

Executive decrees and the Public Opinion: Exploring the Demand Side of Unilateralism

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Abstract

This study examines the implications of executive decrees in Italy, focusing on their impact on legislative processes and public perception. Utilizing both a conjoint and a single-blind survey experiment, we find that respondents evaluate legislative drafts conditionally on the legislative procedure employed, with executive action decreasing support by approximately 10%. Political affiliation and legislative content further influence public evaluations. While the use of decrees does not directly enhance satisfaction with the government's performance, it does shape perceptions of governmental efficiency and responsiveness. To explain the puzzling gap between disapproval of unilateral procedures and stable cabinet evaluations, the study introduces a formal signaling game. The model shows that under realistic informational assumptions, voters may be unable to infer cabinet competence from procedure choice, resulting in pooling equilibria where all governments use decrees regardless of urgency. These findings shed new light on the strategic use of decrees and their potential to shift the balance of power within parliamentary democracies.

1 Introduction

The use of executive decrees in Italy has grown to significant proportions. With the rising popularity of decrees as a legislative instrument, their application across various policy areas has expanded. This trend has alarmed many observers, who caution against the diminishing legislative authority of the parliament [Celotto (1997)]. Beyond these concerns, the frequent issuance of decrees presents tangible challenges. The Italian Parliament, inundated with a high volume of decrees, struggles to effectively process and oversee legislation¹. This influx can result in legislative overproduction and a diminished capacity for leg-

¹Openpolis, I problemi legati all'abuso della decretazione d'urgenza, <https://www.openpolis.it/i-problemi-legati-allabuso-della-decretazione-durgenza/>

islativ scrutiny, potentially undermining transparency, accountability, and the quality of legislative output [Gratton et al. (2021)]. Consequently, discerning the factors driving the use of executive action becomes crucial.

Much of the existing literature focuses on the institutional determinants of executive action, emphasizing the trade-offs that influence prime ministers' increasing reliance on decrees [Carey & Shugart (1998)]. A prevalent explanation is the Italian executive's limited agenda-setting power. Given that cabinets cannot freely schedule their bills on the legislative calendar, they resort to decrees to compel the chamber to address pressing issues [Kreppel & Della Sala (1998)]. Another perspective links the rise of decrees to fragmented executives and the presence of numerous institutional veto players [Pereira et al. (2005)]. The challenge of maintaining stable majorities in the chamber often results in delays in bill approvals through standard legislative procedures. Yet, decrees also serve as a potent communication tool for governments. In recent times, cabinets have strategically named decrees—like the “Decreto Aiuti”, “Decreto Sicurezza”, and “Decreto Dignità”—to resonate with public sentiment. This raises the question: does the electorate view the issuance of decrees favorably, or do they penalize the cabinet for such actions?

This paper seeks to address these queries using a survey experiment, incorporating both a conjoint component and a single-blind treatment. The findings suggest that respondent support for legislative drafts is influenced by the chosen legislative procedure. Not only can individuals distinguish between decrees and standard legislative processes, but the choice of procedure also significantly affects their support. On average, there's a prevailing negative sentiment towards unilateral actions. Specifically, opting for an executive procedure reduces approval rates by 10%. Intriguingly, even with a balanced sample and controls for ideological biases, more progressive reforms witness a dip in support. While the use of decrees doesn't necessarily enhance overall satisfaction, it does increase the likelihood of respondents associating the government's actions with efficiency and promptness. The data underscores that cabinets deploy decrees as a signaling tool, emphasizing the urgency but failing to communicate commitment for a given issue.

While the empirical results reveal nuanced public perceptions of executive action, they also pose a puzzle: why do voters penalize decrees at the policy level but refrain from punishing the government? To address this, the paper develops a simple signaling model that formalizes the strategic interaction between voters and governments under informational asymmetries. The model demonstrates that procedural choices may be uninformative when voter beliefs about cabinet quality are sufficiently pessimistic or optimistic, offering a the-

oretical explanation for the experimental findings.

This section contributes to the literature on electoral accountability, which models how voters discipline politicians despite informational asymmetries and moral hazard [(Barro 1973, Fearon 1999)]. While much of this work focuses on policy choices as signals of ideology or competence [(Maskin & Tirole 2004, Fox & Shotts 2007)], we shift attention to legislative procedures as a source of information. In particular, we examine whether voters infer cabinet quality from the constitutional appropriateness of procedure, especially under varying urgency conditions. This complements recent work on crisis responsiveness and voter learning [(Ashworth et al. 2017)], but with a focus on procedural signaling rather than preparedness or policy design.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents five testable hypotheses linking legislative procedure to public approval and perceptions of government performance. Section 3 outlines the design of the survey experiment, including the conjoint and single-blind components. Section 4 reports the empirical results, highlighting both average treatment effects and variation across respondent subgroups. Section 5 introduces a formal signaling model that explains the strategic use of executive procedures under incomplete information. Section 6 concludes with a discussion of the implications for democratic accountability and directions for future research.

2 Executive Action and Popular Support: Five Hypotheses

Numerous studies have demonstrated that the American public closely observes and evaluates U.S. presidents based on their use of unilateral action. These studies consistently indicate that voters tend to disapprove of unilateral action, sometimes even penalizing presidents for such measures [Reeves (2011), Reeves & Rogowski (2022, 2018, 2016, 2015), Christenson & Kriner (2019), Lowande & Shipan (2022)]. While some scholars have ventured to compare attitudes towards unilateral action across various political systems [Chu & Williamson (2022)], there remains a gap in large-scale empirical studies specific to the Italian context. This paper aims to bridge that gap, exploring whether Italian voters consider the legislative procedure when assessing legislative drafts and if the use of decrees influences support for individual drafts or overall government performance.

Hypothesis 1 (Hypothesis 1): *Voters' evaluation of a legislative draft is influenced by the cabinet's chosen procedure.*

Hypothesis 2 (Hypothesis 2): *Voters generally favor the ordinary legislative procedure over unilateral action.*

This research also delves into potential context-dependent mechanisms that could account for the prevalent use of unilateral action. In Italy, executive decrees, as outlined in Art. 77 of the Italian Constitution, are constitutionally recognized tools intended for policy initiation during urgent or emergency situations. However, their contemporary application often extends beyond these stipulated conditions, suggesting that governments might employ decrees to signal their responsiveness to pressing issues. By emphasizing urgency, governments could potentially rally public support and dominate public discourse.

During crises or emergencies, the executive branch might consolidate public opinion, amass additional powers, and even exert influence over elected assemblies [Rossiter (1948), Howell & Rogowski (2013)]. An examination of executive action during the COVID-19 crisis by Lowande and Rogowski revealed an anomaly: contrary to prior findings, the public’s policy evaluation remained consistent regardless of the implementation through executive action [Lowande & Rogowski (2021)]. This suggests that governments might be incentivized to frame decrees as protective measures during imminent crises. While research on the endogeneity of crises remains limited [Bils (2022)], understanding this dynamic is pivotal to discerning the relationship between executive action and government support. This paper seeks to determine if voters perceive policies legislated by decree as more urgent and to analyze the correlation between unilateral action and perceptions of government efficiency and responsiveness.

Hypothesis 3 (Hypothesis 3): *Utilizing executive action enhances support for the cabinet.*

Hypothesis 4 (Hypothesis 4): *Cabinets employing executive action are perceived as more efficient.*

Hypothesis 5 (Hypothesis 5): *Cabinets use executive action as a signal to voters, emphasizing the urgency and commitment to an issue.*

3 Data and Methods

This study utilizes a survey experiment divided into two segments: a conjoint experiment and a single-blind treatment. The conjoint experiment is designed to address Hypotheses 1 and 2, while the single-blind treatment explores the relationship between executive action, perceived urgency, and government support. The survey, conducted by

Dynata in September 2023, yielded responses from approximately 2000 Italian adults.

For the conjoint experiment, participants were tasked with evaluating two legislative proposals, each characterized by three attributes: the ideological stance of the cabinet, a brief outline of the legislative proposal, and the procedure used. The ideological attribute has three levels, mirroring the types of governments Italy has seen over the past three decades: centre-left, centre-right, and technocratic. The "grand coalition" government type was excluded because it is not necessarily well-known by the public. Secondly, almost all instances of grand coalition have occurred under technocratic executives, creating possible redundancies and noise in the data. The second attribute provides a concise description of the draft's content, with four variations: two related to immigration and two to education. The choice of these policy areas reflects the varying urgency associated with different issues. The survey was delivered in a time when the refugee crisis was tragically severe and a very hot political talking point. The management of the influx of refugees may require swift legislation, which would be appropriately delivered by decree. In contrast, education, less urgent in nature, might not necessitate such a unilateral approach. Each policy area presents a conservative and a progressive option to control for mismatches in preference elicited by partisan affiliation.

Participants were presented with a vignette containing two randomized policy proposals. Each task is repeated four times. Similarly to Reeves and Rogowsky (2018) and Chu Williamson (2022), both policy proposals have to be evaluated with a numerical value between 0 and 10. The difference in terms of numerical evaluation communicated the preference of the respondent towards one or the other. This process was repeated four times. The numerical difference in evaluations indicates the participant's preference, serving as the dependent variables for Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Given the nested structure of evaluations and preferences within individual respondents, I employ a varying intercept model with a thick-tailed half-T prior on individual-level intercepts to account for individual differences. The priors on the general intercept and on the coefficients are slightly informative and normally distributed around zero. This model gauges the average marginal component effect of each attribute. Subsequently, marginal means were computed to elucidate the nuanced preferences over procedures within significant respondent subgroups.

To address Hypotheses 3, 4, and 5, a single-blind treatment experiment was implemented. Participants were presented with a vignette detailing a legislative draft introduced

by a hypothetical cabinet. They were then randomized between two legislative drafts, one addressing an industrial pollutant spill and the other proposing a regulation on train ticket prices to areas with declining populations. A treatment group received a vignette where the cabinet addressed one of the two issues via decree, while a control group saw the draft proposed through the standard procedure. Similarly to the conjoint model, the two policy areas are meant to control for the variance in the dependent variable that is attributable to the urgency of the issues rather than to the procedure itself.

Respondents are then asked questions a series of questions related to the draft and the intentions of the cabinet. More precisely, they are told to rate their satisfaction with how the cabinet has approached the issue. They are also asked whether they think the cabinet aims to communicate that an issue urgent matter and whether it is taken at heart. Finally, they are invited to choose 3 words from a set of 16 adjectives related to speed and efficiency (8 positive and 8 negative).

Contrarily to the conjoint component, responses from the single-blind treatment are not nested within individuals. For this reason, the paper employs a Bayesian multinomial model without random intercepts. As earlier, the priors for the coefficient and the intercept are slightly informative, centered around zero and normally distributed.

4 Results

4.1 Legislative procedure and public approval

The primary outcomes of the conjoint experiment are derived by regressing experimental attributes against preference evaluation scores. To account for minor imbalances in the randomization, I incorporated multiple sources of variation in a secondary specification. As depicted in figure 1), the use of decrees as a legislative method decreases support for a draft by approximately 10 percent (table ??), affirming H2. This trend persists across the entire sample, irrespective of whether respondents were provided with an explanatory paragraph detailing the differences between standard legislation and unilateral actions. Table 1 presents a comprehensive list of coefficients, highlighting several key points that warrant deeper exploration.

A notable observation is the negligible effect of the explanatory paragraph, which parallels the non-effect of self-reported prior knowledge of political systems. Grasping how

the capability to differentiate legislative procedures influences the assessment of legislative drafts is pivotal for addressing H1. The data suggests that access to the explanatory paragraph doesn't markedly alter outcomes. The graphs, specifically the marginal mean draft evaluations based on varying levels of political knowledge (figure 2), provide further clarity. The graph on the top illustrates that while evaluations appear more varied for those exposed to the explanatory paragraph, the overall influence of this supplementary information is minimal. The central plot underscores that as individuals' political knowledge intensifies, their average draft evaluations rise. This distinction becomes particularly evident when considering evaluations from those with minimal or no self-reported political knowledge. Such individuals not only exhibit more skepticism but also demonstrate heightened caution towards executive decrees. It's plausible that moral, ethical, or ideological considerations might replace knowledge as evaluation heuristics. In this regard, Reeves and Rogowsky find that respect for the rule of law negatively impacts approval for executive action [Reeves & Rogowski (2016)]. Once primed with additional pieces of information though, those who admit to lack expertise on the matter seem to be more prone to update their evaluation. Consequently, the final graph in Figure 1 reveals that offering the explanatory paragraph to politically uninformed individuals considerably diminishes their approval of decrees.

So far, the evidence suggests that supplementary information predominantly influences evaluations of those lacking prior expertise. This infers that respondents can effectively differentiate between legislative procedures and condition their evaluations accordingly. Hypothesis 1 is thus substantially validated. However, evaluations appear linked to two other significant variance sources, despite analyzing a well-balanced survey. The initial variance source is political affiliation. As illustrated in figure 1, transitioning from a technocratic to a center-left cabinet adversely affects respondent approval. In contrast, a shift from technocratic to center-right doesn't significantly modify approval levels. A parallel trend emerges when assessing the influence of legislative content. Drafts aligned with liberal stances are notably less favored than their conservative equivalents. Yet, the conservative subgroup, in terms of party affiliation, mirrors its leftist counterpart in both sample composition and effect magnitude. This suggests that a substantial portion of left-wing voters also prefer more conservative policies. However, allegiance to the Meloni administration and a more conservative party affiliation do not necessarily equate to heightened unilateral action support. Concurrently, conservative respondents consistently express greater approval too all drafts compared to their liberal counterparts, especially pronounced among staunch Giorgia Meloni supporters.

Pertinent ethical judgments potentially influencing these estimates relate to the values

of compromise and decisionism in democratic contexts. This research categorizes individuals who assign high value to political compromise as "parliamentarists." Such individuals advocate for consensus-driven decisions respectful of political minorities and believe that parliamentary processes should constrain the executive power. Conversely, "decisionists" criticize the slowness of democratic deliberations, championing a more dominant executive role. These attitudes are gauged through two key questions:

- How strongly do you agree with the following statements: "Parliamentary procedures are slow and inefficient. Elected governments should be free to legislate as they prefer"?
- How strongly do you agree with the following statements: "Parliamentary protocols are vital for curbing executive power and safeguarding minorities. Governments, even if victorious in elections, must legislate bound by the agreement of the forces represented in parliament"?

Logically, decisionist-leaning individuals should exhibit favorable views towards unilateral actions, with parliamentarists expected to lean the opposite way. However, those expressing strong agreement or disagreement with either statement don't display markedly different behaviors. As figure 3 showcases, approval trajectories for drafts and procedures closely align, suggesting that prior commitments to parliamentarism or decisionism offer limited explanatory value. Similarly, factors like income and educational levels do not significantly influence decree preferences, as no subgroup demonstrates distinct preferences.

4.2 Executive action and government support

This study evaluates hypotheses 3-5 using a single-blind experiment. The baseline and full models, which incorporate various controls, are presented in tables 2 and 3. Hypothesis 3 posits that respondents exposed to a legislative proposal issued by decree should exhibit heightened satisfaction with government performance. Yet, the models do not identify a direct causal link between executive action and satisfaction with government activity. Notably, respondents displaying the most satisfaction are those presented with the environmental reform treatment, a policy addressing the urgent issue of pollutant spillover. Irrespective of the legislative method used, respondents recognize the gravity of the situation and reward the cabinet's proactive stance (figure 4).

While the treatment itself doesn't directly boost government satisfaction, treated participants more frequently use positive descriptors related to swift execution and efficiency (figure 5). Thus, legislative proposals issued via decree do garner favorable feedback. The

top five descriptors used by treated respondents to characterize the cabinet’s legislative approach are ”Sensible, Effective, Adequate, Suitable, and Superficial”. In contrast, the untreated group’s top five are ”Suitable, Sensible, Superficial, Adequate, and Ineffective”. Among these, the untreated group includes an additional negative term, and ”effective” is supplanted by its antonym. Intriguingly, while treated participants more frequently use positive speed-related terms, the most prevalent descriptors pertain to efficacy. This is surprising given that decrees’ primary advantage is their swift implementation, designed for urgent scenarios. Terms like ”sensible” and ”effective” seem more apt to describe structural reform leading to greater advantages in the long term. This discrepancy likely stems from ingrained attitudes towards democratic deliberation. Treated respondents identifying as staunch decisionists emphasize the velocity of decrees. The more discontented respondents are with the sluggishness of parliamentary compromise, the more they recognize elements of rapidity in executive legislation. On the other hand, those who are more likely to be defined as parliamentarists tend to justify executive action by emphasizing the element of efficiency.

This association between treatment and efficiency supports hypothesis 4, indicating the presence of positive reinforcement. However, executive action fails to convey commitment to the issue.(figure ??). This could have been a double-edged sword. On one hand, it fosters accountability by communicating to voters that an issue has a high priority on the agenda. Executives who are unable to solve issues that they deem important can be punished at the polls. On the other, frequent executive actions and shifting priorities can impede voters’ ability to monitor successes and failures. The lack of a causal link between commitment and executive action indicates that cabinets may try to shield themselves from the responsibility arising from policy failures. If decrees are communicated as a tool employed by the the compelling nature of the policy challenge rather than a deliberate choice of the executive, cabinets can argue for the inefficiency of legislative procedures as opposed to low quality of legislation.

In light of this, the results on communicating of urgency are particularly illuminating because it could also contribute to lower degrees of accountability. In fact, treated participants more readily perceive the cabinet’s portrayal of issues as urgent (figure 6). This is a critical mechanism that links executive action with the balance of power between the government and parliament. This tactic, framing matters as pressing, is widespread. The spectrum of an imminent crisis can unify supporters and sterilize criticism. At the same time, by leveraging on a sense of immediate need, cabinets may acquire greater power and influence. Italian respondents recognize this strategic use of decrees to amplify urgency. While this doesn’t directly boost satisfaction or alter procedural preferences, cabinets em-

ploying this tactic are deemed more effective. This insight is pivotal for comprehending the interplay between executive power, crisis politics, and potential democratic backsliding. Surely, further research needs to investigate the extent to which a reinforcing cycle exists between decree issuance, government popularity and threat to democratic representation. Nevertheless, it is crucial to understand how this evidence depends on the informational environment in which voters operate. To explore these questions more rigorously, the next section introduces a theoretical model of strategic procedure choice under incomplete information.

	Draft evaluation	Draft evaluation
Legislative procedure (Decrees)	−0.09*	−0.10*
	(0.98)	(0.98)
Ideology (Center-right)	0.02	0.00
	(0.64)	(0.53)
Ideology (Center-left)	−0.09	−0.10*
	(0.94)	(0.96)
Content (Education - liberal)	−0.71*	−0.70*
	(1.00)	(1.00)
Content (Immigration - conservative)	−0.16*	−0.14*
	(0.99)	(0.98)
Content (Immigration - liberal)	−0.76*	−0.74*
	(1.00)	(1.00)
Explanatory paragraph	−0.02	0.02
	0.59	0.59
Knowledge (self-reported)		0.08
		(0.91)
Decisionism		0.15*
		(1.00)
Parliamentarism		0.07*
		(0.96)
Immigration (determinant of gvt support)		−0.00
		(0.53)
Education (determinant of gvt support)		0.03
		(0.89)
Immigration (relevance)		0.11*
		(1.00)
Education (relevance)		0.07*
		(1.00)
Immigration (urgency)		−0.01
		(0.62)
Education (urgency)		−0.02
		(0.79)
Employment (Retired)		−0.21*
		(0.94)
Employment (Student)		−0.07
		(0.67)
Employment (Unemployed)		0.27*
		(0.98)
Support for Meloni		0.36*
		(1.00)
Income		0.01
		(0.62)
Education		0.02
		(0.74)
Political preference (left)		0.10
		(0.69)
Political preference (other)		−0.37*
		(0.97)
Political preference (right)		−0.29
		(0.92)
sigma	11	2.58
		(1.00)

Table 1: Results from the conjoint analysis

	Satisfaction	Positive comment	Efficiency	Speed	Urgency	Responsiveness
Intercept	0.41* (1.00)	0.21* (0.99)	0.27* (1.00)	−1.09* (1.00)	1.52* (1.00)	0.39* (1.00)
Treatment assignment	0.09 (0.94)	0.20* (0.98)	−0.16* (0.94)	0.35* (1.00)	0.15* (1.00)	0.04 (0.77)
High/Low urgency assignment	0.17* (1.00)	0.21* (0.98)	−0.08 (0.80)	0.37* (1.00)	0.04 (0.86)	0.32* (1.00)
sigma	1.13 (1.00)				0.77 (1.00)	1.11 (1.00)

Table 2: Baseline treatment regression table

	Satisfaction	Positive comment	Efficiency	Rapidity	Urgency	Responsiveness
Intercept	−0.50 (0.99)	−0.92 (0.99)	−1.09 (1.00)	−0.79 (0.97)	1.00 (1.00)	−0.80 (1.00)
Treatment assignment	0.00 (0.51)	0.27 (0.98)	0.26 (0.97)	0.36 (1.00)	0.16 (1.00)	0.07 (0.86)
Support for Meloni	0.30 (1.00)	0.54 (1.00)	0.54 (1.00)	0.29 (1.00)	0.19 (1.00)	0.31 (1.00)
Explanatory paragraph	0.06 (0.82)	0.12 (0.82)	0.17 (0.89)	−0.01 (0.53)	0.06 (0.89)	0.07 (0.86)
Environment (determinant for gvt support)	0.02 (0.78)	0.09 (0.97)	0.10 (0.98)	0.07 (0.92)	0.01 (0.68)	0.01 (0.63)
Infrastructure (determinant for gvt support)	0.04 (0.95)	−0.02 (0.67)	−0.04 (0.77)	0.01 (0.55)	0.03 (0.95)	0.02 (0.82)
Environment (relevance)	0.00 (0.57)	0.02 (0.71)	0.03 (0.72)	−0.02 (0.70)	0.01 (0.71)	0.02 (0.88)
Infrastructure (relevance)	0.00 (0.51)	−0.01 (0.55)	−0.01 (0.56)	0.02 (0.70)	−0.00 (0.54)	−0.00 (0.58)
Environment (urgency)	0.03 (0.87)	−0.01 (0.61)	−0.02 (0.63)	−0.07 (0.94)	0.00 (0.61)	0.03 (0.92)
Infrastructure (urgency)	−0.02 (0.77)	−0.04 (0.79)	−0.02 (0.64)	−0.07 (0.93)	−0.02 (0.83)	0.01 (0.63)
Party affiliation	−0.09 (0.97)	−0.12 (0.88)	−0.12 (0.89)	0.05 (0.69)	0.02 (0.70)	−0.05 (0.85)
Urgent issue	0.20* (1.00)	0.29* (0.98)	0.25* (0.97)	0.36 (1.00)	0.08 (0.95)	0.31 (1.00)
sigma	1.05 1.00				0.73 1.00	1.05 1.00

Table 3: Full specification models for the single-blind experiment

5 A teoretical account of Strategic instrument choice.

One of the interesting pieces of evidence emerging from the empirical study is the fact that, despite voters appreciating decree legislation significantly less, they do not revise their view of the government unfavourably upon seeing that it has employed that procedure. Importantly, this is the case even for those issues that are less urgent. This raises an important question: if voters are aware of the advantages of fast-track executive legislation and value greater responsiveness—going so far as to associate this outcome with words like efficiency—why don’t they reward the government for those actions? By the same token,

if voters express a dislike for executive action, what explains their failure to penalize the government?

Many formal models have sought to explain how voters hold executives accountable through electoral confirmation, typically under conditions of asymmetric information and moral hazard [(Barro 1973, Fearon 1999)]. A central insight from this literature is that voters must infer the competence or type of a politician based on observed behavior—often policy choices—which may or may not align with voters’ ideal points. Building on this foundation, a substantial body of work has examined how politicians strategically manipulate public perception through policy signals, sometimes pandering to public opinion rather than implementing their most informed preferences [(Maskin & Tirole 2004, Fox & Shotts 2007, Canes-Wrone et al. 2001, Kartik et al. 2015)]. This literature also emphasizes the role of voter sophistication and learning: when voters are more informed, the scope for pandering is reduced, though not necessarily eliminated [(Ashworth & Shotts 2010, Esponda & Pouzo 2016)].

This model departs from that tradition by shifting attention away from policy content and toward the procedural choices governments make—specifically, whether they legislate via executive decree or ordinary parliamentary procedure. While policy-centered models typically treat procedures as neutral implementation mechanisms, we posit that procedures themselves can serve as signals of cabinet competence or intent, particularly in systems like Italy where executive action is formally circumscribed. Some recent work has explored how voters learn from government behavior in crisis conditions, emphasizing preparedness and responsiveness as inferred traits [(Ashworth et al. 2017)]. While that approach focuses on the ex-ante qualities of executives and the magnitude of shocks, our framework instead examines whether voters use the constitutional appropriateness of the legislative procedure—given the urgency of the issue—as a cue to infer cabinet valence.

The main problem voters face is selecting high-quality incumbents through electoral confirmation. One way to do this is by assessing the quality and appropriateness of legislative choices. Ordinary legislation and decrees are procedurally distinct and serve different institutional functions, and strict preferences between the two depend heavily on both endogenous beliefs related to democratic values and practical considerations tied to the circumstances of their formulation. Ideally, times of great urgency call for rapid and circumscribed interventions that are optimally delivered through executive legislation. In this game, voters see a procedural decision by the government to issue a decree or to initiate an ordinary legislative procedure, while also being fully informed about the level of urgency surrounding the issue. After that, they must choose between confirming or rejecting the cabinet. If the cabinet is confirmed, it gains the corresponding second-period wage; other-

wise, it falls without being replaced. Voters know that cabinets can be of high quality with probability π , but their true type is known only to the cabinet.

The timeline of the game is as follows:

1. Nature assigns type (Θ_i) to the cabinet and establishes the urgency of the issue at hand (U_i) , with $i \in \{high, low\}$
2. The cabinet observes U , his own type Θ and decide upon which legislature procedure L to initiate, with $L \in \{D, O\}$.
3. Voters observe the urgency level U_i , the legislative procedure initiated and decide whether to confirm or reject the cabinet.
4. Utilities are realised. If the cabinet has been confirmed, it enjoys wage w . If the cabinet has issued a decree, it becomes applicable regardless the outcome of the election (the decision of the voter). If the cabinet has initiated an ordinary legislative proposal, the proposal becomes law only if the incumbent has been confirmed by the voter.

Both Cabinet and Voters are policy and reelection oriented. As the cabinet gains positive utility from implementing its preferred policy l_i , voters also receive positive payoff from the implementation of good policy k_h , with the crucial difference of receiving negative utility from policies k_l initiated by low quality cabinets. Similarly, voters receive positive payoff q_h if they reelect a high quality cabinet, and a negative payoff q_l otherwise.² Hence, voters try to maximise utility

$$V_V = k_i - \beta - q_i$$

where β refers to a penalty that voters apply when decrees are used in times of low urgency. Therefore, $0 < \beta < k_h$ if $L = D \cap u \neq u_h$ and $\beta = 0$ otherwise. On the other hand, Cabinets try to maximise the following utility:

$$V_C = w + g(\theta, u, L, \tau) + \delta w$$

with $g(\theta, u, L, \tau) =$

$$g(\cdot) = \begin{cases} l_h & \text{if } (U = u_h \cap L = D \cap \Theta = \theta_h) \\ \tau(l_h - m_h) & \text{if } (U = u_h \cap L = O \cap \Theta = \theta_h) \\ l_h - m_h & \text{if } (U = u_l \cap L = D \cap \Theta = \theta_h) \\ \tau l_h & \text{if } (U = u_l \cap L = O \cap \Theta = \theta_h) \\ \vdots & \text{(symmetrically for } \theta_l) \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

²For practical purposes we assume that $q_h > k_h > 0 > q_l > k_l$, with $|q_l| < q_h$ and $|k_l| < k_h$.

where $\tau = 1$ if the voter decides to confirm the incumbent cabinet, eg if $P(\theta_h|u, L) > P(\theta_l|u, L)$ and 0 otherwise. $0 < m < q_l$ constitutes a penalty for not having used the appropriate legislative instrument (Decree if u_h and O if u_l). However, the main distinction between θ_h and θ_l is the assumption that only high types are concerned with using the right procedure at the proper time. In other words, $m_l = 0$.

Proposition 1 (Executive equilibrium): *If the prior belief that the cabinet is high quality satisfies*

$$\pi < \frac{-q_\ell}{q_h - q_\ell},^3 \quad (1)$$

*then there exists a pooling equilibrium in which both high- and low-quality cabinets choose decrees regardless of the level of urgency, and voters always reject the incumbent.*⁴

This equilibrium arises in environments where voter priors are sufficiently pessimistic about cabinet quality (with share of competent politicians lower than threshold π_A). The condition implies that even high-quality cabinets find it unprofitable to incur the cost of separating by using the appropriate procedure, since the posterior belief of the voter remains too low to secure reelection. As a result, both types of cabinet converge on the same behavior—issuing decrees irrespective of urgency—which makes the procedure uninformative. Voters, rationally anticipating this, ignore the instrument choice and systematically reject the incumbent. The logic of this equilibrium reflects a vicious cycle: low voter trust leads to pooled behavior, which in turn justifies low voter trust. In this setting, cabinets know they are facing rejections and willingly legislate with decrees to make sure that their preferred policy would still come into effect.

Proposition 2 (Virtuous equilibrium): *If the prior belief that the cabinet is high quality satisfies*

$$\pi > \pi_A,$$

and

$$\pi > \frac{-(k_\ell + q_\ell)}{(k_h + q_h) - (k_\ell + q_\ell)},^5 \quad (2)$$

³ $\frac{-q_\ell}{q_h - q_\ell}$ is hereby references as π_A

⁴ This is supported by the following set of prior beliefs:

$$\begin{cases} P(L = D|U_h) = 1 & \text{for both } \theta_h \text{ and } \theta_\ell \\ P(L = D|U_\ell) = 1 & \text{for both } \theta_h \text{ and } \theta_\ell \end{cases} \quad (2)$$

⁵ $\frac{-(k_\ell + q_\ell)}{(k_h + q_h) - (k_\ell + q_\ell)}$ is henceforth references as π_B

*then there exists a (virtuous) pooling equilibrium in which both high and low cabinets use decree in high urgency occasions and ordinary legislation in low urgency occasions.*⁶

This equilibrium reflects a strategic regime supported by relatively optimistic voter priors regarding the share of competent cabinets and by prior beliefs that reinforce expectations of procedural appropriateness. In other words, not only is there a good enough chance that the cabinet is competent, but voters—despite not being able to differentiate types by their strategies—firmly believe that each type will follow a course of action aligned with the observed level of urgency. When $\pi > \pi_B$, voters confirm cabinets after observing $L = O$ in low-urgency environments. While high-quality cabinets already have an ex-ante preference for this strategy, low-quality cabinets do not benefit from deviation. By the same token, when urgency is not high, low-quality cabinets can once again mimic the behavior of their high-quality counterparts and secure reelection by playing $L = O$.

It is important to note that, in principle, another pooling equilibrium is possible in which both types play $L = O$ regardless of the urgency level. However, this equilibrium not only requires that (2) is satisfied but also hinges on several strong assumptions about voter beliefs and the ratios between penalties and benefits voters receive upon the realization of utilities, making it extremely fragile. Regarding prior beliefs, voters must expect that both high- and low-quality types employ ordinary legislative procedures with certainty in every scenario—a belief that conflicts with the incentives of both types when urgency is high. In addition, it may require that, holding all else constant, the utility voters derive from policy implemented by high-quality incumbents exceeds the utility of simply confirming such a cabinet in office⁷. This reflects a situation in which voters assign great importance to a particular issue and believe that the potential benefit of having a competent cabinet regulate it outweighs the cost of confirming an incompetent one. Crucially, this incentivizes voters to confirm cabinets using ordinary legislation and to sanction the use of decrees, even in high-urgency situations, despite valuing the match between procedure and context. Such a voting body—highly sensitive to both policy quality and procedural misuse—might be able to curb the use of decrees, but it may not reflect realistic voter behavior. In high-urgency environments, for example, the gravity of the situation is likely to push low- and high-quality cabinets toward similar policy responses, unlike other settings such as restructuring

⁶This is supported by the following set of prior beliefs:

$$\begin{cases} P(L = D|U_h) = 1 & \text{for both } \theta_h \text{ and } \theta_\ell \\ P(L = O|U_\ell) = 1 & \text{for both } \theta_h \text{ and } \theta_\ell \end{cases} \quad (3)$$

⁷Symmetrically, holding all else equal, the penalty voters incur from an incompetent policy drafted by a low-quality cabinet must exceed the disutility of having it remain in power.

the justice system in ordinary times. After a hurricane or earthquake, for instance, the rules governing resettlement and reconstruction are likely to exhibit less divergence than policies in more ideologically loaded areas. Therefore, the material and theoretical conditions for this equilibrium may be too restrictive to hold in practice.

Overall, the impossibility of a separating equilibrium in this simple game underscores how difficult it is for voters to identify competence through procedural choices, even when urgency is perfectly observable. In the experiment, voters show strong procedural awareness, being significantly more likely to associate unilateral action with positive descriptors like efficiency and rapidity. However, their evaluation of the government did not improve (or deteriorate), which is even more puzzling given that decrees were found to be around 10% less popular than ordinary legislative procedures. This simple game offers a possible explanation for why cabinet ratings did not rise in line with qualitative perceptions: under the current informational structure, voters cannot infer cabinet valence. More importantly, the parameter β , which captures the disutility voters derive from inappropriate use of executive action, does not affect the threshold that determines the equilibrium. Nevertheless, the game shows that the competence of cabinets is not the only constraint on executive behavior—voter expectations and beliefs may be equally, if not more, powerful.

6 Conclusions

The magnitude of the phenomenon of executive legislation in Italy cannot be underestimated. As a larger percentage of legislation is adopted through the executive procedure, decrees have become a common feature of the political debate. This paper has examined the use of executive decrees in Italy, highlighting its implications for legislative processes and public perception. The increased use of decrees has raised concerns about the diminished role of the Italian Parliament in the legislative process. Our research shows that the use of decrees reduces public support for legislative drafts by approximately 10 percent. However, the public’s understanding and perception of these decrees vary. The data indicates that individuals can differentiate between legislative procedures and evaluate legislative drafts accordingly. Factors such as political affiliation and the content of the legislation also influence public evaluation.

While decrees do not directly increase satisfaction with the government’s performance, they do impact how the public views the government’s efficiency. Using decrees to present issues as urgent is a clear communication strategy, indicating the government’s focus on specific issues. However, this approach also raises questions about its potential to shift the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches and a possible threat to accountability.

To better understand the apparent disconnect between voters’ procedural preferences and their overall evaluation of cabinet performance, the paper developed a formal model of strategic procedure choice under incomplete information. The model formalizes the intuition that voters observe both the level of urgency and the legislative procedure used, but not the cabinet’s underlying quality. Two types of pooling equilibria emerge. In the “executive equilibrium”, low voter priors about cabinet competence induce all types of cabinets—high and low quality—to rely on decrees regardless of urgency. In this scenario, procedure becomes an uninformative signal, and voters systematically reject incumbents. Conversely, in the “virtuous equilibrium”, optimistic voter priors support conditional procedural behavior: both types use decrees in urgent cases and ordinary procedures in routine ones. Here, voter expectations discipline cabinet behavior, even in the absence of separating equilibria.

Importantly, the model helps explain why decrees are less popular, but do not affect electoral evaluations: when voters cannot extract information about competence from procedure choice, they rely on other signals such as perceived efficiency or urgency. This theoretical insight complements the experimental findings and suggests that voter beliefs—rather than only institutional constraints—may be central in shaping executive behavior. It also highlights the difficulty of establishing accountability through procedural cues alone: if urgency is observable but competence is not, even well-informed citizens may be unable to reward appropriate procedural use or punish abuse.

This study has provided insights into the relationship between executive action, public perception, and democratic processes in Italy. However, more research is needed. The frequent use of decrees to present issues as urgent suggests a need to explore their long-term effects on democratic representation. The relationship between the frequency of decree issuance, government popularity, and potential threats to democratic representation also requires further investigation. Theoretical extensions should examine how endogenous shifts in voter beliefs—fueled by elite behavior or media framing—can reinforce or destabilize the equilibria identified here.

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7 Survey questions

7.1 Pre-Treatment Questions

- How well do you know the process of law-making and the functioning of political systems?
 - Very well
 - Quite well
 - Not very well
 - Not well at all

- **How much do you agree with the following statement: "Parliamentary rules are slow and inefficient. Elected governments should be free to legislate as they prefer"?**
 - Strongly agree
 - Somewhat agree
 - Somewhat disagree
 - Strongly disagree

- **How much do you agree with the following statement: "Parliamentary rules are essential for limiting the executive and protecting minorities. Elected governments should legislate bound by the agreement of the forces represented in parliament"?**
 - Strongly agree
 - Somewhat agree
 - Somewhat disagree
 - Strongly disagree

- **How relevant are the following political areas for your private and/or professional life (0 = not important, 10 = very important)? Move the slider to make your choice.**
 - Agriculture
 - Immigration
 - Defense
 - Education
 - Environment
 - Infrastructure and Transport

- **How relevant are these political areas when you judge the government's performance (0 = not important, 10 = very important)? Move the slider to make your choice.**
 - Agriculture
 - Immigration
 - Defense

- Education
 - Environment
 - Infrastructure and Transport
- **Currently, how much do you think these political areas need new laws (0 = no immediate necessity, 10 = extreme need for legislation)? Move the slider to make your choice.**
- Agriculture
 - Immigration
 - Defense
 - Education
 - Environment
 - Infrastructure and Transport

Conjoint Analysis You will be shown two tables, each with two alternative legislative proposals. The proposals will be characterized by:

1. The ideological orientation of the government.
2. A brief description of the legislative proposal.
3. An indication of whether the proposal is formulated as a decree-law or as ordinary legislation.

If you are not familiar with the difference between ordinary legislative procedure and decree-law, read the brief paragraph below. For each table, express your support for each proposal with a number from 1 to 10.

Explanatory Paragraph The decree-law is a legislative act adopted by the government and is immediately applicable without the preliminary vote of Parliament. The chambers are convened within 5 days of the adoption of the decree and must approve it (with or without amendments) within 60 days; otherwise, the decree expires. Article 77 of the Constitution prescribes that the decree-law can be used in times of extraordinary necessity. On the other hand, the ordinary legislative procedure requires the adoption of the same text in both houses of Parliament. The Constitution establishes that Parliament holds legislative power, and as such, there is no time limit for the adoption of any bill, which can only produce legal effects after being successfully voted on by a parliamentary majority.

7.1.1 Attributes, Levels, Randomization Strategy

- **Political Orientation of the Government:** Right; Center-right, Left, Center-left, Broad agreements. Equally likely (doubles allowed). ($P = \frac{1}{5}$)
- **Description:** Policy area: immigration. The legislative project makes it more difficult for international migrants to acquire political asylum; Policy area: immigration. The legislative project allows international migrants to acquire political asylum more easily; Policy area: Education. The legislative project increases the autonomy of regional governments in choosing textbooks for public schools; Policy area: Education. The legislative project limits the autonomy of regional governments in choosing textbooks for public schools. Equally likely (doubles allowed). ($P = \frac{1}{4}$)
- **Legislative Procedure:** Decree-law; Ordinary legislative procedure. Both are represented in the same pairwise choice (doubles not allowed). Equally likely (doubles allowed). ($P = \frac{1}{4}$)

7.2 Treatment-control experiment

7.2.1 Treatment

Higher Likelihood of Executive Decree You will be shown the introductory paragraph of a newspaper article. Note that it does not refer to the current Italian government but to a hypothetical government without a predefined ideology.

The government has announced a new decree-law that regulates industrial pollution practices along the coasts. The decree provides new guidelines for the disposal of pollutants by industrial complexes and allocates funds to public environmental agencies to oversee its implementation. The decree will be effective in the coming days, and parliamentary commissions will have 60 days to amend it, approve it, or reject it.

Lower Likelihood of Executive Decree You will be shown the introductory paragraph of a newspaper article. Note that it does not refer to the current Italian government but to a hypothetical government without a predefined ideology.

The government has announced a new decree-law that regulates train fare rates to areas affected by demographic decline. To revitalize municipalities experiencing depopulation, the decree sets a cap on the price of train tickets for those areas of the country. The decree will be effective in the coming days, and parliamentary commissions will have 60 days to amend it, approve it, or reject it.

7.2.2 Control

Higher Likelihood of Executive Decree You will be shown the introductory paragraph of a newspaper article. Note that it does not refer to the current Italian government but to a hypothetical government without a predefined ideology.

The government has presented a new legislative proposal to the parliament that regulates industrial pollution practices along the coasts. The law would provide new guidelines for the disposal of pollutants by industrial complexes and allocate funds to public environmental agencies to oversee its implementation. The government has introduced the legislation in the House and it will only become effective after parliamentary approval.

Lower Likelihood of Executive Decree You will be shown the introductory paragraph of a newspaper article. Note that it does not refer to the current Italian government but to a hypothetical government without a predefined ideology.

The government has presented a new legislative proposal to the parliament that regulates train fare rates to areas affected by demographic decline. To revitalize municipalities experiencing depopulation, the law would set a cap on the price of train tickets for those areas of the country. The government has introduced the legislation in the House and it will only become effective after parliamentary approval.

7.2.3 Post Treatment Questions

Given the information provided above, are you satisfied with how the government is regulating train fares (industrial pollution)?

- Extremely satisfied
- Quite satisfied
- Rather dissatisfied
- Extremely dissatisfied

Choose 3 words that describe what you think about how the government is regulating train fares (industrial pollution). ELEMENTS: (Hasty, Quick, Late, Rapid, Comprehensive, Incomplete, Adequate, Inadequate, Effective, Ineffective, Appropriate, Problem, Decisive, Impulsive, Superficial, Sensible).

How much do you think the government considered the issue of train fares (industrial pollution) to be urgent?

- Very much
- Quite a bit

- A little
- Not at all

Do you think the government wanted to communicate to voters that it cares about transportation policy (industrial pollution)?

- Definitely yes
- Probably yes
- Probably no
- Definitely no

8 Figures

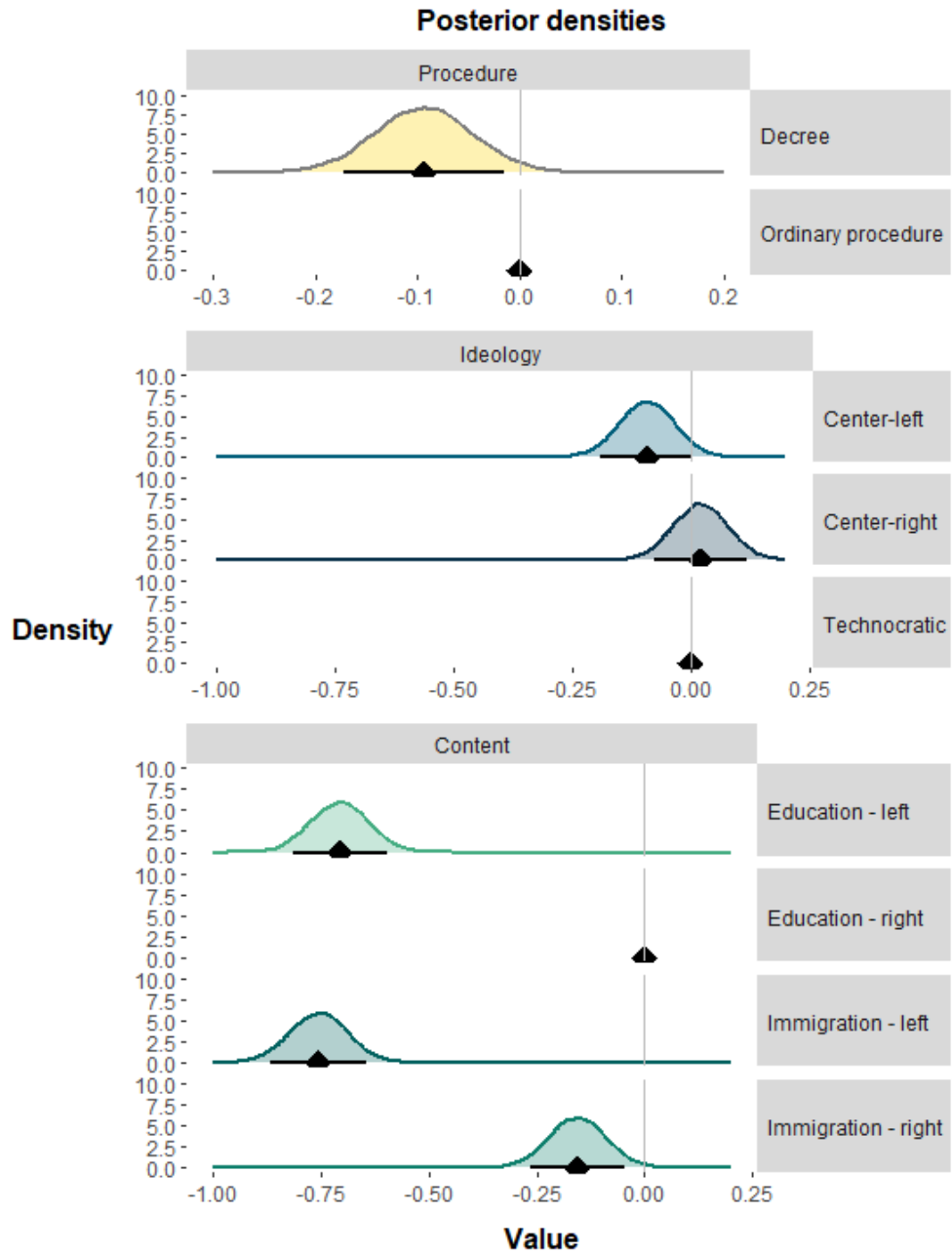


Figure 1: Posterior densities of attributes from the conjoint experiment

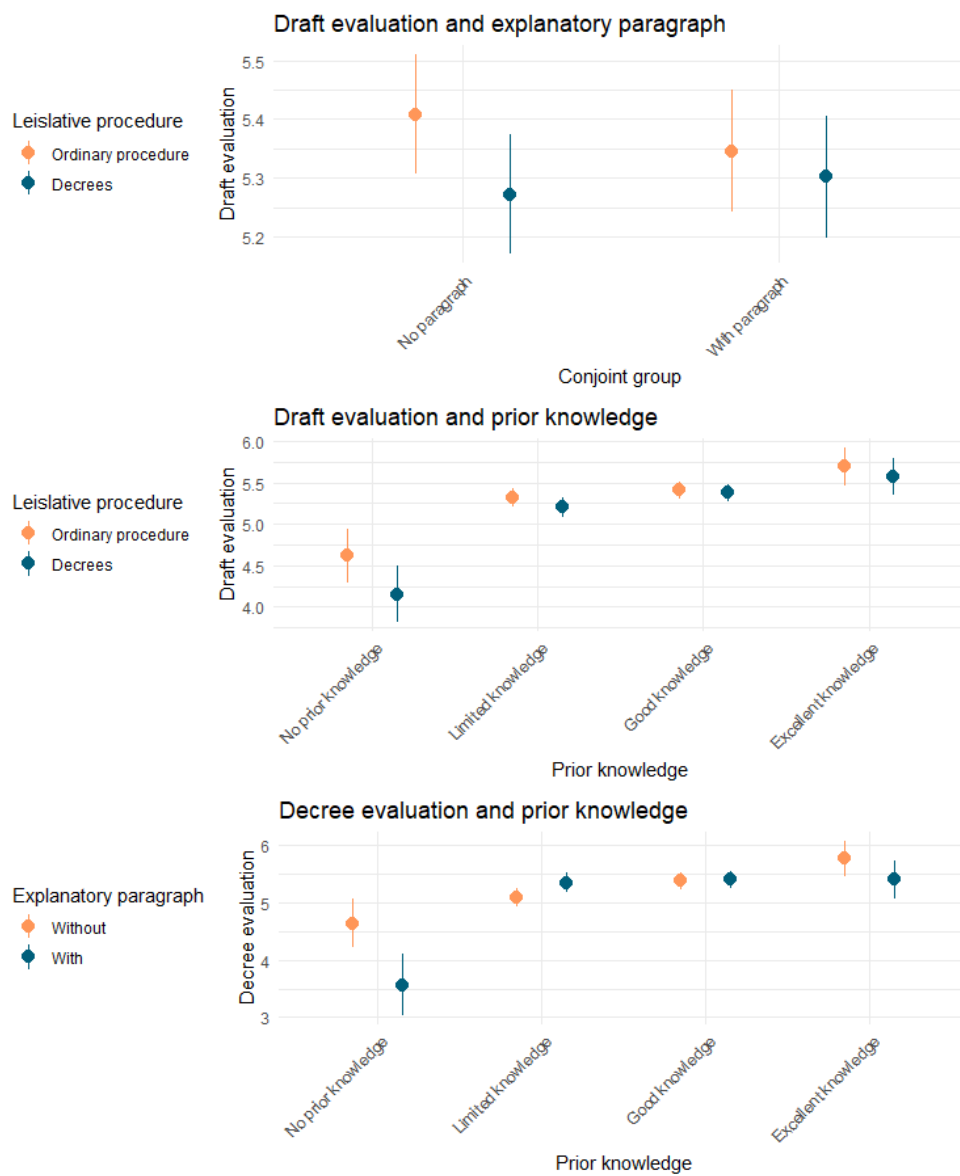


Figure 2: Marginal preferences and prior knowledge

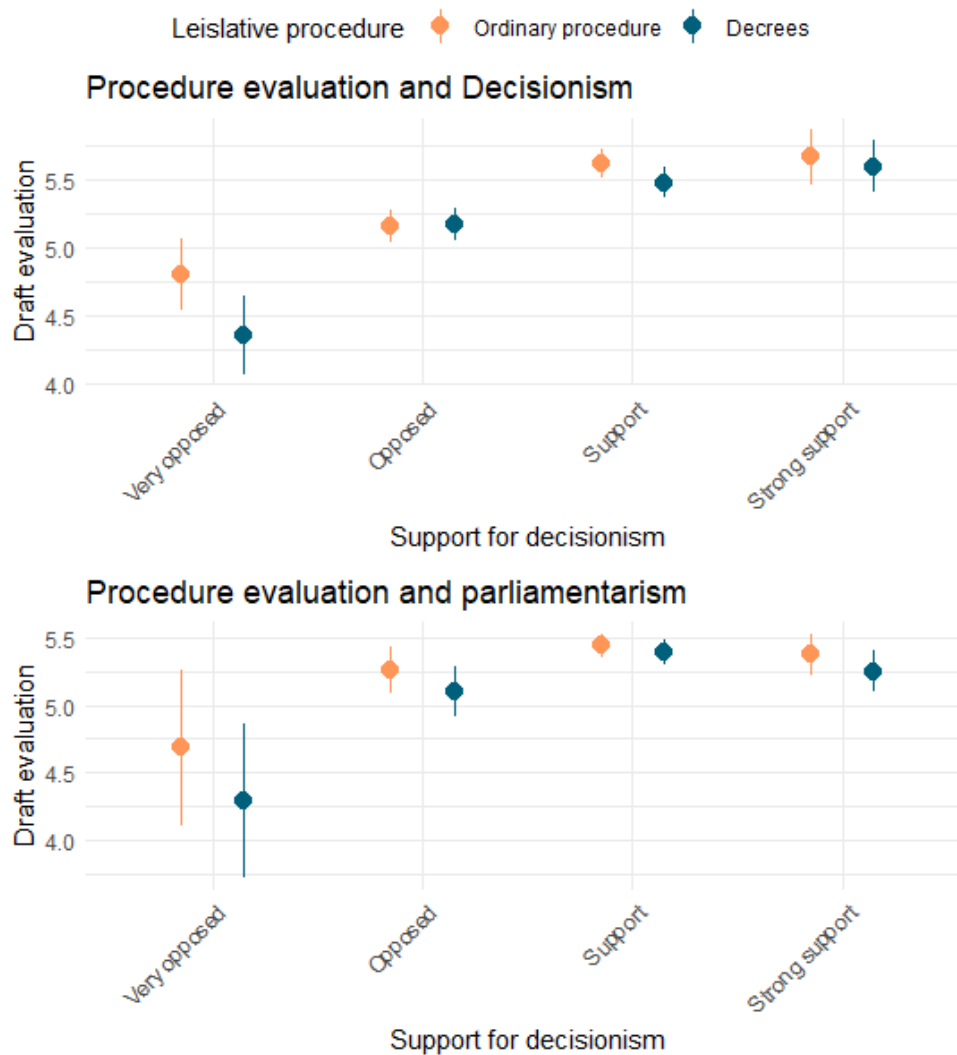


Figure 3: Preference evaluations and opinions about democracy

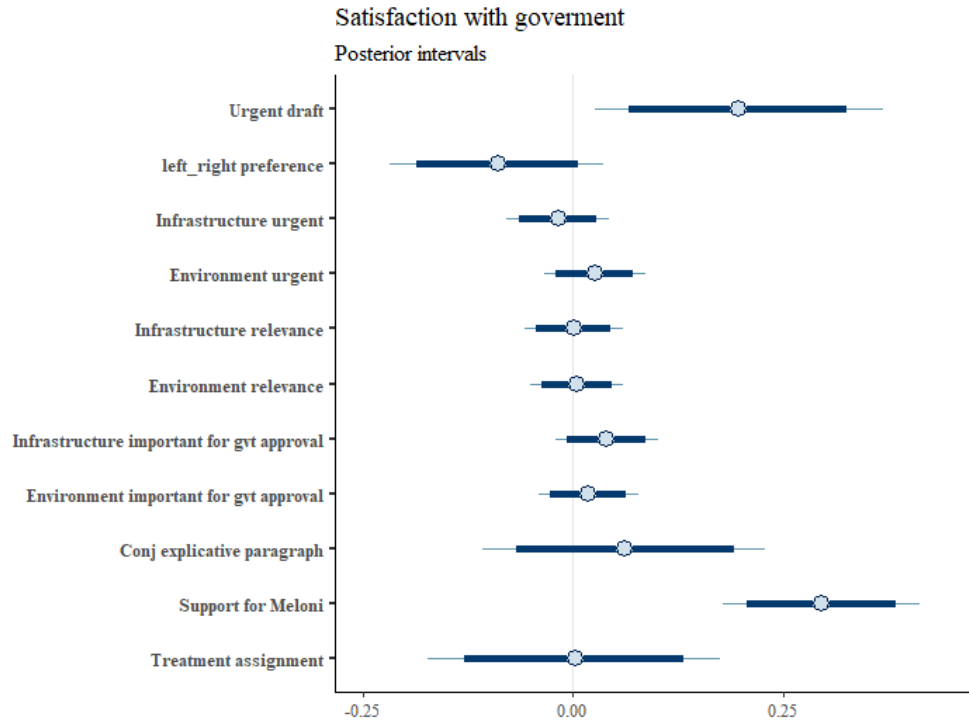


Figure 4: Treatment on government satisfaction

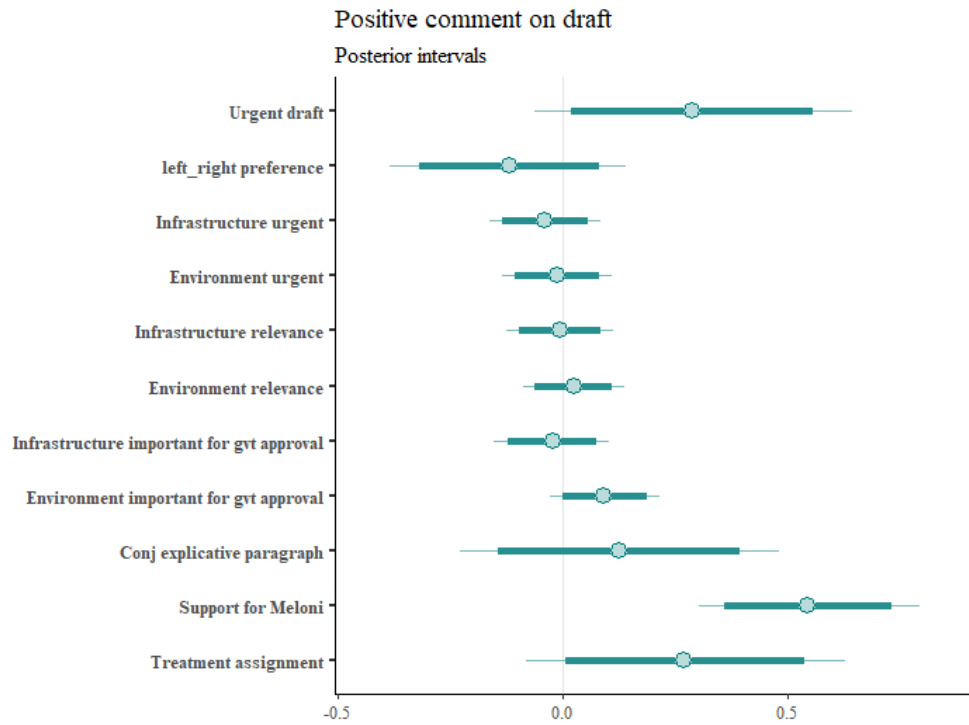


Figure 5: Treatment on positive comments

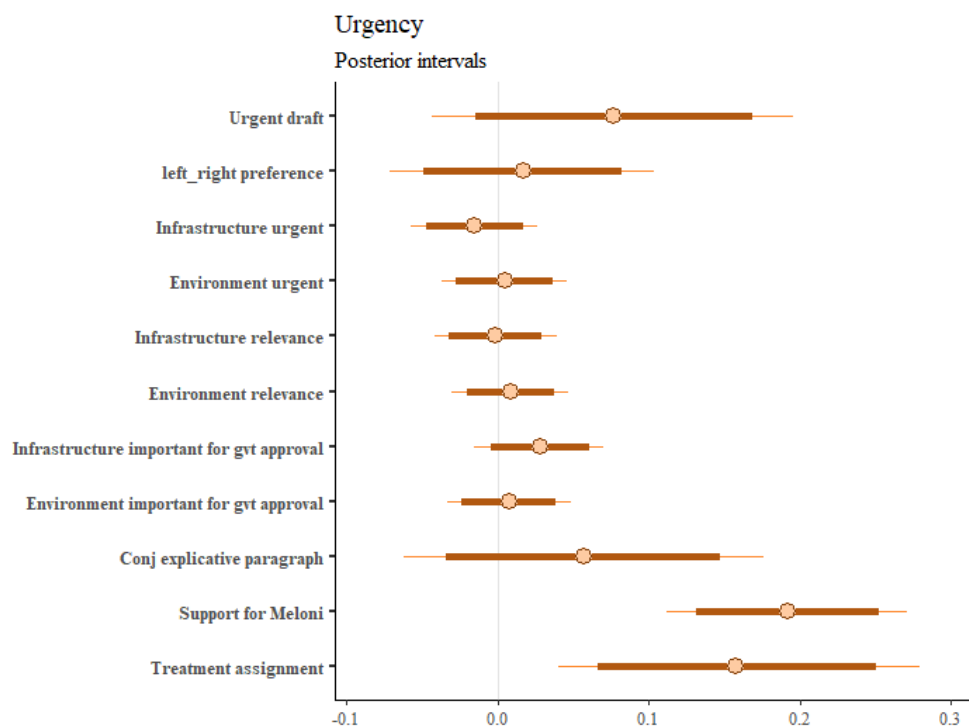


Figure 6: Treatment on urgency

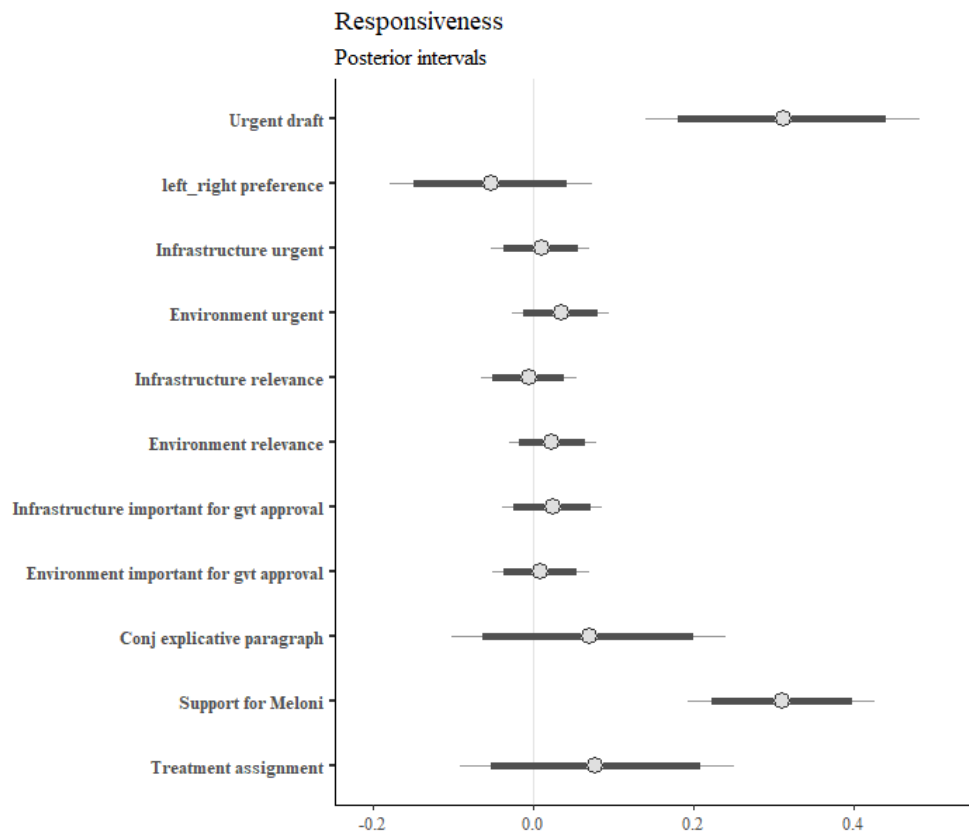


Figure 7: Treatment on responsiveness