

Direct democracy is ill-fitted to engaging the politically disengaged, but popular with more active citizens

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The UK has seen a spate of referendums since 1997, with the public being consulted on the creation of new mayoralities, parliaments, assemblies, voting systems, and soon our membership of the European Union. But does direct democracy have the potential to engage those who are currently disinterested in politics? **Arndt Leninger** argues that while it is popular with engaged in politics already it will do little to engage the disengaged.*



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Referendums are increasingly making the news these days. Only a few weeks after the Greek referendum it is now the UK capturing headlines with the British government intending to hold a referendum on the UK's EU membership by 2017. This will not be the first referendum for the UK in recent times. Only last year Scots voted on independence in a referendum. Throughout Europe and the world referendums on matters of national sovereignty are becoming more common. But they are also increasingly used to decide more traditional policy matters. In 2011 for instance British voters rejected a proposal to replace the first-past-the-post system for the Westminster elections with the Alternative Vote. These developments raise the question whether an increased institutionalization and use of direct democracy is indeed desirable. How will it change, still pre-dominantly representative, democratic politics?

I addressed these questions in my recent article "[Direct Democracy in Europe: Potentials and Pitfalls](#)" published in a symposium on "[Changing the European Debate: A Rollback of Democracy](#)" in the journal *Global Policy*. In it I survey the potentials and limitations of direct democracy based on empirical research. Most of the empirical studies I draw on are based on evidence from Switzerland or the USA. Both countries see an extensive usage of direct democracy – Switzerland (at the national level) or the state of California alone have in the past decades consistently held more referendums than all EU member states combined. Therefore, one should not simply assume that the findings presented here will apply one-to-one in the UK or other European democracies where direct democracy is still a relatively new thing and used infrequently.

Institutions of direct democracy allow citizens to cast a binding vote on policy, rather than having representatives

decide the matter. Citizens may put forward proposals themselves via the initiative, or vote government initiated or constitutionally mandated referendums. Direct democracy seems to allow for more citizen involvement in politics. It is for this reason that it is considered as fruitful response to a democratic recession in Europe that many observers identify. The most widely received of such diagnosis is [Colin Crouch's 'post-democracy'](#) which will surely be familiar to many readers of this blog.

Such diagnosis usually identify 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. It is the likely impact of direct democracy on these 'symptoms' that structured my review.

Direct democracy might positively impact upon electoral participation through politicizing citizens and increased mobilization efforts on the side of parties. Indeed, referendums held concurrently with or shortly before elections do seem to increase turnout by a couple percentage points. However, this effect, if it is one, only accrues to turnout in so called second-order elections – turnout in national elections is not affected – and can become negative as a fatigue effect seems to set in when many referendums are held regularly.

Though, one worry about referendums is that turnout in them is usually lower than in elections held on the same level of government. In Switzerland, for instance, 192 of 273 (70.3%) referendums between 1980 and 2012 saw a turnout that was lower than turnout in the preceding national election. As turnout is strongly skewed in socioeconomic terms low turnout might imply that referendum outcomes are not representative of the wider public's policy preferences. An interesting study by [Dyck and Seabrook](#) 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.

Proponents of the democratic recession thesis worry about citizens having less influence in policy making. Here, direct democracy can make a difference. In the US the initiative is a major source of policy innovation at the state level having brought issues like marijuana legalization, gay marriage or term limits to the fore. Some referendums have a lasting impact as for instance 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.

The crucial question is whether these changes in policy brought about by the initiative have been in the interest of a majority of citizens. Consider the fact that on election day citizens in polities with the referendum 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. A number of studies find that voters can use cues from parties or interest groups to reach the decisions they would have taken had they had more information.

However, this raise the specter of special interests having undue influence, particularly those that can outspend their opponents in referendum campaigns. In a study of 168 referendum campaigns in eight US states [Gerber](#) finds that wealthy interests like industry groups are quite effective in campaigning against unwanted initiatives but are ineffective in staging successful ones themselves. My casual reading of the Swiss situation is that similar dynamics are at play there.

Disillusionment with conventional politics is frequently cited as a key reason for the popularity of direct democracy. Indeed, political dissatisfaction is a strong predictor for support for direct democracy – the most consistent finding in research on attitudes towards direct democracy. Yet, do these finding imply in reverse that direct democracy makes people more satisfied? [Frey and Stutzer](#) 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. 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.

Observational studies do find some relationship between people's political efficacy or satisfaction with democracy and referendums. Yet, the direction of causality is unclear as politically interested are more likely to participate in referendums. One [noteworthy experimental study](#) evades this problem. The experiment randomly designated 49 Indonesian villages to choose a development project either 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 remains to be seen whether the results carry over to other contexts like national referendums in developed democracies where outcomes are less tangible than in the case of local public goods provision.

On balance direct democracy seems to entail as many pitfalls as potentials. Nevertheless, given direct democracy's widespread popularity, politicians of all stripes should feel encouraged to give citizens more of it. Ignoring demands for reform will only serve to fuel discontentment. When introducing instruments of direct democracy much will depend on institutional 'hedges' to ensure their proper democracy-enhancing functions. Two caveats apply. Firstly, any positive effects that may be realized will be only accrue over the medium- to long term and be modest at best. Secondly, it is people who are already engaged with politics who desire direct participation the most. Direct democracy is ill-fit to draw those who already are distant from politics back to it.

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*This piece is based upon the longer article ['Direct Democracy in Europe: Potentials and Pitfalls'](#) from the *Global Policy* journal. It represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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