

Local referendums in Germany 1956–2024

Factsheet / Key Facts

1. Quantity

- From 1956 to 2024, there were a total of 9.453 procedures at the municipal level. This resulted in 4.768 referendums.
- In the past five years, an average of 285 new procedures were initiated per year. In 2023 and 2024, there were 264 respective 229, slightly fewer than in previous years.
- The 9.453 procedures are divided into two types of procedures: 7.839 citizens' initiatives (“Bürgerbegehren”) were initiated “bottom-up” by citizens, 1.614 council referendums (“Ratsreferendum”) were initiated “top-down” by the respective municipal council.
- About 40 per cent of all recorded procedures took place in the federal state of Bavaria.

2. Topics

- Most of the procedures concerned economic projects (20,5 per cent), public social and educational institutions (19,6 per cent) and traffic projects (15,8 per cent). Which topic arises how often varies from federal state to federal state. One important reason for this is that in several states, local urban land use planning, which affects many subject areas, is not permitted or only permitted to a limited extent.

3. Results and chances of success

- 38,9 per cent of all completed procedures were successful in the meaning of the initiators. A referendum is not necessarily required for success: 1.078 of the 7.839 citizens' initiatives (13,8 per cent) led the municipal council to adopt the demands of the initiative – so no referendum was necessary.
- Looking at the referendums, 51,5 per cent of them were successful in the meaning of the proposal. Council referendums had a higher success rate of 55,5 per cent than citizen-initiated referendums with 49,7 per cent.
- 2.054 of the 7.839 citizens' initiatives were declared invalid (26,2 per cent).
- In a nationwide comparison, the federal state of Berlin has the lowest proportion of invalid citizens' initiatives at 12,5 per cent. In Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Saarland, Saxony, Thuringia, Saxony-Anhalt and Lower Saxony the proportion is more than 35 per cent. These differences are due to the different legal regulations in the federal states, for example the exclusion of topics.

4. Referendums

- The average turnout for referendums was 51,1 per cent. The turnout in small municipalities is significantly higher than in larger cities and rural districts.
- Nationwide, every eighth referendum (12,0 per cent) did not reach the approval quorum. Although the initiators' proposal received the majority of votes, the proposal failed because the approval quorum was not reached. Such an approval quorum exists in most federal states.

5. Local referendums and refugee accommodation

- In the period from 2015 to 2024, a total of 94 procedures took place regarding of refugee accommodation. This is 3 per cent of all procedures.
- Of the 90 procedures already completed, 27 procedures resulted in a referendum. 43 of the 90 procedures were declared invalid. The remaining 20 completed procedures resulted in a compromise, led the municipal council to adopt the demands of the initiative or they were not submitted.
- Most procedures took place in the States of North Rhine-Westphalia (26), Bavaria (19) and Baden-Württemberg (19).
- Many procedures advocated for a better refugee accommodation.
- 27 referendums: 1 referendum was about infrastructure; 16 referendums (59,3 percent) had a “refugee-friendly” result – be it that the majority voted in favour of an accommodation or voted for a better location; in 10 referendums (37,0 percent) the accommodation was rejected.

Source: Mehr Demokratie e. V., Bürgerbegehrensbericht 2025, German language:

<https://www.mehr-demokratie.de/>

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