

POLITICIANS' SOCIAL WELFARE CRITERIA: AN EXPERIMENT WITH GERMAN LEGISLATORS*

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Much economic analysis derives policy recommendations based on social welfare criteria intended to model policymakers' preferences. Yet, little is known about policymakers' normative views suitable for this use. Our behavioural experiment elicits German legislators' welfare criteria. When resolving preference conflicts *across* individuals, they place substantially more importance on least-favoured alternatives than on most-favoured alternatives, contrasting with common aggregation mechanisms and the equal weighting inherent in utilitarianism. When resolving preference conflicts *within* individuals, politicians choose inconsistently with behavioural economists' most common approach to welfare analysis with time-inconsistent preferences. In distribution, politicians largely support the same welfare criteria as the public.

JEL codes: C9, D6

Much economic analysis derives policy recommendations based on assumed social welfare criteria that are typically left to policymakers to judge. Yet, little is known about what criteria policymakers actually support (Gul and Pesendorfer, 2007). Empirical evidence that infers policymakers' preferences from actual policies, from policymakers' voting behaviour, from party election proposals, or from survey responses (Butler and Nickerson, 2011; Heinemann and Janeba, 2011; Jacobs *et al.*, 2017; Heathcote *et al.*, 2020) is arguably confounded by political economy considerations, strategic motives and social signalling concerns. Nonetheless, politicians' personal inclinations can substantially affect their policymaking in democracies

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(Washington, 2008; Besley *et al.*, 2011; Lee *et al.*, 2021; Amsalem and Sheffer, 2023).¹ To study the social welfare criteria German federal and state legislators support while minimising political economy constraints, we conduct an anonymised behavioural experiment with real consequences. Critically, our work does *not* seek to improve predictions of politicians' real-world behaviour, which may be shaped by political economy and signalling constraints. Rather, we seek to identify the social welfare criteria politicians *genuinely* consider normatively appealing. The aim is to reduce the potential mismatch between the social welfare criteria on which economists' policy recommendations typically rely and those that policy-makers endorse.

When economists derive optimal policy recommendations, they must often take a stance not only on how to resolve preference conflicts *across* individuals (social aggregation), but also on how to adjudicate conflicts between mutually inconsistent preferences *within* the same individual—especially when time-inconsistent preferences affect optimal sin taxes (Gruber and Köszegi, 2001; O'Donoghue and Rabin, 2006; Allcott *et al.*, 2019), optimal social security systems (Bisin *et al.*, 2015), the regulation of payday loans (Allcott *et al.*, 2022), optimal energy policy (Allcott and Taubinsky, 2015), or similar policies that are reviewed in Bernheim and Taubinsky (2018). The criteria that economists typically assume might deviate from those that politicians support in both of these domains. We therefore measure how politicians resolve preference conflicts both across and within individuals.

To resolve preference conflicts across individuals, economists often assign equal weight to those who most prefer the chosen policy and to those who least prefer it. This is the case, for instance, when policy recommendations derive from the maximisation of a utilitarian social welfare function, or when policies are ranked according to the Kaldor–Hicks criterion (Hausman *et al.*, 2016). Our experiment lets us characterise how politicians impartially aggregate both when only ordinal information is available (as in the framework of Arrow, 1950), and when cardinal preferences play a role (as in utilitarian aggregation). We design the experiment in a way that lets us infer ordinal aggregation preferences because cardinal information is often difficult to obtain, either because no meaningful cardinal measures may exist (for instance, in the case of setting priorities) or because it may not be feasible to measure them. We focus on the relative weights that politicians implicitly assign to citizens as a function of the preference rank of the alternative they obtain, or of the cardinal utility associated with that alternative.

In the domain of preference conflicts within individuals, the case of time inconsistency has received particular attention (see Ericson and Laibson, 2019, for a review). To derive policy recommendations, economists commonly take the stance, known as the *long-run criterion*, that choices involving immediate rewards are mistaken (due to the lure of immediacy), but choices only involving future rewards reveal 'true' preferences (e.g., O'Donoghue and Rabin, 1999; 2006; Gruber and Köszegi, 2001; 2004; DellaVigna and Malmendier, 2004; Allcott *et al.*, 2019). We test whether politicians' preferences are consistent with the long-run criterion. In this context, we also study how politicians resolve the trade-off between respecting the autonomy of a voting-age German citizen and ensuring that they receive an outcome

¹ The first three papers show, respectively, that the number of daughters affects US congresspersons' voting on reproductive rights issues, that the personality traits Openness to Experience and Extraversion predict stated policy preferences of elected representatives in democracies, and that more highly educated leaders cause higher economic growth in democracies. Lee *et al.* (2021) shows that voters merely decide who is elected into office, but cannot change any given candidate's voting behaviour, due to the candidates' lack of commitment power.

that the politician regards as good. We regard this decision, too, as the resolution of a conflict of preferences within an individual—those that the citizen reveals in their choices, and those which, in the mind of the politician, they would have if they understood what is truly good for themselves.

To study how politicians resolve preference conflicts across individuals, we use the method developed in Ambuehl and Bernheim (2025). Each respondent learns that they are matched, with some chance, to a group of five German voting-age citizens. Each of them has ranked three given political foundations in the order in which they would like them to receive a donation of €30 that cannot be split. The respondent observes this preference profile, along with five other profiles. To ensure that respondents reveal their aggregation preferences rather than their own political leanings, we anonymise the foundations. For each profile, the respondent decides which of the anonymised foundations will receive the donation. The respondent knows that one of these preference profiles is real and that their decision on that profile will be carried out. Because we do not reveal the identity of the real profile, the respondent has an incentive to make a serious choice on each profile (as long as they are not completely indifferent to the group of citizens). We then elicit the respondents' beliefs about citizens' willingness to pay to trigger or prevent the donation to whichever foundation they ranked first, second and last. These cardinal beliefs let us compare respondents' aggregation decisions to a utilitarian benchmark.

To study how politicians resolve preference conflicts within individuals, we rely on the method used in Ambuehl *et al.* (2021). Respondents make choices concerning the conflict between respecting other individuals' autonomy and ensuring that they receive outcomes considered good. Each respondent is matched, randomly, with a German voting-age citizen who can choose how to receive payment for their study participation. Each choice option consists of two payments, one disbursed six months before the other. Impatience is costly: larger, earlier payments are associated with smaller total payments. The respondent's task is to construct the choice set from which the citizen will choose. Our interest centres on the number and type of options which the respondent includes in that set. To identify implicit support for the long-run criterion, the respondent constructs one choice set from options that involve immediate payments, and another one from options in which even the early payment occurs one month after the study.

We invited all 2,588 members of German state and federal parliaments to participate in our study, and obtained 423 responses (16.3%) from across the political spectrum. We weight all responses in our analysis by age, education and political affiliation to address any remaining selection issues. Because the ultimate sovereign of a democracy is its citizenry, we conduct parallel experiments with a general population sample of well over a thousand members of the German voting-age general public. The comparison between this sample and politicians allows us to check the alignment of lawmakers' social welfare criteria with those of the general public.

We obtain three main findings. First, when politicians resolve preference conflicts across individuals, they deviate from economists' typical practice of weighing them equally. Instead, the average politician promotes compromise by placing substantially more weight on minimising the number of individuals who receive their least favoured of the three alternatives than on maximising the number of citizens who obtain their most-favoured alternative. This behaviour also contrasts with aggregation mechanisms commonly used in practice,

such as the plurality vote, that place disproportionate emphasis on first-ranked alternatives and thus implement majoritarian choices. The weight on the least-preferred alternatives varies with a politician's party's position. It is weakest for representatives of the far left party and is especially pronounced for centre parties. In this sense, more centrist politicians focus on the losers of collective decision-making to a greater extent. When we use politicians' beliefs about citizens' willingness to pay (WTP) to trigger a donation to their most, second-most and least-preferred foundations, we find that utilitarian aggregation based on these beliefs would produce far more majoritarian choices than we actually observe. Politicians' choices are better rationalised by a welfare function that applies a concave transformation to WTP beliefs, consistent with a motive to reduce inequality in utility.

Second, when politicians resolve potentially conflicting preferences within individuals, they deviate from the long-run criterion commonly used in economics in two ways. First, the choice sets they construct are largely independent of the availability of immediate rewards, in contrast to what one would expect if the lure of immediacy were of particular concern. Second, even when all rewards are delayed, more than half of all politicians remove impatient alternatives. This behaviour conflicts with the long-run criterion's prescription to defer to the agent's preferences when no immediate rewards are available. Briefly, politicians seek to impose a minimum level of patience that is independent of whether immediate payments are available. Moreover, representatives of parties further to the political right intervene more often in otherwise autonomous choices.

Third, the social welfare criteria of elected politicians broadly align with those of the general public, though there are subtle differences. While politicians and the general public both prefer compromise solutions over majoritarian solutions, that preference is slightly more pronounced among politicians. In the domain of interpersonal preference conflicts, the general public shows as little support for the long-run criterion as politicians, though its members intervene slightly more often to prevent impatient (and in some cases patient) choice. In spite of the similarities in the public's and politicians' welfare criteria, and in spite of monetary incentives for accuracy, the public's beliefs about others' choices are systematically biased. They underestimate both politicians' and the public's preference for compromise, and they substantially overestimate politicians' interventionism. The latter bias is so severe that subjects believe politicians intervene more often than the general public, even though the opposite is true.²

There are three advantages of obtaining these results through an experiment, aside from minimising political economy confounds. First, we can present our experimental decisions in a largely context-free way. Thus, we obtain plausibly context-independent results that generalise to the various policy domains in which economists use social welfare criteria to derive policy recommendations. Second, the stylised nature of our tasks makes it difficult to infer what choice would be socially desirable, which diminishes the types of experimenter demand effects that plague other research with elected representatives. Third, diverging assessments of real-world policies in other research might stem from both heterogeneous beliefs about likely consequences and from differences in value judgements. By contrast, our

² When asked whether to delegate decisions to either politicians or to other members of the general public, respondents display such a strong aversion to delegating to politicians that beliefs about the two subject pools' choices have no explanatory power.

paper mutes the belief channel and can thus unambiguously trace the reasons for subjects' choices to their value judgements.³

Our results provide guidance to research in economics that derives policy advice based on social welfare criteria. It is important to align the welfare criteria that underlie such research with those that policymakers support. Policy recommendations based on value judgements that decision-makers reject are less likely to be followed (Sapienza and Zingales, 2013).

Our results also inform the literature on *positive welfare economics*, which empirically studies how individuals resolve normative questions (Konow, 2003; Almas *et al.*, 2020; Andreoni *et al.*, 2020; Ackfeld and Ockenfels, 2021; Bartling *et al.*, 2021; Cappelen *et al.*, 2022; Chen and Schøyen, 2022). That literature largely relies on laboratory and general population samples.⁴ Our finding that politicians' welfare criteria generally mirror the public's—despite some specific differences—suggests that the broad conclusions of positive welfare economics in other domains can be expected to apply to politicians as well.

Finally, this paper contributes to an evolving literature that studies the preferences, traits and biases of elected representatives (Fatas *et al.*, 2007; Heß *et al.*, 2013; Hanania, 2017; Linde and Vis, 2017; Sheffer *et al.*, 2018; Sheffer and Loewen, 2019; Janezic and Gallego, 2020).

Despite a recent rise in survey and experimental work with political elites, behavioural experiments with real-world policymakers remain scarce (Kertzer and Renshon, 2022). Extant research has not measured the social welfare criteria of politicians. Our finding that the social welfare criteria of politicians and that of the general public broadly align, but that the general public believes in substantial differences, resonates with a recent meta-analysis that finds that elite-public gaps in decision-making are often smaller than commonly believed (Kertzer, 2022). By studying the general preference of politicians to compromise and intervene (largely abstracting from re-election context), our paper thus also speaks to a larger body of political economy papers that study issues of voter representation by political elites as well as political selection and behaviour in office.⁵

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 1 presents our experimental design. Section 2 provides institutional context and explains our samples and weighting strategies. Section 3 contains our main results about politicians' social welfare criteria. Section 4 compares them to the welfare criteria of the general public. Section 5 analyses respondents' beliefs about the decisions that politicians and other general population respondents have made. Finally, Section 6 concludes.

³ This point is of particular concern when comparing politicians' inferred value judgements to those of the general public, given that politicians are often demonstrably better informed than citizens (Lee *et al.*, 2021).

⁴ As an exception, Fisman, Jakiela *et al.* (2015) consider the distributional preferences of a likely future elite. A complementary literature shows that general population subjects' decisions in laboratory-type tasks predict real-world political choices (e.g., Fisman *et al.*, 2017; Epper *et al.*, 2020).

⁵ Other papers, for instance, study whether politicians know the preferences of their electorate (Broockman and Skovron, 2018), discard voter opinion selectively or discriminate against voters (e.g., Butler and Broockman, 2011; Butler and Dynes, 2016), represent their voters' interests (e.g., Bailer *et al.*, 2022), violate rational choice theory (Fatas *et al.*, 2007) or are factually more knowledgeable (Lee, 2022). A recent meta-study of Kertzer (2022) shows that differences in political attitudes between politicians and the broader public may actually be overstated and that these differences may be rather due to demographic differences rather than genuine differences between these groups. A more distantly related literature, reviewed in Gulzar (2021), studies selection into political office depending on factors such as competence and socio-economic background (e.g., Dal Bó *et al.*, 2017; Jokela *et al.*, 2022), earning levels in politics (e.g., Fisman, Harmon *et al.*, 2015), institutional incentives (e.g., Galasso and Nannicini, 2017), outside options and intrinsic motivation (Besley, 2005) as well as social motivators (e.g., Gulzar and Khan, 2017).

(a) Preference Aggregation (to resolve conflicting preferences *across* individuals)

	Best	Middle	Worst	Choice	Equally good
Foundation A	●●	●	●●	☐	☐
Foundation B	●	●●●●		☐	☐
Foundation C	●●		●●●	☐	☐

(b) Choice set construction (to resolve conflicting preferences *within* individuals)

Options	Available	Unavailable		Advise against this option
	Please make ONE cross each row			
€0 immediately and €24 in 6 months	☐	or	☐	☐
€3 immediately and €15 in 6 months	☐	or	☐	☐
€6 immediately and €3 in 6 months	☐	or	☐	☐

Fig. 1. Main Decisions.

1. Design

Our main experiment has two parts. They allow us to answer, respectively, how politicians aggregate preferences (conflicting preferences *across* individuals), and how politicians resolve the trade-off between respecting individual liberty and ensuring that individuals obtain outcomes the politician regards as desirable (conflicting preferences *within* individuals, i.e., paternalism). A fraction of the general population respondents complete two additional parts. We explain each part in turn.

1.1. Conflicting Preferences Across Individuals

In this part of the experiment, the politician’s task is to aggregate the preferences of five voting-age German citizens that we call stakeholders.

Stakeholders have preferences over three social alternatives, *A*, *B* and *C*. The politician observes the preference profile of the five stakeholders over the three alternatives as in Figure 1(a) and then chooses one of the social alternatives to be carried out. Ambuehl and Bernheim (2025) show that ordinal preference aggregation is largely robust to the specific graphical presentation of preference profiles. Politicians make one such decision for each of six preference profiles. The politician knows that with a 10% chance, one of these profiles represents the preferences of a real group of five stakeholders and that their decision on that profile will be carried out, but they do not know which profile that is. Consequently, as long as they are not entirely indifferent towards all stakeholders, they have an incentive to reveal their aggregation preferences truthfully for every preference profile which they encounter.

We inform politicians that each social alternative is a non-divisible donation of €30 to one of three political foundations (Hans Böckler Stiftung, Bund der Steuerzahler Deutschland and Ludwig Erhard Stiftung).⁶ To ensure that politicians reveal their aggregation preferences rather than their political leanings, we anonymise the foundations, representing them with individually randomised letter labels *A*, *B* and *C*.

In a preliminary online survey, stakeholders ranked the three foundations according to their preference. We incentivised stakeholders to answer truthfully. They knew that with a one in forty chance, the ranking they provided would determine the recipient of the €30 (the first- and second-ranked foundations would receive it with a two-thirds and one-third chance, respectively). Stakeholders did not learn how the recipient of the €30 would be determined otherwise. Hence, they could not strategically misrepresent their preferences. We enrol stakeholders solely to incentivise politicians who make aggregation choices.

After making these aggregation decisions, politicians indicate their beliefs about stakeholders' willingness to pay to trigger the donation to their first, second and least-preferred foundation. We ask politicians to enter a negative amount if they believe stakeholders would pay to prevent rather than trigger the donation.

1.1.1. Identification

Following Ambuehl and Bernheim (2025), we use a revealed preference approach to infer how politicians aggregate ordinal preferences. Specifically, we ask what theoretical ordinal preference aggregation function best matches the sequence of choices that a politician makes across the six preference profiles. The literature emphasises two classes of such aggregation functions, *scoring rules* and *Condorcet extensions* (e.g., Gaertner, 2009).

Scoring rules assign values 1, *s* and 0 to each stakeholder's most, middle and least-preferred alternatives, respectively. They then select the alternative for which the sum of scores across the stakeholders is highest. The case $s = 1/2$ is the Borda rule, and the case $s = 0$ is the plurality rule (one person, one vote, and the alternative with the largest number of votes wins). Scoring rules encompass a judgement on how important it is that many stakeholders get their most-preferred rather than the second-most-preferred option, relative to how many get their least-preferred rather than their second-least-preferred option. The Borda rule weighs both considerations equally. The plurality rule only places weight on the first consideration, and hence is *majoritarian*. Its polar opposite, the anti-plurality rule ($s = 1$), only places weight on the second consideration.⁷ We interpret the parameter *s* as a preference for compromise—the higher the *s*, the more willing a politician is to prevent a stakeholder from obtaining their least-preferred alternative by selecting an alternative for which most other stakeholders only have a middling preference.⁸

⁶ On their websites, the foundations describe themselves as follows. The Hans Böckler foundation deals with co-determination, research linked to the world of work, and the support of students on behalf of the confederation of German trade unions. The Bund der Steuerzahler Deutschland is devoted to combat wasteful spending of taxpayer money and tax revenues, and advocates the rights of taxpayers. The Ludwig Erhard foundation aims to promote the principles of liberty in politics and economy, to foster freedom and responsibility, and to strengthen the development of the social-market economy.

⁷ The anti-plurality rule can be implemented through negative voting: each stakeholder receives one vote that they can use against their least-preferred alternative. The alternative with the fewest votes against it wins.

⁸ All else equal, scoring rules with $s > \frac{1}{2}$ favours an option ranked *n*-th by two people over an alternative ranked $(n - 1)$ -th by one and $(n + 1)$ -th by another. Scoring rules with $s < \frac{1}{2}$ do the opposite because they place more weight on gains from high ranks. All else equal, they favour an option ranked $(n - 1)$ -th by one person and $(n + 1)$ -th by another over an alternative ranked *n*-th by both.

Table 1. *Preference Profiles.*

Index	Preference profile					Scoring rules				Condorcet
						$\bar{s}$	$0 \leq s < \bar{s}$	$s = \bar{s}$	$\bar{s} < s \leq 1$	
1	B	C	C	A	A	1/3	A^a	{A,B}	B	B
	A	B	B	B	B					
	C	A	A	C	C					
2	B	B	A	A	A	1/3	A	{A,B}	B	A
	C	C	B	B	B					
	A	A	C	C	C					
3	A	A	A	B	B	1/2	A	{A,B}	B	A
	C	B	B	C	C					
	B	C	C	A	A					
4	C	C	A	A	A	3/5	A	{A,B}	B	A
	B	B	B	B	B					
	A	A	C	C	C					
5	C	A	A	A	B	2/3	A	{A,B}	B	A
	B	B	B	B	A					
	A	C	C	C	C					
6	C	A	A	A	A	4/5	A	{A,B}	B	A
	B	B	B	B	B					
	A	C	C	C	C					

^a If $s = 0$, then the set of selected options is {A, C}.
Notes: Each profile is displayed as a 3×5 matrix. Columns correspond to stakeholders, rows correspond to preference ranks. A stakeholder's first, second and third-ranked alternatives are listed in the first, second and third rows, respectively.

Rules in the class of *Condorcet extensions* select the social alternative that wins a pairwise majority vote against every other alternative (the *Condorcet winner*) if such an alternative exists. They differ according to the selections they make when no Condorcet winner exists.

We select our six preference profiles so we can identify the scoring parameter s for individuals whose choices are consistent with a scoring rule. In conjunction with the others, one profile helps separate the use of the Condorcet rule from scoring rules. While this set of rules is only a subset of those considered in the theoretical literature on ordinal preference aggregation, these are the only rules that receive non-trivial empirical support in the comprehensive classification of Ambuehl and Bernheim (2025).

Table 1 lists the preference profiles we use. Each profile is associated with a value $\bar{s}$ such that scoring rules with $s \leq \bar{s}$ select alternative A (the *majority winner*) and scoring rules with $s \geq \bar{s}$ select alternative B (the *compromise option*). Scoring rules never strictly prefer alternative C in any of the profiles, though C ties for majority with A in profile 1 and will be selected along with A if $s = 0$. In order to ensure that one of the six profiles corresponds to the real stakeholder preferences, we form groups of five stakeholders each such that each group matches one of the six preselected profiles. [Online Appendix B](#) presents details.

1.2. *Conflicting Preferences Within Individuals*

In this part of the experiment, politicians learn that they may be paired with a German voting-age citizen who will participate in a follow-up study and who will choose how to receive their study payment from a choice set. We refer to that citizen as *Chooser*. The politician's task is to construct the choice set that will be available to the citizen from a menu,

Table 2. *Menus from Which Respondents Construct Choice Sets.*

	Menu 1A		Menu 1B	
	Early	Late	Early	Late
Most patient	€0	€16	€0	€24
Middle	€2	€10	€3	€15
Least patient	€4	€2	€6	€3
	Menu 2A		Menu 2B	
	Early	Late	Early	Late
Most patient	€0	€18	€0	€24
Middle	€3	€12	€4	€16
Least patient	€6	€3	€8	€4

using a decision screen as in Figure 1(b). The sole restriction is that at least one alternative must be available. Each option in that menu is a pair of payments, one received half a year before the other. In each menu, impatience is costly: the citizen can only increase their early payment by reducing their overall payment. In a follow-up session, the citizen selects one of the options the politician made available, without learning how the choice set was determined.

To measure implicit support for the long-run criterion, politicians construct choice sets from two different menus. In one of them, the citizen receives the early payment immediately, and the late payment with a half-year delay. In the other, the early payment is paid one month after the citizen's participation, and the late payment is paid seven months after. In addition to this variation in the availability of immediate payments, we vary the menus within individuals to prevent artificially consistent choices. Table 2 displays the menus from which politicians construct choice sets. Politicians are assigned to construct choice sets either from menus 1A and 1B or from menus 2A and 2B. The menus in a pair are rescalings of each other. The amounts in 1A are two-thirds of the amounts in 1B, and the amounts in menu 2A are three-quarters of the amounts in menu 1B.

After constructing choice sets, politicians report their beliefs about the choices previous citizens made from each of two unrestricted choice sets. For each of the three options in each of two menus, they predict how many out of ten randomly chosen people chose that option. These beliefs allow us to measure the probability with which politicians believe they impose binding restrictions by excluding options from choice sets.

1.3. *Delegation*

Respondents from the general public make the same decisions as politicians. Some of them additionally decide to which of three groups of individuals to delegate their preference aggregation and choice set construction decisions, after making these choices themselves. They make two such delegation decisions, either in the context of aggregation decisions or in the context of choice set construction, depending on the survey version. Respondents can delegate the decision to either of three groups: (i) federal and state legislators, (ii) the general public or (iii) a sample of the general public selected to match the demographic characteristics of federal and state legislators.⁹ We inform respondents that the members of these groups

⁹ In case of group (iii), we inform respondents about the average demographic characteristics (gender, age, university education and marital status) of the general population subjects to whom a delegation is possible.

have previously participated in the same survey and that they have already made their decisions. Respondents further learn that we have randomly chosen one member of each group and that the decision of this selected member is implemented if the respondent decides to delegate to the corresponding group.

1.4. *Beliefs About Other Participants' Aggregation and Intervention Decisions*

From a part of the general population respondents, we elicit beliefs about how politicians, other members of the general public and a sample of the general public that matches the politicians' demographic characteristics decided when aggregating preferences. They indicate, for each respondent group, how many out of ten respondents from that group chose option *A*, *B* and *C* when aggregating the preferences in profile 2 of Table 1. We elicit the same beliefs corresponding to the preference in profile 5.

Other respondents from the general public report beliefs about what choice sets each of the three respondent groups constructed. They indicate how many out of ten respondents decided for each of the following choice sets: $\{A\}$, $\{A, B\}$, $\{A, B, C\}$, and 'other'. They provide one set of such beliefs for each of the two menus from which they have previously constructed choice sets themselves.

1.5. *Additional Elicitations*

We complement politicians' responses with background information using publicly available data. Since such data is not available for general population respondents, we survey relevant background characteristics for the general public. Respondents from the general public report their gender, year of birth, German citizenship status, federal state of residence, highest educational attainment, marital status, monthly household income and own monthly net income. They further indicate which political party they most identify with, whether they are a member of a political party, the extent to which they are politically active and their own political attitude on a left/right scale.¹⁰

We asked another subset of respondents from the general public whether they believe politicians have a stronger or weaker preference for majoritarian over compromise solutions than the average German citizen, and whether they intervene more or less in others' choice sets. For each of these two domains, subjects rated their agreement with a statement that the difference between politicians and the general public arises as an effect of selection into political office and a statement that the difference arises due to experience in office.

1.6. *Implementation*

1.6.1. *Survey versions*

Our main analyses rest on four versions of the survey, summarised in Table 3.¹¹ The first two versions (*Politicians* and *Public 1*) include the preference aggregation and intervention

¹⁰ In addition, both politicians and respondents from the general public answer the three questions about risk, time and social preferences from Falk *et al.* (2018), and they indicate their support for additional compulsory retirement savings. In light of the recent study by Chapman *et al.* (2025) which demonstrates a lack of support for the use of experimentally-validated qualitative self-assessments as proxies for choice-based preference measures, we interpret these responses with caution and defer their analysis to Online Appendix Sections E.3 and E.4.

¹¹ See Online Appendix H for English translations of each survey version. The surveys were custom-coded by the ZEW (Leibniz Centre for European Economic Research).

Table 3. *Survey Versions.*

Version	Politicians	Public 1	Public 2	Public 3
Participants				
Politicians	✓			
General population		✓	✓	✓
Main decisions				
Preference aggregation	✓	✓	✓	
Choice set construction	✓	✓		✓
Beliefs about other participants				
Preference aggregation			✓	
Choice set construction				✓
Delegation				
Preference aggregation			✓	
Choice set construction				✓

Notes: Main decisions also include the elicitation of beliefs about stakeholders' willingness to pay to trigger or prevent the donation and about the choices unrestricted choosers would have made.

parts (Subsections 1.1 and 1.2) as well as the questions listed in Subsection 1.5. All politicians complete this version, as does a sample of the general public that matches the universe of federal and state legislators on observables (details below). These two versions differ only in that general population respondents answer additional demographic and attitudinal questions. We administer the remaining two versions to the general public. Version *Public 2* only contains decisions and questions regarding preference aggregation. Version *Public 3* only includes decisions and questions regarding interventions. Both of these versions include the delegation stage (Subsection 1.3) and the prediction stage (Subsection 1.4) for the corresponding domain (aggregation or intervention). They also include the questions of Subsection 1.5.

All politicians complete the preference aggregation part before the intervention part. In anticipation of attrition in the politician sample, we chose this fixed ordering to increase the chance of achieving sufficient statistical power for at least one of the two parts.

Within each part of each survey version, we randomise the order of decisions and the parameters displayed. We use block-randomisation to limit the number of non-identical surveys. This limit arises from the fact that politicians receive a paper version of the survey, sent through postal mail (along with a link through which they can participate online). Each respondent who makes aggregation decisions is randomly assigned to one of the following four orders in which the preference profiles are presented: (2, 3, 4, 5, 1, 6), (6, 1, 5, 4, 3, 2), (6, 2, 1, 3, 5, 4), (4, 5, 3, 1, 2, 6). Independently, the display of preference profiles randomises the table rows that correspond to the social alternatives into one of the following orders: (A, B, C), (C, B, A), (B, A, C), (C, A, B). Each respondent who constructs choice sets does so by selecting options either from menus 1A and 1B or from menus 2A and 2B. The respondent reveals beliefs about Choosers' unrestricted choices regarding the corresponding left-out menus. We include immediate payments in either menus 1A and 2A, or in menus 1B and 2B. Finally, a respondent either first sees the menus with immediate payouts, both in the decision and belief elicitation stage, or they first see the menus without immediate payouts in each of these stages.

Overall, there are thus sixteen variations of the preference aggregation part and eight versions of the intervention part. In order to limit the total number of survey variations to six-

teen, we deterministically pair each variation in the aggregation part with a variation in the intervention part. See [Online Appendix Table A.1](#) for details.

The versions for general population respondents include comprehension tests.¹² The comprehension test on aggregation decisions serves to ensure that respondents understand the display of the preference profile. They view a preference profile and indicate (i) how many stakeholders rank alternative A in the middle, and (ii) which alternative is preferred most by three people. The comprehension test on interventions serves to ensure that respondents understand the menu of options from which they construct choice sets. For a given menu in which the least patient option is marked as unavailable, subjects indicate (i) the maximal amount that the Chooser can obtain immediately from that choice set, and (ii) the amount of money the Chooser receives with a six-month delay if they choose to receive €3 immediately. The comprehension checks precede decision-making for each domain. Subjects who make decisions only in one domain (*Public 2* and *Public 3*) complete only one of these checks. Subjects have three attempts to answer correctly, otherwise the survey terminates. We provide an email address to which subjects can send questions if they feel they have understood the instructions but still cannot continue.

An additional version of the study with general population respondents, *Public 4*, replicates *Public 1* but includes additional elements to address questions that arose after completion of the main surveys, which we detail later.

1.6.2. Incentives

All politicians and general population respondents learn that a random 10% of them are paired with either a group of five real stakeholders or with a real voting-age German citizen choosing from a choice set that they construct, and that one decision from the study affecting these subjects will be selected at random and carried out. Because respondents do not know whether they are among these 10%, and because they do not know which decision will be carried out, they have an incentive to reveal their preferences truthfully, as long as they are not completely indifferent towards all other study participants (see [Online Appendix B](#) for the implementation of these decisions). While decisions affecting others have real consequences, they do not affect the respondent's own study payout.

All respondents indicate beliefs about stakeholders. We refrain from incentivising these elicitations for politicians because sending money to elected representatives would raise bribery concerns. To permit a clean comparison to the general public, we also refrain from incentivising the corresponding questions for these respondents. We do, however, incentivise the elicitation of beliefs about participants' aggregation and intervention decisions. In each of these prediction problems, the respondent assigns ten identical hypothetical individuals to three or four categories to predict the probability distribution across these categories. If the respondent's prediction matches the true distribution, they receive €5 in the form of our survey provider's panel currency. Otherwise, the respondent loses €0.50 for each of the hypothetical individuals we need to assign to a different category until the elicited and observed distributions coincide. We pay these incentives to a random 10% of respondents, for one randomly selected prediction problem. Respondents are aware of this scheme.

¹² We did not include such tests for politicians, both to keep the survey brief and to avoid the risk of appearing patronising.

2. Samples and Context

Our study enrolls German politicians and the German general public. Germany is a federation with sixteen constituent states that each have their own state parliament and legislature. The federation and all states are multiparty representative democracies. The federal level features a bicameral system. The 736 members of the federal parliament (*Bundestag*) represent the votes of the German population approximately proportionally. It is roughly comparable to the US House of Representatives. Our study does not target the second chamber called *Bundesrat*, which is roughly comparable to the US Senate.

Since 2017, the *Bundestag* has consisted of members of six major parties, along with a handful of organisations with a single representative each, as well as a small number of representatives without party affiliation.¹³ Each of the sixteen federal states has a single-chamber system with a parliament (*Landtag*) whose members are full-time politicians (except for the chambers of the small city states Bremen and Hamburg). The six major parties of the *Bundestag* are also the dominant parties in the state parliaments. The federal states have far-reaching political power and autonomy in many important policy fields. For example, they have full legislative autonomy in the fields of education, culture, police system, penal system, social housing and regulative law, and they independently govern taxes on the transfer of land and real estate. State parliaments have additional political power through their representation in the *Bundesrat*, which needs to approve many federal-level legislative proposals and which can veto any proposed changes to the federal constitution.¹⁴

2.1. Politician Sample

We fielded the politician survey between late May and mid-September 2021. We invited politicians through the ZEW Mannheim (Leibniz Centre for European Economic Research), which had conducted surveys with politicians for many years on a regular basis (e.g., Heinemann *et al.*, 2016). Politicians thus recognised and trusted the organisation and its surveys. We invited all 709 members of parliament (MPs) in the federal parliament (*Bundestag*) and all 1879 MPs in each of the 16 state parliaments, both by email and by postal mail, and asked politicians to respond personally. Politicians could answer the online survey on a mobile or desktop device. Alternatively, they could submit their responses to the printed version through postal mail, fax or email. The invitation letter and emails promised strict confidentiality, as did the survey itself.¹⁵ In order to increase response rates, we repeatedly contacted MPs both by email and by phone if they had neither participated nor explicitly declined to do so. We did not require politicians to answer every question, but the online interface displayed a message in case of skipped questions or invalid answers.

¹³ These six parties are the centre-right conservative union of Christian Democrats and their Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union, which we treat together as CDU/CSU, the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens (Grüne), the centre-right Liberals (FDP), the left-wing party Die Linke as well as the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).

¹⁴ A brief overview of the German political system is available, for example, at Expatrio (2023).

¹⁵ To address concerns that MPs outsourced the completion of the surveys to staffers, we categorised all the emails that politicians or their offices sent to us during the time we fielded the study. Emails containing suggestions or complaints about the survey always came from MPs directly. A handful of politicians informed us that they had just participated. Emails from staffers usually stated that the MP invited for participation did not have the capacity to complete the study. These interactions suggest that politicians largely completed the survey themselves.

Table 4. *Politician Responses.*

Party	Answers	Total	Share
AfD	56	336	16.67%
CDU/CSU	117	814	14.37%
FDP	47	196	23.98%
Gruene	67	346	19.36%
Linke	43	214	20.09%
Fraktionslos	11	62	17.74%
SPD	82	619	13.25%
Total	423	2,587	16.35%

Notes: A legislator is *fraktionslos* if they are not associated with a government party. [Online Appendix C.2](#) splits this table by parliament type.

We obtained responses from 423 legislators, of whom 342 are members of state parliaments and 81 are members of the federal parliament.¹⁶ These numbers correspond to a response rate of 16.3% across parliaments. Table 4 displays the party composition of our sample and compares it to the composition of the parliaments. We obtained good coverage across the political spectrum; for each of the six government parties, we have responses from at least forty-three representatives. Response rates vary from 13.25% to 23.98% across the political parties. The differences in response rates do not obviously relate to party position. Detailed non-response analysis shows that participation rates are higher among those over 60 years of age, those who were elected directly rather than through party lists, those who have completed tertiary education, those in state parliaments rather than the federal parliament, and those with fewer years of experience in the federal parliament or in a state parliament. [Online Appendix C.2](#) presents details.

2.2. General Population Surveys

The commercial provider Norstat fielded our surveys *Public* 1, 2 and 3 with the voting-age German general public between May and September 2021. This period coincides with our fielding of the politicians' survey. All respondents completed the survey online. For all survey versions, we defined quotas and tracked respondent characteristics during sample collection. In response, Norstat adjusted the targeting of invitation emails to meet the quotas. For survey *Public* 1, we recruited 609 individuals with demographic characteristics that match those of the universe of federal and state politicians as follows. We required a high net household income (€4,000 or more per month¹⁷) and a tertiary degree. We further matched the sample to politicians on age, gender, political attitude (left or right, self-stated in the case of the general public), and all interactions between these variables. For surveys *Public* 2 and *Public* 3, we recruited 810 and 708 respondents, respectively. We sought representativeness to the German general population along the attributes age, gender, political attitudes (left or right), all interactions of the foregoing three attributes, state of residence, education level and net household income. For each survey version, we ensured that each federal state is represented

¹⁶ Response modes are the following: 56 postal mail, 354 online on a desktop device and 13 online on a mobile device. The median response time among politicians responding online for the total survey is just under 12 minutes (691 seconds). Their response time for the six aggregation decisions is 102, 150 and 271 seconds at the 25th, 50th and 75th percentiles. The corresponding response times for the two intervention decisions are 40, 62 and 91 seconds, respectively.

¹⁷ The mean household net income in Germany was €3,612 per month in 2020 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021b).

proportionally. [Online Appendix C.1](#) presents summary statistics.¹⁸ Norstat fielded the survey *Public 4* in December 2024 to obtain 1,220 responses following the same procedures and targeting representativeness along the same dimensions as surveys *Public 2* and *3*. We use the results of that survey to answer ancillary questions that previous waves cannot answer. Because we ran that survey at a different time than the main surveys, however, we do not integrate it into our main study sample.

2.3. Survey Weighting

In order to obtain estimates that are representative of our baseline populations along observables, we will use weighted regression throughout. To determine the population distribution among politicians, we hand-collected all state and federal legislators' age (categories 18 to 40, 40 to 59, 60 or over), gender, education level (no college, college, doctorate) and political party affiliation. We weight our politician sample on all these attributes both in levels and in interactions.¹⁹ We weight our general population sample along the same dimensions, both in levels and in interactions. We obtain the baseline distribution from the 2018 wave of the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) (Goebel *et al.*, 2018) which includes the party the respondent reports to have voted for in the 2017 federal election. [Online Appendix C.1](#) displays summary statistics.

3. Politicians' Social Welfare Criteria

We begin by examining how politicians resolve preference conflicts across individuals (Subsection 3.1). Subsection 3.2 considers politicians' intervention choices (preference conflicts within individuals). We compare politicians' decisions to those of the general public in Section 4. Section 5 then studies the alignment between respondents' beliefs about politicians and their actual choices.

3.1. Aggregation: Preference Conflicts Across Individuals

How do politicians aggregate ordinal preferences when acting as an impartial social planner? What do they genuinely consider good for a heterogeneous group of stakeholders when no strategic or reputational concerns shade decisions?

We study these questions by first examining whether politicians follow the majority preference and select alternative *A*, or whether they choose the compromise option *B* and thus defy the majority preference. Figure 2 shows the distribution of politicians' choices across all preference profiles, using data from the 345 politicians who made a choice on each of the six profiles. In profile 1, slightly over 80% of politicians favour the compromise option *B* over the tied majority winners *A* and *C*. In profile 2, where three stakeholders rank alternative *A* first, around three-quarters of politicians opt for the compromise option *B*. Even on profile 6, in which four out of five stakeholders most prefer the majority winner *A*, more than a quarter of politicians still opt for the compromise option. Overall, politicians place more weight on

¹⁸ Response times among general population respondents for the aggregation decisions are 80, 114 and 170 seconds at the 25th, 50th and 75th percentile, respectively. The corresponding response times for the intervention decisions are 56, 86 and 134 seconds, respectively.

¹⁹ To ensure sufficient bin size for all interactions, we combine the SPD and Left party into a single category.

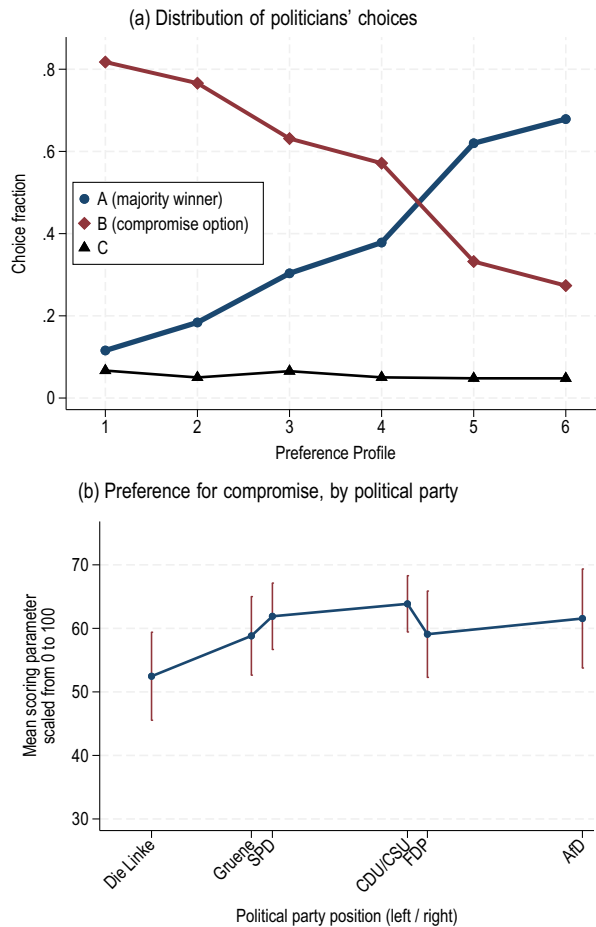


Fig. 2. Politicians' Preference Aggregation Choices.

Notes: (a) Distribution of preference aggregation decisions. Profiles are numbered as in Table 1. In each profile, politicians using a scoring rule with $s < \bar{s}$ will choose option A, and politicians with $s > \bar{s}$ will choose option B (except that rule $s = 0$ generates a tie between A and C on profile 1). The threshold value $\bar{s}$ increases from left to right and is given by $\frac{1}{3}$, $\frac{1}{3}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{3}{5}$, $\frac{2}{3}$ and $\frac{4}{5}$, respectively. (b) Best-fitting scoring parameters, by party position. Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals, with standard errors clustered by subject. Position on political spectrum from Bakker *et al.* (2020).

preventing stakeholders from having to live with a last-ranked option than on making sure stakeholders receive their first-ranked option. There is substantial support for compromise.

The Condorcet rule selects the majority winner throughout. This is inconsistent with a preference for preventing stakeholders from having to live with their last-ranked option. In fact, for profile 2, where A is the Condorcet winner, only one in five politicians select that option (and a part of that fraction might represent the usage of a scoring run-off rule rather than Condorcet decision-making, as the scoring run-off rules with $s \in (\frac{1}{4}, 1)$ yield the same

predictions as the Condorcet rule).²⁰ We conclude that politicians strongly favour scoring rules over Condorcet extensions.

Figure 2 also shows that politicians respond sensitively to the rank distributions of the three alternatives. As we consider preference profiles with higher indexes, the rank distribution of the majority-preferred alternative improves, and the rank distribution of the compromise option worsens. Politicians respond to this variation by selecting the majority winner *A* more frequently, at the expense of the compromise option *B*. This pattern is what one would expect if politicians choose consistently with scoring rules but are heterogeneous in their preference for compromise (the scoring parameter *s*). [Online Appendix D.1](#) corroborates this analysis by assigning each politician to the one of twenty-one theoretically possible aggregation rules that best describes their behaviour. In that analysis, 79% of politicians are assigned to a scoring rule, and, of these, 84% place more weight on preventing last-ranked choices than on realising first-ranked choices (scoring parameter $s > 0.5$).

The way in which politicians resolve interpersonal preference conflicts might depend on their position on the political spectrum—some politicians might be more centrist precisely because they have a stronger preference for compromise than members of more extreme parties. To test this hypothesis, we assign each politician the scoring parameter that best describes their sequence of choices, using the procedure of Ambuehl and Bernheim (2025).²¹ We allow for the possibility that a politician may aim to harm rather than help the group of stakeholders assigned to them. For politicians classified as benevolent, we relate the estimated scoring parameter to the position of their party on the left/right spectrum as measured on a 1 to 10 scale by Bakker *et al.* (2020).²²

Our procedure classifies 325 of our 345 respondents as benevolent. Of these, 9 are not affiliated with a party. For the remaining 316 politicians, Figure 2(b) plots the relation between their preference for compromise (measured by the best-fitting scoring parameter) and

²⁰ In profiles 2 to 6, the Condorcet winner coincides with the plurality winner and can be determined easily. In profile 1, the Condorcet winner can be determined as follows. Three people rank *C* last, so *B* wins a pairwise majority vote against *C*. Hence, if there is a Condorcet winner, it must be *B*. *B* also wins a pairwise majority vote against *A*. The reason is that any stakeholder who ranks *A* last must rank it below *B*. But the one stakeholder who ranks *A* second must also rank it below *B*, because no stakeholder ranks *B* last. Hence, *B* wins a pairwise majority vote against both *A* and *C*, making it the Condorcet winner.

²¹ Specifically, we use a Bayesian classifier. That classifier addresses the issue that less resolute rules (rules that create more ties) can mechanically better match any given choice sequence; it appropriately penalises such rules. It rests on four assumptions. First, the prior probability over rules is uniform. Second, for each of the six profiles, the respondent follows their assigned rule with probability $1 - \epsilon$. They uniformly randomise across all options with probability ϵ . Third, decision errors are independent across outcomes. Fourth, when a rule creates ties, the respondent uniformly randomises over the prescribed choices. The classifier calculates the posterior probability for each rule and a noise parameter ϵ conditional on the respondent's choice sequence. It assigns each respondent the rule and noise parameter for which this posterior is highest. The procedure is robust to any variation in the choice of prior that does not alter the mode of the posterior distribution. Ambuehl and Bernheim (2025) demonstrate the robustness of this approach in multiple ways. First, a clustering procedure shows that the set of aggregation rules considered does not omit empirically relevant rules. Second, an identification strategy that does not rely on classification corroborates the results obtained from the Bayes classifier. Third, Ambuehl and Bernheim (2025) show that their classification achieves high predictive power not only out of sample, but even out of context.

²² The party alliance of the CDU and the CSU acts as a union. We elicited membership and party preference for the union, but not separately for the constituent parties. Bakker *et al.* (2020) list the left/right position separately for the member parties. We average these positions to the position of the alliance as follows. The CSU represents the union in the state of Bavaria, whereas the CDU represents the union in all states outside of Bavaria. Hence, we calculate the position of the union on the political spectrum as the weighted average of the CSU and the CDU's position, with the weight of the CSU equal to the relative population share of Bavaria compared to the German population. The population of Bavaria is 13.08 million, compared to a total German population of 83.02 million, which yields a weight of 0.1576 for the CSU.

Table 5. *Politicians' Aggregation Preferences.*

Variables	(1) Preference for compromise (scoring parameter s scaled from 0 to 100)	(2)	(3) Assigned to benevolent rule	(4)
Political party position				
Linear	1.238** (0.580)	1.305** (0.628)	0.005 (0.007)	0.002 (0.009)
Square	-0.382* (0.223)	-0.432* (0.253)	-0.003 (0.003)	-0.003 (0.003)
Federal parliamentarian		16.900** (8.238)		-0.032 (0.024)
Political experience (years)		0.049 (0.248)		0.000 (0.002)
Female		3.159 (2.737)		-0.019 (0.032)
Age		0.016 (0.141)		-0.001 (0.001)
Observations	316	316	336	336

Notes: Columns 1 and 2 only use politicians assigned to a benevolent rule. Regressions do not include respondents not associated with a government party (*fraktionslos*). Political experience measures the total years of experience in federal and state parliaments. Columns 2 and 4 include fixed effects for the sixteen state parliaments. Party position represents overall ideological stance on the left/right spectrum from Bakker *et al.* (2020), measured on a scale from 1 to 10, de-meanned. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

the position of their party.²³ The figure shows a relatively weak association between party position and aggregation preferences, though we observe a trend for a weaker preference for compromise towards the left of the political spectrum. Yet, members of each party display a preference for compromise over majoritarian solutions. Specifically, the mean best-fitting scoring parameter is either higher or statistically indistinguishable from $\frac{1}{2}$ (the Borda rule). The members of each party place at least as much weight on preventing last-ranked outcomes as on realising first-ranked outcomes, on average.

To document our results more formally, we regress politicians' scoring parameters on the political position of their party and on its square. Column 1 in Table 5 shows the result. The linear effect is statistically significant at the 5% level. The negative estimate of the square term indicates a concave relationship between party position and preference for compromise, though that estimate is significant only at the 10% level. Column 2 adds demographic control variables (age, gender, education), an indicator for whether the respondent is a federal or state politician, and fixed effects for each state parliament. It also controls for the respondent's political experience in state and federal parliaments in years. Adding these controls only exerts minor effects on estimated parameter values. While we find a Null effect of years of political experience, federal parliamentarians exhibit a significantly higher preference for compromise (< 0.05). One hypothesis consistent with this finding is that a greater preference for compromise increases a politician's odds of running for or being elected to the federal parliament. The remaining control variables are far from statistically significant.

Columns 3 and 4 show that our results are not an artefact of focusing on respondents classified as benevolent. We regress an indicator for whether a politician is assigned to a benevolent rule on the same predictor variables as in columns 1 and 2, respectively. All coefficient estimates are close to zero and statistically insignificant.

²³ In our experiment, most scoring parameters are interval-identified. We use mid-points for analysis.

Table 6. *Beliefs About Willingness to Pay and Implied Utilitarian Choice.*

	(1) WTP in €		(2) Implied utilitarian choice	(3) Actual choice
Preference rank		Choice Option		
Best	18.188 (0.795)	A (majority winner)	0.660 (0.019)	0.383 (0.020)
Middle	6.010 (0.432)	B (compromise option)	0.302 (0.020)	0.591 (0.020)
Worst	-1.860 (0.579)	C	0.039 (0.006)	0.026 (0.008)

Notes: WTP is the believed amount in euro that a politician believes a stakeholder would be willing to pay to trigger or prevent (negative WTP) a donation to the foundation in their first, second and third preference rank, respectively. Implied utilitarian choice is the choice a politician would make if they selected alternatives by maximising the sum of believed WTP. Actual choice is the actual choice the politician made. For profile one, choice option A (majority winner) coincides with the tied majority winners A and C. Standard errors in parentheses clustered by subject. Table based on data from politicians who provided complete and consistent WTP beliefs about each preference rank.

While our results document the relation between aggregation preferences and political attitudes, we can only speculate about the reasons underlying that relation. In light of the null effect of experience, any relation likely represents a selection effect. The tendency towards concavity is consistent with the fact that Germany's centre parties feature a more pronounced compromise culture than those further from the centre. Indeed, leading centrist political figures such as former prime ministers Konrad Adenauer, Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt have viewed compromise as key for a functioning democracy.²⁴

Our data also let us interpret politicians' choices in the framework of cardinal welfare maximisation. A total of 212 politicians provided complete and consistent beliefs about stakeholders' willingness to pay (WTP) to trigger the donation of €30 to their first, second and last-ranked foundation, or to prevent it (indicated by negative numbers). If politicians chose social alternatives by maximising the sum of the willingness to pay instances, what choice distribution would we observe? Column 1 of Table 6 lists mean WTP beliefs by preference rank.²⁵ The difference in WTP between obtaining one's first-ranked rather than second-ranked alternative is more than one-and-a-half times as high as that between obtaining one's second-ranked rather than third-ranked alternative. Accordingly, if politicians aggregated preferences according to a utilitarian welfare function, they would frequently prefer the majority option over the compromise option. As column 2 shows, utilitarian maximisation selects options A, B and C in 66%, 30% and 4% of the cases, respectively. These values differ substantially from the actual choice frequencies for this subsample, listed in column 3. The majority-preferred option A is chosen 28 percentage points less often than predicted by the utilitarian benchmark, whereas the compromise option B is chosen 29 percentage points more often. Hence, on the assumption that politicians aggregate preferences based

²⁴ After the political vote on the constitution in 1949, Adenauer (Germany's first prime minister) stated that 'compromise also has a great advantage: It teaches the parties, who [are] thus forced to work together, to appreciate the committed, honest opponent even in their political opponents' (Parlamentarischer Rat, 1949, pp.241–3). Brandt referred to compromises as the 'essence of democracy' (Tagesschau.de, 2025). Schmidt said 'Anyone who cannot compromise is useless for democracy' (ibid.).

²⁵ We restrict the believed WTP to range from -€30 to €30. To check if our results depend on excluding WTP values outside this range, we rerun the analysis on the sample of 227 complete responses, allowing unrestricted beliefs on others' WTP. Aside from more extreme values for the mean WTP held by politicians, the results remain consistent. Additionally, two politicians provided inconsistent beliefs about stakeholders' WTP. We again rerun the analysis after including these inconsistent responses. The results remain virtually unchanged.

Table 7. *Rank Distributions of Stakeholder Preferences over the Foundations.*

Charity	Ranked 1st	Ranked 2nd	Ranked 3rd
Ludwig Erhard Stiftung	0.27	0.33	0.40
Hans Böckler Stiftung	0.28	0.39	0.32
Bund der Steuerzahler	0.45	0.27	0.27

Notes: Numbers show the fraction of subjects in the stakeholder sample that place a given foundation in the indicated rank position.

on their beliefs about cardinal utilities, they place substantially more weight on equity than utilitarians.²⁶

A potential concern about our results on preference aggregation is the possibility that politicians may have tried to infer the identity of the political foundations that could receive the donation and may have chosen to satisfy their private preferences rather than what they believe best reflects the will of the stakeholders. This interpretation is implausible *ex ante* because such an inference would be extremely weak, for three reasons. First, politicians know that five of the six preference profiles they see are hypothetical, and they do not know which profile is real. This factor greatly dilutes inference.²⁷ Second, each politician observes the preference rankings of only five stakeholders. Such a small sample leads to highly uncertain inference. Third, real stakeholder preferences are diverse. Table 7 displays the rank distribution of each foundation. These distributions are close to uniform, except that the Ludwig Erhard Stiftung is ranked last slightly more often than one-third, and the Bund der Steuerzahler is ranked first slightly more often. Because these distributions are close to uniform, ordinal preferences provide little information about the identity of the foundations.

Empirical evidence from our survey *Public 4* additionally suggests that inference about the identity of the political foundations, to the extent it happened, does not act as a confound, though it may lead to choices that appear as noise in our data. Specifically, because we randomise the assignment of letter labels to social alternatives, any inference drawn from information presented earlier than the preference profiles (such as the order in which the instructions present the foundations) acts as noise. Choice based on the believed identity of the foundations acts as a confound only if inference is based on the preference profiles as such.²⁸ Survey *Public 4* randomises the order in which the instructions present the foundations. It also elicits subjects' beliefs about which letter represents which foundation, as well as the respondent's preferred foundation. This data shows that the former type of inference indeed affects choice. To check for effects of the second type of inference, we test whether subjects who prefer the arguably most centrist foundation Bund der Steuerzahler select the compromise option *B* disproportionately often. We also check whether subjects who prefer one of the other foundations select the compromise option *B* disproportionately rarely. Nei-

²⁶ Online Appendix Section D.3 estimates the parameter of a constant-elasticity cardinal welfare function in which cardinal utility u enters welfare through the concave transformation $f(u) = u^\alpha / \alpha$. We obtain a parameter estimate of 0.65. Due to the limited sample size and possibly noisy elicited beliefs, the estimate is imprecise, with a standard error of 0.26.

²⁷ Because we needed to make the survey available in pen-and-paper format, all six preference profiles were predetermined. To implement respondents' decisions, we matched stakeholder preferences to one of the six profiles *ex post*. Therefore, unbeknownst to respondents, no inference can in fact be drawn from the six preference profiles.

²⁸ Respondents might observe, for instance that a given alternative is often ranked either at the top or at the bottom across the preference profiles, and may thus conclude that that alternative likely does not represent a foundation that is viewed as politically centrist.

ther is the case, which suggests that the second, problematic type of inference does not play a substantial role in *Public 4*. [Online Appendix G](#) presents details.

Overall, our analysis shows that politicians' social welfare criteria in the domain of preference aggregation substantially deviate from those commonly employed in economics research. They demonstrate a strong preference for compromise, especially among members of moderate parties. They place significantly more weight on stakeholders who end up with their least-preferred alternative than the utilitarian or Condorcet-type aggregation often employed in economics.

3.2. *Intervention: Preference Conflicts Within Individuals*

We now turn to politicians' intervention decisions. How do politicians trade off the objective of making sure citizens make choices they consider good on the one hand, and the objective of respecting others' autonomy on the other hand? A subset of politicians provided valid responses in this second part of our survey (191 and 193 for the case without and with front-end delay, respectively, with 181 politicians providing valid responses in both cases).²⁹ [Online Appendix C.3](#) details the difference between the two samples. Attrition does not differ by political preference or rank, but older politicians ($p < 0.05$) attrit more often.³⁰ We account for the slightly changed composition of this smaller sample by recalculating our regression weights.³¹

Politicians' resolution of the trade-off becomes apparent in Figure 3(a). Two features stand out. First, politicians intervene frequently. They exclude the least patient option from the choice set about half the time. Second, politicians intervene to impose patient choice. The choice sets they construct exclude less patient options much more often than more patient options when rewards are immediate. Most politicians' decisions on whether to intervene are consistent across the two rounds. Only 7.3% of our respondents intervene in only one of the two rounds, whereas 62.2% intervene in both decisions, and 30.5% in neither.

Are politicians' decisions consistent with the long-run criterion, according to which citizens' intertemporal choices should be respected unless the lure of immediacy might bias them? The answer is no, for two reasons. First, as the figure shows, politicians do not remove alternatives substantially more often when immediate payments are available than when all payments are delayed. The lure of immediacy plays practically no role in politicians' intervention decisions. Second, politicians' choices are inconsistent with the view that citizens' intertemporal choices should be respected if potential bias caused by the availability of immediate payments is not an option. Even when all payments are delayed by at least one month, politicians still exclude the least patient alternative more than half the time.³²

²⁹ Six observations from five politicians who answered the pen-and-paper version of the survey are invalid because the choice sets they constructed in these cases are empty.

³⁰ Choices in the preference aggregation part do not differ depending on whether a politician attrited or completed the entire survey.

³¹ Evidence from survey *Public 4* considers the effect of making intervention decisions after rather than before making preference aggregation decisions. In line with a hypothesis of decreasing attention over time, we find that when intervention choices come second, general population subjects remove the most patient alternative more often and the least patient alternative less often. Fatigue might exert a similar effect on politicians' decisions. [Online Appendix G.2](#) presents details.

³² The availability of immediate payments neither affects politicians' beliefs about unrestricted citizens' choices, nor does it affect the actual choices of these subjects (see [Online Appendix B.2](#)). Even so, politicians violate the long-run criterion by intervening when no immediate rewards are available.

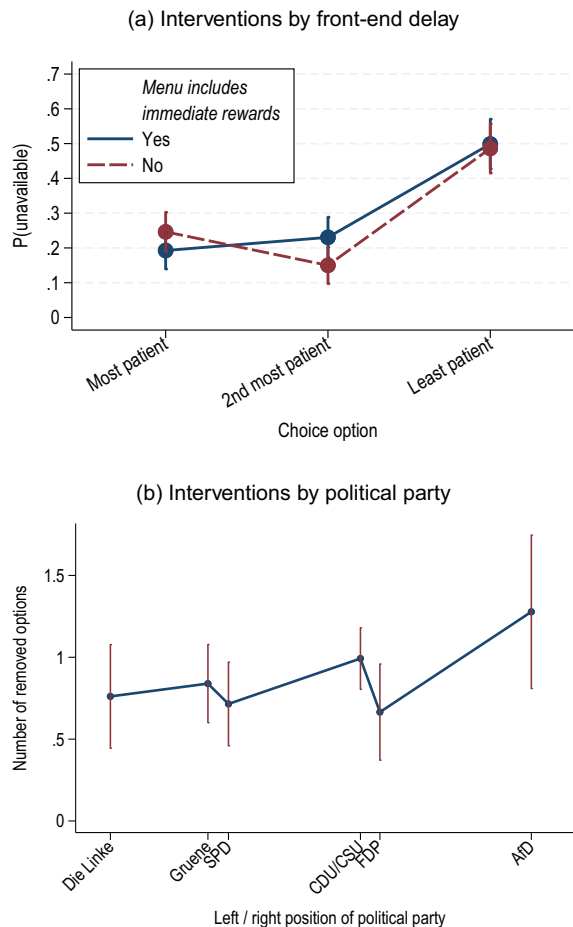


Fig. 3. *Politicians' Intervention Decisions.*

Notes: Panel (a) displays the fraction of cases for which politicians exclude options from the choice set they construct, categorised by relative patience. The solid (dashed) line corresponds to choice sets constructed from menus that include (exclude) immediate rewards. Panel (b) displays the average number of excluded options by party position, measured as ideological stance on the left/right spectrum by Bakker *et al.* (2020). Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals, standard errors clustered by subject.

Politicians do not simply remove options they believe no citizen would have chosen. Rather, their decisions reflect a genuine trade-off between respecting citizen autonomy and enforcing patient decisions. Recall that each politician indicated the probability with which they believe an unrestricted citizen would have chosen a given option, for each option in the menu.³³ This data shows that politicians assign 25.0% probability mass to options they ex-

³³ We exclude four politicians providing beliefs not summing up to ten from our analysis. To test whether the presented results depend on this exclusion, we perform the same analysis on the sample, including these inconsistent responses. We find no difference in the results.

cluded. Hence, politicians who remove options believe their decisions will change the choice of nearly one-quarter of citizens.³⁴

Next, we study whether and how politicians' interventions depend on their position on the political spectrum. Three possibilities are plausible. On one hand, traditional conservatives' more libertarian attitudes suggest a negative relationship between interventions and conservatism. On the other hand, both conservatives' tendency to uphold traditional values like patience and the recent link between conservatism and authoritarian tendencies suggest the opposite. It is also possible that centrists, who tend to favour compromise and respect minority preferences, are more likely to defer to citizen autonomy. The latter hypothesis predicts a U-shaped relationship between interventions and political position.

In fact, we find that politicians towards the right of the spectrum tend to exclude more options from the choice sets they construct, as Figure 3(b) shows. This finding parallels the positive relationship between conservatism and interventionism that Ambuehl *et al.* (2025) find in a sample of US voters. To document this effect econometrically, column 1 of Table 8 regresses the number of excluded options on party position measured on a scale from 1 to 10 by Bakker *et al.* (2020) and its square. We find that a politician on the very right of the political spectrum excludes an additional 0.70 alternatives per menu than a politician on the very left ($p < 0.05$). This effect increases to 0.90 and becomes statistically significant at $p < 0.01$ as we include demographic control variables (age, gender, education, state), an indicator for whether the respondent is a federal or state politician, and the respondent's political experience in state and federal parliaments in years. The coefficient on the square term is close to zero and far from statistically significant in both cases, in contrast to the hypothesis that centrist politicians respect citizen preferences more.

Unlike in the case of preference aggregation, we find no effect of being a federal parliamentarian; preferences for paternalistic interventions do not appear to predict running for or being elected to federal office. There is a substantial effect of gender, however, as column 2 shows. Female politicians remove an additional 0.32 options ($p < 0.05$).

Are politicians further to the right knowingly more restrictive? An alternative hypothesis is that these politicians simply remove options they believe nobody would choose, but differ in their beliefs about what these options are. To distinguish between these mechanisms, we calculate the probability with which a politician believes their intervention changes the citizen's choice. As column 3 shows, this *believed restrictiveness* increases with political party position both when we control for demographic and political background variables ($p < 0.01$, column 4) and when we do not ($p < 0.1$, column 3). A politician on the very right believes it is 23 percentage points more likely that their intervention forces a citizen to change their choice than a politician on the very left. Hence, politicians further to the right know that their more restrictive interventions will change the choice of a larger number of citizens.³⁵ This

³⁴ As described in Section 3, to prevent artificially consistent choices, we elicit beliefs about slightly different menus than those from which the respondent has previously constructed choice sets. Strictly speaking, beliefs and intervention choices are thus not directly comparable. We estimate a model of how beliefs respond to the six specific payment amounts that characterise a menu. We estimate a two-equation system that expresses the elicited beliefs that an unrestricted citizen would choose options A and B, respectively, on all payment amounts and on the relative prices of gaining one additional present euro in terms of future Euro from selection option A rather than B, as well as the respondent's intervention choices. We obtain estimates of the beliefs about unrestricted citizens that are corrected for the difference in payment amounts as the predicted values of this regression. This correction lowers the believed effectiveness of the chosen interventions from 25.0% to 23.5%.

³⁵ This result would obtain mechanically if beliefs data were pure noise. Contrary to this interpretation, our beliefs data is highly predictive, as Online Appendix E.1 shows.

Table 8. *Politicians’ Intervention Decisions.*

Variables	(1) Number of options removed	(2)	(3) Believed restrictiveness	(4)
Mean of the dependent variable	0.895 (0.064)	0.895 (0.064)	0.177 (0.021)	0.177 (0.021)
Political party position				
Linear	0.057** (0.028)	0.082*** (0.029)	0.017* (0.009)	0.023*** (0.009)
Square	0.010 (0.012)	0.009 (0.011)	0.000 (0.004)	−0.001 (0.004)
Federal parliamentarian		−0.143 (0.295)		0.018 (0.172)
Political experience (years)		−0.008 (0.010)		−0.001 (0.003)
Female		0.319** (0.124)		0.072** (0.034)
Age		0.007 (0.006)		−0.000 (0.002)
Front-end delay	−0.040 (0.037)	−0.049 (0.038)	−0.002 (0.020)	−0.002 (0.022)
Fixed Effects				
Education		✓		✓
State		✓		✓
Subjects	195	195	186	186
Observations	369	369	350	350

Notes: Weighted regressions. Regressions do not include respondents not associated with a government party (*fraktionslos*). Political experience measures the total years of experience in federal and state parliaments. Columns 2 and 4 include fixed effects for the sixteen state parliaments. Columns 3 and 4 include a smaller number of observations due to non-responses on beliefs. Party position represents overall ideological stance on the left/right spectrum from Bakker *et al.* (2020), measured on a scale from 1 to 10, de-meaned. Standard errors in parentheses, clustered by subject. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

finding is consistent with recent cross-country survey evidence that shows that right-wing populist voters favour stronger, more interventionist leaders (Donovan, 2021). Likewise, female politicians know that their stricter interventions restrict a larger number of people.

Overall, these results show that many politicians across the spectrum—but especially on the right—readily intervene to enforce choices they regard as good, even if that comes at a cost in terms of citizen autonomy. Yet, their decisions show no sign of support for the long-run criterion that is frequently used in economics research.

4. Welfare Criteria of the General Public

Representative democracy is based on the idea that politicians’ value judgements represent those of the general public. Moreover, much research in positive welfare economics studies normative views of the general public (Almas *et al.*, 2020; Ambuehl *et al.*, 2021; Bartling *et al.*, 2021; Ambuehl and Bernheim, 2025), even though actual policymaking often falls to elected representatives, which raises a question of external validity. Therefore, we now examine the alignment between politicians’ social welfare criteria and those of the general public. Throughout, we pool the data in survey versions *Public 2* and *Public 3* with the corresponding parts of version *Public 1*.

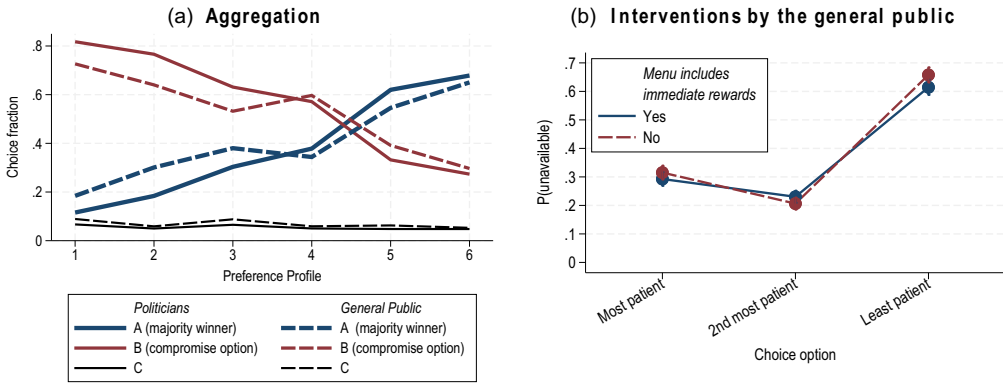


Fig. 4. *Social Welfare Criteria of the General Public.*

Notes: Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals, standard errors clustered by subject.

4.1. Aggregation: Preference Conflicts Across Individuals

The distribution of aggregation choices among the general public is similar to that of politicians, as Figure 4(a) shows. Averaged across preference profiles, the general public selects alternatives A, B and C in 38.5%, 53.1% and 8.4% of cases, compared to politicians' 37.2%, 56.5% and 6.3%. Statistically, there are no significant differences between these distributions. We also observe no significant difference in the scoring parameters of politicians and the general population. Yet, in particular, among preference profiles 1 to 3, which require lower scoring parameters s to rationalise the choice of option B, politicians select the compromise option B more often.

Looking at the distribution of best-fitting choice rules between politicians and the general public (see [Online Appendix D.1](#)), we find that members of the general population are significantly more likely assigned scoring rules with low parameters than politicians (specifically, $s = 0$ and $s \in (0, \frac{1}{3})$), and are less likely assigned the scoring rules with parameter $s \in (\frac{1}{2}, \frac{3}{5})$.³⁶ These results are robust to multiple hypotheses testing using the Romano–Wolf step-down procedure (Romano and Wolf, 2005). Moreover, the distribution of best-fitting rules in our samples is highly similar to the distribution that Ambuehl and Bernheim (2025) find with Swedish and United States general population samples in a setting where stakeholder preferences concern the question of which international charity will receive a fixed donation amount, and with Swiss student samples in which stakeholders have preferences about which Swiss party will receive a donation of CHF30 that cannot be split. This similarity suggests that our results are robust to variations in the domain of stakeholder preferences.

Overall, as a group, when deciding as impartial social planners, politicians resolve preference conflicts across individuals similarly to the general public, though in a slightly less majoritarian fashion.

Yet, in contrast to politicians, the political position of the preferred party of members of the general public does not relate to their aggregation decisions, as Figure 5(a) shows. The difference in party dependence between politicians and the general public may have multi-

³⁶ We additionally find that general population members are significantly less likely to be classified as following the supermajority rule.

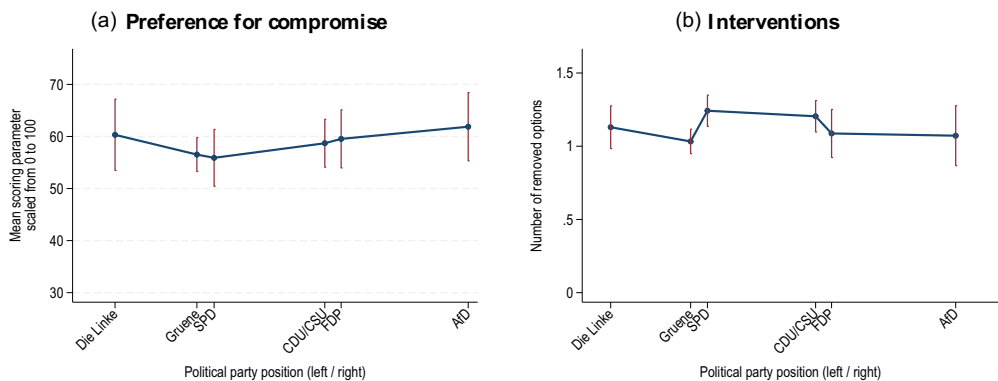


Fig. 5. *Social Welfare Criteria of the General Public by Party Position.*

Notes: Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals, with standard errors clustered by subject. Party position represents overall ideological stance on the left/right spectrum from Bakker *et al.* (2020).

ple causes, including the possibility that a politician's party affiliation is more strongly tied to their identity than a general population member's party preference is to theirs.³⁷ To test this possibility, we regress best-fitting scoring parameters on an indicator for the general public, the position of a respondent's preferred political party, and its quadratic, as well as on the interaction between the general public indicator and the party position variables. Column 1 of Table 9 shows that the difference in party dependence across the two populations is statistically significant. This conclusion is unchanged once we control for age, gender, education and state (column 2). This finding implies that some parties' electorates endorse systematically different social welfare criteria than the politicians representing those parties in parliament.

When we consider the general public's beliefs about stakeholders' WTP to trigger or prevent a donation to their first, second and third-ranked foundation, respectively, our results again parallel those of the politician sample. In particular, implied utilitarian aggregation based on these beliefs yields a choice distribution that places dramatically more weight on the majority winner than the general public's actual choices. See Online Appendix D.2 for details.³⁸

4.2. Interventions: Preference Conflicts Within Individuals

As is the case for politicians, the general public's choices are inconsistent with the long-run criterion. Figure 4(b) plots the intervention rates of the general public by front-end delay. It

³⁷ We do not condition on whether general population respondents are registered party members. The reason is that only a small minority of Germans are members of a political party. In 2019, the six government parties had a total of 1.2 million active members (Niedermayer, 2020), which is 1.4% of the 83 million German population, or 2% of the 60 million Germans entitled to vote (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021a). In our sample, ninety respondents making aggregation decisions and seventy-five respondents making intervention decisions report that they are members of a political party. While these respondents represent 6.3% and 5.7% of our respective samples, they are still too few to permit statistical inference. Online Appendix E.2 shows that our conclusions pertaining to the general public remain unchanged once we account for political involvement measured as voting regularly in elections.

³⁸ As is the case for politicians, these results do not depend on the exclusion of believed WTP outside the range of –€30 to €30.

Table 9. *General Population Versus Politicians.*

Variables	(1) Preference for compromise (scoring parameter s scaled from 0 to 100)	(2)	(3) Number of options removed	(4)
Political party position	1.238** (0.579)	1.513** (0.614)	0.057** (0.028)	0.057** (0.028)
(Political party position) ²	−0.382* (0.223)	−0.499** (0.241)	0.010 (0.012)	0.009 (0.011)
General public				
× 1	−5.281** (2.297)	−4.171* (2.196)	0.354*** (0.083)	0.272*** (0.083)
× political party position	−0.920 (0.795)	−1.051 (0.807)	−0.057* (0.031)	−0.059* (0.031)
× (political party position) ²	0.615** (0.305)	0.658** (0.315)	−0.016 (0.013)	−0.013 (0.012)
Female		3.479* (2.006)		0.028 (0.049)
Age		0.028 (0.075)		0.010*** (0.002)
Fixed Effects				
Education		✓		✓
State		✓		✓
<i>p</i> -values significance of party position for general public				
linear term	0.560	0.388	0.990	0.878
square term	0.265	0.453		
Observations	1,655	1,655	3,003	3,003
Subjects	1,655	1,655	1,512	1,512

Notes: Weighted regressions. Regressions exclude politicians not associated with a government party (*fraktionslos*). Party position represents overall ideological stance on the left/right spectrum from Bakker *et al.* (2020), measured on a scale from 1 to 10, de-meant. Standard errors in parentheses, clustered by subject. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

shows that the availability of immediate rewards has no effect on the frequency with which members of the general public exclude any alternative. Moreover, even absent immediate rewards, members of the general public intervene to remove the least patient alternative more than half the time, in contrast to the criterion's prescription to defer to citizens' preferences in that case. Additionally, both politicians and general population respondents remove the most patient alternative slightly more often than the middle alternative.³⁹ The difference in removal rates between the most patient and middle options, however, is an order of magnitude smaller than that between the middle and least patient option. Hence, for both samples, enforcing patient choice is the dominant concern.

There is, however, one difference between politicians' and general population respondents' interventions. General population respondents intervene more often than politicians. While politicians exclude 0.90 choice options on average from the choice sets that they construct, general population respondents exclude 1.16 ($p < 0.01$).

Figure 5(b) shows that there is no relation between interventions and political party preference among the general public, just as in the case of preference aggregation, and possibly

³⁹ This pattern is not driven by spite towards other subjects. To check this possibility, respondents decided whether to costlessly increase the Chooser's payment by €0.50, to leave it unchanged, or to decrease it by €0.50. 91% chose to increase the recipient's payment, only 3% chose to decrease it. The extent of non-monotonicity in intervention decisions remains nearly unchanged once we exclude spiteful respondents.

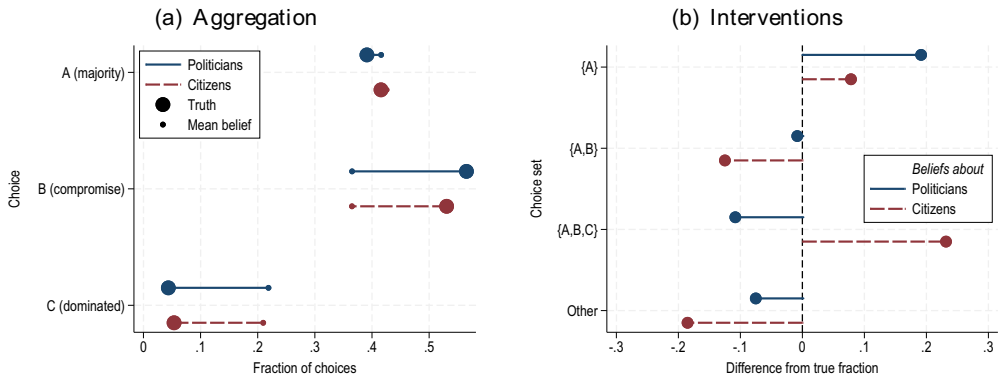


Fig. 6. *Beliefs About Politicians' and Other General Population Respondents' Choices.*
Notes: Panel (a) aggregates across preference profiles 2 and 5, for which we elicited beliefs. Panel (b) aggregates across menus.

for the same reasons. To document the effect of party position econometrically, we regress the number of excluded options on an indicator for general population respondents, the position of the preferred political party, and the interaction between the two. Column 3 of Table 9 displays the result. The negative coefficient on the interaction term almost exactly offsets the effect of party position for politicians, leading to a p -value of 0.93 for a dependence on political position among the general public. These results remain largely unchanged once we control for gender, age, education and state fixed effects.

Just as in the case of preference aggregation, the fact that politicians' intervention decisions depend on their political position while those of the general public do not implies that the politicians of some parties more closely represent the social welfare criteria of the parties' supporters. With the exception of the Green Party and the AfD, politicians of each party intervene statistically significantly less than their supporters. Controlling for gender, age, education and state fixed effects renders the effect for CDU/CSU statistically insignificant. All findings are robust to multiple hypothesis testing.

5. Beliefs About Politicians' Decisions

Having shown that politicians' and the public's welfare criteria broadly align yet differ in specifics, we now assess whether respondents are aware of these similarities and differences.

For the preference aggregation domain, Figure 6(a) compares general population respondents' beliefs about other decision-makers to their actual choices (focusing on the two profiles for which we elicited beliefs). Beliefs about politicians and about the general public resemble each other closely. Yet, they diverge from the actual choice probabilities. Most notably, while both politicians and the general public chose the compromise option substantially more often than the majority winner, respondents believe the opposite would be the case ($p < 0.01$ both for beliefs about politicians and beliefs about the general public, see

[Online Appendix F.1](#)). Hence, general population respondents underestimate others' preference for compromise, both in politicians and in other general population respondents.⁴⁰

In the domain of intervention decisions, beliefs are systematically distorted, too, as Figure 6(b) shows. For easier visibility, we centre the actual choice frequencies at zero and show the deviations from that benchmark. Subjects systematically overestimate how often politicians enforce patient choice. They overestimate the fraction of politicians who remove all but the most patient alternative *A* by about 20 percentage points, they correctly estimate the fraction of politicians who exclude only the least patient option, and they underestimate the fraction of politicians who include all alternatives by about 10 percentage points. In contrast, beliefs about the general public deviate from the truth non-monotonically. Respondents overestimate both the extent to which general population respondents remove all but the most patient alternative, and the extent to which they include all options. Overall, while beliefs about general population subjects are inconclusive, respondents greatly overestimate politicians' interventionism, both compared to their actual choices and compared to the general population. [Online Appendix F.1](#) documents these effects econometrically.

To examine the mechanisms responsible for such beliefs, our ancillary survey *Public 4* asks respondents whether they believe politicians have a stronger or weaker preference for majoritarian over compromise solutions than the average German citizen. Of our respondents, 62.2% believe that politicians prefer more majoritarian aggregation than average citizens (SE 1.4%). To study the origins of these beliefs, we asked subjects to rate their agreement with two statements: that politicians' aggregation preferences differ from those of the average citizen because individuals with such a preference are more likely to be elected to political office, and that they differ because experience in politics causes politicians to form such a preference. Respondents do not believe that experience plays a substantially different role in explaining these preferences than selection. Encoding subjects' responses on the six-point scale with integers 1 to 6, their agreement with the selection and experience statements is 4.32 (SE 0.03) and 4.36 (SE 0.03), respectively.

Subjects answer parallel questions concerning intervention decisions. Corroborating the result in Figure 6, 71.7% of our respondents believe that politicians will make fewer alternatives available than the average citizen (SE 1.6%). As in the case of aggregation preferences, subjects' attribution of the difference to selection and experience in politics is nearly equal, though at a slightly lower level (the mean agreement is 3.94 (SE 0.036) for both statements).

Overall, respondents appear to have relatively clear ideas about how politicians differ from average citizens, but lack specific hypotheses about the causes of that difference.

6. Conclusion

Economic analysis often derives policy recommendations based on assumed social welfare criteria. The appropriateness of these criteria is typically left to the policymaker to judge. Little is known, however, about policymakers' normative views in a way that is amenable to this use. Our study begins to fill this gap. We conduct a behavioural experiment with German

⁴⁰ Subjects also overestimate the frequency with which the rank-dominated option *C* would be chosen, possibly indicating their beliefs about how (in)attentively others would choose. Our results are unlikely to be a consequence of inattention to the belief elicitation itself, however. As [Online Appendix F.1](#) shows, elicited beliefs vary sensitively with the particular preference profile for which we elicit these beliefs.

federal and state politicians that avoids confounds from political economy considerations. We complement it with parallel experiments with the German voting-age general public.

We document three main findings. First, when resolving preference conflicts across individuals, politicians assign substantially more importance to individuals who obtain their least-favoured alternative than to receive their most-favoured alternative, in contrast to both common aggregation mechanisms and the equal weighting inherent in utilitarianism and the Kaldor–Hicks criterion. Second, when resolving preference conflicts within individuals, specifically that between respecting citizen autonomy and ensuring outcomes that politicians believe to be good for the citizen, politicians place substantial weight on the latter motive. Their choices are inconsistent with the long-run criterion that is frequently used in behavioural public economics as a foundation for policy recommendations. Not only has the availability of immediate rewards virtually no effect on politicians' choices, but politicians still intervene frequently to enforce patient choice when we rule out the possibility that the lure of immediacy might bias citizens' choices. Third, the welfare criteria of politicians and those of the general public broadly align—though general population respondents (wrongly) believe that politicians are less willing to compromise and more willing to limit others' autonomy, both compared to general population respondents and compared to politicians' actual choices.

Our results provide guidance to researchers who derive policy recommendations based on social welfare criteria, so that they reflect those of policymakers and of the general public. Additionally, our result that politicians' and the general public's welfare criteria broadly align is encouraging for the field of positive welfare economics, which typically relies on general population samples. It increases our confidence that its broad results will generalise to elected policymakers both in Germany and in other representative democracies.

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Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Online Appendix Replication Package

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