

Mehr Demokratie e.V.



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A review of the main arguments

For and Against Referendums

Referendums are not a panacea – but they are an effective way of dealing with some of the problems of modern politics. Here we list the main arguments in favour of referendums and then answer some of the most common objections.

PRO: an accelerator and a brake for politics closer to the people

Elections (the “blank cheque”) are not enough!

Constitutionally, the citizens are the supreme power in the state – but only once every four years. Then we vote for our representatives – and hand our sovereignty over to them. But if voters have the right to launch initiatives, with binding referendums, we can express our views in a much more diverse way: I may have voted for a particular party in the election, but I can choose to oppose one of their policies – on nuclear power, for example – in a referendum.

The accelerator: new ideas, an engine of reform

Citizen-initiated referendums exert pressure for necessary reform – as in Bavaria in 1991, for example. Citizens’ initiatives are campaigning for an ecologically sound policy on waste treatment. The ruling CSU party is digging in its heels. A citizens’ initiative collects nearly 1 million signatures: there is a change of heart. The result: Bavaria becomes a pioneer in modern waste management.

Political parties and parliaments often fail to take up good ideas. Cost-saving reforms are blocked. Referendums allow citizens to exert direct pressure for change and move the political process forwards.

Direct democracy allows the considerable knowledge, talents and skills of ‘ordinary members of the public’ to benefit society. In Germany alone there are around 70,000 citizen action groups, which contain an enormous reservoir of knowledge and new ideas. And yet all this creative abundance and wealth of experience usually goes to waste, because only the elected representatives and officials possess formal rights to make political decisions.

The brake: no policies without popular approval

Referendums reveal the disagreements between politicians and voters. Like in Switzerland. Voters often vote down what parliament has agreed – with the result that Swiss politicians pay much more attention to what people want. And they put much more effort into ‘selling’ their policies, because they know that if they fail to take the citizens’ wishes into account, the issue will very likely go to referendum.

Political responsibility

Today’s policies create the conditions for tomorrow’s generations. Our children and grandchildren will also have to deal with pensions, nuclear power, waste, the environment, biotechnology and Europe. Far-reaching and frequently irrevocable decisions need broad-based approval – because no-one can precisely foresee the consequences. No government or parliament can assume responsibility by themselves. The bearers of sovereignty – the citizens – need to make these crucial decisions.

Citizens are better informed

Direct democracy is a gigantic educational institution. The Danes and the Irish are much better informed about Europe than the Germans – because they have had referendums on it. In the run-up to a referendum there is an intense and wide debate, often heated, but also fundamentally educative.

More democracy, less self-service

Political parties have made themselves very comfortable in our political systems. Referendums allow citizens to change the rules of the game. In the USA, for example – where referendums shortened the periods of office of deputies and senators in 22 states. The voters set maximum limits for donations to parties and ensure fair voting rights.

People want to be involved

It’s a common cry: “Those up there don’t listen to us – they just do what they want”. When people are unable to influence decisions, the result is alienation, apathy, low turnouts. In Germany, 75% of those asked want referendums. Support for direct democracy cuts across party boundaries – referendums are politically neutral. They are a tool which encourages people to get involved. Citizens no longer feel alienated when they can actually change things.

“Direct democracy strengthens competition in politics, and that produces better policies. Academic research confirms the link. Switzerland’s high standard of living and her competitiveness are due not least of all to her referendum system.”
Prof. Reiner Eichenberger, Swiss economist.

Referendums strengthen parliament

The government normally makes all the important decisions. Parliament often merely rubber-stamps them. But in a referendum system parliament has an important role: it can present a competing counter-proposal to a citizens’ initiative. And initiatives give the opposition parties the chance to be actively involved in shaping policies between elections.

People are involved in solving problems!

All political decisions affect people. So it makes perfect sense that those who are going to be affected by the decisions should be able to contribute to discussing the issues and finding the best solutions to them. If people have a right to citizen-initiated referendums, they will play a more active role in politics and their views will be taken more seriously. Their understanding of politics and their problem-solving abilities will improve.

Political competition produces better results!

Giving more people the chance to put forward their ideas increases the chances of finding good solutions to problems. The ideas are in competition – but they can also fertilize each other. Competition ensures that no-one can simply hide behind a position of power. Everything is open to question – policies on subsidies, armaments, traffic, welfare. Competition will produce better results because people can choose what seems to them the best out of a range of options.

Both apathy and power-politics are undermined!

Many people feel apathetic, or they feel angry but powerless. If there is no avenue for legitimate democratic protest, their alienation can turn into political violence. The events surrounding the nuclear waste transports show clearly that citizens are no longer prepared to be fobbed off with bland assurances, but demand that their concerns are heeded. A citizens' decision (by referendum) has more credibility than that of a government or parliament. If problems are really going to be solved, they have to be discussed with all concerned instead of being swept under the carpet or 'solved' by politicians alone.

Greater acceptance of political decisions!

People want to participate in making important political decisions. That's clear from the recent past on such matters as the Euro and pensions reform. Where there is no referendum, there is an increased likelihood that policies will be boycotted. With referendums, on the other hand, people are more likely to accept decisions, because they have been able to influence them.

Democracy has to evolve!

Society is involved in a continuous process of change. The way we live today is very different from how it was 40 or 50 years ago. People are better educated and are more aware of social problems. The way democracy is practised also has to evolve. Democracy has two legs: elections and referendums. For the past 40 years or so, our democracy has been hopping around on only one leg. That has to change, if we are to face the future with confidence.

Contra: are we voters really too stupid?

The electorate is too stupid

Of course, this argument is not usually presented in such crass terms. Instead, we are told that the issues are too complex and difficult to understand for 'the ordinary citizen' etc. The assertion that 'the people' are not intelligent or well-educated enough to make difficult political decisions is an old argument which has been used against all forms of democracy. It was used to fight the introduction of parliamentary democracy and women's franchise. In fact, history shows that 'ordinary people' are very well able to make intelligent political choices. In the run-up to referendums there is intensive public debate which gives people a much better chance to make up their minds than in elections. Referendums are also about single issues, while elections deal with a host of different issues, mostly superficially. Those who vote in referendums are, of course, informed to differing degrees. Some want to know all the details, while others vote according to whether the party or association they support is in favour or not.

The idea that our representatives are fully informed and competent to decide on every conceivable subject is of course nonsensical. Most of the time they are simply toeing the party line. Most ordinary citizens have no party line.

More Democracy maintains that every registered voter should receive a referendum pamphlet, which sets out in easily understood language the main arguments for and against the referendum proposal.

The voters are too suggestible!

Manipulation of voters is a problem for democracy in general, not especially for referendums. We need only think of the enormous influence of the lobby groups in parliament – such as the farming lobby, for instance, which for a long time prevented timely action against BSE. Of course referendums can also be manipulated: but US studies show that lobby groups there actually have limited influence on them. Some of the larger unions and trade associations are against direct democracy because they know that they have more direct influence in parliament.

A long public debate before a referendum and a balanced information leaflet help to make the referendum vote more objective. In Germany – unlike in the US – political advertising on radio and TV is banned, closing one possible source of manipulation.

Anyone who has taken part in a referendum campaign in Switzerland knows that referendums produce a much more objective public debate – even in the media.

Right-wing forces can exploit referendums!

There are cases in both Switzerland and the USA in which minorities – such as foreigners – have been discriminated against in referendums. But the truth is that the general public is no more antagonistic towards minorities than parliaments are. Politicians are equally guilty of infringing the rights of smaller, weaker groups.

Direct democracy has an inbuilt protection mechanism: any initiative which infringes fundamental human rights is stopped before it goes any further. In any disputed case, the federal Constitutional Court makes a ruling.

But the basic principle applies: debate, public discussion, lie at the heart of democracy. No problem facing society can be resolved without discussion. Denying, sweeping under the carpet or glossing over problems never solved them. If xenophobic or reactionary initiatives are launched, then it is the task of those who oppose them to become active and try to ensure that the vote will go against them. Referendums do not cause conflicts – they merely expose them.

Minorities can impose their will on the majority!

It is asserted that in many referendums only those who feel directly affected vote – which allows a minority to impose its will on the ‘silent majority’. This argument assumes an electorate which is either too lazy – or half-asleep! Every voter has the opportunity to vote in a referendum. Whether they do so or not is everyone’s free choice: if they are serious about democracy and concerned about a particular issue, they will tend to vote. The Swiss and American experience shows that the average turnout for referendums is around 40%. Where referendums are an accepted part of the system, citizens still accept the result even if the turnout is lower than this. What counts is that the opportunity to take part actually exists.

Direct democracy is slow and expensive!

Of course it is true that direct democratic processes can take longer than parliamentary ones. But the fact that referendums enjoy a greater acceptance level and involve people more directly in political life makes this worthwhile.

Direct democracy often acts as an accelerator: citizens take up issues which have been ignored or shelved by politicians.

Experience in other countries shows that citizens are often more economical with the resources of the state than politicians. In the USA and Switzerland, direct democracy leads to lower levels of national debt, more efficient administration and lower taxes for the same level of services. Referendums cost relatively modest amounts of money to organise. Direct democracy is a sensible investment!

You can't have referendums on everything!

Direct democracy would not replace parliament, but complement it. Voters only decide things if enough of them have voted to win a referendum. Referendums usually only deal with the most important issues – such as pensions, ending the use of nuclear energy, tax reform etc. 99% of decisions are still taken by parliament.

Existing civil rights are perfectly adequate!

Those who care about the quality of democracy know how frustrating it is to have to approach politicians merely as supplicants. The enormous resources of knowledge and experience in the general public go to waste. If civil rights end with the right of petition, this is nothing but a beggar's charter. The politicians can make all the decisions, even if the majority of people don't agree with them.

“Referendums do not compete with parliamentary democracy, but supplement it. Stable democracy needs self-confident, aware individuals who engage in public debate.”

Marianne Birthler, member of board of trustees, More Democracy

Issues are reduced to Yes/No decisions!

Every decision is ultimately reduced to either 'yes' or 'no'. It is no different in parliament. In the view of More Democracy, legislation ought to allow room for compromise. Campaigners for an proposal should be able to modify their proposal – after the initiative has been launched i.e. after the first stage of citizen-initiated legislation - to take into account the results of discussions with parliament. Parliament should also have the right to present an alternative proposal (a 'counter-proposal') to be voted on in the referendum. This gives voters more choice and makes the referendum more flexible.

Referendums make it unclear who is responsible!

No matter who makes the decision – politicians or people – those who are affected by it always bear the consequences. At most, a politician might be forced to resign, or is not re-elected. When the people make the decisions, they have to accept responsibility for them – there is no-one else to blame. This is an educational experience. In any case, just how much responsibility do politicians take? Within a term of office, politicians make so many decisions that it is virtually impossible for voters to 'reward' them or 'punish' them every four years in the elections.

The constitution prescribes a purely representative democracy!

Not true. Article 20 of the German federal constitution states that the people exercise their sovereign power “through elections and referendums”. However, in contrast to the law on elections, the constitution does not set out in detail the provisions for referendums (except in Art.29 on revision of state boundaries). In 1948/49, when the constitution was being worked out, the parliamentary council could not agree on the provisions for direct democracy. The obligation deriving from Article 20 remains unfulfilled. 50 years after our constitution was instituted, it is now time to add the right to referendum to that constitution.