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Promoting or Controlling Political Decisions? Citizen Preferences for Direct-Democratic Institutions in Germany

FLORIAN GROTZ and MARCEL LEWANDOWSKY

After the 2017 Bundestag election, the relaunched government coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD announced in its coalition treaty to consider introducing 'elements of direct democracy' at the federal level, no doubt with the intent to address citizens dissatisfied with German representative democracy. However, it remains unclear which direct-democratic institutions citizens support. We explore this question by arguing that voter preferences for distinct forms of direct democracy differ according to the parties they sympathise with. More concretely, citizens seeking to introduce specific issues more actively support agenda initiatives that promote political decisions. In the German context, this group is mostly found among voters for the Greens and The Left, parties that have long advocated the expansion of democratic participation. In contrast, citizens feeling alienated from representative democracy prefer decision-controlling procedures in the form of mandatory referendums, which divert power away from elected politicians and direct them to the people. Politically, this group supports the AfD, a party that propagates direct democracy as a fundamental alternative to parliamentary democracy. The empirical study based on data derived from an internet panel survey confirms our argument. These findings have important implications for the current debate in Germany and the comparative study of participatory reforms.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, direct democracy is on the rise worldwide (Altman 2011; Qvortrup 2014). Both advanced and new democracies have introduced provisions for referendums and popular initiatives or facilitated their use by lowering participation quorums and other legal requirements. Regardless of the varying circumstances in individual countries, these participatory reforms intend to counteract widespread dissatisfaction of citizens with representative democracy (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Geissel and Newton 2012). Germany is a special case in this regard. Originally, the founders of the Federal Republic decided against popular initiatives and referendums to be enshrined in the Basic Law (Rux 2008).¹ Although the German Parliament (Bundestag) has repeatedly discussed the introduction of direct-democratic institutions at the federal level, no legislation has been agreed upon so far.

Most recently, this debate gained new momentum when the 2017 Bundestag election resulted in a major decline of votes for the main parties, the Christian Democrats

(CDU/CSU) and the Social Democrats (SPD) and a concurrent rise of the populist radical right Alternative for Germany (AfD). In early 2018, the relaunched government coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD committed itself to examine whether the representative institutions of the Basic Law should be supplemented by direct-democratic institutions. This reform initiative targets those voters who are dissatisfied with the actual workings of German democracy. However, it remains unclear which institutional forms of direct democracy these citizens would prefer that could lessen their democratic discontent.

The comparative study of direct democracy distinguishes two basic types of direct-democratic institutions (Schiller and Setälä 2012, 6–7). Firstly, there are popular initiatives that allow a certain number of citizens to introduce a legislative bill. As they add a new issue to the political agenda, popular initiatives belong to the ‘decision-promoting’ procedures of direct democracy (Uleri 1996). Secondly, referendums address policy proposals that have been decided by political elites. As referendums provide the people with a veto right in the legislative process, they belong to the ‘decision-controlling’ procedures of direct democracy. Various studies show that referendums and popular initiatives have distinct consequences for democratic politics and policies (e.g. Freitag and Vatter 2006; Altman 2013). However, when direct-democratic institutions are to counter political dissatisfaction, it is not only important which institutional arrangements are suitable from a functional perspective but also which ones the citizens – the actual reform addressees – prefer.

Research on direct-democratic institutions has not sufficiently explored the latter issue despite a multitude of analyses which address to what extent specific social and political groups support direct democracy in Germany and other Western countries (e.g. Coffé and Michels 2014; Bowler et al. 2017; Gherghina and Geissel 2017). These studies are largely silent about which particular forms of direct democracy citizens prefer.

Against this background, our paper investigates the preferences of German citizens for direct-democratic institutions at the federal level. More precisely, we seek to examine whether preferences for distinct forms of direct democracy vary with party support. In doing so, we argue that direct democracy generally appeals to those dissatisfied with parliamentary democracy. At the same time, citizens are expected to prefer different forms of direct democracy depending on which institutional arrangements seem most suitable to address their respective discontent. On the one hand, some may wish to participate more actively and advocate a direct input in the policy-making process. Consequently, they might prefer agenda initiatives. Politically, this group is aligned with parties that strongly promote the expansion of democratic participation: the Greens and The Left. On the other, some citizens may feel alienated from representative democracy and thus demand alternative procedures of decision-making that improve the output side in their own interest. We expect this group to prefer the introduction of mandatory referendums, which empower citizens to make policy decisions instead of elected officials. Politically, these citizens are likely supporters of the populist radical right, the AfD, a party that promotes such demands as part of its institutional reform agenda.

The following section discusses our argument about citizen preferences for direct-democratic institutions in more detail. We then formulate relevant hypotheses for the German case and examine them with data from an internet panel survey conducted before the 2017 Bundestag election. The final section summarises the findings and

reflects on their implications for both the German context and the comparative study of participatory reforms.

DIRECT DEMOCRACY AND ITS PUBLIC SUPPORT

At the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, most Western countries have experienced the longest period of democratic rule in their history. At the same time, the core institutions of representative democracy show signs of wear and tear. Decreasing electoral turnout, lower levels of party membership and the growth of populist parties and protest movements seem to reflect deep-seated political discontent. In view of these developments, participatory reforms have widely been considered a suitable means to revitalise citizen involvement in politics and thus to increase public support of the democratic system (Smith 2009; Geissel and Newton 2012). In this context, direct-democratic institutions have played a prominent role for two major reasons (Gherghina 2017, 616–7). First, they enable citizens' direct input into the policy process that normally takes place within the parliamentary arena only. Second, they establish a distinct decision-making channel allowing for policy outputs in accordance with popular interests that are not sufficiently represented in parliamentary politics. Therefore, direct democracy may enhance the legitimacy on the input and the output sides of the political system.

Whether direct democracy exerts these effects in practice depends on a variety of factors, among them its institutional design. Two basic forms of direct democracy with distinct functional properties can be distinguished (Uleri 1996).² In '*decision-promoting*' procedures, the policy proposal and the demand for a decision come from the same political actor. It includes popular initiatives which allow a certain number of citizens to introduce a legislative bill that is decided upon either by popular vote ('full-scale initiative') or by parliament ('agenda initiative'; Schiller and Setälä 2012, 6–7). Granting citizens a key role in political agenda setting, popular initiatives may primarily satisfy demands for more participation on the input side of representative democracy. In '*decision-controlling*' procedures, the agenda setter and the initiator of the decision are not the same political actor. A common institutional arrangement belonging to this form are referendums which are constitutionally mandated (that are held by constitutional requirement) ('mandatory referendums'). The same rationale applies to referendums which are triggered by a certain number of citizens upon a law that already has been enacted ('abrogative referendum') or is not yet in force ('rejective referendum'; Setälä 2006, 706–7). As referendums have a clear 'veto function in the legislative process' (Schiller and Setälä 2012, 7), they provide citizens with an effective instrument of agenda control on the output side of representative democracy.³

The extant literature has extensively explored the workings of popular initiatives and referendums, primarily in Swiss cantons and U.S. states, illustrating that they have distinct consequences on the input and the output sides of democratic systems. For instance, they exert different effects on electoral turnout (Altman 2013), tax policy (Freitag and Vatter 2006), health care expenditures (Vatter and Rüefli 2003), and economic performance (Feld and Savioz 1997). However, for a comprehensive assessment whether direct-democratic institutions enhance democratic legitimacy, it

is also important to know to what extent ‘ordinary people’ prefer their introduction—and for what reasons.

An increasing number of studies has dealt with the latter question.⁴ Overall, this literature has identified two different lines of argument why citizens may support direct-democratic institutions. The first is the ‘*“New Politics” explanation*’ as a seminal article on the German case called it (Dalton, Bürklin, and Drummond 2001).⁵ Accordingly, the enhanced quest for direct democracy in Western countries originates from modernisation and social change. These processes foster ‘a new range of “postmaterialist” political interests’ and generate ‘support for a new participatory style of politics that emphasizes basic democracy, public interest groups, and other forms of direct action while simultaneously casting doubt on hierarchical authority structures such as parties and the representative system’ (Dalton, Bürklin, and Drummond 2001, 146). Therefore, support for direct democracy is particularly strong among citizens who ‘possess the political skills and resources that enable them to deal with the complexities of politics’: the younger, the better educated and the ‘more politically sophisticated’ (Dalton, Bürklin, and Drummond 2001, 147). Regarding party allegiances, Dalton, Bürklin, and Drummond (2001) expect this group to be aligned with the postmaterialist Greens. For them, the appeal of direct democracy lies primarily in the direct and proactive input into decision-making.

Several studies have taken up this line of argument and found corresponding results for different Western democracies. For instance, in a comparative study of six countries Donovan and Karp (2006) find that younger citizens and those with greater political interest favour direct democracy. Comparing 21 EU member states, Schuck and de Vreese (2015, 149) demonstrate that referendums are particularly supported by citizens ‘who are critical of traditional party politics but committed to democratic practices’. Bengtsson and Mattila (2009) make a similar argument for party sympathisers, showing that Finnish citizens with left orientations exhibit stronger support for direct democracy than those with right-wing orientations.

The second explanation for citizen preferences of direct democracy relies on ‘political dissatisfaction’ (Dalton, Bürklin, and Drummond 2001) or, more precisely, *political alienation*. Accordingly, citizens wish a more direct say in politics because they ‘feel frustrated or disenfranchised by representative democracy’ (Dalton, Bürklin, and Drummond 2001, 148). Thus, advocacy for direct democracy indicates a fundamental discontent with the institutional status quo and a resulting desire for alternative procedures of decision-making that primarily improve the output side of the political system. Citizens belonging to this group are ‘those at the margins of politics: the less interested, the less educated, and those who support protest parties’ (Dalton, Bürklin, and Drummond 2001, 148).

This line of argument is also seconded by several empirical studies. For example, Coffé and Michels (2014) contend that in the Netherlands lower-educated citizens have stronger preferences for direct democracy than higher-educated ones. Similarly, Pauwels (2014) has shown a strong correlation between preferences for populist radical right parties and for direct democracy in three European countries.

These various theoretical approaches and empirical findings notwithstanding, the literature on direct-democratic support has not investigated *which forms of direct democracy citizens prefer*. This question becomes particularly relevant when

participatory reforms are on the parliamentary agenda. If political parties discuss which direct-democratic procedures to introduce, they are well advised to consider the respective preferences of the citizens as ultimate addressees of such reform. As citizens may support direct democracy for different reasons, one can also assume that they have a specific preference for direct-democratic arrangements that fit their respective interests and are thus most appropriate to address their dissatisfaction with the representative system. Which forms of direct democracy are supported by different groups of citizens?

At this point, we suggest to connect the mentioned differentiation of direct-democratic institutions with the basic explanations of public support for direct democracy. More precisely, we argue that citizens with a 'new politics' profile prefer 'decision-promoting procedures', i.e. popular initiatives, that enable them to introduce issues they feel have been ignored into the agenda-setting process. In contrast, citizens feeling alienated from representative democracy are suspected to primarily support 'decision-controlling procedures', such as mandatory referendums, because they provide them with the power to take policy issues into their own hand and, if successful, force the parliament to act.

CITIZEN PREFERENCES FOR DIRECT-DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS IN GERMANY

To explore these relationships in a concrete context, Germany seems to be an appropriate case for several reasons. First, the country has seen a long-lasting and vivid debate about direct democracy (Rux 2008; Grotz 2013). In the early Federal Republic, the political elites were almost unanimously convinced that direct democracy would endanger parliamentary democracy. Therefore, the Basic Law only included a mandatory referendum for very specific and extraordinary events: a territorial restructuring of the *Länder* ('Neugliederung des Bundesgebiets'; Art. 29 GG) and the ratification of a completely new constitution (Art. 146 GG). This anti-plebiscitary consensus began to erode in the late 1960s, when newly emerged leftist movements called for the expansion of participation rights. Since then, several Bundestag study commissions have discussed the introduction of referendums and popular initiatives at the federal level, and a number of relevant bills have been introduced as well (Decker 2016, 137–148). However, none of these initiatives has been successful, leaving Germany as the only EU member state that has never held a nation-wide referendum since 1945 (Grotz 2018).

After the 2017 federal election, the issue of direct-democratic reform experienced a revival. This revival was in part spurred by the rise of a populist radical right party, the AfD, which entered the Bundestag with 12.6 per cent of the votes. According to most observers, the party's success mirrored a widespread discontent with the performance of the outgoing CDU/CSU-SPD government and, more generally, parliamentary representative democracy (Scully 2017; Schuetz 2017). Therefore, in their relaunched coalition treaty of February 2018, CDU/CSU and SPD promised to establish 'an expert commission that should prepare proposals whether and in which form our proven parliamentary-representative democracy can be complemented by further elements of citizen participation and direct democracy' (CDU, CSU, and SPD 2018, 164; translation by the authors). Thus, the question which forms of direct democracy at the federal level

would be best suited in the eyes of the citizens to counter their dissatisfaction is of great topical interest.

A second characteristic of the German case that matters in the present context is the existence of direct democracy at the subnational level (Scarrow 1997). By the mid-1990s, all *Länder* had introduced provisions for ‘popular legislation’ at the regional and local levels (Decker 2016). Although the institutional details of these procedures and their political use vary from Land to Land, German citizens are not only familiar with the general idea of direct democracy but also with its practical implementation. Thus, we assume that they can distinguish between the basic forms of direct democracy and to evaluate them differently.

Third, the major political parties in Germany have distinct positions on the subject. Demands for direct democracy at the federal level have been a traditional domain of progressive left-wing parties. This is particularly true for the Greens which have attracted the votes of the ‘postmaterialist’ electorate since the early 1980s. Although they have undergone substantial organisational and programmatic changes, the Greens still stand for a participatory vision of democracy (Poguntke 2017). Their 2017 manifesto posits that direct-democratic institutions are an appropriate means for strengthening the ‘democratic culture’ (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen 2017, 148). In a similar vein, The Left has strongly supported direct democracy at the federal level (Die Linke 2017, 21, 108). It is thus not surprising that most bills for institutionalising direct participation of citizens at the federal level have been introduced by the Greens and The Left, followed by the SPD and the liberal FDP (Decker 2016, 138). Among all established parties, the Christian Democrats have been most ambivalent towards the idea of direct democracy and reluctant to support respective reforms. Although the CDU contends in its platform that ‘representative democracy does not exclude elements of direct democracy’ (CDU 2007, 88), the party has never proposed any bills on direct-democratic reforms to the Bundestag. Its Bavarian sister party CSU tends to be more supportive of direct democracy, given that popular initiatives have been common practice in Bavaria since decades (CSU 2016, 79, 86). Nevertheless, the CSU has not supported concrete initiatives for direct democracy at the federal level either.

The spectrum of party positions on direct-democratic institutions significantly changed when the AfD entered the political stage. Founded in 2013, it had a populist radical right profile from the outset (Berbair, Lewandowsky, and Siri 2015; Lewandowsky, Giebler, and Wagner 2016; see Schmitt-Beck 2014; Arzheimer 2015 for deviant findings). Similar to other radical right parties (Taggart 2004, 273), the AfD manifesto for the 2017 Bundestag election demands the introduction of plebiscites to limit the decision-making power of the ‘ruling elites,’ especially with regard to constitutional amendments and the transfer of national powers to the European level (AfD 2017, 7). Thus, the AfD converges with the leftist parties in their general support for direct democracy. However, the underlying reasons are completely different: while the leftist parties promote direct-democratic institutions as a means to enhance participation and thus appeal to citizens with a ‘new politics’ profile, the AfD interprets direct democracy as a fundamental alternative and thus seeks to attract those citizens who feel alienated with parliamentary democracy. This populist support for direct democracy is an entirely new position in the German party system (Decker 2018b, 177–8). Taken

together, one may assume that these distinct positions of German parties on direct democracy are also reflected among their respective electorates.

Thus, we first of all contend that direct democracy is generally appealing to citizens who are discontent with the actual functioning of parliamentary democracy. This notion also corresponds with the findings of Gherghina and Geissel (2018) who demonstrate a significant connection between democratic dissatisfaction and preferences for direct-democratic reform in Germany. Yet, reform support of dissatisfied citizens is still unspecified as it may refer to any form of direct democracy, independent of the institutional form it takes.

H1: Citizens dissatisfied with the workings of parliamentary democracy prefer the introduction of direct-democratic institutions irrespective of their specific form.

While individuals dissatisfied with representative democracy are expected to advocate direct-democratic reform, their institutional preferences might vary according to the political expectations that they connect with different reform proposals. To be sure, we do not assume strict causality between party preference and preference for certain participatory reforms. Rather, our theoretical considerations have shown that there are reasons to suspect that citizens preferring popular initiatives and those supporting referendums differ according to the parties that citizens tend to vote for. More concretely, sympathisers of the Greens and The Left are likely to support the expansion of participation rights via popular initiatives as a way to open up the agenda-setting process for citizen input. In contrast, prospective AfD voters might strongly support the installation of referendums at the federal level, thus replacing parliamentary control at the crucial stage of decision-making.

H2: Citizens supporting the Greens and The Left prefer the introduction of popular initiatives.

H3: Citizens supporting the AfD prefer the introduction of referendums.

DATA AND VARIABLES

To explore the extent to which distinct groups of citizens support different forms of direct democracy in Germany, we use survey data as a way of direct observation of individual preferences. Our analysis is based on the first wave of the *Bundeswahlkompass* online panel, which took place in the run-up to the German federal election from 22 June to 17 July 2017 (Bundeswahlkompass Panel Data 2017).⁶ Overall, the sample includes 961 respondents, of which 861 answered the entire questionnaire consisting of 89 items. It is the only survey that measures citizen preferences for different forms of direct democracy and is therefore suitable for testing our hypotheses. Descriptive statistics of the variables included in our study are available in the appendix (Table A1).

In line with our hypotheses, we first look at the distribution of citizen support for popular initiatives and referendums.⁷ Regarding popular initiatives, we have not surveyed public support for ‘full-scale’ initiatives that may culminate in a (decisive) popular referendum and could thus be considered an instrument of decision control. For our purposes, we have concentrated on agenda initiatives that allow for active participation in policy-making without affecting parliamentary discretion. We measure it with the approval of the ‘opportunity for groups of citizens to introduce bills to the

Bundestag.’ With this item, we also take into account that strong supporters of agenda initiatives at the federal level exist in Germany (Decker 2018a, 642).

We operationalise the second item based on the level of agreement to the statement that ‘mandatory referendums on amendments to the constitution represent an appropriate way to improve democracy.’ We focus on mandatory referendums for three reasons. Firstly, the functional logic of mandatory referendums is clearly distinguishable from other (facultative) referendums. In contrast to the latter, the former implies a shift of the decision-making process away from the ‘ruling elite’ since neither government nor parliament may decide on a mandatory referendum to take place or not (Decker, Lewandowsky, and Solar 2013, 55). Secondly, referendums on amendments to the constitution are one of the instruments that are commonly discussed in the German debate and promoted by different parties, such as the Greens and the FDP (Decker 2016, 142), the CSU (Decker 2018a, 639) as well as the populist radical right AfD (2017, 7). Thirdly, our decision to limit the scope of mandatory referendums to constitutional amendments takes into account that strong supporters of popular decision-making as well as more ‘moderate sympathizers’ are likely to agree to this restricted variant. Conversely, the option of triggering referendums on any legislative issue would attract decisive advocates only.

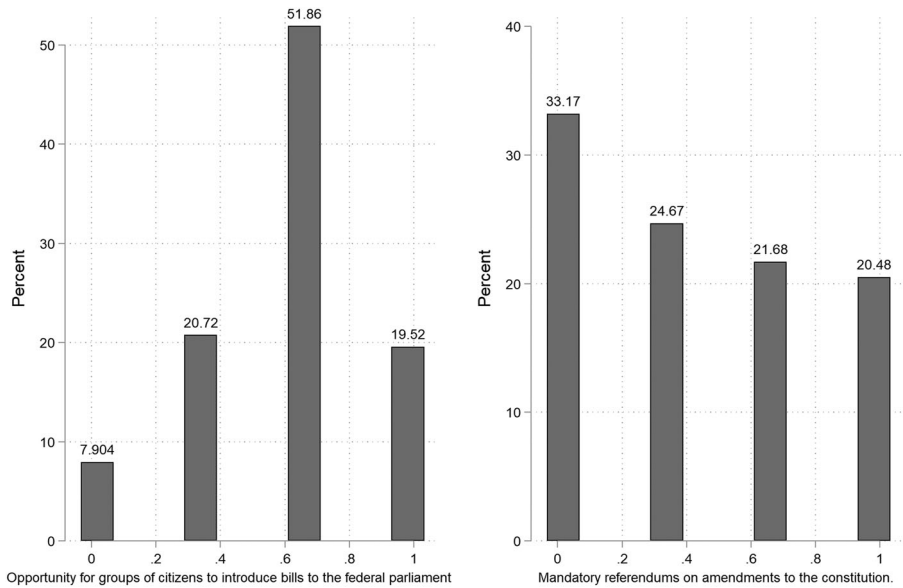
Agenda initiatives and mandatory referendums thus represent two distinct and focused alternatives in line with our argument: the former instrument is unambiguously associated with decision promoting, the latter with decision control. Therefore, preferences for agenda initiatives and mandatory constitutional referendums should vary considerably within the given sample if our theoretical assumptions are correct.

Figure 1 shows how the support for each of the two participatory reforms is distributed on a four-point scale in our sample, whereby 0 indicates total rejection and 1 complete approval of the reform at hand. Distinct patterns emerge: Agenda initiatives are completely or partially supported by a vast majority of 71.4 per cent whereas only about 8 per cent of the respondents strongly disapprove this option. In contrast, although the referendum option is restricted to constitutional amendments, a majority of 57.8 per cent rejects it while 42.2 per cent is supportive or rather supportive.

This first examination already suggests that citizen preferences for direct-democratic institutions are not uniformly distributed. Rather, a significant part of the respondents evaluates agenda initiatives and mandatory referendums in different ways. Interestingly, the instrument that puts citizens in the decision-promoting position is much more popular among the survey participants than the more powerful instrument of decision control. The reasons for these aggregated differences are not easily explained. For example, they might result from a skewed sample in which higher-educated citizens are overrepresented and homogenously responded in favour of initiatives and against referendums. But it might be equally plausible that the group of initiative supporters is made up of citizens with diverse education backgrounds. In this case, other factors may account for the strong approval of agenda initiatives and the predominant rejection of referendums.

In the remaining analysis, we first test the influence of democratic dissatisfaction on individual preferences. A significant part of the literature uses discontent with the democratic system as an explanatory factor, locating it among the lower educated and supporters of populist radical right parties. Indeed, Dalton, Bürklin, and Drummond (2001) use

FIGURE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF SUPPORT FOR AGENDA INITIATIVES AND MANDATORY CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUMS IN THE SAMPLE (IN PERCENT; $N = 835$). THE RESPECTIVE ITEM IN THE SURVEY IS FORMULATED AS FOLLOWS: ‘THERE ARE MANY SUGGESTIONS TO EXTEND CITIZENS’ OPPORTUNITIES FOR POLITICAL PARTICIPATION. WE SHALL MENTION SOME OF THEM IN THE FOLLOWING. PLEASE STATE WHETHER YOU CONSIDER EACH PROPOSITION AS (RATHER) APPROPRIATE OR (RATHER) INAPPROPRIATE TO IMPROVE DEMOCRACY IN GERMANY.’



political dissatisfaction as proxy and find empirical support for this assumption among these cohorts. However, we argue that general discontent with democracy is independent from party attachment and education. By including democratic dissatisfaction, we prohibit party support and education from being more influential than they actually are since a great deal of the effects on the preferences within these cohorts might be due to their overall dissatisfaction. We contend that referendums are the preferred choice of those who are dissatisfied with representative democracy because politically disappointed citizens demand popular control rather than enhanced participation in the agenda-setting (see Dalton, Bürklin, and Drummond 2001). Our measurement of democratic dissatisfaction is in line with the findings of previous studies who explored satisfaction with the current state of democracy via surveys (e.g. Roßteutscher et al. 2017). Although other approaches employ more sophisticated measurements (e.g. Linde and Ekman 2003), we suggest that a simple question in a direct survey is most useful for the purpose of our study.

How is dissatisfaction with democracy distributed in our sample? (Rather) satisfied citizens represent 70.6 per cent of the respondents while 29.4 per cent are (rather) dissatisfied with the state of democracy. The distribution in our sample is therefore similar to other, representative surveys. For example, in autumn 2017 26 per cent of German citizens were (rather) dissatisfied with democracy while 72 per cent reported that

they were (rather) satisfied with the democratic status quo (European Commission 2018).

The second independent variable is party support. We operationalise it through a categorical variable, based on the question which party the respondent would vote for if the election were held today: CDU/CSU, SPD, Greens, FDP, The Left, AfD, other parties and no preference. As argued above, we expect sympathisers of the Greens and The Left to be most prone to support agenda initiatives while those of the AfD are likely to support the introduction of referendums. Since the CDU and to some extent the CSU have been quite ambivalent with regard to direct democracy, we take their sympathisers as the reference category. The 'other' category includes smaller parties not represented in the Bundestag, such as the National Democratic Party (NPD), the Pirate Party, the Animal Rights' Party or The Party (a satirical party formation). In addition to these parties explicitly mentioned in the survey, 27 smaller ones were part of regional lists. Since we do not know exactly which 'other' parties the survey participants refer to, we can hardly make general assumptions about their preferences regarding direct-democratic institutions. The same applies to those citizens who do not specify a specific party preference.

Education, income, age and gender serve as control variables. Education is measured by a categorical variable with three characteristics: secondary education, high school diploma, and university degree. A high school degree serves as the reference category. By including education, we control for the argument presented in the literature that participatory reforms are favoured above all by higher educated individuals. As an additional control variable, we integrate income. In doing so, we examine the extent to which effects of education in our sample are actually due to a higher material status. Age is included for two reasons. First, respondents with high school diploma are generally younger than those with a university/polytechnic degree. Second, we want to measure if age directly affects direct-democratic preferences, taking up Donovan and Karp's (2006, 678) argument 'that younger voters are more likely to hold post-materialist values and to desire more say in politics via direct political action.' Gender, measured with a dummy variable (1 equals 'female'), is another standard control. Moreover, it might be that women are more supportive of direct-democratic institutions than their male counterparts because of their experiences with discrimination and political underrepresentation. Although women 'have been at the forefront in all initiatives of direct democracy, of both the old and new types', there is a specific political demand for 'new participatory democracy put into practice through active citizenship' (Giorgi 2016, 164). Thus, female respondents are specifically expected to support agenda initiatives as a decision-promoting instrument.

RESULTS

We conduct multiple linear regressions (OLS) for each of the direct-democratic institutions. Although our dependent variables, strictly speaking, are not continuous, we choose this procedure as a most comprehensive way of interpreting the data. As a robustness check, we have also conducted ordered logistic regressions (OLR), which are found in the appendix (Table A2). Since the effects do not vary substantially

from those of the linear regression models, we conclude that both methodological approaches lead to similar findings.

We calculate separate models for agenda initiatives (group A) and mandatory constitutional referendums (group B). Models A1 and B2 only contain socio-demographic controls. Models A2 and B2 add democratic dissatisfaction, while the overall models A3 and B3 account for all variables, including prospective voting for specific parties. The models are displayed in Table 1.

H1 is confirmed: dissatisfaction with democracy affects both preferences. For agenda initiatives, the explained variance increases from 1.6 per cent (model A1) to 8.2 per cent (model A2) when democratic dissatisfaction is added to the socio-demographic controls. The explanatory power of dissatisfaction is even stronger regarding mandatory referendums as an instrument of decision-control. Here, the respective R^2 rises from 5.2 per cent to 20.6 per cent. We can therefore conclude that, apart from all other factors, the fact that citizens are discontent with the current state of democracy systematically affects their support for participatory reforms. Furthermore, the coefficients of democratic dissatisfaction differ between the two reform proposals: the association between dissatisfaction and the preference for mandatory constitutional referendums is stronger than the relation between dissatisfaction and the support for agenda initiatives. This finding tentatively supports what Dalton, Bürklin, and Drummond (2001, 148–149) have found: perceived exclusion from representative democracy results in a strong demand for instruments that put citizens ‘back in control.’

The results of the final models (A3 and B3) confirm both related hypotheses. In accordance with H2, prospective voters of The Left and the Greens significantly prefer the introduction of agenda initiatives. AfD sympathisers also tend to be supportive of agenda initiatives, but the coefficient is smaller than those of the Greens and The Left and only marginally significant. One plausible explanation for this finding could be that parts of AfD sympathisers interpret agenda initiatives as an additional option to restrict the political discretion of the ruling elites. In contrast, adherents of the SPD and the FDP are not very different from those of the CDU/CSU: the coefficients for these groups show no significant correlation with support for agenda initiatives.

Respondents who tend to vote for ‘other’ parties are supportive of agenda initiatives. Remarkably, this effect is the strongest considering all party categories. Given the high ideological heterogeneity of the ‘other’ group, we cannot trace this finding to specific party positions. Instead, we might plausibly assume that the connection between support for agenda initiatives and for ‘other’ parties is primarily associated with their small size: agenda initiatives seem to be the means of choice for putting small-group interests on the political agenda, which would normally not be taken up by parliament nor prevail in popular referendums. Finally, for citizens without party preference we cannot identify specific support for either direct-democratic institution. The absence of any systematic relationships can have different causes. For instance, this group might be most heterogeneous in terms of its political attitudes and therefore does not have homogenous preferences regarding direct-democratic institutions either. However, one could also assume that individuals without support for specific parties have less interest in politics and thus do not have a particularly strong preference for more citizen participation of any kind.

TABLE 1
ESTIMATES OF LINEAR REGRESSION MODELS

	Agenda initiative			Mandatory referendum		
	A1	A2	A3	B1	B2	B3
Democratic dissatisfaction		0.276*** (0.0369)	0.208*** (0.0446)		0.581*** (0.0453)	0.436*** (0.0566)
<i>Party affiliations</i>						
SPD			0.0658 (0.0390)			−0.0978* (0.0496)
Greens			0.121** (0.0411)			−0.0342 (0.0515)
FDP			0.0667 (0.0441)			−0.0679 (0.0542)
The Left			0.126** (0.0401)			0.00653 (0.0514)
AfD			0.118* (0.0510)			0.200*** (0.0604)
Other			0.220*** (0.0497)			0.0377 (0.0714)
No preference			0.0680 (0.0469)			−0.0589 (0.0576)
Controls						
<i>Education</i>						
Secondary education	0.0120 (0.0349)	0.0107 (0.0328)	0.0151 (0.0334)	0.162** (0.0515)	0.158*** (0.0463)	0.144** (0.0469)
Polytechnic/University degree	−0.0557* (0.0247)	−0.0473* (0.0240)	−0.0366 (0.0242)	−0.0532 (0.0365)	−0.0361 (0.0329)	−0.0352 (0.0334)
<i>Household income</i>						
up to 1500 €	0.0248 (0.0327)	0.0145 (0.0318)	0.0178 (0.0320)	0.00329 (0.0454)	−0.0166 (0.0420)	0.00590 (0.0418)
2500–4500 €	0.0246 (0.0261)	0.0341 (0.0255)	0.0393 (0.0257)	−0.0164 (0.0356)	0.00337 (0.0322)	0.0155 (0.0318)
more than 4500 €	−0.0353 (0.0301)	−0.00828 (0.0299)	0.00279 (0.0305)	−0.0793* (0.0400)	−0.0224 (0.0381)	−0.0123 (0.0375)

Year of birth	0.000247 (0.000678)	−0.000600 (0.000676)	−0.000288 (0.000679)	0.00249** (0.000934)	0.000706 (0.000888)	0.000761 (0.000880)
Gender (female)	0.0480* (0.0235)	0.0607** (0.0225)	0.0583* (0.0232)	−0.0348 (0.0316)	−0.00845 (0.0294)	−0.00446 (0.0299)
Constant	0.628*** (0.0381)	0.528*** (0.0401)	0.437*** (0.0519)	0.396*** (0.0490)	0.185*** (0.0474)	0.248*** (0.0629)
Observations	768	768	760	768	768	760
Adjusted R^2	0.016	0.082	0.097	0.052	0.206	0.233

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The results for H3 are even more clear-cut: AfD supporters significantly and strongly prefer the introduction of mandatory constitutional referendums at the federal level. In contrast, the coefficients for all other parties are non-significant (with the exception of the SPD) and, apart from The Left and the 'others', negative compared to the CDU/CSU reference group. Moreover, their values deviate only slightly from the CDU/CSU. In light of the preference distributions shown for agenda initiatives, we can contend that while approval and disapproval of mandatory referendums is balanced within the followers of most parties, AfD sympathisers are the only ones in the sample who predominantly prefer this instrument. Indeed, their support for direct-democratic institutions seems to be a feature of scepticism towards representative democracy, corresponding to the AfD's demand for providing 'the people' with a veto right in constitutional matters.

The importance of political dissatisfaction and partisan inclinations for the preferences of direct-democratic institutions is also evident when looking at the effects of socio-demographic controls. First, the effects of education are largely in line with our expectations. Support for referendums is significantly stronger among lower educated respondents than it is in the higher educated groups, especially considering the relatively small number of participants with secondary education ($N = 95$). At the same time, there is only a small negative association between higher education and preferences for agenda initiatives, which we do not consider a substantial result due to the low coefficients and the low level of significance ($p < 0.05$). In a similar fashion, the relationship with age is not consistently significant. We do find, however, gender effects. More specifically, women second agenda initiatives to a slightly higher extent than men, whereas the models for referendums display no significant effects. Furthermore, there is no evidence that preferences for different direct-democratic institutions depend on income. We find no significant effects in any of the models, except for a slight negative relationship in B1, which disappears with the inclusion of additional variables. This indicates that preferences for either participatory reform do not seem to depend on income.

In summary, the statistical analysis shows nuanced results of citizen preferences for distinct forms of direct democracy. Both proposals are supported by individuals dissatisfied with the democratic status quo. At the same time, there are clear differences with regard to party sympathy: as expected, the decision-control instrument appeals to the supporters of the populist radical right AfD, whereas Green and Left sympathisers prefer the decision-promoting instrument.

CONCLUSION

Unlike most other European countries, Germany has not introduced provisions for nation-wide referendums and popular initiatives in the last decades. Still, the political debate about direct democracy at the federal level was never settled. Most recently, it re-emerged in the aftermath of the 2017 Bundestag election when the CDU/CSU-SPD government announced to examine options of complementing the representative institutions with 'elements of direct democracy'. As the obvious purpose of this announcement has been to counter public dissatisfaction with parliamentary democracy, it is highly relevant to know which institutional arrangements of direct democracy

German citizens would support if given a choice. Furthermore, given the recent rise of the populist radical right AfD in the German party system it is of particular interest to explore if the sympathisers of the different parties also have distinct preferences for direct-democratic institutions.

Our analysis of survey data gathered in the run-up to the 2017 election revealed interesting findings. Most basically, citizens dissatisfied with the actual workings of German democracy prefer direct democracy, irrespective of its institutional form and independent of their social background and the parties they support. *Prima facie*, this seems to confirm the approach of the German government to counter democratic discontent with participatory reforms. Beyond the general idea of direct democracy, however, institutional design clearly matters in the citizens' eyes: the majority of survey respondents supports the introduction of the agenda initiative but is sceptical about mandatory referendums. This finding indicates that there is not only a cleavage between adherents and opponents of direct democracy but also one about its institutional specification, which makes relevant reforms even more difficult. Finally, citizen preferences for direct-democratic institutions are not distributed randomly but vary among politically distinct groups. Mandatory referendums are especially supported by AfD followers, whereas agenda initiatives are mainly preferred by voters of the Greens and The Left. Thus, we might conclude that in the German debate on direct democracy there are distinct institutional preferences based on heterogeneous ideas of how democracy should be organised.

Our paper has been a first attempt towards a more differentiated understanding of citizen preferences for direct-democratic institutions. However, it might also pave the way for further research. First, future studies could expand the empirical basis by testing the representativeness of our results through appropriate sampling methods. In doing so, one would be able to see if the effects of party attitudes, educational attainment and further socio-demographic and attitudinal variables hold or are even more pronounced. Second, investigating the association of party support with demands for specific forms of direct democracy would suggest cross-national analyses that include different party-system contexts. For instance, the strong connection between voting preference for AfD and support for mandatory referendums in Germany raises the question whether similar patterns exist in other countries with established populist radical right parties. A third promising strand of inquiry would consist in linking performance analyses of direct-democratic institutions with survey studies. More specifically, one might investigate how citizen preferences for popular initiatives and referendums evolve over time and in what way the political use of and public discourses on direct democracy influence them. In particular, one could ask about the effects of participatory reforms on public support of democracy (Bedock 2017). Indeed, if specific forms of direct democracy are preferred by specific groups of citizens, it would be of utmost importance to explore whether their introduction positively affects democratic satisfaction within these groups. Finally, it would be particularly important for comparative studies to employ more fine-grained distinctions of direct-democratic institutions, especially with regard to referendums. While we have focused on mandatory constitutional referendums due to their relevance in the German context, further analyses could either accommodate the heterogeneity of referendums or develop a consistent measure of agenda control at the item level. Either way, our findings open the way to a broad range of subsequent research questions.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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NOTES

1. The Basic Law only allows mandatory referendums for two extraordinary scenarios (see below).
2. Several other approaches classify the institutional variety of direct democracy in a more differentiated way (e.g. Jung 2001). We rely here on Uleri (1996) because his basic distinction fits the purpose of this paper to analyse citizen preferences for direct-democratic institutions.
3. Schiller and Setälä (2012, 7) correctly note that ‘the function of a direct democratic institution is not determined by its institutional design only’ but also depends on the context of the political system. However, the present paper seeks to identify citizen preferences with an eye to the potential introduction of direct democracy, not the actual workings of direct democracy in a particular context. We therefore introduce functional properties that are theoretically assigned to the basic forms of popular initiatives and referendums.
4. The literature on citizen support for direct democracy is growing fast and in various analytical directions. For instance, a most recent study on the German case investigates whether citizens’ preferences for certain political decision-makers (politicians, citizens or expert) affect their political participation (Gherghina and Geissel 2017). For the sake of conciseness, the following literature review concentrates on studies exploring the reasons why specific groups of citizens may support direct-democratic institutions.
5. An expanded version of this article with detailed data analyses was published in German (Bürklin, Dalton, and Drummond 2002).
6. As it is often the case with online convenience samples, the distribution of education, age and income is not representative with regard to the population. For instance, respondents with higher education are over-represented in our sample (69.4 per cent have a university degree and 19.5 per cent a high school diploma while 11.4 per cent have secondary education). Furthermore, the sample is distorted regarding party sympathisers: SPD and Green sympathisers are overrepresented (20.3 and 16 per cent respectively) while those of CDU/CSU are underrepresented (9 per cent). However, we do not consider this a major problem for our study. First, it would be problematic if the probability that a person is represented in the sample relied on the dependent variable, which would be the case, for instance, if participants would have been selected specifically for their positioning with regard to decision-promoting or decision-controlling procedures. This is clearly not the case here, and the selection on the dependent variables should not have a distorting effect. Secondly, we counteract the distortion of the sample in terms of the independent variables by controlling for exactly those factors in which our sample is distorted (age, gender, and education). This being said, although we are nonetheless able to measure effects, we do not claim representativeness in the sense of statistical inference. In other words, since we do not draw any conclusions about the population, assumptions about the normal distribution of the residuals do not matter much at this point, and our results are preliminary in this sense.
7. One factor that could have a distorting influence on the sample is the individual experience of using direct-democratic procedures (at the Land level or in municipalities). However, corresponding variables are not included in this dataset but should clearly be considered in future studies.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1
FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF THE DEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Variable	Item ^a	N	M	SD	Min	Max	Modifications/Comments
Support for mandatory constitutional referendums	<i>Q23(1)</i> Mandatory referendums on amendments to the constitution.	835	2.29	1.13	1	4	rescaled into 0–1
Support for agenda initiatives	<i>Q23(2)</i> Opportunity for groups of citizens to introduce bills to the federal parliament.	835	2.83	0.83	1	4	rescaled into 0–1
Democratic dissatisfaction	<i>Q19</i> Overall, are you very satisfied, rather satisfied, not satisfied or not at all satisfied with how democracy works in Germany?	836	2.23	0.78	1	4	rescaled into 0–1
Party affiliation	<i>Q3</i> If the federal election was held today, which party would you vote for?	828	4.08	2.07	1	8	Distribution in the sample: CDU/CSU: 73; SPD: 168; Greens: 132; FDP: 102; The Left: 150; AfD: 82; other: 47; no preference: 74
Level of education	<i>Q87</i> What is your highest educational qualification?	836	5.17	1.25	1	7	rescaled into three groups (categorical variable) Distribution in the sample: high school diploma: 95; secondary education: 163; university/polytechnic education: 578
Income	<i>Q89</i> What is the monthly net income of your household as a whole?	769	6.83	2.31	1	11	rescaled into four groups (categorical variable) Distribution in the sample: 1500 to 2500 €: 171; up to 1500 €: 124; 2500 to 4500 €: 284; more than 4500 €: 190
Year of birth	<i>Q42</i> When were you born (2006–1920)?	836	35.17	15.36	9	78	–
Gender	<i>Q41</i> What is your gender?	836	.20	.40	1	2	rescaled to 0 and 1

^aItems Q23(1) and Q23(2) succeed the following introduction: ‘There are many suggestions to extent citizens’ opportunities for political participation. We shall mention some of them in the following. Please state whether you consider each proposition as (rather) appropriate or (rather) inappropriate to improve democracy in Germany.’ (Original text: ‘Es gibt ja viele Ideen, wie man den Bürgern mehr politische Beteiligungsmöglichkeiten einräumen könnte. Wir nennen Ihnen im Folgenden einige davon. Bitte klicken Sie an, ob Sie den jeweiligen Vorschlag für (eher) geeignet oder (eher) ungeeignet halten, um die Demokratie in Deutschland zu verbessern.’)

TABLE A2
RESULTS OF ORDERED LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODELS

	Agenda Initiative			Mandatory Referendum		
	A1	A2	A3	B1	B2	B3
Democratic dissatisfaction		8.885*** (2.537)	5.307*** (1.778)		27.41*** (8.052)	13.60*** (4.622)
<i>Party affiliations</i>						
SPD			1.512 (0.415)			0.570* (0.157)
Greens			2.255** (0.658)			0.848 (0.239)
FDP			1.532 (0.466)			0.683 (0.206)
The Left			2.334** (0.685)			1.023 (0.289)
AfD			2.455* (0.886)			3.036** (1.086)
Other			5.253*** (2.093)			1.116 (0.429)
No preference			1.660 (0.551)			0.754 (0.241)
Controls						
<i>Education</i>						
Secondary education	1.065 (0.279)	1.083 (0.285)	1.090 (0.292)	2.257** (0.573)	2.408*** (0.635)	2.232** (0.600)
Polytechnic/University degree	0.680* (0.124)	0.714 (0.131)	0.764 (0.143)	0.780 (0.137)	0.798 (0.143)	0.807 (0.148)
<i>Household income</i>						
up to 1500 €	1.193 (0.272)	1.073 (0.247)	1.135 (0.265)	1.003 (0.218)	0.909 (0.203)	1.030 (0.235)
2500–4500 €	1.182 (0.218)	1.255 (0.234)	1.325 (0.250)	0.939 (0.165)	1.066 (0.192)	1.142 (0.208)
more than 4500 €	0.779 (0.160)	0.962 (0.202)	1.065 (0.227)	0.679* (0.134)	0.919 (0.188)	0.983 (0.205)
Year of birth	1.000 (0.00474)	0.993 (0.00484)	0.995 (0.00492)	1.012* (0.00461)	1.004 (0.00476)	1.004 (0.00488)
Gender (female)	1.331 (0.230)	1.484* (0.259)	1.483* (0.266)	0.868 (0.140)	0.983 (0.163)	0.996 (0.171)
Constant	0.628*** (0.0381)	0.528*** (0.0401)	0.437*** (0.0519)	0.396*** (0.0490)	0.185*** (0.0474)	0.248*** (0.0629)
Observations	768	768	760	768	768	760
Pseudo R^2	0.010	0.044	0.054	0.022	0.089	0.104

Note: Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.