Rejecting representation? Party systems and popular support for referendums in Europe

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A B S T R A C T

Under what conditions do citizens favor deciding political issues by popular vote? Models of support for popular vote processes usually consider the influence of individual attitudes such as political trust and interest in politics. But much less is known about the effect of institutional variables on support for popular vote processes. This article builds on research showing that disaffection with elected officials shapes support for referendums by considering the influence of the party system. First, an analysis of multilevel data from twenty-four European democracies indicates that individuals are more supportive of referendums in countries with fewer effective political parties. Second, a mediation analysis provides evidence that the number of parties influences referendum support through individual-level political trust and external efficacy. Where there are fewer viable parties, feelings that elected officials are unresponsive tend to increase popular support for referendums. These findings suggest a trade-off between available representation by political parties and support for direct influence over public policy.

Under what conditions do citizens support the use of referendums? Citizens' views of popular vote processes—a term that includes referendums as well as other processes that allow citizens to vote directly on policy issues (el-Wakil and McKay, 2019, 1)—are usually attributed to more foundational attitudes about politics. For instance, interest in politics, trust in elected officials, and populist attitudes have been shown to shape support for processes that increase popular control over policy (e.g., Bowler et al., 2007; Bengtsson; Mattila, 2009; Mohrenberg et al., 2019). Yet referendums occur alongside parties, legislative elections, and other institutions that—to varying degrees—encourage responsive policy-making by elected officials. As such, differences in countries' representative institutions are likely to shape popular demand for the use of referendums. Here, I extend research on attitudes associated with referendum support by considering the contribution of institutional variables. Specifically, I argue that party systems shape popular support for referendums through citizens' perceptions of system responsiveness.

Referendum support is an important attitude about the process by which voters' preferences are incorporated into public policy. While many democratic theorists are wary of processes seen to promote "direct democracy" (Madison, 1787; Gutmann and Thompson, 2009), others argue that, when used alongside other representative institutions,

referendums will increase popular engagement in politics (Smith and Tolbert, 2009) and provide a check on self-interested elites (Matsusaka, 2005, p. 204). Additionally, most citizens in Western democracies express relatively favorable views of referendums (Bowler et al., 2007; Dalton et al., 2001). This paper contends that popular attitudes about referendum use are responsive to differences in countries' representative political institutions.

I argue that high levels of referendum support follow from limited representation available to voters in countries with fewer viable political parties. With fewer parties, voters are less likely to identify parties that capture their full range of views and are therefore prone to view elected officials as unresponsive. Further, in more majoritarian systems, limited representation for those who vote for electorally unsuccessful parties increases perceptions that authorities are unresponsive or untrustworthy. In turn, views that authorities are unresponsive lead citizens to support referendums as a perceived remedy to unresponsive government. Citizens respond to limited party representation by supporting the use of referendums as a way to constrain elected representatives or directly influence public policy.

This article contributes to the literature examining citizens' process preferences by providing evidence that these preferences are shaped by

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the political context. Most research on support for popular vote processes emphasizes the attitudes that lead voters to prefer popular control over public policy.[1] As such, we know little about how, if at all, institutional conditions shape support for popular vote processes. I build on research showing that referendum support is associated with feelings that government is unresponsive (e.g., Schuck and de Vreese, 2015; Bengtsson; Mattila, 2009; Coffé; Michels, 2014) by linking these feelings with variation in the party system. Namely, I argue that cross-national variation in the number of political parties shapes referendum support *through* individuals' attitudes toward their political representatives. The analysis indicates that citizens are sensitive to the availability of representation by political parties; they respond to limited party representation with increased support for referendums.

In the following section, I conceptualize referendum support and discuss prior research on support for popular vote processes. Next, I extend this research by developing the argument that decreases in the number of parties contribute to referendum support through citizens' perceptions of system responsiveness. I then test this proposition using data from twenty-four European democracies. In combination, hierarchical linear models and a causal mediation analysis indicate that the number of parties influences referendum support through political trust and external efficacy. As discussed below, external efficacy involves feelings about government's responsiveness to people's interests. The analysis indicates that party systems shape citizens' attitudes about the role of "the people" in political decision-making. Where party representation is limited, citizens are more likely to prefer processes perceived to create popular control over public policy.

1. Direct democracy and referendums

Direct democracy refers to a model of democratic practice where citizens play an immediate role in deciding political issues. It is usually understood in contrast to representative democracy, where decisions are made by elected officials who are supposed to embody or interpret citizens' interests (Held, 2006). In contemporary democracies, however, elements of direct democracy co-exist with representative institutions including elections, political parties, and legislatures. el-Wakil and McKay (2019) therefore recommend a "democratic systems approach" that recognizes that popular votes processes—i.e., initiatives and referendums—interact with and potentially complement other democratic institutions. In line with this premise, I examine how the party system shapes citizen support for referendums.

Referendums are a type of popular vote process that allow citizens to vote on policies that have already been proposed or approved by elected officials. Accordingly, referendums provide citizens with "a device of control and issue-based accountability" over the legislature or executive (Cheneval and el Wakil, 2018, 295). Put differently, referendums introduce majority opinion as a potential veto player in democratic systems (Hug and Tsebelis, 2002). Successful referendums can alter the *status quo* by overturning or otherwise altering existing policies. Other properties of referendums vary. Among other differences, they can be initiated by citizens (from the bottom up) or by political elites (from the top down) and their outcomes can be non-binding or legally binding.[2]

2. Explaining referendum support

Citizens can be said to support *referendums* if they favor referendums as decision-making processes for important political issues. As such, referendum support is a preference about the *processes* that governments use to decide on policy.[3] Most citizens in Western democracies approve of the occasional use of referendums and other popular vote processes (Dalton et al., 2001; Bowler et al., 2007). However, there is still significant individual-level and cross-national variation in this preference. Previous studies have focused on explaining why some individuals are highly supportive of referendum use while others are not.

The framework created by Dalton et al. (2001) parses between participatory and disaffected attitudes as drivers of support for popular vote processes. On one hand, referendum support might be explained by cognitive mobilization within the electorate. The *cognitive mobilization hypothesis* predicts that referendum support comes from politically engaged citizens who value more direct participation in political decision-making. On the other, support for referendums may stem from dissatisfaction with the conventional institutions of representative democracy. The *dissatisfaction hypothesis* predicts that citizens who are distrustful of political elites or dissatisfied with institutional outputs will support referendums. According to this logic, dissatisfied citizens favor popular vote processes because they seem to allow voters to steer or bypass the legislature.

The cognitive mobilization hypothesis rests on the idea that engaged citizens favor processes that allow them participate in political decisions. In theory, economic development and widespread education promote participatory values that contribute to support for referendums (Dalton et al., 2001, 146–47). Several studies find that interest in politics—used as an indicator of political engagement—is associated with referendum support (Bowler and Donovan, 2019; Donovan and Karp, 2006; Bowler et al., 2007). Relatedly, Schuck and de Vreese (2015) find that a sense of civic duty is associated with support for holding referendums on E.U. membership. But other studies suggest that political engagement is less important for referendum support. Some studies find weak or negative relationships between political interest and referendum support (Werner, 2020; Bengtsson; Mattila, 2009). Recent work also suggests that, rather than participatory values, more instrumental concerns over policy outcomes shape attitudes around referendums (Werner, 2020; Brummel, 2020). In short, there is mixed evidence for the idea that political engagement shapes referendum support.

Political dissatisfaction is more consistently associated with referendum support. Feelings that elected officials are untrustworthy or unresponsive can motivate support for processes that appear to place decision-making power in the hands of voters (Dalton, 2004, 184). Empirically, low levels of external efficacy have been shown to shape support for referendums. Low external efficacy indicates perceptions that "government institutions and authorities" are insufficiently responsive "to citizen demands" (Craig et al., 1990, 290). Separate Dutch and Finnish samples indicate that low external efficacy is associated with support for popular vote processes (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009; Coffé; Michels, 2014). Similarly, Schuck and de Vreese (2015) find that political cynicism—an attitude that involves a "gap between voters and their political representatives" (pg. 151)—is related to support for using referendums to decide on E.U. integration.

Low levels of political trust also correspond with support for popular vote processes. While related to the concept of external efficacy, political trust is a somewhat broader concept that involves feelings about political authorities' capacity and commitment to act in voters' interests

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[1] Among others, see Dalton et al. (2001); Donovan et al. (2009); Coffé and Michels (2014); Bowler et al. (2007); Font et al. (2015); Bengtsson and Mattila (2009). For exceptions see Schuck and de Vreese (2015) and Bowler and Donovan (2019).

[2] For a discussion of these properties see Cheneval and el Wakil (2018). Altman (2018) refers to elite-initiated popular vote processes as plebiscites, while Qvortrup (2018) refers to them as *ad hoc* referendums. I use the broader term, referendums, to refer to both citizen and elite-initiated processes that allow citizens to vote on existing legislation.

[3] See Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2001) on process preferences. Brummel (2020) uses the phrase "referendum support" while Bowler and Donovan (2019) refer to this variable as "support for referendums." I use the two phrases interchangeably.

(Craig et al., 1990). Several analyses indicate that low levels of political trust are associated with increased support for referendum use (Bowler and Donovan, 2019; Werner, 2020; Dalton, 2004). Distrust in political parties, in particular, is strongly related to referendum support (Dalton, 2004, 183). This is likely because referendums are seen to provide a popular check on parties in the legislature. In a similar vein, Bauer and Fatke (2014) show that frequent popular vote processes are associated with lower levels of political trust in Swiss cantons. When officials are seen as untrustworthy, voters seem to favor popular vote processes as a ways to constrain their representatives or more directly influence policy.

3. Party systems and referendum support

I argue that referendum support reflects differences in countries' representative political institutions. Namely, I expect that referendum support varies with the opportunities for representation provided by political parties: In countries with fewer successful parties, individuals should, on average, be more supportive of referendums. This argument follows from the idea that voter representation suffers as the number of relevant parties decreases. First, fewer parties contribute to perceptions that the legislature is untrustworthy (low political trust) or unresponsive to citizens' interests (low external efficacy). Second, perceptions that government is untrustworthy or unresponsive increase referendum support. Decreases in the number of relevant parties thereby contribute to referendum support through political trust and external efficacy. This causal sequence is illustrated in Fig. 1.[4]

In systems with fewer parties, misalignment between voters and parties in government decreases political trust and external efficacy (arrow *A* in Fig. 1). Primarily, voters are less likely to identify parties that correspond with their full range of policy views in countries where there are fewer parties.[5] Decreases in the number of parties therefore reduce congruence between citizens' views and party platforms (Weβels, 1999, 2007; Dalton, 1985). Secondly, countries with fewer parties are more likely to be governed by single-party majority cabinets (Taagepera, 2002; Lijphart, 2012). The number of parties is logically connected to cabinet type: Single-party majority cabinets are "always possible" when there are fewer than two legislative parties and "always impossible" when there are more than four legislative parties (Taagepera, 2003, 5). Systems with fewer parties tend to produce cabinets that exclude minority parties and therefore provide poor representation to individuals who support smaller parties.

In turn, Europeans' feelings toward elected officials reflect the availability of party representation. Representatives are regarded as less trustworthy (Marien, 2011; Miller and Listhaug, 1990) and less responsive (Karp and Banducci, 2008) in countries with fewer relevant parties. External efficacy and political trust are related attitudes that tap into the more general concept of system responsiveness (Miller and Listhaug, 1990, 359). As noted above, external efficacy refers to "beliefs about the responsiveness of governmental authorities and institutions to

citizen demands" (Craig et al., 1990, 290). In comparison, political trust involves judgments about government actors' commitment and capacity to act in voters' interests. People tend to trust institutions that appear faithful to their interests and capable of enacting them (Levi and Stoker, 2000). These two attitudes—i.e., political trust and external efficacy—mediate the effect of the party system on referendum support.

Through these attitudes, lower numbers of parties lead citizens to support referendums as a way to more directly influence policy (arrow *B* in Fig. 1). Why do political distrust and low external efficacy increase referendum support? Feelings that elected officials are unresponsive create support for processes perceived to take decisions out of the hands of politicians and create popular control over policy (Dalton, 2004, 181–184). First, voters likely consider referendums a way to bypass poor representation and alter the legal *status quo*. Citizen-initiated referendums, in particular, allow voters to challenge existing laws that no longer conform with their policy preferences (see Cheneval and el Wakil, 2018). Second, voters may understand referendums as a way to constrain their representatives. Once voters signal their preferences in referendums, it becomes costly for party elites to ignore their policy preferences (Hug and Tsebelis, 2002; Matsusaka, 2005). Even non-binding referendums can considerably limit policy-makers who find it untenable to oppose decisions made by popular vote. Voters can use referendums to signal their dissatisfaction with existing policies and thereby check officials' legislative power. This makes referendums attractive to individuals who find their representatives untrustworthy or unresponsive.

A related argument for the influence of the party system concerns electoral losers. In systems with fewer parties, referendums are appealing to electoral losers who face limited representation in government coalitions. Those who vote for electorally unsuccessful parties—i.e., electoral losers—receive comparatively poor representation in systems with fewer parties (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Lijphart, 2012). More proportional systems support more parties and, consequently, give political minorities greater say in the government decision-making. Electoral losers in majoritarian systems are therefore "less satisfied with the way democracy works" than their counterparts in more proportional systems (Anderson and Guillory, 1997, 68). Several studies suggest that support for out-of-government parties increases support for referendum use (Karp and Banducci, 2008; Smith et al., 2010). Along these lines, Bernauer and Vatter (2012) find that electoral losers are more satisfied with democracy in more proportional systems and in countries that employ popular vote processes. In countries with fewer legislative parties, electoral losers likely see referendums as a way to influence policy and offset limited representation in government.

Finally, note that the argument focuses on the number of relevant parties rather than the broader electoral system. While components of the electoral system, most importantly district magnitude, shape the number of relevant parties (Shugart and Taagepera, 2017; Cox, 1997), the number of parties most directly reflects citizens' *options* for political representation. The effective number of *legislative* parties is particularly critical since party members can only provide representation if they are elected to parliament. Relatedly, greater numbers of legislative parties increase the likelihood of multi-party cabinets (Taagepera, 2002, 2003). There is also significant variation in the number of parties within systems under PR (proportional representation) (Lijphart, 2012). This variation is partly a product of the electoral system but also reflects other factors such as the number of social cleavages at key historical junctures (Bértoa, 2014; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Increases in the number of viable parties make PR systems relatively more proportional. Even across PR systems, decreases in the number of relevant parties should lower political trust and external efficacy and, consequently, increase referendum support.
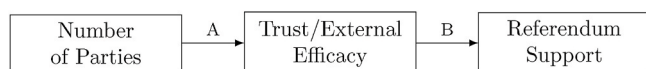

Fig. 1. Proposed pathway linking the number of parties with referendum support.

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[4] The argument allows for the possibility that—alongside external efficacy and political trust—other attitudes might link the number of parties with referendum support. I do not assume that the effect of the number of parties is *entirely* mediated by efficacy and political trust.

[5] See Dalton (1985): "… as the number and variety of parties increases, it becomes easier for voters to locate a party that simultaneously represents their views on all issue dimensions" (287).

4. Data and methods

The analysis uses survey data from Wave 6 of the *European Social*

Survey (2012) alongside different country-level variables. Wave 6 is particularly useful since its democracy module asks respondents for their opinions about various democratic procedures, including referendums. In addition, there were relatively few high-profile referendums in 2012.[6] This is conducive to the current study because, in the short-term, referendum support is likely influenced by the results of symbolically important referendums. For instance, the United Kingdom's 2016 Brexit referendum likely shaped referendum support in the U.K. and, possibly, elsewhere in the European Union.[7] The absence of high-profile referendums makes this year well-suited to study the influence of the party system. The analysis includes individuals located in 24 European democracies.[8]

4.1. Dependent variable: referendum support

Referendum support is indicated by a single item measure that ranges from 0 to 10. This survey question asks respondents: "*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.*" Possible responses range from "not at all important" to "extremely important," with larger values indicating greater importance. The survey item asks about *referendums*; a common type of popular vote process that allows citizens to vote on policies that have been proposed or approved by elected officials. It further specifies that citizens should "have the final say" and therefore suggests a preference for deciding important political issues through binding popular votes.

Fig. 2 presents country means of referendum support sorted from lowest (in the Netherlands, 7.21) to highest (in Cyprus, 9.00). The cross-country mean is 8.27. Consistent with prior research, most people say they support referendum use (Donovan and Karp, 2006; Bowler et al., 2007). The relative position of each country also roughly corresponds with other research on referendum support. In Switzerland, where popular vote processes are highly institutionalized, referendum support is comparatively high. Likewise, Spanish samples generally show high levels of referendum support (Bowler et al., 2007, 352). This consistency supports the validity of the measure and suggests that country-level variables shape referendum support.
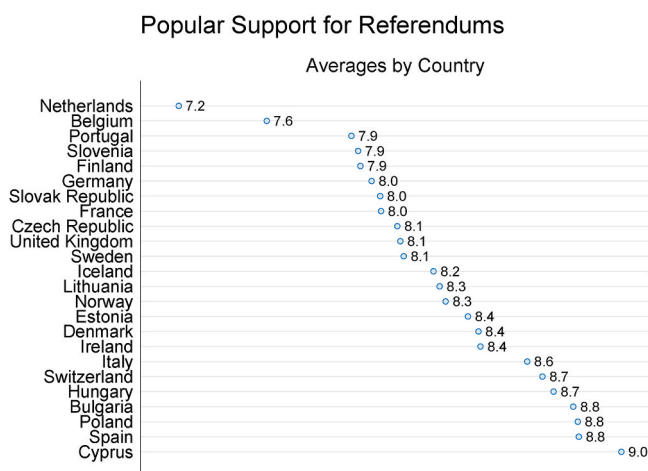

Fig. 2. Mean popular support for referendums in 24 countries.

While referendum support is high on average, it is significantly more concentrated in some countries than others. Figure S1 in the supplemental materials shows the distribution of referendum support in each country included in the analysis. In some countries, most individuals strongly endorse referendum use. For example, in Cyprus 60% of respondents indicate the highest level of referendum support—i.e., that referendums are "extremely important for democracy"—and 84% of individuals fall within the highest three values. Referendum support is similarly concentrated in Spain, Poland, and Bulgaria. In comparison, other countries have a larger base of moderate support for referendum use. Only 20% of Belgians, 30% of Portuguese, and 13% of Dutch answer that having the "final say" via referendums is "extremely important for democracy." More moderate referendum support indicates that referendums are seen as less essential for democratic decision-making in these countries.

4.2. Independent variables

4.2.1. Country level

The primary country-level variable is *the effective number of legislative parties*. The effective number of legislative parties is a "size-weighted count" of the parties that obtain seats in the legislature (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979; Shugart and Taagepera, 2017, 64).[9] This is a standard measure and is particularly appropriate here, since parties with comparatively few seats are less capable of translating party-voters' preferences into policy. Those who vote for parties that receive fewer seats are likely to view authorities as unresponsive and to support referendum use. The effective number of legislative parties matters because it affects voters' opportunities for representation in the national assembly.[10]

The models also include a dummy variable indicating *majoritarian electoral systems*. This allows us to examine the influence of the number of parties while holding PR versus majoritarian rule constant. The majoritarian variable is coded as one for countries with majority or plurality electoral districts at the first electoral tier in the previous national election. Coding was based on the *National Level Party Systems* dataset, used by Shugart and Taagepera (2017).[11] The majoritarian systems in the sample include; Britain (first-past-the-post), France (majority-plurality), Bulgaria, Hungary, and Lithuania (mixed-member majoritarian).[12] The remaining countries in the sample use some form of PR.

The frequency that countries employ popular vote processes might also shape support for referendums. While Schuck and de Vreese (2015) find no effect of previous referendum use, Bowler and Donovan (2019) find that more frequent referendums are associated with referendum support. In theory, frequent usage creates familiarity with popular vote processes and could bolster support for referendums. The analysis includes *a count of the number of popular votes* held in each country between 2002 and 2012. This variable is from the *Varieties of Democracy* dataset and does not distinguish between different popular vote processes (e.g.,

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[6] Five countries in the sample had some type popular vote processes in 2012: Iceland, Ireland, Lithuania, Slovenia, and Switzerland.

[7] See Brummel (2020) and Marien and Kern (2018) on the effect of losing in referendums.

[8] Table S3 in the supplemental materials presents the list of countries.

[9] The effective number of legislative parties "is the inverse sum of squared fractional [seat] shares:This measure is from the Comparative Political Dataset Set (see Armingeon et al. 2017)." $N_s = \sum 1/(s_i)^2$, where s is the seat share of party i (Shugart and Taagepera, 2017, 64).

[10] I show a model with the effective number of *electoral* parties in Table S10 in the supplemental materials. This measure captures the number of parties weighted by the proportion of *votes* received by each party (Shugart and Taagepera, 2017; Laakso and Taagepera, 1979).

[11] See Struthers et al 2018.

[12] Bulgaria reformed its electoral system in 2011, scrapping single-member districts. But as of 2012 representation was based on the 2009 elections which were conducted using a mixed-member majoritarian system (Hardman, 2011). Under mixed-member majoritarianism, the upper tier only partially compensates for single-member districts at the first tier, making these systems closer to majoritarianism than PR (Shugart and Taagepera, 2017, 59).

citizen initiatives or referendums). To account for the diminishing impact of each additional referendum, this variable is logged in the main analysis. Logging the variable also reduces the influence of outliers, such as Switzerland, where popular votes are uncommonly frequent.[13] Half the countries in the sample held at least one popular vote during this ten year period.[14]

Finally, the analysis accounts for the size of the population and democratic quality in each country. The population measure indicates the total population (logged) during 2012.[15] Small populations may increase support for referendums. Given a smaller population, people may perceive their votes in referendums or initiatives as more impactful (c.f. Ladner, 2002, 826). Democratic quality is measured using the electoral democracy index from the *Varieties of Democracy* dataset, where larger values indicate higher quality democratic institutions.[16] All else equal, high quality democratic institutions allow citizens to hold politicians accountable and may reduce demand for referendums.

4.2.2. Individual level

At the individual level, the primary independent variables are *external efficacy* and *political trust*. The political trust measure is an additive index of three items: trust in politicians, trust in political parties, and trust in parliament ($\alpha = 0.92$) and is scaled from (0) "no trust at all" to (10) "complete trust." The index captures confidence in the actors most responsible for political representation. *External efficacy* is indicated by an item that asks respondents "how often do you think the government in [country] today changes its planned policies in response to what most people think?" The measure is scaled from 0 to 10 with highest value indicating that the government "always" responds to people's preferences.

Alongside these variables, I include a measure indicating the *importance of living in democracy*, an indicator of *interest in politics*, and a *party alternatives* item which asks respondents whether political parties offer "clear alternatives to one another." The party alternatives item relates to the opportunities voters have for substantive representation by political parties. The importance of democracy item helps parse between disaffected and pro-system attitudes associated with referendum support. As with *civic duty* with respect to voting (Schuck and de Vreese, 2015), I expect that referendum support will increase with beliefs in the importance of democracy.[17] The political interest indicator ranges from (1) "not at all interested in politics" to (4) "very interested in politics." Existing research suggests that political interest is associated with support for referendums (Schuck and de Vreese, 2015; Donovan and Karp, 2006).

Finally, I include control variables indicated by the existing literature. These include gender, age, political ideology (left-right), years of education, and household income. Increases in income and education are usually associated with decreased support for referendums (Bowler et al., 2007; Coffé and Michels, 2014). Findings are mixed with respect to ideology, though there is some indication that liberalism corresponds with approval of referendums (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009). Interestingly, a number of studies indicate that women are more likely to favor referendums (Donovan and Karp, 2006; Bengtsson; Mattila, 2009;

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[13] Switzerland held 81 popular votes between 2002 and 2012.

[14] While referendum support is generally high, popular vote processes are relatively infrequent in most countries in the sample. The number of referendums in the previous ten years and individual-level referendum support are only weakly correlated ($r = 0 : 04$).

[15] The population measure is from the *Comparative Political Data Set*.

[16] The electoral democracy index includes components capturing freedom of association and expression, clean elections, and the extent of suffrage (see Coppedge et al., 2017, 49).

[17] The importance of democracy item may resemble the dependent variable. In fact, the items are only moderately correlated ($r = 0.198$). Different model specifications also show that the results are robust to the exclusion of this item.

Bowler et al., 2007). One possibility is that women are more supportive of referendums in response to their comparatively poor descriptive representation in parliament.

4.3. Empirical strategy

I have argued that referendum support is shaped by the number of political parties and, in turn, by individuals' feelings about government responsiveness. First, I graphically present the relationships between the key independent variables and referendum support. These plots provide a sense of the data and indicate countries that deviate from the expected relationship. Second, I analyze the effects of country-level and individual-level variables with a series of hierarchical linear models. The analysis employs random intercept models with two levels; *i* individuals nested within *j* countries. Standard errors are adjusted for the number of observations at the country-level, permitting appropriate significance testing of the country-level variables (Steenbergen and Jones, 2002; Krull and MacKinnon, 1999). Third, I incorporate these models into a mediation analysis in order to evaluate external efficacy and political trust as mediators of the party system.

5. Results

Simple scatter plots indicate that fewer parties, low trust, and low external efficacy are associated with increased referendum support. First, Fig. 3 plots the effective number of legislative parties against average support for referendums in each country. As expected, referendum support decreases as the effective number of parties increases (n = 24, r = −0.52). A number of country cases are noteworthy here. Belgium (BE), for example, falls close to the trend line but has a remarkably high number of parties (8.43). Cyprus (CY) has a moderate number of parties (3.60) but is uncharacteristically high in referendum support (9.00). The Netherlands (NL) has a relatively large number of parties (5.72) but is uncommonly low in support for referendums. It is worth noting that the Netherlands has a highly permissive electoral system with nationwide proportional representation and a large number of parties for a country of it size (Shugart and Taagepera, 2017, 33). Overall, Fig. 3 clearly illustrates the broader relationship: fewer effective legislative parties are associated with increased support for referendums.

The number of parties likely shapes referendum support through perceptions of system responsiveness. Fig. 4 presents the relationships between country means of political trust, external efficacy, and average referendum support in two scatter plots. The left-hand panel plots political trust against average referendum support in each country (n = 24, r = − 0.36). The right-hand panel shows the relationship between
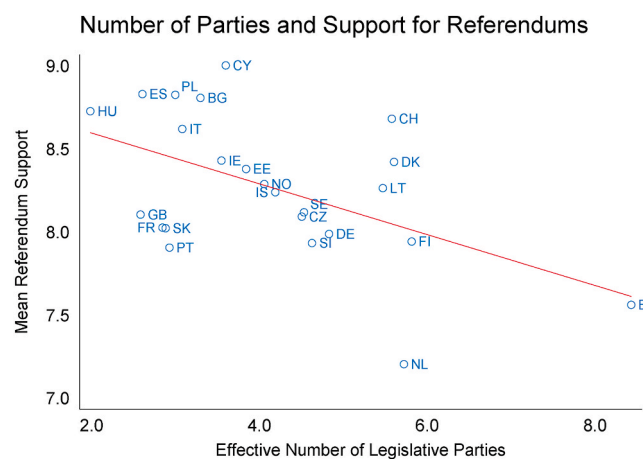

Fig. 3. Number of legislative parties and mean referendum support in 24 countries.

Relationship with Referendum Support

Fig. 4. Country means of political trust, external efficacy, and referendum support.

external efficacy and the same dependent variable ($n = 24$, $r = - .19$). Since political trust and external efficacy both capture views of system responsiveness, the relative position of each country roughly corresponds across the two panels. While there is considerable spread around the line of best fit, the trend indicates that as political trust decreases, referendum support increases. Switzerland (CH) and Denmark (DK) present notable exceptions: they are uncommonly high in trust and support for referendums. The right-hand panel illustrates a similar trend with respect to external efficacy: increases in external efficacy correspond with decreases in referendum support.

5.1. Hierarchical models

Table 1 presents five random intercept models that explain referendum support as a function of country and individual-level variables. All five models include the same country-level variables: the effective number of legislative parties, the number of popular votes held between 2002 and 2012 (logged), an index of democratic quality, and total population (logged). Model 1 only includes the country-level variables. Model 2 includes the individual-level control variables but excludes the proposed mediators, i.e., political trust and external efficacy. The proposed mediation process *requires* that the estimated effect of number of parties is diminished when political trust and external efficacy are added to the model (Krull and MacKinnon, 1999; Baron and Kenny, 1986). Models 3 and 4 iteratively add political trust and external efficacy. Finally, Model 5 incorporates the full set of variables alongside the proposed mediators.

5.2. Results: country-level

5.2.1. Number of parties

Lower numbers of legislative parties are associated with increased referendum support. The coefficient on the effective number of legislative parties is negatively signed across the models and reaches statistical significance in Models 1 and 2 ($p < 0.05$). The diminished effect of the number of parties after the introduction of political trust (Model 3) and external efficacy (Model 4) is consistent with the mediating effect of these variables (see Baron and Kenny, 1986; Krull and MacKinnon, 1999). Based on Model 1, which omits the individual-level variables, a

one-SD (1.44 party) increase in the number of parties is associated with a 0.20 unit decrease in the country mean of referendum support. Once individual-level controls are included, as in Model 2, an identical increase is associated with a 0.17 unit decrease in referendum support.

Fig. 5 presents predicted values of referendum support as the effective number of legislative parties increases from the minimum (1.98) to maximum (8.43) observed values. Moving from the minimum to maximum number of parties is associated with a 0.89 unit decrease in referendum support. While some caution is warranted since few countries exceed six effective legislative parties, Fig. 5 demonstrates the general relationship: an increase in number of legislative parties is associated with a decrease in referendum support.[18]

This general relationship is robust to changes in the sample and model specification. To address the concern that outlying countries bias the results, I regressed support for direct democracy on the country-level variables while iteratively omitting each country-case from the model. This analysis indicates that no particular country-case drives the relationship between fewer parties and increased referendum support.[19] The estimate associated with the number of parties is also robust to variety of alternative model specifications. In the supplemental materials, I include alternative measures of democratic quality and popular vote frequency, and add controls for federalism, unemployment, and economic growth. Increases in the number of legislative parties are significantly associated with decreased referendum support in each model specification.[20]

5.2.2. Other country-level variables

First, referendum support is not significantly associated with PR or

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[18] An increase in the number of *electoral* parties also corresponds with a decrease in referendum support. See Table S10 in the supplemental materials.

[19] Table S7 in the supplemental materials shows the results of this analysis omitting three outliers: The Netherlands, Switzerland, and Belgium. As shown here, $p = 0.07$ when Belgium is omitted from the model. In all other models, the coefficient on the effective number of parties is statistically significant at $p < 0.01$. The full analysis includes 24 identical models, each of which excludes one country-case.

[20] These models are presented in Tables S8 and S10 in the supplemental materials.

Table 1

Models of support for referendums in 24 countries. Random effects specified at the country-level. Higher values of the dependent variable indicate increasing importance of deciding policy by referendums.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Country-level					
No. Parties (seats)	−0.139***	−0.117**	−0.072	−0.080*	−0.050
	(0.054)	(0.053)	(0.052)	(0.046)	(0.046)
Majoritarian	−0.136	−0.008	0.052	0.014	0.049
	(0.206)	(0.203)	(0.199)	(0.177)	(0.177)
Ln Pop. Votes, 02 - 12	0.050	0.066	0.067	0.072	0.069
	(0.066)	(0.065)	(0.064)	(0.057)	(0.056)
Electoral Dem. Index	−2.202	−2.181	−1.335	−1.490	−0.943
	(1.363)	(1.346)	(1.321)	(1.172)	(1.171)
Ln Population	−0.012	0.004	−0.005	0.009	0.001
	(0.056)	(0.056)	(0.055)	(0.049)	(0.049)
Individual-level					
Political Trust			−0.131***		−0.100***
			(0.006)		(0.007)
External Efficacy				−0.076***	−0.054***
				(0.005)	(0.005)
Political Interest		−0.027*	0.025*	0.041***	0.076***
		(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.015)
Party Alternatives		0.061***	0.086***	0.061***	0.076***
		(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Imp. Democracy		0.205***	0.216***	0.192***	0.200***
		(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Ideology (LR)		−0.030***	−0.021***	−0.021***	−0.015***
		(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Education (years)		−0.024***	−0.021***	−0.011***	−0.009***
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Income		−0.027***	−0.023***	−0.021***	−0.018***
		(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Female		0.110***	0.129***	0.036	0.052**
		(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.023)
Age		−0.002***	−0.002***	−0.002***	−0.002***
		(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Variance Components					
Individual-level	0.112***	0.109***	0.105***	0.081***	0.081***
	(0.033)	(0.032)	(0.031)	(0.025)	(0.025)
Country-level	3.927***	3.661***	3.604***	3.180***	3.149***
	(0.027)	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.029)
Observations	43,415	31,049	30,645	23,875	23,583
Log Likelihood	−91,344	−64,245	−63,172	−47,727	−47,025

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

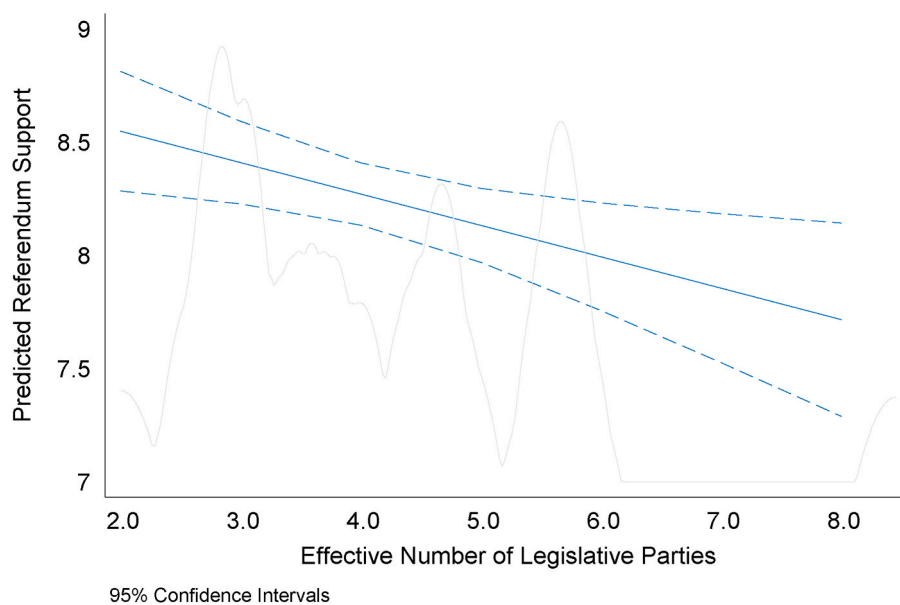## Number of Parties and Referendum Support

95% Confidence Intervals

Fig. 5. Effective number of legislative parties and predicted values of referendum support. Predictions are based on the fixed portion of the model.

majoritarian rule. Notably, increases in the number of parties still correspond with decreases in referendum support when holding PR versus majoritarian rule constant. Second, I find that more frequent popular vote processes are not significantly associated with referendum support. As literature on the Swiss experience suggests, more frequent popular vote processes might signal dissatisfaction with political leaders rather than enthusiasm for referendums (Bauer and Fatke, 2014).[21] Third, the electoral democracy index is negatively signed but not statistically significant. In part, this may be due to limited variation in democratic quality in this sample. Finally, logged population is not significantly associated with referendum support.

5.2.3. Results: individual-level

Political trust and external efficacy are associated with decreases in referendum support across the models in Table 1. Fig. 6 presents the individual-level coefficient estimates from Model 5. Political trust is significantly associated with decreases in referendum support. According to model 5, a one-SD increase on the political trust item corresponds with a 0.22 unit decrease in referendum support. Likewise, external efficacy is associated with decreases in support for referendums. Model 5 indicates that a one-SD increase on the external efficacy variable corresponds with a 0.13 unit increase in referendum support. These two variables indicate that feelings that elected officials are untrustworthy or unresponsive increase popular support for referendums.

The importance of democracy and political interest items are associated with increased support for referendums. The effect of the importance of living in a democracy variable is relatively substantial. Model 5 indicates that a one-SD increase on the importance of democracy measure corresponds with a 0.38 unit increase in referendum support. Political interest is associated with a more modest increase in referendum support.[22] General approval of democratic government and, to a lesser extent, political are associated with support for deciding issues through referendums.

Against expectations, the party alternatives variable is associated with increased support for referendums. We would expect that views that parties are similar, and therefore offer limited options to voters,

Estimated Effect on Referendum Support

Fig. 6. Coefficient estimates from Model 5. Higher values of the dependent variable indicate the increasing importance of referendums.

would be associated with referendum support. But Model 5 indicates that a one-SD increase on the party alternatives measure corresponds with a 0.18 unit increase in referendum support. This is probably because the party alternatives variable captures political engagement rather than congruence (or incongruence) between voters and parties.[23] The political trust and external efficacy variables, in comparison, more directly measure perceived congruence between citizens and their representatives (Craig and Maggiotto, 1982; Levi and Stoker, 2000). That is to say, the party alternatives variable likely captures pro-system attitudes related to referendum support.

The remaining individual-level variables suggest that, in general, those who benefit less from the *status quo* are more likely to favor referendums. Decreasing income and education are associated with support for referendums. The analysis also indicates women are slightly more supportive of referendum use. All else equal, female respondents score 0.05 units higher on the referendum support measure.[24] Liberal ideology is associated with modest increases in referendum support across the models in Table 1. Finally, increasing age is associated with modest decreases in referendum support.[25]

5.3. Mediation analysis

The main contention of this paper is that the party system influences referendum support through individual-level political efficacy and political trust.[26] To evaluate this sequence, I conduct a causal mediation analysis using the multilevel data structure described above. The causal mediation framework builds on conventional mediation procedures (e. g., Baron and Kenny, 1986) and is compatible with the multilevel data.[27] Causal mediation analysis decomposes a proposed causal sequence into the direct effect of a treatment variable (T_i) and the effect occurring thorough specified mediators (M_i) on some outcome of interest (Imai et al., 2011). Here, I evaluate the effect of a four party increase (T_i) on support for direct democracy through the mediators external efficacy and political trust (M_i).

Table 2 presents the models employed in the mediation analysis. Models 6 and 7 regress the mediators, political trust and external efficacy, on the effective number of parties and the independent variables from the preceding analysis.[28] Note that the outcome model, i.e., Model 8, tests for mediating effects of political trust while controlling for external efficacy (and vice versa) and therefore provides a tough test of the proposed mechanism. As shown in Table 2, the number of parties varies with the mediating variables in the expected direction; increases in the number of parties are associated with higher levels of political
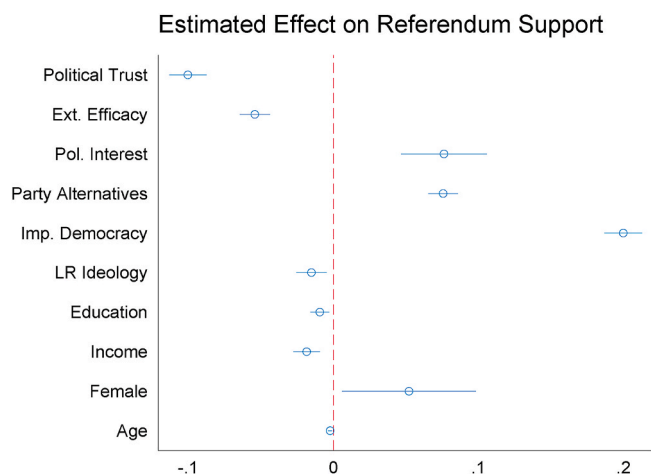
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[21] Table S8 in the supplemental materials includes controls for the *availability* of popular vote processes.

[22] Political trust is negatively signed only when the model omits external efficacy or political trust. Models 3–5 control for these variables and should therefore produce more reliable estimates of the relationship between political interest and referendum support.

[23] The party alternatives item is positively correlated with political interest, political trust, and the importance of democracy items. A simple random intercept model indicates that the party alternatives item is not significantly associated with the number of parties.

[24] Estimate based on Model 5.

[25] For similarities with previous research see: Coffé and Michels (2014) on education, Rose and Weβels (2020) on income, Bengtsson and Mattila (2009) on education, Donovan and Karp (2006) on gender, and Schuck and de Vreese (2015) on age.

[26] Interactions are appropriate for *moderation* effects. Appropriately, cross-level interactions between the number of parties and the attitudinal variables are not statistically significant.

[27] Retaining the multi-level structure allows for correct calculations of the standard errors and therefore reduces the likelihood of type-I error (Krull and MacKinnon, 1999). See Imai et al. (2011) for a full discussion of causal mediation analysis. I use their R package, mediation, for the following analysis (Tingley et al., 2014).

[28] These controls reduce the likelihood that the relationship between the mediator and outcome variable is confounded by another omitted variable. Models with the full set of control variables are presented in the appendix. The model predicting political trust does not include external efficacy as predictor (and vice versa).

Table 2
Mediation Models. Control variables presented in the appendix.

|	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Dependent variable:		
	Political Trust	External Efficacy	Referendum Support
No. Parties	0.377***	0.249***	− 0.050
	(0.103)	(0.084)	(0.046)
Political Trust			− 0.100***
			(0.007)
External Efficacy			− 0.054***
			(0.005)
Observations	23,583	23,583	23,583
Log Likelihood	− 47,748	− 52,703	− 47,025

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

trust and external efficacy. Model 8 then regresses referendum support on the number of parties, the mediating variables (external efficacy and political trust), and the controls. Consistent with the proposed mechanism, the estimated effect of the number of parties decreases in magnitude once the mediators, external efficacy and political trust, are included in the model. This provides initial evidence that the effect of

the party system is mediated by external efficacy and political trust.

I then use the method proposed by Imai et al. (2011) to estimate the effect of an increase from two to six parties on support for direct democracy *through the mediators external efficacy and political trust.* This procedure first estimates values of the mediators, efficacy and trust, with the effective number of parties held at values of two and six, respectively. Second, values of the outcome variable, support for direct democracy, are estimated using the predicted values of efficacy and trust obtained from the previous set of models. The average causal mediation effect (ACME), i.e., the effect of the party system mediated by efficacy and trust, is calculated as the average difference between estimates of support for direct democracy using the values of the mediators from the two and six-party conditions. Thus the ACME associated with political trust (or external efficacy) captures the average difference in support for direct democracy occurring through political trust (or external efficacy) when the number of parties increases from two to six. Finally, confidence intervals around the ACME and other of interest quantities are estimated by quasi-Bayesian Monte Carlo using 1000 simulations (King et al., 2000; Imai et al., 2010).

This analysis indicates that political trust and, to a lesser extent, external efficacy mediate the effect of the available representation by political parties. Fig. 7 graphically presents the results of the mediation analysis. The *average causal mediation effect* (ACME) indicates the
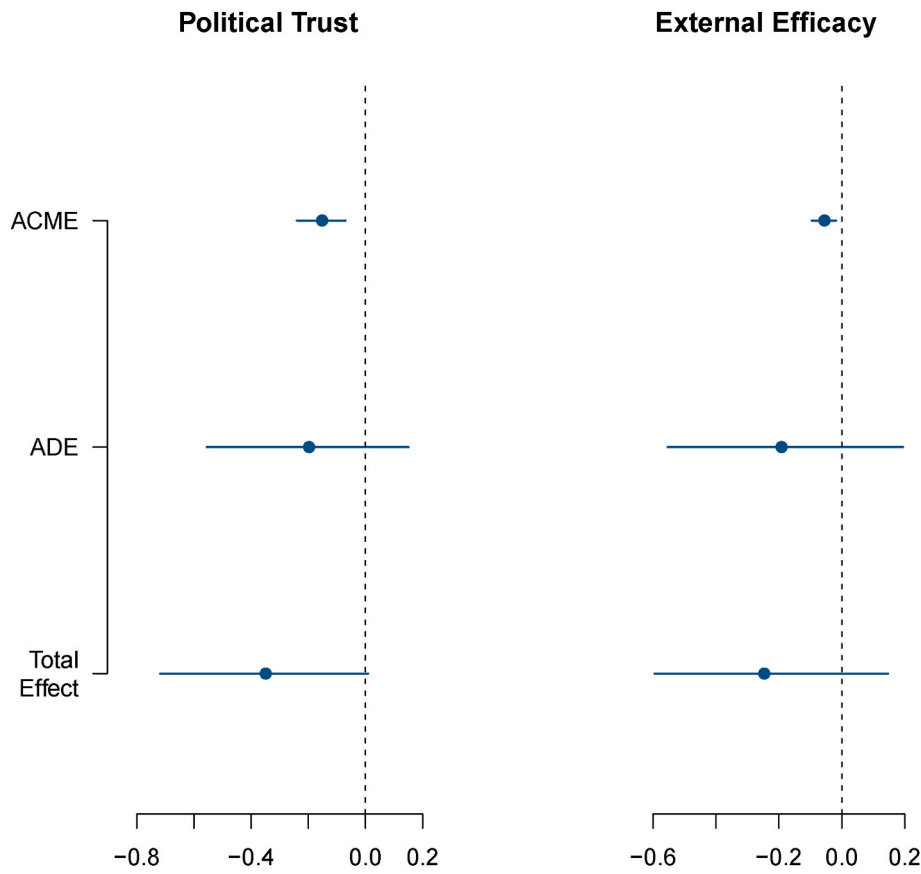
Political Trust: ACME = -0.15

External Efficacy: ACME = -0.05

Fig. 7. Results of the mediation analysis. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals around the average causal mediation effect (ACME), average direct effect (ADE), and total effect.

average effect of the number of parties occurring through external efficacy or political trust, while the *average direct effect* (ADE) represents the unmediated effect of a four unit increase in the number of parties on referendum support. The *total effect* captures both the direct effect of the party system and the effect mediated by external efficacy or political trust. The total effect is therefore equal to the sum of the ACME and ADE.

As illustrated in the left-hand panel of Fig. 7, the mediation effect (ACME) associated with political trust is negative and statistically different from zero while the direct effect is not. This suggests that increases in the number of parties attenuate referendum support through the mediating variable, political trust. The ACME associated with political trust is −0.15 while the total effect is −0.35, indicating that political trust mediates about 41% of the effect of the number of parties on referendum support. As shown in the right-hand panel, the ACME associated with external efficacy is also statistically different from zero but more modest in magnitude. Holding political trust constant, external efficacy is estimated to mediate about 18% of the effect associated with the number of parties. Meanwhile the direct effect of the party system is not statistically different from zero. This indicates that the effect of the party system is likely mediated by external efficacy as well as political trust.

The mediation analysis supports the contention that attitudinal variables, political trust and external efficacy, mediate the relationship between the number of parties and individual-level support for referendums. Nevertheless, mediation analysis cannot alleviate concerns about feedback effects between individual-level attitudes and referendum support.[29] As such, the sequence tested here significantly depends on the theoretically stipulated relationship between the party system and individual-level attitudes. Recall, then, that the causal sequence is logically motivated: First, the effect of system-level variation on support for direct democracy is necessarily mediated by individual-level attitudes. Second, because parties are the main avenue for political representation, political trust and external efficacy covary with country-level differences in the number of parties (Miller and Listhaug, 1990; Anderson and Guillory, 1997). Finally, because referendums allow voters to alter existing policies or constrain their representatives, people who view political authorities as unresponsive are likely to support referendums.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The analysis indicates that popular support for referendums is responsive to variation in the party system. Primarily, the multilevel analysis indicates that decreases in the number of relevant parties correspond with increases in referendum support. The general relationship between the number of parties and referendum support holds when the analysis omits any one country-case and is robust to a variety of alternative model specifications. Further, the mediation analysis provides evidence that the number of parties shapes referendum support through individual-level political trust and external efficacy. First, decreases in the number of parties contribute to feelings that authorities are untrustworthy or unresponsive. In turn, feelings that elected officials are unresponsive generate support for referendums. This sequence indicates that referendum support results from limited representation by political parties.

Several qualifications are worth noting. First, the extent to which the argument applies to other types of popular vote processes is open to question. While the dependent variable refers to referendums, limited party representation might generate support for other types of popular vote processes. For example, initiatives allow for citizens to propose new policies (Altman, 2018) and therefore might be seen as a better corrective to poor representation.[30] Future studies might address whether the institutional context shapes support for other types of popular votes processes. Second, though the argument emphasizes political dissatisfaction, the analysis provides evidence that pro-system attitudes also contribute to referendum support. Notably, the importance of living in a democracy and, more modestly, political interest were associated with support for referendums. Majority decision-making procedures are likely to be appealing to individuals with strong democratic commitments.

Even so, the idea that referendum support is responsive to party representation is consistent with research indicating that citizens are concerned with policy outputs (Strebel et al., 2019; Esaiasson et al., 2019). That is, citizens are more supportive of referendums when they believe that party representatives are inattentive to their policy interests. This is not to suggest that referendums will, in fact, generate more representative policies, particularly for individuals with minority views. Support for referendums might rest on unfounded beliefs that public opinion—and the likely outcome of referendums—align with individuals' preferences (Werner, 2020). Rather, these findings indicate that voters *perceive* referendums as a potential remedy to poor substantive representation by political parties.

Citizens' responsiveness to the party system challenges the idea that support for referendums—and other popular vote processes—is necessarily part of a 'populist' view, where representative institutions are seen as "unfortunate substitutes for direct democracy" (Achen and Bartels, 2017, 88). The idea that referendum support constitutes a naive vision of democratic practice suggests that citizens will endorse referendums at similar levels *regardless* of the availability of party representation. Against this view, this analysis shows that citizens respond to increases in the number of relevant parties with decreased referendum support. Popular support for referendums does not mean that citizens are rejecting representation, but it does suggest that the party system is seen as insufficiently representative.

An important implication is that electoral reforms that increase the number of parties can decrease referendum support. Because the number of parties is subject to institutional design (Lijphart, 2012; Shugart and Taagepera, 2017), reforms that increase the number of parties are likely to decrease popular demand for referendums.[31] Citizens are sensitive to the trade-offs between referendums and conventional party representation, even if they do not see the two as completely interchangeable. More broadly, this suggests that process preferences are responsive to interactions between different democratic institutions. Future research might examine how support for other decision-making procedures, including more deliberative and technocratic varieties, is shaped by the larger institutional context. Better understanding the

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[29] See the supplemental materials for sensitivity analyses (Fig. S2 and S3) and a discussion of the sequential ignorability assumption.

[30] See Bowler et al. (2007): Among Californians who think ballot initiatives are a "good thing," 76.9% believe that they "make government more responsive" (pg. 359).

[31] See Table S5 for models that control for change in district magnitude between 1990 and 2012. While increases in district magnitude are associated with modest decreases in referendum support, the contemporaneous effect of the number of parties is robust to the inclusion of this variable.

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perceived trade-offs between different processes would provide insight into how democratic systems can better respond to citizens' preferences.

Appendix

Table A.1
Mediation models.

	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Dependent variable:		
	Political Trust	External Efficacy	Referendum Support
Mediation Components			
No. Parties	0.377***	0.249***	− 0.050
	(0.103)	(0.084)	(0.046)
Political Trust			− 0.100***
			(0.007)
External Efficacy			− 0.054***
			(0.005)
Controls			
Country-level			
Majoritarian	0.503	0.473	0.049
	(0.395)	(0.322)	(0.177)
Ln Pop. Votes, 02-12	0.024	0.212	0.069
	(0.126)	(0.103)	(0.056)
Electoral Dem. Index	6.178**	4.329**	− 0.943
	(2.615)	(2.133)	(1.171)
Population (logged)	− 0.061	0.017	0.001
	(0.108)	(0.088)	(0.049)
Individual-level			
Political Interest	0.371***	0.058***	0.076***
	(0.015)	(0.019)	(0.015)
Party Alternatives	0.199***	0.210***	0.076***
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)
Imp. Democracy	0.088***	0.008	0.200***
	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.007)
Ideology	0.052***	0.063***	− 0.015***
	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.005)
Edu (years)	0.016***	− 0.001	− 0.009***
	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.003)
Income	0.036***	0.014**	− 0.018***
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)
Female	0.153***	0.010	0.052**
	(0.024)	(0.030)	(0.023)
Age	− 0.003***	0.0002	− 0.002***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Observations	23,583	23,583	23,583
Log Likelihood	− 47,748.330	− 52,703.480	− 47,025.390

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102219.

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