

WITH A FOREWORD BY  
SIR DAVID BUTLER

# REFERENDUMS AROUND THE WORLD

EDITED BY  
MATT QVORTRUP



# Referendums Around the World

Matt Qvortrup  
Editor

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With a Foreword by Sir David Butler

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*Editor*

Matt Qvortrup  
Coventry University  
Coventry, UK

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## FOREWORD

Referendums are playing an increasingly important role in national and international politics. The Brexit referendum in June 2016 is but a recent example of this. This new edition of *Referendums Around the World* up-dates Prof. Qvortrup's edited volume from 2014, which, in turn, was an updated version of the two edited volumes Austin Ranney and I put together in, respectively 1978 and 1994. As we showed in earlier volumes, referendums have varied enormously in purpose, conduct and outcome. When Austin Ranney and I compiled works on the subject we were clear that the most interesting element in each volume was the list of every nationwide referendum that we could trace in the whole history of the world. The list contained only the date, the subject, the 'Yes' percentage and the turnout. What astonished us was the diversity of national experience. As our co-authors and we showed, for every generalization about referendums there is a counterexample. Yet, much as unique circumstances played a role, scholars have recently found that referendums tend to follow certain patterns. Matt Qvortrup and his colleagues outline these in this new and very timely edition. Whatever one thinks about referendums, they are continuing to play an important and sometimes pivotal role in modern politics.

Nuffield College, Oxford  
2017

Sir David Butler

## PREFACE

Since the first edition of this volume several crucial referendums have taken place. Scotland voted against independence in September 2014, but by a much narrower margin than many had expected. And two years later—after the momentous Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom—the Scottish government is toying with the idea of yet another referendum. These British votes are not exceptional. Far from it, referendums in Colombia on a peace plan (2016) and the vote in Turkey on the introduction of a presidential system in April 2017, are other examples of how referendums capture international headlines. One is tempted to say that we live in the age of referendums. This second edition brings the previous edition up to date by analyzing some of these recent referendums in the light of supposedly growing populism. In addition to adding new empirical material this book also outlines overall trends of when and why different types of regimes have resorted to (semi) direct democracy, and when and why they have, respectively lost or won. It is not the aim of political science to preach but to present *positive* facts. In presenting this book, we have endeavored to be as factual and neutral as possible. The goal of this volume is to provide unbiased evidence so that the reader can decide for herself if referendums threaten or strengthen democracy. In so doing we hope to make a contribution to countering fake news and ‘alternative facts’.

Coventry, UK  
February 2017

Matt Qvortrup

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Washington, DC  
March 2017

Matt Qvortrup

# CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction: Theory, Practice and History</b>	<b>1</b>
	Matt Qvortrup	
<b>2</b>	<b>Western Europe</b>	<b>19</b>
	Matt Qvortrup	
<b>3</b>	<b>Switzerland</b>	<b>47</b>
	Uwe Serdült	
<b>4</b>	<b>Russia, the Former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe</b>	<b>113</b>
	Ronald J. Hill and Stephen White	
<b>5</b>	<b>North America and the Caribbean</b>	<b>147</b>
	Todd Donovan	
<b>6</b>	<b>Latin America</b>	<b>185</b>
	David Altman	
<b>7</b>	<b>Africa</b>	<b>213</b>
	Norbert Kersting	
<b>8</b>	<b>Australasia</b>	<b>237</b>
	Matt Qvortrup, Caroline Morris and Masahiro Kobori	



<b>9 Two Hundred Years of Referendums</b>	<b>263</b>
Matt Qvortrup	
<b>Appendix A: Nationwide referendums 1793–2016</b>	<b>273</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>301</b>

## EDITORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

### ABOUT THE EDITOR

**Matt Qvortrup** is Professor of Political Science at Coventry University. He obtained his doctorate in politics from Brasenose College, Oxford and holds a Diploma of Law from the College of Law, London. Prof. Qvortrup is a joint editor-in-chief of *European Political Science Review*. His most recent publications include *Referendums and Ethnic Conflict* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2014) and *Angela Merkel: Europe's Most Influential Leader* (Duckworth 2016). In addition to his academic work, Prof. Qvortrup is an advisor to the *House of Commons Constitutional Affairs Committee* and a regular contributor to *Newsweek*, *Bloomberg* and *BBC World*.

### CONTRIBUTORS

**David Altman** University in Santiago, Santiago, Chile

**Todd Donovan** Political Science Department, Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA, USA

**Ronald J. Hill** Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland

**Norbert Kersting** Institut Für Politikwissenschaft, Münster, Germany

**Masahiro Kobori** Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan

**Caroline Morris** University of London, London, UK

**Matt Qvortrup** Coventry University, Coventry, UK

**Uwe Serdült** University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

**Stephen White** University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland

# LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 2.1	Factors determining European referendum outcomes 1990–2012	34
Fig. 6.1	Typology	188
Fig. 6.2	Mechanisms of direct democracy growth	196
Fig. 6.3	Intensity of use of mechanisms of direct democracy in Latin America since 1978	196
Fig. 9.1	Referendums and plebiscites 1900–2017	264
Fig. 9.2	Referendums in democratic countries: constitutional, Ad Hoc and citizens' initiatives	266

# LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1	Provisions for referendums in West European constitutions	22
Table 2.2	Pearson's correlations between types of referendums and policy	39
Table 3.1	National referendum frequencies by decade and type of legal instrument	61
Table 3.2	Cumulative participation for seven consecutive referendum votes in the city of St. Gallen (percent)	64
Table 3.3	Bottom-up votes by initiators and historical periods, with success rates (1874–2010)	68
Table 3.4	Submitted and withdrawn initiatives for a partial revision of the Constitution by decade (1891–2016)	69
Table 3.5	Swiss referendum votes, 1848–2017	71
Table 5.1	Number of state popular referendums and initiatives in the US, through 2016	154
Table 5.2	Number of federal and provincial referendums in Canada: 1878–2012	158
Table 5.3	Substance of referendums in Canada: 1878–2012	159
Table 5.4	Frequency of state-wide ballot measures in the US: 2000–2016	162
Table 5.5	Number of popular initiatives in the US, and per cent approved, by decade	164
Table 5.6	Substance of popular initiatives in the US: 1910–1919 and 2000–2009	165
Table 5.7	Spending on American ballot measures, 2004–2012	167
Table 5.8	Major donors to California initiative campaigns, 2012	171
Table 5.9	America's wealthiest initiative donors	173

Table 5.10	Referendums and direct democracy provisions in the Caribbean and Central America	179
Table 6.1	Overview of legal/constitutional provisions	194
Table 6.2	Uses of different types of mechanisms of direct democracy in Latin America since 1978	198
Table 8.1	Constitutional provisions for referendums in Asia	240
Table 8.2	Statistical predictors of referendums in Asia	243
Table 8.3	Provisions for referendums in Oceania	255

## Introduction: Theory, Practice and History

*Matt Qvortrup*

Referendums are increasingly becoming vehicles for political change—or sometimes vehicles of conservatism. In 2016, for example, the voters in the United Kingdom caused a major upheaval when they voted for leaving the European Union. Later in the same year, a majority of the voters in Colombia followed suit when they rejected a peace plan carefully negotiated by the political elites to end decades of civil war. Were these decisions prudent? Were they signs that ‘the people’ had grown tired of the old political class or was it just an indication that they did not like what was on offer? Or, were these sign of growing populism? Not exactly, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban failed to win the approval for his anti-immigration referendum when only 44% of the voters turned out. And just to cheer up self-professed progressives, the Irish voters’ approval of gay marriage in a constitutional referendum in 2015 suggests that the voters in some countries were willing to stand up for and endorse liberal values. Whatever has caused the many referendums and why they have been won or lost, one thing is certain. There is a greater tendency to submit issues to the voters.

This growing use of referendums (here defined as popular votes on bills before they become law) and legislative initiatives (defined as popular votes on laws proposed by the citizens) has led to a demand for

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M. Qvortrup (✉)  
Coventry University, Coventry, UK  
e-mail: [matt.qvortrup@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:matt.qvortrup@coventry.ac.uk)

comparative analysis. Questions include what determines their outcome, and which issues are submitted to a vote. But the use of referendums has also led to a renewed interest in the questions of democratic and normative political theory pertaining to their use.

This book is a successor to David Butler and Austin Ranney's seminal book *Referendums Around the World* (1993), which, in turn, was an updated version of their book *Referendums: A Comparative Study of Practice and Theory* (1978). Like its predecessors, this book takes an empirical approach and does *not* subscribe to any particular theoretical model. But, unlike its much-praised forerunner, the present volume covers *all* continents on the planet. Instead of looking at a number of countries that have frequently used referendums, the authors in this volume analyze *all* the nationwide referendums from each of the following continents and regions: Africa, Latin America, Western Europe, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, North America (including the Caribbean), and Oceania and Asia. Needless to say, not all referendums receive the same level of attention. Some votes are more pivotal than others. But the intention has been to present the most comprehensive update of the worldwide use of the referendums that have been held from the French Revolution to the present day.

In this introductory chapter, the undersigned presents an overview of the history and political theory of the referendum. In Chap. 2, the present author surveys the experience with direct democracy in Western Europe—but leaves out Switzerland. In so many ways *sui generis*, the latter country has held roughly half of all nationwide referendums in history, hence, Switzerland deserves its own chapter. Uwe Serdült surveys the experiences in Switzerland. This chapter is followed by Ron Hill and Stephen White's analysis of direct democracy in the former Soviet Union and the former Communist countries in Central—and Eastern Europe. This chapter, in turn, is followed by an analysis of referendums North America and the Caribbean by Todd Donovan and by David Altman's analysis of referendums in Latin America. Next, Norbert Kersting analyses referendums in Africa, and lastly Morris, Qvortrup and Kobori present an overview of the emerging experiences with referendums in Asia and the established practices with direct democracy mechanisms in Oceania. The book is concluded by a chapter summarizing the overall tendencies around the world with a special emphasis on the relationship between referendums and democratization.



### Referendums or referenda?

There has always been debate as to whether one should refer to public votes as *referendums* or *referenda*. It is generally agreed that the former is grammatically more correct than the latter. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word ‘referendum’ comes from the Latin neuter of *referendus*, gerundive of *referre*, ‘to refer back’. Grammatically speaking, as the Latin gerundive *referendum* has no plural, the plural gerundive *referenda*, meaning ‘things to be referred’, necessarily connotes a plurality of issues, which would be misleading. Hence, ‘referendums’ would be more correct. However, those who are not convinced by this argument might be persuaded by the debate in the House of Commons on 3 June 1998. The Conservative MP Alan Clark—the author of the very readable *Diaries* (Clark 1993)—asked the Speaker Betty Boothroyd to make a ruling to the effect that the plural ‘referenda’ should be used. His point was that he had ‘heard on many occasions colleagues refer to referendums—which is an exceedingly ugly term’. He wanted to know whether Madam Speaker would ‘prefer us to continue to use the Latin word, or whether you have no objection to the continued Anglicization of this term’. Betty Boothroyd answered that she—though she did not rule on the subject—preferred the Anglicized term: ‘I think the plural is a matter of taste but I’ve always preferred the use of the English language to any Latin form if that is of some guidance’ (H.C. Debs 3 June 1998: Col. 282). So referendums it is!

Fundamentally, referendums challenge the basic assumptions of the tried and tested system of representative democracy. As Richard Wyn Jones and Roger Scully noted, ‘a referendum takes power of decision over a specific question back from the elected representatives and returns it to the people who decide a matter directly’ (Jones and Scully 2012: 4–5).

Whether this re-delegation of power from elected representatives and back to their electors is a good idea or not is a hotly debated issue. Not infrequently, politicians who have experienced defeats in referendums have denounced them. In the wake of the Brexit referendum it was a common complaint that the voters in Britain had been seduced by ‘fake news’. Not surprisingly, this was mainly a proposition put forward by those who lost, such as former British Prime Minister Tony

Blair. But the contention is far from new, let alone unique. In 2005 José Manuel Barroso (the then President of the European Commission) criticized the use of referendums in the wake of the defeat of the European Constitution in France and the Netherlands. Referendums, he said, should be avoided because they “undermine the Europe we are trying to build by simplifying important and complex subjects” (Barroso quoted in Hobolt 2009: 23). Barroso, if he had been that way inclined, could have cited Plato’s tale in *The Republic* about the wise sea captain who was undermined by his incompetent sailors (Plato 1968: 488). And, if the former President of the European Commission had wanted to further undermine the legitimacy of the institution, he could also have pointed out that the device has a less than unblemished pedigree; in the words of David Altman, ‘the list of nondemocratic regimes that abuse plebiscites is pathetically high’ (Altman 2011: 29).

It is, in the light of this, almost incomprehensible that deliberative democrats and advocates of consensus democracy have espoused more referendums. These idealists tend to regard the referendum as “a successful constitutional instrument”, which can “protect a deliberative environment within which citizen participation can be fostered” (Tierney 2012: 285).

Referendums are—it seems—either hated or loved. The objections against referendums raised after Brexit is an echo of earlier complaints. In the 1970s, Derrick Bell, an American legal scholar, wrote,

The emotionally charged atmosphere often surrounding referenda and initiatives...can reduce the care with which voters consider the matters before them. Tumultuous, media oriented campaigns such as the ones successfully used to repeal ordinances recognizing the rights of homosexuals in Dade County, Florida, St Paul, Minnesota, and Eugene, Oregon, are not conducive to careful thinking and voting. Appeals to prejudice, oversimplification of the issues, and exploitation of legitimate concerns by promising simplistic solutions to complex problems often characterize referendum and initiative campaigns. (Bell 1978: 18–19)

Yet, as a respondent to this criticism observed,

Apart from Open Housing referendums and low income housing referendums, all he [Derrick Bell] cites in support of his proposition are two pre-civil war referenda...Moreover ballots that lose are not much of an argument against initiatives. Thus the only state-wide measures that Prof. Bell cites (apart from the Open Housing ones) to demonstrate

the growing threat that direct democracy poses for individual rights are Washington's [vote] to control obscenity, Maine's desire to perpetuate a traditional method of financing schools, and California's tax-reduction proposition. Those measures collectively do not constitute much of an assault on individual rights. (Allen 1979: 1026)

Middle positions are rare. Some see referendums as 'the most majoritarian of policy making device[s]' (Shugart and Carey 1992: 66). Yet other believe they facilitate 'the fundamental shift that dominates our politics... a shift from representative to direct democracy' (Bernard 2012: 199). As we shall see in this book's chapters, the dichotomous positions are not always warranted. The truth is most often somewhere in the middle; there is reason to criticize some referendums for disinformation and one-sided campaign spending—yet it is difficult to claim they are incompatible with representative democracy.

Further, many of the criticisms of referendums are could equally be leveled against candidate elections. A dose of direct democracy can complement parliamentary government—but referendums cannot replace representative government. So what is the justification for referendums?

## THEORY

Historically, referendums have been proposed, endorsed and rejected for different tactical and political reasons (Cholet 2011). The Roman historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus (AD 56–117) commented approvingly on the system of government among the Germanic tribes, in which “on matters of minor importance only the chiefs debate; on major matters the whole community” (Tacitus 1970: 110). And, in what was to become Switzerland, the ‘thirteen-canton Confederacy of 1513 instituted the policy of taking central decisions back to the communes *ad referendum et instrumentum*’ (Kobach 1992: 18; italics in the original).

However, referendums were first used in earnest in the wake of the French Revolution. This happened under less than ideal democratic circumstances by Napoleon Bonaparte in the first years of the nineteenth century. Forty years later, in the 1840s and in the 1860s, the referendum was once again used when “the modern state of Italy was built by a series of referendums in which overwhelming majorities turned out to vote for unification of their country” (Goodhart 1971): 139.

However, the theoretical justifications for letting the people decide only emerged in the early part of the twentieth century. Often, these arguments were politically motivated, and—as a general rule—those advocating referendums and initiatives were opposition figures who wanted to prevent legislation (through referendums) or who wanted to force governments to adopt policies (through initiatives). There have been discussions of referendums in many countries, but the examples of Britain and Germany are particularly illustrative, and will be used here as case illustrations to understand the theoretical arguments.

## BRITAIN

Liberal constitutionalists on the right of the political spectrum, such as the British lawyer A.V. Dicey (1835–1922), stressed that the referendum, essentially, was a Conservative weapon—what political scientists nowadays would call a ‘veto-player’ (Hug and Tsebelis 2002; Tsebelis 2002). Concerned about the Liberal government’s intention to introduce Home Rule for Ireland without having campaigned for this in a general election, Dicey wanted to introduce a check on the elected government at a time when the House of Lords had lost its position as a veto-player. Dicey stressed that the referendum was “the one available check on party leaders [and the only institution that could] give formal acknowledgement of the doctrine which lies at the basis of English democracy—that a law depends at bottom for its enactment on the consent of the nation as represented by its electors” (Dicey 1911: 189–190).

Dicey, and politicians such as Conservative Prime Minister Arthur Balfour (1848–1930), positively eulogized the referendum as a force for change. Indeed, Balfour noted that in practice the ‘referendum [was] ... used... always in a Conservative sense’, and that this device was his ‘idea of Tory Democracy’ (quoted in Bogdanor 1981: 9). In the light of this, it was not surprising that the Conservative and Unionist Party pledged in their manifesto in 1910 that they would hold a referendum before introducing Tariff Reform (tax on imported goods from outside the British Empire). However, the Conservatives failed to win the election in January 1910 and the promise was dropped by Balfour’s successor Bonar Law (Bogdanor 1981: 24).

The referendum was mainly an institution championed by British Conservatives. However, some on the moderate left were also endorsing the idea. In his influential book *Liberalism*, the Liberal writer

L.T. Hobhouse (1864–1929) admitted that ‘there are many issues for which it is ill suited’ (Hobhouse 1996: 89); still, he found it ‘regrettable that so many liberals have closed the door on the referendum’ (Hobhouse 1996: 89). A prominent left-leaning Liberal who had not ‘closed the door’ but who actively endorsed the referendum was J.A. Hobson (1858–1940). Hobson—whose critical work on imperialism had inspired Lenin’s *Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Lenin 1948)—had made a case for the referendum as a mechanism for breaking the deadlock between the House of Commons and the House of Lords (Meadowcroft and Taylor 1990).

This argument was pertinent to the crisis that emerged in the year when the book was published. After the Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer (Finance Minister) Lloyd George (1863–1945) had proposed a budget including progressive taxation and benefits for the poor and elderly (the so-called ‘People’s Budget’), the Conservatives had used their majority in the House of Lords to block it (Murray 1973). One of Hobson’s arguments in *The Crisis of Liberalism* was that such deadlocks could be resolved by reference to the people instead of through a general election. In his own words, “the formal legislative power left to the new Second Chamber should be the power of causing a Bill of the Commons which they disapprove to be submitted to a separate vote of the electorate, in order to test the question whether or not the people desires that the disputed bill should become law” (Hobson 1909: 32).

However, this suggestion came to naught. The referendum has hitherto not been used as a mechanism for overcoming deadlock between the two elected chambers.

It was a different altogether on the Left side of politics. At the turn of the century politicians on the Socialist left were more or less uniformly opposed to the referendum. This opposition was a new development. In the middle of the nineteenth century several trade unions had advocated the introduction of referendums and initiatives (Webb and Webb 1897: 21). However, the leadership of the Labour movement was skeptical of the merits of referendums and initiatives. And, in 1897, Sidney and Beatrice Webb (two of the founders of the Fabian Society) flatly rejected the referendum in their book *Industrial Democracy*. After a long analysis of the uses and—as they saw it—abuses of referendums, the Webbs rejected the device as being against the interests of the Socialist movement. As they put it, ‘what democracy requires is assent to results; what the referendum gives is assent to projects’ (Webb and Webb 1897: 61).

The Socialist society was a unified whole and not subject to political cherry picking. Other Fabians were similarly skeptical as regards the wisdom of the voters. In a pamphlet published in 1911, Clifford Sharp echoed the Webbs and rejected the referendum on the grounds that ‘the average elector may be able to judge principles, but he has neither the time nor the knowledge nor the will to consider details’ (Sharp 1911: 15). In the light of these denunciations, it was hardly surprising that Ramsey MacDonald (who later became Labour’s first Prime Minister in 1924) rejected the referendum, and described it as ‘but a clumsy and ineffective weapon which the reaction can always use more effectively than democracy, because it, being the power to say “No” is far more useful to the few than to the many’ (MacDonald 1911: 153).

The referendum was, in general, more popular on the right than on the left. Historically speaking, it is not surprising, therefore, that Harold Wilson (Prime Minister 1964–1970 and 1974–1976), when faced with a demand to hold a referendum on membership of the EEC (forerunner of the EU) in 1966, rejected the idea. As he said, ‘decisions of great moment of this kind have to be taken by the elected Government of the day, responsible to this House. The Constitutional position is that whatever this House decides in this matter, or any other matter, is the right decision’ (*House of Commons Debates*, Vol. 731, 14th July 1966, Col.1718). However, this principled opposition was all but forgotten a few years later when Harold Wilson seemed to have abandoned his principled opposition to referendum, and the issue of continued membership of the EEC was put to a referendum. As Cicero once noted, ‘unchanging consistency of standpoint has never been considered a virtue in great statesmen’ (Cicero 1978: 67).

## GERMANY AND THE CONTINENT

From the 1870s and onwards, the debate about the introduction of mechanisms of direct democracy played a considerable role in German politics. In *Das Gothaer Programm*, the Social Democrats (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) had demanded direct law-making by the people: ‘*Direkte Gesetzgebung durch das Volk*’ (Aleman 2010: 35). This demand was repeated in the Erfurt Programme in 1891, in which the party demanded direct legislation by the people through the power of proposing and rejecting bills (Euchner et al. 2005: 191). This commitment was widely shared by Socialist and radical

parties in Europe. Indeed, all the Socialist parties in countries bordering Germany adopted the idea of referendums (Bullock and Reynolds 1987).

However, this enthusiasm among practitioners was in sharp contrast to the misgivings that existed among the intellectuals in Germany at the time. As a young man, before he won the Nobel Prize for literature and became a representative for a seemingly lost German *Kultur*nation, Thomas Mann (1875–1955) expressed his reservations about referendums in his *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (*Considerations of an Unpolitical Man*) and declared that it was ‘questionable if the principle of the referendum [*das Prinzip der Volksabstimmung*] actually painted a true picture of the will of the people [*ob sie das wirkliche Bild des Volkswillens gäbe*]’ (Mann 2002: 281).

Prominent figures from the left shared this negative view of the referendum. Karl Kautsky (1854–1938), arguably the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD)’s leading theoretician, warned in the 1890s that the referendum would be abused by the government (Kautsky 1893), and later complained that ‘the referendum violated the principle that all laws ought to be a result of compromises between different groups’ (Kautsky 1911: 78). Although the referendum was included in the Weimar constitution—mainly at the instigation of the sociologist Max Weber (1856–1920) (Weber 1958: 468)—it was predominantly after the Second World War that Western European countries made provisions for referendums in their constitutions.

The opposition to the referendum was also shared by the left in Italy. The syndicalist Arturo Labriola (1873–1959) had written a short book against the referendum (*Contro il referendum*) in 1897, and his objection was echoed by Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), the leader of the Italian Communist Party and arguably one of the foremost Marxist theoreticians of the twentieth century. Gramsci, though he stressed a need for ensuring that ‘the broadest take a direct interest in general discussions’ (Gramsci 1978: 50), nevertheless stated that “Communists are on principle opposed to the referendum, since they place the most advantaged and active workers on the same plane as the lazy, ignorant and idle workers. If one wants direct, individual, consultations, then this must take place in assemblies, after an organized debate, and a vote must presuppose knowledge of what is at stake and a sense of responsibility...the delegates’ assembly is an assembly performing the function of a referendum” (Gramsci 1978: 50).

This system, it could be argued, suffered from a lack of accountability. Gramsci was aware of this. He did concede that ‘a referendum [could be] called in exceptional circumstances’ (Gramsci 1978: 50), but, like Lenin and before him Marx, Gramsci believed that the recall was a better mechanism for ensuring accountability. Karl Marx had made passing reference to a system under which the elected representatives’ mandates were ‘at all times revocable’ (*‘jederzeit absetzbar’*) (Marx 1953: 339). Vladimir Lenin had taken this idea a step further and supported the ideal of a ‘fuller democracy’ in which all officials should be ‘fully elective and subject to recall’ (Lenin 2004: 36), as this was the only way of overcoming what Karl Marx had considered to be the problem of parliamentarianism, namely, ‘deciding once in 3 or 6 years which member of the ruling class was to represent people in parliament’ (Marx cited in Lenin 2004: 39). Following Lenin and Marx, Gramsci argued that the recall would solve the problem of accountability while at the same time ensuring that decisions were taken after deliberations. In a democratic state, Gramsci wrote, ‘the delegate is elected...imperatively mandated, and instantly recallable...Since the mandate is imperative and revocable it can also be assumed that the delegates’ assembly represents the opinions of the mass of the workers at all times’ (Gramsci 1978: 50). Despite this subtle argument, the recall fell into disuse in Communist countries (see Hill and White’s chapter in this book).

Before looking at the use for the referendum as it became practiced after 1945, it is worth considering the use of the referendum by authoritarian regimes and the justification for its use by the controversial theorist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985).

The German Socialists and the British Conservatives—their fundamental differences notwithstanding—wanted to use the referendum as a device in the hands of the opposition. The Conservatives wanted a mechanism that could hinder the government’s sins of commission; the Populists and the Socialists, on the other hand, wanted a mechanism that would rectify the executive’s sins of omission.

But there was yet another way in which referendums could be used. This is how the device has been used in France. Here popular votes have—as the case of Napoleon Bonaparte shows—been used as a top-down device to acquire legitimacy for a decision made by a more or less autocratic ruler. While one may question the fairness of the early referendums held by Napoleon Bonaparte in the first decade of the



nineteenth century, it is remarkable that the votes were held at all. This use of the referendum—although it is often overlooked in the literature (but see Berbera and Morrone 2003: 24)—was also advocated by the controversial constitutional theorist Carl Schmitt, who, in a series of writings, made a case for the use of plebiscites; that is, votes held by dictators to get popular legitimacy.

Schmitt recognized that in the present day no one ‘would remain on the throne against the will of the people’ (Schmitt 1988: 29). However, due to its divided nature and opposing political parties, a parliamentary system could not speak for ‘the people’. As a result of this, ‘institutions of direct democracy’ would always be ‘in a position superior to the so-called indirect democracy of the parliamentary state’ (Schmitt 1988: 60). However, the people themselves—Schmitt argued—were not in a position to pose the questions: ‘the people can only respond yes or no. They cannot advise, deliberate and discuss’ (Schmitt 1988: 93). Hence, ‘plebiscitary legitimacy requires a government or some other authoritarian organ in which one will have confidence that it will pose the correct question’ (Schmitt 1988: 90).

Schmitt’s theory was readily adopted by the National Socialists, who duly submitted issues to the voters in order to acquire the ‘plebiscitary legitimacy’ that, Schmitt argued, could be described as a ‘decision through one will’ (Schmitt 1988: 92).

It was arguably this abuse of the referendum, which prompted Clement Attlee to reject Winston Churchill’s proposal for a referendum on the postponement of the 1945 elections. Attlee said, “I could not consent to the introduction into our national life of a device so alien to our traditions as the referendum, which has only too often been the instrument of Nazism and Fascism. Hitler’s practices in the field of referenda and plebiscites can hardly have endeared these expedients to the British heart” (Attlee quoted in Bogdanor 1981: 35).

However, it does not follow that plebiscitary referendums are necessarily undemocratic. Charles de Gaulle, who in no way shared Schmitt’s political sentiments, argued along the same lines as the German writer when he submitted controversial issues to referendums over Algeria and the direct election of the French President in the early 1960s. President de Gaulle wrote, “I was convinced that sovereignty belongs to the people, provided that they express themselves directly and as a whole, I refused to accept that it could be parceled out among the different interests represented by the parties ... I considered it necessary for the

government to derive not from parliament, in other words the parties, but from over and above them, from a leader directly mandated by the nation as a whole” (De Gaulle 1971: 6).

To ensure that the president represented the people, de Gaulle introduced ‘the referendum system’ (De Gaulle 1971: 7). This system, de Gaulle went on, would enable the president to ‘submit to a referendum any government bill dealing with the working of the country’s institutions; that in the event of a grave crisis, internal or external, he [the president] should be able to be empowered to take the measures demanded by the circumstances’ (De Gaulle 1971: 31). While the logic of de Gaulle’s argument was strikingly similar to that of Schmitt, there was one important difference; de Gaulle was willing to accept defeat. He resigned when he lost a referendum in 1969 (Morel 1996).

## PRACTICE

‘The use of referendums around the world has proliferated remarkably in the past 30 years’ (Tierney 2012: 1). This—apparently—growing use of mechanisms of direct democracy is not only characteristic of politics at the national level. Indeed, countries that hitherto have had very few national referendums are now experimenting with referendums at the local level. For example, in each of the German *Länder* (States) the citizens have the opportunity to vote on legislation, and have been given the chance to decide on matters ranging from education to constitutional reforms (Schiller 2011).

Why was it that after 1970 the people began to demand referendums? Is this an indication that the world has become more democratic? Why is it that political parties have apparently been willing to concede to these demands and to relinquish their monopoly on legislating?

The reason could be that the traditional system of representation failed to represent people’s views. According to Tierney’s analysis of mainly established western democracies, ‘referendums can help fill the gap between the growing interest of people in politics and ... the tapering away of traditional patterns of democratic forms of participation’ (2012: 302). According to David Altman’s study, there is evidence to suggest that referendums have been a ‘legitimization tool for constitutional changes that occasionally serve as a synchronization mechanism between politicians and citizens’ (Altman 2011: 197). The same explanation seems to hold true for referendums at the municipal level, where—in the words

of Theo Schiller—local referendums contribute ‘an additional qualitative dimension to the public space of local politics by opening new channels for public deliberations on issues’ (Schiller 2011: 69).

To understand the apparent change towards a greater use of direct democracy, a bit of historical context might be useful. In the middle of the twentieth century, political theorists were skeptical of the people. Empirical political scientists found that the electorate was ‘almost wholly without detailed information about decision making in government... [and] almost completely unable to judge the rationality of government actions’ (Campbell quoted in Hobolt 2009: 6). The Austrian theoretician Joseph Schumpeter summed up the general consensus when he wrote, in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, that,

[Democracy does] not mean and cannot mean that the people actually rule in any obvious sense of the terms ‘people’ and ‘rule.’ Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men [!] who are to rule them. But since they might decide this also in entirely undemocratic ways, we have had to narrow our definition by adding a further criterion identifying the democratic method, viz., free competition among would-be leaders for the vote of the electorate. (Schumpeter 1942: 242)

Sixty years on, the view was very different. Countries that had held few referendums began to submit issues to the voters for consultation. From a theoretical point of view, referendums can provide a democratic safety valve and mechanism for letting out political steam. According to the input–output model, originally developed by political scientists Gabriel Almond and G. Bingham Powell (Almond et al. 2006), the political system can be seen as an input–output model, in which groups in the surrounding environment *articulate* demands, which are channeled into the *political system* by *aggregators* and transformed into policies, decisions and actions, in other words *outputs*.

In the traditional model, the role (or function) of *articulators* was performed by civic groups and trade unions (Almond et al. 2006: 67), and the role of *aggregators* was performed by political parties that ‘aggregated’ the views ‘articulated’ by organizations and civic groups (Almond et al. 2006: 81). By performing this function, the political parties ensured that concerns and demands from the environment were translated into policies.

The referendum can, if we follow this model, be seen as a result of a malfunction on the input side of the political system. If political parties do not respond to demands articulated by the groups outside the political system, this might be resolved by using an alternative aggregator, namely, the referendum—and, if we want to go a step further, by citizens' initiatives, which allow citizens to initiate legislation rather than merely vote on proposals initiated by the elites.

This analysis is supported historically. In fact, in the period from 1920 to 1970, when the Western European party system was 'frozen' along the lines of the main social, economic and religious cleavages—as famously suggested by Rokkan and Lipset (1967)—there were very few referendums. This was possibly because the political parties were able—and willing—to respond to views articulated by the interest groups they represented.

Referendums began to be used and demanded at virtually the same time as *dealignment*, that is, at the time when the relationship between 'aggregators' and 'articulators' broke down; at the time when the frozen party system began to thaw, and at the time when the number of *party-identifiers* began to drop. As Altman observes, referendums are 'used twice as frequently today compared with 50 years ago and almost four times more than at the turn of the twentieth century' (Altman 2011: 65).

Why? It could be conjectured that the people felt that political parties were not willing and able to represent them. The views articulated by minority groups (especially on the 'New Left') failed to be aggregated by political parties, and, at the same time, voters on the Centre-Right felt that the traditional Centre-Right parties were unresponsive to views of the New Right.

To be sure, the voters were still broadly in agreement with the dominant political parties (though see Powell 2013). Søren Holmberg, writing about Scandinavia, for example, found that there was congruence between the voters' preferences and the policy positions of the representatives in 79% of cases (Holmberg 2000: 155). But there was disagreement in the remaining 21% of cases. It is arguable that it was to cater for this incongruence that the referendum became a convenient alternative—'aggregator'. This analysis is not only plausible in Western Europe and other developed nations; it is also corroborated by research in younger democracies, for example, in Latin America. According to Altman, "Because institutionalized party systems may ... become over

institutionalized, they have serious dilemmas for channeling social demands, they lack the required flexibility to do so, and ultimately they will be subject to massive demands for movement towards citizens' preferences" (Altman 2011: 197).

To relieve the political system from these demands, mechanisms of direct democracy—especially initiatives—served ‘as institutionalized, sporadic safety valves of political pressure’ (Altman 2011: 198). By developing mechanisms for letting out political steam in the form of referendums, the political systems seem to have become more legitimate. And it appears—though hard evidence is difficult to come by—that countries with more referendums have suffered lower levels of political distrust in the political elites; ‘giving people more voice is widely considered a promising remedy against the current crisis of democracy’ (Bernard 2012: 199). Traditionally the referendum was used only in exceptional circumstances (Tierney 2012: 29). It was a mechanism reserved for momentous constitutional change; a bulwark against radical and irreversible constitutional change. In more recent years, the referendum has become more than a constitutional safeguard (Setälä and Schiller 2012: 12). But different countries have had different experiences, and the implications of referendums have differed from continent to continent. The following chapters outline how.

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