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Parliamentarians' Support for Direct and Deliberative Democracy in Europe: An Account of Individual-Level Determinants

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Abstract

The increasing critique of representative democracy and its institutions determined reformers to consider the direct and deliberative processes as potential solutions to bridge the gap between elites and citizens. Substantial research investigates the functioning of these alternatives models of democracy but surprisingly little attention is paid to politicians' perspectives and preferences for these reforms. This article fills this gap through an analysis of parliamentarians' support for referendums and deliberative debates. It uses individual level data from the PartiRep Comparative MP Survey in 14 European countries to identify individual-level determinants of legislators' support. The findings reveal distinct explanatory factors of support for deliberative and direct reforms, which have important implications for democratic reform since elected representatives' preferences strongly influence the type of innovation adopted.

Keywords: direct democracy, deliberation, politicians, attitudes, Europe.

Citizen dissatisfaction and lower engagement with representative processes are perplexing problems for established democracies.¹ In searching for solutions, it has often been suggested that what is needed is more democracy,² or at least different types of democratic engagement that are less mediated and allow for more direct and considered citizen participation. Along these lines, an extensive strand of research refers to alternative models of democracy or decision-making.³ One of these models, direct democracy, has been promoted as a mechanism

through which citizens have a direct say in the policy-making process, bypassing the representative institutions that they distrust and blame for inefficiency and self-interest. Supporters argue that it empowers the people by allowing them to engage beyond their vote for representatives and by providing a tool for vertical accountability between elections.⁴ The other model, deliberative democracy, is oriented towards increasing the quality of decisions, understanding the process, and educating citizenry. It involves citizens at crucial stages of the policy-making process, placing emphasis on discussion, and aims to include the voices of multiple segments in society.⁵

Both models complement traditional representative democracy, trying to compensate for perceived shortcomings in representational processes and the gap between citizens and political institutions, rather than aiming to bolster and support the mechanisms of representation. In practice, they have important limitations. For example, scholars show that even with deliberative processes inequality of participation persists, with more educated and politically interested citizens being more likely to participate. Then, during deliberative events, the better educated and more confident (groups of) citizens tend to take the lead, carrying more weight within discussions.⁶ Referendums have been broadly criticized because campaigns may include information asymmetries, which may mislead public opinion and voting choice.⁷ More generally, the majoritarian principle usually underlying referendums may be incompatible with the protection of minorities' interests and could cause frustration among the "losers".⁸

Research into the deliberative and direct models of democratic reform has developed in two diverging directions. On the one hand, earlier studies focused on the adoption of rules and regulations related to both direct and deliberative democracy, the functioning of the two distinct models, the ways in which existing political institutions accommodate the reforms, and the consequences of integrating direct and deliberative democracy into political systems for governance and society at large.⁹ These studies document the increasing use of both alternative

models of democracy throughout the world over the last several decades.¹⁰ On the other hand, a substantial corpus of research on citizens' attitudes towards these models indicates that the public often supports these reforms and have an appetite to get involved.¹¹

At the same time, little is known about how elected politicians perceive these alternative democratic processes.¹² This issue is crucial, since the politicians in many cases promote reforms and, perhaps more importantly, are the gatekeepers who decide whether these models are adopted and implemented.¹³ Despite the classic delegate model of political representation suggesting that elected representatives could follow constituents' demands,¹⁴ politicians have considerable leeway in determining policy and often act as trustees or partisans.¹⁵

Furthermore, for those seeking elected office, voicing a willingness to implement democratic innovations might seem an effective electoral, vote-seeking strategy, especially when facing a skeptical electorate. However, once elected, politicians could seek to avoid implementing reforms so as not to undermine the place of representatives in a pivotal decision-making role. Despite these possibilities, legislatures have adopted deliberative and direct democratic models where they did not previously exist, indicating that some elected politicians support participatory mechanisms. Such a dynamic certainly deserves further investigation.

This article addresses this gap in the literature through an analysis of parliamentarians' support for referendums and deliberative debates in Europe. Hence, it innovates from previous research that has not delineated between these two models of democracy, either considering only direct democracy¹⁶ or support for participatory devices in general.¹⁷ To achieve this goal, it uses individual-level data from the PartiRep Comparative MP Survey (conducted in 2009–2012) that includes 944 national legislators from fourteen countries. Our statistical analysis aims to identify the explanatory power of MPs' satisfaction with legislative work, resentment towards the current system, and their style and focus of representation on support for democratic reforms. In that way, the research takes into account attitudinal factors related to perceptions of

representation,¹⁸ therefore going beyond instrumental and ideological factors usually pointed out as drivers of support for reform.¹⁹ In addition, we control for MP age, gender, and left-right self-placement. The findings reveal distinct explanatory factors of support for the two forms of democracy. This brings crucial implications in terms of public policymaking, since the type of alternative democratic models adopted seems to be influenced by the profile of elected representatives and their attitudes towards representative institutions and processes.

The Drivers of Support for Participatory Democracy

Existing research has devoted relatively limited attention to politicians' attitudes toward reforms designed to enable and expand citizens' opportunities for direct involvement in policymaking processes. A few studies investigate local-level politicians' opinions toward political participation.²⁰ Previous studies conclude that, in general, politicians welcome and encourage citizens' political participation in British local communities.²¹ This is mainly driven by benefits that political elites envisage: participation could convey citizens' preferences and assist in addressing problems. Other studies also find evidence of positive attitudes towards public political participation amongst elected officials.²² Namely, politicians' support for referendums at the local level is linked to their belief that referendums are the most effective avenue through which citizens can influence decision-making processes. These studies point at important country variations, with politicians in established democracies being more likely to express positive attitudes toward, and a willingness to increase the frequency of, referendums.

A second strand of literature has examined national (and regional) candidates' and elected representatives' support for participatory democracy,²³ highlighting political elites' differing levels of support, as well as differential understanding of participatory democracy.²⁴ Overall, these studies emphasize the effect of three types of factors explaining politicians' support for participatory mechanisms: instrumental motivations, with parties and politicians

winning from the status quo less likely to support alternatives to representative democracy, and “losers”—more likely to do so;²⁵ ideology, with support for participatory democracy being more frequent on the left-side of the spectrum, and in some party families (e.g., the Greens, the radical right, and radical left);²⁶ and finally, and to a lesser extent, politicians’ negative emotions toward the current system.²⁷

We build on these strands of research and address two important gaps. In terms of dependent variables, we distinguish between two democratic reforms that offer alternatives to representative democracy: direct democracy in the form of referendums and deliberative democracy. We hypothesize different mechanisms at play for support of each model. We thus innovate from most previous quantitative studies, which have either focused on support for referendums²⁸ or considered participatory democracy as an encompassing category including diverse mechanisms.²⁹ We build on qualitative research suggesting that MPs may have bifurcated opinions on participatory mechanisms,³⁰ and we examine this assumption further by systematically testing the impact of MPs’ individual attitudes toward representation. We focus on politicians’ attitudes toward representative democracy by including several indicators of satisfaction, but also by considering politicians’ approach to representation. Hence, we propose to go beyond instrumental and ideological motivations, often related to the politician’s party, in order to deepen our understanding of individual politicians’ preferences for democratic reforms.

Lower Support for Referendums than for Deliberative Events Before explaining our expectations regarding the individual determinants of support for direct and deliberative democracy, we need first to clarify that there is no *a priori* reason to think that MPs will value both types of reforms equally. Referendums are, by their very nature, designed to circumvent traditional representational relationships, sidestepping politicians’ decision-taking role. On the

one hand, calling a referendum might appear instrumental to the governing elites. They are “sometimes called because a government party finds itself divided on an important issue.”³¹ It could also be the case that for intractable and highly emotive political issues, shifting the decision to the public, rather than taking it up within the parliament, helps to insulate MPs from the negative repercussions of unpopular or contentious decisions. But even if in some cases referendums may be used as plebiscitary devices by a ruling majority to escape parliamentary debate and bolster perceived popular legitimacy,³² there are good reasons to believe that legislators might prefer less public “meddling” in the legislative processes.

Referendums diminish elected officials’ power and authority and are often a recognition that the political system is unable to resolve matters through standard processes.³³ Beyond the issue of initiatives being specifically used to bypass and circumvent legislatures (and legislators), previous research shows that state-level law-makers in the U.S. have been increasingly willing to modify and even overturn successful citizen initiatives, arguing that they are poorly written, do not take account of existing law, and would have unintended consequences.³⁴ In short, there are inherent tensions between (legislators’ views of) legislative processes and direct democracy outcomes³⁵ and plenty of reason to assume that lawmakers might be highly skeptical of direct democracy.

It is less clear how parliamentarians may view deliberative democracy initiatives. There is evidence of elected officials actively engaging in deliberative events,³⁶ from the first televised deliberative poll, held in Manchester, England,³⁷ to more recent events in Ireland.³⁸ To our knowledge there are fewer assessments of elected officials’ support for deliberative mechanisms than for referendums. In contrast to referendums, deliberative events are designed to inform political processes and are less often tied to binding decisions. At least for the idealized form of deliberative democracy, citizens would be more positively disposed toward their institutions and processes of governance.³⁹ Given the potential for parliamentarians to be

dismissive of processes that circumvent the traditional representative-constituent relationship, we would expect parliamentarians to prefer deliberative democracy, which may be seen as less invasive. Further, legislators may believe, as do many political theorists, that participation in deliberation enhances social capital, encourages citizens to undertake positive collective action, and creates a general feeling of community.⁴⁰

Hence, given the reforms' differing internal logics, we can hypothesize that parliamentarians will be less inclined to support referendums than deliberative democracy reforms (H1). Additionally, we expect to find differentiated levels of support for each model of democracy, depending on MPs' attitudes towards the representative system and their representation preferences.

Dissatisfied Parliamentarians, Dissatisfied Citizens From research conducted on citizen demands, we know that citizens' dissatisfaction with existing representational systems is a driver of support for alternative models of democracy. Citizens have gradually lost confidence that political institutions and their office holders can perform their duties and responsibilities. The large number of policy delivery failures, mishandled situations, slow decisions, and corruption scandals shed a negative light on the process of representation. The public have become increasingly critical over time⁴¹ and have started making demands for types of involvement that either bypasses the state institutions in the decision-making process (direct democracy) or allows citizens to contribute to the quality of decisions (deliberation).⁴²

In the 2013 elections in two German states, the candidates' support for referendums is negatively correlated with their level of satisfaction with democracy and the political system: candidates who are more critical of the political system favor widening political participation.⁴³ The results of a survey of candidates for the European and German parliaments link

respondents' lack of confidence in the parliament's ability to resolve the issues of the day to their support for allowing citizens to initiate binding referendums.⁴⁴

Citizens who express a lack of confidence in parliamentary institutions are more likely to support referendums.⁴⁵ Like citizens, parliamentarians may express dissatisfaction towards different objects or processes. Elected officials may be critical or reject the political system, which they perceive to be inefficient in responding to public demands (low external efficacy). Hence, parliamentarians belonging to populist parties⁴⁶ or those expressing a commitment to the principle of public engagement in policymaking may seek to contest the authority of established systems of representation. Instead of rejecting the system as a whole, some politicians may be more critical of the procedural aspects of the system, including the principle of power-delegation through the election of representatives, and could, for instance, support co-decision mechanisms in the form of mini-publics.⁴⁷ Accordingly, we hypothesize that dissatisfaction with the representative system and elections will increase support for both direct and deliberative models of democracy (H2a).

Finally, beyond the issue of satisfaction with the representative system, we also take into account politicians' satisfaction with legislative activity and with the performance of Parliament in fulfilling its tasks (government control, citizen representation, legislation). We hypothesize that dissatisfaction with legislative activity should decrease support for direct democracy (H2b), but would have a neutral or even positive impact on support for deliberative democracy (H2c). After all, ideally, deliberative democracy mechanisms involve similar processes to those of legislative work, at least in committee (e.g., exchange of ideas and argument, discussion, willingness to compromise, etc.).

The Style and Focus of Representation In spite of the normative perspective behind the principal-agent model, highlighting control and accountability (ex ante and ex post), and

directionality of relationships between voters and MPs,⁴⁸ things are more nuanced in reality.⁴⁹ In addition to their role as agents, politicians also act as gatekeepers when deciding what forms of political engagement exist in a polity and when they can take place. For example, in many countries, an unauthorized protest results in the punishment (e.g., fines or imprisonment) of those who participate. Similarly, although citizens may have high demands for referendums, the parliamentarians are the ones who decide if and when to introduce this decision-making procedure among the available options.

Further, politicians may have different approaches towards their roles as representatives of the people, and we argue that their attitudes towards representation may affect their support towards direct and deliberative democracy. A study on French-speaking deputies in Belgium advances a similar argument: representatives' support for various participatory devices (consultative mini-publics, binding mini-publics, etc.) is partly rooted in different conceptions of democracy (participatory, elitist, or ambivalent) that involve normative perceptions of the respective role of representatives (agents) and citizens (principals).⁵⁰

According to their approach towards representation, the legislators can (somewhat crudely) be divided into several categories. The first category is that of delegates who follow strictly the principal-agent model and act in accordance with what their constituents (voter delegate) or parties (party delegate) ask them to do.⁵¹ A second category is that of trustees who rely more on their own judgements when making a decision in Parliament.⁵² The third category is that of politico who alternate between trustee and delegate, depending on the situation.⁵³

Voter-delegates and trustees work in the best interest of their voters (or constituents) either by directly following their will (i.e., acting as voter-delegates) or by undertaking what they, the MPs, believe is in their constituents' best interest (i.e., acting as trustees). That is, both the mandate/delegate and trustee models can map onto a dyadic, promissory model of representation following principal-agent logic.⁵⁴ On the other hand, MPs who identify as party-

delegates subscribe to a rather different model of representation in which the polity's interest is best served by following their party's manifesto pledges.⁵⁵ In order to do so they must prioritize maintaining the party's control of the policy- and decision-making agenda. We would therefore expect that MPs who identify as voter-delegates and trustees would be more favorable toward public involvement in decision-making through referendums and deliberative mechanisms than would party-delegates (H3). Further, with their emphasis on the role of the public will mandating MP's priorities and action, we would expect that voter-delegates would be more supportive of referendums than trustees.

The focus of representation can also influence the attitudes towards direct and deliberative democracy. The representational focus refers to the level and type of constituency on which a parliamentarian chooses to concentrate their attention.⁵⁶ Representational focus has generally come to be associated with geographic focus, that is, whether a legislator concentrates on representing their specific constituency interests or the wider national interest;⁵⁷ however, there are other possible foci for legislators' attention, such as traditionally marginalized groups.⁵⁸ A more nuanced approach towards the focus of representation uses three criteria: geographically defined interests, functional interests, and partisan interests.⁵⁹ In this research, we identify three foci of representation that may be of importance for elected representatives: all the people in the country (thus based on geographical interests); all the people who voted for the party (partisan interests); and specific groups within society (functional interests).

Our argument is that a general territorial focus (that is, giving a high importance to representing all the people of the country) might have a contradictory effect on support for participatory mechanisms. On the one hand, it might increase the support for direct and deliberative democracy (H4a) in that parliamentarians, giving strong importance to representing the nation as a whole, may be more supportive of mechanisms that allow the entire population to express their opinions, either directly through referendum or through deliberative

events. On the other hand, parliamentarians giving strong importance to the nation as a united group could also fear referendums and their potential polarizing effects on nations, as well as their tendencies to override political minorities (H4b).

Deliberative events organized at the national level should ideally allow the expression of various interests and the exchange of arguments that are representative of the population's diversity. Directly related to these principles, parliamentarians giving strong importance to representing groups in society should be more supportive of deliberative democracy than of referendums (H4c), as deliberative processes tend to be designed to ensure the representation of minority groups, whereas referendums might threaten minorities' interests. Finally, representation rooted in partisan interests should, in a similar way to a party-delegate style of representation, decrease support for alternative models of democracy that would potentially reduce party influence in policy-making (H4d).⁶⁰

Controls In addition to these main predictors, we control for a series of variables that were identified in the literature as having a potential impact on legislator's attitudes toward representational reforms: age, gender, and left-right self-placement.⁶¹ It is well established that sociodemographic variables tend to have a direct effect on attitudes related to direct or deliberative democracy. For example, younger citizens tend to favour direct democratic decision-making.⁶² Gender may shape parliamentarians' attitudes towards the two alternative models of democracy through the emphasis they place on various types of representation (e.g., substantive, descriptive, symbolic, etc.).⁶³ The self-positioning on the ideological left-right axis could also play a relevant part since those parties on the left side of the spectrum are more inclined towards inclusiveness and egalitarianism;⁶⁴ consequently, the MPs belonging to that side of the political spectrum may be more inclined to support direct and deliberative democracy.

In addition, previous research has suggested that support for democratic innovations could also be related to parties' and elites' placement at ideological periphery.⁶⁵ We expect that the greater the degree of radicalism of MPs in the left-right space, the greater MPs' propensity to support democratic innovations, especially referendum.⁶⁶ Finally, we control for the status of the MPs' party in government or in opposition. Existing research has repeatedly shown that parties in government are more reluctant to change the status quo, thus less supportive of democratic innovations.⁶⁷ We go a little further by distinguishing parties that have never taken part in executive government from parties that are currently in opposition but which have previously exercised power. We expect MPs from parties which have never taken part in forming a country's government to show a greater support for democratic innovations.

As a recent study illustrates, some political parties support referendums more than others in their election manifestos.⁶⁸ We expected that this could influence the attitudes of their MPs towards direct democracy. Empirical tests show a small and non-significant statistical effect on these MPs' support for referendums. Overall, this variable does not produce changes to results since the findings are highly similar when including or excluding party manifestos' references to referendum. This variable is not correlated with the position in government. For reasons of simplicity we do not include this variable in the statistical models.

Research Design

This article uses the attitudinal survey collected in the frame of the PartiRep Comparative MP Survey project.⁶⁹ The survey was carried out among national and regional legislators across fourteen European democracies: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.⁷⁰ In addition to socio-demographics and career patterns, the survey asked MPs about their views on their role as representatives, connection to groups in society, and relation to their party.

Crucially, it also contains measures relating to MPs' satisfaction with the functioning of parliamentary democracy and their support for alternative forms of decision-making processes. In this analysis we include only the MPs from national parliaments. MPs were invited to respond either through an online web-survey (32 percent), print questionnaires (42.3 percent), face-to-face interviews (24.9 percent), or by telephone (0.8 percent). Data were collected between spring 2009 and winter 2012, with a response rate of 19.5 percent, averaged across all parliaments surveyed, although this rate varies from one parliament to another—below 15 percent in Italy, France, the United Kingdom, and Poland; above 40 percent in the Netherlands and in Belgium. In spite of these different response rates, the sample remains representative of the population.⁷¹ The final sample includes 944 MPs.

Measuring MPs' Support for Referendum and Deliberative Events In order to measure MPs' support for the two alternative models of democracy, we refer to referendums (the most common form of direct democracy) and to deliberative events. We use a question asking MPs about their opinion on the desirability to reform democratic decision-making processes in various ways. The question is: "In recent years, different views on voters' distrust of politicians and political parties have inspired widely diverging suggestions for reform. Of each of the following directions that reform could take, could you indicate how desirable you consider them?" MPs were presented with the propositions: "increase the number of referendums" and "increase the number of deliberative events, where groups of ordinary citizens debate and decide on a particular issue." These two items asked MPs to give their opinion on the desirability to implement alternative models of democracy that would increase citizens' say in the decision-making process: direct democracy, through the use of referendums, and deliberative democracy. For each item, MPs were asked to position themselves on a Likert type scale ranging from 1 ("not at all desirable") to 4 ("very desirable"). Figure 1 depicts the frequency distribution of preferences and leads to two general observations. First, there is substantial variation in parliamentarians' support for the two alternative models of democracy.

Figure 1 about here

Second, confirming H1, above, deliberative events have more traction than referendums among the surveyed parliamentarians. Increasing the number of deliberative events seems to attract greater support (around 70 percent consider them as desirable, i.e., the sum of the fairly and very desirable, mean score at 2.8, standard deviation at 0.82) than increasing the frequency of referendum (only 35 percent see them as desirable, mean score at 2.2, standard deviation at 0.94). Both variables positively and significantly correlate, but the coefficient is not high (Spearman's $\rho = 0.268$, $p < 0.001$). This empirical evidence confirms earlier research that these

two alternative models of democracy have a different logic, and they are accordingly perceived differently.⁷² Looking at the dispersion of preferences (standard deviation), we also see more disagreement amongst MPs on support for referendums.

Independent and Control Variables We measure MPs' dissatisfaction with legislative activity (H2) through a question asking how satisfied they are in general with the performance of Parliament and parliamentarians in fulfilling the following tasks: (1) scrutinizing the government, (2) representing the views and interests of the voters, and (3) doing legislative work.⁷³ Satisfaction is measured with a four-point Likert scale that ranges from "very unsatisfied" to "very satisfied." Satisfaction with these three activities correlate significantly (Spearman's rho scores around 0.4, $p > 0.001$, Cronbach alpha=0.70). We created an index measure of MPs' general satisfaction with the working of parliament using factor analysis (principal component factor, eigen value=1.88, KMO=0.67).⁷⁴

The degree to which MPs are critical towards the system of representation (H2) is measured with two variables. First, we use the answers to the following question: "It is often stated that voters have lost trust in politics and politicians. Below are a few statements that are very commonly heard in this regard. Regarding each of these commonly heard statements, could you indicate whether you personally agree or disagree?" The answers range on a five-point Likert scale (1 "strongly disagree," 2 "disagree," 3 "neither," 4 "agree," and 5 "strongly agree") for the following items: "political parties are not offering really different options to the people," "parties make too many promises on which they cannot deliver," "most politicians are out of touch with people's concerns," "politicians let their own position on political issues be determined by the campaign advisers and the polls," "politicians are more concerned with the clash of persons than with the confrontation of ideas," and "special interests have too much influence on public policies."⁷⁵ A principal component factor analysis reveals one factor (Eigen

value 2.43).⁷⁶ The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy is 0.78, which is acceptable. We use this factor as a measure of MPs' critical assessment or resentment towards the current political system. Second, we measure MPs' critical assessment of the electoral process as an effective way to channel citizens' demand. This second measure focuses on a procedural aspect of representative democracy that implies delegating power through election, while the first variable asks about the capacity or integrity of the actors (the parties and politicians). MPs' opinions about the effectiveness of voting in elections for channelling citizens' demands is operationalized using the answers to the question, "There are many opinions on how citizens can most effectively influence decisions in society. Can you indicate for [vote in elections] how effective you think it is, 1 being not at all effective and 7 being very effective?"

In order to identify an MP's preferences for styles of representation (H3), we use the classic "dilemma" question, asking MPs to choose whose position they will follow when voting in cases of disagreement. Three choices are proposed in the survey: (1) the party's position versus the MP's own opinion, (2) MP's own opinion versus voters' opinion,⁷⁷ and (3) voters' opinion versus the party position.⁷⁸ Based on these choices, we code legislators as either belonging to the voter delegate (i.e., choices 2 and 3 in which they systematically pick the voters against their own opinion or their party's position) or to a trustee style of representation (i.e., options 1 and 2). Voter-delegates represent 11.4 percent of the sample whilst trustees constitute 33 percent of the sample. These two categories are merged into one to form the voter-oriented legislators (coded 1), which oppose the remainder of legislators who are party-oriented (coded 0).

The importance MPs attribute to representing voters and groups—the focus of representation (H4)—is the next independent variable considered. The survey asked, "How important is it to you, personally, to promote the views and interests of the following groups of

people?” Three items are considered, on which respondents were asked to position themselves on a scale from 1 to 7: the importance of promoting the views and interests of (1) all the people who voted for your party (mean=5.69, std=1.24), (2) a specific group in society (mean=5.49, std=1.26),⁷⁹ and (3) all the people in the country (mean=5.23, std=1.62). Levels of support are high for all three items, and items (1) and (2) correlate at a significant level (Spearman’s rho=0.26, $p < 0.001$). Note that data are missing for a quite substantial number of respondents (twenty-five for item 1, fifty-five for item 2, and thirty-seven for item 3).

The measurement for control variables is straightforward: age is a count variable in years at the time of survey, gender is a dichotomous variable (man=0, woman=1), and left-right self-placement is on the usual 11-point ordinal scale (0=left and 10=right).⁸⁰ We measure the ideological radicalism of MPs as the ideological distance between the MP’s left-right self-placement and the mean position of the MPs in the same country, hence accounting for country context.⁸¹ The variable ranges from .056 to 5.94, with a mean at 1.98. Finally, we classify parties into three categories: parties that have never been in government (forty parties, 14 percent of MPs), parties that are currently in government at the time of the survey (thirty-two parties, 48 percent of MPs),⁸² and parties that are currently in opposition, but which have already exercised power (thirty-two parties, 38 percent of MPs).

Analysis

Given the ordinal nature of the dependent variables, the analysis explores the individual-level factors of support for referendum and deliberative democracy through ordinal logit. Given the nested nature of the data, with parliamentarians nested within parties (N=102) and parties nested within countries (N=14), we use multilevel modelling. Table 1 presents empty models including only the dependent variables.⁸³ The intra-class correlation measures (ICC) indicate that the variation observed in our dependent variables is weakly explained by country

differences: around 4 percent of the variation of support for referendum and around 1 percent of the variation of support for deliberative events are due to country-level explanations. This justifies the need to look at individual-level determinants of support for referendum and deliberative events. However, the ICC measures for referendums also reveals that an important part of the variation observed is due to party-level factors. The party-level control introduced in the models related to the party's position in or out government indeed helps explain support for referendum.

Table 1 about here

Table 2 includes six models, three for direct democracy and three for deliberative democracy. Model 1 includes the effect of satisfaction with legislative work, resentment towards the current system, assessment of the effectiveness of the election, and the style and focus of representation. Model 2 includes only the control variables, while Model 3 includes all independent and control variables. A VIF (variance inflation score) procedure ensures that the multicollinearity between the predictors is limited (the VIF values are all below 1.25).⁸⁴ Figure 2 helps visualize the findings by plotting the coefficients and confidence intervals.

Regarding support for referendums, the effects of satisfaction with legislative work, resentment towards the current system, and assessment of the effectiveness of elections as a way for channelling citizens' demand appear significant in Model 1. The more effective MPs think existing legislative and electoral processes are at channelling public demands, the less inclined they are to support referendums. Nevertheless, the effect of satisfaction with legislative work loses its significance when control variables are introduced (Model 3). MPs' focus of representation seems to matter as well, but not exactly as expected: MPs who give a great deal of importance to representing groups in society show a slightly higher support for referendums, although the effect is small and statistically significant only at the 0.1 level. Those MPs could

perceive referendums as tools for groups in society to express their opinion. Our hypothesis that voter-delegates and trustees would be more supportive of democratic innovations has limited support when considering the sign of the relationship (for both referendum and deliberative events); however, the effect is not significant.

Table 2 about here

Regarding the models' fit, we cannot directly estimate as in linear regression models the proportion of explained variability in the response data, but comparing the Akaike-Information Criteria (AIC) and Bayesian-Information Criteria (BIC), we see that the independent variables have a higher explanatory power than the control variables. Regarding the effect of control variables, we particularly see the effect of party status in government or in opposition (Figure 2): support for referendums is higher among MPs affiliated with parties that have never exercised government power. Additionally, the further MPs' ideological position from the average placement of their national fellows, the higher their support for referendums (p value <0.1). That is, representatives located at the fringes of the political spectrum evidence higher levels of support for referendums than representatives located more at the center, while the left-right ideological leaning per se has no significant effect.

The support for deliberative events presents a different story. None of the variables related to dissatisfaction or assessment of the current system appears significant, even if the sign of the coefficients for "satisfaction with legislative work" and "resentment" go in the expected direction. However, the focus of representation seems important: the importance MPs give to representing their party's voters significantly increases support for deliberative events.⁸⁵ The individual-level control variables seem to matter as well. First, being ideologically more right-wing decreases support for deliberative events, but radicalism has no effect, by contrast,

on support for referendums. Also, the effect of a party's governmental or opposition status is weaker on support for deliberation than it is on support for referendums.

Women appear significantly more supportive of deliberative events. This gender effect confirms a trend raised in qualitative surveys of elected officials.⁸⁶ At least two types of explanations can be posited. First, by relying on some kind of "essentialist" perspective, women would tend to be more supportive of deliberation than men because deliberation would rely on so-called "feminine" qualities of understanding, appeasement, and avoidance of conflict.⁸⁷ Second, women's support for deliberative events could be explained by a belief in the capacity of deliberation to include the voice of more marginalized groups (including women) or to provide a more equal participation of men and women, which in fact depends greatly on the composition of the deliberative assembly and on the group's decision rule.⁸⁸ The logic underlying the second explanation could also help explain the left-right effect: left-leaning representatives may be more concerned than those on the right with making the voices of marginalized groups heard, thus displaying greater support for deliberative events.

Overall, support for the two models of democracy clearly indicates different logics. Direct democracy seems to be more supported by MPs located at the fringes of the ideological space and holding negative opinions towards the current representative and elective system, in connection to their position away from the realm of power. Deliberative democracy seems to be less salient among those disaffected MPs but seems supported by representatives who would give more importance to representing the voice of more marginalized groups.

Conclusion

This article has sought to shed light on parliamentarians' support for referendums and deliberative events in Europe. With the decline in both specific and diffuse support across established democracies, parliaments and governments seek ways to improve the links between

publics and their governing institutions. The fear is that declining support for political institutions and processes of representative democracy highly correlates with a disinclination to obey laws, pay taxes, adhere to conventional norms of civility, and tolerance in the public sphere. Advocates assert that both deliberative and direct democratic reforms are, if not a panacea for what ills representative democracies, then a salve on the wounds.⁸⁹ Yet tensions may arise between traditional legislative processes and the newer democratic reforms or the ways in which those reforms are leveraged to adopt policies. Whilst it is important to understand how the public engages with and supports these democratic innovations, it is equally important to improve our understanding of how lawmakers perceive and evaluate innovations that may substantially change how they relate to voters.

Direct democracy can bypass traditional representative institutions, which are increasingly seen as ineffective and inefficient means to channel citizens' demands. On the side of citizens and legislators, criticisms addressed to the existing system encompass various dimensions: dissatisfaction with the role of parliaments in fulfilling their main tasks, including representing the people and controlling government; skepticism towards the efficiency of the electoral processes to adequately process citizens' demands; and resentment towards parties and parliamentarians, which are seen as unable or unwilling to respond to society's challenges and issues. Our findings show that legislators, similar to the citizens they aim to represent, express a lack of confidence in the institutions and decision-making processes they take part in and, as a consequence, consider direct democracy an alternative to the deficiencies of the representative system.

At the aggregate level, across fourteen European national assemblies, parliamentarians tend to display somewhat greater support for deliberative events than for referendums, and there is less consensus regarding support for referendums among elected representatives. One potential explanation would be that most deliberative mechanisms are advisory, and thus their

outcomes could be seen as more potentially malleable and pliable. Legislators may support them because they do not undermine their decision-making power. Referendums often carry a heavier weight, are harder to ignore, and push elected officials for action (even if consultative). However, the parliamentarians' views on referendums are somewhat easier to predict than their views on deliberative events. Those lawmakers who tend to think that existing legislative processes work appropriately and that elections remain a key link between voters and parliamentarians, allowing for the expression of public sentiment on the key issues of the day, also tend to voice less support for referendums. And it seems to be equally the case that MPs who express support for the strong party model of parliamentary democracy also tend to put less stock in mechanisms designed to give the public direct voice in the policy-making process.

The support for referendums is higher among legislators who resent the current system, who consider elections ineffective, and who belong to parties with no experience in government. For these MPs, the support for referendums can mean a criticism of traditional structures and processes of representative democracy to which they did not have access. Many of these MPs come from populist parties that hold a critique against the representative system of government built on these characteristics. Our findings partially confirm the conclusions reached at party level indicating that populists refer more to referendums than other political actors.⁹⁰

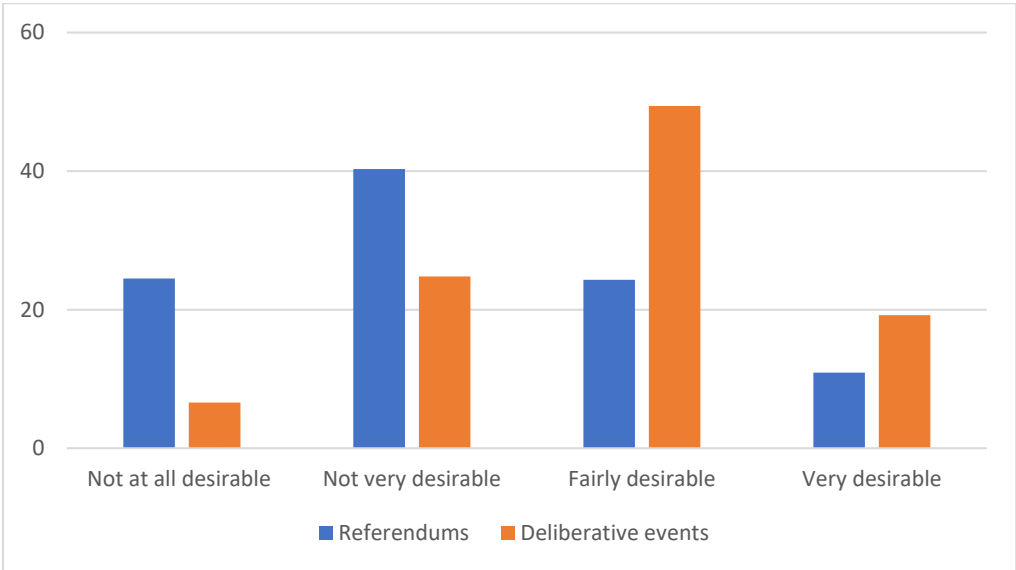
The support for deliberative democracy follows a different logic and is not rooted in the dissatisfaction or rejection of parliamentary democracy. One explanation might be that deliberation is part of the everyday life of parliaments, especially through work in committees. The functioning of deliberative events may resemble that of an elected assembly, except that citizens directly intervene and interact with one another and are not pressured by the prospect of upcoming elections. This interpretation is strengthened by the finding that legislators who prioritize the representation of their party voters support deliberative events. They could

consider deliberation as an alternative arena in which a specific group (of party supporters) gets a voice. In addition, deliberation, in contrast to referendums, demands that the diversity of interests and ideas is taken into account in the decision-making process. Support for deliberative events appears significantly higher among women who may perceive deliberation as a way to better take into account the interests of, if not to give a more equal voice to, under-represented groups.

A more comprehensive view would link the goals of representatives to their support for the two models of decision-making. Unfortunately, our data are limited by not including sufficient information to distinguish between different goals and to test their effects on preferences for democratic reform. Further research could seek to address this problem by collecting more nuanced data on MPs' goals and incentives.

At the end of the day, we seek to better understand elected politicians support for democratic reforms and how much “democracy,” or popular input into the law-making process, is considered optimal. This is not a new debate. This issue dates back to some of the classic debates and arguments around political representation.⁹¹ During the founding of the United States, Madison, Hamilton, and Jay argue in *The Federalist Papers* in 1787–1788 that public passions, opinions, and participation needed to be mediated by secure (and insulated) political institutions: the saucer that cools the tea. Edmund Burke expressed similar ideas in his famous letter to the electors of Bristol in 1774.⁹² At the same time, American founders such as Jefferson argued that public political participation had an educative effect and would improve the character and quality of the citizenry should popular participation be expanded and extended.⁹³ Recognizing the pivotal and crucial role political elites play in developing and shaping democratic institutions means a step forward in the direction of narrowing the gap that separates them from citizens.

Figure 1 Distribution of Support for Referendum and Deliberative Events (in percentage)



Note: Number of valid answers: 926 for referendums and 927 for deliberative events.

Figure 2 Regression Coefficients Plots

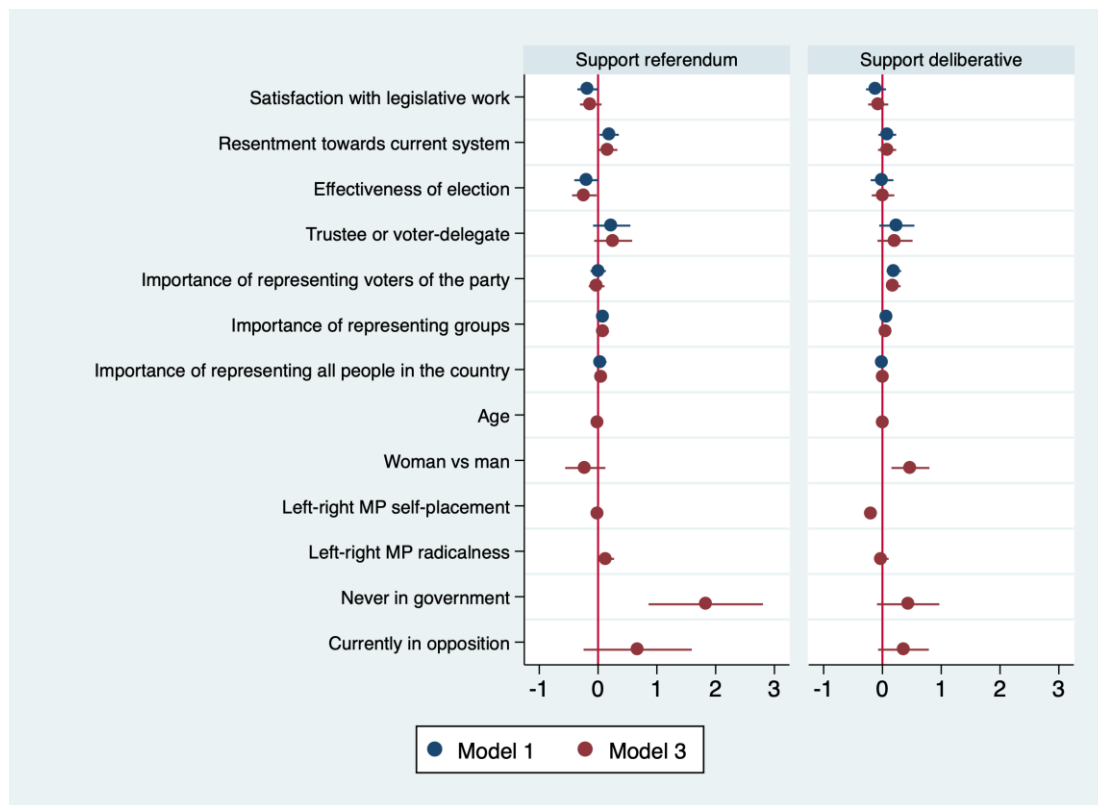


Table 1 Support for Referendums and Deliberative Events—Empty Multilevel Models

	Referendums	Deliberative events
Constant	2.31	2.83
ICC Country	.041	.011
ICC Party	.403	.081
Observations	926	927

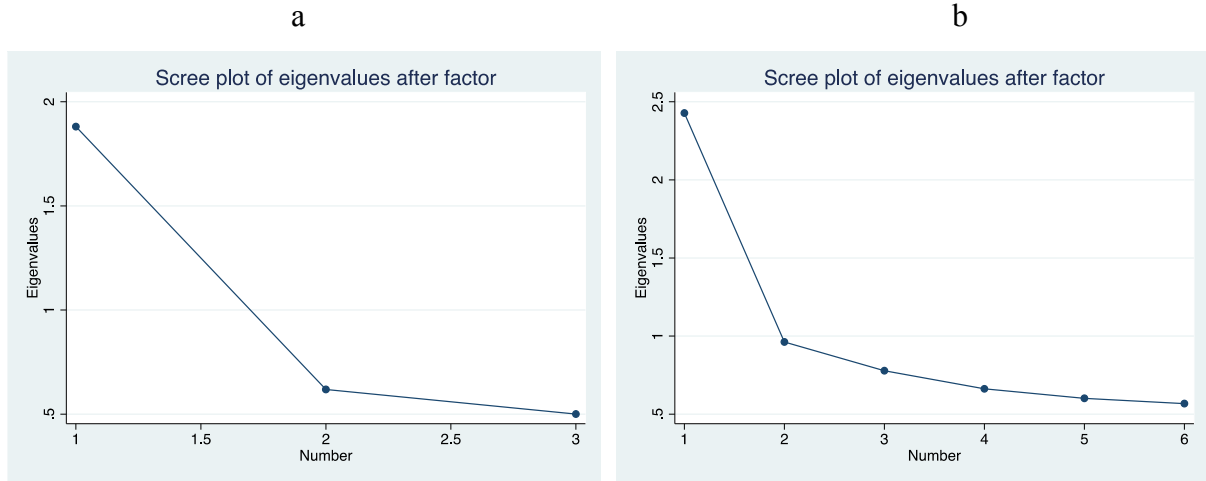
Table 2 Ordinal Multilevel Logit Regressions Explaining the Support for Referendum and Deliberative Events

	Support for referendums			Support for deliberative events		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(3)
Satisfaction with legislative work	-0.17+		-0.12	-0.11		-0.07
Resentment towards current system	0.19*		0.16+	0.08		0.08
Effectiveness of election	-0.20+		-0.23*	-0.01		0.01
Trustee or voter-delegate	0.23		0.26	0.24		0.21
Importance of representing voters of the party	0.00		-0.02	0.19**		0.18**
Importance of representing groups	0.09+		0.09+	0.08+		0.05
Importance of representing all people in the country	0.04		0.05	-0.00		0.01
Age		-0.01	-0.01		0.01	0.01
Woman vs man		-0.16	-0.22		0.47**	0.48**
Left-right self-placement		0.00	-0.01		-	-0.20***
Left-right MP radicalism		0.12+	0.14+		0.01	-0.07
Party currently in government (ref. cat.)						
Never in government		2.09***	1.83***		0.56*	0.44
Currently in opposition		0.86+	0.67		0.38+	0.36
Constant	3.00***	2.69***	2.51***	0.54**	0.20	0.21
Observations	791	871	778	789	871	776
<i>AIC</i>	1721.67	1863.08	1678.29	1830.14	1976.38	1767.60
<i>BIC</i>	1777.75	1915.54	1762.12	1886.19	2028.85	1851.38

+ p<0.1, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Scree plots: Satisfaction with parliament items (a) and Resentment (b)



NOTES

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² Loic Blondiaux and Yves Sintomer, “L’impératif délibératif,” *Politix*, 15 (2002), 17–35.

³ André Bächtiger, John S. Dryzek, Jane Mansbridge, and Mark E. Warren, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Bruce E. Cain, Russell J. Dalton, and Susan E. Scarrow, eds., *Democracy Transformed?: Expanding Political Opportunities in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Matt Qvortrup, ed., *Referendums Around the World: With a Foreword by Sir David Butler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁴ David Altman, *Direct Democracy Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Sergiu Gherghina, “Direct Democracy and Subjective Regime Legitimacy in Europe,” *Democratization*, 24 (2017), 613–31.

⁵ James S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Lawrence LeDuc, “Referendums and Deliberative Democracy,” *Electoral Studies*, 38 (2015), 139–48. More recently, research moves beyond the models of decision-making and uses a problem-based approach according to which the democratic systems combine different features (see Michael Saward, *Democratic Design* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Mark E. Warren, “A Problem-Based Approach to Democratic Theory,” *American Political Science Review*, 111 (February 2017), 39–53). This article uses the models of decision-making approach for two reasons: to illustrate how some of their features appeal to elites and to mirror the studies covering citizens’ attitudes towards direct and deliberative democracy.

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- ²⁹ Nunez, Close, and Bedock.
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- ³⁵ Gerber, Lupia, McCubbins, and Kiewiet.
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- ³⁷ Luskin, Fishkin, Jowell.
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⁵⁹ Nathalie Brack, Olivier Costa, and Conceição Pequito Teixeira, “Attitudes Towards the Focus and Style of Political Representation among Belgian, French and Portuguese Parliamentarians,” *Representation*, 48 (2012), 387–402.

⁶⁰ Guillaume Gourgues, *Les politiques de démocratie participative* (Presses universitaires de Grenoble: Grenoble, 2013).

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⁷⁰ The PartiRep survey project also included Israel, which is excluded from this analysis given our focus on geographically European countries.

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⁷² LeDuc.

⁷³ Another question in the PartiRep survey asked MPs to assess aspects of day-to-day work in parliament as well as parliamentary politics. These items were quite specific (e.g., “Members frequently question another member’s sincerity and integrity in public,” “Confidential party discussions usually find their way to the media,” and “Members frequently take parliamentary initiatives without the parliamentary party’s authorization”). Although interesting per se, these items do not directly measure MPs’ satisfaction. Empirically, no clear patterns emerge from the

exploration of the data (no clear correlations or underlying factor). Hence, we do not include this measure in our analysis.

⁷⁴ Factor loadings between 0.75 (“scrutinizing the government”) and 0.81 (“representing the views and interests of the voters” and “doing legislative work”). For details, see Appendix 1. Due to space constraints, the Appendix is not in the print version of this article. It can be viewed in the online version, at <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/cuny/cp>.

⁷⁵ Responses to these items all correlate significantly (and Cronbach alpha=0.70)

⁷⁶ Factor loadings between 0.49 (“special interests have too much influence on public policies”) and 0.71 (“politicians let their own position on political issues be determined by the campaign advisers and the polls”).

⁷⁷ “How should, in your opinion, a Member of Parliament vote if his/her own opinion on an issue does not correspond with the opinion of his/her voters? a. ... according to his/her own opinion b. ... according to the opinion of his/her voters.”

⁷⁸ “How should, in your opinion, a Member of Parliament vote if his/her voters have one opinion and his/her party takes a different position? a. ... according to the opinion of his/her voters, b. ... according to his/her party’s opinion.” But see Andeweg and Thomassen (2005) for a critique of this typology.

⁷⁹ We have also considered delineating between the type of group (e.g., women, young, elderly, employee, self-employed, farmers, religious groups, etc.). However, data were missing for a high number of respondents (around eighty), and the type of group was highly linked to the left-right orientation of respondents—left-wing MPs highlighting groups such as women, ethnic minorities, and employees; right-wing MPs highlighting groups such as self-employed, religious groups, and farmers/fishermen.

⁸⁰ We also considered controlling for MPs’ intention to run at the next election. However, data are missing for the Netherlands. Besides, no evidence was found of any effect or altering of the general findings when introducing the variable in the models.

⁸¹ Models presented in draft versions of this contribution included party family as a control variable. We have dropped that variable from the models presented below, given that ideological radicalism and government/opposition status in fact grasp most of the party family effect.

⁸² The variable covers the national governments between 1975, or from first election after an authoritarian breakdown, until 2012.

⁸³ We use linear multilevel models instead of ordinal ones because it eases the interpretation in terms of variation observed in the dependent variables. This is unlikely to be a problem since the overall findings are similar irrespective of the (ordinal or linear) model used.

⁸⁴ In addition, we have looked at correlation coefficients between the predictors, as we may expect that style and focus of representation could also be rooted in dissatisfaction with the parliamentary institutions and/or with the principle and functioning of representative democracy. Significant correlation coefficients were found between believing in the effectiveness of election and the importance of representing the voters of the party (Kendall tau= 0.11***) and with the importance of representing groups (0.09**) and between adopting a voter or a trustee style (vs. party delegate or politico) and a low level of satisfaction with parliament (Kendall tau=0.11***). While statistically significant, these correlations are relatively weak. Resentment towards the representative system does not seem to be related to any of the attitudes towards representation.

⁸⁵ This finding is consistent with Barker and Carman who argue that public preferences for “delegate” style of representation is linked to a more communitarian orientation that values and promotes the idea of public engagement in politics.

⁸⁶ Bedock, Rangoni, and Talukder; Jacquet, Schiffino, Reuchamps, and Latinis.

⁸⁷ Marion Paoletti and Sandrine Rui, “Introduction. La démocratie participative a-t-elle un sexe ?,” *Participations*, 12 (November 2015), 5–29.

⁸⁸ Christopher F. Karpowitz, Tali Mendelberg, and Lee Shaker, “Gender Inequality in Deliberative Participation,” *American Political Science Review*, 106 (August 2012), 533–47.

⁸⁹ Smith; Gherghina and Geissel, 2019.

⁹⁰ Gherghina and Pilet.

⁹¹ Burke.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ James Gilreath, ed., *Thomas Jefferson and the Education of a Citizen* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1999).