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How Political Parties use Referendums: An Analytical Framework

Abstract
Extensive research has shown how political parties use referendums to achieve their goals. Most studies use either a policy-oriented or an institutional based approach to explain parties' actions. In spite of much empirical evidence, to date the analytical dimensions were not put together to facilitate the study of referendum instrumentalization across countries. This article makes a first step in that direction and proposes a typology that distinguishes between the goals and types of action of political parties. The theoretical reasoning behind such a typology is then backed by empirical evidence from five East European countries included in the special issue to this journal.

Keywords: political parties, referendums, policy goals, institutional goals

Introduction

The process of political representation in democratic constitutional countries faces a series of major challenges. Among them, the most important are the erosion of citizens' confidence in institutions, growing public dissatisfaction with the system of representative democracy (Dalton 2004; Norris 2011), impatient citizens with intermediaries between their opinions and public policies (Morris 1999) and the low involvement in traditional forms of politics (Dalton & Wattenberg 2000; Norris 2011; van Biezen et al. 2012). These developments affect the framework within which politics operate and the legitimacy of policy-makers to act. The adoption of regulations and use of referendums were seen in some theories as a potential cure for this malaise (Scarrow 2001; Geissel & Newton 2012). The basic argument is that tools of direct democracy adapt to changing demands of the citizenry towards the political system and may help to cure the democratic malaise, link citizens' preferences to political decisions and increase regime legitimacy (LeDuc 2003; Newton 2012; Gherghina 2017).

However, recent real life examples illustrate how referendums may be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it may undermine the advantages of representation by giving voice to oversimplified, so called 'popular' ideas (e.g. Brexit in 2016) or to authoritarian tendencies of leaders who wish to legitimize their decisions (e.g. the 2017 Turkish constitutional referendum). On the other hand, referendums control the extreme

tendencies of political elites (e.g. the 2016 referendum in Hungary against the EU quota for refugees). Both sides of the medal are illustrative for the ways in political parties may use referendums to reach their ends. So far, research has shown that the instrumental use of referendums may occur in different political settings, with various goals (Butler & Ranney 1994; Walker 2003). Most studies analyzed particular cases to reveal the sources, mechanisms and consequences of this process. Little attention has been paid to the elaboration of a framework that could foster the systematic assessment of the instrumental use of referendums across different settings. To address this void in the literature and to foster understanding about the instrumental use of referendums, this article provides a typology applicable across contexts, with broader implications for the use of referendums in contemporary representative systems. This typology has two analytical dimensions – the initiators' type of action and type of intended goals – which incorporate the arguments according to which referendums have gradually become useful tools to promote policies preferred by particular political elites and potential strategies for fringe actors on the political arena (Barney & Laycock 1999; Qvortrup 2005; Topaloff 2017). At the same time, while much discussion in the literature about referendums and hijacking by political parties focused on policies, this typology introduces an institutional component as potential driver for the steering of the public will.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The first section summarizes the most common arguments provided in the literature about the vices and virtues of referendums. The second section discusses the ways in which political parties may approach referendums in an instrumental way and derives a broadly applicable typology. Next, the article focuses on the relevance of this typology from both a theoretical and empirical perspective. The final section provides an overview of the special issue introduced by this article and explains how each of the six countries provides empirical evidence indicating how the typology developed here is applicable in various political contexts.

The Vices and Virtues of Referendums

Referendums are controversial decision-making processes in contemporary politics. Extensive literature was dedicated to their advantages and disadvantages, how far they can go in terms of decision and how many decisions should be reached through referendums, the (in)competence of voters and the reasoning behind the call for a referendum. The

following lines will provide a brief summary of the main arguments used by the opponents and supporters of referendums. Opponents referred primarily to having too much responsibility on the shoulders of average citizens who are not competent, lack time and information, or have a low interest in many issues (Kriesi 2012a). In this sense, the most common critique is that citizens are unable to take wise decisions (Budge 2012) and they are manipulable and easy to influence by those who pursue narrow interests. Under these circumstances, representatives appear to be the most appropriate to take decisions since they have sufficient time, resources, and access to relevant information that enables them to engage in political deliberation (Beetham 2012). The result of this situation is a relative asymmetry between political institutions and citizens in which the former are likely to influence the latter. Empirical evidence indicates that voters generally follow the recommendations of the government and political elites have a strong influence on voters.

A second major critique is the under-representation of minorities and the possible outcomes of a majority policy towards these minorities. The uneven participation across social groups has a stronger bias towards majority and a more significant impact on society when particular groups turn out to vote. For example, "in situations of low voter turnout, such as in California, this means that the referendum may amplify the opinion of those most likely to actually vote: white, middle class, suburban voters" (Mendelsohn & Parkin 2001). This reflects a clear under-representation of citizens with low education and an over-representation of graduates and senior managers. Related to this, a third criticism about referendums focuses on its problematic legitimacy. Low voter turnout in referendums, often rooted in low citizen interest and involvement in politics, has important influence for the outcomes of a vote. When the average turnout in many Swiss referendums is below 50% or in California and other American states below 40%, there is a danger that only a minority of the entire electorate actually decides on an issue that affects the entire community or society (LeDuc 2003). When less well-educated and informed people abstain from voting, referendums become an instrument for the already politically privileged (Smith 2009, pp.125–127).

Another concern is the tendency of referendums to focus attention on single issues. When deciding on particular policies, citizens are not required to observe and analyze the complexity of contemporary processes. The result can be an irrational policy in which citizens approve new spending programs and at the same time cutting their taxes (Lupia &

Matsusaka 2004). This weakness of referendums is reflected in the cases when voters are asked to cast opinions about the adoption of a new constitution (that brings many changes to the previous one) or about large-scale decisions with implications on several layers (e.g. referendums about human rights). This simplifying process is problematic also because it lacks a mechanism to reflect voter priorities among issues (Clark 1998). Citizens are pushed to agree or disagree with a policy that may be more nuanced or they have to adopt a change that does not have to be a radical shift from existence to non-existence (or the other way around), but may be a matter of degree.

The supporters of referendums claim that its procedures make democratic ideals come true and allow for real participation of citizens beyond representatives. In their view, the referendum complements the existing mechanisms of representation and corrects some of its flaws, providing a cure for this malaise (Geissel & Newton 2012). While it is true that citizens are sometimes not informed enough, not sufficiently competent and not interested by all state matters or policies, earlier research indicates that voters were cautious and have almost always rejected extreme proposals (Smith 2009). They are not as easy to manipulate by populists as asserted by critics and quite often their reactions go against those of the initiators. For example, the referendum to impeach the Romanian president in 2012 did not enjoy popular support although the parliamentary majority against the president was very high. This example illustrates that although citizens voted for some representatives and those elected officials wanted to oust from office the elected president through a radical measure, voters opposed it in referendum. In Switzerland, citizens who participate are significantly more competent than the overall electorate; self-selection takes place, which on the one side reduces the possibility of unreasonable decisions (Kriesi 2012b).

The delegation of power can lead to citizens' alienation from politics and decrease responsibility for collective decisions. In representative democracies elections are the crucial mechanism that guarantees citizens' involvement. However, elections rarely provide effective opportunities for citizens to influence policy-making. In the context of growing public dissatisfaction with the system of representative democracy (Dalton 2004; Norris 2011) and impatient citizens with intermediaries between their opinions and public policies (Morris 1999). Referendums may compensate for these shortcomings and link citizens' preferences to political decisions. They can accommodate the demands of an increasingly educated public that rejects the guidance of representative institutions. In this sense,

educated citizens are likely to "take the promise of democracy seriously and seek to get their preferences directly enacted into public policy" (Budge 2012, p.35).

Another major virtue of referendums is that they may improve the quality of democracy (Geissel 2016). If representative institutions do not live up to the public expectations of democratic citizenship, referendums may alter the degree of discontent by favoring the emergence of a (partial) system of self-government. The latter allows the pursuit of interests and preferences that may be (for various reasons) squeezed out of representative politics. One possible consequence is a better and more responsible decision-making process from both representative institutions – that will feel the pressure of alternative policy-making – and citizens who will have no one to blame for poor decisions. In brief, the openness of the regime towards direct democracy tools, such as referendums, is likely to boost popular evaluations of legitimacy (Gherghina 2017). Furthermore, representative democracy has been considered too hierarchical, bureaucratic and partisan to be able to deal effectively with questions of popular sovereignty or social exclusion. For example, some voters see their preferences discarded when the parties for which they voted are not large enough to participate in policy-making, i.e. fail to gain access to Parliament. The disappointment may end up in exclusion from participation in the next elections. Referendums reduce the likelihood of such situations by allowing citizens to express their preferences although they may be in minority.

The Instrumentalization of Referendums

This brief account of the debate in the literature illustrates the complex nature of referendums and their role in the framework of contemporary representative democracies. The continuous increase in the use of referendums and related institutions throughout the last decades (Tierney 2012; Qvortrup 2014a; Reidy & Suiter 2015) is partly supported by the implementation of direct democracy mechanisms within newly established democracies (Hug 2005; Hill & White 2014). Within this framework there is great emphasis on the consequences of referendums on the functioning of the political system (Budge 2001; Mendelsohn & Parkin 2001; Grynaviski 2015). Referendums were analyzed as tools designed to allow citizens to influence public policy outcomes or to shift the focus on referendums' initiators who were looking for a higher legitimation of their position by citizens

(Mendelsohn & Parkin 2001; Morel 2001; Rahat 2009; Setala 2009; Qvortrup 2014b; Grynaviski 2015).

Nevertheless, this approach has both theoretical and empirical limitations. From a theoretical perspective, there are several motivations of the political actors that do not exclude the role of the citizenry but can influence it. Studies have shown that politicians and political parties may use referendum in the attempt to solve internal disputes, advance the legislative agenda, gain legitimacy for fundamental changes, or extend their public electoral support (Budge 2001; Mendelsohn & Parkin 2001; de Vreese & Semetko 2004; Rahat 2009). Political parties are likely to use referendums as a tool to pursue their own interests and achieve particular goals (Walker 2003; Kuzelewska 2015) either as means to mobilize their own supporters for the upcoming national elections – while the topic of referendum has only minor importance – or as means to harm their opponents in government or parliament.

From an empirical perspective, political parties provide cues to their voters irrespective of the topic (Silagadze & Gherghina 2017). There are several types of referendums and the expected consequences of referendums are more nuanced in practice. To use two examples that were mentioned in the introduction, the most recent national-level referendums in member states of the European Union (EU) sparked different debates about their importance. On the one hand, the June 2016 referendum in Great Britain resulted in a vote favoring the leave of the country from the EU. Opponents of this result contested vehemently the competence of ordinary citizens to make difficult decisions, their degree of information and the tyranny of a narrow majority (such an argument was used especially in areas where the majority of the population favored a stay in the Union). On the other hand, the result of the November 2016 referendum called by the Hungarian government against the EU quotas for refugees was seen as a balance for the narrow interests of political elites, a potential avenue to pursue a greater good and an indicator that the voice of the people is often driven by reason and less by emotions as often argued.

Consequently, referendums may have an ambivalent function: they undermine the advantages of representation by giving voice to oversimplified "popular" ideas and it controls the extreme tendencies of political elites. The common practice illustrates that the role of political parties is prominent in the mandatory (required by the constitution or special laws for a change in the political system) or top-down initiated referendums (i.e. by parliament, government, president). At the same time, even citizen-initiated referendums

are subject to involvement of political parties since the collection of signatures requires organization and costs that are rarely supported by civil society. In spite of these theoretical arguments and empirical observations, it remains unclear how political parties – as key institutions of representation – use referendums to their own advantage in contemporary times.

Two Dimensions for Analysis

The argument about the instrumental use of referendums is not new and rests on the concerns regarding the boundaries, competence and reasoning behind the citizens' involvement in decision-making. A referendum places too much responsibility on the shoulders of average citizens who are not competent, lack time and information or have a low interest in many issues (Kriesi 2012a). The most common critique is that citizens are unable to take wise decisions (Budge 2012), being manipulable and easy to influence by those who pursue narrow interests. Under these circumstances, representatives appear to be the most appropriate to take decisions since they have sufficient time, resources, and access to relevant information that enables them to engage in political deliberation (Beetham 2012). The relatively low levels of competence, knowledge and interest allow citizens to take only decisions with a general character. The result is an asymmetry between political institutions and citizens in which the former are likely to influence the latter.

This asymmetry provides several reasons for which political parties may be tempted to control the public participation in decision-making processes. They make the referendum an instrument helping them to rationally pursue their own interests (Moller 2002). When discussing the strategic use of referendums, the existing literature focuses either on policy or institutional gains. To begin with policy oriented goals, Gallagher and Uleri (1996) differentiate between decision promoting and decision controlling referendums to illustrate how referendums may be used both in support for an initiative and to prevent a change of the *status quo*. Scarrow (1999) shows how the policy oriented approach of the parties towards referendums is not limited to their own interests. In response to the increasingly observed political alienation of citizens, German political parties adopted direct democracy regulations meant to encourage public decision-making and specific types of political activity. Their goal was to ensure the legitimacy of the system. At the same time, the parties favoring the introduction of such procedures hoped to enhance their popularity and boost

their vote share by showing responsiveness towards new participation preferences. In the case of the 2003 Czech referendum for EU accession, the agenda pursued by the political parties was also quite broad. The referendum enjoyed cross-party support, which reflected a general elite consensus regarding the importance of the European future of the country (Baun et al. 2006). The pro-EU stances of the mainstream parties shaped the domestic debates and decisively influenced the outcome of the referendum.

Referendums provide political parties the opportunity to advance their own ideas, to promote their political agenda (Ladner & Brändle 1999). Such a possibility comes along with free publicity and higher visibility for political parties when taking stances on controversial issues. To this end, elites use referendums to foster their legitimacy and to win a policy debate when they believe that the people favor their position (Walker 2003). For example, the 2015 referendum in Greece against accepting the EU and IMF financial bailout was used by the prime minister and governing parties to strengthen their agenda and legitimize their position (Topaloff 2017). In addition, when incumbents win a referendum they can attribute it to their skills and competences in handling the entire issue, thus improving their popularity (de Vreese & Semetko 2004). When playing this card, there is also a major risk of losing much when failing to win the referendum: the image of parties and politicians can be severely damaged (de Vreese & Semetko 2004; de Vreese 2006). This usually happens when the parties are internally divided over referendum topics (Silagadze & Gherghina 2017).

When referring to institutional gains, Walker (2003, p.5) argues that through referendums political elites will seek "to change the distribution of power between their respective institutions if they believe the people support the strengthening of their institution to the detriment of their opponents' institutions". Referendums are used to handle conflicts outside the parliamentary arena and avoiding the political debate that usually surrounds controversial issues. For example, they may address deadlocks that occur in democratizing countries because political parties either lack negotiation experience / are not inclined to compromise or the political polarization is large. Moller (Moller 2002) explains that the referendums in Lithuania and Latvia were driven by incentive structures derived from the different degrees of party system polarization. In Lithuania, the polarization between two major parties opened the door to the use of referendums as an election weapon used by each of them in the fierce competition. In the fragmented Latvian party system, the referendum was an instrument of pressure used by the periphery parties

against the center parties. In this context, the referendums were not sought as solutions to existing problems, but rather a tool to avoid deadlocks, put pressure on opponents and increase their share of votes. Research conducted in Switzerland showed that parties with small organizations can benefit from the use of referendums. The latter allow party leaders to mobilize a large number of supporters because they provide a framework in which elites address the public directly on controversial issues (Gruner 1977). Thus, the mobilization take place without building a strong organization that may be costly for the party.

All these findings indicate that political parties pursue policy and institutional goals when making use of referendums. The two are not exclusive and there are spillover effects. It is quite rare for a political party to strive only a policy or institutional-oriented goal. For example, when a referendum is called to solve an institutional deadlock (i.e. institutional goal), it usually seeks to promote a certain policy – different than those belonging to the opponents – and to increase the popularity and legitimacy of the initiator. At the same time, the type of action appears to be an important distinction that has not been made so far in the literature. The existing separation between offensive / proactive and defensive / reactive strategies with respect to policies (Gallagher & Uleri 1996) does not cover the institutional goals and fails to account for the different behavior of parties. In their instrumental use of referendums political parties appear to pursue two types of actions: favoring them and / or oriented against their opponents. When parties undertake actions that bring primarily an advantage to themselves they are centripetal, oriented to themselves; corollary, when their actions target opponents and seek to enhance their position in competition with other actors, the action is centrifugal. The resulting typology (Figure 1) is a two by two matrix in which the two criteria are intended goals and type of action.

Figure 1: How Political Parties use Referendums: A Typology

		Type of Intended goals	
		Policy	*Institutional*
Type of action	*Centripetal (party-oriented)*	Agenda setting Popularity Legitimacy	Party organization
	Centrifugal (vs. opponents)	Popular mobilization Electoral gains	Deadlocks By-pass institutions Early elections

The approaches presented in the four cells of the figure reflect empirical evidence from previous research (reviewed above) and available in the articles gathered in this special issue. The following section briefly describes the content of each contribution and explains how the instrumental use of referendums fits the analytical dimensions in Figure 1.

Relevance of the Typology

The typology is a parsimonious analytical tool with broad applicability. It is not country or region (e.g. Eastern Europe) sensitive and the general mechanisms presented in the cells are recognizable throughout political processes in many democracies or democratizing countries. The typology cuts across the issue of parties' position in the system of governance and is not remains immune to its potential effect. In many areas of politics parties in government have more access to resources than parties in opposition. This influences the way they act and the efficiency of their actions. Since the analytical framework focuses on the goals of these parties, one can easily claim that the goals parties try to achieve through a referendum depend on their incumbency. The access to more resources may facilitate access to more agents that can initiate referendums, e.g. parliamentary majority, government, president. This perspective is quite limited in the case of referendums because government status does not grant access necessarily to more but to different resources. While parties in government have a slightly easier task in initiating top-down referendums with the help of state institutions, opposition parties can usually count more on agents of bottom-up mobilization, such as citizenry or civil society. At the same time, when presidents do not belong to the government parties, the political opposition has fair chances of influencing their willingness to initiate a referendum.

The typology helps refining the arguments and empirical evidence about the linkage between referendums and populism. It does so by distinguishing between centrifugal and centripetal types of actions, which remain colluded in previous research. For example, earlier research on Germany shows that popular support for direct democracy can be found among the citizens at the periphery of politics (Dalton et al. 2001). These citizens are usually targeted by radical-right wing populists that rely extensively on their ability to address the concerns of ordinary people – with the language of ordinary people – to increase their electoral base and legitimacy (Canovan 1999; Mudde 2007; Pirro 2015). While such political

actors favor the use of referendums (Bowler et al. 2003), they do it both for party-oriented goals (agenda-setting, popularity and legitimacy) and against other competitors (popular mobilization). This nuance is important both to understand the interests of populists in supporting referendums. In essence, it can have implications for the normative assessment of political action as it reveals whether political parties claiming to speak for the people pursue party-oriented or competition-related actions. The distinction between the two types of actions is important because it allows to observe whether political parties seek to increase the loyalty of their voters (Gherghina 2014) on the short, medium or long run. Moreover, the distinction made between policies and institutional goals sheds light upon the intentions and long-term prospects of these parties when using referendums.

Overall, this analytical framework and its applicability throughout the articles in this special issue bear important theoretical, methodological and empirical implications. At theoretical level, the types indicate the necessity to draw attention to what occurs at policy and institutional levels, but also within these levels. The policy and institutional dimensions are crucial arenas for participation and decision-making processes that affect the broader democratic and representative process. For example, this typology can reveal how political actors seek to cultivate a demagogic relationship with the masses and mask through the instrumental use of referendums an attempt to bypass the institutions of representative democracy (Webb 2013). At methodological level, this conceptualization makes measurement easier, enhances the comparative study of instrumental use of referendums, and helps developing empirical tools to grasp its dynamism. So far, most research on the relationship between parties and referendums focused widely on single-case studies where contextual matters could not allow for a comparison. The application of this typology makes the concept of instrumentalization less vague and subject to contextual interpretations, increasing its comparability across various settings. At empirical level, with this typology one could, for example, question and examine the (causal) relationship between several dimensions of instrumentalization in and between the different types of referendums or political parties, common or diverging causes, and potential consequences for the political representation and decision-making.

Content of this Special Issue

The use of referendums gains momentum in Europe and an increasing amount of policies is subject to popular decision. In this context, it is crucial to understand the extent to which political parties initiate, guide or control these processes. This special issue explores the ways in which political parties make an instrumental use of national level referendums in Eastern Europe. The contributions focus on the ways in which political parties initiated and used referendums outlining the aim and type of action pursued by political parties. It gathers single case studies on individual countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Romania) that differ in terms of party systems, political stability and use of referendums at national level. The articles serve three objectives that are the equivalent of three ways to advance our knowledge about the topic. First, they elaborate on theoretical reasons and mechanisms through which political parties and their leaders initiate, coordinate and extensively use referendums to their benefit. Second, the articles provide solid empirical evidence of instrumental use of referendums by political parties in different political systems. Each article covers one country, some have a longitudinal perspective, and this allows for a broader comparison of party behavior towards referendums across Eastern Europe. Third, they use primary data to tell a story that has not been covered in the literature so far.

The common definition of a referendum, as it is used in the contributions to this special issue, is that it corresponds to a single question on a ballot. This methodological choice rests on the grounds that referendums are decisions made by citizens abut particular policies; One policy decision is captured by one question, a collective set of questions refers to more policies, and thus we count as many referendums as questions. In case of multiple questions, some countries ask them on different ballots although the voting is organized at the same time, so that voters can even decide if they want to abstain on some issues while voting on others.

To better illustrate the instrumental use of referendums in their countries, the articles use one of the following two approaches. On the one hand, the studies about Poland, Romania and Slovakia have a comprehensive approach that covers all referendums organized in the country in their post-communist history. The relatively small number of referendums organized in each of these countries allows the authors to apply the typology presented in this introduction to the entire universe of cases. On the other hand, the analyses about Bulgaria and Hungary use a snapshot approach and focus on particular

referendums that clearly illustrate the mechanisms presented in the typology. This perspective has the advantage of an in-depth analysis aiming to reveal the ways in which political actors involve specific resources to achieve their goals. Some of these processes are symptomatic for several national referendums (e.g. Hungary), while others are quite unique (e.g. Bulgaria). With this combination of approaches towards the use of referendums the special issue indicates the reliability of the designed analytical framework. More precisely, it shows how the typology can be applied to various settings, encompassing both for broad and narrow implications.

The article about the Bulgarian 2013 referendum looks at how one political party in opposition sought to achieve two different policy-oriented goals both of a centripetal nature. On the one hand, it tried to augment its image in the eyes of the public by supporting a policy that seemed to be quite popular within the electorate. On the other hand, it pursued its previous political agenda by picking up as topic of the referendum a legacy of their time in government. The analysis reveals how the Bulgarian Socialists channeled a citizens' initiative to reach a favorable decision about the building of a new nuclear plant initiated when the party was in office a few years before. The contribution analyzing the instrumental use of the 2004, 2008 and 2016 initiatives and referendums nuances this picture. While acknowledging the importance of party-centered policy approaches in which the initiator pursued agenda-setting and popular legitimacy, but at the same time its type of actions are institutional and centrifugal aiming to by-pass parliament in the decision-making process.

The article focusing on Poland compares the instrumental use of five nationwide referendums. The analysis combines the close look at the circumstances reasons behind the referendum initiation with a description of six methods employed by political parties to use the institution of nationwide referendum to their own benefit. The vast majority of the goals were policy oriented, being either centered around the initiator (i.e. legitimacy) or oriented against other competitors (e.g. electoral gains). In one instance the referendum was used as a combination of agenda-setting and institutional conflict in which it was called to shed negative light on the initiative of the country president. A similar combination of ways to instrumentalize the referendum is revealed by the article on Romania. The study focuses on seven national level referendums (out of which four were mandatory) and indicates a combination of policy and institutional oriented goals. In terms of policy, as in the Polish

case, legitimacy and electoral gain are the policy centripetal and centrifugal types of action for the Romanian political parties. The institutional reason was centrifugal in two referendums and was meant to solve an institutional deadlock between the legislature and the executive. In one of these instances, the institutional dimension was combined with a legitimacy oriented goal. In Slovakia, the institution of referendum served as a tool to expand the power of political parties rather than as a way to increase the public engagement of citizens to the democratic system. The article dedicated to Slovakia in this special issue shows how political parties use referendums either as a way to mobilize their supporters for national elections or to harm their opponents. The analysis of seven referendums reveals the importance of a centrifugal strategy.

The empirical evidence presented in all five countries strengthen the idea that the instrumental use of referendums can be seen along the analytical dimensions presented in Figure 1. The combination of goals and types of action is frequent and reflects a complex reality in which political parties seek to gain several advantages by using a tool that is in theory designed to provide citizens a relevant say in the decision-making process. In this sense, the parties do not behave only as gate keepers willing to preserve the *status quo*, but their actions move far beyond such a role.

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