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Direct Democracy and Policies: Mapping Out Practices and Success Factors





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To my parents, Zaal and Manana

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*“Enjoy the little things,
for one day you may look back
and realize they were the big things”*

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Abstract

There is an increased interest in democratic innovations as a way to foster citizens' direct participation in the decision-making process and counteract the 'democratic malaise'. Governments around the globe have adopted various mechanisms to implement participatory measures in political decision-making. Nevertheless, referendums remain the most widespread and established instrument in the repertoire of democratic innovations and their impact on modern politics is indisputable since more and more policies are decided via a popular vote.

This dissertation studies the process of referendums throughout history and identifies factors behind referendums' success. The first article explores the trajectory of referendum use in Europe using an original dataset of 630 referendums organised in 48 countries. A policy-based typology is developed and applied as a tool for mapping out the referendum practice in the last two centuries (1793–2019), revealing the salient issues in different societies at various moments in time. The second article investigates factors behind the adoption of recent referendums. The comparative analysis is based on 31 national level top-down referendums organised in Europe over the course of a decade. The results indicate that the size of parliamentary majority and the clarity of party cues play an influential role in the outcome of a referendum. Interestingly, binding referendums appear to be less successful than the non-binding ones. The third article zooms into the policy area of moral and ethical issues and scrutinises abortion referendums held during the last four decades. This is a qualitative study employing the QCA method to analyse twelve nation-wide referendums on abortion conducted in four countries (Italy, Ireland, Portugal, and Switzerland). The findings suggest that relative consensus in the parliament, support of medical experts and level of secularisation play a major role in the adoption of a policy. The fourth article represents a first tentative attempt to move beyond the dichotomous definition of success and examine instead the degree of approval within referendums irrespective of their formal outcome. According to the findings, referendums that are mandatory, conducted in Eastern Europe and oriented towards change receive more Yes votes. More importantly, the effects differ significantly across policy fields, implying that distinct mechanisms might be at play. Overall, the results of these studies indicate that the design of a referendum and actors involved do matter for the success of a popular vote.

Keywords: direct democracy, referendums, success factors, policies, relative consensus, degree of approval, Europe

Abstrakt

I årtionden har vi bevittnat ett ökat intresse för demokratiska innovationer som ett sätt att främja medborgarnas direkta deltagande i beslutsprocessen och motverka den 'demokratiska sjukan' –medborgarens politiska fjärmande. Regeringar runt om i världen har implementerat olika mekanismer för att öka folkligt deltagande i politiskt beslutsfattande. Icke desto mindre är folkomröstningar fortfarande det mest utbredda och etablerade instrumentet bland demokratiska innovationer och deras betydelse i dagens politiska system är obestridlig då fler och fler politiska beslut fattas genom en folkröstning.

Denna avhandling studerar folkomröstningsprocesser genom historien och identifierar faktorer bakom folkomröstningars framgång. Den första artikeln utforskar folkomröstningar i Europa med hjälp av en originaluppsättning bestående av 630 folkomröstningar organiserade i 48 länder. En policybaserad typologi utvecklas och tillämpas som ett verktyg för att kartlägga folkomröstningspraxis under de senaste två århundradena (1793–2019). Genom den får vi insyn i vilka som varit framträdande frågor i olika samhällen vid olika tidpunkter. Den andra artikeln undersöker faktorerna bakom framgången för de senaste folkomröstningarna. Den jämförande analysen baseras på 31 folkomröstningar på nationell nivå, organiserade i Europa inom en tidsram på ett drygt decennium. Resultaten visar att storleken på den parlamentariska majoriteten bakom förslaget och tydligheten i partiets signaler spelar en inflytelserik roll i resultatet av en folkomröstning. Intressant nog verkar bindande folkomröstningar vara mindre framgångsrika än rådgivande folkomröstningar. Den tredje artikeln tar en närmare titt på moraliska och etiska frågor och granskar folkomröstningar om aborter som hölls i Europa under de senaste fyra decennierna. Det är en kvalitativ studie som använder QCA-metoden för att analysera tolv landsomfattande folkomröstningar om abort i fyra länder (Italien, Irland, Portugal och Schweiz). Resultaten tyder på att relativ konsensus i parlamentet, stöd från medicinska experter och landets sekulariseringsnivå spelar en viktig roll i antagandet av en politisk linje. I den fjärde artikeln gör jag ett första preliminärt försök att gå bortom en dikotom definition av framgång och istället undersöka graden av godkännande i folkomröstningar oavsett deras formella resultat. Enligt resultaten får folkomröstningar som är obligatoriska, genomförda i Östeuropa och inriktade på förändring fler ja-röster. Ännu viktigare är att effekterna skiljer sig avsevärt mellan olika politikområden, vilket antyder att olika mekanismer spelar en roll här. Sammantaget tyder resultaten i avhandlingen att utformningen av en folkomröstning och de aktörer som är inblandade spelar en roll för en folkomröstnings framgång.

Nyckelord: direkt demokrati, folkomröstningar, framgångsfaktorer, politik, relativ konsensus, grad av godkännande, Europa

Part I

INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

1. Introduction: The Age of Referendums

Long has it been lamented that ‘democratic malaise’—citizens’ alienation from the political process—occurred in modern societies (Budge 1996; Scarrow 1999). Democracy is under pressure from within due to growing public dissatisfaction with the system of representative democracy, citizens’ declining trust in institutions and their limited involvement in traditional forms of politics (Dalton 2004; Frey 1992; Morris 1999; Norris 2011). As a response, democratic innovations, which are “institutions specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process” (Smith, 2009: 1), have been adopted and implemented at various political levels globally as a potential cure for this malaise. The common rationale is that more direct involvement of citizens in the political process brings the policy outcomes closer to their preferences and restores perceptions of legitimacy among the public (Cain, Dalton, and Scarrow 2003; Frey and Stutzer 2010; Geissel and Newton 2012; Scarrow 2001).

Simultaneously, an ascending demand for participatory mechanisms ensued as a result of ‘cognitive mobilisation’ among the citizens—their willingness and ability to take an active role in decision-making (Dalton, Burklin, and Drummond 2001). Dalton and Welzel (2014) explain that a new generation of assertive citizens emerged with higher expectations of the political system and calls for institutionalised involvement of the ordinary citizen. Hence, educated citizens tend to “take the promise of democracy seriously and seek to get their preferences directly enacted into public policy” (Budge 2012, 35). Rose (2020, V) refers to this as “a twenty-first century challenge to the late nineteenth-century belief that if citizens can elect a parliament this is enough to ensure democratic government”. As a consequence, “institutional devices that increase direct participation of ordinary citizens are no longer located at the margins of democratic politics”, fundamentally shaping European politics in recent decades (Jäske and Setälä 2019, 1).

Within democratic innovations, direct democracy is the most widespread and established. In recent decades, instruments of direct democracy have spread not just across countries and regions, but also across levels of government (Ruth, Welp, and Whitehead 2017). The contemporary momentum for referendums first began in the 1960s. Referendums are “used twice as frequently today compared with fifty years ago and almost four times more than at the turn of the twentieth century” (Altman 2011, 65). In practice, out of all 195 sovereign states only sixty-five had never conducted a referendum, while 41 states had one (Qvortrup 2017). Bogdanor (1994)

explains the rising number of referendums partly as a reflection of the ‘frozen’ party system which became incapable of representing salient issues in contemporary societies within a globalising economy.

As with other democratic innovations, direct democracy, in spite of its widespread use, “has not replaced representative democracy but has complemented the work of parliamentarians and political parties” (Kaufmann and Waters 2004, XIX). Direct democracy is widely considered a supplement to representative democracy, rather than a replacement; it is not a stand-alone instrument that would address the entire complexity of citizens-state interaction (Frey 1994), nor is it a variable that is independent from all other political institutions (Vatter 2009). Moreover, the fact that referendums became institutionalised in an increasing number of countries does not automatically demarcate a shift towards more direct citizens’ participation since in a vast majority of countries the power to launch a referendum remains in the hands of political actors (Hollander 2019). Hence, it is “far from a divorce between representative and direct democracy, on the contrary, political parties play a prominent role in the activation of this mechanism” (Serdült and Welp 2012, 91).

Referendum practices and the research gap

As of today, there are significant cross-country variations in referendum practice confirming the observation made by Butler and Ranney (1978, 18) that referendums “fail to fit any universal pattern”. There is a broad variety of referendum regulations across and within the continents (Beramendi et al. 2008; Kaufmann, Büchi, and Braun 2010). In Europe, Hollander (2019) identifies three clusters of countries in regards to provisions for direct democracy: states where the constitution allows for the use of national referendums, and where referendums are frequently held (e.g. Italy, Ireland, France, Latvia, Slovakia); countries where the constitution entails referendum provisions, but where they are held infrequently (e.g. Finland, Sweden, Spain, UK); and countries where national referendums are not regulated by the constitution and are not held at all or held very irregularly (e.g. Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Germany and the Netherlands). In contrast, citizens’ initiative is far from being a universally accessible mechanism compared to referendums—only 11 EU member states institutionalised this instrument, out of which seven are post-communist countries and four are in Western Europe (Hollander 2019; Serdült and Welp 2012).

Although, referendums primarily remain an instrument of party democracy, its regulations tend to fit the institutional design of the polity. Hence, cross-country variations in referendum provisions and applications are embedded in differences in democratic tradition. For instance,

majoritarian democracies commonly allow parliamentary majorities to trigger referendums, but not parliamentary or popular minorities; whereas in consensus democracies, popular votes can be launched by minorities and are usually accompanied by quorums to ensure proportional outcomes. Conversely, an institutional context with a high number of veto players hindered referendum institutionalisation and use of referendums. Similarly, referendums are held less frequently in countries where only a parliamentary majority can launch a popular vote, like in the UK. In essence, referendums are designed in a manner that reflects a country's government-opposition dynamics rather than challenging the system of representative decision-making itself (Hollander 2019). In Switzerland, for instance, popular initiative has become a bargaining mechanism between the government and interest groups rather than an uncontrolled device of direct legislation (Kriesi 2005); the simple threat of a citizens' initiative has often proved to be sufficient to produce the necessary compromises and reach consensus within assemblies (Kobach 1994).

To summarise, thus far, research has established a paramount importance of referendums in modern politics. Concurrently, the influence of political parties over the whole process of popular votes remains pivotal. However, to date, there is no longitudinal study that examines the referendum practice throughout history or systematically identifies the reasons behind referendums' success. This research gap is the main focus of the thesis and raises questions about how referendums have been used across time and countries: what policies have been subjected to popular votes within different polity types, and how referendums are won—what factors contribute to a successful adoption of a policy. The overarching aim of this thesis is to empirically study how the process of referendums is influenced by a variety of aspects and thus, contribute to the flourishing scholarship on democratic innovations in general and on direct democracy in particular.

In doing so, this dissertation is comprised of four independent articles. Article 1 explores the trajectory of referendum use in Europe using an original dataset. A policy-based typology is developed and applied as a tool for mapping out the referendum practice in the last two centuries and illustrating patterns of salient issues in societies. Article 2 investigates the factors behind success of recent referendums. This is a quantitative study involving 31 cases within a time frame of over a decade. Article 3 presents a qualitative analysis of abortion referendums held so far in Europe. Using the method of QCA, possible conditions and their combinations are identified for both restrictive and permissive outcome of the votes. In Article 4, a first tentative attempt is undertaken to move beyond a dichotomous definition of success and instead examine the degree of approval within referendums

irrespective of their formal outcome. To this end, several potential institutional variables are tested.

The remainder of this introductory chapter is structured as follows. In the next section, I introduce the key concepts within direct democracy, outline the advantages and main critique points of the referendum tool, elucidate on its functions and the role of political parties in the process. Section 3 is devoted to the empirical design of the dissertation. Data and methods are explained, and the rationale behind the case selection is clarified. Section 4 provides a brief outline of the four empirical papers which make up this thesis. In section 5, I summarise the main findings from the studies, discuss their implications, and suggest future avenues for research.

2. Analytical Perspective: Key Concepts, Functions and Success Factors

This section elaborates on the main concepts and theories used within the framework of this dissertation. First, I examine direct democracy through the lens of democratic theory. Next, policy-based typology is introduced, and its merits are explained. Subsequently, I elaborate on functions of referendums, political parties' role in the process and the factors contributing to a successful outcome of a popular vote.

2.1 Direct democracy and democratic theory: the virtues and vices of referendums

The empirical research on democratic innovations is mainly founded on two normative ideas: direct democracy and deliberative democracy.¹ Democracy itself is a contested concept within social and political science, as is direct democracy. Both scholars and politicians have opposed and advocated for direct democracy. Indeed, the nature of referendums is multifaceted and complex. This tool has been used by liberal and conservative forces, by executives and legislatures, by democrats and autocrats. As any other democratic procedure, referendums are not beyond reproach and have their share of pros and cons. This section summarises the arguments previously brought forward in favour and against this mechanism.

Direct democracy is about discussing and deciding upon specific policies and not (only) on parties and candidates. Since many issues are not discussed in general elections, referendums offer citizens an additional channel to articulate their policy preferences. Hence, policy outcomes in a direct democratic setting are closer to the median voter's preferences (Frey and Stutzer 2010). Furthermore, direct citizen participation in the decision-making process promotes the perception of procedural fairness (Dorn et al. 2008; Frey and Stutzer 2010) and thus, the mere possibility to directly take part makes outcomes more acceptable (Bellamy 2019). At the same time, opportunities to participate expand citizens' competence by facilitating access to information (Schiller 2011). Accordingly, availability of direct democracy is associated with higher levels of political knowledge, interest and civic engagement (Smith and Tolbert 2004; Smith 2002). Most importantly, the key element of democratic innovations in general and direct democracy in particular is their potential for strengthening democratic legitimacy by integrating entire demos into the decision-making process

¹ Often an umbrella term of participatory democracy is used to refer to all practices of citizens' involvement in the political process beyond voting in elections.

(Geissel and Newton 2012). Direct democracy as an institution, provides instruments of political control and thereby supports the accountability and responsiveness of political elites (Setälä and Schiller, 2009).

Interestingly, the impact of direct democracy on equality in a society remains disputed. Some scholars emphasised positive effects of referendums on equality (Feld, Fischer, and Kirchgässner 2010; Gamble 1997; Garry 2013), while others pointed out that instruments of direct democracy benefit well-off middle and upper-class citizens, resulting in a more unequal society (Merkel 2011; Schäfer and Schoen 2013). The latest research shows that a majority of referendum proposals in Europe that occurred between 1990 and 2015 were not related to equality at all. Nevertheless, there were a higher number of successful pro-equality bills than contra-equality measures adopted, although with significant regional differences. The study reveals that referendums often lead to positive outcomes when pertaining to socio-economic equality, whereas legal and political equality seem to be diminished more often under popular votes than fostered (Geißel, Krämling, and Paulus 2019b, 2019a).

A classic argument against referendums rests on the premise that ordinary citizens are not competent and lack time and information in order to take wise decisions on complex matters (Kriesi 2012b; Schiller 2011). However, as Budge (1993, 149) points out, even the representatives are 'living beyond their intelligence' when making decisions on far-reaching policies. Nevertheless, repeated reliance on direct participation of citizens might result in the 'participation paradox': more intense forms of political participation will be used mainly by the more privileged groups within society, thus, further disrupting equality and legitimacy (Verba and Nie 1972). Setälä (1999) refers to this tendency as a 'saturation point' of political participation. In addition, research from Switzerland suggests that in referendums, the less educated refrain from participating (Kriesi 2005). What is more troubling is the finding that the proliferation of direct democracy not only leads to lower levels of participation in the referendums themselves, but also spills over into electoral participation (Freitag and Stadelmann-Steffen 2010).

One of the major criticisms is related to the under-representation of minorities in direct-democratic practices. With the help of referendums, majorities can impose and legitimise policies unwanted by minorities—a 'tyranny of the majority' (Butler and Ranney 1978; Gamble 1997). Conversely, there is a concern that a referendum may overturn a compromise elaborated within the parliament that reflected the will of the majority and instead enforce a view held by the politically active minority (Bellamy 2018; Topaloff 2017). Furthermore, one of the major challenges that arises with direct

democratic mechanisms is defining ‘the people’—those who are allowed to participate. The controversial nature of referendums becomes obvious in a constellation where a part of the EU demos (a single country) makes decisions that influence the whole community, even those not involved in the vote (Auer 2006; Mendez and Mendez 2017). This means, that EU referendums fundamentally contradict the democratic principle that all affected parties should participate in a decision (Dahl 1970; Goodin 2007). Broadly speaking, this results in a constitutional conundrum over the question of who may decide on the (dis)integration of the multilevel system (Bellamy 2019).

Another critique concerns the lack of cyclical accountability of referendums (Topaloff 2017). In a nutshell, popular votes are one-time events and create all-or-nothing, winner-takes-all situations. Referendums typically produce irreversible decisions: after the vote occurs, there is (in most of the cases) no flexibility or opportunity of revoking the outcome with another vote. Furthermore, in some instances, referendums take precedence over legislated law (Walker 2003). Connected to the previous point, another important criticism refers to the conflict between two competing sources of legitimacy—elected representatives and direct popular votes (Topaloff 2017). The notorious example of the Brexit referendum illustrates how the parliamentary system can be turned inside out in such a context. Sometimes, legitimation of policies using the referendum tool, might, in fact, weaken political parties’ legitimacy and the authority of representative institutions (Morel 1993, 2018a).

Another challenge of the referendum tool is that popular vote rarely expresses an answer to the question asked. Popular consultations often turn into a vote of confidence. For instance, the recent 2016 Italian referendum on institutional reforms transformed into a vote of no confidence towards Matteo Renzi (Morel 2018a). In addition, there is a long tradition of second-order referendums on European matters. LeDuc (2015, 141) concludes that “it would be difficult to find a case in which second order effects of some type are entirely absent”.

2.2 Key concepts and typologies within direct democracy

The literature on referendums has flourished in recent decades and various analytical tools were developed for their comparative analysis. However, despite the growing academic interest towards this subject, there is no consensus on components of direct democracy or the meaning of the term referendum. Direct democracy is defined as “a regime in which citizens as a whole debate and vote on the most important decisions, and where their vote

determines the action to be taken” (Budge 1996) as “the right of citizens to be directly involved in political decision-making” (Kaufmann, Büchi, and Braun 2010). Along the same lines, Altman (2011) defines a mechanism of direct democracy as “a publicly recognized institution wherein citizens decide or emit their opinion on issues—other than through legislative and executive elections—directly at the ballot box through universal and secret suffrage”. Accordingly, a referendum is “the opportunity for electors to participate in a decision-making process by voting on an issue more or less specific and determined” (Uleri 1996a). Therefore, “in a referendum, a mass electorate votes on some public issues” (Butler and Ranney 1994) and “a referendum is held when people cast a vote to accept or reject a question of law or policy, such as whether to amend a constitution or a piece of legislation” (Williams and Hume 2010).

Additionally, there is a scholarly debate on the term plebiscite. Uleri (1996a) highlights that “general agreement on the distinction between plebiscite and referendum is lacking”. For the Initiative and Referendum Institute Europe (IRI), plebiscites “are procedures which citizens cannot initiate, and whose use lies exclusively within the control of the authorities. This distinction between plebiscites and referendums is fundamental for a proper understanding of direct democracy” (Kaufmann, Büchi, and Braun 2010). According to Rose (2020), a referendum is turned into a plebiscite when the outcome is predetermined due to unfair and unfree conditions on the ballot. In this regard, Hamon (1995, 59) reasons that between a plebiscite, which is often defined as a vote where one personality dominates the debate, and a referendum there is at most only a difference of degree. As a possible solution for avoiding negative connotations with the term plebiscite, Svensson (2011) suggested replacing the term with the more neutral ‘popular vote called by the authorities’.

The ambiguity of the term referendum is reflected in the existing typologies which echo the dis-consensus over conceptualisation. Hence, scholars suggest their own classifications, often derived from the experiences and peculiarities in their own countries, and hardly agree on the number of referendum types and criteria to be employed. For instance, applying different criteria Magleby (1984) identified four types of referendums, Auer (1989) suggested five types, Möckli (1994) distinguished between six types and Suksi (1993) identified twelve types. Similarly, direct democracy is categorised in various manners. For example, the typology developed by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) identifies four broad types of direct democracy—referendums, citizens’ initiatives, agenda initiatives and recall; distinguishing between mandatory and optional referendums (Beramendi et al. 2008). The classification

elaborated by the IRI views direct democracy as votes on substantial issues, not on people, thus excluding recall. Furthermore, the IRI's distinction between top-down and bottom-up procedures is crucial, since direct democracy should empower people, not governments, suggesting categorising plebiscites as a part of representative rather than direct democracy (Kaufmann, Büchi, and Braun 2010).

In an attempt to provide analytical dimensions to differentiate between referendums, Altman (2011) provides a typology based on four criteria. The first criterion is whether the mechanism is legally regulated by law or the constitution: mandatory versus facultative. The second involves whether the result of the vote is absolute: binding versus consultative votes. The third criterion refers to the purpose of the procedure: whether it aims to alter the status quo (proactive) or attempts to sustain the status quo (reactive). The final criterion deals with the trigger of direct democratic procedure: initiated by the political establishment (top-down) versus citizen-initiated (bottom-up). Along similar lines, Svensson (2011) contends that direct democracy consists of only four types of votes: mandatory referendums, popular votes called by authorities, popular votes called by citizens (on a newly passed or existing law) and citizens' initiatives. Additionally, Uleri (1996a) differentiates between decision-promoting (referendum initiator is the author of the decision put to the vote) and decision-controlling popular votes (the referendum initiator and the author of the decision put to the vote are two different agents). A further distinction is made with regard to decision-controlling votes: a rejective vote—if a vote is on a decision taken by government or parliament, but not yet enforced; and an abrogative vote—on a decision already taken and implemented (Uleri 1996a).

Several scholars developed their own (usually rather short) categorisation based on the type of referendums analysed in their research. For instance, Christin and Hug (2002), studying mainly referendums on the EU integration, differentiate between required (or mandatory), non-required passive (launched by the government) and non-required active referendums (launched by actors outside government). Tridimas (2007) highlights three main institutional features of a referendum: binding versus consultative; constitutional versus post-constitutional (e.g. on ordinary laws like taxation); and constitutionally mandated (mandatory) versus non-required. Qvortrup (2014b) differentiates between initiatives, constitutional referendums, citizens' referendums, facultative referendums and plebiscites.

2.2.1 Towards a policy-based approach

All the aforementioned typologies and categorisations have one common denominator—institutional design. In essence, the variations within the

types of direct democracy are structured along two questions: who initiates the referendum and the legal impact of the vote. Hence, these typologies delineate the institutional characteristics of referendums (e.g. mandatory vs. facultative and top-down vs. bottom-up) but devote limited space to their substance, i.e. the policy. This is rather surprising since policy submitted to a vote is one of the defining features of referendums. Even semantically, the word 'referendum' refers to popular votes on a policy issue (Qvortrup 2017). Additionally, apart from being designed exclusively around the institutional features of a popular vote, these typologies are largely decoupled from the main directions of research on referendums that focus on substantive issues: the causes for their introduction, functioning and consequences (Geissel and Newton 2012; Hobolt 2009; Qvortrup 2014d). In alignment with the semantics of the word and in an endeavour to avoid further misunderstanding, 'referendum' is used in this dissertation as a popular vote on a policy issue, thus comprised of all votes that were initiated either by the elite (top-down referendums, plebiscites) or by citizens (popular initiatives, abrogative or rejective referendums) or launched automatically in accordance with the country's constitutional provisions (mandatory).

Admittedly, the policy-oriented approach has been partially applied to several types of referendums. For instance, earlier studies analysed the EU/NATO membership referendums—separately from other types of referendums—and across different countries, finding similarities and country-specific aspects (Hobolt 2009; Mendez, Mendez, and Triga 2014; Qvortrup 2016). Constitutional referendums received similar special attention (Anckar 2014; Tierney 2012). Analogously, ethnic/sovereignty referendums received distinctive attention from the scholarship (Mendez and Germann 2018; Qvortrup 2014a). Furthermore, there are some isolated studies on fiscal/budget referendums and their effects, mainly in Switzerland and the USA (Feld and Matsusaka 2003; Kriesi 2012a). Consequently, the policy-based approach has not been fully developed covering the full range of referendums held throughout history. Accordingly, this complementary typology was developed in an explorative manner based on the referendum experience in Europe of over two centuries with the focus on policies subjected to a popular vote on a national level. After a thorough analysis of the referendums conducted so far in Europe, twelve broad categories of policies were identified: constitution, state formation, political and electoral system, interior policies, foreign policies, economy, environment, health, education, moral and ethical issues, labour and social issues, and media.

The constitutional category includes all referendums on adoption of a new constitution or on approval of constitutional reform regarding major changes (e.g. the 2016 referendum in Italy or the 2017 referendum in Turkey); state

formation includes all referendums on independence (e.g. independence referendums in former Soviet republics in the early 1990s). The category political and electoral system is comprised of votes on the form of government, distribution of power or the introduction or abolishment of new political institutions (e.g. Belarus 1995 on the president's power to dissolve parliament and Iceland 2012 on introduction of initiatives). The interior policy referendums encompass popular votes on basic rights, laws on citizenship or other particular regulations (Hungary 2004 on dual citizenship and Sweden 1955 on traffic regulations). The foreign affairs category integrates all topics of interstate relations and international arrangements (Lithuania 1992 withdrawal of Soviet Troops and Luxembourg 1919 Economic Union with France or Belgium). This policy category is dominated by referendums related to the issue of EU integration and NATO membership for which more than thirty referendums were organised, inter alia: Norway 1972 on accession to the European Economic Community, Denmark 2000 on the introduction of the Euro, Georgia 2008 on NATO membership. The economy category brings together the issues related to economic or financial measures (Greece 2015 on accepting bailout conditions of EC, ECB and IMF), Poland 1997 on economic reforms and San Marino 2016 on capping public sector salaries at 100,000€). The environment category covers referendums on nuclear plants (Lithuania 2012 and Bulgaria 2013) and general policies concerning the environment (Italy 2016 on oil and natural gas drilling and Liechtenstein 2002 on a sustainable transport policy). Health policies refer to specific health-related issues (Finland 1931 on an alcohol policy and Liechtenstein 2009 on the Tobacco Control Act) or to general issues about the healthcare system (Hungary 2008 on the abolition of fees for ambulatory treatments). The education policies touch upon both higher education (Hungary 2008 on the abolition of fees) and school policies (Slovakia 2015 on children's right to skip classes involving education on sex and euthanasia). The relatively broad category of family, ethics and moral issues includes referendums on same-sex marriage (Ireland 2015), divorce (Malta 2011), abortion (Portugal 2007), the death penalty (Belarus 1996) and other moral issues (Italy 2005 on embryonic research). The labour and social issues include referendums on labour regulations, pensions and social policies (Slovenia 2011 on part-time work law, Sweden 1957 on pension reform and Liechtenstein 1967 on increasing child benefits and family allowances). The media category incorporates all referendums on broadcasting rights and other regulations related to media landscape (Italy 1997 on the abrogation of the Association of Journalists and Liechtenstein 1930 on media law).

2.2.2 Merits of the policy-based typology

This typology, developed with the policies at its core, serves as a complementary analytical tool offering several advantages. To begin with, the policy-based approach provides a parsimonious way to understand referendums in terms of their content. Every policy subjected to popular votes brings a package of attributes. For example, referendums on same-sex marriage or a new nuclear plant set completely different argumentation lines. This results in different modes of campaigning, actors involved, degrees of emotions and perceived political pressure for parties. Hence, this classification depicts a more precise and complete picture of referendums and enables the elucidation of issue-specific determinants, taking into account all the nuances characteristic to each topic. At the same time, the typology maps out the history of referendum use showing the chronology of salient issues in different societies, deepening our understanding of referendum practice throughout history. Over time, the topics subjected to popular vote are repeated globally and some are more common than others. It allows an observation of what kind of issues dominate the public discourse in a society, on a continent, and during a certain time period. In particular, the first issues to be subjected to popular votes were matters on constitution, state formation and political system which made up their exclusive use until 1919. Next, this typology fosters comparisons across countries, political systems and over time within *one* policy area. The comparisons between policy areas show important differences in terms of dispersion. For example, the referendums on constitutions come in waves, while those on the political systems have a relatively uniform distribution. Furthermore, our typology allows for the investigation of the existence of mimetism in referendum use on a particular policy—when political leaders ‘copy’ the experiences with direct democracy in their neighbouring states. Additionally, referendum initiators, politicians or citizens, can learn from the experiences in other states how to approach a popular vote in the policy area of their proposal. For instance, those who are willing to initiate a referendum on health issues can be inspired by previous practices in countries in which such referendums were carried out. Last but not least, this typology bridges two strands of literature: categorisation of referendums along institutional features and substantial research of causes, and consequences and processes of popular votes. For example, it is detectable that almost half of the referendums on moral and ethical issues (47%) are bottom-up, while the overwhelming majority of constitutional referendums (94%) are either mandatory or top-down.

2.3 Functions of referendums

In general, referendums have direct and indirect effects on politics. Direct effects include the introduction of a new law or policy in the case of a yes-vote (Linder 2010, 103) or a stabilisation of the status quo if a proposal is rejected (Stadelmann-Steffen 2011; Tsebelis 1999). More implicit, indirect effects occur especially with the bottom-up referendums, like placing new issues on the political agenda or broadening what was perceived as politically acceptable/imaginable (Linder 2012, 288). Moreover, referendums serve “as institutionalized, sporadic safety valves of political pressure” and “as a synchronization mechanism between politicians and citizens” (Altman 2011, 197–98).

In regard to popular votes initiated by political establishment, scholarship has identified various functions of referendums for political parties: internal cohesion, adoption of legislation, gaining more political power, legitimising decisions and winning back citizens (Altman 2011; Björklund 1982; Butler and Ranney 1994; Morel 1993, 2007; Qvortrup 2006; Rahat 2009). A policy is granted additional legitimacy when it is approved by the people: “once a policy has overcome the referendum hurdle, it has acquired more credibility because it is not just based on the support of a parliamentary inner circle” (Papadopoulos 1995, 433). Moreover, referendums serve as a crisis-solving mechanism: parties are able to decouple a controversial topic from the upcoming election via putting it to a popular vote. For instance, if the government faces criticism regarding a certain policy, a referendum could flip the coin to one side without the government losing its authority. Referendums also have a crisis-avoiding function: a highly divisive decision by parliament might not be regarded as fully legitimate until it is contested in a referendum. Similarly, a referendum, with the special legitimacy it confers, is used as a tool of path deviation: when a government makes a decision that is in clear contradiction to its previous commitment and puts it to a referendum, thus, legitimising the controversial choice and avoiding intra- and inter-party conflict (Björklund 1982; Morel 1993, 2007). Referendums are also used to legitimise a tough policy while simultaneously avoiding the political cost derived from its adoption (Setälä 2006). Rahat (2009) differentiates between three main reasons for political actors to initiate a referendum: motive of avoidance (of a split within the party or losing party voters), motive of addition (of legitimacy to the decision and empowering the initiator) and motive of contradiction—adopting a legislation that was rejected through other channels. Qvortrup (2006) suggests a further incentive—strategic calculation: a referendum is organised for the purpose of mobilising political support in favour of the initiator. Additionally, referendums often serve as a bargaining tool in the negotiations the mere

possibility of which fosters compromise building (Kobach 1994; Walker 2003). All in all, motives for holding a referendum vary, “some have seen in the instrument a last chance for a loser, others a legitimising factor for the winner” (Wyller 1996, 150). It is important to bear in mind that the political elite find ways of reconciling direct democracy with the representative processes—either prior to a popular vote or during the subsequent stage of implementation (Marxer and Pallinger 2009).

2.4 Political parties’ role in a referendum process

From cross-country studies on popular votes, the role of political parties in referendums is pivotal, although their level of control varies depending on the type of referendum and context (LeDuc, 2003; Rahat, 2009). Parties play a central role not only in the campaign but also in the subsequent implementation of the people’s will. There have been a series of adopted referendums that have never been implemented (Muntean, Pop-Eleches and Popescu, 2010; Bassanini, 2012) or attempted to overturn an inconvenient result, as in the case of Brexit.

There are various mechanisms that allow political parties to influence the referendum process regardless of its initiator. One of the components of parties’ clout over the vote are the cues that they provide to citizens during the referendum campaign. The objective of a political campaign is to influence the outcome of a referendum by shaping public opinion (Schmitt-Beck and Farrell 2002). Cues communicated by elites during the referendum campaign are essential, especially for voters with little prior information (Zaller 1992). Voters can make competent choices even with limited information by relying on elite cues which help them to overcome their information shortfalls and imitate the behaviour of relatively well-informed voters (Lupia 1994). The lower the level of information among the electorate on an issue, the more determining the political cues for their final decision (LeDuc, 2009, 158). Accordingly, the campaign is supposed to increase knowledge levels among the citizens and encourage them to vote (de Vreese and Semetko 2004). The more familiar voters become with the topic, the higher the probability of their turnout at the polls (Kriesi 2005; Sager and Buehlmann 2009). As Lutz (2007, 631) puts it, “the heuristics, shortcuts and cues a voter can use in an election are not different in principle from those that can be used in popular votes”, implying that voters rely on shortcuts provided by the parties and their leaders during the referendum campaign.

When parties take a clear stance over the referendum topic, they excel in mobilising their electorate for the issue at stake as opposed to being internally divided (de Vreese and Semetko 2004). The degree of consensus or

division between and within political parties results in very different campaign modes and affects the decision-making process of the voters. Franklin (2002, 755) explains: “A party that is split generally has minimal influence on the opinions of its supporters. A united party of government has [the] most influence, along with a united opposition party”. When parties are internally divided over a referendum topic, they send mixed signals to their voters, and thus diminish their influence or even discourage individuals from voting due to political ambiguity, increasing uncertainty among citizens. Yet divisions within a party over an issue is one of the most frequent reasons for calling a referendum in the first place (LeDuc 2002). Moreover, some degree of inter-party conflict is present in the vast majority of all referendums (Sinnott 2002).

Closely related to party cues, the size of parliamentary majority in favour of the proposal is another influential element for the outcome of a referendum. Initiators with a comfortable majority in the parliament are five times more likely to succeed compared to the initiators from the parliamentary minority (Silagadze and Gherghina 2018). However, referendums often occur precisely because of the lack of parliamentary majority in favour of a proposition. A consensual referendum that is backed by all parties is an exception rather than a rule (Henderson 2004). The role of political consensus for the outcome of a referendum has been widely acknowledged in previous research (Henderson 2004; Hobolt 2009; Kissane 2009). In their analysis of all referendums and initiatives voted on in Switzerland since 1947—1,485 acts in total—Trechsel and Sciarini (1998) conclude that there is a straightforward dependency between the level of consensus that was reached in the parliamentary process and the chances of success at the polls. Similarly, Kriesi (2005, 2006) showed that the chances of success at the polls increased proportionally to the size of a given camp.

The lack of parliamentary majority for a certain topic does not necessarily mean the absence of any kind of consensus among the parties. Political actors have strong incentives to attract as many allies as possible in referendum campaigns. Since, in referendums, the political elite do not control the outcome, their best chance to influence the polls is to form a large camp that effectively campaigns either for or against the ballot measure (Bernhard 2019). Hence, the factor explored in this dissertation is *relative consensus within the parliament* for the issue at stake. Relative consensus is defined as a similar position echoed among at least three out of five of the largest parties, thus, probably not qualifying for the formal majority necessary to push through the legislation, but, nevertheless, exhibiting powerful support for the issue by potentially mobilising the electorate behind the chosen position. Relative consensus is different than parliamentary majority

since in referendums there are usually only two sides, with all the votes reallocated to the 'Yes' or 'No' side. This means that the classic representation formula in the parliament or exact percentage of a party is not as important as its mobilisation effect, clear stance and persuasive power. The very nature of the referendum, which represents a decision between two alternative policies², pushes parties towards building consensus; on many occasions, several parties align on the same side, even if they are fierce competitors in other settings. The more parties in favour of a referendum proposition, the higher the chances are for it to be adopted. Cross-party coalitions enjoy enhanced influence over their voters as they naturally tend to activate more constituents in support of their position. The mechanism is twofold. First, parties and politicians are elected representatives who enjoy a certain degree of authority and standing among their voters. Accordingly, voters tend to follow their recommendation or at least consider it as a source of information. Second, considerable resources and funds (apart from staff, volunteers, know-how and reputation) that parties have at their disposal fuel the campaign in combination with an increased media presence.

2.5 Success factors in referendum

In essence, referendums require voters to either accept or reject a specific policy proposal.³ However, how to define 'success' of a referendum remains controversial: for some authors the adoption of a referendum is automatically a 'success', others see a referendum as successful if the motives for its initiation are fulfilled. For instance, Williams and Hume (2010) define success at the ballot as the majority voting Yes for a proposal; for Lacy and Niou (2000) a referendum has two possible outcomes—an adoption (success) or failure; similarly, for Qvortrup (2005) success of a referendum is measured by whether it passes or fails. Luthardt (1994) takes a more differentiated perspective stating that the definition of success of a referendum depends on the functions and motives of its initiation. Broadly speaking, a referendum is successful if it fulfils the motives for its initiation: this can mean adoption of a referendum issue, confirmation of the initiator's popularity, avoiding the split within a party etc. Walker (2003) adds another dimension to the concept of success and argues that a referendum is successful when the vote's legitimising power is acknowledged not only by its supporters, but also by those who opposed the policy.

² Some countries practice multi-option referendums, although an overwhelming majority of popular votes provide merely a binary choice.

³ In some instances, two or more policy alternatives are put on the ballot (multi-option referendums).

This dissertation combines various approaches and develops the concept further. Accordingly, Article 2 follows the common definition and views a referendum as successful if it passes. Article 3 takes a more nuanced approach and differentiates between the policy related outcome: pro-life or pro-choice and investigates the reason behind each of them. Article 4 moves beyond the dichotomy of passed/rejected and suggests instead to look at the degree of approval in referendums regardless of the formal outcome.

2.5.1 Redefining the concept of success

As outlined above, concept of success in referendums has been dichotomised so far and studied only in terms of approval or rejection at the ballot. Within the framework of this dissertation, I undertake an attempt to move beyond this straightforward categorisation and instead study approval rates across referendums and elucidate the possible reasons behind the varying degree of approval.

A valid question that might come to one's mind would be: why is it beneficial/desirable to go beyond the formal definition of a referendum's success and examine instead the degree of approval across popular votes irrespective of their formal outcome? To begin with, due to various turnout and approval quorums across states and even within a country, the formal result might not show an accurate picture. For instance, Netherlands – 30% turnout quorum, Hungary – 50% turnout quorum; Slovenia – 20% quorum for rejection, San Marino – 25% approval quorum, Latvia – 50% approval quorum; Poland – the vote is binding if 50% turnout quorum is met; Bulgaria – the result of a referendum is binding if the turnout reaches the level of the turnout in the last parliamentary elections and if more than a half of votes are in favour of the proposed question. Moreover, the 2009 Danish referendum on female succession to the throne had an approval quorum of 40% in favour (in order for the legislation to pass a minimum 40% of all eligible voters had to vote Yes) while in the 2015 referendum on joining EU Justice and Home Affairs policies Denmark had a 30% quorum for rejection. This range of varying requirements provides an understanding of why a simple adoption/rejection of a referendum might not tell the whole story.

Another reason to extend the notorious adopted/rejected terminology of the referendum outcome would be the concept of legitimacy. Legitimacy is one of the main motives of initiating a referendum in the first place: a policy is granted additional legitimacy when it is approved by the people (Papadopoulos 1995), thus it is often used to legitimatise a tough policy, simultaneously avoiding the political cost derived from its adoption (Setälä 2006). Moreover, quorum rules were originally adopted to avoid distortions in outcomes resulting from low turnout, and thus undermining their

legitimacy since the lower the participation rate, the greater the deviation from the 'will of the people' (Qvortrup 2005). In reality, these quorums created incentives for abstention both among supporters and opponents of the referendum proposals depending on the legal requirements. The so-called 'quorum-busting' strategy—campaigning for not taking part in the referendum—distorts the results and incentivises citizens to abstain from voting (Herrera and Mattozi 2010). Indeed, various salient policy issues failed for not fulfilling the quorum—e.g. referendum on abortion legalisation in Portugal in 1998 or 2015 Slovak Family referendum where the LGBT minority campaigned for not taking part in the referendum. This creates a situation where turnout is below the required threshold but there is an overwhelming majority in favour of the proposition among those who partook in voting. Votes cast in favour of a proposition in a referendum reveal the strength of an opinion (Warren 2017). This might have an effect on the subsequent implementation of the policy. One of the arguments in the long-lasting Brexit debate has been precisely the fact that the difference between the Leave and Remain votes was only roughly 2%.

2.5.2 Policy domains

The first step in investigating the factors that contribute (to a high degree of) approval in popular votes was to identify four main policy domains within which all referendums occurred across various regime types. With this goal in mind, the earlier developed policy-based typology with 12 categories was further refined/elaborated and clustered into: international system, domestic norms, welfare and postmaterialist issues (Silagadze and Gherghina 2020). The broad domain of international systems includes two policy areas – state formation and foreign affairs—and deals with all issues of national sovereignty and interstate politics, encompassing cases from border disputes through EU/NATO membership and other international arrangements to independence referendums. Domestic norms encompass popular votes on constitutional, political/electoral system and interior policies. The logic behind this domain rests on the general political architecture of the society with its fundamental norms and principles anchored in the constitution, to more specific regulations and practices manifested in the interior legislation, and to the 'rules of the game' defining the political and electoral landscape. The third policy domain is welfare and covers referendums on economic issues, social and labour matters and on health and education. The point of departure for this domain was Esping-Andersen's (1990) research on welfare regimes. Welfare is concerned with economy and redistribution of wealth with tax regulations as one of its main components; education being an influential factor in the process of social

stratification. Apart from this, the access to the healthcare system has become one of the main features of modern welfare regimes. The fourth policy domain are the postmaterialist issues with three policy areas—environment, media and moral/ethical issues. This domain reflects the conceptual contribution made by Inglehart (1977) on post-materialism. To begin with, post-materialism is about the empowerment of an individual and their liberation from stringent norms. That is why the discussion on ethical and moral topics gains relevance in these societies. Another important aspect of post-materialism is its focus on nature and environmental preservation, often against economic calculi. In addition, post-materialism is about participatory democracy and people having more say in the politics. Media represents the link between citizens and politics with its controlling function.

2.5.3 Approval degree in referendums

The exploration of what drives people's approval in referendums beyond the formal outcome is conducted by selecting three components. In this subsection the rationale behind the selection is delineated in detail.

Importance of the referendum type

Referendums can be either mandatory or optional⁴. The literature defines mandatory referendums as those pre-regulated, i.e. launched automatically according to constitutionally or otherwise legally prescribed norms (Suksi 1993). In contrast, optional referendums are defined as those initiated by the political establishment (e.g. president, government, political parties etc.) or citizens⁵. In general, mandatory referendums occur when major changes in the society are at stake: for instance, issues concerning national sovereignty (e.g. EU Treaties, NATO membership), adoption of a new constitution, constitutional reform or adoption of single amendments to the existing constitution (often related to electoral or political system). Hence, mandatory referendums mostly involve major alterations in different areas of the society that are far-reaching, complex and not straightforward to interpret for the general public. Consistent with the previous work on issue complexity

⁴ There is no consensus in the field in regards to terminology. For instance, Uleri (1996b) and IDEA (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) call referendums that are required by law/constitution 'mandatory' (Beramendi et al. 2008), whereas IRI (The Initiative and Referendum Institute Europe) refers to them as 'obligatory' (Kaufmann, Büchi, and Braun 2010). Moreover, Uleri (1996) and Beramendi et al. (2008) use the term 'optional' referendum for all other non-mandatory votes, while Altman (2011) suggests referring to them as 'facultative' referendums.

⁵ The common terms used are top-down, referendums initiated by the political establishment, and bottom-up, initiated by citizens (Papadopoulos 1995). However, this differentiation is not essential for this piece of work, since the main focus is on the referendums launched automatically as opposed to all other types.

(Carmines and Stimson 1980), recent research indicates that when deciding on more complex topics (e.g. constitutional reform) citizens rely heavily on party cues since they do not feel well-informed enough (Coan et al., 2008). Simultaneously, if a policy requires approval in a referendum in accordance with the country's constitutional provisions, the political elite have an intrinsic interest in coming to a consensus and securing consent among the population or avoiding the issue completely. Having reached a broader (intra- or inter-party) agreement allows the political establishment to speak with one voice, send clear messages to their electorate, and thus mobilise as many voters as possible. As previous scholarship showed, the more consistent and clearer the cues from the political parties, the higher the chances for approval in a referendum (Hobolt 2009; Silagadze and Gherghina 2018). Additionally, due to the paramount significance of the policies voted upon in mandatory referendums, these popular votes enjoy high saliency. Consequently, the referendum topic is very present in political debates and media. As saliency is linked to levels of information on the issues, in the wake of a high salient campaign citizens tend to feel more informed and encouraged to vote on it (Hobolt 2007; de Vreese and Semetko 2004).

Optional referendums exhibit a different nature and set of functions. As opposed to mandatory referendums, optional popular votes tend to decide on a narrower, specific topic, often limited to the interests of initiators. They usually take place precisely because no broad agreement among political elite could be reached, and thus optional referendums serve as a tool to, for example, settle conflicts within parties or coalitions over a contradicting issue or decoupling it from future electoral campaigns (Rahat 2009). Consequently, government or parties are often divided over an issue and send mixed messages to their electorate that inevitably affects their mobilisation (Hobolt 2007). Optional referendums are regularly organised/initiated by opposition parties, private persons, various interest groups, NGOs, trade unions or church organisations targeting a very specific topic. However, it is extremely difficult to engage larger segments of the population for a narrow topic. Moreover, financial resources to conduct an effective campaign might be very limited in cases of optional referendums, which also affects the saliency and visibility. Thus, optional referendums are of a different amplitude and deal with smaller and narrower topics that do not affect the broader population.

Status-quo bias in politics

Individuals tend to perceive the mere existence of something as a positive fact that is often evaluated more favourably than an alternative state (Eidelman and Crandall 2014). Accordingly, people tend to prefer the current state of affairs over a possible alternative even if it would benefit them personally

(Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004). The status-quo bias over the change option is also present in politics in general and referendums in particular. As shown by Hobolt (2009), citizens would vote for a referendum proposal only if they perceived it as less uncertain than the alternative *ceteris paribus*. Moreover, as the extensive experience from Switzerland suggests, voting No serves as a clear strategy for decision-making—a ‘status quo heuristic’ (Kriesi 2005). Consequently, in democratic politics, changing the status quo can be a challenging task with not only institutional barriers but also citizens’ intrinsic preferences for ‘keeping the world as it is’. The latest studies show that support for a referendum proposal decreases when voters assume that it will change the status quo (Morisi, Colombo, and De Angelis 2019). According to Morisi (2016), referendums exhibit an asymmetrical structure of vote choice where a riskier ‘change option’ is opposed to a safer ‘status-quo option’.

The asymmetry between Yes and No votes in terms of risks and uncertainties echoes the importance of personal economic costs when deciding in a referendum since the popular votes are influenced among other factors by risk-opportunity frames (Schuck and de Vreese 2009), economic evaluations and cost-benefit perceptions (Clarke, Kornberg, and Stewart 2004; Nadeau, Martin, and Blais 1999). The attitude towards risk-taking influences political choice in referendums indirectly since it affects the relative weights the voter gives to different decision aspects (Nadeau, Martin, and Blais 1999). In addition, opting for modifying the status-quo requires longer consideration due to the assessment of inherent risks and uncertainties that results in a constellation where a larger share of potential supporters of the ‘change option’ lies in the group of undecided voters (Morisi 2016).

East-West tendencies in referendum practice

Eastern and Western Europe had distinct paths for centuries and the division is rooted in the long-term historical development with different political, economic, cultural and institutional patterns. After almost ten years of post-communist states being members in the EU the long-standing east-west divide has not been transcended yet (Göncz 2013). Furthermore, the division has deepened in the wake of the recent migrant crisis as significant value differences were brought to light, especially when it came to diversity and cosmopolitanism (Krastev 2017).

In regard to direct democracy, most new constitutions of the East European countries were approved by a popular vote. Moreover, many post-communist nations opted for participatory constitutions allowing for various tools of direct democracy, partly as a reaction to the decades of authoritarianism. Although, direct democratic decision-making has become an established feature of the political arrangement in Eastern Europe, there

are some differences between East and West in this respect. For instance, East European countries have more instruments of direct democracy available at the national level, whereas in Western Europe legislative provisions for local direct democracy are more extensive. In addition, there is a detectable relationship between the availability of local level provisions for direct democracy and levels of regime legitimacy in Western Europe, while no such relationship appears in the East. Furthermore, there is a stronger negative correlation between provisions for direct democracy at the national level and legitimacy in the Eastern countries that might be explained by the lack of their implementation: if provisions remain merely on paper, the attitudes of citizens are not affected (Gherghina 2017). As Vatter and Bernauer (2009) note, when it comes to the actual use of direct democracy, East European countries are leading with regards to mandatory referendums but not regarding the optional ones. Different trends were also noted in the EU related referendums: in the Eastern countries there was a lower turnout with a higher proportion of Yes votes while in Western countries there was a higher turnout with a lower share of Yes votes (Bozóki and Karácsony 2003).

3. Empirical Design

In this section, I discuss the methodological choices made in the course of this dissertation. A particular attention is paid to the selection of cases, geographical region, time frame and research methods applied. Furthermore, I elaborate on reasons behind compiling an original dataset and the accompanying challenges.

3.1 Case selection

At the broader level, the geographical focus of the dissertation is the European continent. Europe was chosen as an area of investigation for two reasons. First, modern direct democracy took its origin in this region, and thus Europe is viewed as the homeland of direct democracy. Second, Europe is the continent where the most referendums have been held, namely 62% of all referendums registered worldwide (Marxer et al. 2007, 9). Hence, to explore the referendum mechanisms of any other continent would be to choose a smaller statistical pool, not to mention the intrinsic value inherent in studying a democratic tool in the geographic area in which the device was founded.

Switzerland has been excluded from the quantitative analysis.⁶ Only in the qualitative analysis (Article 3) are Swiss cases taken into consideration. The rationale behind this choice rests on the fact that this country, with its longest and most intensive tradition of direct democracy, is an exception rather than a rule in Europe. Accordingly, consideration of Swiss referendums would distort the overall picture of European referendums rather than contribute to the clarity of the data. For instance, since the beginning of the referendum history up until 2019 there have been 630 national popular votes in Europe. Alone Switzerland held approximately the same number of referendums in that period. Switzerland represents a special case in debates on direct democracy since it is the most developed polity in this regard, offering procedures of direct democracy at all levels (Kriesi 2005). Additionally, excluding Switzerland is an attempt to go beyond the ‘usual suspects’—already a bulk of research within direct democracy focuses on Switzerland and the US at the state level (Altman 2011). As Butler and Ranney (1978) put it, there are ‘two worlds of referendums’: California and Switzerland on the one hand and rest of the world on the other. Recent research confirms that even in the global perspective, the Swiss cases skew the data considerably

⁶ Swiss cases are taken into consideration since the number of referendums held on abortion in Switzerland is not found to be overrepresented relative to other countries. Moreover, the qualitative research benefits highly from in-depth study of a plurality of cases.

since its practice accounts for between a quarter and a half of the referendums held worldwide (Morel 2018b).

3.1.1 National vs. local referendums

From a historical point of view, direct democracy was first developed locally—in districts or regions, and only afterwards at a national level. For instance, Switzerland implemented the first referendum at a sub-national level in the 1830s and at a national level in 1848 (Williams and Hume 2010). However, the main evolution of the institutions of local direct democracy has occurred since the early 1990s (Schiller 2011). In East European countries direct democracy at the national level was introduced over the course of the democratic transformation and as a symbol of popular sovereignty (Auer and Buetzer 2001). Most of these countries extended initiative and referendum instruments to the local level, except the three Baltic States (Avtonomow 2001). In the same period, some West European states finally introduced new instruments for more civic participation in local politics, including direct democratic tools. This took place partially as a result of the strengthened position of the Greens in many countries and their demand for more participatory democracy (Schiller 2011). However, “as an overall assessment, we must realise that many countries in Europe are still left without instruments of local direct democracy, or that formally available procedures are regulated in such a restrictive way that they cannot be successfully used in practice” (Schiller 2018, 78).

In the broader picture, this dissertation aims at providing a historical perspective of referendum use in the last two centuries by mapping out what policies dominated societies at different points in time and examining the possible institutional factors behind their approval. For this reason, national level referendums were selected as most appropriate on several grounds. To begin with, the vast majority of countries have provisions for nation-wide referendums, although they are not used with similar frequency (Gallagher and Uleri 1996; Morel 2018b; Qvortrup 2014b). In contrast, as highlighted above, local referendums in Europe have been mostly introduced only in recent decades and their practice remains relatively sporadic, matching the procedural restrictions. In general, if instruments of direct democracy do not exist at higher state levels, either weak or no forms of direct democracy are found on the local level (Schiller 2018). Second, policies and questions subjected to popular votes on the national level are weightier within the political context. Although, issues voted upon in the municipalities are without a doubt very close to citizens, they remain less salient on the level of the entire society. Closing the swimming pool or relocating a parking lot may be very important for a local community, whereas the overall impact of such

a referendum remains limited for the country's direction. Third, the range of issues that may be subjected to local referendums is heavily restricted, resulting in a limited variety of topics. At the same time, identifying a broad spectrum of policies voted upon in referendums and finding patterns among them was one of the main objectives of this dissertation. Fourth, there is no variation in the institutional design of local referendums in terms of legal impact—local votes are only advisory. As Schiller summarises (2018, 75), “Subject matters covered by the procedures are strongly limited in some countries, requirement profiles are restrictive in the majority of countries, and referendum votes are consultative only...”.

3.1.2 Referendums in autocracies

Over time, referendums have gotten a bad name due to their misuse by dictators and autocrats—from Napoléon Bonaparte, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini to more recent cases of Bashar al-Assad, Saddam Hussein, Ayatollah Khomeini and Alexander Lukashenko. Indeed, one of the critic points of referendums has been their popularity among authoritarian political figures who have utilised this tool as a vehicle for seizing or consolidating power, often awarding themselves extraconstitutional powers (Topaloff 2017). Authoritarianism is defined as a form of government that is characterised by strong central power and limited individual freedoms (Linz 2000). However, even dictators need popular support since modern states do not draw their authority from kings or divine blessings. Whether it be a democrat or autocrat, some legitimacy from the people must be claimed (Bendix 1978). Thus, a referendum held in the authoritarian context is ‘a handy tool’ for dictators to boost their legitimacy (G. Smith 1976, 3) and accordingly, actors in nondemocratic states “have developed a fondness for referendums” (Walker 2003, 1). Hamon (1995) calls such popular votes “referendum as the recourse of the prince”. Qvortrup (2017, 150) identifies a general rule in accordance to which referendums in semi-authoritarian or Partly Free states ‘function as a mechanism, albeit a flawed one, for claiming legitimacy—internationally as well as on the domestic front’.

The inclusion of the referendum provisions in the German constitution between the two World Wars is only one example. German legal and political theorist Carl Schmitt, an apologist for the Nazi regime, advocated the use of plebiscite since “the institutions of direct democracy, as an unavoidable consequence of democratic thinking, [are] in a superior position to the so-called indirect democracy of the parliamentary state” (Schmitt 1932, 65). He considered referendums as the most efficient and appropriate means of gaining support in light of the fact that referendums created an unprecedented legitimacy as “plebiscitary legitimacy is the single last

remaining accepted system of justification” (Schmitt 1932, 93). Put differently, within an authoritarian regime “the plebiscite is not a method by which ‘mass man’ imposes his choices upon his rulers; it is a method for generating a government with unlimited authority to make choices on his behalf” (Oakeshott 1991, 380). A referendum symbolises an authoritative and definitive statement of the popular will, and hence, an authoritarian leader is strongly incentivised to make use of this legitimising device (R. J. Hill and White 2014). Similar to the function of elections, “referendums are sometimes part of an effort to grant an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regime a democratic façade” (Morel 2018b). In addition, plebiscites can be used as a sophisticated means of repression and intimidation directed at strengthening the grip on the population, particularly in ethnically divided places (Kobori 2014; Qvortrup, O’Leary, and Wintrobe 2020). As early as 1920 it was identified that “a plebiscite is a double resource for an autocrat. If it sustains him, he becomes a hero. If it decides against him, he receives applause for yielding to the will of the people” (D. J. Hill 1920, 464).

If before the Second World War the use of direct democracy was mainly associated either with authoritarian regimes or with the exceptional case of Switzerland, the picture changed with the third wave of democracy which has also been a wave of direct democracy since most new democracies have included referendum provisions in their constitutions (Serdült and Welp 2012). However, non-democracies still exist and ‘hybrid’ polities (Diamond 2002), sometimes called ‘illiberal democracies’ (Zakaria 1997) or ‘competitive authoritarian regimes’ (Levitsky and Way 2002) emerge and flourish, along with ‘neo-authoritarianism’ (Fuchs 2018). As a general trend, in electoral democracies parliamentary initiated referendums are much more common, whereas in non-democratic regimes, the initiation of referendums is concentrated in the hands of the head of the state, and thus the personal use of referendums has become a feature of autocracies or not fully consolidated electoral democracies (Morel 2018b). According to another observation, difference-elimination referendums (aimed at homogenisation) occur in authoritarian regimes, whereas difference-managing referendums (related to ethnic or national differences) occur in democratic regimes. Dictators opt for such referendums to prove that the ‘people’ are united behind them, in spite of the ethnic diversity (Anckar 2018).

Constitutional referendums are particularly popular in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian settings (Wheatley 2017). For instance, the 2017 Turkish referendum on constitutional amendments orchestrated by President Erdoğan under the emergency law after the failed coup attempt, aimed at replacing the existing parliamentary system with an executive presidency. The close margin of victory, despite enormous resource advantages and the

uneven playing field, was viewed as a Pyrrhic victory for the ruling AKP and as a setback for Erdogan. Nevertheless, the referendum reshaped the political landscape of Turkey in fundamental ways, transferring power away from parliament to the president and contributing to the further personalisation of executive power (Esen and Gümüşçü 2017). Similarly, the 2016 Azerbaijan 29-question referendum increased the presidential term of office, granted the incumbent president Aliyev the right to dismiss the parliament and allowed government officials to expropriate privately owned land (Geybullayeva 2016).

Despite the problematic nature of referendum use in autocracies, we need to maintain the perspective that democracies represent only a segment among the forms of government on the continent, especially considering the development trends over time. Therefore, it is important to study the use of referendums in other political settings as well since cross-country variations in referendum practice “fail to fit any universal pattern” (Butler and Ranney 1978, 18), the finding that has been supported by recent research (Hollander 2019). Interestingly, although there has been extensive research on the use and function of elections in autocratic regimes (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009) and there is a growing number of studies on public performance of closed regimes (Carlitz and McLellan 2020), referendums in the authoritarian context have not received equivalent scholarly attention. Moreover, comparative or theoretical inquiry on plebiscites in autocracies has been non-existent (Qvortrup, O’Leary, and Wintrobe 2020). So far, no study has investigated the policy-related patterns of the referendum practice across political systems throughout history, including democracies, autocracies and states in-between. This thesis partially addresses this lacuna as two articles explore referendum trends in all types of regimes and two articles look at the factors that contributed to a successful referendum in democracies. Scrutinising success factors of popular votes in non-democracies seems to be redundant since popular votes there “tend to bring about outcomes which are almost without exception supportive of government policies” (Setälä 1999, 1).

3.2 Why an original dataset

For Article 1 and Article 4 an original dataset was compiled. Data used for article 1 is made available on the open-access repository Zenodo (<http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4925922>) and dataset applied for article 4 is attached as an appendix. The created dataset addresses the major shortcomings of existing databases that are inconsistent in their coding and

incomplete.⁷ The following lines briefly summarise the problems of the two most comprehensive databases for referendums. The Database and Search Engine for Direct Democracy (www.sudd.ch) is inconsistent when reporting voter turnout and not reliable with the types of referendums and their results. In many cases, the percentages of ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ votes are calculated relative to the entire electorate and not to the turnout, thus making difficult comparisons for approval rates. Turnout in some referendums is available with invalid votes (e.g. Bulgaria 2013 and Croatia 2013), while in most cases turnout is calculated based on the valid votes. There are important factual errors with misclassification of referendums, e.g. the 2016 Italian referendum is labelled as a citizens’ initiative when it was initiated by the prime minister, the 1997 Hungarian referendum and the 2003 Polish referendum are designated as top-down votes instead of mandatory, and the 2016 Bulgarian referendums are noted as binding when this was relative to the turnout (valid votes). The 1996 referendum in Poland and the 2016 referendum in Liechtenstein are considered adopted, while in reality they both were rejected. Additionally, although the website formally provides an English version, all the information about referendums is available only in German.⁸

The database of the Centre for Research on Direct Democracy (www.c2d.ch) is incomplete: several referendums are completely missing (e.g. Andorra 1933, Azerbaijan 2002 and Romania 2009), turnout is not available for some votes (e.g. Austria 1938, Ireland 2013, Liechtenstein 2003, Latvia 2003 and Lithuania 2014), legal impact is completely absent in some cases (Italy 2000 and Liechtenstein 2014) or incorrect in other votes (Iceland, Poland 2015, Bulgaria 2016 and Greece 2015). In some instances, the outcome of a referendum is categorised incorrectly: the 2003 Armenian referendum is marked as adopted, although in fact it was invalid, and thus rejected since it did not meet the quorum of approval of 33.3% of registered voters. Moreover, the categories ‘vote trigger’ (initiator) and ‘institution’ are confusing. For instance, the 2015 Armenian constitutional referendum is described simultaneously as top-down (vote trigger) and mandatory (institution), whereas in the case of Brexit the initiator is ‘automatic’ (instead

⁷ Please note that the following shortcomings have been observed at the stage of collecting the data. It is possible that the aforementioned websites have meanwhile addressed some of the points.

⁸ In order to search for a country in the English database one needs to enter the exact name of the country in German and if any special German sign is missing or the name of the country is spelled in English (Rumanien or Romania instead of Rumänien), the system doesn’t recognise it at all and doesn’t offer any options, stating ‘nothing could be found’. This makes it very hard to use, especially for German non-native speakers. Furthermore, I was not able to find any referendums held in the UK in this database, though trying various combinations: Großbritannien, Vereinigtes Königreich and England.

of top-down) and the institution is 'governmental referendum'. Additionally, one of the major inconveniences of this dataset is that the votes cast in favour or against a proposal are not calculated in percentage but rather are presented in absolute numbers.

To overcome these shortcomings, multiple sources were synthesised to compile a more advanced version of the dataset. On average, seven different sources were used, compared and contrasted for each referendum. Among them, primary sources, including country-specific databases, country reports and analyses, constitution or special law texts (for turnout and approval quorum), newspaper articles, online publications, official statements, or academic texts (encyclopaedias, volumes, research articles) devoted to the thorough analysis of particular countries. Furthermore, independent sources were identified, i.e. no cross-referencing, and the same strategy was systematically applied for the situations in which the information collected was contradictory. To increase the reliability of the data an attempt was made to find as many sources as possible and the most common piece of information encountered in these sources was subsequently chosen, giving priority to primary documents. In those cases in which no information was available (e.g. Liechtenstein) country experts in the field of direct democracy were consulted about particular referendums and asked for sources. Most information was available in English, German or Russian and translations for the few remaining referendums were used (e.g. Azerbaijan 2009 and 2016).

Accordingly, this dataset covers more than two centuries (1793-2017)⁹ and includes 620 national referendums organised in 48 countries.¹⁰ Referendums are counted in accordance to the number of issues put to the vote. For instance, the 2016 constitutional referendum in Azerbaijan included 27 separate questions, consequently, they were seen as 27 referendums. Similar to earlier studies (Qvortrup 2014c), the dataset considers one referendum as corresponding to one policy decision that citizens have to make. If there are more questions asked the same day, they are counted as different referendums (see the online Appendix). This conceptualisation allows us to separate between referendums with different initiators (elite vs

⁹ For Article 4 a shorter timeframe was applied to account for more recent trends: 2000-2019 and 283 referendums held in 39 countries correspondingly. The analysis in Article 2 is not based on this original dataset but rather on secondary sources for 31 referendums held in Europe between 2001 and 2013. The timespan for this article is somewhat different due to the fact that the data collection took place at a different point in time.

¹⁰ These countries are: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Soviet Union, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, Ukraine and the United Kingdom.

citizens) organised the same day and account for different levels of approval across various policies.

The dataset is comprised of a diverse array of countries: former/no more existing states (Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union), states with the longest history of democracy (San Marino since 1600 and Liechtenstein since 1921), consolidated democracies (Denmark, France, Italy etc.), transition countries (Albania, Georgia, Macedonia etc.) as well as authoritarian regimes (Azerbaijan, Belarus, Russia etc.). Referendums in all these types of regimes are included to allow for a broader comparison, aiming at the comprehensive understanding of the whole European continent. Established democracies are only a part of the universe of cases and the focus on them is equivalent to losing important data and overlooking explanatory variables. Furthermore, the dataset does not cover the referendums in conflict or internationally non-acknowledged areas (Donetsk, Crimea, Ossetia, Abkhazia, Northern Cyprus, etc.). In addition, if a country, at the moment of a popular vote, was part of a different state, it is not in the analysis, e.g. Romania in 1864 (which held a referendum on Constitution and electoral law) was officially part of the Ottoman Empire, and thus was excluded from the dataset. Neither are unofficial/private referendums incorporated—e.g. Italy in 2007 as trade unions and the government organised a referendum where only employees, unemployed and pensioners were called to vote (approximately 15 million out of the total electorate of approximately 50 million).

3.3 Methods

This thesis is a compilation of four studies applying a multi-method and multi-data approach. As all research designs have their strengths and limitations, the merit of each particular research design is relative to how well it addresses the research question at hand (Reis 2009). The main focus of the dissertation has been comparative studies with large-, medium- and small-N. Comparative method seeks to establish “[...] general empirical relations between two or more variables, controlling, keeping constant, all others” (Lijphart 1971, 70). Comparative studies occupy a prominent place in the political studies with the classic distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods of social research (Piovani and Krawczyk 2017). Nowadays both quantitative and qualitative methods are widespread whereas up until the 1960s quantitative methods dominated empirical research in social sciences, while qualitative methods held a marginal position (Punch 2005). The main differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches lie in the nature of their data, and the methods used for collecting and analysing data. Quantitative analysis enables a reliable,

standardised and objective comparison as well as an overall description of situations and phenomena in a systematic and commensurable way (Phillips 2008). Qualitative data possesses the necessary richness and holism to deal with the complexity of social phenomena and is designed to study nuances in attitudes, behaviours or phenomena (Babbie 2004). If qualitative research implies an inductive approach (deriving concepts from the social reality), in contrast, the deductive approach is prescribed to by the quantitative research—applying social science theory to social reality (Padgett 2008).

This dissertation mainly represents the quantitative research tradition in political science combined with Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). Article 1 is primarily exploratory, analysing the patterns of referendum use across time with the help of descriptive statistics. Article 2 has a comparative (cross national and longitudinal) focus and applies bivariate and multivariate (binary logistic regression) analysis. Article 3 is based on the QCA method whereas Article 4 utilises bivariate correlations and multivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. As the QCA method is not as widespread compared to purely quantitative or qualitative methods, the following subsection outlines the essence of this method in a nutshell.

QCA

Based on Boolean algebra and set theory, QCA integrates qualitative and quantitative research methods. QCA preserves the richness of an in-depth qualitative approach combined with formalised cross-case comparisons; hence, strengthening the capacity for generalisation (Ragin 2008). Put it succinctly, QCA allows for abstracting idiosyncrasies of single cases and generating comprehensive explanations of social phenomena by identifying alternative combinations of conditions that can produce a given outcome (Legewie 2013). This method was evaluated as most appropriate in studying the complexity of a referendum outcome which represents a sophisticated interplay of numerous variables (conditions in QCA terminology). This tool identifies in a systematic manner, the configurational impact of various factors and assesses the multicausality of a given phenomenon. QCA is a theory driven approach and is recommended for small- and medium-N studies in which the researcher knows each case in depth and complements this knowledge with quantitative analysis to increase the external validity of the study. Crisp-set QCA is the most widely used technique within this method (Rihoux and De Meur 2009) and was also applied in the framework of this dissertation due to the nature of the data—most conditions were dichotomous.

Necessity and sufficiency are two central concepts within QCA terminology since the goal of QCA is to identify what conditions or combinations of conditions are necessary or sufficient for the outcome.

Condition A is necessary for outcome Y if Y cannot occur in the absence of A, but A alone is not enough to produce Y (in QCA, terms, Y is a subset of A). Condition A is sufficient if Y always occurs when A is present; however, other conditions besides A may also produce Y (Rihoux and Ragin 2009). Empirically, it is quite rare to identify a necessary condition since factors usually influence the occurrence of an event or phenomenon in conjunction; hence, most conditions or combinations of conditions are 'quasi-necessary' or 'quasi-sufficient' (Legewie 2013; Ragin 2006). The truth table analysis is the core element of the QCA data analysis, which serves to identify 'causal recipes' (combinations of conditions) that are sufficient for the outcome.

4. Article Summaries

This thesis consists of four articles, two of which are based on the original dataset (Article 1 and Article 4) and two used mainly the secondary data (Article 2 and Article 3). Three studies are published in international peer-review journals; one study is currently under review. This section summarises the results from each of these articles.

4.1 Bringing the Policy in: A New Typology of National Referendums (Article 1)¹¹

Article 1 sought to offer a policy-based typology of referendums as a complementary tool in the referendum research. So far, there has been a consensus in the field about dis-consensus over conceptualisation and classification of direct democracy in general and referendums in particular. Previous typologies were designed exclusively around the institutional characteristics of the popular vote (e.g. binding vs. non-binding, mandatory vs. facultative, top-down vs. bottom-up) and ignore, to a great extent, the substance of popular votes, i.e. the policy (Altman 2011; Beramendi et al. 2008; Kaufmann, Büchi, and Braun 2010; Svensson 2011; Uleri 1996a). This is rather noteworthy since voting on a policy is the core of the referendum process, distinguishing it from elections.

This typology was developed inductively after scrutinising all national-level referendums in Europe, covering a period of more than two centuries (1793–2019). The dataset used for the analysis is original, compiled from primary sources and includes 630 referendums organised in 48 countries. According to this typology, all referendums held so far throughout history can be clustered into twelve policy areas: constitution, state formation, political and electoral system, interior policies, foreign policies, economy, environment, health, education, moral and ethical issues, labour and social issues, and media. This policy-based typology fosters comparisons across countries, political systems and over time within *one* policy area, thus serving as an analytical tool. At the same time, the typology maps out the historical path of referendum use and identifies specific trajectories, revealing the salient issues in different societies at various moments in time. For instance, the most used topics in referendums belong to political/electoral systems (almost one-third) and interior policy (almost 17% of the total number). Together, these two policy areas amount to approximately 50% of all referendum topics. At the other extreme, the less used topics are in the areas of education, media and health, amounting to approximately 5% all together.

¹¹ *European Political Science* (2020), 19, 461–477. Co-authored with Sergiu Gherghina.

Another pattern observed with this typology is that referendums on moral and ethical issues emerged quite late in the history of European direct democracy, but their distribution is fairly balanced across time whereas, for instance, referendums on state formation and constitution which were one of the first topics to be put on referendum, come in waves.

4.2 When Who And How Matter: Explaining The Success Of Referendums In Europe (Article 2)¹²

Article 2 of this dissertation investigates what makes referendums successful. Success is defined as an adoption of the policy subjected to a vote. This question is of high relevance considering the increased importance of the referendum tool in contemporary politics as more and more policies are decided via a popular vote. The study aimed at identifying factors that contributed to an adoption of a referendum proposal. In doing so, three institutional factors have been tested—popularity of the initiator, size of the parliamentary majority, and political cues during referendum campaigns. Additionally, the study controlled for the type of referendum and voter turnout. The comparative analysis is based on 31 national-level top-down referendums organised in Europe between 2001 and 2013. The data used for the analysis has been collected from referendums and electoral databases, public opinion surveys and newspaper articles.

The results indicate that the size of the parliamentary majority and the clarity of party cues are influential factors for a referendum success. Within the given analytical framework, the size of parliamentary majority is the strongest predictor of referendum success: initiators with a comfortable majority in the legislature are six times more likely to succeed as compared to the initiators from the parliamentary minority. Similarly strong evidence was found for party cues: referendums accompanied with clear political cues are nearly four times more likely to be successful compared to those with mixed cues. In contrast, the analysis suggests that the popularity of the initiator contributes to the outcome of a referendum only to a limited extent, marginally increasing the likelihood for its success. In a like manner, referendums with high turnout have slightly higher chances of success than the ones with low turnout. Interestingly, binding referendums appear to be less successful than the non-binding ones. This concurs with the viewpoint that in modern democracies non-binding referendums have the same political power as binding ones (Beramendi et al. 2008), and thus such distinction must be relativised (Morel 2018b). Another possible explanation

¹² *Comparative European Politics* (2018), 16(5), 905–922. Co-authored with Sergiu Gherghina.

for this finding is that the requirements for non-binding referendums are more relaxed than those for the binding ones (e.g. in terms of the quorum of approval or quorum of participation). Moreover, the topics of non-binding referendums may be more appealing to citizens.

4.3 Abortion referendums: Is there a recipe for success (Article 3)¹³

Article 3 zooms into the policy area of moral and ethical issues and explores the reasons behind adoption of pro-choice or pro-life policies in abortion referendums. The topic of abortion has been among the most salient and polarising issues on the European continent and its saliency is reflected in over a dozen national referendums on this policy since the 1970s. Moreover, abortion remains topical as the idea that women have the right to terminate pregnancies has not yet reached the level of global institutionalisation. Since abortion on request is legally provided in only around 60 countries, future referendums on this issue can be expected.

This study goes beyond the usual models of single case/country analyses and offers an explanation of a referendum outcome based on a comparative approach. To this end, 12 nation-wide referendums on this policy are scrutinised. The analysis includes four countries (Italy, Ireland, Portugal and Switzerland) and encompasses four decades (1977–2018). For assessing multicausality for a given outcome, the QCA method is applied which allows the integration of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The analytical framework of this paper accounts for the idiosyncratic nature of the abortion policy by including level of secularisation and support of the medical community, and bridges it with the insights from referendum research, i.e., the role of consensus and position of the head of government.

The findings suggest that relative consensus in the parliament, support of medical experts and level of secularisation play a major role in the adoption of a policy. Accordingly, a referendum had a pro-choice outcome in cases when relative consensus within the parliament was in favour of a pro-choice policy together with either support of medical experts or a high level of secularisation in the country. No empirical evidence was found for support of the head of government. From a theoretical perspective, the finding that relative consensus explains the outcome in all referendums is very interesting. This factor was the common denominator among all pro-choice outcomes, whereas its absence was the common denominator in all pro-life outcomes. This uncovering provides first ground support to include the concept of relative consensus into future theoretical explanatory models.

¹³ *Politics & Policy* (2021), 49(2), 352–389.

4.4 When do Citizens Approve Policies? Explaining Variation in National Level Referendums across Europe (Article 4)¹⁴

Article 4 of the dissertation aims to explain the factors that drive support for distinct referendum policies. The study differentiates between four broad policy domains—international system, domestic norms, welfare and post-materialist issues. In doing so, the paper moves beyond the conventional approach of analysing the outcome of a referendum only in terms of approval or rejection at the ballot since this straightforward rationale does not account for various turnout and approval quorums that vary throughout and even within the countries. Instead, the focus of this article is the degree of approval, irrespective of the formal outcome, which offers a more accurate picture of public support for a given policy. The analysis empirically tests for the effect of three country-level factors that, in theory, may explain the variation in degree of approval: type of the referendum (mandatory vs. optional), aim of the referendum (change vs. status-quo) and East-West division. Additionally, the study controls for legal impact of the vote (binding vs. consultative), mimetism and time. The analysis uses an original data set that covers 283 national level referendums in Europe between 2000 and 2019.

The results suggest that referendums that are mandatory, conducted in Eastern Europe and oriented towards change receive more Yes votes. More importantly, the effects differ significantly across policy fields implying that distinct mechanisms are at play. Furthermore, the strongest empirical support was found for East-West division. East-European voters are more eager to approve decisions related to international, domestic and welfare policies but are rather reserved when it comes to post-materialist issues, the opposite trend is present across Western countries. Contrary to many studies on political behaviour, status-quo referendums do not tend to receive more approval than pro-change referendums. This is an encouraging finding since change is at the core of the political process; however, status-quo bias among citizens has long been seen as a real challenge for the democratic decision-making. Overall, binding referendums are slightly more likely to receive Yes votes and there is a weak negative relationship between the referendum that took place on the similar policy in the neighbouring country, time of the referendum and the percentage of Yes votes. However, time plays out differently depending on the policy at stake.

The graph below shows the factors that proved to be influential in the referendum process. The depiction is based on the results of the

¹⁴ Under review in *European Political Science Review*.

aforementioned articles. Depending on the policy at hand various factors played a role. The policy one might assume serves as a background variable.

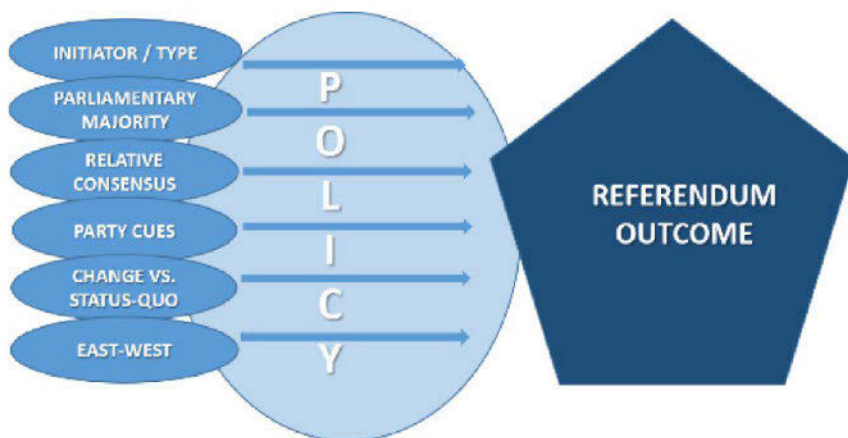


Figure 1: Influential factors for the referendum outcome.

5. Contributions and Conclusions

Referendums are criticised and admired. Indeed, recent popular votes confirm that they may be a double-edged sword with an ambivalent function: on the one hand, they undermine the advantages of a representative system by giving voice to oversimplified 'popular' ideas (Brexit in 2016), and on the other, controlling the extreme tendencies of political elites—the 2016 referendum in Hungary against the EU quota for refugees (Gherghina 2019). Referendum phenomenon is not uniform, and hence, there cannot be 'a general theory of the referendum' (G. Smith 1976). The referendum itself becomes a variable, as its context is entangled with a variety of dimensions, well beyond the referendum issue (LeDuc 2002). This thesis has been devoted to disentangling to some extent the referendum practices and success factors by differentiating between distinct policy areas. The four studies included in the dissertation contribute to a more thorough understanding of how referendums have been applied, how they function and how they can be won.

5.1 Reflections on the main findings

One of the most important methodological contributions of this thesis concerns the elaboration of a new policy-based typology of referendums based on the practices in the last two centuries (Article 1). This typology allows for meaningful and straightforward comparisons between referendums on *one* policy across countries and over time. Accordingly, it facilitates future testing of the hypotheses about the causes, forms, functions, evolutionary trajectories and consequences of referendums in different social, political and cultural contexts. Furthermore, this typology has the potential to advance the democratic theory, by looking at the topics that were subjected to votes and their effect on, for instance, legitimacy or satisfaction with democracy as a whole. As Walker (2003) argues, not all referendums are equally important to the political actors and to the people, depending on their effect on the system. Therefore, categorisation of referendums on the basis of policies is a significant step towards better comprehension of referendums and their nuances.

In the broader theoretical sense, this thesis revealed that it is the political parties and not single individuals that have a crucial impact on the referendum outcome. This is good news for democracy and an optimistic outlook for the democracy research since one of the caveats of direct democracy has been considered its susceptibility to populism and populist rhetoric by a charismatic leader. For instance, the results from paper 2

highlight that the popularity of the initiator plays only a marginal role in the success of a popular vote. At the same time, the clarity of political messages and the size of the parliamentary majority backing up the proposal were identified as pivotal elements influencing the ballot's outcome. Similarly, paper 3 which followed a qualitative, context-sensitive path, revealed that the support of the head of government for the policy at stake did not shape the vote. Simultaneously, a potent explanatory power of the *relative consensus within the parliament* was discovered. This factor explained the outcome in all referendums on abortion: it was the common denominator among all pro-choice outcomes, whereas its absence was the common denominator in all pro-life outcomes. We need to pause for a moment in order to understand the implications of this finding. In essence, this could mean that without a proper engagement of political parties more restrictive policies are likely to be adopted. This uncovering once again brings forth the importance of the political establishment in the whole referendum process, issue framing, mobilising and its subsequent outcome. Moreover, this study provides first grounds to include the concept of relative consensus into future theoretical explanatory models as an additional dimension given that it clearly exhibits relevance for at least this type of referendum.

Article 4 offered a more fine-grained approach towards evaluating a referendum's outcome by introducing a degree of approval, and hence, moving beyond the simple dichotomy of adopted/rejected referendums. The study identified patterns when a referendum is more broadly accepted by a society and explored under what circumstances this occurs. According to the results, and contrary to many studies on political behaviour, status-quo referendums do not tend to receive more approval than pro-change referendums. This is another encouraging find since change is at the core of the political process and the only constant in the ever rapidly shifting world. However, status-quo bias among citizens has long been seen as a real challenge for the democratic decision-making.

In addition, this thesis represents one of the very few works that took into consideration the referendum practice across various regimes—democracies, countries in transition and autocracies. To date, there has been extensive research on elections in autocratic regimes, whereas comparative studies of plebiscites in autocracies have been non-existent. Although, the previous scholarship highlighted that authoritarian regimes use direct democracy according to their own interest, to enhance power and assert their legitimacy, there has not been a single comparative analysis that backs this assumption, including all popular votes throughout the history in this type of polity. Therefore, this dissertation sheds light on the referendum practices in authoritarian regimes, offering some insights from this understudied area.

The findings illustrate that the topics (or their proportion) voted upon in different political settings, in fact, varied. One general trend worth mentioning is that in authoritarian countries, most referendums (over 85%) were held in the policy domain of domestic norms, with the highest concentration of votes on political and electoral systems, whereas the domain of welfare and post-materialist issues together had a share of less than 9%. This pattern reflects the reality that in these settings plebiscites are mostly around the issue of power allocation, and citizens are not ‘consulted’ about other topics; for instance, concerning ethical or social matters. In contrast, the votes on these policy fields in democracies are nearly evenly spread. Furthermore, if in democratic settings, around half of the votes are bottom-up, in autocracies the share of citizen-initiated referendums equals zero (Silagadze and Gherghina 2020). This is logical, since in these societies, with no civil or political freedoms, the system is designed in such a way that its citizens have no say in politics.

5.2 Limitations and avenues for future research

Within the scope of the thesis, some limitations occurred that could be overcome by further research. First, the operationalisation of the relative consensus requires further elaboration, although the findings suggest the existence of certain threshold levels. This is merely a first tentative step in introducing this factor in the explanatory models of referendums. Second, despite the above-mentioned merits of including autocracies in the analysis, their presence might play out as a limitation, possibly distorting the overall results. This can be partially overcome by concentrating solely on (semi)authoritarian regimes. Third, the exact motives and subsequent results for the initiation were not explored. In this regard, one possible avenue for future research would be to look more closely into the outputs of referendums and their implementation, and thus measure the effects of direct democracy on society as a whole. For instance, it would be interesting to link the degree of approval with the subsequent (degree of) implementation of policies as the legitimacy of carrying out the decision also might depend on the level of approval. Another avenue would be the examination of the policy’s effect on the success of the referendum—which policies tend to be adopted and which rejected. The scrutiny of the policy-related factors can serve as an alternative explanation to the institutional or campaign determinants. In addition, one could compare the ways in which institutional factors play a role in top-down as opposed to bottom-up referendums. Lastly, there is potential for wider research by expanding the

analysis beyond the European continent and investigating whether the identified patterns hold across regions.

5.3 Concluding remarks

There is a certain paradox involved in the practice of referendums. In theory, it is the closest we can get to the ideals of democracy within a representative system. However, referendums are often hijacked by authoritarian leaders who can't be further away from democratic credentials. Left to its own devices, the institution of referendum is neither 'bad' nor 'good', but rather neutral. If coupled with other forms of democratic innovations—for instance, deliberative democracy, some of the challenges might be overcome. 'Talk-centric' mini-publics could complement the 'vote-centric' referendums, adding another dimension of deliberation and increased quality of discussion/opinion formation. In fact, in some countries deliberative and direct democracy go hand in hand, producing rather progressive and empowering outcomes (legalisation of same-sex marriage or abortion in Ireland).

Overall, it is unrealistic to expect one single innovation to solve all the problems of the modern societies. Hence, direct democracy cannot serve as a simple fix for democratic deficits or as a cure-all for political ills. With all the pitfalls and limitations that come with this instrument, it is fair to say that direct democracy is not simply an add-on to parliamentary democracy, but rather needs to be carefully crafted to fulfil its functions. Referendum is a great tool, in the right political context and with the right design.

Democratic innovations in general and direct democracy in particular have become a stable component of representative democracies in many countries. There is no reason to expect that their application will fade away with time; on the contrary, the rise is likely to persist. In this context, it is important to continue asking critical questions regarding the whole process of referendums, the variety of policies subjected to vote and the influential role of diverse aspects, actors and factors. Furthermore, it is vital to inspect what outcomes referendums produce under which conditions in order to assess its impact on democracy and democratic governance in the long run. Hopefully, this work will serve as another step to help grasp the dynamism and magnitude of the referendum tool. Having said this, the discussion is far from being settled as every single referendum represents a unique case with a bundle of interconnected and conflicting attributes.

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