

The History and Current State of Direct Democracy in the World



A woman casts her ballot in the Central African Republic during the referendum, UN Photo/Nektarios Markogiannis

KEY FINDINGS

- Mechanisms of direct democracy are increasingly used for contentious and important decisions, yet the lack of comparative data on direct democracy has impeded understanding of the breadth of its use and quality.
- V-Dem data allows for assessment of the quality and prevalence of direct democracy around the world.
- On average, the potential for direct democracy has increased worldwide, but this increase is not evenly distributed across the globe.

Direct democracy is not a new concept. Mechanisms of direct democracy have been used with varying frequency around the world. In recent decades, direct democracy has become an increasingly important tool. However, despite the increasing salience of direct democracy, cross-national data on the topic has been lacking (WP 17:3). The V-Dem data set addresses this gap with data on direct democracy of unprecedented depth and scope. Based on this data, V-Dem Working Paper 17 (WP 17) presents a new index to measure the state of direct democracy around the globe. This policy brief presents the key findings of this new research.

Direct democracy is “an institutionalized process by which citizens of a region or country register their choice or opinion on specific issues through a ballot” (Altman 2016: 2). This definition encompasses initiatives, referendums and plebiscites and excludes recall elections and deliberative assemblies, as well as any other situation where voting is not done in secret (Altman 2016).

New Index of Mechanisms of Direct Democracy (MDD)

In WP 17, Altman distinguishes four different Mechanisms of Direct Democracy (MDD): popular initiatives, referendums, mandatory referendums and plebiscites. He then places these mechanisms into two sub-groups: citizen initiated (CI-MDD) and top-down initiatives (WP 17:4). In the realm of CI-MDD, popular initiatives offer an alternative to the sta-

tus quo, while referendums are used to prevent change. Top-down MDD encompass obligatory referendums and plebiscites. Obligatory referendums are used mostly for constitutional questions. Authorities’ plebiscites are usually utilized as a consultative tool for policy questions (WP 17:4).

According to Altman (2016: 2) direct democracy has three key dimensions: the ease of triggering, the ease of approval and the consequentiality of the vote. Ease of triggering refers to the existence of an institutional framework allowing for MDD, the number of signatures needed to trigger the MDD and the timeframe for signature collection. Ease of approval is about the quorums pertaining to participation, approval, supermajorities or district majorities that are needed to approve a MDD such as a popular initiative. Finally, consequentiality captures whether the decision taken by the people is consultative or binding, as well as the track record on the implementation of successful MDDs.

Altman aggregates V-Dem data capturing these dimensions to a new index. This index captures the Direct Democracy Practice Potential (DDPP) for 197 countries from 1900 to 2014.

State of Direct Democracy

The early 1900s saw a slow but gradual upward trend for DDPP and it was at a steady level until the 1960s. From the 1960s until the 1990s DDPP levels increased. This increase can be attributed to newly inde-

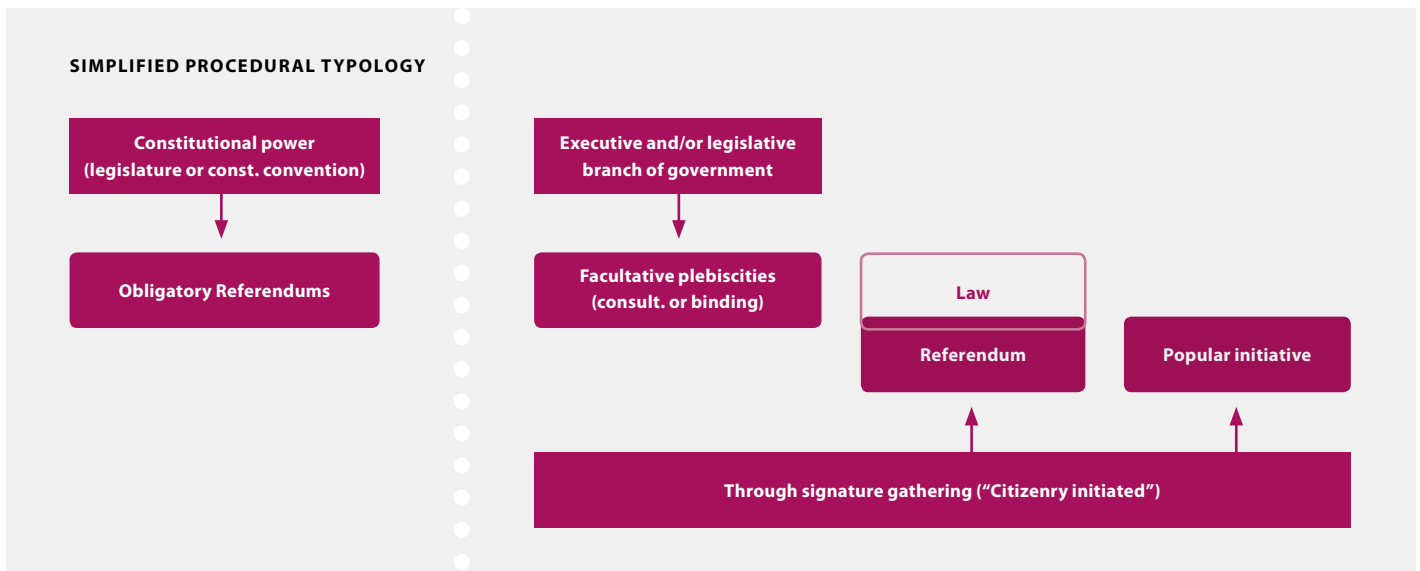


Figure 1: Simplified procedural typology of mechanisms of direct democracy. Source: WP 17:4

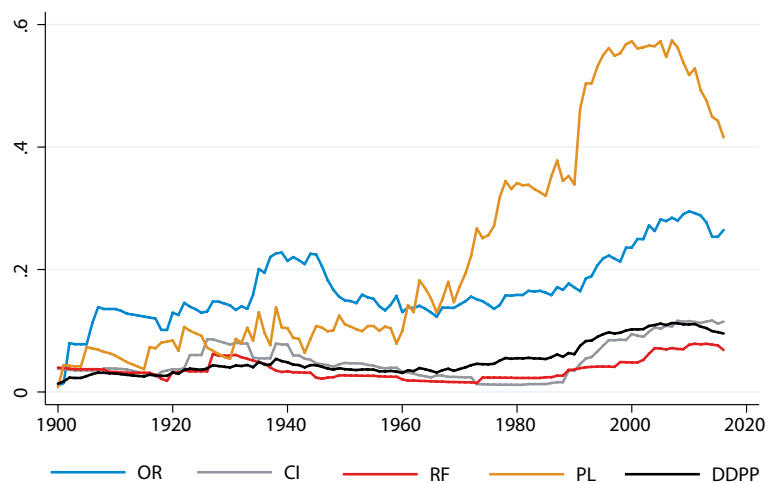


Figure 2. World average of direct democracy practice potential 1900 to 2014. Source: WP 17:16.
Note: OR = Obligatory Referendums RF = Referendums CI = Citizen Initiatives PL = Plebiscites DDPP = Direct Democracy Practice Potential.

pendent states because former French colonies tended to follow the French constitution and implemented the right to call for plebiscites for election of their presidents (WP 17:17). In the 1990s, DDPP levels as a global average increased because many post-Soviet states adopted referenda as a mechanism for constitutional changes (WP 17:17). As of 2014, obligatory referendums have increased the most according to the global average, followed by referendums and citizen initiatives. Citizen initiatives and referendums have seen a minor upward trend in recent decades, but remain the least developed Mechanism of Direct Democracy across the world.

Figure 3 provides a general overview of the state of DDPP around the world in 2012. The darker the shade, the more potential there is for DDPP on the national level. While there are certain geographical con-

centrations, there are still sharp divides within continents and groups of countries as well. High levels of DDPP can be found in many countries in North and West Africa, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, as well as in Latin America.

Implications of the Data

Recent controversial referenda highlight the importance of direct democracy across the world. Altman's research shows that there is no single instrument of direct democracy, but rather that the institutional rules differ greatly.

Quorums, signature collection times and ease of approval are all important for ensuring a high level of direct democracy. The DDPP is depend-

STATE OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY PRACTICE POTENTIAL IN THE WORLD IN 2012



Figure 3. Source: WP 17:17. The darker the shade of grey, the higher the DDPP country score.

ent on the complex relationship of these components. For example, in some countries triggering a popular vote is easy, but nevertheless the potential for direct democracy is low due to participation quorums. This problem has been particularly acute in Eastern Europe (Altman 2016). In other countries, such as Switzerland or Australia, double majorities of cantons or states are required for certain types of mechanisms of direct democracy be approved. Similar situations occur with approval quorums or super-majorities, although these qualifications are much less used and extended than the former ones.

In order to refine and expand their use of direct democracy instruments, political actors can refer to V-Dem data and Altman's findings. For proponents of direct democracy, the positive trends in the 1960s and 1990s are important to note. The potential for direct democracy can be increased with popular ratification of constitutional amendments.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- V-Dem is the first data set to provide academics, policy makers and practitioners with a comprehensive empirical basis for understanding the development of direct democracy.
- Policy makers aiming at increasing the levels of direct democracy need to pay attention to the institutional details that shape the potential for direct democracy such as quorums, signature collection processes and requirements for a popular vote for constitutional change.

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ABOUT V-DEM INSTITUTE

V-Dem is a new approach to conceptualizing and measuring democracy. The project's multidimensional, nuanced and disaggregated approach acknowledges the complexity of the concept of democracy. With four Principal Investigators, two Project Coordinators, fifteen Project Managers, more than thirty Regional Managers, almost 200 Country Coordinators, several Assistant Researchers, and approximately 2,600 Country Experts, the V-Dem project is one of the largest-ever social science data collection projects with a database of over 15 million data points.



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