

DIRECT DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

POTENTIALS AND PITFALLS

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May 7, 2015

Paper accepted for publication in a special issue of *Global Policy* on the Dahrendorf Symposium and “Rollback of Democracy”-Workshops. Pre-Peer-Review version – published paper differs slightly from submitted draft.

Abstract

Diagnoses of a democratic recession or ‘hollowing out’ of democracy are numerous and varied but usually encompass the following symptoms: a decline in turnout and other forms of political participation; policy making that is increasingly detached from ordinary citizens and their preferences; and an erosion of trust in government and satisfaction with democracy among citizens – all of which ultimately challenge the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Direct democracy is one of the most prominent, far-reaching and popular remedies proposed in response to such diagnoses. It, by allowing citizens to directly vote on questions usually decided by representatives, seems intuitively appealing as an obvious extension and deepening of democracy. In this paper I survey the potentials but also pitfalls of an increased institutionalization of direct democracy and use thereof in the countries of the European Union focusing on the three key aspects identified above: representation, turnout, and citizens’ political trust and satisfaction.

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1 Introduction

Concerns exist about democratic developments in Europe and beyond. Diagnoses of a democratic recession usually make out at least the following three symptoms: a decline in turnout and other forms of political participation, policy making that is increasingly detached from ordinary citizens and their preferences, and an erosion of trust in government and satisfaction with democracy among citizens, all of which ultimately challenge the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Direct democracy is one of the most prominent, far-reaching and popular remedies proposed in response to such diagnoses ([Altman 2012](#); [LeDuc 2003](#)). In this paper I provide an assessment of the potentials but also pitfalls of an increased institutionalization and use of direct democracy in the countries of the European Union focusing on the three key aspects identified above: turnout, representation and citizens' political trust and satisfaction.

As regards citizens' participation I show that there is good evidence that the active use of direct democracy can indeed increase turnout in elections by a few percentage points. Referendums held on election day, particularly if held on highly salient issues, can even have substantially larger effects. Yet, institutional details matter. The empirical evidence on direct democracy's effect on representation is much less clear giving at best a weak indication that direct democracy improves how citizens' preferences are translated into policy. Underrepresented groups will not be better represented through direct democracy, but also not worse. While referendum campaigns seem to make people more confident about their ability to engage in politics and improve their political knowledge there is less evidence on whether it also changes their evaluative and affective orientations towards the political system.

Optimism about the development of democracy, the 'third wave' of democratization ([Huntington 1991](#)), and in Europe particular after the fall of the wall, has given way to concerns that the ensuing expansion of democracy has been followed by a 'democratic recession' ([Diamond 2008](#)) in both new and established democracies. These developments said to have taken place on a global scale during the past decades have been described by scholars of democracy as among others a 'rollback' ([Diamond 2008](#)), 'hollowing out' ([Mair 2013](#)) of democracy or establishment of 'post-democracy' ([Crouch 2007](#)).

While [Diamond \(2008\)](#) focused on the crumbling and failure of newly established democracies others have been more concerned with developments in established democracies (e.g. [Mair 2013](#); [Crouch 2007](#); [Dalton 2004](#)). It is the latter for which many hope direct democracy can be a remedy. There, the formal institutions of democracy remain intact but a process is said to take place that can be described as a mutual retreat of parties and citizens. Parties are losing their role as mediators between civil society and the state, in consequence they are retreating towards the state, prioritizing their governing over their representational role. This is a scholarly interpretation of the popular claim that parties and governments are increasingly out of touch with ordinary citizens.

Citizens on the other hand withdraw from participation in conventional politics in ever greater numbers, for instance voting and party membership, as they grow increasingly dissatisfied with their national democracies and less trusting of key actors and institutions. Both developments seem prone to reinforcing each other.

Two concurrent developments are commonly identified as driving the democratic decline. Firstly, a process of de-alignment whereby societal cleavages dissipate giving way to greater individualism. Such cleavages used to structure party competition in that parties would be seen as representatives of certain segments of society. Citizens within these segments held strong attachments to the corresponding parties, and were encouraged by strong class-based organizations to vote. As these cleavages disappear the link between citizens and parties and therefore politics more generally weakens. Secondly, globalization and increased supranational governance as for instance embodied by the European Union have challenged the efficacy of national policymaking, so that governments find it increasingly difficult to be responsive to their citizens and citizens less trusting in their governing institutions.

While certain aspects of these diagnoses like decreasing turnout are undisputed, although their interpretation may be, others are more controversial. Yet, my aim here is not to assess the merits of these diagnoses but rather to provide an assessment of the likely effects of an increased institutionalization and use of direct democracy in Europe.

Direct democracy is probably the most popular and far-reaching remedy proposed to counter a lack of elite responsiveness and citizen involvement

(Altman 2012; Smith 2009; LeDuc 2003). Few introductory texts on direct democracy fail to make reference to the diagnosis described above – also, the remedy metaphor is frequently invoked.

While satisfaction with and trust in institutions and actors of politics is in decline citizens remain committed to democratic norms and principles (Dalton 2004). Part of the rise in discontent could thus be explained by increased expectations on the side of citizens. Direct democracy then seems as straightforward way of tackling citizens’ disaffection by providing more participatory opportunities to ‘critical citizens’ (Norris 1999, 2011). When asked, citizens in polities with and without direct democracy consistently voice support for direct democracy in substantial majorities, in fact in all countries of the European Union there exist substantial popular majorities.¹

Improved education and advances in communication technology are said to have increased the people’s capacity and demand for participation and thus also serve to explain the spread in institutionalizations and increase in usage of direct democracy around the world in recent decades (Altman 2010; Butler and Ranney 1994). Support for direct democracy is especially strong among the young and politically interested according to Donovan and Karp (2006), yet a number of studies find political dissatisfaction to be a strong determinant of support for direct democracy (Dalton, Burklin and Drummond 2001). This also resonates with a continued emphasis of participation in the political theory literature whether it be participatory democracy (Pateman 1970), strong democracy (Barber 1984), or deliberative democracy (Dryzek 2002; Bessette 1997).

But such appeal is not without corresponding fears about detrimental effects of direct democracy. It offers opportunities for political participation beyond the conventional means. Yet, turnout in referendums most often is even lower and therefore prone to be more unequally distributed among segments of the population than in elections. Direct democracy promises citizens the possibility to correct unpopular decisions made by representatives and to make policy makers pay greater heed to public opinion. However, it can also open up a new venue for populists and special interests to influence politics (Gerber 1999). Participation is known to breed trust but what effect can it have in the aggregate if those who are most unsatisfied are already

¹Popular support ranges from 78% approving of direct democracy in the Netherlands and Slovenia to around 89% in Poland, Spain and Cyprus (own calculations based on data from round 6 of the European Social Survey).

the least likely to participate? There are both well-argued hopes and fears. The question is what evidence there is to support some and dispel others.

This article surveys the potentials and pitfalls for an increased institutionalization and use of direct democracy to address the symptoms of a ‘hollowing out’. Or, put more sanguinely, how it might affect participation, particularly turnout, representation as well as trust in government and satisfaction with democracy.² Although focused on Europe I provide a transatlantic perspective as I draw heavily from experiences with direct democracy in the US as well as, obviously, Switzerland and the scholarly work that has been developed in that context.

Towards that end I proceed as follows. In the following section I, after having defined direct democracy, provide an overview over the institutionalization and use of direct democracy in the European Union. Subsequent sections address the themes of participation, representation and citizens’ attitudes towards democratic government. I conclude by summarizing the key findings from the scholarly literature and corresponding policy recommendations.

2 Direct Democracy in Europe

The term direct democracy as used in this article refers to citizens directly voting on substantive issues elected representatives normally vote on. An important distinction is to be made between the citizens’ initiative and the referendum. The initiative is the most far-reaching form of direct democracy – it entails citizens proposing and voting on a policy. If a group of citizens registers a proposal for a new policy or change of law or constitution and collects a predetermined number of signatures in a predetermined time frame its proposal is put to a vote. Initiatives may be used to amend the constitution, change or propose laws, or both. A facultative referendum, also called popular or abrogative referendum, is similar to the initiative in that is initiated by citizens through the collection of signatures to repeal a law passed by the legislature, not to propose new legislation.

A referendum more narrowly signifies the process of citizens voting on a policy – which can be triggered by a citizens’ initiative, initiated by the leg-

²For a more comprehensive introduction to direct democracy covering a greater number of possible ramifications of the instrument see for instance [Butler and Ranney \(1994\)](#) or [Altman \(2010\)](#).

islative or executive branches of government or required by the constitution for the final passage of certain laws like changes to the constitution.

A simple typology of direct democracy can be drawn up along the answers to the questions of who triggers the referendum and whether the vote will be binding.³ In keeping with the literature a focus will be put on binding forms of direct democracy as consultative referendums (also called plebiscites) are either considered to be of lesser importance because governments are not legally bound to follow the citizens' decision (Altman 2010) or just as consequential as binding votes because of the political ramifications of ignoring a popular vote (Hug 2004; LeDuc 2003).

Then there are also regulations common to all types of direct democracy which are participation or approval quorums and for some polities supermajority requirements. Specific to the initiative and also facultative referendum are requirements concerning the number and geographical distribution of signatures as well as the time frame in which they are to be collected all of which determine the effectiveness of the instrument. Some polities also limit the range of topics that can be addressed through an initiative, for instance by excluding budgetary issues.

Yet, the crucial defining aspect of direct democracy is that the process must lead to a vote by the citizens. Other forms of citizen involvement that might share certain aspects of direct democracy like petitions, agenda initiatives or mini-publics should not be referred to as direct democracy as they lack the aspect of voting on policy. The European Citizens' Initiative despite its name is therefore not a form of direct democracy.

Usage of direct democracy as well as its institutionalization has increased all around the world.⁴ It is most prominent in Switzerland and the US. In the latter which is the origin and focus of much of the recent work on direct democracy no state that has adopted the initiative has done away with it and new states are adopting it at a rate of one state per decade while there has been a rise in the number of initiatives in the past decades (Matsusaka 2005a). The number of national referendums held in Switzerland has also increased steadily since the 1950s – with peaks of usage in the 1970s and 1990s. The pattern is similar to that in the EU (Fig. 1). Beyond the US

³For a more exhaustive definition and typology of direct democracy interested readers are referred to Altman (2010) and Hug (2004).

⁴More detailed descriptions of this trend can be found in among others Altman (2010); LeDuc (2003); Butler and Ranney (1994).

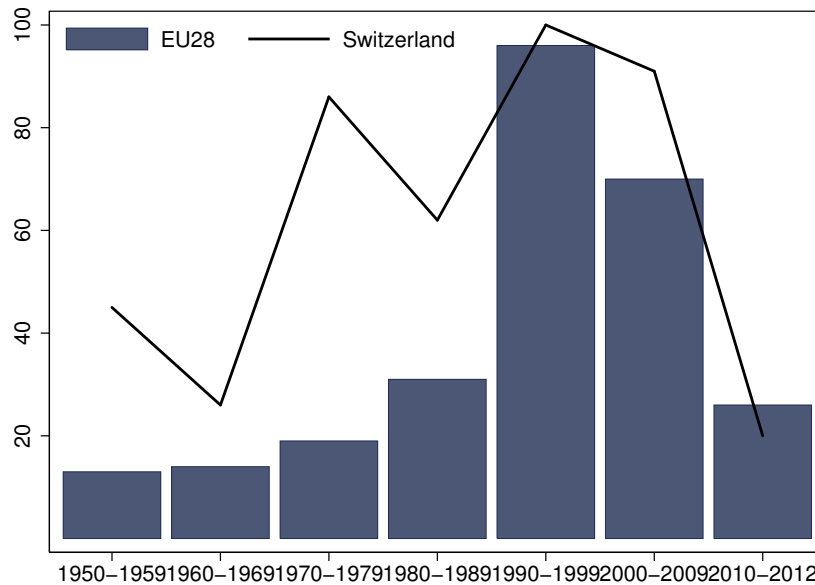


Figure 1: Number of national referendums per decade in the 28 EU member states and Switzerland (as comparison). Own visualization using data from [Centre for Research on Direct Democracy \(2014\)](#); [Universität Bern \(2014\)](#)

and Switzerland the number of countries providing mechanisms of direct democracy has increased as has the usage of those mechanisms in all parts of the world. Among 58 democracies with a population above 3 million in the world 39 had conducted at least one referendum between 1975 and 2000 – yet, among countries that never saw referendum at national level are also established democracies like United States, India, Japan or Germany ([Altman 2010](#), 29).

In the EU, direct democracy, so defined, is more common and frequently used than one would think, yet its usage lags far behind the usage found in US states or Switzerland. 27 member states of the EU have held referendums on the national level since World War II. A total of 286 national referendums have been held in EU member states since World War II, compared to 186 in Switzerland in the period 1990-2009 on the national level alone. California in the same time has seen 123 referendums. Yet, the use of direct democracy in the EU has increased markedly although not continuously since the 1970s (Fig. 1). Usage of the initiative is most frequent in Italy (72 referendums since 1945), followed by Ireland (36) while Belgium, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Finland, Luxembourg and the Netherlands held only

one referendum.

23 EU member states have some institutionalized form of direct democracy on the national level. Nine countries have the initiative, the arguably most potent form of direct democracy, while 23 allow for government initiated referendums making it the most common form of direct democracy at the national level in the EU. Lastly, 14 countries have constitutional provisions making the holding of referendums on certain policy issues mandatory (most commonly changes of the constitution).

Belgium, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Germany and the Netherlands are the only EU members to not have provisions for direct democracy at the national level. Of these only Germany never saw a referendum at that level since World War II.⁵ Yet, it has provisions for referendums at the regional and municipal level, like many other European countries do (Tab. 1). 21 countries have provisions for direct democracy at the subnational level. While this overview is focused on direct democracy at the national level most of the theoretical arguments and empirical evidence discussed here also apply to the subnational level. Indeed, much of the empirical scholarly research discussed in the following sections focuses on subnational politics.

One of the attractions, also to politicians, of direct democracy is that referendums can potentially settle political issues more decisively than the representative process. Not surprisingly then, it is used for far-reaching and potentially contentious issues like accession to the EU. However, a referendum can only fulfill that function if its result is sufficiently clear. If referendum outcomes are close, they might even worsen societal cleavages. Of the 279 national referendums held in Europe since 1945 for which the data is available⁶ 39 (14 %) had an outcome where the majority was within five percentage-points of 50%.

The EU itself has been the subject of referendums in a number of countries, with the people in some countries like Norway – where the electorate rejected membership twice – or France – which voted on the Maastricht treaty and the failed constitutional treaty – even voting multiple times. 15 member states have decided on their accession to the EU by means of a national referendum (Tab. 1). For the enlargement round of 2004 eight of

⁵Actually, German has a constitutional provision requiring a referendum in case the boundaries of federal states are to be redrawn. Yet, as this not a policy issue it is coded as effectively not having direct democracy.

⁶The C2D data lacks data on vote shares for 7 referendums

ten new member states held referendums. What is striking is that while support for accession was relatively strong in the eight Eastern European countries that joined in 2004 turnout in the respective referendums was very low. In these countries there was broad political and popular consensus about the desirability of EU membership, whereas EU membership was much more controversial in for instance Malta, Sweden, Finland or the UK as evidenced by smaller majorities for accession in these countries' referendums (Szczzerbiak and Taggart 2004). Indeed, turnout and contestation, measured by the share of yes-votes, are negatively related as indicated by a correlation coefficient of $-.62$.

3 Turnout

The fact that there has been a secular decline in turnout in all major established democracies in Europe and elsewhere at least since the early 1980s is an undisputed finding in the political science literature (Gray and Caul 2000). Post-war turnout in current EU member states has declined over the years – by an average decrease of about a fifth of a percentage point per year, equivalent to roughly one percentage point per electoral cycle (Fig. 2). In the 1950s turnout in national parliamentary elections in 28 member states was 81.9% compared to 67.5% in the 2000s – differences in turnout between countries have also widened as the standard deviation has almost doubled from 7%-points in the 1950s to 13%-points in the 2000s.

This decline in turnout is quite puzzling considering that on the individual level income and education, or socioeconomic status (SES) more broadly, are strong determinants of turning out to vote. Notwithstanding an increase at the aggregate level in both personal income and educational attainment turnout has substantially decreased.

The afore described process of dealignment is one of the reasons behind this development (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). However, there is a disagreement on normative evaluations of that trend. Particularly for countries that see their turnout levels decrease from above average levels to more average levels there is debate whether this trend constitutes a worrisome decline or just a process of normalization. It remains to be seen whether turnout decline will extend into the future or whether turnout will stabilize at a certain point. Yet, the fact remains that current levels of turnout are seen

Table 1: Institutionalization and use of direct democracy in the EU member states: (1) year of accession to the EU, (2) number of post-World War II referendums held since the country became a democracy, (3) types of direct democracy available at the national level (I = citizens' initiative, F = facultative referendum, G = government or parliament sponsored referendum, C = constitutionally mandated referendum), (4) levels of government at which direct democracy is available (N = national, R = regional, L = local), (5) average turnout in national referendums. Sources: [Initiative and Referendum Institute Europe \(2014\)](#); [IDEA \(2013\)](#); [Centre for Research on Direct Democracy \(2014\)](#); [Szczurbiak and Taggart \(2004\)](#)

Country	Accession	EU Referendum Yes % (Turnout %)	National Referendums	Types of Referendum	Levels of Government	Avg. Turnout (%)
Austria	1995	66.58 (82.35)	4	G, C	N, R, L	36.6
Belgium	1952	-	1	-	R	92.92
Bulgaria	2007	-	4	I, G	N, L	70.7
Croatia	2013	66.27 (43.51)	7	I, G	N	30.1
Cyprus	2004	-	1	-	-	89.2
Czech Republic	2004	77.33 (55.21)	1	-	-	55.2
Denmark	1973	63.29 (90.41)	18	G, C	N, L	70.7
Estonia	2004	66.83 (64.06)	4	G, C	N, L	70.1
Finland	1995	56.88 (70.40)	1	G	N,L	70.8
France	1952	-	11	G, C	N, R, L	65.3
Germany	1952	-	-	-	R, L	-
Greece	1981	-	5	G	N	78.1
Hungary	2004	83.76 (45.62)	12	I, G, C	N, L	47.2
Ireland	1973	83.10 (70.88)	36	G, C	N	47.8
Italy	1952	-	72	F, G	N, R, L	53.8
Latvia	2004	67.00 (72.50)	10	I, G, C	N, L	45.5
Lithuania	2004	90.97 (63.37)	20	I, G, C	N	50.1
Luxembourg	1952	-	1	F, G, C	N	90.4
Malta	2004	53.64 (90.86)	3	I, G, C	N, R, L	57.8
Netherlands	1952	-	1	-	R, L	63.3
Poland	2004	77.45 (58.85)	12	G	N, R, L	55.7
Portugal	1986	-	3	I, G, C	N, R, L	41.2
Romania	2007	-	6	G, C	N, R, L	37.8
Slovakia	2004	93.71 (52.15)	15	I, G, C	N, R, L	21.2
Slovenia	2004	89.64 (60.44)	21	I, G	N,R, L	40.2
Spain	1986	-	4	G, C	N, R, L	49.1
Sweden	1995	52.74 (83.22)	13	G	N, R, L	70.6
United Kingdom	1973	67.23 (64.03)	2	G	N, R, L	53.1

by many as unsatisfactorily low.

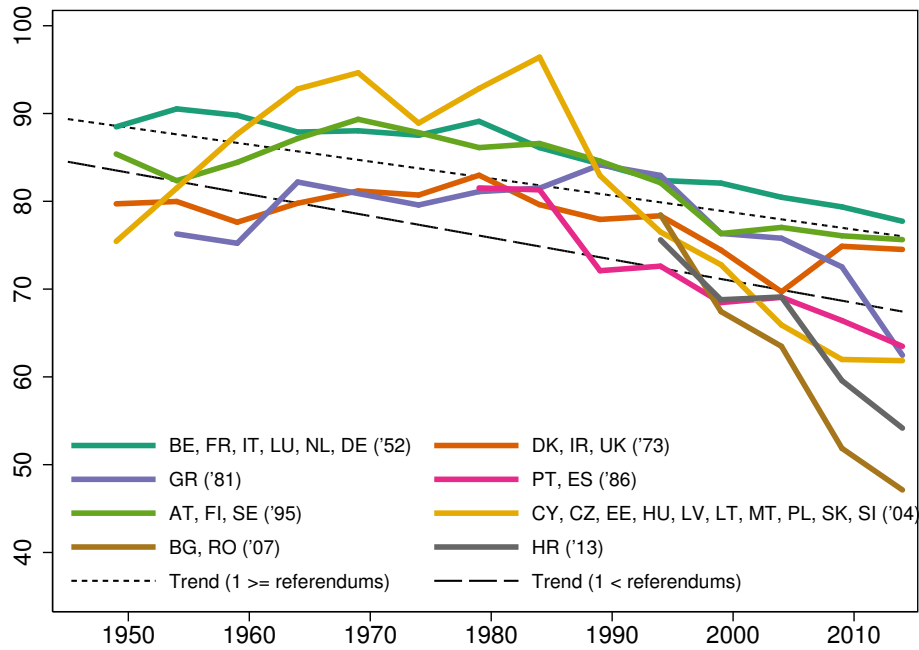


Figure 2: Turnout (5-year averages) in national parliamentary elections for 28 EU member states, grouped by year of accession. “Trend” indicates time trend in turnout over all states controlling for level differences in turnout between states (based on OLS with country fixed-effects) as for instance some states have compulsory voting.

Direct Democracy relates to turnout in at least two important ways. Firstly, there is the question “whether direct democracy fosters or undermines the representative game through enlightening citizens or alienating them from participating at representative elections” (Altman 2012, 1). Secondly, direct democracy is criticized for often seeing lower turnout than elections held on the same level of government which raises questions about the representativity and legitimacy of direct democratic votes.

On one hand, referendum campaigns and corresponding media coverage thereof can provide additional information to citizens, potentially raising their interest in politics in general and elections in particular. Referendums can stimulate debate among citizens, leading to increased political efficacy. Lastly, the regular holding of referendums could contribute to a participatory culture where voting is considered a value in itself. On the other hand, referendums take decision over policies out of the hand of parliament which could make elections seem less important. Furthermore, the holding of many

referendums could lead to an electoral fatigue among voters that would depress turnout.

The available evidence suggests that both arguments have some truth to them. In the short term referendums do indeed stimulate turnout but in the long term they seem to contribute to an electoral fatigue. Studies on the referendum in US states suggest that holding a referendum in the two years prior to or on election day increases turnout in mid-term elections (Altman 2012; Tolbert, Bowen and Donovan 2009; Tolbert 2005; Tolbert, Grummel and Smith 2001). Estimates of average effects range from one to seven percentage-points. For highly salient referendums, measured by newspaper coverage, the induced increase in turnout can be as high as 30%-points (Lacey 2005). A cursory glance at Table 1 also reveals that turnout in EU referendums seems to be higher for countries where EU membership was controversial at that time. These are all effects for actual referendums, the simple presence of direct democracy turns out to be inconsequential for turnout. Effects on presidential elections, where election campaigns are more intense and turnout higher, are much lower with some studies reporting null results (Schlozman and Yohai 2008). A study of Californian local elections found that if municipalities hold a local referendum in parallel this increased turnout by about four percentage-points (Hajnal and Lewis 2003). Some studies include a squared term to account for possible decreasing marginal effects of referendums and indeed find the effect of an additional referendum to decrease in the total number of referendums, again lending support to electoral fatigue arguments.

Yet, two studies from Switzerland, where referendums are even more important relative to elections than in the US, provide contradictory evidence. Here, referendums are associated with lower turnout in elections (Altman 2012; Freitag and Stadelmann-Steffen 2010). Interestingly, Freitag and Stadelmann-Steffen (2010) who distinguish between referendums held up to six months prior to the general election and referendums held in preceding years find the latter, more long-term factor to have a stronger negative effect on turnout.

Who turns out to vote in referendums is an important question in its own right as who participates might affect the outcome of such votes (see section 4). Critiques are quick to point to low turnout in referendums. Butler and Ranney (1994) found that mean turnout in national referendums in 12

established democracies conducted between 1945 and 1993 was up to 30 percentage points lower than turnout in general elections in these countries. In Switzerland where referendums are frequent and a regular part of politics, 192 of 273 (70.3%) referendums held between 1980 and 2012 saw a turnout that was lower than turnout in the preceding national elections. Yet, turnout in Swiss referendums is also subject to high fluctuation, ranging from 30% to 80%. Turnout in national elections is very low, too – mean turnout between 1979 and 2011 was 46.3% and turnout never surpassed 50%. Research shows that only between 15 and 20% of the Swiss voting population never vote in referendums, whereas around 60% of citizens vote selectively (Marques de Bastos 1993).

In the EU turnout between referendums and countries varies considerably. In Italy for instance, which with 72 referendums since 1945 has seen the most referendums among all EU members, turnout ranged from 23.5% in a 2009 referendum on electoral reform to 89.08% in a 1946 referendum on the future form of government. Across all referendums average turnout is lowest in Slovakia with 21.2% and highest in Belgium with average turnout of 92.9% - yet Belgium did only hold one referendum.⁷

A unique study by Dyck and Seabrook (2010) on referendum-only special elections in the US reveals that partisans are more likely than independents to vote in referendums raising doubts whether those more distant to politics will be drawn back to it by direct democracy. The salience of the referendum is important. Kriesi (2007) finds that an individual's awareness of the referendum issues are a strong determinant of the decision to turn out to vote which is itself strongly influenced by referendum campaigns. A cursory glance at Tab. 1 also suggests that turnout for salient referendums like EU membership is most often close to and can sometimes even surpass turnout in elections. Again, short-term forces like referendum campaigns are more important determinants of individual turnout than long-term forces like 'participatory fervor' of citizens.

Participation in referendums follows similar patterns to voting in an election – with citizens of high SES, as well as older and politically interested citizens more likely to vote in referendums (Kriesi 2007). Sceptics fear that if turnout in a referendum is lower than in elections the voting population will

⁷In 1950 Belgians were asked to vote in a referendum on the return of King Leopold III.

likely be even more unrepresentative of the population at-large. Obviously, this problem is evaded if a referendum is conducted in conjunction with an election. Surprisingly, unlike in elections there seems to be no gender gap in referendums as evidence from Switzerland and EU referendums in various countries suggests (Treichsel 2007) – women seem just as likely as men to vote in referendums.

Another important point regarding turnout in referendums concerns the effect of participation quorums which define a total turnout that needs to be reached for the policy to pass in case of a yes-vote. Participation quorums provide incentives for opponents of a yes-vote to campaign for abstention to make the referendum fail the participation quorum which is considerably easier than mobilizing a majority to vote no (Altman 2010). Indeed, in an analysis of 109 referendum votes Aguiar-Conraria and Magalhães (2010) find that participation quorums decrease turnout by on average 11%-points. Approval quorums have no such effect – these simply require the number of yes votes to surpass a threshold for the vote to pass and therefore provide no such perverse incentives for proponents of a no-vote.

What these findings suggests is that referendums do indeed have an effect on turnout. That effect seems to be stronger in less salient elections. Also, such an effect is driven by short-term mobilization through campaigns and that in the long term having too many referendums can actually depress turnout. Politics considering the expansion of direct democracy should aim for moderate number of referendums, although it is hard to say given the evidence what constitutes a moderate number of referendums. Turnout in referendums is highest when held in conjunction with an election or the topic of the referendum is highly salient. In politics where referendums occur frequently turnout is on average lower than in national elections. As turnout in referendums follows similiar patterns as turnout in elections this raises the specter of unrepresentative referendums outcomes, when small minorities win low turnout referendums against the interests of an inactive majority.

4 Representation

Many political scientists use the criterion of the regular holding of (free and fair) elections to distinguish democracies from non-democratic polities. This

is because they are meant to provide accountability, that is, a connection between the performance of the representatives and the probability of their re-election which serves to make representatives responsive to their citizens. Clearly, a democratic government should provide a close correspondence between the positions it takes and policies it enacts and the preferences of voters. As [Powell \(2004, 9\)](#) argues “responsiveness in this sense is one of the justifications for democracy itself.”

Representation refers to the extent and means in which governments, parliaments or legislators represent the preferences or interests of their constituents. It is a concept that is, unlike turnout, very difficult to measure – and therefore many different operationalizations are used for empirical work. Consequently, diverging opinions about the performance of different institutions, particularly electoral systems, in providing it and about the existence of time trends exist ([Golder and Stramski 2010](#); [Thomassen and van Ham 2014](#)).

Diagnoses of a democratic decline rest on claims that representation, however conceived, has gotten worse. They contend for instance that parties have become less distinguishable on positional issue and that policy and ideology play a lesser role in elections.

The introduction of particularly citizen-initiated forms of direct democracy seem especially attractive to give greater prominence to policy again. In the US where the initiative has brought issues like marijuana legalization, gay marriage or term limits to the fore “policy innovation [in the states] is now being driven as much by voter initiatives as by legislatures and governor” [Matsusaka \(2005b, 162\)](#) contends.

There is an increasingly broad literature on policy effects of direct democracy, finding for instance that subnational units with direct democracy spend less and have less debt ([Matsusaka 2004](#); [Feld and Kirchgaessner 2001](#)). Yet, the crucial question is whether these changes in policy brought about by the initiative have been in the interest of a majority of citizens.

Direct democracy has appeal because it seems to allow for an unmediated expression of the will of the people. Therefore, by intuition, successful initiatives should by the nature of majority rule lead to outcomes a median voter would prefer to the status quo. However, it is far from clear whether referendums really do improve representation.

Consider the fact that on election day citizens in polities with the refer-

endum are not just confronted with a number of representatives to elect but also a number of ballot propositions. This puts high cognitive demand on voters who might not possess the information necessary to make an informed decision. Although, [Lupia \(1994\)](#) in a study of referendum votes in California finds that cues from interest groups citizens trust can help them to reach the decisions they would have taken had they had more information.

Initiatives are often launched by moneyed industries who use paid signature collectors to obtain the required number of signatures to put their proposition on the ballot. States with heavy initiative use like California have developed a veritable initiative industry. Special interests can also outspend their opponents in referendum campaigns. In a study of 168 referendum campaigns in eight US states [Gerber \(1999\)](#) finds that wealthy interests like industry groups are quite effective in campaigning against unwanted initiatives but are ineffective in staging successful ones themselves.

Turnout for referendums is lower if they are not held in conjunction with regular elections. In this case an unrepresentative minority might impose legislation on a silent majority that would have opposed the proposition were it better informed or the referendum held on an election day.

Whether referendums lead to unrepresentative outcomes is an important question regarding the normative desirability of direct democracy. Yet, little systematic evidence to answer this question exists. One study of 60 Swiss national referendums held during the 1980s finds that in 13 referendums the majority of non-voters would have voted differently from how the majority of voters voted: in six, ten percent of all the referendums in this period, would full turnout have changed the outcome of the referendums ([Di Giacomo 1993](#)). These are all referendums with a very slim majority, and with especially low levels of participation – around 50%. [Lutz \(2007\)](#) who studies a greater number of national referendums finds that for half of the referendums voter and non-voters had significantly different opinions on the referendum issues. His econometric simulations suggest that full turnout would have changed the outcome of the referendum by 0 to 10% points. More research is needed in this area before a more complete picture of the representativeness of referendum outcomes can emerge.

However, even if the referendum is not subverted by vocal and powerful minorities, critiques argue that this essentially majoritarian device tends to work to the disadvantage of minorities. Citizens unlike elected politicians

lack accountability and need for public justification of their decisions. As such they are free to follow their prejudices. For instance, [Gamble \(1997\)](#) in an analysis of referendums in the US finds that referendums against minorities pass more often than referendums on other topics. The impact of direct democracy on minorities is possibly the most contested issue in the scholarly literature on direct democracy consisting of a wealth of studies. While the issue is still contested, it seems to be a straightforward safeguard to exclude fundamental rights, in particular those of minorities, from the set of policies that can be decided through direct democratic institutions.

Referendums receive a lot of attention but indirect effects of the initiative may be just as important. Although the number of propositions put on the ballot can sum up to over a dozen a year in very active states that number is still small compared to the number of laws emanating from the legislature. Focusing only on the indirect effect of the initiative risks to underestimate its effect. Game theoretic work on the topic suggests that direct democracy also has an indirect influence through the behavior of forward looking legislators who factor the possibility of initiatives into their decisions ([Hug 2004](#); [Matsusaka and McCarty 2001](#); [Gerber 1996](#)). To prevent a measure from being proposed in an initiative and adopted they should prefer to pass legislation of their own, meeting potential sponsors of an initiative halfway. For instance, it is the Swiss government's stated objective to only put forward 'referendum proof' legislation that is unlikely to be challenged by means of a facultative referendum or citizens' initiative.

Empirical evidence on the effects of direct democracy on representation is still limited, mixed in its conclusions and subject to discussions (see for instance the exchange between [Matsusaka 2001](#); [Hagen, Lascher and Camobreco 2001](#)). Much of the disagreement in the literature centers around the question how to attain valid and comparable measures of public policy and opinion, a longstanding issue in representation research ([Hug 2011](#); [Matsusaka 2001](#); [Achen 1978, 1977](#)).

I focus here on the studies with a strong claim to internal validity. For instance, [Gerber \(1996\)](#) studies so called parental consent laws which require parents to consent for their underage children to have an abortion which is regulated at the state level in the US. She finds popular approval or disapproval of the measure is more likely to be matched by a corresponding policy in initiative states. Similar results for abortion policy and the death penalty

are provided by [Hug \(2004\)](#) and [Burden \(2005\)](#). The most comprehensive evidence is provided by [Matsusaka \(2010\)](#) who assembled a dataset of 10 binary issues over 50 states collected from multiple waves of the American National Election Survey. As these studies focus on one or a small set of highly salient issues⁸ it remains to be seen whether the findings hold beyond the narrow subject area they study.

It is safe to say that the most tangible effect of direct democracy is the direct effect through trough referendums. One example is California's Proposition 13 that limited the tax raising power of the state and sparked a number of tax cutting propositions as well as legislative activity in other states. Although politically significant the occurrence of such influential referendums is too irregular and infrequent to be statistically significant in most systematic empirical studies.

Term Limits for state legislatures are another example. These limit the number of legislative periods a member of a state legislature can be part of the legislature. Although popular majorities for term limits exist in all 50 states, Louisiana is the only non-initiative state to have term limits. In contrast, 15 of 24 initiative states have term limits and have all been – starting in 1990 with California, Colorado and Oklahoma – established via the initiative. This is a case where direct democracy has clearly served to improve representation.

In conclusion, the empirical evidence does not really support proponents nor opponents of direct democracy and their respective views. Here, disagreement over concepts and measurements translates to disagreement over effects and trends. Representation is probably the most dubious aspect of diagnoses of a crisis in representation as it rests at least as much on subjective impressions as on systematic evidence. How people perceive to be represented is more tangible and also possibly more consequential as disputed 'objective' measures of representation. It is for one a significant determinant of citizens' satisfaction with democracy ([Aarts and Thomassen 2008](#)), the topic I now turn to in the following section.

⁸As survey items are only fielded for minimally salient issues.

5 Citizens' attitudes

Democratic regimes rely on the consent of their citizens rather than coercive power to ensure the rule of law. Therefore, citizens' attitudes towards the political system are of key importance to the legitimacy and continuation of a political system (Almond and Verba 1963; Easton 1965, 1953).

Citizen's often complex and multifaceted attitudes towards politics are summarized under the term political support which conceptually has different levels and objects. It ranges from diffuse support for the political community and political regime to more specific support for political actors such as parties, courts or parliament (Dalton 2004; Norris 1999; Easton 1965). Satisfaction with democracy is one the most often used indicators. In practice, it is the support for the regime performance, located on a medium level of this typology.⁹ Whereas trust is specific support for actors.¹⁰

A number of indicators of trust indicate a gradual decline in specific support among citizens for parties, parliaments and governments (Dalton 2004). Citizens seem to become increasingly critical of key actors of the political system. Although this development is often summarized as a rise in discontentment or disaffection, satisfaction with the way democracy works and other measures of diffuse support have actually been remarkably stable showing just weak signs of decline, if at all (Norris 2011; Wagner, Schneider and Halla 2009). However, during the financial crisis satisfaction with the way democracy works and trust in parliament have decreased across nearly all European countries, though with some exceptions like Germany or Poland (Armingeon and Guthmann 2014).

'Disillusionment' with conventional politics is frequently cited as a key reason for the popularity of direct democracy. As Butler and Ranney (1994, 14) points out, "[a]dvocates of the referendum device believe that one of its greater virtues is the belief of most ordinary people that decisions they make themselves are more legitimate than those made by the public officials." If referendums are regarded as the most authoritative expression of 'the' popular will, allowing for them, might increase popular support for the political system.

⁹The question commonly used reads, "And on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?" (as used in ESS round 6).

¹⁰Questions commonly used read something like "[P]lease tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust." (as used in ESS round 6)

Frey and Stutzer (2000) suggest that direct democracy should increase citizen satisfaction for two reasons: because it offers them more control over policy and thereby improves representation, as well as more participation which citizens should value for itself independent of political outcomes. As Bowler and Donovan (2002, 376) hypothesize “both the opportunity to participate, as well as the act of participation on policy decisions, can be expected to promote more positive views about the efficacy of individual political activity.”

However, direct democracy might in the contrary lead to traditional institutions and actors of democratic politics to be looked upon even less favorably – particularly if a government loses a referendum. Also, populists might use it to further their causes and portray political elites as unresponsive to the people. Hence, direct democracy might also further erode the standing of other democratic institutions like parties, parliaments and governments in public opinion.

There are few studies to investigate the link between direct democracy and political support. Some studies rather focus on the political efficacy of citizens. For instance, two studies find that citizens’ political knowledge (Smith 2002) and internal efficacy (Bowler and Donovan 2002) to be positively associated with initiative usage. However, the former effect only occurs for voters. This might be explained by voters having been more exposed to referendum campaigns than non-voters. In a unique study using a rolling cross-section conducted before the 1992 referendum on the Charlottetown Constitutional Accord in Canada Mendelsohn and Cutler (2000) find that political knowledge among citizens increased during the campaign.

Hero and Tolbert (2004) using time series-data data from the National Election Study (NES) spanning ten years (1988-1998) find that citizens who are exposed to a greater number of referendums are more likely to perceive government as responsive. These results support earlier findings gained from cross-sectional data from the 1992 NES (Bowler and Donovan 2002). Again it is actual referendums rather than the mere presence of the institution that matters.

Whether citizens feel that governments are responsive to them should also influence their political support. Indeed, in Switzerland citizens of canton with more intense usage of referendums are more satisfied with the way democracy works (Stadelmann-Steffen and Vatter 2012). Institutional

rules themselves, again, are insignificant. [Hug \(2005\)](#) uses cross-sectional and panel data on 19 Eastern and Central European to have that citizens in countries with institutions of direct democracy show more confidence in parliament and government and that the introduction of direct democracy raised confidence. [Bernauer and Vatter \(2012\)](#) who study an even broader sample of 26 established democracies rate these along a parties-interest groups, a federal-unitary, and a cabinets-direct democracy scale. They find larger coalitions and direct democracy to be positively associated with satisfaction with democracy.

Additional evidence comes from studies linking direct democracy to support for EU integration and tax morale ([Hug 2005](#); [Hug and Spörri 2011](#)). The former find that voters more supportive of EU integration after a referendum has been held on such an issue. The latter provide evidence for a stronger link between trust and tax morale in countries with direct democracy at the national level. Yet, they find not evidence for a direct effect of direct democracy on tax morale, contradicting earlier studies ([Torgler 2007](#); [Weck-Hannemann and Pommerehne 1989](#)).

Yet, as most observational studies these studies face problems of endogeneity. One might just as well hypothesize that citizens that are more efficacious and content participate more in politics, including supporting initiatives. A noteworthy experimental conducted in 49 Indonesian evades this problem ([Olken 2010](#)). The experiment randomly designated villages to choose a development project through a representative assembly or a referendum. Citizens in villages that held a referendum showed greater knowledge of as well as satisfaction with the development projects. Due to its experimental setup the study provides high internal validity but it is questionable whether the results carry over to other contexts like national referendums where outcomes are less tangible than in the case of local public goods provision.

Direct democracy seems to affect citizen's attitudes from diffuse to specific support, yet, the evidence is still limited. There also is an indication that referendums are associated with citizens being or feeling more competent to participate in politics. As for turnout and representation the actual holding of referendums shows significant effects in some studies, while there is only little evidence for an effect of the institution itself. The mechanism linking direct democracy and citizens' political efficacy are likely the infor-

mational effects of referendum campaigns. How direct democracy impacts on diffuse and specific aspects of political support is less clear.

6 Conclusion

Taking note of diagnoses of a democratic decline I asked what the likely effects of direct democracy would be on the most commonly attested symptoms: a decline in turnout, deteriorating representation, and an erosion of trust in government and satisfaction with democracy among citizens – all of which ultimately challenge the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

As regards the political participation of citizens, the moderate use of referendums can indeed serve to increase turnout, particularly when elections and referendums are held simultaneously. Turnout in stand-alone referendums tends to be lower than in elections. It thus seems advisable to hold referendums in conjunction with national elections when possible. As the already politicized are more likely to vote in referendums one should have no false hopes for the potential of direct democracy to re-politicize disaffected citizens.

If referendums occur too frequently a long-term negative effect on turnout might set in. However, this is not an immediate concern as no European country is likely to reach the levels of usage of direct democracy seen in Switzerland or California within the foreseeable future.

Institutional details are important for turnout, too. For direct democracy to be an effective instrument it needs to be used by citizens. Therefore, the barriers to its use should not be set too high, but for it to be legitimate participation in it should not be too low. Participation requirements are therefore necessary to give legitimacy to direct democratic decisions and are best defined in terms of an approval quorum. Participatory quorums provide perverse incentives to opponents of a yes-vote to campaign for abstention rather than a no-vote and should therefore be avoided.

It seems advisable to set medium to high signature requirements but to allow for long collection periods and not too restrictive rules for signature collection to allow grass-roots organizations to use the instrument. The popular support of an initiative should be measured in terms of the number of people who supported it by signing it, not by the effort individuals exerted to sign the petition.

While there is hardly any disagreement on time trends in turnout – although normative judgments about them might differ – diagnoses of representation are much more ambiguous. An indirect ‘threat’ effect should not be overstated as there still is very little convincing evidence. However, the citizens’ initiative can be an instrument to bring new and popular topics on the political agenda. Direct democracy can sometimes serve as a vehicle for political reform, even against the will of the political elite, as the case of term limits for US states legislatures illustrates.

Referendum outcomes do not seem to be more unrepresentative than representative outcomes. There is no strong evidence that direct democracy gives even more influence to vocal and powerful minorities than representative democracy. Yet, what about the specter of a tyranny of the majority?

Whether direct democracy disadvantages minorities is a contested issue in the literature. My answer to this question is that any reform of direct democracy must exclude fundamental rights, in particular those of minorities, from the set of policies that can be decided by that institution. In some political systems such as Germany’s which has a strong constitutional system this might be sufficient to prevent discriminatory policies. Yet, in other cases where such constitutional safeguards does not exist, the rules of direct democracy need to be specified to exclude these issues.

Trends in citizens’ political attitudes are also not as clear-cut as some diagnoses of democratic recession suggest. While there has been a decline in some measures of specific support for political actors, diffuse support for the political system remained rather stable.

Nevertheless, direct democracy could affect both. Again it is actual use of the institutions that matters. Referendum campaigns have the potential politicize citizens. Yet, governments will likely be reluctant to stage information campaigns and encourage citizens to vote if a vote is to be held on an initiative directed against the government’s policy.

On the individual level, the educational and attitudinal effects of direct democracy seem to particularly accrue to voters. These tend to be those who already participate in regular elections. While direct democracy might on average improve citizens’ political abilities and attitudes towards the political system, there surely are better means to reach those already distant to politics.

Given the available evidence it seems justified to agree with David Alt-

man's (2010, 14) assessment that "[d]irect democracy does not constitute a panacea for solving problems of current democracies, nor is it something intrinsically wrong to be avoided at any price." The benefits of direct democracy are not be overstated as they are modest – at the same time there is little evidence for drastic detrimental effects of direct democracy. Specifics details play an important role as the careful design of direct democratic institutions can prevent or make less likely some of the possible negative effects.

Once a referendum on an important issues has been held, a precedent has been set to involve citizens in future political decisions, too. Consequently, there is no reason to think that increase in institutionalization and use will not extend into the future. Direct democracy will remain on the political agenda for the foreseeable future. Its extended usage provides ample opportunities for research for political scientists as much is still to be learned.

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