s approval rating is largest in the United Kingdom overall. Marginalizing over all combinations of policy congruence and party leadership response, the approval is .66 significantly higher if the MP shares the respondents position than when she does not in the United Kingdom, but that statistically significant difference is only .54, .38, and .34 in Germany, Italy, and France, respectively. This is again indicative of the possibility that UK respondents care more about substantive representation than do respondents in other countries.

A final notable difference across countries relates to the average approval of leaderships who criticize: the leaderships who criticize rebellious behavior by MPs are liked more in Italy than anywhere else. At the same time, if the leadership welcomes the behavior of MPs (lower quadrants of fig. 1), the estimates from the Italian sample are close to those from the other countries, suggesting that the first effect is not the result of differential item functioning. Instead, it suggests that acts to enforce party discipline are received more positively by Italian voters than others.

CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated that how MPs explain rebellion and how party leaders react to it has significant implications for voter support, even once we account for substantive policy congruence between the rebel’s, the party leader’s, and the

voter’s views. Although much research has demonstrated that voters value rebellion, understanding how voters react to particular messaging around rebellion has not been explored systematically. In parliamentary systems, where party unity is often prized, it is important to understand how MPs and party leaders leverage rebellion to their advantage. Our research provides insights into how messaging affects voter support for MPs and leaders and, thereby, into the type of representation that voters value most as well as the incentives that MPs and leaders face when selling or reacting to intraparty dissent.

We find that voter support for trustee representation in the face of rebellion is highly contingent on whether the voter shares the policy position of the MP. Although voters often express a desire for independent-minded MPs who stand up for personal beliefs, in practice, voters only support these types of vote explanations when they agree with the underlying policy content. When voters agree with the MP, they are highly supportive of MPs who couch their rebellion in terms of their own personal convictions. However, if they disagree, voters are more supportive of rebels who explain the vote as following the will of the their voters, in other words, stressing responsiveness and pluralist aims. Indeed, from the rebels’ perspective, appeals to a delegate-style representative relationship can secure relatively high approval ratings not only with voters sharing their policy positions but also with those disagreeing with them. This result holds in all countries irrespective of the party leadership’s actions. Moreover, it suggests that voters may not only like rebels because they infer valence characteristics (e.g., independence, integrity, trustworthiness) from rebellious behavior (Campbell et al. 2019; Kam 2009), but they may also appreciate that many rebels portray themselves as defenders of the delegate principle of responsiveness.

In turn, party leaders can increase voters’ support of the leadership by welcoming instead of ostracizing dissent. However, welcoming dissent also brings with it the danger of increasing support for dissident MPs in some situations, and it may cause problems for the leadership to keep the party unified in the long run. Party leaders face a trade-off between increasing support for themselves and potentially encouraging more dissent by making it relatively more attractive to their MPs. Our results provide important evidence for why parties tolerate some level of rebellious behavior—despite all negative electoral consequences of infighting in the long run (Ferrara and Weishaupt 2004; Greene and Haber 2015; Kam 2009). In the short run, party leaders benefit from accommodation.

Across four European democracies, our results show that communication greatly affects how dissent influences representation. Our results suggest that research must pay more

countries (except for one explanation in Italy where it is zero). It is also statistically significant for all explanations in Germany, for all but one in France (exception: “Bill does not go far enough” when rebel MP and voter differ in policy position), for all but one in the United Kingdom (exception: “Against personal convictions” when MP and voter differ in policy position), and for seven out of 12 in Italy.

16. Figures B.7 and B.8 plot the marginal means for the approval of the rebel MP and of the party leadership for all four countries separately.

attention to how MPs and party leaders explain dissent to the public. Such work could employ MP explanations or party reaction strategies different from those in our study or attempt to replicate our findings with alternative methodologies. For instance, one could be concerned that voters do not react in the same way to real-world media reports as they do to our vignettes. We have shown through our earlier examples that politicians often present rebellion in a similar manner, and media provide similar information, to the descriptions we offer in our vignettes. Similarly, existing studies, while not directly examining voter reactions to explanations for rebellion, suggest that MPs think that voters likely care about explanations for their behavior (Bhattacharya and Papageorgiou 2019; Sieberer 2015; Zittel and Nyhuis 2019). Nevertheless, this can only provide circumstantial evidence for the external validity of our findings. Hence, future work should be encouraged to validate our findings using other methodological approaches that promise higher external validity, such as field experiments (e.g., randomizing the display of certain articles about rebellion to consumers of online media).

Finally, it is possible that the findings here apply to all communication between MPs and voters, not only to communication about decisions to vote against one's party. Our current design cannot speak to this possibility because, in contrast to previous work on voter support for rebellion (e.g., Campbell et al. 2019), all of our vignettes are about instances of rebellion. We focus on cases of rebellion to accurately capture occasions when MPs need to communicate explanations of votes to their voters. MPs must have a reason to communicate individual positions to voters, and voters need a reason to pay attention to them. This happens when there is internal disagreement within the party. If MPs agree with their party, they can easily let the party speak for them. In fact, rebellion provides an opportunity for MPs to speak to a broader public about their policy views. Because of our focus, we are able to present a diverse set of explanations for MP behavior and explicitly link them to the rebellious vote—an act that requires explanation. Additionally, our focus on rebellion allows us to incorporate the party leadership's response to the rebellious behavior to account for elite competition in the public sphere. For these reasons we pay special attention to how parties and leaders communicate this rift.

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