

Who do the people want to govern?

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Abstract

Relative to the well-developed theory and extensive survey batteries on people's preferences for substantive policy solutions, scholarly understanding of people's preferences for the mechanisms by which policies should be adopted is disappointing. Theory rarely goes beyond the assumption that people would prefer to rule themselves rather than leave decisions up to elites and measurement rests largely on four items that are not up to the task. In this article, we seek to provide a firmer footing for "process" research by 1) offering an alternative theory holding that people actually want elites to continue to make important political decisions but want them to do so only after acquiring a deep appreciation for the real-world problems facing regular people, and 2) developing and testing a battery of over 50 survey items, appropriate for cross-national research, that extend understanding of how the people want political decisions to be made.

Keywords

governmental processes, direct democracy, stealth democracy, popular desires

Introduction

Scholars and practitioners have a reasonably detailed understanding of the public policies people prefer but not of the processes people want democratic governments to employ in adopting those policies. The rise of Donald Trump in the United States and politicians cut from similar cloth around the world—for example, Viktor Orban in Hungary, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and Recep Erdogan in Turkey—lends urgency to the task of understanding the public's preferred arrangements. This wave of politicians not only shares anti-immigrant and tough-on-crime policy attitudes but also displays shallow devotion to democratic procedures, making public preferences for governing all the more relevant.

Our objective in this article is to improve understanding of ordinary people's desires for the way their government should operate. Previous efforts in this vein have been hindered by measurement issues—in particular a dearth of

appropriate survey items—but also by contradictory findings and undeveloped theory. By starting with a theory, by drafting a large number (over 50) of original, process items, by administering those survey items to a representative sample in one country (the United States), and by using the findings to draw substantive conclusions pertaining to the accuracy of the theory, we hope to advance research on public preferences for governmental processes. Still further progress, however, will depend on similar studies being conducted in numerous countries; thus, we aim to provide a

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battery of survey items that is suitable for a wide variety of cultural contexts.

Theory and literature review

Theorists have long debated the advantages and disadvantages of giving more power to the people at the expense of elected representatives (Burke, 1949 [1775]; Rousseau, 1946 [1762]; Mill, 1977 [1861]) but much of this debate is quite detached from information concerning what the people themselves actually want. This situation is unfortunate given that people's satisfaction with processes affects election outcomes, legislative successes, compliance with laws, and even overall democratic health (Chanley et al. 2001; Citrin, 1974; Harbridge and Malhotra, 2011; Harbridge et al. 2014; Hetherington, 2005; Hibbing and Alford, 2004; Miller, 1974; Tyler, 1990).

Underdeveloped theory is a central problem. A long-standing assumption is that ordinary people are populists who want to rule themselves rather than allow important political decisions to be made by elites but as described below the empirical evidence for this assertion is less than supportive, suggesting instead that people's process preferences are nuanced, multidimensional, ambivalent, and variable across individuals. Building on the existing literature, we believe people's process preferences have more of a theoretical core than is typically implied.

Our theory is that people neither want to continue to give what they see as *carte blanche* to self-serving elites nor to be required to make important political decisions themselves. What they actually want is what we call "attentive democracy," an arrangement in which elites still make formal policy decisions but do so only after they have been in sustained, intimate contact with everyday people and only in the interests of those people. When survey items present respondents with the dichotomous option of either direct popular or classic representative democracy, as has been typical to this point, people's answers are bound to appear messy, uncertain, and confused. We believe they want a third option.

Existing survey items on process are limited and make it challenging for analysts to develop cross-culturally appropriate theory. Procedural items in the vaunted American National Election surveys are confined primarily to four items on trust and even these do not address people's preferences for how the government should function. The Eurobarometer and especially the World Values Studies do better on this front. These regularized survey operations have included excellent process items on occasion but they typically disappear from subsequent iterations and have rarely been subjected to standard psychometrics and subsequent refinements. Finally, the buildup to and aftermath of Brexit stimulated substantial interest in public attitudes toward popular referenda, especially with regard to membership in

the EU (Rose and Borz, 2013; Shuck and De Vreese, 2015; Eichlorn et al. 2021) but the survey items in that research stream are understandably fairly narrowly drawn. The result is that no sophisticated, agreed-upon process batteries are available.

One well-known effort to assess people's preferred procedural mechanisms is found in *Stealth Democracy* (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; hereafter HTM). HTM relied heavily on four process items: one each addressing the topics of compromise, debate, giving more influence to business people, and giving more power to "unelected experts." They found that ordinary people expressed little appreciation for debate and compromise, key features of a democratic political system. They also found that, though people frequently expressed a knee-jerk desire for greater public involvement (via such mechanisms as ballot propositions), these same individuals worried that people like them lacked both the desire and the ability to make important political decisions.

Subsequent work in a variety of countries, including Spain, Finland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the (more recent) United States, found general support for these conclusions (Atkinson et al., 2016; Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009; Coffe and Michels, 2014; Font et al. 2015; VanderMolen, 2017; Webb, 2013).

A series of follow-up efforts, however, also raised concerns with the methodological approach and in particular the reliance on only four items, hardly enough to reflect the complexity of attitudes or to facilitate standard scale construction techniques. Moreover, factor analyses conducted by multiple teams suggested that the four original items do not fit together but rather fall into two distinct factors (Atkinson et al., 2016; Coffe and Michels, 2014; Font et al. 2015; Lavezzolo and Ramiro, 2017; VanderMolen, 2017; Webb, 2013). The first factor includes the two items asking respondents whether "elected officials should stop talking and take action" and whether "compromise is just selling out on principles." The second factor includes the two items asking respondents if they agreed that "government would run better if important political decisions were left up to successful business people" or if "decisions were left up to non-elected experts." Preferences regarding how decisions should be made (subsequent to debate and compromise or not) seem to be distinct from preferences regarding who should make them (elected officials or less accountable entities). Some evidence went further and indicated that the desire to empower business people is different from the desire to empower unelected experts (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017; Gangl, 2007; Lavezzolo and Ramiro, 2017).

Additional concerns have been raised about the wording of the original four items (Neblo et al., 2010; VanderMolen, 2017). Holding up "taking action" as the alternative to debate likely depresses support for debate. Likewise, suggesting that

compromise may be akin to “selling out on principles” seems leading. One team of scholars responded to these problems by rewording the deliberation item to read: “would you prefer that members of Congress take action without engaging in lengthy discussion” or that they “discuss issues more thoroughly before taking action” (Mondak and Mitchell, 2009). With this wording, support for deliberation shoots up so much that it is preferred four to one over the “no lengthy discussion” option. The item on compromise was also made more balanced by omitting the reference to “selling out.”

Questions have also been raised about the wording of supplemental items dealing with the entities respondents want to make decisions. The available options in HTM’s work were “the people” on the one hand or “policy experts and members of Congress” on the other. As subsequent research has shown, however, in the people’s minds “elected officials” are very different from “experts” (see Gherghina and Geissel, 2017) so should be treated separately. VanderMolen (2017) extends this distinction by separating opinion on the concepts of “government bureaucrats,” “business leaders,” “independent experts,” and “elected politicians.”

Recognizing the leading nature of HTM’s original items, Neblo et al. (2010) reverse the bias. Instead of emphasizing the negative aspects of compromise, they reworded it to emphasize the positive: “openness to other people’s views and a willingness to compromise are important for politics.” Not surprisingly, when compromise is equated with “openness” rather than “selling out” support for it increases dramatically (see also Webb, 2013).

Rather than merely modifying the original four, some scholars add a limited number of items. For example, Coffe and Michels (2014) included people’s perceptions of the appropriate political role for ordinary citizens vis-a-vis elected officials and Font et al. (2015) added items on respondents’ attitudes toward rule by the people, rule by representatives, and rule by unelected experts. A more extensive compilation of process items, though focusing narrowly on attitudes toward “populism,” is found in Akkerman et al. (2014; see also Hawkins et al., 2012).

In sum, though everyone working in the area agrees on the need “to improve measurement” (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009: 13), HTM’s original, flawed four items, sometimes after modifications and supplements but frequently alone and verbatim, remain at the center of many studies of attitudes toward governmental structures and procedures (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2016; Fernandez, 2015).

Constructing an extensive, generalizable battery of items would make it possible to build theory and, relatedly, to identify key correlates of inter-personal variations in preferences for governmental procedures—a matter that to this point has produced confusion and mixed results. For example, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) and Bengtsson and Mattila (2009) find that gender and age are not related to

attitudes toward process, whereas other work reports that they are significantly correlated (see Evans et al. 2013), and still other work finds that gender and age predict some but not all process attitudes (Coffe and Michels, 2014).

Other disputes concern the effects of education, political interest, political knowledge, and ideology on preferences for governmental procedures. The educated and knowledgeable appear to be more likely to support representative government (see Atkinson et al., 2016) but debate continues over whether those who favor the delegation of political power to unelected experts are informed and educated but disillusioned or merely less educated and less knowledgeable about politics. Webb (2013) finds that those with less education and political interest are more likely to favor stealth democracy type procedures. Bengtsson and Mattila (2009) report that those with less education are most likely to want change. Donovan and Karp (2006) and Bowler et al. (2007) find that the politically interested tend to want referenda and direct democracy, whereas Dalton’s analysis (2004) suggests it is the less politically interested who want direct democracy. And HTM, Bengtsson and Mattila (2009), and Webb (2013) find some evidence that those on the left favor direct democracy while those on the right favor less accountable structures, a result consistent with the apparent anti-democratic impulses of the followers of leaders such as Trump and Bolsonaro.

Data collection procedures

In order to develop an improved and expanded survey battery, we began by compiling the items in the existing literature, keeping (sometimes with slight modifications) those relevant to our theory but eliminating those that were less relevant and/or that addressed specific reform proposals such as term limits for officeholders, open versus closed primary elections, or ranked preference voting since those would be too country-specific and do not pertain directly to our theory. We then drafted several original items to address aspects of the theory not covered by existing items. We did include three U.S.-specific items, asking whether the power of the President, state and local governments, and members of Congress should be increased or decreased. Scholars seeking to administer this survey battery in other countries will either want to delete these three items or substitute institutions that are relevant to the country of interest. For the most part, however, our items keep the focus on the core theoretical issue surrounding democratic governance since its inception: who should rule (Mosca, 1939).

Our initial battery contained 51 total items tapping respondents’ perceptions of 1.) the politically-relevant capabilities of “ordinary people” (eight items), 2.) the capabilities of politicians (five items), 3.) the nature of governing and optimal processes (eight items), 4.) the value of increasing or decreasing the political power of various

entities (18 items), and 5.) the way to make government run better (12 items).

In terms of response options, the first three of the five categories of items were formulated in the standard five-point Likert style: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree (see Table 1 for the question wordings). The 18-item battery on where power should be increased or decreased offers three response options: increase, stay the same, or decrease (see Table 2 for question wordings). And the fifth category taps the changes each respondent believes would make government run better by setting up a 1–10 scale with anchors on each end (see Table 3). For example, “Government would run better if elected officials listened less to ordinary people” (1) or “...listened more to ordinary people” (10).

In mid-2017, during the early stages of the Trump Presidency, we administered these 51 items, along with items on sociodemographics, personality, political preferences (ideology, party identification, and issue positions), and political activity/interest/knowledge items, to a demographically representative sample of American adults recruited by the international polling firm YouGov. YouGov uses an online panel of approximately 1.8 million US respondents to create representative samples. Our sample was specifically matched to a 2010 American Community

Survey (ACS) sampling frame on gender, age, race, education, party identification, and political interest. The total N is 800 (AAPOR RR3=71.3), large enough to detect effects of $r = 0.10$ with 80% power (sample size required for $r = 0.10$, $\alpha = 0.05$, and $\beta = 0.20$, is $N = 783$).

Descriptive results

Initial results are presented in Tables 1–3. One of the clearest conclusions from the results in Table 1 is that respondents have a very low opinion of the political capabilities of ordinary people, saying they are deficient in common sense (73.1%), information (76.2%), and judgment (69.4%). More disagree (32.6%) than agree (30.4%) that people are informed enough to make important political decisions and only 31.2% “trust ordinary people to make important political decisions.” Still, politicians fare no better than ordinary people. They are viewed as corrupt and selfish (57.5%), as having the “wrong” motives (57.9%), and most respondents believe politicians would “ruin society if the people did not stop them” (61.4%).

If neither the people nor politicians are up to the task, who should be empowered to shape political decisions? In stark contrast to their unhappiness with current political processes, most people are reluctant to embrace significant

Table 1. Attitudes toward everyday people, politicians, and governing.

	<u>Disagree(%)</u>	<u>Neutral(%)</u>	<u>Agree(%)</u>
Attitudes toward everyday people			
I trust ordinary people to make decisions.	27.9	40.9	31.2
The public's lack of common sense scares me.	7.4	19.5	73.1
The public's lack of information scares me.	6.8	17.0	76.2
The public's lack of sound judgment scares me.	9.0	21.6	69.4
People should be given power.	20.4	36.5	43.1
People are informed enough to make decisions.	32.6	37.0	30.4
People have the skills necessary to make decisions.	21.9	35.2	42.9
Ordinary people have enough time to make decisions.	23.1	37.0	39.9
Attitudes toward elected officials			
I trust elected officials to make decisions.	40.9	35.1	24.0
Politicians are corrupt and selfish.	11.5	31.0	57.5
Politicians would ruin society if people didn't stop them.	8.6	30.0	61.4
Politicians should be stripped of power.	24.1	36.8	39.1
Politicians have the wrong motives.	8.2	33.9	57.9
Attitudes toward governing			
Governing is more complicated than people believe.	16.6	20.4	63.0
Governing is not as complicated as people believe.	49.1	26.0	24.9
We should have more direct ballot referenda.	9.5	28.6	61.9
We should have fewer direct ballot referenda.	46.8	32.1	21.1
Politicians should be willing to compromise.	12.9	32.9	55.1
Politicians shouldn't be expected to compromise.	40.0	37.1	22.9
Officials need to continue to make political decisions.	31.2	39.0	29.8
Everyday people know better than so-called experts.	27.0	34.5	38.5

Table 2. Preferences for alteration in influence.

Desire for the influence of the following to be increased, kept the same, or decreased:

	Decreased (%)	Kept the same (%)	Increased (%)
Judges	24.6	58.2	17.1
The president	25.2	54.9	19.8
Members of congress	33.0	57.6	9.4
State and local governments	13.3	54.8	31.9
Bureaucrats	55.1	38.7	6.1
Unelected experts	18.3	50.7	31.0
Business people	29.4	45.4	25.2
Military generals	16.7	56.1	27.2
Scientists	10.4	41.4	48.3
Medical doctors	7.6	54.4	38.0
Religious leaders	40.3	41.4	18.3
People with no previous gov experience	24.2	53.9	21.9
People with substantial previous experience	16.8	59.3	23.9
Random citizens chosen by lot	14.8	58.5	26.6
People who experienced real problems	3.5	36.6	59.9
Billionaires	58.2	33.3	8.5
Politicians prohibited from re-election	34.3	51.3	14.4
Politicians who can't benefit themselves	11.6	39.0	49.4

Table 3. Beliefs about how to make our government run better.

On a scale of 1–10, our government would run better if elected officials such as members of Congress:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Mean
Talked and deliberated less					Talked and deliberated more					6.97
Stuck to their principles regardless					Compromised to reach agreement					7.06
Listened less to ordinary people					Listened more to ordinary people					8.31
Stuck to their personal ideological beliefs					Were more ideologically flexible					7.11
Paid less attention to business people					Paid more attention to business people					6.25
Paid less attention to independent experts					Paid more attention to independent experts					7.09
Paid less attention to scientific research					Paid more attention to scientific research					7.46
Went with their gut instinct when deciding					Did more research before deciding					8.13
Listened less to elites					Listened more to elites					4.09
Relied more on their own opinion					Relied more on the views of others					6.93
We're not so beholden to their party					Were more loyal to their party					4.17
Had little previous political experience					Had substantial previous political experience					6.00

change (Table 2). “Keeping influence the same” is the modal response for 13 of the 18 categories, regularly attracting more than 50% support. Still, people do express a desire to alter the influence of certain entities. The strongest preferences are to decrease the influence of billionaires (58.2%) and bureaucrats (55.1%) and to increase the influence of “people who have experienced real-world problems and challenges in their lives” (59.9%) and “politicians who are not in a position to benefit personally from their political decisions” (49.4%).

People seem attracted to the possibility of shifting power toward those who are not in a position to feather their own nests. Four times as many respondents wanted to increase as decrease the influence of “politicians who are not in a position to benefit personally from their political decisions.” For that much support to be given to any option that includes the word “politicians” is noteworthy. Also, unelected experts, scientists, and medical doctors—groups generally perceived to base their decisions on facts rather than self-interest—are frequently viewed as deserving of additional influence. The public’s instinct here makes sense given that people believe the average citizen lacks the requisite tools and perceive politicians to be corrupt and selfish, leading them to prefer to turn to informed individuals whose motives are not suspect—if such individuals can be found.

In terms of people’s perceptions of the nature and challenges of governing, the results indicate a more realistic view

than that suggested in previous work (e.g., Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002). In Table 1, 63% agree that governing is complicated and 55.1% acknowledge that politicians should compromise (only 12.9% flat out disagree with the need to compromise). In the 1–10 scales (see Table 3), people clearly believe that governing would work better with more, not less, deliberation (6.97), compromise (7.06), and especially research (8.13). Still, a slice of the population—about 25%—is convinced that “governing is not as complicated as most people believe” and that deliberation is unnecessary.

People’s perceptions of the value of previous governmental experience are conflicted. They may agree that governing is complicated and background research necessary but they are not particularly convinced that previous governmental experience is an asset. One survey item asked whether people with no previous experience should have their power increased or decreased (see Table 2) and sentiments were evenly split: 24.2% said influence should be decreased but 21.9% said it should be increased. When respondents were asked whether government would work better if elected officials had little or substantial previous experience (Table 3), the mean tilted toward “substantial” (6.0) but support for political experience was the third lowest of the 12 items, behind only support for elites and political parties. Political experience is definitely a mixed bag in the eyes of the people even though most of them see government as complicated and as requiring research, debate, and compromise.

Finally, respondents believe people should be listened to, even though the people are believed to lack information, common sense, and judgment, and there is a particular group of people who are believed to be especially deserving. When we asked about giving more influence to “random citizens selected by lot,” only 26.6% of respondents thought that was a good idea, but when we asked about giving more influence to “people who have experienced real problems” 60% of respondents agreed. This is by far the most support for any of the 18 groups included. It would seem that, as we theorized, the desire is not so much for people to have to take over decision-making tasks but rather for decision-makers to be acutely aware of the daily challenges confronting real people. More than they want direct democracy, people want attentive democracy—a political system that is in tune with the problems and needs of regular people.

The underlying structure of procedural preferences

As mentioned, a major concern with previous research on public procedural preferences is that the survey batteries utilized were typically short (often just four items) and underdeveloped, making it a challenge to draw conclusions about dimensionality. What happens with improved and more numerous items?

In order to identify any broader underlying elements in people’s preferences for governing processes, we began with the 51 items in Tables 1–3 but then set aside 10 redundant items. For example, one item asked whether “politicians should be willing to compromise,” another asked whether “politicians should be expected to compromise,” and a third asked whether it was better for politicians to compromise or to stick with their principles.” In the interest of parsimony, we kept the most direct item (“should politicians be willing to compromise”) but not the other two. We then conducted an exploratory factor analysis on the remaining 41 items, using an ordinary least squares, minimum residual solutions. We ran both exploratory and confirmatory FAs on the 41 items but the results are virtually identical. We report the exploratory results because they are the most widely used in the literature and therefore will be the more familiar to most readers. To make interpreting the relationships simpler, we have bolded the items having a correspondence to the underlying factor that is significant at the 95% level (see Table 4).

The dimensions are: 1.) perceptions of the degree to which “citizens are capable of governing” (eight items); 2.) perceptions of the degree to which “politicians are capable of governing” (four items); 3.) preferences for “shifting political influence to ordinary people” (five items); 4.) preferences for “shifting influence within existing facets of governing” (six items); 5.) preferences for “shifting influence to non-political experts I” (three items); 6.) preferences for “shifting influence to non-political experts II” (four items); 7.) preferences for “shifting influence to non-traditional actors” (five items); and 8.) beliefs about the need for deliberation, compromise, flexibility, and experience” (six items).

All the items dealing with respondents’ perceptions of the political abilities of the public loaded significantly on the first dimension and all four items on perceptions of the capabilities of politicians load on Dimension 2. For Dimension 3, on respondents’ desires to shift influence toward or away from ordinary people, the item on having “fewer direct ballot referenda” does not fit with the others, a finding that may be consistent with the notion that attitudes toward ballot propositions are not purely indicative of a desire to shift power to the public.

The items in the dimension on empowering or disempowering particular elements of government (Dimension 4) indicate that members of Congress, bureaucrats, judges, and experienced politicians tend to be viewed similarly, whereas the President and state and local governments stand a bit apart. Desires to increase the influence of unelected experts, medical doctors, and especially scientists, load on a seemingly ideological dimension (Dimension 5) as do desires to increase the influence of business people, billionaires, military generals, and religious leaders (Dimension 6). The seventh dimension—on non-traditional sources

of potential power—is driven by the aforementioned item on being in touch with real-world problems and, to a somewhat lesser extent, by attitudes toward “politicians who can’t benefit themselves.” Finally, attitudes toward deliberation, compromise, research, and political experience all load nicely on a central concept (Dimension 8).

The next question is the extent to which each of these eight individual dimensions correlates with the others. Are there overarching dimensions that unite, for example, a negative view of ordinary people, a desire to empower politicians, and a belief that governing requires compromise, deliberation, and research; or, alternatively, a negative view of politicians, a desire to empower ordinary people, and a belief that governing is best done without deliberation, research, compromise, and previous political experience?

In Table 5, we present the correlations of the eight dimensions and the take-away message is the low correlations between most of the factors. Only a few conclusions are notable—and somewhat predictable. For example, respondents with a favorable view of citizen competence prefer redistributing political power to ordinary people ($r = 0.41$). Likewise, respondents who have a positive view of politicians not surprisingly have a negative view of shifting power toward the public ($r = -0.53$) and want a redistribution of power within government toward the judicial and legislative branches ($r = 0.38$). Those who want to shift power to the people do not want to shift it to the judicial and legislative branches ($r = -0.26$). Further, there is a reasonably robust negative correlation between a preference for empowering businesspeople, billionaires, the military, and clergy and the belief that governance requires deliberation, flexibility, and expertise ($r = -0.25$).

Beyond these relationships, however, the central theme seems to be disconnection. There is a glimpse of a larger “anti-politics,” “anti-politician,” and “anybody can govern” sentiment (and its converse) in the correlations but the real message seems to be the degree to which the various dimensions fail to correlate with each other. For example,

perceptions of citizen competence have no correspondence to views of redistributing power *within* government and there is little connection between perceptions of the difficulty of governance and the degree to which inexperienced or random citizens should be empowered and the degree to which politicians are capable of governing.

Process attitudes are remarkably multifactorial. The fact that the four “stealth democracy” items did not load well on a single dimension may not have been solely the product of a paltry number of questionably worded items. Even with more and better items, there appear to be numerous, largely distinct elements of attitudes toward governing. In many respects, this result should not be surprising. After all, substantive issues have numerous components, with social, economic, racial, and “toughness” policies frequently constituting distinct dimensions. A central finding arising from this first comprehensive battery of process items appears to be that, like substantive policy attitudes, process attitudes load on many diverse factors. No single change in who is empowered and how government operates is likely to do much to placate a populace with such diverse views.

Correlates of variations in process preferences

The next matter concerns the specific independent variables that explain variation in the eight dimensions. To address this question, we assigned respondents a score on each of the eight dimensions and then ran regression models in an attempt to account for the variance in each. The independent variables we employed fall into three groups: basic demographics (age, education, and race); selected political variables (level of political participation, political knowledge, and attitudes toward those on the “other side” of the political spectrum); and ideologically relevant variables (Republican, religious, economic conservative, social conservative, authoritarian, and Trump voter in 2016). We also ran the models with sex, income, and the Big 5

Table 4. Correlations of the eight dimensions.

	Dimens. 1	Dimens. 2	Dimens. 3	Dimens. 4	Dimens. 5	Dimens. 6	Dimens. 7
Dimension 1—Citizens are capable of governing	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Dimension 2—Politicians are capable of governing	-0.17	—	—	—	—	—	—
Dimension 3—Shift power to ordinary people	0.41	-0.53	—	—	—	—	—
Dimension 4—Shift power within government	-0.06	0.38	-0.26	—	—	—	—
Dimension 5—Shift power to non-political experts I	-0.21	0.05	-0.08	0.34	—	—	—
Dimension 6—Shift power to non-political experts II	0.20	0.07	0.03	0.12	-0.18	—	—
Dimension 7—Shift power to non-traditional actors	0.03	-0.21	0.25	-0.02	0.20	0.11	—
Dimension 8—Governing takes deliberation, compromise, and experience	-0.11	-0.06	-0.02	0.21	0.31	-0.25	0.06

personality traits but the results were largely unaffected when these concepts were included.

The variables were measured as follows: age in years; education, 0 = no high school diploma to 5 = post-graduate degree; white = 1 if white and 0 if not; participation ranged from 0 to 7 with one point each being given for political acts such as voting in 2016, making a political donation, communicating with a government official, attending a rally, etc.; political knowledge, 0 = no correct answers to 5 = all correct answers to political knowledge questions such as who is the current Vice-President; out-party negativity ranged from 0 to 3 with 3 = agreeing that those with an ideology opposite that of the respondent are less informed, less truthful, and more closed-minded and 0 = disagreeing with all three; Republican, 0 = strong Democrat to 6 = strong Republican; religious, 0 = never attend religious services to 5 = attend them at least once/week; economic conservative = score on a factor composed of preferences for low taxes and small government and preferences

opposed to government healthcare and welfare spending; social conservative = score on a factor composed of preferences in favor of the death penalty and immigration limits and preferences opposed to gay marriage and gun restrictions; authoritarian, 0–4 with 4 indicating beliefs that childrearing should instill respect for elders, good manners, obedience, and good behavior; and Trump voter = 1 if voted for Trump in 2016 and 0 if not. We selected those explanatory concepts that were included in previous research or that were relevant to our theoretical interests. The results are presented in Table 6.

The three demographic variables do not correlate much with people's locations on the various dimensions, with age being an occasional exception, but the three broadly political items do somewhat better. Political knowledge is significantly (0.05) related to attitudes in six of the eight dimensions. Those who are knowledgeable see both the people and politicians as incapable and they prefer to shift power away from the leaders of business, the military, and

Table 5. Regression analysis of process preferences.

	Dimension 1 Citizens capable	Dimension 2 Politicians capable	Dimension 3 Shift power to people	Dimension 4 Shift power within govt	Dimension 5 Shift power to non-pol 1	Dimension 6 Shift power to non-pol 2	Dimension 7 Shift power to non-trad	Dimension 8 Governing requirements
Intercept	0.25 (0.23)	1.23** (0.23)	-0.82** (0.20)	0.34 (0.20)	-0.16 (0.19)	-0.10 (0.18)	-0.34 [†] (0.19)	-0.08 (0.22)
Age	0.00 (0.03)	-0.08* (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	-0.15** (0.03)	-0.07** (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.08* (0.03)
Education	-0.04 [†] (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.04 [†] (0.02)
White	-0.14 [†] (0.08)	0.12 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.07)	0.06 (0.06)	0.09 (0.06)	-0.15** (0.06)	0.10 [†] (0.06)	-0.04 (0.07)
Participation	0.15 (0.14)	-0.02 (0.13)	0.20 [†] (0.12)	0.21 [†] (0.11)	0.17 (0.11)	0.13 (0.10)	0.35** (0.11)	0.19 (0.12)
Political knowledge	-0.08** (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.08** (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)	-0.10** (0.02)	0.07** (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Out-party negativity	-0.26 (0.18)	-1.21** (0.17)	0.83** (0.15)	-0.50** (0.15)	-0.03 (0.14)	-0.29* (0.14)	0.09 (0.14)	0.19 (0.16)
Republican	-0.12 (0.12)	-0.16 (0.12)	0.15 (0.11)	-0.08 (0.10)	0.09 (0.10)	0.12 (0.10)	-0.03 (0.10)	-0.29* (0.11)
Religious	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	-0.04** (0.01)	0.05** (0.01)	0.00 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
Economic conservative	-0.05 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)	0.02 (0.04)	-0.24** (0.04)	-0.19** (0.04)	0.19** (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	-0.26** (0.05)
Social conservative	0.12* (0.06)	-0.04 (0.06)	0.06 (0.05)	-0.05 (0.05)	-0.20** (0.05)	0.23** (0.04)	0.05 (0.05)	-0.21** (0.05)
Authoritarian	0.31 (0.21)	-0.46* (0.21)	0.31 [†] (0.18)	0.20 (0.18)	-0.05 (0.17)	0.58** (0.16)	-0.16 (0.17)	-0.02 (0.19)
Trump voter	0.25** (0.09)	-0.02 (0.09)	-0.06 (0.08)	-0.08 (0.08)	-0.14 [†] (0.07)	0.19* (0.07)	0.02 (0.08)	0.13 (0.09)
N	800	800	800	800	800	800	800	800
R2	0.10	0.12	0.11	0.25	0.27	0.42	0.08	0.23

[†]p < .1. *p < .05. **p < .01.

religion and toward doctors, scientists, and experts. And those who have a particularly negative view of their political opponents also have a distinctly negative view of politicians and therefore are more likely to want to shift power from those currently holding it to ordinary people.

Finally, the six more ideologically relevant independent variables display intriguing patterns. Perhaps surprisingly, variables relevant to location on the right of the political spectrum (identifying with the Republican Party, being religious, being economically and socially conservative, being authoritarian, and voting for Donald Trump) do not seem to be associated with a particularly negative view of politicians (only authoritarian is significant) or with a desire to shift power to ordinary people (none is significant and the coefficients are small)—see Dimensions 2 and 3. They do, however, correlate with the desire to shift power away from scientists, doctors, and experts (Dimension 5) and toward leaders of business, religion, and the military (Dimension 6). In addition, those identifying as a Republican and those favoring socially and economically conservative policy positions are more likely to believe that government works best when decision-makers have little experience, do not

deliberate and compromise, do not stress research and consultation, and are ideologically inflexible (Dimension 8).

In sum, left-right differences on the basic issue of whether to empower ordinary people or elites (Dimension 3) are not nearly as clear as left-right differences on which elites to empower and how they should proceed once they are in a position to make decisions. These findings seem to fit with modern events where it appears that the followers of leaders such as Trump and Duterte do not want power to be given to ordinary people as much as they want power to be given to decision-makers sympathetic to the causes dear to their hearts (see Hibbing, 2020).

Future Research

At present, the substantive conclusions drawn here are based on data from a single country. To merit greater confidence, parallel information on public preferences for the way government operates needs to be collected in a variety of countries. One of our objectives is to facilitate cross-national research by providing a battery of process items suitable for such a purpose. The 51 items listed in

Table 6. Suggested 21-item survey instrument on governmental processes.

Citizen capability

I trust ordinary people to make important political decisions.

Ordinary people are informed enough to make important political decisions.

Ordinary people have the necessary skills to make important political decisions

Politician capability

Politicians are too corrupt and selfish to make important political decisions.

Politicians would ruin society if people didn't stop them.

Politicians have the wrong motives.

Power to the people

Ordinary people should be given as much power as possible.

Politicians should be stripped of as much power as possible.

We should have more ballot referenda where people vote on issues directly.

Power to non-political experts I

The political power of unelected experts should be increased.

The political power of scientists should be increased.

The political power of medical doctors should be increased.

Power to non-political experts II

The political power of business people should be increased.

The political power of military generals should be increased.

The political power of religious leaders should be increased.

Power to non-traditional actors

The political power of people who have experienced real-world problems should be increased.

The political power of politicians who can't benefit themselves should be increased.

The political power of people with no previous governmental experience should be increased

Perceptions of the nature of governing

Government would run better if elected officials deliberated more.

Government would run better if elected officials compromised more.

Government would run better if elected officials were more ideologically flexible.

Table 7. Factor analysis.

Dimension 1—Citizens are capable of governing	
I trust ordinary people to make decisions	0.75
The public's lack of common sense scares me	-0.27
The public's lack of information scares me	-0.27
The public's lack of sound judgment scares me	-0.33
People are informed enough to make decisions	0.73
People have the skills necessary to make decisions	0.64
Ordinary people have enough time to make decisions	0.53
Everyday people know better than so-called experts	0.49
Dimension 2—Politicians are capable of governing	
I trust elected officials to make decisions	0.40
Politicians too corrupt to make important decisions	-0.75
Politicians would ruin society if people didn't stop them	-0.66
Politicians have the wrong motives	-0.75
Dimension 3—Shift power to ordinary people	
People should be given power	0.58
Politicians should be stripped of power	0.67
We should have more direct ballot referenda	0.42
We should have fewer direct ballot referenda	-0.11
Officials need to continue to make political decisions	-0.23
Dimension 4—Shift power within government	
The president	0.17
Members of congress	0.56
State and local governments	0.22
Bureaucrats	0.60
People with substantial previous experience	0.54
Dimension 5—Shift power to non-political experts I	
Unelected experts	0.42
Scientists	0.70
Medical doctors	0.49
Dimension 6—Shift power to non-political experts II	
Business people	0.73
Military generals	0.55
Religious leaders	0.56
Billionaires	0.59
Dimension 7—Shift power to non-traditional actors	
People with no previous government experience	0.33
Random citizens chosen by lot	0.31
People who experienced real problems	0.56
Politicians prohibited from re-election 0.14 Politicians who can't benefit themselves	0.46
Dimension 8—Governing requires deliberation, compromise, flexibility, and experience	
Deliberation	0.47
Compromise	0.62
Ideological flexibility	0.73
Research (not instinct)	0.52
Reliance on others	0.51
Experience	0.49

Bold = significant ($p < .05$).

Tables 1–3 constitute a battery that is much too long to insert into most survey instruments but by pruning the items that load less well it is possible to derive a tighter and more usable battery.

Recall that our factor analysis yielded eight dimensions. We first eliminated the dimension labeled “shift power within government” since it included items specific to a country (e.g., “should the power of members of Congress be increased or decreased”) and since opinions on such matters are likely to reflect the party or parties controlling the various institutions at the time. For each of the remaining seven dimensions, we identified the three items loading the best. The resultant 21 items are presented in Table 7 and we believe they constitute a useful and cross-nationally appropriate battery of items assessing who people want to make important political decisions and how. If 21 items is still too many (space on survey instruments is always at a premium), it would be possible to select those items relevant to a subset of dimensions of particular interest to the researcher. Finally, though in our survey the items had three different formats, the items in Table 7 could all be offered in a standard Likert format.

Conclusion

Dalton et.al (2004: 144) write that “ironically debate over representation versus direct democracy has been largely an elite affair...the public itself has seldom been directly consulted.” We could not agree more. Elites and theorists have been eager to push certain forms of governance onto the people without first soliciting people’s opinions. Uncertainty regarding the governmental structures people want has only intensified with the salience of leaders such as Le Pen, Trump, Orban, Modi, and Erdogan. Do the people want to take power themselves by throwing out elites (populism) or do they want a strong authority figure who dictates what the people should do (authoritarianism)? Are they willing to sacrifice democratic accountability to get the policy outcomes they desire?

Our central finding is that people are not smitten with either direct democracy or typical representative democracy and that what they want instead is attentive democracy—an arrangement in which elected officials continue to make decisions but do so only after being informed by sustained, intimate contact with work-a-day citizens. When we asked respondents which entities they would most like to see acquire additional political influence, the top preference by far was “people who have experienced real-world problems” and the second was “politicians who can’t benefit themselves” (and, thus, presumably, would be free to focus on the people they are supposed to represent).

At the same time, it is easy to misread the public’s desire to shift influence to real-world people. Respondents have a very dim view of the political capabilities of people like

them: 76.2% agree that “the public’s lack of information is scary.” And when asked if elected officials need to “continue to make political decisions,” about as many respondents agreed as disagreed.

We believe that when people say they want to see more influence given to people with real-world experiences they are not advocating for more formal political powers to be shifted to the people but rather for more attention to be given to their life situations. This desire for attentive democracy is consistent with, and helps to account for, several of the empirical findings we highlight. The multidimensionality apparent in Tables 4 and 7 makes sense because for the people the tradeoffs are more complex than is reflected in a single dimension running from direct democracy to representative democracy. People’s reluctance to endorse radical change (see Table 2 where “keep the same” is usually the preferred option) makes sense because, despite how much they mistrust elected officials, people still want them to play a role in decision-making. People’s desire to empower whichever elites are more in line with their own predilections (scientists for the left and generals for the right) makes sense because having those groups exercise influence would make it appear to the relevant ideologues as though government was paying attention to them. And people’s negative perceptions of the capabilities of elites as well as rank-and-file citizens make sense in the context of their desire for attentive democracy—which seems to them to be the most reasonable process given people’s political failings and given elected officials’ tendency to focus on their own self-interest.

From the people’s perspective, the precise governing mechanisms are less important than simply having their voices heard and acknowledged. This desire for attention is not benign, however, because people seldom recognize the extent to which their own problems and desires are distinct from those of other ordinary people (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002). This lack of appreciation for opinion diversity often leads people to conclude that politicians are not listening when in fact elites are likely listening but listening to a very different group of people.

The most pertinent research questions moving forward are the extent to which these conclusions are generalizable across time and borders as well as the degree to which attitudes vary predictably across people and contexts. Our hope is that the conclusions, theory, and survey items presented here will further cross-national research on how people want their governments to go about addressing important societal problems.

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