

# A Matter of Life or Death: A Survey Experiment on the Perceived Legitimacy of Political Decision-Making on Euthanasia

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Most representative democracies seem to experience dwindling levels of legitimacy in the eyes of citizens. Nevertheless, it remains unclear what people want from parliamentary decision-making. In this study, we test the impact of outcome favourability, actor involvement and justifications on the perceived legitimacy of a parliamentary decision-making process on euthanasia in Finland. We do so with the help of a **survey experiment (n = 1243)**, where respondents were exposed to a vignette where the treatments varied randomly. **The results suggest that outcome favourability is of primary importance, but the involvement of experts and citizens also boost legitimacy in the eyes of citizens.** Justifications, or presenting arguments for the decisions, does not enhance legitimacy and may even cause a backfire mechanism where the difference between getting and not getting the preferred outcome is amplified.

Keywords: Decision-making, Legitimacy, Parliament, Representation, Survey experiment, Euthanasia

There is widespread agreement that citizenries are growing increasingly dissatisfied with traditional political forms of representative decision-making. However, different bodies of literature point in somewhat different directions regarding the potential sources of this dissatisfaction and what can be done about it. While few suggest abandoning representative democracy altogether, there is increasingly a sensation that the traditional patterns of parliamentary decision-making need to be updated to accommodate the changing demands of citizens. **Nevertheless, it remains unclear what democratic decision-making processes citizens want.**

In this article, we will contribute to resolving this puzzle by exploring what factors affect how people evaluate the legitimacy of parliamentary decision-making on a specific policy issue. Legitimacy may be defined broadly as the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society' (Lipset, 1959, p. 86). Legitimacy not only serves to grant authorities the right to make decisions, but also has instrumental value by reducing costs of enforcing compliance (Parkinson, 2006, p. 22). When citizens believe a system to be legitimate, people are for example more willing to accept decisions of authorities (Levi *et al.*, 2009).

We examine the effect of three characteristics of the decision-making process on perceived legitimacy. Empirical studies indicate the overall importance of outcome favourability when it comes to the perceived legitimacy of decision-making (Arnesen, 2017; Esaiasson *et al.*, 2017). In systems where decision-making powers are delegated, it should also matter what political actors are involved in the decision-making process (Grönlund and Setälä, 2012; Warren and Gastil, 2015). And even when political decisions do not meet the expectations, decision-makers can soften the blow by carefully justifying why a specific decision was taken (Pitkin, 1967; Chambers, 2003; Levendusky and Horowitz, 2012; Robison, 2017; Banducci *et al.*, 2018).

We here examine how outcome favourability, actors and justification affect perceived decision-making legitimacy with the help of a population-based survey experiment linked to a citizen initiative on the issue of euthanasia delivered to the Finnish parliament. Perceived decision legitimacy is measured with the help of four measures: process approval, an index of perceived legitimacy, confidence in political decision-making and support for the introduction of the measure.

Our findings suggest that outcome favourability has a strong impact on perceived decision legitimacy. Moreover, we find that citizens favour processes that involve experts, and to some extent ordinary citizens, over elected representatives making decisions independently. Interestingly, it also seems that giving a justification for an outcome fails to enhance perceived legitimacy, and may even generate a backfire effect, whereby it increases the impact of outcome favourability on perceived legitimacy rather than cushions disappointment with an unfavourable outcome.

## 1. Explaining perceived legitimacy of parliamentary decision-making

In this article, we examine various factors that can be expected to influence perceived legitimacy of parliamentary decision-making. Legitimacy is both a normative and an empirical concept. As a normative concept, it is often understood in terms of procedures and discourses used in making decisions and exercising power. According to this idea, a political system is legitimate when it conforms to

certain notions of how a system ought to function, for example following the models of liberal or deliberative democracy (Beetham, 1991; Habermas, 1996). When understood in empirical terms, legitimacy is expected to hinge on citizens' beliefs and perceptions of political systems, processes or decisions rather than on independent criteria for legitimate procedures. In this article, we are interested in legitimacy in this empirical sense. Admittedly, the normative and empirical interpretations are likely to be connected since a system with normatively desirable features is also more likely to be considered legitimate in the eyes of citizens.

The starting point is the idea that citizens want decision-makers to deliver outcomes that are in line with the stated preferences of citizens. According to Beetham (1991, p. 138), a political system can be justified by the ruled based on its ability to provide citizens with what they need or want from a society, e.g. security and welfare. When governments fail to do so, this will invariably affect judgments about legitimacy. In more narrow terms, outcome favourability may be understood as a correspondence between political decisions and the stated preference of an individual, which is likely to be a central factor influencing perceived legitimacy of parliamentary decision-making. Unsurprisingly, it is a recurring finding that those who are among the 'winners' tend to have more positive evaluations of the functioning of the democratic system, however conceived (Holmberg *et al.*, 2017). Recent studies suggest that outcome favourability influences whether people find decisions or procedures acceptable (Arnesen, 2017; Esaiasson *et al.*, 2017). Using a panel survey to study reactions to a proposed restructuring of the local school system, Esaiasson *et al.* (2017) find that the importance citizens ascribe to receiving a favourable outcome limits the significance of a responsive process. Arnesen (2017) reports a similar finding from two population-based survey experiments, where he finds that preferred outcomes matter to respondents whereas influence over decision-making has little impact on outcome acceptability.

A potential explanation for the impact of outcome favourability can be found in the research on cognitive biases such as motivated reasoning (Ford, 2012). According to this literature, humans are goal-directed information processors who tend to evaluate information with a directional bias toward reinforcing their pre-existing views (Molden and Higgins, 2005). The central component to motivated reasoning is hot cognition, i.e. whenever people are expected to react to some political stimuli for which they have prior impression, the brain automatically responds with the appropriate affective marker, be it positive or negative (Morrell, 2010, p. 132). In relation to decision legitimacy this would mean that if a policy outcome suits prior preferences, it generates a strong positive reaction, whereas a negative outcome leads to a negative reaction (Arvai and Froschauer, 2010). Based on this, our first hypothesis is that:

**H1: Perceived legitimacy is higher when a decision is in line with the preferred outcome.**

Other factors may also influence how people evaluate political decision-making. We here focus on how two aspects of the process leading up to a political decision affect the perceived legitimacy of decision-making: the actors involved and the provision of justifications.

According to some authors (Saward, 2000; Geissel and Newton, 2012), people are more likely to consider decisions as legitimate when the decision-making process includes different actors. Accordingly, a legitimate political process must ensure that there are adequate possibilities for a variety of political actors to provide input into the decision-making to ensure legitimacy.

For parliamentary decision-making, the role of scientific advice has been debated (Maasen and Weingart, 2005), while others stress the importance of input from ordinary citizens (Leston-Bandeira and Thompson, 2017; Hendriks and Kay, 2017). This discussion is also central in the literature that examines process preferences (Font *et al.*, 2015; Bengtsson and Christensen, 2016), which find a persistent pattern of process preferences across Europe whereby people distinguish between preferences for representative, participatory and expert<sup>1</sup> decision-making.

It is therefore important to examine how perceived legitimacy varies depending on the inclusion of different actors in parliamentary decision-making. People are not only making judgements regarding policy outcomes, but also about the actors involved in the decision-making process as well as their trustworthiness. While political trust and legitimacy are theoretically separate concepts, they are empirically closely linked (Johnson *et al.*, 2014). Perceived legitimacy of decision-making can therefore be expected to be higher when people have trust in actors involved in the process.

Warren and Gastil (2015) contend that different political actors, such as experts, elected representatives and fellow citizens, are trusted on different grounds. Trust in elected representatives is selective because citizens tend to have in Warren's and Gastil's (2015, p. 566) terms '[...] warranted distrust of representatives who hold opposing interests'. In addition to partisanship, representatives are driven by electoral motivations, which give citizens further reasons for distrust. Empirical studies show that citizens tend to have less trust in elected representatives than public officials that are expected to be

<sup>1</sup>Building on the work of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), the stealth model consists of two disparate decision-makers: business leaders and experts. However, in a European context it has been argued that it is more important to consider the role of experts (Font *et al.*, 2015), which we do here.

impartial (e.g. courts) or provide public goods (e.g. the police) (Grönlund and Setälä, 2012).

According to Warren and Gastil (2015), trust in experts is based on their competence and professional practices and ethics maintaining norms such as impartiality. Because citizens are willing to defer their judgements to experts, trusting these entails rather low cognitive demands on citizens. Warren and Gastil (2015) also discuss trust in decision-making by fellow citizens. Citizen deliberative bodies such as deliberative mini-publics are likely to be trusted because they are descriptively representative and include non-partisan citizens, or ‘people like you’. In a similar vein, Arnesen and Peters (2017) find that descriptive representation promotes decision acceptability. In addition, the deliberative processes in mini-publics are designed to facilitate balanced and good-quality judgements, and empirical studies on the Citizens’ Initiative Review in Oregon show that mini-publics were regarded as trustworthy as impartial bodies such as courts and more so than elected representative bodies (Warren and Gastil, 2015: 571).

Since this suggests that citizens prefer other actors than elected representatives to be involved in decision-making, we examine the following two hypotheses:

**H2a:** *Perceived legitimacy is higher when experts are involved in decision-making compared to when elected representatives make decisions themselves.*

**H2b:** *Perceived legitimacy is higher when citizens are involved in decision-making compared to when elected representatives make decisions themselves.*

The actors involved is not the only relevant factor for how the process affects perceived legitimacy. There is a substantial literature on procedural justice argues that perceived legitimacy depends on people’s experience on fairness of decision-making procedures (Tyler and Caine, 1981; Tyler, 2001). This usually not only refers to the fairness of decision-making process used by public authorities, but may also concern other aspects such as fair consideration of all the relevant information on the issue and impartiality of public administration. Previous studies have examined how the provision of justifications affect the perception of political actors (Levendusky and Horowitz, 2012; Robison, 2017; Banducci *et al.*, 2018). According to this line of research, justifications can help alleviate negative reactions from changing opinion or going back on campaign pledges.

A specific interpretation of justifications is given in the literature on deliberative democracy where different policy alternatives are judged by the merits of the arguments supporting them. In theories of deliberative democracy, accountability is primarily understood in terms of ‘giving an account’, that is, publicly articulating, explaining and most importantly justifying public policy (Cohen, 1997, pp. 76–77; Chambers, 2003). Hanna Pitkin (1967) argues similarly that elected

representatives are free to define the actions that are in the best interest of the represented if they present 'good reasons in terms of their interest of why their views are not in accord with their interest' (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 209–210).

The publicity principle almost always involves a claim about the salutary effects of going public with the reasons and arguments backing up a policy, proposal or claim (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996, pp. 97–101). Even if the arguments fail to convince citizens that an outcome is superior, the provision of reasons can serve to convince them that decision-makers have made their decisions based on careful consideration of different viewpoints, which is important since few, if any, decisions will please everyone they affect. According to this line of reasoning, justifications should enhance decision-making legitimacy. Contrary to this, some empirical studies have found that people have difficulties unpacking the quality of decision-making from their outcomes, meaning that the deliberativeness of the process makes little difference in terms of perceived legitimacy (Arvai and Froschauer, 2010). Nevertheless, our H3 is:

**H3:** *Perceived legitimacy is higher when the decision is justified by provision of arguments*

Hence, we examine the direct effects of outcome favourability, actor involvement and justifications. However, there may also be an intricate interplay between them. For one, justification from experts may have a stronger positive effect whereas arguments from politicians are less likely to be taken at face value. Trust in actors may be important here. While it is established that people seek out for information confirming their pre-dispositions, the reception of incongruent information or arguments could be facilitated by respondents' trust in political actors who present it. We examine this proposition in H4:

**H4:** *The effect of justifications on perceived legitimacy is stronger when experts deliver the arguments compared to when other actors do so.*

Another possible interaction concerns the interplay between outcomes and justifications, which entails that it is insufficient to consider only whether decision-makers provide justifications. Instead, it is imperative to consider whether these are in line with or contradict individual preferences to grasp the impact of justification. For example, some argue that justifications for a measure may help soften the blow among those who from the outset were not in favour of that decision (Pitkin, 1967; Chambers, 2003; Towfigh *et al.*, 2016). Contrary to this, a growing body of research imply that providing justifications may have adverse effects on legitimacy. Not only do people disparage information that undercuts their beliefs or worldview (Molden and Higgins, 2005), information or justifications for an adverse outcome may produce a backfire effect, which entails that justifications decrease rather than increase perceived legitimacy (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010;

Guess and Coppock, 2018). Accordingly, people who receive a verbal justification for an unfavourable outcome would not react to it as a validation of the decision, but rather as further politicisation of the outcome. Being exposed to an argument that contradicts an initial opinion can therefore have a delegitimising effect. These conflicting expectations for the interplay between outcome and justifications are the topic for our final hypothesis:

**H5:** *The effect of outcome favourability on perceived legitimacy is moderated by justifications.*

In the following, we explain how we examine these hypotheses.

## 2. Data, variables and methods

In this section, we first describe the background for the experiment, before moving on to explaining the structure of our survey experiment and the main variables used in the empirical examination.

### 2.1 The survey experiment

A population-based survey experiment is an experiment that is administered to a representative population sample (Mutz, 2011, p. 2). While the intention is to produce experimental subjects that are representative of the population, other studies demonstrate that treatment effects from convenience samples are similar to those obtained from representative samples (Mullinix *et al.*, 2015). Survey experiments make it possible to administer randomized treatments to larger and more diverse samples, thereby alleviating some of the concerns with external validity of the experimental approach (Mutz, 2011, pp. 8–20). For our purposes, the main advantage is that it is possible to discern what aspects of parliamentary decision-making respondents find particularly important when evaluating legitimacy.

Our data come from a survey experiment conducted during December 2017 in Finland. The background for the study is a real citizens' initiative that proposed to legalize euthanasia in Finland. We chose to focus on this discussion for three reasons. The first two are methodological. First, it was highly topical at the time, meaning the experiment is tied to an on-going public discussion. Survey experiments often rely on hypothetical scenarios, which is a potential problem for the validity of the answers when respondents fail to connect the scenario to realistic decisions. Secondly, euthanasia may be regarded an example of an 'easy issue' (Carmines and Stimson, 1980), which means that it is more likely possible to elicit a 'gut response' from respondents even when they do not have a profound understanding of the issue. This makes it more likely that we can examine the mechanisms at play in shaping decision-making legitimacy. The third reason is substantive. By relying on a

process involving a citizens' initiative, we tie the experiment to the on-going discussion on how to involve the public in the legislative process (Leston-Bandeira, 2012; Leston-Bandeira and Thompson, 2017). The citizens' initiative forms part of efforts to improve relationships between parliament and citizens (Su Seo and Raunio 2017). We add to this discussion by examining what procedures citizens want parliament to adapt when scrutinising input from citizens.

Since 1 March 2012, 50,000 Finnish citizens eligible to vote have had the right to make legislative proposals to the Finnish parliament (*Eduskunta*). The Finnish citizens' initiative (CI) is a so-called 'indirect' or 'agenda' initiative because it does not lead to a popular vote. It is in the parliamentary discretion to decide whether to approve, amend or reject any initiative. After submission to parliament, each initiative goes to a relevant committee, which discusses and gives a report on the initiative before it is voted on in plenary (Christensen *et al.*, 2017).

The initiative 'On behalf of a good death', which aimed to legalize euthanasia, gathered more than 63,000 signatures and was delivered to Finnish parliament in February 2017 (Yle News, 2017, 2 February). The process gathered interest in national media, not least because a coalition of senior parliamentarians from several political parties were behind launching the citizens' initiative (Yle News, 2016, 19 December). Hearings on the initiative by the Social Affairs and Health committee commenced in November 2017. In the end, Parliament on 4 May 2018 decided to reject the initiative with a plenary vote where a comfortable majority of 12,860 backed the decision.

Our experiment was conducted in a survey distributed via Qualtrics and responses collected 7–15 December 2017 during the hearings in the committee. The survey comprised an online sample including 1243 respondents<sup>2</sup> stratified to reflect the general population structure when it comes to gender and age and reflects the general population when it comes to the proportion with higher educational qualifications (See [Supplementary Material](#)). Nevertheless, the respondents come from an online panel assembled by data providers through nonprobability methods, meaning we cannot exclude that there is an element of self-selection. However, since estimates from convenience samples as mentioned are similar to purely random samples, this should not be a major cause for concern (Mullinix *et al.*, 2015).

<sup>2</sup>The sample originally comprised 1251 respondents but to ensure data quality, we deleted five respondents who took more than an hour to complete the survey and three respondents who completed it in less than 60 seconds. This did not affect the composition of the sample.

## 2.2 Vignette

In the vignette for our survey experiment, we describe a decision-making process on euthanasia where we randomly vary components to examine the importance of:

- (1) **ACTORS**: Whether the decision-making involves politicians, experts or ordinary citizens.
- (2) **OUTCOME FAVOURABILITY**: Whether recommendation for a final decision is favourable or unfavourable compared to peoples' preferences.
- (3) **JUSTIFICATION**: Whether or not the decision was justified by presenting arguments in support of the decision.

We phrased the vignette as follows (Randomized elements in capital; **TREATMENT NAME BOLDED**; *ITALICS*: *PHRASING 1/PHRASING 2*):

*There is currently a debate in Finland on whether euthanasia (actively ending life) should be allowed, and Parliament decides on a citizens' initiative proposing this during this parliamentary term. Before deciding, the matter is debated thoroughly. Imagine that the preparations are made in the following manner:*

A group of [**ACTORS**: EXPERTS/ORDINARY CITIZENS/ PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATIVES] discusses the issue of euthanasia. Many different points of views are presented during the discussions. The [**ACTORS**: EXPERTS/ORDINARY CITIZENS/ PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATIVES] produce a recommendation based on deliberation. The recommendation is that euthanasia should [**OUTCOME FAVOURABILITY**: BE ALLOWED/NOT BE ALLOWED]. [**JUSTIFICATION**: [NO JUSTIFICATION: EMPTY]/ [ARGUMENT FOR WHEN RECOMMENDATION IN FAVOUR] EUTHANASIA IS ALWAYS BASED ON THE FREE WILL OF A LEGAL ADULT. PATIENTS SUFFERING FROM AN INCURABLE ILLNESS AND INTOLERABLE PAIN SHOULD NOT BE FORCED TO ENDURE AGAINST THEIR WILL/[ARGUMENT AGAINST WHEN RECOMMENDATION NEGATIVE] EUTHANASIA IS A SLIPPERY SLOPE AND WEAKENS THE RESPECT FOR HUMAN LIFE IN SOCIETY. QUESTIONING THE VALUE OF LIFE MAY LEAD TO CASES WHERE EUTHANASIA IS CARRIED OUT AGAINST THE WILL OF THE PATIENT.]

### 2.3 Treatment variables

For actors, a categorical variable distinguish three groups that correspond to whether elected politicians made the decisions singlehandedly, or involved expert or a group of citizens. Previous studies find that the distinction between politicians, experts and citizens is well entrenched in the Finnish population (Bengtsson and Christensen, 2016) and we therefore expect that respondents should have clear perceptions of these actors. We do not examine any combinations of actors, which would best reflect the empirical reality of policy-making in Finland, but instead focus on the distinctive impact of each set of actors.

For outcome favourability, we combine prior preferences with the outcome recommended in the vignette. To measure prior preferences, we before the vignette ask respondents to indicate their attitudes towards the introduction of euthanasia on a five-point Likert scale (Strongly in favour-strongly opposed).<sup>3</sup> The answers were recoded into three categories: *For* euthanasia (70.7%)/*Neutral* (19.5%)/*Against Euthanasia* (9.8%). We subsequently combined this with whether the recommendation presented in the vignette was to introduce euthanasia or not (49% exposed to recommendation to not introduce and 51% to a positive recommendation). The final measure of outcome favourability divides respondents into *Unfavourable outcome* when the recommendation for or against euthanasia contradicted the preference of the respondent (39.8%), *Neutral* when no preference was indicated (19.5%) and *Favourable outcome* when the recommendation and the stated preference for euthanasia were aligned (40.7%).<sup>4</sup>

For justifications, we include a variable that measure whether the recommendation for or against was accompanied by arguments justifying the recommendation. Euthanasia is a controversial issue with a long-standing debate where several different arguments from ethical, medical and economical standpoints have been presented both for and against (Rietjens *et al.*, 2009). Our aim here was not to construct sophisticated arguments able to convince respondents about the merits of the proposal. Instead, we merely seek to examine how offering an argument to justify a decision affects the perception of legitimacy.

To this end, we relied on two classical arguments for and against that should be familiar to the respondents when phrasing our arguments. The argument in favour emphasises the free will of the individual (right to die), whereas the argument against emphasises the possible negative effects on moral in society

<sup>3</sup>We asked this question before the vignette to ensure that the results were unaffected by the experimental design. To avoid unintentionally priming the respondents to be either for or against euthanasia we asked for their attitudes towards several issues that have been the topic of citizens' initiatives.

<sup>4</sup>We also tested a simpler dichotomous version where we combined the neutral category with the opposing category and the substantial results were similar.

(slippery slope) (Devettere, 2016). These are obviously simplistic arguments that fail to capture the richness of the possible scientific or ethical arguments for or against euthanasia. Nevertheless, they are typical of the type of arguments used in the public debate on euthanasia and should therefore be recognisable as such to the respondents. Hence, even if they may not be the most convincing arguments, the respondents should recognise them as actual arguments for or against the issue, which is what we aim for here.

## 2.4 Outcome measures

We use four different variables to capture the perceived legitimacy of the decision-making; *i.e.* how respondents evaluate the legitimacy of the decision-making process. The first two are directly related to the perceived legitimacy of the process whereas the two others indicate whether the decision-making had broader consequences for confidence in political decision-making and policy support:

- (1) **Process satisfaction:** A single measure indicating whether respondents felt that this way of making political decisions was satisfactory (*To what extent do you find this way of making political decisions on the issue acceptable? 7-point Likert scale Extremely acceptable–Extremely unacceptable*).
- (2) **Legitimacy index:** Sum index based on six items measuring attitudes to aspects of input, throughput and output process legitimacy (*Based on the decision-making process described before, please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements. This way of making political decisions...: (i). does not include all relevant interests [Reversed], (ii). Is made in an inclusive manner, (iii) is biased to favour certain interests [Reversed], (iv) is made in an appropriate manner, (v) ensures a fair outcome and (vi) fails to ensure an outcome that benefits society [Reversed]. Five-point Likert scale Strongly agree–Strongly disagree; Cronbach's alpha = 0.79*).<sup>5</sup>
- (3) **Confidence in political decision-making:** A single measure indicating whether respondents felt that their confidence in political decision-making

<sup>5</sup>We initially wanted to capture the distinction between input, throughput and output legitimacy presented by Schmidt (2013), but this distinction is not empirically viable in this case. A principal component analysis suggests that a two-dimensional solution is most appropriate where all reversed items load onto a separate dimension while a principal factors analysis suggests that a one-dimensional solution is more appropriate. Since the two-factor solution is most likely an artefact of the reversed coding (Weijters and Baumgartner, 2012), we proceed with a one-dimensional measure of process legitimacy. Preliminary analyses show similar substantial results for separate indexes measuring input, throughput and output legitimacy, which further indicates that process legitimacy is adequately captured by a single index in this case.

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics

Variable	n	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Description
Actor	1243	1.00	0.82	0.00	2.00	Categorical variable with 3 categories (0=Politicians, 1=Citizens, 2=Experts)
Outcome favourability	1243	1.01	0.90	0.00	2.00	Categorical variable with 3 categories (0=Unfavourable, 1=Neutral 1=Favourable)
Justification	1243	0.49	0.50	0.00	1.00	Categorical variable with 2 categories (0=No justification, 1=Justification provided)
Process approval	1243	0.65	0.23	0.00	1.00	7-point Likert scale recoded 0–1 (1=High process approval)
Legitimacy index	1243	0.50	0.17	0.00	1.00	Index 0–24 recoded 0–1 (1=High legitimacy)
Confidence in decision-making	1243	0.54	0.24	0.00	1.00	5-point Likert scale recoded 0–1 (1=High positive influence on confidence)
Support introduction	1243	0.72	0.25	0.00	1.00	7-point Likert scale recoded 0–1 (1=High support for introduction)

increased as a result of the process (*Based on the decision-making process described before, please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements. This way of making political decisions increased my confidence in political decision-making. Five-point Likert scale Strongly agree–Strongly disagree*).

- (4) **Support for introduction of Euthanasia:** A measure of how strongly respondents support approving the citizens’ initiative to allow euthanasia following the vignette, thereby measuring whether the decision-making affected policy support (*To what extent do you support the approval of the citizens’ initiative to introduce euthanasia? Seven-point Likert scale Support a great deal–Oppose a great deal*).

All outcome variables are coded to vary between 0 and 1 to make results comparable. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for all variables.

The main method of analysis is three way ANOVA where we examine the impact of our three factors including their interactions for each outcome measure. The analyses do not include control variables since randomisation of respondents should ensure that all characteristics are evenly distributed between treatments and therefore cannot affect differences in outcomes (Mutz, 2011).<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Analysis

First, we display mean scores and standard deviations for all cells in Table 2.

There are clear differences in mean scores between the cells. In particular, it seems like respondents presented with a favourable outcome perceive decision-making as more legitimate. The subsequent question concerns which of the differences are significant? We examine this with three-way ANOVA for the four outcome measures in Table 3.

The results confirm the first impression for H1 since the most persistent effect is found for outcome favourability. There are significant differences in mean scores for process approval [ $F(2, 1225) = 68.64, p < 0.000$ ], legitimacy index [ $F(2, 1225) = 58.75, p < 0.000$ ], confidence in decision-making [ $F(2, 1225) = 23.73, p < 0.000$ ] and support for introduction [ $F(2, 1225) = 84.65, p < 0.000$ ]. This shows that the respondents give significantly higher approval of the process when the recommendation is in line with their preferred outcome, which corroborates H1. To illustrate what the significant differences entail for perceived legitimacy, Figure 1 shows displays differences in predicated values of the outcome measures.

The expected mean scores are about 0.1 higher on the 0–1 scale when there is a favourable recommendation compared to an unfavourable one. The only exception is support for the introduction, where it is only the neutral category that clearly deviates from the two others. This is evidence of the pervasive support for the introduction of euthanasia in Finland. Nevertheless, the results clearly show that perceived legitimacy depends on the outcome of the process, as H1 suggests.

The second noticeable main effect concerns H2 and involvement of actors. Here there are significant effects for the legitimacy index [ $F(2, 1225) = 7.35, p < 0.001$ ] and confidence in decision-making [ $F(2, 1225) = 4.52, p < 0.05$ ]. Figure 2 shows how the mean scores are affected by what actor is involved.

<sup>6</sup>Since one of our treatments includes an observed variable we checked that the respondents are evenly divided between the cells for the individual characteristics age, gender, education, religiosity and prior use of the citizens' initiative. The results of the ANOVA analyses suggested no significant differences and we therefore refrain from presenting results including these characteristics as control variables. ANCOVA analyses including age, gender, and education as control variables showed that their inclusion does not affect the substantial results, as shown in the [supplementary material](#).

**Table 2** Mean scores and standard deviations

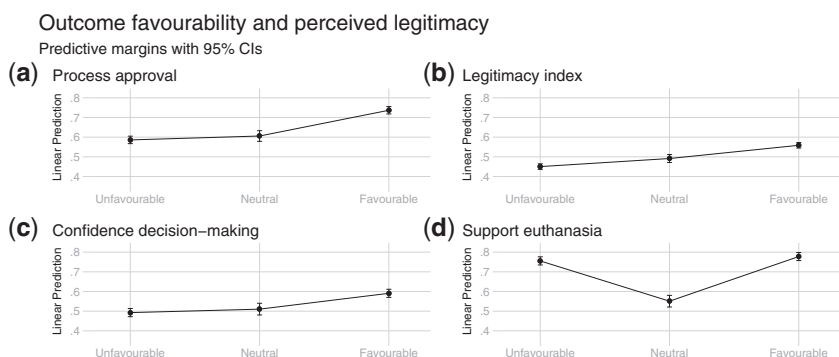
Actor involved	Outcome measure	Unfavourable		Neutral		Favourable	
		No justification	Justification presented	No justification	Justification presented	No justification	Justification presented
<i>Politicians</i>	Process approval	0.58 (0.26)	0.58 (0.23)	0.61 (0.13)	0.58 (0.22)	0.70 (0.15)	0.77 (0.21)
	Legitimacy index	0.43 (0.17)	0.43 (0.16)	0.47 (0.14)	0.47 (0.16)	0.50 (0.14)	0.55 (0.18)
	Confidence in decision-making	0.48 (0.25)	0.45 (0.26)	0.49 (0.20)	0.49 (0.26)	0.55 (0.20)	0.59 (0.22)
	Support introduction	0.78 (0.21)	0.77 (0.25)	0.58 (0.14)	0.54 (0.21)	0.73 (0.25)	0.83 (0.21)
<i>Citizens</i>	Process approval	0.60 (0.24)	0.56 (0.24)	0.62 (0.16)	0.59 (0.19)	0.69 (0.21)	0.74 (0.24)
	Legitimacy index	0.45 (0.16)	0.43 (0.17)	0.49 (0.11)	0.49 (0.15)	0.57 (0.17)	0.57 (0.18)
	Confidence in decision-making	0.48 (0.24)	0.47 (0.23)	0.50 (0.19)	0.51 (0.25)	0.58 (0.24)	0.63 (0.26)
	Support introduction	0.78 (0.23)	0.71 (0.30)	0.54 (0.16)	0.57 (0.16)	0.79 (0.23)	0.75 (0.28)
<i>Expert</i>	Process approval	0.61 (0.24)	0.59 (0.24)	0.67 (0.14)	0.58 (0.21)	0.73 (0.20)	0.79 (0.17)
	Legitimacy index	0.45 (0.17)	0.49 (0.16)	0.52 (0.11)	0.51 (0.14)	0.57 (0.15)	0.59 (0.14)
	Confidence in decision-making	0.52 (0.27)	0.56 (0.26)	0.56 (0.19)	0.51 (0.21)	0.60 (0.24)	0.61 (0.17)
	Support introduction	0.78 (0.22)	0.72 (0.27)	0.54 (0.17)	0.54 (0.19)	0.77 (0.23)	0.80 (0.22)

*Note:* Entries are mean values with standard deviations in parentheses.

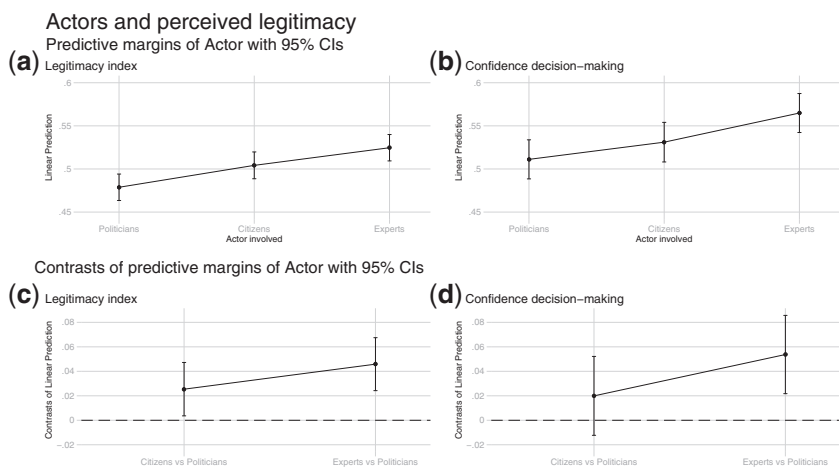
Table 3 Three-way ANOVA analyses

Source (df)	Process approval			Legitimacy index			Confidence in decision-making			Support introduction		
	F	p	Effect size	F	p	Effect size	F	p	Effect size	F	p	Effect size
Model (17)	9.36	0.000	0.12	8.47	0.000	0.11	4.02	0.000	0.05	11.09	0.000	0.13
Actor (2)	1.64	0.195	0.00	7.35	0.001	0.01	4.52	0.011	0.01	0.48	0.620	0.00
Outcome favourability (2)	68.64	0.000	0.10	58.75	0.000	0.09	23.73	0.000	0.04	84.65	0.000	0.12
Justification (1)	0.20	0.658	0.00	0.56	0.453	0.00	0.95	0.666	0.00	0.27	0.439	0.00
Actor # Outcome fav. (4)	0.42	0.795	0.00	0.32	0.864	0.00	0.19	0.433	0.00	0.34	0.896	0.00
Actor # Justification (2)	0.84	0.434	0.00	0.63	0.533	0.00	0.15	0.335	0.00	0.82	0.439	0.00
Outcome fav # Justification (2)	7.86	0.000	0.01	0.79	0.454	0.00	1.09	0.335	0.00	3.51	0.030	0.01
Actor # Outcome fav. # Justification (4)	0.39	0.818	0.00	0.72	0.579	0.00	0.76	0.552	0.00	1.64	0.163	0.01
Residual (11225)	Partial SS	MS		Partial SS	MS		Partial SS	MS		Partial SS	MS	
	56.05	0.05		30.91	0.03		67.53	0.06		66.55	0.05	
Total (1242)	63.33	0.05		34.55	0.03		71.30	0.06		76.80	0.06	

Note: Entries are F-values from three-way ANOVA analyses and level of significance. Effects sizes are partial eta<sup>2</sup>.



**Figure 1.** Impact of outcome favourability on process approval, legitimacy index and confidence in decision-making.

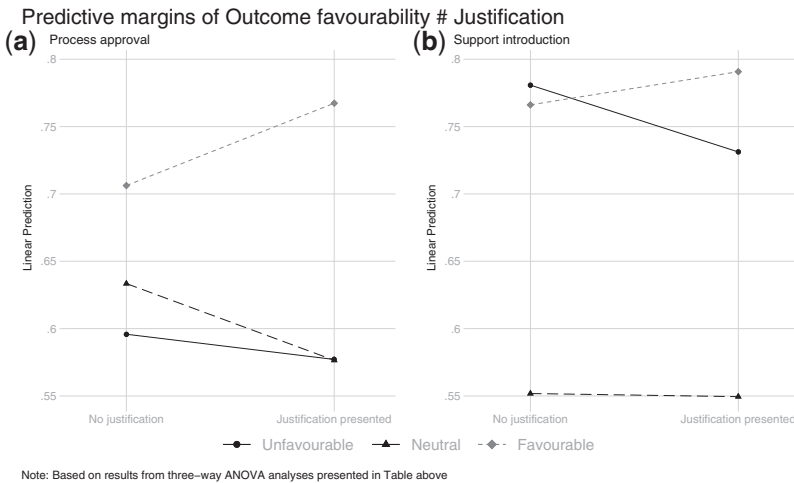


Note: Based on results from three-way ANOVA analyses presented in Table above

**Figure 2.** Impact of actor on legitimacy index and confidence in decision-making.

For both measures, it results in higher mean scores when experts make the recommendation whereas they are lower when politicians do it. The contrasts show that the differences between politicians and experts are statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) for both measures, whereas the differences between citizens and politicians are only significant for the legitimacy index. This shows that people prefer experts, and to at least some extent also citizens, to be involved in the decision-making when it comes to euthanasia. These results corroborate H2a and H2b.

The main effects of justification are less pronounced since there are no significant main effects, which means H3 is not supported. However, this does not entail that this aspect is inconsequential. While there is no support for H4 which



**Figure 3.** Impact of interaction between outcome favourability and justification on process approval and support for introduction.

suggests a stronger effect of justifications when experts deliver the arguments, there are significant interaction effects for outcome favourability and justification in the ANOVA models examining process approval [ $F(2, 1225) = 7.86$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ] and support for introduction [ $F(2, 1225) = 3.51$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ], which corroborates H5. The implications of this are shown in Figure 3.

The results are again uniform for both measures and show that while justifications do not have a significant main effect on perceived legitimacy, delivering arguments in favour of the recommendation serves to boost the differences in perceived legitimacy depending on outcome favourability. When no justification is given for the recommendation, the differences in mean scores between favourable and unfavourable outcomes are less pronounced, and the mean score is even slightly higher for an unfavourable outcome when it comes to supporting the introduction of euthanasia (albeit non-significant). However, when justification is given in the form of arguments, it serves to increase the differences between favourable and unfavourable outcomes by increasing legitimacy among those who get their preferred outcome and decreasing it among those who do not.

#### 4. Discussion of results

Our results have several implications for the prospects of reforming representative democracy and parliamentary decision-making in particular.

The clearest result was that people perceive decisions as more legitimate when they get their preferred outcome (H1) since the results show that the most

important determinant of process legitimacy is that people get the outcome that they prefer. This finding is in line with several previous studies (Arnesen, 2017; Arnesen and Peters, 2017; Esaiasson *et al.*, 2017). It may appear unsurprising that people prefer decision-making that delivers policy outputs in line with their preferences, but the pervasiveness of the effect is nonetheless remarkable. The effect here is not limited to outcome acceptability, as Arnesen and Peters (2017) find, but also people's perception of the quality of decision-making. That people tend to think that the decision-making is of high quality when the outcome matches their initial preferences confirms the findings by Arvai and Froschauer (2010) and suggests that people have difficulties separating outcomes from other characteristics of decision-making. From a democratic perspective, the strong impact of outcome satisfaction on legitimacy beliefs is somewhat disconcerting, since political decisions hardly ever please everyone. This finding confirms the conventional wisdom that political decision-makers need to be responsive to citizens' demands to preserve legitimacy.

However, our other findings show that perceived legitimacy is not only affected by outcomes. Based on previous research we hypothesized (H2a+H2b) that perceived legitimacy is higher when experts or citizens, rather than elected representatives, are involved in preparing decisions. The results suggest that, regardless of both outcomes and arguments, people favour decision-making processes that involve ordinary citizens and experts over elected representatives deciding on their own. While we do not directly test the effect of trust on the perceived legitimacy of decision-making, this finding may be interpreted to support the claim that people distrust representatives, which goes beyond what Warren and Gastil (2015: 566) call 'warranted distrust' in representatives of opposing interests.

It is noteworthy that experts seem to be particularly favoured in this case. People tend to value issue knowledge over accountability for the issue of euthanasia, which is not only medical, but also a moral in its nature. While we do not believe that our results indicate a general preference for expert decision-making, they show that people are sometimes willing to let people who they believe have the proper competences decide on complicated matters such as euthanasia. It is worth recalling the argument by Warren and Gastil (2015) that trust in experts and professionals may lead people to defer their own judgements. Moreover, it should be noted that we did not specify what kind of experts were involved in the decision-making. When it comes to euthanasia, this could include philosophers, medical experts and people with terminal diseases. Nevertheless, the results suggest that involvement of expertise as well as ordinary citizens increase legitimacy of decision-making in the eyes of citizens.

The direct effect of justifications (H3) was negligible, meaning respondents seemed to care little about whether decision-makers present arguments to justify

their decisions. This result seems to contradict the position of deliberative democrats who emphasise the importance of reason giving and argumentation for the legitimacy of decisions. In this way, our results indicate a mismatch between normative conceptions and empirical measurements of legitimacy, previously pointed out by [Johnson \*et al.\* \(2014\)](#), for example. The reason for the lack of direct impact of justification may be that the arguments presented failed to match those put forward in public debate on euthanasia, in the media and so on. Even so, the results imply that not any justification will do, and the quality of the arguments matters as well.

However, justifications had an indirect effect since we found that they can serve to increase the gap in perceived legitimacy between those who get their preferred outcome and those who fail to do so (H5). It seems that rather than cushion the blow ([Towfigh \*et al.\*, 2016](#)), justifications here serve to intensify the differences. These findings are in line with research suggesting that arguments and information contradicting prior opinions can produce a backfire effect since contradicting arguments activate a negative response in people who do not agree with the outcome ([Nyhan and Reifler, 2010](#)).

Here it is again important to note that the justifications we used were not intended to be particularly sophisticated, as explained in the research design. Research focusing on backlash effects suggest that how information is delivered is important for peoples' reaction to it. For example, [Nyhan and Reifler \(2018\)](#) find that graphical evidence is more powerful than textual evidence for correcting misperceptions. Similarly, [Guess and Coppock \(2018\)](#) show that an academic sterile description of facts is less likely to generate a backlash. It is possible that our arguments triggered a backfire effect since they restated common pro and con arguments in the debate on euthanasia rather than provide responses to specific concerns. Nevertheless, while our results by no means constitute irrevocable evidence for the existence of a backlash effect, they at least indicate that providing general arguments that do not address citizens' concerns may be counter-productive for decision-making legitimacy. To this end, decision-makers should aim to specifically address the concerns of citizens rather than provide general statements.

While these results produce several insights concerning factors that affect decision-making legitimacy, they come with some limitations. It is unclear whether similar results would be obtained for other types of decisions. Future studies ought to examine whether similar results are obtained in other policy areas since it is likely that both the intensity of outcome favourability and preferences for actor involvement differ systematically across policy areas.

It should also be recognised that the experimental approach entails certain limitations when it comes to external validity. Our results may be partly due to fact that our experimental design did not vary the process of exchanging different

arguments in the preparation of a decision, nor did it examine the impact of combinations of actors or different types of arguments. It is noteworthy that several studies that find that outcomes shape legitimacy are survey experiments (Arvai and Froschauer, 2010; Arnesen, 2017; Arnesen and Peters, 2017). Although Hainmueller *et al.* (2015) find that hypothetical choices in survey experiments successfully capture actual behaviour when it comes to voting behaviour in referendums, it should be acknowledged that this method creates an artificial scenario that does not necessarily capture actual preferences. In our experiment, respondents were presented with a single hypothetical situation for a decision-making procedure, which may fail to do justice to many of the procedural and discursive aspects of legitimacy stated in normative theories of democracy. In real life, political decision-making occurs in a context multiple and repeated processes and here the importance of receiving a favourable outcome in single case might diminish, while the appreciation of proper justifications and accountability of representatives might turn out to be crucial. More research is therefore needed to settle these issues conclusively.

### Supplementary Data

[Supplementary Data](#) are available at *Parliamentary Affairs* Online.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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