

**ERC Starting Grant 2024**  
**DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIONS (PART B)**

**ERC Starting Grant 2024**  
**Research proposal [Part B1]**

**Political Process Preferences in Europe: Rethinking  
Conceptual, Ontological and Methodological Foundations  
(PoPPiE)**

**Cover Page:**

- Name of the Principal Investigator (PI): Rikki Dean
- Host Institution for the project: University of Southampton
- Proposal duration in months: 60 months

To understand the levels of dissatisfaction with democratic performance in Europe, as well as the most effective reforms for addressing it, requires an understanding of citizens' process preferences: how do they want democracies to function? Empirical research on process preferences is rapidly proliferating, but it has been underpinned by an assumption that the task of this research is to discover which one of a set of abstract, normative models of democracy citizens subscribe to. The driving idea behind PoPPiE is that this assumption is a serious limitation. It has led the study of process preferences to focus on discrete choices between simple alternatives that fail to represent the real choices facing the inhabitants of complex democratic systems and neglected the extent to which individuals are conflicted between competing democratic norms. It prevents robust inferences on important questions, such as levels of polarisation and support for democratic innovations.

PoPPiE develops a groundbreaking new approach to rethink the conceptual, ontological and methodological foundations for researching political process preferences.

- First, by applying democratic systems theory to re-conceptualise the content of process preferences it will generate a wholly new conceptual understanding of preferences for complex democratic systems, rather than ideal models of democracy.
- Second, instead of assuming that the nature of process preferences is inherently ideological, PoPPiE uses a novel multidimensional theoretical framework to assess levels of contextuality, conditionality and coherence in process preferences.
- Third, it develops a new mixed methods approach, producing a unique dataset that combines qualitative and quantitative data on a single individual's preference.

The new approach will not only strengthen the foundations of the science of process preferences, but ensure its findings are more policy relevant for the project of renewing European democracies.

## Section a: *Extended Synopsis of the scientific proposal*

### MOTIVATIONS AND OBJECTIVES

The study of what kind of democracy citizens want – their *political process preferences* – is driven by a concern to find solutions for several real problems facing European democracies: what is driving dissatisfaction with democratic performance, what would be the most effective democratic innovations to address this crisis of legitimacy, and how polarised are citizens on the question of how they should be governed? The driving idea behind PoPPiE is that the way political science conceptualises both the content and nature of political process preferences is a serious limitation on answering these motivating questions.

European democracies are complex systems in which functional capacity is distributed amongst an array of different political actors and practices, stretching across multiple levels of governance, from the local to the transnational. Yet, process preferences research commonly offers citizens a choice between single actors and practices. A typical question is, for instance, to ask whether they would prefer for citizens, politicians or experts to make political decisions (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Bengtsson, 2012; Font *et al.*, 2015; Gherghina and Geißel, 2017, 2018; Pilet *et al.*, 2020). Trying to judge support for either the status quo or reforms of a complex political system by presenting discrete choices between simple options is akin to asking people whether they prefer an apple or an orange in order to understand what kind of fruit salad they would like. It is not unhelpful information, but it is also not a basis for robust inferences. Democratic governance is also characterised by deep normative dilemmas, for instance, should we prioritise free speech or protection from harmful speech? Yet process preferences research proceeds as if individuals should be untouched by these dilemmas, instead categorising them into neat ideological boxes. Sorting people into ideological boxes on dilemmatic questions without taking account of whether individuals are internally conflicted – for instance, whether they are torn between preventing harm and protecting free speech – is likely to seriously overestimate polarisation and underestimate procedural consensus.

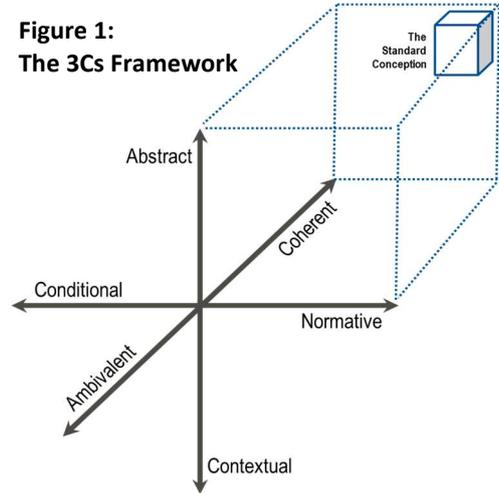
PoPPiE will provide an alternative understanding of process preferences in Europe by applying a groundbreaking new approach. It is based around three key innovations, one conceptual, one ontological and one methodological:

1. applying democratic systems theory to **re-conceptualise the content** of process preferences;
2. using a novel theoretical framework based around three dimensions of *contextuality*, *conditionality* and *coherence* to **examine the ontology** of process preferences;
3. developing an **iterative, mixed-methods approach** to deliver a unique dataset that combines qualitative and quantitative data on a single individual's preference.

The application of democratic systems theory to conceptualising political process is intended to address the domination of models-based approaches in current research. This has seen the goal of process preference research as categorising individuals in terms of their support for different models of political system, whether that is autocracy versus democracy (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Ariely and Davidov 2011) or alternative models of democracy – most commonly, liberal versus social versus direct democracy (Ferrín and Kriesi 2016b; Hernández 2016; Kriesi, Sarris, and Moncagatta 2016; Oser and Hooghe 2018; Quaranta 2018) and representative-led versus citizen-led versus expert-led (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Bengtsson, 2012; Font *et al.*, 2015; Gherghina and Geißel, 2017, 2018; Pilet *et al.*, 2020). Democratic systems theory provides a new perspective. It conceives of democracy as a complex set of interactions between actors, practices and arenas, working to realise democratic norms and functions across a multi-level governance system (Dean, Rinne, and Geissel 2019; Dryzek 2009; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012; Warren 2017). It will be used to develop systems profiles that better represent the complexity of: a) the functional differentiation that characterises real democracies, and b) the challenge of democratic reform, which is usually a case of rebalancing the system rather than the wholesale replacement of one model with another. By offering choices between options that are closer to the real democratic systems we inhabit, this will provide the basis for more robust inferences about how to intervene to address public disillusion with democratic institutions.

The examination of the ontology of process preferences investigates whether the current literature is warranted in reifying normative constructs from democratic theory as if they are real psychological phenomena. It has been assumed that preferences should also be model-like in nature. Individuals should possess a coherent ideological conception of democracy that is consistent across contexts, influences more fine-grained preferences for particular kinds of reforms, and predicts political behaviours (Bengtsson 2012; Hernández 2019a). But what if people do not think about political processes in this way? A raft of recent studies have chipped away at this assumption, suggesting that support for political processes, such as referendums, is not

abstract and generalisable (Bertsou 2022; Dean 2016; Landwehr and Harms 2019; van der Does and Kantorowicz 2021; Werner 2020; Wojcieszak 2014). It can depend on many factors, such as the nature of the issue context and strategic conditionalities, like what policy outcome the process is likely to deliver. Nevertheless, there has been no unifying theoretical framework behind these endeavours, meaning they have proceeded piecemeal, only investigating one or two aspects of contextuality and conditionality, and often conflating these two dimensions. The 3Cs Framework (Dean 2023b) will provide the necessary unifying theory for a more systematic examination. Its three dimensions ask to what extent process preferences are: 1) contextually specific or contextually abstract, 2) purely normative or strategically and pragmatically conditional, and 3) ideologically coherent or ambivalent. This opens new possibilities for understanding the nature of a process preference compared to the standard conception underpinning existing research (see Figure 1). This will strengthen the basis for assessing procedural consensus and polarisation, as well as for targeting democratic innovations to the contexts and conditions where they are most wanted.



Both the democratic systems approach and the 3Cs Framework necessitate methodological innovation. PoPPiE will develop an iterative mixed-methods design based on two principles that significantly depart from standard practice in process preference research. First, it will collect both quantitative and qualitative data on the same individual's preferences. There are very few mixed-methods studies and those that there are apply the different methods to different sets of respondents (e.g. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Ganuza and Font 2020). However, linked qualitative and quantitative data is essential to explore the multifaceted nature of the process preference suggested by the 3Cs Framework. Second, the iterative design will enable the inclusion of citizen perspectives into the development of the research instruments. The models-based approach simply deduces survey questions from normative theory (e.g. see: Ferrín and Kriesi 2016a), producing the aforementioned reification of normative constructs. PoPPiE introduces an inductive element to ensure that the democratic systems approach is not purely imposed upon participants but informed by their perspectives. This follows calls to bring the demos into research on democracy (Dean, Gagnon, and Asenbaum 2019; Geissel 2022).

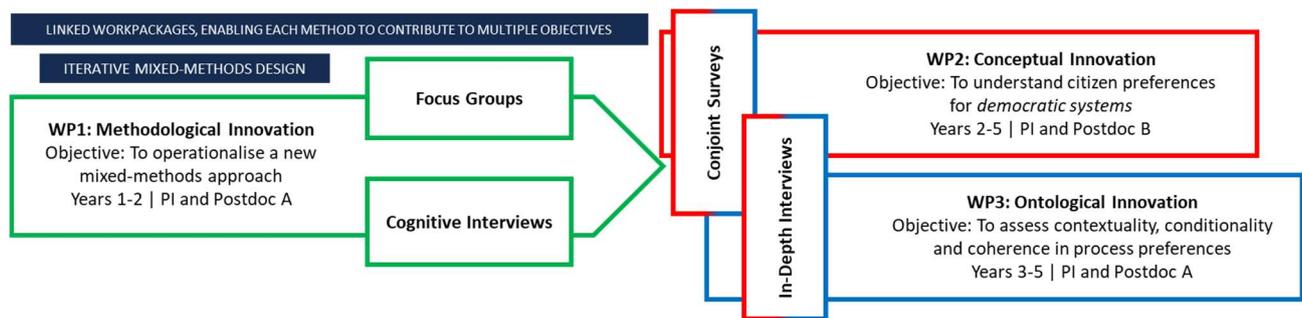
**Table 1: Brief summary of relationship between research problems and project objectives**

Research Problem	Objective
<b>Conceptual:</b> Conceptions of political process are too tightly linked to models-based theories of democracy, neglecting the complexity of real political systems in favour of simple choices between abstract alternatives.	To <u>investigate preferences for democratic systems</u> , capturing the complex set of interactions between actors, practices and arenas that characterise real, multi-level European democracies.
<b>Ontological:</b> The nature of a process preference is assumed to be abstracted like an ideological model, reifying normative concepts as if they are real psychological phenomena.	To provide <u>a first comprehensive assessment of the extent of contextuality, conditionality and coherence</u> in political process preferences by deploying the 3Cs Framework.
<b>Methodological:</b> Methods for researching process preferences have been determined according to these prior conceptual and ontological commitments, encoding their limits into existing methods and data.	To develop an innovative mixed-methods approach based on two principles: the value of collecting <u>linked quantitative and qualitative data</u> , and the value of <u>including the public in research on democracy</u> .

## PROJECT STRUCTURE AND METHODS

The conceptual, ontological and methodological objectives of PoPPiE structure the work plan into three work packages, which combine focus groups, cognitive interviews, survey experiments and in-depth interviews in an iterative, mixed-methods design. Each method has a primary association with one WP, but also feeds into the other WPs to examine process preferences through multiple methodological lenses. Qualitative data collection will focus on Germany and the UK, expanding to include the Czech Republic and Spain for the quantitative surveys in order represent more of the diversity in European democratic systems.

**Figure 2: Work Packages and Methods**



► **WP1: Methodological Innovations: Operationalising a Democratic Systems Approach:** The dominance of the standard, models-based approach to researching process preferences means that there are no validated research tools for collecting data on and analysing process preferences from alternative theoretical perspectives. Applying the democratic systems approach and the 3Cs Framework thus requires their operationalisation into new methods of data collection and analysis. The core objective of WP1 is to transparently develop and validate new designs for survey experiments that will be deployed in WP2 using a mixture of focus groups and cognitive interviews. This operationalisation process will also enable the incorporation of citizen perspectives on democratic systems into the research design, ensuring that PoPPiE’s process preference questions retain a connection to the way citizens conceive of the political system, rather than reifying the conceptual preoccupations of democratic theory and impose them upon survey respondents.

*Primary Methods: Focus Groups and Cognitive Interviews:* The WP begins with a series of six focus groups (three in Germany and three in the UK), tasked with imagining their ideal political system. The results will be used for two purposes. First, they will inform the selection of attributes and attribute levels of conjoint surveys through insights into which elements of the democratic system the participants inductively raise as most salient. Much of the literature turns on the question of who gets to make political decisions (e.g. Bengtsson 2012; Gherghina and Geissel 2018; Font, Wojcieszak, and Navarro 2015). Is this what citizens also find the most important element, or do their visions revolve around other factors? In addition, it will inform attribute levels by facilitating an assessment of the relevant dimensionality of these elements. If the decision-maker is an important element, who do the participants discuss as possible decision-makers? Is it politicians, citizens and experts, as the literature presupposes, or do they alight upon other actors? Second, these focus groups will provide rich qualitative data that can also be used for WP2, enabling the comparison between individual and dialogical expression of democratic system preferences.

The resulting survey designs will then be tested through a minimum of 40 cognitive interviews to identify potential design problems and check interpretations of the new questions. These interviews play a key role in validating the new surveys. Cognitive interviews often reveal more than just design issues, giving a window into participants decision-making considerations. They will thus also provide an indicator of the potentially salient forms of contextuality and ambivalence that are worthy of systematic investigation in WP3.

► **WP2: Analysing Systems Preferences: Actors, Practices and Levels:** The objective of WP2 is to understand preferences for democratic systems. The initial proposition, which may be amended depending on the results of WP1, is to focus on three elements of the system where a democratic systems approach would offer novel insights compared to the predominant models-based approaches to researching process preferences: *system actors*, *system practices* and *system levels*. On system actors, the approach will be to offer choices between functionally differentiated constellations of actors, rather than simple choices between single decision-makers. As such, the approach will directly address Ganuza and Font’s (2020) critique that the oversimplification of existing approaches does not enable people fully express the complexity of their preferences. On system practices, the democratic systems approach will bring to the fore the overlooked integrative design features of democratic innovations (Boswell, Dean, and Smith 2023). Rather than asking about deliberative mini-publics, participatory budgeting and referendums as abstract institutional designs, WP2 will examine the importance of how they are connected to existing institutions in determining their desirability. On system levels, WP2 will address the neglect of the multilevel aspect of modern democracies within process preference research. Rather than assuming that the national level is the most important and generalising from national-level preferences to other governance levels, WP2 will investigate whether people have substantial differences in the preferences for local, state, national and transnational governance. WP2’s

application of democratic systems theory will therefore reinvent the way that we understand process preferences on multiple aspects of democracy.

*Primary Method: Survey Experiments:* WP2's application of the democratic systems approach will be centred on three survey experiments. Each experiment will be conducted with a representative population sample of 1500 people in four European countries (Germany, UK, Czech Republic and Spain), totalling 6000 respondents per survey. Conjoint experiments are particularly promising for translating the democratic systems approach into an operationalised method of enquiry for two reasons. The conjoint approach offers the possibility for respondents to choose between systems profiles with a large number of attributes that better capture complexity of the system, compared to Likert-scale surveys, where each item has to be independently rated by the respondent (see: Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014; Bansak et al. 2021). Take the actor dimension of the system for example, rather than simply asking about preferences for decision-makers, one can build systems profiles that represent the functional differentiation between different stages of the policy cycle enabling an investigation of which actors are preferred in which roles (Bertsou 2022). The second benefit of conjoint experiments is that choosing between competing complex alternatives better represents the real choices we face in relation to democratic reform than independently rating each aspect of the system abstracted from its other parts. Much of the literature researches support for a single process. It examines whether people support referendums, whether they support mini-publics, or whether they support participatory budgeting (e.g. Goldberg 2021; Landwehr and Harms 2019; Rojon, Rijken, and Klandermans 2019; van der Does and Kantorowicz 2022; Werner 2020). It treats each process as if it exists in a vacuum, as if there is only one possible democratic innovation, which we can either support or reject. Yet in real politics the question is not usually an absolute one, but a comparative one about which form of democratic innovation to adopt, so it is important to provide choices that reflect this.

► **WP3: Analysing the Ontology of Preferences: Contextuality, Conditionality and Coherence:** WP3 will deploy the 3Cs Framework with the objective of providing a new understanding of the nature of process preferences. It will empirically map the extent of contextuality, conditionality and coherence in process preferences. This is a fundamental break with the unidimensional conceptions of ontology that have underpinned process preferences research, largely following Converse's (1964) definition of political attitudes in terms of ideological coherence and viewing any responses that deviate from this as simply non-attitudes (as in: Bengtsson 2012; Hernández 2019). It also goes beyond unidimensional challenges to this approach, such as research on whether process preferences are intrinsic or instrumental (Landwehr and Leininger 2019), which corresponds to only a single dimension of the 3Cs Framework: *conditionality*. WP3 will instead use the 3Cs Framework to plot the nature of each individual's process preference in a three-dimensional space in order to systematically compare them. This will furnish an understanding of the average levels of contextuality, conditionality and coherence in preferences, and whether individuals vary substantially on these dimensions, thus whether there are ontologically different types of preferences.

*Primary Methods: Survey Experiments plus In-Depth Interviews:* WP3 will draw on the same conjoint experiments as WP2 but complement them with qualitative interviews. Some aspects of contextuality and conditionality can be examined directly through the conjoint experiments. It is possible, for example, to test for the extent of policy issue and governance level contextualities simply by including them as attributes of the conjoint profiles. Using the 3Cs Framework to inform the survey designs will ensure that these attributes are included and that other relevant variables for assessing contextualities and conditionalities are included in the survey design. Asking respondents for their process preferences on multiple policy issues allows the introduction of other variables to explore strategic and pragmatic conditionalities (Werner 2020). Issue-by-issue questions on perceived policy alignment with different decision-making actors can, for instance, be used to test whether individuals shift their process preferences based on what is most likely to realise their strategic policy goals on the respective issue (Dean 2023a). Analysis of intra-individual variability within the survey response can thus be used to map individuals within the three-dimensional space of the 3Cs Framework.

The surveys will be supplemented with 100 in-depth interviews that explore the reasoning behind respondents' survey choices. It is through this process that the unique dataset combining qualitative and quantitative data on the same person's preference will be created. Though this approach is uncommon in the process preference literature, it has a precedent in Jennifer Hochschild's (1981) pioneering study of ambivalence in American's views about redistributive justice, which I adopted in my previous work on political actors' views of participatory governance (Dean 2016). The in-depth interviews are essential for examining levels of coherence and ambivalence in process preferences, which are difficult to measure with survey responses alone. Survey responses provide the analyst with final choices, but there is no robust basis for judging whether that choice was a conflicted or not. So, whilst consistent responses may be viewed as a proxy for low ambivalence and high coherence, this needs further investigating. It is possible that consistent choices in surveys hide significant

ambivalence within those choices (Dean 2016). The inferential leap from inconsistent survey responses to ambivalence is even more tenuous. Inconsistent choices could be a result of strongly felt ambivalence or just because of indifference. This is the question is stake: whether inconsistent choices can be viewed as preferences at all and should not, as Converse (1964) tells us, be classified as non-attitudes. The interviews will thus be key in assessing the contention of the 3Cs Framework that ambivalence is an important and widespread aspect of process preferences that has been problematically neglected.

### **RISK AND FEASIBILITY**

The ambitious objectives and approach of PoPPiE are high risk. They involve the application of two new theories that have not previously been used for empirical research. These theories are more complex than the standard, models-based understanding of process preferences, making them more difficult to translate into survey instruments, and there is a risk that this can fail. The project plan of PoPPiE is deliberately designed to mitigate against this risk. First, WP1 ensures there is sufficient time allocated to work through problems of operationalisation. Second, the multiple strands of data collection, means that no single strand is integral to the overall success of the project – for example, failure in one experiment can be compensated for in the other two. Moreover, my track record of developing new theory and converting it into empirical research strategy (see Section B) demonstrates I have the capacity to deliver on this ambitious goal. A second risk is the challenge of integrating findings from the different types of quantitative and qualitative data. Nevertheless, I again believe I am the person to solve this problem. I am one of the few researchers in this subfield working with both qualitative and quantitative methods. I have shown I can flexibly respond to the challenges of integrating these different data types. The impetus for the 3Cs Framework, for instance, emerged from the challenge of reconciling the findings of a quantitative factor analysis and a qualitative discourse analysis that I conducted for my PhD thesis. I have since obtained two seed fund grants in support of this proposal that have enabled me to work through some of these potential issues: the *Is This What Democracy Looks Like?* project, funded by GRADE Social Sciences at Goethe University (8.000€), through which I developed the 3Cs Framework to guide operationalisation, and my *Democratic Connections* project, funded by the Johanna Quandt Young Academy (16.000€), through which I have run a pilot conjoint survey. I will therefore begin this project with a good understanding of the risks and several strategies for dealing with them.

### **REWARDS AND IMPACTS**

The rewards of PoPPiE will be worth these risks, since the potential impact is nothing less than a new conceptual, ontological and methodological foundation for researching political process preferences. WP2 will provide a wholly new conceptual understanding of preferences for complex democratic systems, rather than ideal, normative models of democracy. WP3 will be the first to systematically examine the ontology of process preferences on multiple dimensions, rather than assuming that there are just ideological preferences and non-preferences. WP1 will create new methodological instruments, used to produce a unique dataset with linked qualitative and quantitative data, both of which will be made freely available to the scientific community in accordance with practices of open science.

PoPPiE's impacts will go far beyond its benefits to the scientific community. The groundbreaking new approach will substantially sharpen and nuance the quality of our inferences about citizen support for democratic governance in ways that will be useful for politicians and civil society groups attempting to reform democratic practice to address growing dissatisfaction and authoritarian drift. The democratic systems framework will provide a much more realistic picture of how citizens appraise the complex trade-offs that are an inescapable feature of democratic governance. Insights into contextuality and conditionality will enable more fine-grained targeting of democratic innovations to the contexts where there is demand for them, increasing their likelihood of success. A better understanding of coherence and ambivalence will provide information that enables an assessment of how to build cross-cutting coalitions of support for democratic reforms. In summary, the aim of this project is not only to strengthen the foundations of the science of political process preferences, but also to ensure that its findings can be used to renew European democracies.