The Voice Effect Beyond the Participants:
A Study of the Effects of Citizen Involvement in Political Decision-making Processes on the Wider Public

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Abstract

Small scale citizen involvement processes can only play a role in mass democracies if they manage to impact the wider public. But does involvement of citizens in political decision-making processes increase perceptions of democratic legitimacy among citizens who were not involved? If so, why? Drawing on procedural fairness theory, we argue that learning about the use of small scale citizen involvement processes signals to citizens that the authority respects them, is interested in their views and experiences and takes them seriously. Drawing on three survey experiments (n=ca. 700 per experiment), we find that information cues about citizen involvement in a political decision-making process lead to higher perceptions of fairness. This holds even when the outcomes of the process are unfavorable and the issue is highly contested. These findings open up exciting possibilities to enhance the legitimacy fostering functions of small-scale citizen involvement procedures.

Citizen involvement in political decision-making processes has been repeatedly called for and experimented with to address observed deficits in perceptions of democratic legitimacy (Barber, 1984; Dryzek, 2002; Pateman, 1970; Warren, 1992). But does citizen involvement deliver on these big promises? Is it worth the current big investments of resources and efforts? Can it have an effect on the legitimacy perceptions of the citizenry? Particularly the small scale nature of most involvement processes and the unequal participation levels observed have led several critics to dismiss them as irrelevant for mass-democracies (e.g. Aachen and Bartels, 2016 but also Chambers, 2009). We know perceptions of legitimacy among the participating citizens can increase (e.g. Christensen, Himmelroos, & Grönlund, 2016; Esaiasson, Gilljam, & Persson, 2012; Esaiasson, Persson, Gilljam, & Lindholm, 2016; Grönlund, Setälä, & Herne, 2010). Yet we know surprisingly little about the potential broader implications of small scale involvement processes.

We argue that the effects of citizen involvement processes are much larger than generally assumed. In particular, we argue that the effects of citizen involvement processes can run well beyond the participants in these processes. Allowing citizens to participate in decision making processes signals to all members of the collective that their authority is interested in their views and experiences, takes them seriously and values them as members of the collective (Tyler & Lind, 1992). Individuals are extremely attentive to information cues about their relationship with the group and its authorities. Procedures can provide useful information about this and function as symbols of group values. This procedural fairness framework has been highly influential in political science, yet, the signaling mechanism Tom Tyler and Allan Lind (1992) propose for the voice effect is rarely discussed. Moreover, political scientists have thus far mainly focused on studying the voice effect among participants of the political decision-making process. The potentially broader signaling effects of using citizen involvement processes are markedly overlooked.

We designed three survey vignette experiments (n = ca. 700 each) in which we draw on real world involvement processes in the Netherlands to assess the causal effect of receiving information on the process on perceptions of fairness. Dutch participants watch short videos that describe a political decision-making process in their municipality. We vary the issue of the

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decision making across the three experiments to cover budget gains, budget losses and a moral issue (asylum reception centers in local municipalities). In addition to the level of citizen involvement, we manipulate the favorability of outcome of the process. If knowledge about the process increases fairness perceptions, does this positive effect also hold when the involvement process provides you with unfavorable outcomes?

Across all three experiments, we find that the sheer knowledge of citizen involvement in a political decision-making process leads to higher perceptions of fairness even in the case of unfavorable outcomes on highly contested issues. These findings have important implications for the role that small scale involvement processes can play in mass democracies.

Can citizen involvement address perceived legitimacy deficits?

In the last decades, a steep increase in the implementation of citizen involvement processes such as town hall meetings, participatory budgeting, or consensus conferences can be observed (Fung & Warren, 2011; Sintomer, Herzberg, & Röcke, 2008; Smith, 2009). Small scale involvement processes, often referred to as mini-publics, have increased in popularity. They are generally open to all citizens or the selection of participants typically follows a random or stratified sampling procedure (Fung, 2006). Usually the involvement process fulfills an advisory function to parliament or city councils, but in some cases also hold decision making power (e.g. participatory budgeting processes in Latin America) or are followed by a referendum (e.g. BC constitutional assembly on electoral reform; Irish citizen assembly on legalization of abortion).

A core rationale for this democratic experimentation is addressing current deficits in citizens' perceptions of democratic legitimacy. In effect, levels of political trust are low and in declining in several countries (della Porta, 2013; Norris, 2011). Results from the International Social Survey Program (2014) for instance show that about half of the surveyed population thinks their government does not care about what people like them think. Only a fourth thinks the government can be trusted to do the right thing. Implementing more participatory and deliberative processes is an often raised answer to these deficits. For instance, drawing on the theory of post-materialism, Norris (2011) and Dalton and Welzel (2014) have argued that current levels of democratic dissatisfaction come from the demands from a more assertive citizenry that

wants to have more voice in political decision-making processes. The argument is that by increasing voice opportunities, democracy can be strengthened and perceptions of democratic legitimacy will be fostered.

It indeed seems intuitive to imagine how participants in those procedures could perceive a process as more legitimate in which they had a direct say. Yet a core problem is that these involvement processes are almost by definition small scale. Only a fraction of the citizenry can be involved and to make matters even more complicated this fraction tends to be the higher educated, politically interested kind. So even if we find increases in perceived fairness among those that participated – is it worth the effort for only a handful of people? This characteristic has led critics to dismiss such types of citizen involvement as irrelevant for mass-democracies (Achen & Bartels, 2016).

Even proponents of these procedures have recognized this problem and have stirred debates about the role that those citizen involvement procedures can play in larger democratic systems (e.g. Curato & Böker, 2016; Fung, 2015; Goodin & Dryzek, 2006; Lafont, 2017). Particularly the connection between small-scale participatory forums and the wider citizenry is emphasized. As Gastil, Rosenzweig, Knobloch and Brinker (2016) put it, "it is imperative that research clarify the relationship between mini-publics and the larger publics they aim to serve." (p. 175). Yet so far these calls from democratic theorists have remained largely unanswered by empirical research on legitimacy perceptions (notable exceptions are Boulianne (2018) and Knobloch (2012)). This poses a serious problem to our understanding of the potential of citizen involvement processes to effectively complement representative decision-making in fostering democratic legitimacy.

The effects of citizen involvement

Most research on citizen involvement and its potential to tackle perceived legitimacy deficits has focused on the effects on *participants*. Notably, Peter Esaiasson and colleagues have studied the impact of different decision making arrangements in a number of context, ranging from budgetary to regulatory issues, field and survey experiments (Esaiasson et al., 2012; Persson, Esaiasson, & Gilljam, 2012). They find that providing individuals voice in the process, for

instance by direct vote, can increase their legitimacy beliefs (see also Curato & Niemeyer, 2013; Grönlund et al., 2010; Herian, Hamm, Tomkins, & Pytlik Zillig, 2012). These studies offer interesting insights into the effect of citizen involvement processes on its participants. Given the small-scale nature of most involvement processes, their implications remain somewhat limited in scope.

Therefore, we argue we should study the effects of citizen involvement processes on perceptions of legitimacy among non-participants. Can hearing about a process with citizen involvement already have an effect? Only few studies have investigated whether knowledge about citizen involvement in decision-making processes has an influence beyond its participants. As deliberation scholars are particularly concerned with the stimulation of day-to-day deliberation and updating of opinions, the focus in this research strand has been on effects on policy positions (Gastil et al., 2016; Ingham & Levin, 2017, 2018). To our knowledge, only two studies have explicitly addressed the potential impact of citizen involvement on legitimacy beliefs of the wider citizenry. First, Boulianne (2018) has studied potential effects on measures of efficacy and political trust in the context of two real mini publics in the UK, manipulating the information provided to respondents. She finds that hearing about the process has small yet significant effects on external political efficacy and mixed findings on political trust. Second, Knobloch (2012) studied the CRI process in Oregon using Panel Surveys and also finds positive effects on external efficacy. Both studies therefore provide first indications that participatory procedures can indeed exert the desired effects on perceptions of legitimacy. While both studies went through the laudable effort to study real cases, this naturally constrains their ability to generalize to different contexts and different decision making issues. As such, we still lack confidence in the causal link between knowledge of involvement of other citizens and perceptions of legitimacy.

Further, the two described studies do not account for outcome favorability. A consistent finding in research on citizen involvement is the impact that favorable decisions have on perceptions of legitimacy. For instance, Marien and Kern (2017) document that the legitimacy boost that can be observed after a local referendum in Belgium can be primarily attributed to the decision winners of the referendum whereas decision losers remain on a stable level. Similarly, Arnesen (2016),

Doherty and Wolak (2012) and most comprehensively Esaiasson and colleagues (2016) have shown that individuals perceptions of the fairness of the process and the willingness to accept the decision differ strongly between decision winners and decision losers. Arguably, it is particularly the consent by losers that is crucial for the stable functioning of a democratic system (Anderson, Blais, Bowler, Donovan, & Listhaug, 2005) as they are at risk of not complying with laws and regulations they personally find undesirable. If a procedural arrangement with citizen involvement can generate a boost for decision winners but at the expense of lower legitimacy perceptions of decision losers, this poses a democratic problem and certainly renders the desirability of such procedures debatable. Therefore, it is important to test whether possible positive effects hold in cases of unfavorable outcomes as well.

The Signaling Mechanism

If we shift the focus from participants to the wider public, the question arises why citizen involvement would have an effect on people that were not involved? Especially if they do not favor the outcome of this process. Drawing on procedural fairness theory, we argue that involvement of few citizens can have positive effects on the general public because it *signals* specific characteristics of the respective political authority. Procedural fairness theory as developed in organizational psychology and legal research, particularly the relational model by Tyler and Lind (1992) predicts that procedures that provide voice to individuals are perceived as fairer because they present important information about the relationship between authority and the individual. Specifically, allowing members of the collective to participate in decision making signals to citizens that the authority respects them, is interested in their views and experiences, takes them seriously and values them as members of the collective. As such procedures function as symbols of group values and individuals are extremely attentive to information cues about their relationship with the group and its authorities. Even though particularly Tom Tyler's work on procedural fairness has been highly influential in political science, the mechanism he proposes for the procedural fairness effects has rarely been taken up in the field.

Translating this theory to the political context, we argue that citizen involvement procedures can have positive effects on perceptions of legitimacy because they show citizens that politicians care about them, listen to them and respect them. Subsequently, this effect can also occur when

the individual is not personally involved, as long as citizens feel that people like them have been included or can be included if they wish to do so. Accordingly, receiving the opportunity to participate functions as the important cue to citizens.

The described signaling function also connects to literature on responsiveness. For instance, Esaiasson, Gilljam and Persson (2017) argue that feeling listened to by authorities and the justification of decisions increases acceptance of decisions, also when they are unfavorable. They show that communicating sincere interest to citizens can be more effective in establishing good relationships between representatives and represented than merely following majority opinion.

Citizen involvement procedures can be an opportunity to communicate such sincere interest to citizens. We do not neglect that under certain conditions, citizen involvement can potentially produce an array of other desirable democratic outcomes, such as educating citizens, increasing internal feelings of internal efficacy and empowering underrepresented voices in the public and parliamentary discourse. In this study, we aim to make a broader claim by focusing on the effects that such involvement processes can have on the wider publics' perceptions of legitimacy. The signaling function serves as a potential explanation for why small scale citizen involvement processes can foster perceptions of democratic legitimacy beyond the few citizens that participate and beyond favorable outcomes. We cannot give all citizens the outcome they want, but we can design processes that signal citizens' voices are valued.

Building on these theoretical arguments we formulate the following hypotheses:

H1: Knowledge about citizen involvement in the political decision making procedures generates higher legitimacy perceptions compared to knowledge about decision making processes by representatives without citizen involvement.

H2: This effect holds even when the outcomes of the decision-making process are unfavorable.

Design

We conducted three survey experiments to test the robustness of the findings and its generalizability across different issues. Scenario experiments are common in both psychological and political science research (Herian et al., 2012; Rothstein & Eek, 2009). We are specifically interested in the effect of knowledge about processes and not the personal experience of being involved, therefore, the scenario experiment comprises the ideal method to achieve experimental realism yet maintain a high level of internal validity. The respondents do not experience the stimulus directly, they do not participate themselves in a political decision-making process, yet this is exactly what we aim to study. What is the effect of sheer knowledge about a decision-making process? The described scenarios come close to mediated presentations of such processes in the real world we aim to study. Another advantage of using vignette experiments for our purpose is that we can describe an actual political decision making procedure with realistic political issues while at the same time manipulating our variable of interest to strengthen causal inference (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014).

Based on our theoretical model, we employ a 2 (procedure: involvement; no involvement) by 2 (outcome: favorable, unfavorable outcome) between-subjects design. The three experiments are congruent in regards to the experimental protocol, the decision making procedure that is presented and the employed measures. They mainly differ in the particular issue on which the decision should be made.

Data and sample

For all three studies we collected data in the Netherlands, using an online panel database (PanelClix). To achieve heterogeneous samples with sufficient statistical power online panel constitutes a good sampling procedure. PanelClix uses a stratified sampling approach to reach representativeness on the variables age, gender, postcode and education of the adult Dutch population. For instance, the sample for study 1 consists of 687 participants from the Netherlands with an average age of 52 years, 48 percent are female and more than 23% hold a university degree which is in line with census data of the Dutch population ((CBS, 2018); similar sample sizes and scores for Study 2 and 3).[1]

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[1] Various studies have assessed the quality of online panel experiments compared to lab research and the overall conclusion is that online panels show roughly the same estimates (Clifford & Jerit, 2014; Mullinix et al., 2016).

Stimulus material

We chose to present the vignettes in the shape of short videos to both increase comprehensibility and engagement with the scenario. The movies consist of simple cartoon characters and a voice over. The first part of the movie consisted of an introduction. Respondents were told that they should imagine that an important decision has to be made in their community. The issue varied across experiments.

Experiment 1: In the first study, the choice is between the implementation of a project on safety which would imply additional policemen on the streets or a project on education equality which would imply additional social workers in schools. The choice of projects was based on data from the Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2018) that revealed both issues as equally and moderately important to people living in the Netherlands. Further, a pretest showed that both issues were equally emotional and that people had a strong opinion on whether to favor one over the other. This first scenario describes a choice between two gains. Accordingly, decision losers do not actually lose in the literal sense but do not experience gain. In consequence, this can be considered a relatively low-stakes situation, which is nonetheless realistic in the Netherlands and other democracies.

Experiment 2: In the second study the same principal policy areas are presented, yet instead of gaining additional policemen or social workers, a choice has to be made on a budget cut. Hence, the municipality has to decide if they employ less policemen to protect the neighborhoods or less social workers. Since this scenario describes a choice between potential cuts, decision losers actually lose something. Since losses are more painful than the absence of gains, we assume that this situation is a higher stake situation than in experiment 1.

Experiment 3. The third study described a different issue. Here the municipality has to decide whether they would open an asylum center for Syrian refugees or not. As a consequence of the increased influx of Syrian and Iraqi refugees since 2015, this is a particularly salient and controversial issue in the Dutch context. Compared to experiment 1 and experiment 2 that both

described a budget issue, this last issue relates more to a moral debate. Given the remarkable salience of the topic of refugees and migration generally in the Netherlands (and most other Western democracies, e.g. Eurobarometer, 2018), we assume that citizens consider this to be a high stakes issue.

In all three experiments, after presenting these projects and indicating that the topic is debated among citizens of the city, respondents were asked to state their preference for one of the two options, depending on the experiment. This information was used to assign a matching outcome, depending on whether the respondent was randomly assigned to the favorable or unfavorable outcomes condition. In the second part of the movie, participants were told that there was a discussion in their municipality about how the decision should be made. The city council could either make the decision themselves or could host a citizen forum which has already been implied in various towns in the Netherlands. The description of the citizen forum was based on real life cases of deliberative mini-publics or 'burgerforums' (Fournier, van der Kolk, Carty, Blais, & Rose, 2011). Afterwards, depending on condition, respondents were either told that the citizen forum was hosted (involvement condition) or that the city council takes the decision themselves (no involvement condition). In the following, respondents were shown the outcome of the procedure, depending on condition either their preferred option (favorable condition) or the not preferred option (unfavorable condition).

In all conditions the movies were identical apart from the choice of procedure and the outcome. The speaker was a female native Dutch person without identifiable accent. The stimulus material was pre-tested in cognition tests where people (differing on age, education on gender) watched the movies and expressed their thoughts. Accordingly, the movies were easy to understand and did not elicit undesired associations. The full text can be found in the Appendix.

Procedure
Participants completed the study online. In the beginning, participants indicated the name of the community they live in, which was used (via a piped text function) throughout the questionnaire to increase realism. Participants were assigned one of the four conditions (for instance:

involvement – winner) at random. Further, participants watched the introduction movie and indicated their preference for either the safety or the education equality project. Then, they watched the second movie, which entailed the decision making procedure and the final decision. Subsequently, participants filled in a questionnaire assessing their procedural fairness perceptions, manipulation checks and demographics.

Measures

To assess perceptions of the legitimacy of the process, we focus in particular on *perceptions of fairness*. This is in line with research on procedural fairness in psychology, legal research and political science. Numerous studies both in legal and psychological research but also in political science have documented that perceptions of fairness lead to higher levels of decision acceptance, trust in authorities and cooperation and compliance (e.g. Marien and Werner 2018; Esaiasson et al. 2016; Tyler 2011). The crucial link for empirical investigation is to understand what kind of decision making is considered as fairer by citizens.

In political science research, this concept is usually measured by simple one item questions. To increase robustness we aimed for multiple item measures that differed slightly across the three studies. In experiment 1, by drawing on fairness criteria identified by Leventhal and previous empirical studies, we measure the perceptions of a fair procedure by four items, assessing fairness, ethicality, influence and voicing opinions (Colquitt & Rodell, 2015; Esaiasson et al., 2012; Herian et al., 2012). Item wording was for instance: *The procedure was fair* or the *procedure fulfilled my moral standards.* Answers were assessed on a 7-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The scale yielded satisfactory reliability (experiment 1: cronbach's alpha=.91). In experiment 2 and experiment 3 we used similar general items about an overall assessment of fairness but added 3 other items that included slightly different attributes: *good, just* and *appropriate.* The 7-point response scale ranged from very unfair (etc.) to very fair (etc.). The overall scale yielded satisfactory reliability (e. g. experiment 2: cronbach's alpha=.95). More details on the measures can be found in the Appendix (Table A1-A3).

Compliance check. To grasp whether participants actually exposed themselves to the stimulus material, we employed a sound check in the beginning of the study, measured the time that

individuals spent watching the video and assessed whether participants could recall the two projects.

Manipulation check. The stimulus material was designed to manipulate citizen involvement in political decision making. Accordingly, we asked individuals to rate the extent to which citizens were involved in the procedure on a 7-point scale ranging from not involved at all to very involved.

Results

The following analyses were carried out on the full samples excluding cases that could not participate due to technical constraints (could not listen to sound on their device) and cases that showed physically impossible response times (25 % of the average response time). However, all analyses were also conducted including cases from the last category and the results did not deviate substantially from the presented estimates (Appendix, Table B4).

Credibility and compliance

The movies were perceived as rather credible across conditions (E1: $M= 4.17$, $SD= 1.70$; E2: $M= 4.20$. $SD= 1.56$; E3: $M= 4.08$, $SD= 1.64$, scale:1-7). In all three experiments, the movies with involvement procedures were perceived as slightly less credible than the representative procedures, which makes sense given the still rare application of citizen forums in the Netherlands.

In all three studies, participants complied well in terms of paying attention to the treatment. Almost all participants were able to recall the issues discussed in the movies (E1: 91.44%; E2: 97.58%; E3:98,43%). For all three studies non-compliance was evenly distributed across the four conditions as there was no significant difference between the time people spent watching the movies, the ability to recall the issues and the likelihood to perform the sound check correctly across conditions.

Manipulation checks

The manipulation of citizen involvement by means of vignettes was successful in all three experiments. Across the three studies, participants evaluated the procedure as significantly more

involving of citizens in the involvement condition (E1: *M=4.98, SD=1.38*; E2: *M=5.01, SD=1.52*; E3: *M=4.97, SD=1.57*) compared to the representative condition (E1: *M* = 3.02, *SD* = .1.65 *t*(827) = -18.25, *p* <.001; E2: *M=2.97, SD=1.42, t*(741)=-18.89, *p<.001*; E3: *M=2.89, SD=1.55, t*(657)=-17.01, *p<.001*).

The dependent variable of interest, procedural fairness perceptions, was fairly normally distributed, showed a mean slightly above the median and substantive variance (e.g. E1: *M=4.14, SD* = 1.54, *Skewness=.23; Kurtosis* = 2.44 (scale: 1-7)).

Analysis

Turning to the relations of interest, we first plot the mean scores in the respective treatment groups across the three experiments. As can be seen in Figure 1, respondents held higher fairness perceptions when they were told the decision was made using a participatory process than respondents who were told the process did not make use of this procedure. We also see substantial differences between favorable outcomes ("W" for winners) and unfavorable outcomes ("L" for losers), as losers express lower levels of fairness perceptions than winners in all conditions and studies. Nonetheless, losers also seem to gain from involvement procedures and particularly so in experiment 1.

Figure 1: *Mean scores of fairness perceptions across studies and conditions.*
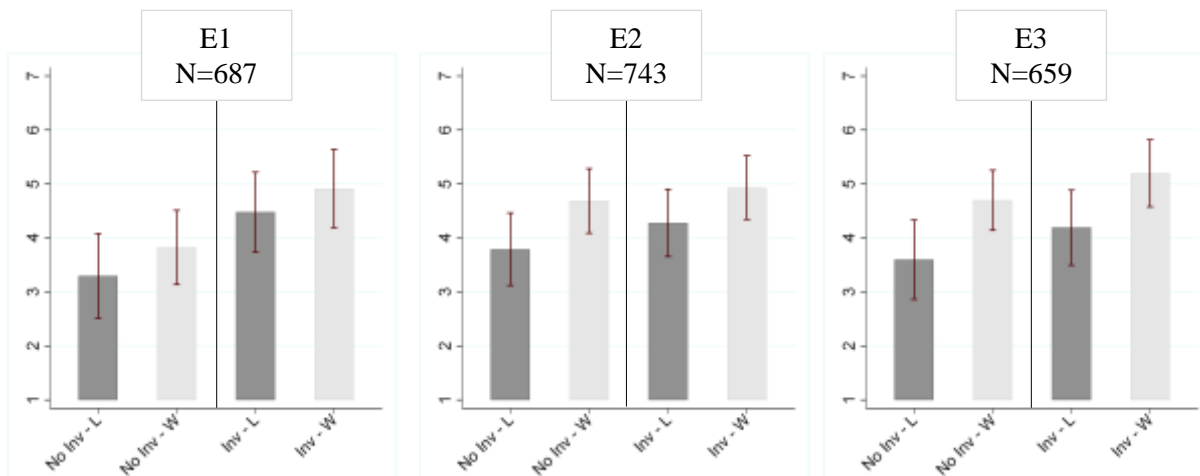
Note: Fairness perceptions range from 1-7. Error bars present standard deviations.

In the next step we investigate whether those differences are statistically significant using regression models. Based on our hypotheses, we first investigate to what extent citizen involvement could increase fairness perceptions across the whole sample. Second, we focus particularly on decision losers and test whether they could get a significant boost in fairness perceptions from involvement procedures despite their unfavorable outcome.

H1: The effect of citizen involvement on legitimacy perceptions

First, we analyze the average treatment effects on fairness perceptions. As can be seen in Table 1, in all three experiments we see a positive significant effect of knowledge about a process with citizen involvement compared to no citizen involvement on fairness perceptions. Accordingly, across winners and losers and decision making issues, giving voice to citizens does lead to more positive evaluation of the process. The effect seems to be slightly stronger in Study 1 – the low stakes issue – but given the slightly different measure, this can also be attributed to a mere measurement artefact.

Accordingly, the first hypothesis receives support. The sheer knowledge of involvement of citizens in the process in one's municipality fosters average fairness perceptions in all three studies.

H2: The effect of citizen involvement on legitimacy perceptions for decision losers

However, this effect could be driven by decision winners who are already satisfied with the decision at the expense of lower legitimacy perceptions of decision losers. Accordingly, we turn to testing the second hypothesis: can involvement procedures increase fairness perceptions among the critical group, decision losers?

Indeed, as a regression model on this subsample of participants shows (Table 1, Model II), there is a positive significant effect across the three experiments. Decision losers exert higher perceptions of fairness if the decision was made in a process that allowed for voice than if there was a purely representative procedure. This effect also seems to be strongest in Study 1, indicating that it is easier to satisfy losers if the substantial losses were less painful. Importantly, this also holds for the highly contested issue of asylum reception centers in one's municipality. Even then, observing that other citizens were involved could substantially increase perceptions

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of a fair decision making process. To be precise, providing the opportunity of voice resulted in a .59 increase on the 7-point fairness perception scale.

This finding supports the second hypothesis. It shows that even the presumably most critical group – decision losers - appreciates citizen involvement even if they did not personally participate.

Table 1: Explaining fairness perceptions across treatment groups

	Study 1						Study 2						Study 3					
	all			losers			all			losers			all			losers		
	coef	*p*	*SE*	*coef*	*p*	*SE*	*coef*	*p*	*SE*	*coef*	*p*	*SE*	*coef*	*p*	*SE*	*coef*	*p*	*SE*
treatment: involvement	**1.12**	**.000**	**.11**	**1.16**	**.000**	**.15**	**.37**	**.000**	**.09**	**.49**	**.000**	**.13**	**.55**	**.000**	**.10**	**.59**	**.000**	**.16**
R²	.15			.13			.11			.03			.17			.04		
N	687			345			743			373			659			333		

Note: non-standardized coefficients are presented, estimates with a p-value below .05 are printed in bold. E1: gains (policemen or social workers), E2: losses (policemen or social workers), E3: opening an asylum seeker center.

Robustness Checks

We conduct several additional checks to address the robustness of our findings. First, we pay particular attention to Experiment 3 which described the potential installation of a reception center for refugees in one's municipality. Compared to the other two studies in question, this one did not include a choice between two gains or two losses. Depending on the individual preference, losers either were faced with the installation of an asylum seeker center in their municipality that they opposed, or the absence of such a center that they supported. One might argue, that loss is quite different for the different groups and that particularly the first would be resentful of such a decision because of its high perceived impact. It could be the case that our finding in support of the voice effect is simply driven by those losers that favored the asylum seeker center whereas for those that opposed it, frustration was too high to be appreciative of citizen involvement. Conducting test for the separate groups shows that this is not case (see Appendix, Table B1). Also for participants that experience loss on a highly topical and polarizing issue such as the undesired installation of a reception center for asylum seekers, involvement exerts a substantial and significant effect on perceptions of fairness.

Second, to account for the variation in measures, we conduct all our analyses also with the single item measure that was used in all three experiments as well as in the literature, which asked for an overall assessment of fairness of the procedure. The estimates align substantially with the presented findings and yield slightly stronger effects across all studies (see Appendix, Table B2).

In a third step we address the question of scope of our present study. Since we presented our study as a decision making scenario on the municipal level in the participants local community, it is possible that the effect only holds when one feels that fellow citizens are highly similar to them. This could imply that on higher levels of governance the legitimacy boosting effects might be less strong. To address this possibility, we include the perceived alignment with fellow citizens in ones municipality as a moderator. In none of the three studies could we detect a significant difference in the effect between people that felt highly aligned with fellow citizens and people that did not (see Appendix, Table B3).

Lastly, we conduct our main analyses on the full samples, including racers and participants that did not fully watch the movies. As expected, the estimates decrease in size yet remain significant and meaningful (see Appendix, Table B4).

Discussion

In this paper we have argued that a crucial test for citizen involvement procedures to foster perceptions of legitimacy lies in its ability to influence the broader public. Therefore we have advocated a shift in attention away from individuals that participate personally to fellow citizens that merely hear about or observe such participatory procedures. By doing so we have taken up the recent call by political theorists to study empirically if such involvement procedures can be successfully embedded in mass democracies (e.g. Curato & Böker, 2016)).

Our empirical analysis of three survey experiments has yielded strong evidence that the mere knowledge of citizen involvement – in our case through citizen forums on the local level – can foster perceptions of procedural fairness. This effect also holds for least likely scenarios where citizens receive unfavorable outcomes and the issue is highly salient and contested.

We explain this effect by drawing on the relational model of procedural fairness as developed by Tyler and Lind (1992). By voluntarily involving citizens in the decision making process, the authority signals goodwill, interest, trust and respect for citizens and their opinions and experiences. As such, procedures provide important cues about the relationship between citizens and authorities.

These findings resonate with previous studies by Knobloch (2012) and Boulianne (2018) but also for instance by Ulbig (2008) or Terwel and colleagues (2010) who indicate that observing voice could suffice to evoke the desired benefits.

The presented findings hold several implications for our scholarly understanding of involvement and the organization of such procedures in practice:

The results of this study can certainly be interpreted as a positive signal for proponents of more involvement to address deficits in perceived legitimacy. As was assumed by for instance Gastil (2006), our studies suggest that involvement procedures can have a substantial impact on the broader public. This provides an empirical counterargument to criticism that e.g. mini-publics are irrelevant for the greater workings of society because of their small scale. In this context, many authors have previously noted that the *opportunity* to participate may be almost equally influential than actual participation (Grimes, 2006; Warren, 1996). Drawing on the relational explanation discussed in this paper, knowing that citizens have the possibility to step in and be involved in political decision making if they desire to do so, can also function as an informative cue about the respect and willingness to collaborate of the authority. There is also some empirical evidence for this idea, as for instance Bauer and Fatke (2014) find that in Swiss cantons the mere opportunity to initiate referendums substantially increases political trust.

In addition, our findings address recent criticisms in the study of voice that outcomes are the only relevant criterion for citizens. In fact, decision losers seem to appreciate involvement to the same extent as decision winners. Subsequently, our findings also speaks to an often voiced claim that involvement procedures are only beneficial if the individual had substantial influence over the outcome (Grimes, 2006; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2008; Ulbig, 2008). Drawing on the signaling function of involvement procedures, we propose that it is not necessary for the individual to control the decision to find a procedure as more legitimate. However, this is not a

waiver for authorities to ignore citizens' wishes and conduct involvement procedures for show. They still have to be effective in the way that they are taken seriously and engaged with thoroughly.

A similar, more fundamental aspect has been discussed in procedural fairness research as well. If procedures, particularly the perceptions of procedures can satisfy individuals despite unfavorable outcomes, does this not make it a powerful tool for authorities to manipulate the citizenry while depriving them of substantial policy changes (MacCoun, 2005)? Based on the relational model of authority, giving voice to citizens fulfills primarily a symbolic function. Does this downgrade participatory procedures to mere opium of the masses?

We do agree that this is a serious concern and the extant use of participatory tools, for instance also in autocracies, must be assessed in regards to this risk. However, in established democracies there are indications that the causes of legitimacy deficits are in fact relational rather than policy-oriented. Numerous books, for instance Hibbing and Theiss-Morses "Stealth democracy" have documented how citizens have become increasingly critical of the political elites and suspicious of their intentions. Also the parallel improvement of life standards and the decrease in proxies of legitimacy such as trust or support for protest parties speak in favor of the hypothesis that the legitimacy deficit is at least partly a relational problem compared to a response to decreasing outcome quality. This is not to dismiss that certain groups have in fact lost socio-economic status and that resource inequalities are persistent and partly growing.

Therefore we do believe that an increase in perceived legitimacy is desirable even if it does not stem from improvement of policy outcomes. Furthermore, we consider the risk of "false consciousness" as relatively low precisely because citizens have become so suspicious of political elites. Citizens have to perceive involvement procedures to be genuine. Any notion of alibi-involvement is likely to be detected and punished immediately by the citizenry.

If we consider the fostering of legitimacy through procedures as desirable, we can also infer practical recommendations for organizers of participatory procedures from the findings of our studies. Given the importance and feasibility to impact the broader public with involvement procedures, the diffusion of knowledge about such processes should become a core goal for authorities. So far, this is often a missed opportunity to fully exploit the potential benefits. This

includes a stronger focus on collaboration with news media and campaigns, as has also been argued for by Fishkin. An example for a broad communication strategy is the Irish citizens assembly in the uptake to the abortion referendum in 2018. The assembly was broadcasted online and scientists involved in the process regularly appeared in the news media – resulting in 65% of the population knowing about the assembly (RTE poll 2018).

As with every study, ours come with some limitations. Importantly, we have used scenario experiments to study our relationship of interest and cannot be perfectly confident that we would find the same results in real cases. By designing our vignettes as close to the political realities as possible and by including different issues, we tried to increase experimental realism while maintaining a high level of control. Nevertheless, future studies might investigate the posed research question using panel designs in real cases of participatory decision making (like for instance Knobloch, 2012). Second, we used fairness perceptions as a proxy for perceived legitimacy which is certainly not the only relevant indicator. Yet since previous research has repeatedly shown a strong link between fairness perceptions and trust, compliance and cooperation (for instance Tyler, 1990, 2011), it seems plausible that involvement can also trigger more behavioral aspects of consent.

Lastly, we have suggested that a signaling mechanism based on the relational model of procedural fairness underlies the effect between knowledge of citizen involvement and legitimacy perceptions. Further research is required to dig deeper into the causal link indicated in this paper.

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