

THE EFFECTS OF INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIVENESS ON DECISION LEGITIMACY

Ben Seyd

School of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent

Aleksandra Cichocka

School of Psychology, University of Kent

Abstract: Even though citizens may disagree with the substance of an official decision, they often accept, and comply with, that decision. This reflects a number of factors about the procedural qualities of the decision. Among these, a particularly important factor is whether decisions are responsive. Yet what does it mean for decisions to be responsive, and what effects do different aspects of responsiveness have on legitimacy? We distinguish and test three aspects of responsiveness: whether citizens have the opportunity for voice, whether their views are taken into account, and whether decisions reflect citizens' general interests, as opposed to their immediate preferences. The way people react to decisions reflects not only the process by which decisions are reached, but also their outcome. We therefore consider whether the effects of decision responsiveness are moderated by whether people get what they want from the decision. We pursue these research questions through an online experiment conducted on a sample of British citizens. Our results suggest that while public authorities may attract positive evaluations by listening to citizens and acting on their desires, they may also do so by taking decisions that reflect their constituents' general interests.

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One of the tenets of representative democracy is that the decisions made by public officials should be responsive to citizens' needs. While those officials need to enjoy some discretion, few seriously question the principle that, in general terms, public decisions should reflect the preferences held by citizens. Yet beyond this principle, important questions quickly arise. In particular how must public officials act to ensure their decisions are responsive to the public? Is it sufficient that officials simply consult with citizens to find out what their preferences are? Or must they go beyond consultation by taking decisions that actually meet citizens' demands? Might officials also behave responsively if their decisions reflect citizens' general interests, if not necessarily their expressed preferences?

The issue of how closely public authorities should follow the wishes of their populations has a long lineage (Manin, 1997: ch5), but one that has an acute contemporary importance, given the ease with which public preferences can now be conveyed to decision-makers. It is therefore worth examining how far responsiveness matters for public acceptance of official decisions. In particular, we should consider different components of responsiveness, and the potential contribution that each makes to decision legitimacy. This article takes up these issues by exploring the impact on public evaluations of three aspects of responsiveness: whether agencies consult with citizens, whether they adapt their decisions to meet public preferences, and whether they take decisions that reflect citizens' broad interests.

To test the effects of different aspect of responsiveness on decision acceptance and legitimacy, we employ an experimental approach. We expose participants to scenarios involving different forms of organisational responsiveness in the context of a policy decision being made by a local tier of government. We use this manipulation to test the effects on the perceived legitimacy of the public authority of whether the authority consults with citizens, takes into account their demands or acts on their interests. In addition to the effects of different degrees of responsiveness, we also examine how far decision acceptance is shaped by people's substantive views. In particular, we explore whether these substantive preferences moderate the impact of the decision's procedural qualities on the way citizens evaluate a political authority.

Our analysis thus explores how far evaluations of a public authority are shaped by the procedural and substantive qualities of its decisions. We make two particular contributions to scholarly understanding of how citizens assess the legitimacy of a decision-making agency. First, we re-visit and provide new evidence on the unresolved issue of how far decision-makers are evaluated positively only if they appraise themselves of people's preferences and then act on those preferences, as opposed to listening but not acting, a strategy that may – as we note below – be particularly damaging to public evaluations. Second, and more novel, we explore the impact on popular evaluations of decision-making that reflects citizens' general interests rather than their more immediate preferences. We examine whether, if a decision authority deviates from people's expressed wants yet follows their interests, its decisions can still be seen as legitimate. We also provide a further test of the claim that a decision's substantive outcome serves to moderate the effect of its procedural qualities on legitimacy beliefs. All this is done in the context of a carefully designed vignette-based survey experiment employing participants drawn more widely than the frequently used sample of college students.

The paper proceeds by first outlining the nature of responsiveness and the impact responsiveness is deemed to have on public acceptance of official decisions. The second section outlines the experimental design used to explore the impact of different aspects of responsiveness on decision acceptance. The third section presents the results of our experiment, while the fourth section concludes and discusses the implications of the findings for public authorities.

1. Institutional responsiveness and decision legitimacy

Elected officials in representative democracies are expected to be responsive to the wishes of their electorates. Notwithstanding the arguments of those who commend a ‘trustee’ model of representation – in which elected officials are entitled to exercise independent judgement – politicians are supposed to rule with citizens’ wishes in mind, and political institutions are designed to ensure that this principle is followed.¹ Yet what does it mean for a public agency to be ‘responsive’?

To be responsive involves paying some attention to another person’s wishes and needs. It also involves going beyond this minimal condition, to act in a way that furthers those needs. The twin elements of responsiveness are thus to consult or listen to another person’s wishes, and then to act on those wishes. But responsiveness may go beyond a mechanical obedience to those wishes. An actor or institution may act responsively if they make a decision that is not favoured by citizens, yet also provide some explanation of, or justification for, the decision (Pitkin, 1967: 163-66; Bies and Shapiro, 1988; Esaiasson et al, 2013). If we think about cases in which an actor may deviate from another’s wishes and seek to rationalise this decision via a justificatory account, we quickly identify another potential condition of responsiveness. This condition arises if there is a (perceived) discrepancy between a person’s *wishes* and their *interests*. We define the latter as a person’s overall or long-term utility, or the nature of their fully-informed preferences. A person may hold a preference for a particular decision, but if they suffer from imperfect information – for example by failing to understand the nature of the decision or the trade-offs it might involve – this preference may only weakly reflect their general interests. Various scholars have argued that an actor may be responsive to another even when ignoring that person’s preferences as long as decisions are taken with their interests in mind (eg. Pitkin, 1967: 155-67, 209-14; Eulau and Karpis, 1977). Indeed, when asked about the qualities sought among legislative representatives, studies have shown apparent popular support for politicians pursuing both principled decision making – which might be taken to reflect citizens’ general interests – and more preference-oriented decisions based on the particularistic demands of local districts (Doherty, 2015).

There are therefore four elements of responsiveness which can be distinguished: to consult with another, to take a decision in line with another’s wishes, to take a decision in line with

¹ An exception to this principle arises in cases where acting responsively might compromise officials’ ability to act ‘efficiently’, for example by establishing credible commitments (Rodrik and Zeckhauser, 1988). In these cases, one might wish officials to minimise their responsiveness to citizens, and institutions may be designed – notably by delegating authority to a ‘non-majoritarian’ agency – to achieve this goal.

another's general interests, and to take a decision that does not meet another's wishes (or perhaps their interests) but for which an explicit justification or rationale is offered. Of these four elements, we only consider the first three here, paying no further attention to the contribution of the justificatory element of responsiveness.²

Empirically, it is clear that decision-makers are rewarded for seeking the views of those affected by their rulings. This is manifested most obviously in the scores of studies that point to the beneficial effect of opportunities for 'voice' – whether by individuals or groups – on decision acceptance and legitimacy (Thibaut and Walker, 1975; Lind et al, 1983; Lind and Tyler, 1988; Tyler et al, 1985; van den Bos et al, 1998; Terwel et al, 2010; for recent reviews, see McCoun, 2005; Lind and Kulik, 2009).

How far legitimacy is compromised when decision-makers fail to adapt to citizens' wishes is less clear. Some studies suggest that voice serves to stimulate higher rates of decision legitimacy irrespective of whether citizens have any control over the substance of decisions (Lind et al, 1983; Tyler, Rasinski and Spodick, 1985; Lind and Tyler, 1988: 94-106; Lind et al, 1990; Hildreth et al, 2014). However, other studies suggest that listening to public concerns is, in itself, insufficient and that legitimacy requires that citizens have greater control over the decisions taken by political authorities (Lind and Tyler, 1988: ch9). In a survey-based study of attitudes to municipal government in the US, for example, Ulbig (2008) found more favourable reactions among people who believed that citizens' views influenced government decisions than among people who believed only that citizens had the opportunity to express their views to government. Indeed, a number of studies have suggested that, where an actor seeks people's preferences yet ignores these views in reaching a decision, legitimacy can be depressed beyond the point obtained if no consultation takes place (termed a 'frustration effect'; Folger, 1977; see also Avery and Quinones, 2002). This finding has been confirmed in the context of a monetary allocation game, which showed that the ability of citizens to communicate their preferences to decision makers reduced their satisfaction with an outcome in cases where these communications go unheeded (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002).

We therefore have three aspects of responsiveness, each of which – individually or in combination – might serve to shape citizens' acceptance of a decision made by a public authority. We expect to see a positive effect if the authority identifies its constituents' needs by consulting with them. A further positive effect should arise if the authority takes a decision that fits with constituents' needs. Yet there may be a penalising effect if, having consulted with citizens, the authority does not then act in line with their preferences. However, and finally, if the authority can show that it has taken a decision on the basis of

² This constraint reflects the limited number of conditions that could be studied in our experiments. Other studies have, however, explored the role that decision justification might play on popular attitudes. One recent study found that justifying a decision had no impact on citizen satisfaction, over and above whether a public authority consulted with citizens and adapted its decisions to meet citizen preferences (Esaiaasson et al, 2013). However, other studies have shown that evaluations of a decision can be sensitive to the rationale, or justification, offered (Bies and Shapiro, 1988; Grose et al, 2015). In other words, legislators need not necessarily be punished for slipping from public preferences, so long as they can account for why this slippage took place.

citizens' interests rather than their preferences, that decision may be viewed as legitimate even though it doesn't reflect citizens' immediate wishes.

Alongside its procedural qualities, we also expect evaluations of a decision to reflect its substantive nature. People's acceptance of a decision is a function not only of the way in which the decision is taken, but also of whether they agree with its substance. Substantive preferences may also moderate the impact of procedural fairness on legitimacy. Prior studies have suggested that, where an individual is satisfied with the substance of a decision, the impact of its procedural qualities on legitimacy is fairly minor; yet where substantive congruence is lower, the impact of procedural qualities assumes greater importance (Brockner and Wiesenfeld, 1996; Brockner et al, 1997; Esaiasson, 2010; van der Toorn et al, 2011; Hogan et al, 2013; Wu and Wang, 2013). In other words, if citizens perceive a decision to have yielded an outcome of which they approve, they appear to feel it unnecessary to consider how that decision was reached. Where an unfavourable outcome is produced, however, citizens pay greater attention to the procedures underlying the decision.

2. Research design

To test the impact on decision acceptance of the three aspects of responsiveness, we employ an experimental research design, in which different groups of a sample of citizens are exposed to different ways in which a standardised agency reaches a policy decision. Since we are interested in three aspects of responsiveness, our experiments adopt a 2 (agency consults v does not consult) × 2 (agency adapts to majority opinion v does not adapt) × 2 (agency takes into account citizens' general interests v does not take interests into account) between-subjects factorial design. This design enables us to identify both the unique contribution made by each element of responsiveness, as well as their combined contributions.

The organisation chosen for the decision-making scenarios was a local council (a municipal tier of government). This tier was preferred over the national level since, for reasons of scale, it is more reasonable to desire and assume responsive behaviour from a local agency than from a national one, and thus for responsiveness to form a central element in evaluations of that agency.³ As for the substance of the policy decision, we sought an issue that was subject to some controversy – so that experimental participants would themselves hold substantive preferences, and would also care how responsive the council was – but also one on which citizens' immediate 'preferences' might be distinguished from their more general 'interests'. Policy issues involving an element of social risk arguably meet these criteria, and we

³ In evaluations of the legitimacy of national-level actors and institutions – with whom citizens enjoy less direct contact – beliefs about citizens' proximity to the decision-making process (measured by whether people feel their views are being represented) have been found to be less powerful than beliefs about the qualities of political representatives (measured by whether politicians are seen to hold good intentions) (Gangl, 2003: 136). Indeed, in large-scale political units, it may make little sense for citizens to base their support for political actors on whether they get to influence policy decisions since, for the average citizen, the chances of such influence are minimal (Rothstein, 2009). If we are interested in the effects of responsiveness, it therefore makes sense to focus on a lower-level tier of government, whose members might be expected to be closely in touch with what citizens believe.

selected the construction of a mobile phone mast (or base station) as the topic for decision. Mobile phone technology is a significant source of concern for citizens, with base stations being associated with a range of negative associations, notably risks to personal health (Siegrist et al, 2005). Moreover, these risks are often perceived to be imprecisely quantified and subject to some doubt (Sjöberg, 2002; McLean and Patterson, 2012). Given this, it is reasonable to suppose that citizens might look to others – such as scientific experts – to guide decisions relating to mobile phone technology. If these experts recommend a decision that runs counter to citizens' preferences, this opens up the potential for distinguishing between citizens' interests and their wishes, and for a decision-making body to potentially gain legitimacy by following these interest-based recommendations.

The experimental treatment consisted of a fictitious newspaper-style account (set out in the Appendix) of a decision reached by a local council. The account identified the conflictual nature of the policy issue, by noting that some local residents favoured construction of the mobile phone mast (on the grounds of improved telephone signal reception), while others opposed it (on the grounds of increased risk of radiation). The account thus established that there exists no popular consensus to which the council could straightforwardly defer. Having laid out these descriptive details, participants were then randomly allocated to one of eight groups, each of which was exposed to a different combination of the three responsiveness factors. The first factor corresponded to whether the council consulted or not with local people. Where consultation occurred, this took the form of council-convened meetings from which a majority opinion on the phone mast was identified. Where consultation did not occur, experimental participants were told that majority opinion had been identified from phone-ins to a local radio station. The second factor corresponded to whether the council's decision – to accept or reject the mobile phone mast – either followed or deviated from the opinion of the majority of local citizens. The third factor corresponded to whether the council took into account citizens' wider interests, by seeking or not seeking the advice of technology experts on whether to approve or reject the siting of the phone mast, and by then acting on those experts' advice.

Our experiment took the form of a short internet-based survey hosted by Prolific Academic, an online participant recruitment platform based in the United Kingdom.⁴ Over a one month period between late March and late April 2015, we recruited 438 participants, to each of whom we paid a small fee of £0.55 (US\$ 0.84). Removing cases where there were problems in viewing the newspaper article, inaccurate recall of the newspaper topic (indicating low participant attention to the task), and repeating the survey left us with 407 cases. Of these, 57 per cent were female, with 61 per cent holding a university-level qualification or above; the age range was 18 to 60 years, with a mean of 27.7 years (SD=9.6).

Our outcome measures were similar to those used in previous studies on this topic, and concerned legitimacy ("how legitimate would you say the council's decision was?"), trust ("how much trust in general would you have in the council?") and decision acceptance ("how far do you think that local people should accept the decision made by the council?"). Although these concepts are not identical, they are conceptually related and empirically we

⁴ As of May 2015, Prolific Academic reported just over 6000 participants, over three quarters of whom resided in the UK and US. The modal age of participants was 22 years, and 60 per cent were male.

find the distribution of responses to the measures to be highly correlated ($\alpha=0.89$). We therefore combine the measures in a single additive scale tapping perceptions of the council (1=negative, 10=positive; mean=5.82; SD=2.20). To assess the moderating impact of participants' substantive opinions, our experiment also gathered data on whether they favoured mobile phone technology or not.⁵

3. Results

We begin by assessing how far our experimental manipulations succeeded in conveying information about the procedural qualities of the council's decision. Due to a technical fault in the original survey, manipulation checks were conducted through a separate survey.⁶ For this separate survey, we again drew on Prolific Academic to recruit participants, using only people who had not taken part in the original survey. Excluding participants who reported problems in viewing the study materials and/or who failed the attention check left us with 149 cases. We included the same manipulation materials as in the original survey and asked participants how far they believed the council's decision reflected consultation with local people, adaptation to local people's views and adaptation to local people's general interests. Responses were recorded on a 1 to 10 scale. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) show that participants in the consultation condition perceived the council to have consulted with local people to a greater extent (mean=7.61) than those in the non-consultation condition (mean=2.86; $F=154.88$, $p<0.001$). Participants in the adaptation condition similarly were more likely to perceive the council taking local people's views into account (mean=6.41) than those in the non-adaptation condition (mean=3.92; $F=35.78$, $p<0.001$). Finally, participants in the expert advice condition thought the council took local people's general interests into account somewhat more (mean=6.10) than did participants in the non-expert advice condition (mean=5.09; $F=5.82$, $p=0.05$). Thus, the experimental manipulations appear to have been successful, albeit that the manipulation designed to reflect people's general interests generated only a modest effect.

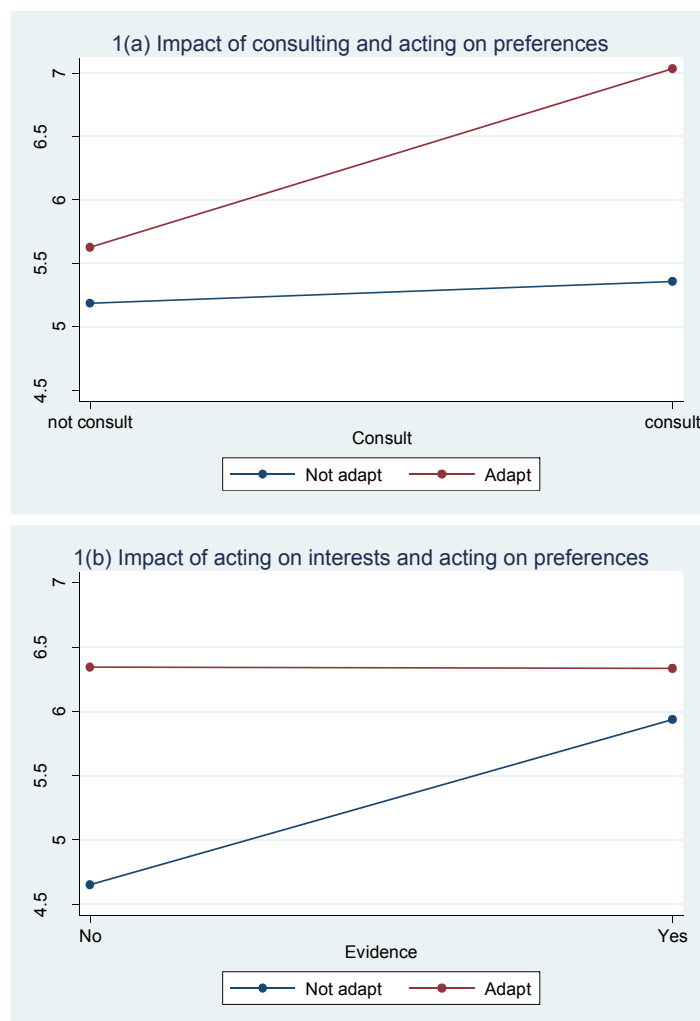
How far did the different forms of responsiveness involved in the decision-making process affect people's evaluations of the council? One-way ANOVAs show more positive evaluations ($F_{1,405} = 14.08$, $\eta^2=0.03$, $p<0.001$) when the council consulted with local people (mean=6.22) than when it did not (mean=5.41);). Evaluations are also more positive ($F_{1,405} = 25.35$, $\eta^2=0.06$, $p<0.001$) when the council adapted to public demands (mean=6.34) than when it did not (mean=5.27). Finally, when it comes to acting on people's general interests, we again find more positive evaluations ($F_{1,405} = 9.28$, $\eta^2=0.02$, $p<0.003$) when the council took into account people's interests (mean=6.15) than when it did not (mean=5.49). So each of the three forms of responsiveness appears to have an independent effect on evaluations of the council, with adapting to people's demands having the strongest – albeit not that substantial – effect.

⁵ These opinions were gathered prior to participants' exposure to the newspaper account. To ensure that the opinion question did not unduly prime participants to think in a particular way about mobile phone masts, we embedded the question among a set of other items tapping attitudes towards environmental risks.

⁶ The technical fault meant that the questions designed to measure the effects of the experimental manipulations did not appear on the original survey.

The different aspects of responsiveness have significant effects on people's evaluations of a decision-making authority not only uniquely, but also jointly. To explore these combined effects, we ran ANOVAs with interaction terms between our three responsiveness conditions. There were no significant effects on evaluations for the interaction between consultation and taking into account people's interests, nor in three-way form between each of the responsiveness conditions. But significant effects are apparent in the interactions between acting on preferences and consulting ($F=8.97$, $p<0.003$), and between acting on preferences and taking into account interests ($F=9.74$, $p<0.002$). These effects are shown graphically in Figure 1. In Figure 1(a), we see the substantial increase in evaluations of the council if decisions involve consultations with citizens and also reflect their preferences; acting on preferences always boosts legitimacy more than merely consulting, but the payoff of the two combined is particularly strong. The impact of council decisions that take into account people's general interests is somewhat different. As shown in Figure 1(b), in cases where council decisions reflect people's preferences, it matters little to evaluations if decisions also reflect their interests. But decisions that do not reflect people's preferences can have a significantly more positive impact if they are seen to reflect people's interests.

Figure 1: Combined effects of different aspects of decision responsiveness



Hence, to generalise from our results, public authorities that do not wish to, or cannot, take decisions that reflect their constituents' immediate wishes may nonetheless gain some credit, as long as they can demonstrate that those decisions relate to constituents' general interests. Alternatively, public authorities wishing to bolster their evaluations among citizens may take care both to consult with citizens and to adapt to their preferences. However, where authorities consult but do not adapt to preferences, there is little indication of a public backlash. The results from our study cast some doubt on the 'frustration effect'. Recall that this concept describes the negative feelings induced when opportunities for voice do not result in preferences being acted on, an arrangement that depresses feelings beyond those experienced when no opportunities for voice are offered. Yet as can be seen in Figure 1(a), decisions that involve consulting with citizens but not acting on their preferences lead to no more negative evaluations (mean=5.36) than decisions that involve no such consultations (mean=5.19).

In sum, no single aspect of responsiveness seems to deliver particularly positive evaluations of policy decisions. Those decisions gain in legitimacy if they are subject to both citizen 'voice' and 'control'. Yet even where decisions do not reflect these propitious conditions, public authorities can still gain credit if they can show that decisions are at least taken with citizens' general interests in mind. Moreover, authorities which consult with citizens but then fail to act on their wishes may not be penalised quite as much as suggested by some previous studies.

We now turn to consider the effects of substantive preferences on evaluations of public decisions. As previously noted, the issue used in our decision-making scenario (the siting of a mobile phone mast) was selected because it was likely to engage people's preferences, without being so sensitive or salient an issue that those preferences washed out any procedural qualities of the decision. In fact, opinion among our sample was strongly supportive of mobile phone masts: 84 per cent supported mobile phone technology against just 16 per cent who opposed it.⁷ This skew is not detrimental to our experiment, since random allocation to treatment groups provided us with roughly equal proportions where the council's decision (to approve or reject the mobile phone mast) either matched or did not match participants' own preferences. We explore whether these preferences moderate the impact of responsiveness on evaluations of the local council. If voice is valued by citizens for instrumental reasons, then we should find that taking preferences into account substantially reduces the effects of responsiveness on evaluations of political authority.

In Table 1, we show mean evaluations of the local council by decision responsiveness and congruence with participants' own preferences. The results largely confirm the moderating role of the substance of a policy decision on the impact of its procedural qualities. When the council takes a decision that accords with individual preferences, the degree of responsiveness matters little. When the council's decision does not accord with individual preferences, evaluations are more strongly shaped by responsiveness. Take the figures for consultation as an example. Where a decision matches individual preferences, the effect of consulting with the public over not consulting raises evaluations by a measly amount (mean

⁷ Since we embedded this question within a battery of measures on attitudes towards various risk technologies, we asked about mobile phones in general, not the siting of base stations in particular.

Table 1: Evaluations of local council by responsiveness and decision congruence

		Congruent			
		No		Yes	
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>
Consultation	No	5.32	(101)	5.50	(107)
	Yes	6.68	(106)	5.72	(99)
Adaptation	No	3.89	(32)	5.54	(167)
	Yes	6.41	(175)	5.97	(33)
Interests	No	5.95	(101)	5.03	(103)
	Yes	6.08	(106)	6.22	(97)

Figures show mean orientation towards local council (1=negative orientation, 10=positive orientation).

evaluations of the council increase from 5.50 to 5.72). Yet where a decision does not match individual preferences, the payoff of consulting is significantly greater (mean evaluations increase from 5.32 to 6.68). This finding also holds in the case of adapting or not adapting to citizens' opinions, although it does not hold in the case of acting or not acting on people's interests. Here, the increase in evaluations due to procedural responsiveness is actually greater where decisions are congruent than where they are not.

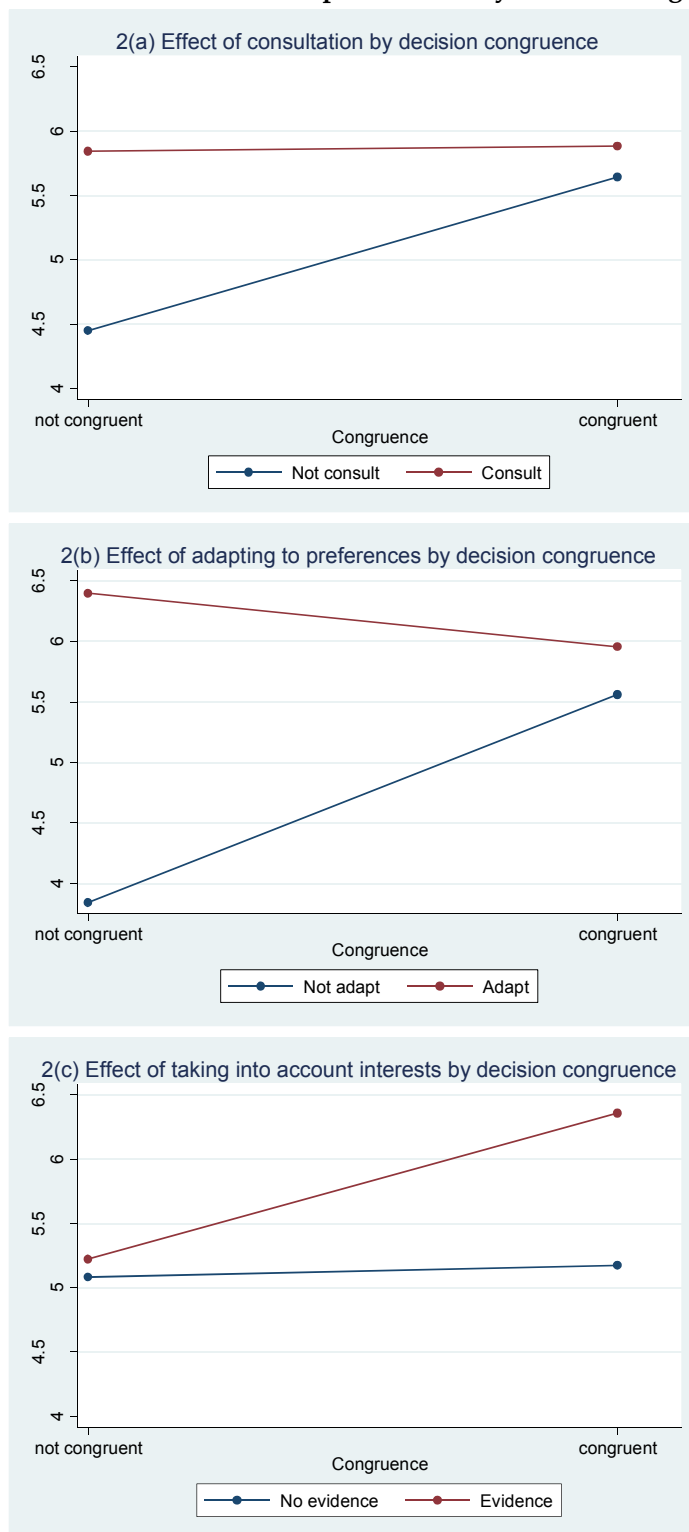
We can see these effects more clearly when we interact the responsiveness and congruence variables. Two-way ANOVAs show that the impact of each of the responsiveness conditions on council evaluations varies with the degree to which decisions are congruent with personal preferences (see Figure 2).⁸ Where decisions are congruent with the preferences of our study participants, the degree to which the council consults (2a) or adapts to people's wishes (2b) matters little. Where decisions are not congruent, however, the impact of responsiveness is far stronger. Yet this pattern does not hold in relation to acting on people's interests (2c), where the degree of responsiveness appears to matter more, not less, when decisions are congruent. In general, though, our results reaffirm previous studies which have shown that 'winning' or 'losing' from a decision significantly alters the impact of procedural fairness on evaluations of a decision-maker.

4. Conclusion

Elected public officials face a dilemma of responsiveness. In many cases, and for good reasons as well as ill, officials wish to leave themselves the maximum latitude with which to take decisions, unencumbered by citizens' demands. Yet those officials must at least be seen to identify those demands, by consulting with citizens. Consulting with citizens, however, raises the prospect that officials will, or at least should, respect popular views by making decisions that reflect the desired outcomes. In certain situations, however, it may be possible for officials to ignore popular views if they can show that their decisions reflect citizens'

⁸ We tested for three-way (congruence x two responsiveness conditions) and four-way (congruence x three responsiveness conditions) interactions, but found none to be significant.

Figure 2: Effects of decision responsiveness by decision congruence



wider interests. In short, faced with increasingly demanding and assertive populations, political authorities in contemporary advanced democracies have to confront dilemmas of how to respond to citizens' demands. This article has explored how these authorities might fare in adopting different forms of responsive decision-making.

We find that people evaluate authorities more favourably when they take the trouble to consult with citizens. Evaluations are even more positive if people perceive authorities to take decisions that reflect (majority) popular preferences. Unsurprisingly, citizens look most favourably on decision-makers that both identify what the public wishes and then deliver on these preferences. However, decision-makers need not slavishly follow popular demands. For a start, where decisions diverge from public opinion, authorities can retain a level of popular legitimacy if they can show that choices were made with citizens' wider interests in mind. There is at least the potential here – particularly perhaps in relation to complex issues or issues involving competing or incommensurate goods – for decisions to move beyond public demands, as long as citizens can be shown that public officials have their interests, if not necessarily their immediate preferences, at heart. At a time when many complex and sensitive policy issues are being delegated by elected politicians to unelected officials – precisely to weaken vote-seeking incentives, and thus raising the potential for decisions that deviate from popular wishes (see footnote 1) – this finding suggests that the legitimacy that comes from responsiveness need not necessarily disappear.

Yet we should add some cautionary notes to these findings. It is conceptually difficult to distinguish between a person's 'interests' and their 'preferences'. Empirical differentiation is even more fraught. Even though our experiments were designed carefully, our description of a decision-making process informed by experts may not have succeeded very well in capturing the notion of citizens' interests. The limited effect of this experimental manipulation on participants' perceptions of how well citizens' interests were followed suggests potential shortcomings in our experimental design. Citizens may well reward public officials for acting in their general interests – over and above their immediate preferences – but until alternative, and perhaps better, treatments are designed to tap this aspect of responsiveness, we are reluctant to place too much weight on this result.

A second reason why our findings suggest political authorities may not need to pander to public demands arises from the lack of a 'frustration effect' we uncovered. Where an authority delivers what a majority of the public wishes, it is rewarded. This reward disappears if the authority consults with citizens, but does not deliver. But at least in such circumstances the authority does not appear to be penalised beyond the level attained if there is no consultation at all. It is worth pondering why we uncover no apparent frustration effect, when many previous studies have done so. Perhaps frustration arises more readily in situations where participants have a direct personal interest in the outcome of a decision. In the study conducted by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), for example, the decision-making scenario consisted of an allocation game, in which participants were informed they would keep a monetary sum selected by an allocator. This study showed that participant reactions to the allocator's decision were heavily dependent on whether the allocator had taken any notice of participant wishes. Yet it may be that 'voice without influence' is particularly damaging to people's evaluations in situations where they stand to make a personal gain from a decision, or where a decision is particularly important to them. Where the payoff from that decision generalises across a population, it may be that unfulfilled voice is less damaging to evaluations of an authority. However, other studies (eg. Ulbig, 2008) that have examined just such generalised decision arrangements have detected frustration effects where citizens penalise authorities who consult with them but then fail to act on their preferences. Moreover, the results presented here suggest that, where decisions are

congruent with individual preferences, the impact of procedural considerations on evaluations weakens (Figures 2a and 2b). This suggests that instrumental considerations – where people look to a decision-making process to deliver a particular set of outcomes – are at work in determining how people evaluate public agencies. Yet these instrumental considerations do not, in this study at least, appear to create frustration in cases where people are consulted yet go unheeded.

The results presented here are, to be sure, suggestive and not definitive. They are based on a single experiment, not multiple experiments. The sample, although wider than the student population on which similar experiments are often based, can hardly be described as representative. Yet before we worry too much about the samples on which our treatments are examined, there are a more important, and wider, set of issues to consider. The relationship between the responsiveness of a public agency and its legitimacy is highly likely to depend on the type of agency being reviewed. In this study, we deliberately studied the role of a local agency, since we anticipated that citizens would be more likely to demand responsiveness from a local agency than from a national one. But if major or ‘salient’ issues of public policy are more likely to be decided at the national level than at the local one, maybe this assumption is misplaced and citizens will be more likely to seek responsiveness from national agencies than from local ones.

Aside from testing the tier or level of decision-making agency, further research could also be devoted to considering the nature of the policy issue being dealt with. Where issues are deemed by citizens to be straightforward to appraise (issues that are either ‘easy’ [Carmines and Stimson, 1980] or ‘appropriate’ [Van den Bos and Spruijt, 2002]), demands for responsiveness may be high and legitimacy heavily shaped by the procedural qualities of a decision. Yet evaluations of decisions on more complex issues may be marked by weaker procedural criteria. In addition, where issues are highly salient – and in particular where they comprise a moral dimension – citizens may care far more about the outcome of decisions than about their process. Hence, on issues such as abortion, procedural fairness may be less consequential for legitimacy appraisals than on less emotive, and more technical, issues such as budgetary decisions (Skitka, 2002; Gangl, 2003; Bauman and Skitka, 2009; although see Besley, 2012). The impact of responsiveness on legitimacy is thus likely to be heavily contingent on the particular policy issue being discussed. Further research on whether the findings reported here also apply across different types of policy issue would greatly enhance the external validity of our claims.

Appendix: Details of experimental treatments

Experimental participants were given the following fictitious newspaper report to read and respond to. The basic information provided to all participants was as follows:

After months of debate, the local council reached a decision on Monday night on the construction of a new mobile phone mast in the locality. The issue had proved controversial among local people. Many people supported the new mast on the grounds it would improve the quality of telephone reception. But many others opposed the mast since they feared it would emit radiation and pose a risk to people's health. The council had debated whether to consult local people about the mast; some councillors felt local people should have a say, while others felt councillors themselves were best placed to make the decision.

The text was then manipulated in accordance with the different features of the decision-making process being explored.

(a) Consulting with citizens v not consulting

Consultation: In the end, the council decided to consult local people, and convened a series of open meetings across the locality to find out what residents felt. The meetings were well attended, and votes held at the end of each showed a clear majority of local people opposed to the mast.

No consultation: In the end, the council decided not to consult local people. A phone-in programme on the local radio station showed that most local people opposed the mast.

(b) Adapting to citizen demands v not adapting

Adaptation: At its meeting last night, the council decided to reject construction of the new mobile phone mast.

No adaptation: At its meeting last night, the council decided to approve construction of the new mobile phone mast.

(c) Acting on interests v not acting

Interests: In order that its decision reflected local people's interests, the council took advice from technology experts. Most of these experts advised that the health risks of the mast were small and outweighed by the mast's benefits.

Not interests: no information provided.

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