

Referendums Around the World

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Referendums Around the World

The Continued Growth of Direct Democracy

Edited by

Matt Qvortrup

Department of Management and Security, Cranfield University, UK

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Contents

<i>List of Tables and Figures</i>	vii
<i>Foreword</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xi
Introduction: Theory, Practice and History <i>Matt Qvortrup</i>	1
1 Referendums in Russia, the Former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe <i>Ronald J. Hill and Stephen White</i>	17
2 Referendums in Western Europe <i>Matt Qvortrup</i>	43
3 Referendums in Switzerland <i>Uwe Serdült</i>	65
4 Referendums and Initiatives in North America <i>Todd Donovan</i>	122
5 Direct Democracy in Latin America <i>David Altman</i>	162
6 Referendums in Africa <i>Norbert Kersting</i>	186
7 Referendums in Asia <i>Masahiro Kobori</i>	207
8 Referendums in Oceania <i>Caroline Morris</i>	218
9 Conclusion <i>Matt Qvortrup</i>	246

<i>Appendix A: Referendums Around the World</i>	252
<i>David Altman, Todd Donovan, Ron Hill, Norbert Kersting, Caroline Morris, Stephen White and Matt Qvortrup</i>	
<i>Appendix B: Referendums on Devolution and Self-Government in Subordinate Territories</i>	300
<i>Matt Qvortrup</i>	
<i>Index</i>	302

Tables and Figures

Tables

1.1	Referendums in France, 1800–1852	9
1.2	Referendums in the Third Reich	10
2.1	Number of referendums and initiatives in West European countries	45
2.2	Existing provisions for referendums and direct democracy in Western Europe	46
2.3	Regression model: Occurrence of referendums and initiatives	52
2.4	Pearson’s correlations between types of referendums and policy outcomes	59
3.1	National referendum frequencies by decade and type of legal instrument	79
3.2	Cumulative participation for seven consecutive referendum votes in the city of St Gallen (%)	82
3.3	Bottom-up votes by initiators and historical periods, with success rates (1874–2010)	85
3.4	Submitted and withdrawn initiatives for a partial revision of the Constitution by decade, 1891–2010	87
3A.1	Swiss referendum votes, 1848–2012	94
4.1	Number of state popular referendums and initiatives in the US	129
4.2	Number of federal and provincial referendums in Canada, 1878–2012	133
4.3	Substance of referendums in Canada, 1878–2012	133
4.4	Frequency of state-wide ballot measures in the US, 2000–2012	137
4.5	Number of popular initiatives in the US, and per cent approved, by decade	138
4.6	Substance of popular initiatives in the US, 1910–1919 and 2000–2009	140
4.7	Spending on American ballot measures, 2004–2012	142
4.8	Major donors to California initiative campaigns, 2012	146
4.9	America’s wealthiest initiative donors	148
5.1	Overview of legal/constitutional provisions	170

5.2	Uses of MDD in Latin America	174
7.1	Constitutional provisions for referendums in Asia	209
7.2	Statistical predictors of referendums in Asia	212

Figures

3.1	Average turnout for Swiss national referendum votes per year (grey bars) and ten-year moving average (dashed line), 1879–2012	81
5.1	Typology	164
5.2	MDD growth	172
5.3	Intensity of use of MDDs in Latin America since 1978	173
5.4	MDD topics in Latin America since 1978	177
5.5	Unpacking basic services	178
9.1	The use of referendums worldwide, 1900–2010	247

Foreword

Referendums are universal. Of the major democracies only the US, India, Japan and Israel have never experienced one at the nationwide level, and the US, of course, has had thousands in individual states. The referendums have varied enormously in purpose, conduct and outcome.

When Austin Ranney and I compiled works on the subject in 1978 and 1994, 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 we and our co-authors showed, for every generalization about referendums there is a counter-example.

In the last two decades there has been increasing recourse to referendums in many parts of the world, largely to legitimize constitutional change. In the UK the politics of avoiding a referendum on Europe has been as important as the frequent use of referendums at the regional or local government level. The European issue led the Dutch to hold their first ever referendum, and the Italians turned referendums from an occasional device to a frequent habit. The international bodies that have turned election watching into a profession have found increasing demands for their services all across the world. And, despite the unique circumstances of so many referendums, the mere number justifies more elaborate classifications and general lessons than was possible 30 years ago. This new work is overdue.

*David Butler,
Nuffield College*

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Contributors

David Altman is Professor of Political Science at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. He works on comparative politics with an emphasis on the quality of democratic institutions, mechanisms of direct democracy and executive–legislative relations. He is the author of *Direct Democracy Worldwide* (2011).

Sir David Butler is Emeritus Fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford. The author of many publications, including the Nuffield Election Studies since 1945, he was a prominent on-screen expert at the BBC for several decades. His *Political Change in Britain: Forces Shaping Electoral Choice* (1969), written with US political scientist Donald Stokes, brought modern American science treatments to the UK and is regarded as a pioneering analysis of its kind. Elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1994, he was knighted in the 2011 New Year Honours for services to political science.

Todd Donovan is Professor in the Political Science Department at Western Washington University, in Bellingham, WA. He has taught at Western for 20 years. Donovan is co-author or co-editor of ten books. His latest include *The Limits of Electoral Reform* (2013, with Shaun Bowler) and *Why Iowa? Sequential Elections, Reform and United States Presidential Nominations* (2010, with David Redlask and Caroline Tolbert). His articles have appeared in many scholarly journals, including the *American Journal of Political Science*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, *Public Opinion Quarterly* and *Political Research Quarterly*.

Ronald J. Hill is Fellow Emeritus at Trinity College, Dublin, where he retired in 2007 as Professor of Comparative Government. He is a widely published author of books, articles, chapters, commentaries and reviews on Soviet, Communist and post-Communist affairs, including *Putin and Putinism* (co-editor 2010).

Norbert Kersting is Professor for Local and Regional Politics at the Department of Political Science, University of Münster, Germany. Previously Willy Brandt Chair at the Department of Political Science, University of Stellenbosch, he has written widely on African politics and

comparative government. His publications include *Electronic Democracy. State of the Art and Future Perspectives* (2012) and *Local Governance Reform in Global Perspective* (2009).

Masahiro Kobori is Professor of Political Science in College of Law at Ritsumeikan University, Japan. He took an undergraduate degree in College of Law at Ritsumeikan University, and received his LLM and PhD from Osaka City.

Caroline Morris holds degrees from Victoria University of Wellington, the University of California and the University of London. She is currently a member of the Department of Law at Queen Mary, University of London, having previously held posts at King's College London and Victoria University of Wellington. She is a member of the international advisory board of the Initiative and Referendum Institute (Asia) and regularly advises governmental bodies and legislatures on matters of electoral law. Her most recent publication is *Parliamentary Elections, Representation and the Law* (2012).

Matt Qvortrup teaches at the UK Defense Academy and Cranfield University, UK. He obtained his doctorate in politics from Brasenose College, Oxford and holds a Diploma of Law from the College of Law, London. Professor Qvortrup won the Political Studies Association's BJPIR Prize for best political science paper in 2012 and is also a past winner of the Oxford University Press Law Prize. Recent publications include *Direct Democracy* (2013) and *Referendums and Ethnic Conflict* (2014).

Uwe Serdült is Vice-Director of the Centre for Research on Direct Democracy (c2d) at the Centre for Democracy Research Aarau (ZDA) and Lecturer in Comparative and International Studies at the University of Zurich.

Stephen White is James Bryce Professor of Politics at the University of Glasgow. He is also Visiting Professor at the Institute of Applied Politics in Moscow, and joint editor of the *Journal of Eurasian Studies*. Recent publications include *Understanding Russian Politics* (2011) and *Russia's Authoritarian Elections* (co-author 2012). He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2010.