



Beyond parliamentarism: How do citizens want to decide on divisive policies?

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Abstract

Europeans, on average, are distrustful toward representative institutions. In recent decades, to restore confidence in political institutions, several countries have implemented alternative decision-making processes. The literature has analyzed preferences for these alternatives, such as direct democracy or technocracy, and their drivers. However, these analyses often treated these preferences in isolation, without considering that citizens might have more complex preferences involving multiple actors in the decision-making process. We test whether this complexity exists in a novel survey experiment where citizens are exposed to two different vignettes about divisive policies in Italy. Our results indicate that, more than anything else, Italian citizens prefer having their fellow citizens decide alone in referendums. However, they also favor consulting experts before Parliament's decision. Furthermore, we demonstrate that while instrumentality is still crucial in evaluating the fairness of the processes, certain decision-making processes make losers of the policy outcome as satisfied as specific groups winners. These findings hold significant implications for citizens' policy evaluations, highlighting that the decision-making process might influence their overall satisfaction with policies.

Keywords Decision-making · Representative democracy · Direct democracy · Technocracy · Process preferences · Instrumentality

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Introduction

In the last decades, Europe has witnessed the spread of democratic innovations: Direct democracy and, to a lesser extent, deliberative democracy became crucial decision-making processes in several European and non-European polities (Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Landwehr and Harms 2019; Fishkin et al. 2021; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001). Numerically speaking, these processes are increasingly adopted within the framework of the European liberal-democratic regimes (Paulis et al. 2020; Silagadze and Gherghina 2019; Vittori et al. 2023b).

The literature has shown that citizens have a positive inclination toward their direct involvement in decision-making through referendums (Bowler et al. 2007; Leininger 2015; Rojon and Rijken 2020) and that they also view experts in government as a valid alternative to politicians (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017; Chiru and Eynedi 2021; Vittori et al. 2023a). One important gap in the literature, however, is that these processes are often conceived and operationalized as irreconcilable ideal types or are presented in contrast with representative democracy (Hibbing et al. 2021; Pilet et al. 2023). Revising the studies on citizens' democratic preferences conducted between 2019 and 2020, König et al. (2022) advocate a combinatorial measurement approach, in which process preferences are not analyzed in isolation but are considered as potential complementary decision-making tools (see also Kriesi et al. 2016). This means that, instead of proposing analyses based on trade-offs between processes (Beiser-McGrath et al. 2021; Coffé and Michels 2014; Font et al. 2015; Gherghina and Geissel 2017), there is a need to focus on mixed preferences. In this regard, works on multi-layered decision-making processes are rare (exceptions are Beiser-McGrath et al. 2021; Bertsou 2021) and, to the best of our knowledge, none of them have considered the possibility of having a multi-layered decision-making process in which citizens, experts, or politicians can be the ultimate decision-maker or a consultative body, as we plan to do in this paper. In several European countries, these decision-making processes do coexist and sometimes overlap. For example, the Parliament might appoint a fully technocratic government, as in the case of the 2021 Draghi Government in Italian. Citizens might vote in a non-binding referendum that is subsequently ratified by the Parliament, as in the case of the 2016 Brexit Referendum. People might reject, via referendum, a proposal that was ratified in Parliament, as in the case of the 2016 citizens' initiative against the Netherlands' Ukraine–EU Association Agreement. Or experts might be appointed in special committees for drafting policies that are (eventually) voted by the Parliament, such as the group of experts nominated in 2018 by the Italian Minister of Economic Development for elaborating the National Strategy on Artificial Intelligence. Thus, it is worth enquiring whether specific combinations with specific actors having the last word in the decision-making process are preferred over the representative system in divisive policy fields. Our analysis starts from the recent findings on process preferences: Firstly, we test processes in isolation, by looking at whether direct democracy or technocracy is more appreciated than having Parliament deciding alone. Secondly, we test whether citizens prefer that either experts or citizens are



consulted prior to decision-making by Parliament, instead of being the final decision-makers, as suggested by Beiser-McGrath et al. (2021) and Bertson (2021). Finally, we test whether citizens prefer having other actors being consulted when non-traditional actors are entitled to make the final decision.

To answer the research questions, we have designed a unique survey experiment by varying (1) the types of actors (Parliament, citizens, experts), (2) the number of actors involved (1–3), and (3) the role of each actor (consultative or decisive) in the decision-making process. We have repeated the experiment for two polarizing issues in the Italian context: the inheritance tax and the legalization of soft drugs. Our results show that Italian citizens are most keen on processes where citizens have the final say via referendums and care less about whether citizens are consulted during the decision-making process. Contrary to expectations, expert-led decision-making processes do not enjoy an advantage relative to parliamentary ones, but the consultation of experts boosts support for the decision-making process in some cases. Finally, we show that when non-traditional actors make a decision, the fact that they were consulted prior to the decision does not change the evaluation of the process.

Support for decision-making processes other than representative democracy

Recent contributions (Hibbing et al. 2021; Pilet et al. 2023) have highlighted that citizens have different conceptions of the role of political and non-political actors in political decision-making. The different roles that citizens assign to political actors reflect different conceptions of how democracy should be organized. König (2022), using an original survey in Germany, shows citizens have different conceptions of decision-making processes within liberal democracy, which oftentimes overlap. Europeans, thus, have different conceptions of democracy, each of which entails a prevailing group making the most important decision for the country. In this regard, Ferrin and Kriesi (2016) have shown that citizens with “pure” preferences for one conception of democracy are relatively rare. This is not surprising since European political systems have also made use of processes not related to representative democracy. For example, direct democracy can be a structural part of decision-making (e.g., Switzerland, Italy) or be implemented on an ad hoc basis at the national and local level (Netherlands, Germany, Hungary). The same goes for the use of deliberative democratic instruments, such as mini-publics, which are increasingly adopted as a non-binding decision-making process in several European countries (Paulis et al 2020). Along the same lines, technocratic governments and ministers are on the rise in European countries, although they tend to be more common in Southern and Eastern Europe (Vittori et al. 2023b). Therefore, not only do democratic innovations coexist with the representative model of democracy, but also it is possible that citizens have more complex ideas of how decisions should be made than pure ideal types. Process preferences, however, are not disconnected from the context in which they occur. In this regard, experimental and observational studies on process preferences have highlighted the importance of instrumentality in the evaluation of a decision-making process. Regardless of the overall support to different decision-making process, when confronted with scenarios where policy gains



are at stake, citizens seem to prioritize policy gains over process fairness (Arnesen 2017; Esaiasson et al. 2012, 2016a, b; Smith et al. 2010; Tilley and Hobolt 2023; Werner 2020; Werner and Marien 2022). This indicates that in assessing the fairness of a policy decision, citizens discern a distinct division between those who benefit and those who don't, with the former generally perceiving the process more favorably and the latter more unfavorably. The gap between winners and losers is nothing new to the study of democratic support: Losers' consent is the backbone of the survival of democratic regimes, where elections are held on a regular basis (Nadeau and Balis 1993; Anderson et al. 2005). Thus, within the democratic framework, the idea of winner–loser consent is crucial: For example, when elections are free and fair, losers' consent increases (Lago and Martinez i Coma 2017). Although the gap between winners and losers has been empirically proven, to what extent losers' consent increases based on the process that leads to a decision is still debated in the literature of process preferences (Werner 2020).

Based on previous findings, thus, there are two important research questions that should be tackled. Firstly, is it that citizens generally prefer decision-making arrangements empowering one specific actor, which is how the literature has studied public opinion so far, or do they actually prefer an integrative model combining experts, referenda, and parliamentary models in line with a recent study from Germany (Goldberg et al. 2020)? To answer to this research question, we take stock of Werner and Marien's framework of analysis (2022), which builds on Warren (2017)'s intuitions: The authors have signaled the importance of a “realistic” problem-based approach, where different decision-making processes are not irreconcilable, but might be complementary. The comparison between a realistic status-quo, a pure representative system in Werner and Marien's work (2022), and other more complex decision-making options where actors are consulted prior to the decision would improve our understanding of how citizens conceive decision-making within the democratic framework.

In particular, differentiating between decision-makers and decision-influencers is of particular importance. For example, while citizens are keen on fellow citizens or independent experts being more involved in decision-making processes, they would rather have these actors informing as opposed to actually taking the decisions (Bertsou 2021; Rojon et al 2019; Bedock and Pilet 2020). The second research question we want to tackle is whether preferences for combinatory processes as opposed to single-actor decision-making process show the very same winners–losers gap dynamic that has been observed for other cases, such as elections (Anderson et al. 2005) or direct democracy (Werner 2020). While we expect this pattern to exist here as well, there are also good reasons to expect that the evaluation of the decision-making process depends on who is involved in the process (Martin et al. 2022).

Hypotheses

In this section, we present four primary hypotheses. Instead of offering separate hypotheses to explain citizens' instrumental reasoning, which will be addressed in the analysis, we outline overarching expectations related to distinct processes. We



have previously shown that support for citizens and experts taking political decisions has been studied in isolation and in opposition to decision-making by elected representatives (Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Bowler et al. 2007; Neblo et al. 2010). Therefore, our first hypothesis deals with preferences for the actors responsible for taking decisions alone. Before detailing our expectations related to mixed processes, we want to test the extent to which citizens are dissatisfied with the representative system, i.e., a system in which the Parliament is the main decision-maker, as opposed to direct democracy and technocracy. Empirically, in parliamentary democracy, the Parliament has the final say on a decision, regardless of whether the proposal comes from the members of the Parliament or the government. We, thus, opt for contrasting a pure representative system, which resembles the most common decision-making process in parliamentary democracies, as in Werner and Marien's work (2022), and other decision-making options.¹ Processes other than parliamentary decision-making, such as direct democracy or technocracy, when analyzed in isolation, enjoy the support of the majority of the population across Europe (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017; Rojon and Rijken 2020). In the last couple of decades, referenda have been used more frequently (Altman 2014), and the attention given by scholars to referenda and the determinants of referendum support have grown accordingly (De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2005; Silagadze and Gherghina 2019; Qvortrup 2016). Recently, Rojon and Rijken (2020) have shown that direct democracy is widely supported across European countries, even though doubts have been cast over the possibility that preferences for direct democracy are stable across time (e.g., Steiner and Landwehr 2022). Support for experts and technocrats is, on average, less evident than for direct democracy. In their seminal study on technocratic attitudes, Bertsou and Pastorella (2017) have shown that in several European countries, the perception of experts taking decisions was viewed negatively, while in others, particularly in Eastern Europe, support was more widespread. Overall, in the majority of the countries (19 out of 27), those who support experts in government constituted more than 50% of respondents. In their nine-country comparison, Chiru and Eynedi (2021) have found that technocracy was supported by less than 50% of the respondents. Experimental evidence provided contrasting findings: Lavezzolo et al. (2021) have shown that in Spain, experts are perceived more favorably than partisans, while Bertsou (2021) in her seven-country analysis has shown that in the decision-making process, experts are no better perceived than elected politicians. Finally, Beiser-McGrath et al. (2021) have shown that favorability toward experts is dependent on instrumental considerations (see also below, for a further discussion). Regardless of the drivers that lead to support for technocracy (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017; Bertsou and Caramani 2020; Chiru and Eynedi 2021), technocracy is more divisive than direct democracy, but still supported by European citizens.

H1 Citizens and experts deciding alone are preferred over the pure representative system, i.e., when the Parliament decides on its own.

¹ This is also what Gherghina and Geissel (2017: 27) use as a point of comparison in their analysis of three different decision-makers (politicians, experts, and citizens): In representative democracy, "political representatives are considered as the main actors of political will-formation and decision-making."



Our first hypothesis postulates that the role of citizens and experts as decision-makers would be more appreciated than the representative system. In general, however, citizens and experts are not just the decision-makers, but they can influence the decisions being taken by elected representatives. For example, experts in a specific field might be consulted by the Parliament during the drafting of a law or specific groups of citizens might be selected to provide non-binding suggestions to decision-makers. The literature on public support for alternative processes does not take into consideration scenarios where non-political actors are consulted prior to decision-making by politicians, even though such scenarios are not uncommon in European democracies. Equally important, consulting actors might be decisive in changing the overall acceptance of the policy-making processes: In a recent experiment, Fishkin et al. (2021) have shown that deliberative democracy in the form of a deliberative poll decreases affective polarization. In an experiment among a representative sample of the Finnish population, Christensen et al. (2020) found that, besides instrumental considerations, the involvement of citizens and experts boosts the perceived legitimacy of policies (on euthanasia). Not only does consultation matter, but according to König (2022: 382), “it is hard to find citizens who, for example, show strong support for only populist or technocratic politics; many of them are also strongly committed to liberal-democratic principles, and there are even citizens who support both populism and technocracy.” Research showing that consulting other actors increases the legitimacy of the decision-making process that focuses primarily on consultation through deliberative mechanisms. In their work on the Belgian case, Bedock and Pilet (2020) demonstrated that consultative DMPs are more appreciated than DMPs replacing local council. DMPs on average are less appreciated as final decision-makers, but still there is some empirical support for the idea that some citizens like consultative bodies composed by their peers in the literature (Rojon and Pilet 2021; Van Dijk et al. 2023). To the contrary, consultative referendums are seldom analyzed (e.g., Folkestad et al. 2019). In a recent contribution, however, Rojon et al. (2019) in a study on US have shown that the difference in the support for advisory and consultative referendums is contextual: People only preferred binding referendums over consultative in US states that had direct democracy, whereas in non-direct-democratic states, there was no preference for either. Lacking empirical analysis on the support for non-binding referendums in Europe, we can exploratively derive from the literature on support for direct democracy that this process might be appreciated by citizens more than the pure representative system. Furthermore, few studies have dealt with experts as consultative actors. As an exception, Bertson (2021) and Beiser-McGrath et al. (2021) have shown that independent experts are more supported than elected representatives in the design (and in the implementation of policies) but not in the final decision-making stage. While acknowledging that, similarly to direct democracy, the results are so far limited, and there are good reasons to exploratively expect that involving experts as consultative actors should improve the evaluation of the process.

H2 Citizens’ consultation hypothesis: Citizens being consulted before Parliament makes the decision is preferred over the pure representative system.



H3 Experts' consultation hypothesis: Experts being consulted before Parliament makes the decision is preferred over the pure representative system.

So far, our core interest was using a quintessential representative democracy scenario as a point of comparison between other decision-makers (deciding along) and between complex scenarios where Parliament is consulted prior to the decision-making. However, as suggested by the literature (König et al. 2022; König 2022), citizens' process preferences might be complex and entail actors other than the Parliament as final decision-makers. For this reason, we exploratively seek to test another hypothesis, based on the relevance of consultation in other scenarios where non-traditional actors are the final decision-makers. Following the logic of the previous hypothesis, if citizens like and give importance to having other citizens or experts being consulted prior to a decision, then they should also like cases when these actors are consulted, but another actor makes the final decision. If we see no differences between pure scenarios where the decision-maker decides without consultations and complex decision-making scenarios (where the decision-maker is consulted prior to the decision-making), then we might assume that consultation does not provide an added value to the legitimacy of the non-traditional processes. If this is not the case, then, as the literature has suggested, citizens do care about mixed process preferences even when non-traditional actors decide and, in particular, care about consultations preceding the decision-making process (Bertsou 2021; Goldberg et al. 2020).

H4 For non-representative decision-making processes, consultation prior to decision-making is preferred over decision-makers deciding alone without consultation.

The survey and the experimental design

In August 2021, we conducted a computer-assisted web interview (CAWI) survey with an experimental component among a sample of 5008 Italian respondents. Our sample is representative of the whole Italian population for age, gender, region of residence,² and education.³ We are using data from Italy as Italian citizens have, over recent years, been confronted to three models of government. They live in a representative democracy with an elected parliament. They have experienced several technocratic cabinets composed of experts as ministers rather than elected politicians (like the recent cabinet of Mario Draghi until 2022). And several (abrogative) referendums have been held over recent years, asking citizens to decide on specific policies. Therefore, we might expect that it would be easier for Italians to evaluate decision-making processes representing different logics of representative democracy, technocracy, and direct democracy.

We first presented respondents with an introductory sentence asking respondents "*to think about a future scenario, which is not related to present politics.*" This

² The areas are North-West Italy, North-East Italy, Center, and South (and Islands).

³ To match our distribution with the Italian population distribution, we applied weights for the four stratification criteria.



premise was necessary, as some of the decision-making processes we analyze are not common or have not been experienced so far (for example, a *propositive* referendum, which is not among the direct democracy tools permitted in Italy). We presented respondents two vignettes with two different policies. We designed the experiment to deal with specific policy issues so that we could control for the effect of instrumentality on citizens' decision-making preferences, as previous studies have shown that citizens tend to care more about the actual decision than about the decision-making process. We selected two positional issues for which we could find evidence of polarization of public opinion among Italian citizens (see the Issue Competition Comparative Project, De Sio and Lachat 2020). As for the soft drugs' legalization, Italians are divided almost evenly: According to CISE (2022), 56% of Italians were in favor of soft drugs' legalization in 2022. As for the former, even though our experiment was slightly different, as we asked Italians about the *introduction* of an inheritance tax, overall Italians were against the *increase* in inheritance tax (67%). In the vignettes, we tell respondents that each policy has been already approved through a (randomized) decision-making process: The rationale behind this choice was due to the survey design. Randomizing the potential outcome would have doubled the potential combinations available. As we detailed below, our experimental design has 12 combinations, which would have become 24 with the randomization of the outcome, thus making the interpretation of the combination much more complicated and, equally important, creating inferential problems due to the further subsampling of the dataset (see below). Then, we ask respondents two questions: one related to the fairness of the decision-making and one related to the content of the proposal. Below, we present the vignette which deals with the inheritance tax issue (the wording of the different vignettes is available in the Supplementary Materials—Vignettes and Descriptive Statistics). Due to space constraints and to ease the interpretation of the results, we report the results of the soft drugs legalization issue in the Appendix (see Appendix C and D).

The randomization

In the vignettes, the randomization is related to the decision-making processes. We opted for including three main decision-making processes which the Italian electorate is accustomed to: the representative democracy process, direct democracy, and technocracy. Every decision-making process is associated with a corresponding actor who is in charge of making the final decision: the Parliament (representative democracy), the (Italian) people (direct democracy), and a technocratic government (technocracy). In each vignette, one and only one actor is responsible for making the final decision on the issue at stake, so the decision-making process is always hierarchical: One actor makes the final decision, while none, one, or two actors are consulted. We did not randomize the order of the consulting actors, as we do not prime respondents about the flow of the decision-making process: In the combinations including three actors, we only state that two actors have been consulted and the final actor has made the decision (see below). Because only two actors are being consulted, we do not expect any order effects.



When only two actors are involved, the vignette looks like this:

Imagine that a new tax on inheritance will be introduced in Italy. A group of experts provided support for the idea in a consultative roundtable. The decision was then taken by a majority of MPs in the Parliament.

In the above case, the Parliament makes the final decision after having consulted a group of experts, who embody the technocratic actor. When three actors are involved, the vignette is as follows:

Imagine that a new tax on inheritance will be introduced in Italy. A group of experts provided support for the idea in a consultative roundtable, and a majority of MPs expressed their agreement with the idea in a parliamentary vote. The decision was then taken by a majority of citizens in a binding referendum.

To make the vignettes plausible, we made some adjustments in the different combinations: Technocracy is operationalized as a technocratic government when this actor has a final say on the issue, while it has been operationalized as a group of experts when the actor plays a consultative role. Respondents received two vignettes in total: one for each issue. Within each vignette, we created 12 randomized levels, based on who makes the final decision and who is consulted prior. In order not to overcomplicate the experiment, we opted for creating a streamlined decision-making process where all actors involved in the process have agreed on the measure to be implemented. Furthermore, when three actors were involved, we did not discriminate between the order: In our vignettes, there is not an actor that offers its advice *first* and the second one *after*. We opted for having the three actors, as our aim was to inquire whether support for the policy changes according to the actor who has a final say and whether it changes according to the actors involved in supporting the decision, via non-binding consultation. All the vignettes are available in the Supplementary Materials—Vignettes and Descriptive Statistics). Table 1 summarizes all combinations present in our experiment.

Dependent Variables

Our dependent variable captures the evaluation of the decision-making process, in a similar way to the study by Christensen et al. (2020). The question is the following: *On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means "extremely unacceptable" and 7 means "extremely acceptable," how do you evaluate this way of making political decisions on the issue?*

Modeling

For each issue, we calculate the difference between the mean scores of each scenario. To evaluate favorability toward the process and not just the effect of switching from one level to another, we use marginal means (Leeper et al. 2020). We report, in the main text, the means and 95% confidence intervals for the different scenarios.



Table 1 All scenarios presented in the survey experiments

Vignette	Randomization levels for each issue	Actors involved	Respondents
1	Final actor (FA): Parliament	1	412
2	FA: Citizens	1	414
3	FA: Technocratic government	1	411
4	FA: Parliament; Consulted via (CV): Citizens	2	425
5	FA: Citizens; CV: Parliament	2	412
6	FA: Parliament; CV: A group of experts	2	412
7	FA: Technocratic government; CV: Parliament	2	413
8	FA: Citizens; CV: A group of experts	2	413
9	FA: Technocratic government; CV: Citizens	2	412
10	FA: Parliament; CV: Citizens and a group of experts	3	415
11	FA: Citizens; CV: Parliament and a group of experts	3	425
12	FA: Technocratic government; CV: Parliament and citizens	3	413

To test H1, we first subset our dataset to show the effect of the pure representative system (Parliament deciding on its own) versus those scenarios in which the final decision is made by citizens or experts alone (that is, without consulting other actors).⁴ To test H2, we contrast pure representative system scenario to a scenario where citizens are consulted prior to the decision made by the Parliament. We do the same for experts (H3).⁵ For our last hypothesis, we compare scenarios where either citizens or experts decide alone to scenarios where citizens and experts are consulted by other actors prior to the decision.⁶

All results are modeled to account for citizens' instrumental considerations. As we previously pointed out, outcome favorability is pivotal in the evaluation of process preferences: In a nutshell, citizens appear to give a crucial importance to the substantive outcome of the decision-making process (whether it favors them or not), while the procedure in itself is less relevant or relevant only to some citizens (Beiser-McGrath et al. 2021; Christensen et al. 2020; Graham and Svulik 2020; Esaiasson et al. 2016b; Werner 2020). To account for outcome favorability, we create an interaction between the decision-making processes and the outcome. We did not use the question about the support for the policy outcome presented in the vignette, as the support for the process might be endogenous to the randomization level. Instead, we opted for asking a question for each of the two policy domains, at the beginning of the questionnaire; to avoid consistency biases, we use very similar, yet not identical domains. As a proxy for the inheritance tax, we use the property tax, and as a proxy

⁴ We compare respondents receiving Scenario 1 with respondents receiving Scenario 2 and Scenario 3.

⁵ To test H2 and H3, we compare respondents receiving Scenario 1 with respondents receiving Scenarios 4 and 6.

⁶ We compare respondents receiving Scenario 2 with respondents receiving Scenarios 5, 8, and 11 (clustered together), and we compare respondents receiving Scenario 3 with respondents receiving Scenarios 7, 9, and 12 clustered together.



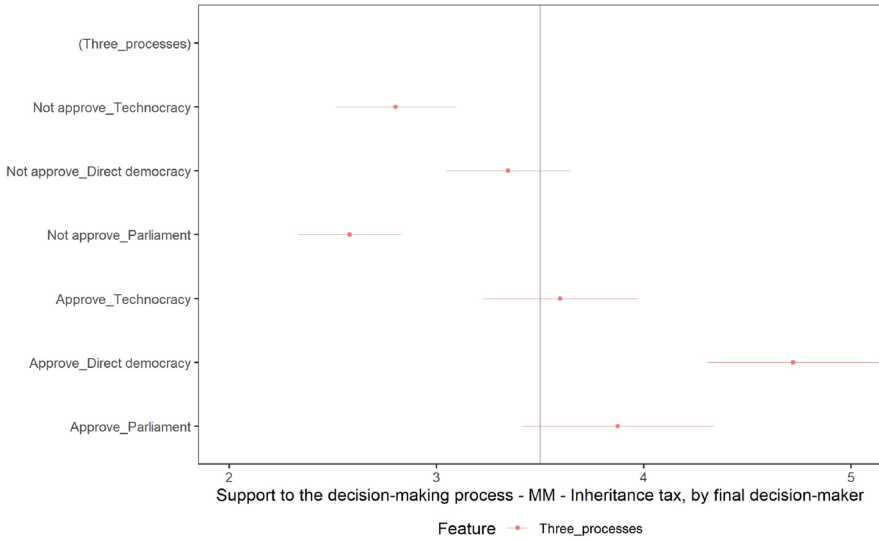


Fig. 1 Support to the decision-making process according to whether respondents approve or disapprove the policy outcome: Parliament making the decision alone (“Parliament”) versus people making the final decision alone (“Direct democracy”) versus a technocratic government making the final decision alone (“Technocracy”)

for soft drugs’ legalization, we use the depenalization of cannabis for recreative use. We ask respondents how much they agree with these two proposals on a scale ranging from 0 (strongly oppose) to 10 (strongly in favor). We then dichotomize the answers, creating a dummy (“Approve” or “Not approve”). To be sure that we capture only citizens who are supportive of the policy proposal, we place the mid-point (value = 5) in the negative pole (“Not approve”), while values higher than 5 are in the positive pole (“Approve”). The descriptive statistics for the dependent variables and interaction variables are presented in the Supplementary Materials—Vignette and Descriptive Statistics. As a robustness check, we also re-run the analyses presented in the main text without the mid-point (value = 5), i.e., neutral respondents (see Appendix B for the inheritance tax issue and D for the soft drugs’ legalization), demonstrating that the same results hold.

Results

We begin by testing the four hypotheses with the experiment on the inheritance tax issue. The results for the soft drugs’ legalization issue can be found in Appendix C and D. For the most part, they are consistent with the inheritance tax issue; when they differ, we report the differences in the discussion below. The coefficients for the estimated models corresponding to each figure in the main text are reported in Appendix A (Table 2 for Fig. 1, Table 3 for Fig. 2, and Table 4 for Fig. 3).



Our first hypothesis postulates that citizens would prefer citizens or experts deciding alone to a situation in which Parliament decides alone.

Figure 1 provides partial support for the H1; in general, we find that citizens prefer processes where the final decisions are taken by citizens via a referendum, but that this preference is even stronger for those who agreed with the content of the policy outcome. Contrary to H1, however, we do not find that citizens prefer experts as decision-makers over politicians. In fact, the winners appear to be even less keen on decision-making by experts than by politicians. Hence, H1 is confirmed for citizens but not for experts. Specifically, we notice that instrumentality matters because those who do not approve the inheritance tax are more critical of the decision-making process. However, we also notice that losers who received the pure direct democracy process do not differ in their support from winners who received the pure representative democracy process. Fig. 1 shows that these two scenarios overlap with the mid-point.⁷ This finding is also confirmed when looking at the soft drugs' legalization issue. First of all, contrary to the inheritance tax issue is that there is a comparatively higher acceptability of all scenarios. Secondly, and in line with inheritance tax issue, there is a clear-cut difference between winners and losers. Furthermore, the analysis of the soft drug legalization issue (Appendix, Figure 8, Table 9) shows that, among losers, the direct democracy scenario is significantly more appreciated than Parliament and experts deciding alone (the value is above the mid-point). However, among winners, we do not see the difference we have noticed between Parliament deciding alone and citizens deciding alone.

The next step in our analysis is to check whether having citizens (H2) or experts (H3) being consulted by Parliament increases the process acceptability.

Besides the importance of instrumental considerations, Fig. 2, in line with Bertou (2021), shows that, among losers, experts functioning as consultative actors do improve the policy acceptability compared to when Parliament decides alone. Among the winners, the confidence intervals between Parliament deciding alone and Parliament deciding alone after experts' consultations overlap at $p < 0.05$ (but not at $p < 0.1$, as shown in Appendix, Fig. 4, and Table 5) meaning that we cannot rule out the possibility that experts' consultations give a boost to the procedural fairness evaluations. We note, however, that Parliament deciding after experts' consultations is significantly higher than the mid-point (3.5), while Parliament deciding alone is not. Equally important, among losers, we note that the score for Parliament deciding after experts' consultation is no different from the two winner scenarios (Parliament deciding alone and Parliament deciding after citizens' consultation), thus implying that instrumental considerations, while present, might be attenuated by the different types of process. Overall, our findings confirm the experts' consultation hypothesis (H3) but not the citizens' consultation hypothesis (H2); consulting citizens prior to a decision by Parliament does not improve the acceptability of the process. The findings are robust also, when looking at the soft drugs legalization issue (Appendix, Figure 9, Table 10).

⁷ In this case, however, when removing the neutral respondent, the difference between losers and winners become more marked; losers receiving the direct democracy scenario are significantly less satisfied with the fairness of decision-making compared to the winners receiving Parliament deciding alone.



In the final hypothesis (H4), we postulate that consultations prior to the decision of non-traditional actors will increase the acceptability of the process compared to scenarios where non-traditional actors make the decision alone. Our results are only partially in line with our expectations; among winners, the difference between citizens deciding alone and citizens deciding after consultation is not significant, while the difference between experts deciding alone and experts deciding after consultation is indeed significant, meaning that Italian citizens seem to be distrustful of technocratic governments deciding alone, but also more confident if other actors are consulted prior to experts' decision. Among losers, there is not a clear-cut distinction between non-traditional actors deciding alone or after consultations, thus further corroborating the idea that is behind process evaluation, there exists a strong instrumental component. However, as we already noted, citizens deciding alone among the losers does not differ from experts deciding alone among the winners. When looking at the soft drugs legalization issue (Appendix, Figure 10, Table 11), we notice that, in line with the inheritance tax issue, instrumentality still matters and among winners, the difference between citizens deciding alone and citizens deciding after consultation is not significant. However, we also notice that the means for experts deciding and experts deciding after consultation do not differ significantly. Overall, we cannot confirm our H4. Based on our previous findings, we can conclude that consultation makes a (partial) impact when traditional actors (i.e., Parliament) are consulted, while it has limited impact when non-traditional actors consult other traditional and non-traditional actors.

Discussion

The goal of this study is to examine what type of decision-making process boosts the perceived acceptability of policy decisions among citizens. The topic has been addressed before, but mostly, examining rather simple scenarios in which one non-political actor is contrasted to the traditional picture of representative institutions taking policy decisions. Complex processes that associate different actors and in different roles are rarely examined in-depth (König 2022).

For this reason, we design a survey experiment that assigned randomly the respondents to one of 12 different decision-making processes that could identify citizens (via referendums), elected politicians (via Parliament), or experts (via a technocratic government) in a decision-making or in a consultative capacity. Those processes are embedded into two contemporary policy debates in Italy: the introduction of an inheritance tax and the legalization of soft drugs.

Our findings indicate that the nature of the process (who decides and who is consulted) may have an impact on how citizens judge a new policy decision, but this impact should not be overestimated. In line with earlier studies, we confirm that what matters the most is how the respondents evaluate the content of the policy decision (the so-called instrumentality): Citizens who agree with the content of the decision are, in general, more positive about the decision-making process than those who disagree. Second, among those who disagree with the content of the policy, the type of decision-making process has less of an impact on respondents' evaluations.



Everything else being equal, losers tend to be less favorable toward decision-making process. However, we do find that there are cases in which winners and losers receiving different decision-making processes do score similarly on process acceptability. In particular, compared to a situation where Parliament decides alone, citizens do not seem less satisfied if they lose on the policy side, as long as the decision was taken by fellow citizens or was informed by independent experts.

Nevertheless, it is among those who agree with the content of the new policy that we observe the most relevant impact of how the decision-making process is organized. And we observe especially two main effects. First, introducing referendums as decision-making instrument, and therefore giving citizens the final word (without consulting other actors) in the new policy, has a positive impact. Italians seem to prefer direct democracy over other forms of decision-making, including those where citizens listen to other actors prior to the decision. Second, we partially confirm, in line with previous studies, that involving experts as consultative actors may also boost perceived process acceptability, while giving experts the final say (alone) does not boost perceived process fairness among respondents. Our study has also disconfirmed some of our expectations. First, even if trust in elected politicians is very low in Italy, it is not true that citizens would evaluate more positively any alternative to decision-making by elected politicians. Only a few alternative decision-making processes are rated significantly more positively (among winners) than leaving policy decision to Parliament. Equally important, when non-traditional decision-making processes are at stake, play a similar role compared to when Parliament consults other actors: In both scenarios, we have shown that consultation matters depending on *who* is consulted. Consultation is, in most of the cases, contextual and depends on the actors involved and the structure of the decision-making; adding a layer of complexity in the decision-making process does not automatically improve the quality of the process in the eyes of the citizens. This result speaks directly to the recent findings in the literature (Ferrin and Kriesi 2016; König 2022), which have highlighted the importance of mixed preferences.

Overall, those findings shed new light on the growing literature on citizens' process preferences. Our study indicates that complex decision-making process might matter and this complexity should be taken into account both in future academic studies as well as in concrete political debates about institutional reforms, yet without exaggerating its importance, since the policy outcome is what matters the most. Citizens are primarily instrumental in their evaluations of political processes (Christensen et al. 2020; Esaisson et al. 2016b; Werner 2020). Reforming institutions and procedures might have an effect, but it would be mainly (yet, not entirely) limited to those who have already obtained the decision they wanted. Most probably, losers are more concerned with the outcome than they are with the process. This has important implications, because if an institution or actor making a decision is incapable of delivering, changing the actors involved in the decision-making might make little difference for them.



Our findings also underline the need for other similar studies, in more countries, about complex decision-making processes. Italy is a specific case where citizens are familiar with representative democracy, technocracy, and direct democracy. It would be crucial to re-test our hypotheses in other national contexts and potentially for different policies, because we observed some differences between the two policies under analysis. We might expect to find significant variations across countries, especially among countries that have had recent contentious experiences with direct democracy (e.g., UK, The Netherlands, Spain) or technocracy (e.g., Bulgaria, Greece). Our experiment also has some limitations that should be accounted for when evaluating preferences for decision-making process. Our scenarios, in which actors make decisions independently, do not explicitly specify that the final actor did not consult with other actors before reaching the decision. We acknowledge this limitation, but we also believe that priming respondents explicitly with a statement that clearly indicates that other actors were not consulted would have additional drawbacks. This could create the impression that the final actor deliberately refused to consult with other actors or, worse, disregarded the decisions made by the consulted actors. In this regard, we exclude the possibility of compromise between the actors involved in the decision-making, something that in real-case scenarios can occur, especially within Parliament and when decisions are informed by other actors prior to a decision. For instance, citizens may perceive a decision made solely by a technocratic government more negatively, as this actor theoretically lacks the political legitimacy inherent in decisions made by either the Parliament or the citizens. Another limitation of our setting is that the experiment was designed not to have disagreement among actors; having actors pulling in different directions might affect (even significantly) the way citizens evaluate the overall process. In particular, further research should look at the consequences of ignoring what consulted actors have suggested or, in a more radical fashion, a complete reversal of the decision suggested by the consulted actor(s). Moreover, future research should also look at the specific content of the policies under analysis. In our experimental setting, we propose two general statements about two different policies, but we did not include treatments related, for example, to the levels of taxation of the inheritance tax, nor did we specify the implications of the soft drug legalization's policy. This further layer of complexity might be helpful to meaningfully distinguish between winners and losers of the policy.

Appendix A

Inheritance tax issue. Estimated means for Figs. 1, 2, and 3; replication of Fig. 2 with 90% confidence intervals (Fig. 4, Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5).

Appendix B

Inheritance tax issue. Replication of Figs. 1, 2, and 3 in the main text without neutral response (for the inheritance tax issue) (Figs. 5, 6, and 7, Tables 6, 7 and 8).



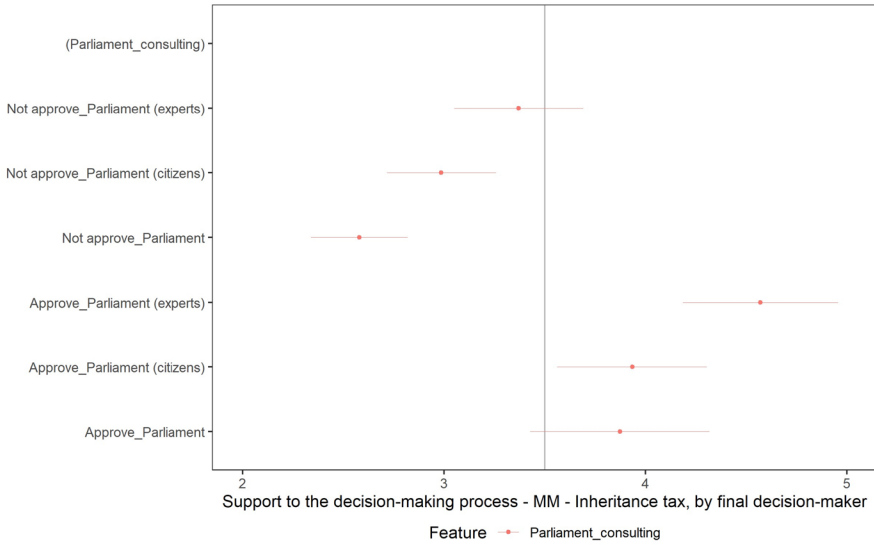


Fig. 2 Support to the decision-making process according to whether respondents approve or disapprove the policy outcome: Parliament making the decision alone (“Parliament”) versus the scenario in which the Parliament makes the decision after consulting citizens versus scenarios in which the Parliament makes the decision after consulting experts

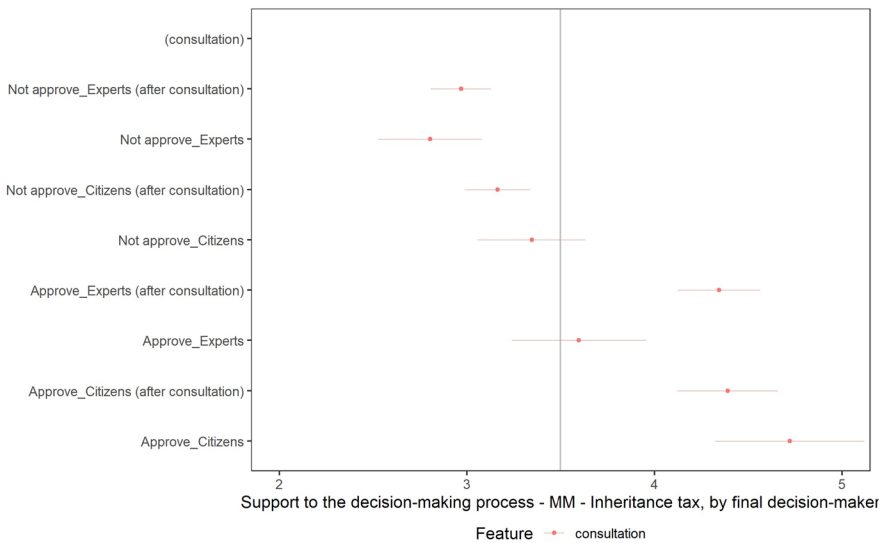


Fig. 3 Support to the decision-making process according to whether respondents approve or disapprove the policy outcome: Citizens making the decision alone (“Parliament”) versus scenarios in which the citizens make the decision after consulting other actors versus scenarios in which the experts make the decision alone versus scenarios in which the experts make the decision after consulting other actors



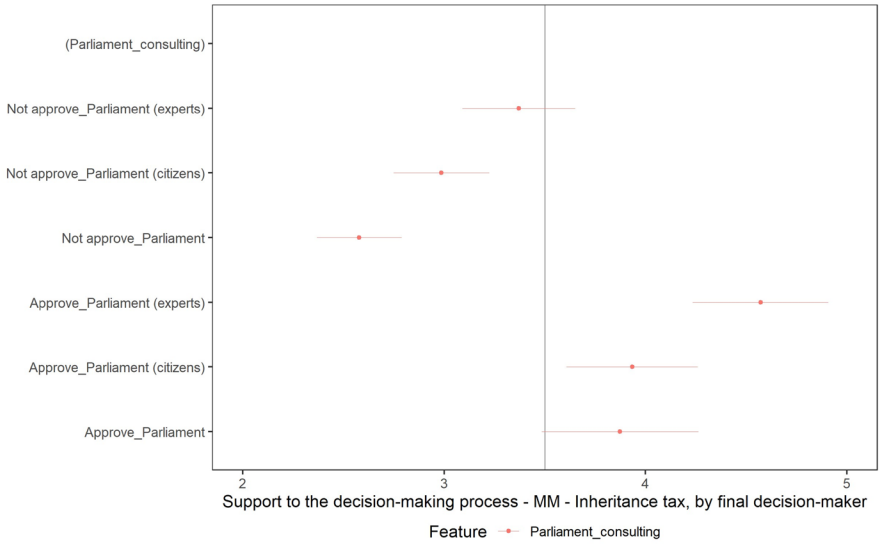


Fig. 4 Support to the decision-making process according to whether respondents approve or disapprove the policy outcome: Parliament making the decision alone (“Parliament”) versus the scenario in which the Parliament makes the decision after consulting citizens versus scenarios in which the Parliament makes the decision after consulting experts. Alpha=0.1, instead of 0.05

Table 2 Estimated means for Fig. 1

Level	Estimate	SE	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	Lower	Upper
Approve_Parliament	3.872935	0.237118	16.33336	0.000	3.426965	4.318905
Approve_Direct democracy	4.721319	0.210582	22.42035	0.000	4.325258	5.11738
Approve_Technocracy	3.597718	0.190318	18.90372	0.000	3.239769	3.955667
Not approve_Parliament	2.579772	0.127629	20.21312	0.000	2.339729	2.819815
Not approve_Direct democracy	3.344687	0.152799	21.88946	0.000	3.057304	3.632071
Not approve_Technocracy	2.803055	0.146398	19.14683	0.000	2.527711	3.078399

Table 3 Estimated means for Fig. 2

Level	Estimate	SE	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	Lower	Upper
Approve_Parliament	3.872935	0.237047	16.33825	0.000	3.427098	4.318772
Approve_Parliament (citizens)	3.933718	0.197648	19.90268	0.000	3.561984	4.305453
Approve_Parliament (experts)	4.570619	0.205071	22.28796	0.000	4.184922	4.956315
Not approve_Parliament	2.579772	0.12759	20.21918	0.000	2.339801	2.819743
Not approve_Parliament (citizens)	2.98729	0.144032	20.74042	0.000	2.716395	3.258185
Not approve_Parliament (experts)	3.371155	0.170236	19.80279	0.000	3.050976	3.691335



Table 4 Estimated means for Fig. 3

Level	Estimate	SE	z	p	Lower	Upper
Approve_Citizens	4.721319	0.210519	22.42707	0.000	4.325376	5.117261
Approve_Citizens (after consultation)	4.390635	0.141922	30.93689	0.000	4.123708	4.657561
Approve_Experts	3.597718	0.190261	18.90939	0.000	3.239876	3.955556
Approve_Experts (after consultation)	4.343335	0.116249	37.36223	0.000	4.124694	4.561976
Not approve_Citizens	3.344687	0.152753	21.89602	0.000	3.05739	3.631984
Not approve_Citizens (after consultation)	3.162941	0.09324	33.92242	0.000	2.987575	3.338307
Not approve_Experts	2.803055	0.146354	19.15257	0.000	2.527794	3.078317
Not approve_Experts (after consultation)	2.96814	0.085648	34.65519	0.000	2.807054	3.129226

Table 5 Estimated means for Fig. 4

Level	Estimate	SE	z	p	Lower	Upper
Approve_Parliament	3.872935	0.237047	16.33825	0.000	3.483027	4.262843
Approve_Parliament (citizens)	3.933718	0.197648	19.90268	0.000	3.608617	4.25882
Approve_Parliament (experts)	4.570619	0.205071	22.28796	0.000	4.273307	4.907931
Not approve_Parliament	2.579772	0.12759	20.21918	0.000	2.369904	2.789639
Not approve_Parliament (citizens)	2.98729	0.144032	20.74042	0.000	2.750378	3.224202
Not approve_Parliament (experts)	3.371155	0.170236	19.80279	0.000	3.091141	3.651169

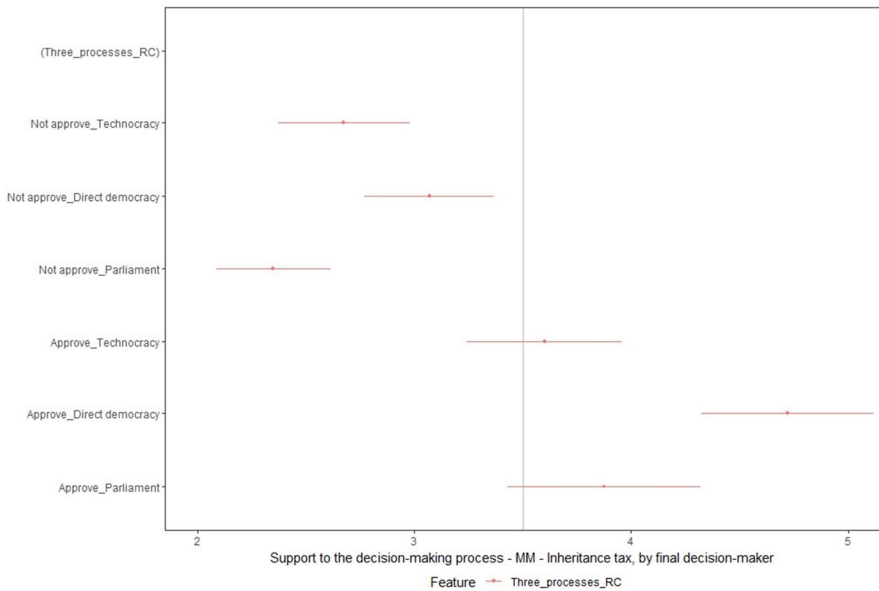


Fig. 5 Replication of Fig. 1, without neutral responses for the policy issue (inheritance tax)



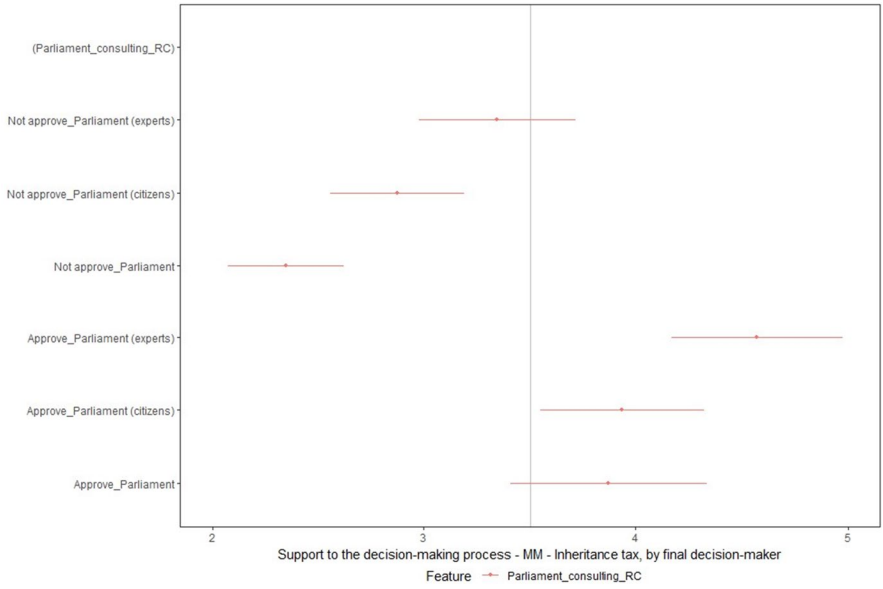


Fig. 6 Replication of Fig. 2, without neutral responses for the policy issue (inheritance tax)

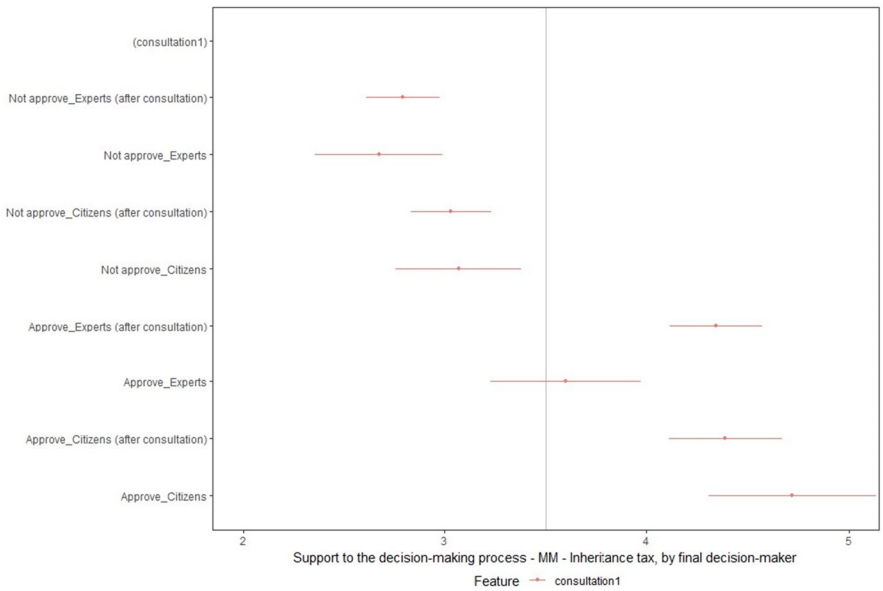


Fig. 7 Replication of Fig. 3, without neutral responses for the policy issue (inheritance tax)



Table 6 Replication of Fig. 1 (see also Table 2)

Level	Estimate	SE	z	p	Lower	Upper
Approve_Parliament	3.872935	0.237118	16.33336	0.000	3.426965	4.318905
Approve_Direct democracy	4.721319	0.210582	22.42035	0.000	4.325258	5.11738
Approve_Technocracy	3.597718	0.190318	18.90372	0.000	3.239769	3.955667
Not approve_Parliament	2.349892	0.140117	16.77092	0.000	2.086361	2.613424
Not approve_Direct democracy	3.068267	0.158364	19.37472	0.000	2.770416	3.366118
Not approve_Technocracy	2.675304	0.160958	16.62111	0.000	2.372575	2.978033

Table 7 Replication of Fig. 2 (see also Table 3)

Level	Estimate	SE	z	p	Lower	Upper
Approve_Parliament	3.872935	0.237047	16.33825	0.000	3.408331	4.337539
Approve_Parliament (citizens)	3.933718	0.197648	19.90268	0.000	3.546336	4.321101
Approve_Parliament (experts)	4.570619	0.205071	22.28796	0.000	4.168687	4.972551
Not approve_Parliament	2.349892	0.140075	16.77595	0.000	2.07535	2.624435
Not approve_Parliament (citizens)	2.873403	0.160993	17.84805	0.000	2.557864	3.188943
Not approve_Parliament (experts)	3.345275	0.187669	17.82538	0.000	2.97745	3.7131

Appendix C

Soft drug legalization issue. Replication of Figs. 1, 2, and 3 with estimated means reported in the corresponding tables (Tables 9, 10 and 11).

Appendix D

Soft drug legalization issue. Replication of the figures in Appendix C without neutral response (for the soft drugs legalization issue) (Tables 12, 13 and 14).

Table 8 Replication of Fig. 3 (see also Table 4)

Level	Estimate	SE	z	p	Lower	Upper
Approve_Citizens	4.721319	0.210519	22.42707	0.000	4.30871	5.133928
Approve_Citizens (after consultation)	4.390635	0.141922	30.93689	0.000	4.112472	4.668797
Approve_Experts	3.597718	0.190261	18.90939	0.000	3.224813	3.970623
Approve_Experts (after consultation)	4.343335	0.116249	37.36223	0.000	4.115491	4.57118
Not approve_Citizens	3.068267	0.158317	19.38052	0.000	2.757971	3.378563
Not approve_Citizens (after consultation)	3.030722	0.101572	29.83823	0.000	2.831645	3.229799
Not approve_Experts	2.675304	0.16091	16.62609	0.000	2.359926	2.990682
Not approve_Experts (after consultation)	2.793839	0.092225	30.29371	0.000	2.613081	2.974597



Table 9 Estimated means for Fig. 8

Level	Estimate	SE	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	Lower	Upper
Approve_Parliament	4.764127	0.190527	25.00502	0.000	4.405785	5.122469
Approve_Direct democracy	5.107904	0.16107	31.71231	0.000	4.804964	5.410844
Approve_Technocracy	4.819013	0.171128	28.16024	0.000	4.497156	5.14087
Not approve_Parliament	2.955317	0.199545	14.81028	0.000	2.580014	3.33062
Not approve_Direct democracy	3.881635	0.204183	19.01054	0.000	3.507608	4.265662
Not approve_Technocracy	2.75516	0.1696	16.24503	0.000	2.436177	3.074142

Table 10 Estimated means for Fig. 9

Level	Estimate	SE	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	Lower	Upper
Approve_Parliament	4.764127	0.190469	25.01259	0.000	4.390814	5.13744
Approve_Parliament (citizens)	4.879008	0.171221	28.4954	0.000	4.543421	5.214595
Approve_Parliament (experts)	5.520723	0.143763	38.40159	0.000	5.238953	5.802493
Not approve_Parliament	2.955317	0.199485	14.81476	0.000	2.564335	3.3463
Not approve_Parliament (citizens)	3.675375	0.173632	21.16763	0.000	3.335063	4.015687
Not approve_Parliament (experts)	3.816039	0.222233	17.17131	0.000	3.380469	4.251608

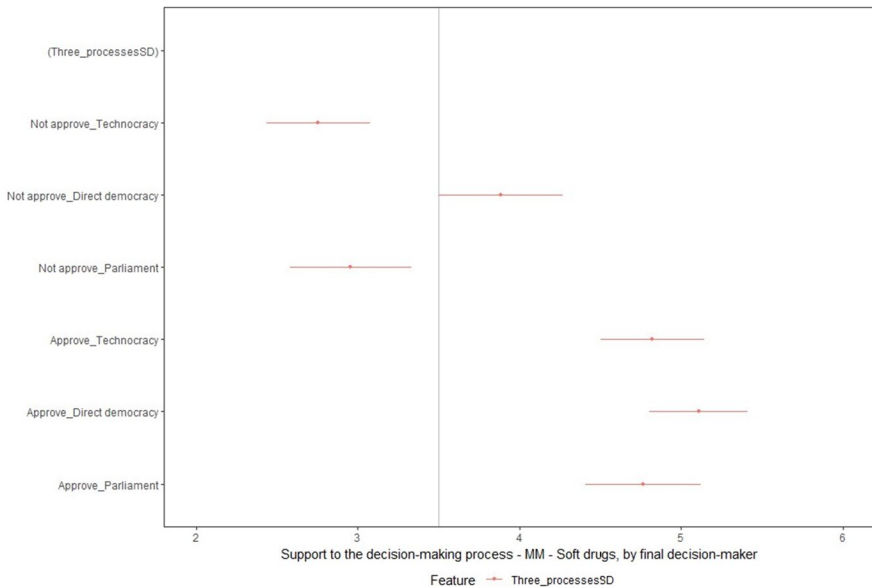


Fig. 8 Soft drug legalization issue. Support to the decision-making process according to whether respondents approve or disapprove the policy outcome: Parliament making the decision alone (“Parliament”) versus people making the final decision alone (“Direct democracy”) versus a technocratic government making the final decision alone (“Technocracy”)



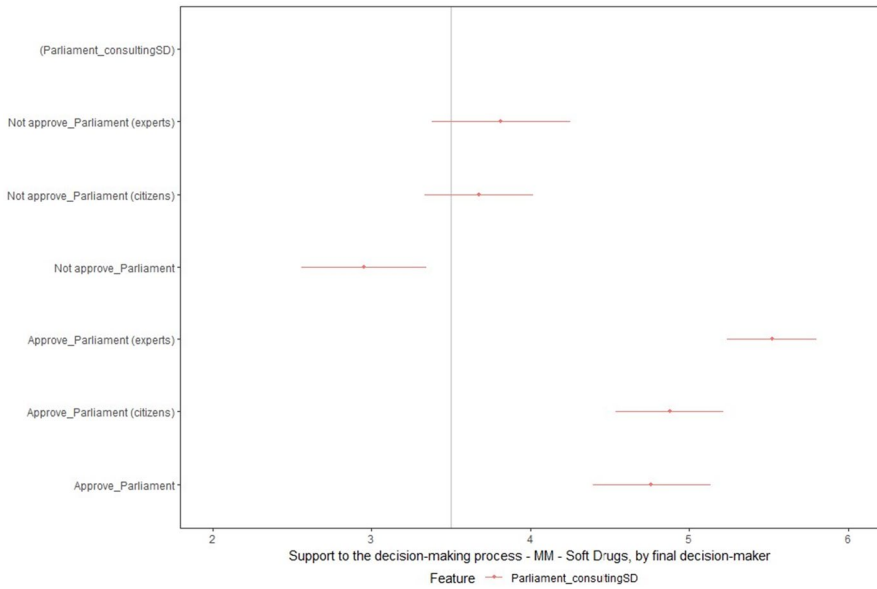


Fig. 9 Soft drug legalization issue. Support to the decision-making process according to whether respondents approve or disapprove the policy outcome: Parliament making the decision alone (“Parliament”) versus the scenario in which the Parliament makes the decision after consulting citizens versus scenarios in which the Parliament makes the decision after consulting experts



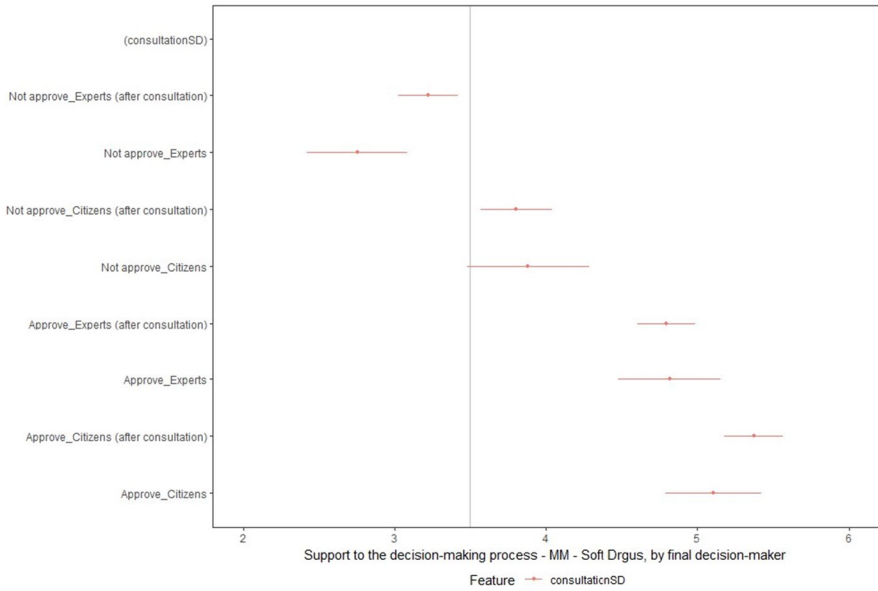


Fig. 10 Soft drug legalization issue. Support to the decision-making process according to whether respondents approve or disapprove the policy outcome: Citizens making the decision alone (“Parliament”) versus scenarios in which the citizens make the decision after consulting other actors versus scenarios in which the experts make the decision alone versus scenarios in which the experts make the decision after consulting other actors

Table 11 Estimated means for Fig. 10

Level	Estimate	SE	z	p	Lower	Upper
Approve_Citizens	5.107904	0.161021	31.7219	0.000	4.792308	5.4235
Approve_Citizens (after consultation)	5.372935	0.097425	55.14953	0.000	5.181985	5.563884
Approve_Experts	4.819013	0.171076	28.16876	0.000	4.483709	5.154317
Approve_Experts (after consultation)	4.798305	0.09764	49.14295	0.000	4.606935	4.989676
Not approve_Citizens	3.881635	0.204122	19.01629	0.000	3.481564	4.281706
Not approve_Citizens (after consultation)	3.803707	0.119438	31.84673	0.000	3.569613	4.037801
Not approve_Experts	2.75516	0.169549	16.24994	0.000	2.42285	3.087469
Not approve_Experts (after consultation)	3.223189	0.099299	32.45944	0.000	3.028566	3.417811



Table 12 Estimated means for Fig. 11

Level	Estimate	SE	z	p	Lower	Upper
Approve_Parliament	4.764127	0.190527	25.00502	0.000	4.405785	5.122469
Approve_Direct democracy	5.107904	0.16107	31.71231	0.000	4.804964	5.410844
Approve_Technocracy	4.819013	0.171128	28.16024	0.000	4.497156	5.14087
Not approve_Parliament	2.793805	0.240569	11.61332	0.000	2.341345	3.246266
Not approve_Direct democracy	3.58768	0.237374	15.11402	0.000	3.141228	4.034132
Not approve_Technocracy	2.420589	0.196133	12.34155	0.000	2.051702	2.789475



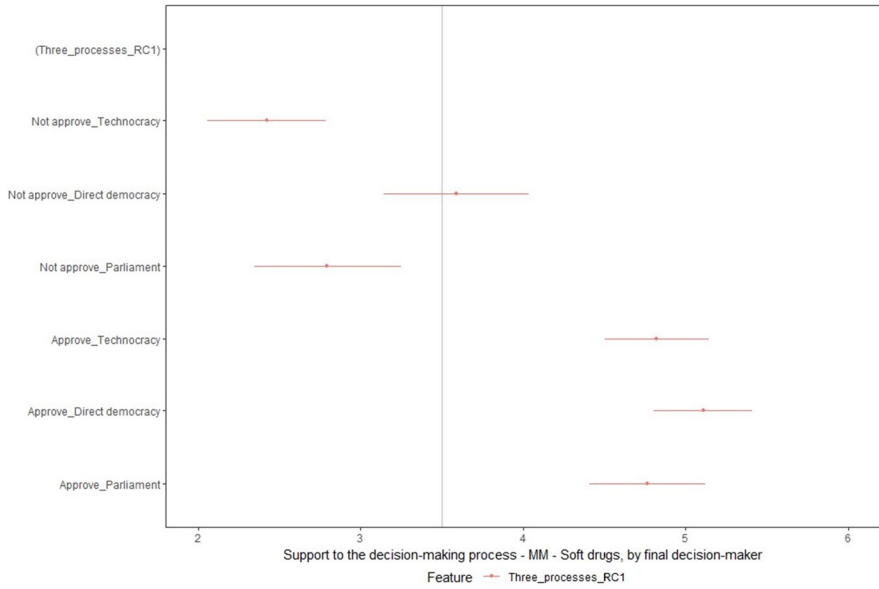


Fig. 11 Soft drug legalization issue, replication without neutral responses. Support to the decision-making process according to whether respondents approve or disapprove the policy outcome: Parliament making the decision alone (“Parliament”) versus people making the final decision alone (“Direct democracy”) versus a technocratic government making the final decision alone (“Technocracy”)



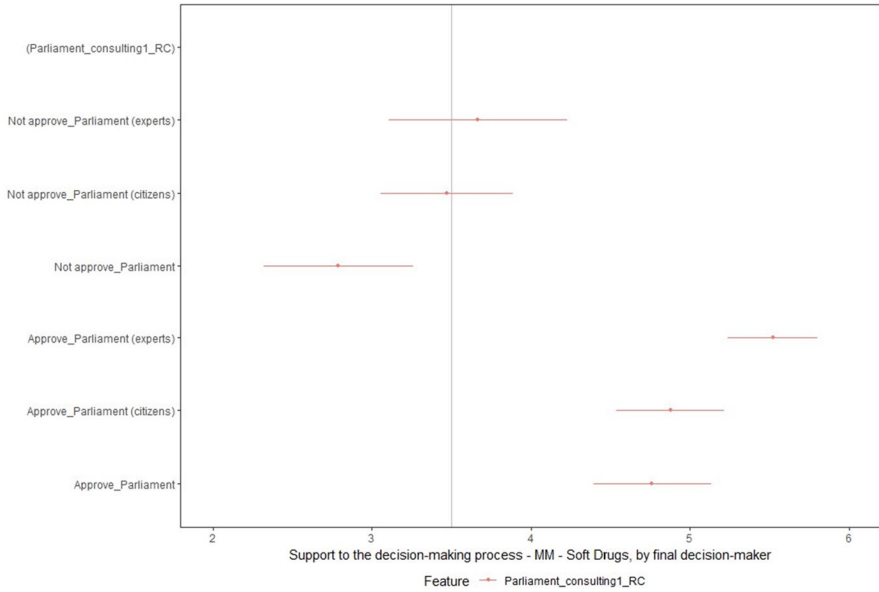


Fig. 12 Soft drug legalization issue, replication without neutral responses. Support to the decision-making process according to whether respondents approve or disapprove the policy outcome: Parliament making the decision alone (“Parliament”) versus the scenario in which the Parliament makes the decision after consulting citizens versus scenarios in which the Parliament makes the decision after consulting experts



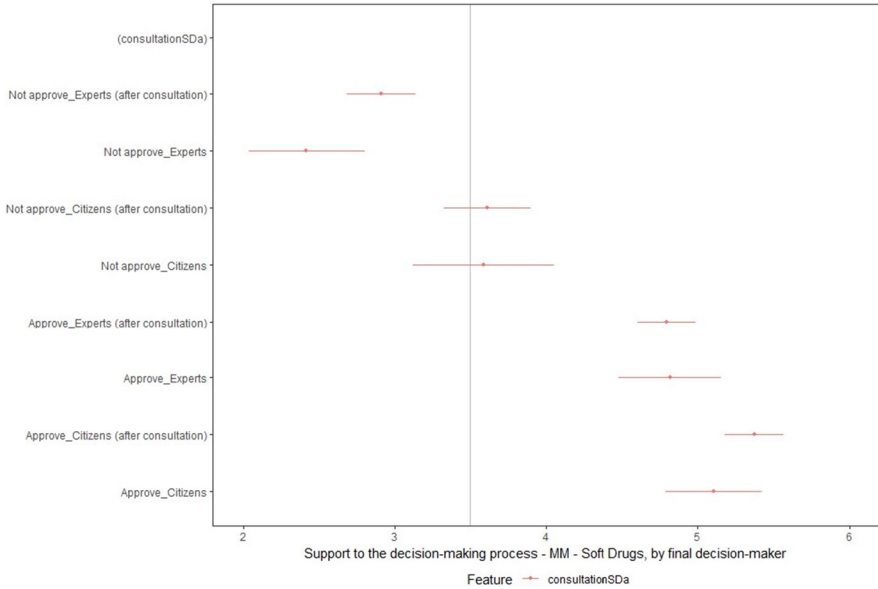


Fig. 13 Soft drug legalization issue, replication without neutral responses. Support to the decision-making process according to whether respondents approve or disapprove the policy outcome: Citizens making the decision alone (“Parliament”) versus scenarios in which the citizens make the decision after consulting other actors versus scenarios in which the experts make the decision alone versus scenarios in which the experts make the decision after consulting other actors

Table 13 Estimated means for Fig. 12

Level	Estimate	SE	z	p	Lower	Upper
Approve_Parliament	4.764127	0.190469	25.01259	0.000	4.390814	5.13744
Approve_Parliament (citizens)	4.879008	0.171221	28.4954	0.000	4.543421	5.214595
Approve_Parliament (experts)	5.520723	0.143763	38.40159	0.000	5.238953	5.802493
Not approve_Parliament	2.955317	0.199485	14.81476	0.000	2.564335	3.3463
Not approve_Parliament (citizens)	3.675375	0.173632	21.16763	0.000	3.335063	4.015687
Not approve_Parliament (experts)	3.816039	0.222233	17.17131	0.000	3.380469	4.251608



Table 14 Estimated means for Fig. 13

Level	Estimate	SE	z	p	Lower	Upper
Approve_Citizens	5.107904	0.161021	31.7219	0.000	4.792308	5.4235
Approve_Citizens (after consultation)	5.372935	0.097425	55.14953	0.000	5.181985	5.563884
Approve_Experts	4.819013	0.171076	28.16876	0.000	4.483709	5.154317
Approve_Experts (after consultation)	4.798305	0.09764	49.14295	0.000	4.606935	4.989676
Not approve_Citizens	3.58768	0.237303	15.11859	0.000	3.122576	4.052784
Not approve_Citizens (after consultation)	3.610645	0.145254	24.85747	0.000	3.325953	3.895337
Not approve_Experts	2.420589	0.196074	12.34528	0.000	2.036291	2.804887
Not approve_Experts (after consultation)	2.913576	0.116804	24.94414	0.000	2.684644	3.142508

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-024-00379-3>.

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