

Bring in the Experts? Citizen Preferences for Independent Experts in Political Decision-Making Processes

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Research Note[†]

Abstract

Do citizens welcome the involvement of independent experts in politics? Theoretical and empirical work so far provides conflicting answers to this question. On the one hand citizens may demand expert involvement in political decision-making processes in order to ensure efficient and effective governance solutions. On the other hand, citizens can be distrustful of experts and reject the unaccountable and non-transparent nature of expert-based governance. This study investigates citizen preferences for the involvement of experts in different stages of political processes and across hard and easy political issues. Results show that, in the absence of explicit output information, respondents prefer independent experts over national elected representatives in the policy design and implementation stages across political issues. For the crucial stage of decision-making, respondents show no differences in their evaluation of processes that delegate decisions to experts or to elected representatives, with the exception of environmental policy, where expert decision-making is preferred. These findings are relevant for ongoing discussions on how to incorporate a role for independent experts in political decision-making in a way that citizens find legitimate, and on how to address increased citizen dissatisfaction with the representative democratic functions performed by political parties, governments and politicians.

Keywords *experts, process preference, technocratic governance, technocracy, stealth democracy*

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Introduction

The question regarding the role of technocrats and independent experts in political systems has firmly entered the public debate in many democracies around the world. The prominence of technocratic executive appointments at the height of the European financial crisis in Italy and Greece, or as a response to domestic crises in the case of Romania, gave flesh and bones to the theoretical tension between technocracy and democracy and brought it at the forefront of political attention (Pastorella 2015). In addition, the past decade has seen health and environmental crises playing out at the world stage, intensifying calls for a larger role for independent experts in guiding political decision-making (Van der Linden et al 2017). Survey evidence show that large numbers of citizens in democracies around the world – in most cases a majority – would welcome a greater role of experts in their political systems as opposed to elected representatives (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017).¹ At the same time however, public mistrust towards experts and the denigration of expertise by populist leaders appears to be on the rise across established and newer democracies (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

This research note contributes to the ongoing discussion regarding the role of independent experts in political decision-making. It suggests that citizens might welcome a greater role for experts in political processes depending on the task and issue at hand. As a first step, the paper pits elected representative actors against unelected experts for various political roles, including the design of a policy, the final decision, the implementation and oversight. Secondly, drawing on the classical distinction between hard and easy issues (Carmines and Stimson 1980), it investigates whether preferences for more expert governance depend upon issue complexity.

¹Wave 6 of the World Values Survey (2010–14) shows that more than 50% of citizens across Western democracies are favourable to being governed by independent experts and not elected politicians. The survey question reads: “would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country? Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country.”

Public Preferences for Independent Experts

Democratic governments around the world are forced to deal with an ever-increasing need for technocratic expertise to govern effectively, while at the same time remaining committed to and representative of the citizens who voted for them (Mair 2009). Democratic theory and empirical political science strive to determine what constitutes a legitimate use of political power and what renders the function of a political system legitimate in the eyes of its citizens, so that they will give their support and accept its decisions (Warren 2017; Mansbridge 2012). So far, weight has mainly been thrown behind the idea of democracy as “self-governance” and of legitimate power as that which is sanctioned by the people (Warren 2017; Williams 1998). At the same time however, another source of legitimacy and source of system stability is found in the quality of political outputs and the epistemological robustness of political decisions (Estlund 2009; Scharpf 1999; Schumpeter, 1942). In this sense democracy must reflect solutions to collective action problems and requires that government outputs satisfy the true needs of a community (Manin, 1997). In line with Mansbridge (2012), if one views democracy as a theory of collective action, then the importance of getting things done is an integral part of democracy.

This approach requires a balancing act between technocratic and democratic power (Schudson 2006; Radaelli 1999). Elected representatives and party-governments derive their legitimacy from the people who select them and remain accountable to them throughout their governing function. Independent experts are often perceived as challenging this legitimacy, as well as the transparent, accountable chain of delegation. *Technocratic legitimacy* is derived from scientific knowledge, sector expertise and unattached interests of its members, which allow experts to govern independently, efficiently and effectively (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020). Yet technocratic theory and evidence-based public policy can tell us little

about what citizens perceive as legitimate and are likely to support (Widmer 2009).

When it comes to citizen preferences, the dilemmas regarding the role of independent experts in political decision-making processes persist. People may welcome and trust independent technocratic expertise in politics because they expect it to promote efficient governance with the production of better outcomes for the entire society. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (2002) seminal work on stealth democratic attitudes showed that American citizens often prefer to passively observe political decisions made by impartial experts rather than be actively involved in politics. Other studies have shown that relatively large numbers of citizens in established democracies share such views (Coffé and Michaels 2014; Font et al 2015). Technocratic citizen attitudes that capture preferences for delegating powers to unelected independent experts over elected representatives are also strong among European democracies (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017). Yet, at the same time, people may also oppose the involvement of independent experts in politics based on principles of transparency and accountability, since an increased role of such actors in political processes reduces transparency and lengthens - or even breaks - the accountability chain (Webb 2013). Process scholars argue that evaluations of processes reflecting input and throughput legitimacy concerns are important for citizen support of governance arrangements and legitimacy perceptions (Strebel et al 2018; Marien and Werner 2019; Doherty and Wolak 2012).

We use the term governance to refer to a broad range of political processes through which public policies are shaped, decided and enacted. The aim of governance, and the actors involved in it, is the production of policies that solve public problems of collective action. Specifically, democratic governance refers to such processes legitimized in the eyes of citizens due to their adherence to democratic norms. Most empirical research on process and outcome preferences shows that outcome effects are always stronger in predicting perceptions of legitimacy, willingness to agree with and trust the decision taken, rather than process

characteristics (Strebel et al 2018, Esaiasson et al 2016). Outputs are therefore crucial and can even colour citizens’ evaluations of process legitimacy (Esaiasson et al 2019; Werner et al. 2019). We therefore focus on citizen preferences for the set-up of governance, without any explicit mention of the decision taken and the outcomes of these processes. Removing the explicitly instrumental element for supporting a specific political process should redirect respondents’ attention to the actors with the power of shaping each stage of the process.²

The main area of interest is public preference for greater political power for independent experts compared to elected representatives at the national level. While elected representatives can be specified easily, the label of “independent experts” may signify different groups to different people. In some cases independent bureaucracies staffed with experts in their field may be closer to a citizen’s idea of independent expertise, while in other cases it can be closer to scientific institutions or agencies. We return to this debate in the conclusion of this research note. For the purposes of this study the two aspects of “independence” and “expertise” are the crucial signifiers. They are used to describe actors that are not elected by the people and who are expected to act responsibly, not responsive to some majority or principal, as well as actors that possess superior knowledge, skill and experience in dealing with the political question at hand.

By focusing on the set-up of a political process and separating the design of a policy from the decision-making stage and the responsibility for implementation and oversight, it is possible to specify distinct roles for independent experts and see which of those stages citizens would rather delegate to them than to their elected representatives. Unelected experts are often welcomed as an important influence on policy-making. For many people, their support for expert involvement does not necessarily come at the expense of input and throughput legitimacy (Dommett and Temple 2019; Ganuza et al 2017). Although the act of framing,

²Nevertheless, respondents may make their own assumptions regarding the outcomes of processes from the actors involved.

defining and designing a policy solution entails some political power, the public policy - especially with its emphasis on evidence-based criteria for policy-making - has provided the basis for public acceptance of such power for unaccountable and independent expertise (Schudson 2006; Tortola 2020). The first hypothesis is therefore as follows:

H1: Citizens will prefer delegating the policy design and implementation stages of political processes to independent experts over elected representatives.

Turning to the crucial democratic moment of political decision-making, delegating such a task to independent experts would be a direct challenge to the democratic idea of self-governance and accountable representative governance. The second hypothesis is thus:

H2: Citizens will prefer decision-making by elected representatives over independent experts.

Finally, considering the arguments put forward in the evidence-based policy and technocracy literatures, we assume that demands for technocratic expertise are more pronounced in technically complex issues. Scientific knowledge and sector expertise is considered to be the backbone of successful policy that yields good governance outcomes. Similarly, technocratic arguments rest on the assumption that citizens and elected professional politicians do not have the capacity to respond to current governance problems in a highly complex and inter-connected world (Caramani 2017). It is therefore important to also distinguish between policy areas that vary in their level of technical complexity and their level of global reach, as citizens may be more likely to prefer expert governance in some political areas but not in others. We use the distinction between “hard issues”, issues that are technically complex and require strategic planning, and “easy issues”, political issues that are typically symbolic and rooted in cultural or moral values (Carmines and Stimson 1980). The political issues

chosen are: (i) Carbon Emissions and Climate Change, (ii) Civil Partnership and Same-sex Marriage, (iii) Immigration and Refugee Settlement, (iv) Security and Counter-terrorism and (v) Taxation, Wages and Pensions. The policy areas of the environment and security represent examples of technically complex issues that often transcend national borders, while the area of the economy represents a core political dimension rooted firmly in the domain of political parties and representative actors. Policy areas on immigration and LGBTQ rights represent examples of "easy" issues rooted on individual values. Accordingly, the third hypothesis follows:

H3: Citizens will prefer involvement of independent experts over elected representatives in political processes dealing with more technically complex issues.

Data and Experimental Design

The data for this study stem from a survey of adult national samples representative of the population according to age, gender and location in seven European democracies. They include three Western (Germany, France and Netherlands) two Eastern (Poland and Romania) and two Southern European countries (Italy and Greece).³ Sample sizes for each country are between N=1,008 and 1,096 (Greece and the Netherlands respectively), adding to a total pool of N=7,357 respondents. Evidence from multiple European countries are expected to boost the generalizability of findings and show how European citizens view the role of independent experts in political decision-making processes.⁴

A conjoint experiment was used in order to assess citizen preferences for delegating power to different groups of actors and for different policy stages, which allows us to analyse re-

³Three countries experienced technocratic or technocrat-led cabinets in the past decade (see footnote 2). Further, coordinated market economies such as the Netherlands and Germany, have a different experience of incorporating and relying on expertise through institutionalized practices (Maasen and Weingart 2005).

⁴Information about respondent recruitment is available in the online appendix.

spondents’ reaction to different attributes that vary simultaneously (Hainmueller et al. 2014). Conjoint experiments can help analyse citizen preferences that entail a comparison between the available options (Hausermann et al. 2018). In this study, respondents were asked to select one of two political processes on a single political issue in which the actors responsible for each stage of the process (attributes) varied. The three attributes of the political process (the design, decision-making and implementation stages), are introduced in the regression equation as factor independent variables, meaning that we can use one of the categories (group of actors) as a baseline. We estimate average marginal component effects (AMCEs) that can be interpreted as the effect of an individual component averaged over the joint distribution of the remaining attributes (Hainmueller et al. 2014). In this experiment, this estimate can be interpreted as the percentage point change in the probability of choosing one political process over another when a certain attribute changes from the baseline category (the actors being responsible being the elected representatives at the national level) to another level of interest (independent experts). Because AMCEs are sensitive to the level selected as the baseline category and can be misleading when comparing subgroups of respondents, unadjusted marginal means (MM) are also calculated and reported in the online appendix to provide a descriptive summary of respondent preferences (Leeper et al. 2018).

The main comparison of interest is registered preference for policies that involve independent experts compared to elected representative actors. To stay as close as possible to real political processes across European democracies, elected representative actors are described as “the national government” (policy design stage), “vote in national parliament” (decision-making stage) and “parliamentary committee from all political parties” (implementation stage). Expert actors are referred to as a “committee of independent experts” that is appointed and needs to make decisions by agreement. To provide a realistic alternative regarding the origin, decision-making and implementation of a number of policies in the countries under study, a third set of actors at the EU level is included in the set-up of the

experiment. Support for processes that involve EU actors would capture preferences for more international and coordinated governance and provide an alternative option for respondents motivated primarily by mistrust of national politicians (Costa Lobo and McManus, 2020).⁵ Finally, direct democracy, in the form of national referendum, is also included as an option in the decision-making stage of the proposed political process. We include this option to stay in line with research in citizen process preferences (Font et al 2015; Coffé and Michaels 2014) and to ensure that “independent experts” are not the only non-political option available to respondents who might be driven more by diffuse distrust of political parties and the political establishment at the national and EU levels. The idea of direct citizen involvement in political decision-making has been gaining prevalence both as an answer to disaffected electorates that have come to distrust their elected representatives and desire a greater and more frequent say in political matters (Marien and Kern 2018; Webb 2013). The precise wording for the experimental design is presented in the appendix.

Table 1 below shows an example of a choice task for a respondent. Respondents were asked once to select their preferred process that would determine policy in one of the five political issues (randomized). Balance tests to ensure randomization was successful, as well as other robustness checks to ensure there are no order effects and no repetitive process profile problems are available in the online appendix.

⁵European institutions and the EU in general has often been associated with technocratic governance. To battle this perceived democratic deficit, institutional changes have prioritised democratic input through a directly elected European Parliament (EP) and President of the Commission (through the leaders of EP party groups). Nevertheless, in the years following the eurocrisis and immigration crisis, the “independent” credentials of EU institutions have been undermined in the perceptions of citizens across the Union. For a discussion see DeVries (2018).

QUESTION: On the issue of *carbon emissions and climate change*, which of the two political processes of decision-making would you prefer between the two outlined below? Please select one.

Policy Process 1	Policy Process 2
A policy plan designed by the national government	A policy plan designed by the EU institutions
The final decision is taken through a vote in the national parliament	The final decision is taken through a national referendum
The implementation and progress of the decision is overseen by an appointed team of independent experts	The implementation and progress of the policy is decision by an appointed team of independent experts

Table 1: Example of Choice Task

Results

Figure 1 presents the results of the conjoint experiment pulling all policy areas and countries together. The results show a clear preference for delegating power to independent experts in regards to the designing of policy plans and to the implementation and oversight of solutions. This is in line with the first hypothesis of citizens preferring processes where the task of designing and implementing policy solutions is delegated to independent experts rather than elected representatives at the national level. Processes where independent experts are in charge of the design of a policy are 8 per cent more likely to be chosen compared to processes where this responsibility rests with the national government. Similarly, processes where independent experts oversee the implementation of the policy program are 8 per cent more likely to be chosen compared to processes where parliamentary committees are tasked with the role of implementation and oversight.

Moving to the key moment of political decision-making, the hardest test for public support for expert political power, results show no significant differences in the likelihood that

respondents will select processes where decisions are taken by independent experts over decisions taken by their elected representatives in national parliament. While processes where the decision is taken via national referendum are 5 per cent more likely to be chosen over the baseline category (elected representatives), there is not enough evidence in favour of hypotheses 2, which maintained that, ultimately, democratic power for decision-making should stay with elected representatives and therefore not delegated to unaccountable, independent elites. Respondents appear to be indifferent between processes where decisions are made through a vote in national parliament by their elected representatives, as would be currently the case in most countries under study, and processes where decisions are made by a committee of independent experts.

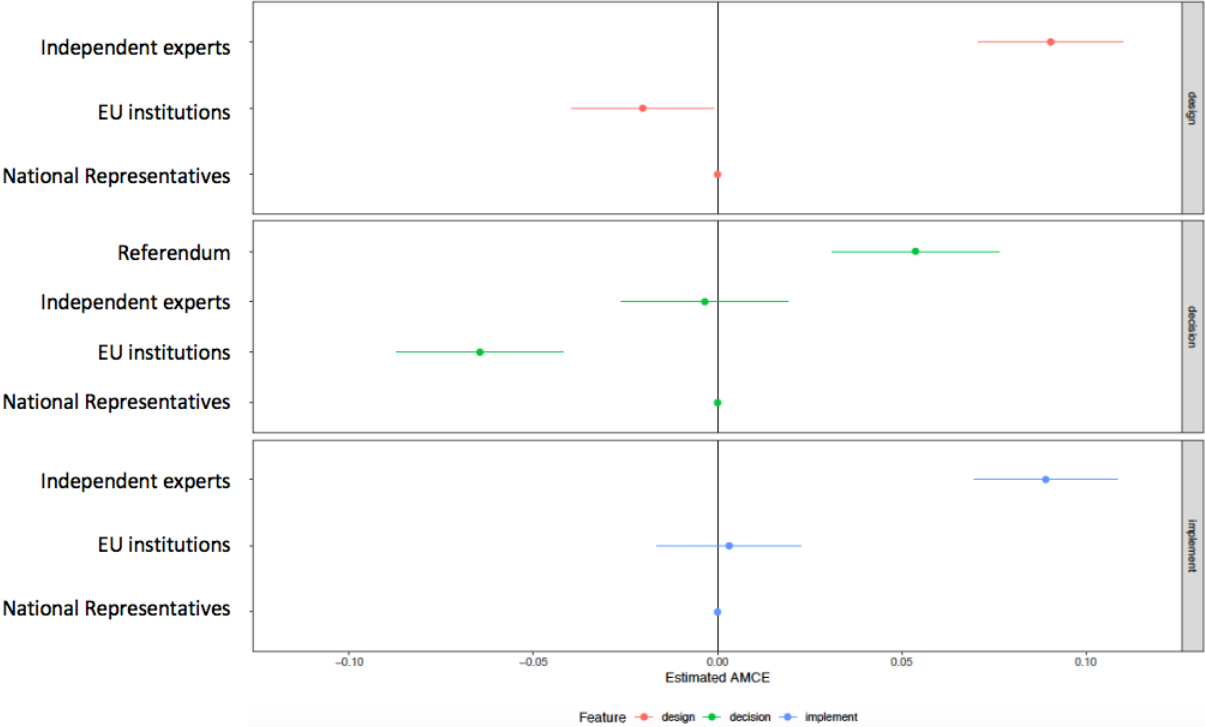


Figure 1: Conjoint Results

The involvement of EU actors is evaluated negative by the respondents at the policy-

design and decision-making stage, both relative to national representatives and independent experts. This suggests that in the eyes of respondents EU institutions are not equivalent to technocratic, independent and expert-based governance arrangements. In the implementation and oversight stages of the political process, independent experts are again preferred to EU actors, but this time there is no significant difference between national and EU political actors.

Looking at the results across the five different policy areas, Figure 2 shows effects in the expected direction, but evidence is less conclusive. The issue of the environment conforms to expectations regarding technically complex issues, with stronger positive effects for the involvement of independent experts across all stages of the political process, including a significant positive effect for expert decision-making. When asked about carbon emissions and climate change, respondents prefer processes where decisions are taken by independent experts, over processes where decisions are taken by elected representatives, and at par with decision-making via a referendum. We do not see a similar pattern in the issue of security and counter-terrorism. The “easier” issues of immigration and civil partnerships show smaller positive effects for expert involvement in the design and implementation stages and small negative effects for expert decision-making. Results are therefore in the expected direction, but effects are small and do not reach statistical significance. Further study of expert involvement in political processes regarding the environment, as well as the sector of public health (which is not included in this study) should be undertaken to investigate whether incorporating independent experts to political decision-making processes could boost citizens trust and satisfaction.

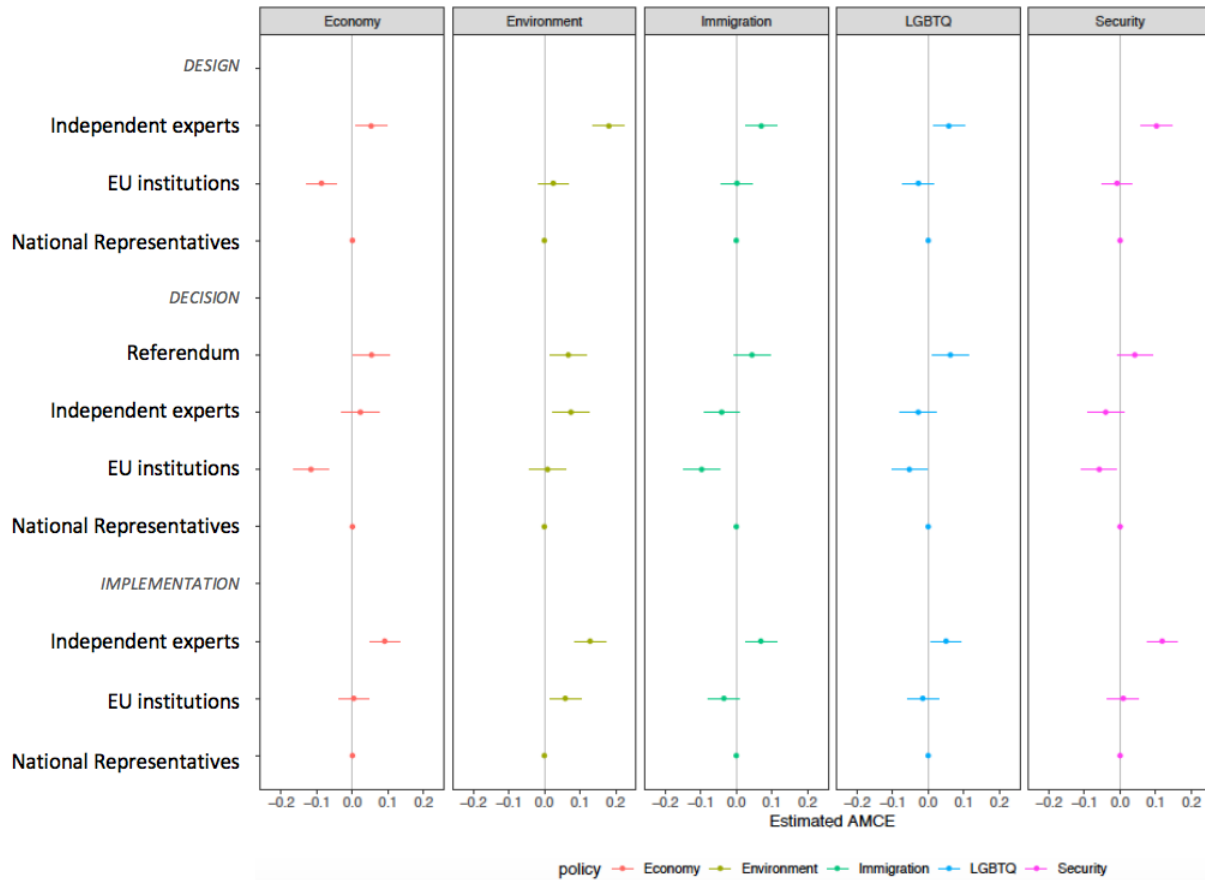


Figure 2: AMCEs results by policy area

Separate analysis for each of the seven European countries in this study (results in presented in Figure 4 in the appendix) do not show important differences when it comes to respondent preferences of independent experts over elected representatives. This highlights the promising potential for examining citizen preferences for expert governance across different stages of policy and decision-making processes across European democracies. The only exception in this study is Poland, where respondents prefer delegating decisions to their elected representatives rather than to independent experts. This is an interesting finding that merits a closer look in future research, given the prevalence of technocratic attitudes among Polish citizens and recent controversial moves by the Law and Order party to limit judicial and bureaucratic freedom (Fijalkowski 2017; Bertou and Pastorella 2017).

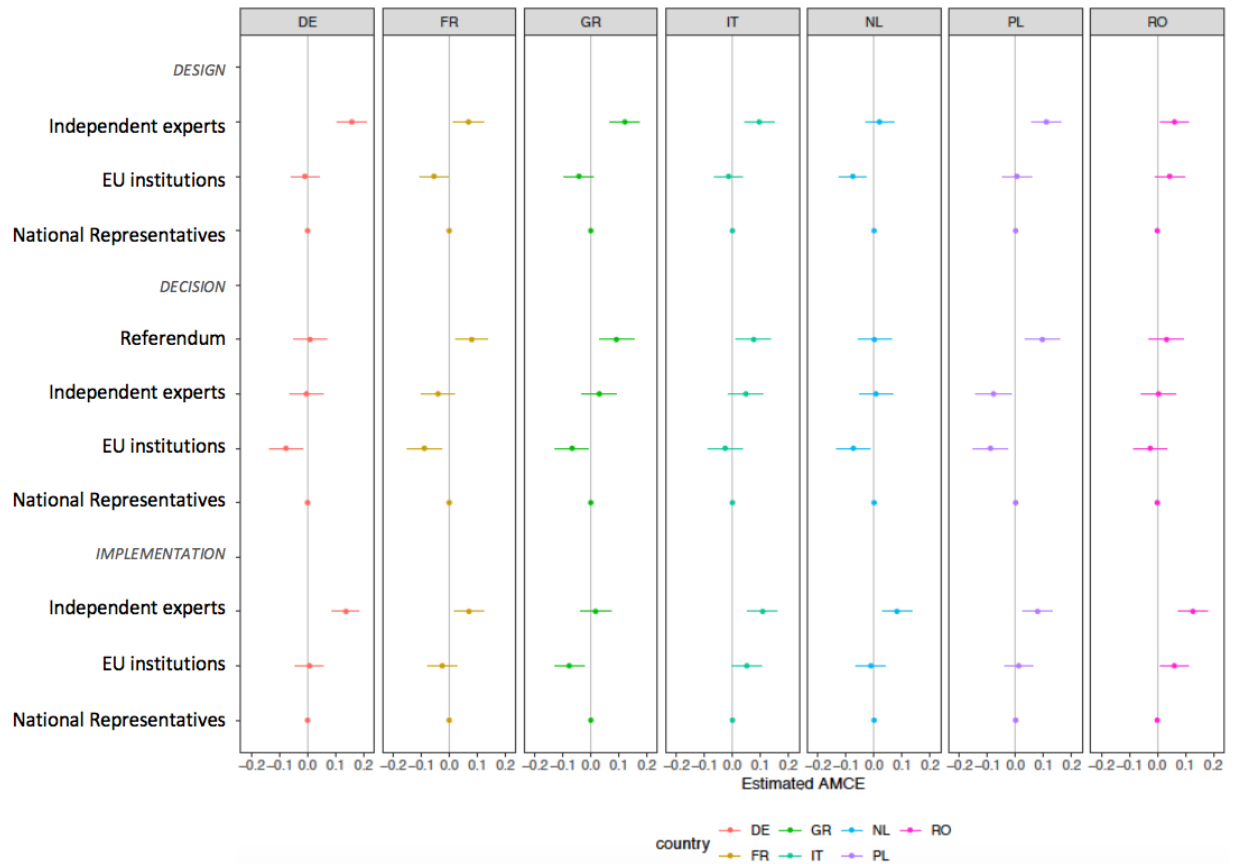


Figure 3: Conjoint results per country

Conclusion

Do citizens welcome independent technocratic expertise in politics or are they wary of delegating political power to independent experts? Extant work has provided both reasons for favouring greater power to independent experts and for public mistrust and rejection of unaccountable expertise in democratic politics. Yet public support for political processes that incorporate independent expertise are yet to be systematically examined. This research note provides a first test and contributes to the aforementioned debate by pitting unelected, independent experts against national elected representatives, by separating three key stages in political processes and differentiating between hard and easy political issues. Respondents

in this study consistently preferred processes where independent experts had responsibility over the design of policy and the implementation phase, highlighting a potential avenue for democratic politics to incorporate independent expertise in a way that can boost citizen approval for political decisions. With the exception of environmental political issues, respondents did not appear to differentiate between processes where the final decision is taken by independent experts or elected representatives.

These results highlights two important opportunities for further study. Firstly, survey data showing citizens who support having “experts, not governments making decisions according to what they think is best for the country” overestimate the amount of public support for out-right technocratic decision-making considerably.⁶ This could be a result of obfuscating levels of support for different potential roles that independent experts can have in political processes across different issue areas. Alternatively, such indicators may be simply capturing dissatisfaction with the state of national and European politics, rather than a candid preference for more political power in the hands of independent experts.

Secondly, the positive result of expert decision-making in the more technically complex issue of the environment and climate change suggests that public acceptance of a less responsive and accountable (but more responsible) decision-maker can be conditional upon the urgency and technical nature of a political issue. Therefore, the incorporation of independent experts in democratic political processes is worth exploring in more depth. While political decision-making through direct citizen involvement was the most appealing to respondents, the possibilities for innovating democratic processes to incorporate citizens and experts are plentiful. This research note has focused on the role of independent experts to provide a first test of whether their inclusion in political processes in diverse roles and issues would be

⁶In this study 68% - 77% of respondents said having “experts, not governments making decisions according to what they think is best for the country” is a good or fairly good way of governing across the seven countries under study. Experimental subgroup analysis based on these preferences is shown in the online appendix.

welcomed by citizens and could boost support for political decisions. Further research is necessary to establish the criteria to qualify as an “independent expert”. While citizens appear to be positive towards delegating more political responsibility in the hands of independent experts in abstract terms, it is not clear whether all agree on the criteria for assigning “expert” and “independence” labels. Finally, our findings also support a wide range of studies that highlight the difficult position that representative political actors find themselves in across many European democracies. In the eyes of citizens, elected representatives at the national level are no longer the de-facto bearers of democratic legitimacy and might need to reconsider their role in democratic governance.

Appendix

Conjoint Experiment

An example of the policy process vignette for a respondent (combination of Policy issue 4, Process A (1-2-2), Process B (3-1-2)) is presented in Figure 1.

Policy issues: Randomized at the question level

1. Security and Counter-terrorism
2. Immigration and Refugee settlement
3. Taxation, Wages and Pensions
4. Carbon Emissions and Climate Change
5. Civil Partnerships and Same-sex Marriage

Policy Process Vignettes: 2 Policy designs presented to each respondent

ATTRIBUTE 1 Policy Design: A policy plan that is designed by...

1. the national government
2. a committee of independent experts
3. the EU institutions

ATTRIBUTE 2 Decision-makers: The final decision is taken...

1. through a national referendum
2. through a vote in the national parliament
3. by agreement in committee of independent experts
4. at the EU level

ATTRIBUTE 3 Policy Implementation: The implementation and progress of the decision is overseen by . . .

1. a parliamentary committee from all political parties
2. an appointed team of independent experts
3. the EU institutions

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