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Hans Lueders

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Evidence from Petitions
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Hans Lueders

Department of Political Science, Stanford University.
hlueders@stanford.edu

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Abstract

Contested elections are usually seen as preconditions for constituent responsiveness. This paper shows that even uncontested elections can create incentives for dictators to respond to and address citizen demands. I argue that autocratic governments engage in cycles of responsiveness to assure citizens of their competence before uncontested elections and ensure that high popular support mitigates the short-term destabilizing effects that elections can have. Using a unique dataset of petitions to the government of the former German Democratic Republic, I show that response times to petitions were up to 31 percent shorter before elections, and that success rates were up to 63.6 percent higher. While extant research on responsiveness in autocracies usually highlights the incentives of local officials, my results are driven by the central government. The paper furthers our understanding of electoral mobilization in closed regimes and contributes to an emerging research agenda on responsiveness and accountability in autocracies.

Keywords

closed regimes; uncontested elections; electoral cycles; citizen complaints; responsiveness; German Democratic Republic

1 Introduction

Competitive multiparty elections are a hallmark of democratic governance. Because they incentivize office-seeking incumbents to represent and cater to their constituents' interests, they establish an “electoral connection” between citizen demands and political outcomes (Mayhew, 1987). Consequently, the presence of free and fair elections is widely regarded as the single most important characteristic of democratic governance, which is why it lies at the core of most modern definitions of democracy (Schumpeter, 1950; Dahl, 1971; Geddes et al., 2014).

Accordingly, contestation is often seen as a precondition for responsiveness and accountability (Powell, 2004; Shmuel, 2020). This is why extant scholarship agrees that only some authoritarian elections are able to generate responsiveness. While competition in autocracies between multiple candidates for the same seat can lead candidates to invest heavily in the provision of services to their constituents (Lust-Okar, 2006, 2008; Magaloni, 2006; Blaydes, 2011), it is scholarly consensus that elections do not incentivize political elites to respond to their constituents if these elections are uncontested (Brender and Drazen, 2005; Pepinsky, 2007; Veiga et al., 2017; Shmuel, 2020).

This paper challenges this conventional understanding of authoritarian elections. The focus is on uncontested elections in “closed autocracies,”¹ where the only choice voters have is whether or not to support the regime’s handpicked candidates. I demonstrate that, despite this lack of contestation, uncontested elections can still generate an “electoral connection” between voters and the government.

I propose that governments in closed regimes improve responsiveness to citizen demands before elections in an effort to raise public support. High popular support reduces the risk of elite challengers or opposition mobilization at a time when autocratic regimes are vulnerable. It also ensures high turnout, which is needed for uncontested elections to perform their informational and signaling functions (Bahry and Silver, 1990; Magaloni, 2006; Malesky and Schuler, 2011; Geddes et al., 2018). Responsiveness to citizen grievances is a useful tool to increase regime satisfaction and participation propensities as it demonstrates the regime’s competence (Gorgulu et al., 2020), increases subjective political efficacy (Sjoberg et al., 2017; Dipoppa and Grossman, 2020), and increases trust in the government (Truex, 2017).

Evidence for the argument that uncontested elections generate cycles of responsiveness comes from an analysis of the petition system of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Like other closed regimes—such as the Soviet Union (Dimitrov, 2014a), Iraq (Walter, 2018), China (Luehrmann, 2003; Distelhorst and Hou, 2017), or Saudi Arabia (Pan, 2020, p. 166)—the GDR encouraged citizens to report their grievances directly to the government. East Germans made extensive use of this system. They wrote between half (Class et al., 2018) and one million (Mühlberg, 2004) petitions every year, equaling up to 8.1 percent of the East German electorate. As the breadth of topics covered in

¹Closed autocracies impose tight restrictions on political and civil rights: there is no political competition and no freedom of speech, association, and assembly (Schedler, 2006).

these petitions demonstrates, they were not unlike 311 calls² (Christensen and Ejdemyr, 2020), pothole complaints (Burnett and Kogan, 2016), or “FixMyStreet” requests (Sjoberg et al., 2017; Dipoppa and Grossman, 2020) in democracies. And, just like in democracies, the petitions were answered faster before elections.

Analyzing a unique dataset of petitions submitted to the central government of the GDR between 1978 and 1990, I show that average response time was 22 to 31 percent shorter in the three months before elections, decreasing the time between receipt and response by more than one week. Petitions were also more likely to be successful before elections. The probability of success rose by up to 63.6 percent relative to an average success rate of 14.3 percent. To assure citizens of its competence, the regime was particularly responsive to petitions containing a direct criticism of the government. The main driver of this effect was the central government; petitions answered by central government officials saw a particularly strong decrease in response time before elections.

I use my data to rule out several alternative explanations. First, I show that differences in petition volume or topic are unlikely to drive my results. There is little evidence that East Germans submitted more or different petitions before elections, or that the regime strategically selected petitions it could answer easily. Controlling for petition topic has no impact on my findings. Second, the results cannot be explained by bureaucratic turnover: petitions to the central government were answered more quickly before elections regardless of whether the election impacted the composition of the responding central government body. Third, there is no evidence that government officials attempted to artificially deflate response times before elections: there is no effect of elections on the number of days between the dates petitions were written and received.

My work makes multiple contributions to the scholarship on responsiveness in closed regimes (Manion, 2015; Truex, 2016). I show that uncontested elections can serve as a powerful incentive for responsiveness in closed autocracies. This result calls into question existing assumptions about the unresponsiveness of closed autocracies and the absence of electoral business cycles in these regimes (e.g., Powell 2004; Brender and Drazen 2005; Pepinsky 2007; Veiga et al. 2017; Shmuel 2020). It also expands on past work on responsiveness in closed regimes, usually considering non-electoral incentives, such as informal institutions (Tsai, 2007), political connections (Tsai and Xu, 2018), co-ethnicity (Distelhorst and Hou, 2014), threats to contact upper-level officials (Chen et al., 2016), threats of collective action (Distelhorst and Hou, 2017), or threats of economic disruption (Hilbig et al., 2021). Moreover, I emphasize that responsiveness can be driven by the central government. This identifies an important yet little-acknowledged driver of responsiveness, as the existing literature usually explains responsiveness with local bureaucrats’ desire to rise up in the bureaucracy (Chen et al., 2016; Distelhorst and Hou, 2017; Jee, 2021), win local elections (Martinez-Bravo et al., 2020), or preserve their social standing

²311 calls refer to the telephone number 3-1-1, which provides residents in many communities in the United States and Canada access to local services.

Table 1: Parliamentary election results in select closed autocracies

Country	Regime Party / Electoral Alliance	Year	Turnout	Vote share
Cuba	Committees for the Defense of the Revolution	2018	85.65%	94.42%
Laos	Lao Front for National Construction	2016	97.94%	unknown
North Korea	Democratic Front for the Reunification of Korea	2019	99.99%	unknown
Vietnam	Vietnamese Fatherland Front	2016	99.35%	unknown
Benin	People’s Revolutionary Party of Benin	1984	93.15%	98.10%
Cambodia	National United Front of Kampuchea	1976	98.00%	unknown
Cape Verde	African Party for the Independence of Cape Verde	1985	68.80%	94.00%
Guinea	Democratic Party of Guinea – African Democratic Rally	1980	95.69%	99.80%
Madagascar	National Front for the Defense of the Revolution	1989	74.60%	97.29%
Romania	Front of Democracy and Socialist Unity	1985	99.90%	97.73%
South Yemen	Yemeni Socialist Party	1978	91.27%	99.87%

Source: [Inter-Parliamentary Union \(2020\)](#).

([Tsai, 2007](#)). Lastly, I show that responsiveness can lead to tangible improvements in citizens’ livelihoods. This finding builds on extant work on responsiveness in democracies and autocracies, which mainly asks whether officials respond to petitions, but has by and large not considered the substantive consequences of responsiveness ([Distelhorst and Hou, 2014](#); [Chen et al., 2016](#); [Distelhorst and Hou, 2017](#); [Christensen and Ejdemyr, 2020](#); [Dipoppa and Grossman, 2020](#)).

2 Electoral Responsiveness in Closed Autocracies

2.1 Elections in closed regimes

Most autocracies today conduct regular elections for national office. Elections are also routinely held in closed regimes, where they often take the form of referenda: the only choice voters have is whether or not to support the government’s handpicked candidates. Such *uncontested elections* are carefully-orchestrated mass events. Widespread voter mobilization and intimidation, coupled with electoral manipulation, ensure a result that bolsters the government’s claim that it enjoys undivided popular support: regimes ranging from Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam today to Cambodia, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Romania, or South Yemen in the past routinely reported that they achieved near-unanimous support on election day. According to official results, few voters stay home, and even fewer vote against the government (Table 1).

Despite near-unanimous popular support on paper, uncontested elections can constitute moments of regime vulnerability. I argue that autocratic governments seek to secure high popular support before elections to minimize two election-related threats to their survival.

First, high popular support can counteract the destabilizing effects of elections. The probability of autocratic breakdown is higher around elections as elections represent focal points for opposition coordination ([Knutsen et al., 2017](#)). A worse-than-expected result tells citizens that support for the government is lower than it claims ([Magaloni and Kricheli, 2010](#); [Cheibub and Hays, 2015](#)), which

can encourage dissatisfied citizens to join an opposition movement (Kuran, 1991). At the same time, elections can motivate citizens to participate in various forms of collective action, further raising the probability of anti-regime mobilization (Baldwin and Mvukiyehe, 2015; Fearon et al., 2015). Elections pose additional risks because they offer opportunities for splits in the ruling coalition (Magaloni, 2006). High citizen support for the regime can reduce these risks: if support is high, few citizens would be willing to participate in contentious collective action, join uprisings, or support elite challengers.

Second, strong popular support is needed for elections to perform their core functions (Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; Geddes et al., 2018). With the outcome a foregone conclusion, uncontested elections have no bearing on who governs. Still, they provide the dictator with *information* about public support (Zaslavsky and Brym, 1978). Abstention or a vote against the regime are usually seen as dissent, such that elections help identify local pockets of opposition (Karklings, 1986; Bahry and Silver, 1990). Uncontested elections further allow the regime to *monitor* local officials and learn about their ability to mobilize voters in their jurisdiction, which can impact promotion decisions (Malesky and Schuler, 2011, 2013; Geddes et al., 2018). Lastly, successful mass mobilization demonstrates the regime's capacity to control the population. This *signal of invincibility* deters challengers (Magaloni, 2006; Magaloni and Kricheli, 2010; Geddes et al., 2018).

High turnout is crucial for these functions. If turnout is low, elections cannot credibly signal invincibility and may invite regime challengers or encourage anti-regime mobilization. Moreover, low turnout makes it difficult to distinguish true regime critics from voters who stayed home out of convenience.

Coercion and fraud alone are insufficient to achieve high turnout. If citizens are forced to vote, dictators remain unsure about their true level of support (Wintrobe, 1998). If the election result is fabricated, the government gains little information about regime opposition or the competence of local officials. A large gap between true and reported turnout further undermines the credibility of the regime's claim to unanimous popular support, and elections lose their deterrent effects. Moreover, both coercion and fraud are costly (Pepinsky, 2007). Repression before elections can increase the risk of popular protest afterwards (Hafner-Burton et al., 2016), while "stolen elections" can facilitate revolutionary collective action (Tucker, 2007; Kuntz and Thompson, 2009). Norms of international election monitoring have further raised the likelihood that fraud is detected and punished internationally (Hyde, 2011).

Instead, uncontested elections perform their functions best if popular support is high enough that most voters turn out voluntarily: witnessing one's peers going to the polls seemingly out of their own volition creates the illusion that popular support is high, leading most regime critics to believe that a rebellion would be futile. Moreover, if turnout is high, only strong opponents remain at home, which facilitates dissident identification.

2.2 Electoral cycles of responsiveness

I propose that improved responsiveness to citizen demands in the lead-up to elections can generate public support at a time when the regime is vulnerable. Citizen demands are usually channeled through petition systems. Petition systems offer citizens a legal avenue through which they can report their grievances to the government. In the aggregate, petitions serve as “barometer of public opinion” (Dimitrov, 2014b) because they allow the government to identify and address causes of citizen dissatisfaction (Dimitrov, 2017). Petitions are similar to 311 calls (Christensen and Ejdemyr, 2020), pothole complaints (Burnett and Kogan, 2016), or “FixMyStreet” requests (Sjoberg et al., 2017; Dipoppa and Grossman, 2020) in democracies in that they draw the government’s attention to citizens’ everyday grievances. They are an ideal mechanism to raise public support as petitions allow the regime to prove its *competence*.

Responsiveness to petitions can take two forms, both of which raise government approval. It can be part of “performative governance”—that is, “the state’s theatrical deployment of visual, verbal, and gestural symbols to foster an impression of good governance before an audience of citizens” (Ding, 2020, p. 5-6). Here, the government responds to citizens’ concern without resolving them, for example by acknowledging citizens’ grievances or providing an explanation for why the government is unable to help. Such responsiveness can improve citizens’ subjective political efficacy, making them more likely to engage with the government in the future (Sjoberg et al., 2017; Dipoppa and Grossman, 2020). It can also increase popular trust and regime satisfaction, especially in contexts where citizens’ expectations about political access are low (Truex, 2017).

Responsiveness can also mean that an issue was resolved (“substantive responsiveness”). Because petitions contain everyday grievances, they reveal citizens’ expectations about what the government ought to deliver. Actually delivering on these expectations raises citizen approval (Gorgulu et al., 2020), an effect augmented by the resulting tangible improvements in citizens’ livelihoods (Dickson et al., 2016; Cho et al., 2019; Guriev and Treisman, 2020; Hilbig et al., 2021). Moreover, substantive responsiveness reassures citizens of the regime’s ability to meet their demands and reminds them of the implicit bargain many authoritarian governments strike with their citizens (Dimitrov, 2014b): the government delivers socio-economic progress in return for popular acquiescence (Dale, 2005).

Local and central government officials alike have powerful incentives to improve responsiveness before elections because both are reliant on strong public support. Local officials need popular support to mobilize as many voters as possible and thus deliver the best possible election outcome in their jurisdiction. Here, local officials improve responsiveness to demonstrate their competence to the central government in an effort to advance their careers (Chen et al., 2016; Distelhorst and Hou, 2017; Jee, 2021). The central government, in turn, needs strong support to discourage political challengers and ensure a turnout rate high enough for elections to perform their functions. Here, the central govern-

ment improves responsiveness to demonstrate its competence to voters in an effort to ensure political survival.

2.3 Summary

In sum, I propose that uncontested elections offer powerful incentives for both local and central government officials to improve responsiveness to citizen demands before elections. To minimize a regime's vulnerability around elections, and ensure that elections perform their functions, an autocratic regime relies on high popular support before elections. Responsiveness to citizen complaints can increase support by assuring voters of the regime's competence and ability to deliver on citizens' expectations. The implication is that even uncontested elections can generate an "electoral connection" (Mayhew, 1987).

This argument implies that electoral cycles are not confined to regimes with contested elections. Scholars of electoral cycles tend to believe that electoral cycles do not exist in authoritarian regimes that hold uncontested elections (Brender and Drazen, 2005; Veiga et al., 2017; Shmuel, 2020). For instance, Block et al. (2003, p. 447) argue that "in a world with no uncertainty, the models predict no [electoral] cycles" Similarly, "in dictatorships where elections are merely a show of force [...] this model should not apply" (Pepinsky, 2007, p. 141). However, there is little evidence that electoral cycles are indeed absent in closed autocracies. Case studies of authoritarian electoral cycles usually focus on hegemonic or competitive regimes—such as Egypt (Blaydes, 2011), Malaysia (Pepinsky, 2007), Mexico (Gonzalez, 2002; Magaloni, 2006), or Russia (Akhmedov and Zhuravskaya, 2004)—while cross-country analyses routinely omit uncontested elections altogether (Brender and Drazen, 2005; Veiga et al., 2017).

3 Elections and Petitions in Socialist East Germany

3.1 Elections

Evidence for my argument comes from the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). The GDR conducted quintennial elections for the country's legislature—the *People's Chamber* (*Volkskammer*)—and, non-concurrently, for local councils. Candidates in each multi-member electoral district were selected by the regime and represented the ruling *Socialist Unity Party of Germany* (SED), affiliated ("block") parties, and mass organizations. All candidates were part of the same electoral list: the *National Front*. GDR elections were emblematic of uncontested elections. Voters' only choice was whether to support or oppose the *National Front*. Elections in the GDR thus stand out as even less competitive than in other closed regimes—such as Cuba (Fonseca Galvis and Superti, 2019), Vietnam (Malesky and Schuler, 2010, 2013), or China (Shi, 1999; Manion, 2015)—where voters can choose between several regime-aligned candidates.

Table 2: Elections in the GDR

Date	Type	Turnout	Share yes
20 May 1979	Local elections	98.28%	99.82%
14 June 1981	People's Chamber	99.21%	99.86%
6 May 1984	Local elections	99.37%	99.88%
8 June 1986	People's Chamber	99.73%	99.94%
7 May 1989	Local elections	98.77%	98.85%

Notes: Official election results, taken from the archives of the *Neues Deutschland* newspaper. Accessed at <https://www.neues-deutschland.de/archiv.php> (2020/08/13).

A vote in favor of the *National Front* was done in public by folding and depositing the ballot in the ballot box. To vote against the *National Front*, voters had to strike through every single name on the ballot. Because this act required voters to enter a voting booth—typically placed in the farthest corner of the room—poll workers took immediate notice (Wolle, 1998). This and other forms of intimidation effectively deterred most voting against the government (Karklings, 1986; Wittenburg, 2018); the regime's main concern was to get voters to the polls.

The East German government spent enormous resources on voter mobilization. The period before elections saw an increased supply of consumer goods to create the illusion of social progress (Wittenburg, 2018). On election day, all government and many apartment buildings displayed flags and propaganda posters. The first voters to cast ballots, as well as first-time voters, were greeted with flowers, while the Young Pioneers entertained voters waiting in line with socialist workers' and battle songs (Ansorg, 1993). Poll workers kept meticulous records of individual turnout and sent hourly updates to the election committees. During the final voting hours, poll workers paid in-person visits to citizens who had not yet voted (Wolle, 1998; bpb, 2019). Mobile ballot boxes allowed the sick and elderly to vote at home or in hospitals (Der Spiegel, 1990).

According to official records, the GDR government always claimed to have achieved quasi-unanimous support. Reported turnout and votes for the *National Front* usually exceeded 99 percent (Table 2). These results were publicly announced across all media (see Figure 1 for an example), along with a characterization as “overwhelming proof of trust in our socialist state” (1979 elections) or “impressive commitment to our politics of peace and socialism” (1989).³ Such a characterization was only possible because the regime managed to obtain such high turnout and electoral support. Of course, the true result was unlikely as high. But evidence of some fraud notwithstanding (bpb, 2019), scholarly consensus holds that both turnout and support for the *National Front* was very high (Karklings, 1986; Weber and Florath, 2019). I propose that improved responsiveness to citizen petitions was one way the regime sought to achieve such high support.

³Headlines from the *Neues Deutschland* national newspaper. Accessed at <https://www.nd-archiv.de> (2020/08/13).

Figure 1: Front page of the *Neues Deutschland* newspaper (9 June 1986)

Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt euch!

NEUES DEUTSCHLAND

ORGAN DES ZENTRALKOMITEES DER SOZIALISTISCHEN EINHEITSPARTEI DEUTSCHLANDS

Montag,
9. Juni 1986
41. Jahrgang / Nr. 134
B-Ausgabe
Einzelpreis 15 Pf
Redaktion und Verlag: Form-Making
Postfach 1, Berlin, 1017, Telefon: 38 55
(Sprechstunden), Abonnementpreis
monatlich 3,50 Mark, ISSN 0232-4942

Einmütige Entscheidung für Frieden und Sozialismus

99,94 Prozent stimmten für die Kandidaten der Nationalen Front

Bürger der DDR wählten die Abgeordneten der Volkskammer, der Stadtverordnetenversammlung von Berlin und der Bezirktage / Eindrucksvolles Wahlergebnis bestätigt übergelagert: Was der XI. Parteitag beschloß – das ist unser aller Sache / Hohe Wahlbeteiligung: Um 12 Uhr hatten bereits 97,6 Prozent ihre Stimme abgegeben / Erste Wähler herzlich begrüßt / Arbeitskollektive mit erfüllten und überbotenen Plänen / Volksfeste in geschmückten Städten und Dörfern

Bekanntgabe des vorläufigen Ergebnisses der Wahl zur Volkskammer der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik durch den Vorsitzenden der Wahlkommission der Republik, Egon Krenz

Berlin (ADN). Der Vorsitzende der Wahlkommission der Republik Egon Krenz gab am Sonntagabend im Fernsehen der DDR das vorläufige Ergebnis der Wahl vom 8. Juni 1986 bekannt:

Liebe Bürgerinnen und Bürger der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik!

Nach einem ereignisreichen, von Leidenschaft und Zukunftsglauben geprägten Wahlkampf sind Ihnen zu dieser Stunde mitteilen, daß die Wähler zur Volkskammer, zur Stadtverordnetenversammlung von Berlin und zu den Bezirktagen zu einem einstimmigen Votum für die Kandidaten der Nationalen Front der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik wurden.

Das eindrucksvolle Wahlergebnis bestätigt überzeugend unser gemeinsames Wahlprogramm. Was der XI. Parteitag beschloß – das ist unser aller Sache. Es dokumentiert die politische Reife und Einheit unseres Volkes und der Wähler aller Klassen und Schichten in der ersten Sitzung der Partei der Arbeiterklasse, ihres Generalsekretärs und seines Generalsekretärs Egon Honnecker. Das Wahlergebnis unterstützt zugleich die Entschlossenheit der

Bürger unseres Landes, auch weiterhin all ihre Kräfte für Sozialismus und Frieden einzusetzen, alles zu tun für das Wohl der Völker.

Das eindrucksvolle Gesamtresultat der Wahlen zur Volkskammer der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik lautet:

Es wurden 12 454 430 Stimmen abgegeben.

Das entspricht einer Wahlbeteiligung von 99,75 Prozent.

Die Zahl der gültigen Stimmen beträgt 12 398 619.

Das sind 99,8 Prozent.

Die Zahl der ungültigen Stimmen beträgt 2411.

Das sind 0,02 Prozent.

Für den gemeinsamen Wahlvorschlag der Nationalen Front der DDR wurden 12 391 117 gültige Stimmen abgegeben.

Das sind 99,84 Prozent.

Orgen den Wahlvorschlag wurden 1502 Stimmen abgegeben.

Das sind 0,06 Prozent.

Dabei wurden 500 Abgeordnete in die Volkskammer der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik gewählt, wie es Verfassung und Wahlgesetz vorschreiben.

Zugleich wurden 203 Nachfolge-kandidaten für die oberste Vertretung unseres Staates gewählt.

Der Glückwunsch der Wahlkommission gilt in dieser Stunde allen gewählten Abgeordneten und Nachfolge-kandidaten.

Herzlichen Dank sagen wir den Mitgliedern der jeweiligen Wahlkommissionen und Wahlvereinigungen, den zahlreichen ehrenamtlichen Helfern der Ausschüsse der Nationalen Front, den Mitarbeitern der Wahlbüros und der örtlichen Bäte. Wir danken allen, die mit hoher Verantwortung und großer Einsatzbereitschaft dazu beigetragen haben, die Volkswahlen so erfolgreich zu gestalten.

Lassen Sie mich, liebe Bürgerinnen und Bürger, die Gemütsheiter ausdrücken, daß die gewählten Vertreter die Werte gemeinsam mit Ihnen, Ihren Wählern, dafür sorgen werden, daß unsere sozialistische Heimat weiterhin als Staat des Sozialismus und des Friedens, der Freiheit und der Demokratie, der Menschewürde und der Volkereinheit, zu unser aller Nutzen gedacht.

Vorläufiges Gesamtergebnis der Wahlen zur Volkskammer der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik

Zahl der Wahlberechtigten	12 454 430	Zahl der für den Wahlvorschlag der Nationalen Front abgegebenen gültigen Stimmen – In Prozent	99,94
Zahl der abgegebenen Stimmen	12 401 030	Zahl der gegen den Wahlvorschlag der Nationalen Front abgegebenen Stimmen – absolut	7502
Wahlbeteiligung – In Prozent	99,75	Zahl der gegen den Wahlvorschlag der Nationalen Front abgegebenen Stimmen – In Prozent	0,06
Zahl der gültigen Stimmen – absolut	12 398 619	Anzahl der aufgestellten Kandidaten	705
Zahl der gültigen Stimmen – In Prozent	99,98	Anzahl der gewählten Abgeordneten	500
Zahl der ungültigen Stimmen – absolut	2411	Anzahl der gewählten Nachfolge-kandidaten	205
Zahl der ungültigen Stimmen – In Prozent	0,02		
Zahl der für den Wahlvorschlag der Nationalen Front abgegebenen gültigen Stimmen – absolut	12 391 117		

Notes: Front page of the *Neues Deutschland* newspaper following the 1986 *People's Chamber* elections. It reports that 99.94 percent voted for the *National Front* candidates, a result characterized as “unanimous decision for peace and socialism.” Details about the election result are provided in the bottom right. Source: <https://www.neues-deutschland.de/archiv.php> (2020/08/13).

3.2 Petitions

Article 103 of the GDR's Constitution gave every citizen the right to submit petitions (*Eingaben*) to any branch and level of government. East Germans made extensive use of this system. They submitted between half (Class et al., 2018) and one million (Mühlberg, 2004) petitions every year, equaling between 4 and 8.1 percent of the East German electorate. Given that most petitions were written on behalf of households or neighborhood associations, the true share of the population writing a petition was likely much higher. Improved pre-electoral responsiveness was thus a wide-reaching strategy.

Petitions provided the government with invaluable information about everyday popular grievances.⁴ Because the regime needed this information to identify sources of citizen discontent early, citizens did not face repercussions for submitting petitions. A large bureaucracy created detailed reports about petition volume and content by county and year (Stadt, 1996).⁵ These reports contained valuable infor-

⁴This section is informed by a review of numerous internal documents and petition files accessed at archives in Germany. See Appendix A for details on the files consulted.

⁵E.g., see annual reports on petitions to the *State Council* in 1964-1967 (BArch DE 2/43626), 1985 (BArch DA 5/11419), 1986 (BArch DA 5/11421), 1987 (BArch DA 5/11423), or 1988 (BArch DA 5/11425).

mation about local supply shortages, public grievances about insufficient government service delivery, and overall regime support (Dimitrov, 2017). This information sometimes impacted policy-making, as best illustrated by the coffee crisis in the mid-1970s: in an effort to stem a coffee supply shortage, the government had decided to dilute ground coffee with pea flower. Public outcry about the resulting poor coffee quality was so overwhelming that the regime quickly reversed this decision (Mühlberg, 2004).

Petitions could also improve petitioners' living conditions. There are numerous examples of petitioners' obtaining better housing,⁶ a new job,⁷ or access to college education or vocational training,⁸ among many others.

Petitions further allowed the government to monitor local officials (Chen et al., 2016). Numerous petitions in the GDR included a direct criticism of local decisions or a lack of responsiveness.⁹ The central government's follow-ups with local authorities often confirmed citizens' critiques and led to revisions of prior decisions.¹⁰

4 Research Design

4.1 Data

The analysis draws on a unique dataset of more than 70,000 petitions submitted to the central government of the former GDR between 1974 and 1990. There are two samples. The first one comprises 10,892 petitions to the *People's Chamber* (*Volkskammer*), the country's legislature, between 1974 and 1989. I created it by manually reviewing all available *People's Chamber* petition files at the German Federal Archives in Berlin.¹¹ As most petitions were forwarded to other agencies, the original petition text is usually unavailable. But each file contains a summary card with basic information (see Figure 2 for an example). Using these cards, for each petition, I manually recorded data on the date it was (1) written, (2) received, and (3) answered, as well as data on (4) the location of the petitioner (zip code, city, county, and district), (5) their gender (coded based on their first name), (6) a brief summary of

⁶E.g., *People's Chamber* petitions 715/1977 (BArch DA 1/16905), 200/1980 (BArch DA 1/19173), 26/1981 (BArch DA 1/15938), 557/1982 (BArch DA 1/14847). See also BArch DA 5/10906, BArch DA 5/11026, BArch DA 11432.

⁷E.g., *People's Chamber* petitions 618/1978 (BArch DA 1/16900), 298/1982 (BArch DA 1/14878), 813/1982 (BArch DA 1/14899). See also BArch DA 5/11436.

⁸E.g., *People's Chamber* petitions 242/1978 (BArch DA 1/16911), 318/1978 (BArch DA 1/16900), 668/1978 (BArch DA 1/16909), 938/1982 (BArch DA 1/14865).

⁹E.g., *People's Chamber* petitions 15/1974 (BArch DA 1/15925), 1215/1977 (BArch DA 1/16912), 116/1978 (BArch DA 1/16895), 571/1981 (BArch DA 1/15943), 460/1983 (BArch DA 1/14917), 1515/1987 (BArch DA 1/16387), 266/1988 (BArch DA 1/16388).

¹⁰E.g., BArch DA 5/10913, BArch DA 5/10926, BArch DA 5/11072, BArch DA 5/11079.

¹¹See Appendix A for the archival signatures of the 282 boxes consulted.

Figure 2: Sample petition to the *People's Chamber*

Date received 14.4.77 (Datum)	Input number 452 (E.-Nummer)	(Sachgebiet)	Dresden (Bezirk)	District Bautzen County (Kreis)	T.: <i>Dr. Krenzelt</i>
(Name)	Last name	(Vorname)	First name	Bchr.v. 5.4.77 an Date written	T.: <i>K</i>
86 Bautzen (Postleitzahl) (Wohnort)	zip code and city	(Straße)	Address	Erledigungsvermerk: <i>Abge</i> 4.5.77 Date answered	Zentrales Schreibzimmer
Auswertung - Ablehnung der Freikörperkultur Brief description of content A					

Notes: Example summary card of a *People's Chamber* petition. It was received on 14 April 1977 from the city of Bautzen and contains a complaint about nude beaches at the Baltic Sea. Source: *People's Chamber* petition Nr. 452/1977 (BArch DA 1/16893).

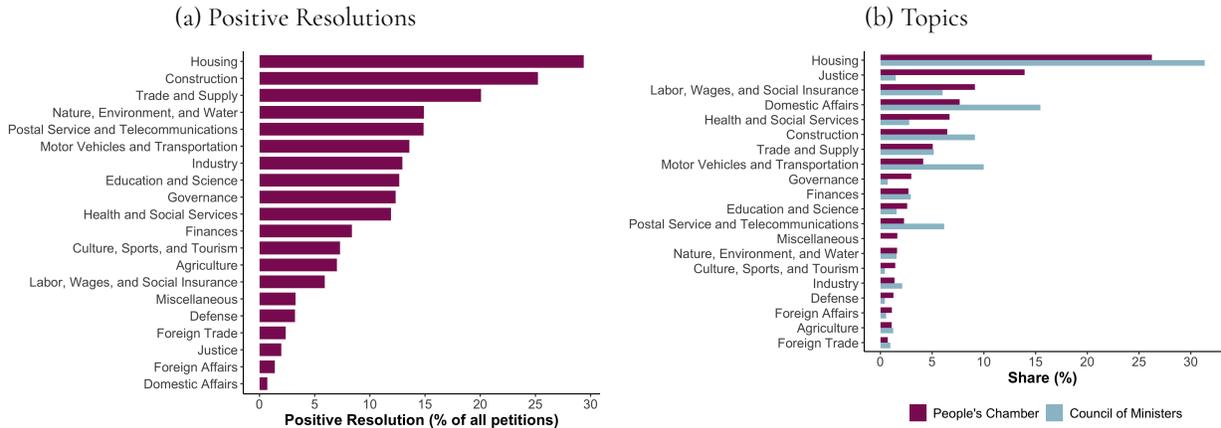
the content, and (7) a chronological input number. The sample comprises almost all petitions sent to the *People's Chamber* surrounding the 1979, 1981, and 1984 elections, defining the period of analysis.¹²

Responses to petitions could take two forms. Most responses did not solve the petitioner's grievances, instead acknowledging their concerns or explaining why the government was unable to help. However, some petitions were successful. They gave petitioners access to the requested government service or led to a change in government policy. Information on success is available for 1977 to 1984, when summary cards included a handwritten note that an issue was resolved positively (*positive Erledigung*). During that period, the share of successful petitions was about 14.3 percent. The true success rate was likely higher though, as not all petitions asked for government action. As such, the success rate in my sample matches that reported in other contexts. Fitzpatrick (2005, p. 177), for instance, finds that between 15 and 30 percent of petitions in the USSR received a bureaucratic response. Success rates varied by topic (Figure 3a), ranging from close to zero (domestic or foreign affairs) to 30 percent (housing).

The second sample comprises 60,491 petitions to the *Council of Ministers (Ministerrat)*—the ministerial cabinet—between July 1988 and October 1990. They come from an electronic database created

¹²To compute the share of *People's Chamber* petitions collected, I divided the total number of petitions collected each year by the highest input number (see Appendix B.1 for details). Coverage in the period of analysis ranges from 81 (1984) to 98 (1980) percent. The exception is 1985, for which only few petitions were available. As shown in Appendix D.5, my findings remain unchanged when this year is dropped.

Figure 3: Distribution of positive resolutions and topics



Notes: Left panel: share of successful *People's Chamber* petitions by topic. Data restricted to 1978-1983. Right panel: distribution of topics (in % of all petitions) by petition sample. Data restricted to the three months before and after elections.

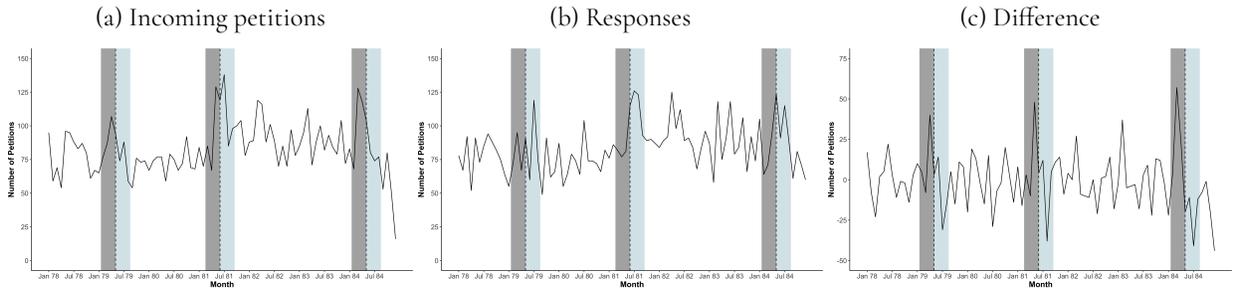
by *Council of Ministers* staff. To the best of my knowledge, this second sample contains the universe of all petitions submitted in that period.

Figure 3b depicts the distribution of topics for both samples (see also Table A4 in Appendix B.2), emphasizing the breadth of issues covered.¹³ The main topics were housing (e.g., complaints about poor living conditions or requests for better apartments), justice (e.g., requests for legal assistance or advice), and labor, wages or social insurance (e.g., requests for a better job, inquiries about pay raises, or questions about welfare eligibility). Other petitions included requests for renovations, automobiles, or phone lines; complaints about neighbors, supply shortages, or pollution; questions about school curricula or the GDR's relations with other countries; or suggestions about public policy changes, among many others. The vast majority of petitions covered everyday citizen grievances, demanding competence from the government, not political change.

The *Council of Ministers* data contain three additional variables (see Table A5 in Appendix B.2 for details). The first one codes the petition's *character*. Most petitions contained requests, while 38 percent contained a criticism of the government, 4 percent of petitions contained suggestions or policy proposals, and 2 percent were follow-ups to previous petitions. The second variable codes the petition's *reference*, available only for one-third of petitions. Most of those petitions referred to a specific law (21%), followed by elections (8%), and decisions made at the local level (2%), the *Council of Ministers* (1%), or the politburo (0.2%). The third variable codes information about *who answered* the petition.

¹³I used the content summaries of each *People's Chamber* petition to manually code its topic. Some of the differences in the topic distributions are likely due to the different time periods covered: the continuing deterioration of the housing stock, and increasing demand for exit visas may explain why more petitions were about housing and domestic affairs in the *Council of Ministers* sample. It is also plausible that citizens knew of the different competences of the *People's Chamber* and the *Council of Ministers*, and they were strategic about the recipient of their petition.

Figure 4: *People's Chamber* petition volume over time



Notes: Monthly number of (a) incoming petitions to the *People's Chamber* and (b) responses to petitions, and (c) the difference between both. Gray and light blue mark the 90-days before and after elections.

27 percent of petitions were answered by the central government, and the remaining petitions were forwarded to county (22%), district (14%), or municipal governments (14%), or companies (6%).

Below, I use the distinction between critical and other petitions to show that the regime used pre-electoral responsiveness to assure citizens of its competence. Writers of critical petitions argued that the failure of the government to live up to its promises constituted an infringement upon core socialist principles. For example, some claimed that a local government did not provide better housing despite the petitioner's eligibility, while others criticized a lack of responsiveness altogether. My argument suggests that critical petitions were answered particularly quickly in order to prove the regime's competence and prevent citizens from becoming disillusioned with the regime. Additionally, I use information on whether central or local government officials responded to the petition to explore whether there are differences in the effect of elections on responsiveness by level of government.

Figure 4 reports the monthly volume of petitions to the *People's Chamber*: the number of (a) incoming petitions and (b) responses, and (c) the difference between both (see Figure A3 in Appendix C.1 for the *Council of Ministers* petitions). The data provide some evidence that the volume of both incoming petitions and government responses to these petitions was higher around elections. Citizens may write more petitions either because election proximity raises government salience, or because they strategically time their petitioning. Increased incoming petition volume may allow the government to strategically select petitions it could answer quickly before elections. If true, these concerns may make petitions submitted or answered around elections less comparable to those in other periods. I address this concern below: I find few qualitative differences in incoming petitions over time, and, the government was not more selective in which petitions to answer before elections.

4.2 Empirical strategy

The empirical analysis considers two outcomes. Following existing work on responsiveness to citizen requests (Christensen and Ejdemyr, 2020; Dipoppa and Grossman, 2020), one dependent variable is the natural logarithm of 1 plus the number of days between the date a petition was received and answered (“response time”).¹⁴ However, this variable does not allow me to distinguish between performative and substantive responsiveness. To measure the latter, I use a dichotomous indicator of whether a petition was successful (“positive response”; *People’s Chamber* sample only). I expect response time to be shorter before elections, while the probability of success should be higher.

I test this expectation in two ways. As the *People’s Chamber* petitions are available for election and non-election years, they allow for a difference-in-differences design that exploits temporal variation before vs. after elections, and between election vs. non-election years. Each election was matched with the same period in the two adjacent, non-election years (“pseudo-election”), with pseudo-election dates corresponding to the actual election date. I estimate the following equation using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression:

$$y_{icdy} = \alpha_1 \text{pre}_{dy} + \alpha_2 \text{pre}_{dy} \times \text{election year}_y + \phi_d + \delta_y + \mu_c + \epsilon_{icdy}. \quad (1)$$

y_{icdy} denotes response time or success of petition i submitted from county or zip code area c and answered on day d in year y . pre_{dy} indicates whether day d in year y is before or after a (pseudo-)election. election year_y indicates election years. All models include fixed effects for day d (ϕ_d), year y (δ_y), and county or zip code c (μ_c). Standard errors are clustered by county or zip code, respectively. In one model, I additionally cluster standard errors by month-year (i.e., unique combination of month and year). Of interest is the coefficient on the interaction term (α_2). It reflects how the difference in the outcome between the pre- and post-election periods changes from election and non-election years.

Council of Ministers petitions are unavailable for corresponding pseudo-election periods. I thus use OLS to estimate a simpler model:

$$y_{icd} = \beta_1 \text{pre}_d + \mu_c + \epsilon_{icd}. \quad (2)$$

y_{icd} in Equation 2 is the response time for petition i submitted from county or zip code area c and answered on day d . pre_d indicates whether day d is before or after the election. The coefficient of interest is β_1 , which represents the difference in average response times between the pre- and post-election periods. All models include fixed effects for county or zip code (μ_c). Standard errors are clustered accordingly.

¹⁴I add one day to prevent petitions with a same-day response from being dropped when log-transforming this variable. Appendix D.2 shows that this transformation does not impact the results.

Data availability restrict the analysis to four elections. The *People’s Chamber* petitions are analyzed around the local elections on 20 May 1979 and 6 May 1984 and the legislative elections on 14 June 1981. The *Council of Ministers* data are available for the local elections on 7 May 1989.

I consider the 90 days before and after a (pseudo-)election.¹⁵ Response time was top-coded at the 99th percentile. Most petitions received a response. Only about 0.3 percent of *People’s Chamber* petitions were left unanswered. A larger share of *Council of Ministers* petitions (8.4 percent) remained unanswered, but the difference between the pre- (8.9 percent) and post-election periods (7.7 percent) is small.

Response time is likely a function of the number of petitions awaiting response (“pending petitions”): backlog likely constrains government bureaucrats’ ability to respond to petitions in a timely manner, while low petition volume makes responses easier. I therefore control for the number of pending petitions each day.¹⁶

My empirical strategy relies on three identifying assumptions (see Appendix for evidence). First, I assume that the timing of elections is unrelated to the East German regime’s ability to respond to petitions. This assumption holds: the elections considered here were held at the end of their regular five-year legislative terms. Second, difference-in-differences designs assume no spillovers. There are no differences in response time between election and non-election years in the post-election period: the fact that elections changed responsiveness before elections did not impact responsiveness thereafter (Table A8). In addition, there are no differences in responsiveness between the pseudo-pre- and pseudo-post-election periods in non-election years (Table A16). Third, I assume parallel trends: election and non-election years should move in parallel outside of elections. I substantiate this assumption by showing that there were no differences in response times when considering petitions answered outside the 180-day window around elections (Table A16).¹⁷

5 Results

5.1 Shorter response times before elections

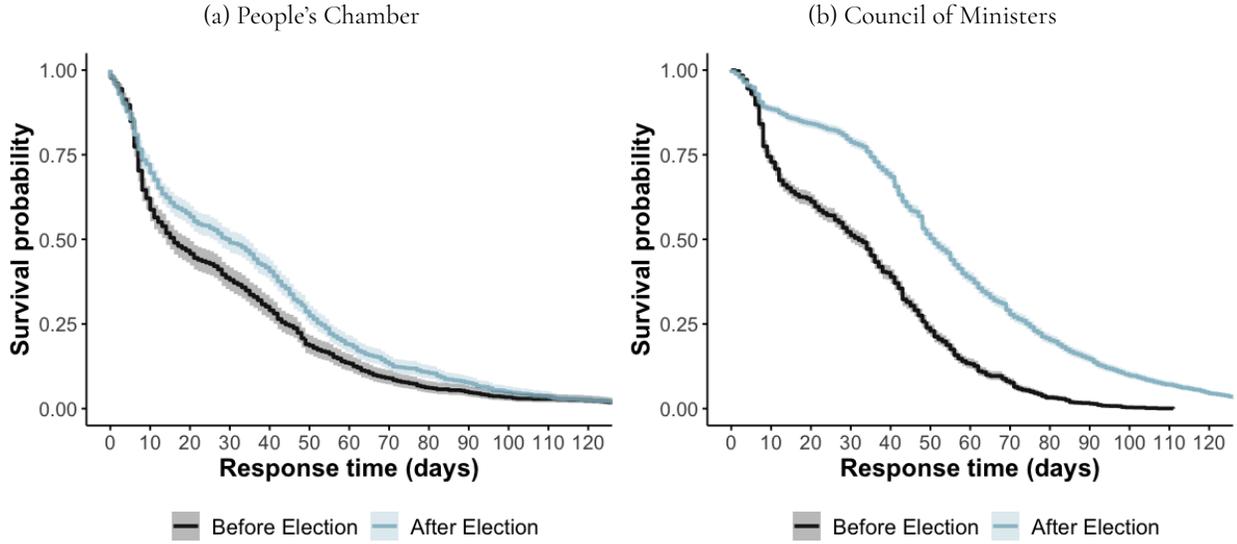
Figure 5 visualizes average response times before (light blue) and after (gray) elections using survival analysis. Each point reports the share of petitions with a response time of at least as many days as indicated on the horizontal axis. The curve for the pre-election period is consistently below that for the post-election period; as hypothesized, petitions were answered in a shorter period of time before elections.

¹⁵Appendix D.1 shows that all results are robust when using alternative time windows.

¹⁶Appendix D.4 shows that there is little evidence that my findings are driven by the inclusion of this control, which might introduce post-treatment bias.

¹⁷Appendix B.2 provides summary statistics for all variables employed in the analysis.

Figure 5: Response times around elections: Kaplan-Meier estimates



Notes: Distribution of response times (in days) for *People's Chamber* (left) and *Council of Ministers* petitions (right) for the three months before (gray) and after (light blue) elections. Estimated using survival analysis. Each point reports the share of petitions with a response time of at least as many days as indicated on the horizontal axis.

Table 3 probes this conclusion. Models 1 through 4 examine the *People's Chamber* petitions (Equation 1). Models 5 and 6 analyze the *Council of Ministers* petitions (Equation 2). All models control for the number of pending petitions. Models 1 through 4 include day- and year-fixed effects. I add county-fixed effects to Models 1, 3, 4, and 5 and zip code-fixed effects to Models 2 and 6. Standard errors are clustered accordingly. The exception is Model 4, which clusters standard errors by county and month-year.

The estimated difference in response times is negative, statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, and substantively similar across all models, both samples, and both estimation strategies. This implies that response time was between 23.3% ($100 \times (e^{-0.265} - 1)$; Model 5) and 30.6% ($100 \times (e^{-0.366} - 1)$; Model 2) shorter before elections. Outside the 180 days around elections, the mean (median) response time to a *People's Chamber* or *Council of Ministers* petition was 37.39 (23) and 38.51 (32), respectively. It follows that responsiveness improved by between 8.7 (37.39×0.233) and 11.8 days (38.51×0.306) relative to the mean, or between 5.4 (23×0.233) and 9.8 days (32×0.306) relative to the median.¹⁸

These effects exceed those found for democracies. Christensen and Ejdemyr (2020, p. 469), for instance, find that response times to 311 calls in San Francisco and New York decreases by about four days as elections approach. Responsiveness to “FixMyStreet” requests in the United Kingdom, in turn, improves by about 11 percent, or six days, before elections (Dipoppa and Grossman, 2020, p. 15-16).

¹⁸Appendix D.3 shows that count models (Poisson and negative binomial) yield very similar results.

Table 3: Petitions were answered faster before elections

	Response time (log days)					
	People's Chamber				Council of Ministers	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Pre-Election	0.193* (0.101)	0.165 (0.160)	0.153 (0.107)	0.193*** (0.073)	-0.265*** (0.033)	-0.282*** (0.039)
Pre-Election × Election year	-0.314*** (0.094)	-0.366*** (0.115)	-0.296*** (0.098)	-0.314*** (0.097)		
Control for # pending petitions?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Day-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Year-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓		
County-FE?	✓		✓	✓	✓	
ZIP code-FE?		✓				✓
County × year?			✓			
SE clustered by	county	zip code	county	county & month-year	county	zip code
Observations	3,737	3,732	3,737	3,737	4,770	4,770
Adjusted R ²	0.090	0.087	0.089	0.090	0.166	0.140

Notes: Difference in response time to *People's Chamber* (Models 1 to 4) and *Council of Ministers* (Models 5 to 6) petitions between the pre- and post-election periods. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

5.2 Higher success rate before elections

Using linear probability models of the form specified in Equation 1, Table 4 explores whether the probability that a *People's Chamber* petition received a positive resolution varied around elections. Models 1 through 4 mirror those in Table 3. The coefficient of interest is positive across all four models (albeit insignificant in Model 2). I compute that the probability of success increased by between 7.7 (Models 1 and 4) and 9.1 percentage points (Model 3), or up to 63.6 percent relative to the mean (14.3%) of this variable (0.091/0.143).

Increased success rates were a credible signal of regime competence. I show this by distinguishing between petitions about housing or construction and all other petitions. Due to the scarcity and deteriorating quality of housing, resolving housing petitions was costly. Still, the impact of elections on positive resolutions is concentrated among these petitions (Model 5), while there is no difference in success rates for all other petitions (Model 6).

5.3 Critical petitions and the role of the central government

I argue that the goal of improved responsiveness was to signal competence to voters. If true, we should find the strongest effect for critical petitions, which directly questioned the regime's competence. Model 1 in Table 5 tests this argument by adding an interaction between critical petitions and the pre-election period to Equation 2. The results imply that, while critical petitions received a faster response than other petitions throughout the period examined, this difference was more than three times as large before the election ($p < 0.01$). The average response time for critical petitions was about

Table 4: Increased probability of positive resolution before elections

	I(positive resolution)					
	all petitions			(4)	housing/construction	other petitions
	(1)	(2)	(3)		(5)	(6)
Pre-Election	-0.011 (0.067)	-0.120 (0.104)	-0.026 (0.069)	-0.011 (0.063)	0.048 (0.209)	0.033 (0.071)
Pre-Election × Election year	0.077* (0.044)	0.090 (0.058)	0.091** (0.046)	0.077** (0.032)	0.240** (0.105)	0.047 (0.047)
Control for # pending petitions?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Day-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
County-FE?	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Zip code-FE?		✓				
County × year?			✓			
SE clustered by	county	zip code	county	county & month-year	county	county
Observations	2,625	2,621	2,625	2,625	852	1,773
Adjusted R ²	0.029	0.072	0.059	0.029	0.021	0.039

Notes: Difference in the probability that a *People’s Chamber* petition was successful between the pre- and post-election periods. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

37.4% ($100 \times (e^{-0.110-0.359} - 1)$) shorter than for non-critical petitions before elections, compared to 10.4% ($100 \times (e^{-0.110} - 1)$) in the three months thereafter.

In theory, both local officials—to advance their careers—or the central government—to deter challenges and gather information—had incentives to improve responsiveness before elections. However, I find that improved responsiveness was driven primarily by the central government. Model 2 in Table 5 adds an interaction between the pre-election period and central government response to Equation 2. The resulting coefficient is negative and significant at $p < 0.01$: petitions answered by the central government usually had a 21.0% shorter response time ($100 \times (e^{-0.236} - 1)$) than those answered by other entities in the post-election period. This difference rose to 36.2% before elections ($100 \times (e^{-0.236-0.213} - 1)$).

Models 3 and 4 show that these faster response times are not driven by increased selectivity of the central government. They use linear probability models to show that petitions were more likely to be answered by the central government, whose propensity to respond rose by 6.6 percentage points (or 25 percent relative to the mean) before elections (Model 3; $p < 0.01$). Including an interaction between the pre-election period and critical petitions (Model 4) shows that the central government paid particular attention to critical petitions: while critical petitions were about 10.3 percentage points less likely to receive a central government response after the election, they were 7.2 points ($-0.103 + 0.175$) more likely to receive a central government response before the election ($p < 0.01$).

Taken together, these results provide strong evidence that even uncontested elections incentivize government officials to respond more quickly and positively to citizen requests. The motivation is to assure voters of the government’s competence, thereby ensuring their continued support around elections. While the existing literature has principally focused on the local dynamics of responsiveness and service provision in autocracies, I find that the central government can be an even more important driver of responsiveness.

Table 5: Stronger effects for critical petitions and petitions answered by the central government

	Response time (log days)		1(Central government response)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Pre-Election	-0.101*** (0.037)	-0.125*** (0.026)	0.066*** (0.020)	0.005 (0.022)
Contains criticism	-0.110*** (0.041)			-0.103*** (0.020)
Pre-Election × Contains criticism	-0.359*** (0.060)			0.175*** (0.032)
Central government responds		-0.236*** (0.036)		
Pre-Election × Central government responds		-0.213*** (0.054)		
Control for # pending petitions?	✓	✓	✓	✓
County-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	4,634	4,014	4,014	4,005
Adjusted R ²	0.184	0.284	0.052	0.060

Notes: Difference in responsiveness among critical petitions (Model 1) or petitions answered by the central government (Model 2). Models 3 and 4 are linear probability models of central government response. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Robust standard errors, clustered by county, in parentheses.

5.4 Alternative explanations

This section discusses multiple alternative explanations for my findings. First and foremost, it is possible that my results are driven by differences in the volume or content of petitions before elections. As shown in Figure 4a above, citizens submitted slightly more petitions before elections. Higher incoming petition volume may have made it easier for bureaucrats to strategically respond to those petitions they could answer quickly, thus artificially inflating the difference in response times between the pre- and post-election periods.

Yet, the data do not support this concern. More incoming petitions were usually met with concomitant increases in the volume of responses to petitions. By law, government officials had only four weeks to submit an initial response to petitions, which significantly curtailed the regime’s ability to strategically select “easy” petitions. Second, the spikes in petition volume seem to be driven by seasonality effects instead of the electoral cycle. Table A6 in Appendix C.1 supports this conclusion. It tests for differences in the number of incoming petitions and responses between the pre- and post-election periods. Using the empirical strategies defined in Equations 1 (which explicitly accounts for seasonality effects by including day-fixed effects) and 2, I find no differences in petition volume before and after elections.

I also find little evidence that citizens strategically submitted different kinds of petitions in anticipation of better government responsiveness, nor was the regime more selective in choosing which petitions to answer before elections. As shown in Figure A4, there were few differences in the topics of incoming petitions or responses between the pre- and post-election periods. The one exception is

incoming petitions to the *Council of Ministers*, which were more likely to be about domestic affairs before elections. However, this increase was accompanied by a concomitant increase in responses about domestic affairs. Moreover, Table A7 in Appendix C.1 shows that controlling for petition topic, character, or reference leaves the coefficients of interest unaltered.

Lastly, it is possible that the regime spent extra resources on resolving petitions in the pre-election period, at the expense of its ability to respond to petitions afterwards. If true, my results would be driven by a post-election slowdown in responsiveness instead of a pre-election improvement. Table A8 conducts the analysis of responsiveness to *People's Chamber* petitions separately for the pre- and post-election periods. I find improved responsiveness in election years in the pre-election sample, but no differences across years in the post-election data.

A second alternative explanation emphasizes bureaucratic or legislative *turnover* after elections. Outgoing officials may have wanted to finalize pending petitions before leaving their position. Alternatively, new officials who started after the election may require some time to familiarize themselves with the job, which would slow down initial response times. If this argument were true, responsiveness should only change before elections for the respective body. However, responsiveness to *Council of Ministers* petitions improved before the 1989 local elections, even though the elections did not alter the Council's composition. Table A9 in Appendix C.2 similarly shows that response times to *People's Chamber* petitions decreased before both local and national legislative elections, even though only the latter impacted the composition of the *People's Chamber*.

It is further possible that petitions were assigned a later *receipt date* before elections, potentially in an effort to artificially deflate response times. Appendix C.3 provides evidence against this idea. It shows that there were few differences in the number of days between the dates a petition was written and received.

Activists were able to collect proof of fraud in the 1989 elections (bpb, 2019). As information about irregularities circulated, complaints about electoral conduct skyrocketed: in the 90 days after the election, 41 percent of all *Council of Ministers* petitions concerned the elections, compared to 10 percent before. A last alternative explanation argues that this large number of *election-related complaints* diminishes the comparability of the pre- and post-election periods in the *Council of Ministers* sample. Yet, as shown in Appendix C.4, the coefficients of interest remain unchanged when omitting election-related petitions.

6 Discussion

Many closed autocracies hold uncontested elections in which a citizen's only choice is whether or not to support the regime's handpicked candidates. According to conventional models of accountability, the absence of electoral contestation should preclude any meaningful responsiveness to citizen preferences

in these regimes. With the election outcome a foregone conclusion, officials are theorized to lack the incentive to cater to their constituents' demands.

Yet, the GDR's petition system is at odds with this model of autocratic unresponsiveness. This paper instead describes a regime that spent significant resources on both responding to and addressing citizen demands. That responsiveness varied systematically around elections is evidence of "electoral connections" (Mayhew, 1987), even in the least democratic regimes.

This paper analyses an important electoral mobilization strategy in closed autocracies that has received insufficient scholarly attention to date. East Germans wrote between one-half (Class et al., 2018) and one million (Mühlberg, 2004) petitions to all levels and branches of government every year. With 12.4 million eligible voters (1986), the East German government could signal its competence to up to 8.1 percent of the electorate—and an even larger share of households—who wrote a petition every year. Petitions are an equally significant avenue to demonstrate competence in other regimes. Just like the former GDR, closed autocracies ranging from the Soviet Union (Dimitrov, 2014a), Bulgaria (Dimitrov, 2014b), or Iraq (Walter, 2018) in the past to China (Luehrmann, 2003; Chen et al., 2016; Distelhorst and Hou, 2017; Jee, 2021), Saudi Arabia, or Vietnam (Pan, 2020, p. 166) today use petition systems. Petition volume is equally large in these contexts. For instance, up to 700,000 petitions were written in communist Bulgaria every year (Dimitrov, 2014b), corresponding to 10.6 percent of the electorate, while the central committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union alone received about half a million petitions annually (Dimitrov, 2014a).

This paper emphasizes the importance of competence in generating political order in authoritarian regimes (Huntington, 1968). One reason for the stability of the former German Democratic Republic and other communist regimes was the governments' abilities to forge *and* uphold an implicit contract with the population (Dale, 2005; Dimitrov, 2014b; Dickson et al., 2016). The petition system played a crucial role in this process. Petitions allowed the government to identify and address popular concerns and demonstrate its competence (Gorgulu et al., 2020). However, it also generated popular expectations about what the government ought to deliver. The extent to which the government was able to meet these expectations determined its stability.

The emphasis on competence has implications for our theorizing about authoritarian regimes. It draws attention to the role of the central government in service delivery and responsiveness. While most work on authoritarian responsiveness considers the incentives of local officials (Chen et al., 2016; Distelhorst and Hou, 2017; Jee, 2021), I instead show that the central government may have stronger incentives and capacities to respond. This suggests that the centralization of power in authoritarian regimes may be advantageous for the provision of services, as illustrated by quicker and more decisive autocratic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (Cheibub et al., 2020; Stasavage, 2020).

The paper's results call for a re-appraisal of citizen influence in authoritarian regimes. Much theorizing about autocratic regimes focuses on patronage. Citizens are usually seen as passive actors whose

acquiescence or support is bought with clientelistic goods (Lust-Okar, 2006; Magaloni, 2006; Blaydes, 2011; Stokes et al., 2013). I propose instead that citizens can play an active role in authoritarian politics: by submitting demands to the regime, they can hold their government accountable, even in the absence of contested elections and despite widespread repression and little political freedom. This accountability mechanism works because the regime has created strong expectations about its competence, and failure to meet these expectations can undermine regime stability.

This conclusion contributes to an emerging research agenda that asks how citizens can influence political outcomes even in non-democratic regimes (Williamson and Magaloni, 2020). While much past work asks how elections shape interactions between governments and elites (Gandhi, 2008; Malesky and Schuler, 2011, 2013; Truex, 2014), we know little about the interactions between the government and ordinary citizens. Relatedly, while most work on government responsiveness in closed regimes emphasizes non-electoral mechanisms (Tsai, 2007; Distelhorst and Hou, 2014; Chen et al., 2016; Distelhorst and Hou, 2017; Tsai and Xu, 2018; Pan, 2020; Jee, 2021), we need to pay greater attention to how electoral considerations can drive responsiveness. More research on these topics is needed to generate a better understanding of how citizen-government interactions can influence the material well-being of citizens in some of the most repressive regimes in the world.

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Electoral Responsiveness in Closed Autocracies: Evidence from Petitions in the former German Democratic Republic

—Online Appendix—

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A Archival Sources

This paper assembles new evidence on the petition system of the former German Democratic Republic. Part of this evidence comes from a review of internal petition reports. All files cited in the main text are listed in Table A1.

I further assembled a novel dataset of petitions to the GDR government. This dataset comprises two samples. The first sample consists of 10,892 petitions sent to the GDR's *People's Chamber* between 1974 and 1989. I manually retrieved data on these petitions from 282 boxes stored at the archives. The archival signatures of these boxes are listed in Table A2. To the best of my knowledge, the dataset contains all *People's Chamber* petitions available at the archives.

The second sample consists of 60,491 petitions sent to the *Council of Ministers* between 1988 and 1990. The data were entered into an electronic database by *Council of Ministers* staff. This database was converted into a modern file format by researchers at the German Federal Archives, from whom I obtained the data. To the best of my knowledge, this dataset contains the universe of all petitions submitted to this body in this period.

Table A1: Archival sources on the GDR petition system

Collection	Signature	Document
<i>BArch: Bundesarchiv / German Federal Archives</i>		
DA 5 (Staatsrat / State Council)	BArch DA 5/10906	“Kurzinformation über die im Jahre 1978 an den Staatsrat gerichteten Eingaben aus dem Bezirk Erfurt” [“Short report on the petitions sent to the State Council in 1978 from the district Erfurt”]
	BArch DA 5/10913	“Kurzinformation über die im Jahre 1978 an den Staatsrat gerichteten Eingaben aus dem Bezirk Neubrandenburg” [“Short report on the petitions sent to the State Council in 1978 from the district Neubrandenburg”]
	BArch DA 5/10914	“Kurzinformation über die im Jahre 1978 an den Staatsrat gerichteten Eingaben aus dem Bezirk Potsdam” [“Short report on the petitions sent to the State Council in 1978 from the district Potsdam”]
	BArch DA 5/10926	“Kurzinformation über die im Jahre 1979 an den Staatsrat gerichteten Eingaben aus dem Bezirk Karl-Marx-Stadt” [“Short report on the petitions sent to the State Council in 1979 from the district Karl-Marx-City”]
	BArch DA 5/11026	“Kurzinformation über die im Jahre 1980 an den Staatsrat gerichteten Eingaben aus dem Bezirk Magdeburg” [“Short report on the petitions sent to the State Council in 1980 from the district Magdeburg”]
	BArch DA 5/11072	“Kurzinformation über die im Jahre 1982 an den Staatsrat gerichteten Eingaben aus dem Bezirk Cottbus” [“Short report on the petitions sent to the State Council in 1982 from the district Cottbus”]
	BArch DA 5/11079	“Kurzinformation über die im Jahre 1982 an den Staatsrat gerichteten Eingaben aus dem Bezirk Leipzig” [“Short report on the petitions sent to the State Council in 1982 from the district Leipzig”]
	BArch DA 5/11419	“Bericht über den Hauptinhalt und die Bearbeitungsergebnisse der an den Staatsrat und seinen Vorsitzenden gerichteten Eingaben der Bürger im Jahre 1985” [“Report on the main content and outcomes of citizen petitions to the State Council and its chairman in the year 1985”]
	BArch DA 5/11421	“Bericht über den Hauptinhalt und die Bearbeitungsergebnisse der an den Staatsrat gerichteten Eingaben der Bürger im Jahre 1986” [“Report on the main content and outcomes of citizen petitions to the State Council in the year 1986”]
	BArch DA 5/11423	“Bericht über den Hauptinhalt und die Bearbeitungsergebnisse der an den Staatsrat gerichteten Eingaben der Bürger im Jahre 1987” [“Report on the main content and outcomes of citizen petitions to the State Council in the year 1987”]
	BArch DA 5/11425	“Bericht über den Hauptinhalt und die Bearbeitungsergebnisse der an den Staatsrat und seinen Vorsitzenden gerichteten Eingaben der Bürger im Jahre 1988” [“Report on the main content and outcomes of citizen petitions to the State Council and its chairman in the year 1988”]
	BArch DA 5/11432	“Kurzinformation über die im Jahre 1985 an den Staatsrat gerichteten Eingaben aus Berlin, Hauptstadt der DDR” [“Short report on the petitions sent to the State Council in 1985 from Berlin, Capital of the GDR”]
	BArch DA 5/11433	“Kurzinformation über die im Jahre 1986 an den Staatsrat gerichteten Eingaben aus dem Bezirk Neubrandenburg” [“Short report on the petitions sent to the State Council in 1986 from the district Neubrandenburg”]
	BArch DA 5/11436	“Kurzinformation über die im Jahre 1988 an den Staatsrat gerichteten Eingaben aus dem Bezirk Leipzig” [“Short report on the petitions sent to the State Council in 1988 from the district Leipzig”]
DE 2 (Staatliche Zentralverwaltung für Statistik / Central Statistical Office)	BArch DE 2/43626	Sammlung Informationsberichte Eingaben der Bürger, 1964-1967 [collection of reports on citizen petitions, 1964-1967]

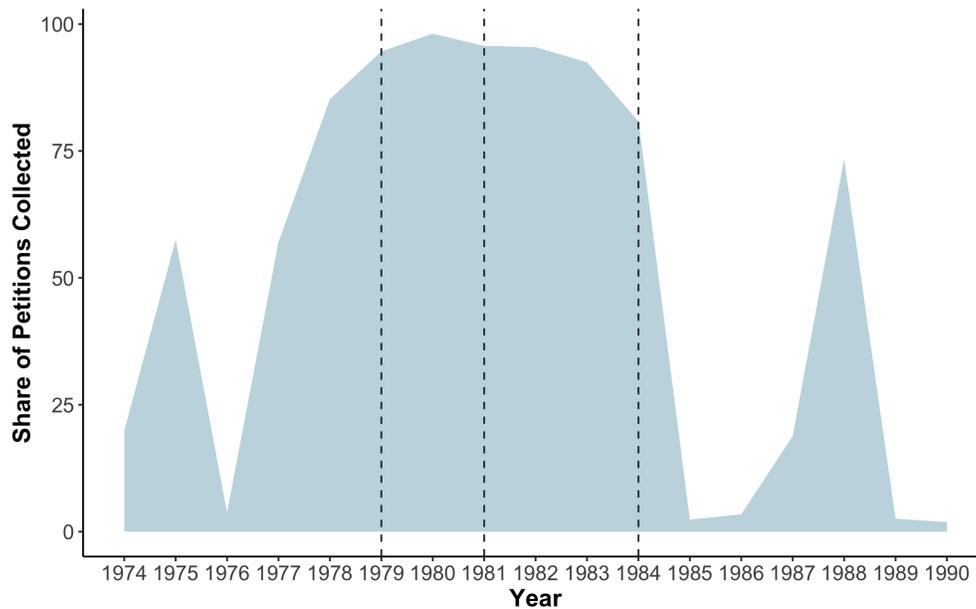
B Summary statistics

B.1 Share of People's Chamber petitions collected

Not all *People's Chamber* petitions are available at the archives. To examine the share of all petitions that I collected in a particular year, I exploit the fact that each petition received a sequential input number, which starts at 1 at the beginning of each year. Dividing the number of petitions collected in a particular year by the highest input number in the same year yields a rough estimate of the share of petitions collected. Figure A1 reports this statistic by year. Vertical dashed lines indicate the three election years considered in the analysis of *People's Chamber* petitions. All three years and their corresponding pseudo-election years are characterized by low missingness. I compute that I collected between 81 (1984) and 98 percent (1980) of petitions in that time period.

The exception is the pseudo-election year 1985, for which only a few petitions were available. Removing this year leaves all results unchanged, as shown in Table A15 below.

Figure A1: Share of *People's Chamber* petitions collected



Notes: Estimated share of all *People's Chamber* petitions collected by year. Vertical dashed lines indicate the three election years examined.

B.2 Descriptive statistics

This Appendix section presents various summary statistics. Table A3 provides descriptive statistics for all variables included in the analysis. The samples are restricted to the 90 days before and after elections or pseudo-elections. Statistics for the number of incoming petitions, government responses to these petitions, and pending petitions are provided by day. All other statistics are calculated across all petitions.

Table A3: Summary statistics

	People's Chamber		Council of Ministers	
	mean	sd	mean	sd
Response time (days)	34.885	35.086	45.988	32.011
Contains criticism			0.392	0.488
Central government responds			0.325	0.468
# Pending petitions	16.457	38.987	4420.884	360.832
# Incoming	2.581	3.166	30.547	44.768
# Responses	2.598	4.111	26.354	44.961

Notes: Summary statistics for all variables used in the main analysis. The samples are restricted to the three months before and after elections or pseudo-elections.

Table A4 reports the share of petitions by topic, separately for the *People's Chamber* and *Council of Ministers* petitions. The data are restricted to the 90 days before and after elections or pseudo-elections. The shares correspond to those depicted in Figure 3 in the main text.

Table A4: Distribution of topics

Topic	People's Chamber	Council of Ministers
Agriculture	1.07	1.24
Construction	6.46	9.12
Culture, Sports, and Tourism	1.44	0.44
Defense	1.26	0.44
Domestic Affairs	7.67	15.46
Education and Science	2.59	1.55
Finances	2.70	2.94
Foreign Affairs	1.10	0.57
Foreign Trade	0.71	0.96
Governance	2.98	0.71
Health and Social Services	6.67	2.79
Housing	26.25	31.35
Industry	1.36	2.10
Justice	13.92	1.47
Labor, Wages, and Social Insurance	9.13	6.00
Miscellaneous	1.62	0.00
Motor Vehicles and Transportation	4.14	9.98
Nature, Environment, and Water	1.60	1.55
Postal Service and Telecommunications	2.28	6.17
Trade and Supply	5.05	5.16

Notes: Distribution of topics (in % of all petitions submitted) covered in the *People's Chamber* and *Council of Ministers* petitions. The data are restricted to the three months before and after elections or pseudo-elections.

Table A4 reports the distribution of *Council of Ministers* petition attributes: the share of petitions by character, reference, and responding government body.

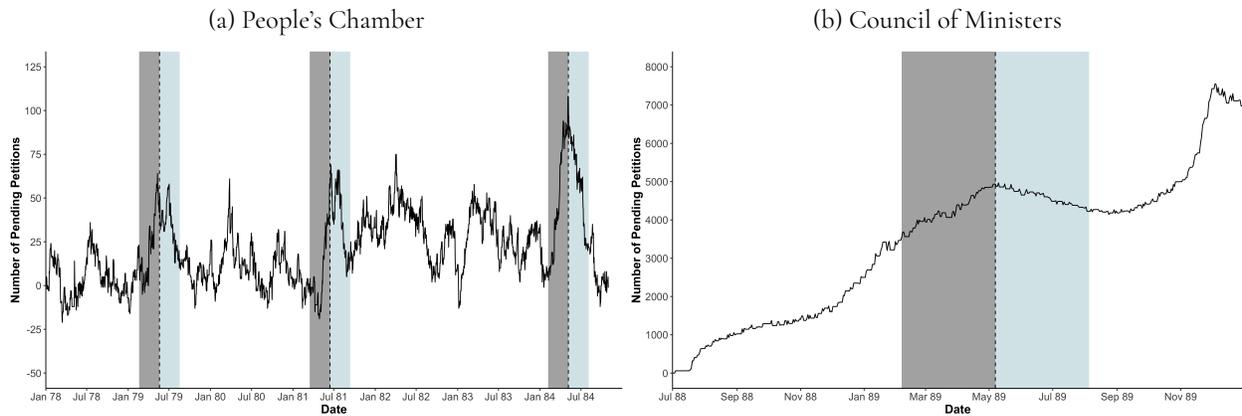
Table A5: Distribution of petition attributes

	Attribute	Share
Character	Complaint	9.18
	Criticism	28.93
	Follow-up petition	2.24
	Request	52.85
	Suggestion	0.44
	Tip	3.50
	Unknown	2.85
Reference	Council of Ministers decisions	0.67
	Elections	7.80
	Law	20.86
	Local decisions	2.22
	Politburo	0.19
	Unknown	68.26
Response by	Central government	27.36
	Company	6.31
	County government	22.16
	District government	14.07
	Municipal government	14.26
	Unknown	15.85

Notes: Distribution of *Council of Ministers* petition attributes (in % of all petitions submitted). The data are restricted to the three months before and after the 1989 local election.

B.3 Number of pending petitions

Figure A2: Number of pending petitions



Notes: Daily number of pending *People's Chamber* (left panel) and *Council of Ministers* petitions (right panel). Calculated as the difference between the cumulative number of incoming petitions and responses. Gray and light blue mark the 90-days before and after elections.

Figure A2 reports the number of pending petitions by day, which are calculated as the difference between the cumulative number of incoming petitions and responses. Negative values are possible because the calculation does not account for petitions received in years not covered in the dataset.

Regarding the *People's Chamber* petitions, Figure A2a shows that while the number of pending petitions fluctuates over the course of a year, it remains roughly the same across the years for which data are available. By contrast, the number of pending *Council of Ministers* petitions kept increasing for most of the period for which the data are available (Figure A2b). This justifies the inclusion of a control for the number of pending a petitions: it accounts for the fact that due to the rising backlog of *Council of Ministers* petitions, we should expect average response times to increase over time.

C Alternative explanations

This section provides evidence against several alternative explanations for my results.

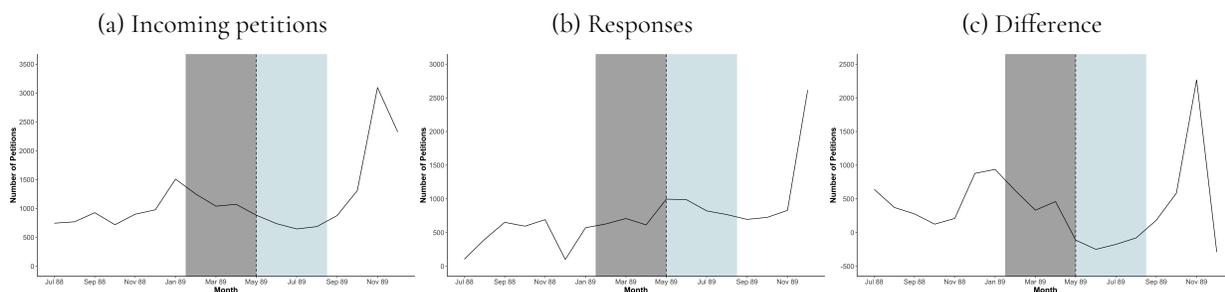
C.1 Different volume and content of petitions?

It is possible that my results are driven by differences in the volume or content of petitions between election and non-election periods. Specifically, a higher volume of incoming petitions may have allowed government bureaucrats to strategically select those petitions they could answer easily and quickly, thus artificially lowering average response times and introducing upward bias into my coefficients. Alternatively, citizens may have anticipated better responsiveness and thus strategically submitted petitions about different topics to the government. Another possibility is that the government answered fewer petitions or only petitions about particular, “easy” topics. This section addresses these concerns. I show that there is little evidence that petition volume or content varied systematically around elections. Furthermore, accounting for petition volume in the regression analysis leaves the coefficients of interest unchanged. Lastly, I show that the effects reported in the main paper are driven by improved responsiveness before elections as opposed to worse responsiveness thereafter.

C.1.1 Increase in petition volume?

Figures 4 in the main text and A3 in this Appendix section report the number of (a) incoming petitions and (b) government responses to these petitions, separately for petitions to the *People’s Chamber* and *Council of Ministers*. They also report the difference between incoming petitions and responses (c). Visual inspection of the figures suggests that East Germans sent slightly more petitions to the central government in the pre-election period. However, increases in incoming petition volume were usually accompanied by increased volume of government responses to petitions about a month later. By law, petitions had to receive an initial response within four weeks, thus forcing the government to respond to more petitions as the volume of incoming petitions went up. In other words, the law constrained bureaucrats’ ability to strategically select “easy” petitions.

Figure A3: *Council of Ministers* petition volume over time



Notes: Monthly number of (a) incoming petitions to the *Council of Ministers* and (b) government responses. (c) reports the difference between both. Gray and light blue mark the 90-days before and after elections.

Table A6 conducts a formal test of whether petition volume varied systematically around elections. It regresses the (log) number of *People’s Chamber* (Models 1 and 2) and *Council of Ministers* (Models 3 and

Table A6: No change in petition volume around elections

	# Incoming (log)		# Responses (log)	
	PC	CoM	PC	CoM
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Pre-Election	0.147 (0.152)	0.345 (0.313)	0.020 (0.160)	-0.455 (0.298)
Pre-Election × Election year	0.056 (0.097)		-0.112 (0.111)	
Day-FE?	✓		✓	
Year-FE?	✓		✓	
Observations	1,440	180	1,440	180
Adjusted R ²	0.119	0.001	0.059	0.007

Notes: This table examines whether the *People's Chamber* (Models 1 and 3) or the *Council of Ministers* (Models 2 and 4) either received (Models 1 and 2) or answered (Models 3 and 4) a different number of petitions before elections. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Robust standard errors, clustered by day (Models 1 and 3), in parentheses.

4) petitions that were received (Models 1 and 3) and answered (Models 2 and 4) by the respective entity each day. The analysis parallels the main model specification without county-fixed effects. Of interest are the coefficients on the interaction term between the indicators for the pre-election period and election years (Models 1 and 3) or the coefficient on the indicator for the pre-election period (Models 2 and 4). These coefficients are insignificant, implying that petition volume was not statistically significantly different between the pre- and post-election periods. This result suggests that seasonality effects may explain the change in petition volume before elections: in fact, we notice that petition volume was equally high in the same months in non-election years. The inclusion of day-fixed effects in my main specification (Equation 1) accounts for these seasonality effects.

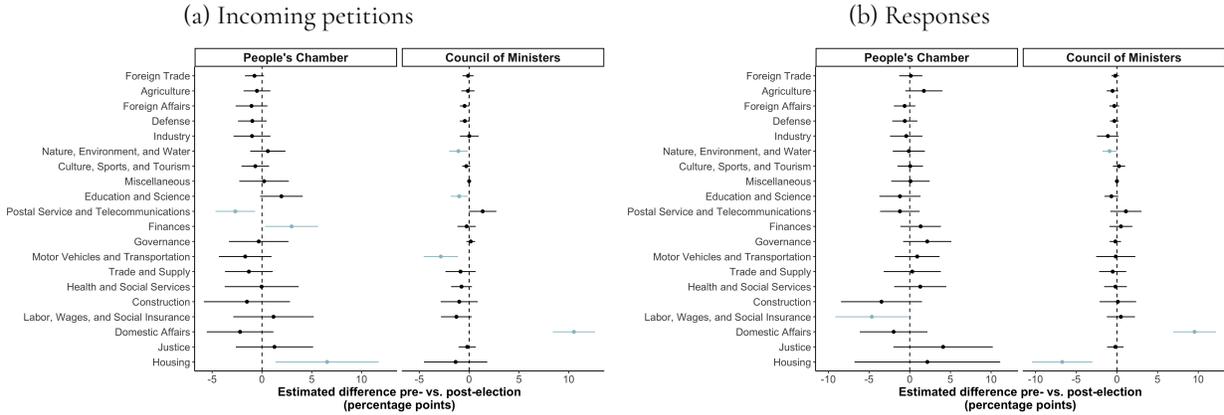
C.1.2 Change in petition content?

It is further possible that citizens submitted petitions with a different content before elections. Alternatively, East German bureaucrats might have selected petitions they could answer easily in an effort to improve average response times. If true, we should find that the content of incoming petitions or government responses differed before elections.

Figure A4 tests this implication. It reports the probability that a petition sent to (Figure A4a) or answered by (Figure A4b) the *People's Chamber* or *Council of Ministers* was about one of the 20 topics. The coefficients are estimated using Equation 1 (*People's Chamber*) and 2 (*Council of Ministers*), where the dependent variable is an indicator of the respective topic.

Most coefficients lack statistical significance, implying that the content of petitions did not vary systematically around elections. I find that petitions sent to the *People's Chamber* in the 90 days before elections were somewhat more likely to talk about housing and finances, while they were less likely to be about the postal service and telecommunications. Regarding incoming petitions to the *Council of Ministers*, four out of the 20 topics see changes in topic proportions. The most notable is domestic affairs, which sees an increase by more than 10 percentage points. Yet, notably, the increase in incoming petitions about domestic affairs is accompanied by a concomitant increase in government responses about the same topic (Figure A4b).

Figure A4: Variation in topics before elections



Notes: Differences in the likelihood that a particular (a) incoming petition or (b) government response is about the indicated topic. Statistically significant coefficients ($p < 0.05$) are emphasized in light blue.

In sum, there is little evidence that petition topics varied systematically around elections. To establish more formally that variation in the content of petitions does not explain the differences in response times, I show in Table A7 that the main results remain unchanged when controlling for petition content. This table replicates the base models from Table 3 in the main text. Model 1 examines the *People's Chamber* petitions and adds controls for petition topic. Models 2 to 5 examine the *Council of Minister petitions*. I subsequently add controls for topic, character (i.e., complaint, criticism, follow-up petition, request, suggestion, tip, or unknown), and reference (i.e., Council of Ministers decision, Elections, Law, Local decisions, Politburo, or unknown). Model 5 includes all three variables. Model 6 returns to the *People's Chamber* petitions and adds topic-fixed effects to the base model in the analysis of successful petitions (replication of Model 1 in Table 4). Across all models, the inclusion of these additional controls does not substantively alter the coefficients of interest; the size and level of significance of the coefficients of interest remain unchanged.

C.1.3 Increase in response time after elections?

Lastly, more incoming petitions before elections may have slowed down response times afterwards: it is possible that the regime spent extra resources on resolving petitions only before elections, such that it took the regime longer to respond in the post-election period. In that case, my results would be driven by this post-electoral slowdown instead of improved pre-electoral responsiveness.

Table A8 provides evidence against this idea. It modifies the original analysis of the *People's Chamber* petitions by considering the pre- and post-election periods separately. I regress response time on an indicator of election years, along with controls for the number of pending petitions and fixed effects for day, year, and county. The coefficient on the election year dummy reflects the average difference in response time between election and non-election years. If my findings were driven by a slowdown in the post-election period, the coefficient of interest should be small and insignificant in the pre-election period (Model 1), but positive and significant thereafter (Model 2). Yet, I find the opposite: consistent with the idea that my results are driven by improved responsiveness before elections, the coefficient on

Table A7: The effect is not due to differences in petition topic, character, or reference

	Response time (log days)					1(positive resolution)
	People's Chamber	Council of Ministers				People's Chamber
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Pre-Election	0.128 (0.097)	-0.171*** (0.031)	-0.248*** (0.031)	-0.200*** (0.033)	-0.170*** (0.030)	-0.028 (0.062)
Pre-Election × Election year	-0.315*** (0.086)					0.098** (0.040)
Topic: Construction	0.317* (0.190)	0.034 (0.154)			0.055 (0.158)	0.253*** (0.056)
Topic: Culture, Sports, and Tourism	-0.197 (0.266)	0.149 (0.178)			0.138 (0.182)	0.083 (0.080)
Topic: Defense	-0.473** (0.231)	-1.067*** (0.294)			-1.099*** (0.291)	-0.027 (0.077)
Topic: Domestic Affairs	-0.878*** (0.179)	-0.951*** (0.154)			-1.009*** (0.159)	-0.003 (0.046)
Topic: Education and Science	-0.250 (0.201)	-0.271 (0.191)			-0.338* (0.190)	0.084 (0.056)
Topic: Finances	-0.292 (0.199)	-0.154 (0.166)			-0.178 (0.164)	0.065 (0.058)
Topic: Foreign Affairs	-1.039*** (0.217)	-1.087*** (0.185)			-1.175*** (0.197)	-0.029 (0.056)
Topic: Foreign Trade	-0.563** (0.268)	-0.388** (0.196)			-0.468** (0.197)	0.016 (0.054)
Topic: Governance	-0.102 (0.222)	-0.195 (0.215)			-0.281 (0.218)	0.094 (0.062)
Topic: Health and Social Services	0.00004 (0.209)	-0.424** (0.173)			-0.460*** (0.173)	0.088* (0.052)
Topic: Housing	0.301* (0.174)	0.133 (0.154)			0.082 (0.151)	0.281*** (0.050)
Topic: Industry	0.105 (0.224)	0.266 (0.180)			0.189 (0.181)	0.107 (0.077)
Topic: Justice	-0.560*** (0.178)	-0.194 (0.195)			-0.268 (0.196)	0.021 (0.048)
Topic: Labor, Wages, and Social Insurance	-0.226 (0.184)	-0.255 (0.160)			-0.309* (0.161)	0.037 (0.051)
Topic: Miscellaneous	-0.708*** (0.275)					0.035 (0.060)
Topic: Motor Vehicles and Transportation	-0.190 (0.190)	0.161 (0.157)			0.094 (0.156)	0.163*** (0.059)
Topic: Nature, Environment, and Water	-0.036 (0.261)	-0.001 (0.188)			-0.077 (0.189)	0.055 (0.073)
Topic: Postal Service and Telecommunications	0.211 (0.181)	0.109 (0.163)			0.047 (0.165)	0.090 (0.063)
Topic: Trade and Supply	-0.0004 (0.192)	0.179 (0.159)			0.124 (0.158)	0.197*** (0.055)
Character: Criticism			-0.629*** (0.039)		-0.258*** (0.049)	
Character: Follow-up petition			-0.239** (0.107)		-0.250** (0.105)	
Character: Request			-0.189*** (0.033)		-0.100*** (0.038)	
Character: Suggestion			-0.485** (0.229)		-0.424* (0.218)	
Character: Tip			-0.465*** (0.076)		-0.439*** (0.080)	
Character: Unknown			-0.640*** (0.094)		-0.368*** (0.091)	
Reference: Elections				0.082 (0.165)	0.046 (0.145)	
Reference: Law				-0.681*** (0.162)	-0.003 (0.145)	
Reference: Local decisions				-0.103 (0.163)	-0.164 (0.150)	
Reference: Politburo				0.303 (0.198)	0.180 (0.195)	
Reference: Unknown				-0.117 (0.168)	-0.143 (0.147)	
Control for # pending petitions?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Day-FE?	✓					✓
Year-FE?	✓					✓
County-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	3,736	4,768	4,770	4,770	4,768	2,625
Adjusted R ²	0.202	0.313	0.218	0.224	0.327	0.111

Notes: This table shows that the main finding remains robust when controlling for petition content: Models 1, 6 (*People's Chamber* petitions), and 2 (*Council of Ministers* petitions) control for petition topic. Models 3 and 4 (*Council of Ministers* petitions) control for the character of each petition and what it refers to, respectively. Model 5 includes all three measures. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Robust standard errors, clustered by county, in parentheses.

the election year dummy is twice as large in the pre- (Model 1) compared to the post-election period (Model 2).

Table A8: Response time differences between election and non-election years

	Response time (log days)	
	Before election	After election
	(1)	(2)
Election year	-0.609** (0.283)	-0.326* (0.188)
Control for # pending petitions?	✓	✓
Day-FE?	✓	✓
Year-FE?	✓	✓
County-FE?	✓	✓
Observations	1,751	1,986
Adjusted R ²	0.088	0.086

Notes: This table estimates differences in response time between election and non-election years, using the *People's Chamber* petition sample. Model 1 considers the 90 days before elections, while Model 2 examines the 90 days thereafter. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Robust standard errors, clustered by county, in parentheses.

C.2 Bureaucratic or legislative turnover?

A second alternative explanation is that petitions were answered faster before elections because bureaucrats and legislators wanted to finalize pending petitions in anticipation of bureaucratic or legislative turnover. Alternatively, new officials after the election may require some time to familiarize themselves with the job, which would slow down response times after the election.

If true, the effects reported in the main text should be concentrated in elections that affected the composition of the respective body. Yet, the results are inconsistent with this idea. Even though the 1989 local elections did not alter the composition of the *Council of Ministers*, the *Council of Ministers* petition sample yields the same results as the *People's Chamber* data.

Further evidence against this implication is provided in Table A9. Here, I examine pre-electoral response times for each election separately. If the results were driven by anticipated legislative turnover, we should only find an effect in the 1981 *People's Chamber* elections (Model 2), while the local elections in 1979 (Model 1) and 1984 (Model 3) should leave response times the same. This expectation is not borne out in the data. The coefficient on the interaction term between the pre-election period and the election year dummy is negative and statistically significant across all elections.

Table A9: The effect is constant across different types of elections

	Response time (log days)			
	1979	1981	1984	all
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Pre-Election	0.126* (0.071)	0.113* (0.068)	0.021 (0.101)	0.084* (0.045)
Pre-Election × Election year	-0.205* (0.112)	-0.378** (0.147)	-0.381*** (0.144)	-0.332*** (0.075)
Control for # pending petitions?	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓
County-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,424	1,661	1,113	3,737
Adjusted R ²	0.023	0.040	0.041	0.028

Notes: This table examines the difference in response time to *People's Chamber* petitions between the pre- and post-election periods, separately for the 1979 local (Model 1), 1981 legislative (Model 2), and 1984 local elections (Model 3). Model 4 reports the result when all three elections are considered. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Robust standard errors, clustered by county, in parentheses.

C.3 Were petitions entered with delay?

Table A10: Few differences in the time between submission and receipt of petitions

	Time between submission and receipt (log days)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Pre-Election	-0.085 (0.099)	-0.146 (0.131)	-0.042 (0.110)	-0.085 (0.090)
Pre-Election × Election year	-0.098* (0.055)	-0.089 (0.083)	-0.126* (0.067)	-0.098 (0.061)
Control for # pending petitions?	✓	✓	✓	✓
Day-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓
County-FE?	✓		✓	✓
ZIP code-FE?		✓		
County × year?			✓	
SE clustered by	county	zip code	county	county & month-year
Observations	2,355	2,353	2,353	2,355
Adjusted R ²	0.111	0.153	0.116	0.111

Notes: This table estimates differences in the number of days between the submission and receipt of a petition around elections. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

It is possible that the receipt date assigned to petitions differs in the pre-election period. Government officials may have recorded a later receipt date before elections to artificially decrease response time and signal competence to their superiors.

Table A10 tests this idea. The dependent variable is the natural logarithm of 1 plus the number of days between the date a petition was written and the date it was received. The variable was top-coded at the 99th percentile. Not all petitions are dated, which explains the smaller sample size. Information on the date a petition was written was unavailable for the *Council of Ministers* sample, such that this analysis is restricted to the *People's Chamber* petition data. Petitions were assigned to either the pre- or post-election (or pseudo-election) periods based on the date they were received.

Of interest is the coefficient on the interaction term between the pre-election period and election years. If it is true that it took the government a longer time to enter petitions before elections, this coefficient should be positive. The model specifications mirror those in Models 1 through 4 in Table 3 in the main text. All models control for the number of pending petitions and include day- and year-fixed effects. Models 1, 3, and 4 include county-fixed effects. Model 2 uses zip code-fixed effects instead. Standard errors are clustered accordingly. Model 4 additionally clusters standard errors by month-year.

The results are at odds with the idea that petitions were entered with delay before elections. If anything, the opposite appears to be the case: all coefficients are negative, and some of them are significant at $p < 0.1$. This finding provides some additional support for my argument that the East German government sought to process and respond to petitions more quickly before elections.

C.4 Petitions about the 1989 local election?

Activists were able to collect proof of widespread fraud in the 1989 local elections. As information about irregularities circulated, complaints about the conduct of these elections skyrocketed: in the 90 days following the election, 41 percent of all *Council of Ministers* petitions were about the elections, compared to 10 percent before. A third alternative explanation argues that this large volume of election-related complaints diminishes the comparability of the pre- and post-election periods.

Table A11 provides evidence against this argument. It shows that the coefficient of interest remains substantively the same when dropping all *Council of Ministers* petitions related to elections.

Table A11: The effect is not due to petitions about fraud in the 1989 local elections

	Response time (log days)			1(Central government response)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Pre-Election	-0.229*** (0.034)	-0.067* (0.039)	-0.093*** (0.027)	0.061*** (0.021)	0.0003 (0.024)
Contains criticism		-0.138*** (0.046)			-0.092*** (0.022)
Pre-Election × Contains criticism		-0.350*** (0.063)			0.177*** (0.033)
Central government responds			-0.235*** (0.038)		
Pre-Election × Central government responds			-0.203*** (0.055)		
Control for # pending petitions?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
County-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	4,398	4,265	3,664	3,664	3,658
Adjusted R ²	0.164	0.185	0.290	0.050	0.057

Notes: This table repeats the analysis of the *Council of Ministers* petitions, dropping all petitions that make a reference to the conduct of the 1989 elections. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Robust standard errors, clustered by county, in parentheses.

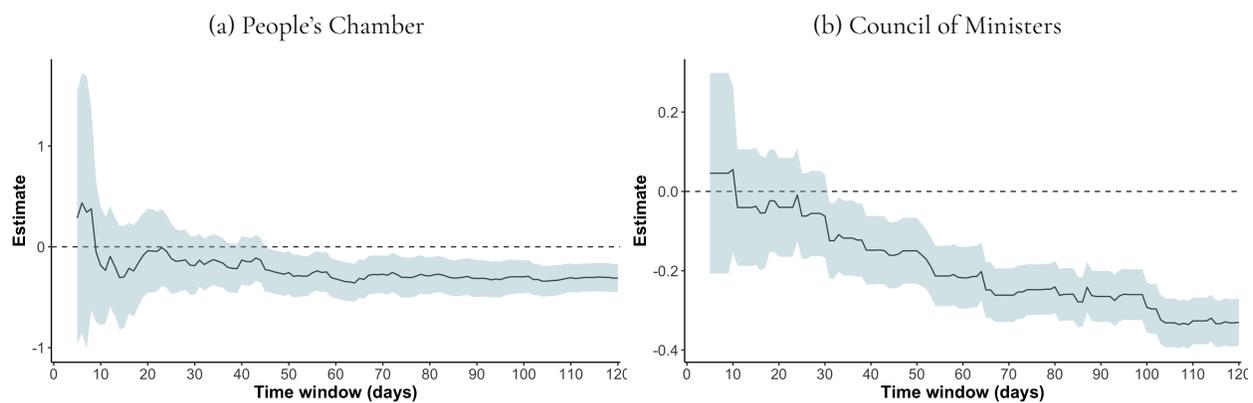
D Robustness checks

This Appendix section summarizes multiple robustness checks that show that my findings are not driven by particular coding and modeling decisions.

D.1 Varying the time window

The analyses in the main text consider all petitions answered during the 90 days before or after elections. I repeated the analysis (Models 1 and 5 in Table 3) with varying time windows, ranging from 5 to 120 days. The resulting coefficients of interest, along with 95% confidence intervals, are depicted in Figure A5. For the *People's Chamber* petitions, the results reflect a high amount of stability. Regarding the *Council of Ministers*, I find that the difference in response time keeps decreasing with the size of the time window, but is negative for all but the shortest time windows.

Figure A5: Varying time window



Notes: Estimated difference in response time (in log days) for varying time windows (5 to 120 days) around the election date. Left: *People's Chamber* petitions. Right: *Council of Ministers* petitions. 95% confidence intervals are depicted in light blue.

D.2 Alternative definitions of the dependent variable

The dependent variable in the main text is the natural logarithm of 1 plus the number of days between receipt of and answer to a petition. I add one day to the response time to ensure that the first day is properly accounted for. It also ensures that same-day answers are considered, which otherwise would be dropped from the analysis as the logarithm of 0 is not defined.

I show in Table A12 that this transformation does not impact the results. The findings remain unchanged when I do not add 1 to the number of days and thus drop all same-day responses (Models 1 and 4), when not taking logs (Models 2 and 5), and when not taking logs while at the same time dropping same-day responses (Models 3 and 6).

Table A12: Robustness to alternative specifications of the dependent variable

	People's Chamber			Council of Ministers		
	Response time (log days)	Response time (days)		Response time (log days)	Response time (days)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Pre-Election	0.264*** (0.098)	6.978** (3.243)	7.614** (3.244)	-0.280*** (0.035)	-15.388*** (1.130)	-15.567*** (1.126)
Pre-Election × Election year	-0.313*** (0.108)	-14.261*** (3.187)	-14.353*** (3.404)			
Control for # pending petitions?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Day-FE?	✓	✓	✓			
Year-FE?	✓	✓	✓			
County-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	3,681	3,737	3,681	4,758	4,770	4,758
Adjusted R ²	0.107	0.088	0.093	0.171	0.161	0.164

Notes: This table repeats the main analyses presented in Table 3, but uses three alternative measures of the dependent variable. Models 1 to 3 consider the *People's Chamber* petitions, while Models 4 to 6 examine the *Council of Ministers* petitions. The dependent variable in Models 1 and 4 is the natural logarithm of response time (without adding 1). Petitions that were answered on the same day are thus dropped from these samples. Models 2, 3, 5, and 6 consider response time linearly. Models 2 and 5 include petitions that received a same-day response. Models 3 and 6 drop those petitions. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Robust standard errors, clustered by county, in parentheses.

D.3 Alternative estimation technique

Table A13 analyzes the data using Poisson (Models 1 and 3) and negative binomial regression (Models 2 and 4). The dependent variable here is the count of the number of days between receipt of and answer to a petition. The models are defined as before: I model response time to *People's Chamber* petitions as a function of the interaction between the pre-election period and election years, along with county- and year-fixed effects and the number of pending petitions. Response time to *Council of Ministers* is modeled as a function of the pre-election period, county-fixed effects, and the number of pending petitions. The resulting coefficients of interest, which express the percent change in response time in the pre- compared to the post-election period, are almost the same as those in the main text.

Table A13: Robustness to alternative estimation technique: count models

	Response time (days)			
	People's Chamber		Council of Ministers	
	Poisson	Neg. Binomial	Poisson	Neg. Binomial
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Pre-Election	0.165 (0.117)	0.173 (0.124)	-0.351*** (0.009)	-0.333*** (0.011)
Pre-Election × Election year	-0.392*** (0.092)	-0.353*** (0.086)		
Control for # pending petitions?	✓	✓	✓	✓
Day-FE?	✓	✓		
Year-FE?	✓	✓		
County-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	3,737	3,737	4,770	4,770

Notes: This table shows that the main results remain robust when estimating count models: Poisson (Models 1 and 3) and negative binomial (Models 2 and 4). *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Robust standard errors, clustered by county, in parentheses.

D.4 Omitting the control for pending petitions

My regression models control for the number of pending petitions. A backlog in petitions might have slowed down the government and increased average response times. As shown above, the volume of incoming petitions and government responses varied slightly around elections. The inclusion of the control for pending petitions may thus introduce post-treatment bias. To show that this is not the case, I replicate the analysis reported in Table 3 without this control. The results are summarized in Table A14.

The omission of the pending petitions control leaves the coefficients of interest for the *People's Chamber* petition analysis virtually unchanged. Regarding the *Council of Ministers* petitions, I find that the coefficient of interest actually becomes more negative. This finding suggests that my estimate of the difference in response time before vs. after elections reported in the main text is conservative. Still, I believe that the inclusion of this control is important. It accounts for the fact that the number of pending *Council of Ministers* petitions continued to rise throughout the period for which data are available (Figure A2b). This trend started before the pre-election period and continued thereafter. It is therefore unlikely to be caused by the election.

Table A14: The main results hold when not controlling for the number of pending petitions

	Response time (log days)					
	People's Chamber				Council of Ministers	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Pre-Election	0.191* (0.101)	0.165 (0.160)	0.151 (0.107)	0.191*** (0.071)	-0.558*** (0.030)	-0.570*** (0.034)
Pre-Election × Election year	-0.327*** (0.082)	-0.366*** (0.106)	-0.310*** (0.084)	-0.327*** (0.083)		
Day-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Year-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓		
County-FE?	✓		✓	✓	✓	
ZIP code-FE?		✓				✓
County × year?			✓			
SE clustered by	county	zip code	county	county & month-year	county	zip code
Observations	3,737	3,732	3,737	3,737	4,770	4,770
Adjusted R ²	0.090	0.087	0.089	0.090	0.118	0.090

Notes: Difference in response time to *People's Chamber* (Models 1 to 4) and *Council of Ministers* (Models 5 to 6) petitions between the pre- and post-election periods. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

D.5 Dropping 1985

As shown in Figure A1, I was able to collect only a small share of *People's Chamber* petitions in 1985. It is unlikely that petitions in that year are missing at random. Table A15 shows that my results remain unchanged when dropping 1985 from the analysis altogether.

Table A15: Robustness to dropping petitions in 1985

	Response time (log days)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Pre-Election	0.201** (0.102)	0.170 (0.160)	0.155 (0.109)	0.088* (0.051)
Pre-Election \times Election year	-0.325*** (0.095)	-0.375*** (0.116)	-0.301*** (0.098)	-0.337*** (0.085)
Control for # pending petitions?	✓	✓	✓	✓
Day-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year-FE?	✓	✓	✓	✓
County-FE?	✓		✓	✓
ZIP code-FE?		✓		
County \times year?			✓	
SE clustered by	county	zip code	county	county & month-year
Observations	3,726	3,721	3,726	3,726
Adjusted R ²	0.089	0.084	0.090	0.029

Notes: This table reports the difference in response time (in log days) between the pre- and post-election period among petitions to the *People's Chamber*. The sample excludes petitions in 1985. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

D.6 Identification assumptions

Table A16: Testing the identification assumptions

	Response time (log days)	
	(1)	(2)
Pre-Election	0.263 (0.193)	-0.105 (0.142)
Pre-Election × Election year		-0.112 (0.145)
Control for # pending petitions?	✓	✓
Day-FE?	✓	✓
Year-FE?	✓	✓
County-FE?	✓	✓
Observations	2,056	3,236
Adjusted R ²	0.134	0.076

Notes: Model 1 shows that there are no differences in responsiveness between the pseudo-pre- and post-election periods in non-election years. Model 2 shows that there are no differences between election and non-election years outside of the 90-day window around elections. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Robust standard errors, clustered by county, in parentheses.

This paper’s empirical strategy relies on three identification assumptions. First, the timing of elections must be exogenous and not related to the regime’s capacity to respond to petitions. This assumption holds: GDR elections were held at the end of regular five-year legislative terms. There is no evidence of strategic election timing.

Second, difference-in-differences designs require no spillovers: the fact that some observations are treated must not change the outcome among non-treated units. Table A8 shows no statistically significant differences in response time between election and non-election years in the post-election period: the fact that responsiveness changed before elections did not impact responsiveness thereafter. It is further possible that responsiveness was generally different in the months before elections or pseudo-elections. To rule out this possibility, Model 1 in Table A16 examines differences in responsiveness between the pseudo-pre- and pseudo-post-election periods in non-election years, using the base model specification. I find no differences in non-election years before and after pseudo-election dates, which substantiates the no spillover assumption.

Third, I assume parallel trends: election and non-election years should move in parallel. Model 2 in Table A16 substantiates this assumption. It replicates the base model (Model 1 in Table 3 in the main text), but considers petitions answered outside the 180-day window around elections. It shows that the difference between the pre- and post-election periods does not vary systematically in election years compared to non-election years in this sample. Outside election season, there are no statistically significant differences in response times between the pre- and post-election periods when comparing election and non-election years.