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Citizens' Preferences for Representation Styles: Exploring the Mandate–Independence Controversy in Eight European Countries

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Abstract

How do citizens want to be represented? What individual-level factors are associated with variation in these preferences? While existing research emphasises the crucial link between citizens and elected representatives, surprisingly little attention has been given to citizens' expectations regarding *how* representation should be exercised. This article investigates citizens' preferences in eight European countries for one central dimension of representation styles: the mandate–independence controversy. Relying on data from an original comparative survey conducted in 2025 ($N \approx 15,000$), we analyse how individual-level factors—ranging from ideological outlook and cognitive mobilisation to electoral status and democratic satisfaction—correlate with citizens' positioning on the trustee–delegate continuum. Our findings highlight the relevance of deep-rooted ideological orientations and the important role of contingent political dynamics and factors such as democratic satisfaction. Also, the study highlights the importance of national contexts and cautions against broad generalisations drawn from single-country analyses or pooled comparative findings alone. The article contributes to the literature by investigating the nature and origins of preferences towards representation styles, unsettling the conventional view that such preferences reflect principled commitments. Rather, it suggests they might often be evaluation-based, contingent, and far less normatively anchored than is usually assumed.

Keywords

cognitive mobilisation; populism; representation styles; satisfaction with democracy; trustee–delegate continuum

1. Introduction

Political representation, understood as a reciprocal relationship between citizens and members of parliament (MPs), is a cornerstone of liberal democracy (Pitkin, 1967; Urbinati & Warren, 2008). When representatives listen to, engage with, and justify their actions to the public, they not only build trust but also uphold accountability, understood as citizens' capacity to monitor and influence elected officials, and enhance democratic legitimacy (Dalton, 2004; Przeworski et al., 1999; Wessels, 2007).

A vast literature has examined different dimensions of representation, including *descriptive* representation, which focuses on legislators' backgrounds; *substantive* representation, which analyses MPs' preferences and opinions; and the *focus* of representation, which concerns whom representatives should represent. Nevertheless, less attention has been paid to representation *styles*, that is, the way in which political representatives, generally MPs, may exercise their mandate (Pitkin, 1967). The debate centres on the classic question of whether representatives should serve as *delegates*, prioritising the instructions of their constituents, or as *trustees* in the Burkean sense, relying on their own judgment over that of those they represent.

So far, studies have addressed the problem primarily from a theoretical perspective, focusing on the ideal relationship between representatives and voters. Recent theoretical work has also stressed the multidimensional character of representation, unpacking the relationship between representatives' practices and citizens' expectations (Wolkenstein & Wratil, 2021). Empirical research, by contrast, has mainly taken an elite-oriented approach, concentrating on MPs' views of their role. At the same time, the citizens' perspective has been somewhat overlooked, with most studies focusing on single national contexts or missing a systematic analysis of factors explaining individual preferences (for a review, see Wass & Nemčok, 2020). If we conceive of representation as a relationship between citizens and MPs, it is crucial to assess the demand side, that is, the representation style from the citizens' angle (Harden, 2015).

This is relevant not only from a purely theoretical point of view but also because these preferences may shape the practice of representative democracy. Citizens' representational expectations may create both incentives and constraints for political elites and party organisations. Parties may recruit candidates according to the type of representative relationship they are expected to embody, while MPs themselves may strategically adapt their behaviour to prevailing citizen expectations to maintain electoral support. More broadly, variation in citizens' preferences toward delegate or trustee models may also carry implications for debates on electoral systems, accountability, and the balance between responsiveness and political autonomy in representative democracies (Castiglione & Warren, 2019; Mansbridge, 2011; Pitkin, 1967; Urbinati & Warren, 2008). Last, a mismatch between citizens' representational expectations and the behaviour of political elites may contribute to citizens' detachment from the representative process (André & Depauw, 2017; Arnesen & Peters, 2018). Yet, before addressing these dynamics, it is necessary to determine whether citizens value a trustee or delegate model of representation in the first place. Thus, how do citizens want to be represented? What individual-level factors correlate with these preferences?

This article seeks to address these questions by using new comparative data and, more importantly, by assessing a wide array of potential conditions under which citizens are prone to the delegate or trustee model of representation. Indeed, a normative view of representation styles would imply that preferences are

connected to deeper ideological values. Yet, other, more contingent factors, such as assessments of the democratic process or electoral status, might also be relevant. Drawing on an original comparative survey conducted in 2025 (Verzichelli et al., 2025), we first analyse the prevalence of preferences for representation styles, showing that citizens hold more heterogeneous views than is often assumed. Second, we investigate how individual-level factors are linked to citizens' positioning on the trustee–delegate continuum. As discussed below, our findings highlight the relevance of deep-rooted ideological orientations, while also indicating an association between contingent political dynamics, especially democratic satisfaction, and citizens' positioning on the trustee–delegate continuum. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of national contexts and cautions against generalisations based on individual country studies.

Combining theories of democratic representation with more traditional approaches to public opinion formation, this study contributes to the literature by questioning the nature and origins of preferences toward representation styles, with findings that run counter to assumptions in the normative literature. This is done using brand-new data and a comparative design.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. *The Delegate–Trustee Dimension: A Citizen Perspective*

According to the classic account, political representation is best conceived as a system in which the people participate indirectly, being made present in decision-making through their representatives (Mansbridge, 2011; Pitkin, 1967; Urbinati & Warren, 2008). Thus, political representation is seen as an ongoing relationship in which the represented must be able to influence and constrain elites. The extent to which citizens are engaged or disengaged in this process paves the way for understandings of democratic representation. While citizen-centred or even populist views of representation emphasise the perfect coincidence between the behaviour of the representative, on the one hand, and the interests of the citizens, on the other, more liberal or elitist views of representation highlight competence and discretionary forms of decision-making by the representative (Thomassen, 1994).

When it comes to the styles of representation, or how this tension manifests in MPs' work, the discussion has coalesced around two models based on the extent to which citizens should influence the conduct of elected politicians. These models can be conceived as two opposite poles of a continuum (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005; Eulau & Wahlke, 1959; Meller, 1967; Wahlke et al., 1962). On the one side, the “delegate” model stresses the closeness of the representative–represented relationship and may be defined in terms of the constituency, a political party, or particular voter groups. This implies that representatives serve as agents, “standing for” their constituents (Pitkin, 1967), carrying out the directives of those they represent.

On the other side, the “trustee” model posits that elected politicians make decisions according to their independent judgement, following their own interpretation of the best course of action. The focus of representation is now the good of the whole nation, and the will of constituents is not, per se, a crucial link between interests and decisions (Thomassen, 1994). It is also important to recognise the possibility of a third, “less dogmatic” model of democratic representation that sits between these two opposite ideal types, the “politico” model (Eulau & Wahlke, 1959). In fact, it may be that this controversy between mandate and independence hinges on the issue at stake and the context in which the decision is made (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005).

That said, the mandate–independence dichotomy and the resulting distinction between delegate and trustee models of representation have not escaped criticism. The essence of representation lies in a balance: Representatives are never perfect mirrors of constituents' demands, but neither can they be wholly disconnected from them (Pitkin, 1967). Moreover, the distinction risks oversimplifying the representative relationship by reducing it to a one-dimensional continuum (Wolkenstein & Wratil, 2021) and conflating analytically distinct aspects, such as the source of judgement, the focus of representation, and representatives' sensitivity to electoral sanctions (Rehfeld, 2009). The broader literature has therefore examined representative roles in several ways, including MPs' territorial or constituency focus, behavioural activity profiles, role priorities, legislative specialisation, and multidimensional citizen preferences (Bernhard et al., 2017; Blomgren & Rozenberg, 2012; Blumenau et al., 2025; Campbell & Lovenduski, 2015; Papp et al., 2024; Russo, 2011). Even within the narrower mandate–independence tradition, the delegate–trustee dichotomy has been criticised for overlooking partisan representation, especially in European party democracies, where representatives may prioritise party discipline over both constituency opinion and personal judgement (Bøggild, 2020; Converse & Pierce, 1986). For our research goal, however, we focus specifically on one theoretically central dimension, that is, the mandate–independence controversy, measured through citizens' preferences along the delegate–trustee continuum. While this does not capture the full range of representative roles, it remains relevant because it speaks directly to a core tension in representative democracy: the balance between responsiveness and autonomy, citizen control and political judgement, democratic input and expertise.

The trustee–delegate distinction has proved particularly fruitful in the empirical literature, as it can be translated into a simple, measurable continuum of preferences. Despite this, studies have concentrated more on the supply-side than on the demand-side of representation with contributions focusing mainly on how MPs conceive their role (e.g., Converse & Pierce, 1986; Deschouwer et al., 2014; Esaiasson, 2000; Gunlicks, 1969; Studlar & McAllister, 1996), showing, not surprisingly, that they tend to prefer the trustee model of representation (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005; Converse & Pierce, 1986; Deschouwer et al., 2014). Conversely, citizen-oriented analysis is rather scarce, as citizens are usually considered unable to form opinions on such complex issues or, at best, to favour the opposite delegate model of representation. The handful of available studies, however, seem to suggest that this might not be the case, with substantial variation across publics in preferences for representation styles. A trustee model has been found to be more widespread in Finland (Bengtsson & Wass, 2010) and Spain (Barreda Díez & Ruiz Rodríguez, 2019; Méndez-Lago & Martínez, 2002) whilst a delegate model has been prominent in countries such as France (Converse & Pierce, 1986), the Netherlands (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005), the United Kingdom (Carman, 2006), and the United States (Barker & Carman, 2012).

2.2. Correlates of Citizens' Preferences Towards Representation Styles

As we have seen, analyses of citizens' preferences towards representation and the factors that explain variation among individuals are still largely confined to single national contexts and, with rare exceptions, they have not been scaled up to the comparative level. To the best of our knowledge, comparative research has either focused on a restricted set of factors (Mongrain et al., 2025), failing to provide a systematic assessment of alternative explanations, or it has concentrated on government responsiveness rather than on the MP–citizen link (Bowler, 2017; Rosset et al., 2017).

So, how do people develop different representation preferences? Building on seminal research (Bowler, 2017), we distinguish between two broad families of explanatory factors. First, principle-based factors are relatively stable predispositions that shape citizens' normative views of how representatives should behave (e.g., cognitive resources and ideological values). Second, context-based evaluations capture more short-term and context-dependent political experiences (i.e., evaluations of system functioning and electoral status). In this respect, empirical studies show mixed results (Bengtsson & Wass, 2010; Bowler, 2017; Carman, 2007; Mongrain et al., 2025; Rosset et al., 2017), so further comparative investigation is needed.

2.2.1. The Role of Principle-Based Orientations

Following the normative debate on representation, preferences for representation styles are generally assumed to be principle-oriented and rooted in cognitive resources, enduring values, and ideological orientations. While the delegate model aligns with democratic ideals of responsiveness to citizens, the trustee model emphasises leadership, competence, and responsibility (Birch, 1971; Pitkin, 1967). According to this rationale, preferences regarding delegate–trustee models are often assumed to be relatively stable, reflecting commitments to how democracy ought to function and, as such, long-term individual orientations.

The first relevant set of factors linked to citizens' support for either a delegate or a trustee model of representation concerns individual cognitive skills. Cognitive mobilisation has been associated with a predisposition to participate in politics and to adopt an “elite-directing” view of democratic politics, in which citizens expect political elites to respond to and follow public preferences (Inglehart, 1977; see also Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005). As a result, citizens with higher levels of education are expected to have greater access to political information and a stronger ability to form personal positions on complex political issues. A similar argument applies to those with greater political interest (education and political interest are, in fact, often correlated). More cognitively mobilised citizens may therefore display higher levels of political engagement and a stronger orientation towards responsiveness and representation from below, which should be associated with stronger preferences for delegation over trusteeship. Conversely, less cognitively mobilised citizens might be expected to adopt a more “elite-directed” view of politics, showing less capacity to form opinions and engage in politics. So far, both case-study research in the Netherlands and United Kingdom (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005; Carman, 2006), as well as the only available comparative analysis by Mongrain et al. (2025), have provided scant and conflicting evidence. Accordingly, our first expectation concerns the association between cognitive mobilisation and representation-style preferences:

H1: Higher cognitive mobilisation will be positively associated with preferences for delegation, whereas lower cognitive mobilisation will be positively associated with preferences for trusteeship.

As mentioned, preferences for delegate–trustee models may be linked to different conceptions of democratic representation (direct/populist versus liberal/elitist). It is therefore not surprising that current research has examined the correlation between citizens' preferences for styles of representation and both “thick” and “thin” ideological orientations. With regard to the traditional left–right spectrum, progressive citizens may emphasise participation and responsiveness, reflecting broader egalitarian and participatory conceptions of democracy that favour representation from below and direct citizen involvement in decision-making. Conversely, more conservative citizens may place greater emphasis on order, authority, leadership autonomy, and elite discretion (Barker & Carman, 2012).

As far as “thin” ideological leanings are concerned, a substantial body of literature on populism has flourished over the last couple of decades. In particular, the ideational approach conceptualises populism as a set of ideas (Hawkins et al., 2018; Mudde, 2007), portraying “the people” as a virtuous and unified collective vis-à-vis an elite that is typically depicted as corrupt, privileged, and unresponsive. From this perspective, political authority should remain closely tied to the “general will,” while elites and intermediary institutions are often seen as capable of diluting, distorting, or betraying it (Böhmelt et al., 2022; Crutzen et al., 2020). This makes autonomous representation potentially problematic for populists. When MPs rely on their own judgement, they may be perceived as exercising discretion at the expense of the people’s preferences. Populist voters should therefore be more likely to favour delegate-style representation, in which representatives remain closely bound to voters, rather than trustee-style representation, which relies on independent judgement. Existing research has indeed examined whether populist and mainstream voters differ in their orientations toward political support and democratic attitudes (Quaranta & Martini, 2025; Zaslove & Meijers, 2023), while studies of representation preferences also point to links between ideological orientations and support for delegate or trustee models (Barreda Díez & Ruiz Rodríguez, 2019; Bengtsson & Wass, 2010). Thus, our second and third expectations posit that:

H2: Right-wing citizens will be positively associated with preferences for trusteeship, whereas left-wing citizens will be positively associated with preferences for delegation.

H3: Populist voters will be positively associated with preferences for delegation, whereas mainstream voters will be positively associated with preferences for trusteeship.

2.2.2. The Relevance of Context-Based Evaluations

However, citizens’ preferences towards representation styles may derive not only from stable political orientations or cognitive resources but also from more short-term and contingent factors. These preferences may therefore be more malleable and context-dependent than normative theory presumes, suggesting that attitudes toward either delegation or trusteeship may also be shaped by political experiences and evaluations of democratic performance (Bowler, 2017). Indeed, these contextual evaluations and experiences may also reflect different levels of perceived political integration into the democratic system (Bengtsson & Wass, 2010).

Following this view, citizens’ support for delegate or trustee models may vary according to their perceptions of how democracy and political representation function in practice (Bengtsson & Wass, 2010; Bowler, 2017; Carman, 2007; Rosset et al., 2017). In this respect, satisfaction with democracy is commonly understood as an evaluative orientation toward the functioning of democratic institutions, and existing research suggests that it is strongly influenced by short-term system performance (Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014; Martini & Quaranta, 2020). It is therefore reasonable to expect that citizens who feel excluded from the political system, perceive limited political influence, or are dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy may be more likely to favour representatives who prioritise responsiveness to citizens’ preferences. Dissatisfied citizens may consequently favour tighter control over representatives, leading them toward delegate-style representation. Conversely, citizens who are more integrated into the political system and more satisfied with democracy may be more willing to grant representatives greater autonomy and discretion, relying on elected officials to exercise independent judgement appropriately. Therefore, the more positively

(negatively) citizens evaluate the functioning of the democratic system, the less (more) likely they are to favour the delegate over the trustee model of representation.

Electoral status may also shape preferences toward representation styles. A large body of research shows that electoral winners and losers differ systematically in their evaluations of democratic performance and political representation (Anderson et al., 2005; Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Bowler & Donovan, 2007; Curini et al., 2012; Ridge, 2025). Several mechanisms may account for these differences. First, from an instrumental perspective, losing an election may reduce citizens' expectations that their policy preferences will be translated into political outcomes. Second, electoral defeat may generate negative affective reactions and lower perceptions of political influence and responsiveness. Finally, winner–loser status may shape evaluations of the political process itself through mechanisms of cognitive consistency and dissonance reduction (Anderson et al., 2005). In the context of representation styles, these dynamics suggest that opposition voters may be less willing to grant representatives broad autonomy and may instead demand stronger responsiveness and closer alignment with citizens' preferences. Supporters of governing parties, by contrast, may be more willing to accept greater discretion among elected officials because political outcomes and institutional decisions are more likely to be perceived as aligned with their preferences and interests.

Taken together, these expectations suggest that preferences for representation styles emerge from the concomitant relevance of contemporary political experiences and evaluations. While some citizens may support trustee or delegate models on principled grounds, others may adjust these preferences according to their experiences with democratic institutions and political representation. From this debate, we derive our final two hypotheses:

H4: Satisfaction with democracy will be positively associated with preferences for trusteeship, whereas dissatisfaction will be associated with preferences for delegation.

H5: Support for an opposition party will be positively associated with preferences for delegation, whereas support for a governing party will be positively associated with preferences for trusteeship.

3. Data and Method

3.1. Sample

The REDIRECT citizen survey was conducted between January 2 and January 20 (January 23 in Hungary), 2025, across eight European countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, and the United Kingdom (Verzichelli et al., 2025). The sample consists of individuals aged 18 and above who were residents, at the time of the survey, in one of the countries included in the study. The sample was recruited from an opt-in panel provided by YouGov. While this constitutes a non-probability sample, a robust sampling frame and an effective sampling procedure were employed. The sample was structured according to quotas for gender and age (interlocked), geographical area (based on the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics, NUTS1), and educational attainment. This closely resembles census data in each country, despite small deviations in some national contexts (see Table A1 in the Supplementary File). A data cleaning process was carried out to improve data quality. In line with Baker et al. (2010) and polling industry standards, interview length was used to detect unusually short interviews. The final pooled sample comprises 16,943

complete interviews, which is reduced to 15,217 after removing speeders, that is interviews completed in less than 40% of the median response time, but before listwise deletion of missing values (Belgium: completed 2,092; speeders 209; France: 2,054; 200; Germany: 2,011; 194; Hungary: 1,993; 289; Italy: 2,022; 281; Norway: 2,007; 328; Poland: 1,036; 93; United Kingdom: 2,002; 132). The institutional and cultural diversity of the set of countries provides sufficient variation to assess our hypotheses comparatively.

3.2. Variables

The dependent variable reflects citizens' preferences for the style of representation. Respondents were asked, on a 0–10 scale, whether MPs should primarily follow their party voters, acting as delegates, or rely on their own judgement, acting as trustees, when their own opinion on an issue does not align with that of their party voters. The choice to use “party voters” as the benchmark for the delegate endpoint can be justified, as it follows an established operationalisation in the mandate–independence literature dating back to the early 1970s (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005; Thomassen, 2013). This formulation is also well suited to a comparative design, since party voters provide a more comparable reference group than territorially defined constituencies, whose meaning varies substantially across electoral systems. At the same time, this is not the only way in which citizens' preferences for representation styles have been operationalised. Previous public-opinion studies have measured delegate–trustee preferences through more general references to voters' opinions, public interest, independent judgement, or broader task definitions of MPs' roles (Bengtsson & Wass, 2010, 2011), while more recent party-level research has examined representation styles in relation to parties, candidates, and party voters (Önnudóttir, 2014, 2016). Accordingly, our results should be interpreted as evidence about this specific party–electorate formulation of the delegate–trustee relationship, rather than as a definitive measure of citizens' preferences across all possible representative linkages.

When it comes to our long-term explanatory variables, we assess the relevance of cognitive mobilisation by gauging respondents' levels of education, distinguishing between low (the reference category, that is, primary or lower), medium (secondary), and high (tertiary or above). In this respect, we also include a measure of individual political interest. Because this item was measured differently across countries, we harmonised the variable before including it in the analysis. In seven of the eight countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, and Poland), respondents were asked a four-category political interest question, while in the United Kingdom the item was measured on an 11-point scale (0–10). To ensure cross-national comparability, we first reversed all scales so that higher values indicate greater political interest, then standardised the country-specific measures.

Then, we assess the role of ideology by eliciting individuals' positions on the left–right axis, grouping respondents into those on the left, the centre (the reference category), the right, and those unable to position themselves on this spectrum. Lastly, we classify respondents according to whether, in the event of an election, their voting intention was directed towards a “mainstream” party (the reference category), a “populist” party, “other” options, whether they would “spoil” their vote, “abstain,” or were “undecided” at the time of the survey. Populist parties and their voters are classified using PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2023). Mainstream parties and voters instead refer to the traditional party families (i.e., Christian Democratic, Conservative, Liberal, or Social Democratic parties). For the classification of voters, see Table A2 in the Supplementary File.

Turning to the role of short-term contingent political factors, we include a measure of electoral status by classifying respondents as having a voting preference for a party that was in government or in opposition (the reference category) at the time of the survey. To gauge how citizens' assessments of the system's functioning are associated with their preferences for representation styles, we also include an indicator of satisfaction with democracy, measured on a 0–10 scale from *extremely dissatisfied* to *extremely satisfied*.

Finally, we control for additional sociodemographic characteristics, including the respondent's gender (reference category: male) and age group (reference category: 18–34 years). For more information on question wordings, see the Supplementary File.

All in all, all the continuous and interval explanatory variables (i.e., political interest and satisfaction with democracy) have been rescaled between 0 and 1 for the sake of comparison. Table 1 shows the summary statistics of the variables used in the empirical analysis.

Table 1. Summary statistics of the variables used in the empirical analysis.

Variable	N	Mean/%	St. Dev	25th percentile	75th percentile	Min	Max
Delegate–trustee scale	13,739	5.02	3.45	2	8	0	10
Satisfaction with democracy	14,789	0.45	0.28	0.2	0.7	0	1
Government voters	14,886	26.14	—	—	—	0	1
Mainstream voters	14,605	46.07	—	—	—	0	1
Populist voters	14,605	25.87	—	—	—	0	1
Other	14,605	2.49	—	—	—	0	1
Spoilt vote	14,605	2.63	—	—	—	0	1
Abstention	14,605	5.08	—	—	—	0	1
Undecided	14,605	17.87	—	—	—	0	1
Left	14,107	31.65	—	—	—	0	1
Centre	14,107	20.72	—	—	—	0	1
Right	14,107	38.79	—	—	—	0	1
Neither/Nor	14,107	8.84	—	—	—	0	1
Political interest	14,813	0.58	0.30	0.33	0.75	0	1
Low education	15,217	19.14	—	—	—	0	1
Medium education	15,217	48.33	—	—	—	0	1
High education	15,217	32.54	—	—	—	0	1
Female	15,217	52.76	—	—	—	0	1
Male	15,217	47.24	—	—	—	0	1
18–34	15,217	20.93	—	—	—	0	1
35–54	15,217	34.81	—	—	—	0	1
55+	15,217	44.26	—	—	—	0	1

3.3. Model

We test our hypotheses by running a set of linear regression models. In terms of independent variables, we include education, political interest, ideology, whether respondents are populist voters or belong to other

voter categories, the winner–loser status, and the levels of satisfaction with democracy as the main variables of interest, and gender and age as standard socio-demographic controls.

In describing the results, we will rely on models estimated using pooled data with country fixed effects, as the primary objective of the analysis is to estimate individual-level associations while accounting for unobserved country heterogeneity. At the same time, to assess the stability of the findings across national contexts, we will also consider country-by-country analyses, which allow us to examine whether the observed associations remain substantively consistent across cases. It is worth noting that our analysis cannot avoid the potential circularity of studying attitude-to-attitude relationships; therefore, in the subsequent discussion, we do not intend to imply a specific causal ordering among the variables considered, as this is difficult to identify with certainty. To ease interpretation, we will report only graphical representations of the models' results, while the full models are presented in tabular form in the Supplementary File (Table A5). The analysis presented below is based on unweighted data, but we will also present a series of robustness checks for our pooled analysis, including speeders and weighted analyses. Lastly, as the literature emphasises the distinction among the three representation styles, delegate, politico, and trustee, we additionally replicate our pooled analysis using a categorical version of the outcome variable. Variance inflation factor (VIF) diagnostics conducted for both the pooled and country-by-country analyses, together with an examination of correlations among the explanatory variables of interest, indicate no evidence of problematic multicollinearity among the independent variables (see Table A4 and Figure A1 in the Supplementary File).

4. Results

4.1. *Delegates, Trustees, or Both?*

We begin with a descriptive overview of citizens' representation-style preferences across our eight countries. Indeed, it is often assumed that citizens favour the delegate model over the trustee model of representation (Barker & Carman, 2012; Bowler, 2017; Carman, 2006, 2007; Rosset et al., 2017). Were this to be true, we should see distributions concentrated at the lower end of our scale. As we can observe from Figure 1, which plots the distribution of our dependent variable on the 0–10 scale, along with median values and interquartile ranges for each country and the pooled data, this is not necessarily the case. Despite differences, the distributions display multiple peaks at different score levels, suggesting a multimodal structure, with responses particularly concentrated around the bottom of the scale (representing “delegate”), the midpoint (representing “politico”), and the upper end of the scale (representing “trustee”).

If we divide the scale into three groups corresponding to delegate (values on the 0–4 range), politico (middle point of the scale 5), and trustee (values on the 6–10 range) styles of representation, we see that some countries seem to lean slightly towards a delegate model (Belgium, with 51.6% of respondents in favour of this model; Norway: 49.2%; France: 48.3%; Poland: 45.3%) while others lean more towards a trustee model (United Kingdom, with 56.3% in favour of this model; Italy: 51.1%; Hungary: 49.3%), or are more evenly balanced between the two styles (Germany). Overall, in our pooled sample, 42% of respondents lean towards a delegate-style of representation, while 43% prefer a trustee-style. Lastly, around 15% of respondents place themselves at the midpoint of the scale, corresponding to the “politico” category, that is, a position that does not clearly privilege either the delegate or the trustee model of representation and may suggest that preferences vary according to the specific political context or issue under consideration (this

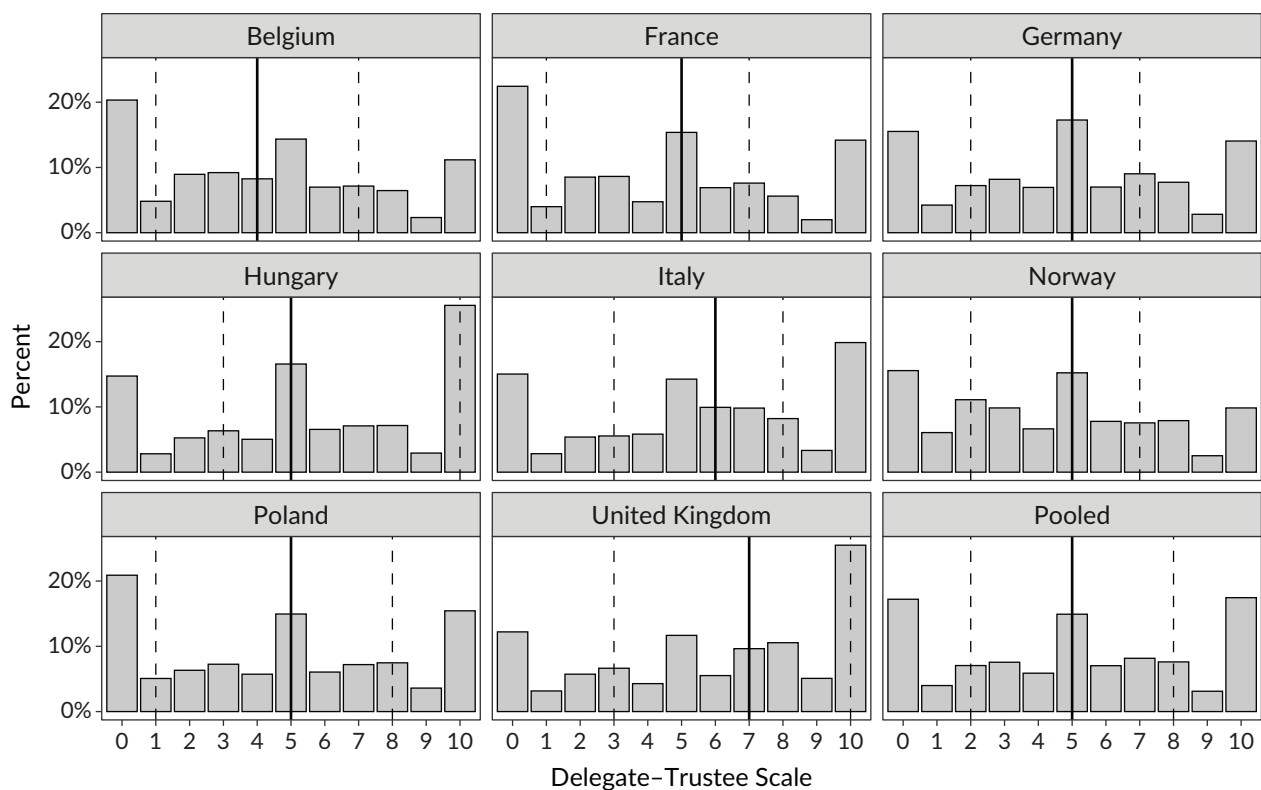


Figure 1. Distribution of the delegate–trustee dimension across the eight countries. Notes: Bars represent the distribution of responses across the 0–10 delegate–trustee scale; solid vertical lines indicate median values, while dashed vertical lines indicate the first and third quartiles (p25 and p75).

percentage ranges from a minimum of 11.7% in the United Kingdom to a maximum of 17.3% in Germany). Cross-national variation is evident, but as already mentioned, it does not follow clear geographical or institutional patterns (see Table A3 in the Supplementary File).

4.2. Which Factors Are Associated With Representation Preferences?

Now, we will consider the results of our regression analysis. Figure 2 displays the estimated coefficients from the pooled regression model for the main variables of interest. Specifically, it reports the coefficients for each variable of interest (shown on the y-axis) on the delegate–trustee scale (displayed on the x-axis). The coefficients are represented by points with their respective 95% confidence intervals: When coefficients are positive, they appear to the right of the vertical line. In contrast, negative coefficients appear to the left (full models are shown in Table A5 in the Supplementary File).

Starting from the bottom of the panel, we first consider two long-term factors related to cognitive mobilisation: education and the level of political interest. As can be seen, in the pooled model, both education and political interest are positively associated with the delegate–trustee scale. Thus, respondents with a high level of education tend to favour a trustee model of representation compared with those with a low level of education (0.197, $SE = 0.094$, $p < 0.05$). Likewise, people with greater interest in politics prefer MPs who act according to their own judgement rather than following their party’s voters’ preferences (0.380, $SE = 0.117$, $p < 0.05$). Overall, these findings contradict our first hypothesis (H1). One possible

interpretation is that more educated voters, and those more interested in politics, tend to place greater value on competence and therefore favour discretionary forms of decision-making. This pattern is consistent with the possibility that such citizens place greater trust in elites and are therefore more inclined towards trustee-style representation (Mongrain et al., 2025).

Turning to ideology, the second relevant long-term factor that may be associated with preferences for representation style, we find that respondents who place themselves on the right of the political spectrum ($0.176, SE = 0.087, p < 0.05$) tend to favour a trustee model compared to those in the political centre and on the left. A Wald test of coefficient equality between “left” and “right” yields a statistically significant difference. This finding seems to support our second hypothesis (H2). We also find evidence broadly consistent with our third hypothesis (H3). In the pooled model, populist voters exhibit significantly stronger delegate preferences than mainstream voters ($-0.600, SE = 0.082, p < 0.001$).

Considering the more contingent short-term factors, in the pooled analysis we find that respondents who are more satisfied with the way democracy works are more likely to favour trustee-style representation, with MPs relying on their own judgement ($1.050, SE = 0.120, p < 0.001$). Vice versa, dissatisfaction with democracy seems to be associated with a delegate model of representation, in which MPs are tied to their parties and constituencies, consistent with our fourth hypothesis (H4). Finally, we do not find support for our last expectation (H5), as voters of governing parties do not appear to differ significantly from opposition voters in their preferences for representation style.

Beyond statistical significance, the magnitude of the associations varies across predictors. Satisfaction with democracy shows the strongest association with representation preferences in the pooled model,

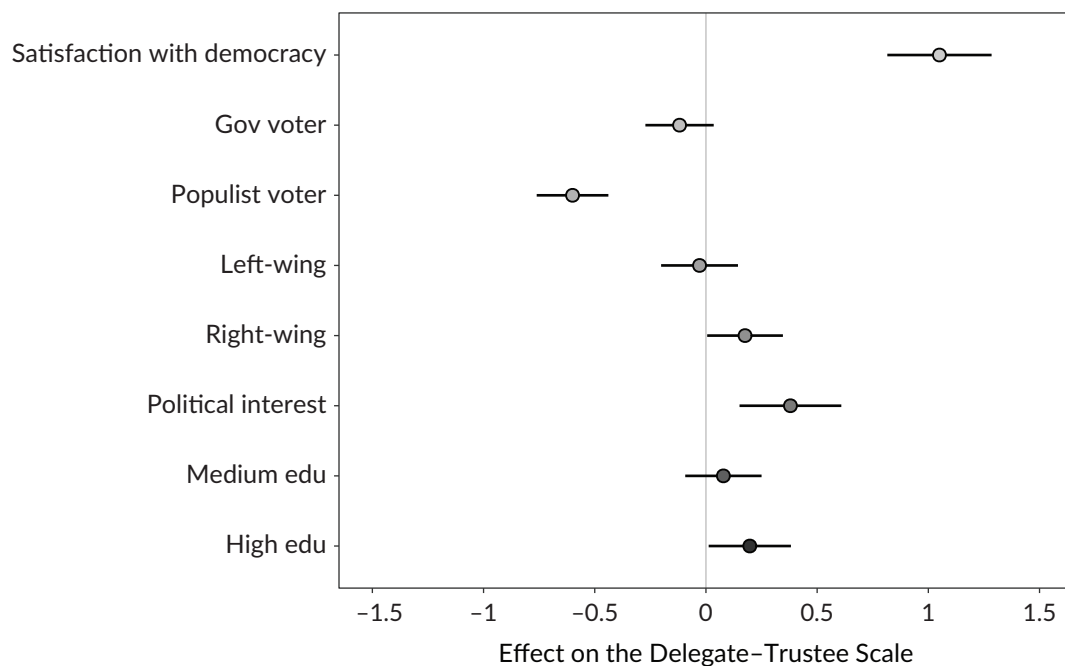


Figure 2. Multiple linear regression results (OLS pooled estimates). Notes: Lines across dots represent 95% confidence intervals; the model includes country fixed effects; the graph reports only estimates relevant to the main argumentation; full results are included in the Supplementary File.

substantially larger than those linked to education or ideology, while populist voting is also meaningfully associated with delegate preferences. By contrast, the effects of education and ideological self-placement remain comparatively modest, and winner-loser status shows no meaningful association. Overall, these differences suggest that contingent evaluations of democratic performance may matter at least as much as long-term ideological orientations in shaping citizens' representational expectations.

To assess the robustness of our findings, we run a series of checks that replicate the pooled analysis by including speeders and weighting our data (see Tables A6–A7 in the Supplementary File). In both cases, the results are consistent with the main specification. Lastly, we replicated our analysis on the pooled data by running a multinomial logistic regression on a recoded version of our dependent variable, identifying now three different representation styles: delegate, politico, and trustee (see Table A8 and Figure A2 in the Supplementary File). This specification appears reasonable, as there is no strong evidence that the model's assumptions are violated (as assessed using standard Hausman and Small-Hsiao tests). The conclusions drawn from this specification are highly consistent with the previous results. Higher education and political interest are associated with an increase in the probability of choosing the trustee model of around +3% ($SE = 0.014$, $p < 0.05$) and +9% ($SE = 0.017$, $p < 0.001$), respectively. Higher political interest is also associated with a 6% decrease in the probability of choosing the politico model ($SE = 0.012$, $p < 0.001$). Locating on the right is associated with a 6% increase in the probability of selecting the trustee model ($SE = 0.012$, $p < 0.001$) and a 6% decrease in the probability of choosing the politico model ($SE = 0.010$, $p < 0.001$). Conversely, having voted for a populist party is associated with a higher probability of selecting the delegate model (+9%, $SE = 0.012$, $p < 0.001$) and lower probabilities of selecting the politico (–2%, $SE = 0.008$, $p < 0.01$) and trustee models (–7%, $SE = 0.012$, $p < 0.001$). To conclude, while voting for a party in government is not associated with our outcome variables, satisfaction with democracy is associated with the largest increase in the probability of favouring the trustee model (+13%, $SE = 0.017$, $p < 0.001$). In comparison, this is associated with a significant decrease in the probability of preferring the delegate model (–15%, $SE = 0.017$, $p < 0.001$).

4.3. How Stable Are These Relationships Across Countries?

We conclude our analysis by assessing the stability of observed relationships across countries. In this respect, Figure 3 presents the country-specific estimates for the pooled model discussed above. The comparison between pooled and country-specific models reveals that some associations are more consistent across contexts than others. In particular, among principle-based factors, the relationship between populist voting and delegate preferences appears comparatively robust across countries. Although the magnitude and statistical significance of the association vary across national contexts, most country-specific estimates point in the expected direction, providing qualified support for H3. By contrast, the associations involving ideology, political interest, and education display substantially greater cross-national variation in both magnitude and statistical significance. Political interest is positively associated with trustee preferences in Belgium and France, but not in Italy or Norway, whereas higher education has a negative coefficient in Norway. Likewise, while left-wing respondents display stronger delegate preferences in Belgium, the association reverses in Germany and Italy, where left-wing citizens tend to favour trustee-style representation.

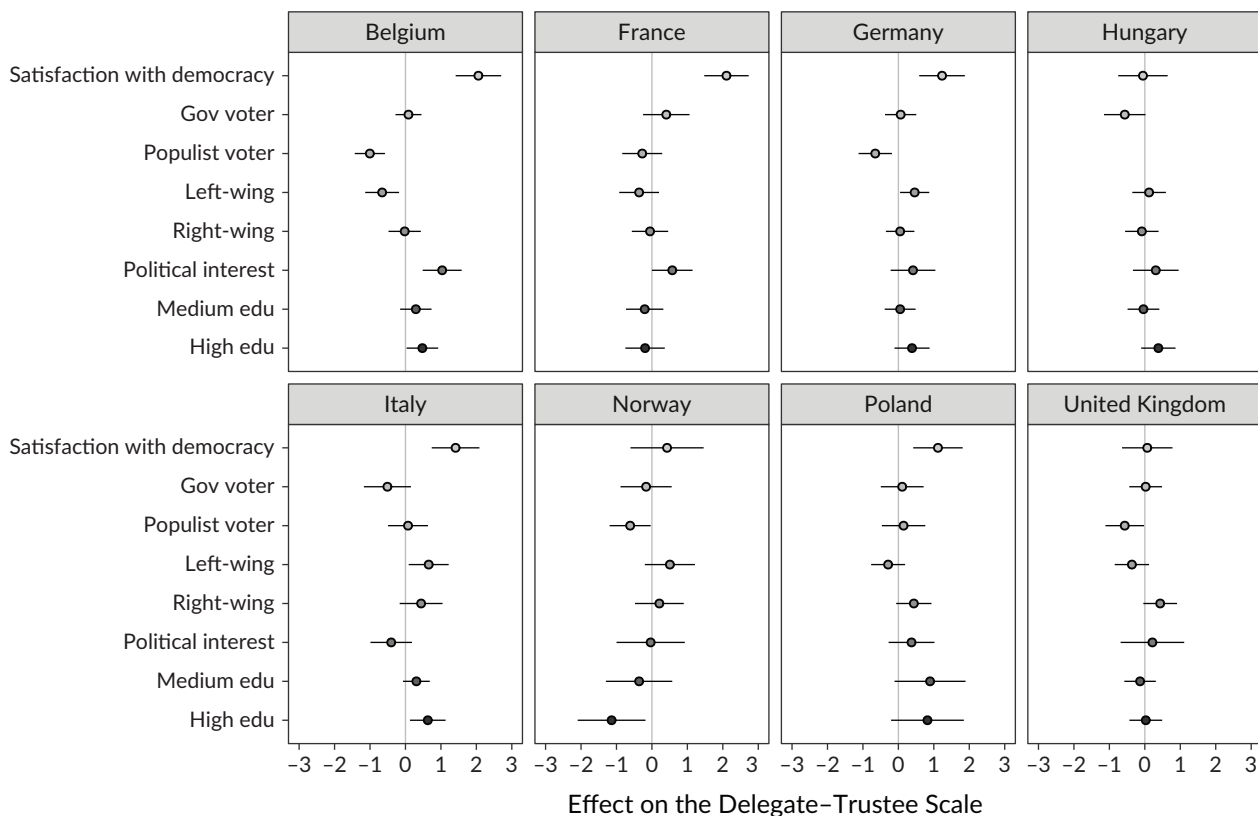


Figure 3. Multiple linear regression results (OLS country-by-country estimates). Notes: Lines across dots represent 95% confidence intervals; the models include the same individual-level covariates as the pooled model; the graph reports only estimates relevant to the main argumentation; full results are included in the Supplementary File; in Hungary, all populist voters supported governing parties, so the two variables are perfectly collinear and the government-voter coefficient captures their shared effect.

Turning to context-based evaluations, the positive association between satisfaction with democracy and trustee preferences emerges in most, though not all, national contexts. However, the magnitude and statistical significance of this relationship vary considerably across countries, becoming substantially weaker or statistically insignificant in cases such as Hungary, Norway, and the United Kingdom. Finally, electoral status, that is, being a government or opposition voter, does not appear to exert a meaningful influence on representation-style preferences across the examined contexts. Overall, these patterns suggest that some determinants of representation-style preferences may be more context-sensitive than others, highlighting the importance of comparative research for assessing both common tendencies and national specificities.

5. Conclusions

This study examined a central but often underexplored question in democratic representation: how citizens wish to be represented. While the trustee-delegate debate has long occupied normative theory, empirical research has paid far less attention to citizens' own preferences, especially from a comparative perspective. Existing studies often focus on elite role orientations or single-country cases, leaving the demand side of representation comparatively understudied. Drawing on an original comparative survey conducted in 2025 across eight European countries, we provide one of the few systematic comparative analyses of the

individual-level correlates of citizens' representation preferences. By doing so, we connect debates on democratic representation with broader research on public opinion and political behaviour.

The findings challenge some common assumptions in the literature. Descriptively, citizens' preferences are far from homogeneous. Instead, we observe considerable cross-national variation, with roughly equal shares of respondents leaning towards trustee and delegate models, and a smaller but still significant group endorsing a mixed "politico" model. Moreover, these distributions do not map neatly onto clear geographical or institutional patterns.

When turning to individual-level correlates, our analysis highlights associations with both long-term orientations and short-term political dynamics. Cognitive mobilisation, measured through education and political interest, was expected to be associated with delegate preferences, but instead correlates with stronger support for trustee models. This pattern suggests that politically sophisticated citizens may place greater value on competence and discretionary decision-making. Ideology also matters, as right-leaning and politically unplaced citizens tend to favour trusteeship. In contrast, populist voters express stronger support for delegation, in line with their people-centrist and anti-elitist leanings. These findings suggest that representation preferences might be associated not only with enduring values but also with contemporary ideological cleavages. At the same time, short-term evaluations also show associations with representation-style preferences. Citizens satisfied with the functioning of democracy are more inclined to favour trustee-style representation. Conversely, dissatisfied citizens are more likely to prefer closer responsiveness in line with delegate models, although the strength of this association varies across countries. By contrast, electoral winner-loser status, while relevant in theoretical expectations, is not significantly associated with preferences in our data.

In conclusion, our analysis contributes to the literature in two respects. Empirically, it provides a comprehensive comparative assessment of citizens' preferences for representation styles, integrating a wide array of explanatory factors. Theoretically, the study complicates traditional normative accounts of representation by suggesting that citizens' preferences might be neither purely ideological nor necessarily stable. Rather, they might be associated with both long-term values and short-term political evaluations, particularly assessments of democratic performance. In this sense, representation preferences appear to depend not only on cognitive resources and ideological orientations but also on how citizens experience democracy's functioning in practice.

Some limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. First, our operationalisation captures preferences regarding the delegate-trustee relationship, specifically with respect to party voters. While this follows an established tradition in the literature and facilitates cross-national comparability, alternative formulations of representational preferences may yield partially different patterns. Second, given the observational nature of the data, the analysis cannot establish clear causal ordering among attitudes and evaluations, so reciprocal relationships between representational preferences and broader political attitudes remain possible. Future research could therefore rely on experimental or longitudinal designs to better assess the causal mechanisms underlying citizens' representational expectations and their evolution over time.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

REDIRECT survey data are not publicly available at this time due to an embargo period. However, all replication materials, including coding scripts and model specifications, are publicly available at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/64MNA> and can be applied to the survey dataset once it is released online at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/EDM75> (upon completion of the project and, in any case, no earlier than 31 January 2027).

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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