

People-Centered or Elite-Centered Democrats?

Legislators' process preferences in the United States and Germany

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Abstract

In the face of populist challenges, citizens' conceptions of democracy and process preferences are increasingly studied, assuming that democracy's resilience will depend on citizen support. However, political elites' attitudes and behavior are just as relevant. Elites were long assumed to lean towards elite-centered, 'institutional' democracy. Recent developments such as the rise of populism and polarization suggest a different trend, as politicians themselves seem to be losing trust in institutions. We explore the actual distribution of legislator preferences in the process space today based on novel data from the US and Germany, offering a comparative perspective. We measure process preferences on a continuum ranging from people-centered to elite-centered democracy. Our findings demonstrate that legislators in Germany are normally distributed on this continuum, while legislators in the more polarized United States lean towards people-centered process preferences. Within both countries, control of government, seniority and electoral safety are important determinants of process preferences.

1. Introduction

What does democracy require? Government 'by the people' can be implemented in many ways.

While some propose that democracy should be people-centered, with citizens having a direct say in specific decisions made by their government, others believe that citizens are best served by leaving political decisions to political elites, with less input from the broader population.

Although a growing literature studies citizens' process preferences over how democratic decisions are made, much less is known about how elected officials view democracy and their own role in it. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argued that citizens perceive representatives as holding more 'institutional' conceptions of democracy which are at odds with citizens' preference for more 'direct' democracy (2002: 47), but we do not know whether this perception is a fair one. Moreover, the rise of populist parties and candidates across many liberal democracies is likely to be reflected in legislators' views of the institutions of representative democracy.

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This paper leverages data from two recent surveys of state and federal legislators in Germany and the United States to explore how elected officials in both countries view democratic institutions. Given that the challenges of gathering data from elite samples have left us with very limited information about this important group's perspective on democratic governance, our surveys help fill a significant research gap. While existing studies consider political elites' attitudes toward democracy most often in individual countries or regions, the transatlantic perspective remains underexplored. In light of recent developments in the United States under Donald Trump's second administration, a comparison between political elites in the US and Germany, Europe's largest democracy, seems timelier than ever. Institutionally, there are similarities as well as differences between the two countries. Similarities include the federal organization of the state and bicameral legislature that necessitate cross-party elite deliberation and compromise, as well as the strong tradition of judicial review. Differences exist with regard to the electoral system and relationship between executive and legislature, with Germany being a parliamentary and the US a presidential democracy. The most important difference, however, concerns expert ratings of regime quality: Whereas Germany's 2025 snap elections resulted in a peaceful transition of power and a centrist "grand coalition" government, the United States has, under Trump's second presidency, come to be described as a regime of "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky and Way 2002) and has been re-classified as a non-democracy by the prestigious POLITY index.¹ While our data were collected before the 2024 US and 2025 German national elections, they enable us to consider whether and how recent events were foreshadowed in the way political elites in both countries viewed democracy in recent years.

Accordingly, we explore legislators' views of democracy by introducing a new measure of process preferences, showing how legislators in the United States and Germany align on our scale and identifying determinants of 'people-centered' vs. 'elite-centered' preferences among legislators. How legislators conceive of democracy seems relevant for regime stability, for the outcomes of government and for the way the public views government. With regard to the resilience of the democratic regime, legislators' trust in and willingness to defend democratic institutions is clearly essential. In addition, the outcomes of government will likely vary depending on whether legislators believe they should focus on responding to the public or to the views of those within government. A higher priority on responsiveness to the public may result in more frequent and wider swings in policy outcomes as policy is made to reflect public shifts in

preferences or even increase elites' antidemocratic policies and actions supported by a polarized public (Svolik 2019). Finally, the way in which legislators approach policy-making also has important implications for how the public views government. Especially in the US, public approval of the government and individuals' willingness to abide by election results and government outcomes they dislike seem to be diminishing. This could be due to a mismatch of process preferences between legislators and the public, or to a sense that the government is elite-centered and insufficiently attentive to what the public prefers. At the same time, if attentiveness to public preferences yields inferior policy-making, this too may produce dissatisfaction among the public, declining trust in government, and anti-incumbent sentiment.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature and spells out our theoretical expectations and hypotheses. Section 3 describes the legislator surveys we draw on, and the methods used to study these data. Section 4 presents our results: We find that while German legislators are distributed normally on the continuum from elite- to people-centered democracy, US legislators lean toward people-centered democracy. Despite their different national contexts and different positions on the elite- to people-centered democracy scale, we also find that US and German legislators' attitudes toward democracy are shaped by similar factors. Specifically, these attitudes are largely driven by structural political context variables, such as control of government, seniority, and electoral safety.

2. Theory and State of the Art

Hanna Pitkin famously defined representation as 'acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them' (Pitkin 1967: 209). She argues that a representative's actions should not be at odds with those of the represented, unless the representative has a good reason and explanation for it. Building on this argument, literature on policy responsiveness established high congruence between citizen preferences and government policies as a key indicator for democratic quality. This claim is not limited to the policy space but can also be extended to procedural questions: Citizens have different expectations with regard to the institutionalization of democracy and expect their leaders and representatives to mirror these preferences and to act accordingly. When citizens prefer to be governed under one set of procedures - such as having access to referendums allowing direct policy-making by citizens - while elites prefer a different system - such as one in which elected officials make policy based on party plans regardless of

the level of citizen support - a procedural preference gap arises. Because day-to-day governance generally occurs without direct citizen involvement, procedural preference gaps can easily produce governance processes more in line with elite than citizen preferences. Just like a substantive gap in policy preferences, a gap in ‘process preferences’ over decision-making procedures between citizens and political elites has the potential to decrease citizens’ satisfaction with democracy and therefore poses a threat to the political system (André and Depauw 2017).

The process preference gap was perhaps most prominently discussed by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse in their 2002 book on ‘Stealth Democracy’. In the book, they also examine the difference between ‘institutional democrats’, ascribing all political power to elected politicians, and ‘direct democrats’, who prefer ordinary citizens to be in charge. They treat these categories as two opposing poles of a continuous scale, allowing for more nuanced process preferences (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002: 43). Their findings demonstrate that US citizens’ attitudes form a normal distribution, with most people preferring a balanced distribution of political power. However, respondents perceive both political parties and the functioning of the government in general to lean heavily toward the institutional side of the spectrum, creating a gap between citizens and elites in the process space (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002: 45-48).

It remains questionable whether these findings were only a snapshot of public opinion or more universally valid, especially considering trends in public opinion since the publication of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse’s book more than 20 years ago. On the one hand, citizens still appear to be broadly supportive of elite-centered and technocratic ideas, summarized under the umbrella term of ‘stealth democracy’ (for example Bloeser et al. 2022; Hibbing et al. 2023). On the other hand, citizens in the US as well as in Europe seem to be strongly people-centered when confronted with the aforementioned distinction between ordinary citizens and elected leaders. This can be observed with regard to various indicators, such as a clear preference for the voter delegate style of representation (for example Bengtsson and Wass 2011; Carman 2006) or procedural preferences for direct democracy (for example Donovan and Karp 2006).

Given these developments, it is necessary to get an updated view of where legislators stand on these issues and, more importantly, to look at the actual positions of legislators rather than citizens’ perceptions of them. Unfortunately, existing research rarely studies legislators’ process preferences in such a broad, comprehensive sense, but mostly focuses on specific aspects and indicators.

One big strand of research established by the seminal works of Eulau et al. (1959) and Miller and Stokes (1963) is centered around representational roles and styles of representation, usually distinguishing between *elite-centered* trustees, *people-centered* voter delegates, and party delegates. While a study by von Schoultz and Wass (2016) comparing citizens and political candidates in Finland shows that their preferences are surprisingly well aligned in that regard, a more recent contribution by Mongrain et al. (2024) comparing citizens and legislators in 13 countries shows legislators to be much more elite-centered than citizens. Other recent comparative studies give some insights into country differences and the effects of different institutional context conditions. Multiple studies report barely any voter delegates in Germany (Dudzińska et al. 2014; Önnudóttir 2016), indicating little people-centrism and a stronger lean toward elite-centered democracy. The comparative analyses also suggest that national legislators are less people-centered than regional legislators (Dudzińska et al. 2014), that control of government decreases people-centrism (Mongrain et al. 2024; Önnudóttir 2016), and that legislative experience increases a preference for elite-centered democracy (Önnudóttir and von Schoultz 2021). Earlier studies also report a clear ideological split, with more conservative legislators being the least people-centered (Damgaard 1997), although this is not confirmed by more recent contributions (for example Önnudóttir 2016).

Arguably, the rise of right-wing populism in both the US and Europe might have blurred this correlation. Generally, populist attitudes are empirically linked to a preference for direct democratic, and thus more people-centered, procedures among the citizenry (for example Mohrenberg et al. 2021; Zaslove and Meijers 2024). In fact, feeling ‘left behind’ and not represented by political elites increases populist attitudes among citizens (Castanho Silva and Wratil 2023; Habersack and Wegscheider 2024; Huber et al. 2023), which suggests that more elite-centered process preferences of political elites could cause societal grievances and thus feed into the increase of populist attitudes observed in recent years. In terms of populist political elites’ support for direct democracy and people-centrism, a study comparing citizens’ and political candidates’ attitudes in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand finds that right-wing candidates have a stronger preference for direct democracy than candidates of other parties, but supporters of right-wing populist parties are not more likely to favor referendums than supporters of other parties (Bowler et al. 2017). Furthermore, a study of Flemish local politicians’ support

for citizen participation shows both progressive and right-wing populist politicians to be more people-centered (Caluwaerts et al. 2020).

Another strand of research focuses on specific procedural preferences of legislators with regard to direct democracy or democratic innovations more broadly. Bowler et al. (2002) show that US legislators have a quite favorable opinion of direct democracy in general but are not supportive of binding initiatives. In line with some of the studies mentioned above, their results also indicate that control of government and seniority increase a lean toward elite-centered democracy. Similarly, two studies on the Swedish case show legislators in the parliamentary majority to be less supportive of referendums across parties (Gilljam and Karlsson 2015) and to be less supportive of citizen protests (Gilljam et al. 2012). A recent comparative study of 14 European countries looks at support for referendums and deliberative events, finding that legislators from opposition parties are significantly more supportive of democratic innovations (Gherghina et al. 2023). Junius et al. (2020) use the same dataset to show a similar opposition effect as well as an effect of electoral safety decreasing support for referendums.

In sum, the literature on legislators' understandings of democracy predominantly focuses either on their understandings of their own role or their support for specific democratic innovations. Moreover, existing studies on US legislators mostly date back over 20 years, while studies of German legislators are often based on small sample sizes. Our study aims to close these research gaps and expand on existing research by analyzing legislators' process preferences on the basis of new surveys of German and US legislators. Using a continuous scale between people-centered and elite-centered understandings of democracy, we can explore both the distribution of preferences and determinants of them.

Context conditions and case selection

While most existing studies look at single countries or compare only European countries, we adopt a transatlantic comparative perspective and look at the United States and Germany. In doing so, we can, on the one hand, compare two cases in which political polarization and societal conflict have occurred in recent years and assess whether this has resulted in similar orientations towards democracy among legislators. On the other hand, the United States and Germany differ in their institutionalization of democracy along several lines. By comparing the two cases, we

can both test hypotheses on contextual effects and gain information on whether similar factors shape legislators' process preferences in different contexts.

Regarding institutional differences between the two countries, the different electoral systems and their consequences for the party system stand out as particularly relevant for our analysis. Whereas the US system is plurality-based (first-past-the-post), Germany uses mixed-member proportional representation. In the US, the electoral system has created a party system dominated by two major parties. Government both at the state and federal level is typically controlled by a single party. In Germany, proportional representation resulted in a multi-party system that at present necessitates coalition governments in all but one state and on the federal level.

Another potentially relevant difference concerns the nominations of candidates. In the US, the introduction of open primaries has given party supporters a significant role in the nomination process, which contributed to the rise of more extreme and polarizing candidates (see Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018). In Germany, by contrast, candidate selection processes are still largely controlled by party elites.

Theoretical expectations and hypotheses

If we do find differences in legislators' process preferences both within and between the two countries, how can we explain these differences? This is the core research question behind our analyses. We define 'process preferences' broadly, seeking to capture attitudinal patterns that connect normative ideas about the role of citizens and their representatives in a democracy with support for democratic legacy institutions or democratic innovations. Generally, process preferences can be driven by instrumental or intrinsic motives (see Landwehr and Harms 2020). However, intrinsic motives, such as ideological convictions or moral principles guiding design preferences, are relatively more idiosyncratic and difficult to isolate. Moreover, compared to citizens, legislators may be expected to have much stronger material interests in institutional design choices, given that their careers and economic security depend on them. We thus expect a tendency among legislators to prefer processes and institutions that benefit their own interests in reelection and in the control of power and resources and focus our hypotheses on measuring the effects of these instrumental interests rather than politicians' intrinsic motives.

With regard to our dependent variable, we therefore expect legislators from parties that have better access to power and resources to hold more elite-centered process preferences. At the

individual level, we similarly expect legislators with more power and resources (such as seniority and electoral safety) to hold more elite-centered preferences. Finally, we expect instrumental process preferences to be at least partially dependent on the different institutional context conditions of the two countries. The exact causal pathways linking individual legislators' values, experiences and expectations to their process preferences will be difficult to identify. However, it seems plausible that a combination of strategic considerations, socialization among peers and rationalization processes results in an alignment between instrumental motives and process preferences.

From these general theoretical considerations and specific findings in existing research, we derive a set of more specific hypotheses. First, consistent with most comparative studies of elite process preferences, we expect differences between Germany and the US to yield different process preferences by country and by party. Government power in Germany is held more consistently by the same parties in coalitions over time and across levels of government. In the US, shifts in which party controls both houses of Congress and the presidency occur regularly and divided party control of government is common. Research indicates that control of government decreases people-centrism (Mongrain et al. 2024; Önnudóttir 2016; Bowler et al. 2002) while legislators outside power are more likely to support people-centered processes like referendums (Gherghina et al. 2023). Legislators from both parties in the US are likely to spend some time out of power due to shifts in legislative party control or divided control of the legislative and executive branches. Moreover, US legislators in minority parties have no hope of accessing power through coalition governments. Accordingly, we expect German legislators to be more inclined to protect institutional power by holding elite-centered orientations and US legislators to be more people-centered. This also corresponds to research on differences in representational roles, which shows that German legislators have more elite-centered styles of representation than those in many other European democracies (Dudzińska et al. 2014; Önnudóttir 2016).

H1: Legislators in Germany will favor elite-centered democracy more than legislators in the United States.

Looking beyond country-level differences, a legislator's status is likely to affect their support for existing institutions and procedures. Longer-serving legislators who have been re-elected multiple times have extensively benefited from the procedural status quo. Their

experience of exercising legislative power will contribute to a more elite-centered view of democracy. Legislators at the federal level generally derive a higher social status from their office and tend to exercise more power than state legislators. Accordingly, existing research found both senior legislators (Bowler et al. 2002; Önnudóttir and von Schoultz 2021) and federal legislators (Dudzińska et al. 2014) to be more elite-centered than their counterparts. In addition, previous research points to a socialization effect that should make legislators more supportive of the existing institutions and decision-making procedures the longer they take part in them (see for example Önnudóttir and von Schoultz 2021). In line with these findings, legislators' experience that law-making requires some degree of discussion and compromise within and across parties helps them consider factors other than the immediate demands of their voters and could therefore incline them away from people-centered democracy.

H2a: Longer-serving legislators will favor elite-centered democracy more than shorter-serving legislators.

H2b: Legislators on the federal level will favor elite-centered democracy more than legislators on the state level.²

Additionally, there are instrumental motivations for legislators in control of government to protect the institution's power rather than distributing it to the public more broadly. Accordingly, multiple studies found legislators in the legislative majority or government coalition to be more elite-centered than their colleagues from the opposition (Bowler et al. 2002; Gherghina et al. 2023; Gilljam et al. 2012; Gilljam and Karlsson 2015; Junius et al. 2020; Mongrain et al. 2024; Önnudóttir 2016). This mechanism could also have an anticipatory component: If legislators believe their position in an institution to be more secure, and expect to serve for a longer time, they have incentives to protect that institution's power, and this too should promote a more elite-centered than people-centered view of democracy. While a legislator worried about losing power in the next election may need to focus more intensively on what voters want, a legislator who is very likely to maintain power can distance themselves more easily from the immediate whims of voters. Existing research on this is less clear, but there is some initial evidence that electoral vulnerability could play a role here (for example Junius et al. 2020). Similarly, previous research has shown electoral winners to be more supportive of the institutional status quo (Bowler et al. 2006). In sum, the closer legislators are to the center of power and the more secure they feel in this position, the more supportive of elite-centered

democracy rather than people-centered democracy we can expect them to be. This leads us to two more hypotheses regarding the structural political context of legislators.

H2c: Legislators who are part of the legislative majority or whose party controls government will favor elite-centered democracy more than legislators whose party is out of power.

*H2d: Legislators who view their party as electorally secure in their area will favor elite-centered democracy more than legislators who perceive their party as less electorally secure.*³

Beyond instrumental motivations and structural factors, individual legislators' social identities may also shape their orientation toward democracy. Particularly, partisan-based and ideological polarization have been found to structure social identity and attitudes towards democracy in the US (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Iyengar et al. 2012; Kingzette et al. 2021) and in Germany and other multi-party systems (for example Helbling and Jungkunz 2020; Wagner 2021). Partisan-based or affective polarization comprises positive feelings towards the in-group, a particular party and its supporters, as well as negative feelings towards the out-group, opposing parties and their supporters (Iyengar et al. 2012: 407). Trust in members of other parties, as an indicator of negative out-group affect, should have an influence on a legislator's willingness to entrust power in the institutions of government rather than the public. Thus, we expect that higher trust is associated with more elite-centered orientations toward democracy.

H3: Legislators who have more trust in members of other parties will favor elite-centered democracy more than legislators with little trust in other parties.

Finally, although our theory focuses on how instrumental motivations shape politicians' process preferences, we recognize that normative considerations based on ideological convictions could also have an effect on attitudes toward democracy and its institutions. Historically, research has found that ideological conservatism is associated with a more elite-centered view of democracy (Damgaard 1997). As right-wing populism has strengthened in both Europe and the US in recent years, research shows that right-wing populist political candidates are more people-centered than candidates from other parties (Bowler et al. 2017). However, progressive and more left-wing legislators also appear more people-centered (Caluwaerts et al. 2020). We therefore include variables measuring economic and cultural ideology in our models in order to update research on this relationship but have no explicit hypothesis regarding their effect.

3. Data and Method

We explore legislators' preferences using two online surveys conducted in 2022 among German legislators and in 2023 among US legislators. The two surveys were largely identical, although the US survey included some additional attitudinal items. We invited all German state and federal legislators as well as all state legislators in the United States to participate in the survey. The responses include 492 German state and federal legislators from all 16 German states (response rate: 20.4%) and 361 US state legislators from all US states except California and Louisiana (response rate: 5.6%). The German respondents are quite representative across relevant socio-demographic and political variables such as party, gender and age, but federal representatives as well as certain states are underrepresented. We apply post-stratification weights based on party, gender, and parliament for the German subsample. The US respondents deviate somewhat more from the population of all state legislators, particularly due to the tendency of Democrats and women to respond to surveys at higher rates than Republicans and men. The partisan deviation is also associated with regional distortions like the underrepresentation of Southern legislators. To manage this, we apply post-stratification weights for this subsample based on party, chamber, region, and gender. More detailed information about the representativeness of the two samples is reported in Tables A1 and A2 in the Appendix.

In contrast to Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's early approach to capturing preferences for more 'direct' or more 'institutional' democracy with a single item asking whether 'ordinary people like you and me' or 'elected officials' should make political decisions (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002: 43), we seek to provide a more nuanced measurement by drawing on a scale composed of eight items (see Table 1). The items are intended to capture elite-centric preferences for responsible over responsive government (Donovan and Bowler 1998) as well as people-centric preferences for majoritarian decision-making and direct involvement of citizens in legislation. Given that existing representative institutions arguably have an elite-centric bias, we also include an item measuring status-quo preferences asking whether respondents think that existing rules and procedures should not be contested. We expect response patterns to these items to reveal process preferences along a single dimension ranging from maximally people-centered (no elites, majoritarianism, legislation by citizens themselves) to maximally elite-centered (legislators as independent trustees, maintenance of status quo, no direct citizen participation). In our survey, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with each of the

eight items shown in Table 1 on a seven-point scale. Results from factor analyses and Cronbach's alpha scores are presented in the analysis section. To test Hypothesis 1 regarding differences between US and German legislators, we draw on descriptive results for the constructed index.

TABLE 1
OVERVIEW OF ITEMS IN OUR INDEX MEASURING PEOPLE-CENTERED VS. ELITE-CENTERED ATTITUDES

Statement	Germany		United States	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Legislators should follow their conscience, even if a majority of voters happens to have a different opinion.	5.81	1.34	4.78	1.58
Sometimes it is better when political decisions are made behind closed doors.	3.86	1.90	2.96	1.76
The government should stick to planned policies, even if a majority of citizens opposes them.	4.31	1.61	2.76	1.41
Existing democratic rules and procedures should not be contested.	4.65	1.92	3.22	1.56
In a democracy, there should be no elites.	4.28	2.03	5.41	1.82
If a large majority of citizens agree, this indicates that the decision is correct.	3.35	1.51	2.95	1.52
There should be opportunities for citizens to have a direct say on important political matters in referendums.	4.90	1.86	5.22	1.75
There should be opportunities for citizens to express their opinions in deliberative citizen forums.	5.37	1.57	6.27	1.07

We include several explanatory variables to test the remaining hypotheses, which are reported in Table 2. For Hypothesis 2a, we include a binary variable measuring whether the legislator was newly elected in 2021 or later to differentiate between shorter-serving and longer-serving legislators. Due to data constraints, Hypothesis 2b can only be tested for the German sample. We include a binary measure indicating whether legislators are serving on the state or federal level in the German models. For Hypothesis 2c, we include a binary measure of whether a legislator is a member of the majority party or coalition for both samples. Hypothesis 2d on the perceived seat safety of legislators can only be tested for the US sample due to data constraints. We measure perceived seat safety with the question ‘About what percentage of political offices in your area are considered “safe” or very certain your party will win?’. The answer categories are (1) 0-39%, (2) 40-60%, (3) 61-100%. Lastly, trust in other parties, the independent variable for Hypothesis 3, is measured for both German and US legislators using the question ‘How much of the time do you think you can trust members of the other party to do what is right for the

country?’, with a seven-point answer scale from (1) Almost never to (7) Almost always. We include gender, age, education, and self-reported ideology of the legislators on two dimensions as control variables. The question text for ideology can be found in the appendix (A3). For effect comparability, all continuous variables such as trust in other parties or the ideology measurements were standardized to reach from 0 to 1.

TABLE 2
OVERVIEW OF EXPLANATORY AND CONTROL VARIABLES

Variable	Available for	Observations	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Newly elected (since 2021)	Full sample	844	.379	.485	0	1
Majority party/coalition		847	.588	.492	0	1
Trust in other parties		753	.462	.243	0	1
Male		795	.644	.479	0	1
Age (55 or older)		771	.492	.500	0	1
Education		732	1.093	.682	0	2
Economic dimension		743	.475	.298	0	1
Cultural dimension	Germany	740	.387	.343	0	1
Federal level		490	.171	.377	0	1
Perceived seat safety	US	302	2.397	.739	1	3

Note: Source: Own data.

To test our hypotheses, we calculate multiple OLS regression models with our measurement of process preferences for people-centered or elite-centered democracy as the dependent variable. Since not all variables are available or applicable in both subsamples, and to capture any opposing effects of our measures across the distinct national contexts we study, we estimate separate models for US and German data. For robustness, we present multiple specifications for the hypothesis tests. We estimate three OLS models per country, one including only the expected predictor variables, a second one adding control variables, and a third one adding party affiliation. Model diagnostics for all six models are reported in the appendix (A4-A6).

4. Analysis: Predictors of People-centered and Elite-centered Democracy Preferences

To generate a measure of legislators’ position on the continuum between people-centered and elite-centered democracy, we first run an exploratory factor analysis for eight individual items designed to capture process preferences. This results in a single factor with an Eigenvalue above 1. As Table 3 shows, the four items expressing more elite-centered attitudes have sizable

positive loadings. The anti-elitism item and the items in support of citizen-centered democratic innovations have clear negative loadings on the factor. The item expressing a majoritarian sentiment leans in the negative direction as well, if a bit less strongly.

TABLE 3
RESULTS OF THE EXPLORATORY FACTOR ANALYSIS

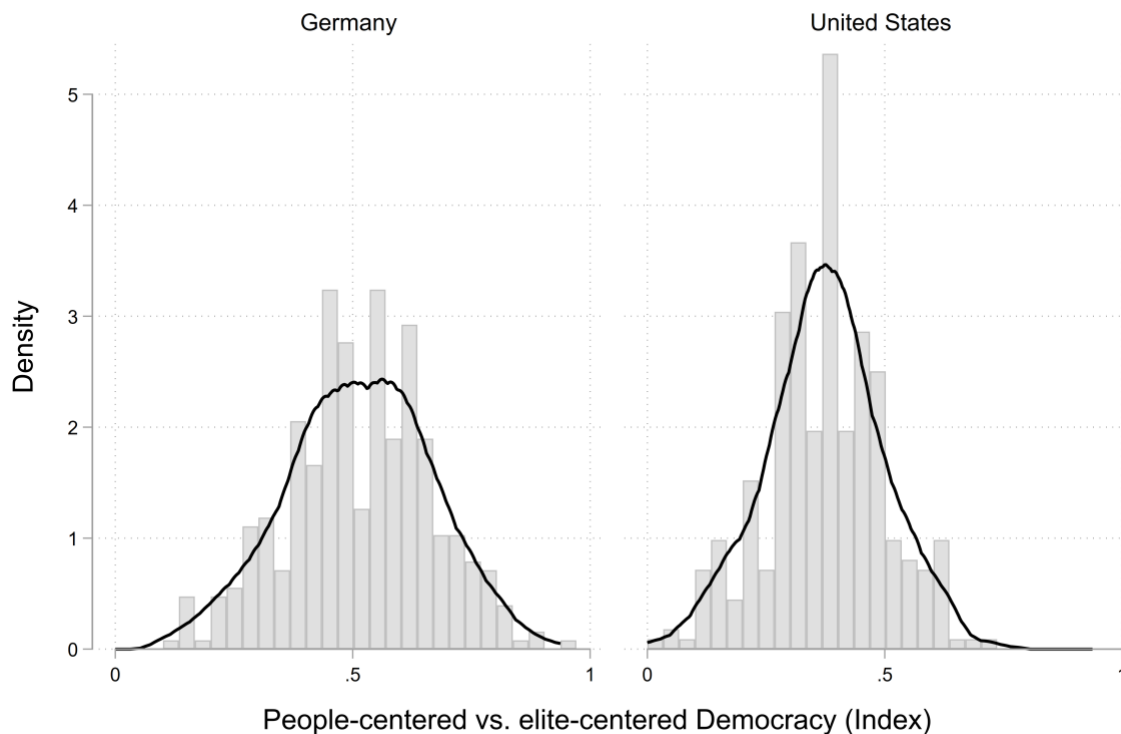
Statement (shortened)	Factor 1	Uniqueness
Legislators should follow their conscience	0.433	0.812
Political decisions behind closed doors	0.525	0.725
Government should stick to planned policies	0.584	0.659
Existing democratic rules should not be contested	0.416	0.827
There should be no elites	-0.466	0.783
Large majority indicates correct decision	-0.170	0.971
Citizens should have a direct say in referendums	-0.484	0.766
Citizens should have opportunity of deliberative citizen forums	-0.466	0.783
<i>Eigenvalue</i>	1.674	

Note: Results of a factor analysis only retaining factors with a minimum eigenvalue of 1. Source: Own data.

In order to increase comparability and reproducibility in future research, we proceed by using a simple index including all eight items, which reaches a Cronbach's alpha of 0.65. We reverse the four items with negative loadings, calculate the mean agreement for each respondent across the eight items and rescale the resulting index to a range from 0 to 1.⁴

We begin by investigating the differences between US and German legislators as specified in the first hypothesis. The descriptive distribution of state legislators on this continuum in both countries, presented in Figure 1, provides evidence in favor of Hypothesis 1, with German legislators holding more elite- and US legislators more people-centered process preferences. Contrary to the citizen perception reported by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse back in 2002, legislators in neither country show a strong lean towards elite-centered democracy. While German state legislators show an almost normal distribution of preferences centered in the middle of the scale, we show that US legislators actually lean strongly towards the *people-centered* side of the index.

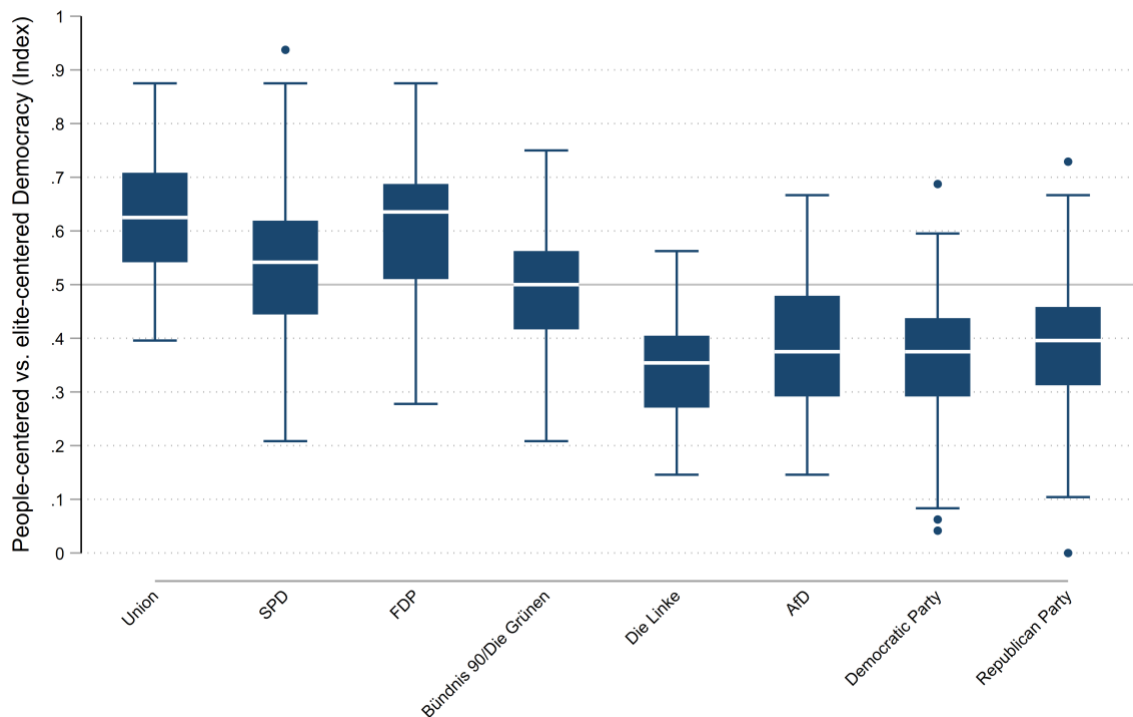
FIGURE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF STATE LEGISLATORS BY COUNTRY



Note: Histogram with a kernel density estimate showing the distribution of legislators on the index ranging from people-centered democracy (0) to elite-centered democracy (1); Source: Own data. For comparability, we exclude the German federal legislators in this figure. However, including them reveals a similar pattern.

The difference in the distribution of preferences between German and US legislators is stark. While German legislators are centered around the mid-point of our scale, very few US legislators even approach that midpoint, and only a small percentage (12.5%) place themselves on the elite-centered side of the scale. Instead, US legislators seem to have established themselves as advocates for people-centered democracy. While the size of the difference revealed in our data was surprising, it is consistent with our argument that stronger polarization and arguably more intense power struggles between the parties in the US would push US legislators away from supporting elite-centered democracy.

FIGURE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF LEGISLATORS BY PARTY



Note: Boxplot showing the distribution of legislators by party on the index ranging from people-centered democracy (0) to elite-centered democracy (1); Source: Own data.

It is possible that these differences between Germany and the US are caused by the dominant parties within each country. To determine if this is the case, we look at the distribution by party as shown in Figure 2. It demonstrates that there is a certain level of disagreement between the German parties with the center-right parties CDU/CSU and FDP leaning clearly toward elite-centered democracy, the established center-left parties SPD and the Greens centered around the midpoint of the index, and the ideologically extreme parties on the right (AfD) and on the left (Die Linke) of the political spectrum leaning strongly toward people-centered democracy. In the US, on the other hand, there appears to be unity across the political spectrum with both parties established firmly on the people-centered side of our scale. Moreover, both the Democratic and Republican parties in the US are as people-centered in their orientation toward democracy as the parties on the two ends of the ideological spectrum in Germany.

Despite these clear tendencies for each party, there are wide and overlapping ranges of preferences, even for parties that are ideologically quite different from one another. This indicates that while party affiliation may partially explain the people-centered or elite-centered

leanings of legislators, it is not the only factor that matters. To investigate determinants of elites' process preferences, as specified in Hypotheses 2a-d and Hypothesis 3, we run separate OLS regression models for the US and Germany. Table 4 reports the results of three OLS regression models for the US subsample. We estimate the effects of seniority (H2a), majority status and government control (H2c), electoral security (H2d) and trust in representatives from other parties (H3) on legislators' orientations toward elite-centered (rather than people-centered) democracy. Regarding our main predictor variables, our results confirm the importance of instrumental motives, and in particular, of majority status and proximity to power, in shaping legislators' attitudes to democracy. First, we find that being newly elected results in more people-centered views of democracy among legislators, providing support for the effect of seniority as formulated in Hypothesis 2a. Being in the legislative majority significantly increases a lean toward elite-centered democracy, thus confirming Hypothesis 2c. In line with Hypothesis 2d, perceiving most of the seats in the area to be safe for one's party has an even larger, significant effect on legislators' preference for elite-centered democracy. . Surprisingly, we do not find any effect of trust in the other party on process preferences and therefore reject Hypothesis 3 for the US case. Including the control variables barely impacts our core results (Model 2), and including party affiliation similarly has little impact (Model 3), which is in line with our descriptive findings for both US parties. Table A7 in the Appendix reports models including a measure for legislative professionalism (Squire 2024), showing that it has no effect on legislators' process preferences, while the effects of our explanatory variables remain stable.

TABLE 4**PREDICTORS OF A PREFERENCE FOR ELITE-CENTERED DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES**

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Newly elected (since 2021)	-0.03 ⁺ (0.02)	-0.03* (0.02)	-0.03* (0.02)
Majority party/coalition	0.04* (0.02)	0.05** (0.02)	0.05** (0.02)
<i>Perceived seat safety (Ref.: 0-39%)</i>			
40-60%	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
61-100%	0.09*** (0.02)	0.08** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)
Trust in other parties	0.00 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Male		0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
55 or older		-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
<i>Education (Ref.: no college degree)</i>			
College degree		0.07* (0.03)	0.07* (0.03)
Post-graduate degree		0.06* (0.03)	0.06* (0.03)
Economic dimension (Conservative)		-0.08 ⁺ (0.05)	-0.09 (0.06)
Cultural dimension (Conservative)		0.05 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)
Republican Party			0.01 (0.03)
Constant	0.31*** (0.02)	0.27*** (0.03)	0.27*** (0.04)
Observations	298	293	292
Adjusted R ²	0.11	0.14	0.14

Note: OLS models; Standard errors in parentheses; ⁺ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; All variables range from 0 to 1; High values on the economic and cultural dimension indicate a conservative/right-wing position; Weighted by party, gender, house, and region; Source: Own data.

Table 5 presents the results for the German subsample in three similar models. Here we see a much bigger difference between the models and, looking at the adjusted R², a significant portion of the variance in legislators' elite- or people-centered democratic attitudes appears to be explained by party affiliation. This is consistent with our descriptive results.

TABLE 5
PREDICTORS OF A PREFERENCE FOR ELITE-CENTERED DEMOCRACY IN GERMANY

	(4)	(5)	(6)
Newly elected (since 2021)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.03* (0.02)
Federal level	0.03 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)
Majority party/coalition	0.06*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)
Trust in other parties	0.14*** (0.04)	0.13*** (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)
Male		0.04* (0.02)	0.05** (0.02)
55 or older		-0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
<i>Education (Ref.: no university degree)</i>			
University degree		0.02 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)
Doctor's degree		0.05+ (0.03)	0.04+ (0.02)
Economic dimension (Right)		0.18*** (0.04)	0.04 (0.05)
Cultural dimension (Conservative)		-0.03 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)
<i>Party (Ref.: CDU/CSU)</i>			
SPD			-0.08** (0.03)
FDP			0.01 (0.03)
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen			-0.11*** (0.03)
Die Linke			-0.27*** (0.04)
AfD			-0.25*** (0.03)
Constant	0.43*** (0.02)	0.30*** (0.03)	0.55*** (0.05)
Observations	425	386	376
Adjusted R ²	0.10	0.22	0.44

Note: OLS models; Standard errors in parentheses; + $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; All variables range from 0 to 1. High values on the economic and cultural dimension indicate a conservative/right-wing position; Weighted by party, gender and parliament; Source: Own data.

Our findings among German legislators, like those among US legislators, indicate that instrumental motives and proximity to power are important determinants of legislators' orientations toward democracy. While we do not see an effect of being newly elected and being a

federal (rather than state) legislator in Models 4 and 5, after controlling for party (Model 6), we do see the effects expected in Hypothesis 2a and Hypothesis 2b for Germany: Federal legislators appear to lean more towards elite-centered democracy, while newly elected legislators lean more towards people-centered democracy. With regard to the effect of being in the majority coalition, as specified in Hypothesis 2c, Models 4 and 5 reveal a strong and highly significant effect of being part of the majority coalition toward a more elite-centered democracy preference, thus confirming the hypothesis. This coefficient is smaller in Model 6, which controls for legislators' party affiliations, but it is remarkable that it remains significant at all given the collinearity between being in the opposition and party affiliation (as the AfD is the most people-centered party in Germany and exclusively sits in the opposition). Trust in other parties – understood as an indicator of low affective polarization – has a strong and highly significant effect towards the elite-centered view in Models 4 and 5, but this effect disappears entirely when controlling for party affiliation (Model 6). Given that the effect seen in Models 4 and 5 seems to be mainly driven by the low trust of AfD legislators, we have to reject Hypothesis 3 for the German case as well. With regard to party affiliation, there are strong and highly significant effects confirming our descriptive results, with legislators of the AfD and Die Linke (The Left) being the most people-centered, while the legislators of the center-right CDU/CSU and FDP have the highest preference for elite-centered democracy. Results from a model including only German *state* legislators for comparability with our US sample which contains only US state legislators are available in the appendix (Table A8) and confirm our primary findings.⁵

5. Discussion and Conclusion

How do political elites, and legislators in particular, view democracy? Do they prefer elite-centered or people-centered decision-making processes? Do legislators' process preferences differ between countries, and what factors determine their positions? In this paper, we answer these questions by drawing on original data from elites in the US and Germany, gathered *recently* to reflect the influence of trends such as the rise of populism, gathered *directly from legislators* to identify their attitudes rather than citizens' perceptions of these attitudes, and measured *on an original scale* that identifies legislators' process preferences using a wider set of survey items than typically present in existing literature. Existing comparative studies of elite attitudes toward democratic process preferences focus largely on European nations and almost never include the US (though see Bowler et al. 2002). Many of them draw on prominent

comparative datasets from 2007-2012, thus focusing on an earlier political and social context (though see Mongrain et al. 2024). While these foundational studies have provided essential findings on which we draw, they leave open many questions about how legislators view the proper functioning of democracy in the present context and whether theories predicting these attitudes hold across disparate, transatlantic settings.

Our findings reveal that the factors shaping legislators' views about democratic processes are remarkably similar even across very different national contexts, electoral systems, and party systems, demonstrating the utility of our theory on how democratic process preferences develop among governing elites. Yet, we also find that the orientations legislators hold toward democracy – their leanings toward or away from people-centered democratic processes – differ cross-nationally because of how the factors we examine vary in different national contexts. Even though legislators in Germany and the US, and many other nations, are facing similar trends such as the rise of populism and polarization, their beliefs about how democracy should function are not responding to these trends in identical ways. Indeed, our findings can be helpful to predict different outcomes across legislators who face different structural contexts. For example, we reveal that while people-centered democratic preferences are strong only among the most right- and left-leaning parties in Germany and German legislators overall remain more balanced in their position on the elite- to people-centered democracy scale, US legislators from both major political parties express a more people-centered than elite-centered view of democracy.

Why do legislators in Germany and the US differ in their orientations? Recent research in several western democracies including Germany found that legislators' characteristics and ideology do not predict their preferences for citizen- vs. elite-driven governance (Mongrain et al. 2024). In this study we turned, instead, to predicting legislators' orientations using *structural* variables. We argued that process preferences are at least indirectly based on instrumental motives: Legislators with higher status and better access to power and resources benefit from existing power structures and institutions and will be more likely to hold preferences for maintaining these. Additionally, the experience of making laws – a process that requires discussion and compromise with other representatives and necessitates the consideration of factors other than the immediate demands of one's voters – could contribute to less people-centered orientations toward democracy. Legislators who have been in office longer are more

likely to have learned that getting things done – something that can contribute to a legislator’s continued power – may occur more easily when legislators are less focused on public opinion.

In accordance with these expectations, we found that the experience of having legislative power and having more experience in office promotes a less people-centered and more elite-centered orientation toward democratic processes. Specifically, legislators who were more recently elected are less likely to hold elite-centered preferences than legislators who have served a longer time in office. For Germany, our data also show that having ascended to federal legislature promotes a more elite-centered view of democracy than serving only at the state level. Most importantly, we reveal that two indicators of legislative power – being in the majority party or government coalition, and (in the US) being in a context where you view seats in your area as electorally secure for your party – inclines lawmakers toward preferring elite-centered democracy.

These findings extend earlier studies to the present to reveal that holding power continues to yield a stronger preference for elite-centered democracy among legislators, even in systems as disparate as the US and Germany (Bowler et al. 2002; Gherghina et al. 2023; Gilljam et al. 2012; Junius et al. 2020; Önnudóttir 2016). Consistent with our theory, when legislators hold majority power in a governing body and when they believe their position is more electorally secure and that they will continue to hold power, they have incentives to protect that institution’s power – promoting a more elite-centered orientation toward democracy – and have less need to worry about the immediate whims of voters in order to maintain their position.

How could the different context conditions in Germany and the US moderate the effect of instrumental motives on process preferences? Why do similar models yield different process preferences across these two nations? To begin with, US legislators in both major parties face more instability in their access to and expected hold on power than do legislators in Germany’s most prominent parties. Shifts in power between the parties regularly occur in US governing bodies, and legislative and executive power is often divided between parties. Divided power can occur on the federal level in Germany (with the *Bundesrat* as upper and *Bundestag* as lower house), but not on the state level. Moreover, coalition governments are essentially unheard of in US legislatures, where power is almost universally held by a single party after each election. In sum, in the US there is uncertainty regarding which party will hold institutional power from year to year, and certainty that when one’s party is in the minority, they will have very minimal

access to the levers of governing. This should leave US legislators more wary of elite-centered democratic processes and potentially more likely to favor people-centered democracy in an effort to strengthen their electoral chances. By contrast, German legislatures demonstrate greater stability in which parties have institutional power over time and ensure that the head of government will be affiliated with the legislative majority rather than external to the governing coalition. Furthermore, the fact that governing majorities are generally coalition-based provides a larger number of parties with access to the governing coalition. These features lay the groundwork for a more elite-centered view of democracy among many German legislators.

What implications do these findings have for future developments in democratic governance? Following ‘change’ elections, when many longer-serving legislators are replaced by new legislators, we should expect to see a turn away from elite-centered views and toward people-centered democracy. A similar shift could also be expected in cases where the entire governing coalition changes (which are rare in Germany compared to the US) – as those who have been out of power and hold more people-centered views take power from those who have been in the majority and are more elite-oriented. In consequence, governance could become more difficult if new legislators are more attentive to the immediate preferences of the public and more resistant to governing by compromise, or even reluctant to maintain rather than contest existing democratic rules and procedures. By contrast, if governments are controlled by similar majority coalitions for a long time and more members of legislatures perceive their seats as electorally safe, this should be associated with a turn toward more elite-centered democratic preferences among legislators.

To the extent that legislators holding people-centered process preferences face greater challenges in governing effectively than legislators with more elite-centered preferences do, our findings suggest some challenges ahead in satisfying both the *process preferences* of citizens and providing them with *good governance*. For example, legislators in the US consistently lean toward people-centered democratic process preferences – putting them more in line with the people-centered democratic preferences of citizens (Hibbing et al. 2023). Yet, people-centered legislators unwilling to protect and use institutional power may have more difficulty governing effectively, which could produce citizen dissatisfaction and decrease trust in government. This could lead to greater electoral turnover, which would, per our findings, result in even more people-centered views of democracy among elected officials. In particular, our findings suggest

that legislative bodies undergoing substantial turnover and party power shifts would contain increasingly people-centered legislators who are more willing to contest existing democratic rules and procedures, less willing to engage in behind-closed-doors policymaking, and more likely to follow the swings of public opinion when governing. An examination of the US Congress in recent years⁶ seems consistent with this prediction and consequential for American democracy and globally. By contrast, German legislators from the parties that regularly form governing coalitions tend to hold more elite-centered process preferences and may be better able to govern efficiently and effectively, as passing legislation can be easier when the legislature is empowered and able to act with somewhat less deference to public opinion. However, if this conflicts with a public who prefer people-centered democratic processes, this could produce public dissatisfaction and lower trust in government, benefit populist parties and yield more people-centered legislators. Thus, legislators face difficulties balancing both the democratic processes preferred by citizens and the effective governance from which citizens benefit.

Obviously, our surveys and findings have limitations. First, it would have been desirable to survey US legislators not only at the state, but also at the federal level and to achieve a higher response rate in US states. Secondly, longitudinal data would have been ideal to study the development of legislators' process preferences and the way it compares to citizen preferences over time. Regrettably, neither of these research desiderata seems realistic to achieve in the near future, as especially US legislators are becoming increasingly difficult to survey - a trend that is exacerbated by the backlash against US universities. At the same time and in light of recent backsliding processes in the US and other democracies, understanding and comparing political elites' attitudes to democratic institutions and procedures seems more important than ever. We therefore look forward to future work building on our findings to explore the extent to which the factors we reveal to shape orientations toward democracy among US state legislators and German legislators apply at other levels and in other national contexts.

¹ See project website: www.systemicpeace.org (accessed March 18, 2025) - “The USA is no longer considered a democracy and lies at the cusp of autocracy; it has experienced a Presidential [sic] Coup and an Adverse Regime Change event”

² This hypothesis can only be applied to the German subsample, which contains data from federal legislators.

³ This hypothesis can only be applied to the US subsample, which contains data on perceived electoral safety.

⁴ 0.94 is the highest value actually reached in the sample. There is a very strong correlation of .99 between the index and the standardized factor.

⁵ This table also contains results from a model using data from German and US state legislators together (Model A5). The German state legislator results (Model A6) reveal a similar pattern of results as those seen in Table 6 and confirm that our structural variables shape legislators’ leanings toward elite- or people-centered democracy among both US and German legislators.

⁶ The US Congress has in recent years experienced frequent majority party shifts, with the Senate changing party majorities six times and the US House four times since 2000 – giving legislators in both parties ample experience in the legislative minority as well as a reason to perceive that their party’s power is not electorally secure. Further, while some legislators remain in office for decades, legislative turnover means that many legislators (45% of the US House and 26% of the US Senate as of 2022) have served six or fewer years, with some election years producing especially high levels of turnover.

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