Referendums and Initiatives: Supplementing or Undermining Representative Democracy?

Although widely used, the term “direct democracy” may be considered misleading because all current democracies are necessarily representative and therefore direct democracy is not a feasible option in modern political systems. However, the term direct democracy can be used to refer to such institutions which allow citizens to raise issues on the decision-making agenda without the mediation of political parties (the initiative), or the settle an issue by a direct popular vote instead of the normal parliamentary procedures (the referendum). Therefore, it is possible to make a distinction between the mediation of people’s opinions in decision-making through the institutions and organisations of representative democracy on the one hand and through the institutions of direct democracy on the other hand.

In the European context, referendums on European integration have frequently raised public debates on the reasons and the justifications given to the use of referendums. Furthermore, the proposal for the EU Constitutional Treaty rejected in the French and Dutch referendums includes a provision for an EU-wide citizens’ initiative which was expected to be a remedy to the “democratic deficit” of the EU decision-making. In the ratification process of the European Constitution the referendum played a major role in some countries and was considered in many others. In several of the new member states of Eastern Europe initiatives and referendums have been quite important, particularly during the transition period.

In many established democracies, there have recently been constitutional debates and also attempts to adopt new institutions of referendums and initiatives at the national level. Although these attempts have not led to significant reforms of national political systems, many countries have
adopted new direct democratic institutions at the local and/or regional level. These developments may indicate some functional deficits of representative institutions which call for additional channels of participation including procedures of direct democracy. Political parties as central actors of representative democracy seem to have an ambivalent position towards institutions of direct democracy. On the one hand they perceive direct democratic devices as competing mechanisms of decision making and political legitimisation, but on the other hand they also quite often use the procedures of direct democracy for their own purposes. Furthermore, party ballots, often called as referendums, have been used more frequently for decision-making inside of parties.

It seems that there are both hopes and fears with regard to the increasing use of referendums and the initiatives alongside with representative procedures. Although the number of academic publications on direct democracy has grown rapidly in the past years, there are still many open questions concerning the use of referendums and initiatives. The general question addressed in this workshop is: Do referendums and initiatives supplement or undermine representative democracy? This question can be approached both theoretically and empirically: i) Theoretically, the aim is to analyse the potentialities and the problems inherent in the use of direct democratic institutions in the context of representative democracies; ii) Empirically, the aim is to outline the role of direct democratic institutions in the existing political systems. The papers in the workshop may deal with the relationship between representative and direct democracy from a variety of perspectives. Especially, the aim is to analyse the relationships between institutional procedures and political actors, as well as the effects of direct democratic devices on participation and on legitimisation.

The papers may, for example, deal with the following research questions. In which situations the demand for referendums is raised? What kinds of patterns there are in political parties’ attitudes to direct democracy? How are parties affected by these institutional mechanisms, how do they themselves use them? Why there have been so many referendums on European integration? How does the use of referendums and initiatives influence parliamentary procedures and accountability? Do referendums and initiatives increase voters’ political knowledge and political interest? How do these instruments work in terms of political mobilization? In which ways public trust and satisfaction with representative democracy is related to support for direct democracy? Are there specific potentials of direct democratic procedures for conflict resolution and reconciliation? What can be their role in constitutional politics? Could the use of referendums and initiatives remedy “democratic deficits” at various levels of governance?
The workshop invites a wide array of papers dealing with the relationship between direct and representative democracy. Papers applying normative theories of democracy and rational choice theory are especially welcome. Empirically, case studies and comparative studies are equally welcome as well as papers applying different quantitative and qualitative methods. However, preference will be given to papers which combine theoretical and empirical approaches and papers which use research methods in an innovative manner.

The workshop directors have many contacts with academics from both Western and Eastern Europe studying direct democracy, for example Prof. Algis Krupavicius (Kaunas University of Technology), Dr. Eric Lastic (University of Bratislava), Dr. Laurence Morel (EUI), Prof. Palle Svensson (University of Aarhus). Both directors were involved in organizing panels on direct democracy at the ECPR General Conference in Budapest in 2005. The scholars in these already established networks are obviously potential participants of the workshop. The workshop is, however, open to all, including young and established academics, studying the role of direct democratic procedures in representative systems. The workshop directors will look into the possibilities of publishing the papers of the workshop, and they will investigate funding opportunities for the publication project and other possible projects resulting from the workshop.

Theo Schiller is a Professor of Political Science at Philipps University in Marburg, Germany. He has published Direkte Demokratie - Eine Einführung (Campus 2002) and Direkte Demokratie - Forschungen und Perspektiven (Westdeutscher Verlag 2002, co-edited with V. Mittendorf) and articles on direct democracy in German local politics, in constitutional politics and in Europe's "secondary democracy". Articles in preparation include an account of recent direct democracy developments in Germany, initiative procedures in European comparison, and approaches of democratic theory to direct democracy. He organised data-base resources and conferences on the subject.

Maija Setälä is a Senior Research Fellow at the Åbo Akademi University, Finland. She has studied referendums and various aspects of democratic theory. In her book Referendums and Democratic Government (Macmillan 1999) and in her articles on referendums she has compared national-level institutions of referendums and analysed the role of referendums from the perspective of democratic theory. She has two forthcoming journal articles on referendums: “Referendums in European Democracies: Recent Developments” in Representation (2006) and “On the Problems of