

Do voters really prefer more choice? Determinants of support for personalised electoral systems*

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Abstract

Which voters prefer having more choice between parties and candidates in an election? To provide an answer to this question, we analyse the case of a radical change from a closed-list PR system to a highly complex open-list PR system with cumulative voting in the German states of Bremen and Hamburg. We argue that the approval of a personalised electoral system is structured in similar ways as support for direct democracy. Using representative surveys conducted prior to all four state elections under cumulative voting in 2011 and 2015, we analyse which individual factors determine the approval, disapproval, or indifference towards the new electoral law. The results indicate that younger voters as well as supporters of left parties are much more likely to support a personalised electoral system. In contrast to previous studies, political interest only has an impact on the indifference towards the electoral system. More generally, our results show that a large proportion of voters does not appreciate personalised preferential electoral systems which seems to be a result of the complexity and magnitude of choice between parties and candidates.

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Introduction

The design of electoral systems involves trade-offs. Most prominently, existing research discusses the trade-off between proportionality and stable majorities (e.g. Carey and Hix 2011; Farrell 2011). An electoral system that guarantees proportionality is less likely to produce clear majorities within a parliament and vice versa. Yet, the proportionality-majority-trade-off is only one among many. In this paper, we focus on a central, but less frequently discussed choice in the design of electoral systems, namely the one between strongly personalised¹ but at the same time rather complex and demanding electoral systems. By personalised systems we refer to electoral rules which allow voters to cast a vote below the party level, i.e. for individual candidates. This study focuses on the role of personalisation in the context of PR systems by relying on a radical reform of the electoral system in the German federal states of Bremen and Hamburg. In these states very simple closed-list PR systems were replaced by complex and heavily personalised open-list PR systems with cumulative voting. The reforms constitute a perfect example for the personalisation-complexity-trade-off: the new electoral systems are among the most personalised in Germany, but they are also very demanding. Drawing on four representative surveys that ask citizens about their evaluation of this reform, we address the question of who supports more personalised electoral systems instead of a simple closed-list PR system.

Our article extends the existing research on electoral reform by applying theories developed for the analysis of support for direct democracy to personalised electoral systems. In line with the theoretical expectations, we find that respondents who identify with the Green or Left Party and younger voters are more likely to approve the new system. We also find that people with high political interest and knowledge

¹We follow recent work by (Renwick and Pilet 2016) and use the term “personalised electoral systems”. Others have referred to such system as “preferential” (Carey and Shugart 1995) or “nominal vs. ordinal” (Rae 1976) electoral systems.

are less likely to feel indifferent towards the electoral law, but are not necessarily more supportive. Approval for the electoral system reform is higher among citizens in Bremen where the electoral rules are less complex than in Hamburg, as the latter state uses two different lists, one for 3–5 seat constituencies and one for a state list. The existence of two lists results in ballot booklets amounting to over 30 pages and much higher levels of complexity. The “information overkill” of choice in Hamburg might reduce the legitimacy of the system compared to Bremen where the ballot is restricted to a single list. In line with the trade-off between complexity and personalisation, the comparison between Hamburg and Bremen demonstrates that complexity is likely to be the decisive factor for higher levels of dissatisfaction with the electoral system reform.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, we turn to the theoretical argument of the paper and describe in more detail why we argue that support for direct democracy and personalised electoral systems should be driven by similar factors. After a description of the electoral system change in Bremen and Hamburg, the data and the methodological approach, we present the results of our analyses. The final section discusses the implications of our findings.

Theorising support for personalised electoral systems

While political scientists have paid a lot of attention to practical and theoretical advantages and shortcomings of different electoral systems (see, e.g. Bowler and Donovan 2013), and while survey evidence indicates that electoral reforms are not favoured by successful candidates (Bowler et al. 2006), we know less about the question of which *citizens* favour certain electoral systems. Previous studies often focus on the relationship between electoral rules in place in a country and citizens’ satisfaction with democracy (Farrell and McAllister 2006; Bosch and Orriols 2014;

Renwick and Pilet 2016) or changes in turnout (Bowler and Donovan 2013). Only few studies² analyse explicitly the attitudes towards an electoral system, despite the notion that electoral system preferences are driven by “who you are, where you are, and where you want to go” (Katz 1997: 308).³

Following Farrell and McAllister (2006), reasons for supporting or opposing more complex but personalised electoral systems can be divided up into three categories. First, the *ballot structure* in preferential electoral systems allows voters more choice by splitting votes for several parties or candidates. In this regard, more choice is often considered to be an inherently good feature of elections. This freedom of choice should be evaluated positively by voters, but also increases the complexity of casting a ballot. To make full use of this choice, voters need to acquire information about individual candidates and parties which can be very time-consuming. The second aspect of preferential systems relates to the *linkage between politicians and citizens* by cultivating a personal vote. In a more personalised electoral system, voters have more influence on who gets elected to parliament. Casting votes for individual candidates and being able to hold them accountable in the next election results in a close linkage between voters and representatives (Farrell and Scully 2003). As a consequence, candidates and legislators are expected to rely more heavily on personal vote earning strategies (Carey and Shugart 1995) which potentially strengthens the influence of citizens on their behaviour (Däubler and Benoit 2017). For instance, the close linkage between voters and politicians is regarded as a disadvantage of the personalised Irish single-transferable vote (STV) system. The direct accountability to the local electorate promotes close constituency work and decreases the representative

²Particularly the case of electoral system change in New Zealand from a first-past-the-post electoral system to a mixed-member PR system in 1993 has received some scholarly attention. For example Jou (2013) and Riambau et al. (2017) analyse who was in favour of the reform and who opposed it. These studies differ from the focus of this study as they provide an analysis of a more radical electoral system change that affects the proportionality-stability-trade-off, while our analysis is focused on changes within the context of PR (from closed- to open-list PR).

³For a recent exception see Farrell et al. (2017).

behaviour and legislative activity by elected politicians (Farrell et al. 2017). The third argument for personalised electoral laws relates to the *relationship between parties*. Under more personalised electoral systems, building blocks between parties becomes more challenging since candidates tend to move towards the political centre. As Farrell and McAllister (2006: 726) argue, such “centripetal” tendencies of personalised electoral systems should also result in higher approval rates of these electoral systems.

The arguments brought forward by Farrell and McAllister (2006) suggest that personalised electoral systems should enjoy higher support than less personalised party-centred electoral systems, at least with regard to the overall satisfaction with the political system and democracy. It is due to these arguments that personalised electoral systems are sometimes framed as being “more democratic”. Such claims are often brought forward by non-governmental organisations which argue that more personalised electoral systems are fundamentally superior to electoral systems that give voters less choice on which candidates are elected. For instance, the American reform group *Fairvote* supports ranking parties or candidates in order to increase voters’ choices.⁴ The German organisation *Mehr Demokratie e.V.* (“More Democracy”) also supports personalised electoral systems as they “open up the possibility of a deliberate political choice”.⁵ However, as we have argued above, one can expect a trade-off between personalisation and the complexity of an electoral system. The less choice voters have, the less complex an electoral system. By increasing the amount of say voters have in choosing candidates and/or parties, the act of voting becomes more challenging (Nyhuis 2014). This trade-off might not be particularly severe when a closed-list PR system is reformed to allow for intra-party voting with just one vote. However, when the number of preference votes increases and cumulative voting and/or panachage is allowed, voting certainly

⁴See <http://www.fairvote.org/rcv> (accessed June 26, 2018).

⁵Authors’ translation.

See <https://www.mehr-demokratie.de/fileadmin/pdf/du25-kumulieren-panaschieren.pdf> (accessed June 26, 2018).

becomes more complex. Additionally, the existence of different tiers also makes electoral systems more complex (e.g. Bawn 1999). Therefore, more vote options are no “free lunch” but come at a cost. The voting process becomes more complex and the behaviour of parties and legislators is affected as well.

Building on the existing theoretical framework, we expect that personal characteristics of citizens can explain the support or disapproval of personalised electoral systems. More specifically, we argue that theories developed for explaining citizens’ support for direct democracy offer the best theoretical toolkit for analysing the support for the personalised electoral systems in Bremen and Hamburg: referendums as well as personalised electoral systems both give more power to voters and less power to parties. In a referendum, policies are directly decided by all voters which weakens the competencies of representative institutions.⁶ Likewise, personalised electoral systems take power away from the parties by providing voters with more influence on candidate selection.⁷ In the following, we outline our theoretical assumptions about individual-level factors that drive support for having more choice in an election.

Political preferences

The introduction of open-list PR systems in Bremen and Hamburg has been strongly influenced by discussions within and between the major political parties (details about the reform are provided below). Support for the new electoral law was structured along political parties, with more right-wing parties being

⁶Admittedly, while the support for direct democracy is very high in many countries, the support for personalised electoral systems might be lower. Citizens might be more prone to directly influence a specific policy outcome instead of the personal composition of the parliament. Voters might care less about the design of an electoral system than about a specific policy outcome because electoral systems are a rather complex and technocratic aspect of the political system.

⁷An important difference between referendums and personalised electoral systems is that referendums often require a higher degree of participation of citizens in the political process, meaning that they have to participate more frequently in elections/referendums. personalised electoral systems do not necessarily lead to a higher level participation; instead they lead to a different form of participation in an election. We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for highlighting this point.

against the reform. For two reasons we expect that citizens' attitudes towards the more personalised system might also be influenced by party attachment. First, as electoral systems are a rather complex matter, voters might rely on shortcuts when stating an opinion about the reform. A large corpus of literature demonstrates that information shortcuts are often employed by voters when the decision task is complex (Lupia 1994; Lau and Redlawsk 2006). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that voters follow the position of their preferred party when asked about the electoral reform. Second, the demand for more direct political participation is often explained by an increase of post-materialist values within society (Inglehart 1977; Donovan and Karp 2006). According to Inglehart (2007), citizens who disregard traditional norms are more likely to hold post-materialist values. The focus on self-expression tends to be connected to scepticism towards authority which results in a higher demand of political participation (Inglehart 2007: 232). Early studies often assumed that post-materialist values do not fit into the classical left-right dichotomy. More recently, however, researchers found increasing evidence that post-materialists are much more supportive for left-wing parties (Mair 2007: 218). Existing research has also found a strong impact of post-materialist values and party preferences on the support for direct democracy. For instance, Bengtsson and Mattila (2009) show that Finnish voters of left parties have a higher interest in direct democracy. Schuck and De Vreese (2015) analyse data from 21 countries and observe a strong and positive effect of being left-wing on the approval of referendums (see also Donovan and Karp 2006). Similarly, Rüdiger and Sajuria (2018) find that left-leaning members of Green parties have a high probability of supporting grass-roots democracy. Other studies show that conservative citizens tend to be more supportive of the existing institutional environment (Jost et al. 2003) and do not favour reforms that make it more convenient to vote (Bowler and Donovan 2018). Based on this evidence, we formulate our first hypothesis about the effect of political preferences on the approval of the personalised electoral law.

Hypothesis 1 *Citizens who identify themselves with a left (right) party, show higher approval (disapproval) of a personalised electoral system.*

Political interest and political knowledge

Political Interest and knowledge are other explanations for the support of direct democracy (see, e.g. Bowler et al. 2007; Rose and Borz 2013). While political knowledge and political interest constitute different characteristics of voters, we assume that political knowledge and interest work in similar ways when we analyse support for more choice in a democracy. People who are regularly involved in politics and know more about political processes do not feel detached from politics, but are more likely to support direct democracy (Schuck and De Vreese 2015). Both referendums and personalised electoral systems require – if taken seriously – that voters are well-informed about certain issues. In order to cast an informed vote in a referendum, one need to understand what the referendum is about. In a more personalised electoral system, one needs more information about the position of individual candidates. The main assumption is that acquiring these additional information is less costly for well-informed citizens (Donovan and Karp 2006). This is commonly referred to as the “cognitive mobilisation hypothesis”. Voters with a detailed understanding of how their vote affects the election outcome should have a stronger interest in having more say in an election. Put differently, a voter who does not fully understand or does not care about a rather comprehensible electoral system is less likely to ask for more options to cast a vote.

Empirical studies find contradicting results regarding the effect of political interest and knowledge on direct democracy. While some studies conclude that referendums are preferred by citizens with high political interest (Bowler et al. 2007; Rose and Borz 2013), a study on Canada shows that citizens with high political knowledge tend to be sceptical towards direct democracy (Anderson and Goodyear-Grant 2010). Citizens with high political interest and knowledge

might not believe that everyone understands the effects and potentially negative outcomes of direct democratic elements. This should decrease the probability that politically interested citizens prefer a complex personalised electoral system. As Schuck and De Vreese (2015) argue, this scepticism of well-informed citizens regarding public referendums might be particularly strong on highly polarising issues. Clearly, these findings contrast with the theoretical expectation derived from the cognitive mobilisation hypothesis. Gallego (2015) assumes that less educated people have scant knowledge of the candidates running in their electoral district, and therefore might not appreciate the option to vote for individual candidates. The same argument might hold for political interest and knowledge: if a respondent is interested in an election, she will be more likely to know candidates and appreciate the option of voting for individual candidates, rather than for parties. On the other hand, political interest and knowledge might also work in the opposite direction. Because of the better knowledge of the potential negative effects of personalised electoral systems on parliamentary work (Farrell et al. 2017), a more knowledgeable respondent might strongly oppose the electoral reform.

Taking these perspectives together, the effect of political interest and knowledge on the (dis)approval of the personalised electoral system is not as clear-cut as one might expect. Politically interested citizens are more likely to find arguments for or against more personalised elements, allowing us to expect that politically interested citizens and voters with high political knowledge are less likely to be indifferent towards the electoral law. Thus, higher levels of political interest and knowledge should result in higher levels of approval and disapproval but lower levels of indifference.

Hypothesis 2 *Citizens with a high level of political interest/high political knowledge should be less likely to be indifferent towards personalised electoral system.*

A different line of research, which contrasts with the cognitive mobilisation hypothesis, argues that more direct forms of citizen participation can serve as

a corrective against political elites (Norris 1999). Especially those citizens who are dissatisfied with representative democracy (but not democracy as a whole) should support direct forms of political participation (Donovan and Karp 2006: 672). From this point of view, dissatisfaction with political elites and a lack of political influence despite regular elections foster the desire for more personalised elements (Dalton et al. 2001). This perspective is one of the major explanations in theories about support for referendums as a means of political participation (Webb 2013; Schuck and De Vreese 2015). We expect a similar mechanism to be evident for attitudes towards more personalised electoral rules. Open-list systems also give citizens more choice and shift the competences of selecting candidates from parties into the direction of voters.

Existing research has used different indicators for measuring dissatisfaction with political elites. For the case of personalised electoral systems, we suggest that dissatisfaction with the work of parties might be the best indicator. This is due to the fact that personalised electoral systems allow voters to have a stronger influence in who is going to be elected. Therefore, our third hypothesis reads as follows:

Hypothesis 3 *Citizens who are less (more) satisfied with the work of their preferred party are more (less) likely to support personalised electoral systems.*

Age

Finally, we expect that the support for more participation is also influenced by a citizen's age. Young voters should prefer more choice, while older voters have experience with and prefer the old and established PR system. We assume that the tendency of older voters being less supportive of the new personalised electoral system has several reasons. First, older voters tend to have stronger attachments to parties (Twenge et al. 2017) and are less likely to split votes between parties (Schoen 2000; Bowler et al. 2018). Post-materialist values also tend to be higher

among younger cohorts (Donovan and Karp 2006). Second, habitual voting may decrease support for a more complex system among older voters (e.g. Plutzer 2002). The electoral system in Bremen and Hamburg remained stable since the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany. Older citizens become habituated to vote under established electoral rules and therefore may not be in favour of a radical reform. Third, older people have a higher probability of turning out in an election, but at the same time show higher degrees of scepticism towards alternative forms of political participation (Melo and Stockemer 2014). Since the beginning of the 1990s there is a clear trend towards more personalised electoral systems (Renwick and Pilet 2016: 267). Older voters – not only in Hamburg and Bremen – have experienced fewer choices on ballots. Thus, older citizens might evaluate these rather recent forms of political participation more critically which results in lower approval rates of the personalised electoral system.

Hypothesis 4 *The older a voter, the lower should be the approval of a personalised electoral system.*

A fundamental electoral reform: the cases of Hamburg and Bremen

For analysing citizens' preferences for strongly personalised electoral systems, we exploit the radical reform of the electoral systems in the German federal states of Bremen (480,000 eligible voters) and Hamburg (1.2 million eligible voters). Since 2011, both states use a personalised open-list PR system, while they previously had a strongly party-centred closed-list PR system. Bremen and Hamburg are the only two of the 16 German Länder that use this kind of electoral system.

Description of the new electoral systems

There are some important differences between the electoral systems in Bremen and Hamburg, but both share the common characteristics that voters have five votes at the state level that can be cumulated or distributed among parties or individual candidates running on behalf of these parties (see Marcinkiewicz and Jankowski 2014; Jankowski 2016). In Bremen only the state tier exists. In Hamburg the system is even more complex, as it is a mixed-member system due to the existence of 17 electoral districts in which 3–5 candidates are elected. Unlike usual mixed-member systems, however, this first tier is also based on open-list PR. Again, voters have five votes that can be distributed or cumulated among all candidates. Thus, voters in Hamburg have ten votes in total: five at the state level and five in their respective constituencies. This difference of the Hamburg electoral system to the one in Bremen is striking, as it increases the complexity of the system in Hamburg by a large magnitude. In Hamburg, for example, the ballot is a book with several pages each containing long lists of all candidates in the constituencies and in the state-tier. In Bremen, in contrast, the ballot paper is far less complex and therefore more comprehensible for voters.

The reforms in Bremen and Hamburg constitute a perfect case for analysing how the change from a party-centred PR system to a strongly personalised PR system is evaluated by voters. At the same time, however, the differences in the complexity of the reform between Bremen and Hamburg also suggest that it is worthwhile to focus on differences between Bremen and Hamburg when comparing the level of support.

How the reforms were introduced

In both cases, the reform of the electoral system was driven by the NGO “Mehr Demokratie e.V.” (“More Democracy”). This organisation is strongly in favour of

the argument that having more choice is fundamentally better for a democratic system. In Hamburg the discussion about the reform started already in the early 2000s, and in 2004 the proposed reform of the electoral system by “Mehr Demokratie e.V.” gained a majority in a public referendum. The ruling CDU, however, rejected the reform and re-reformed the proposed electoral system prior to its first implementation in the election of 2008. Therefore, “More Demokratie e.V.” started a new campaign for the reform of the electoral system and since the now governing system. Since the governing coalition of CDU and Greens feared losing another public referendum they agreed upon the radical reform. In Bremen, the story was a bit different. Again the call for a reform was initiated by “Mehr Demokratie e.V.”. However, having learned from the experience in Hamburg, the parties and “Mehr Demokratie e.V.” agreed on the proposed reform without the need of a public referendum.

Data, variables, and methods

The data used for this study are based on random multistage stratified sampling of eligible voters for the state elections in Bremen and Hamburg 2011 and 2015. Representative surveys were conducted in the week before election day by phone based on a standardised questionnaire (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen 2012a,b, 2016a,b). Our analyses include a total of 4,055 respondents.⁸

The dependent variable *Electoral system preference* consists of three categories: approval, disapproval, and indifference. We treat the dependent variable as

⁸The survey of Hamburg 2015 includes 1,633 respondents. However, the question about the electoral system evaluation has been asked to only half of the respondents (random selection). Thus, our sample for this election is reduced by 50 per cent. After excluding respondents without a valid answer on the electoral system evaluation, the Voter type variable has the highest amount of missing values (9.5 per cent). For all other variables, at least 94 per cent of the observations contain valid values.

nominal because one cannot necessarily argue that indifference is placed “between” disapproval and approval.⁹

Our independent variables are based on the following items: *Party identification* indicates whether a respondent claimed to prefer one party over the other parties. We distinguish between CDU, SPD, FDP, Greens, Left, other parties, and no party identification. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) cannot be analysed separately due to the low number of observations, and is part of “other parties” category. We use party identification on the federal level, not on the state level, as party identification on the federal level should be based more on ideological proximity than for the Land level.¹⁰ Moreover, party identification at the national level is probably a more exogenous measure: party support at the state level might be affected by the position of a party towards the new electoral system.

We measure *Party satisfaction* through a combination of Party identification and a thermometer ranking of the parties. The basic intuition works as follows: if a respondent identifies with party X , but gives this party a low score on the thermometer scale ranging from 0 to 10, we assume that the respondent is dissatisfied with her favourite party.¹¹ If a respondent does not identify with any party, we use the highest value ranking of all five main parties evaluated (CDU, SPD, FDP, Greens, Left).

Political interest is measured through a self-evaluation (low, medium, high). To conceptualise *Political knowledge*, we make use of two factual questions (naming the CDU and SPD main candidates for each state election). Respondents who could name both candidates are classified as people with high political knowledge.

⁹The survey item asks: “For the state election a new electoral system has been introduced. Now voters can distribute five votes among and between parties and candidates. Do you (1) approve this new electoral law, or (2) do you disapprove the electoral law or (3) do you not have an opinion on the electoral law.” Moreover, there is the option “no answer” which we exclude and which was selected only by 4.3 per cent of all respondents.

¹⁰In Section A of the Supplementary Material we show that the results do not change when we use alternative measures of party identification and approval.

¹¹Unfortunately, the surveys do not contain questions about satisfaction with the way democracy works or satisfaction with the current system which would be suitable alternative conceptualisations.

We distinguish between six *Age* groups from the survey. *Education* measures whether the respondent (1) has a high-school degree, (2) whether she has a high-school degree, but not started with third-level education institution, or (3) whether she holds a university degree.¹² The literature on satisfaction with democracy assumes that the legitimacy with the political system is lower among citizens who supported a party that entered the government (e.g. Anderson et al. 2005). In the case of Bremen and Hamburg, supporters of losing parties might dislike the electoral system more than “winners”. Therefore, we include a variable *Support for party in last election* that indicates whether the party a citizen voted for in the previous election was part of the government (winner) or opposition (loser) in the subsequent legislative cycle.

The control variable *Voter type* indicates whether a respondent claimed to vote at the election (or having cast a postal vote already). If a respondent is classified as a voter, we check whether she stated to split votes between more than one party.¹³ Finally, we control for the *Gender* of the respondents and add a dummy variable for each *Election*.

Due to the nominal-scaled dependent variable we run multinomial logistic regression models (Long and Freese 2014). As the substantive effects of these models cannot be interpreted through regression tables easily, we present predicted probability plots for each hypothesis. The full regression tables of the main models and the robustness tests can be found in the Supplementary Material (Section C).

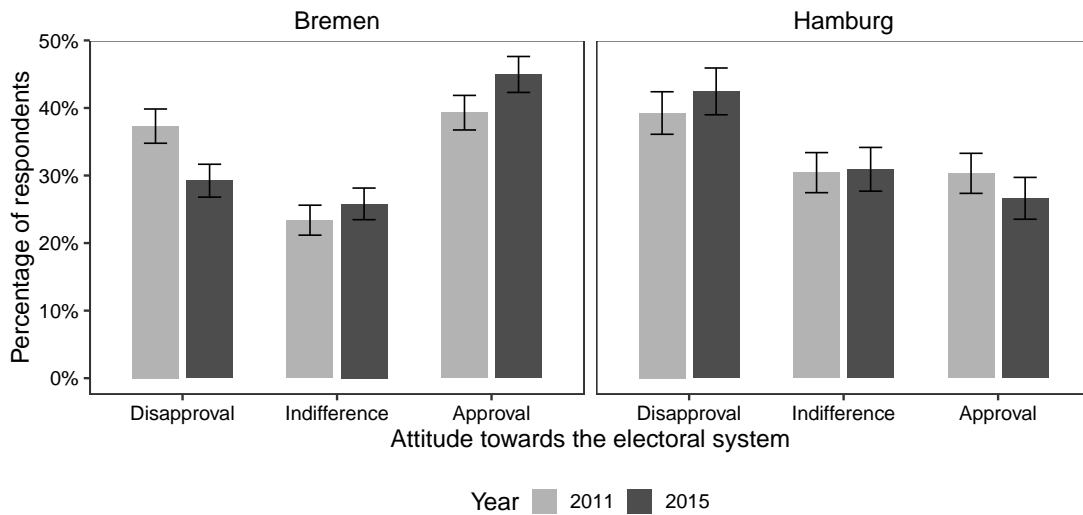
¹²Previous research comes to contrary conclusions regarding the impact of education on the approval of direct democratic elements (Collingwood 2012; Coffé and Michels 2014; Gallego 2015).

¹³Unfortunately, the surveys do not include an item about the question as to whether a respondent splits votes between different parties of the same party. Therefore, we can only assess whether a voter split across parties.

Results

Who is more likely to approve, disapprove, or take an indifferent position towards the personalised electoral system? Figure 1 displays the attitudes towards the open-list PR system prior to each election. In all four elections, less than 50% of the respondents approved the electoral system. In Hamburg, more respondents disapproved than approved the electoral law. In the 2011 Bremen election, the proportion of people who liked and disliked the system were on a similar level. In the 2015 election, the share of approvers increased by six percentage points to 44%. Moreover, the proportion of indifferent respondents is high, ranging between 23% (Bremen 2011) and 32% (Hamburg 2015). Within the electorates in both Bremen and Hamburg we observe a strong polarisation and scepticism towards the personalised electoral system.

Figure 1: Attitudes towards the open-list PR system. The percentage of approval decreases further by 1–3 percentage points if only respondents without missing values in any covariate are considered.

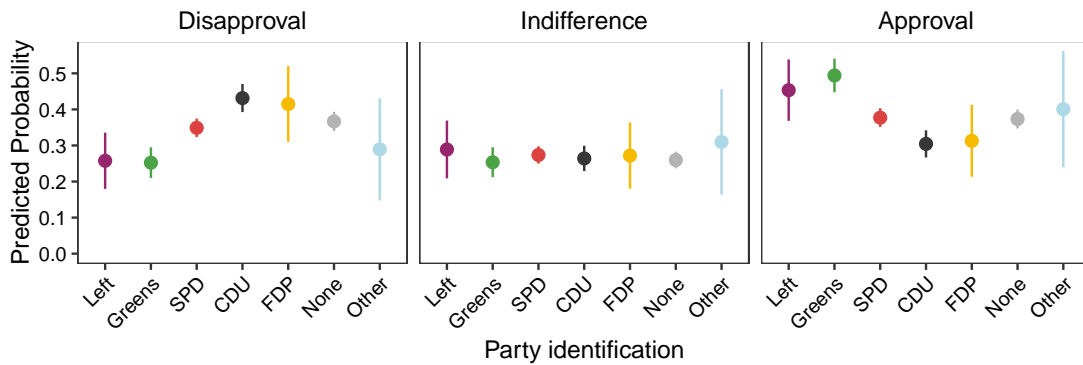


Regression results

Having shown considerable variation in our dependent variable, we present the results of the multinomial regression models. First of all, we expect that supporters

of left parties have a higher likelihood of approving the system, while supporters of conservative parties are rather sceptical (Hypothesis 1). Figure 2 provides strong evidence for these expectations. Approval of the electoral law is strongest among supporters of the Left and Greens, while CDU and FDP supporters have the highest predicted probabilities of disliking the reformed system. At the same time, disapproval is lowest amongst supporters of the Greens and Left party. We do not observe substantial differences between different party identifiers with regard to the indifference towards the electoral system.

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities of the attitudes towards the personalised electoral system depending on party identification. Results are based on multinomial regression models with robust standard errors. Vertical lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.

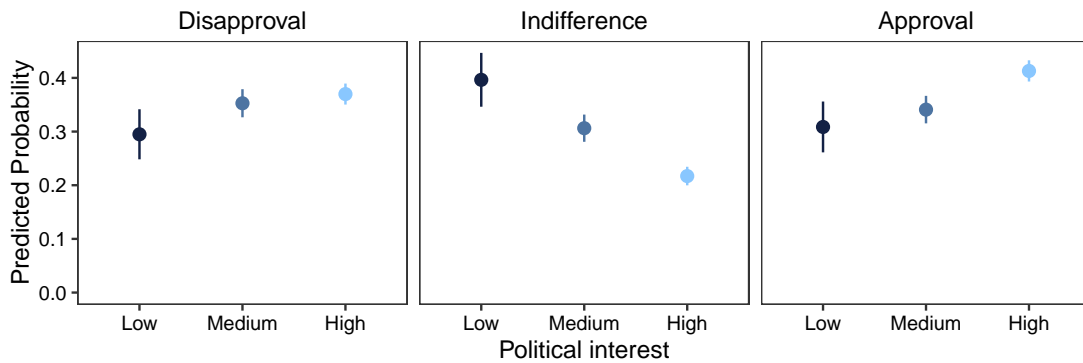


Hypothesis 2 refers to the impact of political interest and knowledge on the indifference towards the electoral system reform. Respondents who are interested in politics should be more likely to have formed an opinion on the electoral reform (either approve or disapprove the electoral system). Figure 3 offers support for this assumption: almost twice as many respondents with low political interest are indifferent towards the electoral law. In turn, politically interested respondents are very likely to either like or dislike the personalised system. Strikingly, we see a very similar relationship between political interest and approval or disapproval of the electoral reform. For both categories, the probability increases for respondents with a higher political interest. The predicted probability for approval is slightly higher than for disapproval among very interested respondents, but these differences are

rather small and negligible. That is, we find very little evidence that politically interested voters are more likely to support the more personalised electoral system. As shown in the Supplementary Material (Figure A1), the results remain unchanged for the conceptualisation of *Political knowledge*: respondents who could name both candidates correctly are more likely to either oppose or like the personalised electoral system.

We assumed that dissatisfied respondents would have a higher likelihood of preferring a personalised electoral law, as they are unhappy with the state of affairs within “their” party. Yet, the results indicate the opposite (Figure A2 in the Supplementary Material). The higher the satisfaction with the favourite party, the higher the probability of approving the open-list PR system. The results remain the same when we plot the predicted probabilities for each party separately. Thus, we do not find support for Hypothesis 3.

Figure 3: Predicted probabilities of the attitudes toward the personalised electoral system depending on political interest. Results are based on multinomial regression models with robust standard errors. Vertical lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.

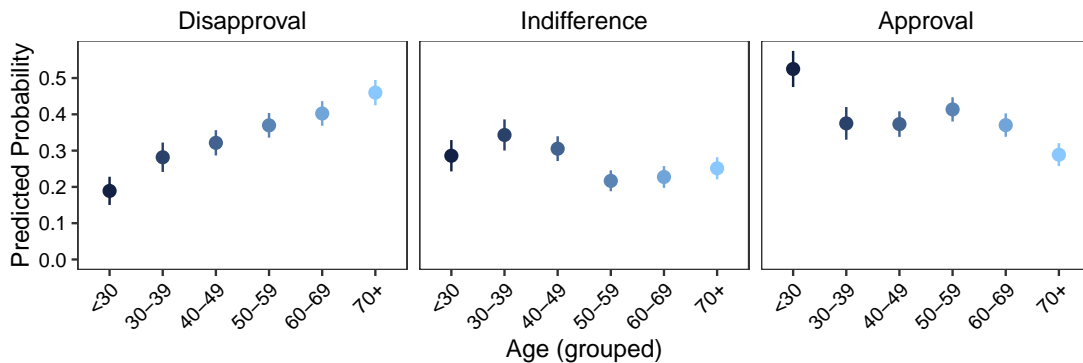


The effect of age on electoral system preferences is displayed in Figure 4. Respondents younger than 30 years have a predicted probability of 20% to dislike the electoral system. As expected in Hypothesis 4, the predicted probability of approving the reform is three times as high as the disapproval. For older voters, the effect shows in the opposite direction. The older a voter, the higher the probability

of disapproval. The difference between respondents younger than 30 to the 30–39 year old respondents is particularly large.

The very strong effect of the youngest voter category suggests that the result is driven by first-time voters. Unfortunately, the survey data does not allow us to divide up the age groups in more fine-grained categories for all of the four elections under investigation as age has been measured slightly differently across the surveys. For three of the four surveys (Bremen 2011, 2015, and Hamburg 2015), however, we can separately analyse the attitudes of the 16–18 and 18–20 year old respondents. Respondents falling into these categories are definitely or very likely (if 20 years old) first-time voters. We plot the results of this more fine-grained model in Figure A3 in the Supplementary Material. Respondents younger than 25 years of age have a 20 percentage points higher probability of approving the electoral system than the group of respondents over 25 years. Within the group of young voters we do not observe differences. The results indicate that the age effect seems to be indeed driven by very young voters.

Figure 4: Predicted probabilities of the attitudes toward the personalised electoral system depending on age group. Results are based on multinomial regression models with robust standard errors. Vertical lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.



Finally, we take a brief look at the control variables. Education does not seem to have a substantial influence on the attitude towards the electoral system (Figure A4). This is an interesting finding in itself, as it is sometimes assumed that complex electoral laws could be too demanding for voters with a low education level. As

expected, voters who made use of their right to split votes across parties are more likely to approve the system (Figure A5). We do not observe any differences in the predicted probabilities for the support of the electoral system for supporters of “winning” and “losing” parties at the previous election. Women tend to be somewhat more likely to be indifferent towards the system, but the effect size is negligible. In Section A in the Supplementary Material we also show that alternative measurements of *Party identification* and *Political interest* do not change our findings.

Differences between the elections

Having survey data for all four elections allows us to test differences between the elections. Although Hamburg and Bremen have a comparable electoral system, the complexity is even larger in Hamburg. Having five votes for the constituency list and five votes for the state list vastly increases the number of choice. The absence of constituency lists in Bremen decreases the amount of choice and also the size of the ballot. In fact, the ballots in Hamburg are booklets consisting of over 20 pages for the state list and around 10 pages for the constituency list. We therefore expect that voters in Bremen generally have a more positive attitude towards the system. Running the regression model for each election separately offers strong support for this assumption. The support of the electoral system reform tends to be higher in Bremen (see also Figure 1). Within each state the results are stable over time, and the main effects show in the same direction and have similar effect sizes (see Figures A9–A13 in the Supplementary Material). Thus, the results reported above are not caused by a single outlier election. To sum up, the individual-level predictors are very similar in Bremen and Hamburg, but the overall support for the electoral reform is higher in Bremen, presumably because of the lower complexity.

Summary and outlook

Who approves a personalised, but at the same time very complex open-list PR electoral system? While political scientists have analysed the advantages and shortcomings of electoral reforms for a long time (e.g. Jesse 1987; Bowler and Donovan 2013) and have also addressed the question of strategic electoral system change (Boix 1999; Benoit 2004), the relationship between voter characteristics and support for certain types of electoral systems has not been investigated directly. Instead, previous studies often used survey items such as satisfaction with democracy as proxies for the degree of support for having more choice in democratic processes. Using the cases of Hamburg and Bremen we could assess the approval of the recent trend towards more personalisation in elections. Against the background that electoral systems are a core feature of every democracy and certain interest groups frequently campaign for personalised electoral systems, we need a better understanding of the public acceptance of personalised electoral laws.

Drawing on the cases of Hamburg and Bremen, our results show that only a minority of respondents in each of the four elections approved the electoral reform. Only among respondents who identify with a left-wing party or within the group of very young voters, the complex electoral system enjoys strong support. Moreover, our results indicate that the refusal of the electoral system is particularly strong among politically interested voters. These findings are especially relevant if we take into account how the electoral systems were introduced. In Hamburg a majority of voters supported the new electoral law in a public referendum, while in Bremen the political parties anticipated a potential loss in a referendum and gave in to the political pressure of an interest group that strongly supported electoral reforms. Therefore, in both cases one could conclude that – prior to the introduction – there seemed to be public support for the more complex electoral system. However, when using the reformed system in elections, citizens seem to have become more sceptical.

The low level of support for the reform in the surveys points to an interesting puzzle: Why were the reforms adopted? Our article rests on the assumption that support for public referendums and personalised electoral systems are driven by similar factors. This also provides a potential explanation for this puzzle. When those who are in favour of personalised electoral systems are also the ones who are more likely to turn out in a public referendum, then this group of voters will be overrepresented in the public referendum. Another important factor is that a public referendum does not directly allow voters to express their indifference towards the electoral systems. The high levels of indifference measured in the surveys indicate that the proportion of voters with a specific opinion on this issue was quite low in the first place. This raises the question of whether electoral systems should be subject to public referendums when a considerable proportion of citizens has no opinion on this issue.

Our article could not analyse if and how the electoral system change had an impact on the attitudes of voters regarding politics (see for such a perspective e.g. Banducci et al. 1999). While a majority of voters seems to reject the electoral system change, it would also be interesting to know whether voters perceived a change in the style of representation after the electoral system reform. Changes in representation address an alternative dimension of electoral system evaluations that diverge from the general measure of public support or satisfaction with the democratic system. Moreover, it would be beneficial to collect cross-national data on the support for various electoral systems. This paper shows that public opinion offers important evidence about the legitimacy of electoral systems which provides crucial information for future attempts of electoral reform and the personalisation of political systems (Renwick and Pilet 2016). Adding items on the evaluation of the current electoral system and possible alternatives to national and subnational election studies would give researchers and policy-makers crucial insights into

voters' views on electoral systems, one of the fundamental institutional features of democracies.

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