

From an Ideological to a Contingent Conceptualisation of Political Process Preferences: A Multidimensional Approach

Rikki Dean, Goethe University Frankfurt

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a rapid expansion in empirical research of political process preferences, but this research has proceeded without a thorough conceptualisation of what a process preference is. Studies have instead implicitly adopted a conception of process preferences as ideological models. This article develops a new, multidimensional approach to understanding the nature of a process preference. It uses this approach to question the implicit assumption of the ideological conception that process preferences are by definition highly abstract, purely normative and ideological coherent, developing an alternative, contingent conception of a process preference based around three concepts of contextuality, conditionality and ambivalence. This multidimensional approach opens up the possibility of ontologically different kinds of process preferences, providing a comprehensive framework for integrating recent more piecemeal challenges to the ideological conception. The elaboration of the concepts of contextuality, conditionality and ambivalence offer a range of new departure points for future research, as well as a more fine-grained understanding of process preferences that could improve the predictive power and policy relevance of research findings.

Keywords: ambivalence; contextuality; conditionality; conceptions of democracy; models of democracy; political attitudes; process preferences.

How do we want our political system to function? Who should make political decisions and through which means? In recent years there has been a rapid expansion of empirical literature examining political actors' responses to these questions (see: König, Siewert, and Ackermann 2022). This expansion follows two important developments: first, the pioneering finding that process is a separate dimension of political attitudes, one that is orthogonal to and thus not simply reducible to the policy dimension (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002); and second, growing concerns about declining support for democratic institutions and a concomitant growing interest in what reforms could address this problem. A well-grounded understanding of political process is key to understanding many of the core concerns of political science. However, there are some troubling disparities between empirical findings on process preferences and actual political developments. How should we square, for example, the very high levels of support that political attitudes surveys find for the core process values of liberal democracy with increasing popular support for right-wing populists who explicitly challenge these values? These disparities force an examination of how process preferences are researched, and this article begins the task by asking, what exactly is the nature of a process preference?

Despite the rapid expansion of empirical studies of process preferences, there has been relatively little consideration of the conceptual foundations of this research. Instead, taking its cue from normative democratic theory, the existing literature has defaulted to conceiving the question of process preferences as, in essence, one of choosing between alternative ideological models – for example, between preferences for direct democracy versus representative democracy. Based upon this assumption, the aims of the process preference literature have been to: establish and describe these models, count the proportion of the population that subscribe to each, identify the factors that explain a person's subscription to a model, and use the models to predict political behaviour (see, for example: Webb, 2013; Bengtsson and Christensen, 2016; Landwehr and Steiner, 2017; Pilet *et al.*, 2020). But what if process preferences are not like theoretical models of democracy? The assumption that process preferences should be as abstracted, coherent and normative as these theoretical models reifies them as if they are real psychological phenomena. It takes for granted that there are individuals with a 'direct democratic' preference, who should, for example, support the introduction of referendums across varying governance levels and issue contexts. But this is quite far from the phenomenological experience of constructing a preference, which is likely characterised by contextual specificities (e.g. desiring different processes on the local and the transnational level), pragmatic and strategic conditionalities (such as whether one's ideals are realisable in practice), and ambivalence between competing process concerns.

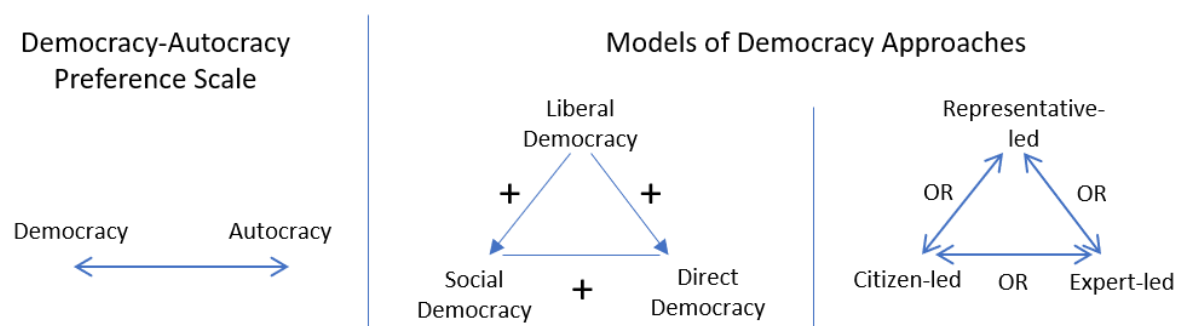
This article develops a new *multidimensional approach* to conceptualising the nature of a process preference, based around these three dimensions. Its first contribution is to use these dimensions to reconstruct the standard, *ideological conception* of a process preference, which underpins the empirical literature but which has never been explicitly articulated. It demonstrates how this implicit conception has powerful effects in structuring the research questions that scholars pose about process preferences and the methodological approach to researching them. The majority of the article then develops an alternative *contingent conception* of a process preference, situated at the opposite ends of the three dimensions to the ideological conception. It outlines one-by-one the contextualities, conditionalities and ambivalence that characterise this contingent conception, arguing that these challenges the assumptions of abstractedness, normativity and coherence of the standard, ideological conception. Finally, the article details how the multidimensional approach and new, contingent conception can provide a guide for future empirical work that would address many of the lacunae and misapprehensions resulting from the standard conception and recent piecemeal attempts to update it. This includes developing questions that define context rather than employing

highly abstract, empty signifiers, as well as a greater focus on intrasubjective ambivalence. It is argued that the greater precision of this approach would help improve the predictive power and policy relevance of empirical findings.

The Standard, Ideological Conception of a Process Preference

The *standard conception* of the nature of a process preference is that it is ideological, namely characteristically abstracted, coherent and normative. This is a result of process preferences research almost universally adopting models-based approaches to conceptualising the content of process preferences. A recent systematic review argued the literature is characterised by its fragmentation (König, Siewert, and Ackermann 2022), however, it is evident from its findings that this is fragmentation within a models-based approach. There is little co-ordination on which models are deployed and how, but models dominate. This is also apparent in the two largest attempts to create comprehensive batteries of survey questions on process preferences. In both cases items are selected for their capacity to tap different models of democracy (see: Hernández 2016; Hibbing et al. 2021). The aim of this section is not to discuss the content of these different models, but to explore how the ubiquity of this approach to content has encoded certain ontological assumptions about what a process preference is into the research field. To do this it is, however, necessary to give a brief overview of different models approaches.

Figure 1: Three Models-Based Approaches to Process Preferences



The models approaches can be divided into three broad strands (summarised in Figure 1). There are many more models in use than just these three strands (see: König, Siewert, and Ackermann 2022), but these are the ones where we find multiple publications from a variety of authors replicating the same approach. The oldest strand situates preferences on a bipolar dimension between two alternate models of political system preferences: democracy and autocracy. It is closely related to questions from the World Values Survey. More recent research has progressed beyond a singular conception of democracy, with a *models of democracy* approach coming to predominate the literature (see: Bengtsson 2012; Ferrín and Kriesi 2016; Font, Wojcieszak, and Navarro 2015; Gherghina and Geißel 2017, 2018; Goldberg, Wyss, and Bächtiger 2020; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Kriesi, Sarris, and Moncagatta 2016; Landwehr and Steiner 2017; Pilet et al. 2020), within which two dominant sub-strands can be identified. The first is connected with the European Social Survey's (ESS) "Europeans' Understandings and Evaluations of Democracy" Module, containing 19 items that attempt to differentiate between models of liberal, social and direct democracy (Ferrín and Kriesi, 2016; Hernández, 2016; Kriesi et al., 2016; Oser and Hooghe, 2018; Quaranta, 2018). The

second approach has been a direct reaction to Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (2002) *stealth democracy thesis* and is driven by debates between advocates and sceptics of more participatory and deliberative conceptions of democracy. It also tends to employ three models of democratic preferences: representative-led, citizen-led or expert-led (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Bengtsson, 2012; Font *et al.*, 2015; Gherghina and Geißel, 2017, 2018; Pilet *et al.*, 2020), corresponding to models of representative democracy, participatory or direct democracy, and stealth democracy or technocracy.

This concern to understand which model of process political actors prefer has naturally been accompanied by the assumption that process preferences are model-like in nature. It connects both to influential works in democratic theory and political attitudes. The idea of models of democracy that defines two of the strands is a direct translation from normative democratic theory (e.g. Habermas 1994; Held 2006), where models of democracy are abstract, coherent, normative conceptions of democracy. Though we should be sceptical about simply applying conceptualisations from democratic theory to political psychology, there is a tradition in political science of interpreting preferences in this ideological fashion, with Converse's (1964) work on belief systems in mass publics a particularly influential touchstone. Converse conceived of belief systems in ideological terms, defined by the coherence of their attitudinal elements (1964, 3). He famously showed that large majorities of citizens do not possess these belief systems. This has been an important point of departure for the process preference literature, especially since it was for a long-time assumed that process preferences were even less likely to exist than policy preferences (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Font *et al.*, 2015; Bengtsson and Christensen, 2016; Ferrín and Kriesi, 2016).

The two most in-depth considerations of the ontology of process preferences from scholars working with the *standard conception* – Hernández (2019) from the liberal/social/direct models approach and Bengtsson (2012) from the representative-/citizen-/expert-led models approach – are both in direct conversation with Converse. Hernández explicitly adopts Converse's "political belief systems" as his analytical framework for understanding "democracy belief systems". The aim of both studies is test whether Converse was right, by examining whether European citizens do express consistent ideals about democracy, "to study the extent to which people's preferences display logical and coherent patterns in line with theoretical expectations" (Bengtsson 2012, 47). Both studies challenge Converse's findings. As Bengtsson puts it, responses to survey questions, "were not random. Rather we find fairly distinct and logical patterns. Future attempts to grasp people's preferences towards different decision-making procedures should therefore not be considered as vain endeavours" (2012, 63). These quotes are useful in highlighting that a core aim of research on process preferences has been to demonstrate that people possess these kinds of abstract, coherent, normative preferences. Non-ideological response is simply random noise that is not worth investigating. This has had pervasive effects in structuring methods for collecting data on process preferences and the way this data is analysed.

The aim to identify, abstract, coherent, normative preferences can be clearly observed in the survey items that are adopted. These are almost universally constructed to tap normative concerns at a very high level of abstraction. All of the process preference questions in the aforementioned ESS rotating module begin with the phrase "how important do you think it is for democracy in general..." (emphasis in original) – for example, "how important do you think it is for democracy in general... that citizens have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums?". This is not restricted to one survey but pervades survey approaches throughout this field. Survey respondents across a number of countries have been asked, for instance, to choose between whether they think "ordinary people should make political decisions" or "popularly elected

representatives should make political decisions” (Bengtsson 2012, 54; see also: Font, Wojcieszak, and Navarro 2015; Gherghina and Geissel 2018). A new battery of questions includes other examples like, “politicians shouldn’t be expected to compromise” (Hibbing et al. 2021). In each of these cases we find very abstracted constructions of political phenomena – such as “political decision” – absent of any kind of context.

The *ideological conception* also influences how this data is then analysed. This includes the predominant adoption of analytical approaches, such as factor analysis and latent class analysis, that are intended to group variables or respondents into one of the models, based on consistent patterns in responses. It even affects what data gets included and how variables are constructed. In an article by Ferrín and Hernández to examine preferences for consensus versus majoritarian democracy, for example, any respondents who expressed that their preference was not abstractedly ideological by replying that “it depends on the circumstances” were removed from the analysis (Ferrín and Hernández 2021, 214 fn.6). In addition, in discussing the construction of their response variable, Gherghina and Geissel (2018, 7) articulate how they “use an approach that allows the identification of consistent preferences. Consequently, the dependent variable of this study is dichotomous to make sure that the preferences for decision-makers are mutually exclusive”. Adopting these kinds of data collection and analysis pre-emptively excludes the possibility of finding forms of contextuality, conditionality and ambivalence.

The influence of the *ideological conception* is not limited to the positivist quantitative approaches that dominate this literature; it is also present in studies that start from a constructivist orientation and adopt more qualitative research approaches. This includes studies that explicitly aim to remain close to the phenomenological experience of the research participants, such as Carlin (2018), Dryzek and Berejikian (1993), and Frankenberger and Buhr (2020). Despite their very different epistemological starting point and methods, these studies still end up using their data to articulate a set of abstracted models of democracy. They contain a critique of the more predominant survey approaches for creating these models top-down, rather than out of the subjective perspectives of the participants, but there is no interrogation of whether their participants’ ontological experience of process preferences should be understood in terms of abstracted models of democracy. This is simply taken as given. As such, the prevalence of the *ideological conception* cannot be solely attributed to the predominance of a single research paradigm, but is more deeply ingrained throughout the field of process preference research.

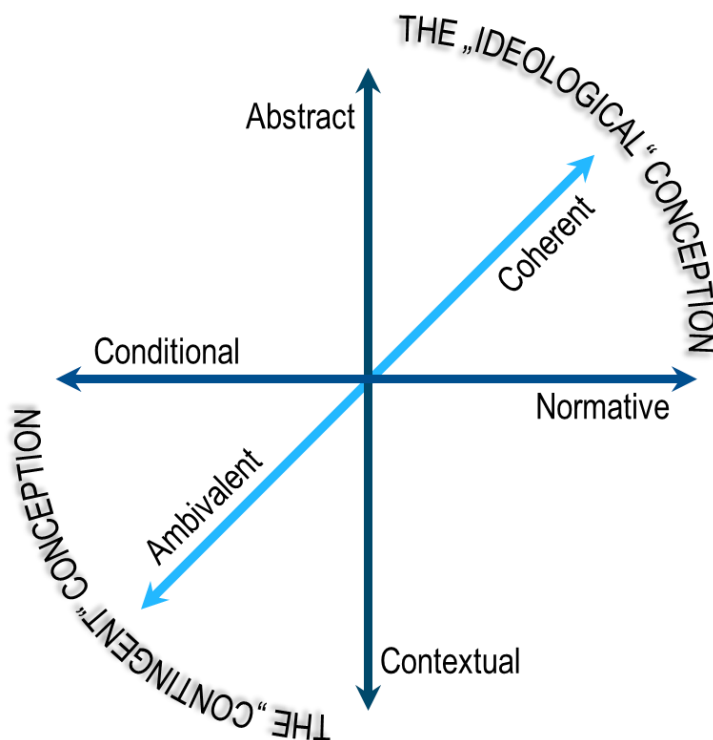
In summary, there is a *standard, ideological conception* of the nature of a process preference that is implicitly in use across a wide swathe of the empirical literature, and which exerts powerful effects on how process preferences are researched, in ways that constrain what is likely to be found. Yet, despite its ubiquity, this conception that process preferences should be by definition ideological – thus characteristically: 1) abstract 2) coherent and 3) normative – largely remains unexamined. The next sections outline a multidimensional approach to conceiving a process preference, using it to elaborate an alternative, contingent conception that challenges these assumptions.

A Multidimensional Approach

The multidimensional approach structures process preferences according to three dimensions. Each dimension captures one of the assumptions of the reconstructed ideological conception that process preferences should be abstract, coherent and normative (see Figure 2). However, it is a substantial revision of how process preferences are normally understood from this perspective in two important

ways. The first revision is the adoption of three dimensions rather than a single dimension. Following Converse, preferences have usually been constructed in relation to a single dimension of ideological coherence, “We define a belief system as a configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint.” (1964, 3). This has filtered into the process preference literature, with both the aforementioned works by Hernandez (2019) and Bengtsson (2012) animated by the same concern with coherence, employing it as the defining feature of a process preference. Coherence is adopted in one of the dimensions in the multidimensional approach, but it is joined by abstraction and normativity, which the reconstruction of the ideological conception showed are also core to this way of thinking about the nature of a process preference.

Figure 2: The Multidimensional Approach



The second revision is to view these concepts as one end-point of the dimension, rather than as the defining qualities of a preference. The ideological conception views any preferences that are not characterised by ideological coherence as, in essence, non-preferences. Converse, for example, constructed five categories ordered in terms of their levels of coherence, calling the top level “ideologues”, proceeding down to “no issue content” – and arguing that the large portion of the electorate that fell into the lower categories “do not have meaningful beliefs” (Converse 1964, 51). Instead of automatically viewing preferences that are low on abstraction, coherence and normativity, as non-preferences, the multidimensional conception theorises the other end of the dimensions. A lack of coherence may not signal non-preferences but ambivalent preferences for example. This opens up the possibility of ontologically different kinds of process preferences. In addition to ideological process preferences that are highly abstract, purely normative and coherent, there is an alternative, contingent conception of a process preference, characterised by high levels of contextuality, conditionality and ambivalence. This provides a framework for interpreting findings from recent empirical studies that are increasingly demonstrating the importance of contextual

specificities and strategic conditionalities. The next sections elaborate these new concepts of contextuality, conditionality and ambivalence, in the process building the alternative contingent conception.

Contextuality

Contextuality is concerned with determining the right level of abstraction for understanding the normative element of process preferences. Is the normative core of a process preference highly abstract and generalisable across contexts, or is it contextually specific? Can we ask questions about “democracy in general”, for example, or do we have to specify whether it is local- or national-level democracy that is under consideration? Similarly, should we ask about support for referendums, or must it be specified whether the referendum is binding or consultative? The *ideological conception* operates on the assumption that it is the former – for instance, asking survey respondents whether, “politicians shouldn’t be expected to compromise”, assumes that people have non-situational specific preferences for compromise that they apply to a general category of people called politicians. This generalised preference for or against compromise is then supposed to provide some predictive power for understanding how the respondent will appraise situation-specific compromises of politicians. This section argues that contextuality is much more important element of process preference than has until now been assumed.

There is increasing evidence from cognitive neuroscience that the brain does not process concepts in isolation from situational information, but engages in *situated conceptualisation* (Yeh and Barsalou 2006; Barsalou 2009). When the brain processes a concept it simultaneously activates neural systems that represent situational information about that concept. In addition, this process of conceptualisation is dynamic: a concept is differently conceptualised in different situations, depending on what is appropriate for the situation (Yeh and Barsalou 2006; Barsalou 2009). The neuroscientist Lisa Feldmann Barrett (2017) provides a vivid example: if you were asked “what fish would you like?” then you would construct the concept of fish quite differently if you were in a pet store compared to if you were in a restaurant. These inescapable features of cognitive processing have important implications for researching process preferences, as a simple thought experiment can demonstrate.

Imagine you are now completing a survey on process preferences and you are asked whether you agree or disagree that “ordinary people should make political decisions”? Are you able to process this question without narrowing down the abstracted concept of “political decisions” to a specific class of political decisions? Perhaps you implicitly thought of national-level political decisions. It is unlikely that you thought about transnational or workplace politics, though there is nothing in the question that rules out these possibilities. The same process could be repeated for the other highly abstracted concepts that are present in such questions, like “ordinary people”, “politicians” or “compromise”, which are not possible to process without connecting them to some situational specific information. Omitting the situational information from the question does not enable us to identify a generalised preference, it only conceals which situational information is salient for the respondent.

Some recent works have begun to highlight the importance of contextualities, articulating an idea of *contextual variations* in process preferences (Dean 2016; Werner 2020). Nevertheless, this framing as contextual variation is conceptually problematic because it implies a conceptual hierarchy, whereby a higher-level, abstracted normative conception is adapted from context to context in

order to produce more specific normative preferences around this abstracted core. When contextualities are tightly defined as normative specificities (and not conflated with the non-normative conditionalities that are outlined in the next section of this article), then it becomes apparent how this idea is conceptually incoherent. Take, for example, a now regularly studied form of process contextuality: the bindingness of the outputs of a participatory process (Rojon, Rijken, and Klandermans 2019; Bedock and Pilet 2020; Goldberg 2021). While a general preference for direct democracy could explain support or lack of support for both consultative and binding referendums, it cannot explain differential support for a binding referendum and a consultative referendum. In this case, there is no higher-level general preference that then varies by context – someone simply has a preference for a binding referendum or a consultative referendum. The same is true for all the other types of normative contextualities. If I have a normatively-based preference for referendums on constitutional issues but not everyday politics, or on the national-level but not the local-level, then it does not make sense to conceive of my support for referendums on the constitutional issues as driven by a generalised preference for direct democracy, since then my lack of support for referendums on other issues is inexplicable. This is not restricted to specific processes, such as referendums – it is also true, for instance, that a preference for a majoritarian electoral system and rejection of a consensual one cannot be explained by a generalised preference for representative democracy.

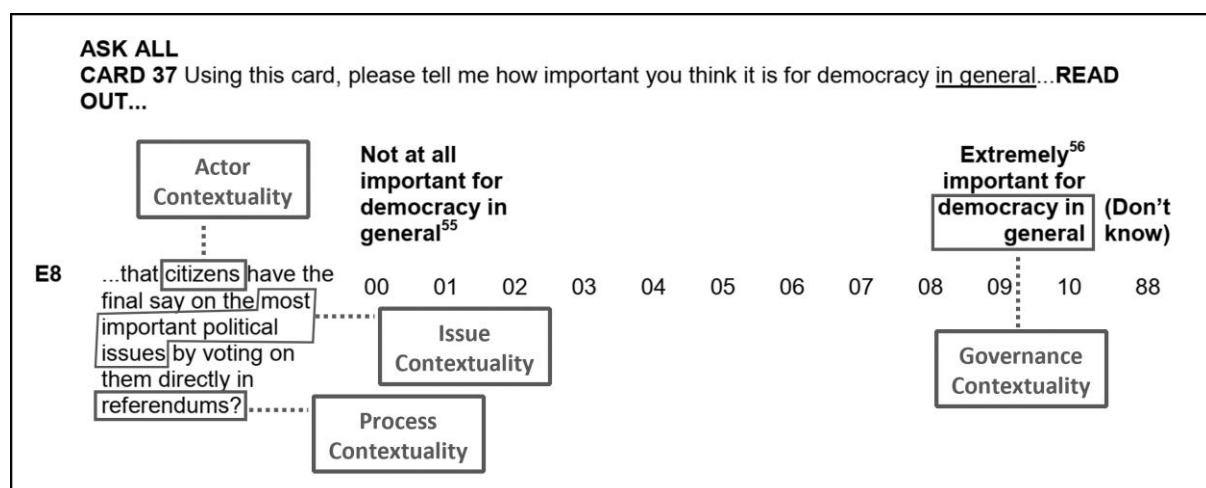
This conceptually hierarchical understanding of process preferences is likely attributable to the goal of distributing people into one of a set of abstract models. From this perspective, the first question is to understand whether someone is a direct democrat, a representative democrat or a stealth democrat and only then investigate what variety of direct democracy, representative democracy or technocracy is favoured. However, this reification of theoretical models of democracy runs into several issues. It underplays the diversity of potential options within the categories of direct and representative democracy, and that these may be just as intensely contested as between category preferences. There are many different manifestations of direct democracy (el-Wakil and McKay 2020), as well as alternative preferences for representative decision-making – for instance, between majoritarian and consensus systems (Ferrín and Hernández 2021). It may be that these distinctions are hierarchically ordered – that people have a top level for preference for representative democracy or direct democracy and it is only then the more fine-grained distinctions come into play. However, this should be investigated rather than assumed. It is not implausible that preferences could violate this conceptual hierarchy. There are also reasons to doubt that people's preferences naturally proceed hierarchically from the abstract to more specific. Research on policy attitudes has found, for example, that there is little correspondence in citizens' support for abstract welfare principles and specific welfare programmes (McCloskey and Zaller 1984). There is tentative evidence that a similar dynamic applies to process preferences from VanderMolen's attempt to compare support for stealth democracy items in the abstract with the same items reframed to refer to specific government institutions, finding "Stealth preferences do not translate from the abstract to specific cases" (VanderMolen 2017, 695).

There are thus a range of reasons – psychological, conceptual and empirical – that suggest process preferences are contextually rather than abstractedly normative. If our brains developed to construct concepts contextually, and there are both conceptual and empirical problems in deriving contextualised preferences from highly abstracted questions, then it is necessary to recast approaches to researching process preferences with a focus on understanding them as contextually normative phenomena. This could also have the advantage of tracking more closely real acts of reasoning about political process. After all, political actors are rarely faced with the problem of articulating a generalised preference for political decision-making, but with how they want decisions

to be made on specific issues by specific institutions. To pursue this endeavour requires an understanding of the salient normative contextualities around which process preferences are structured.

I propose that there are four primary forms of contextuality, which I will call: actor contextuality, governance contextuality, issue contextuality, and process contextuality. A number of these contextualities have already been invoked in the above discussion, and there are several recent empirical studies that either implicitly or explicitly investigate the importance of some of these contextualities in process preferences (Dean 2016; Ferrín and Hernández 2021; Goldberg, Wyss, and Bächtiger 2020; Neblo 2015; Pilet, Bol, et al. 2020; Rojon, Rijken, and Klandermans 2019; Werner 2020; Wojcieszak 2014). These studies formed the starting point for constructing a framework of contextualities that goes beyond the existing focus on *ad hoc* dimensions, which is a necessary step for more systematic empirical investigation of the contextual nature of a process preference. In Figure 2, the four contextualities are situated in relation to the aforementioned ESS question on whether referendums are important for democracy, with the aim of demonstrating that they are comprehensive in capturing the forms of potential contextuality in this question. Though this question is abstractedly framed, exploring the contextualities in relation to it will help to illuminate the definitions of the different forms.

Figure 2: Four Forms of Contextuality



Issue Contextuality

Issue contextuality is the only one of the four where the ESS question already includes contextual specification. Issue contextuality is the notion that, rather than having a singular preference for a system-level mode of political decision-making, people's process preferences may be constructed in relation to the kinds of issues that are to be decided upon. In the ESS question, the respondent is asked about referendums "on the most important political issues", which is a different question to asking about referendums on "all issues", or simply "issues". It is not difficult to imagine a respondent who rates referendums on the most important political issues as extremely important for democracy changing their response if the question was altered to read "all political issues". This would entail that the respondent's preference for referendums is constructed in light of an issue contextuality, namely *issue importance*. This appears to be implicitly recognised in the literature, as different studies vary the question in ways that are consonant with their theoretical preconceptions.

The ESS survey's option to support referendums for important issues fits with the authors' theoretical preconception that direct democracy is additive to liberal democracy. However, this question is not so useful for identifying those who might see referendums as an alternative to representative politics; thus, in Font, Wojcieszak, and Navarro, who start from a models as alternatives approach, the proposition becomes "Organise referenda frequently" (2015, 167). Nevertheless, despite these variations in question design, there has been no systematic comparison of whether issue importance structures support for referendums.

Issue importance is not the only issue contextuality. The most researched issue contextuality is issue complexity. Following Wojcieszak's (2014) influential article, there have been a few studies that examine whether preferences for participation differ for "easy issues" that are personal, emotive and moral, and "hard issues" that are societal, distant and technical (e.g. Dean 2016; Landwehr and Harms 2019; Werner 2020). Werner (2020) found that two thirds of her respondents switched their support for the use of referendums between easy and hard issues, though she attributes this switching primarily to instrumental concerns, and it is not clear if normative concerns about the suitability of participation on hard issues itself played a significant role. Dean (2016) similarly found that public administrators spontaneously raised the technical complexity of the policy issue as a determinant of whether they welcome public participation or not. Issue complexity thus appears to be a relevant concern for process preferences, at least in relation to preferences for participatory politics and policy-making processes.

A third type of issue contextuality is the level of contestation that surrounds an issue – is it highly politically charged or not? Dean (2016) identifies this as a separate dimension of contextuality that his participants spontaneously raised in relation to their preferences for participatory governance processes. Nevertheless, for the most part, it has been bundled together with the other elements of issue contextuality. The definition of "easy issues" as those that are "rooted in ongoing conflicts over longstanding values" (Wojcieszak 2014, 920) bakes an element of contestedness into the concept of issue complexity. This is problematic because it is possible for an issue to be technically simple and at the same time politically uncontroversial. Issue contestedness should be separated out from these other elements. This brings us to three types of issue contextuality – importance, complexity and contestedness – that are likely to be salient concerns when people form their process preferences.

Actor contextuality

Actor contextuality is the notion that process preferences will be constructed in relation to concerns about who is empowered to use those processes. In some cases, as with the question in Figure 2 from the ESS, this is essentially the question of who should form 'the public'. In this question, the respondent is asked about "citizens" having the final say through referendums. Citizens may seem like a relatively uncontroversial choice, but the practice of actual referendums belies this. In the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, for example, resident non-citizens were empowered to vote and non-resident citizens were excluded, whilst in the Brexit referendum resident non-citizens were excluded, as were long-term non-resident citizens, but short-term non-resident citizens could vote. The two also had different minimum age requirements – 16 for the Scottish Independence Referendum, but 18 for the Brexit Referendum. Not only do these two referenda, conducted at a similar time under concurrent legal systems, have quite different franchises, in both cases, these decisions proved subject to much contestation with arguments that they unfairly excluded people from taking part in decisions that affect them. These debates highlight how process preferences are constructed in light of actor contextualities – for example, replacing "citizens" with "residents" in the ESS question could result in different preferences towards referendums.

The difference in the minimum age qualification between the referendums also highlights that, even when a term like “citizens” is employed, it is implicitly taken to refer to a restricted set of citizens. The development of representative democracy has largely been conducted in terms of battles about where that line is drawn. At one time, it would not have been unusual for most people who read “citizens should have the final say” to conceive only of white, adult, propertied, male citizens. There are still live normative debates concerning whether non-citizens, prisoners and children should be included within the public, as well as, from the epistocratic perspective, whether there should be knowledge-based restrictions on who is empowered to vote. This suggests that it is possible that respondents each construct the category of citizens in their own way when they answer such questions, hiding significant differences in preferences.

The centrality of the question “who should govern?” to the process preference literature, means that actor preferences have been intensively studied (see: Hibbing et al. 2021). However, the impetus to categorise into broad models has led to a too tight connection between actor and process – for example, support for citizen decision-makers entails support for referendums, support for representatives goes with support for elections and support for expert decision-makers is support for technocracy. It is possible that the two are more flexibly related. The rise of sortition based processes has shown the possibility for citizen representatives, for example, and support for expert ministers does not exclude the possibility that people want these experts to be elected. Recognising the importance of actor contextualities can therefore redress this too tight coupling of actor and process.

Governance contextuality

Governance contextuality is the idea that process preferences will be constructed with regard to specific domains and level of governance that the process is to be employed within. With the ESS survey question, the governance context is left unspecified through the use of an extremely abstract object of reference, “democracy in general”. This is typical of process preferences more generally which normally employ broad terms such as “our government” or “political decisions”. It would easily be possible to specify the governance level within this question, simply by adding the word “national” or “local” before “democracy”. It seems that in most cases the national-level is implicitly being invoked. This is particularly so with the ESS questions on democracy in general, which are paired with mirror questions on “how democracy is working in [country]” (where the [country] is replaced with the respondents actual country, say, Germany). As such, it is likely that when respondents answer the normative questions they do so with the national-level in mind. The assumption is that we can then unproblematically generalise these preferences for the national-level to other governance levels. The case of Germany, where referendums are banned on the federal-level, but relatively common at state- and local-levels, demonstrates the problems of this assumption. The lack of specificity concerning governance level means there does not appear to be a satisfactory way for someone who supports the status quo in Germany to respond appropriately to the ESS question.

Both the institutional practices of actual democracies as well as arguments in democratic theory provide reasons to believe that governance domain and level would matter for process preferences. Actual democracies do not apply uniform decision processes throughout all of their governance domains. The executive, legislative, judiciary and administrative domains are organised in their own specific ways, based on different claims to legitimacy, with different relationships to the citizen.

Since this domain is almost uniformly¹ left unspecified, we have little idea which domain survey respondents think of when they answer process preference questions, or whether they all think about the same domain. Moreover, theories of democracy have often stressed the importance of governance level to their proposals. In particular, participatory democrats have always claimed that the kinds of radically decentred governance they prefer is more feasible in smaller political units, hence support for the principle of subsidiarity (see: Pateman 1970). This is backed up by empirical research, that identified governance level as core contextual factor in participatory governance preferences (Dean 2016). Theoretical debates concerning transnational governance also make the argument that there is little political will to directly translate the institutional arrangements of the democratic nation state to the transnational context (e.g. Dryzek, Bächtiger, and Milewicz 2011). Many of the important debates concerning the organisation of democracies are therefore debates about governance contextualities, thus these should not be left unspecified when researching process preferences.

Process Contextuality

Process contextuality is concerned with all the specific aspects of process design that are pertinent for constructing a process preference. Some of these have already been mentioned in the discussion of the broader concept of contextuality. With the ESS question, for instance, is it meaningful to ask for a preference towards “referendums”, when referendums can take many different forms? Scholars interested in support for democratic innovations have begun to factor these fine-grained differences into their approach. Pilet et al. (2020) introduce a distinction between binding referendums and consultative referendums – demonstrating this distinction is important for some respondents but not others. Goldberg, Wyss, and Bächtiger (2020) similarly find this binding/advisory distinction is important for public legitimacy perceptions of deliberative mini-publics. The decisiveness of the process is therefore an important process contextuality, at least in relation to participatory processes.

It is beyond the scope of this article to map the full range of possible process contextualities, particularly since some are specific to particular processes. Whether participant selection should be randomly-selected or self-selected has, for example, been an important process contextuality regarding citizen deliberation initiatives, but this participant selection contextuality only seems to be relevant for invited participatory initiatives. Similarly, an important process contextuality for electoral systems – whether they are parliamentary or presidential – does not translate to thinking about participatory processes. Nevertheless, there are some process contextualities that seem to be important in normative debates across multiple process types. Decision rules are one example. The question of whether referendums on constitutional issues should be decided by simple- or super-majorities is a matter of contestation, as is the question of whether election results should be calculated proportionally or by first-past-the-post. Gaps in an individuals’ support between these different types of referendums or electoral systems could be just as big as the gap between their support for direct democratic versus electoral processes.

Conditionality

The concept of conditionality is concerned with the non-normative considerations that shape people’s process preferences. The second assumption of the *standard conception* is that process

¹ VanderMolen (2017) is one exception, differentiating between stealth democracy beliefs in relation to executive, legislative and independent commissions.

preferences are purely normative; however, political actors do not construct their preferences in a normative vacuum. They must take account of what is possible within the social situation they inhabit, as well as their strategic political interests – for example, whether a referendum is going to deliver one’s desired policy. These appraisals of what is realistic and considerations of strategic goals introduce several forms of conditionality into process preferences. Conditionalities are therefore the instrumental and pragmatic concerns that exist alongside the normative dimension of a process preference, which can be a substantial source of instability in the normative dimension.

This differentiates conditionality from contextuality. As described in the previous section contextuality is simply a specification of nuance in the normative preference, not a constraint upon it from outside. It may appear to be a source of variation, but this would only be due to a limitation in the level of measurement, such as differences between an individual’s expression of support for referendums compared to consultative referendums resulting from the way they contextually constructed the initial concept of referendums as binding referendums. The normative aspect of the preference for binding referendums is stable but was simply not originally captured. Now compare this to the most commonly studied conditionality, ‘policy outcome strategy’ (see: (Arnesen et al. 2019; Goldberg, Wyss, and Bächtiger 2020; Landwehr and Harms 2019; Werner 2020)). This conditionality works quite differently to contextualities. It is the idea that even when someone has a normative preference in the abstract, as this preference is translated to real politics it will fluctuate according to its fit with the strategic concern to realise desired policy goals. As such, whilst I argued above against understanding contextualities as “contextual variations” (as in Dean 2016; Werner 2020), I agree that conditionalities should be understood in this way. Part of the value of this new approach is therefore in separating out the two concepts of contextualities and conditionalities that have normally been conflated with one another. Given this agreement with the current approach to conditionalities, there is less need to elaborate the concept here than for contextuality, which challenges current approaches. There is, however, a need to more comprehensively identify relevant conditionalities, since, just as with contextualities, these have largely been investigated in an *ad hoc* fashion. Below I outline three types of conditionalities: strategic, appraisal and informational.

Appraisal conditionality

The first element of appraisal conditionality – process appraisal – is so obvious that it is often overlooked. Process appraisal is the idea that any normative process preference is conditional upon some minimally acceptable standard of quality for that process. When people express a preference for electoral democracy, implicit in that preference is a set of standards for how they believe electoral democracy operates, and if real instantiations of electoral democracy depart significantly from those standards, then the abstract normative preference will not translate into support for the actual institution. This is implicit in the survey item from the ESS that asks about the importance of “free and fair elections”, rather than just elections. A preference for electoral democracy does not entail support for any elections, no matter if the constituencies are gerrymandered to bias the results and opposition candidates are subject to intimidatory violence. Similarly, when people express a preference for referendums, it is conditional on the referendum being carried out to certain quality standards. It is not a preference for referendums where the question is so poorly phrased that nobody knows what they are voting for and the most affected people are excluded from the franchise. Though this condition is obvious it is integral to understanding the relation between normative preferences in the abstract and legitimacy perceptions of the institutional realisations of those preferences.

The second element of appraisal conditionality is political system appraisal. People’s preferences are not simply shaped by what is normatively desirable in the abstract but also what is normatively

desirable in light of their appraisals of how the political system is actually operating, and the two can diverge. The formation of process preferences should be viewed as, at least partly, problem-based (see: (Werner, Marien, and Felicetti 2020). The role of systems appraisal in the formation of process preferences has been at the heart of the stealth democracy versus deliberative democracy debate. The stealth democracy thesis is that people generally do not want to be involved in politics and prefer to leave it to experts, but in practice they participate because of low trust in the actual government. Whereas deliberative democrats have responded that people do want to be involved in political and policy deliberations, but only when they positively appraise government officials as worthy of their time investment (see Neblo 2015 for a detailed discussion). Using some innovative conditional survey questions, Neblo (2015, 127) found that only 30 per cent of his respondents possessed participation preferences that were invariant to this conditionality, with the other 70 per cent expressing that their likelihood to participate was conditional on their appraisal of the extent to which the political system is corrupt and irrational.

Strategic conditionality

I have already alluded to one form of strategic conditionality: outcome strategy. The “winner-loser gap” is an extremely widespread concept in political science, encapsulating the notion that normative process preferences are conditioned upon instrumental concerns about whether they produce desirable outcomes or not. The finding that winners of elections tend to show higher levels of support for representative democracy than the losers is one of the most replicated findings in political science. This same concern has begun to filter into research on support for other means of conducting democratic politics, with studies on referendums (Werner 2020) and deliberative mini-publics (Goldberg, Wyss, and Bächtiger 2020) also finding evidence that instrumental considerations matter.

The second form of strategic conditionality is what I call positional strategy: the concern to preserve or improve one’s individual or group power position. As Hansen and Goenaga put it, we may expect “that members of different social groups emphasize the importance of those parts of the democratic system that effectively empower them” (2021, 5). Positional strategy is not only important for thinking about social groups. In particular, it is likely to be a concern for elite political actors. We may, for example, expect politicians from smaller parties to prefer proportional representation systems and consensus politics since they improve the extent of influence that their party can wield on government. Similarly, democratic reforms that redistribute power from existing decision-makers are likely to be resisted by these officials, particularly when that decision power is constitutive of their professional self-identity (Dean 2016). Power position could be viewed as simply a means to an outcome, and majority versus minority position is often invoked in researching outcome strategy conditions (e.g. (Ferrín and Hernández 2021; Landwehr and Harms 2019; Werner 2020). Nevertheless to conceive it as subordinate to outcome strategy would be to underestimate the importance of power as an end in itself. Moreover, it is possible for the two to diverge, with a process perhaps increasing an individual or group’s likelihood to realise a specific outcome in a single instance but weakening their more generalised power position. Accordingly, it is important to recognise both as separate forms of strategic conditionality.

Informational conditionality

Informational conditionality is comprised of two elements: the option set and the depth of knowledge of those options. This informational conditionality applies both to the research context and real decision-making. The option set is simply speaking the idea that if you give me a choice between an apple and an orange, then you may get a different answer than if I was offered a choice between an apple, an orange and a banana. Given the constraints of the research process, it can be

difficult to provide research participants with a full set of options and sufficient information on those to judge them, so it is important to be alert to whether research findings are in part an artefact of informational conditionality. There is also potentially a gap between option sets in research and real decision contexts. Research contexts provide the opportunity to offer wide-ranging sets of normative options no matter their feasibility of realisation in the real world. Whereas real world option sets will usually be shaped in relation to the *status quo* and may not offer the same diversity of options. This gap is again a potential a source of instability in the translation of normative preferences into actual political preferences and behaviours.

The knowledge condition refers to the fact that most people have unequal knowledge regarding different political processes and that their preference will be partly shaped by this level of knowledge. One example is that support may be conditional on familiarity – for example, people living in consensus democracies show higher support for consensus democracy and likewise for majoritarian democracies (Ferrín and Hernández 2021). This means that, particularly with regard to relatively unknown democratic innovations and loosely embedded democratic practices, preferences could be quite sensitive to the introduction of additional information, especially evidence of high-profile successes or failures. We see this in practice with the wave of deliberative citizens assemblies across Europe that have followed the much-admired Irish Constitutional Convention, and the declining public support for referendums following the UK's referendum on leaving the European Union (e.g. see: Rojon and Rijken 2021).

Ambivalence

Ambivalence is the idea that there will be predictable, reasoned intrasubjective conflict within an individual's process preference. The focus of the process preference literature in demonstrating, contra Converse (1964), that individuals have coherently ideological preferences has meant the *standard conception* defines preferences in one sense as an absence of ambivalence. Anything that is not ideological coherence is simply interpreted as evidence of non-attitudes. This means that there is an almost total absence of investigation of ambivalence in political process preferences. It has been noted in some recent empirical studies (Bengtsson 2012; Neblo 2015), but only as an aside. This is surprising because the ambivalent character of other political attitudes has long been recognised and systematically investigated (see: Hochschild 1981; Lynd 1948; Merton 1976). This section argues that, because the sociological and psychological experience of democracy combine to make ambivalence unavoidable, this needs to be incorporated into our conceptual apparatus for understanding process preferences.

Democracy is both complex and contested. There is no settled agreement on the meaning of democracy as an ideal, but instead a plethora of competing propositions for different ways to reconcile its inherent tension between norms of equality and autonomy. Its real world instantiations encompass a variety of institutions and practices, functioning according to different logics, and often attempting to realise a plurality of normative visions. It is no surprise then that democracy is one of the original "essentially contested concepts" (Gallie 1956). Democratic organisation thus involves many dilemmatic choices between competing democratic principles. A particularly live democratic dilemma in current debates is the tension between protecting freedom of speech and protecting people from harmful speech. Another obvious, unavoidable dilemma is the trade-off between realising popular sovereignty and protecting minority rights, which is at the heart of debates between liberals and republicans. Moreover, such dilemmas do not disappear when we select a preferred model of democracy. Specific models of democracy are characterised by their own

dilemmas, for example; one tension in the rise of deliberative democracy has been the extent to which quality of deliberation, which is easier to realise in smaller groups, should take precedence over achieving maximal participation in deliberation. Relating to these dilemmas is an inescapable feature of forming a process preference.

That democracy is a contested concept is widely accepted in the process preference literature, and a key driver behind the shift to investigating preferences as instances of models of democracy. The aforementioned dilemmas also do not go unrecognised. There are plenty of questions that aim to capture them – the ESS, for instance, includes a direct question on the free speech debate that frames it exactly as a dilemma between allowing or preventing extreme views. The issue is that the research objective of these questions is only ever conceived intersubjectively, as conflicts between people with different preferences. The aim is to find out how many people favour one side versus the other side of the debate – for example, to find who prioritises free speech and who prioritises reducing harm. There is little consideration of whether individuals may be internally conflicted on these issues (they may value both free speech and protecting people from harm) and that this might be important in and of itself. The structure of the dilemmatic ESS questions actually make it impossible to express this kind of ambivalent response pattern. The effect is to force people into response patterns that are suggestive of stark ideological divisions, when most people may be relatively conflicted but in slightly different proportions.

When a concept is essentially contested, then it will not only be contested between individuals and groups but also within individuals. Since internal thought processes will tend to reproduce public debates (see: Billig 1991), preferences are likely to be intrasubjectively dilemmatic. Social Representation Theory has proposed that preferences have a stable core but a flexible periphery (Gaskell 2001), in which case ambivalence would only be restricted to the marginal elements of an individual's preference, however; Dean (2016, p174) challenged this idea, empirically demonstrating how participation preferences were ambivalent on even core ideas. Because political process as a sociological object is contested on its core features, ambivalence will reach right to the heart of a process preference. To square this predictable and reasonable ambivalence with the wealth of evidence showing that people do express coherent process preferences, we can turn to Zaller and Feldman's (1992) theory that political attitudes are probabilistic in orientation. On this account, a process preference would consist in a probabilistic predisposition to resolve such dilemmas in a particular direction in situations of forced choice. People can choose, even if substantial ambivalence lies behind those choices. Still, we should not discard that background ambivalence and assume that the fact that individuals can make consistent choices entails that they should be sorted into neat ideological boxes.

Trying to reconcile the tensions between different democratic norms is not the only potential source of ambivalence. The kinds of gaps that people may encounter between their process goals and substantive policy goals that were discussed in relation to strategic conditionalities are also likely to produce ambivalence. In addition, explorations of ambivalence on other topics have shown that we will find widespread ambivalence when there is a disjuncture between strongly-held values and the possibilities of realising those values (Hochschild 1981; Merton 1976). I therefore theorise that there are three forms of ambivalence that are pertinent to understanding political process preferences: normative ambivalence, strategic ambivalence and appraisal ambivalence.

Normative Ambivalence

Normative ambivalence comes in two varieties. The ambivalence created by tensions between democratic norms has already been discussed above, with examples such as prioritising free speech

or the protection from harmful speech and prioritising popular sovereignty or individual and minority rights. There are myriad others, for example, whether elected representatives should act as a trustee or delegate of their constituents. In addition, a democratic political system does not only contain dilemmas between democratic norms, but also between democratic norms and other process values, such as good governance norms of security and efficiency. These tensions are built into all democratic systems – they are most clearly evident at moments of crisis, where normal practices of democratic input and oversight are frequently curtailed in the service of streamlining decision-making processes. The process preference literature frames this tension between the technocratic impulse for good governance and the democratic impulse for popular control as a choice between different governance systems – as technocracy versus representative or participatory democracy. However, it is more plausible that people experience this tension as a dilemma for which a delicate balance between competing process norms should be found, rather than a discrete choice between ideological models, where one must be chosen to the exclusion of the others.

Strategic Ambivalence

Strategic ambivalence mirrors the forms of strategic conditionality outlined above. Process preferences and policy goals can be aligned or in conflict. If someone has purely instrumental process preferences, then we would not expect divergence to produce ambivalence, the process preference will simply shift to whatever is most likely to realise the policy goal. However, when someone possesses a normative process preference that diverges from their policy goals, we should expect to find ambivalence, as the respondent weighs up means to reconcile them or decides whether to prioritise process values or policy goals. Similarly, positional goals and process preferences can be aligned or divergent, and when they diverge, we should expect to find ambivalence. The ambivalence introduced by instrumental calculations could thus be an important factor in whether those who espouse normative process preferences act to defend or realise them.

Forms of positional ambivalence are further complicated by the fact that we occupy a number of different roles in society and it can be possible for these to also conflict. Merton enumerated this as one of his six primary forms of sociological ambivalence (1976, 11). It is something Dean (2016) observed in researching the participation preferences of key stakeholders in participatory governance projects. Despite asking questions in the abstract, the participants would often stress that they were responding in a particular capacity. Some even spontaneously raised this ambivalence between different roles, saying the response that they provided was their response as a professional and this diverged from their preferences as a citizen, as one respondent put it, “talk to me on a Saturday, I’d be very different” (Dean, 2016, 172). This ambivalence thus highlights the importance for researching process preferences of acknowledging the context in which questions are asked. When context is left unspecified, we do not know if respondents are answering from the perspective of a single social role on a single issue context, or whether they are switching between them and what this means for consistency and inconsistency in responses.

Appraisal Ambivalence

Appraisal ambivalence is again connected to the forms of appraisal conditionality described above. People are likely to experience ambivalence when their normative process preference conflicts with their appraisal of the potential for its successful realisation within the existing political system. Hochschild calls this the “tension between perceived pragmatic limits and an ideal vision” (1981, 245), whilst Merton describes it as the “disjunction between culturally prescribed aspirations and socially structured avenues for realizing these aspirations” (1976, 12). It is the tension between *ought* and *is*. This disjuncture is important one for researching political process preferences because

it is such a prevalent feature of current experiences of democracy, where widespread support for the ideal of representative democracy is accompanied by widespread dissatisfaction with how representative democracy is operating in practice – a form of ambivalence that (Celis et al. 2021) call “resentful affectivity”. Appraisal ambivalence should not be confused with having conditional process preferences. It is possible to have a set of conditional preferences based on political system appraisals without them being ambivalent, for example; clear preferences that when the political system looks like X, I have preference A and when it looks like Y I have preference B. Ambivalence is when the gap between the normative preference A and the possibility of its realisation leads the respondent to vacillate in their response to preference A. As such, its most likely behavioural outcome is a lack of activity.

A second form of appraisal ambivalence is found in the difficulty of rendering differentiated experience and beliefs into simple abstract attitudes and preferences. This is mainly a methodologically induced issue. It lies in the fact that much research on process preferences asks us to make a simple aggregated judgements about complex and differentiated phenomena. Survey respondents are, for example, often asked to make aggregate judgements about diverse groups of actors – to say whether they think that politicians are corrupt or citizens are competent to take decisions. These kinds of questions are apt to produce ambivalence because the object of reference is itself diverse (some politicians are corrupt, some not). This is particularly so when frequency is unspecified and it is unclear whether the answer is supposed to depend on assessment of whether *some*, *most* or *all* of the stated group is corrupt/competent. Responses to these questions are thus likely to be quite volatile depending on the salient frame for the respondent in that particular moment of time.

Table 1: Overview of Dimensions of the Contingent Conception

| CONTEXTUALITY | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| Issue Contextuality | Actor Contextuality | Governance Contextuality | Process Contextuality |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issue Complexity • Issue Contestedness • Issue Importance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actor Affectedness • Actor Identity • Actor qualification | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governance Domain • Governance Level | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisiveness • Decision rules • + Process Specific Factors |
| CONDITIONALITY | | | |
| Appraisal Conditionality | Strategic Conditionality | Informational Conditionality | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process Appraisal • Political System Appraisal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outcome Strategy • Positional Strategy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Option Set • Option Knowledge | |
| AMBIVALENCE | | | |
| Normative Ambivalence | Strategic Ambivalence | Appraisal Ambivalence | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicting Democratic Norms • Conflicting Democratic and Ademocratic Process Norms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicting Process and Policy Goals • Conflicting Process and Positional Goals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict between Ideal and Pragmatic • Conflict between Abstract and Specific | |

Implications of the Multidimensional Approach

This article has proposed that the nature of a political process preference is multidimensional, composed of three dimensions that respectively run from abstraction to contextuality, normativity to conditionality and coherence to ambivalence. This multidimensional approach was then used to develop a contingent conception of a process preference that challenges the idea that process preferences should be ideological in nature. The idea of multidimensionality and the introduction of the three concepts of contextuality, conditionality and ambivalence all have significant implications for how we should conceive of and research political process preferences.

Conceiving of process preferences as multidimensional creates the possibility of examining whether there is diversity in their nature as well as their content. The *standard, ideological conception* only allows for the possibility of understanding differences in the content of people's preferences. The nature of everyone's preference is presumed to be the same, because nature and content are inextricably linked. If your preference does not fit an ideological model, then you just have no preference, not a different kind of preference. The *multidimensional approach* instead says that there are three scalar dimensions along which individuals may vary – for example, some may have highly specified contextual preferences, whilst others have more abstracted preferences. This allows that some may possess ideological preferences, whilst others have more contingent preferences. As such, it provides a framework for understanding empirical evidence that people do respond differently to contextualities and conditionalities (e.g. Neblo 2015; Bedock and Pilet 2020; Werner 2020).

The key implication of contextuality is to rethink the starting point for researching process preferences. The process preference literature has started from the perspective that its task is to identify generalised preferences at a high level of abstraction. When recognised, contextualities are conceived as variations on this general preference. I have argued this is based on unwarranted assumptions of conceptual hierarchy and that process preferences are formed in relation to contextualities. Omitting them from questions does not help us identify a generalised preference, it only hides which contextualities are salient. The implication is that individuals do not possess a single abstract process preference (for instance, for direct democracy), but rather have a multiplicity of more contextually specific preferences. This forces a reconsideration of approach. Instead of beginning with questions at a high level of abstraction, from which few robust inferences can be drawn, and then introducing contextualities, we should begin from the contextually specific and infer abstraction from aggregating consistencies across contextualities.

The identification of different forms of conditionality challenges the way that conditionality has been constructed in recent studies, where it is consistently framed as an investigation of whether preferences are "intrinsic" or "instrumental" (e.g. Landwehr and Harms 2019; van der Does and Kantorowicz 2021; Werner 2020). The *multidimensional approach* suggests that we should be sceptical that individuals' preferences are either intrinsic or instrumental, rather than a complex amalgam of both. Moreover, conditionalities are not only instrumental, strategic concerns but also include pragmatic concerns. As such, the salient cleavage is less between intrinsic and instrumental preferences, than between ideal preferences (what one wants if free from pragmatic and strategic constraints) and applied preferences (what one wants given the pragmatic and strategic constraints of the real situation). Again, the task is not to find out who has ideal and who has applied preferences; most people will possess both. What is important is whether there are gaps between them, and which one dominates in informing perceptions of legitimacy. It is, nevertheless, rarely made clear to survey respondents on which of these bases they are expected to respond.

The recognition of ambivalence also requires rethinking existing approaches to empirical research. First, it requires an acknowledgement that ambivalence is an understandable feature of responding to a contested object and is something worth analysing – it should not be dismissed as noise, or non-attitudes on the expectation that preferences are by definition coherent. This would necessitate much more focus on the intrasubjective, to complement the intersubjective focus of current research. Understanding ambivalence is vital in providing robust inferences on some of the key objectives of the process preference literature. When we only have data about the ideological differences between individuals, without any understanding of whether those individuals are internally conflicted, then we are at risk of underestimating procedural consensus and overplaying polarisation. Moreover, ambivalence is a key factor in whether normative preferences translate into behaviour, as Hochschild (1981) demonstrated in explaining why, despite wide-spread egalitarian values in the US, American's do not push for redistributive policies. Ambivalence has important consequences for whether people act on their preferences or remain passive, so understanding levels of ambivalence would help to improve the power of research on process preferences to predict political behaviours.

The final contribution of the *multidimensional approach* is its more comprehensive theorisation of the contextualities, conditionalities and ambivalences that constitute a contingent conception of a process preference than any work to date (summarised in Table 1). The discussion of conditionality and contextuality demonstrated that several empirical studies have already chipped away at the ideological conception. However, there has been no theoretical framework to guide this work, thus it has proceeded piecemeal, by identifying one or two sub-dimensions of conditionality or contextuality to investigate. The *multidimensional approach* places this endeavour on a firmer, more systematic theoretical footing. Many empirical studies focus on trying to assess one subdimension, however; it is difficult to study one subdimension in isolation as many of them interact with each other. If a study includes one subdimension as the independent variable without taking account of other relevant subdimensions, then this has implications for the inferences that can be drawn. As an example, different preferences for executive, legislative and judicial branches of government (as in VanderMolen (2017)) could be due to a governance domain contextuality, a system appraisal conditionality, or a combination of both. Simply varying the governance domain in the question gives us no basis for identifying which, and this should be factored into any inferences drawn from this data. The *multidimensional approach* can be a guide for more robust study design and analytical interpretation.

In summary, the *multidimensional approach* of the nature of a process preference can provide a new foundation for empirical research on process preferences, one with many new points of departure. This is not simply a case of proposing new research questions for existing data. Since the ontological assumptions of the *ideological+ conception* of a process preference are ingrained into current practices of data collection, the new approach necessitates developing new methods. To understand contextualities requires the operationalisation of survey items that define context rather than adopting highly abstract, empty signifiers. To investigate ambivalence requires data and methods of analysis that can map variability within persons, not only variability between them. These developments would better track the psychological and sociological phenomenology of what it is to hold a process preference. A more fine-grained understanding would also make findings much more policy relevant, improving the predictive power of research on process preferences for explaining political behaviours and public perceptions of institutional legitimacy. This would help address the key concern driving the expansion of this field of enquiry: the need to understand which democratic reforms can best remedy declining perceived legitimacy and trust in democratic institutions.

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