

What is the Nature of a Political Process Preference? The 3Cs Framework as a New Multidimensional Conceptualization.

Rikki Dean, Goethe University Frankfurt

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Abstract

Rising concerns about dissatisfaction with democracy have recently driven a rapid expansion in empirical research of political process preferences. Drawing robust inferences about how people want to be governed requires a thorough understanding of the nature of these process preferences, but this research has largely proceeded without an explicit conceptualization of their ontology. Studies instead implicitly adopt a conception of process preferences as ideological models. This article proposes the 3Cs Framework as a new approach to understanding the nature of a process preference, based around three dimensions of contextuality, conditionality and coherence. This multidimensional approach provides a unifying framework that both better specifies the ideological conception and integrates insights from recent empirical work suggesting a more contingent conception of process preferences. It clarifies several conceptual confusions in the current literature, and demonstrates the need for new approaches to data collection to grasp the complex nature of these preferences.

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

Word Count: 9938 Words

How do we want our political system to function? Who should make political decisions, and through which means? Growing concerns about declining support for representative democratic institutions have driven a rapid expansion of empirical literature examining political actors' responses to these questions in recent years (see: König, Siewert, and Ackermann 2022). It follows two important developments. First, the pioneering finding that process is a separate dimension of political attitudes, not simply reducible to the policy dimension, and a significant factor in democratic dissatisfaction (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002). Second, a concomitant growing interest in whether process reforms, such as the introduction of more referendums or deliberative initiatives, could address this democratic malaise. Despite this rapid proliferation of empirical studies of process preferences¹, there has been relatively little consideration of the conceptual foundations of this research. It means there is currently no systematic answer to the question of the nature of these process preferences. What does it mean to possess one?

The existing literature has defaulted to conceiving the question of process preferences as, in essence, one of choosing between alternative ideological models – for instance, between preferences for direct democracy versus representative democracy (for example: Bengtsson 2012; Ferrín and Kriesi 2016; Font, Wojcieszak, and Navarro 2015; Gherghina and Geissel 2017; 2018; Goldberg, Wyss, and Bächtiger 2020; Hernández 2019; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Kriesi, Sarris, and Moncagatta 2016; Landwehr and Steiner 2017; Pilet, Talukder, et al. 2020). The assumption that process preferences should be as abstracted, coherent and normative as the models from democratic theory reifies those theories as if they are real psychological phenomena. It takes for granted that there are 'direct democrats', who should, for example, support the introduction of referendums across varying governance

¹ Throughout this article I use the term process preferences as a broad term of reference for any preferences about ways of governing, which includes but is not restricted to support for specific process designs like referendums.

levels and issue contexts. A raft of recent empirical studies have chipped away at this assumption, demonstrating that many of their respondents' process preferences are contextual and conditional – for example, holding preferences that are sensitive to issue context (Bertsou 2022; Dean 2016; Wojcieszak 2014) and instrumentally conditional on realizing desired policy goals (Landwehr and Harms 2019; van der Does and Kantorowicz 2021; Werner 2020). However, these findings have not yet fed into a new conceptualization of the nature of a process preference. So, if process preferences are not simply theoretical models of democracy transposed to our brains, what are they?

This article proposes the *3Cs Framework* as an answer. It outlines a new multidimensional approach to conceptualizing the nature of a process preference based upon three dimensions of contextuality, conditionality and coherence. This three-dimensional conceptual space opens up the possibility that there is diversity in the nature of process preferences, not only their content. It enables the 3Cs Framework to integrate into a single, unifying conceptual schema both the standard, ideological conception and the recent empirical findings of contingency in process preferences that challenge it.

The article proceeds in three main sections. Given the lack of attention to conceptual foundations in the process preference literature, the first section reconstructs the standard, ideological conception of a process preference, which underpins much current research, but which has never been fully articulated. It demonstrates how this implicit conception has had powerful effects in structuring the research questions that scholars pose and the methodological approach to researching them in ways that preclude investigation of other alternatives. The second section of the article then introduces the 3Cs Framework, outlining the three dimensions of contextuality, conditionality and coherence, showing how they advance current understanding and help address some conceptual confusions in the existing

literature. The third and final section focuses on the conceptual and methodological implications of the new framework. It suggests several changes are needed in empirical research practices – from more contextual specificity in survey questions to greater attention to intrasubjective ambivalence – in order to provide robust answers to the core questions that animate this field of enquiry.

The Standard, Ideological Conception of a Process Preference

There is surprisingly little explicit theorization within the process preference literature concerning the nature of its object of study: what exactly does it mean to have a process preference? Nevertheless, there is a standard conception that is implicitly in use, which has powerful impacts on how the content of process preferences are defined, as well as the methods of data collection and analysis that are deployed to study them. This section simply aims to reconstruct this standard conception, making explicit what has previously largely been an implicit assumption.

To understand the standard conception of a process preference it is necessary to begin with Converse's (1964) influential work on belief systems in mass publics, since this has been the primary touchstone from the broader political psychology literature for the study of process preferences. Converse conceived of belief systems 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). 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, because, for the study of process preferences to have any value, it is necessary that people actually have meaningful preferences. This concern was particularly acutely felt by those who study process preferences, since it was for a long-time assumed that they 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).

We find this concern at the very center of the two most in-depth considerations of the ontology of process preferences, respectively Hernández (2019) and Bengtsson (2012). Both are 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 to 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). Each study challenges 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). However, in trying to demonstrate, contra Converse, that people do have meaningful process preferences, these studies also encode his criteria for assessing what counts as a meaningful preference. It is simply accepted without discussion that process preferences should be defined by their ideological coherence. Non-ideological response is perceived as random noise that would not be worth investigating.

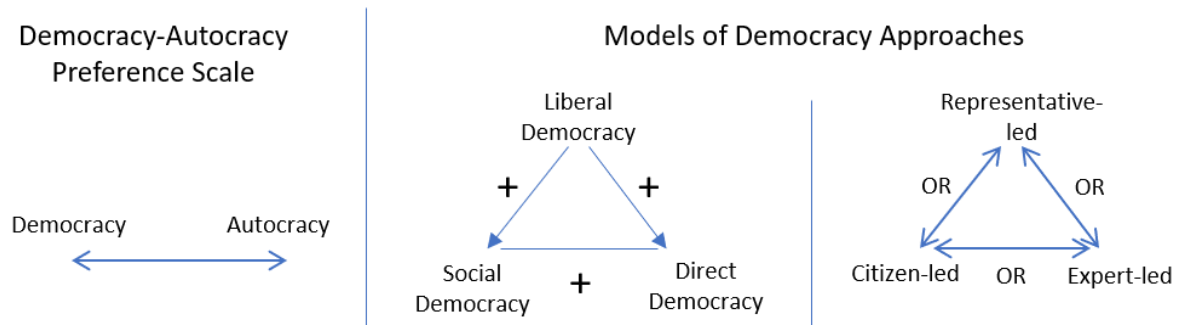
This assumption about the nature of process preferences has also been reinforced by a significant trend in normative democratic theory of recent years to outline alternative *models of democracy* (Habermas 1994; Held 2006), which are themselves abstract, coherent, normative conceptions of what the political system should look like. There is an easy match between the ontological assumption that a preference is defined by ideological coherence and these models. Process preferences research has been dominated by models-based approaches

to conceptualizing the content of process preferences. Though a recent systematic review argued the literature is characterized by its fragmentation (König, Siewert, and Ackermann 2022), 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.

These models approaches can be divided into three broad strands (summarized 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 this 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.

Figure 1: Three Models-Based Approaches to Process Preferences



This Standard Conception has had profound effects on how process preferences are empirically studied. It is deeply encoded into methods of data collection. The two largest attempts to create comprehensive batteries of survey questions on process preferences select questions for their capacity to tap different models of democracy (see: Hernández 2016; Hibbing et al. 2021). The aim to identify, abstract, coherent, normative preferences can also be clearly observed in the nature of 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 Standard Conception also influences how this data is then analyzed. The primary task for analysis is conceived as one of grouping variables or respondents into one of the models, based on consistent patterns in responses, and analytical techniques such as factor analysis and latent class analysis are selected for their capacity to do this. 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). Similarly, 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”. As such the Standard Conception is baked into the data collection and analysis, pre-emptively excluding the possibility of exploring non-ideological understandings of process preferences.

The influence of the Standard 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, normatively coherent 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 the terms of the Standard Conception. This is simply taken as given. This ontological understanding of a process preference is thus so deeply ingrained throughout the research field that it even unites research paradigms that are usually considered to be ontologically opposed.

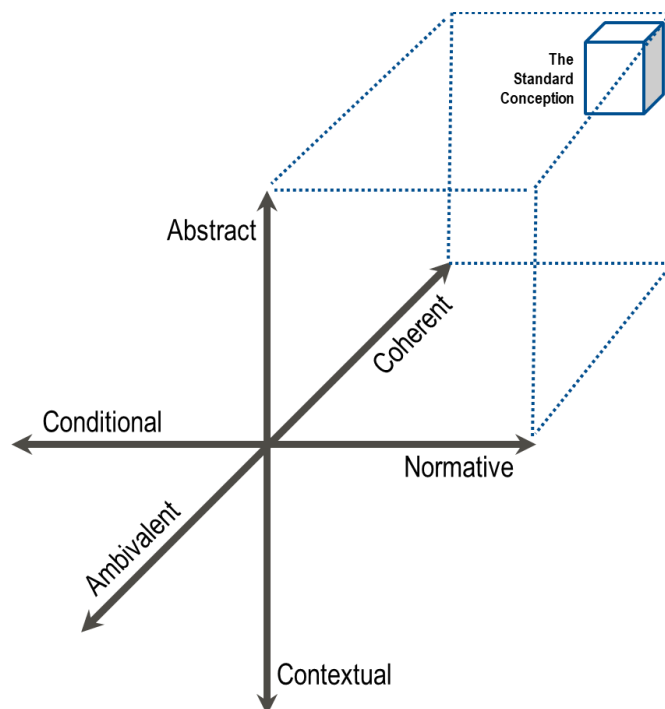
In summary, there is a Standard Conception of the nature of a process preference that is implicitly in use across a wide swathe of the empirical literature, and which exerts powerful effects on how process preferences are researched, in ways that constrain what is likely to be found. Yet, despite its ubiquity, this conception that process preferences should be by definition ideological – thus characteristically: 1) abstract 2) coherent and 3) normative – largely remains unexamined. Now this Standard Conception has been made explicit, it is possible to enquire whether this is the only way to understand the nature of a process preference. The next section develops a multidimensional approach to conceiving a process preference, which demonstrates that the Standard Conception only covers part of the potential conceptual space.

The 3Cs Framework: A Multidimensional Conceptualization of the Nature of a Process Preference

The primary argument of this article is that rather than viewing process preferences as defined in terms of ideological coherence, we should instead conceive of them as located in a three-dimensional space. I call this the 3Cs Framework, since it is based on three dimensions

of *contextuality*, *conditionality* and *coherence*. Each dimension captures an assumption of the reconstructed Standard Conception; however, it is a substantial revision of how process preferences are normally understood from this perspective. Whereas the Standard Conception has seen coherence as the defining feature of a process preference, the reconstruction showed that there were two other embedded ontological assumptions: that process preferences are purely normative and highly abstracted. These assumptions are captured respectively by the conditionality and contextuality dimensions (see Figure 2). Outlining these dimensions is not only intended to provide a fuller articulation of the Standard Conception but also provide a conceptual framework for understanding and integrating more recent empirical findings that challenge this conception.

Figure 2: The 3Cs Framework, with the location of the Standard Conception



Before beginning with the definitions of the three dimensions, it is important to specify that they should be understood differently from Converse's coherence dimension. Converse 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). The three dimensions of contextuality, conditionality and coherence are not intended to distinguish between meaningful process preferences and non-preferences. Instead of automatically viewing preferences that are low on abstraction, coherence and normativity, as non-preferences, the 3Cs Framework theorizes 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. The Standard Conception only fills part of the possible conceptual space; the part at the abstract, normative and coherent ends of the dimensions in Figure 2. There is room for other kinds of process preferences, ones that are contextual, conditional and ambivalent. It is this that enables the integration of findings from recent empirical studies that are increasingly demonstrating the importance of contextual specificities and strategic conditionalities into a single conceptual framework. The next three subsections elaborate the three dimensions, how they relate to one another and how they provide a new perspective on process preferences.

The Contextuality Dimension – From Abstract to Contextual

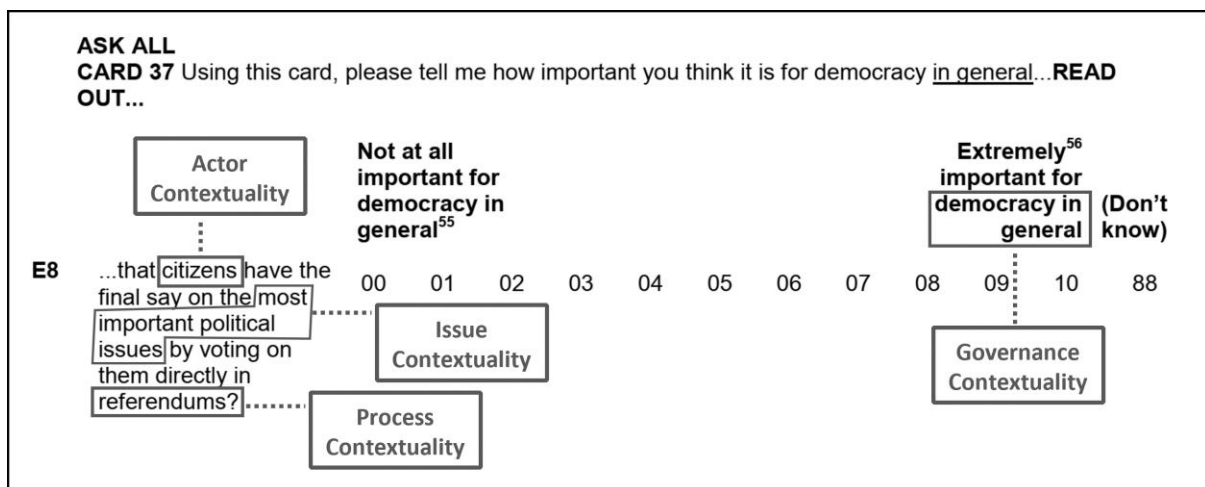
The Contextuality Dimension is concerned with determining the right level of abstraction for understanding process preferences. Are process preferences highly abstract and generalizable across contexts, or are they contextually specific? Can we ask questions about "democracy in general", for example, then generalize to a variety of different contexts, or do we have to specify whether it is local- or national-level democracy that is under consideration? The Standard Conception assumes that it is the former, as can be clearly seen in the common

survey questions that are used to research process preferences. Asking survey respondents 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), assumes that people have a highly abstracted preference for a featureless political actor to take decisions across a generalized set of political decisions. Asking them 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 generalized 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. However, what if people do not have a generalized preference that is applied to specific contexts, but instead possess particular preferences generated from contextual specificities?

To demonstrate this other end of the Contextuality Dimension, and how it differs from an abstracted conception of process preferences, it can be useful to consider how such survey questions may be different if they were created from this perspective. Since it has been deployed across both predominant models of democracy approaches, let’s take the question on referendums from the ESS that is intended to judge support for direct democracy (see Figure 3 below). The question is framed to tap an abstract preference for referendums, assuming that this preference is constant across all types of referendums, different levels of governance, different types of political issues and with different franchises. However, it is possible that preferences for referendums vary in relation to issue context, actor context, governance context and process context. Let’s briefly take each of these in turn.

The question actually already contains an issue context, though it is quite an abstracted specification. 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”. Issue contextuality is simply the notion that this variation may matter. 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 this case, does it matter that respondents rate referendums in relation to “the most important political issues” and would it substantially change their responses if the question was altered to read “all political issues”. If so, this would entail that their preferences for referendums is constructed in light of an issue contextuality, namely *issue importance*.

Figure 3: Four Forms of Contextuality



The second potentially important contextual factor embedded in this question is an 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 this question, the respondent is asked about “citizens” having the final say through referendums. Citizens may seem like a relatively uncontroversial choice, but the franchise of actual referendums is often

more complex than 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 UK Brexit referendum some resident non-citizens could vote (those from Commonwealth countries) but others were excluded, as were long-term non-resident citizens, but short-term non-resident citizens could vote. The term “citizens” also hides some potentially important actor contextualities – for example, on minimum age requirements, or whether prisoners are included in the franchise. Actor contextuality is thus about whether people support certain processes when they empower some set of actors, but not others – for instance, they support referendums that give citizens over 18 years old the final say on political issues, but not ones that give it to residents over 16.

Third is governance contextuality. This is the idea that process preferences may 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 the abstract object of reference, “democracy in general”. This is typical of process preferences research more generally which normally employs broad terms such as “our government” or “political decisions”. A potentially important form of governance contextuality here would be governance level. Do, for example, people support referendums on the national level but not on the local level, or vice versa? For most research, the national level is implicitly invoked. As such, it is likely that when respondents answer such questions they do so with the national level in mind. If process preferences are abstract, then it would not be problematic to generalize from support for referendums at the national level to other levels of governance, whereas if they are contextual, then governance level would matter. Actual democratic practice again gives us reasons to investigate whether governance contextualities are important, because democratic institutions are not uniformly structured across governance levels and domains. In Germany, for example, referendums are prohibited

on the federal-level, but relatively common at state- and local-levels, and a citizen of an EU country is empowered to vote in local and EU elections when resident in another EU nation state, but not the national elections. Anyone who is supportive of the status quo with regard to referendums in Germany or elections in the EU would thus have a contextual rather than an abstract preference on this subdimension.

The fourth and final consideration is process contextuality. This concerns the specific aspects of process design that may be pertinent for constructing a process preference. Is it meaningful to ask for a preference towards “referendums” when referendums can take many different forms? If people have an abstracted preference for referendums, then yes, but if their preference is structured by process contextualities, such as whether the referendum is consultative or binding, then the type of referendum would need to be specified. Scholars interested in support for democratic innovations have begun to factor these process contextualities 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 - and Goldberg, Wyss, and Bächtiger (2020) similarly find this binding/advisory distinction is important for public legitimacy perceptions of deliberative mini-publics. These contextualities could also be just as relevant for electoral systems as for participatory process, for example, the distinction between majoritarian and consensus systems (Ferrín and Hernández 2021). People thus have process contextual rather than process abstract preferences when they support some instantiations of a political process but reject others.

This article is not the first to note these contextualities. As the empirical literature has matured it has increasingly addressed itself to some of these questions, with several recent empirical studies either implicitly or explicitly investigating the importance of some of these

contextualities in process preferences (see: 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; VanderMolen 2017). Nevertheless, there remains no conceptual framework with which to make sense of these findings. Attempts to develop a conceptual grounding have framed these as *contextual variations* in process preferences (Dean 2016; Werner 2020). This framing as contextual variation is, however, conceptually problematic because it: a) conflates contextualities with conditionalities (see the next section) and b) implies a conceptual hierarchy, whereby a higher-level, abstracted preference is adapted from context to context to produce more specific preferences around this abstracted core.

It is not the case that contextual preferences can be easily explained by or inferred from a higher-level abstract preference. Take, for example, the 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 the other types of contextualities. If I have a 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 generalized preference for direct democracy, since then my lack of support for referendums on other issues is inexplicable. This is again 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 an abstracted preference for representative democracy. It may be argued that contextualities are distinctions within a higher-level, abstract preference - that 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 favored. However, this should be empirically investigated rather than assumed. It is not implausible that preferences could violate this conceptual hierarchy.

The Contextuality Dimension, in summary, simply draws attention to questions about the level of abstraction that process preferences operate on. Should we, for example, conceive of process preferences as highly abstract, operating on a similar level to models of democracy, so that we see individuals as direct democrats whose support for referendums is relatively context invariant, or should we conceive of process preferences as constructed in relation to specific contexts, where people support specific kinds of referendums for specific groups of people, on certain issues but not others, at specific levels of governance? These contextualities are not conceived as instabilities or variations in the abstract preference (as in Dean 2016; Werner 2020), but as stable features of the preference – for instance, a person who has a contextual preference for referendums on the local level should always support referendums on the local level (all other contextualities and conditionalities remaining equal). The range of subdimensions that have been outlined – issue, actor, governance and process – mean that this dimension is itself more complex than a simple dichotomy between abstract and contextual, since preferences could be abstract on one subdimension and contextual on another – for example if people were to support referendums only on certain issues, but across all governance levels.

The Conditionality Dimension: From Purely Normative to Strategically and Pragmatically Conditional

The Conditionality Dimension is concerned with the extent to which process preferences are purely normative or shaped by strategic and pragmatic conditionalities. It was argued above that a second assumption of the Standard Conception is that process preferences are normative ideals absent of an appraisal of the actual political situation. This assumption is again evident in the ESS question on referendums, where respondents are essentially asked whether they think referendums are a good thing. The question does not contain any situational information that would, for example, enable them to judge whether referendums would further their strategic political interests, or appraise whether the referendums would be conducted to acceptable quality standards. The Conditionality Dimension directs us to consider the extent to which process preferences can be understood as pure process ideals free from strategic and pragmatic constraints or as applied ideals conditional upon strategic and pragmatic considerations external to process ideals.

Strategic conditionalities fall mainly into two types: outcome strategy and positional strategy. Individuals and groups do not only have process preferences they also possess preferences concerning desired outcomes and their own power position. Power position could be viewed as simply a means to an outcome, but this 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 realize a specific outcome in a single instance but weakening their more generalized power position. A process preference at the purely normative end of the Conditionality Dimension would be invariant to these strategic conditionalities, whereas a purely strategically conditional preference would switch support for a process depending upon whether it is likely to realize strategic goals or not, for instance

supporting referendums when one is in the majority but not when one is in the minority (e.g. Landwehr and Harms 2019; Werner 2020).

Appraisal conditionalities are not concerned with one's own strategic interests but with pragmatic assessments of the way the actual political system can realistically be expected to operate. The question here is whether process preferences pertain to a purely ideal realm or whether they are constructed in relation to the problems of the political system (see: Werner, Marien, and Felicetti 2020). A good example of the way political systems appraisals may influence process preferences is 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). Whichever way this debate is resolved, each thesis contains a claim that people's participation preferences are conditional on their appraisal of the trustworthiness of existing political institutions, whereas a purely normative process preference should not be affected by such concerns.

These conditionalities themselves are not a new discovery but conceiving of them as located on a dimension that runs from normative to conditional is a new intervention, one that challenges the way that conditionality has been conceptualized in recent studies. The "winner-loser gap" - 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 and encapsulates the notion that process preferences are conditioned upon instrumental concerns about whether they produce desirable outcomes or not. This same

concern has begun to filter into research on support for other means of conducting democratic politics, such as referendums (Werner 2020) and deliberative mini-publics (Goldberg, Wyss, and Bächtiger 2020). Nevertheless, these studies consistently frame investigations of strategic conditionalities as an examination of whether preferences are “intrinsic” or “instrumental” (e.g. Landwehr and Harms 2019; van der Does and Kantorowicz 2021; Werner 2020). This dichotomous conceptualization returns to the debate about whether people really have process preferences at all, or whether they are completely dominated by policy preferences – i.e. people want processes that deliver their desired policies. The Conditionality Dimension opens up the substantial conceptual space between purely ideal (intrinsic) or purely strategic (instrumental) process preferences. Going beyond this dichotomous intrinsic-instrumental conceptualization, it suggests that people may have separate process preferences and policy preferences and that these will intersect in complex ways. There is important conceptual and substantive difference between a process preference that is an intersection between a procedural ideal and strategic goal, than one which is purely strategic. We should be careful of inferring that because an individual is more likely to support a process that realizes their strategic goal that they would accept any process that realizes their strategic goal. The Conditionality Dimension provides a means to differentiate between the two.

The Conditionality Dimension is also useful in separating out conditionalities and contextualities, which are different from each other but are often conflated in the literature (e.g. Arnesen et al. 2019; Dean 2016; Werner 2020). The Contextuality Dimension only helps identify the level of abstraction or specificity of a preference – for example, does someone have a preference for referendums, or a preference for referendums on technically simple but not technically complex issues? The Conditionality Dimension is instead oriented towards whether the preference is founded on normative or strategic and pragmatic concerns. The two dimensions intersect because contextualities can be grounded in process ideals or strategic

and pragmatic constraints – i.e. I may think that referendums are not suitable for complex issues because it is problematic to reduce a complex issue to a yes/no vote (normative process ideal), or because the media in my country is incapable of communicating a complex policy debate (appraisal conditionality), or because my policy preferences on most technically complex issues are not shared by the majority of the population (strategic conditionality). In the first case, I would have a normative-contextual preference and in the second and third case a conditional-contextual preference. The multidimensional approach therefore does not only help illustrate how contextualities and conditionalities are different from one another, but also provides a means to understand the relationships between them.

The Coherence Dimension: From Coherence to Ambivalence

A version of a coherence dimension is already in play in the process preference literature (as discussed at length in the reconstruction of the Standard Dimension). Coherence is defined as ideological coherence between attitudinal elements – for example, an individual reporting high support for referendums should simultaneously report high trust in citizens capacities for political decision-making. The Standard Conception views this as a defining characteristic of what it means to hold a process preference. Individuals' attitudinal elements should add up to coherent process ideologies so that we can say, for instance, that one individual is a direct democrat and another is a liberal democrat. The Coherence Dimension employs this same understanding of coherence. Its innovation is to re-theorize the other end of dimension. Rather than viewing a lack of coherence as simply random variation indicative of non-attitudes, it posits the idea that the opposite of coherence is ambivalence. Ambivalence is the idea that departures from coherence may be because of predictable, reasoned intrasubjective conflict within an individual's process preference.

Democracy is both a complex and contested ideal. There is no settled agreement on its meaning, 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 realize a plurality of normative visions. It is no surprise then that democracy is one of the original “essentially contested concepts” (Gallie 1956). Democratic organization thus involves many dilemmatic choices between competing democratic principles. A particularly salient 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 realizing popular sovereignty and protecting minority rights, which is at the heart of debates between liberals and republicans.

A key driver behind the shift to investigating preferences as instances of models of democracy is this recognition that democracy is a contested concept and relating to these normative dilemmas is an inescapable feature of forming a process preference. Nevertheless, the focus on coherence has meant these dilemmas are only ever conceived intersubjectively, as conflicts between people with different preferences. Each individual should resolve the dilemmas in an ideologically coherent fashion and the aim is to find out how many people favor one side versus the other side of the debate – for example, to find who prioritizes free speech and who prioritizes reducing harm, who prioritizes popular sovereignty and who prioritizes rights. Ambivalence is the idea that internal thought processes will also tend to reproduce public debates (see: Billig 1991), so that preferences may be intrasubjectively contested. An ambivalent preference would be one that is internally conflicted because, for instance, a person wants to maximise free speech and protection from harmful speech, so vacillates between the two rather than becoming a free speech ideologue, who coherently always prioritizes free speech. Since ambivalence can be reasoned and strongly felt it is quite

different from the other end of Converse's coherence dimension, with its assumption that a lack of coherence equates to "no issue content".

Unlike the other two dimensions – where despite a lack of theoretical reflection on contextuality and conditionality, there is a rapidly expanding empirical literature oriented towards understanding them – there is an almost total absence of investigation of ambivalence in political process preferences². 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 work directs us towards an understanding of the Coherence Dimension that is deeper than simply dilemmas between abstracted norms on the level of models of democracy.

Normative dilemmas do not disappear when we select a preferred model of democracy. This is partly because specific models of democracy are characterized 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 realize in smaller groups, should take precedence over achieving maximal participation in deliberation. It is also because democratic process ideals may also conflict with process ideals associated with a broader idea of good governance, such as speed of decision-making. This is 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. This means that normative ambivalence comes in two varieties: conflicts between competing democratic process ideals and conflicts between democratic and ademocratic process ideals.

² Only five out of 160 studies that I reviewed contained a reference to ambivalence (Bengtsson 2012; Neblo 2015; Dean 2016; Celis et al. 2021; García-Espín and Ganuza 2017), and of these it was only a direct object of study for Dean (2016) and Celis et al. (2021).

Ambivalences do not only arise from purely normative conflicts but also the pragmatic and strategic considerations that formed the conditionalities of the last section. Both Robert Merton's (1976) and Jennifer Hochschild's (1981) influential studies of ambivalence highlighted that people experience ambivalence when their ideal clashes with their appraisal of the potential for its successful realization 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 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". We might then expect to find coherent process preferences when process ideals are aligned with the operations of the political system or realistic channels for reform, but ambivalent process preferences when they are deeply in conflict. Strategic policy and positional goals can, similarly, be aligned with one's process ideals or diverge from them, with the same implications for whether process preferences are coherent or ambivalent.

Despite these commonalities, it is important that ambivalence should not be equated with conditional process preferences. Conditionality and Coherence are two intersecting dimensions, which means that all combinations of the two are possible: preferences can be normative-coherent, normative-ambivalent, conditional-coherent and conditional-ambivalent. The Stealth Democracy thesis (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002) is one example of conditional-coherent preferences pertaining to political system appraisals. In theory a stealth democrat consistently has preference A (participate), when the political system looks like X

(untrustworthy), and preference B (don't participate), when it looks like Y (trustworthy). A purely strategically conditional process preference would also likely be coherent rather than ambivalent because process ideals will simply shift to whatever is most likely to realize the policy goal. A conditional-ambivalent preference comes out of the potential tension in the conditionality, for example when process ideals and policy goals diverge in a way that someone finds difficult to reconcile because they have a strong attachment to both, so they vacillate between which to prioritize.

In summary, the re-theorization of the Coherence Dimension from Converse's original conception points towards a neglected aspect of process preferences: their ambivalence. Its situation within the 3Cs Framework also expands upon previous works on ambivalence from other subfields, which has focused on articulating dimensions of ambivalence, but without connecting them to the other dimensions of a preference. Now the three dimensions have been described, the article proceeds to considering the conceptual and methodological implications of the new framework.

Table 1: Summary of the Dimensions and Subdimensions of the 3Cs Framework

	<i>Definition</i>
CONTEXTUALITY DIMENSION	The extent to which process preferences are contextually abstract or specific.
Issue Contextuality	Extent of sensitivity to aspects of issue context, such as <i>issue complexity</i> , <i>issue contestedness</i> and <i>issue importance</i> .
Actor Contextuality	Extent of sensitivity to who is empowered by the process, for example <i>actor affectedness</i> , <i>actor identity</i> or <i>actor qualification</i> .
Governance Contextuality	Extent of sensitivity to <i>governance domain</i> (e.g. legislative, administrative, judicial) or <i>governance level</i> (e.g. local, national, transnational).

Process Contextuality	Extent of sensitivity to specificities of process, such as whether a referendum is binding or advisory or whether an electoral system is majoritarian or consensus.
CONDITIONALITY DIMENSION	The extent to which process preferences are purely normative or strategically or pragmatically conditional
Appraisal Conditionality	The extent to which preferences are conditional upon pragmatic appraisals about qualities of the process or political system.
Strategic Conditionality	The extent to which preferences are conditional upon their likelihood of realising desired outcomes or improving power position.
COHERENCE DIMENSION	The extent to which elements of a process preference cohere or conflict.
Normative Ambivalence	Extent of alignment/conflict between <i>democratic process norms</i> , and between <i>democratic and ademocratic process norms</i>
Strategic Ambivalence	Extent of alignment/conflict between <i>process ideals and policy goals</i> or between <i>process ideals and positional goals</i>
Appraisal Ambivalence	Extent of alignment/conflict between <i>process ideals and the pragmatic appraisal of their possible realisation</i>

Conceptual and Methodological Implications of the 3Cs Framework

The 3Cs Framework, with its multiple scalar dimensions, creates the possibility for conceptualizing diversity in the nature of process preferences. The *Standard 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 identical, 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 3Cs Framework instead proposes that there are three scalar dimensions along which the nature of individuals' preferences may vary. It allows that some may possess ideological preferences (highly abstract, normative and

coherent), some may have contingent preferences (highly contextual, conditional and ambivalent), and others may have a mixture thereof.

This is not only a substantial departure from current conceptualizations of political process preferences, but also from theories of political attitudes more broadly conceived. Whilst there is a long and intense debate about the nature of a political attitude, these debates are largely conducted in terms the correct singular understanding of the nature of political attitudes. The orthodox conception of political attitudes – following Allport’s classic definition that “an attitude is a mental or neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual’s response to all objects and situations with which it is related” (1935, 810) – chimes with the Standard Conception of a process preference, as high on abstraction and coherence. It has been heavily criticized by a variety of different approaches from Social Representations Theory (Gaskell 2001) to Discourse Analysis (Potter and Wetherell 1987), which have articulated an alternative more contingent conception that is highly contextual, conditional and ambivalent. The 3Cs Framework, instead of understanding these as mutually exclusive alternatives that either nobody or everyone must possess, suggests that they may exist simultaneously. This concurs with increasing empirical evidence that people respond differently to the 3Cs, with some respondents shifting their preferences to conditionalities and contextualities whilst others’ answers are invariant to them (e.g. Neblo 2015; Bedock and Pilet 2020; Werner 2020), which would be difficult to explain if the nature of everyone’s process preferences is identical. The 3Cs Framework therefore attempts to locate different ontological approaches to political attitudes in relation to one another in a single conceptual space and in a way that also makes sense of otherwise difficult to understand empirical findings.

The 3Cs Framework is the first attempt to incorporate the insights from several recent empirical studies that have chipped away piecemeal at the Standard Conception into a single, comprehensive framework of the nature of process preferences (summarized in Table 1). The aim of this more comprehensive theorization is to provide a firmer, more systematic theoretical footing for this work. It has been shown throughout this article that bringing the 3Cs together in a multidimensional framework is essential for unpicking some conceptual confusions in this literature, which, for example, often conflates contextuality with conditionality and abstraction with normativity. It can also help to guide empirical strategy. The absence of a theoretical framework to guide research design has meant empirical work has proceeded by identifying one or two sub-dimensions of conditionality or contextuality to investigate. It is, however, 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 3Cs Framework can help identify the relevant factors for more robust study design and analytical interpretation.

The Framework also suggests pathways for redesigning approaches to data collection. The first section of this article argued that the dominance of the Standard Conception means it is ingrained into data collection, making it difficult to use existing survey data to investigate contextuality, conditionality and ambivalence. It is thus necessary to consider how data collection could be adapted, so that it interrogates the three dimensions. It is beyond the

scope of this article to give a full account, but I will begin the process with one implication from each dimension.

A key implication of the Contextuality Dimension is to turn attention to problems of the lack of specificity in survey question design. The process preference literature has started from the perspective that its task is to identify generalized preferences at a high level of abstraction and survey questions reflect this. However, if contextualities are important, then omitting them from questions does not help us identify a generalized preference, it only conceals which contextualities are salient. Imagine you are 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. This is consistent with increasing evidence from cognitive neuroscience that the brain does not process concepts in isolation from situational information, but engages in *situated conceptualization* (Yeh and Barsalou 2006; Barsalou 2009). This questions whether people are able to process the highly abstracted concepts that are present in current survey questions, like “ordinary people”, “politicians” or “compromise” without connecting them to some situational specific information. The implication of this is that, 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.

A key implication of the Conditionality Dimension is to highlight the problem of using highly abstracted questions as a proxy for normative support. There are now several studies using

sophisticated approaches to investigate strategic conditionalities in process preferences (e.g. (Landwehr and Harms 2019; van der Does and Kantorowicz 2021; Werner 2020), such as intrinsic versus instrumental support for referendums. It is quite common for these to use a generalized question, such as “There should be more referendums in Germany” (see: Landwehr and Harms 2019) to try to capture the intrinsic or normative element. However, the 3Cs Framework demonstrates that there is nothing inherently normative about abstraction. Abstract support could just as easily be attributable to strategic or appraisal conditionalities as to normative considerations. Therefore, to identify normative support it is necessary to develop questions that directly target it, rather than relying upon an assumption that normativity can be inferred from responses to abstract questions.

Finally, an implication of the Coherence Dimension is the need to develop empirical methods that enable the possibility of an ambivalent response. Democratic dilemmas do not go unrecognized in existing surveys – the ESS, for instance, included a direct question on the free speech debate that frames it exactly as a dilemma between allowing or preventing extreme views. However, the structure of the response categories gives no option for individuals to express that they are internally conflicted on these issues (they may value both free speech and protecting people from harm and struggle to reconcile them). The effect is to force people into response patterns that are suggestive of stark ideological divisions, when it is possible most people may be relatively conflicted but in slightly different proportions. One option is therefore to alter response categories on surveys. An interesting development in this direction is the adoption of a “both equally” response category for dilemmatic questions (as in: Renwick et al. 2022) Another is to combine survey methods with post-survey qualitative interviews to probe ambivalences (see: Hochschild 1981; Dean 2016).

To conclude, this article has attempted to address the neglect of the theoretical foundations of political process preferences by proposing a new multidimensional conceptualization of their nature: the 3Cs Framework. This Framework fully elaborates the Standard Conception of a process preference that is implicitly in use (but rarely explicitly articulated), while also demonstrating that this Standard Conception only fills a small part of the possible conceptual space created by the three dimensions. The expanded conceptualization enabled by the 3Cs provides an integrating framework for understanding cutting-edge empirical findings and for ensuring that future work is built upon a more systematic theoretical foundation. Together the three dimensions point towards the need for both more specificity and more focus on the intrasubjective in future research. When we only focus on eliciting highly abstracted ideological preferences, ignoring the other ends of the three dimensions, we are at risk of underestimating procedural consensus and overplaying polarization. Intrasubjective contextuality, conditionality and ambivalence are an important factor in whether people act on their preferences or remain passive, thus understanding them would provide a more robust basis for inferences about the relationships between preferences and political behaviors. The contextuality, conditionality and coherence dimensions can thus help to sharpen our empirical research tools in order to more robustly pursue the core questions of the field – on levels of procedural consensus, the extent to which process preferences are intrinsic or instrumental, how preferences translate into political behaviours, and which democratic reforms may increase perceived legitimacy and trust in political institutions.

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