

Conceptions of Democracy among Citizens and Legislators in the United States and Germany

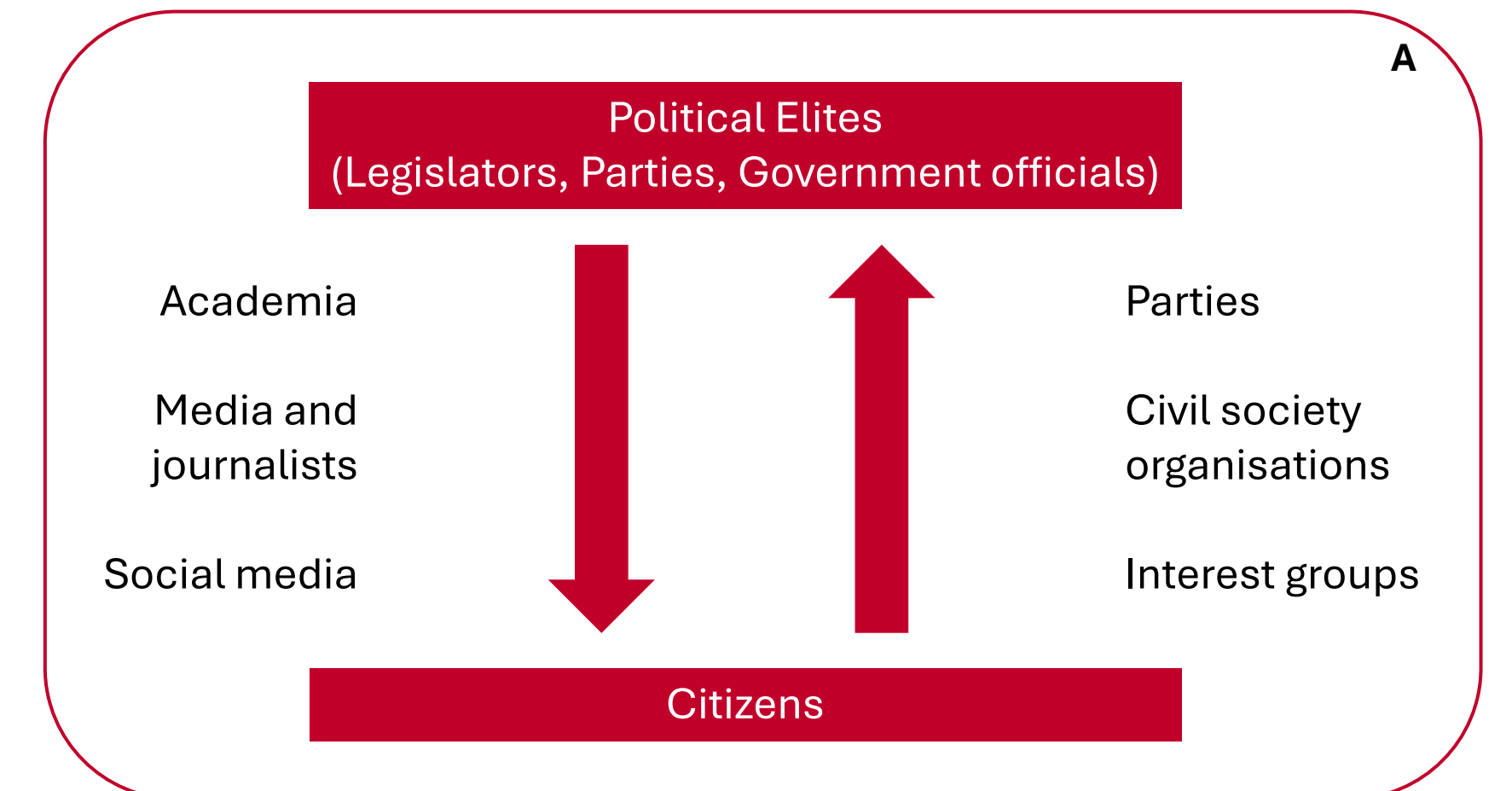
DFG-funded project conducted by Claudia Landwehr, Leonard Häfner, Lea Stallbaum

Background

- A crisis of democracy? Growing polarization, the rise of populism and democratic regression across the globe?
- What do people mean when they talk about “democracy”?
- Conceptions of democracy and process preferences are shaped in reciprocal relationship between political elites and citizens (Fig. A)
→ Democratic stability and resilience depend on what citizens and political elites expect from democracy and on whether their conceptions of democracy are congruent with each other and institutional reality

Research questions: What normative conceptions of democracy do citizens and political elites in Germany and the United States hold? What is the scope of consensus and dissent among and between citizens and elites in the two countries?

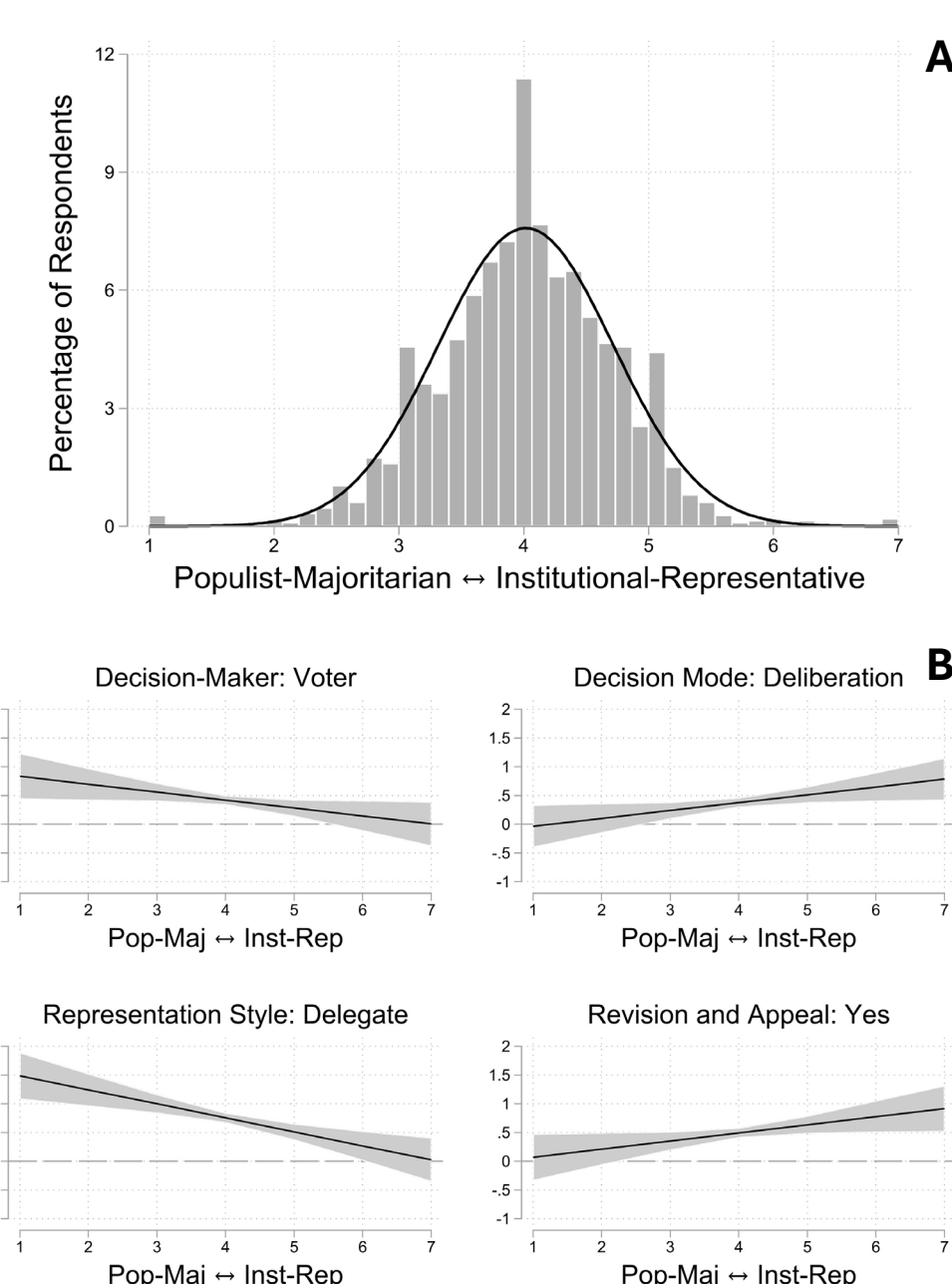
Agenda 2022 – 2025: qualitative content analysis of party manifestos 2000 - 2021, self-conducted online surveys of US and German state and German federal legislators, surveys in citizen panels (GESIS Panel and Understanding America Study)



Results

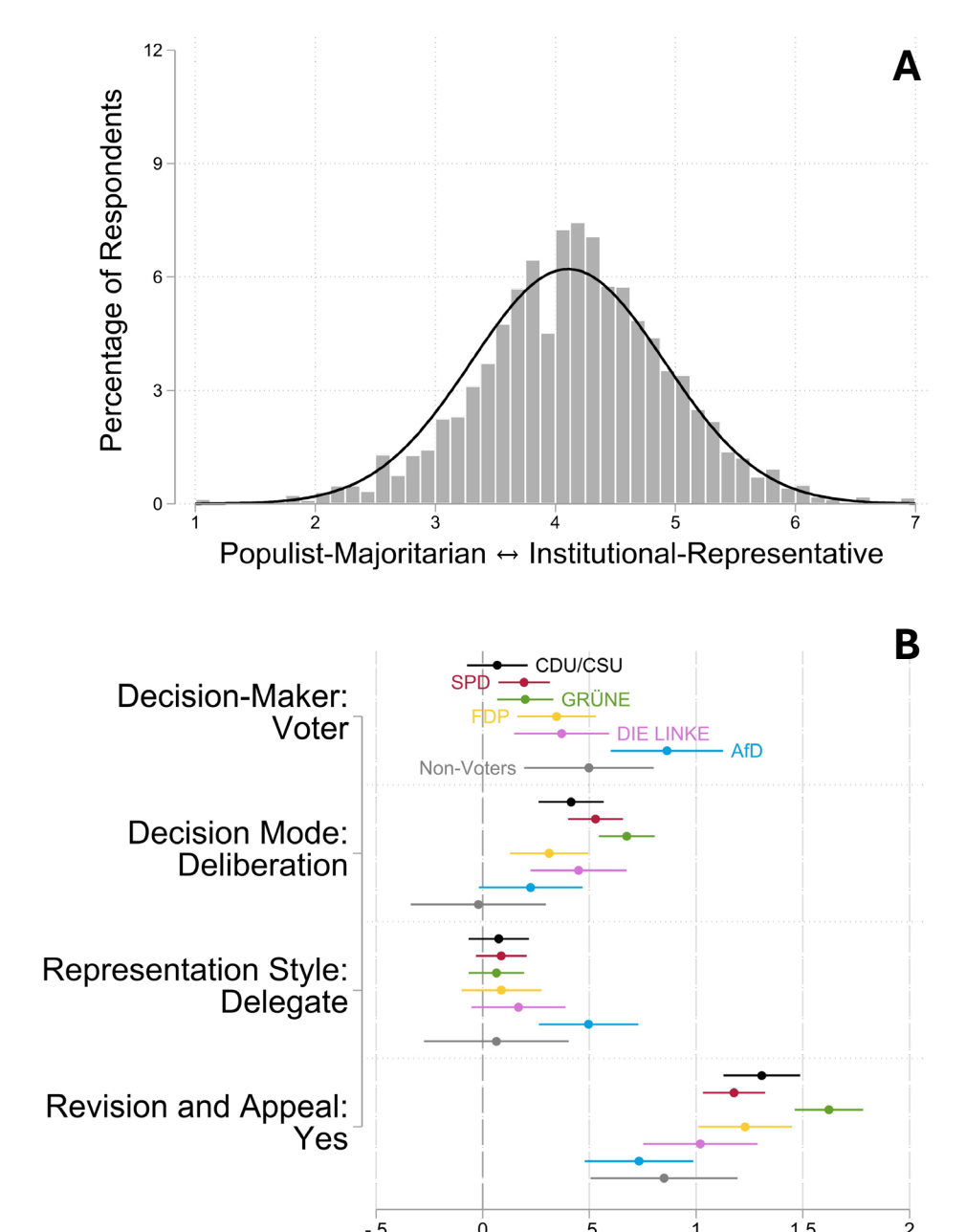
US Citizens

- Conceptions of democracy among US citizens mainly divided along a populist-majoritarian to institutional-representative continuum (Fig. A), deliberative conception of democracy is universally popular
- No differences in conceptions of democracy according to partisanship
- Institutional design preferences: US citizens see system with voter participation, decision-making after deliberation, delegate style of representation and strong revision and appeal as most democratic
- Preferences are not structured along party lines, but along conceptions of democracy (Fig. B)



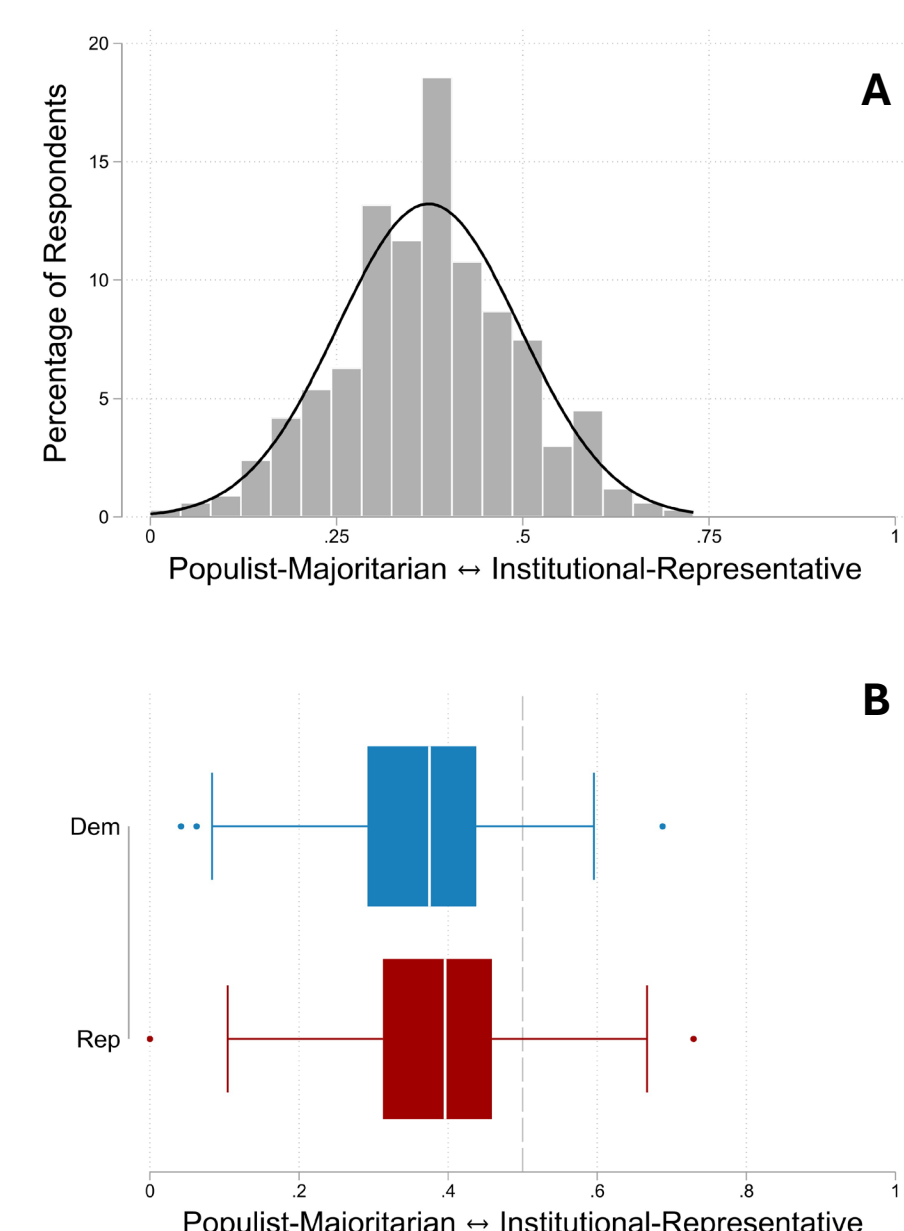
German Citizens

- German citizens mix different conceptions of democracy in their attitudes: main divide between populist-majoritarian and institutional-representative ideas (Fig. A), deliberative ideas are universally popular
- Conceptions of democracy structured by partisanship: supporters of GRÜNE and AfD on opposing ends of continuum
- Institutional design preferences: German citizens see voter participation, decision-making after deliberation, delegate style of representation and strong revision and appeal as most democratic
- Preferences strongly influenced by partisanship (Fig. B) and conceptions of democracy



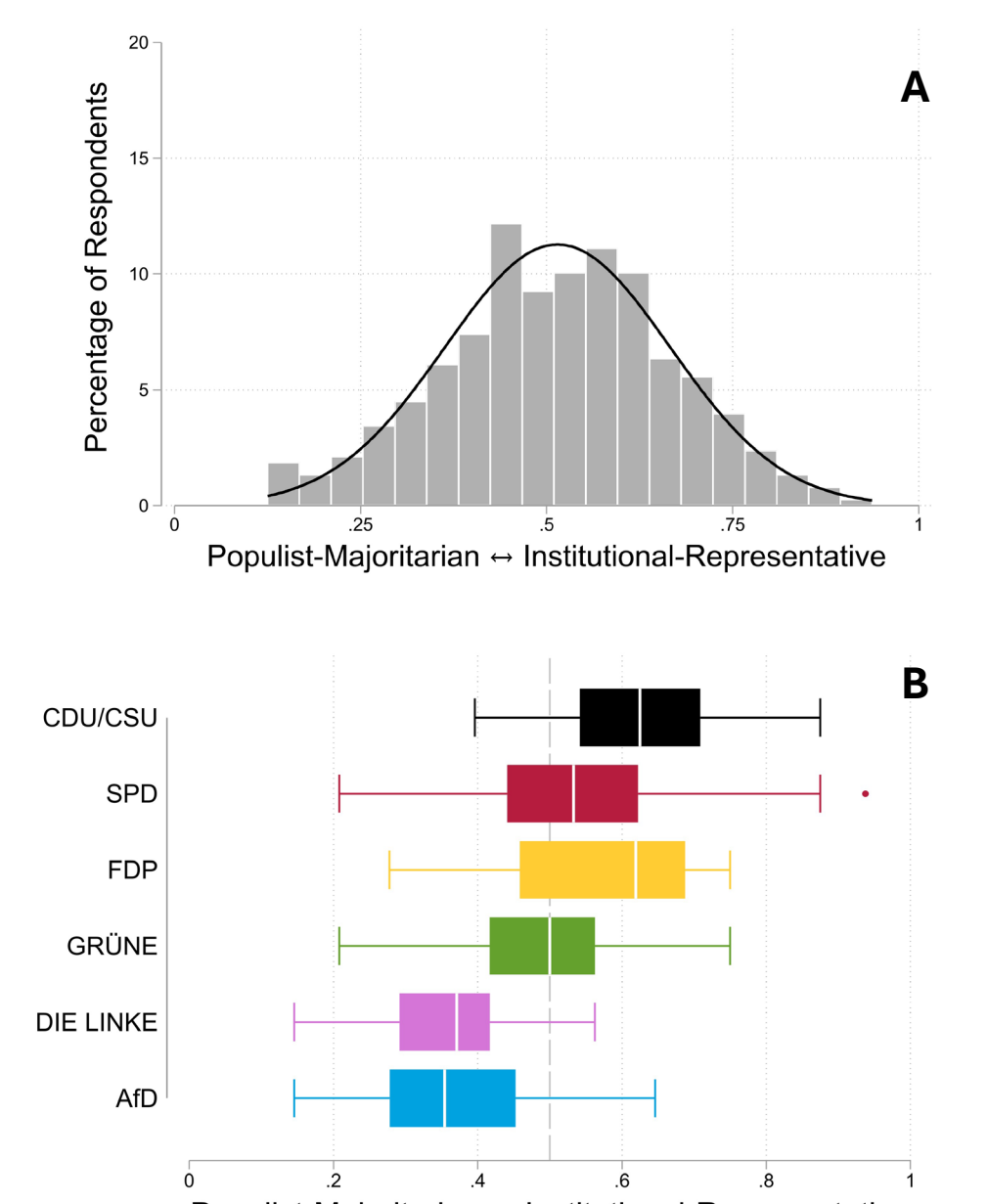
US Legislators

- US legislators lean towards a populist-majoritarian, rather than an institutional-representative conception of democracy (Fig. A), i.e. they prefer direct participation of citizens in decision-making processes and a weak role of representative institutions and political elites
- Attitudes are influenced by structural variables: an institutional-representative conception is held by longer-serving legislators, legislators in the majority party, and legislators who consider their seats to be electorally secure
- No meaningful differences between Democratic and Republican legislators (Fig. B)



German Legislators

- German legislators are balanced between populist-majoritarian and institutional-representative views (Fig. A)
- Beyond structural variables, party affiliation and ideology influence legislators' attitudes: Legislators of CDU/CSU and FDP lean towards an institutional-representative conception of democracy, legislators of DIE LINKE and AfD towards a populist-majoritarian one (Fig. B)
- Social democratic and egalitarian attitudes are structured along legislators' political ideology on the economic dimension
- Legislators from established parties lean towards the status quo, are less supportive of procedural reforms



Conclusions

- Distinct patterns in attitudes towards democracy reflect competing conceptions of democracy and process preferences among citizens and legislators
→ Disagreement and conflict not only over policies, but also over processes and institutions
- Preferences over democratic principles, processes and institutions are less structured in the US than in Germany due to absence of meta-deliberation
- Consensus on democratic principles allows for contestation of concrete rules and procedures; meta-deliberation and democratic innovations could enable democracies to rise to new challenges

Agenda 2025 – 2026: automated text analysis of parliamentary speeches since 2000, self-conducted online surveys of local legislators in Germany and the US, conjoint experiment on preferences for democratic institutional design in citizen panels (GESIS Panel and Understanding America Study)

Publications

Landwehr, Claudia; Ojeda, Christopher; Stallbaum, Lea (2025): Institutional Design Preferences Among German and US Citizens: Results from a Factorial Survey Experiment. *Political Studies*, online first. DOI: 10.1177/00323217241309965.

Häfner, Leonard; Landwehr, Claudia; Stallbaum, Lea (2023): German Legislators' Conceptions of Democracy and Process Preferences: Results from a New Survey. *German Politics*, online first. DOI: 10.1080/09644008.2023.2279183.

Landwehr, Claudia; Crowder-Meyer, Melody; Häfner, Leonard; Stallbaum, Lea; Weingärtner, Paul (2024): American Legislator Survey 2023 (Dataset). <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/3H1YYH>, Harvard Dataverse.

Landwehr, Claudia; Häfner, Leonard; Stallbaum, Lea (2023): German Legislator Survey 2022 (Dataset). <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/GUVA5P>, Harvard Dataverse.

Project Website:



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