



Referendum Democracy: Citizens, Elites, and Deliberation in Referendum Campaigns

Matthew Mendelsohn and Andrew Parkin (eds.)

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Mendelsohn and Parkin's edited collection reflects the growing interest in institutions that enable increased citizen participation in decision-making processes and, more specifically, the growing use of the referendum across liberal democracies. The book is primarily concerned with the effects that referendums have on the practice of liberal democracy and draws together a wide range of scholars working within democratic theory, election and public opinion research and political communication.

The editors use the term 'referendum democracy' as a way of highlighting the extent to which the referendum has become increasingly embedded in the practice of liberal democracies and to move away from the unhelpful and inaccurate opposition of representative *vs* direct democracy. The collection is usefully divided into three broad sections. The first section investigates the reasons why we are witnessing the rising use of referendums. The second section focuses on the impact of referendums on liberal democratic institutions, processes and values, including the role of political parties, the defence of minority rights and our understanding of the principle of equality. The final section analyses the impact on deliberation and decision making, raising questions about voter competence, media effects and the impact of majoritarian decision rules on democratic deliberation.

The subtitle of the collection provides an explicit framework for analysis: the relationship between citizens, elites and deliberation. Typically, the normative commitment to the use of referendums rests on the ideal of political equality realized through direct citizen participation in collective decision making. One of the key themes that emerges throughout the collection is that the analysis of the actual practice and institutional design of referendums exposes the extent to which elites — whether government, powerful interest groups or the media — are often able to set the agenda and define the choices available to citizens. The vision of unmediated citizen engagement is certainly naïve. For critics, this undermines the legitimacy of referendums; for proponents, political leaders, parties and interest groups play an important role in, for example, the provision of information and mobilizing citizens. The institutional framework and the wider political context are



important factors in understanding the relationship between citizens and elites in referendum processes.

The third factor — deliberation — is less well developed within the collection. Although a number of the contributions make passing reference to recent work on democratic deliberation, only the last chapter by Simone Chambers on constitutional referendums engages explicitly and systematically with debates in this area. Given that many deliberative theorists celebrate the public sphere of civil society as the location par excellence of democratic deliberation, the referendum offers an innovative mechanism for communicating wider public debate and opinion and affecting decision making. But Chambers is not convinced of the deliberative potential of referendums. She believes that the majoritarian decision rule (the yes/no vote) hinders the cultivation of mutuality and reciprocity, dispositions essential to democratic dialogue: ‘referendums invite participants to approach debate strategically rather than discursively, that is it creates the incentive to find arguments that will sway only the needed number of voters’ (p. 241). We are faced with the intriguing paradox that the use of particular decision rules may undermine the conditions for democratic deliberation.

The strength of this collection lies in the diverse approaches taken by contributors: no one method of analysis of referendums is favoured; evidence is drawn from across Western Europe, North America and Australia. However, this eclecticism also proves to be a weakness. ‘Referendum democracy’ refers to a wide range of different kinds of institutions such as government-sponsored referendums or citizen initiatives, a focus on legislative or constitutional issues and procedures that are binding or simply consultative. Chapters focus on different aspects of referendum democracy making comparison across chapters difficult. Although the editors provide a useful introduction to the different chapters, an explicit analysis of the variety of different ‘types’ of referendums and initiatives would have been helpful. That said, this is not intended as an introductory text, but rather as part of the ongoing analysis of referendums. Overall, it is an impressive collection that provides an engaging insight into a range of current debates about the role and impact of referendums and highlights the importance of both theoretical and empirical research on questions of institutional design within liberal democracies.

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