

# Do Parliamentarians Listen to Experts or Citizens?

The role of expert knowledge and public opinion in MPs' decision-making

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# Research project

How do members of parliament decide on policies when expert knowledge and public opinion conflict?



# Introduction

- Technocratic and populist critique of representative democracy
- Political representatives must weigh the current demands of their voters against the long-term welfare of the people
- Responsiveness-responsibility dilemma: MPs' role as responsive delegates *of* the people clashes with their role as responsible agents *for* the people
- Members of parliament as elite decision-makers under conditions of uncertainty (inadequate information) and ambivalence (conflicting information)



# State of the art

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- Quantitative research on the decision-making of political elites is still in its infancy
- Previous studies focusing on political elites' responsiveness to either expert evidence or public opinion has often been inconclusive
  - Some studies: policymakers update their prior beliefs when they receive new information about constituents' opinions or facts (Butler and Nickerson 2011; Zelizer 2018; Hjort et al. 2019)
  - The bulk of studies: political elites are biased in their processing of new information (Baekgaard et al. 2019; Bolsen et al. 2015), project their own preferences on voters (Bergan et al. 2024; Sevenans et al. 2023) and suffer from a range of other cognitive biases (Sheffer et al. 2018)
- No study has explored how political elites decide when confronted with different sources of information

# Research objectives

## Identify and analyse MPs' updating of prior beliefs and positions

- » To what extent do MPs update their beliefs in response to expert knowledge (or public opinion) and how does their decision-making behaviour vary when public opinion and expert knowledge conflict?

## Explain inter-individual differences in MPs' decision-making

- » Why do some MPs tend to follow the advice of experts, while others favour public opinion?
- » Do individual differences (e.g., age, gender, education, psychological dispositions) shape MPs' decision-making behaviour?

## Explore cross-party and cross-country variation

- » Are MPs from some parties more likely to update their policy positions in response to public opinion and/or expert knowledge than others?
- » Are there notable cross-country differences in how MPs decide on policies?



# Research Design

## Comparative study

- Three parliamentary democracies: Austria, Germany, United Kingdom
- Three policy areas: environmental, health, and welfare policy

## Data collection

- Collect direct data from national MPs
  - (1) Conduct elite surveys embedding survey experiments
  - (2) Conduct complementary qualitative interviews



# Contributions of my research project

## Theoretical

- » Brings together two literatures: one from political science on representation and the role of evidence in policymaking and one from behavioural economics on opinion adaptation and individual decision-making

## Empirical

- » Novel comparative account of the knowledge use and decision-making behaviour of national MPs in three liberal democracies
- » Large body of original data on MPs' attitudes towards democratic representation and technocracy collected in Austria, Germany, and the UK

## Methodological

- » By weaving together both quantitative and qualitative approaches, this project will contribute to a more nuanced assessment of MPs' decision-making behaviour
- » provide experimental evidence instead of self-reported data on MPs' decision-making

# Practical implications

- Develop strategies to help both experts and citizens to communicate their policy preferences more effectively to MPs
- Contribute to a better understanding of the demands MPs place on experts and the extent to which they request knowledge from institutions such as the Parliament's research services
- Improve the provision of (expert) knowledge to parliamentarians – esp. facilitate the provision of knowledge by the Austrian parliamentary administration
- Share best practice examples from other parliaments with the Austrian parliamentary administration







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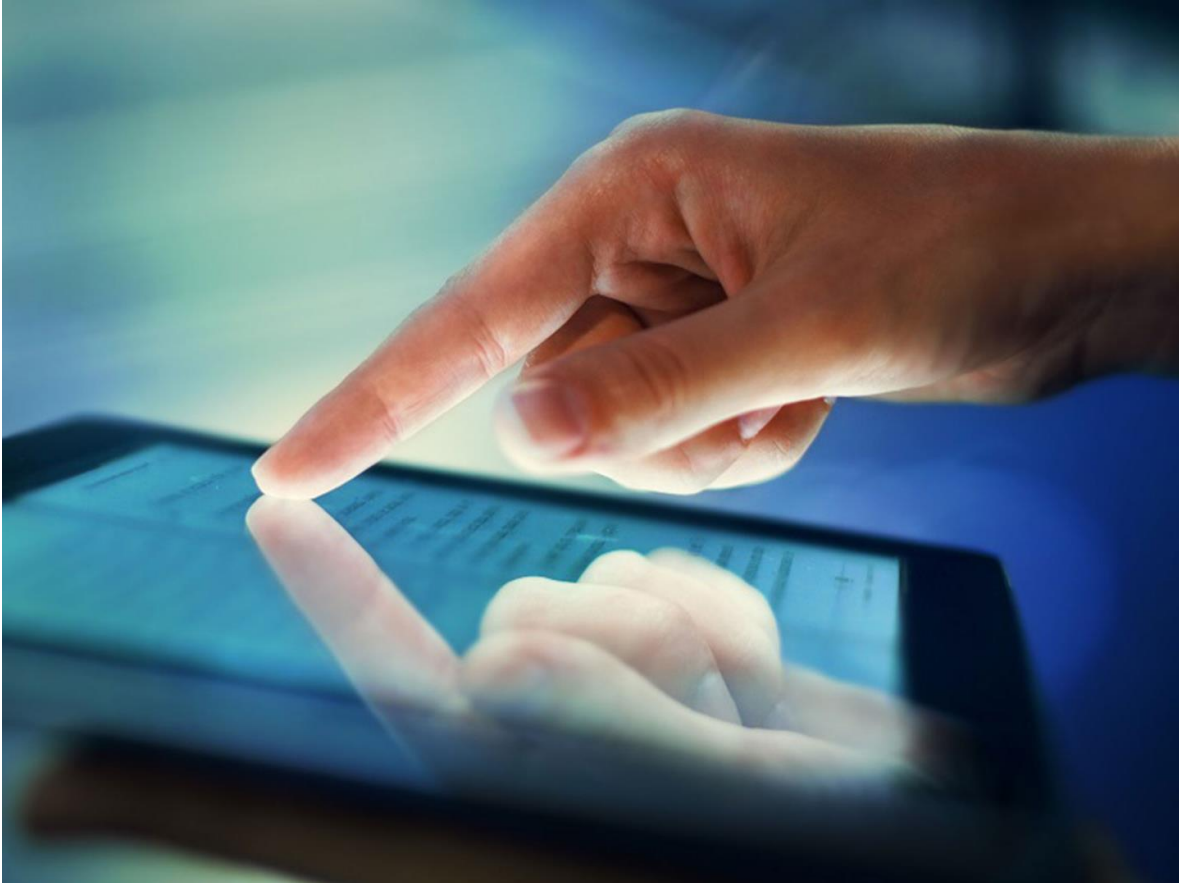
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# Appendix

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# MP survey

## Structure

- (1) Measure existing attitudes and preferences on a set of specific policy proposals (e.g., rent control, carbon taxes, drug consumption rooms)
- (2) Collect data on MPs' attitudes towards democratic representation, technocracy as well as other variables of interest (area-specific expertise, political ideology, and personality characteristics)
- (3) MPs receive additional information on public opinion and expert evidence for specific policy proposals
- (4) Post-measure: Do MPs update their prior policy positions? How do they decide if public opinion and expert evidence conflict? Would they support a party leader pushing for that proposal?

# Decision-making scenarios

**Table 1** Overview of different decision-making scenarios and dependent variables



		Expert knowledge	
		Yes	No
Public opinion	Yes	<div>Disagreement: (4) Choice</div> <div>Agreement: (3) Responsiveness</div>	(1) Voter responsiveness
	No	(2) Expert responsiveness	Prior beliefs (baseline measure)

Note: ‘Yes’ (‘No’) refers to the provision of either public opinion or expert knowledge. If both expert knowledge and public opinion are provided (upper left), the two pieces of information can either be in conflict (disagreement) or compatible (agreement).



# Explaining variation in voter and expert responsiveness

Level of analysis	Independent variables
<b>individual-level</b>	Master beliefs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>beliefs about democratic representation (representational role)</li> <li>beliefs about the role of evidence in policy-making / technocratic mentality</li> <li>theory of voting behaviour</li> </ul>
	Specific beliefs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>electoral motives (interest in re-election; confidence in re-election)</li> <li>issue-specific expertise</li> </ul>
	Personality characteristics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>psychological dispositions (e.g., self-monitoring; need for closure)</li> <li>background variables (age, gender, education, prior legislative experience, former occupation, ideological left-right placement)</li> </ul>
<b>meso-level (exploratory)</b>	Policy area <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>salience and divisiveness of an issue</li> </ul> Party <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>mainstream parties vs populist parties</li> <li>party family</li> </ul>
<b>macro-level (exploratory)</b>	Country <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>differences between Austria, Germany and the UK</li> </ul>