

Decision-Making Preferences in Times of Crisis

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Abstract

During crises, understanding political decision-making processes and evaluating related preferences are key to the legitimacy of political decisions. Our research focuses on preferences in decision-making processes in times of crisis through the analysis of the representational style most preferred by voters: that is, whether they prefer representation of the public good by the representatives, the party lines, the involvement of experts, or the incorporation of voters’ interests. Within the framework of representative democracy, these decisions are mediated by representatives whose representational style determines whose interest and opinion decision-making processes integrate. In our analysis, we examined representative styles in the context of three different types of crises: economic, social, and environmental. Our results indicate that the type of crisis is indifferent when it comes to preferred political decision-making processes, as Hungarian voters tend to favor processes where they are being consulted by the representatives across different scenarios. Representatives’ commitment to party lines is disfavored when making political decisions and we observed there is no clear preference regarding the involvement of experts in political decisions in times of crisis. These observed preferences strongly contradict the prevailing “strong party discipline” in Hungary. This deviation accentuates both weakening representative linkages and the importance of the performative elements of representation feeding into the populist characteristic of Hungarian democracy.

Keywords

decision-making processes; experts; political legitimacy; representative democracy; voter preferences

1. Introduction

In times of crisis, political decisions carry extra weight, with intense debates resurfacing about who should make decisions and whose interests should be considered. In such intense periods, preferences for political

decision-making processes gain momentum, as they influence the legitimacy and the acceptability of political decisions (Arnesen & Peters, 2018). Our research centers on voters' preferences in political decision-making in times of crisis: Do voters want to be consulted, or do they prefer expert involvement? Do they trust politicians to decide what is in the public's best interest, or do they expect them to follow party lines without deviation? Within the framework of representative democracy, these decisions are mediated by representatives whose representation style defines whose voices are heard when decisions are made. Our research connects representational styles to decision-making processes and approaches the question of preferences from the voters' perspective, a bottom-up approach that has not been addressed by literature.

We argue that understanding voters' preferences for political decision-making processes in times of crisis is crucial for several reasons. First, during crises, the legitimacy of the process is an important factor in achieving adherence to the decisions: If people perceive the process as just, they tend to accept the decisions and adhere more closely to the established rules. Second, in many countries, crisis is the "new normal" for politics. While in the last decade we have witnessed periodical crises—such as the financial crisis of 2019 or the pandemic—the "crisis narrative" became a constant, especially in countries with populist leaders in populist regimes. Third, representative democracy is challenged and the growing distrust in democratic institutions calls for new solutions in democratic decision-making (Caramani, 2017), with crises adding a new layer of challenge and calling for innovative measures and transformed representation.

Regarding the alternatives for representative democracy, political scientists have observed two emerging trends: (a) the technocratic solutions, which imply the involvement of experts, and (b) the participatory solutions that imply the involvement of everyday people through direct democracy and/or deliberation, both of which have become more prominent in liberal-democratic settings (Vittori et al., 2023). Citizens' involvement (Kuyper & Wolkenstein, 2019) and/or expert knowledge (Caramani, 2020; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002) frequently compensates for representative democracies' lack of legitimacy. Citizens seem to respond positively to the new forms of decision-making (Lavezzolo et al., 2021) although their preferences are mediated by various factors, including the issues that are being discussed (Wojcieszak, 2014), the design of the processes (Christensen, 2020), voters' characteristics (Coffé & Michels, 2014; Fernández-Martínez & Font Fábregas, 2018), and their historical, political, and social context (Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017; Chiru & Enyedi, 2022).

Still, despite all the challenges and alternatives, representative democracy prevails, and many voters connect to political decision-making processes through their elected representatives. Thus, these models of decision-making not only represent different approaches to democracy but potentially co-exist, allowing representative democracy to incorporate a variety of elements. Vittori et al. (2024) tested decision-making models "combined" and included non-elected actors as decision-influencers who do not decide but rather advise the decision-making process. Their findings on the Italian public support the combined models: "Contrary to expectations, expert-led decision-making processes do not enjoy an advantage relative to parliamentary ones, but the consultation of experts boosts support for the decision-making process in some cases" (Vittori et al., 2024, p. 687). Similar findings are presented for Spain, where significant support for expert involvement can be observed, even though a considerable number of citizens prefer a system where experts serve as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, traditional political representation (Ganuzza & Font, 2020).

These findings suggest that voters' expectations about decision-making processes vary and thus their expectations towards their representatives are situational. Indeed, Wass and Nemčok (2020) warn that "citizens' expectations of an ideal-type, non-contextualized role for MPs do not provide much information" (p. 333) because voters' preferences for representation are always context-dependent. It stems from the dynamic nature of representation (Dalton et al., 2011) where voters have different expectations about decision-making processes depending on the issue at hand and on the setting of the decision. Regarding issues, in the field of environmental policy, for instance, Bertou (2022) observed a preference for decisions made by experts over decisions made by representatives. As for the setting, research into decision-making processes during the 2008 financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic have shown that technocratic attitudes increased in these situations. Wratil and Pastorella (2018) identified political and economic crises as the major drivers for the nomination of technocratic prime ministers. Regarding voters, Lavezzolo et al. (2022) studied technocratic attitudes and found that technocratic attitudes have significantly increased as a consequence of the coronavirus outbreak; while Costa Pinto et al. (2018) also identify economic crises as one of the factors that encourage technocratic trends.

Our research aims to take a closer look at the functioning of representative democracy in times of crisis by understanding preferences about decision-making processes mediated by representatives. Who should representatives consult in times of turbulence? Do citizens want their representatives to consult experts or, rather, their voters? Do citizens expect their representatives to follow the party line or attempt to respect the public good and act accordingly on their own? First, we connect different decision-making processes mediated by representatives to representational styles. Second, we contextualize preferences within different crisis narratives. In line with Ganuza and Font (2020), our first expectation is that in times of crisis, the importance of expertise increases, leading voters to favor decision-making processes that involve consulting experts. Our second expectation is that the preference for expert involvement aligns with a decreased commitment to party lines. Third, we assume that contextualization matters, and thus the extent to which experts should be involved will differ according to the type of the crisis.

2. Voters' Preferences for Decision-Making Processes and Representational Models

Within the framework of representative democracy, decision-making processes are mediated by representatives who can consult different actors throughout the process. Through these consultations, we link different decision-making processes to the main representational styles and identify voter preferences by asking who representatives should talk to. The literature on representation has long distinguished between different representational styles based on "what criterion the representative ought to use when making decisions" (Önnudóttir & von Schoultz, 2020, p. 122). The basic approach has distinguished between the trustee and the mandate styles of representation (Burke, 1774), which differ in the degree of independence attributed to the politician making decisions: Should the politician decide based on their best judgment, or should they listen to its constituents (Pitkin, 1967)? The trustee style is thus framed as "independent decision-making" (Bengtsson & Wass, 2011) where representatives get elected because voters trust that they will know what is best for them, even if voters do not know it themselves. The trustee style thus prompts representatives to make decisions on their own, without consulting experts or voters, and regardless of the party line. The voter-delegate type of representation establishes a stronger connection to the public by prompting the politician to listen to their voters in the decision-making process. The role of party lines as guiding principles in representatives' decision-making prompted a third conceptualization of

representative styles: the party-delegate, where representatives follow the party line rather strictly, which translates to a strict adherence to the party program in the decision-making process. Early literature has considered the effect of context on representation and representational styles, with Wahlke et al. (1962) establishing the category of “politico,” the representative who either acts as a trustee or as a delegate, depending on the situation, signaling a dynamic nature of representation where different styles can be adopted by representatives and consequently preferred by voters.

While representational styles link the choice of the decision-making process with the focus of representation, that is, who the representatives aim to answer to, our approach is different: We consider the voters’ perspective and ask about their expectations regarding representational style. While voters’ expectations regarding the above-mentioned representational styles have been thoroughly researched (Bengtsson & Wass, 2010, 2011; Dageförde & Schindler, 2018; Dassonneville et al., 2021), we are bringing a new element into the picture: technocratic representation mediated by representatives.

Caramani (2017) explained the emergence of technocratic representation and populist representation as a critique of party government and proceeded to conceptualize technocratic representation by triangulating these three concepts. In his attempt to understand these new forms of linkages, he applied the traditional representational models of delegate and trustee representation to populist and technocratic representation and identified how populism doubles as a mandate type of representation but functions as a trusteeship relation. While technocratic representation is a valid and viable model in itself, we argue that it can also be understood as a new style of representation where technocratic decision-making is embedded in representation through the MP who chooses experts as the principal guiding actors of decision-making. Our assumption is that it is a representational style that voters tend to prefer in times of crisis. Furthermore, based on research on technocratic attitudes that emphasize anti-party sentiment (Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017), we assume that the preference for experts is accompanied by a strong disfavor for the party-delegate model in crisis settings.

Both the crisis setting and the anti-party element are reminiscent of populism and indeed populist attitudes can correlate with technocratic attitudes in two dimensions: their anti-political nature and their pro-expert sentiments (Fernández-Vázquez et al., 2023). Caramani (2017) also emphasizes the parallels between populism and technocratic representational models: They both stand for the search for the one common good, which is either what people want or what experts deem necessary. Both are unmediated in the sense that there is no organization needed to collect, sort through, and prioritize interests since there are designated people—the populist leader or the experts—who construct the best solution. In this sense, both are anti-party and define themselves in opposition to the party-dominated political scene. In the case of the technocratic model, it clearly translates into a trusteeship type of linkage since the decision-making is steered by expertise. Caramani (2017) argues that, in the case of populist representation, the linkage is not that clear: While it claims to be a mandate-type representational model where the people are the guiding force, in reality, it is more of a trusteeship where the leader gets wide authorization. Caramani (2017) calls it a disguised mandate, as “populists act, in the ideal type, according to a delegate model. In reality, populists are asked to interpret and form the popular will so that ultimately, they also act according to a trustee model” (p. 63). Similarly, Diehl (2018) also documents a twist in populist representation as leaders promote their similarity to the people, positioning themselves as “one of them” while they also strive for a stronger leadership position. We argue that it is due to this twist and to the disguised nature of the populist model

that, when studying representative styles, we first need to address technocracy. This helps establish preferences for the trustee style, the voter-delegate, the party-delegate, and the technocratic style. Populism often features a mix or, rather, a pseudo-mix of these elements.

Based on the conceptual closeness of technocracy and populism, Hungary seems to be an excellent case study to analyze preferences for decision-making processes, since the country is classified as a populist democracy (Pappas, 2019) characterized by de-democratization (Bogaards, 2018), where populist attitudes prevail (Krekó, 2021) and policy-making processes display strong populist characteristics (Bartha et al., 2020). The country is in a constant state of endogenously created crises (Köröseyi et al., 2016). Within this populist setting, in times of crisis there is also room, albeit limited, for expert knowledge. As Bene and Boda (2021) argue, political decision-making is constructed as the responsibility of the populist leader, with expert opinions serving “only as a crucial factual background for these ‘common sense’-based political decisions.” Our research asks the question then: What is expected of the other democratically elected political leaders, the representatives? In the Hungarian electoral setting, there are 199 parliamentarians, 103 of them elected in single member districts who potentially answer to their electorate. Do voters expect them to also consult experts? Do partisan sentiments show up in a dispreference for party-guided decision-making processes? Are representatives regarded as politicians entrusted with recognizing the public good and acting accordingly along the trusteeship style? Do voters still want to be consulted? We aim to answer these questions by examining Hungarian voters’ preferences for political decision-making processes mediated by representatives.

To test voters’ preferences regarding decision-making processes, we formulated three hypotheses mirroring our assumptions:

H1: In all types of crises, there is a preference for the involvement of experts in the decision-making process (cf. Ganuza & Font, 2020; Vittori et al., 2024).

H2: The type of “crisis narrative” significantly influences voters’ preferences regarding the involvement of experts in decision-making processes (cf. Costa Pinto et al., 2018; Wratil & Pastorella, 2018).

H3: Voters exhibit a preference for expert advice over party lines (cf. Fernández-Vázquez et al., 2023).

3. Methodology and Case Selection

We created a vignette survey experiment to address the question of process preferences and test our hypothesis, asking participants to select between scenarios that incorporated the different representational styles.

The research design reflected the assumption that voters’ expectations are contextualized, they differ depending on the problem being addressed. Our study applies a vignette survey method that allows for the examination of multiple influencing factors simultaneously, by independently manipulating variables and generating them in different steps of the process (Hainmueller et al., 2014). The vignette survey experiment was chosen for its ability to capture the complexity of voters’ preferences, addressing interactions between variables, such as the type of crisis and the preferred type of representational process. By varying each

attribute separately in the vignette stories, this method assesses both independent and interactive effects simultaneously.

The vignette formulated for this research aimed to investigate various representational models and decision-making processes. We presented respondents with a pair of vignettes—two hypothetical scenarios about specific crises. After presenting the scenarios, we asked the participants the following questions: “In the course of their work, do politicians often have to make decisions on controversial issues?” “In the event of conflict, where should good politicians focus their decisions?” In each story, we manipulated three different variables. The first of these variables could take on two distinct values, the second one could take three, and the third one could take four different values. Hypothetical stories looked like the following:

1. *Kálmán* pointed out that in a *social crisis*, the *common good* is particularly important. In a crisis situation, the *public interest* takes precedence.
2. *Katalin* pointed out that in an *economic crisis*, the *interests of the voters* are particularly important. In a crisis situation, the *interests of the people* come first.
3. *Kálmán* pointed out that in an *economic crisis*, a *unified party program* is particularly important. In a crisis situation, *party discipline* takes precedence.
4. *Katalin* pointed out that in an *environmental crisis*, *expert advice* is particularly important. In a crisis situation, *expertise* is the priority.

The expressions in italics indicate the variables, with the last two underlined expressions forming the third variable. This leads us to a $2 \times 3 \times 4$ arrangement with 24 possible scenarios. This design consists of three attributes with a total of nine levels (see Table 1). For the complete list of vignette stories used in our survey experiment, see the appendices.

The conjoint survey experiment was conducted in November 2022. The focus of the research was on the different dimensions of representation including descriptive, substantive, and procedural elements, asking how the different facets of representation resonate with voters due to the constant crisis narratives and populist framework. This objective emphasizes the critical role of the representative by exploring voters’ expectations about how representatives should carry out or, in populist terms, perform their representative role. The procedural aspect of the study focused on representative styles determining whether elected

Table 1. Variables and their values in survey vignettes.

Variable	Values of the variables
Sex	Male Female
Type of crisis	Economic crisis Social crisis Environmental crisis
Important considerations, interests	Public good (trustee) Party program (party-delegate) Experts’ considerations (technocratic style) Voters’ interests (voter-delegate)

leaders should represent their voters (voter-delegate) or the public's interest independently (trustee style), their party (party-delegate), through whose platform they are connected to their constituents, or follow the experts' advice (technocratic style).

We used a questionnaire-based method of individual querying in an online setting. The sample size comprised 1,200 respondents representative of the Hungarian population with respect to age, sex, region, type of settlement, and educational background. This approach provided a broad and inclusive data collection that is reflective of the basic demographic aspects of Hungary.

To analyze the results of our vignette survey experiment, we used several different software programs. For basic operations and analyses, such as querying frequencies and creating charts, we used SPSS. For the average marginal component effect (AMCE) analyses, we used the R statistical software package and Python. AMCE captures the average effect of changing one attribute level with all the other attributes unchanged. In our research, AMCE shows, for example, how the preference for important considerations and interests vary according to the presented crisis type.

4. Results

To thoroughly test our hypotheses, we did not only analyze the dataset as one unit consisting of an original sample of 1,200 respondents. To get a deeper insight, we divided the original sample into three smaller subsamples, each corresponding to a specific type of crisis: economic, social, and environmental. This division created three distinct groups, within which we applied separate AMCE analyses so that we were able to get a better understanding of how voters' preferences change according to the crisis type.

In case of an economic crisis, our findings revealed that Hungarian voters show a preference for having less experts involved in the decision-making process compared to voters' interests, which was considered the baseline; however, these results are not statistically significant. Conversely, decision-making based on party programs is clearly rejected by our respondents, with the data showing negative, statistically significant results: The estimated effect on voter preference is -0.552 , with a standard error of 0.054 , and a p -value of less than 0.001 . This indicates a strong disfavor towards partisan influences within the decision-making process. Interestingly our respondents did not dislike the trustee model but rather showed a preference, albeit statistically not significant, for integrating public interest defined independently by the representative into the decision-making process. Figure 1 and Table 2 show the detailed results.

In case of a social crisis, preference patterns among Hungarian voters show a somewhat different pattern compared to that observed in an economic crisis. During a social crisis, our respondents demonstrate a more sordid rejection of experts, party lines, and the public interest as defined by the representatives compared to incorporating voters' interests in the decision-making process. In this scenario, all three results are statistically significant.

Analyzing the impact of including experts in the decision-making process shows a negative effect, with an estimated effect of -0.295 , with a standard error of 0.055 and a p -value of less than 0.001 . In the case of party lines, the estimated effect on voter preference is -0.606 , with a standard error of 0.048 and a p -value of less than 0.001 . Taking into account the public interest as defined by the representative shows an estimated

effect of -0.145 , with a standard error of 0.0546 and a p -value of less than 0.001 . All three of these variables indicate a strong statistical significance, emphasizing a strong disfavor from our respondents. Figure 2 and Table 3 show the detailed results.

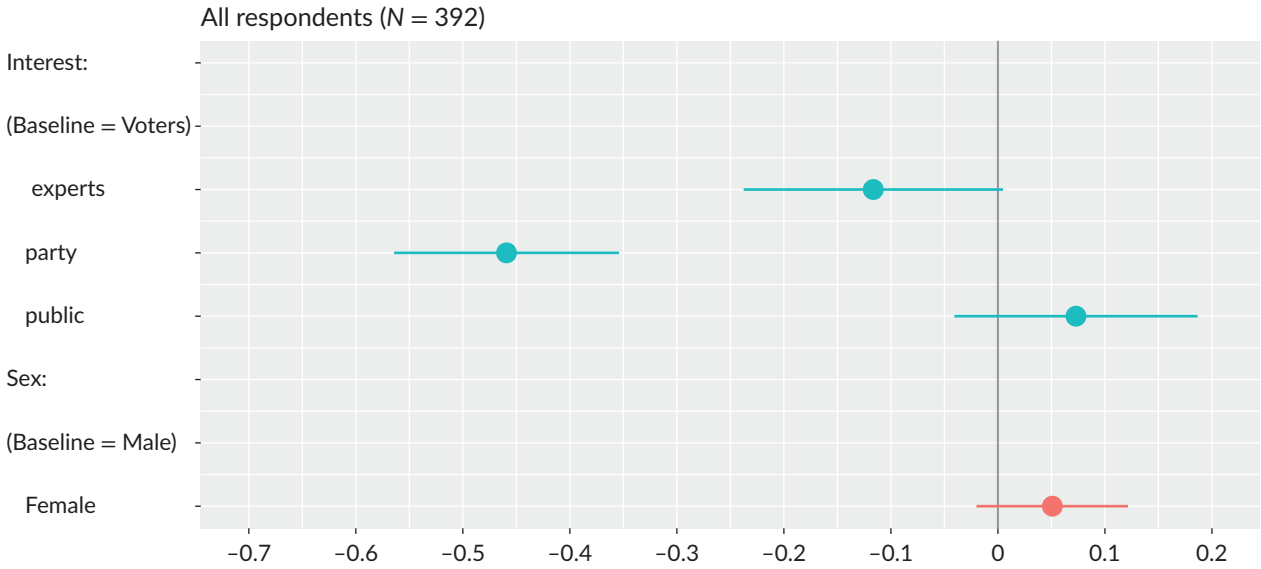


Figure 1. AMCEs on preferences in times of an economic crisis.

Table 2. AMCEs on preference in times of an economic crisis.

Attribute	Level	Estimate	Std. Err	P-value
Interest	Experts	-0.1166	0.0618	0.059
Interest	Party	-0.4594	0.0535	<0.001 ***
Interest	Public interest	-0.0728	0.0579	0.209
Sex	Female	0.0507	0.0361	0.160

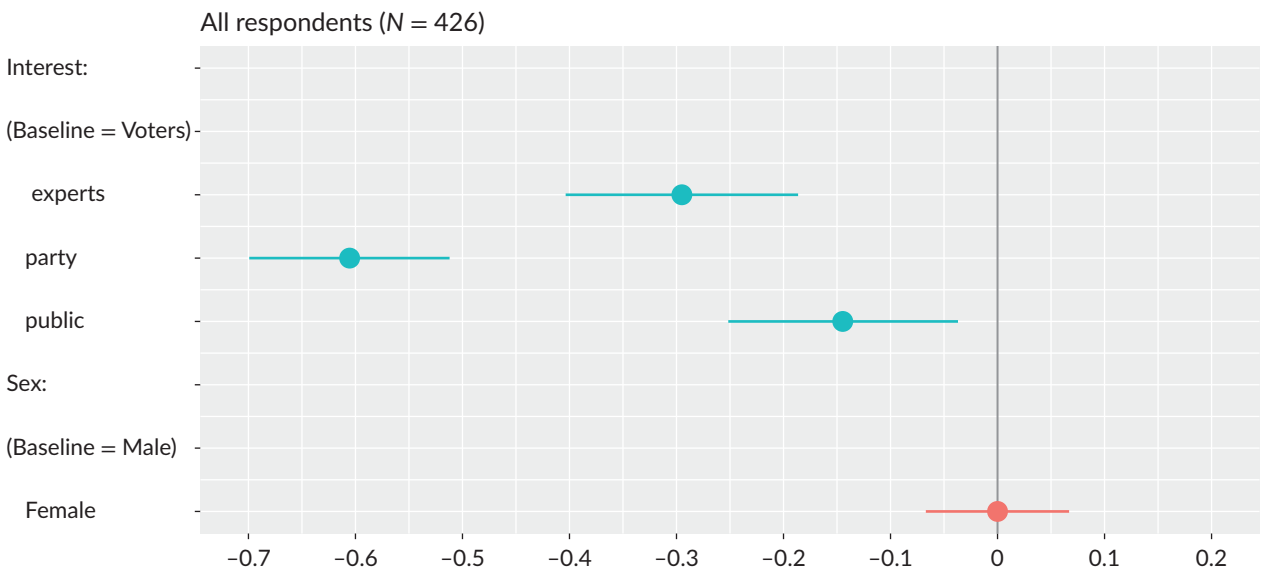


Figure 2. AMCEs on preferences in times of a social crisis.

Table 3. AMCEs on preferences in times of a social crisis.

Attribute	Level	Estimate	Std. Err	P-value
Interest	Experts	-0.2952	0.0552	<0.001 ***
Interest	Party	-0.6056	0.0477	<0.001 ***
Interest	Public interest	-0.1449	0.0546	<0.001 ***
Sex	Female	0.0000	0.0341	0.993

Results connected to an environmental crisis exhibit similarities to those observed in the case of a social crisis. In this situation, our study finds that respondents consistently reject the inclusion of experts, party lines, and the public interest defined by the representative in the decision-making process. Interestingly, among these, rejection of party commitment stands out as the only factor that is statistically significant, with an effect of -0.5515, a standard error of 0.0543, and a *p*-value of less than 0.001. This again underlines a strong statistical significance. Figure 3 and Table 4 show the detailed results.

Based on these results, our first hypothesis is rejected; respondents in our sample tend to reject the inclusion of experts in the political decision-making process, or at least do not show a statistically significant preference for them. As for the contextual effect of crisis types and the commitment to party lines, we could observe rather similar trends emerging for all three subsamples. Hence, we may deduce that the type of crisis has no

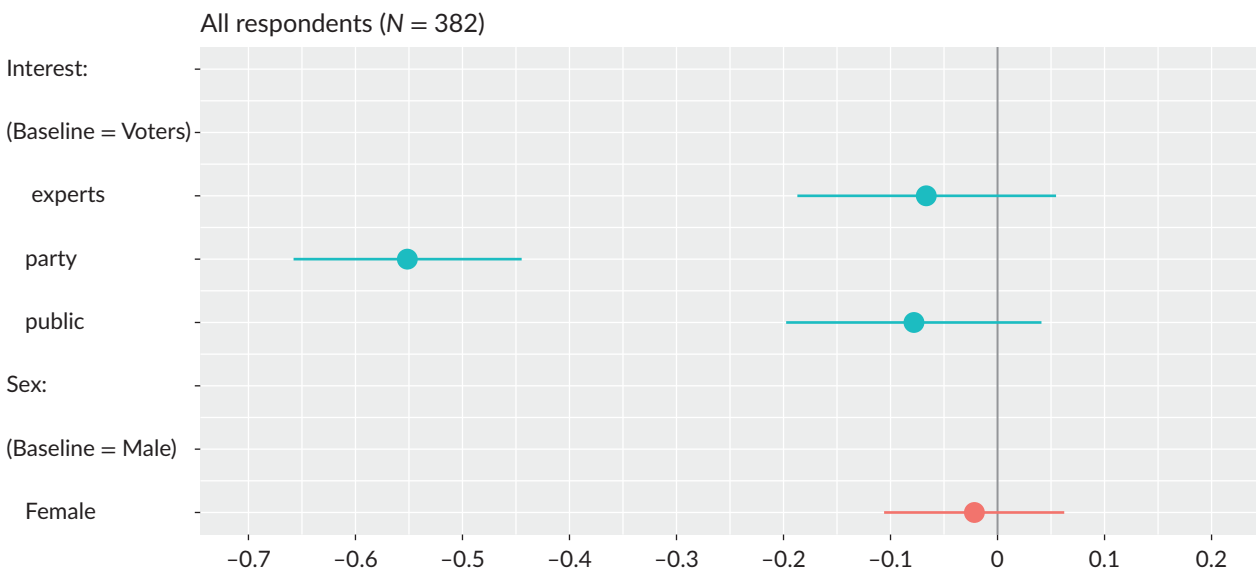


Figure 3. AMCEs on preferences in times of an environmental crisis.

Table 4. AMCEs on preferences in times of an environmental crisis.

Attribute	Level	Estimate	Std. Err	P-value
Interest	Experts	-0.0667	0.0615	0.278
Interest	Party	-0.5515	0.0543	<0.001 ***
Interest	Public interest	-0.0781	0.0605	0.197
Sex	Female	-0.022	0.0428	0.607

significant effect on the preferences of the respondents and parties are disfavored. We can further solidify these results by testing our hypotheses (H2 and H3) on the original sample.

Upon examining Figure 4 and Table 5, which present the results of the AMCE model of the original sample, we can see that respondents in our survey experiment in general show a statistically significant aversion to incorporating partisan interests in the decision-making process. Interestingly, they also have similar views on the inclusion of experts and on prioritizing the public interest embodied by the representatives. Respondents demonstrate the strongest preference for considering voters' interest in the decision-making process.

These results suggest that the type of crisis does not significantly influence voters' preferences regarding the involvement of experts in decision-making processes, although, in an environmental crisis, expert

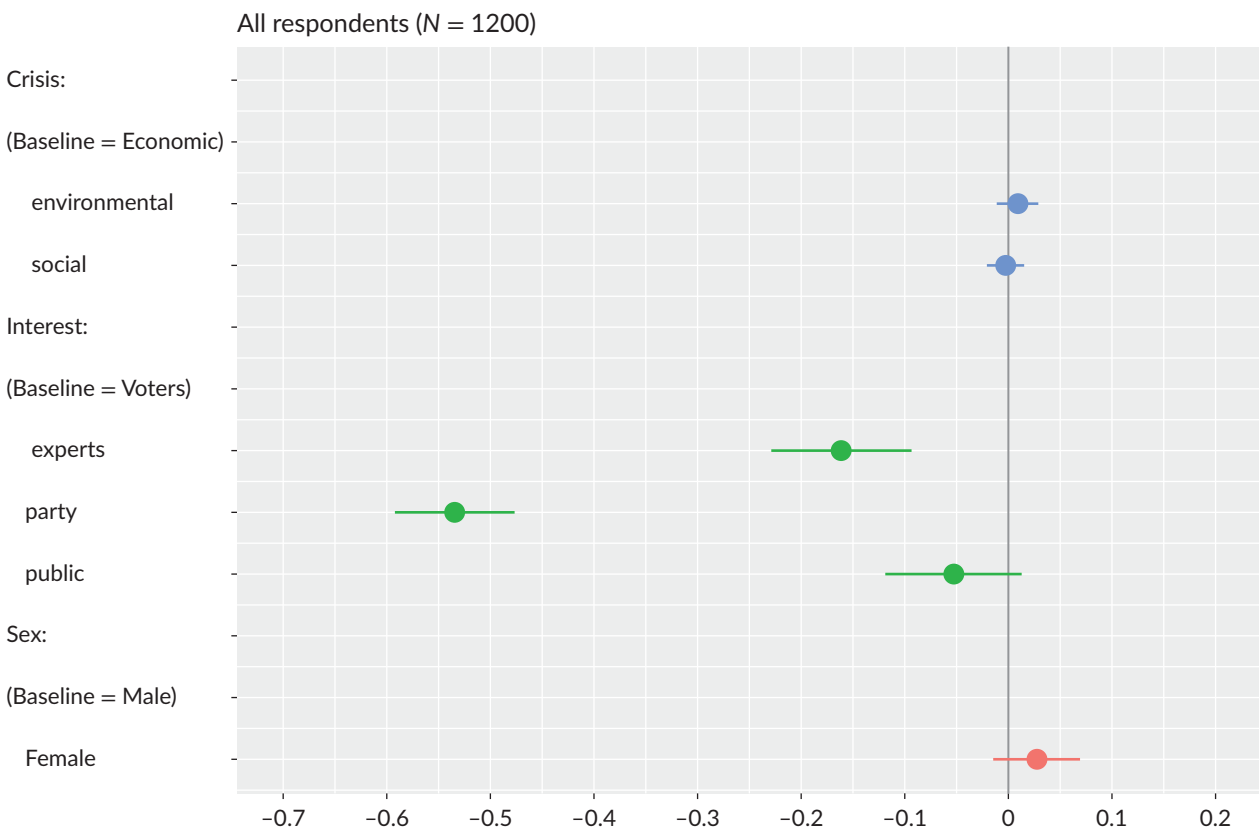


Figure 4. AMCEs on preferences in the decision-making process.

Table 5. AMCEs on preferences in the decision-making process.

Attribute	Level	Estimate	Std. Err	z value	Pr(> z)
Crisis	Environmental	0.0091	0.0099	0.919	0.36
Crisis	Social	-0.0027	0.0093	-0.290	0.77
Interest	Experts	-0.1612	0.0345	-4.672	<0.001 ***
Interest	Party	-0.5342	0.0295	-18.126	<0.001 ***
Interest	Public interest	-0.0527	0.0335	-1.574	0.012
Sex	Female	0.0274	0.0213	1.287	0.20

involvement appears to be more acceptable. However, these findings are not statistically significant, resulting in the rejection of our second hypothesis.

Our third hypothesis is supported by our results, although we need to emphasize its complex nature. Our respondents in the sample exhibit a preference for expert advice over party lines and thus, while they exhibit the expected anti-party sentiment, they do not fill the representative gap by bringing in the experts. Both parties and experts are generally rejected by voters in favor of including voters' interests in the political decision-making process.

5. Discussion

Based on our findings, the Hungarian electorate prioritizes voters' opinions above all else which translates into the preference for the voter-delegate style of representation. Simultaneously, our respondents show a strong aversion towards party programs (the party mandate style), which was expected. This aversion contrasts strongly with the reality of the highly centralized Hungarian political arena. There is little room to maneuver among the strong parties and party patronage rules over the power structure (Meyer-Sahling & Jager, 2012). Additionally, political loyalty and party discipline are strong and expected, with authoritative party leadership, making Hungary "an extreme case for charismatic leadership and populism" (Metz & Plesz, 2023, p. 321) while cooperation across party lines is halted by populist polarization. Although voters appear to have little faith in their representatives to define the public good (trustee style), they are also opposed to including experts (technocratic style) in the decision-making process. This result is rather stable and does not vary according to the crisis frame applied, with only one exception: When the context of the decision is framed as an environmental crisis, the involvement of experts seems to be more acceptable, although this result is not conclusive. Voters do not seem to expect their representatives to handle crises based on inputs from experts, maybe because even at the top level of politics the preference for technocratic representation is only used to further support the regime and contribute to its legitimacy. While these results do not support the presence of technocratic preferences, they are only valid in mediated decision-making processes. Thus, they do not refute preferences for direct expert involvement, either in framing public policies or shaping governmental decisions.

What to make of this strong preference for consulting citizens during decision-making? At the level of representatives, it is a clear message about the voter-delegate: Representatives are supposed to represent. They are expected to monitor and take into consideration their constituency's interests. However, we do know that elected Hungarian politicians do not actually work in a constituency-oriented way even if they promise to do so (Papp, 2018), which, on the one hand, shows the defective functioning of Hungarian democracy and indicates weakening electoral linkages, and, on the other hand, signals how performative politics can alter perceptions.

Altered perceptions are not new to democratic functioning as Ilonszki noted in 1998 representation in Hungary seems to show a well-polished picture, although behind this lies a more disenchanting reality where weak electoral linkages and a substantial representational deficit are documented (Ilonszki, 1998). Since then, the populist regime has incorporated even more performative elements among which the national consultations process is worth mentioning in relation to our results as its use is framed as a channel to listen to voters' opinions. In this regard, the strong preference for the voter-delegate style is answered through a

string of pseudo-participatory measures and the occasional involvement of experts. Despite the lack of democratic content, these performative elements contribute to the legitimacy of the regime and strengthen the representative linkage between the political elite and the voters. The highly personalized politics of Hungary might overshadow the lack of proper institutional functioning.

Our research is lacking in this aspect as it does not inquire about preferred institutional (or other) settings for the decision-making processes. How voters want to express their opinions is a question worth pursuing in future research.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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