

## EDITORIAL

# Referendums, Political Parties and Policies in Europe

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Referendums have become an established political practice in most European nations, and their use has been increasing over the last five decades. The distinctive feature of referendums is their focus on policies, even semantically the word ‘referendum’ refers to a popular vote on a policy issue. Historically, some policies have been more popular than others. For instance, half of all referendums in Europe were conducted on two topics – political/electoral system and interior policies. In sharp contrast, referendums on education, media and health amount to only 5% of all popular votes (Silagadze & Gherghina, 2020). The topic of a referendum is highly important since it shapes the campaign and determines the parties involved as well as the tone of discussion (e.g. abortion referendum vs. NATO membership).

Each referendum involves several stages – pre-referendum, campaign, polling day and post-referendum (Kersting & Grömping, 2022). Each of these stages brings its own challenges and peculiarities. Some stages of the referendum are more studied than others. Previous scholarship has explored, for instance, the pros and cons of direct democracy from the standpoint of the democratic theory, why referendums are initiated and what are their functions for the political parties and leader, the role of the campaign and other factors that influence the outcome of the ballot (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Geissel & Newton, 2012; Hobolt, 2009; Kriesi, 2005; Morel, 2007; Rahat, 2009; Silagadze & Gherghina, 2018; Smith, 2009).

Despite the increasing popularity of referendums and ever-growing academic interest in this topic, some aspects remain mainly underexplored – for instance, its effectiveness/impact as a policy-making tool. The impact can be measured in two ways. First, whether a referendum is successful or not. Second, if the decision is in fact implemented. However, the term ‘success’ is tricky in this context. For some, it is a mere adoption of a referendum question (Qvortrup, 2005; Williams & Hume, 2010); for others, the definition of a referendum’s success depends on the functions and motives of its initiation (Luthardt, 1994).

There is a common understanding that once a popular vote is cast in favour of the question, this result should be reflected in real life. However, in practice, there is a great variation in the degree to which policies are implemented in the aftermath of referendums. Since political parties and governments play a central role in the

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subsequent stage of implementation of the people's will, we have witnessed a number of adopted referendums that have never been implemented due to complex inter-party/intra-party dynamics and calculi (Bassanini, 2012; Muntean et al., 2010). This development is potentially detrimental since the whole promise of direct democracy is to ensure citizens' direct and effective involvement in the decision-making process.

Furthermore, there is no consensus about how to conceptualise or assess consequences of direct democracy: is it the mere change of the public policy or its more long-term effect (for example, increased institutional trust or legitimacy)? In addition, we know relatively little about how citizens view the referendum process and how this affects their perception of the political system.

This special issue presents a rich collection of articles that walk us through all the stages of a referendum process and address various aspects of the highlighted scientific lacuna.

It starts with a literature review entitled: *Amending and Extending Referendum Ballots: Innovations in Referendum Literature and Practice* by Charlotte Wagenaar. This first piece offers a literature review of procedural innovation in the referendum process, mainly at the ballot stage. This state of the art on the topic addresses one of the dominant criticisms in the democratic innovations' literature – the nature of the referendum which mostly promotes a single proposal with a binary choice to either accept or reject. In this article, the author synthesises recent innovations to referendum processes which allow deviations from the traditional binary referendum on a predetermined proposal. In addition, this article reviews the applicability of these ballot innovations for referendums in the low countries and offers four general recommendations on the topic of implementing procedural innovations in referendums.

This literature review is followed by four original research articles. The first one, *The Democratic Potential of Community-Based Initiatives* by Kors Visscher, Menno Hurenkamp and Evelien Tonkens discusses the democratic promises and pitfalls of community-based initiatives (CBIs) from the perspectives of representative democracy and do-democracy. The authors develop an analytical framework for understanding how representative democracy and do-democracy provide different perspectives on key aspects of the democratic legitimacy of CBIs. The article demonstrates that both perspectives have their own criteria for democratic legitimacy which are largely incompatible and lead to tensions between active community members and civil servants due to unspoken assumptions about democracy. One of the main contributions of this article is the development of a vocabulary to prevent these tensions from rising.

The article, *Support for the use of direct democracy among voters and parties of BENELUX countries* by Emilien Paulis and Sacha Rangoni, employs representative samples of voters in Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands to find out what is the role of ideology in citizens' views on the use of referendums and how (some) parties are trying to respond to this demand in their electoral manifestos. The authors show that support for direct democracy is linked to left-wing economic position as well as to right-wing cultural position and self-placement. Interestingly,

radical voters are more likely to support direct democracy, as well as to have their party aligned on their demand.

The third article, *Direct democracy integrity in modern authoritarian systems: The constitutional referendum in Turkey in 2017 and the Russian plebiscite of 2020* by Norbert Kersting, Margarita Zavadskaya and Tiphaine Magne explores the two plebiscites from the innovative lens of Direct Democracy Integrity Index throughout different stages of the referendum process. The authors highlight that both votes were Napoleonic plebiscitary referendums that served the purpose of strengthening their 'sultanistic' regimes characterised by strong autocratic presidential and weak party systems. A significant difference according to the authors lies in the implemented tactics: in Russia, the strategies are more propaganda-based whereas Turkey mainly relies on the strategies of repression.

Entitled, *Responsive or Responsible? On the policy implementation of popular initiatives under challenges of international law* by Laurent Bernhard, the final article investigates under what conditions legislators refrain from implementing policies of accepted initiatives in the face of challenges posed by international law. The article highlights the dilemma that political actors encounter between responsiveness (i.e., respecting the people's will) and responsibility (i.e., complying with supranational obligations) when an initiative is in conflict with international law. With a case study of the Swiss deportation initiative, the author illustrates the balancing act of the Parliament to conform with mandatory provisions of international law while trying to follow the demands of the ballot.

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