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## **Sortition, its advocates and its critics: an empirical analysis of citizens’ and MPs’ support for random selection as a democratic reform proposal**

**Abstract:** The article explores the prospects of an increasingly debated democratic reform: assigning political offices by lot. While this idea is advocated by political theorists and politicians in favour of participatory and deliberative democracy, the article investigates to which extent citizens and MPs actually endorse different variants of ‘sortition’. Thereby, we test for differences among respondents’ social status, disaffection with elections and political ideology. Our findings suggest that MPs appear currently largely opposed to sortitioning political offices when their decisions-making power is more than consultative, although leftist MPs tend to be in favour of mixed assemblies (involving elected and sortitioned members). Among citizens, random selection seems to appeal above all to disaffected individuals with a lower social status. If sortition was hence to be introduced in politics, a possible reform pattern would consist in a minority of politicians advocating for a reform that passes should sufficient civil society support be gained.

**Keywords:** democratic innovation, sortition, random selection, deliberative democracy, parliamentary studies, public opinion

Democracy is an ideal that is never fully attained in real-world politics and democratic regimes continually evolve in response to internal and external pressures. Calls for institutional transformation can take various forms, such as changing the electoral system, decentralizing authority or developing direct democratic tools (Bedock, 2017). Given that the transformation of democracy is not linear, some reform attempts succeed while others remain pure reflections. A crucial factor in this process is the degree of support from political elites and citizens (Renwick, 2010).

This article focuses on an emerging democratic reform proposal that is increasingly debated in contemporary representative democracies: the assignment of political offices by lot. Until recently, this proposal could sound like a strange idea the idea of ‘sortition’ was mainly known by historians of Antiquity and the Middle Ages (Manin, 1997). However, since the spread of deliberative democratic innovations in the 1990s (Smith, 2009; Jacquet and van der Does, 2020), an increasing number of scholars, activists and even elected representatives have called for the (re)introduction of random selection in contemporary politics. One of the most prominent proposals in this respect is to randomly select (some of the) members of legislative assemblies (Gastil and Wright, 2018; Zakaras, 2010).

This echoes other democratic reform initiatives in representative democracies that aim at shifting political decision-making power from elites to citizens (Dalton et al., 2003). According to their proponents, the diversified profiles of this new type of representatives, as well as the absence of electoral commitments could narrow the gap between citizens and politics (Gastil and Wright, 2018). Despite these developments, one may wonder what the popular and political support for such a democratic reform actually is.

The aim of this article is not to assess the normative merits of the sortition proposal but to empirically scrutinize its appeal for political elites and masses. Furthermore, we seek to uncover different factors that underlie the support for various models of this reform proposal.

In the absence of extensive scholarship on the support for sortition, we draw on the existing literature about other democratic reforms, including referenda. In this regard, we study the effect of three main variables: respondents' status (the socioeconomic profile for citizens, the level of professionalization for MPs), their dissatisfaction with the current electoral system and their political ideology (left-wing vs. right-wing orientations). We conduct our research in Belgium, a country where the institutionalization of sortition has witnessed a growing debate.

Our findings suggest that MPs appear currently largely opposed to sortitioning political offices when their decisions-making power is more than consultative, although leftist MPs tend to be in favour of mixed assemblies (involving elected and sortitioned members). Among citizens, random selection seems to appeal above all to disaffected citizens with a lower social status.

In this article, we start by presenting the idea of sortition, its history and the issues it raises for the future of representative democracies. After developing our expectations regarding the factors that may explain citizens' and MPs' support for different uses of random selection in politics, we briefly describe the Belgian context and its relevance for the research. We then introduce the methodology of our study and present the main results of the analysis. We finish by discussing the implications of these results for the prospects of sortition as a democratic reform proposal.

## **Analysing citizens' and MPs' support for the use of random selection in politics**

### *Selecting political officials by lot*

In the public arena, random selection can fulfil various functions. Allocating scarce goods (e.g. university admissions) and burdens (e.g. enlistment of people in military service). In this context, lotteries can be seen as a just procedure when 'it is important that bad reasons are kept

out of the decision' (Stone, 2011: vii). Drawing lots can also be used to assign public offices. The most famous contemporary illustration in this respect is the selection of jurors in the judicial system, but there have been other uses in the past. In Athens during the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., random selection was attached to the ideal of equality among citizens and was perceived as a more democratic selection procedure than voting (Manin, 1997). It was used to ensure rotation in offices and avoid the professionalization of politics. In some Italian republics during the Middle Ages, sortition was also practiced to prevent power from being concentrated in the hands of few factions and families (Manin, 1997).

Random selection reappeared at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the development of deliberative democratic innovations known as 'mini-publics' – such as citizens' juries, consensus conferences and citizen assemblies (Grönlund et al., 2014). These forums gather lay citizens to discuss a political issue and make policy recommendations. The random selection of participants is supposed to increase the diversity of viewpoints and improve the quality of the deliberation (Landemore, 2013). Mini-publics have been organized in most representative democracies and can take various forms (Escobar and Elstub, 2017). These practical experiences have shown that, in well-designed settings, citizens are able to deliberate on complex issues and make meaningful policy proposals (Curato et al., 2017). This has led some to advocate for moving beyond the consultative use of citizen forums towards giving such assemblies real decision-making power. Concrete proposals have emerged in the United States (Callenbach and Phillips, 1985; Leib, 2010), in the United Kingdom (Barnett and Carty, 1998; Sutherland, 2008), in France (Sintomer, 2007) and for the European Union (Buchstein and Hein, 2009). Their arguments are diverse and located in different traditions, but they all share the willingness to reinvigorate representative democracy by empowering an assembly of randomly selected people. In the context of growing citizen disaffection towards politics, sortition is supposed to provide a better descriptive representation of the wider population than

current elected assemblies – especially in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, education and income (Zakaras, 2010). According to their advocates, this diversity of experiences as well as the absence of party affiliation should pave the way for fruitful deliberation that provides better policy outcomes (Gastil and Wright, 2018).

However, these proposals are far from consensual and attract various criticisms. Some of these find echoes in the elitist conception of democracy, according to which most citizens lack both the willingness and capacity to discuss complex political issues (Achen and Bartels, 2016). Others defend the electoral principle itself and argue that if sortition was to replace elections, it would deprive citizens of the ability to express major political choices and to hold their representatives accountable (Pourtois, 2016). Others again highlight that random selection of representatives does not abolish opportunities for lobbyists' attempts to influence public decisions (Umbers, 2018), or argue that because of citizens' inexperience and lack of knowledge of the discussed topics, a sortitioned assembly is more vulnerable to be captured by the bureaucracy in charge of informing and organizing the debates (Landa and Pevnick, 2020). Finally, some democratic theorists have suggested that giving binding powers to a sortitioned assembly could lead to the creation of a new type of elite that bypasses the deliberation of the broader public sphere (Lafont, 2019). In such circumstances, the reform would fail to involve the entire population in political discussion about the public good. These arguments point in different directions, but they show that sortition remains very much debated among scholars. This is also the case among political actors, especially professional politicians, as interviews with them quite bluntly reveal (Niessen, 2019; Schiffino et al., 2019; Jacquet et al., 2015).

In the wake of these debates, we propose to study the actual support for such a reform proposal among both parliamentarians and citizens since they are the very actors whose support is needed for such a proposal to become reality. More specifically, we aim to research the factors that influence their support. Among the different potential uses of random selection in

contemporary politics, this article focuses on four commonly proposed models. The first and most discussed one consists in establishing a new randomly selected assembly in addition to the elected one (Gastil and Wright, 2018; Vandamme et al., 2018). This is a reinterpretation of the existing bicameral logic. Secondly, in light of the Irish Constitutional Convention organized between 2012 and 2014, it is possible to imagine a mixed chamber that is composed of both elected and randomly selected citizens (Suiter et al., 2016). Its aim is to create room for dialogue between both ‘types’ of representatives who could exchange based on their different backgrounds. Thirdly, while the debate is often concerned with the national level, random selection could also be introduced in local assemblies. Finally, random selection is most commonly used in a consultative manner for composing deliberative citizen assemblies, so called ‘mini-publics’.

*Explaining support and opposition for sortition: Between status, electoral disaffection and ideology*

In addition to discovering overall tendencies, the research seeks to analyse the factors that influence the probability of citizens and MPs being supporters or opponents of sortition. In the absence of extensive scholarship on the matter, we base our expectations on previous work developed to analyse the support for other democratic reform proposals – especially the introduction of direct democratic tools (e.g. referendums, initiatives). Thereby, we consider the influence of three main factors: the status of actors, their disaffection towards the current system, and their ideology.

(1) *Status*. We first test the importance of what we call actors’ ‘status’ – a notion whose meaning differs between both groups. With regard to citizens, we analyse the impact of their social status – operationalized through their level of income and education. This reflects a major

ongoing debate in the literature on the type of citizens that support democratic reforms that foster the participation of ordinary citizens in politics (Webb, 2013; Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009; Bowler et al., 2007; Caluwaerts et al., 2017). On one side, some scholars indicate that the support for such reforms mainly comes from the most advantaged group of society (Dalton and Welzel, 2014). Following the logic of *cognitive mobilization*, they argue that citizens with a higher level of education develop higher democratic aspirations and endorse the idea that ordinary citizens should have a more important role in the political system (Norris, 2011). By doing so, citizens disregard traditional and hierarchical forms of participation and favour tools that associate citizens more directly with decision-making. On the other side, scholars argue that it is less-advantaged citizens who are attracted by democratic alternatives (Coffé and Michels, 2014; Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009) because they feel let-down by the actors of the current political systems (Neblo et al., 2010). A recent study on French citizens showed that those with more objective political resources (age, income, education) were less supportive of replacing elected politicians by sortitioned citizens (Bedock and Pilet, 2020). These contrary indications invite us to have competing expectations about the impact of citizens' social status on their probability of supporting sortition.

With regard to MPs, we use the notion of status to refer to their degree of political professionalization. Thereby, we expect the use of sortition in politics to be supported above all by political newcomers since support for alternative modes of decision-making has been previously shown to come from less professionalized politicians (Niessen et al., 2019). This derives from the fact that politicians get socialized and strongly attached to their function the longer they are in office, especially at a parliamentary level. Politicians with a shorter political career, in turn, might have been less influenced by these factors and can hence be expected to be more supportive of the use of sortition in politics. We test the impact of professionalization on the support for sortition accordingly.

(2) *Electoral disaffection*. Secondly, we expect that both citizens and MPs who are satisfied with the current functioning of electoral democracy are more likely to oppose sortition. Since the proponents of random selection argue that it can counterbalance some of the pathologies of elected legislatures (in particular MPs' representative bias or weak levels of deliberation (Gastil and Wright, 2018)), one can reasonably think that the demand for a randomly selected assembly is connected to actors' dissatisfaction with the current functioning of representative institutions. Previous work has furthermore suggested that politically more dissatisfied citizens tend to support proposals that put more powers in citizens' hands (Seyd et al., 2018; Neblo et al., 2010). Regarding MPs, while they are part of the electoral game, we still expect those who consider that it does not work well to be more supportive of alternative modes of democracy.

(3) *Ideology*. Finally, we test the effect of respondents' political ideology. We expect politicians from left-wing parties and citizens who vote for them to be more in favour of the use of sortition in politics since previous research has shown that leftist parties have a higher tendency to organize (Sintomer et al., 2016) and favour democratic reforms that give citizens a greater voice in political decision-making (Heinelt, 2013) (while some studies provide mixed results (Bowler et al., 2002)). Regarding citizens, we have the same expectation since existing research has shown that those voting for left-wing parties also tend to have higher support for direct democratic tools (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009), and more generally, for participatory modes of decision-making (Webb, 2013).

### *Belgium, a land of democratic innovations?*

We study the support for sortition among citizens and MPs in a country that has proven to be a fruitful ground for the development of democratic innovations in recent years, and where public debates on the topic are recurrent. Historically speaking, Belgium is not a place where one

would have most expected democratic innovations to develop because it has been characterized by structural societal cleavages since its creation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, as a way to cope with its structural divisions, Belgium was one of the first countries to introduce the secret election ballot and the principle of compulsory voting in general elections. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Belgium is back at the forefront of democratic innovation when after organizing several citizen panels in the 2000s, the country saw one of the largest citizen-led deliberative experiments worldwide organized in reaction to the government crisis of 2010-2011: the G1000 (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2018; Jacquet and Reuchamps, 2017). In the wake of these developments, the idea of deliberative democracy has grown within society. For instance, all federal and federated parliaments in Belgium have used mini-publics to foster their legislative process (Van damme et al., 2017). In 2019, the German-speaking Community (the smallest federal sub-state entity of the country) even went so far as to establish a permanent sortitioned citizen council that has the right to initiate citizens' assemblies whose results are presented to parliament (Niessen and Reuchamps, 2019). In the same year, the Brussels regional parliaments enacted the possibility to convene mixed parliamentary committees composed by both MPs and randomly selected citizens (Minsart and Jacquet, 2020; Reuchamps, 2020).

In this ongoing debate about introducing deliberative elements in traditional representative institutions, the most frequently proposed idea has been to reform the Belgian Senate. Since its origins in 1830, Belgium has had a bicameral parliament with an upper chamber, the Senate, being progressively democratized – both with respect who could vote and who could be elected. In the wake of the advanced federalization of the state since the 1970s, the Senate has been transformed to a chamber of dialogue between the sub-state entities, and saw its powers being significantly reduced in 2014. In response to discussions about a potential abolition of the Senate, proposals were voiced to transform it into a sortitioned assembly. The promoters of the G1000 made this proposal and one of its most visible figures, the Belgian

writer David Van Reybrouck, refined the proposal in a book *'Against Elections'* that was largely echoed in the public sphere (Van Reybrouck, 2016).

More importantly, however, several elected politicians themselves have supported the idea – be it visible MPs or even former ministers. On the left, the Flemish socialist Peter Vanvelthoven and the Francophone socialists Laurette Onkelinx and Paul Magnette have made public proposals in this sense. The Francophone liberal Richard Miller and the Christian-Democrat Hamza Fassi-Fihri from Brussels have given equal credit to the idea. Dutch- and French-speaking ecologists have made a joint proposal for introducing the use of sortition in parliamentary committees that they want to be composed of both elected and sortitioned representatives. At the local level, sortition has been used in several citizen panels. During the last local election, an increasing number of local lists advocated going further by randomly selecting municipal councils. Alternatively, the Francophone socialist Christie Morreale suggested to randomly select the part of the municipal council that corresponds to the share of blank (and possibly null) votes, instead of not taking them into account.

Until today, none of these proposals has come to life and despite their increasing number, sortition is far from reaching unanimity in the Belgian public sphere. However, the ongoing political debate makes Belgium an interesting case for the opinions of citizens and MPs to be studied. While we are cautious with overgeneralizing the conclusions that can be drawn from the Belgian study, the ambition is to discover tendencies that can inform contexts and countries that would undergo similar developments.

## **Data and method**

We collected original data from a sample of 1000 randomly selected Belgian citizens and from 124 members of the Belgian federal and regional parliaments (MPs) in 2017. The data for

citizens was collected by the survey company *iVox* based on an online sample which was stratified based on respondents' gender, language, age and level of education ( $n = 1000$ , see Appendix 1 for the detailed distribution). For MPs, we collected data ourselves via online and paper questionnaires from June to August 2017. After sending out reminders, we achieved a response rate of 26% with a diversified distribution regarding gender, language and party affiliation ( $n = 124$ , see Appendix 1 for the detailed rates). In these two surveys, several questions were asked to assess citizens' and MPs' support for using sortition in politics and to capture several explanatory factors. To ensure comparability, the question wording was identical in both surveys.

Respondents' degree of support for sortition in politics was measured vis-à-vis the four previously mentioned models of random selection in politics. The measurement was made on five-point scales with the following wording:

Q1 preamble: On the national level, it is sometimes discussed that that legislative chambers could be composed by random selection. Do you agree or disagree with the following propositions?

- Q1a: The institution of a legislative chamber that is composed of randomly selected citizens would be a good thing.

*[Fully agree, rather agree, neutral, rather disagree, fully disagree.]*

- Q1b: The institution of a mixed legislative chamber that is composed of both elected and randomly selected citizens would be a good thing.

*[Fully agree, rather agree, neutral, rather disagree, fully disagree.]*

Q2 preamble: Proposals are sometimes made to adapt the functioning of local democracy. To what extent do you consider the following reforms to be desirable or undesirable – independently of whether they have been introduced in your municipality?

- Q2a: Composing the municipal council by random selection.

*[Highly desirable, desirable, neutral, rather undesirable, highly undesirable.]*

- Q2b: Composing a participatory citizen panel by random selection.

*[Highly desirable, desirable, neutral, rather undesirable, highly undesirable.]*

Thereby, the main objective was to assess citizens' and MPs' support for the basic idea underlying the four different models. Consequently, we did not add questions concerning normative justifications, nor did we specify how they would operate since there are many different ways in which they could (depending on the selection procedures, deliberation rules, role of experts and formal power in the constitutional system).<sup>1</sup> One can see that the first two uses are related to the national level, while the latter two are related to local use. Given that sortition has been used for composing citizen panels at various policy levels in Belgium, but never for composing a legislative chamber (mixed or not), nor for a municipal council, respondents' opinion on the use of citizen panels can be regarded as a kind of benchmark against which the others can be evaluated.

Different variables were created to capture the factors that we expected to explain differences between individual preferences. We tried to assess citizens' 'status' via monthly income (with three categories: < 2000 €, 2000-4000 €, > 4000 €) and their level of education (with three categories: secondary education, Bachelor diploma, Master diploma or more). As for the MPs' 'status', we assessed their degree of professionalization by summing up the years they served in federal, regional or local legislatures and executives. For electoral disaffection, both MPs and citizens were asked to indicate on a five-point scale to what extent they agreed that "voting makes no sense because parties do what they want anyway". As for ideology, we took the party to which MPs belonged and for which citizens had indicated they would vote if elections were to be held. On this basis, we distinguished leftist from other parties.<sup>2</sup> We recorded respondents' age (continuous for MPs and three categories for citizens) and gender (two categories) as control variables. While Appendix 2 provides a synthetic overview of the

measurement, use and directional expectations for all variables included in the analyses, Appendices 3 and 4 provide overviews on the distribution of the explanatory variables.

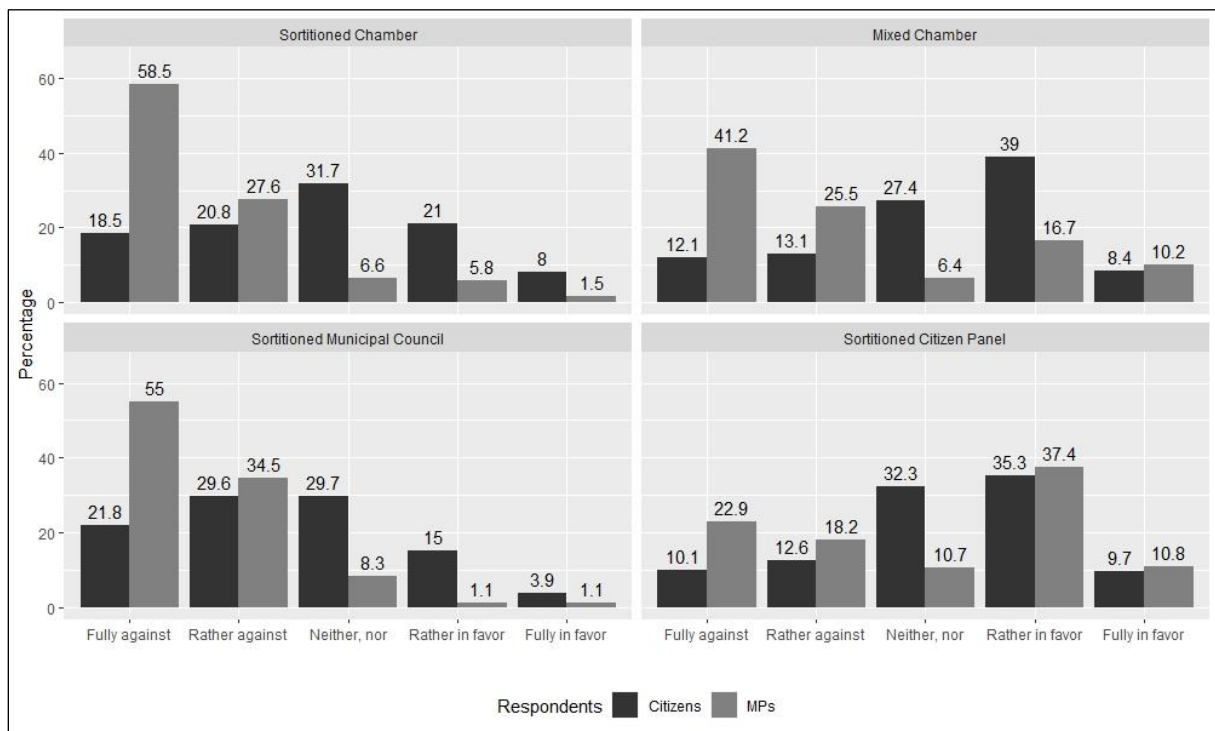
In the analysis that follows, we first present MPs and citizens in-principle support for the different uses of sortition and compare their preferences for each of them. We then test differences in support (i) among citizens with ordered logistic regression analyses,<sup>3</sup> and (ii) among elites with comparative descriptive statistics.<sup>4</sup> To facilitate the interpretation and to ensure a sufficient number of responses in each category for solid ordered logits to be carried out, we translated the response variables (respondents' support for the four uses of sortition) into three categories (supporting – being neutral – opposing).

### **MPs' and citizens' support for the use of random selection in politics**

#### *Aggregated opinions and preferred uses of sortition*

Our results suggest that the use of random selection in politics is received critically by both MPs and citizens when decision-making power is concerned and/or when it is the sole mode of designation. When comparing MPs' and citizens' in-principle support for the different uses under investigation, summarized in Figure 1 hereunder, four lessons can be drawn.

**Figure 1.** Citizens' and MPs' support for the four different uses of sortition



First, it appears that citizens are far less critical than MPs. Citizens have indeed a higher approval rate for all proposed uses – except for a sortitioned citizen panel where MPs score slightly higher (3.2%). Also, one should note that citizens have higher neutrality scores for each of the uses with almost a third of the respondents choosing the intermediate position. This suggests that an important number of citizens do not hold a firm position on the reform proposals.

Secondly, a sortitioned municipal council receives by far the lowest approval and the highest opposition rates – from both citizens (51.4% are against) and MPs (89.5% are against). At first, this might be surprising when one considers that it corresponds to the lowest and least politicized level of political power which is said to be ‘closest’ to citizens. However, this might at the same time be the very reason for why both citizens and MPs do not consider sortition to be a necessary democratic reform. Moreover, it is the political institution where sortition can be perceived as the most encompassing, i.e., whose composition would be perceived as solely

relying on sortition whereas a sortitioned and a mixed chamber could still be imagined in a bicameral setting.

Thirdly, the mixed chamber is substantively preferred over an exclusively sortitioned chamber. While this is the case for both citizens and MPs, the latter remain comparably critical (66.7% are against). For citizens, however, it even gathers a relative majority of support (47.4 being in favour, 27.4 being neutral). This is comparable to (and even slightly higher than) their support for a sortitioned citizen panel, which is noteworthy given that the latter has much less political power and has even had some real political experience in Belgium.

Finally, another relative majority of support can be observed for elites on the use of sortition in citizen panels (48.2% are in favour, 10.7% are neutral). While we are talking about a body whose political decision-making power is at best consultative, it is still noteworthy when coming from political elites whose everyday job relies on a totally different rationale of decision-making. This can be expected to come, among other reasons, with the increasing use of such citizen panels in the last twenty years in Belgium.

### *Who supports and who opposes sortition*

Knowing what citizens and MPs think of different uses of sortition at an aggregated level is one thing, delineating those who support and who oppose it is quite another. While making this distinction has been somewhat difficult for MPs due to the high opposition scores for two of the four uses (and hence little individual differences), some interesting differences exist among citizens' attitudes.

(1) *Citizens*. The results of the *ordered logistic regression* analyses for citizens' opinions, summarized in Table 1 hereunder, show that citizens' social status and electoral disaffection are statistically significantly associated with their opinion on the four uses of sortition. Their

ideology is associated with two of the four uses. The use of sortition in politics is above all opposed by citizens with a higher level of education and income. While education is negatively associated with citizens' opinion on a sortitioned chamber and a sortitioned municipal council with at least 95% confidence, their income is negatively associated with all four uses with at least 95% confidence. The fact that some associations are cancelled out in the joint models (i.e., model 5, 10, 15 and 20) is most probably due to collinearity between education and income.<sup>5</sup> The frequency plots in Appendix 5 confirm the association and show that higher levels of education and income furthermore reduce neutrality scores. Citizens' electoral disaffection, in turn, has a robust negative association with their opinion on the four uses of sortition across all models and with at least 99.9% confidence. The more citizens are disaffected with elections, the more likely they are to support the introduction of sortition in politics. The boxplots in Appendix 6 confirm the association and provide further details on the distribution of the data. Citizens' vote for leftist parties, finally, is positively associated with their opinion on a mixed chamber and a sortitioned citizen panel. The frequency plots in Appendix 6 confirm this but also show the limited magnitude of differences.<sup>6</sup> A glance at the control variables shows that older citizens tend to be less likely to support the use of sortition in politics – at least for a mixed chamber, a sortitioned municipal council and a sortitioned citizen panel. Respondents' gender, in turn, does not show significant differences.

**Table 1.** Ordered logistic regression results for citizens' opinion on the different uses of sortition

|                              | Sortitioned Chamber  |                      |                      |                      |                      | Mixed Chamber        |                      |                     |                      |                     | Sortitioned Municipal Council |                     |                     |                     |                     | Sortitioned Citizen Panel |                      |                      |                      |                      |
|------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|                              | (1)                  | (2)                  | (3)                  | (4)                  | (5)                  | (6)                  | (7)                  | (8)                 | (9)                  | (10)                | (11)                          | (12)                | (13)                | (14)                | (15)                | (16)                      | (17)                 | (18)                 | (19)                 | (20)                 |
| Education (ref. = max. sec.) |                      |                      |                      |                      |                      |                      |                      |                     |                      |                     |                               |                     |                     |                     |                     |                           |                      |                      |                      |                      |
| Bachelor                     | -0.280<br>(0.152)    |                      |                      |                      | -0.307<br>(0.178)    | 0.175<br>(0.157)     |                      |                     |                      | 0.131<br>(0.181)    | -0.191<br>(0.156)             |                     |                     |                     | -0.086<br>(0.182)   | 0.018<br>(0.154)          |                      |                      |                      | 0.047<br>(0.179)     |
| Master                       | -1.163***<br>(0.188) |                      |                      |                      | -0.841***<br>(0.224) | -0.186<br>(0.180)    |                      |                     |                      | -0.024<br>(0.217)   | -0.625***<br>(0.187)          |                     |                     |                     | -0.288<br>(0.223)   | -0.016<br>(0.178)         |                      |                      |                      | 0.192<br>(0.215)     |
| Income (ref. = < 2000)       |                      |                      |                      |                      |                      |                      |                      |                     |                      |                     |                               |                     |                     |                     |                     |                           |                      |                      |                      |                      |
| 2000-4000                    |                      | -0.511***<br>(0.140) |                      |                      | -0.249<br>(0.149)    | -0.148<br>(0.142)    |                      |                     |                      | 0.022<br>(0.150)    | -0.100<br>(0.142)             |                     |                     |                     | 0.148<br>(0.152)    | -0.273<br>(0.142)         |                      |                      |                      | -0.122<br>(0.150)    |
| > 4000                       |                      | -0.903***<br>(0.237) |                      |                      | -0.334<br>(0.257)    | -0.502*<br>(0.234)   |                      |                     |                      | -0.209<br>(0.251)   | -0.864***<br>(0.252)          |                     |                     |                     | -0.501<br>(0.273)   | -0.488*<br>(0.232)        |                      |                      |                      | -0.312<br>(0.251)    |
| Electoral disaffection       |                      |                      | 0.420***<br>(0.043)  |                      | 0.374***<br>(0.050)  | 0.242***<br>(0.042)  |                      |                     |                      | 0.239***<br>(0.049) | 0.358***<br>(0.044)           |                     |                     |                     | 0.334***<br>(0.051) | 0.189***<br>(0.041)       |                      |                      |                      | 0.215***<br>(0.049)  |
| Leftist vote                 |                      |                      |                      | 0.119<br>(0.125)     | 0.170<br>(0.146)     |                      |                      |                     | 0.287*<br>(0.129)    | 0.219<br>(0.147)    |                               |                     |                     |                     | 0.269<br>(0.149)    |                           |                      |                      | 0.574***<br>(0.129)  | 0.527***<br>(0.147)  |
| Age (ref. = < 35)            |                      |                      |                      |                      |                      |                      |                      |                     |                      |                     |                               |                     |                     |                     |                     |                           |                      |                      |                      |                      |
| 35-54                        |                      |                      |                      |                      | -0.309<br>(0.179)    |                      |                      |                     |                      | -0.390*<br>(0.184)  |                               |                     |                     |                     | -0.201<br>(0.182)   |                           |                      |                      |                      | -0.378*<br>(0.184)   |
| ≥ 55                         |                      |                      |                      |                      | -0.340<br>(0.182)    |                      |                      |                     |                      | -0.395*<br>(0.187)  |                               |                     |                     |                     | -0.535**<br>(0.188) |                           |                      |                      |                      | -0.768***<br>(0.187) |
| Gender (female = 1)          |                      |                      |                      |                      | 0.086<br>(0.140)     |                      |                      |                     |                      | 0.213<br>(0.139)    |                               |                     |                     |                     | 0.249<br>(0.142)    |                           |                      |                      |                      | 0.140<br>(0.139)     |
| Intercept                    |                      |                      |                      |                      |                      |                      |                      |                     |                      |                     |                               |                     |                     |                     |                     |                           |                      |                      |                      |                      |
| Oppose - Neutral             | -0.653***<br>(0.078) | -0.771***<br>(0.112) | -0.812***<br>(0.144) | -0.398***<br>(0.076) | -0.187<br>(0.269)    | -1.082***<br>(0.083) | -1.258***<br>(0.118) | -0.370**<br>(0.142) | -1.003***<br>(0.082) | -0.560*<br>(0.268)  | -0.066<br>(0.076)             | -0.074<br>(0.109)   | 1.147***<br>(0.150) | 0.107<br>(0.075)    | 0.975***<br>(0.271) | -1.224***<br>(0.085)      | -1.421***<br>(0.122) | -0.662***<br>(0.142) | -1.059***<br>(0.084) | -0.883**<br>(0.269)  |
| Neutral - Support            | 0.719***<br>(0.079)  | 0.476***<br>(0.109)  | 2.256***<br>(0.160)  | 0.933***<br>(0.081)  | 1.555***<br>(0.075)  | 0.113<br>(0.075)     | -0.129<br>(0.109)    | 0.855***<br>(0.144) | 0.194**<br>(0.075)   | 0.612<br>(0.268)    | 1.346***<br>(0.090)           | 1.235***<br>(0.119) | 2.623***<br>(0.168) | 1.509***<br>(0.091) | 2.372***<br>(0.282) | 0.202**<br>(0.075)        | -0.056<br>(0.110)    | 0.789***<br>(0.142)  | 0.389***<br>(0.076)  | 0.555*<br>(0.267)    |
| Alakke inform. criterion     | 2146.9               | 1725                 | 2085.9               | 2185.5               | 1646.9               | 2117                 | 1661.1               | 2084                | 2112.9               | 1639.3              | 2031                          | 1626.3              | 1970.7              | 2039.5              | 1573.1              | 2129.9                    | 1684.6               | 2106.4               | 2107.7               | 1646.1               |

Notes: Ordered logit coefficients with standard errors in parenthesis. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

(2) *MPs*. When investigating the differences in support for sortition among MPs, one should keep in mind that the aggregated results (Figure 1) have previously highlighted limited variability in their opinion on a sortitioned chamber and the sortitioned municipal council, which almost all MPs opposed. Consequently, meaningful differences can only be observed for MPs attitudes towards a mixed chamber and a sortitioned citizen panel.

The results of the descriptive statistics, summarized in Table 2 hereunder (see also Appendix 7 and 8), indicate that no significant differences can be observed between MPs' opinions on the different uses of sortition based on their degree of professionalization (even when one looks at it non-linearly, i.e., comparing the youngest and oldest MPs to the others). The same can be said for MPs' degree of electoral disaffection – mainly because electoral disaffection is very low among MPs in general (see Appendix 4 for the distribution). The position of an MPs' party on the left-right axis, however, appears to be associated with MPs' opinions on the different uses of sortition – most significantly with their opinion on a mixed chamber and a sortitioned citizen panel (the two others still having many opponents among both leftist and rightist MPs). Thereby, leftist MPs appear more likely to support (at least) these two options than other MPs.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 2.** MPs' support for the uses of sortition by degree of professionalization, electoral disaffection and leftist parties compared to others

| Use of sortition              | Degree of support | Professionalization |                  | Electoral disaffection |                  | Leftist vs. others |                   |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|------------------|------------------------|------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
|                               |                   | <i>Mean</i>         | <i>Std. dev.</i> | <i>Mean</i>            | <i>Std. dev.</i> | <i>Left (%)</i>    | <i>Others (%)</i> |
| Sortitioned Chamber           | Support           | 9.05                | 5.41             | 1.64                   | 1.03             | 8.89               | 8.75              |
|                               | Neutral           | 10.72               | 5.74             | 1.89                   | 1.27             | 13.33              | 3.75              |
|                               | Oppose            | 9.34                | 7.87             | 1.48                   | 0.83             | 77.78              | 87.50             |
| Mixed Chamber                 | Support           | 9.01                | 7.33             | 1.54                   | 0.82             | 55.56              | 17.72             |
|                               | Neutral           | 9.12                | 5.70             | 1.62                   | 0.52             | 4.44               | 7.60              |
|                               | Oppose            | 9.49                | 7.76             | 1.51                   | 0.96             | 40.00              | 74.68             |
| Sortitioned Municipal Council | Support           | 8.25                | 4.50             | 2.00                   | 1.41             | 2.22               | 3.85              |
|                               | Neutral           | 8.75                | 6.31             | 1.33                   | 0.65             | 20                 | 3.85              |
|                               | Oppose            | 9.51                | 7.77             | 1.53                   | 0.90             | 77.78              | 92.30             |
| Sortitioned Citizen Panel     | Support           | 9.01                | 7.12             | 1.51                   | 0.83             | 75.56              | 39.74             |
|                               | Neutral           | 11.17               | 10.03            | 1.33                   | 0.49             | 8.89               | 14.11             |
|                               | Oppose            | 9.72                | 7.06             | 1.64                   | 1.08             | 15.55              | 46.15             |

Notes on the distribution of the explanatory variables (see also Appendix 4): Professionalization: min. = 0.5, max. = 35.5, mean = 9.42, standard deviation = 7.52. Electoral disaffection: min. = 1, max. = 5, mean = 1.52, standard deviation = 0.89. Leftist parties vs. others: left = 45, others = 79.

### The prospects of sortition as a democratic reform

These findings offer an interesting overview on the degree of support from citizens and MPs for four democratic reform proposals based on the idea of sortition. More importantly, they provide insights as to who among them tends to be in favour and those against. On this basis, we discuss in this section what are the political prospects of sortition being introduced as a democratic reform.

In his analysis of electoral system change in representative democracies, Renwick (2010) distinguished between two main types of reform patterns: elite-majority imposition and elite-mass interaction. In the first pattern, a large majority of the elected representatives agree to introduce a democratic reform in order to advance their partisan or personal power interests. According to our findings, this pattern seems currently unlikely for the reforms studied in this

research. The first three variants of sortition – a sortitioned chamber, a mixed chamber and a sortitioned municipal council – are largely opposed by most Belgian political elites. In this respect, the proposals made by prominent political leaders that we presented at the beginning of the article are likely to receive only marginal support among their peers in the short term. A common way to explain this lies in the notion of institutional conservatism (Andeweg, 1989). Members of parliament are the winners of the electoral system and those who have the power in a given system tend to disregard alternatives that would weaken their position (Bowler et al., 2006). That being said, there seems to be some openness towards sortitioned citizen panels, pointing to the possibility for the latter to multiply in the years to come – as long as they remain consultative. This is coherent with the recently observed spread of mini-publics organized by the different parliamentary assemblies of the country. While the Permanent Citizen Dialogue organized by the German-speaking Community and the mixed parliamentary committees in the Brussels region are the most far-reaching of these and illustrate the growing appeal for sortition in the eyes of the Belgian political elites, they too remain largely consultative.

Renwick's (2010) second reform pattern suggests that a minority of politicians advocates for a reform that enjoys considerable support from civil society groups. If the latter's pressure is sufficiently powerful, they can succeed in seeing their demand implemented. This can happen when the dissatisfaction towards a political system is strong and when some political actors portray the reform as a solution to its failure. An example of this would be the extension of voting rights in many countries, like in Belgium, where universal plural male suffrage was introduced in 1893 after intense protests from the labour movement (Mabille, 2011). Based on our findings, this pattern is already a little more likely for the sortition case, although several caveats apply. Our results indicate indeed that citizens' support for the sortition reforms comes from those who are most disaffected with current electoral model and who have a lower level of income and education (in line with the recent results of Bedock and Pilet (2020) in France).

They would then be the societal group on which the reform had to be grounded. However, the second reform pattern suggests that political change only occurs if the supportive societal groups are able to generate sufficient political pressure (Renwick, 2010). In the current situation, these societal mobilizations in favour of sortition exist but remain relatively marginal. In recent years, several grassroots movements have campaigned for the transformation of the democratic model, including by further using random selection in politics – like the G1000, the AGORA movement in Brussels or local lists that competed in the 2018 municipal elections (Jacquet et al., 2020). However, it remains to be shown how much broader public support these can gather to impose the subject on the political agenda.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we examined how the call for randomly selecting the members of political institutions or advisory bodies is received by both MPs and citizens in Belgium, a country where the use of deliberative citizen participation has already somewhat matured. Drawing on original survey data comprising the view of a representative sample of 1000 citizens and 124 MPs, we investigated their support for four different models of sortition: a sortitioned chamber, a mixed chamber, a sortitioned municipal council and a sortitioned citizen panel.

Our results show that none of these models obtains an absolute majority of support – neither from citizens nor from MPs. Relative majorities of support, however, exist among citizens for introducing a mixed chamber and among MPs for introducing sortitioned citizen panels. Among citizens, those disaffected with electoral democracy and those having a lower degree of education and income tend to be more likely to support the four different uses of sortition in politics. Those voting for leftist parties tend to be more likely to favour a mixed chamber and a sortitioned citizen panel. Leftist MPs tend to be less critical towards introducing

a mixed chamber and a sortitioned citizen panel than others. MPs' degree of professionalization and electoral disaffection, in turn, does not seem to make substantial differences. The overly high opposition rates for all non-consultative uses are striking though, since realistic support seems currently only to exist for consultative citizen panels.

That being said, despite their consultativeness, citizen panels start to raise a debate in the political sphere about how political decisions ought to be taken and by whom, thereby laying the ground for a broader debate on the topic. More generally, when looking at the prospects for democratic reforms based on sortition being introduced, one can see that a potential reform patterns would consist in a minority of politicians advocating a reform that enjoys enough support from civil society groups to be imposed on the political agenda.

While the present study identified the groups of MPs and citizens most likely to take this role, it lies beyond its scope whether the necessary political support can and should be reached. More importantly, one should keep in mind that the objective of this survey was to grasp citizens' and MPs' in-principle attitudes to the reform proposals. Consequently, no detailed specifications on the institutional design of the four uses of sortition, nor on the commonly used arguments in favour and against them were proposed in the survey. Together with the complexity of the topic and the relative novelty of the proposals, these may explain the high neutrality shares for some uses – especially among citizens – pointing to the fact that many opinions remain to be formed. Furthermore, while the extent and different patterns of citizens' and MPs' attitudes towards different uses of sortition have been researched in this study, the in-depth motivations for these attitudes remain yet to be discovered.

Drawing on both these limitations and the overall lessons of the study, we want to highlight three avenues for further research. First, it would be interesting to investigate how information about sortition and experience with existing uses influences respondents' opinions. This would allow to study whether and how citizens and MPs might change their minds when

they were to know more about a certain concrete democratic reform proposal or if they had greater experience of existing uses of sortition.

Secondly, experimental vignette studies could analyse whether different ways of implementing these reforms affects preferences for them. As with traditional elected assemblies, these new political institutions can be organized in various ways (in terms of selection, organization, control of the debate as well as the exact competencies) and further research could analyse if preferences for sortition depend on such institutional settings. This also echoes the most recent developments in political theory, where the debate has become less one on the merits of sortition in general than on how its connection with traditional representative institutions should be envisioned. For instance, even the scholars who are strongly against providing sortitioned assembly with authoritative policy-making power defend its use for spreading information in the public sphere or attracting attention on so far neglected perspectives (Lafont, 2019; Landa and Pevnick, 2020).

Finally, it would be very interesting for qualitative research to further scrutinize why elites and masses support or oppose sortition reforms (see for instance, Jacquet, 2019; Niessen, 2019). For instance, does the positive appraisal for random selection indicate a true fondness for the idea of sortition or rather a broad rejection of the current representative system? Would this then translate into a willingness to abandon or to complement existing electoral institutions? Conversely, it would be worth studying why some politicians support sortitioned legislative assemblies despite the risk of undermining their own legitimacy and power.

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## **Appendix**

### **Appendix 1. Response rates for the MP survey**

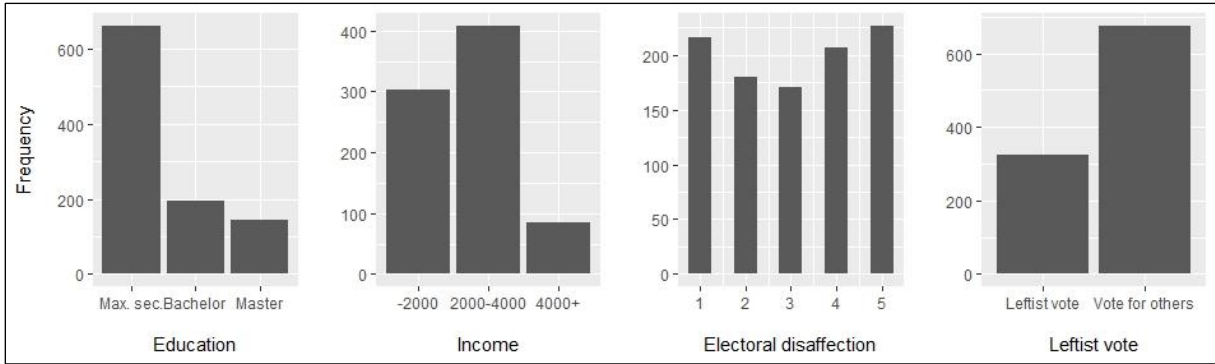
|                     | Sample | Population | Response rate |
|---------------------|--------|------------|---------------|
| Total               | 124    | 473        | 26 %          |
| Men                 | 79     | 283        | 28 %          |
| Women               | 45     | 190        | 24 %          |
| Dutch-speakers      | 56     | 234        | 24 %          |
| French-speakers     | 56     | 214        | 26 %          |
| German-speakers     | 12     | 25         | 48 %          |
| Christian-democrats | 29     | 85         | 34 %          |
| Greens              | 14     | 40         | 35 %          |
| Liberals            | 28     | 106        | 26 %          |
| Socialists          | 30     | 115        | 26 %          |
| Nationalists        | 13     | 87         | 15 %          |
| Other               | 10     | 40         | 25 %          |

**Appendix 2. Measurement, use and directional expectations for the variables included in the analyses**

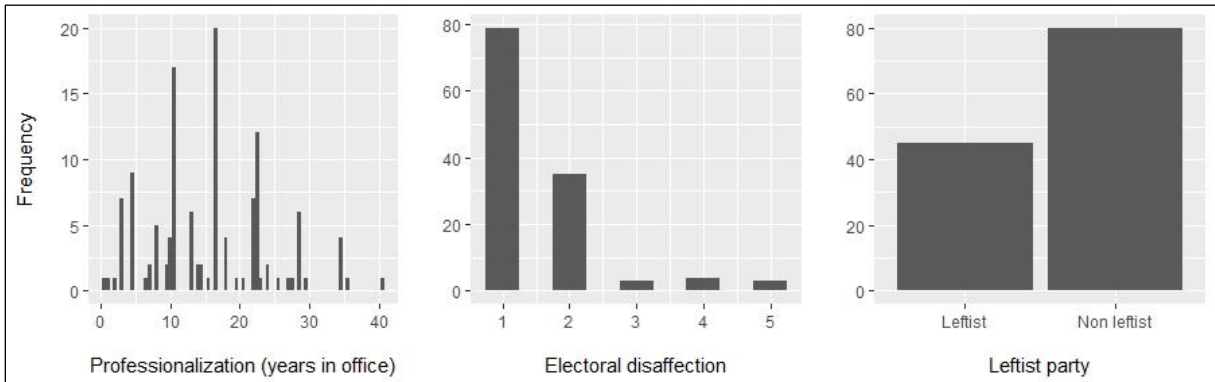
| Variable                             | Citizens              |     |             | MPs                   |     |             |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----|-------------|-----------------------|-----|-------------|
|                                      | Measurement           | Use | Expectation | Measurement           | Use | Expectation |
| Opinion on sortitioned chamber       | 3 categ. (based on 5) | RV  | -           | 3 categ. (based on 5) | RV  | -           |
| Opinion on mixed chamber             | 3 categ. (based on 5) | RV  | -           | 3 categ. (based on 5) | RV  | -           |
| Opinion on sortit. municipal council | 3 categ. (based on 5) | RV  | -           | 3 categ. (based on 5) | RV  | -           |
| Opinion on sortitioned citizen panel | 3 categ. (based on 5) | RV  | -           | 3 categ. (based on 5) | RV  | -           |
| <b>Social status</b>                 |                       |     |             |                       |     |             |
| Political professionalization        | -                     | -   | -           | continuous            | EV  | neg. rel.   |
| Education                            | 3 categories          | EV  | neg. rel.   | -                     | -   | -           |
| Income                               | 3 categories          | EV  | neg. rel.   | -                     | -   | -           |
| Electoral disaffection               | 5 categories (linear) | EV  | pos. rel.   | 5 categories (linear) | EV  | pos. rel.   |
| Leftist vs. other parties            | 2 categories          | EV  | pos. rel.   | 2 categories          | EV  | pos. rel.   |
| Age                                  | 3 categories          |     | control     | -                     |     | -           |
| Gender                               | 2 categories          |     | control     | -                     |     | -           |

\* RV = response variables. EV = explanatory variable.

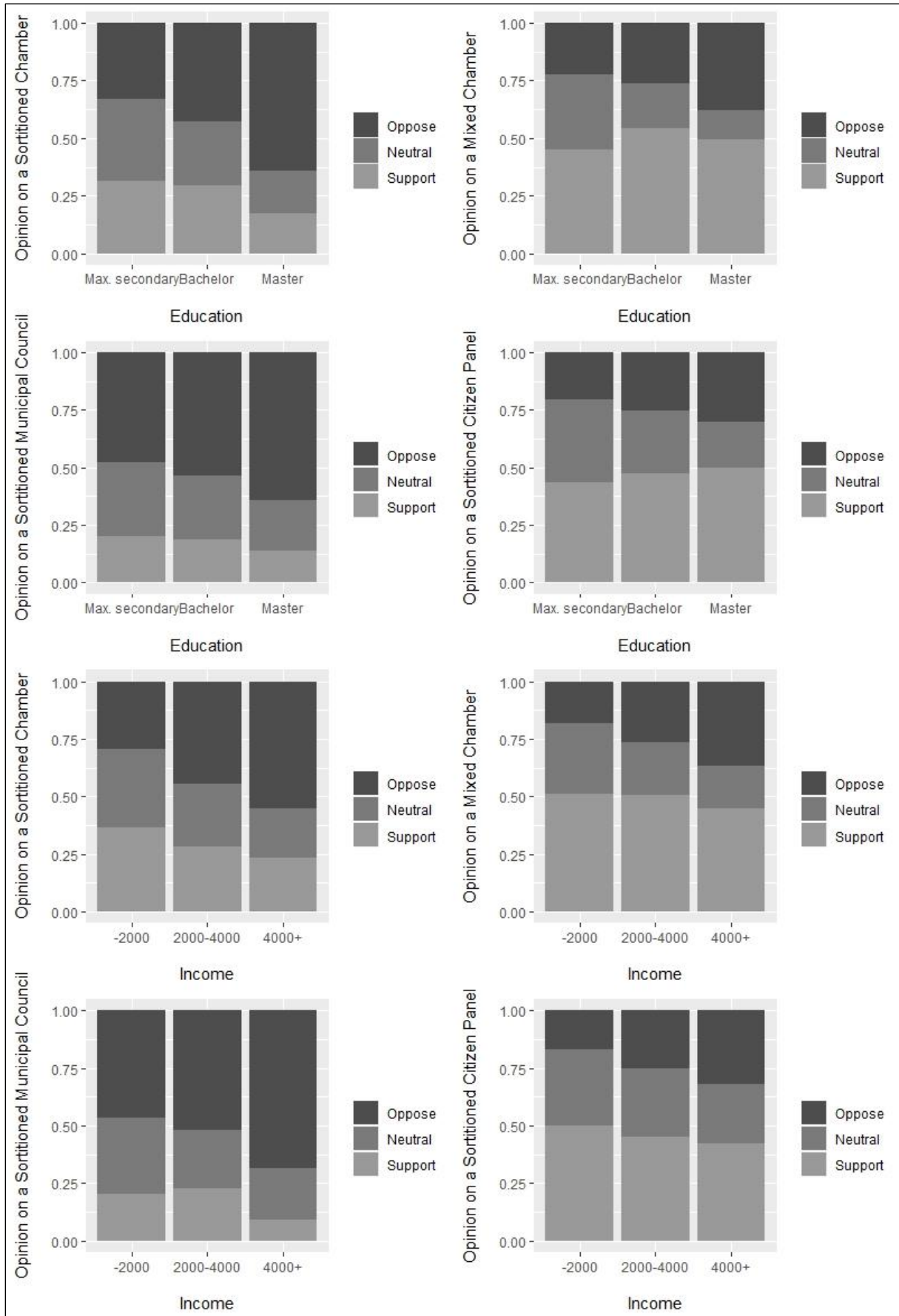
**Appendix 3. Distribution for citizens' education, income, electoral disaffection and leftist vote**



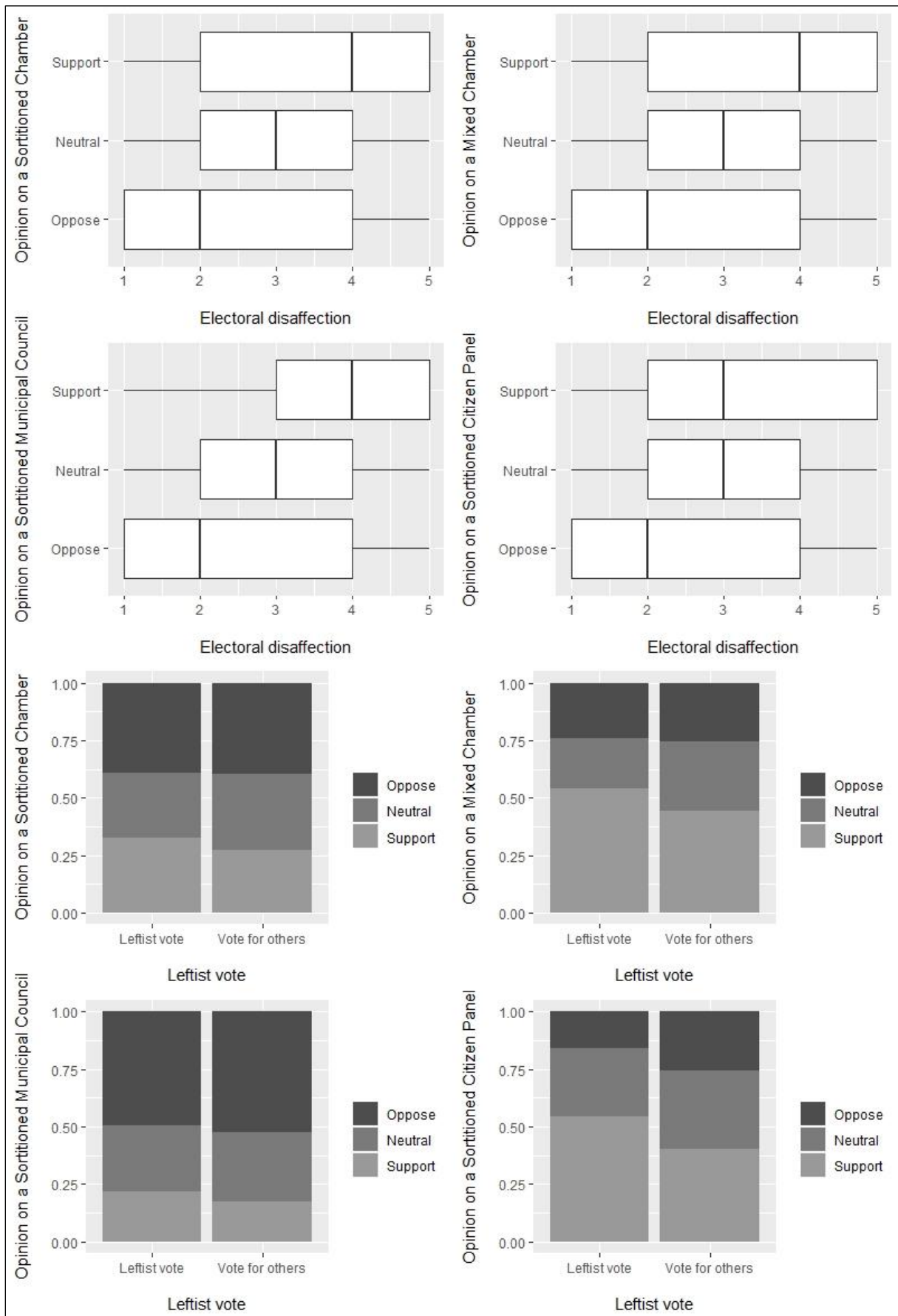
**Appendix 4. Distribution for MPs' professionalization, electoral disaffection and (leftist) party affiliation**



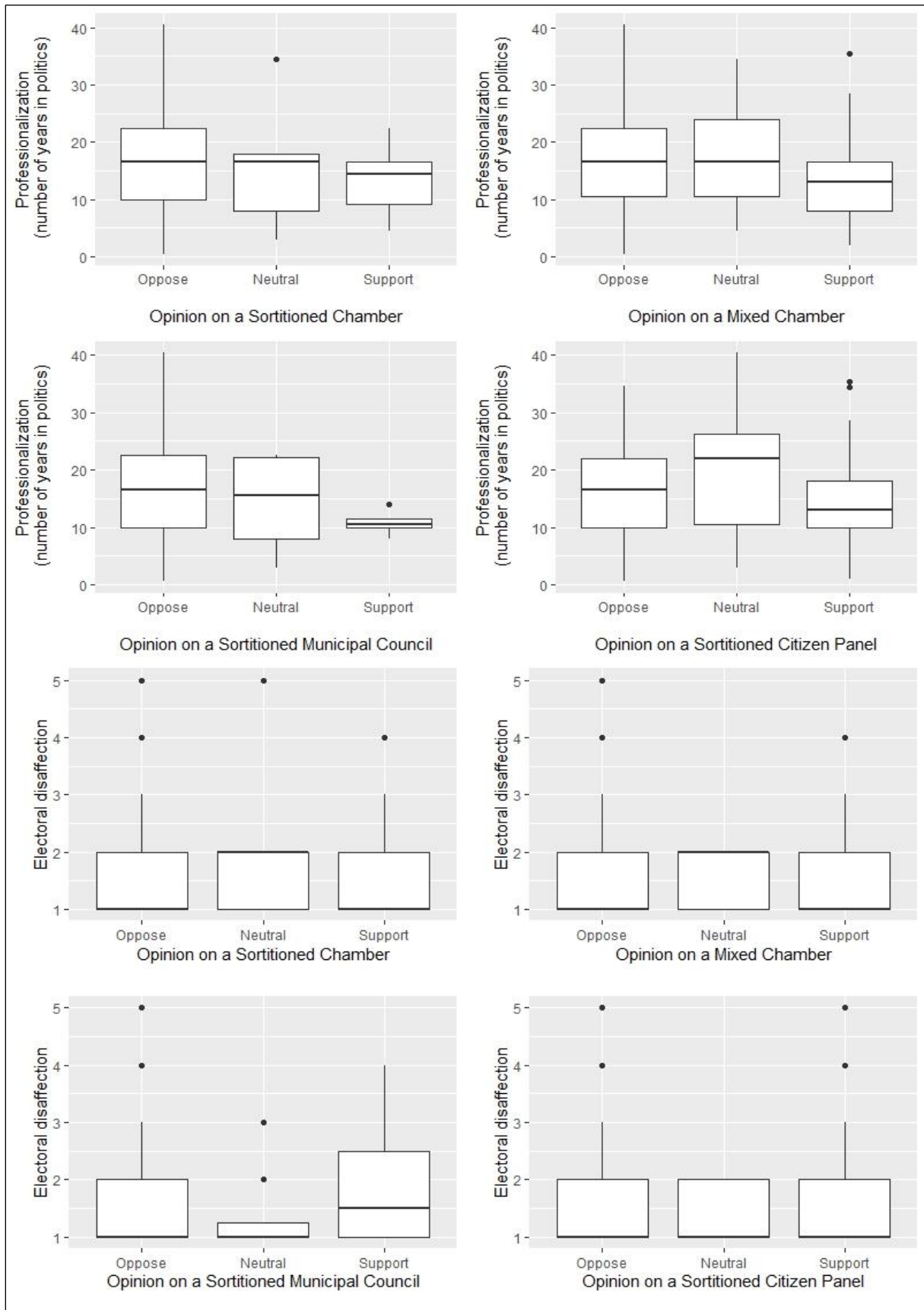
**Appendix 5.** Citizens' opinion on the different uses of sortition by education and income (percentages)



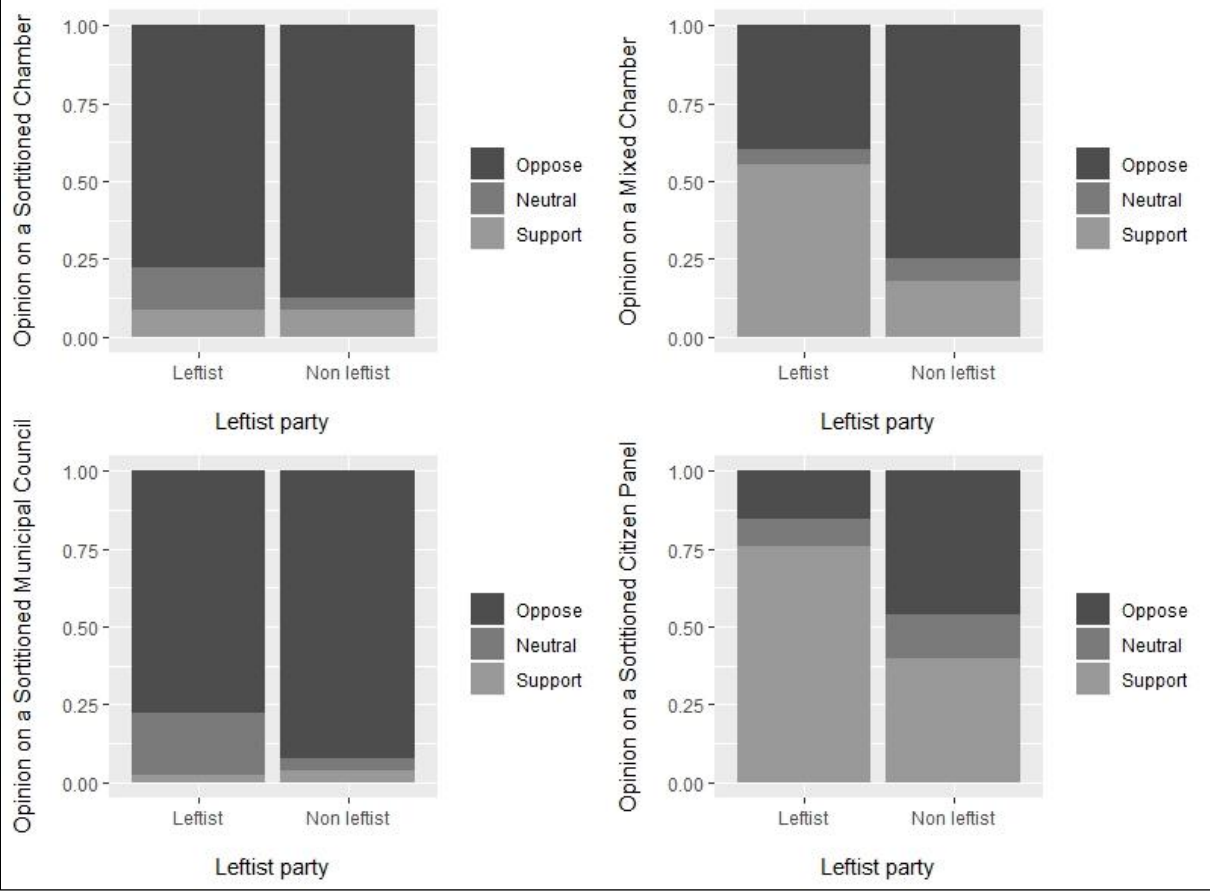
**Appendix 6.** Citizens' opinion on the different uses of sortition by electoral disaffection (boxplots) and leftist vote (percentages)



**Appendix 7.** MP's opinion on the different uses of sortition by professionalization and electoral disaffection (boxplots)



**Appendix 8.** MP's opinion on the different uses of sortition by (leftist) party affiliation (percentages)



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<sup>1</sup> To ensure the robustness of our analysis, we tested whether citizens' 'interest in politics' (as a proxy for their likeliness to have heard about sortition) affects our results. We found that the significance of none of the studied variables was altered (either positively or negatively) and concluded that our model was robust. The calculations are reported in Online Appendix 1.

<sup>2</sup> We considered the socialist (sp.a, PS, SP), green (Groen, Ecolo) and far-left (PVdA, PTB) parties as leftist.

<sup>3</sup> To detect potential collinearity between the explanatory variables (social status, electoral disaffection and ideology), we built models gradually.

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<sup>4</sup> We did not conduct ordered logistic regression analyses for MPs' responses because, as we will see in the results section, the number of observations in favour of several uses of sortition was too low and would have required a far larger sample size for carrying out solid logit analyses.

<sup>5</sup> Education and income were positively correlated with 99.9% confidence (calculated with an *ordered logistic regression*).

<sup>6</sup> To ensure the robustness of our analysis, we tested whether citizens' social status and leftist vote had an interaction effect. We found a positive relation between citizens' level of education and leftist votes (with statistical significance) and a negative relation between citizens' level of income and leftist votes (without statistical significance). When testing for their interaction effect on citizens' support for the different uses of sortition with an ordered logistic regression analysis, none was found. We concluded that our models were robust. The calculations are provided in Online Appendix 2 and 3.

<sup>7</sup> Since the number of observations in some categories of the response variable were too limited for making solid tests of statistical certainty, we based our evaluation on the distribution of the descriptive statistics. In order to test the robustness of the latter, we checked the results of analyses of variance (ANOVA) for MPs' degree of professionalization and their electoral disaffection, respectively, and chi-square tests of independence for MPs' leftist position. While doing so, we attract the attention of the reader to the violation of several statistical assumptions. The results of the ANOVAs confirm our interpretation (some experimental errors being non-normally distributed (see Shapiro-Wilk test [SW]) and variances being unequal (see Bartlett-test [B])): Sortitioned Chamber ~ Professionalization:  $p = 0.75$  (SW- $p = 0.005$ , B- $p = 0.26$ ), Mixed Chamber ~ Professionalization:  $p = 0.16$  (SW- $p = 0.04$ , B- $p = 0.31$ ), Sortitioned Municipal Council ~ Professionalization:  $p = 0.44$  (SW- $p = 0.007$ , B- $p = 0.08$ ), Sortitioned Citizen Panel ~ Professionalization:  $p = 0.20$  (SW- $p = 0.06$ , B- $p = 0.17$ ), Sortitioned Chamber ~ Electoral Disaffection:  $p = 0.38$  (SW- $p = 3.9 \times 10^{-15}$ , B- $p = 0.16$ ), Mixed Chamber ~ Professionalization:  $p = 0.94$  (SW- $p = 5.1 \times 10^{-16}$ , B- $p = 0.13$ ), Sortitioned Municipal Council ~ Professionalization:  $p = 0.43$  (SW- $p = 4.1 \times 10^{-15}$ , B- $p = 0.20$ ), Sortitioned Citizen Panel ~ Professionalization:  $p = 0.49$  (SW- $p = 1.5 \times 10^{-14}$ , B- $p = 0.004$ ). The chi-square tests equally confirm our interpretation (several categories not reaching the minimum of 5 cases): Sortitioned Chamber ~ Leftist Party:  $p = 0.13$ , Mixed Chamber ~ Leftist Party:  $p = 7.3 \times 10^{-5}$ , Sortitioned Municipal Council ~ Leftist Party:  $p = 0.01$ , Sortitioned Citizen Panel:  $p = 5 \times 10^{-4}$ .