How European politicians view citizen participation in decision-making

1. Sources and goals of this text

This document summarizes key results of the survey (2022/3) inquiring politicians in France, Germany, Ireland, Italy and Poland about their opinion on citizens' engagement in decision-making. A similar survey was also conducted in Spain. The document does not explicitly include the Spanish data, but they follow quite similar patterns. You may be interested in checking how your opinions compare with the opinions of other politicians in regard to:

•   The citizens' competencies to contribute to decision-making,

•   Problems of participatory decision-making,

•   Objectives of participatory processes,

•   Design of a participatory and deliberative event.

The survey was addressed to all national and regional parliamentarians and to political representatives in the largest cities of each country Table 1 presents some characteristics of respondents like contribution of women, age, level of education, ideological position or the level of trust in people

	All	France	Germany	Ireland	Italy	Poland
Number of respondents	(998n)	(202n)	(395n)	(89n)	(187n)	(125n)
Female (%)	40,5	55,1	42,7	29,7	36,6	25,3
Age (mean)	51,5	53,6	50,7	52,4	51,1	50,6
Education (1min.; 5max.)	4,2	4,2	4	4,4	4	4,8
Ideology (0, left;10, right)	4	3,4	3,9	4,4	3,7	5,5
Social Trust (0, min.,10, max.)	6,4	6,6	6,5	6,1	6,5	5,7

Table 1: Respondents by Gender, Age, Education, Ideology and Social Trust. Complete + Partial interviews.

In the next sections, we present general opinion patterns, sometimes distinguishing by country or ideology. Differences between territorial levels are not discussed since they were quite small.

2. A soil of limited trust in citizen competence

When asked to evaluate several citizen qualities, most respondents attribute little competence to them: differences are quite marked by countries, with Irish politicians being more optimistic (6 out of 10) and Italian politicians being particularly skeptical towards citizens' competence (3 out of 10). Perceptions are generally more optimistic for other citizens' qualities such us honesty and understanding the needs of the public. This pattern is the opposite to the one often found in citizen surveys, where citizens consider politicians well informed, but show larger concerns about their honesty.
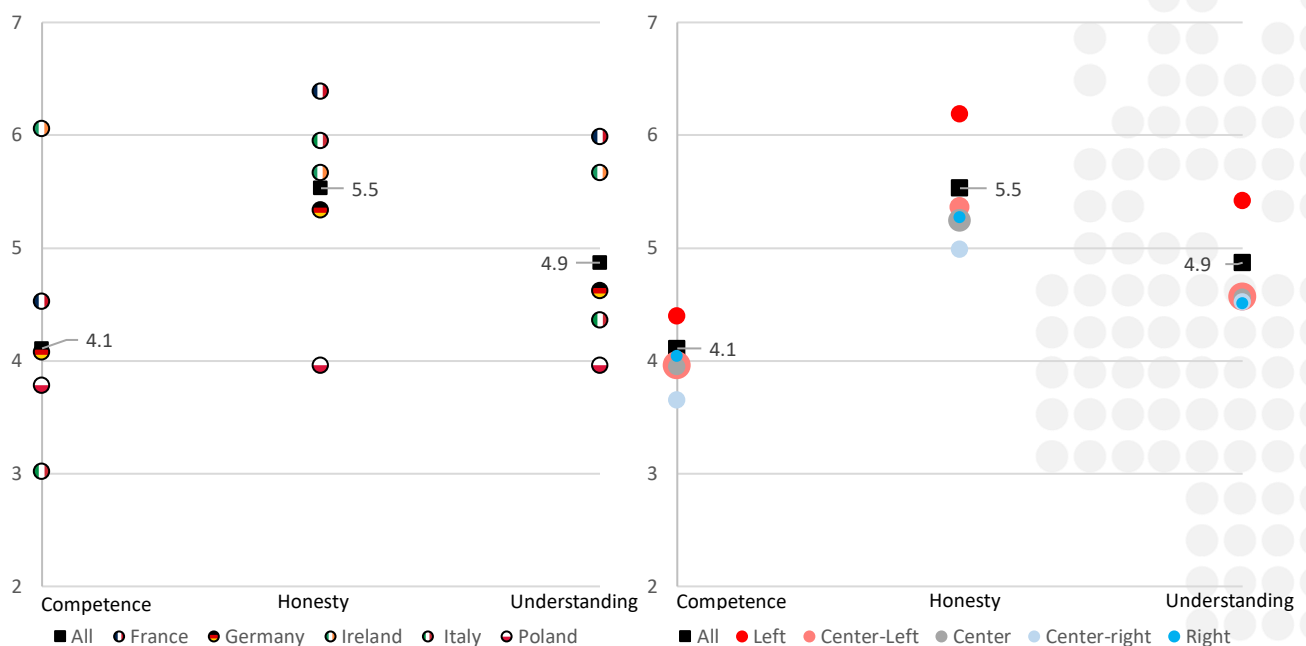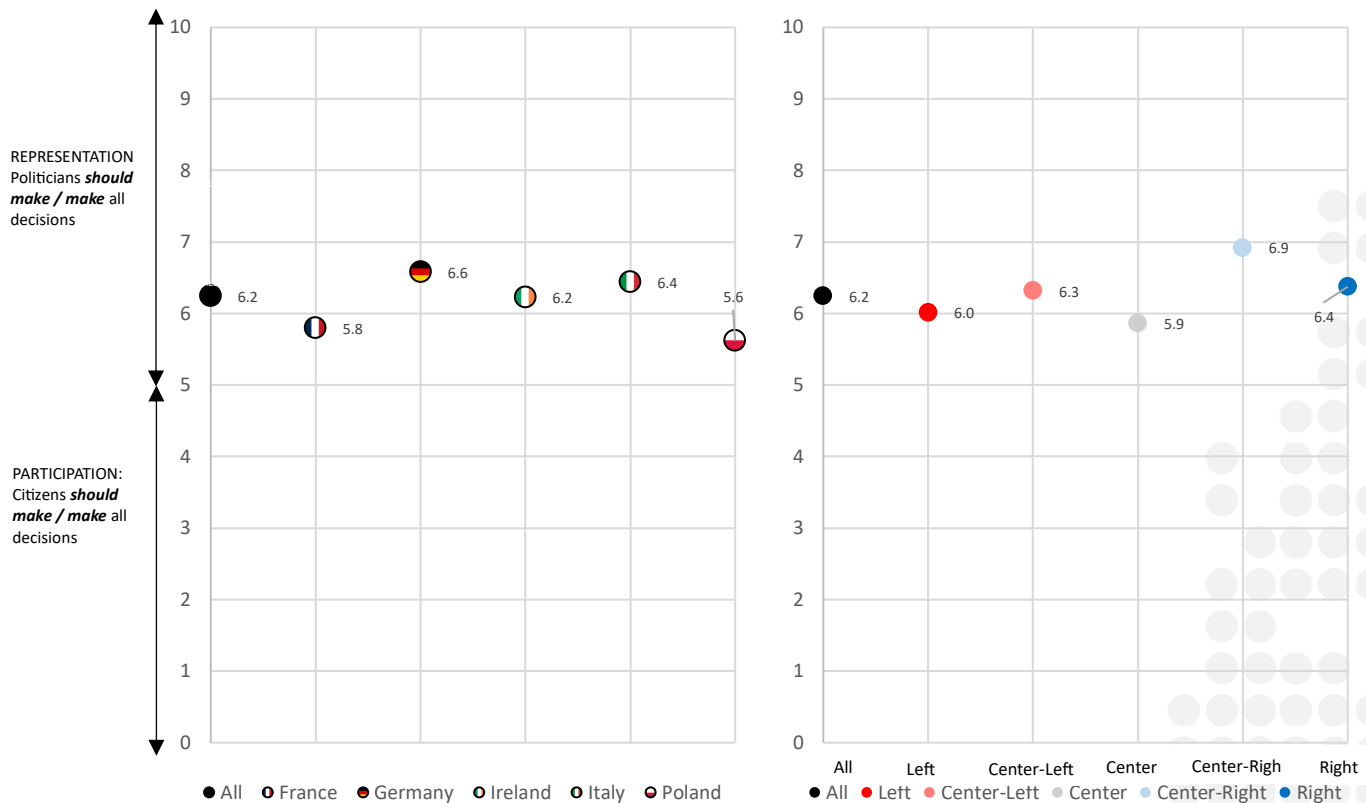

Figure 1. Perception of the citizens' qualities by country and ideology. Mean.
(France, 190n; Germany, 366n; Ireland, 82n; Italy, 171n; Poland, 114n)
(Left, 209n; Center-left, 214n; Center, 105n; Center-right, 103n; right, 81n).

Regarding ideology, representatives on the left have a slightly greater confidence in the capacities of citizens, but these differences gradually disappear among the rest of the politicians, who have a more homogeneous vision.

In spite of this limited trust, European politicians are not against citizen participation. In fact, when we ask them how much citizens should take part in decision-making in a scale where 0 means citizens making all decisions and 10 means politicians making all decisions, the average response lies at 6,2, with German elites preferring more role for politicians and Polish and French elites in a more favorable attitude towards an enlarged citizen role.

Figure 2. Process preference by country and ideology. Mean.
(France, 196n; Germany, 395n; Ireland, 87n; Italy, 187n; Poland, 120n)
(Left, 210n; Center-left, 217n; Center, 106n; Center-right, 104n; Poland, 81n)

3. Merits and pitfalls of participation

Which are the reasons to favor or oppose participation? The survey covered several of them. In line with the previously mentioned results, the main participation challenges identified are related to citizens, such as citizens' lack of information or willingness to engage. In some countries, time and effort consuming reach a similar level of concern, quite larger than for the remaining two issues. Figure 3 shows the country distribution of the answers
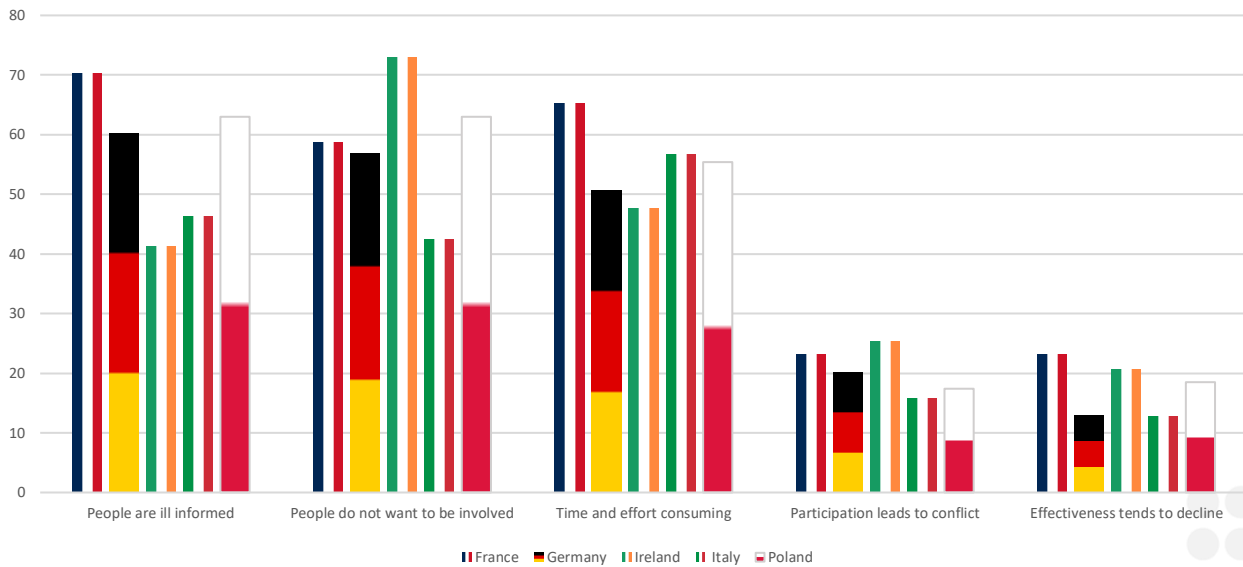
Figure 3. Problems of participatory decision-making (France, 138n; Germany, 290n; Ireland, 63n; Italy, 133n; Poland, 91n).
Note: *Only very important and important.*

4. Organizing participation

a. Participation goals

The survey asked for several possible objectives for participatory initiative. Transparency stands out as the most valued objective (Figure 4). Likewise, a high score is given to reducing disaffection and bringing citizens and politicians closer together. On the contrary, reducing social injustices is the least important for responding politicians. Some country differences appear, especially in the Polish case where empowering citizens and informing elites stand out as more important.
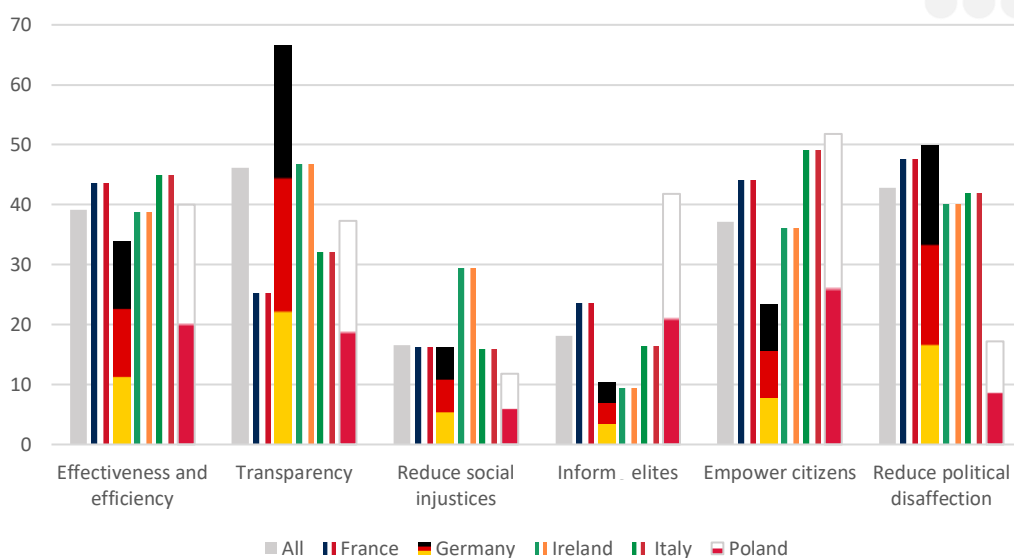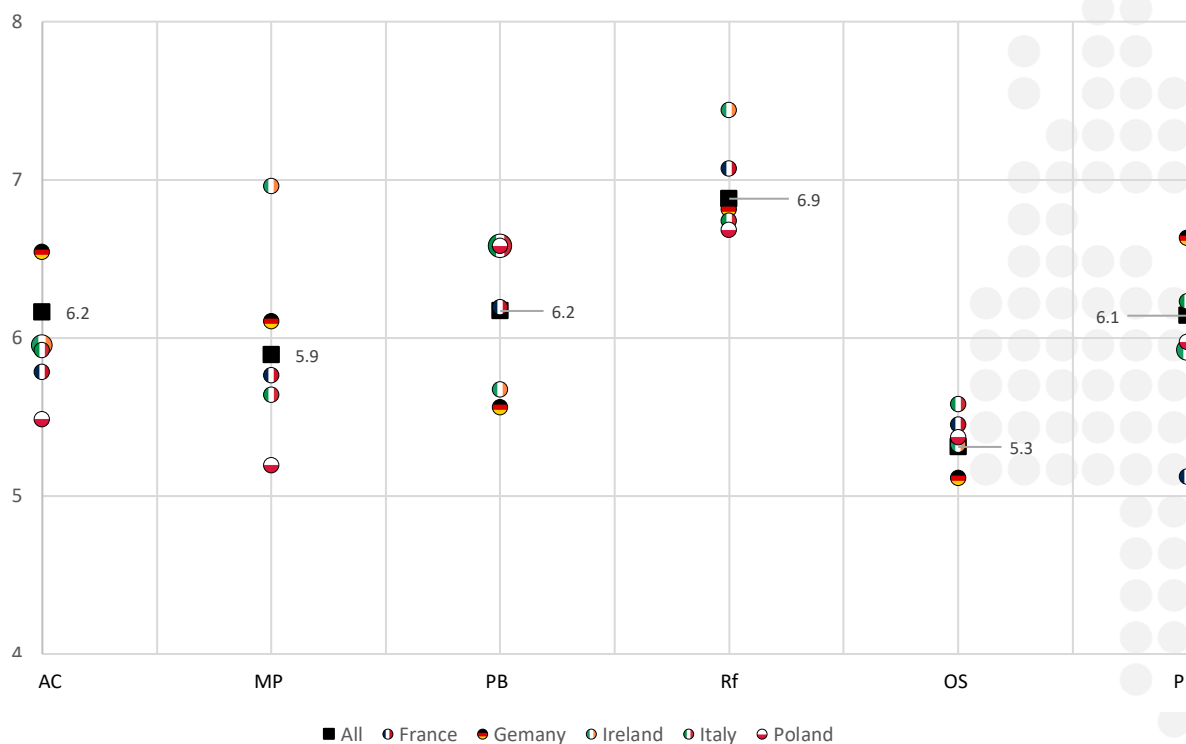

Figure 4. Main objectives of participatory processes by country. Percentage (Sum of the first and second objectives).

b. Preferred type of participatory institutions

Respondents were asked to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of some of the most well-known participatory processes and institutions. In the overall sample referenda receive the better scores, with a 6,9 in a 0-10 scale (Figure 5). Opinion polls rank lowest, receiving slightly over 5 points[1]. Being more or less binding, level of institutionalization or universality of participation could be factors explaining this rank. Familiarity may also play a role. Differences between countries are in some cases wide and may respond to national experience: Irish politicians make a quite more positive assessment of the effectiveness of mini-publics, in a country with several recent experiences with this institution.

Figure 5. Assessing effectiveness of participatory mechanisms by country. Mean.
(AC, advisory councils; MP, minipublics; PB, participatory budgeting; Rf, referenda; OS, Opinion survey; PP, primaries in political parties).

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[1] This pattern is different in Spain, with referenda being less well valued and opinion polls seen as more effective than in other countries.

To assess how the ideal deliberative event would be we included a conjoint experiment in the survey. The experiment asked the respondents to choose between three pairs of deliberative events with different characteristics, making them choose which one they would prefer to implement in their municipality and at the European level. Both events were characterized with the different levels of the attributes shown in Figures 6 and 7.These figures visually represent the influence of each one of those characteristics on the choices made by political representatives.

At the local level, events featuring face-to-face interactions garnered the highest favor. These characteristics increased the likelihood of event implementation by 9% to 11%. Additionally, when the event's topic aligned closely with a representative's agenda, there was a 5% increase in the likelihood of that design being chosen.
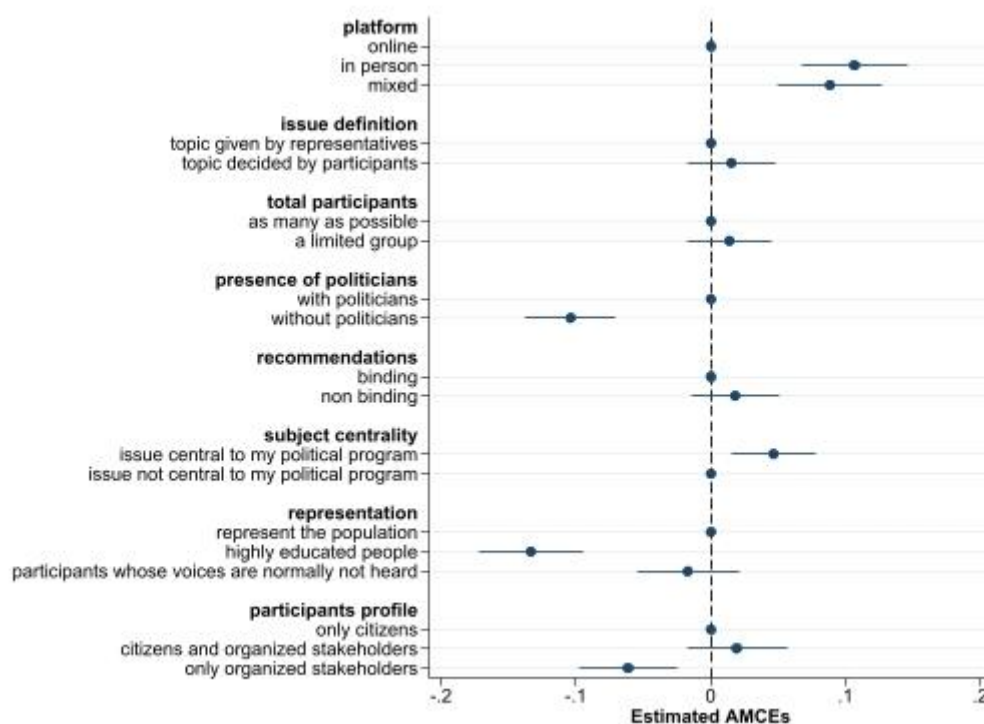

Figure 6. Impact of design features on the likelihood of European Union politicians choosing the event to be implemented at the local level

Conversely, certain features led to a significant decrease in the likelihood of implementation. Events that prominently featured non-representative groups, especially highly educated populations or exclusive stakeholder involvement, experienced a reduction in the likelihood of the event being

implemented of 13% and 6%. Furthermore, events that excluded political representatives from the deliberative groups were significantly less preferred, with a 10% decrease in probability.

When it came to selecting deliberative event designs at the EU level, some differences emerged. Online and mixed formats took precedence over face-to-face encounters. Events involving both citizens and organized stakeholders as participants were the preferred choice for this category.
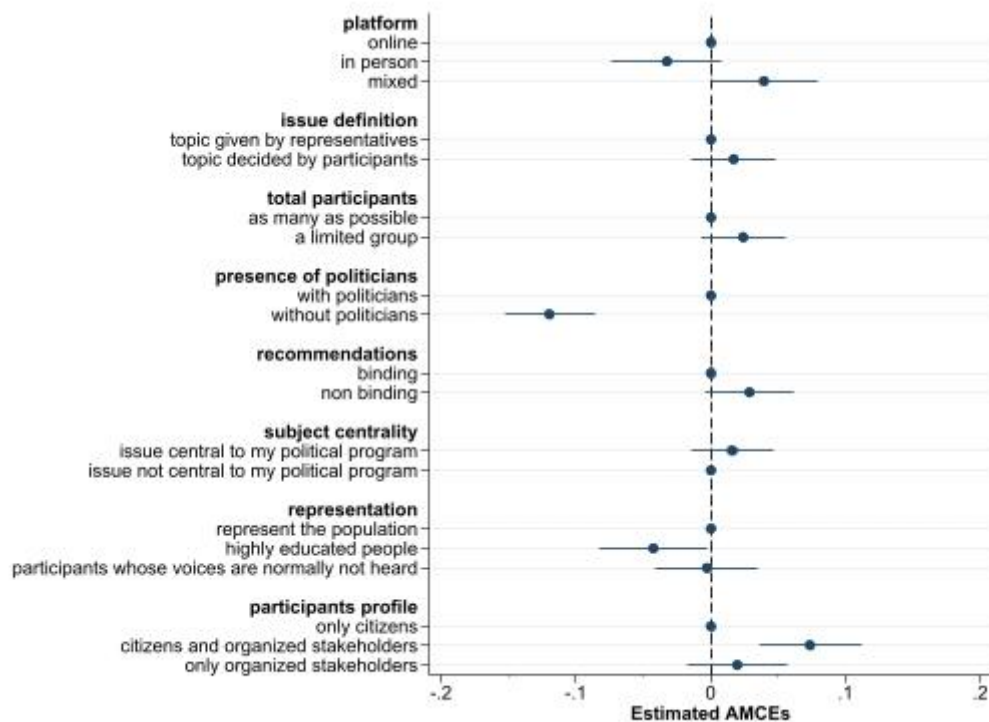

Figure 7. Impact of design features on the likelihood of European Union politicians choosing the event to be implemented at the EU level.

Conclusion

Both politicians and citizens have an opinion about each other's qualities. Politicians approve citizens for honesty but fail them for competence, while previous research has shown the existence of the opposite pattern, where citizens generally approve of politicians on competence but disapprove of them on honesty. This mutual assessment is one of the initial aspects to be addressed when starting a participatory process: politicians need to believe -or invest- in the competence of citizens in order to subsequently recognize the result of the process and, on the other hand, citizens should trust in the honesty of politicians to truly get involved in the process.

These gaps may also emerge both in the objectives and in the type of preferred processes. The questions attached may help us finding mutually acceptable shared rules of the game.