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# **Should sortition be introduced in parliament ? A first empirical analysis of what Belgians citizens and parliamentarians think**

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Democracy is an ideal that is never fully attained in the real-world politics. Democratic regimes continually evolve in response to internal and external pressures (Dalton et al., 2003). One of the most discussed and acclaimed of these evolutions is the extension of voting rights in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Yet, calls for transformation can take various forms, such as changes to the electoral system, decentralization of authority or developing direct democratic tools (Bedock, 2017). Given that the transformation of democracy is not a linear process, some attempts to reform succeed while other remain pure reflections. A crucial factor for explaining their ‘success’ is the degree of support from political elites and citizens (Renwick, 2010).

This article focuses on an emerging democratic reform proposal that is flourishing in western democracies: the use of sortition (also called random selection) to select members of parliament. Until recently, this proposal could sound as a strange and fantasist idea. The mechanism was mainly known by historians of Antiquity and the Middle Ages (Headlam, 1933, Hansen, 1991). However, since the development of democratic innovations at the end of the 20th century (Smith, 2009, Sintomer, 2010), the use of sortition has reappeared as a potential and meaningful option in advanced democracies. An increasing number of scholars, activists, and even elected politicians argue for the use of random selection in the functioning of current representative democracies. The most far-reaching of these proposals is to randomly select (some of the) members of parliament (Zakaras, 2010, Guerrero, 2014).

This proposal is in line with a general trend in most representative democracies, which aims at shifting political decision-making from elites to citizens themselves (Dalton et al., 2003). The sortition proponents pretend indeed to narrow the gap between citizens and politics by randomly selecting members of a legislative assembly. According to them, the diversified profiles of these new types of MPs, as well as the absence of any electoral commitment should contribute to a democratic renewal (Gastil and Wright, 2018). Despite these developments, one may wonder what the support for such a democratic reform is. The aim of this article is not to assess the normative merit of this proposal but to scrutinize its reception among political elites and masses empirically. Since understanding the determinants of their support is crucial to analyse the broader prospects of such a democratic reform, we study: (i) what citizens and elected representatives think of different uses of sortition in politics (ii) if some scenarios preferred over others, and (iii) who are those that support and oppose it.

This article draws on two original surveys conducted among a representative sample of the population and members of parliaments in Belgium. This country has recently witnessed a growing debate on the institutionalization of random selection. Several political leaders have

publicly defended the transformation of the upper house into a sortition chamber. This makes this country a particularly fruitful area to study the support for random selection.

In this article, we start by presenting the idea of sortition, its history and the issues it raises for the future of advanced representative democracies. After developing our expectations about citizens' and MPs' support for the use of random selection in politics – both at an aggregate and individual levels – we briefly describe the Belgian context and its relevance for the research. We then introduce the methodology of our study, and present the main results of our analysis. Finally, we discuss the place of sortition in the wider set of reforms of democracy by drawing on the literature on electoral systems change, before formulating our main conclusions.

## THE RETURN OF SORTITION?

Sortition has a long history in politics (Sintomer, 2010). It was used in Athens in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. to select citizens for several public offices (Manin, 1997, Dowlen, 2008). At that time, sortition was attached to the ideal of equality among citizens and was perceived as a more democratic selection procedure than voting (Aristotle, 1984). It was used to ensure rotation in offices and avoid the professionalization of politics. In some Italian republics during the Middle Ages, sortition was also mobilized to prevent power to be concentrated in the hand of a few factions and families. It disappeared from democratic conceptions through the modern revolutions in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with exception of the judicial sphere (Manin, 1997).

It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the idea of sortition reappeared in the political realm, and it did so in two ways. First, it was used for the development of opinion polls based on the idea of representative samples of the population (Blondiaux, 1998). Secondly, random selection is used to select participants in a growing number of democratic innovations known as 'mini-publics' (Fung, 2007). Initially imagined by Robert Dahl (1970), these forums gather together 12 to 1000 lay citizens to discuss a specific political issue. After hearing testimonies from experts and stakeholders, they deliberate on the issue at stake and make recommendations for politicians. The random selection of participants is supposed to increase the diversity of viewpoints and improve the quality of the deliberation (Landmore, 2013). Mini-publics have been organized in most representative democracies, from the local to the international level (for an overview of such practices, see Grönlund et al. (2014: ). The most standardized forms are citizens' juries, consensus conferences, deliberative polls and citizen assemblies (Smith, 2009). These practical experiences have shown that, in well-designed settings, citizens are able to deliberate on complex issues and make meaningful policy proposals (Curato et al., 2017).

This led some to advocate for moving beyond the consultative use of citizens' forums and giving an assembly of randomly selected citizens real decision-making power. Some concrete proposals have emerged in the United States (Callenbach and Phillips, 1985, Leib, 2010), in the United Kingdom (Barnett and Carty, 1998, Sutherland, 2008), in France (Sintomer, 2007), and for the European Union (Buchstein and Hein, 2009). Their arguments are diverse and located in different traditions, but they all share the willingness to reinvigorate democracy by empowering an assembly of randomly selected lay citizens. This new type of parliamentarians is supposed to be more descriptively representative of the wider population than currently elected representatives – notably in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, education and income.

According to them, this enhanced diversity of experiences as well as the absence of party affiliation should pave the way for a fruitful and just deliberation that provides better policy outcomes.

The introduction of randomly selected citizens in politics can take various forms. The most discussed scenario consist in establishing a new randomly selected assembly in addition to the elected one (Gastil and Wright, 2018). This is a reinterpretation of the existing bicameral logic. Furthermore, in light of the Irish Constitutional Convention organized between 2012 and 2014, it is also possible to imagine a mixed chamber, which would be composed of elected and randomly selected citizens (Suiter et al., 2016). Its aim is to create a room for dialogue between both ‘types’ of parliamentarians who could exchange with different backgrounds. Finally, while the debate is often concerned with the national level, random selection could also be introduced in local assemblies.

While democratic theorists currently argue about the pros and cons of using random selection in politics and the best ways to implement it (some envision it as a complement, others as a replacement of current representative institutions), we propose to study the support for such reforms among parliamentarians and citizens. They are the very actors that would one day need to support it if such a democratic reform should become a reality. The research is conducted in a country where the use of random selection has already somewhat matured, in Belgium. More specifically, we study: (i) what citizens and elected representatives think of different uses of sortition in politics, (ii) if some scenarios preferred over others, and (iii) who are those that support and oppose it.

## EXPLAINING SUPPORT AND OPPOSITION FOR SORTITION

Drawing on two original surveys, this article analyses citizens’ and MPs’ aggregated support for the use of sortition in politics, as well as differences in support within these two groups. In this section, we present our expectations for each of them.

### Aggregated support

Elected representatives are the key actors in current political regimes because they are the ones in charge of deciding on new constitutional arrangements – like introducing the use of sortition for composing the parliament or parts thereof. Furthermore, they have a major influence on the public debate around such questions. At an aggregated level, we expect elected representatives to be foremost against the use of sortition in politics and we do so for two reasons. First, random selection relies on a fundamentally different rationale of decision-making and legitimacy, which contests the exclusive, competitive and aggregative nature of traditional politics (Vandamme, 2018). Secondly, it disrupts traditional power relations and can be seen as undermining and taking over some of their decision-making power. It seems thus reasonable to expect that most MPs oppose the different uses of sortition in politics.

Expectations about citizens’ support, in turn, are more difficult to develop. Randomly selected assemblies are usually presented as a way to narrow the gap between citizens and

politics, and in a context of growing distrust towards politics (Norris, 1999, Dalton, 2017), the use of sortition is supposed to alleviate the current democratic malaise, which one could expect to be welcomed by citizens. However, the popular demand for such kinds of democratic innovations is uncertain (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002, Neblo et al., 2010). In most of the current democratic innovations, indeed, only a minority of citizens accepts to participate, between 1% to 30% (Jacquet, 2017). What is more, given the relative novelty of the proposal, many citizens might simply not have a clear opinion on whether they support sortition. In the absence of existing empirical results and in light of this theoretical ambiguity, we refrain from formulating a clear expectation about the popular support for the use of sortition and consider it uncertain.

### Differences among MPs

While we expect elected representatives to have a rather sceptical attitude towards sortition at an aggregated level, this article analyses two main variables to discriminate between those who oppose and those who support it. They concern MPs' degree of professionalization and the political orientation of their political party.

First, we expect the use of sortition in politics to be supported above all by political newcomers. Support for alternative modes of decision-making has indeed been shown to come from less professionalized politicians (Niessen et al., 2019). This comes with the fact that politicians get socialized and strongly attached to their function the longer they are in office – especially at a parliamentary level. Politicians with a shorter political career, in turn, might have been less influenced by these factors and can hence be expected to be more supportive towards the use of sortition in politics.

Secondly, we expect politicians from left-wing parties to be more in favour of the use of sortition in politics. Previous research has shown that leftist parties have indeed a higher tendency to organize (Sintomer et al., 2016) and favour democratic innovations (Heinelt, 2013).

### Differences among citizens

As for differences among citizens, we expect three factors to distinguish supporters and opponents' of sortition in politics. First, we expect citizens that have a positive view of ordinary citizens political capacity to be more supportive towards the use of sortition in politics. Random selection is based on the principle that every citizen has the same chance to be selected and to serve as a parliamentarian. Supporting random selection supposes therefore that one considers citizens to be capable of meaningfully deliberating and making decisions in the assembly.

Secondly, we expect citizens with a positive attitude towards the current functioning of electoral democracy to be less supportive of the use of sortition in politics. Since the proponents of random selection argue that it can counterbalance some of the pathologies of elected legislature – like MPs' representative bias or weak level of deliberation (Van Reybrouck, 2016, Gastil and Wright, 2018), one can reasonably think that the demand for a randomly selected

assembly is connected to citizens' dissatisfaction with the functioning of current representative institutions.

Thirdly, we expect citizens' support for the sortition in politics to be associated with their social status, in light of the debate on popular support for democratic innovations based on citizens' level of education and income (Webb, 2013). The direction of this association, however, is difficult to predict. Some scholars argued indeed that people with a lower social status are going to be more supportive because they feel let-down by the actors of the current political systems (Neblo et al., 2010). Other scholars, in turn, have argued that democratic innovations are more attractive for advantaged groups of society because they dislike traditional and hierarchical forms of politics and favour models in which lay citizens are more directly associated with the decision-making (Inglehart and Catterberg, 2002, Norris, 2011).

## BELGIUM, A LAND OF DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS?

Belgium has always been a land of democratic innovations. Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Belgium was one of the first countries in the world to introduce the secret election ballot or the principle of compulsory voting in general elections. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Belgium is back at the forefront of democratic innovations. After organizing several citizen panels in the 2000s, the country saw one of the large citizen-led deliberative experiments worldwide organized in reaction to the government crisis of 2010-2011: the G1000 (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2018). In this wake, the idea of deliberative democracy has grown within the society. For instance, all seven parliaments in Belgium have used mini-publics to foster their legislative process. In 2019, the German-speaking Community, the smallest federal sub-state entity of the country, has established a permanent randomly selected assembly that has the right to initiate citizens' assemblies whose results are presented to parliament.

In this ongoing debate about introducing more deliberative democratic elements in traditional representative politics, the most frequent idea over the past years has been to reform the Belgian Senate. From her beginning in 1830, Belgium has been a bicameral state, with an upper chamber, the Senate, that was progressively democratized in light of both who could vote and who could be elected. The quite radical federalization of the state since the 1970s finally led to its transformation to a chamber of dialogue between the sub-state entities and significantly reduced its powers (Dandoy et al., 2015). While discussions were held about a potential abolition of the Senate, proposals were voiced to transform it into a sortitioned assembly. The promoters of the G1000 made this proposal in their final recommendations (G1000, 2012). One of its most visible leaders, the Belgian writer David Van Reybrouck (2016: , refined this proposal in a book '*Against Elections*' that was largely echoed in the public sphere.

More importantly, however, elected politicians themselves have discussed the idea themselves. Prominent MPs and even former ministers have joined this debate and supported a sortitioned Senate. On the left, the Flemish socialist Peter Vanvelthoven and the Francophone socialist Laurette Onkelinx have made public proposals. The Francophone liberal Richard Miller and the Christian-democrat Hamza Fassi-Fihri from Brussels have equally given credit to this idea. Dutch- and French-speaking ecologists have made a joined proposal for introducing

the use of sortition in parliamentary committees that they wanted to be composed by both elected and sortitioned representatives. At the local level, sortition has been used in several citizen panels. During the last local election, an increasing number of local lists advocate going further by randomly selecting municipal councils. Alternatively, the Francophone socialist Christie Morreale suggested to randomly select the part of the municipal council that corresponds to the share of blank (and possibly null) votes, instead of not taking them into account.

Until today, none of these proposals has come to life and despite the impressive number of proposals, sortition is far from making unanimity in the Belgian public sphere. However, because there is an ongoing debate in both the political and public sphere, Belgium provides a highly interesting place for investigating both popular and political support for the topic.

### Citizen and MP surveys

We collected original data among a sample of 1000 randomly selected Belgian citizens and among 124 members of the Belgian federal and regional parliaments (MPs). The data for citizens were collected by the survey company *iVox* based on an online sample which was stratified based on respondents' gender, language, age and level of education ( $n = 1000$ , see Appendix 1 for the detailed distribution). For MPs, we collected data ourselves via online and paper questionnaires from June to August 2017. After sending out reminder calls, we achieved a response rate of 26 percent ( $n = 124$ , see Appendix 1 for the detailed rates). In these two surveys, several questions were asked to assess citizens' and MPs' support for using sortition in politics and capturing several explanatory factors. The question wording was identical in both surveys.

Respondents' degree of support for sortition in politics was measured vis-à-vis four different uses of random selection in politics. First, for composing a legislative assembly. Secondly, for composing a mixed assembly in which both sortitioned and elected representatives seat. Thirdly, for composing a municipal council. Fourthly, for composing a sortitioned citizen panel. One should note that the first two are concerned with the national level, while the latter two focus more on the local or consultative use. More importantly, sortition has been used for composing citizen panels at various policy levels in Belgium, but never for composing a legislative chamber (mixed or not) or a municipal council. The former can hence be regarded as a kind of benchmark against which the others can be evaluated. We measured them on five-point scales:

Q1 preamble: On the national level, one sometimes discusses that legislative chambers could be composed by random selection. Do you agree or disagree with the following propositions?

- Q1a: The institution of a legislative chamber that is composed of randomly selected citizens would be a good thing.

*[Fully agreeing, rather agreeing, neutral, rather disagreeing, fully disagreeing.]*

- Q1b: The institution of a mixed legislative chamber that is composed of both elected and randomly selected citizens would be a good thing.  
[Fully agreeing, rather agreeing, neutral, rather disagreeing, fully disagreeing.]

Q2 preamble: One sometimes proposes to adapt the functioning of our local democracy. To which extent do you consider the following reforms to be desirable or undesirable – independently of whether they have been introduced in your municipality?

- Q2a: Composing the municipal council by random selection.  
[Highly desirable, desirable, neutral, rather undesirable, highly undesirable.]
- Q2b: Composing a participatory citizen panel by random selection.  
[Highly desirable, desirable, neutral, rather undesirable, highly undesirable.]

As for what might explain respondents’ support for the different uses of sortition, citizens were asked to which extent they agreed (on a five-point scale again) that “the average Belgian citizen is capable of participating in public decisions” and that “voting has no sense because parties do anyway what they want” (one should note that this account of ‘electoral disaffection’ was formulated negatively). In turn, MPs were asked to indicate how many years they served in federal or regional legislative and executive office, to which party they belonged, how old they were, what their gender is, and which language they spoke in the first place (MPs from the three language groups responded to the survey). Citizens, in turn, were asked to indicate their level of education (on three categories), their income (on three categories), their age (on three categories), and which language they spoke in the first place (only citizens from the two main language groups were included in the sample).

In our analysis, we first consider MPs and citizens raw support for the different uses of sortition. Secondly, we test for differences among them with *Ordered Logistic Regression* analyses. To facilitate the interpretation, the response variables (respondents’ support for the four uses of sortition) have been translated from five into three categories (supporting – being neutral – opposing). In the regression analyses for MPs’ opinion, we added explanatory variables accounting for their degree of professionalization (equalling the sum of years they served in federal or regional legislatures or executives) and the political position of their party (leftist vs. other parties).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, we added their age (continuous), gender (two categories) and language group (three categories) as control variables. Appendix 2 provides an overview of the measurement, use and directional expectations for all the different variables included in the analyses. In the regression analyses of citizens’ opinion, we added explanatory variables accounting for their view of average citizens’ political capacity (five-point scale), for their degree of electoral disaffection (five-point scale), for their level of education (three categories) and income (three categories). Moreover, we added their age (three categories), gender (two categories) and language group (two categories) as control variables.

## MPS’ AND CITIZENS’ OPINION ON THE USE OF RANDOM SELECTION IN POLITICS

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<sup>1</sup> We considered the socialist (sp.a, PS, SP), green (Groen, Ecolo) and far-left (PVdA, PTB) parties as leftist.



The results of our analyses show that the different uses of sortition in politics receive quite varying degrees of support and that the opinions of MPs and citizens about them differ. MPs are almost all very critical towards a sortitioned chamber and a sortitioned municipal council. Leftist MPs, however, appear to be more in favour of a mixed chamber and sortitioned citizen panels than others. Citizens' opinions, in turn, appear to be influenced by their view of average citizens' political capacity, their disaffection with elections and, at least indirectly, by their societal background.

What MPs and citizens think of sortition and which scenario is preferred

At the aggregated level, the results of our analysis suggest that the use of random selection in politics is received critically by both MPs and citizens – at least when decision-making power is concerned and/or when it is the sole mode of designation. A glance at MPs' and citizens' raw support for the different uses under investigation, illustrated in Figure 1 hereunder, is interesting in four regards.

**Figure 1.**

First, it appears that citizens are far less critical than MPs. MPs' opposition scores are indeed higher for each of the four different scenarios. Citizens', in turn, have a higher approval rate for all – except for a sortitioned citizen panel where MPs score slightly higher (3.2%). Also, one should note that citizens have higher neutrality scores for each of the uses of sortition that almost reach a third of the sample (27.4%-32.3%). Most probably, this is the case because they are less familiar with the topic than politicians.

Secondly, a sortitioned municipal council receives by far the lowest approval and the highest opposition rates – from both citizens (51.4% are against) and MPs (89.5% are against). At first, this might be surprising when one considers that it corresponds to the lowest and least politicized level of political power which is said to be 'closest' to citizens. However, this might at the same time be the very reason for why both citizens and MPs do not consider sortition to be a necessary democratic reform. Moreover, it is the political institution where sortition can be perceived as the most encompassing, i.e. whose composition would be perceived as solely relying on sortition whereas a sortitioned and a mixed chamber could still be imagined in a bicameral setting.

Thirdly, the mixed chamber is substantively preferred over an exclusively sortitioned chamber. While this is the case for both citizens and MPs, the latter remain comparably critical (66.7% are against). For citizens, however, it even gathers a relative majority of support (47.4 being in favour, 27.4 being neutral). It is comparable (and even slightly higher) than their support for a sortitioned citizen panel. This is noteworthy given that the latter has much less political power and has even known some real political experience in Belgium.

Finally, another relative majority of support can be observed for elites on the use of sortition in citizen panels (48.2% are in favour, 10.7% are neutral). While we are talking about a body whose political decision-making power is at its best consultative, it is still noteworthy

for political elites whose everyday job relies on a totally different rationale of decision-making. It can be expected to come, among others, with the increasing use of such citizen panels in the last twenty years in Belgium.

### Who supports and who opposes sortition

Knowing what MPs and citizens think of different uses of sortition at an aggregated level is one thing, knowing who are those who support and who oppose it is quite another. While making this distinction has been somewhat difficult for MPs, some interesting differences appeared to exist among citizens' attitudes. We present both separately.

#### MPs

When investigating the differences in support for sortition among MPs, one should keep in mind that the aggregated results (Figure 1) have previously pointed out limited variability in their opinion – at least for the sortitioned chamber and the sortitioned municipal council, which almost all MPs opposed. Before proceeding to the *Ordered Regression Analysis*, a glance at the raw distribution of the variables of interest is important (*cf.* Table 1 hereunder). When directly comparing MPs' degree of support for the different uses of sortition and their average number of years in legislative or executive office, only little mean difference appears. As for the comparison with the position of MPs' party on the left-right axis, interesting differences exist for MPs' opinion on the mixed chamber which is opposed by most non-leftist MPs but largely divides leftist MPs (of which more than the half (55.56%) are in favour). Regarding MPs' opinion on the sortitioned citizen panel, most leftist MPs are in favour while other MPs are divided (almost half (46.15%) opposing it, while many being neutral). The two other uses of sortition are largely opposed by members of both camps – confirming the previously identified limits of variability. Consequently, the *Ordered Regression Analysis* will only be carried out for MPs attitudes towards a mixed chamber and a sortitioned citizen panel.<sup>2</sup>

#### Table 1.

The results of the regression analyses, summarized in Table 2 hereunder, largely confirm the described tendencies. They indicate that no statistically significant association can be found for MPs' degree of professionalization and their opinion on the two examined uses of sortition. We even tested for a non-linear effect (e.g. whether the youngest and oldest MPs had a

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<sup>2</sup> The others do not even have enough observations in every category to run chi-square tests of independence (i.e. less than five for some).

distinctive opinion), but none was found. As for the position of MPs' party on the left-right axis, it appears to be associated with MPs opinion on both examined uses of sortition with at least 99% of confidence. This means that leftist MPs are significantly more likely to support these two options than other MPs. A glance at the control variables shows that female MPs are more supportive towards both uses of sortition than their male counterparts are. In addition, French- and German-speaking MPs are more supportive towards the two uses of sortition than Dutch-speaking MPs are.

### **Table 2.**

#### Citizens

Given that enough variability was present among citizens' opinions for all four uses of sortition, we immediately tested for differences with *Ordered Logistic Regression* analyses whose results are summarized in Table 3 hereunder. The results indicate with at least 99% of confidence that citizens' support for the four different uses of sortition has a statistically significant positive association with their view of citizens' political capacity and their disaffection with elections. The use of sortition in politics is above all supported by citizens that see other citizens as capable of participating in politics and that have a critical view of the sense of elections. As for the citizens social status, the results indicate with at least 99.9% of confidence that holding a Master's degree lowers citizens' likelihood for supporting the introduction of a sortitioned chamber. For other uses and all comparisons concerned with income, however, no statistically significant association is found. A glance at the control variables shows that older citizens are less likely to support the different uses of sortition. Moreover, Flemish-speaking citizens appear to be less likely than French-speaking to support a sortitioned or mixed chamber and a sortitioned citizen panel. No significant differences are observed between genders.

### **Table 3.**

While the regression analysis showed no statistically significant association between citizens' social status and their support for sortition, we found it worth investigating whether this absence was due to issues of collinearity or indirect association.<sup>3</sup> We tested a potential individual association between citizens' support for the degrees of sortition and their level of education and income with chi-square tests of independence (see detailed results in Appendix

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<sup>3</sup> The former would be the case if the statistical effect exists in individual association but is cancelled out by other correlated variables when analyzed jointly. The latter would be the case if socio-demographic characteristics are correlated to other variables which have a significant association with the degree of support for sortition. Both can also occur together, in which case one cannot say whether the association is direct or indirect.

3 and 4). We found statistically significant associations with at least 95% of confidence for both variables, indicating that citizens with a higher degree of education and income are less likely to support the use of sortition in politics (except for the support for a mixed chamber and a sortitioned citizen panel when education is concerned). The absence of significant results in the regression might be due to issues of collinearity – under the condition that a correlation with another significant variable is found.

When testing the potential correlation between citizens' level of education and income, and their view of citizens' political capacity and electoral disaffection with chi-square tests of independence (see Appendix 5 for the detailed results),<sup>4</sup> we found statistically significant correlations with at least 99% of confidence for both pairs of variables. Our results indicate that citizens with a lower degree of education and income are more likely to have a positive view of citizens' capacity and a negative one of the sense of elections. This provides further ground to the hypothesis of collinearity and even provides an additional potential explanation. It may well be that the association is an indirect one: i.e. that citizens' socio-economic background is associated with their opinion on citizens' political capacity and their electoral disaffection, which, in turn, determine their degree of support for sortition.

## DISCUSSION: THE PROSPECTIVE OF USING SORTITION IN POLITICS AS DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Now, what do these findings tell us about the democratic reform dynamics concerned with the introduction of sortition in contemporary representative democracies? In his analysis of electoral systems' change in representative democracies, Renwick (2010: distinguished between two main types of reform patterns: elite-majority imposition and elite-mass interaction.

In the first, a majority of the elected representatives agrees to introduce a democratic reform by advancing their partisan or personal power interests. According to our findings, this reform pattern seems unlikely for the introduction of sortition because MPs largely rejected the use of sortition in both parliament and municipal councils. As explained earlier, this can be expected to come with the different rationale and legitimacy sortition rely on, or with the reluctance to give up political power (or both). Once sortition is proposed to be used on a consultative basis only, for example, a relative majority of elites even supports the idea.

Renwick's second reform pattern suggests that a minority of politicians advocate for a reform that enjoys considerable support from civil society groups. If the latter's pressure is sufficiently powerful, they can succeed in seeing their demand implemented. This can happen when the dissatisfaction towards the political system is strong and when some political actors portray the reform as a solution to this failure. This type of reform appears to be more plausible for the introduction of random selection. While there is today no absolute majority in support among citizens, the reform seems to be viewed positively by some segments of the population.

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<sup>4</sup> For that purpose, we transformed the view of citizens' political capacity and electoral disaffection from five into three categories.

More precisely, citizens who are the most disaffected with current elections, who see ordinary citizens as politically capable and who have a lower level of income and education support the use of sortition in politics. Especially the latter is a major finding of this research because democratic innovations are sometimes described as the dream of a small intellectual elite which is detached from the reality of the wider population (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002). Our results indicate, however, that this is not the case for random selection and that it is the least advantaged groups of society who support the idea of sortition.

While there seems thus to be some room for popular support in favour of random selection in politics, this support in opinion polls is on its own not necessarily enough to see such a kind of reform implemented (Bedock, 2017). To exercise the sufficient pressure, an active support from the society through broad political mobilization is required. As suggested by Sintomer (2018: ), we observe an evolution in the social and political dynamics around the idea of sortition. In the 1980s and 1990s, proponents of sortition were mainly academics concerned with the development of lab-experiments and standardized procedures. Since the 2000s, however, random selection is increasingly supported by grassroots organizations and activists. Social movements like the *Movimiento 15-M* in Spain, *Syntagma Square* in Greece or *Nuit debout* in France advocate for sortition (Sintomer, 2018). In Belgium, one of the main supporters has been the *AGORA* movement.

The evolution of popular support for the use of sortition in politics deserves further research. Beyond diffusing the idea, one might wonder whether they have the resources and ability to exercise sufficient pressure on decision-making actors to get the idea accepted. Furthermore, one would like to know what motivates different segments of society to support or oppose the idea. As for political elites, the evolution of their opinion and the motivations behind deserve equal attention. Analysing these dynamics is essential to assess the prospects of this democratic reform proposal.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we examined how the call for randomly selecting the members of a legislative assembly is received by both MPs and citizens in Belgium, a country where the use of deliberative sortitioned citizen panels has already somewhat matured. Drawing on original survey data comprising the view of 1000 citizens and 124 MPs, we investigated their support for four different uses of sortition: a sortitioned chamber, a mixed chamber, a sortitioned municipal council and a sortitioned citizen panel. Our results show that none of these obtains an absolute majority of support – neither from citizens nor from MPs. Relative majorities of supports, however, exist among citizens for introducing a mixed chamber and among MPs for introducing sortitioned citizens panels. That being said, the question is far from making unanimity.

This is especially true for citizens among which many differences exist. Their opinion on citizens' political capacity and the sense of elections prove to be significantly associated with their opinion on sortition. This shows that supporting sortition comes with both their disillusion about the current functioning of electoral representative democracy, and with their trust in

citizens to constitute a viable alternative. Given that their support is much higher for a mixed chamber than for a purely sortitioned chamber or a sortitioned municipal council, this does not mean that this alternative is necessarily seen as exclusionary or as to replace elections altogether. Based on these results, it seems indeed plausible that sortition is rather envisioned as a complement to elections. Very interesting in this respect is the fact that citizens with a lower degree of education and income are more likely to support using sortition in politics. This shows that supporting sortition is not a claim reserved to intellectual elites or the rich – quite the contrary.

As for MPs, some interesting differences were observed between leftist MPs being less critical towards a mixed chamber and a sortitioned citizen panel than other MPs. However, more striking is the overall high levels of opposition towards the use of sortition in politics. There seems to be some room of manoeuvre when sortition is used for composing consultative citizen panels, which can be expected to have gained their relative support from elites amongst others due to their constant proliferation in Belgium in the last twenty years. Even if they remain at best consultative, these initiatives start to raise a debate in the political sphere about how political decisions ought to be taken and by whom.

As a complement to the increasing theoretical debates on the question, this article sought to explore the potential support for randomly elected assemblies among MPs and citizens empirically. While our research provided interesting insights in these respects, further comparative research is certainly needed to see how our results travel through context and time. In addition to the individual-level characteristics that were highlighted in this article, variations across political systems and cultures might be discriminating factors to explain support or opposition towards sortition. What is more, our investigation looked into the support ‘in theory’ for an idea that needs yet to be implemented – if ever. The key question will eventually be how much support ‘in practice’ a parliament composed by lot gains – both by those who are selected to participate and all those who remain. A definitive answer to our research’s question is probably pending upon this moment.

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**Table 1.** MPs' support for the uses of sortition by degree of professionalization and left-other party

Use of sortition	Degree of support	Professionalization		Left vs. others	
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. dev.</i>	<i>Left (%)</i>	<i>Others (%)</i>
Sortitioned Chamber	Support	9.05	5.41	8.89	8.75
	Neutral	10.72	5.74	13.33	3.75
	Oppose	9.34	7.87	77.78	87.50
Mixed Chamber	Support	9.01	7.33	55.56	17.72
	Neutral	9.12	5.70	4.44	7.60
	Oppose	9.49	7.76	40.00	74.68
Sortitioned Municipal Council	Support	8.25	4.50	2.22	3.85
	Neutral	8.75	6.31	20	3.85
	Oppose	9.51	7.77	77.78	92.30
Sortitioned Citizen Panel	Support	9.01	7.12	75.56	39.74
	Neutral	11.17	10.03	8.89	14.11
	Oppose	9.72	7.06	15.55	46.15

\* Distribution of professionalization: min = 0.5, max = 35.5, mean = 9.42, standard deviation = 7.52.

\*\* Distribution of left vs. others: left = 45, others = 79.

**Table 2.** Ordered Logistic Regression results for MPs' opinion on the different uses of sortition

	Mixed Chamber	Sortitioned Citizen Panel
	<i>Coeff. (SE)</i>	<i>Coeff. (SE)</i>
Professionalization	0.004 (0.035)	0.048 (0.031)
Leftist parties vs. others (left = 1)	1.732*** (0.450)	1.537** (0.477)
Gender (female=1)	1.088* (0.462)	1.218* (0.475)
Age	0.011 (0.024)	-0.036 (0.024)
Language (Dutch)		
French	1.110* (0.472)	2.338*** (0.474)
German	3.556*** (0.848)	3.471*** (0.920)
Intercept		
Oppose – Neutral	3.004* (1.225)	-0.002 (1.218)
Neutral – Support	3.404** (1.233)	0.799 (1.220)
Akaike inform. criterion	180.08	193.43

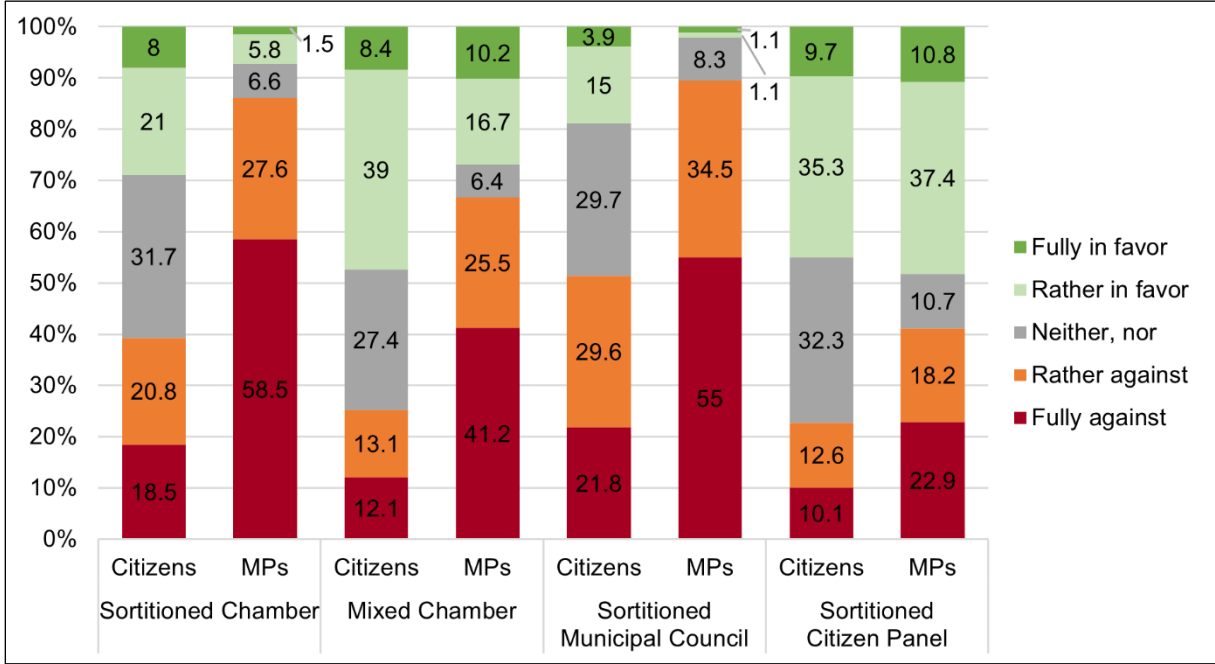
\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Table 3.** Ordered Logistic Regression results for citizens' opinion on the different uses of sortition

	Sortitioned Chamber	Mixed Chamber	Sortitioned Citizen Council	Sortitioned Citizen Panel
	<i>Coeff. (SE)</i>	<i>Coeff. (SE)</i>	<i>Coeff. (SE)</i>	<i>Coeff. (SE)</i>
View of citizens' pol. cap.	0.410** (0.068)	0.355** (0.067)	0.266** (0.068)	0.360** (0.067)
Electoral disaffection	0.314** (0.051)	0.175** (0.051)	0.286** (0.052)	0.142* (0.050)
Education (second. max)				
Bachelor	-0.260 (0.181)	0.165 (0.185)	-0.048 (0.185)	0.103 (0.182)
Master	-0.820** (0.226)	-0.008 (0.220)	-0.247 (0.224)	0.270 (0.216)
Income (... -2000€)				
2000-4000€	-0.126 (0.156)	0.191 (0.158)	0.233 (0.159)	-0.014 (0.158)
4000€ +	-0.006 (0.271)	0.170 (0.267)	-0.288 (0.287)	-0.006 (0.265)
-----				
Age (-34)				
35-54	-0.473* (0.183)	-0.530* (0.187)	-0.297 (0.185)	-0.500* (0.188)
55+	-0.519* (0.188)	-0.519* (0.191)	-0.639** (0.191)	-0.878** (0.191)
Gender (female=1)	0.060 (0.142)	0.196 (0.141)	0.252 (0.143)	0.132 (0.140)
Language (French=1)	0.424* (0.151)	0.562** (0.154)	0.293 (0.153)	0.454* (0.154)
-----				
Intercept				
Oppose – Neutral	1.340** (0.324)	0.487 (0.320)	1.696** (0.326)	0.002 (0.315)
Neutral – Support	2.774** (0.336)	1.711** (0.325)	3.118** (0.340)	1.483** (0.319)
-----				
Akaike inform. criterion	1601.46	1598.18	1557.65	1619.42

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

**Figure 1.** Citizens' and MPs' opinion on the four different uses of sortition (in percentages)



\*The results for MPs were weighted based on gender and party affiliation.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Response rates for the MP survey

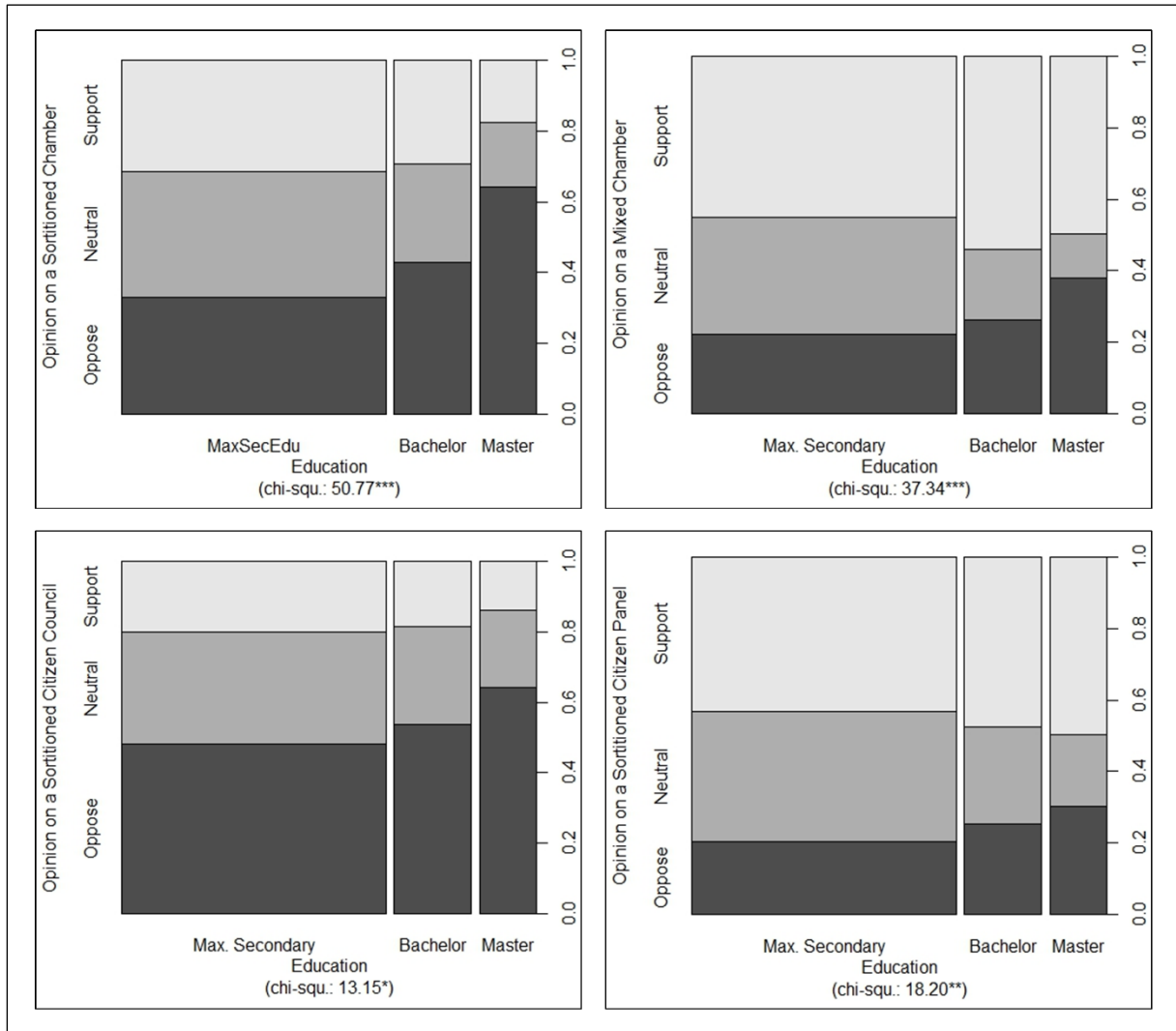
	Sample	Population	Response rate
Total	124	473	26 %
Men	79	283	28 %
Women	45	190	24 %
Dutch-speakers	56	234	24 %
French-speakers	56	214	26 %
German-speakers	12	25	48 %
Christian-democrats	29	85	34 %
Greens	14	40	35 %
Liberals	28	106	26 %
Socialists	30	115	26 %
Nationalists	13	87	15 %
Other	10	40	25 %

### Appendix 2. Measurement, use and directional expectations for the variables included in the analyses

Variable	Citizens			MPs		
	<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Use</i>	<i>Expectation</i>	<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Use</i>	<i>Expectation</i>
Opinion on sortitioned chamber	3 categ. (based on 5)	RV	-	3 categ. (based on 5)	RV	-
Opinion on mixed chamber	3 categ. (based on 5)	RV	-	3 categ. (based on 5)	RV	-
Opinion on sortit. municipal council	3 categ. (based on 5)	RV	-	3 categ. (based on 5)	RV	-
Opinion on sortitioned citizen panel	3 categ. (based on 5)	RV	-	3 categ. (based on 5)	RV	-
Professionalization	-	-	-	continuous	EV	neg. rel.
Leftist vs. other parties (leftist = 1)	-	-	-	2 categories	EV	pos. rel.
View of citizens' political capacity	5 categories	EV	pos. rel.	5 categories	EV	control
Electoral disaffection	5 categories	EV	pos. rel.	5 categories	EV	control
Education	3 categories	EV	neg. rel.	-	-	-
Income	3 categories	EV	neg. rel.	-	-	-
Age	3 categories	EV	control	continuous	EV	control
Gender	2 categories	EV	control	2 categories	EV	control
Language	2 categories	EV	control	3 categories	EV	control

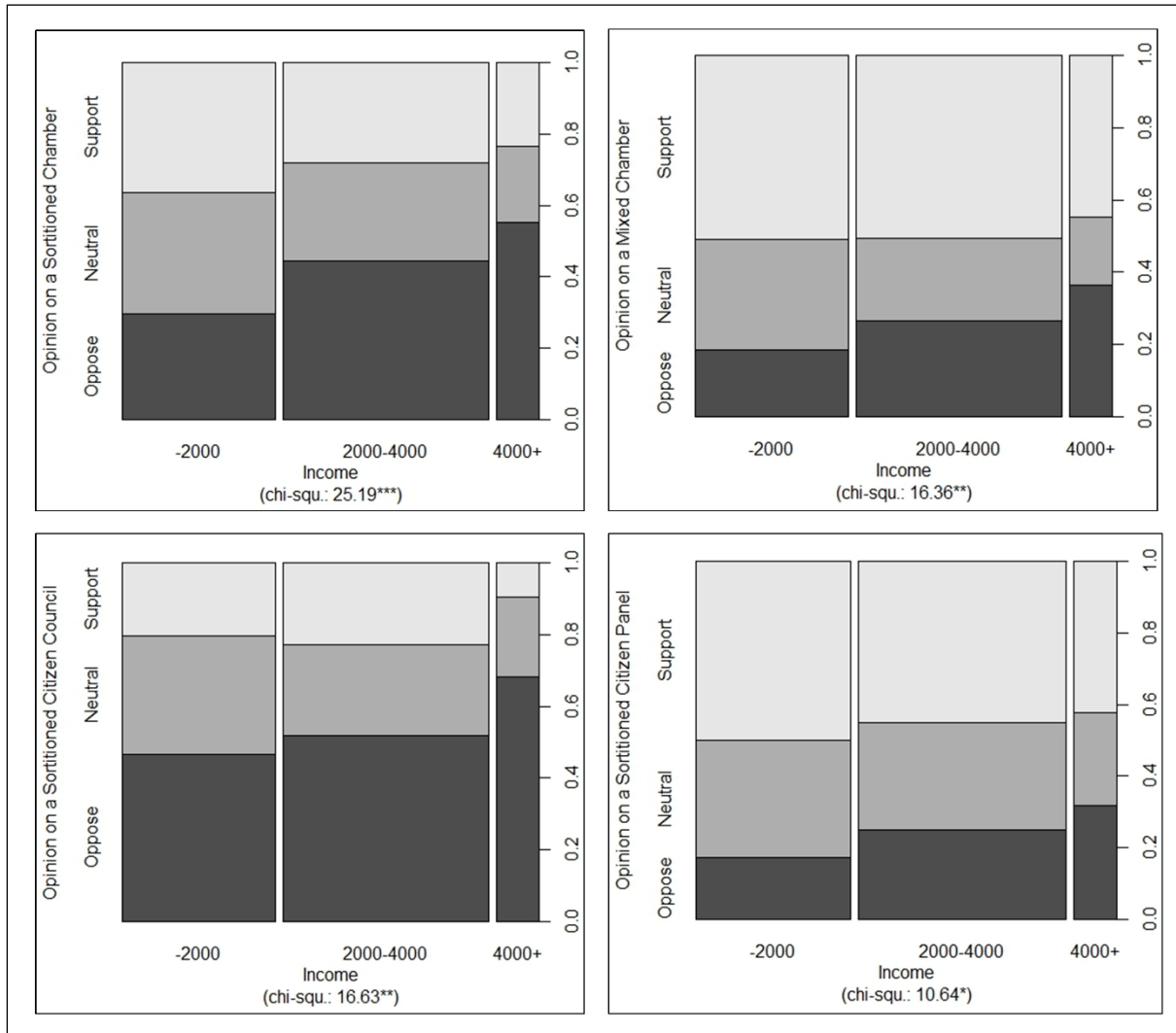
\* RV = response variables. EV = explanatory variable.

**Appendix 3.** Citizens' support for the different uses of sortition by their degree of education



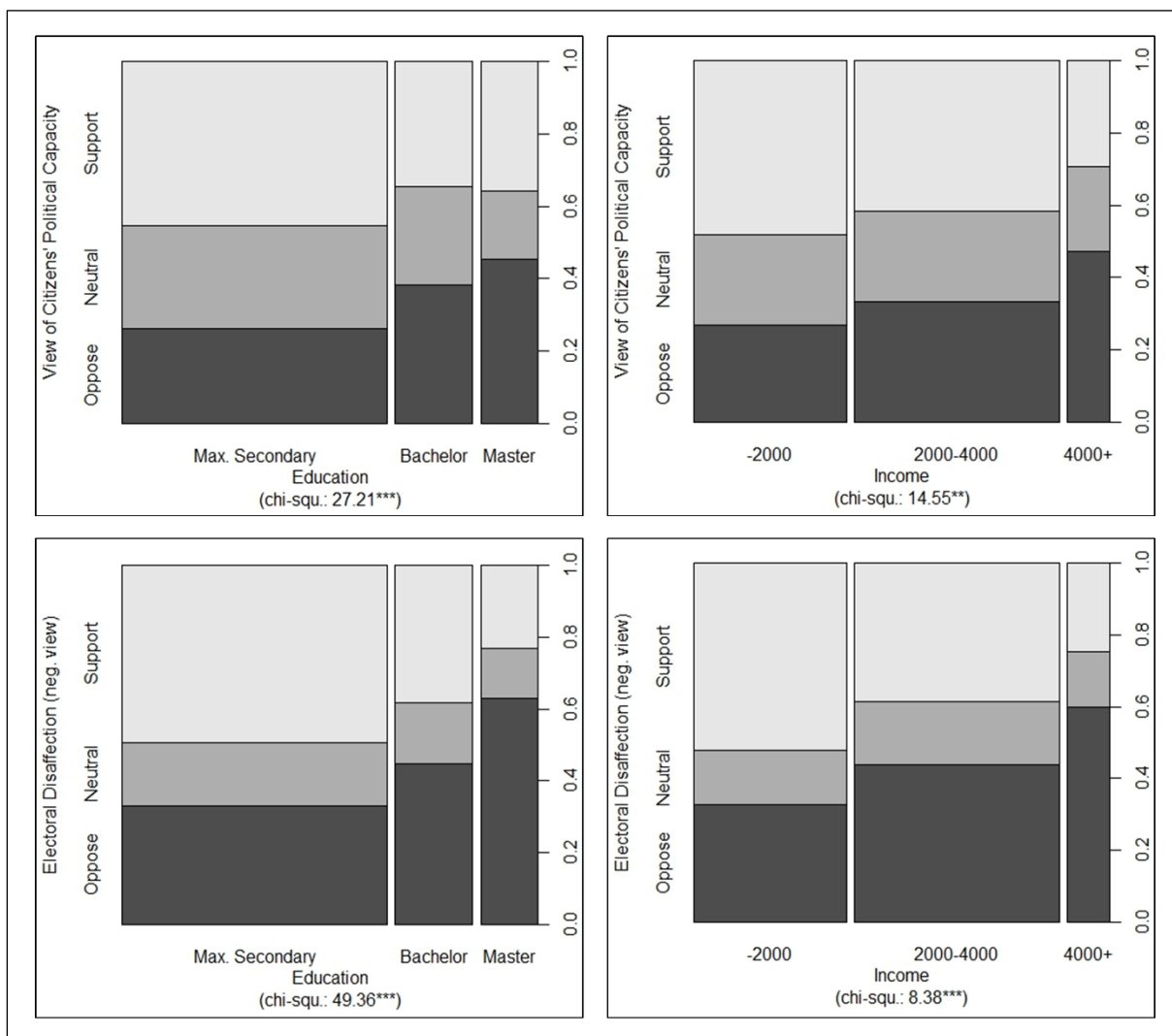
\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Appendix 4.** Citizens' support for the different uses of sortition by their degree of income



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

**Appendix 5.** Citizens' view of citizens' political capacity and electoral disaffection by education and income



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