

# Issue avoidance and blame attribution in leader speeches during the economic crisis in Europe \*

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June 18, 2016

## **Abstract**

How do governments avoid blame for the state of the economy and budget cuts? In this paper we investigate prime ministers' communication strategies during the economic crisis in Europe. We argue that in a context where the electoral risk is high but at the same time governments' policy options are severely limited, prime ministers will use specific communication strategies to mitigate the electoral costs. We analyze two strategies, issue avoidance and blame attribution, based on more than 3000 speeches of prime ministers in Germany, Great Britain Greece and Spain between 2007 and 2015. We find no evidence for issue avoidance. If anything, prime ministers tend to emphasize economic issues when the economy is bad. Furthermore, we find some evidence that blame shifting towards other countries takes place.

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\*Paper prepared for 6th Annual General Conference of the European Political Science Association, 23-25 June 2016, Brussels.

## **Introduction**

The recent economic crisis, which has turned into a debt crisis in Europe, has considerably affected the citizens' life in many European countries. Harsh budget cuts implied cuts in education and social services, and the level of unemployment rose quite dramatically in many countries. The crisis has not only affected the poor but also threatened the standards of living of the comparably well off. Consequently, a growing literature has studied the political consequences of the economic crisis on the individual level, that is, whether voters punished their governments for the bad economy and the austerity measures. While some results are contradictory, it indeed seems to be the case that economic voting has become more important since the beginning of the crisis (Palmer and Whitten, 2011; Rattinger and Steinbrecher, 2011; Anderson and Hecht, 2012; Marsh and Mikhaylov, 2012; Nezi, 2012; Bartels, 2014; Fraile and Lewis-Beck, 2014; Kriesi, 2014; Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck, 2014), and that economic issues have become more important for voters (Singer 2008; Häusermann et al. 2016). However, we still know little about how government parties have dealt with the imminent danger of losing the election. How do they communicate with the public when their room for maneuver in economic policy is severely constrained? In this paper we study how economic hardship influences the blame-avoidance strategies of prime ministers in their public speeches.

This article makes three contributions: first, we discuss different possible strategic options for governments in times of crisis, second, we show how these can be identified based on the speeches of prime ministers and third, we analyze the determinants of these strategies.

## **Governments' public communication strategies in times of economic crisis**

During the economic crisis, government parties face pressure from two sides: from the voters, who are against the budget cuts, on the one side, and from the supranational institutions—the EU the IMF and the ECB – on the other. They are forced to implement budget cuts – especially in the countries that received bail-out packages – while there is growing popular opposition against the austerity measures. How do governments deal with these tensions? How do they mitigate the electoral risk related to harsh budget cuts?

In what follows, we discuss several communication strategies of governments we expect to

find during the economic crisis. The general assumptions are, first, that governments seek re-election and, second, that they anticipate electoral punishment for the bad economy and for the austerity measures and adjust their public communication accordingly.

## **Distraction**

Based on the idea that elections are referendums about the governments' activities (Key, 1966; Fiorina, 1981), the theory of retrospective economic voting predicts that voters will punish governments for bad economic performance (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007; Van der Brug, Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2007; Duch and Stevenson, 2008). It was argued that contrary to other policy areas the economy is of concern for all voters and therefore relevant for their voting decision (Alvarez, Nagler and Willette, 2000).

In recent modifications of the theory of retrospective economic voting, scholars have highlighted the fact that economic voting primarily takes place when the economy is important to voters (Fournier, Blais, Nadeau, Gidengil and Nevitte, 2003; Bélanger and Meguid, 2008; Singer, 2011). The economy is not always a salient issue for all voters at all times. It primarily matters when voters are personally affected by economic downturns and well informed about the economy (Gomez and Wilson, 2006; Anderson, 2007). According to research on media priming, voters are better informed when an issue is in the news (Krosnick and Kinder, 1990; Miller and Krosnick, 2000), because a wide public debate enhances access and the quality of information. Moreover, a public debate does not only increase the knowledge of citizens about the economy, it also affects its salience, since issues become important when they are easily accessible (Krosnick, 1990).

During economic downturns, the salience of economic issues increases and voters are more likely to base their voting decisions on the economy (Singer 2011, 2013). Therefore, governments would have an incentive to avoid economic issues in order not to widen the public discussion about the economy and shift the focus on other policy problems where they have more political leeway. More generally, issue ownership theory argues that parties selectively emphasize issues on which they have a comparative advantage on and downplay others for which they do not have a good reputation (Petrocik, 1996; Bélanger and Meguid, 2008; Budge and Farlie, 1981).

Based on these arguments, we expect prime ministers to use a strategy of issue avoidance in their speeches:

**Strategy 1: Issue avoidance.** Avoid economic issues and shift the attention to other issues in which the government can claim credit.

### **Blame attribution**

In his influential article, Weaver (1986) argued that there is a negativity bias in politics: politicians are more likely to avoid blame than to claim political credit for policies. As a consequence, politicians shy away from policies with potential electoral risk. Pierson (1996) applied this argument to the question why governments shy away from retrenching the welfare state. An entire field of research has since examined the question why some governments can implement unpopular reforms without electoral repercussions and others can not. In other words, what explains the presence of unpopular reforms (Vis and Van Kersbergen, 2007). The main argument is that governments use strategies to avoid the blame for unpopular policies and get away with it.

Many of the discussed blame-avoidance strategies concern the way policies are enacted (or not), such as compensation strategies (Pierson 1994) or agency strategies (i.e., delegation of responsibility) (Weaver, 1986; Hood, 2002). However, in a context of crisis, these policy strategies are not an option, since all governments are forced to implement budget cuts in one way or another. In these “negative-sum” policy situations (Weaver, 1986) “presentational strategies” (Hood, 2002) become important. According to McGraw (1990), the arguments to minimize or avoid blame can broadly be divided into *excuses* – reference to mitigating circumstances – and *justifications* – attempts to reframe the outcome e.g. by emphasizing its future benefits. One type of excuse discussed by McGraw (1990) is “diffusion of responsibility”, which can be horizontal or vertical. In the context of the eurocrisis, this is an interesting concept. Many of the decisions are taken on the supra-national level, thus governments can easily attribute the blame to the supra-national institutions, and we expect them to make use of this strategy frequently in their public communication. However, diffusion of responsibility can also be horizontal, that is, governments would want to blame economically weaker countries or other economic institutions, such as banks, for the crisis. In short, we expect prime ministers to use a strategy of blame attribution in their speeches.

**Strategy 2: Blame attribution:** Shift the blame for unpopular policies and/or bad economy to supra-national levels or other countries.

We expect both strategies, blame avoidance and blame attribution to be most important the more severe the impact of the crisis. However, some governments will have more support from the public than others, for several reasons. When a government is more popular, it is less risky to discuss economic issues, therefore we expect to find less issue avoidance in these situations. Likewise, when a government has more public support, it is less important to find a scapegoat for the austerity policies or the bad economy in general, so we expect the prime ministers to make less use of blame attribution strategies in their speeches if they are popular.

## Data and methods

### Selection of documents

For the analyses in this paper, we use the EUSpeech dataset (Schumacher, Schoonvelde, Dahiya and De Vries, 2016; Schumacher, Schoonvelde, Traber, Dahiya and De Vries, 2016). EUSpeech consists of all publicly available speeches from the main European institutions plus the IMF and the speeches of prime ministers—or president in the case of France—of 10 EU countries for the period after 1 January 2007.<sup>1</sup> We focus on prime ministers’ speeches in four countries: Germany, Greece, Spain and Great Britain between 2007 and 2015. The number of speeches per country varies between 484 and 1784 (see Table 1).

In order to be able to compare speeches in different languages, we used *Google Translate* to translate all non-English texts to English, as this was the language of the majority of speeches. At this point, we have not yet extensively checked the quality of the translated texts for use in automated text analysis but a manual check of some texts did indeed look promising. We used the Google Website translate plugin to translate the original speeches to English, and in turn, these translated webpages/speeches were scraped.

Table 1: Overview of speeches per country or institution

<b>Country</b>	<b>N Speeches total</b>	<b>N Speeches english</b>	<b>N Speakers</b>	<b>Period</b>	<b>N Topics</b>
Germany	580	1	1	10/2008 - 11/2015	55
Greece	484	94	4	10/2009 - 11/2015	50
Spain	1764	768	2	01/2007 - 11/2015	65
United Kingdom	787	787	3	03/2007 - 11/2015	45

<sup>1</sup>These countries are Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Netherlands, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom, Poland and Portugal.

## Method and variables

We identify the first strategy, issue avoidance, by means of topic modeling. To measure the extent to which prime ministers address economic topics in their speeches, we ran LDA topic models (Blei et al 2003)<sup>2</sup> for each country separately. In a first step, we decided on the ideal number of topics in each speech corpus based on the “harmonic means”-measure of the model fit.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 shows the harmonic means for different numbers of topics (steps of 5). We selected the number of topics at the first inflection point (dashed line). In a second step we ran the models again with the selected number of topics for each country and saved the estimated word probabilities for each topic as well as topic probabilities for each speech. The third step involved a manual coding procedure. By looking at the words with the highest probabilities, we decided for each topic whether it was an economic topic or not. Finally, we calculated the economic topic probability for each speech by adding the topic probabilities of all economic topics in a speech. According to this measure, issue avoidance occurs when the economic topic probability is low.

To identify the second strategy, blame attribution, we did a ”keyword-in-context” analysis (*quanteda*-package in R; Benoit et al. 2016), that is, we searched for different keywords and saved the words prior and post these keywords in a separate corpus. On each of these contexts (i.e. each sentence where the keyword occurred) we then performed a sentiment analysis and aggregated the sentiment towards each blame unit to speech level. We investigate four blame units: the EU, the Troika, Banks, Germany and Greece. According to this measure, blame attribution occurs when the sentiment towards one of the institutions or countries is highly negative in a speech.

We use two measures for the state of the economy: GDP growth and change in unemployment (both in the quarter previous to speech date; sources: Eurostat and OECD). Moreover, we collected polling data (mostly from Wikipedia) for the prime ministers’ party and calculated the polls’ averages per month. As a measure for public support, we use the change in the polls in the month previous to the speech date (i.e.  $t-2$  to  $t-1$ ), as well as the difference between

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<sup>2</sup>Latent dirichlet allocation (LDA) is a generative topic model to find latent topics in a text corpus. It assumes that each document contains various topics, and words in the document are generated from those topics. All documents contain a particular set of topics, but the proportion of each topic in each document is different. We used the *topicmodels*-package in R (Grün and Hornik 2011) to estimate the models.

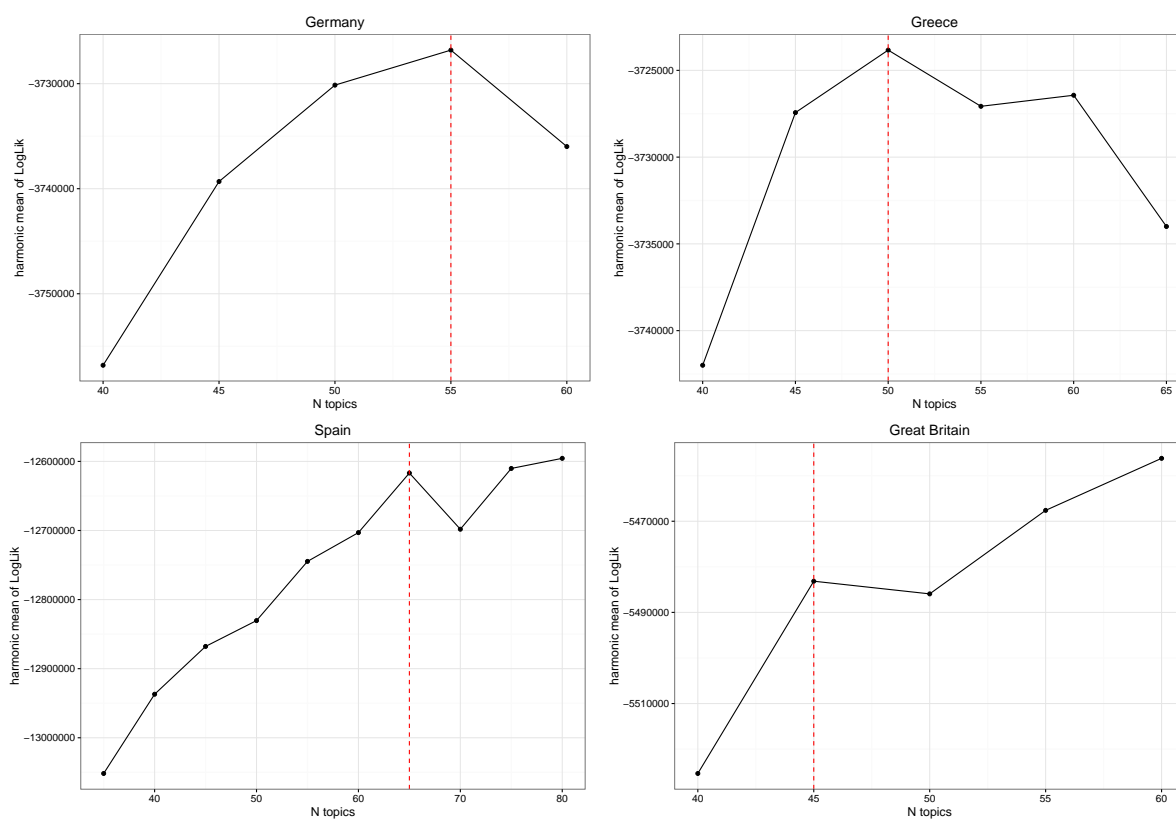
<sup>3</sup>As suggested by (Grün and Hornik 2011) we use the harmonic mean estimator developed by Newton and Raftery (1994), which is based on the log-likelihood of different posterior draws. Although some scholars have expressed reservations about the method (e.g. Wallach 2009), because of its ease of implementation and computational efficiency, we use the harmonic mean method for evaluation.

the polls (month prior to the speech) and the vote share at the previous election. Finally, we calculated the time to the next election, that is the difference in days between the speech date and the next election.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

Variable	n	mean	sd	min	max
Economic topic probability	3453	0.17	0.14	0.01	0.69
Change in unemployment	3453	0.25	0.68	-1	2.8
GDP growth	3453	-0.07	0.92	-3.44	2.03
Change polls	3453	-0.19	1.64	-11.78	13.3
Polls minus election results	3453	-5.48	6.57	-23.25	12.2
Time to election	3453	23.55	15.26	0.07	60.87

Figure 1: Harmonic means of models with different number of topics

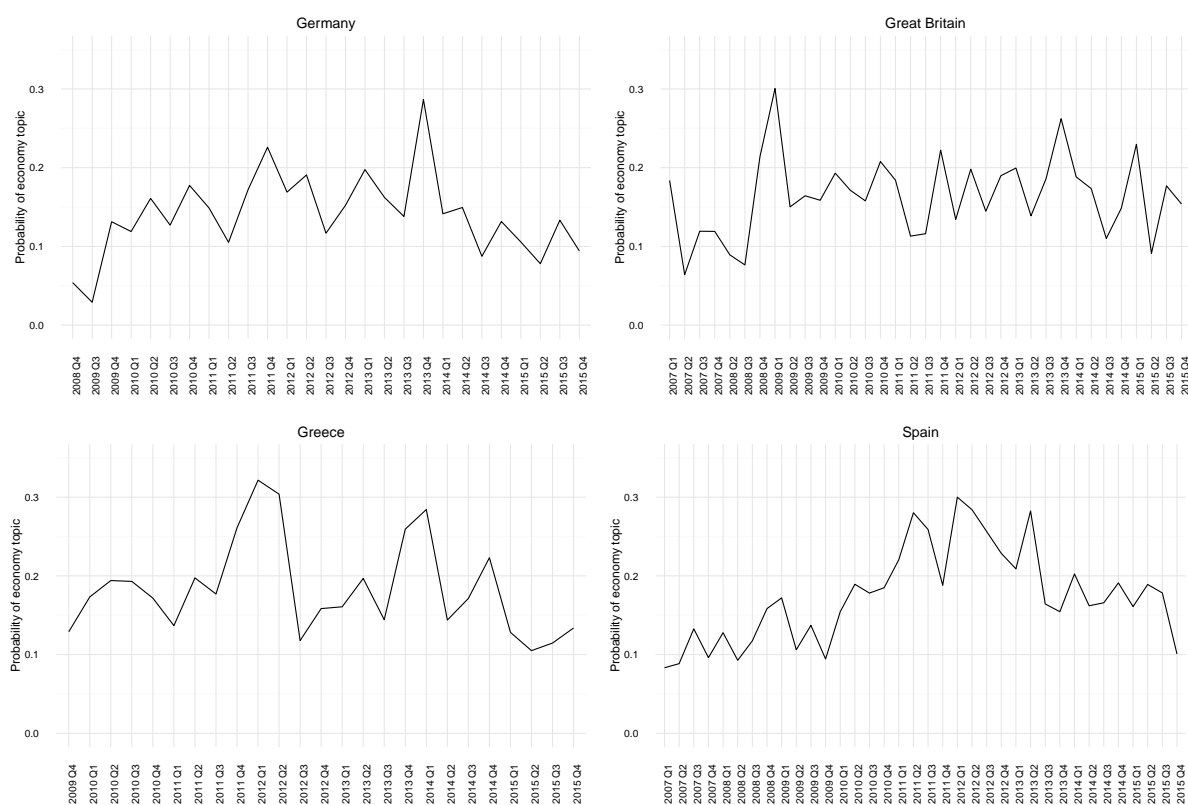


# Analysis

## Issue avoidance

Figure 2 shows the topic probabilities for the economic topic over time. More specifically, we plot the mean probabilities of all speeches within a specific quarter. In Germany, the highest probabilities are in the fourth quarter of 2013, while in Great Britain the peak probability is right at the beginning of the financial crisis, at the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009, with another peak also in 2013. In Greece the periods where the economic topic was most prominent in prime minister speeches are at the beginning of 2012—when the second bailout program was ratified—and again at the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014. These peaks in all three countries at the end of 2013 might be related to the ECB’s cut of interest rates in November 2013, although we would need a more detailed analysis of the speeches to support this conclusion. In the speeches of Spanish prime ministers, finally, the economic topic probability increases steadily after 2009 and decreases after 2013. The peak probabilities are in the first and second quarter of 2012, when the rescue package for the Spanish banks was decided.

Figure 2: Economic topic probabilities 2007-2015





In a next step, we look at different determinants of economic speech. According to the first strategy—distraction—governments would avoid the issue in times of crisis and instead focus on other policy issues on which they have more political leeway. The first regression model in Table 3 investigates this effect of the economy on speech topics. The dependent variable is the probability of the economic topic per speech, which varies between 0.01 and 0.7. We include two indicators for the state of the economy: the GDP growth and the change in unemployment rate, both in the quarter previous to the speech. GDP growth has a significant effect on the speech content but not in the direction we would expect if prime ministers would use a distraction strategy. To the contrary, the worse the economy, the *more* government leaders talk about it, so it seems. In support of the descriptive plots in Figure 2, the regression results show that in times of negative growth, the attention to economic issues is higher.

However, whether prime ministers can address a sensitive issue in their speeches also depends on public support. We have argued that if the voters believe that the government is not responsible for the bad economy, or are in general favorable of the government manages the situation, a distraction strategy is not needed. To test this hypothesis, we include the change in polls (at previous month) and the difference between polls and election results (also lagged) into the statistical models. While the change in polls apparently does not affect economic topic probability, the coefficient for difference between the polls and the last election result is negative. This means that the less popular a government, the *more* the prime minister will talk about the economy, in other words, the less a prime minister has to lose the more he or she will address the sensitive economic topics. Finally, we include an additional variable in model 2 that measures time to the election in days (significant on 10% level). Apparently prime ministers are more likely to talk about economic issues the closer the election date.

In model 2 we include intercepts for countries. Economic topic probability is higher in Great Britain and Spain, compared to Germany. In addition, both models include separate intercepts for years. The results indicate that the topic probabilities for the economic topic increase until 2012 and decrease afterwards.

In sum, we do not find evidence of an issue avoidance strategy—rather prime ministers address economic topics more the worse the state of the economy. And they seem to become even more fearless when their parties are losing public support. We now turn to our analysis of the second strategy: blame attribution.

Table 3: Determinants of economic topic probability

	Model 1	Model 2
(Intercept)	0.122*** (0.013)	0.089*** (0.016)
Change in Unemployment	-0.004 (0.006)	-0.009 (0.007)
GDP Growth	-0.012*** (0.004)	-0.021*** (0.004)
Change in Polls	0.001 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)
Polls minus Election Results	-0.002*** (0.000)	-0.000 (0.001)
Time to Election	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
2008	0.004 (0.016)	0.013 (0.016)
2009	0.013 (0.016)	0.025 (0.017)
2010	0.044** (0.015)	0.071*** (0.016)
2011	0.046** (0.015)	0.079*** (0.017)
2012	0.086*** (0.016)	0.104*** (0.016)
2013	0.057*** (0.015)	0.084*** (0.016)
2014	0.028 (0.015)	0.061*** (0.017)
2015	0.003 (0.015)	0.038* (0.016)
Great Britain		0.035*** (0.008)
Greece		-0.006 (0.011)
Spain		0.043*** (0.010)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.055	0.063
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.051	0.059
Num. obs.	3453	3453
RMSE	0.135	0.135

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$

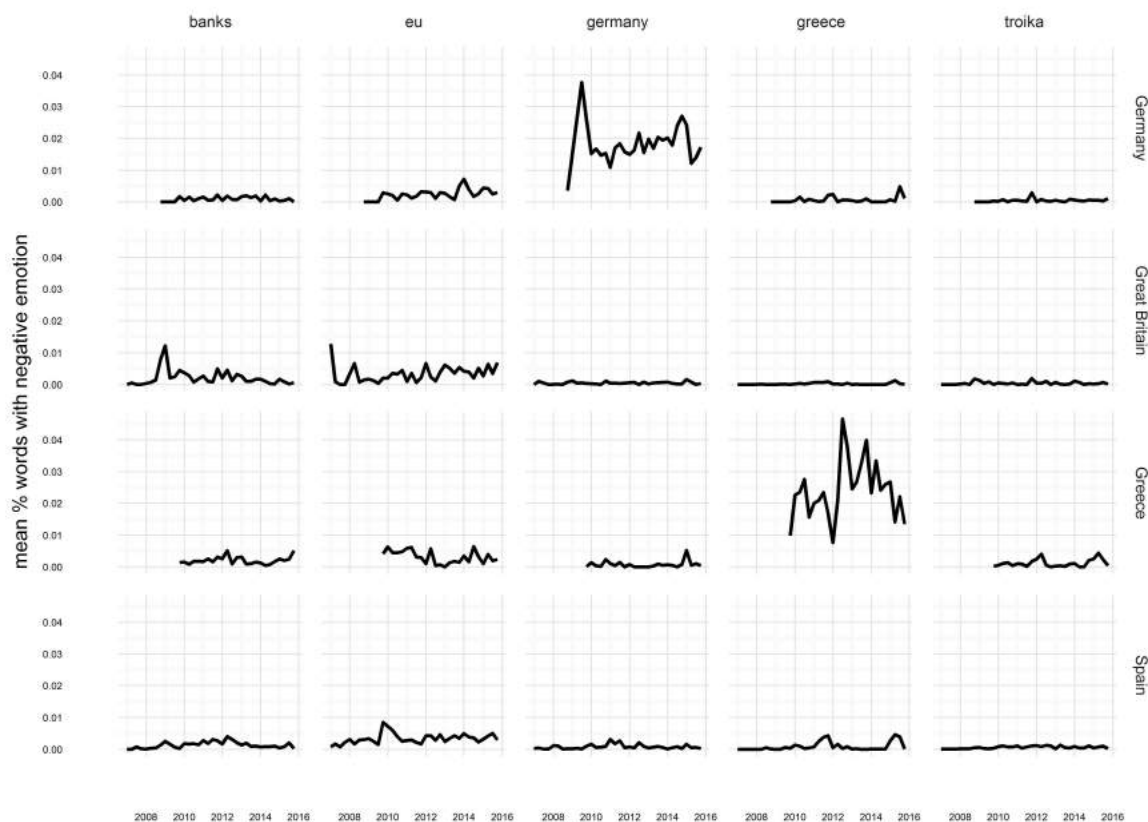
## Blame attribution

We expect governments during the crisis to use a blame attribution strategy in their communication with the public. More specifically we assume that they will try to shift the blame for the state of the economy as well as the unpopular austerity measures either to the supra-national level or to other European countries that supposedly caused the crisis.

Figure 3 plots the negative sentiment for four blame units: Banks, the EU, the troika, Germany and Greece over time. The y-axis presents the mean negative sentiment by quarter of all speeches in the respective countries. As discussed in the methods section, for each speech we performed sentiment analysis on the words directly around the respective blame units. If five of such words contain negative sentiment, the document score is 5 divided by the total number of words in the speech and then multiplied by 100. Because we only select few words arounds the blame unit, the sentiment score per speech is very low. Also, in many speeches banks, the EU, the troika, Germany and Greece are not mentioned. Figure 3 demonstrates that banks were especially blamed in Great Britain, particularly in 2009. The EU also receives much blame from Great Britain, and briefly in Spain too (2010). There is a peak of blame towards Germany by the Greek prime minister in 2015, otherwise there is little negative sentiment about Germany. At the same time, the German prime minister's speeches contain more negative sentiment about Greece. The troika is mentioned negatively by the Greeks, but not so much by the other countries. Finally, negative sentiment about Germany by the German prime minister, and negative sentiment about Greece by the Greek prime minister is presented in Figure 3, but will be ignored in the remainder of this paper. In these cases the prime minister is not blaming another actor, but rather is gloomy about the country's prospects.

Models 1-5 report the regression effects of (1) negative sentiment on banks, (2) negative sentiment on the EU, (3) negative sentiment on Germany, (4) negative sentiment on Greece and (5) negative sentiment on the Troika. The results differ per model. Negative sentiment about banks increases when GDP growth is negative and when the prime minister's party is gaining in the polls. We find similar effects for negative sentiment about the Troika. Negative sentiment about the EU increases when the prime minister's party is losing in the polls, and negative sentiment about Germany increases when the prime ministers' party is gaining. Negative sentiment about Greece increases when the difference between the polls and the previous election result is negative – that is, when the prime minister's party loses support compared to the previous election. Negative sentiment about Greece is also higher when unemployment rises.

Figure 3: Negative sentiment by country and blame unit



We also ran regression models in which we interacted respectively polls and GDP, and polls and unemployment. Figure 4 reports the marginal effects of the interaction between polls and GDP growth. We find that the effect of GDP growth on sentiment about banks is negative, when the prime minister's party is gaining in the polls. So when the economy does well, a party set to win votes is unlikely to blame banks. But, if the economy is shrinking, a party set to win votes becomes more likely to blame banks (see Figure 4a). We find the same result for blaming Germany. There, however, GDP growth is also significant in combination with negative poll change values. This implies that if the prime minister is losing in the polls, GDP growth makes it more likely that the prime minister will blame Germany in her speeches (see Figure 4c). The other interaction effects are insignificant.

Now we move to the interaction effects between polls and unemployment (see 5. Except, for blaming Greece, all interaction effects are insignificant. Figure 5e demonstrates that negative sentiment regarding Greece is high when unemployment is rising and the prime minister's party

Table 4: Statistical models blame attribution

	Banks	EU	Germany	Greece	Troika
Change in Unemployment	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)	-0.000* (0.000)
GDP growth	-0.001*** (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)
Change in Polls	0.000* (0.000)	-0.000* (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
Polls minus Election Results	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Time to election	-0.000*** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
2007	0.000 (0.000)	0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
2008	0.001 (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.001** (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)
2009	0.002*** (0.000)	0.002** (0.001)	0.001*** (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)
2010	0.001*** (0.000)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)
2011	0.001** (0.000)	0.002*** (0.001)	0.002*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)
2012	0.002*** (0.000)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.002*** (0.000)	0.001* (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)
2013	0.001* (0.000)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.001*** (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	0.001** (0.000)
2014	0.001 (0.000)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.001** (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)
2015	0.001 (0.000)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.002*** (0.000)	0.002*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)
Great Britain	0.002*** (0.000)	0.000 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Germany	0.001* (0.000)	-0.001 (0.001)		0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Spain	0.001* (0.000)	0.001 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.000)		0.000 (0.000)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.152	0.193	0.063	0.088	0.115
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.148	0.189	0.058	0.083	0.111
Num. obs.	3501	3501	2921	3095	3501
RMSE	0.005	0.007	0.003	0.003	0.002

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$

is losing in the polls. This effect decreases the better the prime minister's party is doing in the polls.

Do prime ministers engage in blame attribution? Do they shift the blame of a bad economy to other countries or supranational levels? First, we do not find evidence for blame shifting towards the supranational level. Unemployment and GDP growth have no effect on negative sentiment about the EU and the results for blame attribution to the Troika are somewhat contradictory. Further, the interaction effects with poll data are insignificant. Second, when we look at blaming other countries (Germany and Greece), we find that GDP growth has a positive effect (more blame) when the prime minister's party is losing votes in the polls, and it has a negative effect when the pm's party is gaining in the polls. More unemployment is also associated with more blame direct towards Greece, especially when the prime minister's party is losing in the polls. In sum, we find some evidence that blame shifting towards other countries takes place.

## **Conclusion**

How do governments avoid blame for the state of the economy and budget cuts? In this paper we investigated prime ministers' communication strategies during the economic crisis in Europe. We analyzed two strategies, issue avoidance and blame attribution, in more than 3000 speeches of prime ministers in Germany, Great Britain Greece and Spain between 2007 and 2015. We find no evidence for issue avoidance. If anything, prime ministers tend to emphasize economic issues when the economy is in the doldrums, and when elections come closer. With regards to blame attribution, we find some evidence that blame shifting towards other countries takes place.

Figure 4: Interaction effects between polls and gdp growth

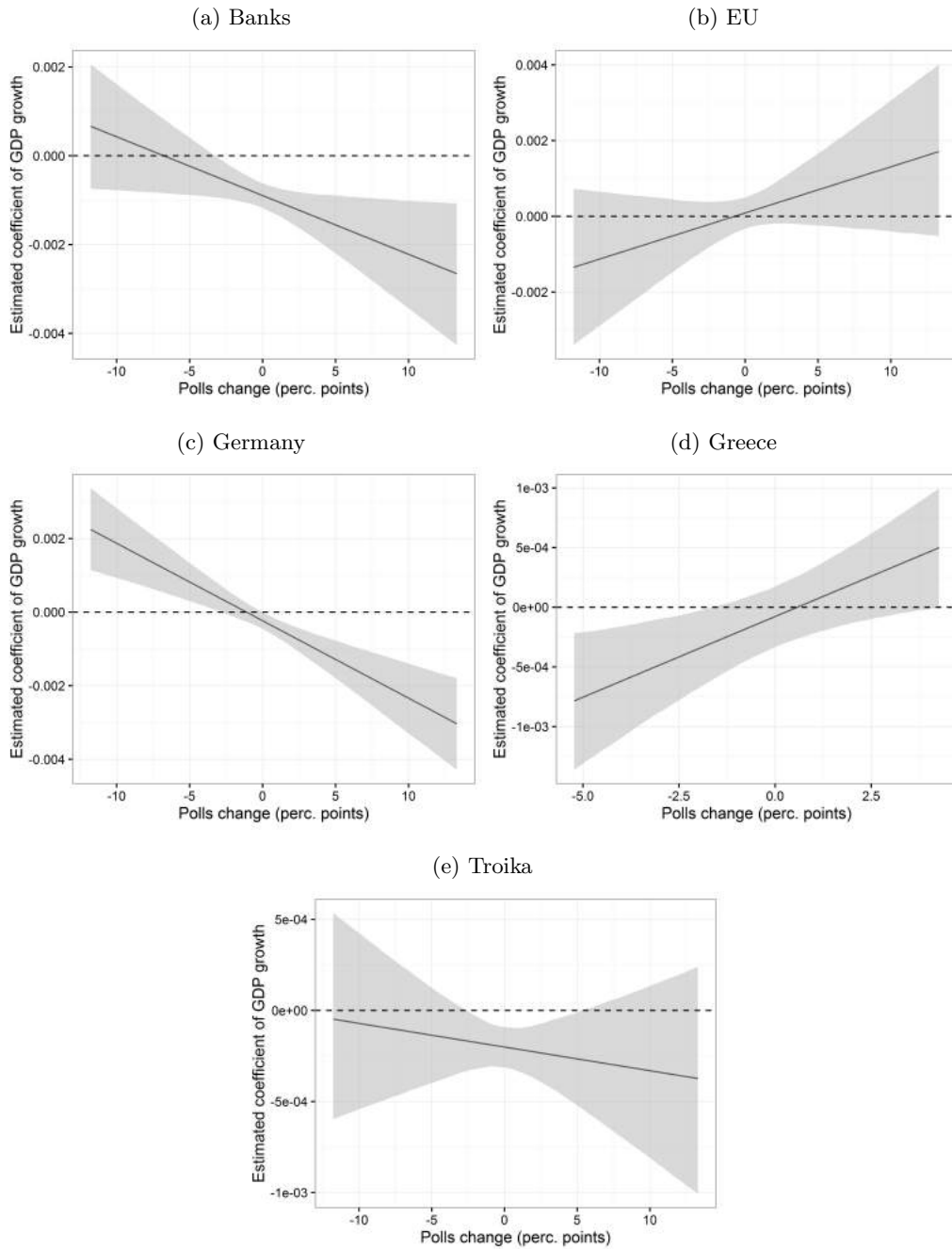
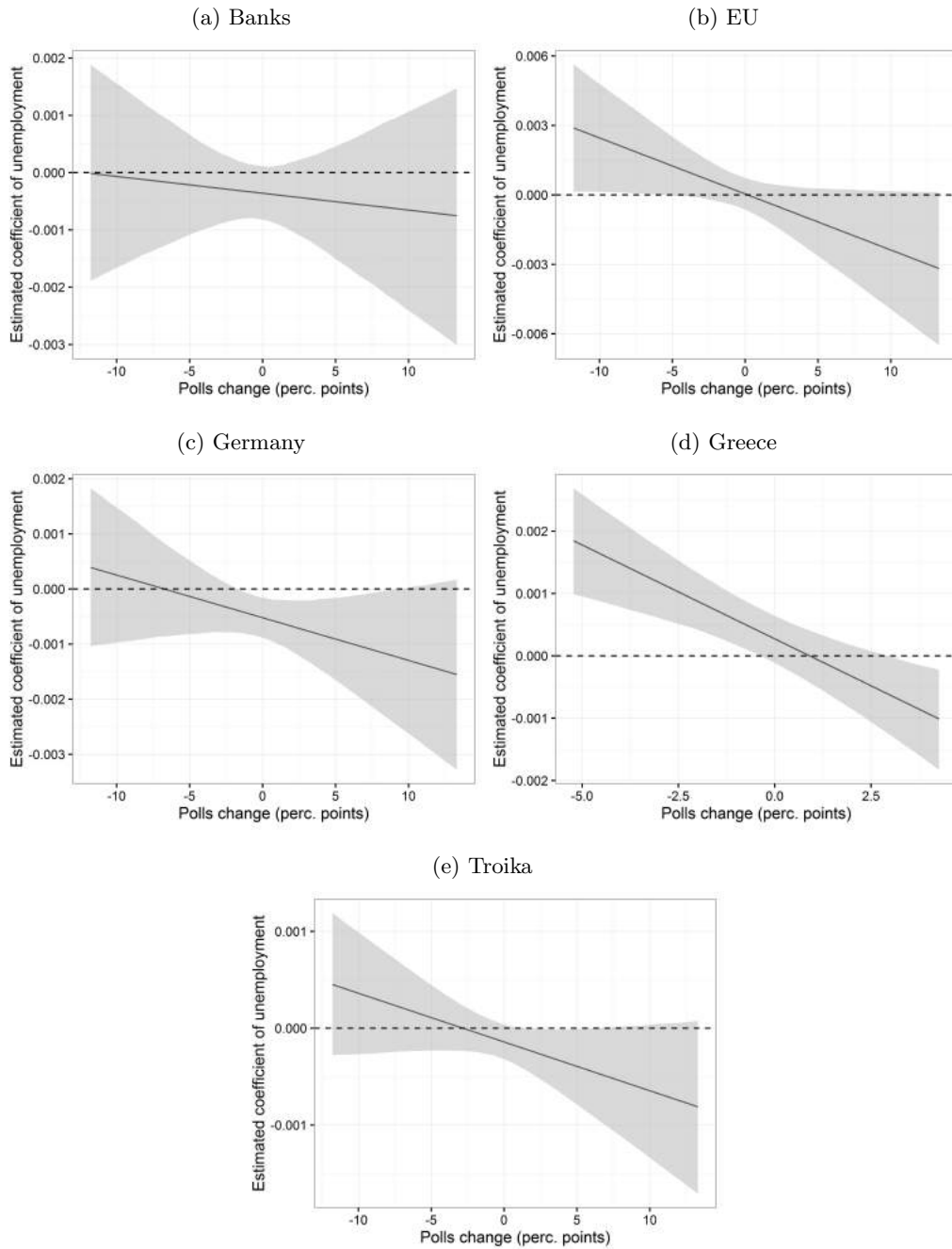


Figure 5: Interaction effects between polls and unemployment change





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