

# **Does Government Support Respond to Governments' Social Welfare Rhetoric or their Spending? An Analysis of Government Support in Britain, Spain, and the United States**

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## **Abstract**

Issue ownership theory posits that when social welfare is electorally salient, left-wing parties gain public support by rhetorically emphasizing social welfare issues. There is less research, however, on whether left-wing governing parties benefit from increasing social welfare spending, i.e., we do not know whether leftist governments gain from acting on the issues they rhetorically emphasize. We present arguments that voters will not react to governments' social welfare rhetoric, and we also review the conflicting arguments about how government support responds to social welfare spending. We then report time-series, cross-sectional analyses of data on government support, governments' social welfare rhetoric and social welfare spending from Britain, Spain, and the United States, that support our prediction of no effects from government rhetoric. We estimate, however, that increased social welfare spending sharply depresses support for both left- and right-wing governments. Our findings identify a strategic dilemma for left-wing governments, who lose public support when they act on their social welfare rhetoric by actually increasing welfare spending.

This paper builds on the debate about voters' reactions to what parties say compared to what parties actually do when in government. Research by Fernandez-Vazquez (2014a, 2014b) and Adams et al. 2011, 2014) finds that citizens do not significantly update their perceptions of parties' issue positions in response to parties' policy statements, whereas Fortunato and Stevenson (2013) present remarkable research that citizens do respond to parties' concrete actions – namely, their decisions to participate in a governing coalition – by updating their perceptions of parties' policy positions.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Soroka and Wlezien (2010) find that citizens react to governing parties' budgetary allocations – another form of concrete action – by thermostatically adjusting their own spending preferences. This research suggests that voters react to governments' deeds, not their words.

At the same time, issue ownership theory posits that parties use rhetoric to direct citizens' attention towards issues the party "owns," in the sense that the party has developed a long-term reputation for competently handling these issues. In particular, the theory posits that mainstream left-wing parties – long-term advocates of the welfare state – enjoy positive reputations for administering government programs pertaining to public health, unemployment insurance, family assistance, old-age pensions, and public housing, so that voters who prioritize these issues tend to support leftist parties because voters trust them to competently address these domains (e.g., Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Green and Jennings 2012). This implies that mainstream leftist parties benefit from emphasizing social welfare issues, because this emphasis increases the public salience of the issues these parties own.<sup>2</sup>

To date, we are unaware of studies that jointly consider how governing party support responds

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<sup>1</sup> In particular, Fortunato and Stevenson (2013) demonstrate that citizens infer that coalition partners' issue positions are more similar than is implied by the policy tone of their election manifestos.

<sup>2</sup> An exception to this generalization may occur when some domestic or international crisis (such as a terrorist attack) overshadows social welfare issues.

to governments' rhetoric versus their concrete actions. That is what we present here. We argue that because governing parties – unlike opposition parties – are in position to enact policies, citizens prioritize governments' deeds over their words, so that – *contra* issue ownership theory – governing parties' support does not respond to their rhetorical issue emphases – the No Rhetorical Effects Hypothesis. We also review the conflicting arguments on how party support responds to governments' concrete actions with respect to social welfare spending. We then present time-series, cross-sectional analyses of data on government support, government rhetoric (in executive speeches) and government spending (from OECD data) from Britain, Spain, and the United States, that support our No Rhetorical Effects Hypothesis. However our analyses identify strong negative effects of social welfare spending on government support, for both left- and right-wing governments.

Our findings pertain to governing parties' electoral strategies and to mass-elite linkages. Our finding that leftist governments – in common with right-wing governments – are punished for social welfare spending pertains to the well-known “costs of governing”, i.e., governments' tendencies to lose public support over time (e.g., Rose and Mackie 1983; Paldam 1991). Scholars have identified diverse factors that contribute to the costs of governing, including competence (e.g., Green and Jennings 2012), performance in office (e.g., Sigelman and Kathleen 1983), and real world conditions pertaining to the economy or war (e.g., Kernell 1978; Powell and Whitten 1993). To these considerations we add a new factor pertaining to left-wing governments: namely, that the budgeting strategy that optimizes leftist governments' short-term support – which is to cut social welfare spending – is impractical in the long term. Not only do leftist governing elites plausibly sincerely support social welfare spending – so that cutting such spending depresses their policy-based utilities (e.g., Strom 1990) – but in the long run governing parties that renege on their policy pledges may undermine their credibility with the public, and alienate their core supporters (e.g., Przeworski and Sprague 1986). In this sense, leftist governments may be “prisoners of their ideologies” (Adams et al. 2006), in that the long-term imperative to

faithfully act on their social welfare rhetoric undermines their short-term political support. This finding suggests yet another dilemma for social democratic parties in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as they confront strategic incentives to adapt their political messages and construct new electoral coalitions (Kitschelt 1994).

In future research we hope to extend our study to additional issue areas where government action is not defined primarily in terms of spending levels – such as environmental and multicultural issues – and also to the issue areas “owned” by the mainstream right, notably crime and defence. For now, our analyses of the social welfare issues associated with the mainstream left suggest that the mass public responds to governments’ actions, not their words.

### **How Public Support Responds to Governments’ Policy Rhetoric and to their Actual Budget Allocations: Hypotheses on the Costs of Governing**

The “cost of governing” phenomenon (Paldam 1991), whereby governing parties tend to lose support over time, has generated an extensive literature which has developed three well-known explanations. The “pendulum swing” model (Rose and Mackie 1983) argues that parties gain governing status in part due to short-term factors such as economic conditions, political crises, and scandals, that propel these parties to positive electoral outcomes that help them capture the government, but because these forces recede over time (a form of regression to the mean) governing parties tend to lose popular support as time passes. A second model, known as the ‘unpopularity’ model, predicts that the more unpopular the government before elections the more likely it will be replaced at the next election (Rose and Mackie 1983) and can be compared to the political business cycle (Palmer and Whitten 2000). A third model is expectation/disillusion theory (Stimson 1976; Sigelman and Kathleen 1983), that governments lose support because they fail to meet expectations they raised during the election campaign.

We extend the costs of governing literature to consider how government support jointly responds to what governments say, via their issue rhetoric, versus what governments actually do via their

budgetary allocations. We address this question in the context of social welfare issues, first because social welfare is the core competency of mainstream leftist parties, second because – as discussed below – we have more reliable data on government spending (and rhetoric) in this domain than in domains associated with the right, such as crime and national defence. However we compare the expected effects of social welfare rhetoric and spending on left- versus right-wing governments.

### *How voters (do not) react to government speech: The No Rhetorical Effects Hypothesis*

We first consider how citizens respond to governments' policy rhetoric. With respect to this question, issue ownership theory posits that parties compete by emphasizing the issue domains they "own," in the sense that voters associate a focal party with particular issues they believe the party can competently address (e.g., Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Green and Hobolt 2008). In particular, the theory posits that mainstream, center-right parties, notably conservative and Christian Democratic parties, enjoy public images for competence on issues pertaining to crime, national defense, and (arguably) immigration, whereas mainstream leftist parties, such as labor and social democratic parties, enjoy superior images for managing social welfare domains including healthcare, public housing, family assistance, unemployment, and old age pensions.<sup>3</sup> Issue ownership theory implies that parties benefit when the issues they own increase in public salience, so that parties have electoral incentives to emphasize their core issues in order to direct voters' attention to these domains. Indeed, empirical research by Hobolt et al. (2009) documents that political parties' policy rhetoric influences citizens' issue priorities. And, extensive research documents that political parties emphasize their core issues (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Walgrave et al. 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> We note that niche parties of the left and right are associated with different issue areas, in particular green parties enjoy positive images with respect to environment issues while radical right parties are associated with issues pertaining to nationalism and immigration (Wagner and Meyer 2014).

At the same time, alternative considerations cast doubt on whether political parties – especially governing parties – can cue public issue priorities via their rhetoric, independently of their actual policy outputs. Citizens plausibly discount government rhetoric versus governments’ actual deeds, because actions speak louder than words. In particular, citizens may reasonably treat governments’ budgetary allocations as “revealed preferences” that disclose the government’s actual priorities, while dismissing government rhetoric as “cheap talk” when it is not matched by action. In this regard, remarkable research by Epp et al. (2014) documents surprising inconsistencies between governing parties’ long-term rhetorical emphases and their actual budgets, in particular that governing parties’ ideologies – left versus right – do not always predict their budgetary allocations, even in issue domains strongly associated with the left (such as social welfare spending) or the right (such as national defense). Citizens who recognize this pattern may discount governing parties’ rhetoric even while they continue to weigh opposition parties’ rhetoric, since opposition parties exert little influence on government policy and thus have no track record of recent actions. Consistent with this expectation, Fernandez-Vazquez and Sommer-Topcu (2015) document that voters update their perceptions of opposition parties’ policy positions – but not governing parties’ positions – in response to parties’ policy rhetoric.

The second reason why voters may discount governments’ policy rhetoric is that opposition parties frequently undercut this rhetoric by publicly questioning its sincerity. At times this opposition strategy is retrospective, and involves highlighting government policies that do not match its promises. For instance in November 2010 – just six months after the May 2010 election that relegated the British Labour Party to opposition status – Labour leader Ed Miliband publicly attacked the Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron for destroying trust in government by leading “a government of broken promises” with respect to its spending on child benefits and university tuition fees.<sup>4</sup> At other times the

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<sup>4</sup> *The Guardian*, November 3, 2010.

opposition prospectively charges that the government’s rhetoric is driven by political opportunism, not principle.<sup>5</sup> And of course voters may draw this cynical inference without prompting from opposition parties. In this regard, Fernandez-Vazquez (2014b) documents that voters discount parties’ claims to have shifted towards publicly popular policy positions, because voters recognize that parties – regardless of their actual policy intentions – have electoral motivations to announce popular positions.

The considerations outlined above motivate our No Rhetorical Effects Hypothesis, that government support does not respond to the issues governments emphasize in their political rhetoric.

#### *How voters react to government spending: Conflicting arguments and no clear prediction*

In contrast to the prediction that voters discount government rhetoric, theoretical considerations offer conflicting predictions about the effects of government spending. In particular, there are arguments that voters will not respond to government spending; arguments that voters will reward increased social welfare spending; and alternative arguments that voters will punish increased welfare spending. The argument that citizens will not react to social welfare spending is that voters are “motivated reasoners” whose partisan loyalties distort their perceptions of government spending to conform to their pre-existing policy preferences, i.e., citizens who support (oppose) the government for other reasons perceive that government budgets match (diverge from) these supporters’ spending preferences, regardless of the facts. In this regard, Bartels (2002) shows that partisanship notably skewed American citizens’ retrospective perceptions of the Reagan administration’s budget allocations. We note that the “percep-

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<sup>5</sup> For instance in March 2015, Labour leader Ed Miliband attacked Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne’s discussion of the government’s budget, asserting “Never has the gap between the Chancellor’s rhetoric and the reality of peoples’ lives been greater than it was today...This is a budget people won’t believe from a government that is not on their side” (*The Independent*, March 18, 2015).

tual screen” that partisanship exerts on perceived government spending is part of a wider phenomenon, whereby partisanship also influences citizens’ perceptions of the economy (Pickup and Evans 2013). And while one might expect political independents to form more impartial estimates of government spending levels, extensive research documents that non-aligned voters display lower levels of political interest and awareness than committed partisans (Dalton 2013), so that the constituency best suited to impartially assess government spending is also the least likely to acquire this information.

Conversely, alternative arguments imply that citizens will respond to social welfare spending, but these arguments have conflicting implications about the direction of this effect – positive or negative – and moreover some arguments have conflicting implications for left- versus right-wing governments. With respect to considerations that apply to all governments, a reason to expect increased social welfare spending to enhance government support is that large public majorities in most western democracies support social welfare programs, in particular citizens who support increased social welfare spending substantially outnumber those who prefer reduced welfare spending (Schumacher et al. 2013). Conversely, survey research also establishes that sizable majorities in western democracies support cutting overall government spending (Schumacher et al. 2013). These conflicting public preferences yield no clear prediction on how social welfare spending affects government support.

With respect to left-wing governments, an argument that increased social welfare spending enhances support is that such spending conforms to leftist parties’ long-term policy emphases on social welfare, thereby enhancing the leftist government’s image for credibility and reliability. Second, and related, Adams et al. (2014) document that while the public is not generally attentive to party policy behaviour, parties’ core supporters do closely monitor their preferred party’s actions. Since leftist parties’ core supporters tend to strongly support social welfare spending (Dalton 2013), this implies that the segment of the public most likely to perceive that a left-wing government has increased social welfare spending is the constituency that most approves this spending increase.

Conversely, alternative considerations imply that leftist governments are punished for increased social welfare spending. First, Soroka and Wlezien (2010) document that citizens respond “thermodynamically” to government spending by decreasing (increasing) their spending preferences in policy domains when the government spends more (less). This implies that increased social welfare spending depresses citizens’ desire for additional welfare spending, which should depress public support for left-wing governing parties whose long-term images are associated with the welfare state. Second, Adams (2015) argues that citizens perceive governments that spend more on social welfare as more left-wing, independently of these governments’ policy rhetoric. This implies that increased welfare spending radicalizes leftist governments’ policy images, i.e., it shifts the government’s image farther to the left, away from the moderate swing voters whose support is crucial for winning elections. Indeed Ezrow (2005) demonstrates that leftist parties in Europe lose support as their Left-Right images radicalize.

With respect to right-wing governments, theoretical considerations again point in conflicting directions. First, because increasing social welfare spending clashes with right-wing parties’ long-term reputations, increased welfare spending may undermine right-wing governments’ public images for credibility and thereby depresses their support. Second, Adams et al.’s (2014) finding that parties’ core supporters disproportionately monitor their preferred party’s actions, referenced above, implies that the constituency most likely to perceive that a right-wing government has increased social welfare spending is the right-wing government’s core supporters, who will mostly disapprove this policy. Conversely, to the extent that voters use social welfare spending to infer governing parties’ Left-Right ideologies (Adams 2015), increased welfare spending shifts governing parties’ policy images to the left, which for right-wing governing parties entails an image shift in the direction of centrist voters, thereby enhancing government support among this crucial electoral bloc.

In toto, we believe theoretical arguments cannot adjudicate the issue of how social welfare spending affects aggregate government support, in that there are reasons to project that citizens will not

react to government spending; other reasons to expect voters to reward increased social welfare spending; and still other reasons to expect citizens to punish increased welfare spending. For this reason we turn to empirical analyses in order to parse out this issue, and also to evaluate our No Rhetorical Effects Hypothesis, that governments' social welfare rhetoric does not affect their support.

## **Data, Measurement, and Case Selection**

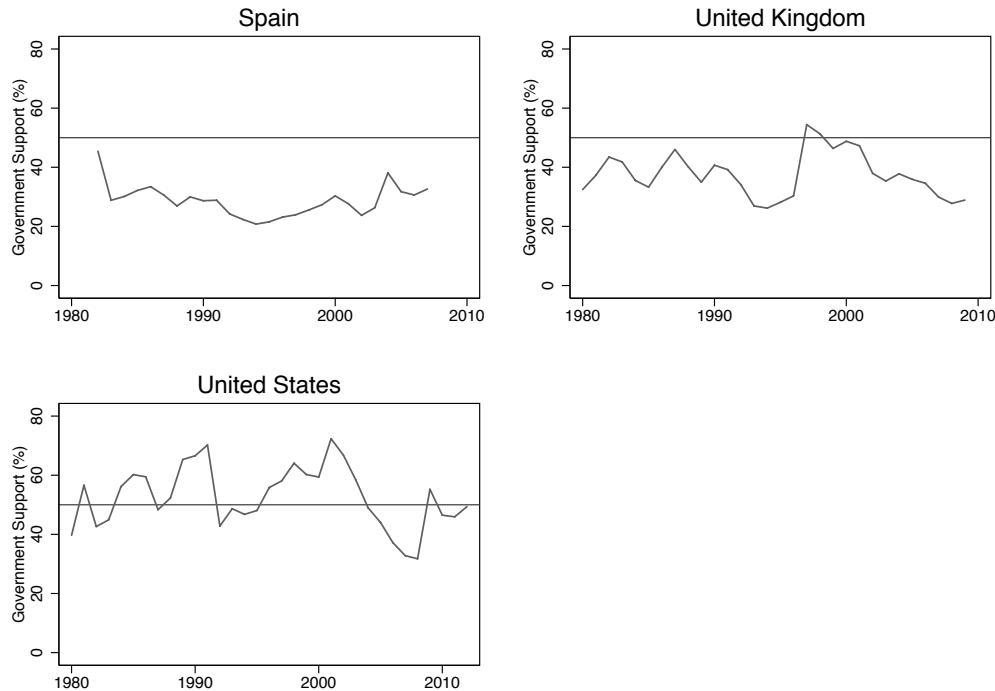
We analyse our research questions using time-series, cross-sectional data on government support, governments' social welfare rhetoric, and their social welfare spending from three advanced democracies: Spain from 1982-2007, the UK from 1980-2009, and the United States from 1980-2012. (Below we discuss the practical and theoretical rationales that determined our choice of countries and time periods.) Our dependent variable is government support, measured through survey data on vote intentions for Spain and the UK, and presidential approval for the US.<sup>6</sup> Such measures are widely used in studies on government support (e.g., Stimson 1976; Green and Jennings 2014; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008). Unlike other measures of party support – such as citizens' reported propensities to vote (e.g., Tillie 1995) – that are more static over time and are based on pre-election surveys, vote intentions are available at least on a yearly basis, allowing us to analyse government support dynamically. For Spain and Britain, government support in the current year is defined as the proportion of survey respondents over all respondents who expressed the intention to vote for a governing party (both countries featured single-party governments during the time period of our study), averaged over all surveys conducted between the time of the current government's executive speech (discussed below) and the previous year's speech; for the US, government support is the proportion of respondents who expressed approval of the

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<sup>6</sup> Spanish data are collected from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) Barometer, the UK data have been kindly provided by Will Jennings (Wlezien et al. 2013; Green and Jennings 2012), and the US data are from Gallup polls.

president's job performance, again averaged over all presidential approval polls conducted between the time of the president's previous State of the Union speech and his current speech. Figure 1 displays the evolution of government support in Britain, Spain, and the United States, according to these measures.

**Figure 1. The Evolution of Government Support in Britain, Spain, and the US**



Notes. The figures display the proportion of survey respondents who expressed the intention to vote for a governing party (in Britain and Spain) or who expressed approval of the President's job performance (in the United States).

To measure governments' social welfare rhetoric we analyze data on executive speeches from the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP). CAP extends comparatively the Policy Agendas Project, which Bryan Jones and Frank Baumgartner initiated in the United States. CAP collects data on governments' issue agendas in different venues (i.e., party manifestos, executive speeches, parliamentary questions, bills, laws, expenditures, and media coverage). Executive speeches are delivered annually by the head

of state or the head of government, and are formal statements that set out the government's agenda for the year ahead (Jennings et al. 2011). Unlike other sources of party promises, such as election manifestos, executive speeches are available yearly and communicate the government's general priorities as well as more specific measures that it plans to address. These speeches are costly signals that 'create future potential costs for the government, if the priorities in the speech are not followed by policy outputs' (Bevan et al. 2011). Indeed, previous studies document the translation of governments' policy agendas into legislative outputs in the United States (Edwards and Wood 1999) and Britain (Bara 2005; Bevan et al. 2011) and, moreover, comparative research documents that executive speeches reflect the issues governing parties emphasize in other venues (such as party manifestos), suggesting that these speeches are reasonable proxies for the government's more general rhetorical emphases (Green-Pedersen et al. 2015). Similar to the Comparative Manifestos Project's codings of party manifestos (Budge et al. 2001), the CAP coding scheme takes the quasi-sentences in executive speeches as the unit of analysis, with each quasi-sentence assigned a single topic code. We focus on social welfare issues in four CAP Major Topics: Health (3), Labour and Employment (5), Welfare (13) and Housing (14). Specifically, our measure of government social welfare rhetoric in the current year, [*government welfare speech (t)*], is the sum of the proportions of quasi-sentences in the executive speech that CAP codes into these categories.

We measure governments' social welfare spending in the current year, [*government welfare spending (t)*], as government spending as a percentage of GDP summed over four categories: Health, Active Labour Market Programs and Unemployment, Welfare, and Housing.<sup>7</sup> Government spending is

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<sup>7</sup> For spending data we rely on the OECD Social Expenditure Database. The "Welfare" category includes the subcategories old age, survivors, pensions, incapacity related, family, and other social policy areas.

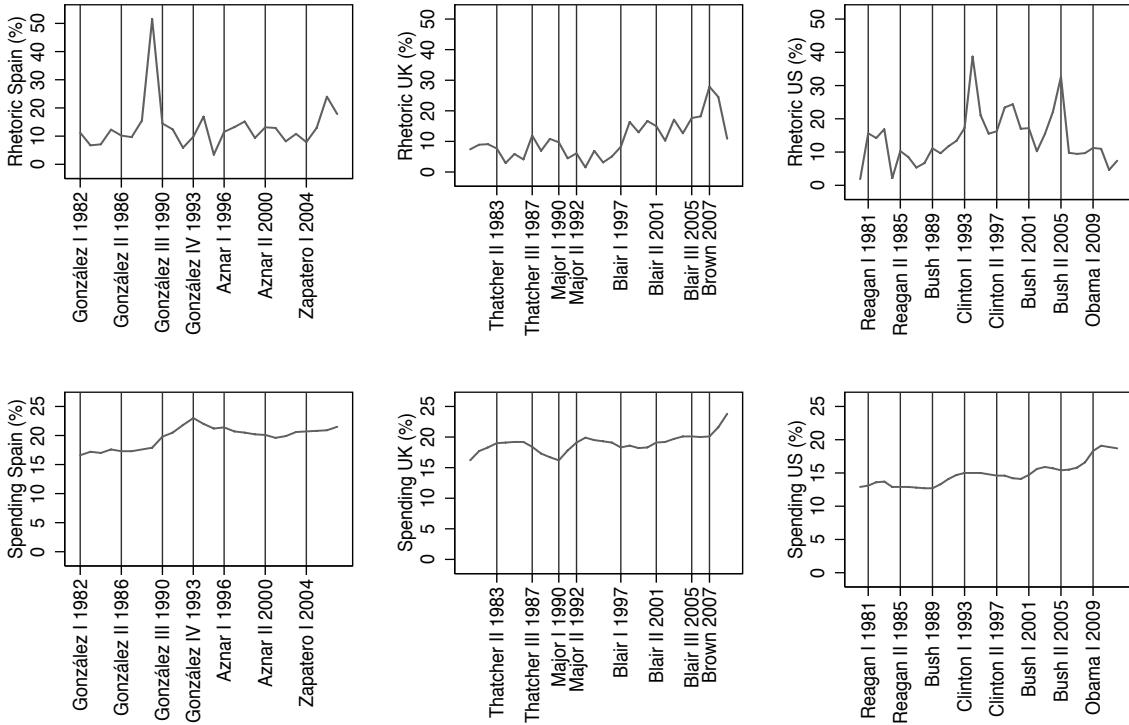
widely used as an indicator of policy in the literature on how party ideology affects public spending (e.g., Epp et al. 2014) and on policy responsiveness (e.g., Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Below we report robustness checks using an alternative measure of government policy, the social welfare generosity index, that some scholars use in preference to social welfare spending.

Figure 2 displays the evolution of government social welfare rhetoric and spending over time in Britain, Spain, and the United States, where the horizontal axis denotes time and also lists the starting points of the different governments (presidential administrations) in each country, while the vertical axis displays the proportion of the executive speech or budget devoted to social welfare domains. Note first the much larger year-to-year fluctuations in governments' social welfare rhetoric (as a proportion of their executive speeches) than in their social welfare spending (as a proportion of GDP). This reflects the well-recognized pattern that government budgets tend to evolve incrementally (Baumgartner et al. 2009), whereas governments (and parties) have more flexibility to adjust their rhetoric. Second, the patterns generally support the expectation that leftist governments emphasize social welfare more strongly than right-wing governments. In Britain the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown displayed higher levels of both social welfare rhetoric and spending than Margaret Thatcher's and John Major's Conservative governments. And in the United States the Democratic President Bill Clinton's administration emphasized social welfare rhetoric – and spent more on social welfare programs – than the Republican presidential administrations of Ronald Reagan, George H. Bush, and George W. Bush, on average. However, consistent with Epp et al.'s (2014) finding that government ideology does not always predict behaviour, we see that George W. Bush rhetorically emphasized social welfare more than the Democrat Barak Obama, and that the Bush administration's average social welfare spending nearly matched that of the Clinton administration. In Spain, the relationship between government ideology and social welfare emphasis is more complex, but displays similar patterns. In particular, the two sharp spikes in Spanish governments' social welfare rhetoric occurred in 1989 and

2006, during the governments of the left-wing Socialist Worker's Party under Prime Ministers Felipe González and José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, as opposed to the governments of the center-right People's Party under PM José María Aznar. And, social welfare spending declined under the first right-wing Aznar government (1996-2000) compared to the final González government (1992-1996), and then increased again following the switch to the left-wing Zapatero government in 2004. Finally, note that because our Spanish data series ends in 2009 it does not cover the period of "austerity" budgets, featuring sharp social welfare benefit cuts, that were subsequently introduced in Spain (as a condition for receiving international loans) in response to the dramatic contraction of the domestic economy that coincided with the worldwide economic recession. We return to this point in the conclusion.

Finally, in our analysis we will estimate – in addition to analyses over all governments – separate models on right-wing and left-wing governments, because the theoretical arguments outlined above suggest that the effects of social welfare emphasis on government support may depend on the government's ideology. We consider the British Labour governments of Blair and Brown as left-wing and the Conservative governments of Thatcher and Major as right-wing; the American administrations of the Democratic presidents Bill Clinton and Barak Obama are coded as left-wing, while the Republican administrations of Ronald Reagan, George H. Bush and George W. Bush are coded as right-wing; and the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party governments of González and Zapatero are coded as left-wing, while Aznar's People's Party government is coded as right-wing.

**Figure 2. The Evolution of Government Social Welfare Rhetoric and Spending in Britain, Spain, and the United States**



Notes. The figures in the top row display the government's rhetorical social welfare emphases in their executive speeches (the vertical axis) over time (the horizontal axis), in Spain, Britain, and the United States. The horizontal axis also labels the starting points of different governments (presidencies). The figures in the bottom row display yearly social welfare spending, as a proportion of GDP.

#### *Case selection*

We apply our analyses to Spain from 1982-2007, Britain from 1980-2009, and the United States from 1980-2012, because with the exception of Denmark these are the only democracies for which the CAP codings of executive speeches are publicly available. Moreover, we cannot include Denmark in our analyses because we lack data on government support for the Danish government over most of the period for which the CAP codings are available.<sup>8</sup> Second, the time periods of our analyses are those for

<sup>8</sup> In particular, there is no government support data available for Denmark between 1991 and 2010.

which we have reliable data on these governments' social welfare spending, from the OECD Social Expenditure Database. Theoretically, our three cases offer high clarity of responsibility (Powell and Whitten 1993) and electoral identifiability (Shugart and Carey 1992), because Spain and Britain featured single-party governments across the period of our study<sup>9</sup>, while previous research finds that American citizens ascribe primary policy responsibility to the president's party, even during periods of divided government (Lacy and Paolino 1998).

## Model Specification

In our analyses we confront variation across countries and over time. Pure OLS is problematic for time-series cross-sectional models (Beck and Katz 1995) because it assumes that errors have equal variance (homoskedasticity) and are independent over time (no serial correlation) and across units (no spatial correlation). As modelling strategies are driven by methodological issues as well as theory, we first evaluate whether our data are stationary. Unit root tests<sup>10</sup> reveal that our dependent variable (government support) and one of our key independent variables (social welfare spending) is non-stationary, and that we cannot reject the null hypothesis that all the panels contain a unit root. Treating these series as stationary could generate biased inferences. Since first-difference models often perform poorly and throw out long-run effects, scholars' attention has recently moved to applications of error correction models (ECMs) to time-series data (e.g., Beck and Katz 2011), particularly in studies of dynamic representation (e.g., Jennings and John 2009; Bevan and Jennings 2014). Another reason why ECM models are appropriate for our data is that we plausibly encounter time dependencies. In fact, tests for

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<sup>9</sup> We note that three of the Spanish governments in our study, González IV (1993-1996), Aznar I (1996-2000), and Zapatero I (2004-2008) received external support for investiture. Nevertheless each of these cases was a single-party government.

<sup>10</sup> We use Fisher-type tests based on ADF tests.

autocorrelation reveal first-order autocorrelation for government support.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to methodological issues, theoretical considerations also support the application of ECMs to our data. In particular, ECMs allow us to estimate both short-term effects, whereby government support responds to changes in government social welfare spending or rhetoric, and long-term effects whereby government support responds to (lagged) levels of social welfare spending or rhetoric. Since we have no *a priori* expectations about whether short- or long-term effects predominate in our analyses, we follow De Boef and Keele's (2008) advice and analyse both effects.

A basic model. Our model specifies over-time changes in government support as a function of the levels of (and changes in) the government's social welfare rhetoric and spending. In the model the dependent variable, [ $\Delta_{govt. support}(t)$ ], is the difference between the government's support in the current year and its support in the previous year, i.e., positive values on the dependent variable [ $\Delta_{govt. support}(t)$ ] denote that the government's support has increased over the past year. Our independent variables are: [ $govt. support(t - 1)$ ], which denotes the government's support in the preceding year; [ $govt. welfare speech(t - 1)$ ], which denotes the proportion of the previous year's executive speech that pertained to social welfare domains; [ $\Delta_{govt. welfare speech}(t)$ ] which denotes the change in the government's emphasis on social welfare in the current year's executive speech, compared to the previous year's speech<sup>12</sup>; [ $govt. welfare spending(t - 1)$ ] which denotes the level of social welfare spending in the previous year; and [ $\Delta_{govt. welfare spending}(t)$ ] which denotes the change in current welfare

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<sup>11</sup> To test for autocorrelation we plotted the autocorrelation and partial autocorrelation function of government support by country. This graphical test reveals evidence of first-order level autocorrelation in the data, which we account for by estimating the dependent variable in changes.

<sup>12</sup> That is, [ $\Delta_{govt. welfare speech}(t)$ ] = [ $govt. welfare speech(t)$ ] – [ $govt. welfare speech(t - 1)$ ].

spending compared to welfare spending in the previous year.<sup>13</sup> We specify the following basic model to be estimated yearly over all the governments in our study, and then separately on all left-wing governments and then on all right-wing governments:

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta \text{govt. support}(t) = & \alpha_0 + \alpha_1[\text{govt. support}(t-1)] + \beta_1[\Delta \text{govt. welfare speech}(t)] \\ & + \beta_2[\text{govt. welfare speech}(t-1)] + \beta_3[\Delta \text{govt. welfare spending}(t)] \\ & + \beta_4[\text{govt. welfare spending}(t-1)] \end{aligned} . \quad (1)$$

To evaluate the No Rhetorical Effects Hypothesis, that government support does not respond to social welfare rhetoric, the key coefficients are those on the  $[\text{govt. welfare speech}(t-1)]$  and the  $[\Delta \text{govt. welfare speech}(t)]$  variables. A positive coefficient  $\beta_1$  on the  $[\Delta \text{govt. welfare speech}(t)]$  variable would denote that an increase in the government's social welfare rhetoric in the current year – compared to the previous year – is associated with an increase in government support, i.e., that government support responds to short-term changes in the government's social welfare rhetoric. The coefficient  $\beta_2$  on the  $[\text{govt. welfare speech}(t-1)]$  variable denotes the relationship between changes in government support (the dependent variable) and the proportion of the government's lagged speech that pertained to social welfare. A positive coefficient would denote that the more the government rhetorically emphasized welfare domains at the previous time period, the more its support increases at the current time period – a long-term effect of the (lagged) level of social welfare rhetoric. Our No Rhetorical Effects Hypothesis implies that the coefficient estimates on the  $[\Delta \text{govt. welfare speech}(t)]$  and  $[\text{govt. welfare speech}(t-1)]$  variables will be statistically insignificant.

The coefficients  $\beta_3$  and  $\beta_4$ , on the  $[\Delta \text{govt. welfare spending}(t)]$  and the  $[\text{govt. welfare spending}(t-1)]$  variables, have substantive interpretations with respect to government spending that parallel the

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<sup>13</sup> That is,  $[\Delta \text{govt. welfare spending}(t)] = [\text{govt. welfare spending}(t)] - [\text{govt. welfare spending}(t-1)]$ .

above discussion with respect to government rhetoric. A positive coefficient  $\beta_3$  on the [ $\Delta\text{govt. welfare spending}$  ( $t$ )] variable denotes that increases in social welfare spending in the current year (compared to the previous year) are associated with increased government support, a short-term effect, while a positive coefficient  $\beta_4$  on the [ $\text{govt. welfare spending}$  ( $t - 1$ )] variable would denote that the more the government budgeted to social welfare domains at the previous time period, the higher its support at the current period. As discussed above, we have no clear expectations about how social welfare spending affects government support, since theoretical arguments point in conflicting directions.

Our specification also includes the government's lagged support, [ $\text{govt. support}$  ( $t - 1$ )], to control for the governing party's long-term level of support, and to evaluate whether governments that were more popular at the previous time period tend to lose more support at the current time period.

Finally, in our empirical analyses we omit country-years when a new government emerged whose ideology differed from the previous government, such as Britain in 1997 when Tony Blair's Labour government replaced John Major's Conservative government. This is because in these years the lagged and current levels of government rhetoric and spending pertain to different governments, so that the public plausibly does not hold the current government responsible for the previous government's lagged behaviour. We note, however, that we consider successive governments with the same Prime Minister (or President) as the same, so that for instance we include Britain in 2001 and 2005, the first years of Tony Blair's second and third Labour governments, respectively, as well as all the years of the four successive González governments in Spain.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> An additional complication is how to treat country-years where there was continuity in the governing party but a new president (prime minister), as occurred in the US in 1989 when George H. W. Bush replaced President Reagan, in Britain in 1990 when John Major replaced PM Margaret Thatcher, and again in 2007 when Gordon Brown replaced PM Tony Blair. (These are the only three instances of

## Results

We first estimated the parameters of equation 1 on the full set of 79 government support changes in our data set, and we then re-estimated these models separately on the 38 support changes for left-wing governments, and then on the 41 support changes for right-wing governments. Table 1 reports the means and standard deviations (in parentheses) of the observed values of the variables in our data set, computed over all governments (column 1); left-wing governments (column 2); and right-wing governments (column 3). The mean value of our dependent variable, [ $\Delta$ government support ( $t$ )], is -0.74% when averaged over all governments, i.e., the governments in our study on average lost roughly three-quarters of one percent of their support at the current year compared to the previous year, consistent with the well-known cost of governing discussed earlier. In addition, the percentages displayed in columns 2-3 of Table 1 indicate that, as expected, left-wing governments devoted higher proportions of their executive speeches and budgets to social welfare domains than did right-wing governments: the mean value of the [govt. welfare speech ( $t - 1$ )] variable is 15.4% for left-wing governments versus 10.3% for right-wing governments, while the mean of the [govt. welfare spending ( $t - 1$ )] variable is 18.4% for left-wing governments but 16.8% for right-wing governments.

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these types of changes in our data set.) We decided to include these country-years because in each case the incoming head of government was closely associated with the outgoing leader's government (George H.W. Bush was Ronald Reagan's Vice President, while Major and Brown both served in their predecessor's cabinet). However we have re-estimated all our models while omitting these three country-years, and these analyses support the same substantive conclusions we report below.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics: Dependent and Independent Variables**

	All Governments (1)	Left-wing Governments (2)	Right-wing governments (3)
$\Delta$ government support ( $t$ )	-0.74% (6.31)	-0.85% (5.28)	-0.64% (7.20)
government support ( $t - 1$ )	40.8% (12.8)	38.9% (11.0)	42.6% (14.2)
$\Delta$ govt. welfare speech ( $t$ )	0.13% (8.95)	0.57% (11.42)	-0.27% (5.93)
govt. welfare speech ( $t - 1$ )	12.8% (8.0)	15.4% (9.2)	10.3% (5.7)
$\Delta$ govt. welfare spending ( $t$ )	0.21% (.65)	0.28% (.67)	0.14% (.62)
govt. welfare spending ( $t - 1$ )	17.6% (2.7)	18.4% (2.4)	16.8% (2.7)
<i>N</i>	79	38	41

Notes. The numbers in the table are the means of the variable values, while the numbers in parentheses are the standard deviations. The variable definitions are given in the text. The set of cases included in our analyses are Spain 1982-2007, Britain from 1980-2009, and the United States from 1980-2012.

Table 2 reports our parameter estimates (with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses<sup>15</sup>)

for the model given by equation 1 above, estimated over all governments (column 1), over left-wing governments (column 2) and over right-wing governments (column 3), where the dependent variable, [ $\Delta$ government support ( $t$ )], is the percentage change in the government's support over the past year.

Before turning to effects pertaining to social welfare rhetoric and spending, note that the coefficient on the variable [government support ( $t - 1$ )] is negative and significant in all three sets of analyses while the coefficient on the intercept is positive and significant, which implies a “regression to the

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<sup>15</sup> We have re-estimated all of our models with robust standard errors, and these estimates support the same substantive conclusions we report below.

mean” in government support, i.e., when government support was unusually high (low) at the previous time period, then support tended to subsequently decline (increase) at the current period.<sup>16</sup> This pattern is found in various social settings and may reflect ceiling/floor effects or underlying dynamic processes (see, e.g., Barnett et al. 2005). The ceiling/floor effect is that aggregate government support is bounded by the values 0% and 100%, so that when lagged government support was unusually low (high) it has more room to grow (decline) at the current period. The dynamic process is that when a government’s lagged support was unusually low (high) this may reflect the effects of short-term factors such as political scandals or the government’s handling of crisis situations, which tend to recede over time.

We now consider the social welfare rhetoric and spending effects that interest us. If government support responds to social welfare rhetoric, we would expect significant coefficient estimates on either (or both) of the variables [ $\Delta\text{govt. welfare speech}(t)$ ] and [ $\text{govt. welfare speech}(t - 1)$ ]. However the estimates on both variables are near zero and statistically insignificant, in all three sets of analyses (those over all governments, over left-wing governments, and over right-wing governments). These estimates support our No Rhetorical Effects Hypothesis, that government support does not respond to governments’ social welfare rhetoric. Indeed, the coefficient estimates on these variables, in combination with their standard errors, imply that we can rule out – at conventional levels of statistical significance – the hypothesis that social welfare rhetoric exerts substantively significant effects on government support. The coefficient estimate on the [ $\text{government welfare speech}(t - 1)$ ] variable is exactly zero in the analyses over all governments (see column 1 of Table 2), and the 95% confidence interval on this estimate is [-0.19, +0.19]. The value +0.19 would imply that, ceteris paribus, an increase of 8% in the lagged proportion of the government’s executive speech pertaining to social welfare domains (a

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<sup>16</sup> Note that this interpretation holds when the error-correction term is negative and falls between 0 and -1, when equilibrium shocks are corrected at a gradual rate (Jennings and John 2009, 841-842).

one standard deviation change in the overserved values of this variable) increases the predicted value of the dependent variable, [ $\Delta\text{government support}(t)$ ], by only about 1.5 percentage points (i.e.,  $[8\% \times 0.19] = 1.52\%$ ). Conversely, the lower bound on the 95% confidence interval for the [ $\text{govt. welfare speech}(t - 1)$ ] coefficient, -0.19, would imply that an 8% increase in the lagged proportion of the government's social welfare speech depresses predicted government support by about 1.5 percentage points. Thus even if the true effects of social welfare rhetoric lie at one of the boundaries of the 95% confidence interval on our parameter estimate, this rhetoric only modestly affects government support.<sup>17</sup>

By contrast, our estimates imply that increased social welfare spending depresses government support, in that the coefficient estimate on the variable [ $\text{govt. welfare spending}(t - 1)$ ] is negative and statistically significant, denoting that the higher the government's lagged social welfare spending the more government support declines at the current time period, i.e., *the public punishes governments for higher levels of social welfare spending*. The coefficient estimate over all governments, -1.43 ( $p < .01$ ), implies that the difference between a lagged social welfare spending level of 17.6% of GDP (the mean for the governments in our data set) and lagged social welfare spending of 20.3% of GDP (one standard deviation above the mean) depresses expected government support by roughly 3.8 percentage points at the current time period, a substantively significant effect.<sup>18</sup> The parameters on the [ $\text{govt. welfare}$

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<sup>17</sup> Computations on the [ $\Delta\text{govt. welfare speech}(t)$ ] variable, which denotes the yearly change in social welfare rhetoric, have similar substantive implications: namely, that if the true value of the variable coefficient lies anywhere inside its 95% confidence interval, which is [-.10, +.20], then realistic over-time changes in social welfare rhetoric will not shift government support by more than about 1.5%.

<sup>18</sup> That is, a 2.7% increase in the value of the [ $\text{govt. welfare spending}(t - 1)$ ] variable increases the predicted value of the [ $\Delta\text{government support}(t)$ ] variable by the amount  $(1.43 \times 2.7\%) \approx 3.8\%$ , where 2.7% is the standard deviation of the observed values of the [ $\text{govt. welfare spending}(t - 1)$ ] variable.

*spending* ( $t - 1$ )] variable estimated over left-wing governments (-1.32,  $p < .01$ ) and right-wing governments (-1.87,  $p < .05$ ) are similar, suggesting that social welfare spending depresses support for both types of governments.<sup>19</sup>

**Table 2. Analyses of how Social Welfare Rhetoric and Spending affect Government Support**

	All Governments (1)	Left-wing Governments (2)	Right-wing governments (3)
<i>government support</i> ( $t - 1$ )	-.33** (.08)	-.24** (.09)	-.41** (.15)
$\Delta$ govt. welfare speech ( $t$ )	.05 (.08)	.03 (.09)	.06 (.23)
govt. welfare speech ( $t - 1$ )	.00 (.10)	.02 (.11)	-.12 (.24)
$\Delta$ govt. welfare spending ( $t$ )	-1.13 (.89)	-1.02 (1.22)	-1.39 (1.35)
govt. welfare spending ( $t - 1$ )	-1.43** (.38)	-1.32** (.42)	-1.87* (.73)
Intercept	38.0** (9.5)	32.8** (10.7)	49.8** (18.2)
N	79	38	41
$R^2$	0.24	0.27	0.27

\*\*\*  $p \leq .01$ , \*\*  $p \leq .05$ , two-tailed tests.

Notes. Panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses. For these analyses the dependent variable, [ $\Delta$ government support ( $t$ )], is the change in the government's support in the current year compared to the previous year. The independent variables are defined in the text.

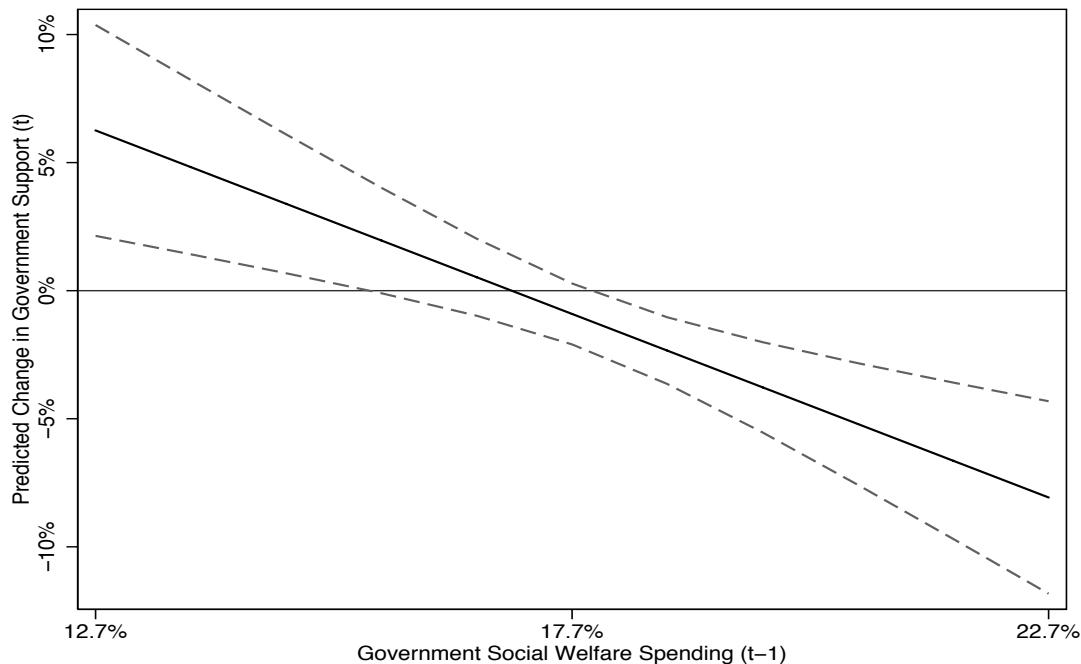
Figure 3 displays the effects of lagged government social welfare spending (the horizontal axis) on predicted changes in government support (the vertical axis), based on the coefficient estimates over all governments (column 1 in Table 2 above). The effects are displayed as a solid line with dashed

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<sup>19</sup> The difference between the coefficient on the [govt. welfare spending ( $t - 1$ )] variable, in the analyses on left-wing governments versus that on right-wing governments, is not statistically significant.

95% confidence intervals, over the full range of values of the [*government welfare spending* ( $t - 1$ )] variable in our data set. (These estimates are calculated while holding all other independent variables at their mean values.) The figure illustrates, first, that governing parties are projected to lose support at the current year – compared to the previous year – for levels of lagged social welfare spending above 17.1% of GDP, and that moreover this projected loss is statistically significant when lagged social welfare spending is above 18% of GDP (which is at the 50th percentile of the values in our data set) – projections that substantiate the well-known costs of governing effect. Second, the figure illustrates how higher lagged social welfare spending substantially exacerbates these projected vote losses, while lower levels of lagged spending mitigate these losses. Indeed when lagged social welfare spending falls below 15.7% of GDP, then governments enjoy statistically significant projected vote gains.

**Figure 3. Effects of Lagged Social Welfare Spending on Government Support Changes**



Notes. The figure displays the predicted effect of the [*government welfare spending* ( $t - 1$ )] variable on the [ $\Delta$ government support ( $t$ )] variable, computed for the coefficient estimates reported in column 1 of Table 2. The dotted lines denote 95% confidence intervals.

Finally, we also estimate negative – albeit statistically insignificant – coefficients on the change in social welfare spending variable, [ $\Delta_{govt.} welfare spending(t)$ ], in all three sets of analyses (those on all governments, on left-wing governments, and on right-wing governments). These negative coefficients are consistent with our conclusion that voters punish governments for higher social welfare spending. That the coefficient estimates on the [ $\Delta_{govt.} welfare spending(t)$ ] variable are insignificant may reflect the modest variation in the values of the [ $\Delta_{govt.} welfare spending(t)$ ] variable in our data set (see Table 1 above), i.e., that governments' social welfare spending changes are typically incremental, which inflates the standard errors on these parameter estimates.

### *Robustness checks*

We estimated the parameters of additional models in order to assess the robustness of our findings.<sup>20</sup> First, we estimated the parameters of an economic effects model, which controls for national levels of unemployment and inflation via the inclusion of a misery index that sums these two variables, along with the yearly change in this index.<sup>21</sup> An extensive literature documents that voters hold governing parties accountable for economic conditions (e.g., van der Brug et al. 2007; Duch and Stevenson 2008), particularly in single-party governments such as those in Britain and Spain during the period of our analysis (Powell and Whitten 1993), so that we expect that higher levels of unemployment and inflation – along with short-term increases in these factors – will depress government support. Column 1 in Table 3 reports our parameter estimates for the economic effects model, estimated over all governments, which continue to support our substantive conclusions. (We report the separate analyses on left-

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<sup>20</sup> We thank three anonymous reviewers for suggesting many of the robustness checks we discuss here.

<sup>21</sup> Data from the OECD are used for unemployment as percentage of civilian labour force and inflation as consumer prices as percentage change on the same period of the previous year.

and right-wing governments, which support the same substantive conclusions, in Table S1 in the supplementary information memo.) With respect to government rhetoric, our estimates again support our No Rhetorical Effects Hypothesis: the parameter estimates on the [ $\Delta\text{govt. welfare speech}(t)$ ] and [ $\text{govt. welfare speech}(t - 1)$ ] variables are near zero and statistically insignificant. And our parameter estimates again imply that higher lagged social welfare spending depresses support, in that the estimate on the [ $\text{govt. welfare spending}(t - 1)$ ] variable is negative and statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ). Furthermore, our parameter estimates on the misery index imply that the public punishes governments for increases in unemployment and inflation, in that the estimate on the lagged misery index is negative and significant (-0.22,  $p < .05$ ).

Next, we analysed a model that includes an alternative indicator of government social welfare policy, namely the social welfare generosity index, which is a measure of the generosity of government social insurance benefits including unemployment insurance, sick pay insurance, and public pensions (Esping-Andersen 1990). The generosity index, which is widely used in comparative studies of social welfare policy (e.g., Scruggs 2007; Green-Pedersen 2014), is arguably a more relevant measure of government policy than the level of social welfare spending, since the latter is influenced by factors such as the unemployment rate and the population of pensioners, that can cause overall government spending to vary even if the underlying social welfare policies are stable. Column 2 in Table 3 reports our parameter estimates for the generosity index model, estimated over all governments, which continue to support our substantive conclusions.<sup>22</sup> (We report separate analyses on left- and right-wing governments in Table S2 in the supplementary information memo.) We again find support for the No Rhetor-

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<sup>22</sup> We downloaded yearly data on governments' social welfare generosity from Scruggs et al. (2014), available at <http://cwed2.org/>. We note that these data stop in 2011, so that we lose one year from each country so that the number of cases in these analyses drops from N=79 to N=76.

ical Effects Hypothesis, in that the parameter estimates on government speech are near zero and statistically insignificant. And our parameter estimates again substantiate that higher lagged levels of social welfare generosity depress support, in that the estimate on the [*govt. welfare generosity* ( $t - 1$ )] variable is negative and statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ).

**Table 3. Analyses of Government Support: Robustness Checks**

	Economic Effects <b>(1)</b>	Generosity Index <b>(2)</b>
<i>government support</i> ( $t - 1$ )	-.41** (.10)	-.24* (.10)
$\Delta$ govt. welfare speech ( $t$ )	.03 (.08)	.05 (.09)
govt. welfare speech ( $t - 1$ )	-.03 (.10)	-.01 (.10)
$\Delta$ govt. welfare spending ( $t$ )	-.89 (.88)	
govt. welfare spending ( $t - 1$ )	-1.53** (.40)	
$\Delta$ govt. welfare generosity ( $t$ )		-.19 (.88)
govt. welfare generosity ( $t - 1$ )		-.60** (.23)
$\Delta$ misery index ( $t$ )	-.48 (.40)	-.73 (.42)
misery index ( $t - 1$ )	-.22* (.09)	-.04 (.08)
Intercept	46.24** (11.49)	24.55* (9.83)
N	79	76
$R^2$	0.28	0.16

\*\*  $p \leq .01$  ; \*  $p \leq .05$  ; two-tailed tests.

Notes. Panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses. For these analyses the dependent variable, [ $\Delta$ government support ( $t$ )], was the change in the government's support in the current year compared to the previous year. The independent variables are defined in the text.

Finally, we performed additional analyses to assess the robustness of our findings. First, we re-estimated our models while including controls designed to evaluate whether governing parties were punished when their social welfare spending did not match their (lagged) social welfare rhetoric. Second, we estimated models where we included additional lags for government spending and speech. Third, in response to previous research suggesting that government support varies based on the electoral cycle (Tufte 1975; Alt 1979), we included controls for the length of time until the next election. Fourth, we estimated models that included separate controls for unemployment and inflation, in order to parse out different effects of these economic variables. Finally, to investigate the possibility that causal processes differ across countries – in particular that there are differences in the US presidential system, versus the British and Spanish parliamentary systems – we re-estimated our modes while omitting one country at a time from our analyses. These analyses, which we report in supplementary materials posted on our web site, continue to support our substantive conclusions. (*Note to reviewers: We have included this supplementary information memo at the end of this paper.*)

In toto, our results consistently suggest that *voters punish governments for higher levels of social welfare spending*, and that these effects are both statistically and substantively significant. This conclusion extends to separate analyses of left-wing and right-wing governments, and to analyses that control for economic conditions and for alternative measures of governments' social welfare spending policies (as well as the additional robustness checks summarized above). By contrast, we find no evidence that government support responds to the government's social welfare rhetoric, and indeed our analyses allow us to rule out – at conventional levels of statistical significance – the hypothesis that welfare rhetoric substantively affects on government support. This finding that the public does not respond to governing parties' stated issue emphases extends Fernandez-Vazquez's (2014a, 2014b) finding that citizens do not meaningfully update in response to parties' stated issue positions.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

The question of whether citizens evaluate governments based on their words or their deeds has normative and empirical implications. The normative question is whether citizens should prioritize political actors' actions over their rhetoric. The empirical question is: Do citizens prioritize actors' concrete behaviour over their rhetoric? We address the latter question here, in the context of the mass public's evaluations of the government's social welfare rhetoric and spending. To our knowledge, ours is the first study to evaluate how citizens jointly respond to governments' words and to their deeds.

We have presented theoretical arguments that the public will not respond to government rhetoric – the No Rhetorical Effects Hypothesis – first because citizens recognize that political actors are motivated to broadcast publicly appealing “cheap talk” regardless of their true policy intentions, second because in the case of governing parties (but not opposition parties) citizens can evaluate the government's concrete actions, which speak louder than their words. However, with respect to the government actions we study here – namely social welfare spending – we believe theory provides limited guidance about how the public will respond (positively or negatively), because theoretical arguments point in conflicting directions. This issue is important because social welfare is a major component of government budgets in all western democracies, and moreover it is a core competency domain of center-left political parties.

Our empirical analyses of governments' social welfare rhetoric from Britain, Spain, and the United States support our No Rhetorical Effects Hypothesis, in that we find no evidence that government support responds to governments' social welfare emphases, as broadcast in their executive speeches. Executive speeches are costly signals because governments face negative public reactions if they renege on the priorities they outline in this speech, so we might expect that if citizens weigh any government communication, it would be the executive speech. Moreover, previous research documents that executive speeches reflect the issues governments emphasize in other public venues (Green-

Pedersen et al. 2015). Yet we find no relationship between the governments' social welfare emphases in these speeches and their public support. Our findings on the (non)effects of governments' issue emphases extend the research of Fernandez-Vazquez (2014a b) and Adams et al. (2011, 2014), who find that citizens do not meaningfully respond to parties' stated issue positions.

Our empirical analyses also uncover – for both left- and right-wing governments – a consistent negative relationship between social welfare spending and government support. We find that public support declines when the government spent more on social welfare programs at the previous time period, i.e., *governments suffer a social welfare spending penalty*. This finding implies a dilemma for mainstream labor and social democratic parties in government: these parties risk short-term support losses if they raise social welfare spending, yet cutting welfare spending plausibly violates leftist politicians' bedrock principles, and also weakens their long-term relationships with their core supporters. In this regard, remarkable research by Karreth et al. (2013) documents that Social Democratic parties that pursued a “Third Way” strategy of scaling back their emphasis on the welfare state (while embracing free-market economics) initially increased their support, but suffered longer-term reverses as their core supporters subsequently deserted them. These findings are consistent with the effects we identify.

We believe our finding that the mass public evaluates governments based on their deeds, not their words, has positive implications for representative democracy. This voter decision rule appears normatively desirable, first because government actions arguably constitute “revealed preferences” that speak louder than their words, second because it implies that governments have limited abilities to distract citizens from unpopular policies via clever public rhetoric. Government accountability is arguably maximized when the public holds the government accountable for its actions. We find that in the social welfare domain, the public fulfills this desideratum.

Our study comes with caveats that also raise questions for future research. First, our failure to detect a relationship between governments' social welfare rhetoric and public support does not prove

that no such relationship exists: absence of evidence does not constitute evidence of absence. In future research we plan to extend our empirical analyses to other countries and time periods, as additional Comparative Agenda Project executive speech codings are released. Such extensions may yet uncover positive evidence that the public responds to government rhetoric. At the same time, we have outlined theoretical arguments that cast doubt on whether citizens will respond to the government's words, given that the public can alternatively react to the government's concrete actions. Moreover, our analyses allow us to rule out, at conventional levels of statistical significance, the proposition that realistic changes in social welfare rhetoric exert substantively meaningful effects on government support.

Second and related, the lack of evidence that aggregate public support responds to governments' social welfare rhetoric does not rule out individual-level effects. To the extent that some citizens respond positively – but others negatively – to social welfare rhetoric, these individual-level effects may roughly cancel out. In future research we plan to analyze whether citizens' reactions to governments' social welfare rhetoric/spending are mediated by individual traits such as citizens' issue priorities, their sociodemographic characteristics, and their policy beliefs. In particular, citizens holding leftist social welfare views plausibly react much more positively to pro-welfare rhetoric/spending than do those on the right. However we believe our aggregate-level findings matter regardless of these individual-level processes, because governments are plausibly more concerned with how their behaviour affects their aggregate support than with the breakdowns across different subconstituencies. Finally, as we noted in the introduction, we hope to extend our analyses to issues such as the environment, multiculturalism, and European integration, where government action is not defined primarily in terms of spending levels, and also to the issue areas "owned" by the mainstream right, notably crime and defence. We also hope to extend our study to other countries where government responsibility is less clear than in the cases of Britain, Spain, and the United States, as additional data on government speeches and popularity become available. Such analyses might also clarify the relationship between public support and

governments' social welfare/rhetoric across varieties of economic and social welfare regimes.

Third, the countries and time periods we analyze do not include instances of the types of savage social welfare spending cuts that governments in Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and – after the time period of our study – Spain enacted, in response to the Eurozone economic crisis that began in 2008-2009. We have analyzed a set of countries (Britain, Spain, and the United States) during periods of (mostly) “normal” government budgets, when yearly changes in social welfare spending were typically incremental, and when, moreover, national governments were not constrained to slash spending to conform to the terms of international financial assistance packages, as occurred in Greece, Ireland, and (eventually) Spain. We make no claims that our findings extend to these types of extraordinary economic and political contexts. At the same time, we believe the collapse in domestic support for some European governments that slashed social welfare spending after 2009 does not contradict our conclusion that welfare spending cuts enhance government support, first because in several cases the government's support collapsed before it slashed welfare spending but after the national economy contracted, suggesting that support collapsed largely due to the severe economic downturn, not government budgets. Second, as discussed above the recent social welfare cuts in Greece, Portugal, and elsewhere were qualitatively different to those we analyze in our study, not only in their severity but because these governments were perceived as acting under pressure from international creditors, which weakened these governments' public images for independence and leadership ability.

Finally, our conclusion that support does not respond to government rhetoric does not necessarily imply that citizens similarly discount opposition party rhetoric. Whereas citizens may privilege the government's deeds over its words, citizens may weigh the opposition's rhetoric because they feel they have no practical alternative: opposition parties often have no meaningful influence on government policy outputs, so that citizens may fall back on opposition parties' words instead.

In this paper we have analysed how government support in Britain, Spain, and the United States responds to the government’s social welfare rhetoric, and to its social welfare spending. We find that government support is not meaningfully related to its rhetoric, but that governments that spend more on social welfare programs see their support decline, regardless of these governments’ ideologies (left or right). This “social welfare spending penalty” poses strategic problems for left-wing governing parties, whose long-term policy images – and linkages with core supporters – are tied to these parties’ associations with the welfare state.

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## **Appendix**

### **Government Support**

Spain: Vote intentions from CIS Barometer

United Kingdom: Vote intentions from WJFFP dataset (see Wlezien et al. 2013; Green and Jennings 2012)

United States: Gallup US President Approval (“Do you approve or disapprove of the way [the President] is handling his job as President?”) from the Policy Agendas Project website

### **Social Welfare Spending**

OECD Social Expenditure Database

### **Social Welfare Generosity Index**

Data downloaded from Scruggs, Lyle, Detlef Jahn and Kati Kuitto. 2014. “Comparative Welfare Entitlements Data Set 2, Version 2014-03.” Available at: <http://cwed2.org/>.

### **Social Welfare Rhetoric**

Spain: Executive speeches from the Spanish Policy Agendas Project (Chaqués Bonafont, Palau, and Muñoz 2014)

United Kingdom: Executive speeches from the UK Policy Agendas Project (Jennings, Bevan, and John 2011)

United States: Executive speeches from the Policy Agendas Project. The data used here were originally collected by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, with the support of National Science Foundation grant numbers SBR 9320922 and 0111611, and were distributed through the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. Neither NSF nor the original collectors of the data bear any responsibility for the analysis reported here.

### **Economic Indicators**

Unemployment rate as percentage of civilian labor force (OECD)

Inflation as consumer prices as percentage change on the same period of the previous year (OECD)