Citizens at the Polls
Direct Democracy in the World, 2020 *

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Abstract

There is suggestive evidence that the growth of democracy has stagnated, and even some signs indicate that democracy is in retreat. In such a context, one might have expected to witness an increase in experimentation with democratic innovations such as direct democracy. This is not the case. While there is a spectacular and statistically significant increase in the uses of mechanisms of direct democracy (MDDs) since the early 1990s, 2020 remained notably similar to the previous years in terms of the level of direct democracy worldwide. In 2019, we witnessed less than half of the MDDs we saw in 2018 (eighteen vs. fifty), but, in 2020, the count bounced back to thirty. The COVID-19 pandemic did not halt the march of direct democracy, although it delayed some of its events. Beyond the specific number of popular votes in 2020, direct democracy still tracks almost perfectly with global electoral democracy trends. When all was said and done, however, thirty MDDs were held in 2020: fourteen obligatory referendums (eight in Liberia, two in Chile, and one in Algeria, Italy, Palau, and Northern Cyprus, respectively), six plebiscites (two in New Zealand, two in Liechtenstein, one in Russia, and one in Guinea), five popular initiatives (four in Switzerland and one in Liechtenstein), and five rejective referendums (all in Switzerland).

Keywords: COVID-19, direct democracy, plebiscites, polyarchy, popular initiatives, referendums.

Many electoral democracies face problems of social unrest and a perceived loss of legitimacy, which includes, but is not limited to, growing citizen disconnect, disenchantment, and distrust of parties and parliaments. When representative

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government ceases to function as expected and there is a demand for change, two (nonmutually exclusive) paths for improvement are open to allow democracies to retain their polyarchical foundations of freedom and equity among citizens. The first involves adjusting existing institutions (such as the electoral system), which tends to preserve political power remaining in the hands of ambitious politicians. The second introduces innovative mechanisms of governance, whereby new actors are included, to some degree, in the decision-making process. Some mechanisms of direct democracy constitute a meaningful, viable way forward among the menu of democratic innovations that has been proposed to reinvigorate current democratic regimes, particularly in the context of highly unequal societies.1

This essay offers an overview of trends in all mechanisms of direct democracy (MDDs) used globally at the national level in 2020. The incremental growth in the use of MDDs last year in contrast to 2019 was evident, albeit the rate of increase paled in comparison to other increases in the preceding years. The expected march on the path of MDDs in 2020 was, however, hardly imaginable, given that it was the year engulfed in the first pandemic in a century, and all polities, democracies included, were wrestling with this very existential threat. Identifying the MDDs in 2020 and delving into some prominent episodes provide a good window of opportunity to examine the thrust and dynamics of contemporary democracies beset with growing public discontent with their representative mechanisms.

The report notes the relevant subtypes of MDDs and deals with some of the topics covered in these popular votes. In doing so, it relies on a methodology to assess the degree of competitiveness and intensity of each vote and the different MDDs. While this essay aims its darts at the national level, it does not preclude us from including a couple of paradigmatic subnational votes when helpful in making a point.

We define a mechanism of direct democracy as a publicly recognized, institutionalized process by which citizens of a region or country—regardless of the democratic level of its regime—register their choice or opinion on specific issues through a ballot with universal and secret suffrage. This definition attributes special consideration to the secrecy of the vote and its universal character. It is intended to embrace initiatives, referendums, and plebiscites, as those terms are usually understood in the literature. It does not encompass deliberative assemblies or other settings in which the vote is not secret, nor does it apply to elections for authorities (representatives or executive officials), nor even to their potential revocation of mandate through recall.2

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1 David Altman, Citizenship and Contemporary Direct Democracy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
2 The literature is evenly divided between those who consider these institutions a subgroup of the direct democratic world, for example, Fernando Tuesta Soldevilla, ed., Una Onda Expansiva: Las Revocatorias en el Perú y América Latina [An expansive wave: Revocatory referendums in...
In the absence of an accepted universal terminology on direct democracy, we follow the Swiss vocabulary to the extent possible. But, as the Swiss direct democracy jargon is not exhaustive, some addendums are incorporated to cover most of the relevant subtypes of MDDs. The approach broadly differentiates between those MDDs that are “citizen-initiated” or “bottom-up” (through the gathering of signatures) versus those that are “top-down” (triggered by a sitting legislative assembly, executive power, or constitutional mandate).

The first group—citizen-initiated mechanisms of direct democracy (CI-MDDs)—is composed of those mechanisms of direct democracy that are initiated by signature-gathering among ordinary citizens: popular initiatives (PIs) and referendums (RFs). The distinction between popular initiatives and referendums is crucial, as popular initiatives are designed to alter the status quo, whereas referendums are created to prevent change.3 The second group comprises those top-down MDDs (TD-MDDs) that are (directly or indirectly) initiated by authorities: obligatory referendums (ORs) and plebiscites (PLs). Their distinction is also crucial because plebiscites typically represent either the bypassing of one representative institution by another (usually the executive avoiding the legislative branch), the renunciation of responsibility for harsh policies, or attempts to legitimize extant policies.4 Plebiscites are the clear example of a subtype of MDD that does not exist in Switzerland, for many, the world standard of direct democracy.5

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3 A popular initiative is a bill, statute, or constitutional amendment, supported by a group of citizens, that offers an alternative to the status quo. Citizens are allowed to decide directly at the ballot on matters of concern to them, without the consent of the country’s main political officials. Optional referendums allow citizens to reject a law passed by the legislature (the “people’s veto” in American jargon, also sometimes called a “popular referendum”). See David Altman, Direct Democracy Worldwide (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

4 The distinction between CI-MDDs and TD-MDDs is something of an analytical artifact, as MDDs may well have a mixed origin. On the one hand, the fact that we observe TD-MDDs in a particular context does not necessarily mean that societal actors view the process antagonistically. Sometimes, collective actors (such as unions, students, NGOs, and business associations) may press authorities to trigger a popular vote on a given matter. On the other hand, not all CI-MDDs generate pristinely from simple unorganized citizens’ inorganic political desires. Political elites, party cadres, and authorities, elected or designated, have participated in developing CI-MDDs, too. In fact, it has been suggested that even so-called bottom-up referendums could be used (a) to concentrate power, (b) to serve as a partisan strategy, and, rather exceptionally, (c) to empower citizens and civil society. In this regard, see Uwe Serdült and Yanina Welp, “Direct Democracy Upside Down,” Taiwan Journal of Democracy 8, no. 1 (2012): 69-92.

5 These are, in most cases, limited to certain specific topics in the constitution or—as in Switzerland, Uruguay, and even all but one of the U.S. states (Delaware)—to an amendment of
This essay is divided into two major sections. The first section provides an overview of all MDDs held in the world in 2020 at the national level and presents aggregate data on how direct democracy has been used since the turn of the twentieth century. It is shown that, although the pandemic delayed some popular votes, it did not drastically disturb the regular progression of direct democracy uses. Section two goes beyond the aggregate statistics and provides context and details to allow the reader to grasp the complexities of these events. Finally, we draw some conclusions regarding the almost perfect parallelism between direct democracy and global electoral democracy.

Contemporary Uses and Trends of Direct Democracy

Uses of Mechanisms of Direct Democracy in 2020

In 2020, there were thirty MDDs, fourteen obligatory referendums (eight in Liberia, two in Chile, one each in Algeria, Palau, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and Italy); six plebiscites (two in New Zealand, two in Liechtenstein, one in the Russian Federation, and one in Guinea); five popular initiatives (four in Switzerland and one in Liechtenstein); and five referendums (all in Switzerland). Thus, about half of all MDDs of the year were obligatory referendums. Two-thirds were top-down, and one-third bottom up. All bottom-up MDDs of the year transpired in the heart of Europe. Moreover, if we divide contemporary countries into three groups (free, partly-free, and not-free), two-thirds of MDDs occurred in free contexts, less than one-tenth in not-free regimes, and a bit more than one-quarter in partly free societies. While MDDs have been used in a variety of contexts, their use remains mostly limited within democratic countries.

Of the fourteen obligatory referendums, eight of them were held on December 8 in Liberia. In this West African country, voters were asked to weigh in on different amendments to the constitution, mostly about reducing the length of office of several authorities (MPs, senators, the president, and the chairman of both the House and the Senate), but also the date of the elections, and whether having two Liberian parents is necessary for acquiring the constitution. Strictly speaking however, it is not a right the population uses in any active way. Rather, it is a defensive right or a veto right. Plebiscites allow authorities to pose a question to the citizenry.

6 In cases when citizens had to vote on a series of questions, each question was coded as a unique MDD, unless the choices were mutually exclusive. However, there is an exception to this rule when the origin of the initiative differs (by origin, we mean those individuals or institutions who triggered the MDD). For example, if the executive branch of government initiates a vote to obtain approval of reform “X,” but opposition legislators propose alternative option “Z,” then the two alternatives have been treated as independent observations, even though the alternatives occur in the same event and are mutually exclusive. This exception does not hold if the law requires the inclusion of an alternative.

citizenship (while also prohibiting dual citizenship-holders from running for public office). Another two obligatory referendums were held on October 10 in Chile, where voters were asked if they fancied a new constitution to replace the previous Pinochet-era one. Citizens overwhelmingly approved the launch of a constitutional reform process and chose a fully elected Constitutional Convention to do so. Finally, the remaining four obligatory referendums went as follows:

- Voters in Algeria decided to amend the constitution after the Hirak protests, in a referendum that was partly boycotted by the opposition and most citizens.

- Italian citizens voted to reduce the number of Members of Parliament.

- Voters in Palau overwhelmingly approved the proposed borders of the country’s territorial waters, in the least competitive event of the year.\(^8\)

- Citizens in Northern Cyprus rejected an increase in the number of Supreme Court judges in the most competitive MDD of the year.

All in all, the success of the year’s obligatory referendums was mixed.

Just as with obligatory referendums, the year’s plebiscites were also a mixed bag when it came to outcomes. Among the six events held in 2020, New Zealanders were asked to weigh in regarding two issues related to social values: euthanasia and cannabis. While voters approved legalizing euthanasia, they refused to modify the existing marijuana legislation. Another two plebiscites took place in Liechtenstein, where voters rejected both the proposed railway expansion and the possibility of dual citizenship, in the year’s most participative instances of direct democracy with a turnout higher than 82 percent. Moreover, both Russian and Guinean voters approved extensions to their president’s term limits (the latter one being the second least competitive event of the year).

Most of 2020’s popular initiatives were held in Switzerland, where voters rejected a ban on the export of war material, new regulations that aimed at protecting the environment, new limits to immigration, and an increase in subsidies to housing cooperatives. A popular initiative that took place in Liechtenstein on assurances of balanced gender proportions in elected bodies was also rejected, and by the largest margin of any citizen-initiated MDD in 2020. Not a good year for popular initiatives.

Finally, all five rejective referendums of 2020 were held in Switzerland. While voters voted to sustain the new paternity leave law and new laws against discrimination based on gender, they rejected new regulations regarding

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\(^8\) By competitiveness, we understand the ratio between affirmative and negative votes. This ratio produces an index that oscillates between 0 and 1, 1 the most competitive and 0 otherwise.
hunting and tax deductions for childcare expenses. Citizens also narrowly upheld the acquisition of new fighter jets by the authorities in the most competitive bottom-up instance of direct democracy of the year.

Regarding the year’s general ideological trends, it is possible to observe a balance among the liberal vs. communitarian poles. While it is not appropriate to assign a particular direction to seven of the thirty events, the divide was somewhat evenly split with eleven and twelve cases, respectively. Among the liberal initiatives, 27 percent successfully modified the status quo, while the remaining 73 percent failed. On the other hand, among the communitarian initiatives, 58 percent were successful, while 42 percent failed, which tilts the balance slightly toward communitarianism. With regard to the prevalent topics, we find that 50 percent of them affected the institutional order, 37 percent dealt with social values and moral questions, 27 percent of them touched on political-economic issues, 17 percent modified national life within their polities, and only 7 percent were related to foreign policy. Considering the different types of MDDs, their ideological tilt, and their thematic nature, 2020 was undoubtedly a diverse year.

Figure 1 depicts all results of 2020. As discussed elsewhere, one way to show the results of MDDs is by representing the percentage of registered citizens who voted affirmatively and those who opposed within an isosceles right triangle. While this graphic display does not offer all dimensions of the electoral results (e.g., blank or null votes, which might provide valuable information), it very efficiently portrays the participation and competitiveness of each popular vote. Unless there are participation, approval, or supermajority quorums, any pair of coordinates falling above the bisector (segment OM) means accepting the question, if they fall below otherwise.

**Tendencies in the Practice of Mechanisms of Direct Democracy**

By the practice of MDDs, we refer to the discrete sum of all popular votes

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9 Liberal MDDs tend to prioritize the well-being of the individual over the community, which entails privileging individual and economic freedoms over other concerns. At the other end, communitarian MDDs prioritize the common good over individual concerns, which usually means subordinating individual and economic freedoms to social and cultural cohesion. For example, while allowing the voluntary interruption of a pregnancy and reducing taxes are liberal initiatives, limiting immigration and increasing public spending are communitarian concerns. 10 The rationale behind these geometrical depictions is fully explained in David Altman, “The Potential of Direct Democracy: A Global Measure (1900—2014),” *Social Indicators Research* 133, no. 3 (2017): 1207-1227. See also, Luís Aguiar-Conraria, Pedro C. Magalhães, and Christoph A. Vanberg, “What Are the Best Quorum Rules? A Laboratory Investigation,” *Public Choice* 185, no. 1 (2020): 215-231. 11 Point M represents the unique, virtually unattainable pair of coordinates with the higher turnout and competition possible. Point M constitutes an implicit benchmark of comparison of any possible pair of coordinates. Its leverage probably echoes the enormously influential work of Robert Dahl, for whom democracy is a regime with high levels of competition and participation. Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971).
at the ballot box at the national level in every country in the world during a considered period. Regardless that voters may have several topics to decide upon on the same day, each question is studied as a single MDD. While there has been a statistically significant increase in the yearly number of MDDs since the early 1900s, the last thirty years are much more stable. If we observe the evolution of all popular votes held at the national level per year since 1900, the overall slope is positive and statistically significant (figure 1a). Yet, if we zoom the last thirty years (figure 1b), the slope is negative but still not technically discernible from zero. Actually, an important oscillation in the number of MDDs is visible (between twenty and eighty MDDs per year.) In short, while in 2019 we witnessed less than half of the MDDs we saw in 2018 (eighteen vs. fifty), in 2020, the count bounced back to thirty; this, however, is still far away from the record year of 2005 with eighty-three MDDs.

We must be careful in deriving clear conclusions based solely on the count of MDDs. Simply counting occurrences of MDDs is meaningless for measuring how much direct democracy potential exists in each country. This is because a credible menace of triggering a CI-MDD (a reactive referendum or a proactive popular initiative) plays a crucial role in moderating political decisions and

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shifting the political course even before the gathering of signatures starts. Such an approach to measurement would “reward” divided societies where agreements are not attainable and thus persons use all the institutional ammunition at their disposal to reach their goals. On the contrary, a society where settlements are found before individuals use the strongest weapon at their disposal (i.e., an MDD) would be “punished.” Thus, conceptually, two different places might have the very same “amount” of direct democracy, but in “A” several MDDs are held per year and in the other, “B,” MDDs appear only occasionally. To avoid noise produced by the oscillation from one year to the other, we base our analysis on the Direct Popular Vote Index (DPVI), which captures the amount of potential direct democracy in a particular time and place.

The DPVI results from the weighted aggregation of the four most important subtypes of MDD in a given country and a year. Each of the subindices (for popular initiatives, rejective referendums, obligatory referendums, and plebiscites, respectively) is composed of three critical components: the ease of triggering, the ease of approval, and how consequential the vote is if approved. The ease of initiation is measured by: the existence of that type of MDD, and,

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when considering CI-MDDs (e.g., popular initiative or referendum), it also includes the number of signatures needed and the time limits for circulating the signatures. The ease of approval is measured by the interaction among the quorums pertaining to participation, approval, supermajority, and district majority. The vote’s consequentiality is measured by the legal status of the decision made (binding or consultative), and the threat capability of the MDD under consideration (the threat is a decay function that reflects the amount of time that has passed since the last time a particular MDD occurred and its success).¹⁴

One of the virtues of DPVI is that it provides a concise overview of the state of direct democracy in a particular context, which is also one of its significant disadvantages: it is too general. Nonetheless, the proper architecture of the index allows us to unpack what is going on regarding one particular subtype of MDDs (e.g., plebiscites) or work in a middle ground (i.e., top-down and bottom-up MDDs). Thus, figure 3 depicts the evolution of the DPVI in the world since 1900 (a weighted average of OR, PL, PI, and RF) and the aggregate level of the citizen-initiated component (CIC, a combination of PI and RF), and the top-down component (TOC, a combination of PL and OR).

In figure 3, we observe a notable increase, almost fourfold, of top-down direct democracy since the beginning of the twentieth century (see TOC, segmented line). The bottom-up expansion is much more moderate (see CIC,

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¹⁴ The complete rationale behind this index’s construction and operationalization is fully explained in David Altman, “The Potential of Direct Democracy: A Global Measure (1900–2014).” In this 2017 article, DPVI was called Direct Democracy Practice Potential (DDPP).
dotted line); its current level is about 20 percent higher than in the late 1920s, which was its apex in the twentieth century. As DPVI is a weighted average of the four subtypes of MDD in a given country-year, and therefore of CIC and TOC, it is somehow in the middle of the two.

Nonetheless, as done previously, figure 4 zooms in on the last thirty years. Here the situation is the inverse of that in the previous figure, where we look at the last 120 years. In these last thirty years (1990–2020), the statistical increase of the overall DPVI—see 4b—comes from a substantial expansion of the level of the bottom-up mechanism of direct democracy, 4d. Technically speaking, there is no growth of top-down MDDs (see the segmented regression line and its confidence interval in 4f). In short, the regression line of DPVI is still positive, driven by the growth in popular initiatives and rejective referendums.

**Illustrative Uses of Mechanisms of Direct Democracy**

As mentioned above, the COVID-19 pandemic did not halt the march of

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15 Several MDDs were postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In Chile, referendums initially set for April 26, changed to October 25; in Italy, they changed from March 29 to September 21; and in Russia, from April 22 to June 30. In Switzerland, three MDDs initially scheduled for May 17 changed to September 27, and, in Liberia, from October 13 to December 8. COVID-19 also affected some of the 2021 MDDs. For example, in Taiwan, the vote on four MDDs initially scheduled to take place on August 28 was delayed until December. Finally, there is only one case of a constitutional referendum delayed without a precise new voting date: Armenia.
direct democracy, although it delayed some of its events.\textsuperscript{15} Overall, globally in 2020, thirty MDDs were held at the national level.\textsuperscript{16} From this universe of thirty cases, this section of the essay concentrates on a handful of MDDs that illustrate different but fundamental dimensions of popular votes: participation and competitiveness. In other words, we select both the most and least participative and competitive popular votes, as well as those whose results were contradictory or even a boomerang for their initiators.\textsuperscript{17}

It is crucial to notice that, while the foci of this analysis are national MDDs only, we also took the liberty to include a couple of instructive subnational examples from the U.S. context. The two selected subnational MDDs (two out of 132 state popular votes in 2020) offer contrasting scenarios that undermine some prejudices about voting behavior in the context of direct democracy (such as citizens tend to vote conservative, progressive, and so on.)

\textbf{Switzerland—New Fighter Aircraft Referendum}

On September 27, 2020, Swiss voters had the chance to decide whether newer models should replace the country’s combat aircraft fleet. The vote resulted from a signature collection campaign against the purchase by the Group for a Switzerland Without an Army (GSoA), which gathered 66,000 signatures throughout the year. Parliament had approved the CHF 6 billion purchase in 2019 and gave leeway to the government in choosing which fighter jets should replace the aging fleet.\textsuperscript{18} This decision was then narrowly ratified by the voters. The government also included an offset agreement, which would force the company that won the bid to spend 60 percent of the contract with Swiss businesses. Opposing groups argued that the initiative would amount to a waste of resources in the middle of a worldwide pandemic and that maintenance costs would mean that the sale would require four times the approved amount.\textsuperscript{19}

While these opponents avoided framing the issue as an anti-army campaign, they stated that the task could be achieved without spending so much, and that the resources could be used in climate mitigation efforts or healthcare infrastructure. On the other end, supporters in Parliament and the government stressed that if the vote failed, the country would lack the means to defend itself through 2030. Terrorism and the need to back up the country’s neutrality claim were also reasons given by the initiative’s supporters.

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{16}] This number is not that far below the decade’s average of thirty-three (with a minimum of thirteen in 2017, and a maximum of seventy-six in 2016.)
\item[\textsuperscript{17}] Providing details of every MDD that occurred in 2020 falls well beyond the scope of this piece, despite the fascinating and unique history of each popular vote.
\end{itemize}
Switzerland is one of the very few countries that allow its citizens to vote on national security issues, including military spending. A similar initiative had failed in 2014, in part because voters thought the matter less pressing, which supposedly had changed this time around. Still, the vote was the second most competitive MDD of the year, due to a larger turnout in urban areas and the pandemic’s effect.20 Others have pointed to the growing distrust and disapproval of former U.S. President Donald Trump (who would go on to lose his reelection campaign) as another reason for the lack of wider support for the aircraft fleet’s renovation, as both American companies that were eyeing the contracts, Boeing and Lockheed Martin, had been viewed as too involved with Trump’s foreign policy.21 It is important to remember that former President Trump was broadly unpopular in Europe. Hence, it stands to reason that a measure associated with him would not garner the support of a broad coalition of voters.22 The result stands in contrast to the previous polls that were conducted around the vote, which showed the initiative winning with a comfortable margin.23 In the end, the rejective referendum failed by less than a quarter of a point (or 8,515 votes!), allowing the government to continue its plan (for now, as the GSoA could launch another campaign against the purchase sometime in 2021).

Chile—Constitutional (Crisis) Referendum

On October 26, 2020, an obligatory referendum took place in Chile to decide whether a new constitution would be drafted and, if so, whether it should be done via a Constitutional Convention comprised of only newly elected representatives or by a combination of acting members of Parliament and newly elected officials for that purpose. The vote was held a little over a year after the 2019 mass protests, in which twenty-nine people died and countless were injured. The most common explanation for the unrest is usually related to inequality and a perceived lack of social mobility that stemmed from the Pinochet dictatorship’s institutional and economic legacy.24 While the direct cause of the so-called Social Outbreak was an increase of U.S.$0.06 in the

20 Ibid.
subway fare, most commentators agree that the underlying causes were the economic inequality and political disaffection that shaped the post-dictatorship years, which was summed up by the popular chant, “It’s not about 30 pesos, it’s about 30 years.”

After almost a month of widespread violence and several instances of human rights violations, members of Parliament and representatives from the mainstream political parties (notable exceptions being the Chilean Communist Party and part of the leftist Broad Front) agreed to hold a referendum on whether the constitution should be replaced. As the _magna carta_ had been drafted and approved under Pinochet rule four decades ago, it represented a symbol of the economic and political status quo; therefore, in 2020, it emerged as the pinnacle of what needed to change in Chile if the crisis were ever to end.

The constitutional referendum—originally slated to take place in April but postponed to October due to the COVID-19 pandemic—was agreed upon as a potential way out of the crisis and as a concession by the political right, which opposed the process from the onset. And while the conservative parties agreed to hold the referendum, most of them campaigned against changing the constitution, arguing that it had been the foundation of the economic prosperity that the country had experienced over the last decades. In contrast, proponents of the constitutional change argued that a new charter not only would provide a newfound sense of legitimacy to the social order, but also could be an opportunity to enshrine new economic, social, and environmental rights in the highest law of the land.

In the end, the result was not particularly close, as almost 80 percent of the voters agreed that the constitution should be replaced—turnout, although low (circa 50 percent), marginally improved in comparison with the last national elections. Curiously, there was even broader support for the mechanism, as the fully elected Constitutional Convention garnered more votes than the option to approve drafting a new constitution. However, once we consider the deep levels of distrust toward political parties prevalent in the country, this result is less surprising.

More significantly than the outcome of the referendum, however, is how it originated. Though formally categorized as an obligatory referendum—ergo,

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25 “No son treinta pesos, son treinta años” [It’s not about 30 pesos, it’s about 30 years]. CLP$30 were equivalent to about 4 U.S. cents.


a top-down mechanism of direct democracy—in reality, it was the product of authorities having given in to street pressure. Therefore, and as was mentioned before,29 this case is an excellent example of the fine line between “bottom-up” and “top-down” mechanisms of direct democracy. It also shows that politics is usually more fluid than the categories that researchers tend to use. What ended up being an obligatory referendum could have been a popular initiative in Switzerland or Liechtenstein, with not much changing beyond the name.

Chileans voted in May 2021 for 155 representatives who will write the constitutional draft, which will then be subjected to a second referendum in mid-2022, before being adopted as the country’s constitution. Some democratic innovations include fifteen seats exclusive to the country’s indigenous minorities and a parity system that ensures that the body is composed of an equal number of men and women. One particularity of the 2022 obligatory referendum is that the vote will be held with compulsory voting (electoral enrollment already is automatic). As a concession during the negotiations between the parties, the Convention will work with a two-thirds quorum on a vote-by-vote basis, leaving any issue that fails to achieve that support among representatives out of the new constitution. What the result of this process will be is yet to be seen.

New Zealand—Cannabis Law Plebiscite
On October 17, 2020, voters in New Zealand had the chance to decide two matters regarding individual freedoms: the use of cannabis and the legality of euthanasia. While the latter initiative succeeded, the former did not manage to garner enough support from the populace. Moreover, as will be further developed later, the cannabis plebiscite was the MDD closest to the highest competitiveness (how close the outcome of the election was) and highest participation (level of turnout) possible of the year. In that way, we could characterize the cannabis vote as the most divisive issue settled through direct democracy in 2020 (see figure 1).

In contrast to the euthanasia vote, the cannabis plebiscite was not binding: while the former had been approved by Parliament and was awaiting popular scrutiny, the latter was still a bill at the time of the general election (in conjunction with which the plebiscites were held). In New Zealand legislation, this is known as an “indicative referendum,” which is typically used by Parliament as a means of gauging the public’s opinion on an issue.30 As a result, voters were asked to weigh in on the topic of whether marijuana use, possession, and sale should be legal. The vote was the product of a push from the Green Party, which secured the plebiscite as a concession from the

29 See footnote #4.
Labor Party in the 2017 government formation and support negotiations. On the one hand, the initiative’s supporters argued that regulating cannabis use would grant control to the state of the existing underground market, thereby mitigating the discriminatory criminalization that the Maori population tends to suffer while also contributing to the economy and the state coffers. On the other hand, critics stated that decriminalizing marijuana would encourage more people to become users, which in turn would affect public health and increase road accidents.

As previously mentioned, New Zealand voters narrowly dismissed the initiative in one of the year’s highest turnout DD events (81.18 percent). While the high turnout can be partly explained by the general election that took place simultaneously with the cannabis and euthanasia votes, it does not account for all of the controversies behind the marijuana decision. As some have argued, a fear-mongering campaign could be responsible for some of the intensity behind the vote, to the point that even Prime Minister Ardern declined to publicly support either option (in contrast to the euthanasia plebiscite, in which she publicly endorsed the yes side). New Zealanders’ refusal to legalize marijuana also stands in contrast to recent changes in countries such as the United States, which last year, after several states decided to decriminalize the drug, saw the House of Representatives approve a legalization plan which will now continue to the Senate. And while the Labor Government achieved reelection in the 2020 election, it is unlikely that it will ignore the voters’ decision in the near future.

Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus—Referendum on the Size of the Supreme Court
On October 11, 2020, citizens in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (hereafter, TRNC) voted in an obligatory referendum regarding the size of the country’s Supreme Court, alongside the first round of the presidential election. The mandatory referendum followed a constitutional amendment approved by Parliament, which allowed for more flexibility in the country’s

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highest court composition. According to the TRNC government, the main reason for supporting the constitutional change was to improve the judiciary’s functioning, as its limited number of judges constrained its ability to process the legal workload.35 The reasons against the initiative seem unclear, but the Parliament’s discussion of the subject touched on the government and its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.36 Northern Cypriots eventually rejected the initiative by only 283 votes (less than 0.25 of a percentage point), making the TRNC’s obligatory referendum the most competitive MDD of 2020. Beyond the politics behind the pandemic, another reason for the divisiveness of the issue could have been the divisiveness of the presidential election itself, as the TRNC electorate had been torn between a reform-oriented incumbent who argued in favor of stronger ties with the Greek side of the island, and a Turkish-backed nationalist who supported closer relations with Ankara and Erdoğan.37 Therefore, we could have witnessed a spill-over effect from representative democracy onto direct democracy, as can happen when issues presented directly to the voters are linked to political figures who are subject to partisan ups and downs.

**Algeria—(Boycotted) Constitutional Referendum**

On November 1, 2020, some Algerian voters took part in a constitutional referendum to decide whether government-backed amendments would be approved. Like the Chilean case, this vote came after a bloody 2019, a year of several protests and instances of unrest linked to a movement called the *Hirak*. Citizens were enraged by the prevalence of corruption and political repression. Through their actions, they managed to oust the sitting president and force political representatives into a position of appeasement. One of the government’s concessions was a referendum to decide whether Algeria’s political system should undergo a process of liberalization, a reform that promised to calm protesters.38 The change would implement term limits and give broader powers to Parliament and the judiciary, among other modifications. However, Hirak participants did not believe the reforms would go far enough. They did not prevent military interference with politics, nor

did they address widespread corruption and an impenetrable political elite. As a result, vast swathes of citizens maintained that the referendum was a ploy to quash the unrest, a mere façade of liberalization that would not change the country’s political system. Protesters mobilized in the weeks before the vote and vowed to boycott the election to demonstrate that the general population agreed with their outrage.

Predictably, less than one in four Algerian voters went to the polls, making it the year’s second lowest turnout MDD, after Liberia’s. For a reform as meaningful as the one being discussed, the significantly low turnout represents a blow to the government’s framing of the referendum as a turning point after a period of turbulence. Therefore, this case helps to illustrates how top-down MDDs are not always successful in their goals. Like other TD-MDDs, the Algerian referendum was intended to process dissent within elite ranks and turn a page after a crisis. But, although the government’s proposal was approved, the unprecedented low turnout signified a lack of trust within the populace and formed a cloud over the government’s narrative. While the COVID-19 pandemic might have been responsible for a part of the disaffection, recent government crackdowns on journalists and pro-Hirak politicians, aside from active blockades during election day, bear the bulk of the blame for the vote’s low turnout. An MDD’s success depends as much on turnout as it does on the actual vote margin, especially when it comes to crisis-spawned ones, so it is reasonable to speculate that the referendum will not be the end of the Hirak.

Liechtenstein—Balanced Gender Representation Initiative
On August 8, 2020, voters in Liechtenstein went to the polls to give their opinion on two plebiscites—one dealing with the construction of the railway network, and another on the possibility of double nationalities. There was also one popular initiative—which intended to ensure that political bodies were composed equally of men and women. As the sole representative of popular initiatives in this section, it will now be examined.

After a group called HalbeHalbe (German for Half-Half, the nickname of the campaign) gathered the required signatures, the proposal to enshrine

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41 As mentioned in the context of the Chilean case, the Algerian case is another outstanding example of the narrow line between “bottom-up” and “top-down” mechanisms of direct democracy. This popular vote was also forced from above to suppress bottom-up demands for genuine reform.
equal representation in the constitution went to Parliament for approval.\textsuperscript{43} As political representatives did not consent, the issue was left to the voters, as is the norm in Liechtenstein. While supporters argued that women were underrepresented in the Landtag and could provide a different policy-making perspective,\textsuperscript{44} critics refused to criticize the initiative outright, only stating that the voters should have a say in the issue.\textsuperscript{45} The organizers behind the campaign expected a negative outcome, as they believed the population tended to reject widespread changes without an assurance from authorities.\textsuperscript{46} Voters ultimately rejected the balanced representation initiative (alongside the other two matters), and the race was not particularly close: a negative fifty-seven point margin ensured that the proposal did not pass, making it not only the year’s least successful popular initiative, but also 2020’s least successful MDD overall. These three votes in Liechtenstein were the three DD events with the highest turnouts of the year, closely followed by the New Zealand plebiscites. While organizers expected a defeat, they were surprised by the definitiveness of the vote.\textsuperscript{47} As a result, Liechtenstein will not incorporate a balanced gender approach into its policy process, which throws cold water on the initiative’s backers.

\textbf{Subnational Spotlight: Alaska’s RCV and California’s Prop 22}

American voters in the State of Alaska had the chance to decide on November 3 whether they wanted to reform their electoral system, among other proposed changes. Ballot Measure 2 would establish ranked choice voting (RCV) as the primary method of electing state-wide authorities, one that allows voters to rank different candidates, which then go through a series of rounds until one receives the majority of preferences.\textsuperscript{48} The measure’s success turned

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Alaska into the second U.S. state (after Maine) to use RCV as its main electoral system, and one of the few to ditch traditional first-past-the-post races. It was also a contrast to a similar vote in Massachusetts, where voters rejected RCV as a potential electoral system.49 Supporters—a collection of political-reform-oriented NGOs, independents, and bipartisan state representatives—argued that the change would allow voters to have more freedom when choosing representatives and ensure that elected officials would get an absolute majority in order to win an election. Critics of the initiative—mainly Republican state officials and Republican-backed organizations, in conjunction with the state Republican Party—argued that the system would be confusing, that it would be biased against people who do not wish to rank their choices, and that it would dissuade people from voting.

Also, on November 3, 2020, voters in the State of California approved Proposition 22, an initiative that sought to define delivery and rideshare drivers as independent contractors. This marks the first instance of a mechanism of direct democracy intended to regulate the so-called “gig economy,” and the proposition’s victory meant that corporations like Uber and Lift would not be required to treat drivers as employees.50 The State Assembly voted in 2019 to modify the definition of an “independent contractor” to try to force delivery and rideshare companies to comply with typical labor regulations. After Uber and the rest refused to do so, several California courts mandated that they reclassify their drivers as employees. Seeing that authorities were unwilling to exempt rideshares and delivery drivers from the new regulations, Uber, Doordash, and Lift launched a campaign to take the issue to the voters. Alongside other companies such as Postmates and Instacart, they contributed a total of U.S. $202.97 million to the campaign, making Proposition 22 the most expensive popular initiative in the state’s history. Yes on 22- Save App-based Jobs & Services, the collective behind Prop 22—comprised of the previous corporations, the state’s Republican Party, and several business associations—argued that if drivers were considered employees, prices would be raised and jobs would be lost. In contrast, No on Prop 22, the collective that commanded the campaign against Prop 22—comprised of the Democratic Party, public and private sector unions, and organizations such as the ACLU—argued that, if passed, the initiative would strip drivers of job security and deny fundamental rights and protections to them.

Though citizens approved both initiatives, the two outcomes represent polar opposites in the world of direct democracy. On the one hand, Alaska’s


RCV vote—a rare instance of institutional change in a country facing political gridlock and institutional ossification—represents a case of democratic innovation, in a vein similar to that of direct democracy itself. In contrast to a plurality system, ranked-choice voting allows citizens to better express their opinions, which are not limited to only one, a change that should have broad political implications. In this context, Alaska senator Lisa Murkowski has been distancing herself from the previous administration and the Republican Party more broadly. As pundits have already stated, the new RCV electoral system should allow a potential independent like Murkowski to chart her own path with regard to her relationship to the new administration. Therefore, a reform that at first seems limited in its capacity to affect national politics could be incredibly consequential to the Biden administration’s ability to modify the status quo.

California’s Prop 22, however, represents a grim prospect for democracy. That five companies could fund California’s most expensive proposition campaign and remake labor laws—basically regulating themselves—runs contrary to the ideal of direct democracy. Moreover, some speculate that gig economy companies, emboldened by Prop 22’s success, will try to modify federal laws to insert similar regulations to those in California. The change already has been referred to as a potential framework for rideshares and delivery drivers across the United States. While the initiative included some benefits to drivers as a concession to critics, some see this encroachment by tech companies into politics as problematic, given their growing economic importance. As a result, Prop 22 stands in contrast to initiatives such as Ballot Measure 2. While the Alaska measure could be interpreted as expanding and improving a state’s functioning democracy, the California measure could be a dangerous precedent for the role that businesses play in the democratic process.

52 Nate Silver, “It also looks like Alaska voters will probably approve an initiative implementing ranked choice voting + a nonpartisan primary where the top 4 candidates advance. Could give Murkowski more leeway to behave as a de facto independent” (2020), https://twitter.com/NateSilver538/status/1328415136420392961 (accessed July 18, 2021).
Conclusions

There is suggestive evidence that democracy growth has stagnated, and even some signs—the spread of populism and nativism, and elected leaders’ use of the pandemic to boost their power—indicate democracy is in retreat. In such a context, one might have expected to witness an increase in experimentation with democratic innovations such as direct democracy. But this is not the case. Direct Popular Vote Index tracks almost perfectly with global democracy trends: starting to increase in the 1970s, a massive spike in the 1990s, and then recently leveling off with a slight downturn (see figure 5). As a percentage of real democracies, DPVI has not changed much at all.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not halt the march of direct democracy, although it delayed some of its events. Even though the DPVI still shows a degree of growth that is statistically discernible from zero, it has experienced

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57 The correlation between V-Dem’s polyarchy (v.11.1) and DPVI is very statistically significant, close to 0.9.
deceleration over the last thirty years. In other words, real existing democracies have barely innovated at all when it comes to direct democracy. This constitutes a major missed opportunity for democracies to heal themselves by incorporating instruments that allow a fine-tuning between governing elites and the citizenry, and institutional gadgets that, with all their known limitations, would allow for internal democratic homeostasis.

As a year, 2020 was hardly predictable. A once-in-a-century pandemic threatened every nation, including democracies, which inevitably spawned a series of unexpected events. It is not surprising that when countries dealt with this existential threat, MDDs also exhibited irregular patterns. However, a review of the past year’s instances of direct democracy still provides a unique vantage point into the dynamics of contemporary democracies, most of which are currently experiencing growing discontent with traditional forms of political representation.