4. Political Responsiveness: The Identification and Processing of Problems in Modern Polities

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Introduction

Modern political systems enable society to address perceived problems by formulating and implementing – more or less effectively – collectively binding decisions. Performing this general function involves highly complex processes that comprise *inter alia* the formulation of problems in political terms, their interpretation within broader meaning contexts, their processing in various policy-making bodies, and the formulation of policy decisions that are binding within the purview of a given polity. Such processes, which amount to the political identification and handling of problems, are highly selective. Only a few of the potential problems experienced and/or formulated in society find resonance in political systems. Moreover, the respective "careers" of politicized problems in the processing machinery of political systems follow contingent paths, which have far-reaching consequences in terms of policy outputs and outcomes.

The present chapter is an attempt to build on and further develop the theoretical framework of this book to account for this diagnosing and problem-solving dimension of political systems. While other chapters emphasize the formation and internal structuration of modern polities (*e.g.*, formation of citizenries through inclusion structures; horizontal and vertical differentiation; autonomous political organizations), the present chapter shifts the focus to the policy-making processes that occur within these structures. More specifically, notwithstanding feedback in the interplay between political structures and policy processes, the chapter examines how the structures of political regimes and the broader societal contexts in which they are embedded condition the operational identification and processing of problems, and thereby the relations between political systems and their societal environment. Given the scope of the topic, the goal of this text is merely to sketch new theoretical perspectives and research angles that can help advance the sociology of political regimes.

Our entry point in the argument is the concept of *political responsiveness*. Since it was introduced in democratic theory in the early 1950s, the concept of political

responsiveness has inspired a prolific stream of research on the relationship between the interests, needs and wants of citizens on the one hand, and the policies crafted by representatives and other policy makers on the other hand. This standard conception of political responsiveness is based on the classical distinction between state and society that permeates political science (Luhmann, 2010). It conceives of the political system as an autonomous entity that exerts legitimate power to order and govern society "from above". Society is envisaged from the point of view of the state, as the national collective of citizens living under its rule. In this perspective, responsiveness is understood as the realization of the democratic principle of rule of the people, by the people and for the people. Political systems are deemed responsive insofar as their policies aim to solve the problems of the "people", that is, problems experienced and expressed by citizens in the political system's environment.

As we will show, the fact that this standard approach to responsiveness embraces the political system's own perspective on a division between state and society induces several theoretical and methodological shortcomings. By revisiting the concept of responsiveness on the basis of a sociological theory of observation and functional differentiation, the chapter outlines new perspectives for the study of diagnosing and problem-solving processes in modern polities. Responsiveness is redefined as the process whereby both democratic and non-democratic political systems selectively identify and address problems that they *attribute* to "society", according to the systems' own structures, their dynamic of self-reproduction (autopoiesis), and their structural couplings with other spheres of modern society. As we will argue, while this process of attribution comprises alleged "demands" and "preferences" of citizens, it extends beyond this specific aspect of politics.

The redefinition of responsiveness proposed in the present chapter can be useful for comparative studies interested in identifying how distinct internal structures of political regimes favor different patterns of problem diagnosis and solution. In addition, the revised concept of responsiveness sheds light on core evolutionary dynamics of political systems, as patterns of responsiveness emerging from distinct structural settings can, in turn, alter political structures by inducing institutional change. Moreover, the revised concept of responsiveness can be useful for the study of relations between political systems and other functionally differentiated spheres of modern society, such as the economy, law, science, mass media, religion and morality. For instance, political responsiveness involves boundary-making processes that define the respective competencies and responsibilities of function systems for given problems (e.g., market prices vs. regulated prices; political vs. legal or religious punishment of deviant behaviors). Similarly, "structural couplings" between political systems and other function systems contribute to conditioning the circulation and translation of problem descriptions from one system to another (e.g., evidence-based policy making; political reac-

tions to mass media contents or moral scandals). Following this perspective, the study of political responsiveness can be connected to a broader sociology of the construction and processing of "problems" in a society characterized by the primacy of functional differentiation.

Standard perspectives on political responsiveness

Whom does the polity work for?

In his seminal book, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*, Harold Lasswell (1936) envisaged policy science as the study of the conditions that determine who can define and pursue desired goals by controlling and exerting power over others. In his view, those who can attain such *positions of influence* constitute an elite, as opposed to the masses. About two decades later, J. Roland Pennock (1952) introduced the concept of responsiveness as a "counterpart of influence", and defined responsive policy making as "reflecting and giving expression to the will of the people" (p. 790). Pennock acknowledged how difficult it is to circumscribe this term. What counts as the "will of the people"? How should a government respond to fleeting demands or to simultaneous but contradictory demands? According to Pennock, as a minimum democratic standard, "governments should be responsive to any clear and settled popular demand" (p. 791), in particular demands that have a high intensity and many supporters.

Several subsequent contributions have anchored this normative conception of responsiveness in democratic studies. In one of the most widely cited, Hanna Pitkin (1967) defined responsiveness as a key feature of political representation that complements electoral mechanisms by ensuring representation between elections: For democratic representation to occur, representatives must act "in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them" (p. 209). Similarly, Robert Dahl (1971) described democracy as "the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals" (p. 1). More recently, G. Bingham Powell (2004) argued that democratic responsiveness occurs "when the democratic process induces the government to form and implement policies that the citizens want. When the process induces such policies consistently, we consider democracy to be of higher quality" (p. 91). While theorists of democracy generally recognize that too much responsiveness would lead to populism, the tyranny of majorities, and systemic instability (Sabl, 2015), they still consider responsiveness to be a defining component of democracy, arguing that the policy process should be oriented toward the satisfaction of the sovereign people.

This general acceptation of political responsiveness has been developed and specified in a number of theoretical and empirical contributions. For instance, in a study of the responsiveness of members of the U.S. Congress, Warren Miller and

Donald Stokes (1963) operationalized the concept in terms of the correspondence between members' roll-call voting behavior and the surveyed preferences of citizens in their respective constituencies. This operationalization of the concept of responsiveness was later criticized by Heinz Eulau and Paul Karps (1977) as being too restrictive. For the two authors, representation-as-responsiveness is about the degree to which representatives satisfy the interests and needs of the citizens they represent. In this perspective, responsiveness entails four distinct components: *i) policy responsiveness* – representatives' attempts to shape policies that serve the interests or expressed wishes of their constituency; *ii) service responsiveness* – representatives' engagement in providing particular services to members of their constituency (*e.g.*, information, advice, contacts); *iii) allocation responsiveness* – representatives' efforts to obtain public goods for their constituency (*e.g.*, infrastructure, job-creating investments); and *iv) symbolic responsiveness* – representatives' use of symbols to nurture trust and support among citizens (*e.g.*, participation in an inauguration ceremony; shaking hands at a local market). Other strands of the literature have expanded the concept of political responsiveness by examining not only the responsiveness of *elected representatives*, but also the responsiveness of *political institutions* (*e.g.*, municipal councils, parliaments, governments) and *policy outputs* (*e.g.*, levels of social welfare spending) (for reviews, see Burstein, 2010; Manza and Cook, 2002; Wlezien and Soroka, 2016).

Overall, the literature has highlighted various conditions underlying contingent patterns of political responsiveness. Unsurprisingly, policymakers are generally most responsive to popular preferences on salient issues, that is, policy issues that raise concerns among a large number of citizens or among groups of citizens who are particularly vocal (e.g. Lax and Phillips, 2009). Conversely, political responsiveness is usually lower when policy issues are technical and isolated from citizens' direct concerns, as in the case of reforms of corporate governance law (Culpepper, 2011). Social class also plays a role, as illustrated by the limited responsiveness of governments to the social spending preferences of lower and lower-middle class voters (Bartels, 2017; Elsässer, Hense and Schäfer, 2017), and an overall tendency of responsiveness in U.S. politics to be "strongly tilted toward the most affluent citizens" (Druckmann, 2015; Gilens, 2012, p. 1).

Electoral mechanisms are another key variable. For instance, Christopher Wlezien and Stuart Soroka (2012) found proportional systems to be less favorable to responsiveness than majoritarian ones. To cite another example, the responsiveness of U.S. presidents varies depending on their respective popularity ratings and the time remaining before the next election (Canes-Wrone and Shotts, 2004). The broader institutional setting of political systems, in which electoral mechanisms of responsiveness are embedded, also seems to affect patterns of responsiveness. For instance, Nada Urbinati and Mark Warren (2008) noted that in democracies, presidential regimes tend to be less responsive than parliamentary

systems. Based on a comparison between Great Britain, Denmark and the United States, Sara Hobolt and Robert Klemmensen (2008) showed that responsiveness grows with the intensity of electoral competition, but decreases with the autonomy of governments *vis-à-vis* legislative assemblies.

Other structural characteristics of political regimes matter as well. One such characteristic is federalism: According to the literature, opaque interest coalitions and the diffusion of decision making among the vertical tiers of federal systems hampers responsiveness by making it difficult for voters to hold individual politicians accountable for policy outcomes (Wlezien and Soroka, 2011; Wood, 1991). Another key variable is authoritarianism: In authoritarian regimes, election rigging and assemblies' limited influence allow a type of "bounded responsiveness", which tends to exclude thematic issues and popular demands that could undermine the regime's stability (Chen, Pan and Xu, 2016; Dukalskis and Gerschewski, 2017; Malesky and Schuler, 2010; Miller, 2015).

Limits of a fuzzy normative approach to political responsiveness

This brief review of the literature offers a sense of the standard understandings of political responsiveness. As Paul Burstein (2010) summarized, responsiveness has been constructed as a normative criterion of democracy based on the distinction "rule by the many, or rule by the few" (p. 74), and empirical studies have tried to determine whether and under which conditions political systems fulfill this criterion. While this understanding of responsiveness makes sense from the perspective of classical democratic theory, it falls short of providing an accurate understanding of the way problems and underlying preferences are identified and addressed in the policy-making process.

Firstly, standard theories of political responsiveness are not clear about *what* political systems are or should be responsive to. Some authors write about people's "wishes" or "preferences", as if these wishes and preferences were a given that politicians could translate into policy measures. But citizens' occasional wishes and preferences are generally formed in reaction to alternative policy options, whether these options are offered by the political system (*e.g.*, electoral programs and promises; policy options under discussion) or hypothesized in public opinion surveys ("Would you prefer option A or option B?"). In other words, wishes and preferences are not external to political systems, but rather are shaped by them – at least to a significant extent. Moreover, given the large volume of daily political decision making in modern states and the limited capacity of citizens to closely monitor the policy process, genuine wishes and preferences of citizens on alternative policy options are the exception rather than the rule. As a rule, "public opinion" is brought into existence by public commentators and opinion *makers*, as well as by

policy makers acting "in the name of" or "on the basis of" opinions that might not exist as such (Disch, 2012).

This discursive construction of public opinion retroacts on politics itself, as politicians try to gauge how their position and the positions of their allies and competitors resonate in "public opinion", in order to adjust their behavior accordingly. In this framework, public opinion is not a point of contact between the political system (the state) and a given environment (a national society), but rather is a kind of self-created mirror in which politics "can only see itself", including its internal description of its environment: a device that "serves the self-referential closure of political systems, the relation of politics to politics. The self-referential closure occurs with the help of an institution that allows the system to distinguish in its operations self-reference and external reference, namely politics and public opinion, and thereby to make itself a picture of the limits of its own scope for action." (Luhmann, 1990, pp. 181, 82, our translation).

Other authors define responsiveness in relation not to citizens' opinions, but to their "interests" or "needs", under the assumption that these needs and interests can be identified objectively – typically by representatives rather than by the citizens concerned. However, as for opinions, needs and interests are contingent perceptions and descriptions, and attributing needs or interests to oneself or to others is generally fraught with uncertainty (Münnich, 2011; Saward, 2006). Furthermore, the identity of those who have wishes, preferences, interests or needs is often considered an external factum, while in fact, the "people" or sub-groups of the citizenry are internal constructs of political systems (Disch, 2012; Fossen, 2019; Stichweh, 2016). In short, the literature on responsiveness tends to overlook the role of the political system in the formation of what it is supposed to respond to: The political system can only be responsive to itself.

Secondly, the very concept of responsiveness remains fuzzy. What exactly does it mean for a political system or any of its internal policy-making components (*e.g.*, elected representatives, political institutions) to be responsive? Some studies in the literature have defined responsiveness on the basis of the degree of static *congruence* or *consistency* between the behavior of a political system and what a majority of citizens allegedly wants, whereas other studies have defined responsiveness in terms of *covariation* between policy choices and public opinion (Wlezien and Soroka, 2016). Both conceptions entail difficulties regarding their operationalization in empirical research. The degree of congruence is hard to assess accurately, as measurements are fraught with conceptual and methodological biases and uncertainties (Burstein, 2010). As for the processual view of responsiveness, the assumption of a unidirectional relation of causality between movements of public opinion and a policy process that "responds" to these movements is not realistic. In practice, there is an interplay between politics and what citizens think or want. This interplay is asymmetrical, as politicians have many

resources (*e.g.*, insider knowledge, authority, privileged access to mass media) to influence people's opinions and preferences. Further, both policy orientation and public opinion can evolve in a similar direction in reaction to external circumstances, without there being a relation of causality between the two (Burstein, 2010; Eulau and Karps, 1977; Page, 2002).

A third limitation of the standard conceptions of responsiveness is their narrow analytical scope. Because the concept of responsiveness is derived from the normative idea that policy makers in democracies *should* track the preferences and interests of citizens, it focuses on the dyadic relationship between "citizens" and "policy makers", while treating other variables involved in policy making as either favorable or unfavorable external conditions. This analytical angle is adequate for research endeavors concerned with discussing and testing responsiveness as a normative criterion of democracy. However, as the next section attempts to show, much can be gained in terms of analytical scope and accuracy by freeing the concept of responsiveness from its normative background, and redefining its meaning to capture the identification and processing of problems by political systems in relation to other functional spheres of modern society.

A systems-theoretical approach to political responsiveness

Problems and responsiveness in modern society

While in standard democratic theory, political systems are – or ought to be – responsive to the preferences, demands and interests of citizens, we propose that the responsiveness of political systems is directed toward socially constructed problems, whose conditions of formation and factual content cannot be reduced to aggregates of individual preferences, demands and interests.

Problems can be defined quite ordinarily as the *observation* of discrepancies between two or more states of things, where one of these states is considered by the observer as being more desirable than the other(s). Individual human beings experience problems by observing such discrepancies in their thought processes, for instance when noticing a feeling of hunger that departs from the preferred state of feeling satiated, or when envisaging the possibility that a political party they dislike could win the next election. But for problems to exist in society, they must be observed and thereby constructed in the communicative processes of social systems. Following Luhmann's theory of society, notwithstanding extensive coupling and interaction between the individual and the social construction of problems, the two must be clearly distinguished. Problems constructed by social systems only need to be described to exist – they do not necessarily match the problems experienced by individuals. In fact, many of the problems constructed in society are attributed to individuals and groups by social systems "from the

outside", such as when climate science informed humanity there was a significant problem of global warming (Weart, 2008), or when, in February 2019, the Trump administration informed the American public about a major security threat at the border with Mexico (Baker, 2019).

Responsiveness involves not only the identification of problems by social systems, but also the processing of these problems in ways that are directed toward solutions. Once an actual or potential problem has been described, any social system that connects to this description and attempts to prevent, remove or minimize the occurrence of non-preferred states is responding to this problem – whatever the success of the attempted solution. Responsiveness is always selective. Social systems identify certain problems but not others, and then only address some of the problems described in their communicative processes. Moreover, the relationships between problems and attempted solutions are not necessarily linear. Problems can be formulated to justify the application of pre-existing solutions, whose true purposes might be to address problems other than those referenced in the official narrative (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972; Kingdon, 2013 [1984]). For example, Trump's description of a national emergency was used to justify the construction of a wall at the Mexican border, but the described emergency was in fact directed mostly toward problems pertaining to the power relations between the Republican president and the Democrat majority in the Congress.

In modern society, the selective identification and processing of problems is conditioned in several respects by the primacy of functional differentiation. To begin with, the functional specialization of social systems focuses their attention on types of problems that correspond to their core function. For instance, because modern science specializes in the production of "truth", it is primarily responsive to problems of uncertainty, which it selectively constructs and addresses through scientific research and the publication of knowledge. The modern economy is foremost responsive to problems of needs, which it constructs and addresses via monetary transactions (investing, lending, trading, purchasing, etc.) that sustain the production and distribution of commodities. In the case of modern polities, their responsiveness focuses mainly on problems related to the self-organization of human communities, such as defining the conditions of membership, setting formal rules of behavior, policing, gathering common resources (taxation) and investing them for collective purposes (education, health, infrastructure, etc.), and managing relations with other political communities (foreign affairs). Polities construct problems by selectively identifying actual or potential problematic situations that are relevant insofar as they can be addressed through collectively binding decisions – decisions whose binding character within the community

rests ultimately on the power of the state to sanction deviance via the legitimate use of physical violence.[1]

That societal problems seem to be shared across many function systems might seem to contradict the idea of functional specialization. For instance, the global financial crisis triggered by the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008 was a problem, *inter alia*, for the economy, politics, law, science, and morality. Similarly, climate change concerns all functional spheres of society. However, even in these cases, problems exist in society only as descriptions within given observing systems. For scientific research, a financial crisis or climate change raises problems of scientific knowledge (*e.g.*, dimensions, causes, consequences), which are not the same as the problems that these phenomena present in other spheres: problems of payment/non-payment in the economic sphere, problems of economic or environmental policy-making for polities, problems of esteem and contempt in moral communication, etc.

The autopoietic dynamic of function systems is a further condition of selective responsiveness. Obviously, science does not identify and address every possible scientific "puzzle", but only a subset of possible research questions. Similarly, the modern economy identifies and addresses only a selected range of needs, and political regimes only devise and enforce public policies related to a selection of problems within the community under their rule. A primary driver of these selection processes is the necessity for systems to reproduce the conditions of their own existence (autopoiesis). Scientific research tackles questions with an eye on the development of disciplines, and publications usually conclude by emphasizing that the findings raise new questions and thus call for further investigation. The economy selects needs that are likely to generate monetary added value, so as to regenerate the circulation of money in the system via the payment of wages, interest rates, dividends, taxes, and other disbursements. For political systems, autopoiesis requires first and foremost formulating problems and policies that maintain or enhance the power of the state, so as to regenerate the capacity of the latter to devise and enforce collectively binding decisions in the future (Luhmann, 1988). This systemic necessity overrides both the demands raised by citizens to the state and the possibility for a political elite to rule according to its own preferences.

Furthermore, selective responsiveness is conditioned by the internal structures of social systems. As much as theories and methods direct the attention of science toward certain research questions, and price-making markets orient the

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1 While this section focuses on polities and uses science and the economy to illustrate commonalities with and differences from other function systems, similar *modi* of specialization could be outlined for the other function systems, including law, education, health, the mass media, religion, arts, sports, and morality (insofar as morality can be considered a function system, a contentious theoretical point that is beyond the scope of the present argument).

production and distribution of commodities toward certain needs, the structures of political regimes condition their patterns of responsiveness.[2] For instance, the dynamics of electoral competition in liberal democracies have been found to influence the political construction of problems by contending parties, depending *inter alia* on their respective interests in ideological polarization or ideological consensus-building (Aragonès, Castanheira and Giani, 2015; Dragu and Fan, 2016; Odmalm and Bale, 2015). Another example is the tendency of presidential regimes to favor "urgent" crisis-like problem descriptions, which allow the president – a political role historically rooted in the figure of the monarch – to display her or his ability to lead and safeguard the nation while standing above the petty divisions of party politics (Keeler, 1993). Additional internal structures arising from the vertical and horizontal differentiation of political systems are likely to condition political responsiveness as well, such as the (de)centralization of decision-making, the distribution of thematic competences among ministries, the role of the army in the state, and the degree to which trade unions and non-governmental organizations are integrated into or kept outside policy processes (see chapter 2).

In addition to functional specialization, autopoiesis, and internal structuration, which are all internal features of function systems, interrelationships between the social systems of modern society are key determinants of responsiveness. Paradoxically, the more function systems have gained concrete operational autonomy by gradually differentiating themselves from other meaning contexts of societal communication, the more they have become interdependent (Luhmann, 2013). For instance, the formation of a world system of national constitutional states and the monetization of exchanges of goods and services have disentangled political rule and material possession from the functionally undifferentiated hierarchical structures of feudal Europe. As a result of this differentiation process, modern polities have come to depend on the economy – for instance, to generate sufficient monetary value to fund public expenses through taxation – while the economy depends on polities – for instance, to set up market-enabling institutions such as property rights or central banks, to allow private investments by reducing uncertainty through the pacification and stabilization of social relations, or to decide on public investments that markets need to flourish but cannot realize on their own.

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2   While the examples provided here focus on the structures of national political regimes, transnational and in particular global governance structures also shape patterns of political responsiveness, as illustrated by the way global political institutions (*e.g.*, World Bank, United Nations Environmental Program) have attributed responsibility for ecological problem-solving to national states and structured national environmental policies through the diffusion of policy blueprints (Goldman, 2005; Hironaka, 2014).

This twin historical evolution of operational autonomy and inter-systemic interdependencies requires function systems to be at least somewhat responsive to problems encountered in other functional spheres. For instance, because political systems rely extensively on scientific knowledge to both identify and legitimize policy options, they cannot ignore science's need for resources such as public funding to conduct research. Similarly, because political systems depend on economic growth to extract sufficient resources for their autopoiesis, they cannot ignore the need to adopt policies that sustain rather than burden economic activity. Conversely, scientific research cannot ignore research questions that are relevant for policy making, as it would undermine public funding for research. Nor can scientific research overlook the moral judgments triggered by morally contentious research activities, as moral condemnations could trigger political and legal reactions that would deteriorate the conditions for future scientific research. Economic decisions, such as closing a factory or investing in a new product, cannot fully ignore political problems such as unemployment, public health risks, or pollution, as failing to do so could trigger political dynamics leading to costly political decisions.

The necessity for function systems to be responsive to problems arising in the meaning contexts of other systems leads them to develop their capacity of "second-order observation" – the observation of observation. While first-order observation describes operations whereby social systems observe themselves and their environment as a given factual reality, second-order observation occurs when a social system observes how another system observes reality. For instance, when policy makers develop expertise or seek input from experts to evaluate the economic impacts of a given public policy, the political system observes how it is observed by the economy. A political system can also observe how scientific research impacts the economy, in other words, how the economy "observes" scientific research, so as to devise science policies that promote research projects likely to have positive economic outcomes.

Responsiveness arising from inter-systemic interdependencies and the ability of social systems to reflect on these interdependencies via second-order observation can have several types of consequences. Firstly, it can lead to self-restriction when a system foregoes operations that could disrupt its autopoiesis by disrupting the functioning of other social systems. As a typical example, a government might not address a problem by raising taxes or lowering interest rates to an extent deemed too detrimental to the ability of the economy to generate added value and address needs, because economic deceleration and/or hyperinflation would impede the ability of the regime to sustain itself. Secondly, inter-systemic interdependencies and second-order observation can lead social systems to exert a form of solidarity. For instance, political systems can adopt policies meant to help science, the economy, or any other social system address problems located in these

other spheres of society, with the hope that this solidarity will pay off in political terms. Thirdly, interdependencies and second-order observation can support the development of institutions meant to make a given social system more responsive to societal problems. For instance, political systems, law, morality, science, education and religion have participated in the institutional development of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which is meant to make profit-driven economic processes more responsive to societal problems such as poverty, harsh labor conditions, human rights violations, and ecological degradation (Krichewsky, 2019). The growing institutionalization of "responsive science", which aims to harness scientific research for societal problem-solving beyond the system's autonomous pursuit of scientific "truth", is another example of such phenomena (Matthies, Simon and Torka, 2015).

Gaining a conceptual grasp on such a wide and multifaceted object as the selective identification and processing of problems in modern society requires a level of abstraction and generalization that might be frustrating for any given reader. Nevertheless, the theoretical perspectives on responsiveness outlined above help overcome the shortcomings of standard theories of political responsiveness. The formal institutions of political regimes are likely to influence the extent to which policy making responds to popular demands and preferences articulated in the public sphere. However, the focus of political systems cannot be to identify and satisfy such demands and preferences, which are largely the product of the political systems themselves. In fact, the identification and processing of problems by political systems is conditioned by social structures and processes that extend much beyond aggregates of individual preferences. The following section attempts to further specify the analytical potential of the revisited concept of responsiveness, and to sketch possible lines of research to investigate political regimes from this analytical angle.

Studying political responsiveness:
research perspectives on inclusion, values and time

The systems-theoretical conceptualization of responsiveness invites a shift in focus from the "who" to the "what". Responsiveness is not only about who or whose interests and preferences direct the policy process, but also about what problems political systems identify and address, and what consequences given patterns of responsiveness have for politics and society at large. How do problem formulations emerge in the policy process? Do structural characteristics of political regimes and structural couplings between polities and other functional spheres of society favor certain problem descriptions while making other problem descriptions less likely? How do characteristics of problem formulations condition the policy options envisaged to address these problems, and how do institutionalized

policy options condition the framing of problems in the policy process? Do problems and solutions follow typical "careers" or trajectories within the policy-making structures of political regimes? How do patterns of responsiveness within political regimes retroact on the structural features of these regimes (e.g., the institutional delineation of policy fields) and the institutional arrangements organizing relations between these regimes and other spheres of society?

To investigate these questions, scholars can draw on a rich tradition of research in political sociology regarding how problems are formulated, placed on the agenda of political decision making, and addressed by way of public policy making and policy implementation. Since the 1960s, departing from the functionalist approaches of "social problems" that view problems as ontological dysfunctions of society (*e.g.*, poverty, racial discrimination, criminality, pollution), constructivist approaches have examined how actors collectively produce and promote various – more or less competing – definitions of problems (Blumer, 1971). In this vein, classical studies have identified typical sequences through which individuals and organizations (*e.g.*, professional groups, urban dwellers, users of public services, organized interest groups, companies, NGOs, media outlets, scientific experts, consultants, elected representatives, bureaucrats) *i)* perceive situations as unsatisfactory; *ii)* define and label these situations as politically relevant problems having specific causes, consequences (*e.g.*, victims), and solution prospects; *iii)* work to put these problems and/or solutions on the agenda of policy making; *iv)* contribute to the policy making process (the "politics" of policy making); and *v)* possibly follow up on the implementation of policies to evaluate outcomes and demand adjustments (e.g. Easton, 1965; Jones, 1970; Kingdon, 2013 [1984]).[3]

Three features of this research tradition are particularly relevant for the study of political responsiveness. One is its sociological outlook on political phenomena, which departs from the focus of political science on political institutions. Unlike standard theories of political responsiveness, which focus on institutions such as citizens, elections, parliaments, and federalism, the political sociology of problems accounts for the role of non-political institutions and participants such as professions, interest groups (e.g., associations of "victims"), social movements, and scientific experts. Looking beyond the political sphere is even more important given the development of collaborative governance over the past three decades, because the formulation and processing of problems within these governance

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3   This Anglo-Saxon literature has been received and further developed in several countries, resulting in overlapping research traditions such as the German study of political planning and steering (e.g. Janning and Toens, 2008; Scharpf, 1973; Wenzelburger and Zohlnhöfer, 2015; Willke, 2014) and French studies on public policies and public action (e.g. Boussaguet et al., 2015; Lascoumes and Le Gales, 2007b; Padioleau, 1982; Zittoun, 2013).

structures rests explicitly on the involvement of a variety of public and private actors (Bartley, 2018; Fuchs, 2007; Levi-Faur, 2012; Lievens, 2015).

Another relevant contribution from this research tradition is the emphasis on contingencies in the relations between problems and solutions. Whereas standard views on responsiveness locate "problems" on the side of citizens and "responses" on the side of policy makers, the political sociology of problems and public policies emphasizes the complex and contingent character of relations between problems and solutions. Notwithstanding the heuristic idea of a "policy cycle", which evokes a clear sequence from problem identification to policy evaluation, empirical studies have shown how problems, goals, policy instruments, participating actors and opportunities for decision making meet and interact without following a rigid sequential order (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Kingdon, 2013 [1984]; Lascoumes and Le Gales, 2007a; Zahariadis, 2003).

Finally, while standard perspectives on responsiveness tend to assume a pre-eminence of formal political structures and processes, studies in political sociology have shed light on the role of informal arrangements. For instance, a number of empirical studies have examined the role of policy networks and related interpersonal ties, which "limit participation in the policy process; shape the behaviour of actors through the rules of the game [prevailing in the network]; privilege certain interests; and substitute private government for public accountability" (Rhodes, 2006, p. 436; see also Victor, Montgomery and Lubell, 2016). A collection of studies on informal politics in the European Union, edited by Thomas Christiansen and Simona Piattoni (2004), provide additional examples of discrepancies between the formalized processes of policy making within political institutions on the one hand, and informal exchanges among public office holders as well as between them and other actors (*e.g.*, experts, lobbyists, journalists) on the other hand.

The systems-theoretical revision of the concept of responsiveness can build on and further develop this political sociology of problem construction and policy making in a way that gives more weight to the conditioning of responsiveness by structural features of political regimes. To illustrate the analytical potential of this approach, we briefly focus on three relevant features of political regimes: inclusion structures, value patterns, and temporalities.

As outlined in the first chapter of this book, *political inclusion structures* are defining features of political regimes. By defining "public roles" (*e.g.*, national citizens, users of public services, beneficiaries of social policies, refugees) and "performance roles" (*e.g.*, presidents, ministers, MPs, civil servants), inclusion structures condition membership in a political community and its subgroups, attribute rights and other resources, formulate behavioral expectations, define the categories through which individuals and groups are addressed by the political system, and shape collective identities. Political inclusion structures also insti-

tutionalize "structural couplings" between political systems and other function systems, for instance when citizenship is coupled with inclusion in a religious or ethnic community, or when franchise or social rights are coupled with levels of economic wealth.

Standard approaches to responsiveness cannot study inclusion structures as an independent variable affecting responsiveness because they envisage inclusion as an integral part of responsiveness – indeed, responsiveness is defined as the inclusion of citizens in the policy process through the effective representation of their interests and preferences. Conversely, our revised concept of responsiveness raises the question of how various inclusion structures influence the selective identification and processing of problems in political regimes. For instance, ethnic patronage and other forms of "neo-patrimonialism" might favor descriptions of problems and policy options that support the reproduction of these bases of power, such as the attribution of causes of problems to the behavior of rival ethnic groups, or the selection of policy options that feed clientelistic systems of redistribution of goods (Bayart, 1989; Berman, 1998; Koter, 2016). Similarly, the attribution of political performance roles to religious clerics in theocracies might reinforce the role of religious criteria in the selective identification of problems and policy options (e.g. Abdolmohammadi and Cama, 2015; Brumberg and Farhi, 2016). With regard to public roles, the salience of caste identities in Indian politics illustrates how subdividing a citizenry along ethnic lines can contribute to shaping both the political construction of problems (*e.g.*, as caste injustice) and the selection of policy responses (*e.g.*, the extension of affirmative action programs to new social groups) (Deshpande, 2013; Jaffrelot, 2003; Jodhka, 2015; Michelutti, 2007).

Value patterns are another feature of political regimes with structural effects on political responsiveness. Following Clyde Kluckhohn (1951), values can be defined as conceptions of the desirable. They are the preferred sides of abstract distinctions that are attached to a preference. For instance, the value of freedom can be conceived of as desirable based on a preference for freedom as opposed to subordination or constraint. The value of prosperity can be conceived of as desirable in opposition to poverty. Knowledge is often valued as opposed to ignorance. Solidarity becomes a value by being considered preferable over egoism. Beauty is generally considered desirable as opposed to ugliness. And power can be a value because it is envisaged as better than being dominated and impotent. As emphasized by Nathalie Heinich (2017), these general and abstract values are "autotelic" principles, in the sense that they are their own end. These "value-principles" can be translated into value scales that are used to evaluate objects (things, people, behaviors, states of the world), thereby conferring value to these objects. This social production of value (from value-principles to value-objects) is embedded in cul-

tural value patterns, and it contributes to reproducing and changing these value patterns over time.

While power is a guiding value in the political sphere, inasmuch as it motivates and orients the behavior of participants who compete for the control of political power, other values can also play a structuring role in political systems. Because it is hard to disagree with value-principles (see Luhmann, 1995b), political regimes formally commit to values to legitimize their rule and elicit adherence. For instance, the preamble of the constitution of the Fifth Republic of France underscores the commitment of the regime to human rights; the self-determination of peoples and the sovereignty of nations; the tryptic "liberty, equality, fraternity"; and environmental protection as defined in the Environmental Charter of 2004. Similarly, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union is imbued with commitments to value-principles such as dignity, freedom, equality, solidarity, and justice. Political parties and politicians also make use of value commitments as a semantic device to elicit consensus and adherence among the citizenry. As Luhmann noted, values "provide communication processes with premises for which one can safely assume consensus. Values are safety posts in every political communication, especially in every political speech and controversial political argumentation. They relieve from the necessity to provide information: one does not even need to know the person one is talking with, talking to, or talking about. Surely no one will come and oppose humanity and fairness, freedom, solidarity, security, well-being, democracy, responsibility, rights, justice, and the like" (1977, p. 171, our translation).

Beyond consensual value commitments, values play a role in the political construction of problems and related policy options. Parliamentary debates, cabinet meetings, interviews given by politicians to the mass media, speeches given during demonstrations, and other instances of political communication use value scales embedded in broader cultural value patterns to evaluate things, persons, behaviors and states of the world. For instance, political communication can evaluate the rearmament policies of other states in terms of their significance for *peace* and *security*, immigration flows in terms of *social cohesion*, the composition of corporate boards in terms of *gender equality*, pesticides in terms of their likely impacts on *public health*, and so on. These myriad instances of evaluation contribute directly to the political construction of problems – discrepancies between valued states of things and actual or potential alternative states. In doing so, political communication also contributes to reproducing and changing the cultural value patterns that serve as a basis for these evaluations: Describing the composition of corporate boards as unequal reasserts the value of gender equality while undermining patriarchal value patterns.

Such processes of evaluation can be studied at a micro-sociological level, as in Sophie Schäfer's analysis of the discursive construction of "Muslims" in rela-

tion to values of religious freedom and solidarity in the German parliament (2018). However, it might also be fruitful to examine systematically how features of the value patterns that prevail in democratic or authoritarian regimes, such as their composition, their degree of heterogeneity, or their stability, induce specific patterns of political responsiveness by selectively favoring or hampering value-based problem descriptions and policy options. As argued in chapter 6, not only do democracy and authoritarianism induce different value patterns, but the role of values in the constitution and stabilization of these two types of regimes differs, with likely consequences for responsiveness. For instance, in authoritarian regimes such as ideocracies and theocracies, problems that allow the regime to mobilize the masses in the name of its core ideological or religious values have an advantage. Conversely, the formulation in political terms of problems arising from values such as free speech or multiculturalism are likely to remain confined to small circles of opponents at the fringes of such authoritarian regimes, whose legitimacy is grounded in values of conformity and cultural homogeneity (Backes and Kailitz, 2016).

Finally, the *temporalities of political regimes* are a structural variable relevant to political responsiveness. In standard scholarship on responsiveness, time is an intrinsic parameter akin to reactivity: Responsiveness implies there is a limited time between the expression of a collective preference by citizens and the production of political decisions directed towards the realization of this preference.[4] As mentioned above, studies have also examined how political temporalities related to electoral cycles impact the responsiveness of politicians and political institutions.

This latter research angle connects with other political science examinations of time in politics. As illustrated by a recent volume on political temporalities edited by Guillaume Marrel and Renaud Payre (2018), this literature examines time in three ways. One is the temporality of electoral mandates in competitive democracies, which structures political careers and confronts policy makers with trade-offs between the long-term effectiveness of useful political measures and the short-term rhythm of electoral competition. A second research angle examines the temporality of political action, such as discrepancies between the routinized and synchronized pace of public administrative work on the one hand, and the jolty temporalities of political maneuvering on the other hand. Finally, researchers have investigated time as both a resource and a constraint that political actors manipulate strategically, for instance by forcing issues and policy options onto the political agenda in the name of an "emergency", by playing with the temporality of formal procedures within political institutions, or by advancing or delaying the transmission of information to gain political advantages.

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4   Notably, French political scientists translate "responsiveness" as "*réactivité*".

Notwithstanding their relevance for research on the construction and processing of problems in democratic and authoritarian polities, these three perspectives on time focus on political *action* within the institutional setting of political systems. Understanding how systemic temporalities condition the responsiveness of modern polities requires the use of other theoretical lenses. One theoretical option is provided by Hartmut Rosa's theory of acceleration (2013). In this theory, Rosa analyses the acceleration of temporal structures (rhythms, tempos, durations, sequences) and temporal horizons (conceptions of past, present and future) in classical modern and late modern society.[5] Acceleration arises from a complex "self-propelling circular process" that extends far beyond political action within political institutions (Rosa, 2013, chapters 6-8). The concrete manifestations and effects of this process can be observed at the level of individual actors, whose daily lives and life perspectives are deeply affected by acceleration and the related requirements of synchronization. But acceleration also has far-reaching structural and cultural impacts at the level of function systems and their interrelationships.

With regard to political systems, acceleration in late modernity undermines the modern assumption that national states can steer the course of history within the frames of domestic and international politics. In liberal democracies in particular, the time required for participatory will-formation and deliberative decision-making limits possibilities of acceleration. Conversely, the growing autonomy and global scope of other function systems, such as the economy, science, law, and mass media, induces a plurality of systems-specific temporalities, whose structures depart from political temporalities. As a result of the desynchronization of politics and other function systems, "the role of politics as a social *pacesetter* that was undisputed in classical modernity has been lost [...]. *Time within politics* is becoming thoroughly disorganized and confused (*durcheinander*), and this is also bringing the classical modern conception of the role of *politics in time* [that is in history] to the brink of collapse." (Rosa, 2013, p. 262)

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5 Up to this point, our argument has focused on the responsiveness of *modern* polities, understood as national political regimes that are regional segments of a world political system that also entails global governance structures (see for instance Stichweh, 2002). With the discussion of Hartmut Rosa (2013) and other references below, in particular Ulrich Beck (2016), modern politics and society are further divided in two periods, namely the development of *classical* modern world society (from the last decades of the 18th century to the late 1970s) and the subsequent (ongoing) period of *late* modernity. The latter is characterized mainly by an accentuation of core modern phenomena, such as functional differentiation, individualization, globalization, and societal acceleration, resulting in structural and cultural changes that disrupt the classical modern order. For instance, the growing autonomy and global integration of function systems weaken nation states' modern project of organizing society within national frames, while the rise of global ecological risks such as climate change undermine the modern ideology of progress.

The rapid pace of other function systems, whose developments and problem-solving expectations often exceed the temporality of political responsiveness, puts democratic regimes under pressure: Decisions can be obsolete by the time they are made; the accelerated inflow of decisions to be made shortens the time available for each decision-making sequence; and as "the limit of the foreseeable moves steadily closer to the present [...] temporary and provisional solutions take the place of larger political design" (Rosa, 2013, p. 264). To relieve this pressure, democracies are tempted to whittle down time-consuming democratic processes such as participation, deliberation, accountability, and the judicial control of public administration. Political developments such as New Public Management, the transfer of regulatory functions from the purview of elected representatives to technocratic agencies (see chapter 5), the increasing role of self-regulation as an alternative to "command and control" systems, governments' use of executive orders as an alternative to parliamentary law-making, and the partial integration of emergency rules within constitutional normality, can be understood as attempts by democratic regimes to keep up with the accelerated pace of late modern society. While these examples suggest trade-offs between synchronized responsiveness and democracy, democratic institutions such as parliaments have also tried to adapt to the new requirements of acceleration, as Ulf Bohmann and Henning Laux (2018) showed in their ethnographic study of synchronization in the German Bundestag. These temporal and structural developments are likely to have far-reaching impacts on both the conditions of political responsiveness and the internal properties (the informational substance) of the problems and policies constructed by (late) modern political regimes.

The question of the informational substance of political problems and policies can be further examined in terms of temporal horizons. Following Luhmann (1995a; 2012 & 2013), social systems operate only in the actuality of the present, as their constitutive communicative *events* are over as soon as they occur. However, social systems also create time by generating in the present information that refers to past or future realities. Conceptualized by Luhmann as the temporal dimension of meaning, this communicative imagination of pasts (memories) and futures (expectations) is a significant aspect of political responsiveness. In particular, while economic operations (investing, saving, pricing, purchasing) are stimulated and partly directed by various imaginations of the future (Beckert, 2016), the policy process is stimulated and partly directed by various anticipations of upcoming problems and likely policy outcomes. As the case of environmental politics illustrates, the role that future outlooks play in the ongoing dynamics of political responsiveness is conditioned by structural features of political regimes. For instance, Germany's multi-party system with free and fair elections has allowed the green party *Bündnis90/Die Grünen* to promote future-oriented concerns for inter-generational climate justice in German politics (Radkau, 2011), while

populist rule under Donald Trump in the United States and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil make the policy process more sensitive to concerns for short-term economic opportunities than to scenarios of a grand climate catastrophe (Bomberg, 2017; Escobar, 2018; Ferrante and Fearnside, 2019). As these contrasting examples make clear, while climate change and other global risks of late modern society recast politics within "cosmopolitical" horizons of references and coordinates of action, which are imbued with imaginations of a threatening future for humanity (Beck, 2016), national regimes remain key to the way these global risks are problematized and addressed in world politics.

Conclusion

Since it was introduced in democratic theory by Pennock in 1952, the concept of responsiveness has had a successful career as a normative criterion of democracy: Unlike regimes where the government controls the political agenda and dictates collectively binding decisions, liberal democracies are expected to ensure that governments translate popular wishes and interests into public policies. Despite its success, this conception of responsiveness has triggered ongoing discussions within and around the field of democratic theories, especially regarding the proper meaning and operationalization of this analytical concept.

Building on Luhmann's theory of social systems, the present chapter reviewed and extended relevant critiques of the standard conception of responsiveness, in particular critiques voiced by the constructivist branch of political theory (Disch, 2012; Fossen, 2019; Saward, 2006). While the latter remain attached to normative concerns about democratic representation within the schematic distinction between state and society, Luhmann's theory of functional differentiation drops that schema. The theory conceives of modern polities as national segments of a self-referential political system that operates within a worldwide system of communication ordered primarily along functional lines. Notwithstanding significant structural couplings and interplay with its social and bio-physical environments, the political system has no direct access to these environments: The political system can only respond to its own *representation* of its environments, which it constructs internally by way of external reference. As Thomas Fossen (2019) remarked in a recent article on constructivist approaches to political representation, representation in politics does not only mean acting for someone in the capacity of a representative (representative agency), but also "*portraying-something-as-something*" (p. 824), in other words, constructing descriptions of reality (representation-as). This emphasis on the two dimensions of representation allows a shift in focus from the responsiveness of polities to their citizenry – according to *whose* preferences and interests does the government act – to the responsiveness of democratic and

non-democratic polities to society's problems – *what* problems do polities identify and address beyond the purely self-referential problem of their own autopoiesis.

This reconceptualization of political responsiveness solves at least some of the problems posed by the standard interpretation of the term. First, the answer to the question of what polities respond to is clear: socially constructed problems. The answer to the question of what responsiveness entails is also clear: the production of collectively binding decisions intended to address these problems, that is, to reduce the observed discrepancies between a preferred state of things and actual or potential alternative states of things. Second, the reconceptualization of responsiveness extends its analytical scope beyond the normative evaluation of political systems. In fact, the approach we propose even moves beyond the widespread normative assumption that democratic problem-solving contributes to modern progress. While states accumulate and legitimize power by demonstrating efforts to identify and solve collective problems for the greater good, no normative viewpoint in society allows the discourse of progress to be considered an objective fact – all the more in late modernity, when negative side effects of progress such as climate change increasingly appear as main effects that threaten the sustainability of the modern episode (Beck, 2016).

The research perspectives brought about by this theoretical move connect, in many respects, with established traditions of political sociology, in particular the sociology of public problems and the sociology of public policies. However, while these research traditions tend to focus on the detailed conditions of problem construction and public policy making, the systemic approach outlined in this chapter offers opportunities to embed such studies within the broader analysis of classical and late modern society. To illustrate the analytical potential of this more systemic approach, we described a few research perspectives on how the inclusion structures, value patterns, and temporalities of modern society can condition the political production and processing of collective problems. This research agenda is well-suited to comparative studies on responsiveness between political regimes, either within or across policy fields; between national polities and transnational or global governance structures; or between political responsiveness and the responsiveness of other functional systems such as science, law, or the economy.

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