

Do Direct-Democratic Procedures Lead To Higher Acceptance Than Political Representation?

Experimental Survey Evidence from Germany*

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April 18, 2016

*We are grateful to Steve Ansolabehere, Paul Bauer, Becky Morton, Isabelle Stadelmann-Steffen, two anonymous referees, as well as the participants of seminars at NYU and the Workshop on Political Parties (Bonn) for helpful comments.

Abstract

Do direct-democratic decisions meet more acceptance than decisions arrived at through representative procedures? We conduct an experimental online vignette study with a German sample to investigate how voters' acceptance of a political decision depends on the decision-making procedure. For a set of different topics, we investigate how acceptance varies depending on whether the decision is the result of a direct-democratic institution, a party in a representative democracy, or an expert committee. Our results show that for important topics, a direct-democratic decision results in higher acceptance; this finding particularly holds for those who have a different opinion than the decision outcome. However, if the topic is of limited importance to the voters, their acceptance does not differ between the mechanisms. Our results imply that a combination of representative democracy and direct democracy, conditional on the distribution of issue importance among the electorate, may be optimal with regard to acceptance of political decisions.

1 Introduction

How can the people's will best be mapped into political outcomes that meet broad acceptance of the constituents? This is a longstanding question in the history of democratic thought, and two avenues have been discerned ever since: democratic decision making through "representative" and through "direct" procedures. Historically, the focus was on representative measures. Montesquieu (2005), for one, wrote:

"The people, in whom the supreme power resides, ought to have the management of every thing within their reach: what exceeds their abilities must be conducted by their ministers. [...] The people are extremely well qualified for choosing those whom they are to intrust with part of their authority. [...] But are they capable of conducting an intricate affair, of seizing and improving the opportunity and critical moment of action? No; this surpasses their abilities."

With the upsurge of what is perceived by many as an acceptance crisis of political decisions arrived at through traditional representative procedures, direct democracy has often been characterized as a preferable solution in recent decades: "Tensions have grown in most Western nations between the existing processes of representative democracy and calls by reformists for a more participatory style of democratic government" (Dalton et al. 2001). Recent years have witnessed a "spread of direct democracy" in many democratic polities (Scarrow 2001; Matsusaka 2005; Donovan and Karp 2006). A case in point is the effort of the European Union, one of the largest democratic political systems in the world, to curtail its alleged democratic deficit (Karp et al. 2003) by introducing large-scale referendums (Auer 2005). However, the question arises whether voters see direct-democratic decisions as more acceptable than decisions achieved through representative procedures.

Why is democratic representation criticized?

For one thing, it has been shown that the effect of traditional systems of democratic representation on acceptance are mixed—they actually lead into a "party paradox" (Towfigh 2015). On the one hand, as Montesquieu suggests, private individuals may not possess the resources to be well-informed regarding the full range of political problems, they delegate this task to representatives—political parties and their candidates. Party labels serve as cognitive heuristics that help the electorate make meaningful decisions and choose policy positions on novel issues (Arceneaux 2008; Druckman 2001; Zaller 1992). Parties thus fulfill an indispensable intermediary function by reducing voters' costs of information and aggregating political packages for them (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2008; Jones and Hudson 1998; Müller 2000; Nisbett and Ross 1992). From this perspective, representation by political parties is functional because it offers a division of labor. As voters are unable to spend sufficiently large amounts of resources on gathering and processing information, spending fewer resources on deciding which party offers the best overall position seems more efficient. On the other hand, this system of intermediaries has also been recognized as producing severe biases in the representation of the people's will, among them the opportunistic political business cycle (Nordhaus 1975; Petring 2010), corruption (Heidenheimer and Johnston 2002), other rent-seeking behavior (McCormick and Tollison 1979), and a lack of choice due to platform convergence (Bernhardt et al. 2009). These weaknesses may affect citizens' satisfaction with the political system and lead to decreased political participation (Scarrow 1999)

or even disenchantment with political parties (Klein 2005; Clarke and Stewart 1998). This paradox of representation may lead to a decline of the acceptance of political decisions by the electorate and contribute to the overall disillusion with democracy (Towfigh 2015).

Can direct-democratic procedures counter these effects?

The final verdict on the benefits of direct democracy is still out, and the literature is divided on the merits of direct-democratic procedures over conventional forms of representative democracy. Proponents argue that the former may stimulate voters' political interest by forcing them to think about the contents of a political decision and may educate voters as political citizens (Benz and Stutzer 2004; Smith 2002). Hence, direct democracy may lead to more active participation (Schuck and de Vreese 2011; Tolbert and Smith 2005) and a better representation of the people's will. The mere threat of a referendum may also discipline the representatives and induce them to stick to the will of the electorate more closely (Hajnal et al. 2002; Matsusaka and McCarty 2001). However, recent cross-country evidence on this issue offers rather sobering insights (Voigt and Blume 2015). Frequent ballots may lead to voter fatigue and thus decrease, rather than increase, electoral participation and decision quality (Bowler et al. 1992; Freitag and Stadelmann-Steffen 2010). Biases in the mapping of the people's will to political outcomes may occur because well-endowed organized interests can initiate referendums by buying the initially required number of signatures (for a discussion, see Lupia and Matsusaka 2004; Hasen 2000). In addition, ballot decisions may, under certain circumstances, suppress minorities in favor of the majority (Gerber 1996; Vatter and Danaci 2010; Hajnal et al. 2002: for a nuanced empirical study). In other words, the quality of political decisions may be decreased because direct-democratic procedures are prone to distortions by specific subgroups of the electorate. Moreover, there exists only little evidence on how the acceptance for a political decision depends on its procedural details.

The present study investigates how acceptance differs between situations in which a political decision results from a direct-democratic mechanism, a political party, or an expert panel. Our empirical results are based on an online survey experiment conducted before the March 2011 state-level election in Rhineland-Palatinate, one of the 16 German federal states (Länder). We employed a $3 \times 5 \times 2$ factorial design to test for differential acceptance rates of political decisions, varying the decision-making mechanism, the issue scenario, and a positive versus negative framing of the decision problem. Our results show that the acceptance of decisions does not vary per se between the decision-making mechanisms, but if voters' core interests are at stake, they prefer more immediate control over important decisions. Therefore, we argue that political parties rightly assume their role of lowering transaction costs of voters for everyday decision-making, but they do less well in terms of acceptance for political decisions that are close to the voters' hearts.

In the following section, we will develop our research questions based on the existing literature. Thereafter, the data collection and methodology are explained in detail before our results are presented. Finally, our paper concludes with a discussion of our results and the broader implications of our findings, suggesting avenues for future research.

2 Research Question

Both direct democracy and representation through political parties seem to have functional as well as dysfunctional elements. We therefore thought it would be worthwhile to investigate the reactions of citizens to these different forms of democracy to the end of better understanding which procedures to use under which circumstances.

Is there a per-se difference between direct-democratic and representative decision-making procedures?

We started out with the assumption that the two modes of decision-making do not, per se, generate different levels of acceptance. This hypothesis is consistent with the usual assumption of outcome-based utilities typically used in rational choice (Becker 1978). If outcomes do not differ, a voter who is purely driven by outcome-based utilities should feel indifferent between all investigated decision-making procedures. In the study at hand with thus test whether, controlling for personal opinion on the desired outcome of a decision, there is a difference per se between the acceptance of outcomes of direct democracy and party representation.

What is the relationship between acceptance, decision procedure and the importance subjectively attributed to the issue?

This research question begs the further question if we can identify determinants moderating the interaction between decision procedure and decision acceptance. The conditions under which acceptance of a decision and its underlying procedure is high or low seem to be complex. Different explanations have been offered, and the study at hand expands on this question, too. Esaiasson et al. (2012) suggest that legitimacy is increased when participation in the decision-making process is implemented. Based on their randomized field experiment, they conclude that “personal involvement is the main factor generating legitimacy beliefs” about distributive decisions. The finding is supported by earlier field experiments of Olken (2010), who concludes that “direct participation in political decision making can substantially increase satisfaction and legitimacy.” Similarly, Gash and Murakami (2015) find that control over the decision increases acceptance of the decision: “individuals are more likely to agree with, and less willing to work against, policies that have been produced by their fellow citizens,” moderated by partisan affiliation.

We seek to qualify these results in a real-world election context at the level of a German federal state. More specifically, we want to investigate whether direct democracy creates higher acceptance levels in situations where the issue to be decided is important for the electorate, whereas the choice of the democratic procedure does not affect citizens’ acceptance of the decision when their stakes are in fact low. If people consider an issue of little importance, they tend to rely on partisan cues (Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Matsusaka 1992). Thus, political parties serve their function as brand names (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2008) and as minimizers of voters’ information and transaction costs perfectly well in contexts of everyday decision-making. Direct-democratic procedures, in contrast, are well suited in situations where voters are intrinsically interested in obtaining more information. Two potential channels are well exemplified with rational voter models: higher stakes would increase both turnout (e.g., Palfrey

and Rosenthal 1985) and collective information gathering (Martinelli 2006). For these relevant issues, citizens prefer the electorate to exercise more control, whereas the decoupling of the political sphere from the auspice of the voters is an acceptable tradeoff for less important issues. These considerations lead to a preliminary second hypothesis to be tested by this study: The more important an issue is for the individual voter, the more the voter accepts it if it is made by means of direct democracy and the less the voter accepts the decision if it is made by political parties.

The policy implication of this argument is that a mix of representative democracy in “normal policy-making” contexts enhanced by direct-democratic decisions during “hot debates” is more promising than current decision-making practices in the majority of industrialized democracies—if acceptance is considered the ultimate benchmark for democratic aggregation of the political will. This, in turn, can presumably explain recent civil unrest in Western democracies after highly relevant incidents, which were largely decoupled from the individual citizen’s sphere, such as the Occupy movements, nuclear energy policy after the Fukushima meltdown, or the “Stuttgart 21” protests in Germany (for details on the cases and the alleged “new protest culture”, see Hartleb 2011).

In spite of this observation, it does not imply that acceptance of a decision-making mode is merely scenario-driven, but dependent on individual perceptions of importance. Citizens reject representation by intermediaries in situations they consider important; but this is not only determined by the overall importance of, say, the Fukushima accident or similarly prevalent issues in the media. We rather predict that there are differences between individuals due to the importance effect even when they are presented with the same issue category, for example a nuclear energy policy decision.

3 Method and data collection

Our dataset was collected between the tenth and the fifth day before the 2011 state election in Rhineland-Palatinate, which has a population of about four million inhabitants. 711 persons eligible to vote were contacted and incentivized with a fixed fee by a professional online panel provider. 86.5 percent (615 persons) completed the questionnaire, which took about twelve minutes on average. Two persons were excluded due to unreasonable age specifications of two and four years, respectively. All

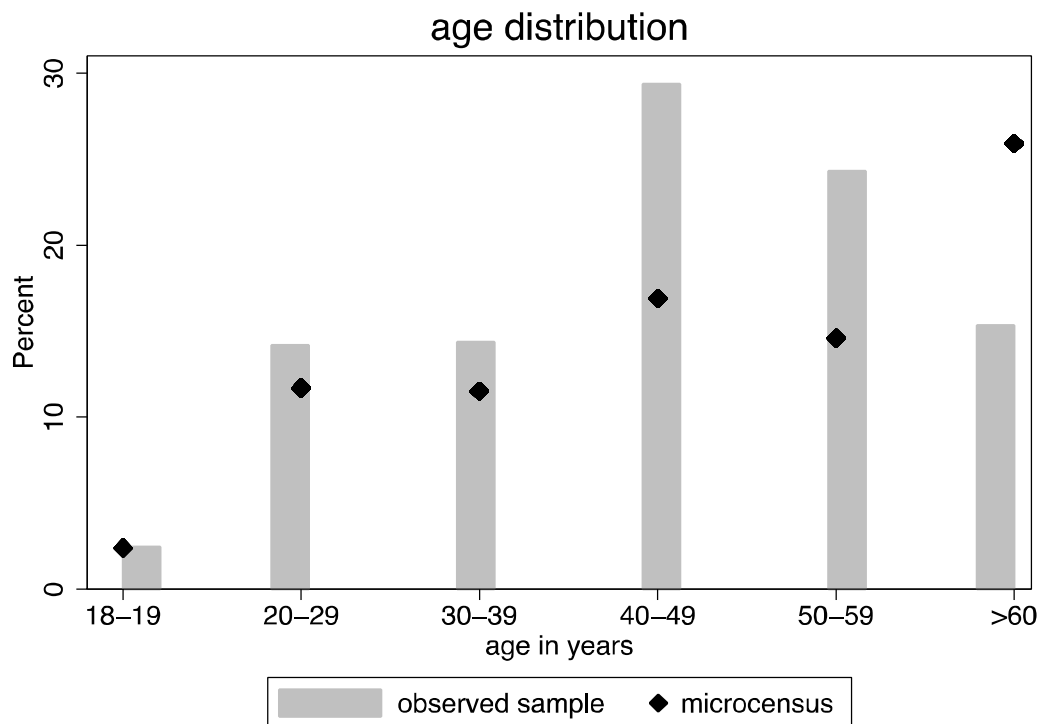


Figure 1: Age distribution in sample and microcensus

analyses presented below are executed on the remaining $n = 613$ participants. Respondents were between 18 and 70 years old (mean = 44.3 years), and the share of female participants was 50.7 percent. In terms of mean age and gender, our sample is roughly representative of the voting population of the state of Rhineland-Palatinate (see Figures 1 for a comparison to the official population statistics). Only with regard to age, there was an overrepresentation of persons in the age range from 40 to 59 and an underrepresentation of persons older than 60 years, which was prevalent for men as well as women (Figure 5 in the Appendix).

Our research design is an experimental vignette study, which allows us to study the potential influence of different decision-making institutions on the acceptance of political decisions. Each respondent faced three different political issues in random order as a within-subjects factor: nuclear energy (Scenario 1), school graduation (Scenario 2), and religious education (Scenario 3). For each participant, one out of five decision tasks was randomly selected, varying the institution that brings forth the decision (either of the two mass parties, “SPD” or “CDU”; the majority of parties; an expert committee; or by a direct-democratic procedure). The scenarios were presented in random order one at a time, keeping the decision-making procedure fixed. The decision-making procedure was held constant over scenarios per participant to avoid effects due to the salience of different procedures. Moreover, the framing of the decision as a positive or negative outcome was randomly allocated in order to cancel out potential biases due to question wording interacting with personal opinion. Hence, the vignette study has a structure of a 3 (issue scenario) \times (decision-making procedure) \times 2 (positive/negative outcome) array. The first factor, the three different issue scenario, was taken from an online voting tool called “Wahl-O-Mat”

(<http://www.wahl-o-mat.de/rlp2011/>, last accessed July 29, 2012).¹ This tool is run by a federal agency subordinated to the Federal Ministry of the Interior. It was set up to help voters compare their own political preferences with the official issue stances of the competing political parties and find their best match for the upcoming election. As such, it is a screening device for voters to learn about the policies the different parties advocate before an election. We adopted issue scenarios from this tool to ensure the real-world relevance of our questions.²

Our dependent variable, acceptance of the decision, was generated as the mean response to five self-constructed questions on a scale from 1 (very little or not at all) to 5 (extremely). Participants indicated agreement to the following items: 1) I accept the decision; 2) the decision makes me angry; 3) the decision deserves my active support; 4) the decision activates my opposition; 5) the decision makes me feel helpless (items 2, 4, and 5 with reversed scales).³ The aggregate acceptance scale was generated for each scenario separately with high scale reliabilities in each scenario (Cronbach's alpha for the different scenarios: nuclear $\alpha = 0.89$; school $\alpha = 0.79$; religion $\alpha = 0.85$). Figure 7 in the Appendix shows the correlations between the six items used for the construction of the acceptance scale with a solid overall scale reliability ($\alpha = 0.85$).

In addition, for each scenario we measured the agreement with the contents of the decision and the importance of the topic. Agreement was assessed by letting respondents indicate whether the decision was in line with their personal opinion on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 4 (completely) with unlabeled intervals between the endpoints. Importance of the topic was measured on a scale from 1 to 5. We further measured affective response, which was highly correlated with acceptance and brought no further insights. Participants rated their affective response to the decision by indicating on the same scale how angry, happy, nervous, and excited they felt about the decision. For reasons of simplicity, we will not report data from this measure.

4 Results

In the following, we will explore how different political decision procedures influence acceptance. Table 1 shows the summary statistics of the collected variables. At first, we will focus on the comparison between direct democracy and political parties, thereby pooling decisions made by SPD, CDU and the Parliament. The average reported acceptance for decisions resulting from direct democracy is slightly

¹ Refer to Appendix A.2 for details on the wording of the scenarios.

² Issue scenario 1 on nuclear energy generated the most public interest during the data collection phase because the Fukushima meltdown had occurred shortly beforehand. We later control for this potential bias of issue scenarios (see Results section below).

³ One assessed item ("I am shocked by the decision") is not included in our acceptance score for conceptual reasons, though all results hold if we include it. Figure 6 in the Appendix shows that the main result reported in this paper holds irrespective of the use of the aggregate acceptance scale or just the first item, which directly inquires whether the respective participant "accepts" the decision. In addition, table 4 in the appendix demonstrates that our main result holds qualitatively for every single item of our acceptance score.

| Variable | Description | min | max | mean | median | type |
|------------------|--|-----|-----|------|--------|----------|
| Acceptance | Acceptance of the decision | 1 | 5 | 3.40 | 3.6 | interval |
| Agreement | Agreement with the decision | 1 | 4 | 2.43 | 2 | interval |
| Importance | Importance of the decision | 1 | 5 | 3.29 | 3 | interval |
| Direct Democracy | Dummy for decision by direct-democracy | 0 | 1 | 0.20 | 0 | binary |
| Expert Committee | Dummy for decision by an expert committee | 0 | 1 | 0.20 | 0 | binary |
| CDU | Dummy for decision by party CDU | 0 | 1 | 0.20 | 0 | binary |
| SPD | Dummy for decision by party SPD | 0 | 1 | 0.19 | 0 | binary |
| Parliament | Dummy for decision by party parliament | 0 | 1 | 0.19 | 0 | binary |
| Scenario 1 | Dummy for Scenario 1: nuclear energy | 0 | 1 | 0.33 | 0 | binary |
| Scenario 2 | Dummy for Scenario 2: school graduation | 0 | 1 | 0.33 | 0 | binary |
| Scenario 3 | Dummy for Scenario 3: religious education | 0 | 1 | 0.33 | 0 | binary |
| Influence Vote | Influence of voting | 1 | 5 | 2.17 | 2 | interval |
| Vote CDU | Dummy for intention to vote for CDU | 0 | 1 | 0.19 | 0 | binary |
| Vote SPD | Dummy for intention to vote for SPD | 0 | 1 | 0.30 | 0 | binary |
| Vote Mass Party | Dummy for intention to vote for CDU or SPD | 0 | 1 | 0.49 | 0 | binary |

Table 1: Summary statistics for the dataset

higher than decision made by political parties (average acceptance of 3.5 vs. 3.37). Thus, we can find some evidence for direct democracy leading to higher acceptance levels at the aggregate level, albeit only weakly significant ($p = 0.07$, two-sided Mann-Whitney u-test). However, whether respondents perceive a decision as “acceptable” is not only influenced by the decision mode, but also by the respondents’ opinion on the topic and the decision. Two determinants we are focusing on are the respondents’ agreement with the decision and the perceived importance of the topic.

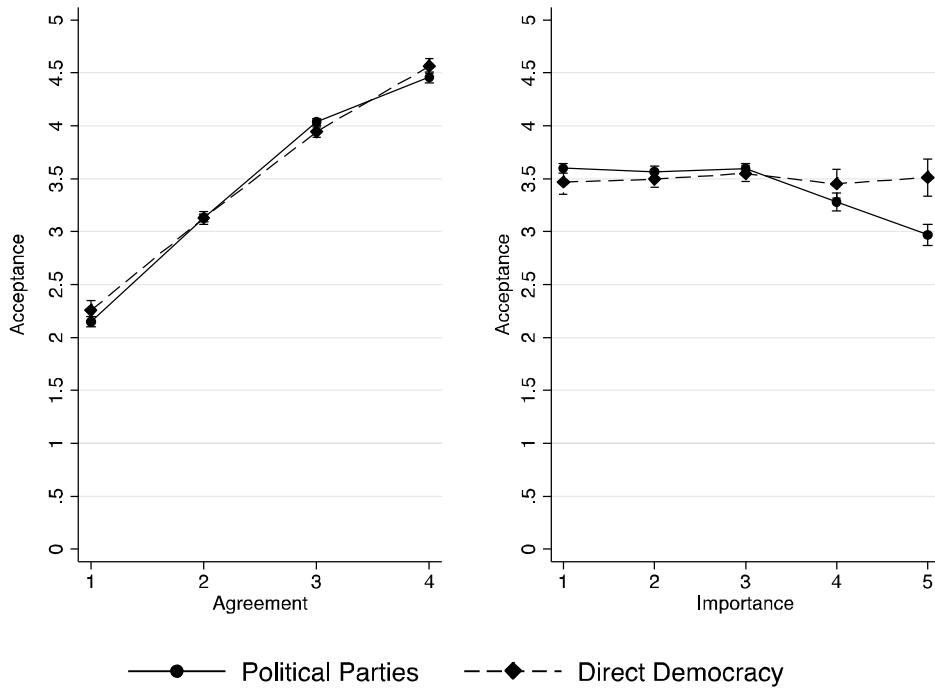


Figure 2: Mean acceptance rate and standard errors by decision mode for different agreement and importance levels.

Figure 2 reports the average acceptance depending on agreement and importance levels. It reveals that average acceptance increases with average agreement for decisions derived by direct democracy (Spearman’s rank correlation $\rho = 0.79$ with $p < 0.0001$) as well as with the average agreement for decision made by political parties ($\rho = 0.75$ and $p < 0.0001$). Focusing on the importance of the topics the decision was about reveals the first differences between the two decision modes. The average acceptance is not significantly correlated with the importance of the topic in the case of direct democracy ($\rho = -0.01$ and $p = 0.887$), but significantly negatively correlated in the case of political parties ($\rho = -0.13$ and $p = 0.014$). This correlation is mostly due to the stark drop in acceptance for important and very important topics. Comparing the average acceptance levels of only very important topics reveals

them to be 27% percent higher for direct democracy—a highly significant difference between the outcomes of the two decisions modes ($p = 0.0015$, two-sided Mann-Whitney u-test).⁴

To control better for these and other additional influences on acceptance we run a series of linear random-effects models presented in Table 3 in the next subsection. Observations are clustered by respondents over three different scenarios and are based on the reduced dataset where direct democracy and political parties are compared with regard to their acceptance levels. In the subsequent section, we include the decisions made by expert committees. The regression models in Table 4 replicate our previous analyses with the full dataset.

4.1 Acceptance of outcomes from direct democracy versus political parties

The dependent variable in all models is the acceptance of the decision by the respondent. Personal agreement with the outcome of the decision and the importance of a topic are the most important control variables. We are primarily interested in the variation in acceptance conditional on decision modes and holding personal opinion on the issue constant. In this regard, Model 1 tests whether direct-democratic decisions are significantly more accepted than decisions made by political parties (the reference group). The `Direct Democracy` variable is a dummy, which is positive if the decision mode is direct democracy and 0 if either `SPD`, `CDU` or `Parliament` is positive. It thus captures the effect of decisions via direct democracy vis-à-vis decisions made by political parties. In line with our initial assumption, direct democratic decision procedures do not create, per se, more acceptance than decisions made by political parties. This follows from the small and insignificant main effect for `Direct Democracy`. As one would expect, personal opinions on the issue measured by `Agreement` and `Importance` influence the acceptance of a decision. The more the respondents agree with the decision the higher their acceptance of the decision, and the more important a decision is for them, the less they accept it.

In a next step we analyze how the acceptance of a direct-democratic decisions depends on the perceived importance of the issue. In Model 2, an interaction between the variables `Importance` and `Direct Democracy` is added. The interaction term demonstrates a strongly significant positive effect, while at the same time the main effect of `Direct Democracy` turns significantly negative. Whether direct democracy or decisions made by political parties lead to higher acceptance depends on the importance of the issue. For the lowest importance level, acceptance of a decision made by direct democracy is 5.3 percentage points lower than for a decision made by a political party ($p < 0.008$). As the importance increases the acceptance score goes up by roughly 4 percent per point if the decision is made through a direct-democratic procedure instead of a party. Or, conversely, any form of party involvement in the decision-making process decreases the decision's acceptance by 4 percent, for an additional point on the importance scale. Thus, for very important topics, acceptance is 6.5 percent higher for decisions derived through direct democracy ($p = 0.012$).

⁴ A similar effect can be observed if we use only the first item of the acceptance score (see Figure 6 in the Appendix). Further regression analyses confirm that we can observe this effect with every single subscale of our acceptance scale (see Table 4 in Appendix).

| Acceptance | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Agreement | 0.796*** (0.019) | 0.793*** (0.019) | 0.794*** (0.019) | 0.791*** (0.019) | 0.792*** (0.019) |
| Importance | -0.157*** (0.014) | -0.181*** (0.016) | -0.175*** (0.018) | | |
| Direct Democracy | 0.025 (0.044) | -0.306*** (0.106) | -0.303*** (0.107) | | |
| Direct Democracy × Importance | | 0.101*** (0.033) | 0.101*** (0.033) | | |
| Direct Democracy = 1 × Importance=1 | | | | -0.207* (0.114) | -0.196* (0.115) |
| Direct Democracy = 0 × Importance=2 | | | | -0.105 (0.07) | -0.104 (0.07) |
| Direct Democracy = 1 × Importance=2 | | | | -0.181** (0.078) | -0.19** (0.078) |
| Direct Democracy = 0 × Importance=3 | | | | -0.224*** (0.063) | -0.223*** (0.064) |
| Direct Democracy = 1 × Importance=3 | | | | -0.256*** (0.079) | -0.249*** (0.081) |
| Direct Democracy = 0 × Importance=4 | | | | -0.467*** (0.073) | -0.449*** (0.078) |
| Direct Democracy = 1 × Importance=4 | | | | -0.373*** (0.082) | -0.356*** (0.085) |
| Direct Democracy = 0 × Importance=5 | | | | -0.69*** (0.071) | -0.677*** (0.08) |
| Direct Democracy = 1 × Importance=5 | | | | -0.477*** (0.107) | -0.462*** (0.114) |
| Scenario 2 | | | 0.098** (0.043) | | 0.091** (0.043) |
| Scenario 3 | | | -0.038 (0.046) | | -0.048 (0.047) |
| Influence Vote | | | 0.084*** (0.025) | | 0.082*** (0.025) |
| Vote Mass Party | | | 0.019 (0.04) | | 0.018 (0.04) |
| Intercept | 1.977*** (0.067) | 2.062*** (0.071) | 2.19*** (0.114) | 1.812*** (0.071) | 1.955*** (0.104) |
| N | 1437 | 1437 | 1437 | 1437 | 1437 |
| R ² | 0.649 | 0.651 | 0.658 | 0.652 | 0.659 |
| χ ² | 1939.829 | 1985.226 | 2121.087 | 2060.369 | 2227.72 |

* p< .1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table 2: Random effects regression with acceptance of a decision as the depended variable. Standard errors in parentheses. Reduced dataset (only decisions arrived at by political parties and through a direct-democratic procedure). For details on the variables and summary statistics see Table 1.

Model 3 demonstrates that this effect is not driven by the subject-matter of the issue at hand. Three different decision scenarios were presented to all respondents: nuclear energy (Scenario 1), school graduation (Scenario 2), and religious education (Scenario 3). While the decision in Scenario 2 meets more acceptance overall than the other two decisions, this has no impact on the size and significance of the interaction effect. In addition, we include two additional control variables in order to check for the robustness of our findings. The `Influence Vote` model term captures the extent of perceived political self-efficacy during the upcoming state-level election: voters who tend to think that the electorate can actually change politics and policies by means of voting for representatives are more likely to accept decisions in general. However, this perceived self-efficacy does not diminish the interaction effect between importance of the issue and decision mode. Even if voters tend to think that their voting for parties can make a difference, they are more likely to accept direct-democratic decisions if they are important to them.

The `Vote Mass Party` variable indicates the intention to vote for one of the two mass parties, SPD or CDU. One may argue that voters of these mass parties may be more supportive of decisions which are made by precisely these parties and less skeptical than other voters even when it comes to important decisions made by these parties. This is clearly not the case; again, controlling for this variable does not alter the coefficient of the interaction effect. Our finding is not conditional on mass party preferences.

Models 1, 2, and 3 impose a linear functional form on the influence of importance; however, Figure 2 suggests that this might not be true. In Models 4 and 5 we replicate our previous results without imposing a functional form on importance. In Model 4 we include interactions between `Direct Democracy` and each level of `Importance`. The coefficients give the impact on acceptance compared to a decision derived by a political party for a topic with the lowest importance level. For the lowest importance level, a decision from direct democracy results in reduction of acceptance by .27 points, translating into a 5.9 percent lower acceptance rate (albeit only weakly significant, $p=0.07$). In contrast to this, direct democracy leads to 7 percent higher acceptance rate for the highest importance level ($p=0.044$, comparing the coefficients `Direct Democracy=0×Importance=5` and `Direct Democracy=1×Importance=5`). Again, the model confirms that acceptance decreases with increased importance, as demonstrated by the highly significant negative coefficients for interactions with importance levels higher than two. Model 5 confirms the results from Model 4 after adding controls for the scenario, the perceived political self-efficacy and the intention to vote for one of the two mass parties.

4.2 Taking decisions by expert committees into account

While Table 2 contrasts direct democracy with political parties, Table 3 presents more models that contrast direct democracy with representative democracy, that is, decisions made by expert committees are added to the group of representative decision procedures, so the `Direct Democracy` effect is tested against decisions made by political parties or expert committees. Model 6 demonstrates that direct democracy is significantly less accepted for issues of low importance, but more accepted than the reference group of parties and expert committees when important issues are at stake. In other words, this is not just a difference between direct democracies and parties, but more generally a difference between direct and representative democracy. In both decision-making arrangements, parties and expert committees, decisions are one step removed from the electorate, and citizens have less control over the decision. While

for issues with very low importance this seems not to harm the acceptance of the outcome, it does reduce the acceptance for issues considered very important.

Figure 2 visualizes these differences between direct democracy and the decision procedures based on intermediaries. While intermediaries perform better in terms of procedural acceptance for decisions of low importance to the respective voter (at importance level 1), direct democracy performs slightly better on average (level 4) and highly significantly better (level 5) when the issue at stake matters to the voter personally.

The remaining models provide additional checks for validity, omitted variable bias, and the functional form for the impact of importance. Model 7, for example, takes political parties out of the reference group and compares the different party configurations with the expert decision-making effect that is left in the baseline group. Separate effects are included for *SPD*, *CDU*, the majority of parties in the parliament. In Model 8 we include interaction terms with perceived issue importance for variables *CDU*, *SPD*, and *Parliament*, as well as controls for the scenarios, the perceived political self-efficacy and the intention to vote for one of the two mass parties.

Model 8 replicates Model 3 for the full dataset. It shows that the interaction effect between importance and direct democracy is not affected by the introduction of issue scenarios. As in Model 3, the positive effect of perceived self-efficacy of voters does not change the result. Instead of *Vote Mass Party*, we introduce two separate control variables this time—*Vote SPD* and *Vote CDU*—as there are also separate model terms for *SPD* and *CDU* in the model specification. Neither of the control variables changes the main results presented above.

As an additional validity check, we exclude all observations where the personal opinion of the respondent is strongly positive; that is, we exclude all observations in Model 9 where *Agreement* = 4 and run the analysis with the remaining observations. We would expect that those who strongly agree with the decision anyway should not have any reason to be dissatisfied with the procedure. Accordingly, the main effect should still hold for the remaining groups and not be driven by this potential artifact. And indeed, the exclusion of these data does not alter the effect size or *p*-value of the interaction term significantly. In other words: The observed effect results from those who disagree and are overruled and those who only “tend to” agree.

| Acceptance | Model 6 | Model 7 | Model 8 | Model 9 | Model 10 | Model 11 |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Agreement | 0.802*** 0.017 | 0.802*** 0.017 | 0.803*** 0.017 | 0.822*** 0.025 | 0.798*** 0.017 | 0.798*** 0.017 |
| Importance | -0.187*** 0.013 | -0.186*** 0.013 | -0.202*** 0.026 | -0.221 0.028 | | |
| Direct Democracy | -0.32*** 0.103 | -0.32*** 0.107 | -0.387*** 0.123 | -0.381 0.137*** | | |
| Direct Democracy × Importance | 0.105*** 0.032 | 0.104*** 0.032 | 0.124*** 0.038 | 0.126*** 0.046 | | |
| Direct Democracy = 1 × Importance=1 | | | | | -0.226** 0.111 | -0.291** 0.127 |
| Direct Democracy = 0 × Importance=2 | | | | | -0.133** 0.059 | -0.187 0.205 |
| Direct Democracy = 1 × Importance=2 | | | | | -0.211*** 0.073 | -0.257 0.26 |
| Direct Democracy = 0 × Importance=3 | | | | | -0.26*** 0.054 | -0.221 0.19 |
| Direct Democracy = 1 × Importance=3 | | | | | -0.267*** 0.075 | -0.196 0.251 |
| Direct Democracy = 0 × Importance=4 | | | | | -0.429*** 0.065 | -0.872*** 0.218 |
| Direct Democracy = 1 × Importance=4 | | | | | -0.388*** 0.078 | -0.957*** 0.269 |
| Direct Democracy = 0 × Importance=5 | | | | | -0.74*** 0.068 | -0.462*** 0.234 |
| Direct Democracy = 1 × Importance=5 | | | | | -0.498*** 0.108 | -0.12 0.31 |
| CDU | | -0.049 0.052 | -0.11 0.12 | -0.007 0.124 | | |
| SPD | | -0.024 0.055 | -0.27** 0.126 | -0.273** 0.132 | | |
| Parliament | | 0.055 0.052 | 0.066 0.116 | 0.116 0.124 | | |
| CDU x Importance | | | 0.019 0.035 | -0.014 0.038 | | |
| SPD x Importance | | | 0.073* 0.039 | 0.085** 0.043 | | |
| Parliament x Importance | | | -0.002 0.037 | -0.008 0.039 | | |
| Scenario 2 | | | 0.098** 0.04 | 0.144*** 0.043 | 0.089** 0.041 | 0.094** 0.04 |
| Scenario 3 | | | -0.05 0.042 | 0.054 0.042 | -0.062 0.042 | -0.057 0.042 |
| Vote CDU | | | 0.044 0.044 | 0.043 0.048 | 0.036 0.043 | 0.039 0.044 |
| Vote SPD | | | 0.021 0.039 | 0.013 0.042 | 0.229 0.039 | 0.022 0.039 |
| Influence Vote | | | 0.075*** 0.021 | 0.054** 0.021 | 0.070*** 0.021 | 0.071*** 0.021 |
| Intercept | 2.061*** 0.061 | 2.061*** 0.068 | 2.239*** 0.121 | 2.167*** 0.131 | 1.941*** 0.093 | 2.001*** 0.114 |
| CDU x each importance level | | | | | | included |
| SPD x each importance level | | | | | | included |
| Parliament x each importance level | | | | | | included |
| N | 1839 | 1839 | 1839 | 1436 | 1839 | 1839 |
| R ² | 0.653 | 0.654 | 0.662 | 0.637 | 0.662 | 0.666 |
| χ ² | 2496.647 | 2511.261 | 2739.98 | 2180.658 | 2871.42 | 3134.72 |

* p < .1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

Table 3: Random effects regression with acceptance of a decision as the depended variable. Standard errors in parentheses. Based on the full dataset (decisions arrived at by political parties, through direct democracy, and expert committees). For details on the variables and summary statistics, see Table

In Models 10 and 11 we again remove the functional form restriction on importance and include interactions between `Direct Democracy` and each level of `Importance`. In Model 10 we replicate Model 5 for the whole dataset; again we observe the same effect of direct democracy and importance on the acceptance of political decisions. The acceptance of decisions generally declines with increasing importance of the issue, but it does so at a considerably faster rate in systems with intermediary decision makers. As predicted, the latter seem to be more acceptable in cases where the issue is less important, while direct-democratic decisions meet significant higher acceptance levels for important decisions. For issues of low importance direct democracy leads to significantly lower acceptance than political representation ($p=0.042$), while for important issues direct democracy leads to significantly higher level of acceptance ($p=0.016$). Figure 3 visualizes the marginal effects of direct democracy for each level of importance as featured in Model 10 with all control variables included. In other words, it depicts how large the *additional* effect of `Direct Democracy` in comparison to the other decision modes is for each level of importance. As the confidence intervals indicate, we do not see significant differences for moderate importance levels but we do see that the procedure does make for a significant difference between issues that are not considered important (1) and issues that are considered very important (5), on both ends of the scale. If an issue is considered very important, direct-democratic procedures lead to significantly higher acceptance rates.

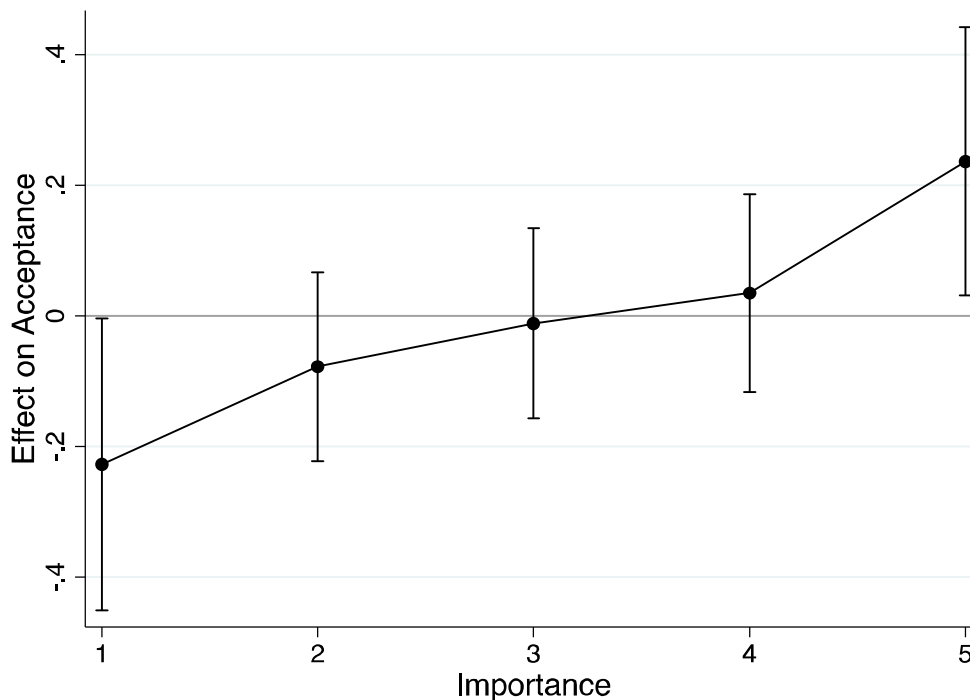


Figure 3 Average Marginal Effects of Direct Democracy. Based on Model 10 with 95 percent confidence intervals, fixing all other model terms.

Finally, Model 11 includes interactions between SPD, CDU, the majority of parties in Parliament and each importance level (not reported in the table). Note that the coefficients of the interactions between

direct democracy and the importance levels are with respect to experts committees and the lowest importance level in this model. The effect demonstrated for the comparison between direct democracy and party decisions can be confirmed for the comparison of direct democracy and expert committees.

5 Conclusion

This paper addresses the question whether direct-democratic institutions lead to decisions with higher acceptance among voters. Our findings suggest that there is no inherent taste for any of the institutions studied. However, we find noticeable differences when we analyze the acceptance levels that different decision processes generate depending on the relevance of the issue at stake. A direct-democratic procedure produced higher acceptance for issues which are dear to voters, while institutions with intermediaries—like political parties or expert committees—seem to be slightly better equipped for low-importance, everyday decision-making situations.

This finding confirms that citizens question decisions made by parties in situations where they are intrinsically motivated to get informed, whereas the decision-making procedure does not matter in less sensitive contexts. Apparently, political parties work well in everyday policy-making contexts where citizens do not have enough resources to acquire knowledge about current issues. In these situations, parties provide easy-to-grasp information packages, or “brands” or “labels” (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2008), which reduce information costs and increase efficiency for voters. This argument may not hold when voters find a decision so important that they inform themselves on the subject—irrespective the cost of information. They rather feel intrinsically motivated to become informed and decide for themselves. Parties as intermediaries are one step removed from the electorate, their decisions are perceived as being beyond the control of the individual voter and decoupled from the electorate at large. Voters seem to perceive direct democracy as a more acceptable procedure to reach a decision when the issue at stake is important to them individually.

Moreover, minorities may be more inclined to accept a decision if it was not made by some aloof representative but by a broader majority of the people. This is in line with pervasive survey evidence finding that voters trust decisions arrived at by the people at large more than those made by their representatives (e.g., see Initiative and Referendum Almanac, Waters 2004). Our findings may also be read to support research that has found that (“hot”) pure preference issues are best decided by direct means while representative procedures are more suitable for (“cool”) matters of low importance and requiring technical expertise (Matsusaka 1992).

From the perspective of decision acceptance or procedural utility, direct-democratic procedures are significantly more efficient when issues are perceived to be important. Why should this perspective matter? The acceptance of core political institutions is a cornerstone of liberal democratic thinking (Cohen 1986; Riker 1982). A major divergence between acceptance of institutions and institutional reality might be more detrimental to the persistence of a polity than a major divergence between the actual and the desired efficacy of the same institutions. Future research may shed more light on the relation between both.

The severity of the issue might be one of the reasons for the adoption of direct-democratic expansion by several political parties in Western democracies (see Scarrow 1999). With such movements, parties can increase acceptance and escape political disenchantment. Research on party systems will show how political parties will cope with the challenges outlined in this article (see also the existing work of Katz and Mair 1995 and Scarrow 1999), and whether they continue to be the dominant form of political decision making as in the last two centuries.

Finally, future research should delimit the boundaries of our findings. Our study was conducted in a Western European consensual democracy at the state level involving responses to an online survey. It would be interesting to explore the role of institutions like plurality versus proportional election systems or pluralist versus corporatist interest intermediation. While the amount of party divergence is similar under proportional representation and plurality rule (Ansolabehere et al. 2012), both may constrain the perceptions of procedural legitimacy in complex ways. Furthermore, the institutions may themselves be a result of underlying cultural traits and preferences for majoritarianism or consensualism (for a related finding on judicial reviews of controversial issues, see Fontana and Braman 2012).

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Appendix: Supplementary information

A.1 Additional figures

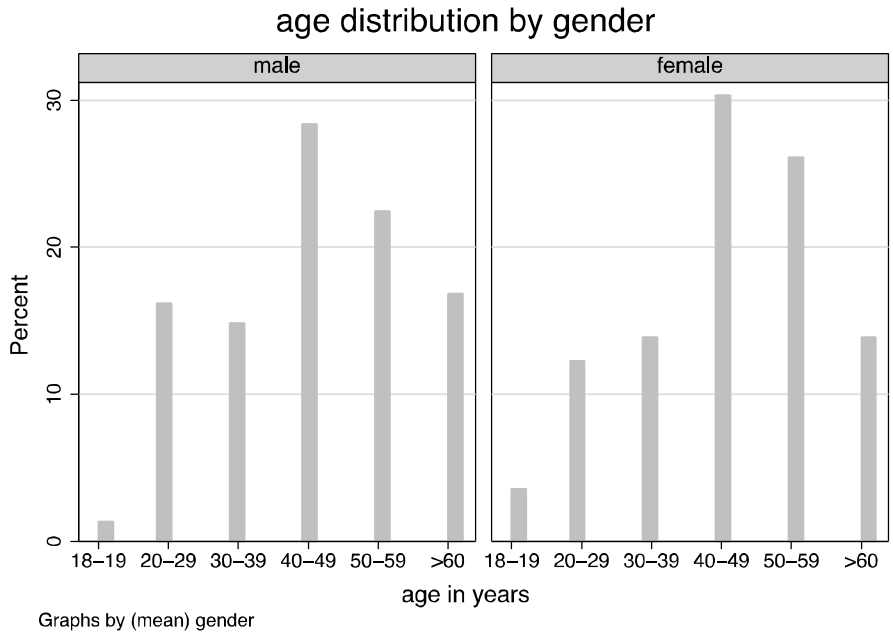


Figure 5: Distribution of age by gender in sample

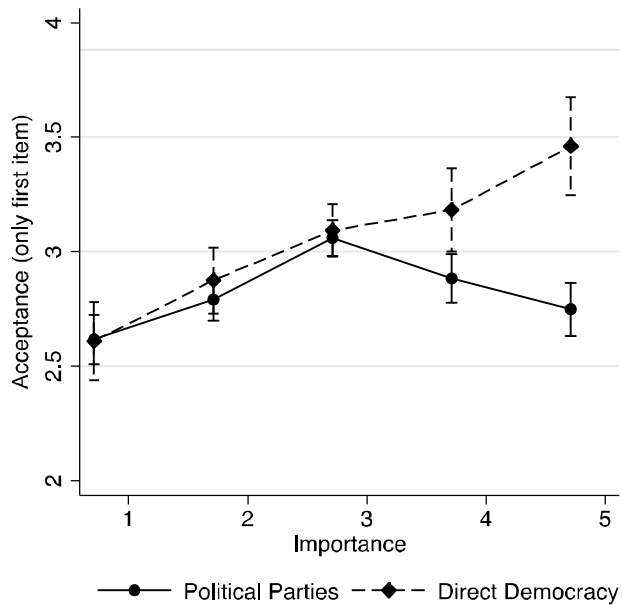


Figure 6: Mean acceptance rate (only first item of acceptance scale) and standard errors by decision mode for different importance levels.

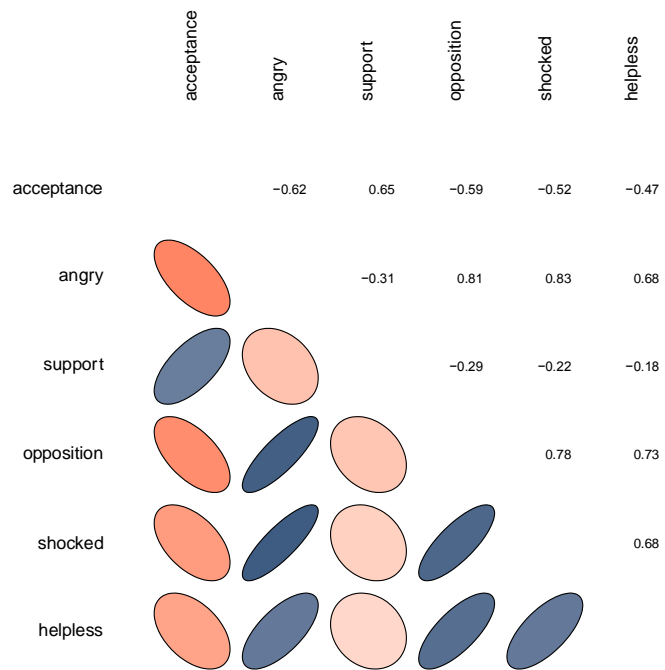


Figure 7: Correlations between items used to construct the dependent variable “acceptance”. Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.85$.

| Acceptance | Acceptance Scale | Item _ Accept | Item _ Angry | Item _ Support | Item _ Resistance | Item _ Helpless |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Agreement | 0.802*** 0.017 | 1.051*** 0.02 | 0.856*** 0.024 | 0.762*** 0.026 | 0.792*** 0.025 | 0.549*** 0.026 |
| Importance | -0.32*** 0.103 | -0.185 0.161 | -0.366** 0.16 | -0.44*** 0.161 | -0.311** 0.156 | -0.308* 0.174 |
| Direct Democracy | -0.187*** 0.013 | -0.005 0.019 | -0.452*** 0.02 | 0.301*** 0.021 | -0.451*** 0.021 | -0.325 0.023 |
| Direct Democracy × Importance | 0.105*** 0.032 | 0.089** 0.045 | 0.115** 0.046 | 0.119** 0.048 | 0.106** 0.049 | 0.096* 0.051 |
| Intercept | 2.061*** 0.061 | 0.352*** 0.086 | 3.2*** 0.096 | -0.614*** 0.094 | 3.472*** 0.095 | 3.883*** 0.088 |
| N | 1839 | 1839 | 1839 | 1839 | 1839 | 1839 |
| r2_o | 0.653 | 0.618 | 0.55 | 0.456 | 0.52 | 0.311 |
| chi2 | 2496.647 | 3209.431 | 2130.542 | 1213.632 | 1455.753 | 510.529 |

* p< .1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table 4: Acceptance of a decision as the depended variable with reported coefficients and standard errors in parentheses. Replicating the main result from table 3 with each item of the acceptance score.

A.2 Scenarios

We employed a 3×5×2 factorial design to test for differential acceptance rates of political decisions, varying the decision-making mechanism, the issue scenario, and a positive versus negative framing of the decision problem. In the following, we will describe the structure of the scenarios, translated from the original German online questionnaire with added emphasis and negative frames given in square brackets. Original scenarios were without emphasis and brackets. In the bold part of the example scenario, we manipulate the decision-making process; in the part in italics, we manipulate the issue of the scenario; and with the square brackets we manipulate the positive/negative framing.

The first issue used in the scenarios was on nuclear power. One example of the scenarios with nuclear power reads as follows:

“Please imagine that after the state election on March 27, 2011, the **majority of the Members of Parliament of Rhineland-Palatinate (of various parties) makes the following decision** concerning nuclear power: *The state of Rhineland-Palatinate will [will not] campaign for revising the decision concerning longer remaining service lives for nuclear power plants.*”

The second issue scenario is about the introduction of a centralized secondary school-leaving examination (instead of a decentralized examination). In this case, the second emphasized text portion in the above decision task was replaced by:

The centralized high-school examination will [will not] be introduced in Rhineland-Palatinate.

Topic 3 deals with the introduction of Islamic education in public schools:

Public schools in Rhineland-Palatinate should [should not] offer Islamic religious education in German language.

The differential effects of five decision-making procedures are tested by the following replacements of the first emphasized text portion in the above task. These descriptions correspond to a decision made by (a) a direct-democratic procedure; (b) an expert committee; (c) the party CDU; (d) the party SPD; (e) the majority of parties, i.e., the parliament.

(a) **based on a direct-democratic procedure, the following decision is made**

(b) **a commission of experts is installed, which reaches the following decision**

(c) **the majority of the members of Parliament of Rhineland-Palatinate follow a petition of the Christian-Democratic Party and make the following decision**

(d) **the majority of the members of Parliament of Rhineland-Palatinate follow a petition of the Social-Democratic Party and make the following decision**

(e) **the majority of the members of Parliament (from diverse parties) makes the following decision**