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## Support for deliberative mini-publics among the losers of representative democracy

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, democratic innovations, and particularly deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) have received growing scholarly attention. DMPs are defined as “*carefully designed forums where a representative subset of the wider population (is selected and) come together to engage in open, inclusive, informed and consequential discussions on one or more issues*” (Curato et al. 2021, 3). The POLITICIZE project has identified 127 deliberative citizens’ assemblies at the national and regional level in Europe since 2000, most of them after 2015 (Paulis et al. 2020).<sup>1</sup> In a report released in 2020, the OECD referred to the growing interest for these institutions in Europe as a “deliberative wave” (OECD 2020). This abundance of experience has often been interpreted through the prism of the “deliberative turn” by political theory (Goodin 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> For an updated list, see <http://politicize.eu/inventory-dmps/>.

In parallel to their growing use, scholars have focused on evaluating the level of public support for deliberative mini-publics in shaping policy decisions. The main conclusion of these studies is that citizens who are politically dissatisfied and/or are unhappy with representative politics are those most likely to support a greater role for these democratic innovations (Bedock and Pilet 2020, 2021; Goldberg and Bächtiger 2022; Jacquet, Niessen, and Reuchamps 2022; Walsh and Elkink 2021). However, the sources of political dissatisfaction that trigger this greater support for mini-publics are less clear.

In this article, we claim that this dissatisfaction is rooted in a position of losers of representative democracy, which we could describe as being in a situation of “persistent minority” within the democratic system (Abizadeh 2021; Christiano 1994). It is well established that being on the losers’ side of representative democracy is associated with a lower degree of political satisfaction (Anderson et al. 2005), and leads to being more open to various forms of institutional change that challenge the purely representative logic (Bowler and Donovan 2019; Bowler, Donovan, and Karp 2007; Smith, Tolbert, and Keller 2010; Ceka and Magalhaes 2020). We extend these arguments to examine support for deliberative mini-publics as a key to understanding the link between political dissatisfaction and backing this type of democratic innovation. In this study, we explore various situations in which citizens may feel as though they are on the losing side in representative democracy and would therefore be inclined to support a greater role for mini-publics. We argue that it is the position of being a “loser of representative democracy” that explains the recurring findings that citizens who are more politically dissatisfied are most favourable to mini-publics (Goldberg and Bächtiger, 2022).

Specifically, we investigate three different situations in which a citizen might feel that they are on the losing side of representative democracy. First, we look at the effect of voting for a party that is not in government on support for mini-publics. Then, we build on a classical conceptualization of political representation (Pitkin 1967) and look at its descriptive and

substantive facets. We examine descriptive representation by testing whether citizens belonging to socio-demographic groups that are under-represented in parliament are more supportive of mini-publics. Then, we look at substantive representation by examining whether citizens whose political views are less accurately represented in parliament and in government are more likely to be supportive of mini-publics. The three situations are tested separately in our study to examine how they are linked to support for mini-publics.

Building on survey data from over 15,000 citizens across 15 Western European countries, our findings confirm that there is a link between being a ‘loser’ of representative democracy and supporting the use of deliberative mini-publics to replace elected politicians. Citizens who are descriptively and substantively underrepresented and/or citizens who vote for opposition parties are more favourable to the idea of moving away from the classical representative model of democracy and are thus more likely to support DMPs. The three "losing" situations we examine influence support for DMPs, although the magnitude of effects varies to some extent. Poor substantive representation in particular seems to drive citizens to support giving mini-publics a greater role in replacing elected politicians.

This article contributes to several fields of political science. It first engages, logically, with the growing community of scholars studying this form of democratic innovation, but its scope extends well beyond that. It also connects to the broader literature on various reforms that have expanded the scope of citizen participation in policy-making. As explained by Manin (1997), the history of representative democracy involves the slow, difficult, and lengthy inclusion of the masses by political elites who are often reluctant to relinquish part of their power to ordinary citizens. In this respect, our study can relate to earlier works on support and opposition for electoral reforms (Bowler and Donovan, 2007; Przeworski, 2009) as well as support for instruments of direct democracy (Bowler and Donovan 2019; Schuck and de Vreese 2015). The

study also contributes to broader debates on process preferences (Hibbing et al., 2023; Pilet et al., 2023). Within this field of research, authors have not only examined preferences for greater citizen involvement but also for other political actors (experts, strong leaders, or political outsiders such as businesspeople or religious leaders). One of the key findings of this literature is the fact that support for alternatives to representative democracy is rooted in political dissatisfaction (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017; Bertsou and Caramani, 2022; Gherghina and Geissel, 2020; Webb, 2013). By examining the mechanisms linking political dissatisfaction and support for mini-publics, this article could pave the way for similar approaches to study other models of government. Finally, this article also contributes to the broader debate on the consequences of inequalities in representation and on losers' consent (Anderson et al., 2005; Hansen et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2012; Schäfer, 2012). This literature has mostly focused on how this might affect citizens' attitudes towards policy-making within the representative model and support for representative actors and institutions. With this article, we shift the focus by considering how it could affect support for alternatives to this model of government.

## **2. Theory and hypotheses: Support for mini-publics and losers of representative democracy**

### *Political dissatisfaction and support for deliberative mini-publics*

A new strand of literature on public support for mini-publics has proliferated in recent years, enriching the existing works on support for various process preferences such as referendums (Bowler and Donovan 2019; Schuck and de Vreese 2015; Smith, Tolbert, and Keller 2010; Werner 2020; Werner, Marien, and Felicetti 2020), electoral reforms (Bowler and Donovan 2007), or technocracy (Beiser-McGrath et al. 2022; Bertsou 2022; Bertsou and Caramani 2020;

Bertsou and Pastorella 2017). Studies have examined what kind of mini-publics (consultative, binding, with few or many participants...) were more popular among citizens (Bedock and Pilet 2020; Christensen 2020; Goldberg 2021; Goldberg and Bächtiger 2022; Pow 2021; Rojon, Rijken, and Klandermans 2019), as well as how mini-publics affect the perceived legitimacy of policy decisions (Boulianne 2018; Christensen 2020; Jacobs and Kaufmann 2021). This article dialogues with another strand of research that assesses which citizens are more supportive of deliberative mini-publics.

Authors have identified several factors that influence citizens' support for mini-publics. Some have stressed the role of political attitudes such as political efficacy, political interest, social trust, or left-right self-placement (Christensen and von Schoultz 2019; García-Espín and Ganuza 2017; Gherghina and Geissel 2020; Jacquet, Niessen, and Reuchamps 2022; Rojon and Pilet 2021). Others underline the effect of socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, and education (Coffé and Michels 2014; Már and Gastil 2021; del Río, Navarro, and Font 2016; Vandamme et al. 2018). These explanations also apply to support for models of government that broadly give citizens a greater role (Bengtsson and Christensen 2016; Font, Wojcieszak, and Navarro 2015; Gherghina and Geissel 2020; Webb 2013) or for other instruments of citizen participation such as referendums (Bowler and Donovan 2019; Bowler, Donovan, and Karp 2007; Schuck and de Vreese 2015). However, the influence of those factors on support for deliberative mini-publics and for greater citizen participation has not been systematically confirmed. Their robustness varies across studies and countries.

The single factor for which results are most consistent is political dissatisfaction. Support for mini-publics is greater among citizens who are politically dissatisfied. This correlation has been observed in a variety of studies. Bowler and colleagues (2007) talk about "enraged citizens" to refer to the association between dissatisfaction and support for reforms which give citizens a greater role in policy-making (see also Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Gherghina and Geissel

2020; Jacquet, Niessen, and Reuchamps 2022; Webb 2013). Political dissatisfaction is also related to support for deliberative mini-publics. Pilet and colleagues (2022) recently established that dissatisfaction with the ruling political elites is the strongest driver of support for deliberative mini-publics across 15 European democracies. In the same vein, in this journal, Goldberg and Bächtiger (2022) underlined that support for DMPs is not very widespread among German citizens, especially when it comes to giving such citizens' assemblies a role that is more than consultative. Yet, support becomes more pronounced when they look specifically at the attitudes of politically dissatisfied citizens.

### *Losers' consent and support for deliberative mini-publics*

Even though the evidence about the impact of political dissatisfaction on support for mini-publics is significant, the roots of political dissatisfaction that lead citizens to believe that citizen assemblies could improve the situation remain unclear. This study analyses the sources of political dissatisfaction that may trigger support for deliberative mini-publics. It tries to understand why a low degree of satisfaction with democracy is associated with support for mini-publics.

In particular, we believe, like Kriesi (2020, 246), that democratic dissatisfaction is rooted in deficits of political representation and that a key driver of political dissatisfaction is the fact of being a loser of representative democracy. This idea also relates to the concept of "permanent (or persistent) minority" coined by political theorists (Abizadeh 2021; Christiano 1994): in a democracy, there are individuals who never have the capacity to influence political decisions due to their social and demographic characteristics, ideological preferences, or political choices. We develop a similar argument and examine whether citizens in a position of permanent minority are indeed more likely to be dissatisfied with representative policies and supportive of deliberative mini-publics. Interestingly, political theory has also shown that a lottery could be a solution to the issue of persistent minority (Saunders 2010). We rely on three dimensions of political representation: political preferences (through voting choice), descriptive representation, and policy congruence.

Our first hypothesis builds on the dimension of voting choice and government composition and on the literature on loser's consent. Research has shown that, especially in Western democracies, those who lost the election are more politically dissatisfied (among many other studies, see Anderson et al. 2005; Blais and G lineau 2007; Farrer and Zingher 2019). In particular, voting for a party that does not enter government has a significant effect on political



dissatisfaction (Singh, Karakoç, and Blais 2012). As Anderson and colleagues explain “losing seems to be one of the first steps in the direction of (institutional) change and reform” (Anderson et al. 2005, 181). Losers of elections are more prone to support change in various institutions. For example, supporters of parties that were most often in the opposition are more likely to support electoral reforms (Vowles et al. 2002; Wenzel, Bowler, and Lanoue 2000). Other authors have demonstrated that election losers are more inclined to support reforms that increase citizens’ direct participation in policy decisions (Bowler and Donovan 2019; Bowler, Donovan, and Karp 2007; Smith, Tolbert, and Keller 2010). Consequently, we expect that the same holds true for deliberative mini-publics.

**H1a.** Voters of parties that are in the opposition are more likely to support giving deliberative mini-publics a greater role.

However, a distinction should be made between voters of parties who are in opposition but might have been in power before, and supporters of parties who remain permanently out of power. The latter may feel more alienated by representative democracy than the former (Bedock and Panel 2017), who could hope to return to government in the near future. We therefore expect that supporters of parties that never come to power are more likely to support a radical change involving the replacement of elected politicians by a mini-public.

**H1b.** Voters of parties that are constantly in the opposition are more likely to support giving deliberative mini-publics a greater role.

### *Descriptive representation and support for deliberative mini-publics*

The notion of 'losers' of representative democracy should not be limited to having voted for a party that remains in opposition. It also relates to citizens' ability to be well represented within representative institutions. Here, we reference Pitkin's work on the concept of representation and examine two facets of representation: descriptive and substantive (Pitkin, 1967). Descriptive representation refers to the politics of presence and the idea that citizens may feel better represented by elected politicians with whom they share similar sociodemographic characteristics. From this perspective, the assembly should mirror society (Pitkin, 1967: 61). However, this is rarely the case in reality. Elected politicians are predominantly male, well-educated, economically well-off, and from the majority ethnic group. Citizens with different profiles – women, those with a low level of formal education, economically disadvantaged individuals, and ethnic minorities – are often not descriptively well represented in most parliaments (Bovens and Wille 2017; Giger, Rosset, and Bernauer 2012; Wängnerud 2009). This lack of descriptive representation affects their satisfaction with representative democracy (Arnesen and Peters 2018).

Inadequate descriptive representation could be considered another facet of being a 'loser' of representative democracy, potentially leading to greater support for DMPs. Since citizens' assemblies are generally composed through sortition to reflect the general population, the hypothesis regarding descriptive representation and support for DMPs appears plausible (Curato et al., 2021). A few studies have recently begun to explore this question and seem to indicate that citizens from descriptively underrepresented groups support democratic innovations (van der Does and Kantorowicz 2022; Gherghina, Mokre, and Miscoiu 2021; Talukder and Pilet 2021). However, these findings are based on single-country studies, while

the presence of women, citizens with lower levels of formal education, or economically worse-off citizens may differ across countries. Our data, derived from a survey across 15 countries, allows us to test the impact of gender, education, and (subjective) income on support for DMPs. However, some recent studies have critically examined the characterization of underrepresented groups based solely on single aspects such as gender, income, or education. They argue for the importance of acknowledging the fluid nature of political identities (Martínez-Palacios 2017; Wojciechowska 2019) and emphasize the need to consider intersectional theories when addressing political representation (Severs, Celis, and Erzeel 2016).

By focusing exclusively on these three characteristics, the concerns of citizens from smaller groups (e.g., natives or unregistered individuals) who may not feel represented are often neglected. Although citizens from highly disempowered and smaller groups might not feel entirely descriptively represented within small-scale DMPs due to limited representation opportunities, they may still feel partly represented by selected citizens who share at least one characteristic with them (e.g., gender, income, or formal education).

Examining whether citizens belonging to these smaller groups feel particularly misrepresented would be valuable. However, conducting such research would require highly specific data and a substantial number of respondents to draw meaningful conclusions.

H2. Women are more likely to support giving deliberative mini-publics a greater role.

H3. Citizens with a lower level of formal education are more likely to support giving deliberative mini-publics a greater role.

H4. Citizens with lower incomes are more likely to support giving deliberative mini-publics a greater role.

*Substantive representation and support for deliberative mini-publics*

Another facet of representation underlined by Pitkin is substantive representation. This refers to the idea that citizens choose elected politicians who do not necessarily share their sociodemographic characteristics, but who share their ideas and policy preferences, and would therefore support their interests in parliament (Pitkin, 1967: 142). However, here again, research has shown that not all citizens are equally substantively well represented (Ellis 2012; Giger, Rosset, and Bernauer 2012; Griffin and Newman 2007; Griffin, Newman, and Wolbrecht 2012; Reher 2018).. Indeed, some citizens hold political views that are only shared by a minority of MPs and are more distant from the dominant views in parliament. Some authors have demonstrated that congruence between citizen preferences and policies positively influences satisfaction with democracy (Ezrow and Xezonakis 2011; Ferland 2021). Substantively underrepresented citizens may also feel they are the losers of representative democracy and thus be more politically dissatisfied (Marié and Talukder 2021; Stecker and Tausendpfund 2016). As a result, we might anticipate that poor representation of one's political views in representative institutions could be associated with greater support for alternative institutions, such as deliberative mini-publics. To date, research has not provided empirical evidence of a link between inadequate substantive representation and support for mini-publics. However, several studies have demonstrated that support for such democratic innovations is higher when citizens perceive that policy decisions adopted in citizen assemblies would more closely align with their own policy preferences (Pilet et al. 2022; see also Landwehr and Harms 2020; Werner 2020; van der Does and Kantorowicz 2022 regarding other instruments of citizen participation).

Consequently, we could expect a relationship between poor substantive representation and support for mini-publics.

H5. Citizens who see their political views less represented are more likely to support giving deliberative mini-publics a greater role.

This hypothesis can be tested for the parliament and the government. Indeed, on the one hand, one might expect that citizens whose policy preferences are badly represented in parliament are more prone to replace elected politicians by randomly selected citizens, as the parliament is the institution that controls the work of the government and where public debates are held. On the other hand, citizens might care more about the policy positions of the government as it is the key actor in the decision-making process. If this were the case, bad substantive representation at the government level would matter more. We will test both these ideas in our study. However, we should also accept the limit of our approach for this hypothesis. By looking at substantive representation in terms of congruence, we assume that voters are able to have clear views on their interests, as well as about how elected politicians represent those interests. Several authors have underlined the limit of such an assumption (see Dahl, 2008). We should keep it in mind in interpreting our findings.

### **3. Data and research design**

To test our hypotheses, we use a web-based survey conducted between March 2nd and April 3rd, 2020, which includes 15,406 respondents from 15 Western European countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands,

Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Respondents were recruited by the survey company DyNata (formerly Survey Sampling International), which employed country-specific quotas based on age, gender, education, and region according to the latest census data. This approach ensures that each national sample is representative of the corresponding country's population in terms of these socio-demographic characteristics. These quotas were strictly enforced throughout the data collection period. The survey, which took approximately 15 minutes to complete, included questions about political attitudes and preferences.

The primary advantage of this comparative survey is that it allows for a more robust test of our hypotheses compared to a single-country study. A cross-country study offers a range of configurations, including different types of opposition parties, variations in the proportion of female MPs and MPs with lower levels of formal education or from less economically well-off groups, and variations in citizens', parliaments', and governments' policy preferences. Additionally, examining 15 Western European countries is particularly relevant for our study. These countries are established democracies with a long tradition of representative democracy, allowing citizens to recognize its strengths and limitations. Recent studies also indicate that most of these countries have held citizen assemblies organized by public authorities at the national or regional level (Paulis et al. 2020). This context increases the likelihood that our respondents are familiar with this democratic innovation, thus enhancing the reliability of their survey responses regarding support for mini-publics.

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<sup>2</sup> The exact sample size per country is: Austria N=976, Belgium N=1,845, Denmark N=997, Finland N=977, France N=977, Germany N=934, Greece N=787, Italy N=990, Ireland N=989, Netherlands N=973, Norway N=992, Portugal N=1,003, Spain N=991, Sweden N=1,001, and United Kingdom N=974. Note that the sample in Belgium is twice as large because it is composed of two separate representative samples, one for the French-speaking community and one for the Dutch-speaking one. The survey also contained attention checks to exclude low quality respondents.

Our dependent variable is based on a survey question asking respondents if they support giving a more significant role to mini-publics. Respondents were first introduced to the concept of deliberative citizens' assemblies selected through sortition with a brief description: "People sometimes talk about the possibility of letting a group of citizens decide instead of politicians. These citizens will be selected by lot within the population and would then gather and deliberate for several days in order to make policy decisions, like politicians do in parliament." While this is a simplification of the institution, it captures its two main characteristics: (1) sortition and (2) deliberation on policy issues. Furthermore, in this type of web-based survey format, written instructions must be concise and straightforward to ensure readability and comprehension, maximizing the likelihood of meaningful responses. The same approach, one based on single-survey items providing basic information about the new decision-making instruments, has been used in several other recent studies on mini-publics (Goldberg 2021; Pow, 2021; Goldberg and Bächtiger 2022; Van Dijk et al., 2023)<sup>3</sup> as well as in earlier studies on support for referendums (Bowler et al., 2007; Schuck and de Vreese, 2015).

After the short description of deliberative citizens' assemblies, we asked respondents to answer the following question: "Overall, do you think it is a good idea to let a group of randomly-selected citizens make decisions instead of politicians on a scale going from 0 (very bad idea) to 10 (very good idea)?" Most respondents understood the question: only 5% of all respondents answered 'don't know' to this question. We removed these respondents from the dataset.

An important aspect to consider is that the survey question refers to deliberative citizens' assemblies as an alternative policymaking institution. This differs from most real-life cases of citizens' assemblies, which primarily serve a consultative role (Paulis et al. 2020; Setälä 2017;

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<sup>3</sup> See also the recent study by Golberg, Wyss and Bächtiger (2020) on the consistency and stability of survey answers to questions on support for mini-publics.

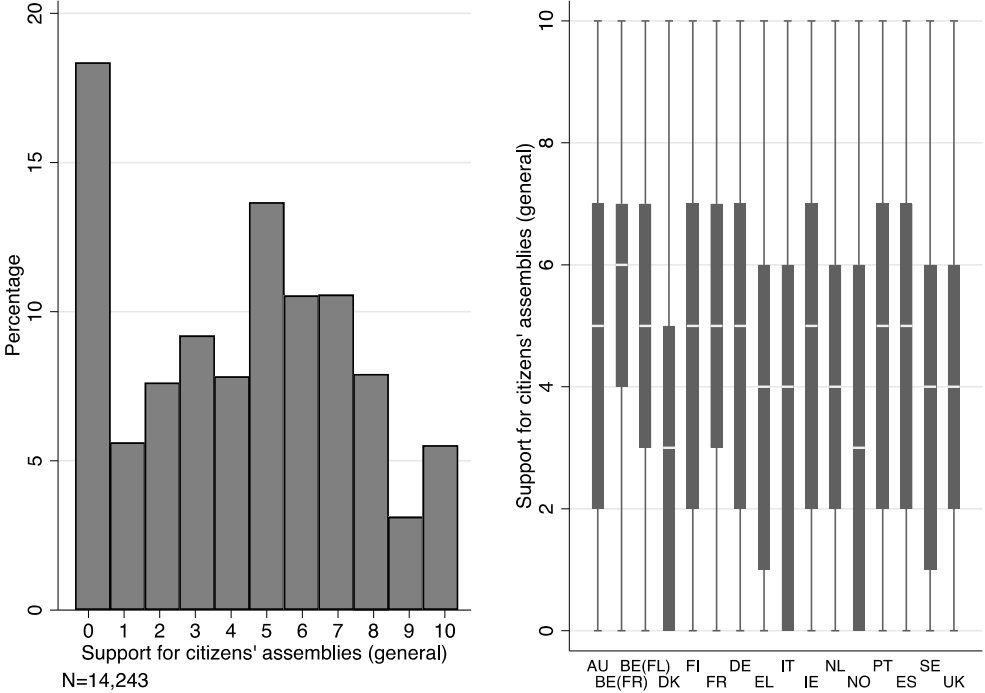
Setälä and Smith 2018). Nevertheless, we chose to present a decision-making version of the institution to better reveal respondents' preferences by raising the stakes. We were concerned that even those who do not particularly favour deliberative citizens' assemblies might still report some support for a consultative version of the institution because they perceive it as "harmless" (see Goldberg and Bächtiger, 2022). However, we kept the radical nature of the question in mind when interpreting the results below, since previous studies suggest a higher level of public support for the consultative version than the decision-making one (Bedock and Pilet 2020; Rojon, Rijken, and Klandermans 2019).

The left panel of Figure 1 displays the distribution of the dependent variable among all respondents in the form of a histogram. First, it reveals that support for deliberative citizens' assemblies is not particularly high, with a median value of 4.32 on a 0-10 scale.

We must be cautious when interpreting this result given the decisional nature of the institution presented in the survey (see above). Second, there are large standard deviations (3.05). This high dispersion appears to be mainly driven by the high proportion of respondents (about 18%) who think that citizens' assemblies are a "very bad idea" (0 on the 0-10 scale). By contrast, about 6% think that the institution is a "very good idea" (10 on the 0-10 scale).



**Figure 1. Distribution of the level of support for deliberative mini-publics to replace elected politicians.**



The right panel of Figure 1 reports the distribution of support for deliberative citizens’ assemblies per country in the form of boxplots. It reveals that the median is either 4 or 5 on the 0-10 scale, the first quartile either 2 or 3, and the third one either 6 or 7. Strikingly, support for deliberative citizens’ assemblies is relatively constant across countries. The largest difference in median values is between Norway and Denmark (median value around 3) and Francophone Belgium (median value around 6). There may be a relationship between the level of familiarity with this tool and support for DMPs across countries: indeed, both Norway and Denmark have never implemented mini-publics whereas French-speaking Belgium has witnessed numerous examples in recent years (Paulis et al. 2020).

Regarding our independent variables, our first set of hypotheses (H1a and H1b) posits that election losers, defined as those who voted for a party that ended up in opposition, are more supportive of mini-publics. We differentiate between those who voted for a party currently in opposition (H1a) and those who vote for parties consistently in opposition between 2000 and 2020 (H1b).

Our operationalization is based on respondents' vote choice and does not capture partisanship, which refers to the intensity of attachment voters might have to a specific party. This concept is particularly important in US politics, where most voters strongly or weakly identify with one of the two main parties (Keith et al., 1992). In Europe, by contrast, partisanship is also relevant but tends to be more fluid, as party systems are more fragmented and facilitate electoral volatility (Huddy et al., 2018; Dassonneville, 2022). Since our study covers 15 Western European democracies, we have chosen to analyse vote choice to determine whether voters would be classified as election losers or winners. It would have been intriguing to also examine the intensity of their attachment to the party they voted for. Regrettably, such a measure of partisanship was not available in the survey.

Then, as developed in the theoretical section, those who are descriptively underrepresented in the Parliament could also be considered to be “losers” of representative democracy. In order to test H2 to H4, we included sex (women/men), level of formal education (Lower secondary education or less, Higher secondary education, Tertiary education) and perception of household income (living comfortably, coping, difficult, very difficult), considering that in all countries, women, individuals with a lower level of formal education, and those who feel they are facing financial strains are underrepresented in parliament.

The last hypothesis of our theoretical framework (H5) tackles the issue of substantive (under)representation and is operationalized as opinion-congruence (Ezrow and Xezonakis 2011; Kirkland and Banda 2019; Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017). More specifically, we

collected the ideological position of all political parties represented in parliament in all 15 countries based on the latest (2019) Chapel Hill Expert Survey Data. To compute a score of opinion-congruence, we combined the Chapel Hill Expert Survey Data with each respondent's self-placement on the left-right axis. To operationalise the data, we first computed a mean position of the parliament on the left-right axis based on the share of seats of each party represented in parliament. Then, we computed the absolute distance between the parliament's mean position and each respondent's self-placement on the left-right axis. Similarly, we computed the mean ideological position of the government and then computed the absolute distance between the government and the ideological position of each citizen. Consequently, a perfectly congruent respondent would have a score of 0 while a score over 0 would indicate lower opinion congruence between the respondent and the parliament (either toward the left or the right).

In addition to these variables on losers of representative democracy, we also incorporate the variable "satisfaction with democracy" (SWD) into our models. As previously discussed, the most consistent finding regarding support for mini-publics is that they are more widely supported by politically dissatisfied citizens (see Goldberg and Bächtiger 2022 in this journal). Our aim with this study is to demonstrate that underlying dissatisfaction with democracy is the experience of being a loser of representative democracy. This feeling leads to increased criticism of the way democracy is functioning and, subsequently, support for alternatives such as mini-publics<sup>4</sup>.

Finally, we included two control variables that might affect citizens' support for deliberative democracy according to earlier studies: political efficacy and age. Indeed, as mentioned in the

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<sup>4</sup> One could argue that satisfaction with democracy and our variables related to losers of representative democracy capture the same variance among our respondents. However, correlation tests provided in the online appendix demonstrate that although there is some association, there is no strict overlap. Further evidence can be found in the structural equation models discussed below, with full details available in the online appendix.

literature section, several studies have shown that citizens who feel more competent are more supportive of deliberative instruments, while older citizens are less in favour of such democratic innovations (Christensen and von Schoultz 2019; García-Espín and Ganuza 2017; Gherghina and Geissel 2020; Jacquet, Niessen, and Reuchamps 2022; Rojon and Pilet 2021).

In terms of modelling, we take advantage of the cross-country survey and perform mixed-effects regression models using restricted maximum likelihood, in order to take into account the multilevel nature of our data (which includes 15 clusters) and to overcome the small-n problem at level-2 units (Stegmueller 2013). We follow the procedure recommended by Elff et al. (2021) and use restricted maximum likelihood estimators for variance parameters and a t-distribution with appropriate degrees of freedom for statistical inferences (using Satterthwaite's method). Restricted maximum likelihood facilitates the analysis of data with a hierarchical structure and estimates the variance components of random effects that cannot be explained by fixed effects in a computationally efficient manner. This method also accounts for biases related to the non-normal distribution of error terms.<sup>5</sup>

#### **4. Results**

To test our hypotheses, we run mixed-effects regression models in which we include each independent variable separately and then run a model with all independent variables. Table 1 below shows the results of our analyses. Model 0 integrates two key control variables according to the literature: political efficacy and satisfaction with democracy. Model 1 focuses on citizens' vote and more specifically on voting for an opposition party. The second and third models focus

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<sup>5</sup> Given that our dependent variable is not normally distributed, we also tested multinomial logit models with robust standard errors. We trichotomized our dependent variable to differentiate supporters (those who gave a score between 7 and 10 to the idea of using DMPs to replace elected politicians), opponents (score between 0 and 3), and individuals who are neutral (score between 4 and 6). This robustness check shows that the variables analyzed in our study explain the difference between opponents and supporters of deliberative mini-publics (see Appendix 2).

on ideological congruence with the government and the parliament.<sup>6</sup> The fourth model focuses on descriptive underrepresentation. Finally, the fifth (with ideological congruence with the government) and the sixth (with ideological congruence with the parliament) models integrate all variables together.

The results corroborate several hypotheses while rejecting others. Overall, our findings are in line with our general expectation: being a loser of the representative system stimulates support for deliberative democracy *even* when satisfaction with democracy is controlled for. Our results apply to the various facets of being a loser of representative democracy (voting for an opposition party, low descriptive representation, and bad substantive representation).

First of all, both H1a and H1b are confirmed. Those who vote for opposition parties are more supportive of deliberative mini-publics replacing the elites by citizens selected by lot. The effect is observed for both voters of parties currently in opposition but with a history of being in power, as well as for parties that consistently remain in opposition. The magnitude of the effect is even larger in the latter case, confirming H1b, which posits that permanent election losers are more likely to support a shift away from a representative logic.

These findings are confirmed both in model 1 and in models 5 and 6. Model 5 predicts that those who vote for a government party give deliberative mini-publics an average rating of 4, whereas this score reaches 4.5 for respondents who vote for a party permanently in opposition. It is also striking that individuals who abstained are not more supportive of DMPs compared to those who voted for a party in government. This suggests that those who express a vote for an opposition party should not be lumped together with non-voters when it comes to attitudes towards DMPs: “voice” (vote for an opposition party) leads to a more critical stance towards the representative status quo compared to “exit” (electoral abstention).

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<sup>6</sup> More specifically, we did not integrate those two variables in the same model as they are highly correlated (>0,8).

Table 1. Determinants of support for the replacement of elected politicians by randomly selected citizens (Mixed-effects regressions with restricted maximum likelihood)

	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<i>Vote (ref = voted for a government party)</i>							
Abstained		0.103 (0.0855)				0.0836 (0.0916)	0.0875 (0.0919)
Voted for a party permanently in opposition		<b>0.460***</b> (0.0709)				<b>0.497***</b> (0.0734)	<b>0.510***</b> (0.0735)
Voted for a party currently in opposition		<b>0.267***</b> (0.0763)				<b>0.306***</b> (0.0778)	<b>0.334***</b> (0.0781)
Ideological incongruence with government			<b>1.179***</b> (0.172)			<b>1.177***</b> (0.173)	
Ideological incongruence with Parliament				<b>0.785***</b> (0.166)			<b>0.821***</b> (0.167)
<i>Education (ref. Tertiary)</i>							
1.Lower secondary or less					<b>0.377***</b> (0.0657)	<b>0.397***</b> (0.0688)	<b>0.399***</b> (0.0688)
2. Higher secondary					<b>0.225***</b> (0.0637)	<b>0.210**</b> (0.0662)	<b>0.214**</b> (0.0663)
<i>Perception income (ref. living comfortably)</i>							
2.Coping					0.123 (0.0676)	<b>0.164*</b> (0.0696)	<b>0.153*</b> (0.0696)
3.Difficult					<b>0.348***</b> (0.0798)	<b>0.377***</b> (0.0831)	<b>0.367***</b> (0.0831)
4.Very difficult					<b>0.583***</b> (0.105)	<b>0.537***</b> (0.111)	<b>0.529***</b> (0.111)
Satisfaction With Democracy	<b>-0.0915***</b> (0.00978)	<b>-0.0739***</b> (0.0103)	<b>-0.0747***</b> (0.0103)	<b>-0.0749***</b> (0.0103)	<b>-0.0726***</b> (0.0101)	<b>-0.0382***</b> (0.0111)	<b>-0.0380***</b> (0.0112)
<i>Politics is too complicated (ref strongly disagree)</i>							
2. Somewhat disagree	<b>0.498***</b>	<b>0.489***</b>	<b>0.585***</b>	<b>0.570***</b>	<b>0.457***</b>	<b>0.533***</b>	<b>0.518***</b>

	(0.0598)	(0.0600)	(0.0620)	(0.0620)	(0.0603)	(0.0626)	(0.0626)
3.Somewhat agree	<b>0.980***</b>	<b>0.990***</b>	<b>1.080***</b>	<b>1.064***</b>	<b>0.912***</b>	<b>1.027***</b>	<b>1.012***</b>
	(0.0710)	(0.0714)	(0.0750)	(0.0750)	(0.0719)	(0.0761)	(0.0761)
4.Strongly agree	<b>1.726***</b>	<b>1.783***</b>	<b>1.936***</b>	<b>1.946***</b>	<b>1.690***</b>	<b>1.928***</b>	<b>1.936***</b>
	(0.113)	(0.114)	(0.122)	(0.122)	(0.114)	(0.123)	(0.123)
Gender (Women =1)	<b>-0.198***</b>	<b>-0.202***</b>	<b>-0.201***</b>	<b>-0.204***</b>	<b>-0.224***</b>	<b>-0.226***</b>	<b>-0.229***</b>
	(0.0510)	(0.0512)	(0.0530)	(0.0531)	(0.0514)	(0.0534)	(0.0535)
Age	<b>-0.0119***</b>	<b>-0.0122***</b>	<b>-0.0139***</b>	<b>-0.0139***</b>	<b>-0.0130***</b>	<b>-0.0156***</b>	<b>-0.0156***</b>
	(0.00163)	(0.00166)	(0.00170)	(0.00170)	(0.00165)	(0.00174)	(0.00174)
Constant	<b>5.102***</b>	<b>4.768***</b>	<b>4.771***</b>	<b>4.850***</b>	<b>4.706***</b>	<b>4.019***</b>	<b>4.081***</b>
	(0.169)	(0.183)	(0.182)	(0.183)	(0.180)	(0.204)	(0.206)
<i>Random effects parameters</i>							
Between-groups variance	<b>0.263***</b>	<b>0.263***</b>	<b>0.299***</b>	<b>0.304***</b>	<b>0.269***</b>	<b>0.296***</b>	<b>0.304***</b>
	(0.100)	(0.100)	(0.113)	(0.115)	(0.102)	(0.112)	(0.115)
Within-groups variance	<b>8.641***</b>	<b>8.621***</b>	<b>8.541***</b>	<b>8.559***</b>	<b>8.606***</b>	<b>8.478***</b>	<b>8.493***</b>
	(0.106)	(0.106)	(0.109)	(0.109)	(0.106)	(0.109)	(0.110)
Observations	13,413	13,299	12,257	12,257	13,238	12,045	12,045
Number of groups	16	16	16	16	16	16	16

Standard errors in parentheses

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

The second, third, and fourth hypotheses pertain to descriptive representation in politics, particularly in parliament. Our results support some of these hypotheses but not all. Citizens with a lower level of formal education (H3) tend to be more in favour of DMPs as a replacement for elected politicians. A similar pattern is observed among citizens who feel their household income does not allow them to live comfortably (H4). The differences recorded for these two variables are relatively similar. Model 5 predicts that respondents with a lower secondary diploma or less assign a rating of 4.5 (on a support scale ranging from 0 to 10) to DMPs, while those with a tertiary level of education and living comfortably on their current income rate them at 4.1. The model predicts that those who feel they live comfortably with their current income assign a rating of 4 to DMPs, whereas those who feel they are really struggling financially give them a rating of 4.6. As citizens with lower incomes and lower levels of formal education tend to have more precarious living and working conditions than the rest of the population, they may be more likely to see themselves as a coherent group with interests that are underrepresented in the current political system, unlike women.

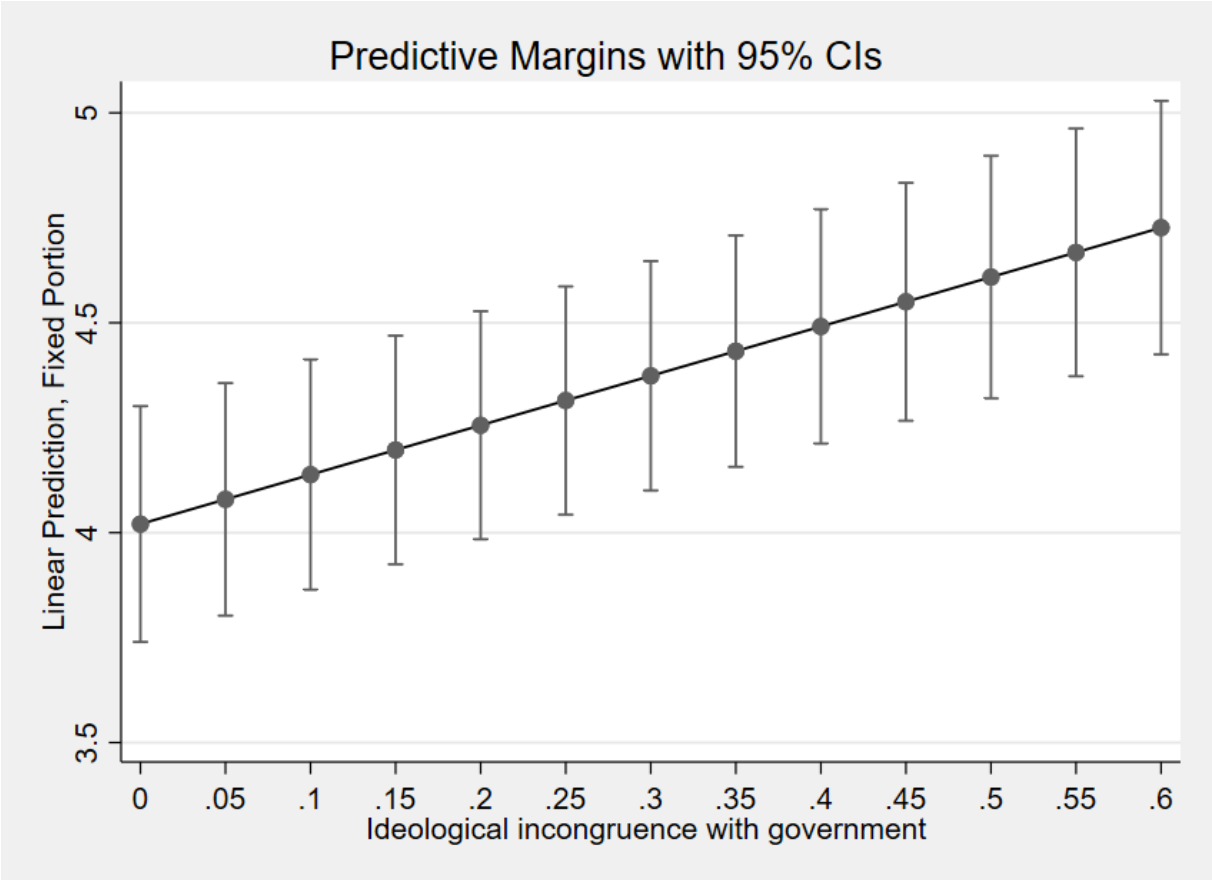
By contrast, H2 is not confirmed. Women are actually (slightly) less supportive than men of the idea of replacing elected politicians with randomly selected citizens. This may be due to the fact that, as argued during the debate on gender quotas in France, "women are not a category" (Bereni and Lépinard 2004): in other words, even though they are typically underrepresented in parliament, they may not see themselves as a coherent group defending shared interests.

Finally, we observe interesting findings regarding substantive representation (H5). The lack of ideological congruence between a citizen and the parliament and government both lead to greater support for citizens selected by lot to replace elected politicians. However, the size of the effect is more pronounced when it comes to the lack of congruence with the government. Model 6 predicts that respondents who are most congruent with the parliament give a rating of 4.1 to the idea of replacing politicians with citizens selected by lot, whereas this figure rises to



4.6 for citizens who have the highest level of ideological incongruence with the parliament. For the government, Model 5 predicts that respondents whose position on the left-right scale is perfectly congruent with that of the government give a rate of 4 to deliberative mini-publics, whereas this score reaches 4.7 for respondents whose position on the left-right scale is the furthest away from the government. These results suggest that when it comes to substantive representation, ideological congruence with the government matters even more than with the parliament when citizens evaluate the relevance of a radical reform of representative democracy that questions the role of elected politicians (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Predicted support for randomly selected citizens replacing elected politicians according to the level of ideological incongruence with the government.



Finally, the goal of this study was not only to analyse whether being a loser of representative democracy would explain support for mini-publics to replace elected politicians, but also to examine whether these configurations of being a loser of representative democracy could explain part of the recurrent finding in earlier studies that lower satisfaction with democracy (SWD) was associated with support for mini-publics. This expectation can be discussed when comparing model 0 with the full models (models 5 and 6). Model 0 confirms the strong association between lower SWD and support for mini-publics. However, we can observe in models 5 and 6 that, when the variables capturing the configurations of being a loser of representative democracy are also included, the magnitude of the effect of SWD diminishes significantly, even if it remains significant. Its effect size is reduced by almost 2.5 times compared to Model 0, which only includes satisfaction with democracy (and control variables). For each unit increase in satisfaction with democracy, support for the replacement of elected politicians by randomly selected citizens increases by 0.04, which is relatively modest. In other words, when we control for being a loser of representative democracy, the effect of political dissatisfaction on support for deliberative mini-publics does not disappear but becomes much less pronounced. In that respect, our findings directly complement recent studies (Goldberg and Bächtiger 2022; Pilet et al. 2022). It is largely because they are badly represented that the politically dissatisfied are more open to moving away from the institutional status quo and to support the creation of truly powerful citizens' assemblies.

The robustness of these findings (and their interpretation) are further corroborated by additional path analyses that we ran using structural equation modelling (see appendix). With this technique, like with the multivariate regressions, we can compare the effect of satisfaction with democracy on support for mini-publics with and without the variables capturing being a loser of representative democracy, while also controlling for the associations between those variables and the measure of satisfaction with democracy. These path analyses confirm that the link

between SWD and support for mini-publics remains significant when adding the variables of being a loser of representative democracy, but the size of the effect is much reduced. Moreover, the path analysis confirms that there is a direct effect of being a loser of representative democracy but also significant indirect effects of vote and income satisfaction through satisfaction with democracy. This is due to the association between being a loser of representative democracy and being less satisfied with the way democracy is working in your country. The analysis shows that being a loser is not fully equivalent to having low satisfaction with democracy. Rather, we believe that being poorly represented may lead some voters to feel dissatisfied with democracy, which further increases their openness to alternatives to representative democracy like deliberative mini-publics.

## **5. Conclusion**

The results of our analyses suggest that citizens who find themselves on the losing side of representative democracy are more supportive of mini-publics. Voting for an opposition party (particularly one that never forms a government), being poorly represented in descriptive terms, and even more so in substantive terms, within representative institutions leads to greater support for a reform that would replace elected politicians with citizens selected by lot. Our findings complement and provide context for earlier studies on the increased support for mini-publics among the politically dissatisfied (see, for instance, Goldberg and Bächtiger 2022). We demonstrate that the sources of this link might, at least in part, be related to the experience of being a loser of representative democracy for some citizens. This implies that support for deliberative mini-publics does not necessarily indicate enthusiasm for the intrinsic virtues of democratic innovations, such as deliberation. It also means that the roots of the link between dissatisfaction and support for mini-publics are largely related to the quality of representation.

What losers of representative democracy express when they favour deliberative mini-publics is the hope that this instrument may provide more voice and influence to citizens disadvantaged by the current institutional status quo.

These findings contribute to both academic and political debates. Academically, they add to existing research on mini-publics and can inform other fields of study. First, they complement studies on losers' consent, which show a link between losing and lower support for the functioning of (representative) democracy (Anderson et al., 2005). Our findings take this well-established observation a step further by demonstrating that increased dissatisfaction with democracy could push losers to advocate for radical reforms (such as replacing elected politicians with randomly selected citizens). In this sense, they also confirm studies on political inequalities that have shown that advantaged citizens defend the institutional status quo, while disadvantaged ones are open to institutional change (Ceka and Magalhaes, 2020). As political inequalities grow, the institutional stability of representative democracies could be at risk.

In this regard, our findings also contribute to the broader academic debate on process preferences. Studies on public support for alternatives to representative democracy (such as technocracy or more authoritarian regimes) have also emphasized the link with political dissatisfaction (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017), without considering the sources of this dissatisfaction. It would be intriguing to explore whether support for other alternatives is also linked to the position of being a "loser" of representative democracy. One could argue, for example, that support for technocracy may be more related to policy outputs and substantive representation (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020) and less to descriptive representation than support for mini-publics.

Lastly, our findings could connect to other studies on the expansion of citizen participation. Future work could compare the dynamics of support for direct democracy mechanisms with what we observe about support for mini-publics. Some of these studies have also highlighted the link between being a loser of representative democracy and support for referendums (Bowler et al., 2007), but other research has noted differences within the public regarding support for deliberative and direct democracy instruments (Rojon et al., 2019). Investigations differentiating various dimensions of "losing" in representative democracy (in political, descriptive, and substantive terms) could help make sense of these differences.

Beyond academic debates, our findings are also directly relevant to contemporary discussions on the use of mini-publics in democracies. Many supporters of DMPs emphasize the intrinsic values of these instruments, which could appeal to most people: deliberation, inclusiveness, and cognitive diversity (Vandamme, 2018). Our findings reveal that, in addition to these virtues, support for mini-publics is also highly instrumental. It is based on a negative evaluation of the current representative model of democracy and rooted in the feeling of being badly represented in the existing system. From this viewpoint, losers of representative democracy would only support DMPs in the long run if these instruments demonstrate their ability to effectively reduce the feeling of being a loser within the political system. This notion connects to the problem-based approach to democracy proposed by Warren (2017). Citizens are pragmatic in their support for democratic institutions. They support reforms, provided they perceive that the new institutions could address the problems they have identified within the current institutional architecture (see also Werner, Marien, and Felicetti, 2020).

Building on this argument, we may argue that the losers of representative democracy would only be satisfied with introducing deliberative mini-publics if the new instrument is able to solve the causes of their political dissatisfaction. This suggests that genuine access to power

should be granted to citizens who are not adequately represented politically, descriptively, and substantively. These citizens expect to address the widely demonstrated notion that most political systems, including liberal democracies, are more responsive to the wealthy and better-educated (Bartels 2018; Peters 2018; Peters and Ensink 2015). They also anticipate that supporters of opposition parties will have a greater say in political decisions.

However, research on institutional change and support for mini-publics has indicated that not all citizens are open to changes heading in that direction. Citizens who are currently well-represented (through the party they vote for, elected politicians with whom they share sociodemographic characteristics, and political views) within parliament and government tend to be more cautious about deliberative mini-publics, particularly when these mini-publics would not collaborate with, but rather punctually or permanently replace, elected politicians. This has also been confirmed by Goldberg and Bächtiger (2022) who have found that a majority of German citizens are unwilling to give more than a mere consultative role to deliberative mini-publics because they remain quite satisfied with the way their representative democracy is working.

Beyond citizens, we also know that political representatives are quite ambiguous – if not sometimes openly hostile - when it comes to mini-publics: with a few exceptions, they only support giving them a consultative role limited to certain topics. They refuse any arrangement putting the current political order of representative democracy into question (Jacquet, Niessen, and Reuchamps 2022; Koskimaa, Rapeli, and Himmelroos 2023; Rangoni, Bedock, and Talukder 2021). In other words, their preferences are quite incompatible with the idea of granting losers of representative democracy fairer representation and a direct say in political decisions. In that sense, we can only concur with Goldberg and Bächtiger (2022: 7) when they stated: “recreating feelings of ‘ownership’ over the democratic process via deliberative citizens’

forums might turn out to be a rockier road than many advocates of DCFs have imagined”. If losers of representative democracy who hope to regain power and better representation through mini-publics must face the hostility of elected representatives and of citizens who feel adequately represented, the ability of mini-publics – or of any reform, for that matter - to address the roots of their political dissatisfaction seems seriously compromised.

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## **Supplementary material**

Supplementary material (SI) for this article can be found on the Cambridge University Press platform. It includes the descriptive statistics for the variables used in our models, multinomial logit models with the dependent variable being trichotomized, descriptive statistics of the statistical relationship between satisfaction with democracy and our main independent variables, and path analyses for the relationships between main independent variables and the dependent variable.

[ADD URL](#)

## **Data availability statement**

Replication data for this paper can be found at

[ADD URL TO BJPS dataverse](#)

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### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this article.

### **Ethical Standards**

The data used in this study is part of a broader survey (EPIS survey) coordinated by Prof. Damien Bol (King's College London) and Prof. André Blais (University of Montreal). The full survey received ethical clearance from King's College London's Research Ethics Office prior to data collection (registration confirmation reference number: MRA-19/20-14511, date 26<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2019).