Direct and Representative Democracy - Supplementing, not Excluding Each Other

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Abstract

This paper presents and discusses four main arguments for and against direct democracy, popular initiatives and referendums: (1) higher responsiveness versus lesser quality; (2) higher popular responsibility versus weaker representatives; (3) higher popular participation versus deeper conflicts; and (4) more transparency and enlightened understanding versus less confidentiality. The arguments are discussed in relation to general political goals of good government such as legitimacy, efficiency and stability. The basic thesis of the paper is that direct and representative forms of democracy are not exclusive. Much of the disagreement among those in favour of and in opposition to the introduction of more elements of direct democracy is caused by arguments that could be tested empirically and on more or less implicit assumptions about an either-or rather than a more-or-less of these forms of government. Nevertheless, fundamentally different conceptions of democratic representation also play a part.
During the last two centuries a debate has unfolded for and against direct democracy, popular initiatives and referendums. It has been argued that direct democracy for almost self-evident reasons is more democratic than representative democracy: “Because of the directness and extent of the people’s decision-making, direct democracy is usually regarded as in a sense ‘more democratic’ than indirect democracy” (Holden, 1974: 27). In opposition to this view, it has been claimed that it is impossible to comprehend a democracy that is not representative: “It ought to be clear that there has never yet been any perfect complete and pure direct democracy, nor is it likely ever to exist“(Ross, 1952: 202; 1967: 215). These various points of departure to a large extent determine the arguments put forward for and against direct democracy and referendums. Apparently, they appeal to completely different values and conceptions of democracy. The question is, however, how much of the disagreement is explained by different conceptions of democracy and how much is explained by different understandings of political realities. Could a common set of values – without reference to democracy as a form of government - be identified that makes a debate both possible and meaningful?

A necessary condition for a dialogue and mutual understanding between adherents and opponents of direct democracy is that they know each others arguments. This is hardly a sufficient condition for reaching agreement, but it seems worthwhile to put forward the arguments as clearly as possible so that the participants in the debate may come to a more conscious understanding on why they disagree. Thus, this paper raises questions such as: Is the disagreement between adherents and opponents of direct democracy caused by mutual misunderstandings? Is it caused by different understandings of political life? Or is it really caused by a different set of normative conceptions of democracy?
The aim of the paper is to present as clearly as possible the main arguments for and against direct democracy in order to elucidate the empirical understanding of political reality and the normative values and conceptions of democracy on which these arguments are based.

The assumption is that adherents and opponents of direct democracy might understand each other better if their arguments are analysed in relation to certain fundamental values on government that all share or at least accept. The assumption is that some of the disagreement may be due to different understandings of reality, which – at least in principle - may be clarified by empirical analyses. Beyond that, undoubtedly, remain fundamental different conceptions of what democracy is or ought to be.

The common values that all – or at least most – people share in Western democracies could be summarised in three main requirements to good government: Legitimacy, efficiency, and stability. I readily admit that these values stem from an analysis of Danish democracy in the 1970’s (Svensson, 1996) and that the paper at this point needs further elaboration. Nevertheless, the assumption is that these values are widely shared and difficult to reject, even though they may not exhaust the basic requirements of good government.

First of all, political institutions, processes and decisions have to be legitimate. In this context this means that they should be accepted voluntarily by all citizens, or at least most of them, most of the time. Citizens should not conform to rules and decisions, such as laws and sentences. In a well-ordered society citizens first and foremost conform to the laws because they feel that these laws

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1 A classic text dealing with these values is Seymour Martin Lipset who writes in *Political Man*: “The stability of any given democracy depends not only on economic development, but also upon the effectiveness and the legitimacy of its political system” (1959/1981: 64). Here stability seems to be of main importance. The paper makes no distinction between "good government" and "good governance". Anne Mette Kjær clarify the core concepts of governance theory as legitimacy, efficiency, democracy and accountability (Kjær, 2004: 11), but does not refer to stability.
have been framed by the right authorities and in the right way, and that they – all things considered – are fair and reasonable decisions. In representative democracies – or polyarchies in Robert A. Dahl’s terminology – it is assumed that the political decisions reflect the interests and opinions of the citizens, because the authorities are responsive to the demands of the citizens, and that the political decisions are accepted voluntarily, at least by most of the citizens, most of the time. Thus, if a large number of citizens find it difficult to accept certain political decisions, or if some citizens find it difficult to accept many decisions, a legitimacy problem may arise, a problem that might find expression in civil disobedience in various forms, such as exceeding speed limits on the roads, moon-lighting, tax evasion, social security fraud, smuggling, occupations of houses by squatters, violent confrontations with the police etc.

Second, political institutions and decisions have to be effective. In a well-ordered society is expected that decisions are taken in order to deal with the problems that citizens find important and that they think should be taken care of by the community. It is expected that the ends agreed upon should be realised by the least possible means. In a good government the political authorities do not leave urgent problems unsolved because of indecisiveness or internal disagreement; decisions are actually implemented and complied with; and the total amount of costs – in particular the economic costs, the taxes – are not higher than they need to be in order to deal with common problems. If the political authorities do not respond to the demands of the citizens and if they are unable to make proper decisions dealing with the problems that citizens demand solved, such problems of inefficiency may cause serious consequences, not only for the individuals filling the posts of the Government and Parliament, but further on for the support for the democratic regime. The some holds true if decisions are not implemented and the intended ends accomplished.
Third, good government involves *stable* political institutions and decisions. Citizens have to know who have the competence to take certain decisions and which rules have to be followed. If the political authorities are replaced time after time because of new elections, governmental changes and renominations, or if laws and governmental regulations are changed every now and then, the citizens do not know what they have to comply with. Thus, if the governmental system lacks the ability to resist political challenges a stability problem may arise that may have far reaching social and economic consequences, such as general insecurity and more specifically increase in interest rates, higher unemployment, decline of exports etc.

In this paper the arguments for and against direct democracy are analysed in relation to the values of legitimacy, efficiency and stability that characterise a good and well-ordered government.

**Arguments in favour of direct democracy**

A large number of arguments have been advanced for direct democracy. Here four main arguments are singled out: (1) that direct democracy leads to a higher responsiveness of the political authorities to the demands of the citizens and to a better agreement between citizens and policies; (2) that direct democracy leads to a higher level of popular responsibility towards policies; (3) that direct democracy leads to more political involvement and participation among the citizens; and (4) that direct democracy promotes transparency in politics and a more enlightened understanding of politics. These arguments, first and foremost, relate to the introduction of more elements of direct democracy, mainly popular initiatives and referendums, in polyarchies, i.e. political systems which are basically representative political systems, and less to a complete change from a representative to
a direct democracy. In fact, a main point of the paper is that much misunderstanding in the debate on direct versus representative democracy is caused by unfounded assumptions that opponents want to introduce a pure direct or representative political system.

The first - and undoubtedly most important - argument for direct democracy is that the best correspondence between the demands of the citizens and the political decisions is achieved when the citizens themselves make decisions by voting on various proposals (referendum) or when they themselves formulate the proposal to be voted upon (initiative)(Butler & Ranney, 1978: 24-27; Bjørklund, 2005: 35f): “… the only way to achieve the ideal that political decisions be made in full accordance with the wishes of the people is to ensure that those wishes are expressed directly, not mediated or interpreted”(Butler & Ranney, 1994: 12). It is a basic democratic principle that political decisions should reflect the demands of the citizens. Robert A. Dahl calls this principle “the strong principle of equality” and spells out that this means that “when binding decisions are made, the claims of each citizen as to the laws, rules, policies, etc. to be adopted must be counted as valid and equally valid” (Dahl, 1989: 105).

It must, in general, be assumed that it is better to act on your own than to have other people act on your behalf. When you are acting on your own you can, yourself, decide what has to be taken into account, whereas a risk of misinterpretations or irrelevant considerations exits, when other people act on your behalf. Of course, this argument presumes that you are as competent other people to act, but this is precisely what Dahl’s strong principle of equality is about. In a democracy it is presumed that all adult citizens are the best judge of his or her own good or interest (Dahl, 1989: 100). The higher the correspondence between the opinions of citizens and the rules they have to comply with, the easier it is for the citizens to accept these rules, and the specific decisions that are made
according to these rules, as reasonable and fair. Thus, a direct democracy is better than a representative democracy, and a representative democracy with referendums and initiatives is better than a representative democracy without such instruments.

This argument is generally advanced about very important decisions, such as constitutional amendments or other changes of the fundamental basis for a society, such as changes of the territory of the state or the right to nation independence.

An objection to the argument that direct democracy provides a better correspondence between the opinions of the citizens and political decisions and policies is that not even by a direct democracy ensures a complete correspondence. Politics inevitably involves conflicts between various interests and opinions. Campaigns of general education and public debate may clear away certain misconceptions, mistakes and resulting disagreements, but it is only exceptionally that complete agreement can be obtained. Groups of citizens have diverging interests and individual citizens hold various values, attitudes and opinions. For this reason some kind of lack of correspondence between the opinions among the citizens and public policies will always prevail. A classical argument is that the larger the community, the more interests and opinions exist, and the more difficult it is to achieve complete or just approximate agreement and correspondence between popular opinions and policies (see for instance Madison, 1788: 127; the argument is discussed by Dahl, 2005: 445). Some citizens have their way, other have to yield. This is why direct democracy with popular initiatives and referendums is better suited for small and homogeneous societies than large societies with many conflicting interests.

But even if no complete correspondence between popular opinions and policies may be ensured, proponents of direct democracy claim that a better correspondence is achieved when decisions are
made by those affected than by other decision-makers. If only some can win and others have to lose, it is better that more agree with the decision than disagree and that all have had the same opportunity to participate in the decision-making (cf. Dahl’s criteria of democracy on equal votes and effective participation, 1989: 106-131). The majority principle is important not only from a normative point of view, but from an empirical point of view as well, because the better the correspondence between popular opinions and policies, the more easy it is to get decisions accepted and followed, and the smaller the risk for breaks and changes.

Everything else being equal, a high degree of correspondence between popular opinions and policies is associated with less resistance and reluctance among those who have to comply with the decisions and policies. “The citizen is more likely to feel entitled to flout a law promoted by an elite, or procured by blackmail or corruption, than one that is seen to reflect the free and informed consent of the majority of citizens” (Geoffrey Walker, cited in Butler & Ranney, 1994: 14). Consequently, fewer measures of coercion and control are needed and fewer expenses have to be spent in order to make decisions authoritative. This means that if policies adopted through direct democracy involve a higher degree of correspondence between popular opinions and policies than policies adopted by institutions of representative democracy, the political efficacy is higher in a direct than in a representative democracy.

Furthermore, if direct democracy involves a higher correspondence between popular opinions and policies, this also contributes to a higher political stability, because more citizens – who have themselves participated in the decision-making – will be willing to defend decisions and policies than to criticise and attack them. Decisions are – everything being equal – approved of more citizens than citizens opposing them, which means that there will be less need for changes and new
policies. Finally, this argument assumes that decisions and policies are perceived as more reasonable and acceptable, when you have, yourself, participated in making them, and that increased legitimacy contributes to both political efficiency and stability.

The second argument for direct democracy is that citizens get *more responsible and committed* to decisions that they have participated in making, than in decisions that have been made by elected representatives. It was one of the classical arguments of the American Progressives that the citizens voting in referendums would inform themselves on the issues, defend their positions against those who felt otherwise, and seek to persuade other to vote with them (Butler & Ranney, 1978: 33). Even though citizens have elected members of parliaments and local councils, and even if they have the opportunity to deny re-election of representatives in case of dissatisfaction with them, something comes in between each an every citizen and the decisions they have to obey. It could be a suspicion that the elected representatives have an eye more to their own interests than to those of the citizens. It could be a disparity between the general political opinions, which formed the basis for the election of representatives, and the more specific content of particular decisions. New issues may be put on the agenda after the election, so the elected representatives do not have a “mandate” to act on behalf of all citizens. And there may be other reasons why the distance in time between the election of representatives and the making of specific political decisions affecting the citizens may be a problem. Furthermore, the sanction of denial of re-election may not be as substantial as it is often claimed to be. It may be rather difficult for the citizens to express their dissatisfaction with a particular decision at the next election, because the political memory is short, because a change of party vote seems to a too drastic consequence to be drawn because of dissatisfaction with a single decisions, and because the party choice is not determined by a single issue, but by of a large number of issues and the ideology or programme of political parties and/or the candidates nominated by the
political parties. In sum, such mechanisms may have the consequence that citizens feel less committed and bound by elected representatives, whereas the higher responsibility and commitment associated with direct democracy contributes to the voluntary acceptance of decisions and policies, and thus to a higher legitimacy. When citizens have themselves participated in making a decision, they feel a larger loyalty to the decision and a stronger duty to comply with it – notwithstanding whether they were on the losing or winning side. Furthermore, such loyalty and sense of duty contributes positively to both political stability and efficiency.

Proponents of direct democracy hold that political efficiency is strengthened by popular initiatives and referendums, because a higher responsibility and sense of duty makes the implementation of political decisions easier. It is comprehensible that if citizens dislike decisions made by elected institutions, they should try to evade decisions they disagree with. For instance, if a citizen lacks confidence in elected politicians he or she may find it easier to defend – both to oneself and fellow citizens – that it is reasonable to evade the obligations of political decisions than if these obligations had been passed in a popular vote in which they have themselves participated.

The political stability is also strengthened by direct democracy because fewer citizens tend to challenge decisions they have participated in making. When a political issue is decided by a popular vote after a public debate, it is more difficult to put it on the agenda soon again and change the decision than if it was made by an elected institution. Thus, if a parliament passes a bill with a majority based on the left wing, a new parliament where the majority has shifted to the right wing will be more inclined to put the issue on the agenda and change the law, than if the law had been approved in a referendum. Although both the Danes and the Irish have voted twice on European treaties within a short period of time, it has also been argued that substantial changes had been made
in order to take account of popular resistance, and in Denmark it has proved very difficult for the political elite to get rid of the four exceptions introduced in the Edinburgh Agreement.

A third argument for direct democracy is that direct participation in political decision-making improves the popular involvement in political life and stimulates political participation (Butler & Ranney, 1978: 31-33). More involvement and participation in turn stimulates the understanding of the possibilities and limitations of political decisions and such enlightened understanding is essential to democracy (Dahl, 1989: 111f). Citizens feel a stronger duty to comply with and a larger readiness to defend decisions that they have taken part in making. This kind of involvement contributes to the over-all acceptance of political decisions. Thus, direct democracy for this reason strengthens legitimacy and efficiency.

Political participation in general and participation in initiatives and referendums in particular has an educational effect (Smith & Tolbert, 2004: 137-38). When voters have to decide a political issue, they are motivated to inform themselves, follow the public debate, and try out opposing arguments in discussions with family, friends, colleagues etc. It is, for instance, hardly accidental that the Danes after participating in several referendums on European issues are among the best informed on such issues in the European Union (Blondel, Sinnott & Svensson, 1998: 185). Understanding the possibilities and limitations of public policies may reduce the demands for new decision and thus improve political stability.

Finally, direct democracy contributes to promoting openness and transparency in society (Butler & Ranney, 1978: 30). Open debate, admission to all relevant information, and public scrutiny of arguments for and against a proposal to be decided in a referendum is a precondition for a viable
direct democracy. When political decisions are handed over to the voters, an obligation follows for
the political authorities and the mass media with a public service obligation to provide the basis for
the decision. While elected politicians in government and parliament have a number of
opportunities to acquire relevant information, the large majority of voters are dependent on the
information provided by the mass media. Thus, public institutions have a responsibility to open up
and provide the relevant information.

Transparency and openness are not only necessary for direct democracy, but also for improving the
possibilities of public control of political leaders. When a political issue is critically examined from
various points of view and all relevant information is provided, the understanding of the necessity
and desirability of political decisions among the citizens is improved and in turn this will,
presumably, encourage the accept of the political decisions. In any case, there is less ground for
development of distrust towards politicians, when politicians and voters act on more or less the
same informational basis for decision-making. Thus, transparency in the political process
contributes to political legitimacy both in direct and representative democracy.

Furthermore, if citizens act on flimsy and imperfect information, more control and sanctions are
needed from the political authorities, because citizens unconsciously and more or less accidentally
break the rules and act against the purpose of the rules and policies. On the other hand, it holds that
the more information citizens have about the purpose and content of rules and policies, the larger is
the chance that they will comply them. Thus, a high degree of openness and transparency
contributes to political efficiency, but in addition may have positive consequences for political
stability, because important interests and opinions are not excluded from the decision-making
process. If such interests and opinions were excluded in a closed decision-making process, they
might cause changes in policies and less stability, when proponents of these interests and opinions gain increased popular support and occupy the positions of power in government and parliament.

When a political issue is openly discussed and critically examined before a decision is made, there will be less cause for change within the near future. Of course, new information may occur and immediate experiences with the implementation of a decision may necessitate a revision, but on the whole more openness and transparency should lead to fewer surprises and more durable decisions, which increase political stability.

That openness and transparency in politics may not be a positive value under all circumstances is discussed below. The main point in relation to direct democracy is, however, that this form of government requires a higher degree of openness, transparency and higher standard of general education in society than a representative democracy, and that this requirement contributes to both political efficiency and stability.

**Arguments against direct democracy**

Western democracies are basically representative democracies or – in the terminology of Robert A. Dahl – polyarchies. If this fact is not merely a result of the strength of well-established interests and the power of political elites, good arguments against direct democracy should prevail (Butler & Ranney, 1978: 34). If representative democracy as a political system rests on a rational basis, these arguments should be stronger than the arguments in favour of direct democracy. Four main arguments against direct democracy are discussed: (1) that direct democracy is associated with lesser quality of political decision-making; (2) that it weakens elected representatives; (3) that it
stimulates deeper conflicts and political polarization; and (4) that the transparency and enlightened understanding required by direct democracy is at the expense of the confidentiality, which may be needed in politics.

The first – and undoubtedly most important – argument against direct democracy is that this form of government does not ensure as high quality of political decisions and policies as a representative democracy. Ordinary citizens are unable to make wise decisions (Butler & Ranney, 1978: 34f). Even though a better correspondence between popular opinions and policies may be attained in a direct democracy, the risk is that bad decisions are made and ill-considered policies adopted. Such consequences may be the result, because prejudices and more or less passing sentiments form the basis for political decision-making in a direct democracy. Furthermore, less coherence in legislation and policies is the result of a succession of initiatives and referendums on single issues under changing circumstances.

An essential argument against direct democracy is and has traditionally been that the people lack the ability to make public decisions in the form of laws and other rules. Ordinary citizens are too ignorant – or perhaps too indolent, if not lazy, to inform themselves – to be handed over a larger responsibility than with regular intervals to elect those who are competent to deal with political decisions on a daily basis. It is both unreasonable and unrealistic to expect ordinary citizens to orientate themselves in complicated political issues, as they have far more important things of a personal matter to deal with. The advantage of representative democracy is that the voters do not need to make up their mind on the details in political life, but only on the main trends and potentialities of the political development. As formulated by the Danish legal philosopher, Alf Ross (1952: 210; 1967: 223):
“While direct democracy firmly holds to the basic democratic ideas of autonomy, self-determination, personal responsibility, representative democracy signifies a modification of these by linking them with the idea of leadership in recognition of and confidence in the greater knowledge and ability of others.”

In addition to elected representatives being more competent than ordinary citizens, representative democracy is also claimed to be advantageous to direct democracy, because decisions made by initiatives and referendums rest on a less informed basis than decisions made by representative institutions. By and large elected representatives using all their time and efforts on informing themselves on political problems and on considering solutions to these problems gain a higher knowledge than the citizens, who among a lot of other activities have more limited time to concern themselves with than political issues.

For these reasons, critics of direct democracy find it more than dubious that any positive contribution to enlightened understanding is achieved by handing out decisions to initiatives and referendums. Most people accept the division a labour that involves that fewer individuals use their time and efforts to make themselves acquainted with political matters. Moreover, in a system of proportional representation as in Continental Europe that opens possibilities for even small minorities for articulating their demands and getting their representatives elected - in particular with a low threshold as in Scandinavian countries - there is little risk that the distance between citizens and elected representatives grows too large and the popular basis for the political regime weakened. The legitimacy that may be gained by direct democracy securing a better correspondence between citizens and policies cannot compensate for the lack of the advantages of modern division of labour, specialisation and competence between popular opinion and public policies. The higher legitimacy claimed by direct democracy is at the expense of decisions of poorer quality, which in the longer
run will undermine the immediate acceptance of decisions and better correspondence. In short, the higher quantity of legitimacy of political decision-making is at the expense of a lower quality of political decision-making.

Furthermore, critics of direct democracy argue that the political efficiency is undermined if more issues are decided by initiatives and referendums. Such decisions are less informed, highly influenced by the mass media, and thus neither adequate, precise nor well-documented. However, poor decisions are not only less efficient in solving the problems at hand, they are also more costly. To inform the public on an issue, to run a long campaign and to sponsor competing groups requires more resources than having parliamentarians and ministers decide an issue.

Finally, critics of direct democracy are not convinced that direct democracy contributes to higher political stability. The risk is rather that this form of government leads to poorer legislation because incoherence and inconsistencies are created between various policies, some adopted by government and parliament and other by initiatives and referendums. Referendums will to a larger extent be decided by changing popular sentiments and actual events influencing popular opinion. With the substantial influence that the mass media – in particular television – has obtained it is inappropriate to decide major issues by popular votes. Constant changes and adaptations are needed in order to create coherence between popular decisions and decisions of elected institutions, which will undermine the political stability.

The second argument against direct democracy is that it weakens elected representatives, as the responsibility of elected representatives is undermined (Butler & Ranney, 1978: 34). When some decisions are made by the people and others by parliament and government in order to implement
the popular decisions and to create coherence in public policies, it becomes impossible to hold the elected representative accountable for the political development. They may quite reasonably argue that their hands have been tied and that they could not pursue the policies they really intended. On the one hand, this makes life easier for less honest politicians; on the other hand, it makes it more difficult for those who try to be honest. For instance, the Danish minister of foreign affairs, Niels Helveg Petersen, resigned in January 2001, because he would not take on the responsibility to administer the Danish exemptions to the Maastricht Treaty adopted with the Edinburgh Agreement.

More specifically a direct democracy tends to weaken the political parties. When the voters decide directly on a number of political issues, in some cases following the advice given by their preferred party, in other cases not doing so, the attachment between parties and voters is loosened. Associated with declining party membership, increased dependence on public financial support and professionalisation of party offices, the introduction of direct democracy will contribute to erode the relationship between the political parties and the citizens.

When becomes more difficult to hold elected politicians accountable and when the loyalty of the voters to the political parties is eroded, the acceptance of political decisions will decline, because the political parties become less credible and their general ideas of the common interest become less relevant. Distrust will increase and support for the regime and the decisions of the political authorities will decline. Thus, direct democracy will not – as claimed by the proponents of direct democracy - lead to a larger, but rather a smaller legitimacy.

It is one of the classical arguments against direct democracy that political authority is undermined when the citizens both make the decisions and shall comply with the same decisions. When
everything may be challenged and rules changed by decisions, which you participate in making, the respect for laws and rules is undermined. Everyone is made the judge on the application of laws and rules, and every one decides for himself what to comply with. In this way, the political efficacy is eroded in a direct democracy. On the other hand, the respect for laws and rules is strengthened, when they have been made by political institutions comprising well-informed and accountable leaders.

Critics of direct democracy, in addition, argue that the impact of direct democracy for the weakened relationship between political parties and voters will be followed by higher volatility. This means less political stability, because continued changes in the strength of power result in frequent governmental reconstructions and shifting majorities in parliament. Thus, it will become increasingly difficult to outline durable policies.

A third argument against direct democracy is that this form of government promotes conflicts rather than compromise and consensus (Butler & Ranney, 1978: 35f). Single issue groups are claimed to be more extreme and less compromising than political parties, which means that direct democracy encourage the taking of extreme positions, whereas the possibility of negotiation and agreement is reduced (Budge, 2001: 68f referring to Magleby, 1984: 188-90 and Cronin, 1989: 248). When a political issue is to be decided by a vote of the people, there are usually only two possibilities, either to vote for or against the ballot text. There are no possibilities for slight differences, negotiations or compromises, and the public debate usually tends to polarize opinions between those who campaign for a yes and a no. Ordinary citizens usually have no well-founded opinion on the issue and only a few have the time and energy to inform themselves properly on new issues. In fact, political liberty is also the liberty to abstain from making up one’s mind on political issues. If citizens more or less
are forced to make up their mind at a referendum, it may not only be on an accidental and insufficient basis, but in addition only half-heartedly. The formation of public opinion is polarised unnecessarily, when citizens are forced to make up their mind for or against a specific decision, while a negotiation between elected representatives in many cases could have accomplished a compromise that took various interests into account.

According to this argument, the political legitimacy is actually not strengthened by a more direct democracy. Decisions do not become more reasonable and fair because all voters have made them, but rather less reliable because many voters associate doubts with their own position and with the final outcome of the popular vote. An element of fortuitousness invades politics and for this reason laws and decisions appear less authoritative, as something you ought to comply with.

According to the critics of direct democracy, the increased level of conflict associated with direct democracy also leads to less political efficiency. When the option is reduced to acceptance or rejection of a public policy, it is less easy to accept a defeat and comply with the majority decision. This means that for a lot of citizens it may be difficult or even impossible to comply with a decision they find completely unacceptable. Rather than a voluntary acceptance of decisions made by well-informed political leaders, a bitter resistance is mobilised against the decision among those who were against the majority decision and who cannot come to terms with the “wrong” decision made. Lacking acceptance of referendum results weakens the compliance with decisions, increases the costs of implementation and, as a consequence, undermines political efficiency.

Furthermore, critics of direct democracy could argue that when politics get polarized and characterised by conflict, it also becomes less stable. The negotiations, moderation and consensus-
seeking that are a characteristic of many representative systems – in particular under proportional representation without any majority party – are lost when decisions are handed out to the people and politics becomes a confrontation between two opposite positions. In such a system of government the influence of political leaders depends on their ability to formulate questions that the voters can understand and make up their mind about and on their ability to manipulate the voters through control of information and performance in the mass media. It becomes vital to have a lot of money in order to run public campaigns and to explore the public opinion through polls, focus groups etc. In short, polarisation and varying outcomes of referendums, where accidental factors and unpredictable public sentiments have decisive influence, will result in lower political stability and the improved interest, involvement and activity claimed by the proponents of direct democracy is at the expense of political stability.

Finally, a fourth argument against direct democracy is that the openness associated with this form of government in many cases is problematic, because it involves less confidentiality in political decision-making. Many political issues, for instance in foreign policy, do not withstand that everything is openly exposed. Some decisions have to be based on confidential information in order to achieve their goals. Some information may only be acquired by a promise of confidentiality. Even though openness and transparency in general may be positive, in many cases negotiations and the seeking of compromises between political opponents require privacy and peace from impatient interference of the mass media.

By opening up for the transparency needed by direct democracy a risk is created for the erosion of confidentiality, which undermines the respect for political decisions by spreading unnecessary doubts and uncertainties. This is neither conducive for legitimacy, efficiency nor stability.
Some kind of trade-off seems to be required and it could, in general terms, be argued that political decision-making should be as open as possible and as confidential as necessary. This means that some issues are less well suitable for direct democracy, and it is hardly accidental that a number of constitutions in western democracies deliberately exclude referendums on certain issues as foreign policy and taxation. The question is, of course, more specifically, whether these are the right issues and whether there are too many or too few exclusions.

Discussion of argument for and against direct democracy

In table 1 the arguments for and against direct democracy are summaries in relation to their supposed impact on the important political goals of legitimacy, efficacy and stability (see, Budge, 1996: 60-61 for another typology of arguments for and against direct democracy).

Table 1 here

Reviewing the arguments for and against direct democracy it seems evident that disagreements mostly are about the understanding of political reality and might be resolved by systematic empirical analysis. Lacking such empirical evidence, the arguments for and against direct democracy rest on interpretations drawn from opposing attitudes to political representation, often called the radical and the liberal theory (Holden, 1974: 68-71). According to the radical theory of democracy, representation is seen as a technical necessity, forced upon those who want to realise a democratic form of government in large societies characterised by substantial social and economic inequalities. According to the liberal theory of democracy representation is, in contrast, seen as a valuable instrument in itself. Representative institutions are more than a technical necessity: “They
perform an independent and desirable function; they are the expression of an elite that, better and more correctly than the people itself, directs the needs that stir within the people” (Ross, 1952: 209; 1967: 222).

In the liberal theory the value of representation and the higher competence of elected representatives as an argument for representative and against direct democracy is often taken for granted. Thus, it has been argued that representation was evitable in what Robert A. Dahl has called the second transformation of the idea of democracy from the city-state to the much larger scale of the nation-state. John Stuart Mill after outlining the value of political participation wrote that “…since all cannot, in a community exceeding a single small town, participate personally in any but some very minor portions of public business, it follows that the ideal type of a perfect government must be representative” (Mill, 1861 (1972): 218). But this does not follow! A representative government is not a logical consequence of larger scale, whereas indirect government is such a logical consequence. The appointment of decision-makers in an indirect government could – to be democratic – be carried out in other ways than electing representatives. Elections have traditionally been the aristocratic method of appointing decision-makers, whereas drawing a lot among the citizens has traditionally been seen as the democratic method of appointing decision-makers (Manin, 1997: chapter 2). For an indirect democracy to be a representative system of government an argument for the higher personal abilities of the elected representative is needed, but it is open for further analysis whether such an argument is documented by empirical evidence. Anyway, it has been argued that the use of lot is meaningful in a modern indirect democracy (Fishkin, 1993; 1995 and for Denmark, Schmidt, 1993).
It is not possible within the limits of a paper like this to go through the empirical evidence that is relevant for testing the arguments summarised in table 1. The claim of the paper is that a number of the arguments could be documented or rejected by empirical research, and that too many arguments are poorly supported by empirical evidence, if at all. In other cases, the evidence may not be as straight forward as often assumed. A few illustrative examples should be sufficient to indicate that available empirical evidence does not exclusively support either the case for or the case against direct democracy.

First, it could be asked, whether available evidence clearly support the argument that the voters are not competent enough to make informed decisions on policy issues that are placed directly on the ballot and that bad decisions undermines political legitimacy? This was clearly the conclusion in classical American studies of voting, such as *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960). New research, however, indicates that voters judge shrewdly and are at least as competent as the corresponding legislators (Cronin, 1989 as cited in Budge, 1996: 71 and 75), and that they appear to be able to draw inferences from available information and to respond to cues when making decisions on ballot propositions:

“That does not mean that all voters, or even most of them, are well informed and in command of narrow factual details about the policies on which they are casting votes. Rather, we show that they vote in predictable ways, in ways that respond to information demands, and in ways that often are consistent with their ideology and … their interests. *At a basic level, then, direct-democracy voters appear sufficiently competent to make informed choices*” (Bowler & Donovan, 1998: 41-42, my emphasis).

Evidence from European studies also indicates that voters are able to inform themselves sufficiently to make reasonable decisions in referendums and that they do not merely vote for or against the
incumbent government. For instance, a study of the Nice referendums in Ireland concluded, that although an effect of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the incumbent government was detectable, it played a much smaller role in determining the outcome compared with the effect of attitudes to a range of European issues. “In short, both Irish referendums on the Nice Treaty were closer to being processes of deliberation on EU issues than to being plebiscites on the incumbent government” (Garry, March and Sinnott, 2005: 215).

A comparative analysis of the four referendums on the European Constitution Treaty in Spain, France, the Netherlands and Luxembourg in 2005 concludes that issue voting was the primary dimension in all four votes and that the referendums engaged public debate and high participation: “More fundamentally, these four votes also allowed citizens to express their opinion on the merits and dements of the constitution as well as the existing integration process.” And more generally, the findings showed that direct democracy is, in comparison with EP elections, a better method for allowing citizens both to participate in the political construction of Europe and hold their elites accountable for the integration project these same elites have moulded” (Glencross & Trechsel, 2007: 15).

If opponents of direct democracy seriously claim that ordinary citizens lack the ability to make political decisions it is doubtful whether it is direct democracy or democracy as such they oppose. When the belief in more well-informed leaders and their more qualified dealing with political matters is combined with such a low evaluation of the political abilities of ordinary citizens the question is whether we are really dealing with a democratic theory of government or rather a theory of guardianship. If the political class of political leaders are claimed to know better than the citizens
themselves what is in the best interest of the citizens, the principle of personal autonomy is rejected (cf. Dahl, 1989: 97-105; Budge, 1996: 82).

Second, does the available evidence clearly prove that high levels of participation is associated with polarisation, less respect for laws and rules, difficult implementation of policies and lower political efficacy? In a classical study of civic culture, American researchers found that high political interest was associated with less openness, less willingness to change points of view and with an almost fanatic party identification. Along these findings, it has been argued that political apathy has a stabilising effect. Citizens in a democracy have, at the same time, to be active in order to influence policy-making and to be law-abiding subjects. As it may be difficult for each and every citizen to balance these two roles, a certain degree of apathy in the electorate as a whole contributes to an over-all balance and stability (Almond & Verba, 1965: 343). This conclusion – or rather interpretation – has been heavily criticised and a recent scrutiny of the evidence concludes that

“the evidence on actual popular participation and involvement in democratic politics does not ‘objectively’ favour the representative argument. It can be interpreted two ways, and there is at least a case for saying, that it demonstrates a potential on the part of ordinary electors for more active involvement, particularly for voting on policies, that is currently allowed them” (Budge, 1996: 17).

Third, is it really true that constant changes are needed in order to create coherence between popular decisions and decisions of elected institutions and that political stability for this reason is undermined? Ian Budge refers to a number of authors that agree on the generally beneficial or at least balanced nature of decisions taken by popular consultations. Among the criteria for their evaluation they include consistency and coherence of public policy: “There are absolutely no sign of a majority steamroller imposing its views on everyone else. For from it. There is a general
predisposition to keep the status quo, especially where the consequences of action is unclear”

The implementation of political decisions is generally done in a co-operation between politicians and civil servants, and the problem is rather that the latter may feel more resistance towards popular decisions than towards decisions made by the political class they belong to themselves. Civil servants may not, accordingly, implement popular decisions with the same energy and determination as decisions made by elected representatives. Anyway, it is remarkable that the Swedish referendum in 1955 rejecting a proposal about a change to driving in the right side of the road was only respected for about ten years, and that it have been very difficult to abolish nuclear power in Sweden despite 40 per cent of the Swedish voters in 1980 approved that this should be done before 1990 and another 40 percent that it should be done before 2010. However, referendums in Sweden are just consultative, but in Denmark the rejection of four land laws in a binding referendum in 1963 did not prevent almost the same regulation to be passed towards the end of the decade. Political stability and adaptation of legislation seems to go well in hand with at least some elements of direct democracy.

The claim of this paper is that supporters and opponents of direct democracy, who want to discuss on a democratic basis, should be able to agree that the empirical evidence does not unambiguously favour the one side over the other. Even though systematic scrutiny of all available evidence is needed and new research is undoubted required in order to be comprehensive, it seems beyond doubt that political legitimacy is increased by direct democracy. At the same time it has to be acknowledged that political efficacy and stability may limit how many issues and how often issues should be decided by popular votes. It has to be realised that it may be too costly - and in fact
impossible - to inform the public sufficiently and conduct proper campaigns on all or even most of the issues to be decided politically (Budge, 1996:63). It is also conceivable that the more issues that are to be decided by popular votes, the higher the risk that the coherence of legislation is lost, perhaps closer scrutiny of evidence from Switzerland could clarify this point?

Even if it is accepted that democracy means rule by the people and that the will of the people shall prevail in case of disagreement, this does not mean that each and every spontaneous and accidental will of the people, which emerge from an opinion poll or from TV viewers pushing a button on a telephone, should decide public issues. The information, the public debate and the high involvement of the citizens cannot be created on all or even the main part of political decisions. If some advantages may be gained in relation to political legitimacy, efficacy and stability by direct democracy, it has for practical reasons to concern a limited number of issues. The number may vary from one country to another according to the political culture and the experience of the citizens and from one issue to another according to the complexity of the issues. Time is needed for information and debate before every popular vote, and it has to be acknowledged that time is a limited resource for citizens as well as media, politicians and civil-servants. A sound conclusion is, accordingly, that popular initiatives and referendums cannot and should not replace, but rather supplement representative democracy (Butler & Ranney, 1994: 13).

It seems as if many supporters and opponents of direct democracy find it hard to accept such a conclusion. On the one hand, supporters often speak so warmly about direct democracy that it is tacitly assumed that they cannot get enough of initiatives and referendums. On the other hand, opponents are so dismissive that they either leave the basis of democracy by completely rejecting the abilities of citizens for participating in politics or they raise drastic consequences of a complete
transition to a direct democracy. In short, supporters and opponents do not communicate, but talk past each other.

In sum, it should not be impossible - after a relaxed debate - to obtain a broad agreement among both supporters and opponents of direct democracy that what could realistically be achieved by institutional changes in a process of continued democratisation is not “a push-button democracy”, where the spontaneous will of the people rules. What could be aimed at, would be a supplement to and not a replacement of representative democracy, and that it would not be all or even most political issues that could or should be decided by initiatives and referendums. The introduction of even modest elements of direct democracy such as popular demand for referendums on bills passed by parliament – rejective initiatives, in the terminology of Pier Vincenzo Uleri (1996: 12) - would undoubted make political participation more effective, broaden the understanding of politics and increase the final control of the agenda by the citizens (cf. Dahl’s criteria for a democratic process, 1989: 106-131).

Nevertheless, even though broad agreement could be achieved on the point of view that it is the well-informed, reflected and sustained will of the people that should inform democracy, and that something could be gained in relation to legitimacy, efficacy and stability by expanding direct democracy to more issues that at present, there would still be room for a large number of disagreements on the number of issues to be put to direct votes, who shall have the right to initiate them, exemptions etc., as such issues are evaluated on the basis of a radical or a liberal theory of democratic representation. Broad agreement on such conflicting conceptions of democracy can hardly be achieved.
References


Table 1: Summary of arguments for and against direct democracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political legitimacy</th>
<th>For direct democracy</th>
<th>Against direct democracy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher correspondence between popular opinions and political decisions means higher acceptance of decisions</td>
<td></td>
<td>Decisions of bad quality and poor consistency in legislation undermines the acceptance of decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher sense of responsibility towards decisions and policies leads to higher loyalty and a sense of duty to comply with decisions and policies</td>
<td></td>
<td>When it becomes more difficult to hold elected politicians accountable and when the loyalty of the voters to the political parties is eroded, the acceptance of political decisions will decline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement and participation in decision-making improves the understanding of policies and a larger readiness to defend them and live with them</td>
<td></td>
<td>Polarisation and varying outcomes of referendums will result in lower political stability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The more information citizens have about the purpose and content of rules and policies, the larger is the chance that they will comply them.</td>
<td></td>
<td>The erosion of confidentiality undermines the respect for political decisions by spreading unnecessary doubts and uncertainties.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Political efficacy</th>
<th>For direct democracy</th>
<th>Against direct democracy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher accept of decisions means fewer expenses for implementation and control</td>
<td></td>
<td>It is costly to inform the public on political issues, to run a long campaigns and to sponsor competent groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly responsible and committed citizens makes implementation easier</td>
<td></td>
<td>When everything may be challenged and rules changes by popular, the respect for laws and rules is undermined and it becomes difficult to implement decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the possibilities and limitations of public policies among citizens requires fewer measures of information, persuasion, control</td>
<td></td>
<td>When the option is reduced to accept or reject a public policy, it is less easy to accept a defeat and comply with the majority decision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-informed citizens are less likely to break the rules and act against the purpose of rules and policies. Thus, less control and coercive measures are needed</td>
<td></td>
<td>The erosion of confidentiality undermines the respect for political decisions by spreading unnecessary doubts and uncertainties.</td>
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Political stability

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<th>For direct democracy</th>
<th>Against direct democracy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Identification with decisions and policies requires fewer changes of decisions and policies</td>
<td>Constant changes are needed in order to create coherence between popular decisions and decisions of elected institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible and committed citizens are less likely to challenge decisions and demand new policies adopted</td>
<td>The weakened relationship between political parties and voters will be followed by higher volatility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the possibilities and limitations of public policies reduces the demands for new decisions</td>
<td>Political decisions become less reliable because many voters associate doubts with their own position and with the final outcome of popular votes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When political issues are openly discussed and critically examined before a decision is made, there will be less cause for change within the near future.</td>
<td>The erosion of confidentiality undermines the respect for political decisions by spreading unnecessary doubts and uncertainties.</td>
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