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Favourable  
outcomes,  
procedural  
fairness, and  
political support:  
results from a survey  
experiment

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## INTRODUCTION

Many studies show that, in their relation with authorities, people care not only about getting their preferred outcomes but also about the way those outcomes are generated, especially about the extent to which decision-making procedures are fair. Furthermore, a growing research agenda has shown an interactive effect between outcomes and procedures (Brockner and Wiesenfeld 1996; Gangl 2003; Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2014; Van Dijke and Verboon 2010; Wilking and Zhang 2017). Through this “process-outcome interaction”, the fairer the procedures, the less people seem to care about outcomes.

Do these aspects of people’s relationship with authorities tend to generalize to the study of political authorities and the policy outcomes they generate? We believe this question is important for the broader themes of citizenship and crisis addressed by this volume. As we have seen throughout Europe in recent years, economic crises generate negative outcomes and thus endanger the public standing of political authorities. Furthermore, economic shocks may force authorities to take measures that, although potentially necessary and beneficial in the long run, produce short-term costs and further losses in support. However, this could be less politically damaging if, as Mansbridge argues, fairness in the procedures behind policy- and decision-making somehow mitigate the detrimental effect of delivering negative outcomes, giving authorities “the discretion to act in ways that, although not in the short-term interest of citizens, may benefit those citizens in the long run” (Mansbridge 1990, 175).

In this research note we address this issue and attempt to add to the literature in three ways. First, we look experimentally at how both procedural fairness and outcome favourability matter for people’s support for *political* authorities, in terms of both incumbent approval and (intended) voting. Second, we look at different dimensions of procedural fairness — Voice, Neutrality, and Transparency — to determine which of them appears to be most consequential for political support. Finally, we test for the existence of a process-outcome interaction in the explanation of political support using the experimental method.

Several aspects remain unclear in the literature testing theories of procedural fairness as they apply to the study of political support. The first concerns the extent to which procedural fairness and outcome favourability matter overall for people when reacting to political and policy decisions. Based on a large number of experiments, Esaiasson et al. (2016) suggest that citizens’

acceptance of policy decisions is driven much more by outcome favourability than by procedural fairness. Our work, whose experimental design is largely based on their own, asks whether that is also the case when we move from “decision acceptance” as the main dependent variable to attitudinal and behavioural support for the political authorities that issues those decisions. A second unclear aspect concerns the dimension of procedural fairness that might be most consequential for political support. While many authors have stressed the importance of “voice” and “neutrality” (Rodell, Colquitt and Baer 2016; Rosenbaum et al. 2017; Van Craen and Skogan 2016), a somewhat neglected dimension has been the notion of “transparency” or “accessibility” (but see Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2014; Migacz, Zou and Petrick 2017). Finally, it is also unclear whether a process-outcome interaction applies when political support is concerned. Positive and negative results coexist: while Kumlin (2004) and Bøggild (2016) find no significant interaction effects between outcomes and procedures in the explanation of political support, other studies obtain such an interaction (Magalhães 2016, 2017).

## METHOD

Our experimental design closely follows Esaiasson et al.’s (2016) model of acceptance of policy decisions, applied to a survey experiment.

## PARTICIPANTS

The survey took place during the months before the local elections in Portugal that took place on 1 October 2017. It was online for 58 days (from 27 July 2017 to 22 September 2017). Online surveys allow systematic access to the information of a given sample, and are an ecological method that takes into account: costs (faster, simpler, and cheaper) and data collection (allows access to a large number of participants in a short period of time). Online surveys are also less intrusive than many other techniques (with fewer social desirability effects) and have greater response accuracy (Bethlehem and Biffignandi 2012). We used a convenience sample; participants were contacted through social networks (including Facebook, LinkedIn, e-mail, and academic portals). The survey was performed with the Qualtrics platform (which presented seven conditions, randomly selecting only one for each participant, using only a single link).

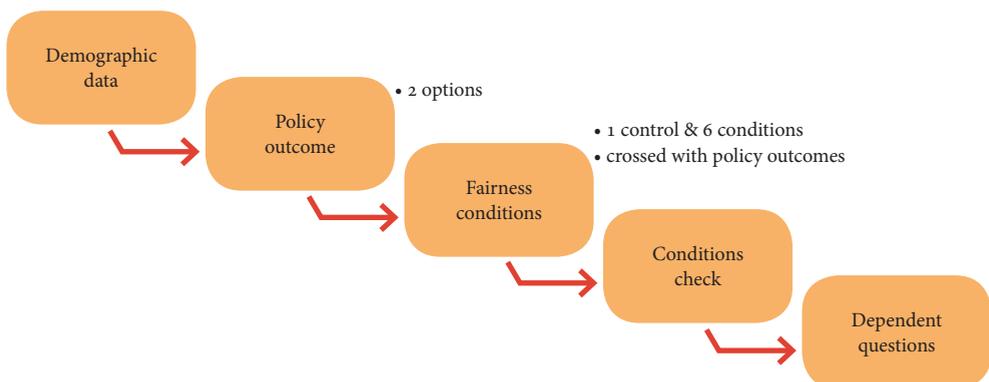
Participants were also informed about the anonymity of their answers. A valid sample of 939 respondents was obtained. Average age was 42.68 (SD = 13.166), 55.1% of the individuals were male. As a result of a preliminary screening, we selected only participants who indicated that they had the right to vote in the Portuguese municipal elections.

#### MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE

Before the survey two pre-tests were conducted with a convenience sample (the first with 40 participants, and the second with 41 participants), which led to the selection of the two outcomes, each showing similar average levels of importance and similar distributions, but being inversely proportional. Following that, the online survey with the two chosen outcomes and seven conditions was conducted (Figure 3.1).

The survey consisted of an initial set of sociodemographic questions (gender, age, level of education, social class, residence, residence council, left-right orientation, and political proximity to a party). Subsequently the survey elicited from respondents their preference about a hypothetical investment outcome. Participants were asked to imagine that the mayor of their municipality had to choose between investing funds in the rehabilitation of degraded municipal heritage or promoting accessibility of municipal buildings for handicapped people. Subjects were then probed about their preferred outcome (whether they personally supported the first or the second policy decision).

**Figure 3.1** *Survey model*



After answering this question, participants were randomly assigned to one of seven conditions (one control group and six fairness conditions). In the control condition, the final decision outcome was indicated (“promoting accessibility”). Under the remaining conditions, we first primed procedural considerations, by presenting subjects with a list of alternative decision-making arrangements to make the policy decision. Three variants were employed for the six remaining conditions, expressing the existence or nonexistence of fairness in the variants of Voice, Neutrality, and Transparency. They involved calling a meeting of the municipal assembly where citizens were allowed to express their opinions about the investment (High Voice), vs. making the decision immediately in closed executive meeting (Low Voice); consult with independent experts on matters of health and patrimony in the city (High Neutrality), vs. consulting only with county council presidents of the mayor’s own party (Low Neutrality); and make all documentation about the pros and cons of each investment publicly available to citizens before the decision was made (High Transparency), vs. divulging such information only after the decision was made and only upon request (Low Transparency).

Finally, under all of the six conditions, as in the control condition, the outcome was revealed (constant for all, “promoting accessibility”), but also the procedure that was adopted, with randomly assigned low or high procedural fairness in the variants of Voice, Neutrality, and Transparency. To conclude the survey, all participants answered on a 0 to 10 Likert scale about “How much do you think the decision was fair?”, “How much do you think citizens have had the opportunity to influence the decision made?”, “To what extent do you think the decision was taken in an impartial manner?”, “To what extent do you think the decision was taken in a transparent manner?”, and “On the basis of the information we have given you, how satisfied are you with the City Council?”. A final question was asked “Based on the information we gave you, would you say that you would feel:” with three options: “More willing to vote for the current Mayor” (2), “More willing to vote against the current Mayor” (0), and “Neither one nor the other” (1).

## RESULTS

There are no significant differences ( $\chi^2(6) = 3.808, p = .703$ ) in the distribution between the response options in the investments when crossed with the

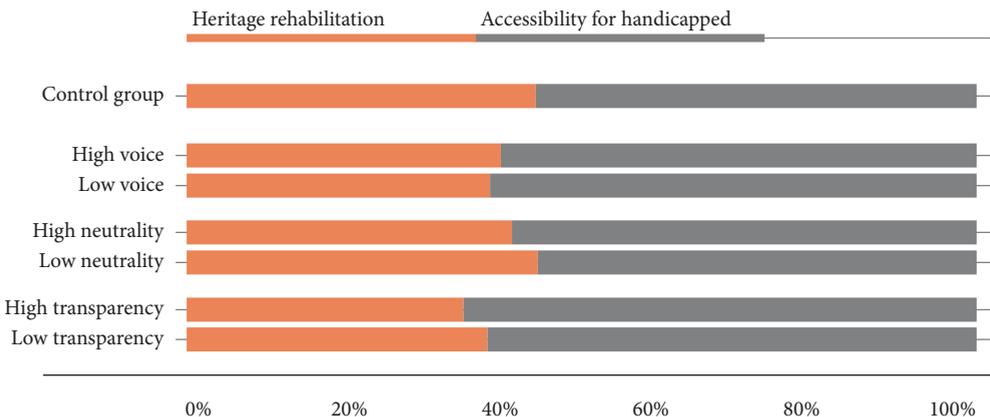
seven conditions (Figure 3.2), which ensures the control of the outcome favourability.

Figures 3.3 to 3.5 show average levels of perceived Voice, Neutrality, and Transparency in the different conditions. Subjects in the Low Voice condition show significantly lower levels of perceived Voice in comparison with the control group, while subjects in the High Voice condition perceived significantly higher levels of Voice, ensuring validity check of voice manipulation. The same occurs with the validity check of Neutrality ( $F(6,885) = 17.073, p < .000$ ), and with the validity check of Transparency manipulation ( $F(6,876) = 37.824, p < .000$ ).

Neither the interaction/moderation between the party of the executive and the choice of response of outcome ( $F(2,928) = 1.640, p = .195$ ), nor between the seven conditions ( $F(12,913) = 1.200, p = .278$ ) show significant differences in the average perception of fairness of decision. The same occurs for the average level of satisfaction with mayor’s office ( $F(2,868) = 0.861, p = .423$ ) and ( $F(12,853) = 1.021, p = .427$ ). This suggests that proximity to the main party in the executive council of the municipality does not overlap or interact with experimental conditions of manipulation of justice or with outcomes.

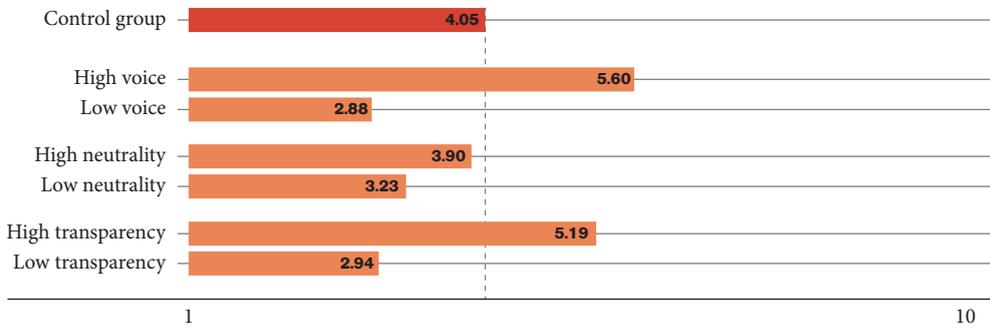
However, there are individual statistical differences in the average perception of fairness of decision ( $F(2,931) = 3.041, p = .048$ ), average level of satisfaction with mayor’s office ( $F(2,871) = 57.039, p < .001$ ), and the change in the intention to vote for the incumbent mayor ( $\chi^2(4) = 54.479$ ,

**Figure 3.2** *Distribution of preferred policy outcomes by condition*

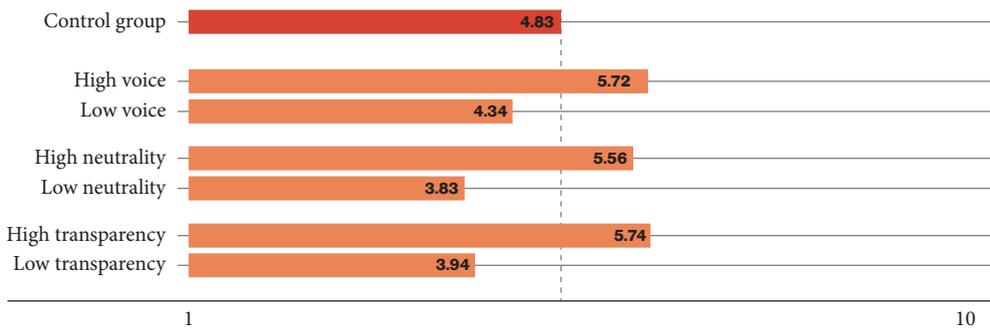


**Figure 3.3**

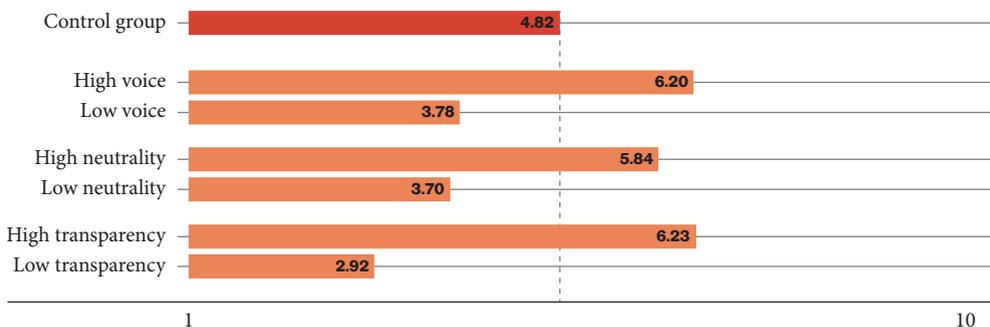
*Average perception of voice on a scale of 1 to 10 per condition (one control group and six experimental groups)*

**Figure 3.4**

*Average perception of neutrality on a scale of 1 to 10 per condition (one control group and six experimental groups)*

**Figure 3.5**

*Average perception of transparency on a scale of 1 to 10 per condition (one control group and six experimental groups)*



$p < .001$ ), depending on proximity to the party of the mayor. This suggests that partisanship mattered in people's responses, and that subjects resorted to their real experience even when asked about a hypothetical political context. This also implies that estimates of the effects of objective and subjective fairness conditions on political support need to be obtained while controlling for partisanship.

To understand those direct and indirect effects, we turned to several structural equation models (SEM), based on Esaiasson et al.'s (2016) model of acceptance of policy decisions. The different models employed each of the several different justice conditions (Voice, Neutrality, and Transparency) and each of the two dependent variables (1) Satisfaction with mayor's office and (2) Intention to vote. Figure 3.6 illustrates one of the models estimated (Voice).

Several features are evident from this analysis. First, whether the decision is hypothesized to take place under an "objective" High or Low Voice condition is something that affects political support (satisfaction with the Mayor's office), both directly and indirectly. While the indirect effect — as mediated by the perceived fairness of decision-making — is greater than the direct one, the latter is also significant. Second, obtaining a favourable outcome increases satisfaction with the Mayor's office, but, in the Voice experiment, only directly so. There is no evidence in this experiment that outcome favourability shapes perceptions of fairness and, by so doing, affects political support. Finally, the total effect of Voice is about twice as large as the effect of Outcome Favourability.

**Figure 3.6**

*Effects on satisfaction with Mayor's office, Voice experiment. Standardized coefficients.*

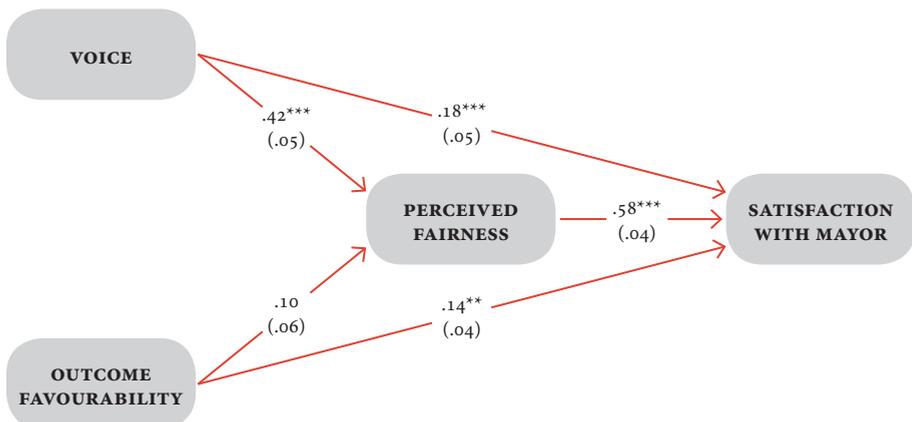


Table 3.1 shows the results for all structural equation models, by variant of procedural fairness and by dependent variable of political support (satisfaction with the Mayor's office or change in intention to vote for the Mayor's party).<sup>1</sup>

Overall, we find that although outcome favourability also affects perceptions of fairness, the total effects of objective procedural fairness are always greater than the effects of outcome favourability, regardless of the objective fairness condition manipulated — Voice, Neutrality, or Transparency — and of the specific outcome variable. On the other hand, in all analyses, most of the effect exerted by objective conditions is indirect, mediated by perceptions of fairness, although in two conditions — Voice and Transparency — objective fairness also exerts a direct effect on political support, regardless of how we measure it.

An additional concern of the paper is related to whether outcome favourability's direct effect on political support is unconditional or, instead, if it decreases as people perceived the decision-making process to be fairer. In other words, we want to test if the mediator “perception of fairness” is also a moderator of the relationship between outcomes and support. Figures 3.7 to 3.9 show the results of the experiments for each dimension of procedural fairness looking at satisfaction with the mayor as the dependent variable:

In each of the analyses, the sign for the coefficient of the interaction term (Perceived fairness\*Outcome favourability) is negative, in the expected direction. However, in one of the experiments — Transparency — the magnitude of that interaction term is more than twice as large as in the other cases, and reaches statistical significance at conventional levels. Results using change in the intention to vote for the current Mayor are very similar, whether treating that variable as continuous or ordinal.

<sup>1</sup> For the equation with vote as the dependent variable (0, less likely; 1, neither nor; 2, more likely to vote for Mayor), we also estimated a structural equation model with ordinal probit. Results are very similar.

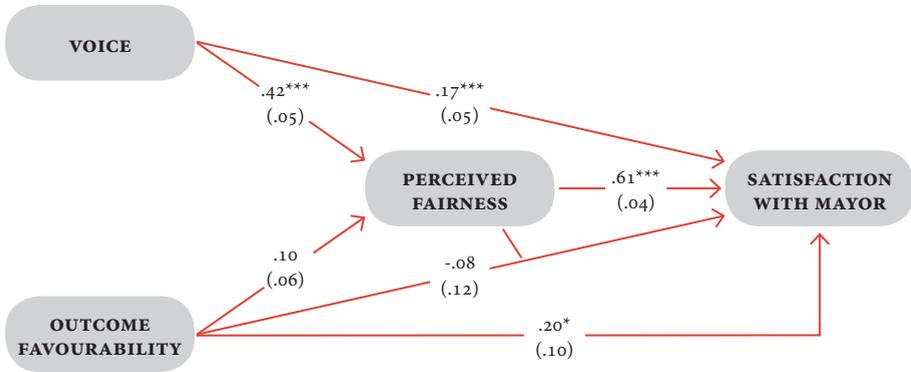
Table 3.1 Structural equation models (standardized coefficients)

PARAMETERS	POLITICAL SUPPORT DV: SATISFACTION WITH MAYOR			POLITICAL SUPPORT DV: CHANGE IN VOTE INTENTION		
	Voice treatment	Neutrality treatment	Transparency treatment	Voice treatment	Neutrality treatment	Transparency treatment
Objective fairness → Fairness perception	.42***	.48***	.61***	.42***	.47***	.61***
Outcome favourability → Fairness perception	.10	.14*	.19***	.10	.14*	.06
Controls (not shown): Sex, Age, Education, Class, Closeness to Mayor's Party						
Fairness perception → Political support	.58***	.67***	.61***	.40***	.40***	.41***
Objective fairness → Political support	.18***	.05	.11*	.13*	.03	.14*
Outcome favourability → Political support	.14**	.10*	.09	.17**	.08	.06
Controls (not shown): Sex, Age, Education, Class, Closeness to Mayor's Party						
Indirect effects						
Objective fairness	.25***	.32***	.37***	.24***	.27***	.37***
Outcome favourability	.06	.09*	.12***	.06	.08*	.11***
Total effects						
Objective fairness	.42***	.37***	.48***	.44***	.31***	.57***
Outcome favourability	.20***	.19**	.20***	.31***	.20*	.21*
CD	.32	.33	.43	.32	.32	.44
N	248	252	247	248	249	247

\*p&lt;.05; \*\*p&lt;.01; \*\*\*p&lt;.001.

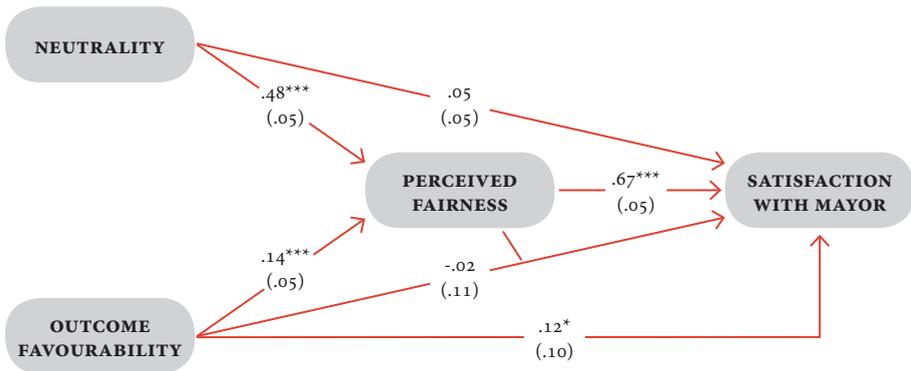
**Figure 3.7**

*Effects on satisfaction with Mayor's office, Voice experiment. Fairness-outcome interaction.*



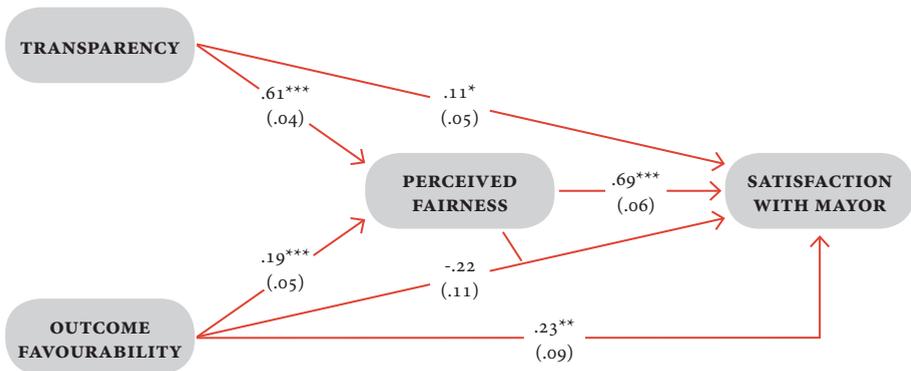
**Figure 3.8**

*Effects on satisfaction with Mayor's office, Neutrality experiment. Fairness-outcome interaction.*



**Figure 3.9**

*Effects on satisfaction with Mayor's office, Transparency experiment. Fairness-outcome interaction.*



## CONCLUSION

This research note reports the results of a survey experiment through which we examined several phenomena; first, the extent to which individuals respond to procedural fairness and outcome favourability when evaluating political authorities responsible for policy decisions. We find that procedurally fair rules have a significantly greater total effect on political support for authorities, an effect that is largely mediated by perceptions of fairness but can also be, in some cases, a direct effect. Second, we examine whether this varies significantly when examining three different dimensions of procedural fairness: Voice, Neutrality/Impartiality, and Accessibility/Transparency. In general, we find that the previous finding holds regardless of the dimension we focus on. Thus, overall, fairness matters more than outcome favourability (when both outcomes are positive outcomes for society, but one is more favourable than the other for each individual person). Moreover, what is most important for a person is not the fairness event/situation itself, but mostly the perception that each individual person has about it (especially with Neutrality, but also detectable with Transparency and Voice).

Finally, we test whether the effects of outcome favourability on support are moderated by procedural fairness. Our findings do not yield such results in all experimental conditions (although we see the same direction, no significant values were obtained). Only when Transparency is manipulated do we find perceived procedural fairness to significantly moderate the direct effect of outcome favourability. These results suggest that in high transparency events/situations, receiving a favourable outcome is of little importance, but in low transparency events/situations, whether or not receiving a favourable outcome counts more. The overall results also highlight the importance of clarifying which dimensions of procedural fairness are used in a given study, because even with similar effects they behave in different ways, with effects that may be different in some contexts.

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