

## Is Direct Democracy a Kinder and Gentler Democracy?

Russell J. Dalton and Steven Weldon

### Abstract

The enduring legacy of Arend Lijphart's research has been to plant the seed of political institutions research that has grown and evolved over the past half century. This model of representative democracy is facing increasing challenges as citizens press for new means of political access and influence. This essay examines a dimension of democracy—direct democracy—that has expanded since Lijphart's initial studies. We use the 2004 International Social Survey Program study to examine the impact of direct democracy on political efficacy, citizen participation in politics, and satisfaction with the workings of democracy, comparing its effects to the kinder and gentler democracy that Lijphart posited for consensual democracy. We find that direct democracy apparently stimulates political interest, but has a negative effect on election turnout. In addition, we find little direct evidence of effects on efficacy, participation beyond elections, or satisfaction with democracy at the aggregate level.

**Keywords:** Direct democracy, elections, political participation, majoritarian democracy, consensual democracy.

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The enduring legacy of Arend Lijphart's research has been to plant the seed of political institutions research that has grown and evolved over the past half century. Through a series of articles and books, Lijphart demonstrated how the contrast between majoritarian and consensual institutions shapes the process of democracy and its outcomes, from the structure of electoral competition, to the representation of political interests, to the qualities of democracy.<sup>1</sup> This

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**Russell J. Dalton** is Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Irvine. <rdalton@uci.edu>

**Steven Weldon** is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver. <sweldon@sfu.ca>

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<sup>1</sup> Arend Lijphart, *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984); Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of*

stimulated major studies of the majoritarian/proportional model of democracy by other scholars.<sup>2</sup> Lijphart developed this model based on the Dutch experience and that of other advanced industrial democracies, but his work also has informed debates on constitutional structure in newer democracies.<sup>3</sup>

As political institutions research has developed, there is increasing evidence that the traditional model of representative democracy in contemporary democracies is facing new challenges.<sup>4</sup> Political parties have hemorrhaged members and lost their predominance in many aspects of the political process. New interest groups and social movements challenge the parties' role in mobilizing and articulating citizen interests. Citizen participation and access to the democratic process has expanded beyond elections, while at the same time turnout in elections has declined. New forms of contentious politics appear to be changing the nature of modern democracy, challenging the representational, elite-driven model embedded in Lijphart's models of democracy. This has led to questions about the continued viability of the traditional model of representative democracy.

One of the clearest examples of such challenges to representative democracy has been the rise in direct democracy through referendums, citizen initiatives, and other new participatory structures. Established democracies have witnessed an increasing frequency of referendums in recent decades, especially at the subnational level. Recent work by Adrian Vatter explores the relationship between Lijphart's two-dimensional framework of democratic institutions and new forms of direct democracy.<sup>5</sup> He argues that direct democracy represents a third institutional dimension, with a mix of effects that reflect both consensual and majoritarian processes.

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*Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); and Arend Lijphart, *Thinking about Democracy: Power Sharing and Majority Rule in Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2008).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For example, G. Bingham Powell, *Contemporary Democracies: Participation, Stability and Violence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); G. Bingham Powell, *Elections as Instruments of Democracy: Majoritarian and Proportional Visions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); and Rein Taagepera and Matthew Shugart, *Seats and Votes: The Effects and Determinants of Electoral Systems* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Markus Crepaz, Thomas Koelble, and David Wilsford, eds., *Democracy and Institutions: The Life Work of Arend Lijphart* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), and Lijphart, *Thinking about Democracy*.

<sup>4</sup> Graham Smith, *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), and Bruce Cain, Russell Dalton, and Susan Scarrow, eds., *Democracy Transformed? Expanding Political Access in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Vatter, "Lijphart Expanded: Three Dimensions of Democracy in Advanced OECD Countries?" *European Political Science Review* 1 (2009): 125-154, and Adrian Vatter and Julian Bernauer, "The Missing Dimension of Democracy: Institutional Patterns in 25 EU Member States between 1997 and 2006," *European Union Politics* 10 (2009): 335-359.

This study systematically examines how national referendums may affect the democratic process at the level of the citizenry. Lijphart's core thesis is that consensual institutional frameworks produce a kinder and gentler form of democracy, including higher rates of citizen engagement, greater feelings of political inclusion and efficacy, and greater satisfaction with the democratic process. We extend this analysis to direct democracy, using empirical evidence from the 2004 International Social Survey.

The essay is organized into four sections. The first section reviews the previous literature on the impact of direct democracy on citizens' involvement in politics and their views of the political process. Much of this research is based on case studies or regional patterns within nations, which we extend to cross-national comparisons. The second section introduces the national incidence of direct democracy for the nations included in the 2004 International Social Survey Program (ISSP). We then use the ISSP survey to measure public feelings of political efficacy, political engagement, and opinions of the government as our dependent variables. The essay's third section examines the basic bivariate relationships between levels of direct democracy and the indicators from the ISSP. Finally, we conclude by reviewing our findings and discussing their implications.

## **Direct Democracy and Its Potential Consequences**

Direct democracy was a rare experience in the established democracies in the 1950s and 1960s. Most nations did not provide for national referendums, and there was only limited use at the subnational level. In the subsequent half century, the situation has changed. Among the nine core members of the European Union (EU), there were ten referendums/initiatives in the 1960s, which increased to twenty-three in the 2000-2009 decade. This growth pattern is also apparent at the subnational level. For example, between 1974 and 2005, there were 1,788 subnational referendums in Germany and 667 in France.<sup>6</sup> The National Council of State Legislatures in the United States reports that there were only 295 state initiatives or referendums from 1950-1959, but a total of 1,654 from 2000-2009. In short, direct democracy is becoming an increasingly common aspect of democratic politics in many nations.

In a series of articles, Adrian Vatter and others replicated Lijphart's analyses of the two-dimensional structure of democratic institutions: a consensual/

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<sup>6</sup> The Federal Republic of Germany rejected the national referendums that had been in the Weimar constitution because they were exploited as Nazi plebiscites during the Third Reich. However, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, all the new states in the East included provisions for referendums in their state constitutions; referendums then were adopted by additional states in the West. National referendums are still not constitutional. See Christophe Premat, "Initiatives and Referendums," in *Political Participation in France and Germany*, ed. Oscar Gabriel, Silke Keil, and Eric Kerrouche (Colchester, England: ECPR Press, 2012).

majoritarian dimension and a federal/unitary dimension.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Vatter created an index that considered the existence, regulations, and use of national referendums and initiatives. This index was part of a third dimension of direct democracy that was orthogonal to Lijphart's two dimensions. And as one would expect, Switzerland and Ireland had high scores on their direct-democracy dimension, while about a third of the established democracies had no provisions for national referendums. This empirical separation of direct democracy from Lijphart's two institutional dimensions fit his initial belief that direct democracy could not

be regarded as either typically majoritarian or typically consensual. In fact, it is a foreign element in both majoritarian and consensual democracy because it is the antithesis of representative democracy...elements of direct democracy can be, and have been, introduced in countries which are mainly majoritarian, mainly consensual, or somewhere in between.<sup>8</sup>

In recognizing the growth of direct democracy, Arend Lijphart believed that some aspects of direct democracy would have the same effects as consensual systems, promoting power sharing and the articulation of potentially excluded interests. Advocates of direct democracy have argued a Jeffersonian position that more "self-governance" increases citizens' competence and interest in communal life.<sup>9</sup> In empirical terms, referendums may stimulate more people to vote because of their interest in a referendum issue.

Several recent referendums illustrate how bringing issues to the ballot can spur overall election turnout. In the 2004 presidential election in the United States, Karl Rove encouraged the Republican Party to place a gay marriage initiative on the Ohio and Michigan ballots to further mobilize its Christian Conservative base. There is some evidence that this mobilized conservative voters and contributed to George Bush's narrow victories in these two crucial swing states.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Benz and Stutzer find that referendums on European union in several member states increased interest and political knowledge about the

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<sup>7</sup> Vatter, "Lijphart Expanded," and Vatter and Bernauer, "The Missing Dimension of Democracy."

<sup>8</sup> Lijphart, *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries*, 31-32.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> Daniel A. Smith, Matthew DeSantis, and Jason Kasse, "Same-Sex Marriage Ballot Measures and the 2004 Presidential Election," *State and Local Government Review* 38, no. 2 (2006): 78-91.

European Union.<sup>11</sup> One can think of such referendums as national civics lessons about the EU, and, predictably, knowledge about the EU increased after the referendum campaigns. Similarly, studies of the use of state-level referendums in the United States have shown that referendums can stimulate citizens' interest and awareness in politics and possibly their political participation.<sup>12</sup> In some forms, therefore, direct democracy may have many of the kinder and gentler features of consensual democracy that Lijphart has claimed.

In other instances, direct democracy, because of its majority-rule principle, might mirror the effects of other majoritarian institutions. For example, direct democracy has the potential for an electoral majority to dominate minority interests through the tyranny of the ballot box. Swiss referendums dealing with immigrant populations are one oft-cited example. The Swiss rejected reforms in citizenship laws in 2004, approved a ban on minarets in 2009, voted for deportation of foreigners with criminal records in 2010, and almost approved a limit on asylum seekers in 2012. Similarly, a variety of referendums targeting immigrant rights or gay/lesbian marriage have been offered, and passed in some U. S. states. In these instances, an opposition group sought to legitimate exclusion through a 50 percent vote of the public.

Critics also doubt whether direct democracy stimulates general participation and efficacy. Switzerland has the most extensive direct democracy in Europe, and also the lowest rates of election turnout. In part, the argument is that referendums narrow cast to a subset of the public, and multiple elections cause "election fatigue" and lower turnout overall.<sup>13</sup> In addition, since the majority of referendums fail, their impact on political efficacy and satisfaction with the political process is unclear compared to the elections of representative democracy.

Thus, the expansion of direct democracy has the potential to reshape the relationship between citizens and the state. But the nature of that change is highly debated. Our study puts these debates about the political consequences of direct democracy to an empirical test. We frame our three research hypotheses in terms of Lijphart's predictions of how a consensual system of government

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<sup>11</sup> Matthias Benz and Matthias Alois Stutzer, "Direct Democracy and Citizens' Information about Politics," in *Direct Democracy in Europe: Developments and Prospects*, ed. Zoltán Tibor Pállinger et al. (Wiesbaden: Verlag fuer Sozialwissenschaften, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Caroline Tolbert and Daniel Bowen, "Electoral Supply and Demand: Direct Democracy Campaigns, Political Interest and Participation," in *Direct Democracy's Impact on American Political Institutions*, ed. Shaun Bowler and Amihai Glazer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Studies of Swiss direct democracy at the municipal and canton levels find negligible effects on interest and participation: David Altman, "Does an Active Use of Mechanisms of Direct Democracy Impact Electoral Participation?" *Local Government Studies* (2012) DOI:10.1080/03003930.2012.679933, and Andreas Ladner and Julien Fiechter, "The Influence of Direct Democracy on Political Interest, Electoral Turnout and Other Forms of Citizens' Participation in Swiss Municipalities," *Local Government Studies* 38 (2012): 437-459.

produces a kinder and gentler form of democracy (with majoritarian systems producing the opposite).<sup>14</sup>

- First, by expanding access and inclusion in the political process, direct democracy may heighten feelings of political efficacy among a nation's citizens.
- Second, national levels of direct democracy may positively encourage turnout in elections, especially when referendums are held conjointly with electing officeholders. This is in line with Lijphart's argument about the broader participatory effects of consensual democracy.
- Third, Lijphart argues that consensual political systems deepen the public's appreciation and acceptance of the democratic process.<sup>15</sup> We posit a similar logic to the usage of direct democracy: citizens of nations that exercise direct democracy should have great appreciation of the way democracy works in their countries.

The alternative to these three hypotheses is that direct democracy in practice emphasizes majoritarian aspects that would produce the opposite effects. This is certainly a possibility since empirical evidence on the impact of direct democracy on the citizenry is limited. These theses and counter-theses are what motivate our research to examine these potential consequences of direct democracy in contemporary democracies.

## Data and Methodology

To examine the consequences of direct democracy on citizen attitudes and actions, we draw upon the 2004 International Social Survey Program. The ISSP is a continuing program of cross-national collaboration on surveys covering various social-science topics. The 2004 module examined the theme of citizenship, which included a large battery of items on various forms of political participation, feelings of political efficacy, trust in government, and other topics. This module included thirty-nine nations that are the base of our research.<sup>16</sup>

The first step was to measure the extent of direct democracy in each of these nations. Even national referendums come in many forms. Some are constitutionally mandated votes, such as several of the referendums on the constitutional expansion of the European Union. In other instances, an

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<sup>14</sup> Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), chap. 16.

<sup>15</sup> Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 286.

<sup>16</sup> For additional information on the ISSP and the questionnaires for the 2004 survey, visit the project Web site: [www.issp.org](http://www.issp.org), or the GESIS archive: [www.gesis.org](http://www.gesis.org). We appreciate that the principal investigators and GESIS make these data available for researchers.

especially contentious issue—that typically divides political parties internally—is put to the electorate for its decision. New Zealand’s 1993 referendum on electoral reform is a prominent example, as is Britain’s 1975 referendum on EU membership. Other votes arise from an interest group or political movement seeking direct public support at the polls, thereby circumventing the national legislature—the Swiss referendums provide many examples of this model.

Given this diversity, one simple measure is the number of national referendums held in the years before the ISSP survey. The first column of table 1 shows the wide variation in the number of national referendums held between 1994 and 2004.<sup>17</sup> Four nations had at least ten referendums over this period, making them the exceptional cases: Switzerland, Mexico, Ireland, and Slovenia. However, more than half of these nations (twenty-one) did not have any national referendum during this period, either because a national vote is not constitutionally possible (such as in the United States or Germany) or a referendum was not placed before the voters (such as in Great Britain).

Many nations, however, have constitutional restrictions on the use of direct democracy at the national level, while allowing it at the subnational level. Consequently, the second column of table 1 shows the equally wide variation in the usage of state referendums between 2000 and 2008. Switzerland again is near the top of the list, making it a leader in direct democracy, but the United States slightly exceeds Switzerland in its number of state referendums. While state referendums do not involve the national public, they are a sign of the use of direct democracy in the political system.

To consider both national and subnational direct democracy, column three of table 1 provides a summary measure of the extent of national and state referendums in each country.<sup>18</sup> Sixteen nations did not have either a state or national referendum during our period of study, although a national referendum might have occurred earlier in their histories. Britain is such an example, with a national referendum in 1975 and later referendums on devolution, but none within the time span of our data collection. This non-user category constitutes

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<sup>17</sup> The national referendum data are from 1994 to 2004, while the state referendum data are from 2000 to 2008. The data were collected by and downloaded from the Center for Research on Direct Democracy: <http://www.c2d.ch/> (accessed January 15, 2013). We use a different date range because the state referendum data are not available before 2000 and we wanted to ensure a sufficiently long time period to estimate referendum usage. Few would consider Mexico a truly free and fully functioning democracy before the 2000 election; nonetheless, we include in our count several national-level referendums held in Mexico between 1994 and 1999. While leaders of autocratic or semi-autocratic societies may have different motivations for using referendums, the referendums may nonetheless stimulate the participation and engagement of civil society in much the same way as in fully democratic societies. Thus, we included the Mexican data in this analysis, while also running robustness checks to ensure that the results were not significantly different when Mexico was excluded from the study.

<sup>18</sup> This is the average of the logged number of national and state referendums to produce a more normal distribution, avoiding the impact of the extreme counts such as in Switzerland and the United States.

Table 1. Levels of Direct Democracy across Nations

Nation	National Referendums 1994-2004	State Referendums 2000-2008	Average of Referendums	Subjective Score	Vatter Index
Australia (AUS)	2	1	1.44	1	2.5
Austria (AUT)	0	0	0	0	2
Belgium-Flanders (BEL)	0	0	0	0	0
Brazil (BRA)	3	0	1.39	1	--
Bulgaria (BGR)	0	0	0	0	0.5
Canada (CAN)	0	13	1.32	2	0
Chile (CHL)	0	0	0	0	--
Cyprus (CYP)	0	0	0	0	--
Czech Republic (CZE)	1	0	.69	1	0
Denmark (DNK)	2	0	1.10	1	3
Finland (FIN)	0	0	0	0	1
France (FRA)	1	2	1.24	1	1
Germany (DEU)	0	13	1.32	2	0
Great Britain (GBR)	0	0	0	0	0
Hungary (HUN)	2	0	1.10	1	1.5
Ireland (IRL)	11	0	2.48	3	2
Israel (ISR)	0	0	0	0	--
Japan (JPN)	0	0	0	0	0.5
Korea, South (KOR)	0	0	0	0	--
Latvia (LVA)	3	0	1.39	1	4.5
Mexico (MEX)	13	6	3.61	3	--
Netherlands (NLD)	0	0	0	0	0.5
New Zealand (NZL)	0	0	0	0	2.5
Norway (NOR)	0	0	0	0	0
Philippines (PHL)	0	0	0	0	--
Poland (POL)	7	0	2.08	3	4.5
Portugal (PRT)	2	0	1.10	1	0.5
Russia (RUS)	0	0	.89	2	--
Slovakia (SVK)	8	0	2.20	3	2.5



Table 1. Levels of Direct Democracy across Nations (2)

Nation	National Referendums 1994-2004	State Referendums 2000-2008	Average of Referendums	Subjective Score	Vatter Index
Slovenia (SVN)	10	0	2.40	3	4
South Africa (ZAF)	0	0	0	0	--
Spain (ESP)	0	2	.55	1	2
Sweden (SWE)	2	1	1.44	1	1.5
Switzerland (CHE)	101	1,036	8.09	3	7.5
Taiwan (TWN)	0	0	0	0	--
United States (USA)	0	1,046	3.47	2	0
Uruguay (URY)	7	0	2.08	3	--
Venezuela (VEN)	4	0	1.61	3	--

a baseline “control group,” but there is considerable variation across the remaining nations.

The fourth data column in table 1 displays a subjective measure of direct democracy, coded by the authors. Nations that have had no national or state referendums are coded 0, and nations that make extensive use of national referendums are coded 3. Relatively active use of state referendums without national referendums is coded 2; other nations with some referendum usage are coded 1. Thus, this measure weights the frequency of national and state referendums without a simple empirical count that may produce skewed results from an outlier. For instance, Switzerland is coded as 3, with its 101 national and 1,036 state referendums, but so is Ireland, with eleven national referendums over a decade.

Adrian Vatter offered the index in the final column of table 1 that codes the characteristics of four types of direct democracy: plebiscites, mandatory referendums (such as for constitutional amendments), optional referendums called by the government, and popular initiatives.<sup>19</sup> For each form of direct democracy, he coded its existence, the rules for usage, and the frequency of usage. These three traits for four types of direct democracy yield a twelve-point scale, running from 0 for no aspect of direct democracy to 12 for full provision on all twelve traits. Vatter coded twenty-eight of the ISSP nations. As the leader in direct democracy, Switzerland scored 7.5, held back by limits on national plebiscites, and from there, the other nations trended downward to a score of 0 for several nations.

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<sup>19</sup> Vatter, “Lijphart Expanded.”

All five measures in the columns of table 1 tap a relevant aspect of direct democracy in a nation, and yet each is distinct in theoretical or empirical terms. To examine the commonality among these measures, we conducted a factor analysis of the five items. This statistical method yields a single dimension with strong positive relationships for all five measures (table 2). The two counts of national and state referendums have the highest loadings, in part because they also overlap with the summary variable to comprise two-thirds of the variables in the analysis. Both the subjective measure and the Vatter index are also strongly intercorrelated with the other items. These results suggest that the five measures should produce broadly similar results. We begin our analyses with the subjective scoring because it considers both national and state referendum usage, and provides a less skewed distribution of cases. Switzerland has extreme values on the other indices, as seen in table 1, which may bias the correlation results. We also replicate our analyses with the other measures.

Table 2. Factor Analysis of Direct Democracy Measures

Variable	Factor Loading
National referendums	.89
State referendums	.68
Avg. of referendums	.98
Subjective score	.75
Vatter index	.81
Eigenvalue	3.45
Variance explained	69.0

Source: See table 1.

Our dependent variables cover three areas discussed in the democracy literature. First, we measure feelings of political efficacy. The ISSP asked about both internal and external efficacy. Internal efficacy measures an individual’s feeling about whether he or she is capable of participating in the political process. This survey question asks whether people feel that they can have a say in what the government does (see questions in appendix 1). External efficacy reflects the feeling that the government will be responsive to one’s efforts; this is measured by a question on whether the government cares what people think.

The second set of analyses examines the relationship between direct democracy and political participation (see appendix 1). The most basic measure of political engagement is interest in politics, which we study with three questions about: (1) general political interest, (2) discussing politics

with friends or family, and (3) attempting to persuade others how to vote. We also look at conventional and unconventional forms of political action. The conventional acts are voter turnout, contacting a politician, contacting the media, and donating money to a political group. Unconventional acts include signing a petition, attending a rally, and boycotting consumer products.

The final set of analyses examines citizens' general orientation toward the political system with two questions concerning: (1) trust in government, and (2) satisfaction with the working of democracy in their country (see question wording in appendix 1). Lijphart argued that the inclusive nature of consensual democracy would heighten support for the political system. We hypothesize a similar pattern for direct democracy.

### **The Consequences of Direct Democracy for Citizenry**

One consequence of an active history of direct democracy in a nation may be to make citizens feel that they can affect the course of government, thus heightening a sense of political efficacy and a positive image of a government. The 1993 referendum on electoral reform in New Zealand is an example. The public was disenchanted with the performance of the government and the responsiveness of the major parties to voters' preferences. The Electoral Reform Coalition proposed a dramatic restructuring of the electoral system from the traditional first-past-the-post model to a mixed member proportional (MMP) system of elections. The goal was to make election results more reflective of public preferences and parties more responsive to their voters. This was a historic event, the first time New Zealanders could directly decide a national issue. Despite being heavily outspent by political forces that favored the status quo, the Electoral Reform Coalition mobilized the voters to support the MMP system in the referendum. It was a victory of populist demand over entrenched political interests. Consequently, surveys found that there was a bounce in political efficacy and trust after the electoral system was reformed, although within eighteen months these opinions began to trend downward again.<sup>20</sup>

Our question is whether the New Zealand example can be generalized to differences in feelings of political efficacy as a function of the general use of direct democracy. Figures 1a and 1b show the relationship between national referendum usage and two questions tapping political efficacy, using box-plots with individual country labels. As noted above, we use the subjective measure of referendum usage in these examples because it limits the potential impact of a few outlier nations in a small N analysis.

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<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Karp and Shaun Bowler, "Coalition Politics and Satisfaction with Democracy: Explaining New Zealand's Disappointment with Proportional Representation," *European Journal of Political Research* 40 (2001): 57-79.

Internal efficacy taps whether citizens believe they can influence government decision making, whereas external efficacy reflects the degree to which citizens believe that their government is responsive to their interests. Contrary to our expectations, there is little evidence that referendum usage is related to efficacy at the aggregate level. The boxes for the four types of referendum usage overlap with one another. This indicates rather paradoxically that, regardless of whether citizens actually can play a direct role in determining policy, they are just as likely to feel as though they have a say in government policy ( $r=.04$ ) and that government is responsive to their interests ( $r=-.05$ ).<sup>21</sup> This is further supported by the average efficacy levels, which are highest for citizens in the countries that have no referendum usage, although the cross-national variation in opinions is also greatest in this last set of nations.

The data of specific countries in the graphs provide some evidence that the use of referendums might increase feelings of efficacy. Citizens in the most prolific referendum-usage countries, the United States (USA) and Switzerland (CHE), have relatively high efficacy levels, especially among the established democracies. Yet, Japan (JPN) and France (FRA) also show relatively high levels of internal efficacy. Ireland (IRL) appears to have low levels of both internal and external efficacy, despite fairly frequent use of referendums.

In sum, the results in figures 1a and 1b do not indicate a clear, systematic relationship between direct democratic institutions and citizens' sense of efficacy.<sup>22</sup> Some specific forms of direct democracy may promote an efficacious citizenry, but this is not a general pattern for all referendums.<sup>23</sup> It is also possible that the winner-take-all nature of direct democracy leads to a greater discrepancy in feelings of efficacy between the "winners" and "losers" of democratic decision making in these systems. If these two factors are roughly in balance, then the efficacious effects of direct democracy would not be apparent in our broad approach.

We now turn to the effects of direct democracy on political participation. Along the top of table 3 are the three modes of engagement we have examined: political interest, conventional participation, and unconventional participation. There are ten specific political actions: nine from the 2004 ISSP survey, and voter turnout taken from IDEA for the most recent election before 2004.<sup>24</sup> We

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<sup>21</sup> See appendix 2 for explanation and table.

<sup>22</sup> We have a limited number of cases ( $N=39$ ). Still, we explored the possibility that these relationships were affected by other factors such as national income (GDP/capita), human development (the United Nations Human Development Index, or HDI), or being new/established democracies. None of these bivariate regression models yielded statistically significant coefficients for either variable in each pair.

<sup>23</sup> Adrian Vatter, "Consensus and Direct Democracy: Conceptual and Empirical Linkages," *European Journal of Political Research* 38 (2000): 171-192.

<sup>24</sup> We use the IDEA statistics as a more reliable measure because surveys typically overestimate voter turnout and the IDEA statistics adjust turnout by the proportion of the public that is eligible to vote (Weldon and Dalton, forthcoming).

Figure 1a. Relationship between Referendum Usage and Citizens' Sense of Internal Efficacy

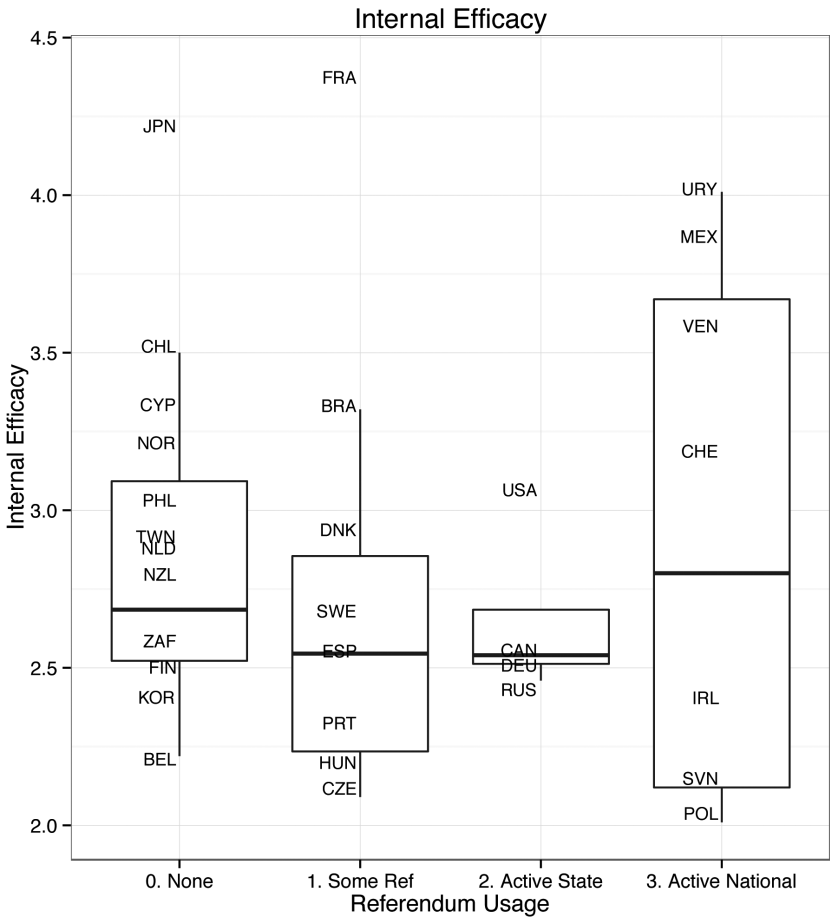
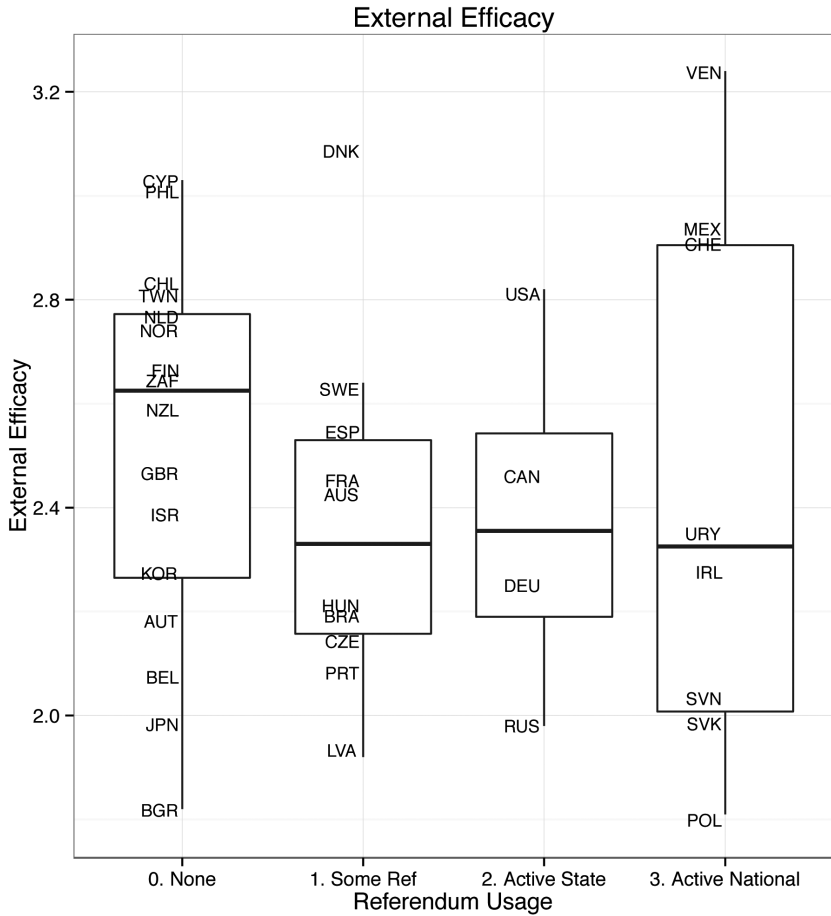


Figure 1b. Relationship between Referendum Usage and Citizens' Sense of External Efficacy



present the five indicators of direct democracy from table 1, logging the raw referendum counts to limit the influence of Switzerland and the United States on the coefficient estimates. The table presents correlation coefficients between the contextual factors in the first column and the aggregate participation levels in each country.

For advocates of direct democracy, one expected benefit is that, overall, it creates a more psychologically engaged and participatory citizenry.<sup>25</sup> This, in turn, may create greater equality in participation and encourage politicians to be more responsive to groups that are often underrepresented in the political process, especially the poor and other minorities. The basic logic is that referendums can lower the number of resources and skills necessary for participation. This is because referendums are on specific, narrowly defined issues, and they result in a simple “yes” or “no” policy outcome. Once citizens become engaged in the democratic process through referendums, this may spill over into other forms of political engagement. In other words, because of their low involvement costs, referendums can act as a gateway to broader, more intensive types of political participation.

We began with the three questions on general political interest.<sup>26</sup> Looking at the left panel of table 3, there is some evidence that direct democracy may encourage higher levels of political interest. While few of the coefficients are statistically significant, most are positive, indicating that direct democracy helps to create a more politically engaged population. For example, the average number of referendums (state and national) is moderately related to general political interest ( $r=.22$ ) and discussion ( $r=.13$ ). A notable finding is that Vatter’s more complex direct democracy measure is the only indicator to yield consistent negative relationships with political engagement.

When we turn to conventional political participation, it appears that direct democracy does not stimulate participation in national parliamentary elections. All five measures show that turnout is markedly lower in systems with direct democracy, and these relationships are statistically significant in several cases.<sup>27</sup> It is not immediately clear why this is the case, especially since there is some evidence that the placement of referendums on the ballot can stimulate voter turnout in the same election. One possibility is that additional referendum elections may produce “voter fatigue.” For example, when Scottish voters were asked to decide on devolution in addition to voting for Scotland’s Parliament and the EU Parliament in a single year (1979), some voters complained that this was too much democracy. Countries such as Switzerland and the United

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<sup>25</sup> Tolbert and Bowen, “Electoral Supply and Demand.”

<sup>26</sup> We also ran the correlations excluding Mexico, which was not fully democratic before 2000, but held several national referendums between 1994 and 1999. Those results are consistent with those reported in table 3.

<sup>27</sup> Bivariate regression analyses also confirm that this pattern persists when controlling for GNP/capita, the UN Human Development Index, or an old/new democracy variable.

Table 3. Effects of Direct Democracy on Political Participation

Direct Democracy Predictor	Political Interest			Conventional Participation				Unconventional Participation		
	Interest	Discuss	Persuade	Voter Turnout	Contact Politician	Contact Media	Donate	Petition	Boycott	Rally
National Referendums (log)	-0.11	0.02	0.01	-0.29 <sup>^</sup>	-0.11	-0.21	0.05	-0.08	-0.01	-0.02
State Referendums (log)	0.37*	0.16	0.04	-0.36*	0.38*	0.05	0.39*	0.25	0.34*	0.20
Average of Referendums (log)	0.22	0.13	0.04	-0.42**	0.23	-0.07	0.32*	0.15	0.25	0.14
Subjective Score (0 - 3)	0.01	0.20	0.07	-0.38*	0.07	-0.19	-0.04	-0.07	-0.05	0.04
Vatter Index (n=26)	-0.21	-0.07	-0.22	-0.21	-0.21	-0.24	0.10	-0.10	0.02	-0.11

Source: ISSP 2004; \*\*, \* p < .01; \* p < .05; ^ p < .10.



States also have several veto points in the policy-making process that serve to limit the relevance of any single election. In contrast, countries such as Norway and the Netherlands commonly go four years between elections that have any implications for national government, and they have fewer veto points in the policy-making process. Another possibility is that direct democracy fosters even greater skepticism about the traditional model of representative democracy in elections.

The ISSP included three questions on conventional political participation: contacting politicians, contacting the media, and donating to a political or social cause. The relationships between the use of direct democracy and political activities are uneven. The logged count of state referendums (and the summary index including this measure) displays a large positive correlation with two items, with three of the six correlations reaching statistical significance. Again, the Vatter index shows negative relationships, and the subjective measure only weak correlations. Thus, there is limited evidence of direct democracy affecting conventional participation.

The last panel in table 3 examines the relationship between national levels of direct democracy and several examples of unconventional political participation. If direct democracy fosters a rejection of participation in conventional channels, this should be apparent in the greater use of these unconventional means. The summary count of national and state referendums again displays a weak relationship with all three unconventional activities, but this is largely driven by the count of state referendums, which is a limited measure of the national use of direct democracy. National referendums, the subjective direct democracy index, and the Vatter measure display weak and inconsistent results. This leads us to conclude that any impact of direct democracy on national levels of unconventional participation are weak and mediated by other factors.

Our third hypothesis is that direct democracy may affect citizens' general orientation to the political system. We explore this idea by using two questions concerning trust in government and satisfaction with democracy. As part of the public's growing disenchantment with political parties across established democracies, citizens have increasingly called for a greater role in the democratic decision-making process at all levels.

Given the general desire for involvement, one might expect that support for government and satisfaction with democracy are greater in countries with a higher incidence of direct democracy. However, as we look at figures 2a and 2b, there is little empirical support for this idea. If anything, our subjective measure of referendum usage shows a negative effect on trust in government ( $r=-.19$ ) and satisfaction with democracy ( $r=-.18$ ).<sup>28</sup> Much like the case for

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<sup>28</sup> Bivariate regression analyses also confirm that this pattern persists when controlling for GNP/capita, the UN Human Development Index, or an old/new democracy variable. Controlling for the HDI almost produces a statistically significant effect for the subjective index of direct democracy ( $p=.14$ ).

Figure 2a. Referendum Usage and Trust in Government

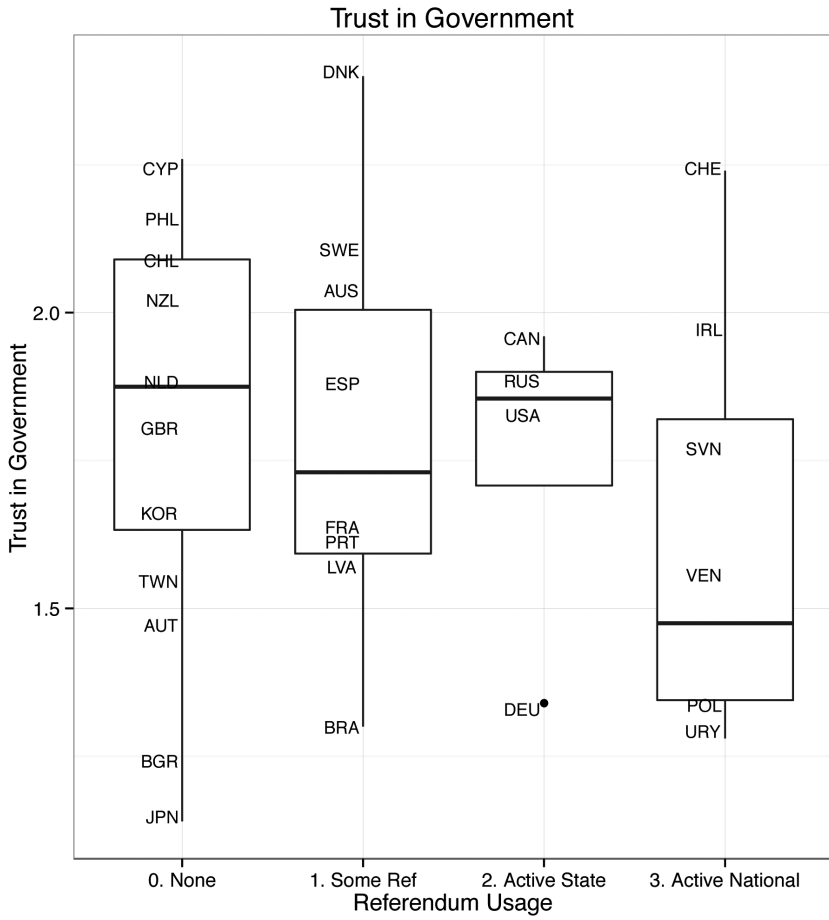
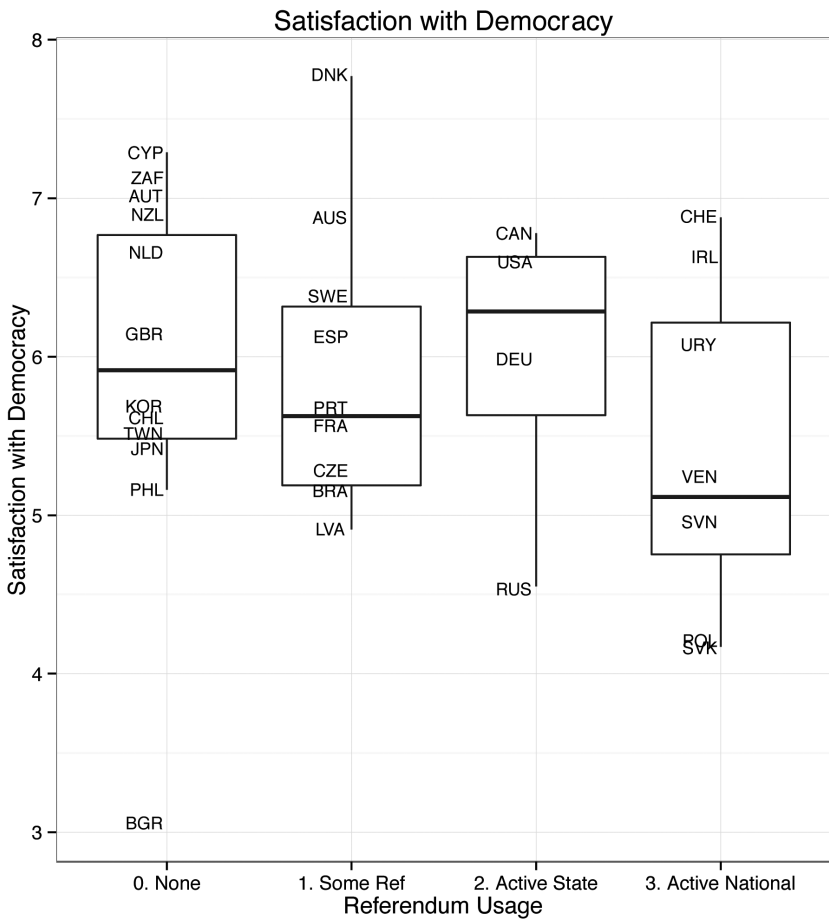


Figure 2b. Referendum Usage and Satisfaction with Democracy



efficacy, however, when we look at the individual countries, we see trust and satisfaction are relatively high in the United States (USA) and especially high in Switzerland (CHE). But this negative relationship does not appear for the other measures of direct democracy.<sup>29</sup> In summary, it is difficult to conclude that political support increases with the frequent use of direct democracy in a nation.

## Conclusion

In March 2013, Swiss voters went to the polls. One of the items on the ballot sought populist reaction to the 2008 Great Recession financial collapse. The Swiss banking giant, UBS, had written off billions in the wake of the 2007 subprime mortgage crisis, and then had to be bailed out by the Swiss government. Yet, the exiting chairman received a golden parachute as he moved to head another firm. Other Swiss firms laid off employees, while giving their executives performance bonuses. These experiences stimulated a popular movement to cap executive salaries, but Swiss business groups and the government opposed reform. This led to a populist challenge through the referendum process, the so-called “fat cat initiative.”<sup>30</sup> The referendum would give shareholders a veto on compensation and ban big payouts for new and departing managers. Over two-thirds of Swiss voters and a majority in all cantons supported this reform, which imposes some of the world's strictest controls on executive pay. One might agree or disagree with the voters' decision on economic terms, but it reflects how citizens can use direct democracy to exert their will, even when the government and large interest groups stand in opposition. This type of example might stimulate feelings of efficacy and political engagement on the part of citizenry.

Analysts of democracy often cite methods of direct democracy as potential new tools to increase the influence of citizens. Direct democracy gives the public a direct voice in policy making, unmediated by the mechanisms of representative democracy. Indeed, the use of direct democracy has expanded at both the national and subnational levels. The development of the European Union, for example, has been tied to public endorsement of constitutional revision by national referendums. The culture wars in the United States are often fought at the ballot box through initiatives and referendums dealing with gay rights, immigration, stem-cell research, and other issues. While direct democracy has not (yet) been adopted by the East Asian democracies of Japan, Korea, or Taiwan, it is expanding among other democratic states.

Direct democracy is also widely endorsed by contemporary publics. The 2004 ISSP survey queried support for referendums, and nearly 70 percent of

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<sup>29</sup> See appendix 2 for explanation and table.

<sup>30</sup> BBC News, “Swiss Referendum Backs Executive Pay Curbs,” March 13, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-21647937> (accessed March 13, 2013).

respondents across all countries agreed with the statement, “Referendums are a good way to decide important political questions.” In only two nations did less than a majority support referendums (Hungary and Slovenia). Moreover, support did not depend on whether countries currently used referendums, suggesting a general belief that direct democracy is preferable to the institutions of representative democracy.

Direct democracy may be a valuable new tool for advancing citizens’ influence and a method by which to expand and enrich the democratic process. However, this essay has focused on the impact of direct democracy on the citizens themselves. Prior research has suggested that direct democracy may have some of the beneficial features attributed to Lijphart’s kinder and gentler model of consensus democracy. That is, the exercise of direct democracy might: (1) increase feelings of political efficacy, (2) expand political participation, and (3) increase support for the democratic political process.

We examined these questions by merging evidence on national usage of direct democracy with public opinion data from the 2004 International Social Survey Program. Across the thirty-nine nations in the ISSP project, there is a great range of experience with direct democracy. We developed several different ways to measure national usage of direct democracy. A plurality of ISSP nations has limited or no usage by any of these measures, running up to high levels of usage in Switzerland (national and subnational), the United States (at the state level), and in several other nations. This variation provides the basis for exploring the potential impact of direct democracy on citizenry.

The research literature is highly divided on the ability of direct democracy to foster a kinder and gentler democracy in Lijphart’s terms. Some studies of referendums at the subnational level have found positive effects on citizenship norms and behaviors such as political efficacy and participation, while others have found negligible evidence or even negative effects. Our extension of this research to cross-national analyses yields equally ambiguous results. The estimated effects of direct democracy are typically weak across various citizenship measures. The strongest effect is to discourage turnout in parliamentary elections. But most effects are not statistically significant and tend to vary across different indicators of national usage of direct democracy.

One lesson from this research is the difficulty in even calculating the use of direct democracy across nations. Constitutions often limit the ability to employ referendums at a national level, while they are permitted at subnational levels. Subnational referendums do not affect all the public, however, and often follow different rules across jurisdictions. Equally important, the legal structure of direct democracy can vary widely across nations.<sup>31</sup> Thus, we often found that

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<sup>31</sup> Vatter, “Consensus and Direct Democracy”; Susan Scarrow, “Direct Democracy and Institutional Design: A Comparative Investigation,” *Comparative Political Studies* 34 (2001): 651-665; and Zoltan Tibor Pállinger et al., eds., *Direct Democracy in Europe: Developments and Prospects* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007).

relationships varied in their positive or negative direction, depending on which measure of direct democracy we used.

These mixed results might lead one to conclude that direct democracy has very limited impact on citizens' attitudes and behaviors. However, we lean toward another possibility. Because direct democracy can take many forms, it may be more important to measure the quality of direct democracy in a nation rather than the simple quantity. Vatter has stressed that top-down methods should not have a positive, empowering impact on citizenry.<sup>32</sup> When direct democracy is top-down, such as DeGaulle's use of referendums in the French Fifth Republic or Arnold Schwarzenegger's attempt at reforms in California in 2005, they are majoritarian means to circumvent the legislative process and thus should not generate consensual effects. In the case of Schwarzenegger's referendums, public rebuke in the election was accompanied by a drop in public evaluations of the governor. In contrast, citizen-initiated systems of direct democracy—such as populist referendums in U. S. states or the electoral reform in New Zealand—should be more likely to spawn feelings of political efficacy and interest in politics. Such an interpretation is consistent with Lijphart's view that direct democracy has both majoritarian and consensual features, which cannot be distinguished in our analyses. Thus, if direct democracy continues to expand in contemporary democracies, the nature of popular participation may be most important in determining its broader consequences on citizenry.

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<sup>32</sup> Vatter, "Consensus and Direct Democracy."

## Appendix 1. ISSP Questions

Concept	Question
Internal efficacy	Q8a. People like me don't have any say about what the government does: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) disagree, (5) strongly disagree.
External efficacy	Q8b. I don't think the government cares much what people like me think: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) disagree, (5) strongly disagree.
Political interest	Q10. How interested would you say you personally are in politics? (1) very, (2) fairly, (3) not very, (4) not at all.
Political discussion	Q14. When you get together with your friends, relatives, or fellow workers, how often do you discuss politics? (1) often, (2) sometimes, (3) rarely, (4) never.
Persuasion	Q15. When you hold a strong opinion about politics, how often do you try to persuade your friends, relatives, or fellow workers to share your views? (1) often, (2) sometimes, (3) rarely, (4) never.
Political participation (question wording below)	Here are some different forms of political and social action that people can take. Please indicate, for each one, whether: (1) you have done any of these things in the past year, (2) you have done it in the past, (3) you have not done it, but might do it, or (4) you have not done it, and would never, under any circumstances, do it.
Contact politician	Q5e. Contacted, or attempted to contact, a politician or civil servant to express your views.
Contact media	Q5g. Contacted or appeared in the media to express your views.
Donate	Q5f. Donated money or raised funds for a social or political activity.
Signed petition	Q5a. Signed a petition.
Boycott	Q5b. Boycotted, or deliberately bought, certain products for political, ethical, or environmental reasons.
Rally	Q5d. Attended a political meeting or rally.
Trust government	Q11a. Most of the time, we can trust people in government to do what is right: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) disagree, (5) strongly disagree.
Democratic performance	Q25a. How well does democracy work in (country) today? (0) very poorly, (10) very well.

**Appendix 2. Explanations and Tables for Footnotes 21 and 29**

Footnote 21:

The same basic pattern is found for the other measures of direct democracy. While all the coefficients are positive, none is statistically significant at even the .10 level.

	National (logged)	State (logged)	Sum Nat+State
Internal Efficacy	.07	.16	.14
External Efficacy	.00	.24	.13

Footnote 29:

The following correlations have different signs and none is statistically significant at even the .10 level.

	National (logged)	State (logged)	Sum Nat+State
Trust in government	-.06	-.16	.05
Satisfaction with democracy	-.11	.21	.04