Motivation
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Methods
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Results
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Conclusion
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Losing Touch: The Rhetorical Cost of Governing

Presentation at EPSA 2022

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June 23, 2022

Motivation
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Methods
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Conclusion
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Governments lose votes over time.

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»few facts are so robust in political economy« (Nannestad & Paldam 2002)

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Governments lose votes over time.

»few facts are so robust in political economy« (Nannestad & Paldam 2002)

»the law of shrinking support« (Cuzan 2015)

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Governments lose votes over time.

»few facts are so robust in political economy« (Nannestad & Paldam 2002)

»the law of shrinking support« (Cuzan 2015)

»one of the most well-established findings in political science« (Thesen et al. 2020)

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Average costs of governing

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Average costs of governing

- from ParlGov, retrieve all party-level election results for 37 continuous democracies since 1989

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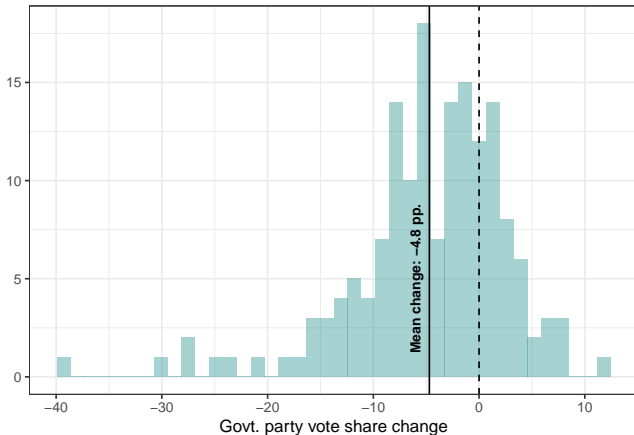○○○

Conclusion
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Average costs of governing

- from ParlGov, retrieve all party-level election results for 37 continuous democracies since 1989

- for each election t, calculate change in govt. support $t \rightarrow t+1$

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Average costs of governing

- from ParlGov, retrieve all party-level election results for 37 continuous democracies since 1989

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Average costs of governing

- from ParlGov, retrieve all party-level election results for 37 continuous democracies since 1989

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Why?

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Why?

- *coalition of minorities*: govt.s amass groups of disappointed voters

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Why?

- *coalition of minorities*: govt.s amass groups of disappointed voters
- *policy misrepresentation*: govt.s strategically drift away from median voter

Motivation
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Why?

- *coalition of minorities*: govt.s amass groups of disappointed voters
- *policy misrepresentation*: govt.s strategically drift away from median voter
- *accumulation of bad news*: negative media coverage of govt. accumulates

Motivation
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Why?

- *coalition of minorities*: govt.s amass groups of disappointed voters
- *policy misrepresentation*: govt.s strategically drift away from median voter
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- (etc.)

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A missing explanation

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A missing explanation

- frequent allegation: elites in govt.
  are 'out of touch' with regular
  people

A missing explanation

- frequent allegation: elites in govt. are 'out of touch' with regular people
- heart of populist critiques of representative democracy

A missing explanation

- frequent allegation: elites in govt. are 'out of touch' with regular people
- heart of populist critiques of representative democracy
- existing explanations fail to account for the appeal of this critique

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A novel mechanism

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A novel mechanism

- voters value rhetorical clarity

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A novel mechanism

- voters value rhetorical clarity
- ⇝ signal of warmth, competence

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A novel mechanism

- voters value rhetorical clarity
- ⤳ signal of warmth, competence
- in response, elected officials maximize clarity

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A novel mechanism

- voters value rhetorical clarity
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- in response, elected officials maximize clarity
- but: functional demands of govt. constrain ability of govt. members to speak clearly

Motivation
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A novel mechanism

- voters value rhetorical clarity
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- mix of formal constraints (e.g., introducing legislation) and substantive constraints (more hedges, nuance)

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- implication: when in govt., elected officials speak less clearly

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A novel mechanism

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"the rhetorical cost of governing"

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Data

Data

- empirical setting: Denmark's *Folketing*

Data

- empirical setting: Denmark's *Folketing*
- from *ParlSpeech V2*, obtain all speeches 1997-2018

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Data

- empirical setting: Denmark's *Folketing*
- from *ParlSpeech V2*, obtain all speeches 1997-2018
- from Folketinget's public database, obtain speeches 2018-2021

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Data

- empirical setting: Denmark's *Folketing*
- from *ParlSpeech V2*, obtain all speeches 1997-2018
- from Folketinget's public database, obtain speeches 2018-2021
- to homogenize speech length, break long speeches into paragraph-like chunks

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- → panel of 819 legislators and ∼1.5M paragraphs

Data

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- from Folketinget's public database, obtain speeches 2018-2021
- to homogenize speech length, break long speeches into paragraph-like chunks
- → panel of 819 legislators and ∼1.5M paragraphs
- full record of govt. membership scraped from Prime Minister's Office website

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Measuring rhetorical clarity

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Measuring rhetorical clarity

- measure 1: standard Nordic-language readability index (LIX)

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Measuring rhetorical clarity

- measure 1: standard Nordic-language readability index (LIX)
- ⤳ weighted avg. of sentence length + prop. of long words

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Measuring rhetorical clarity

- measure 1: standard Nordic-language readability index (LIX)
- ⤳ weighted avg. of sentence length + prop. of long words
- weakness: LIX ignores word features other than length

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Measuring rhetorical clarity

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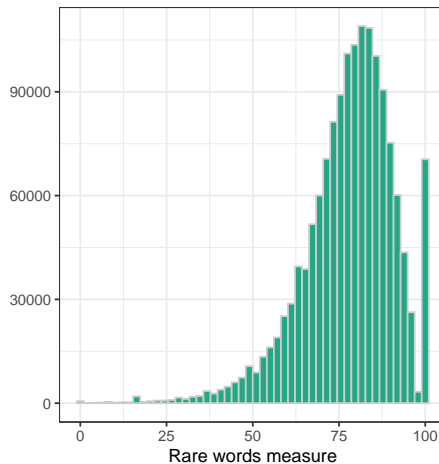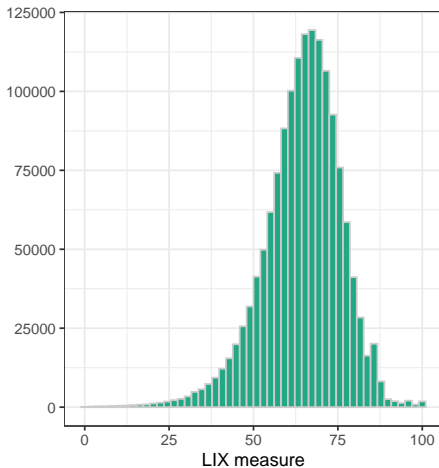- measure 2: proportion of rare words

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Measuring rhetorical clarity

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- weakness: LIX ignores word features other than length
- measure 2: proportion of rare words
- ⤳ proportion of lemmas not among top 10,000 lemmas

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Measuring rhetorical clarity

- measure 1: standard Nordic-language readability index (LIX)
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- weakness: LIX ignores word features other than length
- measure 2: proportion of rare words
- ⤳ proportion of lemmas not among top 10,000 lemmas
- to ease interpretation, reverse measures so high values → high clarity

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Distributions of clarity measures

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Validation

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Validation

- present combinations of sample of 240 texts to representative sample of 500 respondents in a paired choice task

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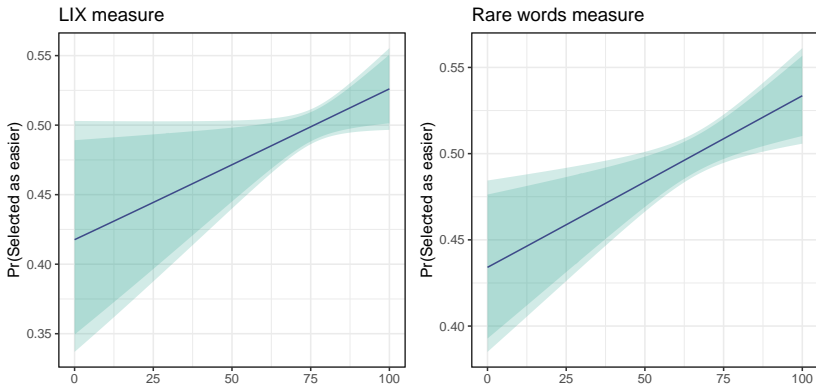Methods
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Validation

- present combinations of sample of 240 texts to representative sample of 500 respondents in a paired choice task
- *which of these two texts is easier to understand?*

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Results
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Conclusion
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- present combinations of sample of 240 texts to representative sample of 500 respondents in a paired choice task
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Validation

- present combinations of sample of 240 texts to representative sample of 500 respondents in a paired choice task
- *which of these two texts is easier to understand?*

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Model specification

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Model specification

for each DV, three specifications:

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Model specification

for each DV, three specifications:

1. *between-legislator*: regress clarity on govt. membership

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Model specification

for each DV, three specifications:

1. *between-legislator*: regress clarity on govt. membership
2. *within-legislator*: + legislator and time FE

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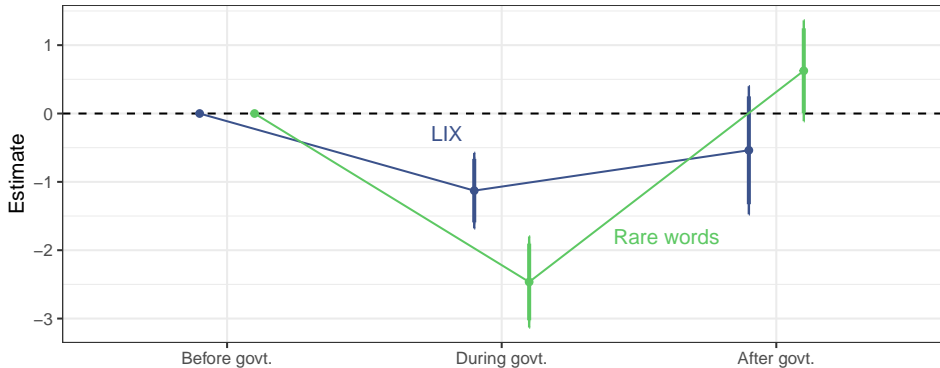○○○

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Model specification

for each DV, three specifications:

1. *between-legislator*: regress clarity on govt. membership
2. *within-legislator*: + legislator and time FE
3. + covariates

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	Clarity (LIX measure)			Clarity (rare words measure)		
Govt. member	-1.0**	-0.77***	-0.77***	-2.0***	-2.4***	-2.4***
	(0.39)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.37)	(0.30)	(0.30)
Seniority			0.75***			0.007
			(0.20)			(0.20)
Speaker+Year FE		Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
N	1,486,662	1,486,662	1,486,662	1,486,662	1,486,662	1,486,662
R^2	0.001	0.054	0.054	0.003	0.046	0.046

Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1

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when legislators leave govt., clarity reverts back to pre-govt. level

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effect remains when considering debates w/o legislative agenda

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effect remains when considering debates w/o legislative agenda

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Conclusion

- legislators incur a rhetorical cost of government in terms of reduced clarity

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Conclusion

- legislators incur a rhetorical cost of government in terms of reduced clarity
- empirical results: legislators speak less clearly when in govt.

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Conclusion

- legislators incur a rhetorical cost of government in terms of reduced clarity
- empirical results: legislators speak less clearly when in govt.
- consistent with role constraints mechanism, clarity reverts post-govt.

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Conclusion

- legislators incur a rhetorical cost of government in terms of reduced clarity
- empirical results: legislators speak less clearly when in govt.
- consistent with role constraints mechanism, clarity reverts post-govt.
- effect not likely to be driven by formal constraints

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Conclusion

- legislators incur a rhetorical cost of government in terms of reduced clarity
- empirical results: legislators speak less clearly when in govt.
- consistent with role constraints mechanism, clarity reverts post-govt.
- effect not likely to be driven by formal constraints
- adds to our understanding of costs of governing and 'opposition advantage'

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Conclusion

- legislators incur a rhetorical cost of government in terms of reduced clarity
- empirical results: legislators speak less clearly when in govt.
- consistent with role constraints mechanism, clarity reverts post-govt.
- effect not likely to be driven by formal constraints
- adds to our understanding of costs of governing and 'opposition advantage'
- next steps: directly estimate effect of rhetorical clarity on electoral support

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Losing Touch: The Rhetorical Cost of Governing

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