Walking a Mile in Their Shoes

– How Local Politicians Perceive Hard Decisions

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*** Work in progress. All comments and suggestions are most welcome! ***

Abstract

In light of increased pressure on local governments' capacity to handle contemporary challenges such as financial constraints, climate change, and an aging population, this article draws attention to those actually making controversial policy decisions. Based on the responses to free-text questions of more than 800 local and regional politicians in Sweden, we map and analyze how they perceive and manage the process of making policy decisions that might upset substantial parts of the population. Two delusively simple questions are in focus: In the eyes of those actually responsible for making them, *what is a hard decision?* and *how should hard decisions be handled?* The article thereby provides a nuanced and practice-based understanding of the everyday reality and considerations of local politicians that can inform contemporary debates on democratic representation and the role of the public in political decision-making.

Keywords: hard decisions, legitimacy, local government, representative democracy, free-text, democratic innovation

Introduction

This is a paper about hard decisions in politics and politicians' thoughts about making them. By hard decisions we mean authoritative decisions that involve trade-offs between legitimate interests and that generates justifiable resentments among citizens in the losing camp. Hard decisions differ from many other political decisions in that ideological values do not provide clear guidance and there are no technical solutions. Illustrative examples are decisions to locate wind farm parks in places that local populations regard as theirs by heritage (Pepermans and Loots 2013; Wolf and Van Dooren 2018) and to cut back on welfare services in times of fiscal austerity (Proctor and Simmons 2000; de Fine Licht et al. 2021; Kim and Warner 2021).

No one wants to make hard decisions and yet democracies must be able to handle them to be meaningful in people's lives. Not making decisions is also a decision that can have negative consequences; not least for the less advantaged in a society. One may argue that elected representatives are authorized to decide all common matters between elections (Urbinati & Warren 2008). Nevertheless, politicians' formal right to make hard decisions does not automatically transfer into citizen acceptance of their decisions (Mansbridge 1997). Since all options are associated with undesirable consequences, and since both sides in the conflict have legitimate interests, the situation is challenging for representatives (Prezeworski 2010).

Research pertaining to the making of hard decisions frequently seeks to understand politicians' motives for action, for example by estimating the relative importance of vote-seeking, office-seeking, and policy-seeking motives (Strøm 1990; Müller & Strøm 1999). Other streams of research targets decision-making processes and asks how citizens can be involved in decision-making as problem-solvers and as co-actors in the process (e.g. Smith 2009; Grönlund et al. 2014; Dryzek et al. 2019; Werner 2020; OECD 2020). In this paper we broaden perspectives by exploring politicians' subjective understanding of the situation. Focusing on the local rather than national level, we ask two ostensibly simple questions: *What is a hard decision to a politician?* and *How should politicians go about making them?*

To explore these questions, we have collected data that combines quantitative and qualitative qualities. Surveying a large number of local politicians (n > 800) in Sweden, we have asked open ended questions about personal experiences of hard decisions and beliefs about the best way of making them. The question format allows politicians to reason about their experiences with a minimum of theoretical framing, while the size of the sample allows a quantification of their accounts.

As indicated by the title of the paper – Walking a mile in their shoes – the study offers a practice-based understanding of the everyday reality of local politicians. We show that the task of handling hard decisions is a multi-faced phenomena which includes a breadth of perceptions, considerations, values, mind-sets, and strategies. It is a question far more complex than being for or against public involvement. Rather, it is a question of navigating conflicting expectations and clashes between one's own ideologies and a reality that that rarely meets the standards. Overall, the making of hard decisions is seen as a mutual commitment where elected representatives and citizens have different roles, but where both sides need to make an effort for the system to work. This ideal is, however, challenged by the realities of contemporary local democracy. Drawing out implications, we think a more explicit incorporation of the decision-makers' perspectives in democratic processes can contribute to a much-needed discussion on what local democracy can and should be in a challenging future.

Hard decisions are central to democracy

As our goal is to let the politicians themselves voice their perceptions, we keep an open approach to what constitutes a hard decision. As a starting point, however, we can stipulate what hard decisions are not: they are not routine, they do not have an obvious technical solution, and they are not easily solved by ideological divisions. Rather, we argue that they tend to involve some kind of acknowledgement that there are competing interests that are legitimate in principle (Mansbridge 1997; Przeworski 2010), and that there is no "right solution" that will benefit all citizens. When hard decisions are made, substantial shares of the citizenry will be forced to live by rules or arrangements that they do not like, and at least partly for understandable reasons. Consequently, these kinds of decisions are likely to generate controversy among the public. While there are obvious connections between hard decisions and, for example, the literature on wicked problems (e.g. Head 2008), we chose the term *hard decision* to signal that we will explore the everyday meaning that decision-makers put on the activity of making

decisions which involves weighing of different alternatives under conditions of scarcity and uncertainty.

The burden of making hard decisions largely defines what it means to be a contemporary political leader (Strøm and Müller 1999). Democracy is essentially about making choices, and a functioning democracy needs distinct political alternatives (e.g. Skoog 2019) as well as expressed disagreement and vivid debate on relevant perspectives (Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Goovaerts 2021). It can even be claimed that democracy *is* organized conflict (Mouffe 2009; Wolf and Van Dooren 2021). At the same time, democracy is of questionable use if it is not capable of solving pressing problems and come to decisions on what will be done (e.g. Warren and Mansbridge 2013). Moreover, it has to be done in a way that does not rely on pure power or violence as such solutions are costly and fragile. To thrive in the long run, democracy needs to handle decisions on resources and burdens in a way that can sustain legitimacy in the eyes of the public (Tyler 2006; Levi 1997). In other words, how hard decisions are handled tells us a lot of what democracy actually is.

Hard decisions are made at all political levels in a society: nationally, locally, and in some cases regionally. Local and national politicians have the same relationship with the citizens who have transferred responsibility for common matters until the next election. There are, however, reasons to believe that the nature of the decision might differ. At national level, decisions are typically about general values and directions, and prioritizations between large groups of citizens, including determining the boundaries of the welfare state and moral issues of freedom and rights. This means that there might be more room for ideology and grand ideas, but also that politicians might have more opportunities to distance themselves—physically and emotionally—from those immediately affected by their decisions.

At local level—the focus of our study—policy issues tend to be both more immediate and comprehensible to individuals than policy decisions at the national level (e.g. Nabatchi and Amsler 2014). Rather than targeting fairly anonymous groups of citizens, decisions at this level have to do with the organizing of the actual local community and the individuals who live in it. Moreover, local politicians often live physically close to the people affected by the decisions. This means that politicians are exposed to both the outcomes of their decisions and the potentially resentful or even hostile citizens to a larger extent. In addition, citizens are likely to feel that decisions are important to them and might find it comparatively easy to

locate and confront a responsible politician. Taken together, we can expect politicians at local level to have a more personal relationship with both the location and the citizens which is likely to be reflected in their beliefs about what a hard decision actually is.

Handling hard decisions: theoretical expectations

In light of contemporary debates on how representative democracy should be revitalized to address contemporary challenges (Norris 2011; Alonso et al. 2011; Castiglione and Pollak 2019; Dryzek et al. 2019; Przeworski 2019; Mansbridge 2019; Fleuß 2021), recent literature has noted that the beliefs and considerations of policy-makers are rarely the explicit topic of studies (e.g. Karlsson 2012; Green et a. 2019; Wolf 2019; Koskimaa and Rapeli 2021; Thompson 2019; Jacquet and van der Does 2021). When representatives' beliefs are the focus, it is often in the form of role perceptions. In particular, researchers have traditionally explored whether representatives identify primarily as trustees who are able to act on their own judgement and preferences or as delegates who follow the directions from their constituents (e.g. Eulau et al. 1959; see Rehfeld 2009 for overview) and/or their party (e.g. Karlsson 2012; Nilsson 2015). The distinction between trustee and delegate has been criticized for being too crude and other models have been suggested, including the influential categorization between promissory and anticipatory representation proposed by Mansbridge (2003). However, although these role perceptions are highly valuable as ideal types in a normative discussion on representation and might be informative as to how representatives are likely to approach their duties in general, they not necessarily provide us with knowledge on how representatives believe that actual cases of hard decisions should be handled.

That being said, the literature on political decision-making identifies at least three themes that can inform our expectations on how local politicians will reason about hard decisions that we will refer to as the rational vote-seeking politician, the negotiating solution-seeking politician, and the public involvement-oriented politician. These themes are typically intertwined and comes in different forms, but highlight different perspectives of what it means to be a political representative.

A first theme can be identified around the ambition to interpret and estimate the motives behind actions and strategies of political decision-makers and parties. This perspective typically sees politicians' as rational goal-maximizers (Downs 1957) who will act strategically to achieve certain objectives. The most traditional or obvious goal for political parties and their

leaders is to maximize votes in order to increase power (e.g. Schumpeter 1942; Downs 1957; Manin 1997). Based on this perspective, we can expect politicians to be highly attentive to public opinion—at least when an election is approaching. To be attentive to public opinion can, however, be done both by trying to interpret and follow the fluctuations of public opinion, and by identifying potential gaps in the political landscape and try to lead and change public opinion in a certain direction (e.g. Mansbridge 2003). Moreover, votes can be won both by presenting oneself as a competent and trustworthy alternative, and by negative campaigning where opponents are miscredited (e.g. Mayhew 1974). This means that we can expect politicians to express concerns for timing and spinning of political messages, as well as for their position in the web of parties and candidates.

The vote-maximizing approach can be criticized for putting too much emphasis on rational goal-seeking. For example, it can be argued that many politicians are more concerned with avoiding blame for unpopular decisions than about gaining a certain outcome (e.g. Weaver 1986; Hinterleitner 2017). This might be of particular concern for local politicians who will live in the immediate society in which they have caused resentment. In such cases, a politician might hesitate to take formal part in a hard decision—even if they genuinely recognize the actual problem—by appealing to ideological concerns or electoral pledges, or by simply adopting and pushing forward the opinion of the protestors. Moreover, it has been suggested that parties are not only trying to maximize votes. They can also be primarily office-seeking and policy-seeking (e.g. Wittman 1973; Strøm and Müller 1999). The difference between these approaches are not always distinct, but whereas a politician who is most concerned with maximizing votes might pay strong attention to public opinion—or even take populistic positions in order to please presumptive voters—an office- or policy-seeking politician might pay more attention to building alliances and coalitions with other parties by, at least temporarily ,downplaying certain opinions.

This brings us to the second theme which emphasizes negotiation and compromise between different policy alternatives as a way to reach agreement on how pressing issues are to be handled (e.g. Lijphart 1999; Martin 2013). While not denying the importance including a broad range of perspectives into decision-making, including public preferences, the focus lies on developing arrangements that can foster respect and trust between representatives of different parties and ideologies; thereby spark the seeking of mutual ground, open reflexive consultation of third-party actors or experts, and constructive deliberation and/or negotiation on

political compromises. For example Wolak (2020) also argues—based on American data—that citizens generally value compromises and expect politicians to be able to solve disagreements and deliver policy outcomes. The focus of this perspective is, accordingly, not necessarily on fulfilling a stated goal, but on finding a *solution* or compromise.

A particular aspect of agreement- fostering arrangements that has evoked conservable debate is the role of the privacy (e.g. Warren and Mansbridge 2013), i.e. decision-making that is to some extent sheltered from the public eye. Liberal democracy holds a normative presumption in favor of transparency in political decision-making (e.g. Chambers 2004). Traditionally, in-house of "secret" decision-making is associated with dubious activities or even outright corruption; not least at the local level (e.g. Erlingsson et al. 2008; Bergh et al. 2017; Broms et al. 2019). At the same time, there is widespread recognition among researchers as well as practitioners that some issues—especially those that are complex, technical, and involves multiple concerns to balance—might benefit from deliberation or negotiation in a comparatively private setting restricted to the group of those finally responsible for the decision (e.g. Chambers 2004; Mansbridge 2009; Warren and Mansbridge 2013; de Fine Licht 2020) as transparency can lead to posturing rather than efficient solution-seeking and compromise.

Empirical studies also show that settings for political debate that are kept sheltered from the public can foster more efficient and constructive discussions on problem-solving and policy alternatives (e.g. Alomar et al. 2021). Specifically, Steiner et.al. (2004) found in their extensive analysis of parliamentary debates that closed sessions can bring mutual understanding and respect between decision-makers on different sides. Similarly, Leirset (2021) shows in his comparison of the relatively closed meetings in local government settings in Denmark and the relatively open meetings in Norway that closed meetings made politicians more able to deliberate in an open and willing-to-change-in-light-of-good-arguments manner. This means that faced by hard decisions, decision-makers may—for both theoretical and experience-based reasons—prefer a more internal process that restricts public involvement. Importantly, this may not necessarily be because they want to engage in dubious activities, but because they see a need to come to agreement on how to handle a pressing issue for the better of their community.

Based on this perspective, we can expect politicians to express considerations for deliberation and negotiation between representatives—both within and between parties—as well as

considerations for expert opinions and facts. Moreover, we can expect them to refer to "political games" or bargaining between fractions, as well as to norms of sticking to decisions and honor agreements once a solution has been settled.

Finally, a third theme revolves around ideals of public involvement in political decision-making. This perspective stems from the debate on how representative democracy can be "revitalized" by establishing forums for greater involvement of citizens into political decision-making (e.g. Dryzek et al. 2019); often discussed under the umbrella term of democratic innovations (Smith 2009; Adenskog 2018; Elstub and Escobar 2019). These processes or institutions include, for example, deliberative mini-publics, citizen assemblies/juries/dialogues, and forums for participatory budgeting. They can be inspired primarily by theories of participatory democracy (e.g. Pateman 1970; Werner 2020) and/or deliberative democracy (e.g. Fishkin 2009; Grönlund et al. 2014), but have in common that they recognize the role of non-elected, non-experts in the decision-making process and often aim at providing policy recommendations of various strength (e.g. Pateman 2012; Lafont 2015; Setälä and Herne 2014; Setälä 2017; Werner 2020).

Ideals of public involvement have been highly influential not only in academic debates, but also in practical policy-making (e.g. OECD 2020). This is not least the case at local level where it has been claimed that citizen participation is now normal practice (Michaels and De Graaf 2017). For example, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions has actively worked for several years to promote citizen participation in local government as a way of increasing citizen trust and strengthen the empirical legitimacy of the representative system (SALAR 2019). The main arguments in favor of increased citizen involvement is that it will give individual citizens a say in the policy process and contribute to the inclusion of individual citizens' perspectives (Michels 2011), which can spark creativity and problem-solution and help to dissolve stalemated processes (e.g. Beauvais and Warren 2019). In the end, the expectation is that policy decisions will be more acceptable to the public; either for purely instrumental reasons or because participants value fairness in decision-making (e.g. Tyler 2006; Fung 2015; Werner 2020), which will benefit the society as a whole.

Arrangement for public involvement in decision-making are typically not presented as alternatives to representative democracy. Rather, they are advisory complements to established democratic procedures (Germann et al. 2021), which provide non-binding recommendations.

This means that elected politicians are still responsible for the final decisions being ethically, practically, and economically possible, and need to be prepared to defend the procedure against well-known objections to increased public involvement such as the potential violation of the principles of equality (e.g. Lafont 2015; Hertting and Kugelberg 2017) and the risk of triviality and disappointment (e.g. Fung 2015). While this has led worries for decision-maker cherry-picking (e.g. Font et al. 2018), the non-binding nature of participatory arrangements also means that politicians are increasingly faced with situations when they have to navigate not only the complicated nature of hard decisions in themselves, but also extensive expectations to arrange and follow sometimes contradictory advise from various forums for public involvement.

Empirical research also shows that citizens generally value the opportunity to be involved (e.g. Christensen 2020; Werner 2020), although outcome favorability has been shown to strongly influence public beliefs about decisions and decision-making procedures (Doherty and Wolak 2012; Esaiasson et al. 2019), and evidence for effects on the general public beyond those actually participating remains inconclusive (see e.g. Lafont 2015; Werner 2020; van der Does and Jacquet 2021 for discussion). A complicating issue is research showing that many citizens think that people like themselves have too little influence in politics, but are, at the same time, reluctant to get actively involved themselves (e.g Renwick et al. 2022).

Given the saliency and popularity of public involvement in both research and practice, we expect public involvement to be on top of the head of local political representatives. They are likely to reflect upon means of communication and interaction with citizens in formal as well as informal settings. However, given both ideological concerns and actual experiences of public interactions, we expect politicians to express both positive and negative attitudes to public involvement.

To sum up, we argue that the so far limited scholarly focus on decision-makers' perspectives calls for an open approach to the reasoning of political representatives striving to gain public legitimacy that centers around the *task* of making hard decisions in the everyday political reality of local politics. We expect to find elements of the three themes presented above in the considerations of decision-makers involved in hard decisions. We do not, expect decision-makers to share a single, coherent attitude. Navigating the task of making hard decisions in contemporary local politics is likely to be highly context dependent and therefore more about

finding a balance and mix between different concerns than about choosing and keeping to a particular model of decision-making.

Available research also indicate that decision-makers hold ambiguous attitudes on how democracy should make decisions on pressing and potentially sensitive issues. For example, Gilljam et al. (2010:39) reported that Swedish local politicians were quite evenly divided when presented with a simple choice between a democratic ideal based on traditional representation with an emphasis on discussion within the group of politicians and an ideal based on representation in combination with extensive public participation. Similarly, Hendriks (2016) and Hendriks and Lees-Marshment (2019) have shown how political appointees and leaders can hold participatory ideals in principle but abstain from organizing institutional forums for participation or following recommendations from citizens because of more practical reasons.

Essentially, we strive to accomplish the aim as presented in the paper's title: to take the perspective of local decision-makers in their struggle to handle pressing issues on behalf, and under the critical eye, of the citizens.

Design and methodological approach

To map and analyze the perceptions of those making hard decisions, we posed free-text questions to a large sample (N = 1089) of Swedish politicians at municipal and regional (secondary municipal) level (from now on: *Local level*). The experiences of Swedish local politicians striving to gain public acceptance for their decisions should be highly informative to the larger debate on democratic legitimacy as Swedish municipalities are, in an international comparison, highly independent (Sellers et al. 2020). Specifically, they set their own tax-rate and have major responsibility for welfare services. Similarly, the regions set their own tax-level and are responsible for health care provision. Therefore, political decision-making at this level constitutes a critical case for legitimate handling of hard decisions.

The participants were randomly selected from the Panel of Politicians (*Politikerpanelen*), which is a web-based panel of individuals who have been elected for political positions in Sweden, conducted at the Laboratory for Opinion Research, University of Gothenburg. This means that although government decisions and party decisions are intimately linked (Strøm and Müller 1999), our focus is on individual representatives and how they perceive local government decisions rather than on the processes and considerations of party organizations or

decisions that party leaders make. The survey was administrated in May 2020 which could be important as this was during the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic was, however, surprisingly absent in the responses to our questions. The politicians seem to have interpreted the questions as more general and eternal, or the pandemic as a question primarily for national policy.

Our questions were embedded into a larger survey of questions proposed by researchers from various fields. From the larger survey, we also got some background information on the participants. 65 percent were men, in total 7 individuals identified as "other" or chose not to report their sex, and the rest identified as women. The majority were quite old: only 7.4 percent were 39 years old or younger, whereas almost 33 percent reported that they were 70 years old or older. Moreover, they tended to be highly educated with 48.5 holding a university degree. When it comes to which party they belonged to, there is reasonable correspondence to the degree of support the parties receive in the country at large, with the notable exception that the right-wing Swedish Democrats was clearly underrepresented with only 3.8 percent of the participants. Although articulated, the characteristics of our sample are in line with the general composition of Swedish politicians at the local level (Olofsson 2019) as older, more educated, and more male-dominated than the Swedish population at large. From our perspective, it is also a clear advantage to experienced politicians included in the sample as they are likely to have given the topic of hard decisions a great deal of thought.

Opting for an open approach which does not specify a particular policy issue (e.g. Wolf and van Dooren 2021), we began our section of questions with informing the participants that we were going to ask them about situations of hard decisions in local politics, and provided a broad explanation of hard decisions as situations where legitimate interests are in conflict with each other and that were likely to upset parts of the population and/or cause protests. Hence, we primed them to consider their relationship with the public when thinking about hard decisions but did not take public participation in policy-making as a point of departure (e.g. Sønderskov 2020). Thus, the format left them a fair leeway to put their own meaning into the concept of hard decisions (which the data also revealed that they did).

For the first research question—*What is a hard decision?*—we asked two related questions: *Can you give us an example of one or several hard decisions that you have been involved in as a politician?* and *Can you describe in which way these decisions were hard?* For the

second research question—*How should hard decisions be handled?* we asked a general question: *Imagine that your municipality or region would have to make a hard decision that is likely to upset parts of the population. How do you think that you, the politicians, should handle the process to gain as much acceptance as possible and increase the chances that the population would trust you as decision-makers?* Note that for logistical reasons, this question was only posed to half the sample (the other half got a related by differently framed question). Finally, we asked all participants a follow-up question on how their perceptions of how hard decision should be handled corresponded with practice: *How have you, the politicians, handled the situations of hard decisions that you have been involved in, in practice? Please provide examples!*

All responses were provided as free-text answers where the participants could write as little or as much as they wanted to. The drawbacks of this approach compared to interviews are obvious: Responses tend to be short and there are no possibilities to ask follow-up questions or demand clarifications. The advantages are, however, several. It gives us the opportunity to map the perceptions and experiences of the representatives as expressed in their own words under the shelter of complete anonymity. Thereby, we are able to capture not only theoretically pre-defined dimensions but also more pragmatic, "incorrect," or unexpected attitudes, at the same time as we can get an indication of the frequency of different dimensions that data based on qualitative interviews would not allow for. Moreover, we were surprised by the richness of the data we got. Although a fair deal of the participants satisfied with a single word such "information" or "dialogue," we also got many detailed descriptions of several sentences, and up to 175 words. Only a handful of the participants complained about the free-text format as being too demanding or stated that they did not understand the questions.

Analytical approach

When analyzing the data, we employed a semi-qualitative perspective where we tried to make use of both the quantity and the richness of the data. Inspired by thematic analysis (e.g. Clarke et al. 2015) we started with a primarily bottom-up approach. This means that while being informed by theoretical concepts and such as public participation, as well as by six explorative interviews with local politicians,[1] we based the analysis on what the participants actually

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[1] Four women and two men representing parties from left to right and both in the position of majority and in the position of opposition were interviewed. The stated theme of the interviews was "how to handle hard decisions"

wrote rather than placing their responses into predefined categories. Inspired by the internationally fairly established way of coding the "most important problem"-question (MIP), we decided to code the first two or three types of considerations that the Politicians mentioned. Since a clear majority of the respondents only mentioned one or two examples and very few wrote more than three, this approach proved to be useful.

In practice, this means that we read the first 100 answers to each question; identifying different aspects of meaning in the texts and creating preliminary broader themes. Since the data consisted of mainly of short texts and we had no possibility to ask for clarifications, we tried to stay as close to the stated meanings as possible. We then applied the themes to the data once again, with the result that new themes were included and others were collapsed. In this process, we strived to create a limited number of categories that could summarize the data in a meaningful way. Each response in the data was then coded with a specific number, to allow for descriptive quantitative analysis. To validate the coding procedure, we double-coded about 20 percent of the responses and discussed all remaining queries. Throughout this process, illustrative examples were collected and briefly commented in a separate document. All quotes were translated from Swedish by ourselves.

It should be noted that the way themes have been chosen and presented is not obvious. The presentation provides one interpretation out of several legitimate ways of showing the results. From this follows that the value of the exact percentages reported is limited. Rather, the reported frequencies should be seen as tendencies and indications of which considerations or activities that the politicians consider important and/or on top of their heads, which need to be interpreted in the light of illustrative quotes and examples to gain full meaning. Moreover, given our explorative approach, our focus in this paper is on mapping perceptions on hard decisions of politicians *as a group*, and not on exploring variations between different types of politicians based on, for example, gender or party affiliation. Although clearly vital for future research, these questions will be left out for now.

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and they were conducted in an open and conversational manner. Each interview took 1 to 1.5 hours. They were not recorded but detailed notes were taken and transcribed.

What is a hard decision?

Do local politicians recognize the situation of having to decide between colliding but legitimate interests of importance to citizens? It turns out that they do, and that they are willing to share their thoughts about it. When asked to provide examples of hard decisions from their own experience, only few politicians in our sample (9 percent) stated that they had none to offer. Among those who qualified the response beyond a straightforward "No", there are four types of reasoning. Some politicians have simply not (yet) made the experience. Others argue that hard decisions are rare in politics, sometimes adding a sarcastic twist to their response: "It is easier to increase spending" (#152). Still others have found a personal way to avoid the situation. The avoidance strategy may be expressed in confrontational terms like in "I'm not bargaining" (#20), or with irony: "[It is] the luxury of being in opposition" (#455). Finally, some politicians question the premise of the question as their ideological values do indeed apply to most situations: "Based on ideology and Marxism, left-wing politicians have a good basis for making good decisions" (#136).

However, attesting to the relevance of hard decisions in local politics, an overwhelming majority of politicians in our sample (91 percent) provided examples from their own experience. The following response captures sentiments that are shared by many local politicians: *Most political decisions have both pros and cons and have complex backgrounds where it is rarely only positive things that come out of the decision. For me as elected representative, it is frustrating that this is rarely reflected in news media* (#103). As we will see, seriousness, complexity, and concerns that outsiders fail to acknowledge how difficult the situation is are recurrent themes in politicians' perceptions of hard decisions.

To narrow in on the meaning of hard decisions, we coded substantial aspects of the examples provided by politicians. The categorization in Table 1 groups responses into six general categories that cut across specific policy areas, and that gives an idea of what type of action or consideration that is prominent in the response. Note that all tables show the percentage of the respondents mentioning a specific category as one of the first two or three. This means that the percentages do not add up to 100.

Table 1: The substance of hard decisions – examples provided by local politicians

Type of decision	% mentioned	Examples
Do not acknowledge the problem	9	No personal experience Rare in politics, politician's shy them Ideology effective guideline Opposition/do not participate in hard decisions
Acknowledge the problem		
Cuts in public welfare	57	Budget deficits/Saving plans Removal/ limitation of specific service (e.g. school closures, withdrawn financial aid to cultural activities).
Land use politics	20	Wind power localization Zooning schemes Building new houses Establishing housing for immigrants/asylum seekers
Value conflicts/prioritiza-tions	16	Nature conservation vs need for housing High quality of services vs a vibrant countryside Choosing form of operation of public services Introduction of surveillance cameras Issues related to individual's rights Fiddling with budget rules
Reorganization of public service provision	9	Reorganization of schools Reorganization of local health services
Taxation	4	Raising taxes Cutting taxes when recourses are scarce
Other	12	National level issues Personal issues Unspecified (lack of content)

Note: Based on free-text responses. Non-responses and "do not know"-responses are excluded. The percent-age shows the share of those responding to the question (n=872) who mentioned the type of decision as one of the first three.

Given this coding principle, one type of decision stands out as dominant: cuts in public welfare. More than every other local politician (57 percent) mentions cuts in the welfare systems. The response from politician (#123) illustrate the range of decisions that involve welfare cuts in Swedish local politics: *Closures of care units, closures of schools, merging of units where the local population prefers to have "own" units in exchange for achieving higher quality in fewer but well-equipped businesses*. Decisions to cut back on public welfare stands out as even more important considering that the category "Reorganization of public service

provision", which was mentioned by 9 percent of politicians, often imply downsizing of welfare services.[2]

The politicians' responses also provide insight into why they find it necessary to decide on welfare cuts. As could be expected, it is a mixture of budgetary constraints and a need to pool resources at fewer units to maintain the quality of service and comply with legal requirements. School closures is the dominant specific decision (mentioned by 25 percent of respondents), which is in good agreement with research on local conflicts in the Nordic context (Autti and Hyry-Beihammer 2014; Larsson Taghizadeh 2016; Uba 2015; Strandberg and Berg 2019).

Besides welfare state retrenchments, two more types of decision are frequently mentioned by politicians. First, decisions related to land uses, such as localization of windfarm parks and changed zooning schemes that allows for new constructions and new activities in a given geographical area (mentioned by 20 percent of politicians). Second, the broad category of decisions that the politicians describe as value conflicts and prioritizations between desirable values, such as high quality of services against protection of a vibrant countryside. Illustrating the broad area of responsibility for Swedish local politicians, this category also includes decisions relating to individual's rights, such as enforcing child protective custody against the will of the parents. Interestingly, and perhaps typical for a Scandinavian welfare state in which citizens are generally supportive of high taxes in return for large welfare commitments, only few politicians in our sample (4 percent) mention tax hikes and other changes of tax rates.[3]

The follow-up question of what makes a decision difficult sheds further light on politicians' concerns. Table 2 displays our coding of politicians' responses when probed to explicate their concerns.

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[2] "Reorganization of public service provision" is coded as a separate category when the decision is described in those terms. Decisions that fall under this category are usually justified in terms of streamlining operations rather than with the need to keep public spending under control.

[3] The remaining category "Other" has a broad content, such as these unspecified responses: "Of course we politicians need to be brave" (#150), and "The Västernorrland region is a catastrophe" (#41). [The administrative unit *Västernorrland* has a conflict-filled history of healthcare re-organization.]

Table 2: What makes a decision hard to make?

Reasons	% mentioned	Examples
No real problem	5	Basing all decisions on ideology makes them easy to handle Opposing decisions that one does not like makes them easy to handle
Conflicts with citizens	32	Direct citizen confrontations Social media protests Personal threats
Negative consequences upon affected individuals	31	Impairments for vulnerable groups Disappointing citizens Bad working conditions for public service personnel
Ideological concerns/emotionally costly	29	Violating deeply held value principles General feeling of having to do something that feels wrong
Conflicts within the group of politicians	10	Conflicts between parties Conflicts within one's own party/coalition
Procedural concerns	8	Uncertainty about outcomes/lack of reliable information Lack of transparency/Exclusionary process Braking promises Stalemated process Unjust/unclear regulation
Other	2	Personal circumstances

Note: Based on free-text responses. Non-responses and "do not know"-responses are excluded. The percentage shows the share of those responding to the question (n=812) who mentioned a specific consideration as one of the first two.

Concentrating on those who actually see a need to engage in hard decisions, three reasons dominate. The first is that it generates conflicts with the citizens concerned (mentioned by 32 percent of politicians). The problem for politicians may be that protests are judged to stand in the way of meaningful communication: *You meet people who are so emotionally engaged that it is not possible to have meaningful conversations* (#398). However, in some cases the level of conflict escalates to involve personal threats: *I was chairman of the child and youth committee. The hatred and threats were completely insane* (#108). Moreover, protests can be particularly unnerving in small localities where everyone knows everyone: *The decision itself was not difficult, but that a small group of people protested loudly, and some of these individuals were my friends. The price I had to pay was that we no longer socialize privately* (#426). Overall, the risk of conflicts with more or less organized interests is clearly important to local politicians, both in terms of missed opportunities for and personal safety.

The other two reasons for why decisions are hard to make are compassion for the persons who are adversely affected (31 percent), and the stress that follows from compromising with ones' personal ideological values (29 percent). Compassion with the affected can be expressed like this with respect to vulnerable groups: *My fear is that the decisions we will have to make will hit hard on the people I care about the most. The people who already have a tough financial situation, who are exposed to violence, who live with an addiction or who in other ways have a tough situation* (#455). Corresponding expressions of emotional stress – cognitive dissonance – can read as follows: *As a politician, you are often faced with a choice between asserting your opinion and maintaining your ideological credibility,* (#799). There is also a fair degree of overlap between compassion and internal emotional stress as the former often leads to the other.

Other and less frequently mentioned reasons relate to internal conflicts among political decision-makers (10 percent) and to limitations of decision-making procedures (8 percent). The former type of reason refers both to internal conflicts within their own party and to conflicts with representatives of other parties. Procedural reasons may be about being bound by rigid regulations, having to break election promises, and having to make decisions under uncertainty. The agony of being unsure of the decision can be expressed like this: *Which expert is right? Was there no way to predict and avoid this?* (#85). Given the research on the difficulties associated with decisions under risk, it is perhaps surprising that such considerations are not more prominent among local politicians in our sample.[4]

Summing up, difficult decisions for local politicians are largely about the discomfort that results from taking away from people what they value, whether it is welfare services or the use of land in their community. Moreover, even though external conflicts with citizens and political peers are part of the problem, it is still internal, psychological, conflicts within the politicians themselves that weigh heaviest when they reflect on what makes decisions difficult to make. The politicians in our sample talk about the difficulties of resolving inconveniences to citizens, of compromising their values, and of dealing with weaknesses in decision-making procedures. The observed reasoning partly deviates from the expected theoretical perspectives we derived from the literature. For example, there is very little in politicians' perceptions of

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[4] The personal reasons assigned to the remaining category "other" (2 percent) may read as follows: "All free time is spent trying to find solutions. It affects my ability to rest and relax" (#49).

hard decisions that relate to goal-seeking rational actors who takes great account of the electoral consequences of their actions (see for example Mayhew 1974). Rather, efforts to make sense of politicians' perceptions of hard decisions might gain more from psychological theories like loss aversion (Novemsky and Kahneman 2005) or cognitive dissonance (Harmon-Jones 2019).

How should hard decisions be handled?

What perspectives emerges when we shift attention to the question how hard decisions should be handled? As previously discussed, a small group of politicians in our sample do not recognize that hard decisions have to be made at all. This position is also reflected in reflections on handling of the problem. For example, Politician (#238) asked: *What could it be that would force the municipality make a decision that would upset the municipal members? If that would happen, information, openness and participation would apply.* Relatedly, some feel that there is no real need to try to handle hard decisions; either because there is no way to do it without upsetting people, because really hard decisions can be avoided or relaxed by compromises, or, cynically, because time will make the problem go away. In the words of Politician (#569): *Those feeling that they are on the losing side are much more emotionally engaged than those one who wins. It is completely stupid to go out on the village and discuss against lousy arguments. Better keep quiet. After 1 month, the "disaster" has become every-day routine.*

For a clear majority, however, the question of how to handle hard decisions trigger reflections.[5] As shown in table 3, the most important characteristic of a process that will generate public legitimacy is, according to politicians, *information* – commonly articulated also in terms of communication or transparency.[6] Many of the politicians show great confidence in the public's capacity to process and react to information in a rational and non-self-interested way, and to act as good losers as long as the politicians act in a decent way. As for example Politician (#1031) argues: *Easy. Say exactly as it is. People probably do not agree, but generally they respect you if they feel that you are someone who really stands up for their*

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[5] Recall that only half of the sample was asked this question. The other half was asked a differently framed question that is used for other purposes.

[6] Transparency is often associated with participation but does not necessarily imply involvement or two-way communication. We have coded transparency as information if there are no specific references to participation or two-way communication in the text.

opinion. Similarly, Politician (#37) notes: *Information about the different alternatives that the policy has to choose from and even more information about why that choice was made.*

Table 3: How should hard decisions be handled?

Ways of handling	% mentioned	Examples
No need for concern	1	Possible to avoid Things will calm down
"Mission impossible"	4	Self-interest is too dominating Trust is already too low
Propose solutions		
Explain/inform	69	Motivating/justifying in media Transparency of documents
Involve citizens in decision-making	49	Meet/listen/talk to citizens Citizen dialogue Referendum
Unity/firmness	17	Building agreement within the group of politicians Joint plan for communication Show that there has to be an end to the process Honor the "silent majority"
High quality decision/ being right	11	Letting things take time Consulting with experts
Other	3	Personal circumstances

Note: Based on free-text responses. Non-responses and "do not know"-responses are excluded. The percentage shows the share of those responding to the question (n=442) who mentioned a specific way of handling decisions as one of the first three.

The importance that politicians ascribe to of information could be interpreted as a fairly classic perception of the representative role where politicians are elected to make also hard decisions but are bound by a duty to explain them to the represented (Pitkin 1967). As we can learn from the table, however, a large proportion of politicians in our sample have a rather participatory view on how hard decisions should be handled; albeit within in boundaries of representative democracy. The broad category of *involvement*—in which we include all forms of activities where representatives interact with citizens in a two-way form of communication, from listening to concerns and responding to questions to organizing public dialogues over a long period of time—is mentioned by almost half of the politicians, and is frequently mentioned in tandem with information.[7] This supports the notion that the last decade has implied a shift in focus from *whether* the public should be involved to *how* and *how much* it should be involved (e.g. Nabatchi and Amsler 2014).

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[7] This category is admittedly inclusive. We have, for example, coded a meeting with citizens as involvement although in theory, a meeting could imply one-way communication where information is simply delivered.

Generally, politicians express high expectations on citizen involvement as a way of generating legitimacy for hard decisions. A typical example is Politician (#471) who wrote: *Communicate with the citizens, and create more participation, democracy. Then we have a greater chance of finding out why and how. Participation creates safety and understanding. Meet face to face.* Others have a more pragmatic position: *A dialogue with those who are upset and adapt the proposals as far as possible without distorting the very idea of the decision. You must also realize that you will never be able to make everyone happy* (Politician #225). Importantly, however, referendum does not seems to be perceived as a solution to hard decisions by the politicians: only a handful of individuals mentioned it at all, and of those, not all were positive. Politician (#864), for example, states that: *Referendum is definitely not a solution!* This statement reflects a previously documented experience where local politicians have felt the need to go against the results of publicly initiated referendums (Wänström 2015).

Although communication and citizen involvement stand out in the data, there is also a substantial group of representatives who believe that the political process should be kept a primarily internal matter for the elected representatives—in consultation with experts and/or public officials. Some of those seem to think that citizen involvement has no real place in the democratic model. As Politician (#836) wrote[8]: *Busloads with citizens coming to the council meetings, applauding speakers who in their ears say the right things. Then democracy is unduly affected. We have elections every four years. You go against the will of the people who always want to keep everything, while politicians must have finances in balance and follow legal requirements such as school laws, work environment laws, etc.* Others, like Politician (#455), rather stress the importance of political deliberation among the representatives, and the coming to agreement on a wise decision: *I believe that the key to the process is information and political agreement. I see the importance of us now joining forces and agreeing on tough decisions together. I really believe that unity and taking responsibility for the tough decisions together can create a greater understanding among the population as a whole.* In this vein, some also mention the importance of sticking to the decision once it has been taken. In the words of Politician (#81): *To show courage and integrity by standing up for the decision and the motives for it.* In this view, it is most important to make the "right decision" and then show firmness and take responsibility for it.

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[8] This quote was in fact a response to the question of what makes a decision hard.

Moreover, some politicians have experiences from ambitious work with citizen involvement that has proved to less worth-while than they hoped. For example, Politician (#310) wrote: *Like tearing plasters on hairy legs. Clear, fast, but still with openness and "facts on the table" and without hesitation or changing the decision halfway. As a municipality, we have participated in a project for "difficult issues" together with SKL[9] and my experience after regular meetings and discussions between different interest groups for several years is that afterwards we were even more firm in our different views and were further from a solution to the school issue - which it was about.* Several politicians also state the importance of "listening – but not too much" (*lagom* in Swedish), as protesting groups might not be representative of the population at large. In this context the idea of a reasonable but silent majority seem to be fairly spread. In the words of Politician (#300): *My experience is that we politicians often miss talking to the silent majority (who often understand the state of the world and realize that sometimes difficult decisions need to be made), but instead spend all our time on the screaming minority.*

In relation to bad experiences of public involvement, we also see signs of discrepancies between the respondents' ideology and practice. As a follow-up question, we asked: *How have you, the politicians, handled the situations of hard decisions that you have involved in in practice?[10]* Of those responding to the question, the majority, 55 percent, stated that they at least tried to follow their own ideal on how to handle the process; regardless whether their ideal was to involve citizens, engage in extensive communication, or stick to the decision. A common answer was: *see previous answer.* Others, like Politician (#709), stated that they were content with the way they handled their tasks: *Generally speaking in a good way. Most of us do our job well.* Some, like Politician (#48), express a pragmatic attitude to the perceived discrepancies between normative concerns of democratic decision-making and real-world events: *Openness, but it will not work anyway, so basically it is just to go for it, if the decisions are good things will calm down eventually and opponents will run out of air.* However, 21 percent or respondents stated explicitly that they (or politicians in general) did not live up to the ideal they had expressed earlier. For example, Politician (#27) answered the

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[9] SKL (nowadays SKR) stands for "Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions."

[10] For the responses to this question, we used a simple coding based on whether the respondent perceived that the politicians at least tried to handle the decisions in the way he/she had described on the previous question or not. Many responses, 24 percent, were, however, coded as "other" since they did not really answered the question but rather described instances of hard decisions, described, again, how it should be handled, or presented his/her own opinions of an issue. 30 % did not respond to the question at all.

question on how hard decisions should be handled by stating: *To inform as much as possible to gain trust and not try to cover up anything but speak about negative as well as positive things.* When later on being asked how decisions are handled in practice, s/he wrote: *The description on the previous question is something that never happens in reality.* This points to the value of not only asking for perceptions or opinions on how the political duty should be carried out under ideal circumstances, but to also ask for real-world experiences.

Some politicians express clear self-criticism. For example, Politician (#488) stated: *Following the models I described, but unfortunately with poor media skills, and perhaps with over- or sometimes underestimation of the citizens' knowledge of the issue.* A recurrent theme is, however, that politicians express frustration that their perceived ambitious job is not really rewarded by the citizens. In the words of Politician (#491)*: No matter how much information, meetings and communication we convey, we are blamed and the opposition takes advantage of the dissatisfaction, even if they have no alternative but are only in opposition.* Similarly, Politician (#265)—who had previously stressed the importance of broad information, transparent reporting of all documentation and clear justifications with references to both pros and cons of the decision as a way to gain public trust—wrote: *I work as I have described it in my previous answer. The problem with the agitation of the citizens is that they are often guided by false information flourishing on social media. To read the municipality's documents about the issue, where the correct information can be found, does not seem to be interesting.* These statements seem to reflect an understanding of politics in which politicians and citizens serve different roles, but are "in it together." If the politicians do their part and provide correct information on the situation, the citizens should be able to critically reflect upon both alternative sources of information, and on perceived populistic statements by the opposition. Politicians should, in this view, at least be given the benefit of the doubt that they are trying to make the best out of the situation. This relationship with the public seems, however, to be an ideal that is out of reach for many local politicians.

Summing up, how to handle hard decisions is a complicated concern for politicians where clashes between ideology and practice are common. There are certainly politicians who prefer to make decisions in comparatively closed settings, but the general picture is that politicians have a rather inclusive ideal of how local politics should be performed. They are prepared to make hard decisions, but they want—and expect—citizens to be prepared to do *their* work, i.e. provide input, evaluate available information in a critical manner, and, perhaps most of

all, be prepared to tolerate decisions that affects them negatively if provided with good arguments. In this regard, the actual reality is, however, often a disappointment for the politicians, who end up feeling misunderstood or innocently accused of not acting in the interest of the community.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study shows that hard decisions are actual concerns that largely shape the everyday reality of local politicians. Understood as decisions that involve choices between interests that are legitimate in principle, local politicians struggle with hard decisions in relation to other political actors and groups of citizens, as well as in relation to their own ideologies and emotions.

Asking politicians for their beliefs and experiences of hard decisions, we generally do not see that much of purely strategic reasoning, vote-hunting, or unprincipled bargaining; all characteristics associated with popular ideas of politicians as manipulative and power-hungry actors. By and large, the local politicians in our sample present their role more as problem-solvers under conditions of resource constraints than as goal-maximizers. In their day-to-day work, they rarely deal with ideological visions or grand ideas about how their community can thrive. Rather, they are dealing with issues of how to make the most of a limited budget and, not least, with down-cutting or reorganization of welfare services; often with consequences for their immediate neighborhood and people they care about and potentially know as individuals. As Politician (#468) described it: *In my gloomiest moments, it feels like we are doing damage minimization instead of building something good.* Similarly, while many politicians express an ideal of politics in which they value citizen engagement and involvement—which is in line with last decades' scholarly and practice-based interest in finding new forms of revitalizing representative democracy—they confront an actual reality in which immediate actions are called for, in which the prospects of honoring the expectations of a demanding citizenry are limited, and in which citizens are not always interested in taking part in decision-making that is not of their immediate concern.

This has consequences for how politicians feel about their role. While we should remind ourselves from start that a large share of the politicians express a fairly optimistic view on their role as representatives and their possibilities to gain public acceptance for their decisions, we also see a considerable group of representatives who appear to be disappointed, resigned, and even sad about the prospects of accomplishing positive effects for the society by means of their

political position. With some exceptions, the politicians generally acknowledge the need to make hard decisions and show willingness to take responsibility for them. What the data reveal, however, is an underlying frustration shared by many politicians that they try to do their best to be open, inclusive, and responsive, but that these efforts are not recognized. Many politicians seem to long for a citizenry that will work together with them. That will be engaged in finding creative solutions, but that also will understand the politicians' difficult position and appreciate the hard work they are doing. And, not least, that will commit to the democratic model even when the effects are against their stated interests.

The study thereby illustrates the problem with putting too much faith in the force of high quality procedures. As our data reveal, also representatives that are highly committed to public involvement, in line with both national and international recommendations, and *want* it to be the solution to public disappointment or resentment, report that it does not always work as intended when people care a lot about the outcome. To state the obvious, it is certainly not as simple as that "good, "democratically minded politicians who care for their citizens are proponents of increased public involvement in political decision-making, and "evil," self-interested politicians who are primarily keen on keeping their political power, are against. Rather, the decision-making context and the type of issues at hand as well as ideological concerns seem to play important roles in the decision-makers' considerations on when or how to involve the public. There are those rejecting public involvement on the basis of care for the society as a whole, as well as those rejecting it for elitist or even corrupt reasons. Similarly, there are those welcoming greater participation based on genuine trust in the positive force of public engagement, as well as those welcoming it for purely populistic reasons.

One reason for why increased involvement of the public in decision-making may not be a clear cut recipe for handling hard decisions or restoring the representative model in local politics could be the types of topics that are discussed. Although forums for interaction with the public can cover "topics ranging from constitutional and electoral reform, to controversial science and technology, and myriad social issues (e.g. health, justice, planning, sectarianism)" (Escobar and Elstub (2017:1), examples in the literature typically focus on issues where something could be gained (i.e. decisions on how to organize the public space in a city), or on highly normative but also potentially more abstract issues (e.g. abortion, electoral reform). Administrating cuts in welfare—the typical example of hard decisions provided by local politicians in our sample—is rarely the topic; at least not in examples presented as successful.

It is true that there have been initiatives to involve the public also in policy areas of extremely tough decisions. A well-known example is the Oregon meetings on rationing in health care in the early 1990:s, where members of the public as well as health care professionals were to deliberate on how to set health care priorities on scarce resources in publicly funded health care. For example Shapiro (2003, p. 28) argues, however, that the Oregon process was in fact a "notable failure" for the ideal that the public could participate in making hard choices, as the result was, in the end, not priority-setting or rationing. Rather, increased media attention resulted in more resources being allocated and the budget increased. This result can of course be interpreted as a sign that the deliberative process revealed basic injustices that had to be corrected (e.g. Gutmann and Thompson 1996, p. 143-144), but for local politicians striving to fit the budget together while not deviating too much from one's ideology as well as from one's responsibility to care for "the whole," that is no great consolation.

The bottom-line is, therefore, that a mile of walking in the shoes of these local politicians has provided us with a fair share of scenic views, but also some painful sores to take care of. As abstaining from making hard decisions is not a possible solution, the hope for a local democracy capable of handling the future challenges of the welfare state—including climate change, refugee crises, pandemics, and an aging population—lies in increased understanding and respect between citizens and representatives. Far from a magic wand, education and mutual interactions are most likely the tools at hand. In the process of designing future arrangements for democratic decision-making, it is our hope that the incorporation of a more nuanced perspective on the elite—which in local politics often consists of ordinary people with common jobs doing political work in their own spare time—can contribute to a more respectful climate and, in the end, fruitful problem-solving.

As previously noted, our research design has significant weaknesses. While we argue for the importance of letting the politicians describe their beliefs and experiences in their own words, it is clear that the politicians have interpreted the questions in different ways and have provided responses of very diverse length, level of detail, and level of reflection. Therefore, the actual frequencies of different considerations and experiences are not as precise as they would have been with a more traditional form of survey with closed alternatives. At the same time, the short text format and lack of possibilities for asking follow-up questions makes any in-depth interpretation of the considerations and beliefs impossible. Therefore, we cannot provide a more

fine-grained and sophisticated thematic analysis. Moreover, we have explored perceptions of hard decisions at local and regional level decision-making. As local politicians are not elite in the same sense as politicians at national level, this means that the experiences we have presented are likely to differ from those of politicians at national or transnational level. Finally, we have conducted our study in Sweden; a country known for both a consensual type of democracy, and for highly independent local governments with extensive responsibilities for the welfare of their citizens.

Therefore, the results of this study should be seen as largely explorative and illustrative. It calls for more in-depth studies on how decision-makers reason and act in practice and over time when confronting hard decisions, as well as for studies on the context of hard decisions; including hard decisions at national or international level, as well as local level in other countries. Finally, future studies should dig into variations between decision-makers by for example exploring how differences in gender, belonging to steering majority or opposition, or representing a small or large municipality affects politicians' beliefs about hard decisions.

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