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**AN ALTERNATIVE TO REPRESENTATION:
Explaining Preferences for Citizens as Political Decision-Makers**

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Abstract

Extensive scholarly attention is devoted to citizens' preferences for alternative models of political decision-making. However, few efforts were made to identify who these citizens are and why they display a certain preference. To address this void in the literature, our article analyzes the determinants of preferences for citizens as decision-makers. It uses individual-level data from a 2014 survey on a probability representative sample in Germany and tests the effects of political attitudes towards institutions of representative democracy, interest in politics and civic involvement. It controls for consumption of political news, education and age.

Keywords: decision-makers, citizens, critique of democracy, political interest, Germany

Introduction

In recent decades, extensive scholarly attention has been dedicated to citizens' preferences for alternative models of political decision-making (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2001; Esaiasson et al. 2012; Bengtsson & Christensen 2016; Gherghina & Geissel 2017). The findings indicate that some citizens favor political representatives as decision-makers, some are more oriented towards experts (Rapeli 2015), while others want citizens to have (more often) the final say (Bowler et al. 2007; Bengtsson & Mattila 2009; Anderson & Goodyear-Grant 2010; Gabriel 2013; Webb 2013; Coffé & Michels 2014; Font et al. 2015). The latter perspective has recently gained momentum and, in addition to the increasing amount of referendums organized worldwide (Altman 2011; Qvortrup 2014), there are important indicators of increasingly positive attitudes towards referendums.¹ For example, according to the World Values Survey (Wave 5, 2015) the majority of people consider the item "people can change the laws in referendums" as an "essential characteristic of democracy". Also, the European Social Survey (Round 6, 2012) points out that Europeans consider referendums to be as essential as free opposition, media freedom or minority rights.

¹ The involvement of citizens in the decision-making process is not considered as replacing but rather complementing the representative mechanisms (Mendelsohn & Parkin 2001; Altman 2011; Norris 2011; Setala & Schiller 2012; Cain 2015).

In spite of this development towards more participatory preferences only isolated efforts were made to explain them. So far, research always referred to one survey question applied in (inter-)national surveys asking for preferences without information about how consistent this preference actually is. Looking at explanatory variables, these studies focused mainly on the ways in which factors like dissatisfaction with democracy, education or political interest may shape preferences for decision-makers (Dalton et al. 2001; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2001; Bengtsson & Mattila 2009; Coffé & Michels 2014). Donovan and Karp (2006) have carved out the main question discussed in the following years, whether the dissatisfied, less educated citizens favor direct democratic decision-making more than the politically interested and educated citizens. Apart from not reaching any conclusive results due to the mixed evidence, this body of research ignored several attitudes that may be relevant to determine the preferences for citizens as decision-makers. To partially address this void in the literature, our article tests the extent to which political satisfaction with democracy as well as with different institutions of representative democracy, interest in politics and civic engagement can explain the consistent preference for citizens as decision-makers. We control for the consumption of news, education and age. It uses individual-level data from a 2014 survey on a probability representative sample in Germany, where almost one quarter of the respondents (approximately 700) had a clear preference towards citizens as decision-makers; the others either favor representative / expert democracy or have mixed preferences.

The following section reviews the state of the art on explaining citizens' preferences, provides the theoretical underpinnings for the main testable hypotheses and briefly discusses the potential impact of controls. Next, we describe our methodological approach and the data, with emphasis on the case selection and variable operationalization. The fourth section presents and interprets the results of the quantitative analysis, while the conclusion summarizes the main findings and discusses broader implications for the study of public attitudes towards direct democratic decision-making.²

² This paper uses the term "direct democratic decision-making" because we are interested in the preferences for citizens as decision-makers. Preferring citizens as decision makers is not completely identical with direct democracy, because some direct democratic instruments are only consultative with political representatives being responsible for the final decision. Accordingly, we apply the term "direct democracy" when referring to a broader concept including different kinds of participatory direct democratic procedures.

State of the Art and Hypotheses

Scholars have recently started to pay closer attention to citizens' preferences considering their role as political decision-makers (Font et al. 2015).³ A variety of surveys provide data on certain aspects of citizens' conceptions: the different barometers conducted around the world (Afrobarometer, Eurobarometer etc.), the World Values Survey (WVS), the International Social Survey Program (ISSP, particularly the modules on citizenship in 2004 or 2014) or the European Social Survey (Round 6, 2012) as well as country surveys. These studies reveal, that citizens all over the world rank referendums as essential, indispensable characteristic of democracy, which means they hold strong preferences for citizens as political decision-makers (Pew Research Center 2017). Research explaining these attitudes provides mixed evidence (Font et al. 2015). While some studies show that political dissatisfaction is the main explanatory variable, other works see mainly the level of education as a driver or use the interactions between these two variables (Dalton et al. 2001; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2001; 2002; Bowler et al. 2007; Bengtsson & Mattila 2009; Webb 2013; Coffé & Michels 2014; Bengtsson & Christensen 2016).

Based on existing research in the field, but also inspired from the literature of political attitude formation and participation, we structure the debate along the two main features potentially influencing the preference for citizens as decision-makers. These are the dissatisfaction with the institutions of representative democracy, and political interest and active engagement in society. Political dissatisfaction and political involvement are the two variables – in addition to the socio-economic status (SES) variables – discussed in most studies on preferences for direct democratic decision-making. Bowler et al (2007) summarized the debate when they asked whether “enraged” (dissatisfied) or “engaged” citizens prefer “direct citizen participation”. This debate continued to shape empirical analysis until today, most recently in the study by Christensen (2017) focusing on “knowing and distrusting”, by Gabriel (2013) including mainly variables in the context of political trust and political interest, or by Rose and Borz (2013) who examined the political involvement and dissatisfaction as the main variables; for a similar effort, see Schuck and de Vreese (2011). Education is the standard variable supposedly explaining preferences for citizens as decision-makers – in some countries citizens with higher education are less enthusiastic

³ Research on citizens' conception of democracy has gained some scientific interest, but only few studies focus on preferences for citizens as decision-makers (Baviskar & Malone 2004; Ferrin & Kriesi 2016).

about direct democratic decision-making than citizens with lower educational background (Dalton et al. 2001; Coffé & Michels 2014). News consumption is also a factor considered as crucial (Gabriel 2013). Also age has turned out to have an impact (Dalton et al. 2001). These variables will now be discussed in more detail.

Political dissatisfaction

Citizens who are critical towards the institutions of political representation and dissatisfied with the existing mechanisms are likely to favor a change. They dislike how democracy in general and institutions of democracy in particular function and thus strive for a political transformation by involving the citizens in the decision-making process. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2001; 2002) considered dissatisfaction with representative democracy as the main rationale behind the citizens' endorsement of direct democratic decision-making. Further studies strengthened this idea and identified a positive correlation between political dissatisfaction and preference for direct democratic decision-making (Dalton et al. 2001; Bengtsson & Mattila 2009; Christensen 2017).

However, other studies show less clear-cut and more mixed findings about the relationship between political dissatisfaction and preference for direct democratic decision-making (Donovan & Karp 2006). Citizens with preferences for referendums often had a strong commitment for democracy, but little trust in institutions of representative democracy (Geissel 2011). Other works come even to opposing conclusions. For example, a comparative study of 16 countries found that citizens with trust in institutions of representative democracy (among other variables) support direct democratic decision-making more strongly than citizens less trust (Bowler et al. 2007). Recently the preference of so-called populist political parties and their voters for direct democracy gained specific scientific attention, especially in the context of political dissatisfaction (Webb 2013; Pauwels 2014). Bowler et al. (2017) found out that preferences of right-wing voters in Australia, Canada and New Zealand have to be explained with different factors. In Australia and New Zealand politically dissatisfied citizens did not favor referendums, whereas in Canada political disaffection and support for direct democratic decision-making were clearly linked – similar to findings from Norway, Sweden and Finland (Donovan & Karp 2006).

These mixed findings reflect a potential relationship between dissatisfaction with representative democracy and preference for direct democratic decision-making. The

differences between the surveys questions might be a reason for the inconsistent findings. In order to measure preferences for referendums different questions were applied, e.g. ‘what do you think about referendums’ or ‘do you think that referendums are a good thing’. The same is true for the measurement of ‘political dissatisfaction’, e.g. it was asked whether respondents trust government, believed that their MPs were ‘out of touch’ (Donovan & Karp 2006, pp.678–679) or whether they are satisfied with democracy in general. Accordingly, we assume that one of the main reasons behind the contradicting findings is the cacophony of survey questions. And similarly important is the fact that studies lumped attitudes recorded at systemic (“democracy in general”) and institutional levels.

In contrast, we are convinced that it is necessary to distinguish between general (“diffuse”) support (Easton 1965) for democracy in general and specific support for different political institutions. Discontent with representative democracy in general or with government or with legislating bodies will most likely contribute in different ways to a preference for an alternative form of decision-making. This approach is in line with several empirical studies in the field. For example, there is a difference within the representative system between government and parliament (among other institutions such as parties) (Christensen 2017) or political dissatisfaction can be differentiated between representative democracy in general and institutions of representative democracy (Arnold et al. 2014).

Accordingly, we expect a relation between satisfaction with representative democracy in general and preference for citizens as political decision-makers (H1). We also expect that discontent with institutions of representation correlates as well and even stronger than the discontent with democracy in general with participatory preferences (H2 and H3).⁴ To pinpoint the specific attitudes of citizens towards the institutions of representative democracy, we look at their opinions about the performance of the government (H2) and how they assess the key function of the parliament, i.e. the right to legislate (H3). We are aware that dissatisfaction with representative democracy in general and dissatisfaction with government and parliament as institutions of representation might

⁴ Over time, a large share of the population developed an increasing critique attitude against representative institutions, i.e. on government and parliament. Citizens seem to be increasingly dissatisfied because these institutions do not demonstrate sufficient responsiveness and do not deliver the expected goods and services (Nicholson 2005; Setälä 2009; Norris 2011). Additional issues such as institutional poor accountability, representatives’ incompetence, non-transparent decision-making process, delayed implementation of policies, or the corruption scandals within the legislative and executive alienate citizens and make them raise question marks about the reliability and appropriateness of such institutions.

correlate. However, in spite of some overlap we see reasons to differentiate and to test the three factors separately.

H1: Dissatisfaction with representative democracy enhances preference for direct democratic decision-making.

H2: Dissatisfaction with the government enhances preference for direct democratic decision-making.

H3: Dissatisfaction with parliament as legislating body enhances preference for direct democratic decision-making.

Political and civic involvement

A complementary argument points out that not the dissatisfied citizens but the politically interested and engaged ones strive for more citizens' involvement. The argument is "that citizens with greater interest in politics may... desire greater participatory democracy" (Donovan & Karp 2006, p.872). Interested citizens want to be involved and to influence politics directly. The reasoning behind the hypothesized effects is inspired by the literature on political participation. An extensive body of literature indicates that political interest is one of the most powerful predictors of political participation (Verba et al. 1995; Norris 2000; Christensen 2017). The argument is straightforward: individuals who are already interested in politics are more likely to participate than the rest of the public.⁵ These considerations point out that political interest might go hand in hand with the preferences for citizens' as decision-makers.

Nevertheless, the empirical evidence is quite mixed. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) show how the US citizens without interest in politics endorse the idea of stealth democracy, which is an alternative to representative democracy quite far from that of direct democracy. In Finland, this correlation does not appear to exist (Bengtsson & Mattila 2009). Christensen (2017) shows also based on Finnish data that the involvement in direct democratic procedures is mainly observable at the knowledgeable citizens. In this sense, political knowledge is crucial for involvement in direct democratic procedures. Previous research indicates how political interest is also a good predictor of the willingness to get involved in deliberative practices (Jacobs et al. 2009), another alternative to representative democracy. Dalton et al. (2001, p.150) found out that popular support for direct democracy "is located

⁵ An increasing share of the population welcomes the possibility to express non-mediated preferences, especially when they are informed about issues of interest to them (Nicholson 2005).

among citizens at the periphery of politics – the less interested and the less informed, and the adherents of extreme parties”. The mixed evidence shows positive correlations between preferences for direct democracy and political interest in some countries, but negative correlations in others (Donovan & Karp 2006). Some differences may be explained by the rough indicators used to measure the independent variables. For example, the political motivation and interest were measured by self-reported voting activity or the frequency of political discussions (Donovan & Karp 2006, pp.678-679). In spite of these problems and contradictory findings, the theoretical arguments presented above provide sufficient reasons to test for the existence of a positive effect of political interest on the preference for citizens as decision-makers (H4).

Following a similar line of argument, citizens who are civically engaged may be inclined to have more say in the political arena. Civic engagement has been long considered a valid explanation for political participation (Verba & Nie 1972; Rosenstone & Hansen 1993; Verba et al. 1995; Putnam 2000), but it may also be a strong predictor for preference formation. The membership in organizations (political or non-political) can enhance the political education and inspire citizens to get more say. People can be socialized with the pro-participatory values and learn specific skills that may lead to aspiring further participation (Leighley 1996). According to the core argument of Putnam (1993), citizens who get involved in voluntary organizations might increase their interest in societal problems. Consequently, their propensity towards political participation and further involvement of citizens might be higher than that of their fellow inactive citizens (H5). Consequently, we hypothesize that:

H4: Interest in politics enhances preference for direct democratic decision-making.

H5: Civic engagement enhances preference for direct democratic decision-making.

Control variables

In addition to these main effects, we test for the impact of three factors revealed in the literature as having a potential impact: consumption of political news, education, and age. News consumption has been considered a potential driver for preference formation especially in the context of referendum campaigns (Donovan et al. 2009; Schuck & Vreese 2011; Gabriel 2013). Media are the primary source for information in general and political information in particular (e.g. Schuck & de Vreese 2011) and an extensive body of literature

identified the existence of an impact of media use on political knowledge (Scheufele 2002; Drew & Weaver 2006). In turn, knowledge influences the ways in which citizens wish to get involved in the decision-making process, as discussed above. Empirical evidence has shown that individuals who closely follow the development of the public affairs are more involved in comparison to the rest of the citizens (McLeod et al. 1999). On the basis of these mechanisms, there is no surprise that earlier findings pointed to a strong correlation between news interest and consumption, on the one hand, and involvement in decision-making, on the other hand (Putnam 2000).

It can be argued that citizens with lower education have more reasons to prefer direct democratic decision-making because political representatives more often satisfy the interests of the well-off voters than those of less privileged citizens (Schäfer & Schön 2013; Elsässer et al. 2017). In this sense, the preferences of lower educated citizens for direct democracy are a rational reaction to politicians skewed responsiveness (Gabriel 2013). Empirical findings provide a fuzzy picture. Studies on Finland and the Netherlands showed that especially citizens with lower education are more likely to favor direct democracy (Bengtsson & Mattila 2009; Bovens & Wille 2010; Coffé & Michels 2014). However, in the US there is no correlation between education and support for citizens as decision-makers (Bowler et al. 2007). Gabriel (2013) detected that among German citizens the level of education influenced the preference for direct democracy much less than the perception of being represented or not. Citizens, who did not feel represented by the representative system and its institutions, were more inclined to prefer direct democratic decision-making – irrespective of their educational background. In many Latin American countries especially highly educated citizens favor direct democracy, whereas the low educated are less fond of referendums (Pew Research Center 2017, 22f.).

We also checked for the effect of age since several studies showed that younger people favor direct democracy more strongly than older citizens (Dalton et al. 2001; Jeydel & Steel 2002; Donovan & Karp 2006; Rose & Borz 2013; Arnold et al. 2014).

Research Design and Descriptive Statistics

To test our hypotheses, we use individual level data from a national survey conducted in August-September 2014 by the GESIS Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences in Germany. The GESIS Panel is a mixed-mode (online and mail) omnibus access panel representative for

the German speaking population aged between 18 and 70 years. The survey included a specific one-wave battery of questions about preferences for certain political decision-makers proposed by the authors of this article. Around 4,000 respondents answered the questions used to operationalize the variables of this study. The “do not know” and “no answer” options were treated as missing values and excluded from analysis.

Germany is an appropriate context to investigate variables explaining citizens’ preferences for decision-makers for several reasons (Gherghina & Geissel 2017). In terms of participatory behavior, Germany plays in the middle field compared with other EU member states (European Social Survey 2012).⁶ Looking at subnational popular votes within European countries, Germany is currently one of the leading countries. Popular vote can be launched top-down, i.e. by authorities, or bottom-up, i.e. by citizens, either to “correct” a decision of the local council or to put a topic on the political agenda.

Variable operationalization and descriptive findings

One methodological choice that could lead to the contradictory results is the use of a standard survey question, e.g. whether respondents favor the idea or use of referendums. Such an approach does not take into account the inconsistent preferences of citizens and they might, for example, endorse at the same time citizens, experts, and politicians as decision-makers. Citizens might declare to want more say in politics and, at the same time, to strive for more decision-making power for experts (Gherghina & Geissel 2017). To explain preferences for citizens as decision-makers, we want to include only consistent preferences. An analysis of citizens’ preferences is more valid, significant and meaningful if we can make sure that people’s preferences are stable and robust. To avoid the oversimplification of our dependent variable, we use an approach that allows the identification of consistent preferences. Consequently, the dependent variable of this study is dichotomous to make sure that the preferences for decision-makers are mutually exclusive. This measure differs from those usually employed in the literature (Bengtsson 2012; Font et al. 2015; Bengtsson & Christensen 2016) in the sense that ensures the belonging of respondents to a single preference category. In addition, it had been used in one of our previous works and provided useful insights into the preferences of citizens (Gherghina & Geissel 2017).

⁶ Similar to other democracies, also German political representatives are more responsive to the interests and demands of well-educated, privileged citizens (Elsässer et al. 2017).

The dependent variable is calculated as follows: respondents had to choose on a six-point continuum between three political decision-makers (politicians, citizens or experts), taken two by two. The respondents were asked the following question: “Who should make important policy decisions? Please indicate the number on the scale from 1 to 6 that is closest to your opinion”. They had to make three choices between I. Citizens (1) and Politicians (6); II. Politicians (1) and Politically independent experts (6) and III. Politically independent experts (1) and Citizens (6).⁷ Respondents are considered as preferring citizens as decision-makers when they favor citizens over both politicians and experts. To measure the preferences for citizens as decision-makers, all respondents who chose 1, 2, or 3 at the question about citizens vs. politicians and those who chose 4, 5, or 6 at the question about experts or citizens were coded 1. All the other respondents preferred an alternative or had inconsistent preferences and were coded 0; for an overview of the descriptive statistics for every variable, see Appendix 1. After applying this coding systematically, 24% of the total sample strive for citizens as decision-makers; as a comparison, they are as many as those in favor of representative democracy (who are 25%) and some respondents who have inconsistent preferences (21%).

The satisfaction with democracy (H1) and with government performance (H2) are measured on a 11-point ordinal scale (0 = very unsatisfied, 10 = very satisfied) corresponding to the answers provided to the straightforward questions in the survey. The critique of parliament as the institution to legislate (H3) is measured on a 6-point ordinal scale (1 = totally disagree, 6 = totally agree) as the answer provided to the following statement “Parliament is the best institution to decide on laws”. Interest in politics (H4) is an ordinal variable measured on a 5-point scale as the answers provided to the question about how much interest respondents have in politics (1 = not at all, 5 = very interested). Civic engagement (H5) is a five-point cumulative index of four dummy variables that measure the involvement (coded as 1) of respondents into religious, social, union, and charity organizations.

The consumption of political news is measured as the answer to the question about how much time is spent on average on political news. It is an ordinal scale that ranges from 1

⁷ In most surveys, citizens are asked questions such as: “please tell me how important you think it is for democracy in general... (0 = not at all important, 10 = extremely important): that citizens have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums”. In our questionnaire, however, citizens were forced to decide, which form of decision-making they prefer over another form.

(never) to 7 (daily, for more than two hours). Education is a four-point ordinal variable that ranges from basic/primary (1) studies to university degree (4). Age has been recoded into four categories with the respondents up to 30 years old in the first group, those between 31 and 45 in the second, those aged 46-60 in the third and Germans above 61 in the last one.⁸

Analysis and Results

Table 1 presents the results of the bivariate correlation analysis between each of the independent variables and the preference for citizens as decision-makers. There is empirical evidence for the first three hypothesized effects about the dissatisfaction of citizens, all statistically significant at the 0.01 level. The strongest among these is the most particular attitude of discontent with the Parliament as a legislative body. This confirms our theoretical argument that the preference for citizens’ decision-making is likely to emerge when respondents perceive particular problems that can be solved through the involvement of citizens. When the Parliament is not the appropriate institution to enact legislation, the direct decision of citizens on policies can be a valid alternative. However, this applies to a less extent in the case of dissatisfaction with the government or with democracy, more general processes or more distant from the citizen’s power to change things through involvement.

There is no empirical support for H4 and H5 since the values of coefficients are very close to statistical independence and they lack significance. All three control variables have a negative sign, being quite weak but statistically significant at the 0.05 level. They indicate that respondents who consume less political news, are poorer educated and young are more likely to display a preference for citizens as decision-makers.

Table 1: Correlations with preference for citizens as political decision-makers

Variable	Coefficient	N
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.15***	3,634
Satisfaction with the government	-0.15***	3,648
Parliament is the best institution to decide on laws	-0.18***	3,621
Political interest	-0.01	3,508
Civic engagement	0.02	3,371
Political news	-0.06**	3,522
Education	-0.05**	3,642
Age	-0.05**	3,668

Notes: Reported coefficients are non-parametric (Spearman)

⁸ We tested for a series of other socio-economic characteristics such as income, medium of residence or gender, but the effects were not relevant and we decided not to report them.

*p < 0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01

Table 2 includes the results of the logistic regression analysis, divided between a model without and one with controls.⁹ The results strengthen the argument according to which the specific discontent with institutions of representative democracy has a stronger effect on the preference for citizens as decision-makers. The critique of Parliament, as the most specific one, is considerably stronger than that of the government which, in turn, has an effect that is stronger than that of dissatisfaction with democracy. The latter is significant at the 0.05 level, while the effects in H2 and H3 are statistically significant at the 0.01 level. The respondents who are unhappy with the Parliament as a legislating body are 1.33 times more likely (this is the reciprocal of OR=0.75, expressed like this for a simpler interpretation) to have a preference for citizens deciding when compared to respondents who are satisfied with the Parliament. In comparison, respondents who are dissatisfied with the government are 1.09 more likely and those who are dissatisfied with democracy only 1.05 times more likely to have a similar preference.

Table 2: Binary logistic regression with preference for citizens as political decision-makers

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
Satisfaction with democracy	0.95** (0.02)	0.94** (0.02)
Satisfaction with the government	0.92*** (0.03)	0.91*** (0.03)
Parliament is the best institution to decide on laws	0.75*** (0.04)	0.77*** (0.04)
Political interest	1.07 (0.05)	1.18*** (0.06)
Civic engagement	1.10 (0.06)	1.12* (0.06)
Political news		0.92* (0.05)
Education		0.94 (0.06)
Age		0.88*** (0.05)
N	3,248	3,192
Pseudo R ²	0.07	0.08
-2 Log likelihood	3432.42	3369.44

Notes: Reported coefficients are odds-ratios (standard errors in brackets)

*p < 0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01

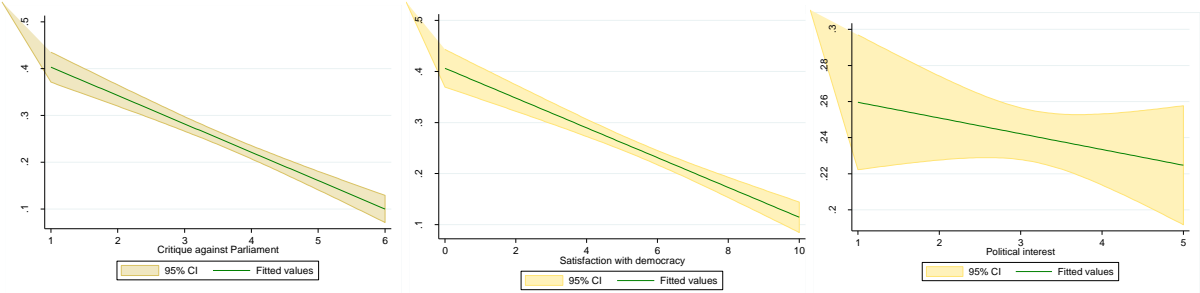
At the same time, the multivariate regression analysis brings additional information to what was observed in the bivariate correlations. When including all five effects into the same model, political interest and civic engagement have an effect, unlike what observed in Table 1. The empirical evidence confirms the expectations for both H4 and H5: although not

⁹ When testing for multi-collinearity we observed that there are no reasons for concern: the highest correlation is between satisfaction with democracy and with the government (0.59***). This average value of the coefficient is an empirical confirmation of our theoretical argument about the necessity to disentangle between the effects of diffuse and specific support on the preference for citizens as decision-makers.

statistically significant, this in the hypothesized direction and its strength is comparable to that of dissatisfaction with government or democracy. These effects get even stronger when the controls are added and they gain statistical significance. In Model 2, the political interest is the second strongest predictor after the critique against parliament. Most of the hypothesized effects get stronger when more variables are added. This happens particularly with interest in politics and civic engagement, but variables become statistically significant in Model 2 (as opposed to Model 1). One possible explanation for this is empirical and lies in the positive correlation between them and some of the controls such as the news consumption or age. When introducing the controls in the statistical model, the strength of the main effects can get higher in comparison with the model without controls. Another possible explanation is methodological: Model 1 has 50 respondents more than Model 2 and the attitudes of those respondents could make a difference.

Figure 1 presents the marginal effects of the critique against the parliament and dissatisfaction with democracy (for comparison) and political interest. The first diagram in the figure shows a strong effect where the criticism against parliament makes a substantive difference in the way in which respondents shape their preferences towards citizens as decision-makers. At a glance, the direction of effect can be somewhat confusing because it is negative, but this is due to the coding of the variable (see the research design). The diagram shows that when the Parliament is not the appropriate institution to enact legislation and the critique against it is high (coded 1), then there is a stronger preference for direct democratic decision-making. The second diagram depicts the marginal effect of satisfaction with democracy and it is weaker. Finally, the political interest appears to be the weakest among the three (as indicated in Table 1, but different in the regression analysis). The interval on which it has an effect on the dependent variable (vertical axis) is considerably smaller compared to the effect of the previous two variables examined here.

Figure 1: The Marginal Effects of Critique against Parliament, Dissatisfaction with Democracy and Political Interest



Among the controls, age has a strong effect indicating that younger respondents are more likely to favor direct democratic decision-making (OR = 0.88, statistically significant at the 0.01 level). The consumption of political news has a weak and negative effect with respondents who spend less time getting political news being more in favor of citizens as decision-makers. While this may appear counter-intuitive at a glance, especially when observing the positive effect of political interest, there are two possible explanations. First, the quality of political information and not the quantity may be relevant. Respondents who bear an interest in politics are likely to pay attention to information received in the first place and do not require extensive attention to internalize it. Second, those who have an interest in politics may have alternative sources of information than political news from the media. They need less exposure to political news than other citizens.

Finally, contrary to previous studies, education does not appear to make a difference. It has a very weak effect and it is the only variable that lacks statistical significance in Model 2. This indicates that, on average, highly educated people have an equal preference for direct democratic decision-making as those poorly educated.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper aimed to identify the determinants of preferences for citizens as decision-makers in Germany. Its main three findings are not straightforward, as it is often the case in social science research, but bear relevant implications for the study of political preferences. First, citizens, who are dissatisfied with the institutions of representative democracy are more likely to favor a change towards more direct democratic decision-making. In particular, the citizens rejecting the notion of parliament as the best institution to decide on laws, support the idea of citizens making decisions. We cannot identify whether they dislike the notion of parliament as a decision-maker in theory or in practice, but we observe that they endorse a greater say for citizens. Dissatisfaction with the legislative institution shapes the preference for citizens to a greater extent than general political dissatisfaction. Second, citizens with an interest in politics and involved in societal issues want to gain stronger influence in the political arena. They strive to get citizens more involved. Third, in contrast to earlier findings that the less educated citizens favor direct democratic decision-making, our study shows that the more interested and involved strata of society have those preferences, irrespective

of their level of education. The effect of education “disappears” in the multivariate regression although it has a rather small effect in the bivariate correlation. This is most likely to happen because the effect of education is mediated through other variables such as dissatisfaction, political interest and civic engagement and thus education cannot be the main explanatory variable. Coming back to the question asked by Donovan and Karp (2006) whether direct democratic decision-making is endorsed by dissatisfied or politically interested citizens, we find evidence that respondents who display each of the two features have that preference.

At theoretical level, we showed that a better understanding of individual attitudes requires a differentiation between general (dis-)satisfaction with democracy and institutions of representative democracy. Our findings reveal that dissatisfaction with political institutions fosters more the preferences for citizens as decision-makers. Citizens, who generally support democracy, but do not feel represented by government and parliament are more inclined to endorse other forms of decision-making. Future research might differentiate even further, e.g. differentiate also dissatisfaction with politicians and political parties. Moreover, it might also be interesting to ask about different ways and mechanisms of will formation and decision-making. This can refer to (preferred) mechanisms of citizens’ involvement, e.g. participatory deliberative procedures or consultative popular votes, as well as to the (preferred) mechanisms applied when politicians act as decisions-makers. Do citizens endorse vote aggregation, deliberation, or negotiation? More research, including qualitative approaches, is necessary on these questions.

Since political and civic engagement strongly influence the support for direct democracy, this factor should be included in future research – with fine-grained differentiation. Whereas the findings considering political interest are clear-cut and straightforward – politically interested citizens favor direct democracy more strongly than their non-interested fellows – the effect of civic engagement requires a closer look. In our study we were not able to differentiate between different kinds of civic engagement, but it is reasonable to assume that there are differences. Involvement in organizations such as trade unions or environmental groups might correlate more strongly with preferences for direct democracy than involvement in church choirs. Not all forms of civic engagement have positive effects on political interest and some have negative effects (Eliasoph 1998). Since

we now know that civic involvement is positively correlated with preferences for citizens as decision-maker, future research should take a differentiating look at this correlation.

In terms of methodology, one of the important implications of our study is the use of a different and more sophisticated way to measure the likelihood to support direct democratic decision-making. As opposed to the usual procedure of asking one question about referendums, our measure asked they had to decide between several options and show consistent preference for direct democratic decision-making. In contrast to other surveys, in which respondents could display preferences for all decision-makers, respondents in our survey made a clear, unambiguous choice. This approach excluded all citizens with mixed preferences. Future research should be more aware that citizens might have consistent or mixed preferences.

At empirical level, the analysis provides the ground for broader discussions. While our study is limited to the German case, comparisons with existing studies indicate that our findings are generalizable to a certain extent. Similar to our results, Dalton et al. (2001, 148f.) had shown that dissatisfaction with institutions of representative democracy is a crucial factor for endorsing direct democracy in many European countries. On the other hand, as Rose and Borz (2013) have proved, national contexts determine the support for referendums, at least on EU-related referendums, and the studies by Donovan et al. (2009) and Leininger (2015) point into a similar direction. The fundamental differences between explanatory factors in different countries insinuate that individual level analysis does not suffice to understand citizens' endorsement for direct democratic decision-making. So far, little is known about the impacts of macro-structural differences such as for example level of welfare, social homogeneity, corruption, Gini-coefficient, or the average level of education. Such macro-structural differences might not only explain, why citizens in some countries endorse direct democracy more strongly in one country than in another country; they might also explain, why the level of education plays a role in some countries, but not in other countries. Comparing for example Finland and the USA, two countries with tremendous macro-structural differences, it is intuitively expectable that variables explaining citizenries' preferences for democratic decision-making procedures differ vastly. Since there is not *one* decisive predictor for direct democratic preferences, a more complex framework of explanation is necessary. Such a framework would have to combine several micro-level as well as macro-level features.

The availability of direct democratic options might play a role as well, differentiating between availability and use at national, state/region and local level. Does it make a difference, whether citizens have some experience with direct democracy or not? Does it make a difference, whether they have direct democratic options? Does it make a difference, whether direct democracy is only allowed at the local level? These and other questions considering the availability and the use of direct democratic instruments at the different levels must be answered in future research.

The debate about alternative forms of democracy beyond the representative version is on the rise and debated fiercely, not only in Germany. Since citizens are in the center of any democracy, they should be heard in this debate. Consequently, we should be interested in the form of democracy citizens endorse and try to understand, how these preferences can be explained. In the current debate, preferences for citizens as decision-makers are often downgraded and evaluated as 'populist tendencies' of low educated citizens (Webb 2013; Bowler et al. 2017). However, oversimplified explanations are not helpful, e.g. the devaluation of direct democracy as 'populist' propaganda for the low educated. Preferences for citizens as decision-makers and more participatory procedures are for many citizens valid and desirable alternatives. Democracy will only survive if it is willing to change and these changes should be in line with citizens' preferences. Understanding these preferences by applying a sophisticated and comprehensive framework of analysis is a necessary step for political science to path the way for future democratic developments.

Appendix 1: Descriptive statistics of the variables included in analysis

Variables	Min.	Max.	Mean	Standard deviation
Direct democratic decision-making	0	1	0.24	0.43
Satisfaction with democracy	0	10	5.56	2.29
Satisfaction with the government	0	10	4.50	2.13
Parliament is the best institution to decide on laws	1	6	3.67	1.27
Political interest	1	5	3.13	0.89
Civic engagement	0	4	0.41	0.69
Political news	1	7	4.74	1.19
Education	1	4	3.08	0.85
Age	1	4	2.05	0.97

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