

THE GLOBAL STATE OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY REPORT 2026

Clara Egger, Department of Public Administration and Sociology,
Erasmus School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Erasmus University Rotterdam
Raul Magni-Berton, Ethics-AnthropoLab, Catholic University of Lille

INHALT

FOREWORD	4
1. LOCAL DIRECT DEMOCRACY: MEASUREMENTS, DATABASES, AND GLOSSARY	5
1.1. Mapping institutions of direct democracy	5
1.2. Glossary of key terms used in the State of Direct Democracy Report	6
2. LOCAL DIRECT DEMOCRACY AROUND THE WORLD	7
2.1. Introduction	7
2.1.1. The challenges of direct democracy at local level	8
2.1.2. What we owe to local direct democracy	9
2.2. Local direct democracy institutions: a global overview	10
2.3. Swiss Cantons	13
2.3.1. The Swiss model of local direct democracy	13
2.3.2. A brief history of local direct democracy in Switzerland	14
2.3.2. Institutional designs across Swiss cantons	16
2.3.3. Interview with Bruno Kaufmann: thought leader on global direct democracy	17
2.3.4. The Swiss laboratory of direct democracy: interview with Prof. Isabelle Stadelmann-Steffen	19
2.4. United States	20
2.4.1. Direct democratic institutions at the state level	20
2.4.2. Historical development of direct democracy in the United States	21
2.4.3. Comparative analysis of local designs in the United States	22
2.4.4. Building a global movement around direct democracy: interview with Joe Matthews	25
2.4.5. Pioneering the study of the effects of direct democracy: interview with John G. Matsusaka	27
2.5. German Bundesländer	28
2.5.1. An overview of direct democracy in the German Bundesländer	28
2.5.2. German Direct democracy institutions	29
2.5.3. A German driving force for direct democracy: Interview with Frank Rehmet	32
2.5.4. A productive German academic research on direct democracy: interview with Prof. Brigitte Geissel	33
2.6. Conclusion	34
3. KEY POPULAR VOTES IN 2024 & 2025	35
3.1. Mandatory Referendums	36
3.1.1. Two Constitutional Referendums in Ireland: Family and Care (2024)	36
3.1.2. Referendum in Uruguay on Nighttime Police Searches (2024)	36
3.1.3. Two Constitutional Referendums in Vanuatu on Representative Mandates (2024)	36
3.1.4. Four Niuean Constitutional Referendums (2024)	37
3.1.5. Constitutional Referendum in the Marshall Islands (2025)	37
3.1.6. Constitutional Referendum in Nauru (2025)	37

3.2. Citizen-Initiated Constitutional Amendments	38
3.2.1. Nine Constitutional Initiatives in Switzerland (2024 and 2025)	38
3.2.2. Constitutional Initiative in Uruguay on Pension Reform (2024)	39
3.2.3. Constitutional Referendum in Lithuania on Dual Nationality (2024)	39
3.2.4. Constitutional Initiative in Liechtenstein on Direct Election of the Executive (2024)	39
3.2.5. Subnational Constitutional Initiatives in the United States: Abortion and Others (2024 and 2025)	40
3.3. Veto Referendums and Legislative Initiatives	40
3.3.1. Eight Facultative Referendums in Switzerland (2024 and 2025)	40
3.3.2. Five Facultative Referendums in Liechtenstein (2024)	41
3.3.3. Slovenia: Abrogative Referendum on Assisted Dying (2025)	41
3.3.4. Italy: Five Abrogative Referendums (2025)	42
3.3.5. Legislative Initiative in Liechtenstein (2024)	42
3.4 Legal Plebiscites	42
3.4.1. Constitutional Plebiscites in Ecuador (2024 and 2025)	42
3.4.2. Consultative Plebiscites in Slovenia (2024)	43
3.4.3. Constitutional Plebiscite in Moldova on European Union Integration (2024)	43
3.4.4. Plebiscite in Kazakhstan on Nuclear Power (2024)	43
3.4.5. Constitutional Referendum in Qatar: Increasing Executive Powers (2024)	44
3.4.6. Legislative Plebiscite in Taiwan (2025)	44
3.5. Ad Hoc Plebiscites	44
3.5.1. Cayman Islands: Three-Question Consultative Referendum (2025)	44
3.5.2. Constitutional Plebiscite in Gabon (2024)	45
3.5.3. Constitutional Plebiscite in Guinea (2025)	45
3.5.4. Slovenia: Cancelled NATO Referendums (2025)	45
3.5.5. Haiti: Failed Constitutional Referendum Attempt (2021–2025)	46

4. LATEST SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE ON DIRECT DEMOCRACY 46

4.1. Conceptualizing, strengthening and protecting direct democracy	46
4.2. Direct democracy and public policy	47
4.3. Direct Democracy and political behaviour	48
4.3.1. Voting Behaviour, Civic Virtues, and Well-Being	48
4.3.2. Legitimacy and Referendum Outcomes	50
4.4. The Strategic Use of Direct Democracy	50
4.5. Who Supports Direct Democracy? Trust, Populism, and Self-Interest	51
4.6. Global Trends and Cross-National Patterns	52
4.7. History of Direct Democracy	52
Conclusion	53

5. DEVELOPMENTS TO FOLLOW IN 2026 55

5.1. Thailand: the road to democracy?	56
5.2. Will the mandatory referendum be introduced in France?	56
5.3. Towards an increase of successful referendums in Germany?	57

FOREWORD

When we published the first edition of the Global State of Direct Democracy Report, we aimed to answer deceptively simple questions: What is the state of direct democracy institutions around the world? How do citizens make use of the right to propose and veto legislation? This second edition builds on that foundation — and the world it documents has not stood still.

A PARTICULARLY PROLIFIC YEAR. The contrast with our previous edition is striking. In the Global State of Direct Democracy Report 2024, we acknowledged that 2023 had been a lean year for popular votes. 2024 answered that question emphatically. Ireland, Uruguay, Vanuatu, Niue, Switzerland, Lithuania, and Liechtenstein all held consequential national votes. In the United States, a post-Dobbs wave of citizen-initiated amendments swept through ten states. Moldova, Ecuador, Kazakhstan, Qatar, and Slovenia added further episodes of varying democratic quality. By any measure, 2024 was one of the most active years for popular voting in recent memory — not only in volume, but in substance: constitutional safeguards against self-entrenchment worked in the Pacific, Swiss voters drew clear lines on pension and environmental policy, and Moldovan voters enshrined a European future by the narrowest of margins. 2025 was more sobering: backsliding accelerated in the United States, post-coup referendums in Gabon and Guinea entrenched military rule, and Haiti’s long-planned constitutional vote was cancelled entirely as state collapse made any genuine popular consultation impossible.

WHAT THIS REPORT CONTAINS. The report is organised into five parts: the conceptual and institutional foundations of direct democracy; a global mapping of direct democratic institutions with particular attention to the local level; a detailed account of every significant national vote in 2024 and 2025; a review of the latest scientific evidence published in English on direct democracy; and a forward-looking section identifying key developments to watch in 2026 — from Thailand’s constitutional process to a possible mandatory referendum in France and ongoing local reforms in Germany.

THE FOCUS: LOCAL DIRECT DEMOCRACY. After a first general issue, each report adopts a thematic focus. This one turns the lens on subnational direct democracy — paradoxically both the most familiar and the least systematically studied arena. We concentrate on three countries where local direct democracy is deeply institutionalised and well documented: Germany, Switzerland, and the United States. Interviews bring scholarly and practitioner insight to this comparative picture.

A CALL TO PROMOTE DIRECT DEMOCRACY. We write at a moment of unusual democratic anxiety. Direct democracy, when genuinely placing power in the hands of the many rather than the few, is a cure for backsliding. However, it can be threatened. The institutions that exist today were built slowly, over decades. Democracy — representative and direct alike — does not survive neglect. In a time when it is challenged everywhere, those who value it must be prepared to say so plainly, and to work to preserve, strengthen, and disseminate what has been built.

Clara Egger, Erasmus University Rotterdam
Raul Magni-Berton, Catholic University of Lille

1. LOCAL DIRECT DEMOCRACY: MEASUREMENTS, DATABASES, AND GLOSSARY

The Global State of Direct Democracy Report provides a global, comparative overview of direct democracy by analysing the legal design of its institutions and reviewing recent practice and academic debate. This second edition focuses on local-level institutions, with particular attention to three well-documented and highly developed cases: Germany, Switzerland, and the United States. By 'local', we mean 'sub-national', including regions and smaller territories. In many parts of the world, local direct democracy institutions exist in large numbers, but its scope is modest and its use infrequent. While national-level direct democracy has been widely compared, local-level comparison remains underdocumented. Only two comparative books (in English language) exist: Theo Schiller's 2011 edited volume¹, limited to Europe, and Christophe Prémat's 2022² collection of case studies. Neither achieves the systematic coverage possible at the national level, largely because local direct democracy varies more widely and depends heavily on each state's territorial organization.

Exhaustively covering local direct democracy in even a single country is difficult; doing so globally is beyond the reach of current scholarship. Such a database will likely emerge gradually through the accumulation of national studies. For now, we offer a global but suggestive map centred on the three most effective and best-documented models.

The report retains the conceptualization used in the first edition: direct democracy as a set of institutions granting citizens initiative and veto rights. The hierarchy between direct and representative institutions remains central, with particular attention to obligatory referendums and constitutional citizen initiatives.

Beyond the local-level analysis, the report also reviews developments from 2024, including notable local trends, major national referendums, and key debates and evidence on direct democracy. This introductory chapter outlines the landscape of local direct democracy, contrasts existing data sources, clarifies the institutional scope covered in the report, and presents a glossary of key terms.

1.1. Mapping institutions of direct democracy

The State of Direct Democracy Report mostly draws upon the **Direct Democracy Navigator**³ (hereafter: the Navigator, see text box below) a database developed by Rolf Büchi (IRI Europe), Bruno Kaufmann (Swiss Democracy Foundation) and Dr. Klaus Hofman (Democracy International) that details the different direct democracy institutions in use around the world. It includes ten different types of procedures and three main institutions: the initiative, the referendum and the plebiscite. Launched in 2010, the Direct Democracy Navigator was initially designed for civil society actors and the media but is now moving towards a more academic format to facilitate its use by scholars. The Navigator aims to annually review the progress and challenges of direct democracy around the world and to contribute to better analysing how direct democratic institutions work.

Box 1.1. The Direct Democracy Navigator

The Direct Democracy Navigator is the world's largest online database for Direct Democracy currently documenting around 2 000 institutions of direct democracy in more than 100 countries on the national, regional and local levels. Two criteria are used to classify the identified institutions: initiation and authorship. The database distinguishes five types of institutions of direct democracy: citizen initiative, agenda initiative, referendum, veto referendum and the mandatory referendum. The Navigator details the legal design of each of these institutions, including, among others, the signature threshold required as well as potential quorum and supermajority requirements.

The Navigator is the only comparative database that aims to cover both national and local (including regional) direct democracy legislation around the world. Currently, the Navigator presents all direct democratic institutions, with updates to national and local data released annually. The data used in this report is cross-referenced with that from other data initiatives and reports that also collect information on direct democratic institutions across the globe, albeit often only partially.

¹Schiller, T. (Ed.) (2011). *Local direct democracy in Europe*. VS Verlag.

²Prémat, C. E. (Ed.). (2022). *Direct Democracy Practices at the Local Level*. IGI Global.

³Democracy International/Swiss Democracy Foundation (2024), *Direct Democracy Navigator*, <https://direct-democracy-navigator.org/>.

While this database largely covers local legislation, many details concerning the concrete functioning of these institutions are difficult to find because they appear in secondary sources of law. Also, at the municipal level, specific devices are used for some communes, resulting in thousands of exceptions or specific cases. Inevitably, there are many omissions and mistakes in the database. Finally, the Navigator only collects the legislative design of direct democracy, not practices.

More accurate—though still incomplete—data on local direct democracy can be found within individual countries. Three countries stand out for the breadth and quality of their documentation: Germany, Switzerland, and the United States. These are also the countries where local direct democracy is most deeply institutionalized, aside from microstates.

GERMANY. Mehr Demokratie, a non-profit organization advocating for direct democracy in Germany and the European Union, maintains detailed data on legal procedures, initiatives, and referendums. Frank Rehm—interviewed in this report—oversees the Volksbegehrensbericht, a biennial report on the state of direct democracy in the Länder. It provides a comprehensive overview of available procedures, the number and types of initiatives undertaken, their topics, and their outcomes.

SWITZERLAND. Data on Swiss direct democracy is both abundant and of high quality. To complement the Navigator’s information, we rely on cantonal constitutions available in online legal archives. To assess accessibility, we calculate signature thresholds as a share of the 2024 population using data from the Federal Statistical Office.

UNITED STATES. Ballotpedia offers an exceptionally rich repository of information on the design of direct democratic institutions, annual ballot measures, and the historical context of each procedure. The work of John Matsusaka—also interviewed in this report—provides further insight into the accessibility and evolution of these institutions.

1.2. Glossary of key terms used in the State of Direct Democracy Report

In this report, we focus on direct democratic institutions that grant citizens initiative and veto powers. We exclude minor forms—such as agenda initiatives or non-binding citizen-initiated referendums (see the first report)—as well as top-down instruments like plebiscites.

We define a **citizen initiative** as a legal mechanism that extends the right of legislative initiative to all citizens. Individuals may submit a proposal to the legislative authority, provided they gather the required number of supporting signatures. Two main types of citizen initiatives are examined in this report.

1. Citizen-initiated constitutional amendment. This is the most consequential form of initiative. It allows any citizen to propose a constitutional amendment and submit it to a binding referendum. At the local level, this is only possible where local governments operate under a constitution—typically in federal or confederal systems. Terminology varies: in Germany it is the *Verfassungsinitiative*, in Switzerland the popular initiative, and in the United States the initiated constitutional amendment.

2. Legislative citizen initiative. This mechanism enables citizens to propose ordinary legislation and trigger a binding referendum on their proposal. Citizen-initiated laws thus coexist with parliamentary legislation, while constitutional amendments remain the exclusive domain of the legislature. In Germany, this is the *Gesetzesinitiative*; in the United States, the initiated state statute. California and Colorado allow citizens to combine statutory and constitutional changes in a single initiative. Switzerland does not have a distinct term for legislative initiatives, which do not exist at the federal level; they are also referred to as popular initiatives, with the clarification that they concern ordinary legislation.

We define **referendums** as instruments that extend veto power from elected representatives to the entire electorate.

Two main types are included:

1. Mandatory referendum. A referendum is automatically required for certain political decisions. These typically involve constitutional amendments, but in Switzerland they may also apply to major public expenditures (financial referendums) or specific ordinary laws. In Germany, these are *obligatorische Verfassungsreferenden*; in Switzerland, obligatory referendums. In the United States, the equivalent is the legislatively referred constitutional amendment, whereby all legislature-initiated constitutional amendments must be approved by voters.

2. Suspensive referendum. This mechanism allows citizens to collect signatures to suspend the implementation of a law adopted by parliament and force a referendum on it. It is a more flexible counterpart to the mandatory referendum, typically used for ordinary legislation given the volume of decisions involved. In some cases—such as Liechtenstein—it may also apply to constitutional amendments. Terminology again varies: in Germany it is the *Referendumsbegehren*, in Switzerland the facultative referendum, and in the United States the veto referendum.

These key institutions to strengthen democratic governance are presented below in table 1.1, with its national names.

Right granted to citizens	Institution's name	German name	Swiss name	US name
Initiative	Citizen-initiated constitutional amendment	Constitutional initiative	Popular initiative	Initiated constitutional amendment
	Legislative citizens' initiative	Legislative initiative	Popular initiative	Initiated state statute
Veto	Mandatory referendum	Obligatory referendum	Obligatory referendum	Legislatively referred constitutional amendments
	Suspensive referendum	Referendum request	Facultative referendum	Veto referendum

Table 1.2 – Institutions covered in the State of Democracy Report

2. LOCAL DIRECT DEMOCRACY AROUND THE WORLD

2.1. Introduction

The local tier is particularly intriguing because, in the popular imagination, it is seen as the ideal arena for direct democracy—while, upon closer examination, it raises challenges far more complex than those encountered at the national level. We are often guided by a misleading intuition that leads us to believe direct democracy is ill-suited to large and populous countries. Although the origin of this idea is very old, it famously appears in the foundational texts of United States democracy, where James Madison asserted: *“In a democracy, the people meet and exercise the government in person; in a republic, they assemble and administer it by their representatives and agents. A democracy,*

consequently, will be confined to a small spot. A republic may be extended over a large region." The claim seemed so self-evident to Madison that he felt no need to justify it. This is partly why direct democracy was not adopted at the national level in the United States, which instead became a republic—or, as we would say today, a representative democracy. Yet at that time, the United States had a population of roughly 3.9 million people, barely a tenth of today's California, which—as we shall see—regularly practices direct democracy. Was Madison mistaken?

The answer lies chiefly in how one conceives direct democracy. In the *Global State of Direct Democracy* reports, we define direct democracy as a form of popular sovereignty, meaning that every citizen participates in the country's most important decisions. Citizens may propose laws and vote directly for or against the changes proposed by others. This definition is not original; it corresponds to what Madison, and before him Aristotle, had in mind. What remains vague in such a definition, however, are the concrete mechanisms through which each citizen may propose changes and decide whether to adopt them. One might think, for example, of the Athenian Ecclesia, where all Athenian citizens gathered and enjoyed the right both to propose and to vote on laws. Although the Pnyx—the esplanade where these great assemblies took place—was spacious, it is difficult to imagine densely populated countries functioning in this manner. This is what Madison had in mind, and it is also what many people unfamiliar with contemporary direct democracy continue to imagine today.

Yet, in the eighteenth century, a simple method was found to make direct democracy compatible with populous states. Any citizen may initiate legislation through a petition that rallies a required number of supporters. Once that threshold is reached, all citizens may accept or reject the proposal through a referendum. Petitions and referendums are therefore the modern instruments that make direct democracy feasible in large and densely populated states.

Thanks to this mechanism, direct democracy today functions just as well in large communities as in small ones, in local realities and in national ones. It is true that very small communities can still rely on assemblies. The Swiss canton of Glarus, for example—whose citizenry is roughly comparable to that of ancient Athens—still practices direct democracy in its traditional form. Yet it is equally true that most communities, even those smaller than Athens, in Switzerland or elsewhere, prefer to rely on petitions and referendums rather than gathering all citizens in a single venue. In fact, it is this petition-and-referendum model that has spread widely and has become the standard institution of modern direct democracy. It is therefore not because local government is the easiest level at which to implement direct democracy that we devote a section of this report to it; rather, it is because, as we explain below, the local level is the one that poses the greatest challenges to making direct democracy work. It is also because it is thanks to local practices that we have learned so much about direct democracy today.

2.1.1. The challenges of direct democracy at local level

Democracy is *direct* when decisions made directly by the people stand hierarchically above those made by their representatives⁴. In Switzerland, for example, a popular initiative immediately acquires constitutional force, such that no other institution may override it. Parliament, for its part, cannot amend the Constitution without the approval of the entire electorate. This hierarchy is essential to ensuring a core democratic requirement: that decisions taken through more inclusive procedures always hold greater authority than those taken through less inclusive ones.

From the standpoint of a sovereign state, respecting this hierarchy is straightforward: citizens directly control their constitution, parliament enacts statutory law, and the government issues decrees and regulations. The hierarchy of norms thus mirrors the degree of inclusiveness of the institution that produces them. At the local level, however, matters become far less clear. One must determine not only whether this hierarchy is respected within the local system itself, but also whether it is upheld in the relationship between the local and national levels.

Consider, for instance, unitary states: they have no local constitutions. As a result, citizen initiatives or referendums at the local level do not generate norms that stand above those enacted by local representatives. In federal states, by contrast, constitutional initiatives often exist at the subnational level, making it possible for directly enacted norms to enjoy superior status. Yet these norms must still yield to federal legislation. When direct democracy

⁴For a justification of this definition, please refer to the *Global State of Direct Democracy 2024*.

exists only at the local level—as is the case in Germany or the United States—direct popular decisions may indeed outrank decisions made by local representatives, but they remain subordinate to decisions produced by federal representatives. A further challenge arises when federal legislation itself respects the hierarchy characteristic of direct democracies. Local norms—even constitutional ones—remain inferior to federal legislation, even when the latter is not constitutional in nature. This may create problems of inverted hierarchy.

These problems are partly avoided in Switzerland, where ordinary laws have always been subject to the possibility of a rejective referendum; even when no referendum is held, such laws may be regarded as having obtained implicit popular consent. Here the direct democratic hierarchy of the sources of law is respected because only the citizens (federal) can restrict the decision made by the citizens (cantonal). Even more striking is the case of Liechtenstein, where municipalities (Gemeinden) possess a constitutional right to secede from the country and become sovereign entities, or to join another state, should their residents so decide. Thus, although they must normally comply with state law, they may in principle override it through a vote on secession.

The question of the hierarchy of decision-making is therefore highly complex at the local level. The same problems occur also for the relations between regions and municipalities. The way these relations are designed is very important to foster or undermine direct democracy. The significance of direct democracy at local level depends not only on the quality of direct-democratic institutions, but also on the territorial organization of power. In general, direct democracy has limited relevance in unitary states, whereas it can exert considerable influence on political life within federal systems. For this reason, we have chosen to focus our attention on three federations: Germany, Switzerland, and the United States.

2.1.2. What we owe to local direct democracy

The focus on these three countries is primarily due to their exceptional contribution to our understanding of how direct democracy functions. Until the early twenty-first century, Switzerland and the United States provided nearly all empirical data used to study the characteristics and effects of direct democracy. Over the past fifteen years, Germany has increasingly drawn scholarly interest. Although still less prominent in academic literature, it offers valuable insights into this mode of policy-making.

In Switzerland, where all cantons and municipalities use direct democratic instruments, research has mainly examined the accessibility of these tools. Low signature thresholds and long collection periods, for example, shape how easily citizens can launch initiatives. The United States presents a more heterogeneous landscape: some states rely heavily on direct democracy, while others do not; some allow citizens to influence constitutional matters, while others restrict direct democracy to statutory legislation. Although state-level direct democracy is almost as old as in Switzerland, county- and municipal-level practices are in some cases much more recent. This institutional variation has been widely used to identify the specific effects of direct democracy. In Germany, by contrast, most Bundesländer and municipalities introduced direct democratic instruments only at the end of the twentieth century, which explains the later emergence of empirical studies. Institutional designs vary considerably across Länder and differ even more from Swiss and American models. Mandatory referendums, for instance, are widespread in Swiss cantons and U.S. states (except Delaware) but rare in Germany. While a simple majority suffices for local decisions in Switzerland, some U.S. states require supermajorities. Approval quorums are almost unknown in Switzerland and rare in the United States, yet they are systematically attached to citizen initiatives in Germany.

This institutional diversity helps identify which effects stem from which rules. Thanks to these three countries, we now have a clearer understanding of how specific institutions shape outcomes. Interpreting these findings, however, requires detailed knowledge of local direct democratic arrangements in each context. This is why this report focuses on local democracy. To our knowledge, no existing document offers a detailed, simultaneous comparison of direct democratic rules in these three countries; this report aims to fill that gap.

Three features characterize the institutions present in the other cases. First, local institutions that allow citizens to directly vote on policies are characterized by a very top-down nature, limiting the range of participation (let alone decision-making) options for citizens. The most prominent institution across non-federal states is the government plebiscite⁵. In the Philippines, local plebiscites have mostly been for creation, inclusion to, or division of new autonomous regions, provinces, cities, municipalities, and barangays. Along with France, Portugal does provide for local plebiscites but they are rarely used. Local recall referendums come second with a strong prevalence in Latin America. Peru is the record holder globally. As noted by Yanina Welp: “Between 1997 and 2013, more than 5000 recall referendums were activated against democratically elected authorities from 747 Peruvian municipalities (45.5% of all municipalities). This makes Peru the world’s most intensive user of this mechanism of direct democracy which is designed to remove elected authorities from office before the end of their term”⁶. Since 2012, the number of recall referendums has also boomed in Bolivia. In contrast, while recall referendums are recorded at the local level in Ecuador and Colombia, in the former country, following an increase in the number of recall attempts, activation conditions have been made more stringent after 2010. Since then, recall referendums have been much rarer. Colombia does provide for municipal recall referendums, but a demanding participation quorum makes attempts unlikely to succeed.

Secondly, in all the other cases, the possibility of using direct democracy instruments locally has not been met with the implementation modalities. This means that while, formally, local regulations and national constitutions provide for such possibility, citizens have no concrete means of organising one single referendum.

Third and last feature: in countries that permit citizen initiatives, referendums proposed by citizens do not offer an alternative to legislation passed by the local assembly. Italy is a prime example. At the regional level, citizens can initiate the abrogation of a law through a binding referendum or propose a new law through a consultative vote. Sardinia is the region where referendums are most frequently requested. Ten referendums were put to the electorate in 2012. Five of these were abrogative (and therefore binding), while the other five were proposals (and therefore advisory). Many of these referendums concerned the territorial division of the provinces. Sardinia had had four provinces since 1974. However, in 2001, the Sardinian government created four new provinces, bringing the total to eight. One of the 2012 referendums sought to repeal this latter law so that the number of provinces would revert to four. However, in an advisory referendum, the Sardinian people also voted in favour of abolishing these four provinces. As the abrogative referendum was binding, the number of provinces reverted to four. In 2016, however, this number increased to five. Following lengthy discussions, the number of provinces increased to eight again in 2021. The new provinces are very similar in geography to those that were abolished in 2012, only two names have changed (see figure 2.2.2). This marked the end of the most significant local event of direct democracy in Italy, which is representative of many others in so far as whatever people vote, their preference is not implemented.

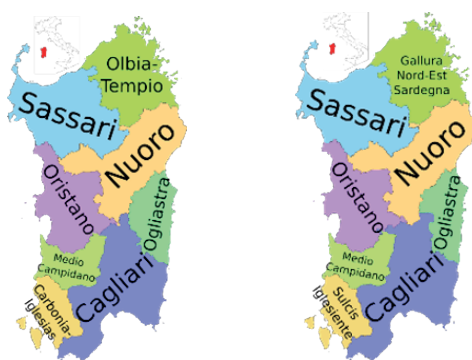


Figure 2.2.2. Sardinia: provinces abolished by the 2012 referendum (left) and the new provinces created in 2021 (right) (Source: Wikipedia.it)

One reason why the decisions made by the elected government always prevail over those expressed in local referendums is that the two are not hierarchically ordered. What is decided by the local representative government

⁶Welp, Y. (2016). Recall referendums in Peruvian municipalities: a political weapon for bad losers or an instrument of accountability? *Democratization*, 23(7), 1162-1179.

is given the same value as what is decided through a referendum. Therefore, since the process of direct democracy is much slower than that of the legislature, the latter can easily update its preferences. This problem is structural because, in unitary states, local authorities do not have superior legal instruments, such as constitutions.

In federal states, by contrast, sovereignty is constitutionally divided between the central government and subnational units. This creates multiple, legally autonomous arenas for direct democracy, where the superiority of direct democratic decisions is possible. This means that the federal government has weak impact on local rules, and the local legislature can be strongly constrained by referendums. Initiatives and referendums can exist at federal, regional, and local levels, each with independent authority and binding force. In such systems, direct-democratic instruments do not merely express popular will on policy questions; they also play a structural role in regulating the federal balance of power. Mandatory referendums, in particular, often serve as safeguards for subnational autonomy by requiring popular consent for constitutional amendments or territorial changes that affect the distribution of powers. Ignoring the federal context risks misunderstanding these votes as simple policy decisions rather than as mechanisms of constitutional self-rule.

For this reason, these federal systems will be the central focus of our analysis. We will in particular focus on countries that provide citizens with a plurality of decision-making capacities and where the practice of local direct democracy is most important. Table 1 below compares these aspects for the 11 federal countries in our sample.

Country	Instruments	Practice
Argentina	Agenda initiative Plebiscite Obligatory referendums (for state constitutional changes)	Limited
Australia	Plebiscite Obligatory referendum in New South Wales Agenda initiative (petition)	Limited
Austria	Agenda initiative Plebiscites Citizen initiated referendums	Limited
Belgium	Advisory plebiscites	Limited
Brazil	Plebiscites	Limited
Canada	(advisory) plebiscites	Limited
Germany	Some mandatory referendums Citizen initiated referendum (both on constitutional and non constitutional matters)	Intermediate
Mexico	Citizen initiative Plebiscites	Limited
Switzerland	Obligatory referendum Citizen initiated referendum (both on constitutional and non constitutional matters)	Strong
USA	Obligatory referendum Citizen initiated referendum (both on constitutional and non constitutional matters)	Strong

Table 2.2.1 – List of federal countries with local direct democracy institutions (Source : Navigator to Direct Democracy)

Table 2.2.1 shows why distinguishing between federal and non-federal countries also matters empirically. Federal systems provide citizens with more entry points for participation and more opportunities to mobilize initiatives or demand referendums, which affects participation rates, issue selection, and success probabilities. While in most of the countries in our sample, the actual practice of direct democracy is limited, institutional opportunity structures are much greater than in non-federal states.

The remainder of our report will focus on the three countries in our sample not only characterized by a wealth of direct democracy institutions but also by a frequent practice: Germany, Switzerland and the United States of America. They will serve as use cases from which good practices can be drawn.

2.3. Swiss Cantons

Switzerland is the country most closely associated with direct democracy. There, federalism and direct democracy form a mutually reinforcing institutional system. Swiss cantons were instrumental in introducing direct democracy at the federal level, through three major steps: the obligatory (constitutional) referendum (1848), the facultative referendum (1874), and the citizen initiative (1891). However, all these institutions were first introduced and practiced at the local level.

2.3.1. The Swiss model of local direct democracy

Switzerland offers one of the clearest contemporary examples of a political system in which power genuinely rises from the bottom up. The philosophy underlying the Swiss model is straightforward: only the federal constitution can limit cantonal powers, and only Swiss citizens can amend the federal constitution. At the cantonal level, citizens therefore retain full control over their constitutions through constitutional initiatives and mandatory referendums, while being bound only by decisions taken collectively by Swiss citizens at the federal level. As a result, representative institutions are always subject to citizens' direct legislative power, even across cantonal and federal boundaries.

Rather than concentrating authority at the centre, the Swiss confederal model is built on the premise that political responsibility begins with the cantons and is transferred to the federal level only when necessary. This logic is explicitly enshrined in the Federal Constitution. Article 3 affirms that the cantons remain sovereign except where the Constitution itself limits their authority, while Article 43 confirms that it is the cantons that decide which public duties they will assume within the scope of their powers.

This constitutional architecture was further reinforced in 2004, when a popular initiative clarified the division of labour between the cantons and the Confederation. The resulting Article 43a establishes a simple but far-reaching rule: the federal level should act only when the cantons are unable to do so themselves or when uniform regulation is indispensable. In practice, this provision entrenches a particularly demanding version of subsidiarity, one that treats federal intervention as a last resort rather than a default solution.

What makes this institutional framework distinctive, however, is how closely it is tied to popular sovereignty at the cantonal level. It is here, more than at the federal level, that Swiss citizens exercise the widest array of direct-democratic rights. In every canton, citizens hold a powerful veto through mandatory referendums, allowing them the final say on constitutional revisions and, in many cases, on major public expenditures⁷. Facultative referendums extend this control even further by enabling citizens to suspend the implementation of ordinary legislation. Alongside these veto rights, cantons also recognize initiative rights at two levels: constitutional initiatives, which parallel the federal model, and legislative initiatives—an instrument that has disappeared at the federal level but continues to shape cantonal lawmaking.

⁷In Uri, all cantonal legislation is subject to mandatory referendums

Some cantons have gone even further, layering additional instruments of direct democracy onto this already dense participatory framework. The recall mechanism, widely associated with American state politics and increasingly discussed in European reform debates, exists in only six Swiss cantons and has been successfully used just once. Bern, Solothurn, and Schaffhausen introduced recall in the nineteenth century for both government and parliament; Ticino extended it to the cantonal executive in 1892 and, much later, to municipal governments; and Uri adopted the most far-reaching version, applying recall since 1915 to all cantonal and municipal elected bodies. Other cantons experimented with recall but ultimately abandoned it, underscoring both the diversity and the pragmatism of Swiss institutional design.

Finally, Switzerland preserves a form of direct democracy that is as symbolically powerful as it is institutionally rare. In the cantons of Glarus and Appenzell Innerrhoden, citizens still gather in the open air at the *Landsgemeinde* to debate and decide public matters by a show of hands. These assemblies do more than keep a historical tradition alive: they vividly illustrate the deep-rooted conviction that political authority, in Switzerland, ultimately rests with the people themselves.

2.3.2 A brief history of local direct democracy in Switzerland

Mandatory referendums were the earliest to assume a modern constitutional form. Their deeper roots lay in long-standing practices of popular assent, most visibly in the *Landsgemeinde* of the rural mountain cantons, where citizens directly approved laws and constitutional decisions in open assemblies. However, the mythical narrative around the *Landsgemeinden* should not hide the fact that the management of cantons in the Middle-Ages was more oligarchic than truly democratic. As population growth and administrative complexity made such assemblies impractical in many cantons, obligatory referendums emerged as a functional substitute. They preserved the principle that fundamental political decisions - above all constitutional change - required explicit popular approval, even where representative institutions had developed.

The decisive breakthrough occurred during the Liberal Regeneration beginning in 1830. Following the July Revolution in France, liberal movements gained power in several cantons and initiated comprehensive constitutional reforms. Crucially, these reforms were subjected to popular approval. Cantons such as Vaud, Thurgau, Zurich, and St. Gallen were the first to introduce mandatory referendums, requiring that all constitutional revisions be approved by the electorate. In this initial phase, the referendum served primarily as an instrument of legitimation, allowing new political regimes to ground their authority in popular sovereignty. Once established, mandatory referendums quickly became permanent constraints on cantonal power. By the 1840s, they were widely accepted as core elements of cantonal constitutional law, often extending beyond constitutional revisions to include major financial decisions. Representative institutions could deliberate and propose, but final authority over foundational matters rested with the people.

A second and distinct instrument emerged alongside the mandatory referendum: the facultative referendum. Unlike the mandatory referendum, which automatically required a popular vote, the facultative referendum empowered citizens to challenge laws passed by cantonal parliaments and force them to a popular vote through petition. According to the historical record, Valais and Graubünden had already established this instrument by 1830. St. Gallen followed in 1831, Basel-Landschaft in 1832, Lucerne in 1841, Vaud in 1845, and Schwyz in 1848. After 1848, the facultative referendum spread rapidly throughout the remaining cantons. The facultative referendum fundamentally altered the balance of power within the cantons. It transformed citizens from passive recipients of legislation into active veto players. While obligatory referendums addressed moments of constitutional refoundation, the facultative referendum inserted popular control into ordinary lawmaking, allowing citizens—often political minorities—to resist legislation perceived as illegitimate or overly centralized.

Alongside referendum rights, cantons also introduced citizen initiatives, though here an important distinction must be made between initiatives on constitutional matters and initiatives on ordinary legislation. The earliest and

most widely accepted form was the constitutional initiative for total revision, which allowed citizens to demand a complete rewriting of the cantonal constitution. Introduced in several cantons during the 1830s and 1840s, this instrument was initially regarded with suspicion but soon came to be seen as a stabilizing force. By channelling deep political dissatisfaction into a legal procedure, constitutional initiatives reduced the likelihood of revolutionary violence and reinforced the legitimacy of cantonal institutions. More controversial was the legislative initiative, which enabled citizens to propose and enact ordinary laws independently of cantonal parliaments. Vaud again played a pioneering role by introducing this instrument in 1845, followed by Aargau in 1852, Basel-Landschaft in 1863, and Zurich, Thurgau, and Solothurn in 1869. The legislative initiative represented the most far-reaching form of popular lawmaking and was therefore adopted more cautiously and unevenly across the cantons.

The distinction between these instruments proved enduring. Mandatory referendums guaranteed popular control over constitutional change; facultative referendums empowered citizens to resist unwanted legislation; constitutional initiatives offered a means of fundamental reform; and legislative initiatives allowed direct popular lawmaking. By the time these instruments were incorporated—selectively—into the federal system after 1848, they were already deeply embedded in cantonal practice. Swiss direct democracy thus developed from the bottom up, shaped by cantonal experimentation rather than federal design.

Instrument	Level	Key Dates	Leading Cantons / Federal Adoption
Obligatory referendum (constitutional)	Cantonal	1830–1831	Vaud, Thurgau, Zurich, St. Gallen
Facultative (optional) legislative referendum	Cantonal	By 1830	Valais, Graubünden
Obligatory referendum (constitutional)	Federal	1848	Introduced in the Federal Constitution
Facultative legislative referendum	Cantonal	1831–1848	St. Gallen (1831), Basel-Landschaft (1832), Lucerne (1841), Vaud (1845), Schwyz (1848)
Facultative legislative referendum	Federal	1874	Introduced by constitutional revision
Citizen initiative (total constitutional revision)	Cantonal	1830s–1840s	Several cantons during Liberal Regeneration
Citizen initiative (total constitutional revision)	Federal	1848	Introduced by the Federal Constitution

Citizen initiative (ordinary legislation)	Cantonal	1845–1869	Vaud (1845), Aargau (1852), Basel-Landschaft (1863), Zurich/Thurgau/Solothurn (1869)
Citizen initiative (partial constitutional revision)	Federal	1891	Adopted by popular vote

Table 2.3.1.: Introduction of direct-democratic instruments at cantonal and federal levels

2.3.2. Institutional designs across Swiss cantons

The practice of direct democracy at the cantonal level in Switzerland operates under different institutional rules across cantons. This variation has generated a rich literature examining the impact of institutional design on direct democracy’s practice and effects on policy, politics, and citizen engagement. An exploration of cantonal-level data allows us to group cantons according to two core criteria: (1) how accessible the signature threshold is, and (2) how the various instruments relate to each other in terms of accessibility.

To assess the accessibility of each direct democratic instrument, we computed a standardized threshold that accounts for both the number of signatures required to launch a referendum (as a percentage of the eligible population) and the time window allowed for signature collection. The restrictiveness score is higher when the accessibility is lower. As shown in the figure 2.3.1 below, facultative referendums are most difficult to activate in Ticino, Geneva, and Jura, while they are considerably more accessible to citizens in Zurich, Aargau, and Solothurn.

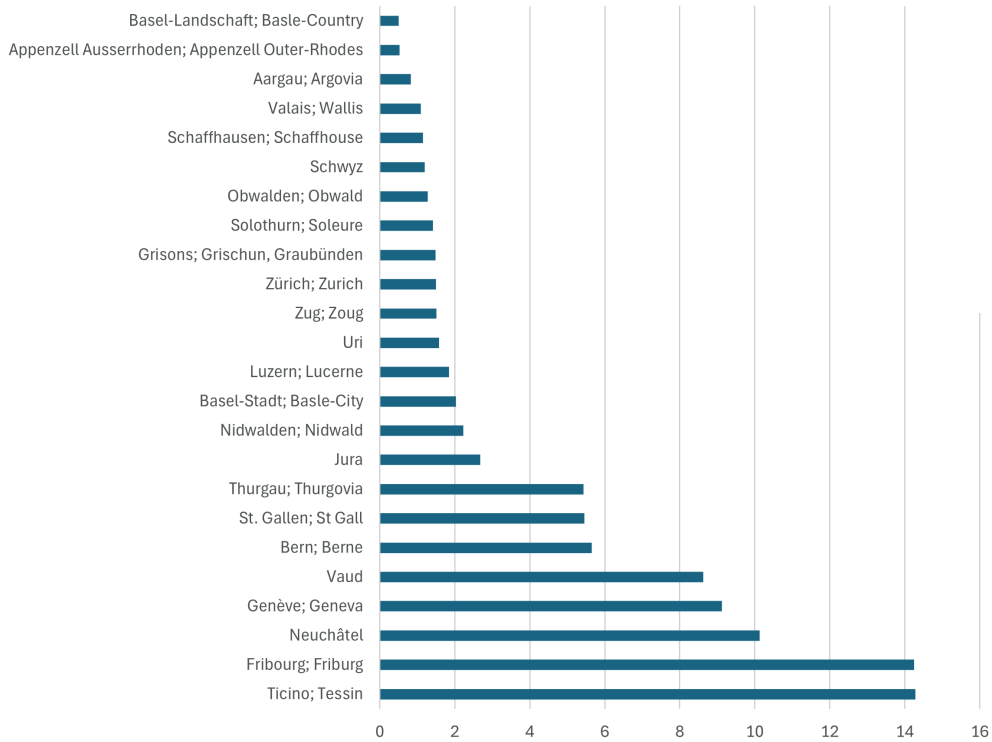


Figure 2.3.1. Restrictiveness of facultative referendums in Swiss cantons (Source : authors’ data, own rendering)

When assessing the accessibility of constitutional and legislative initiatives displayed in figure 2.3.2, the ranking shifts. The three cantons where direct democracy instruments are most difficult to activate are Ticino, Fribourg, and Neuchâtel. Ticino stands out as having, by far, the least accessible constitutional initiative. In contrast, Basel-Landschaft, Appenzell Ausserrhoden, and Aargau offer substantially more accessible instruments.

A final observation concerns the interaction between citizen initiatives on legislative and constitutional matters. This relationship is particularly important given that legislative initiatives do not exist at the federal level. One core argument for maintaining both instruments at the cantonal level is to make the legislative initiative easier to activate than the constitutional initiative, reflecting the hierarchy of norms. However, this relationship does not fully materialize across Switzerland. In half of the cantons, the legislative initiative is equally accessible as the constitutional initiative, while in the other half, the constitutional initiative is indeed harder to activate, reflecting the expected normative hierarchy. In particular, the accessibility of constitutional initiative is particularly lower than the legislative one in Ticino, Neuchatel and Geneva.

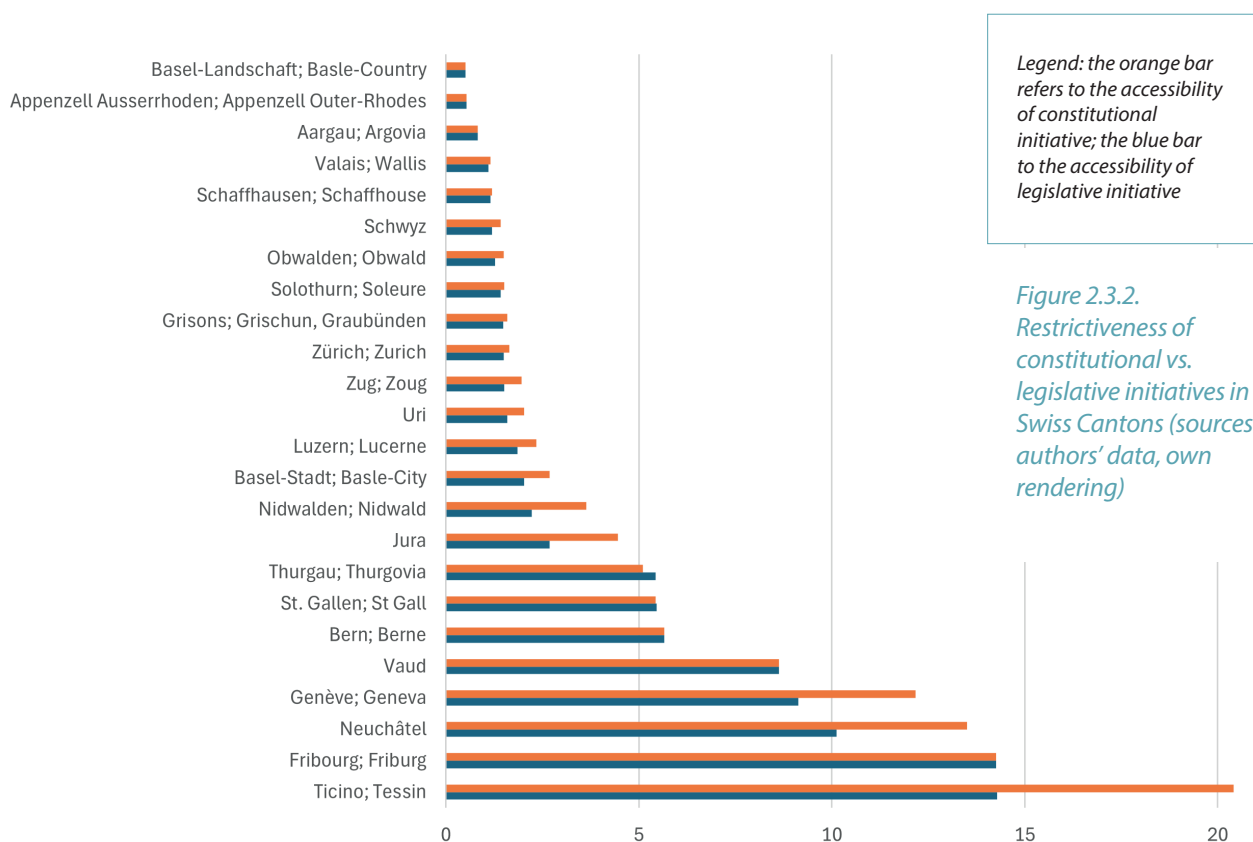


Figure 2.3.2. Restrictiveness of constitutional vs. legislative initiatives in Swiss Cantons (sources: authors' data, own rendering)

2.3.3. Interview with Bruno Kaufmann: thought leader on global direct democracy

The Swiss Democracy Foundation has played a pivotal role in promoting direct democracy as a viable and adaptable form of governance worldwide. Through knowledge-sharing initiatives, it has demonstrated that direct democracy isn't merely a Swiss peculiarity but a set of tools that can be adapted across different political cultures.

The Initiative and Referendum Institute Europe (IRI Europe) – which today is hosted by the Swiss Democracy Foundation - has complemented this work by building a pan-European network focused on participatory and

direct democracy. As a research and advocacy organization, IRI Europe has provided the analytical framework and empirical evidence showing how direct democratic instruments function in diverse contexts—from local municipalities to national referendums.

Together, these organizations helped catalyse the Direct Democracy Navigator and the Global Forum on Modern Direct Democracy, creating the world's premier platform where practitioners, scholars, and citizens exchange experiences about participatory governance. The Forum has transformed direct democracy from isolated national experiments into a global movement with shared learning, comparative research, and cross-border collaboration.

At the heart of these interconnected initiatives stands Bruno Kaufmann, whose work as co-founder, co-president, and thought leader has been essential to their impact. A prominent and familiar face of Democracy International, where he serves as a board member, Bruno Kaufmann is a distinguished journalist with deep expertise in democratic governance. He kindly agreed to answer our questions on direct democracy in Switzerland.



In your view, what are the most effective practices in local direct democracy today in Switzerland today? Why?

BK: There are big differences in procedures and practices around the country: in general, local direct democracy is more developed and used in the German speaking cantons than the French and Italian ones. But there are also interesting differences regarding the numbers of population and the urban-rural character of a region: the most developed polities for local direct democracy you find in highly populated and urban areas like Zürich, Basel and Geneva. In the city of Zurich for example a local citizen may have to make up to 40-60 decisions a year while in the mountainous Uri canton there a most likely just a few. This means: the more complex a decision making community is, the more developed initiative and referendum rights are. That makes a lot of sense and contradicts the idea, that direct democracy fits small and homogenous communities best.

How do you see direct democracy evolving in Switzerland over the next few years?

BK: It is rather stable as big new innovations (like fine-tuned counter-proposal rights or major extensions of voting rights to foreigners or youngsters) most often are voted down in referendums as there are proposed limitations (as not allowing e-voting or introduce direct elections of executive posts). More dynamics can be found in the administration of the initiative and referendum process, examples of which are the misuse of paid signature-gatherers or the intransparencies in campaigns.

What challenges and opportunities do you anticipate?

BK: The free and fair conduct of initiatives and referendums are continuously challenged from many sides: politically you have voices - especially on the hard right - who want to limit voting rights for Swiss abroad and non-Swiss within. Then there are attempts to weaken the political center by extremist fake news undermining the traditionally high trust into public institutions and media. On March 8, 2026 an important public vote took place regarding the fee-based public broadcasting model serving multilingual Switzerland as an important piece of democratic infrastructure. 62% of the voters supported the current household-fee system (300 CHF/year for household and company). Another opportunity will be the forthcoming vote on Switzerland's relationship with the European Union - to take place next year, which will address the transnational dimensions of Switzerland's democratic model.

Could you share a vote, initiative, or referendum that left a strong impression on you?

BK: An interesting citizen-initiative in Basel, where the city-state shall get a new constitutional article prescribing «good relations with Europe». The local initiative was launched after negotiations between the EU and Switzerland back in 2021 on a framework agreement were stopped. For Basel, the neighbouring EU is a very important partner with hundreds of thousands of people crossing the borders every day. The initiative offers an insight into the

fascinating toolbox of local direct democracy and was adopted on September 28, 2025 by a 65%-majority. Now a similar proposal will be launched in Basel-Landschaft canton and a vote is expected to take place during 2026.

Why was it significant, and what lessons should we take from it?

BK: The local «Europe»-referendum in Basel manifests the innovative potentials of local direct democracy, which are not limited to ‘boring’ localist issues. The system invites all citizens to not only become decision-makers but also agenda-setters.

2.3.4. The Swiss laboratory of direct democracy: interview with Prof. Isabelle Stadelmann-Steffen

The Swiss model is long-established, intensively practiced at all levels of governance, and exceptionally powerful, although its designs vary across cantons. Moreover, the Swiss government provides researchers with extensive access to high-quality data. Together, these factors make Switzerland a unique laboratory for the study of direct democracy. Swiss scholars—particularly in the fields of political science, social sciences, and economics—often begin their international academic careers by exploring new perspectives on direct democracy, benefiting from this remarkable comparative advantage. Much of our current understanding of this form of governance is therefore deeply indebted to Swiss research.



This research is represented here by Isabelle Stadelmann-Steffen, a Professor in Comparative Politics at the University of Bern. Her pioneering research in comparative public policy, political behaviour, and attitudes has significantly advanced our understanding of policy feedback effects, particularly in the critical areas of welfare state and energy policy. She has been instrumental in bringing these two traditionally separate domains, offering innovative insights into their interconnections. A hallmark of her scholarly contribution is her rigorous and sustained examination of how direct democracy shapes political behaviour, processes, and outcomes, establishing her as a leading authority on the interplay between institutional design and democratic practice.

To what extent can federal state activity influence direct democracy at the cantonal level? And to what extent can cantonal policies affect direct democracy at the municipal level?

ISS: While Swiss cantons and municipalities generally enjoy broad autonomy in shaping their own policies, especially in areas where authority is fragmented across federal levels, decisions at the federal level can significantly impact direct-democratic practices at lower levels. A recent example is the September 2025 national ballot that approved a new system for residential property taxation. This federal act directly affects cantonal taxation, requiring cantons to adapt their legislation accordingly. Often, these implementation decisions will be subject to cantonal popular votes, particularly when constitutional amendments are needed. This dynamic thus not only illustrates how federal policy influences cantonal direct democracy, but also implies that cantonal direct democracy can shape the implementation of federal laws (e.g., when subnational implementation is rejected at the ballot box). Such implementation challenges, evident in areas like the energy transition, have sparked debate over whether subordinate entities should sometimes lose their right to block important changes through local referendums. A recent example illustrates that this can indeed happen. In 2024, the canton of Lucerne amended its rules in a referendum so that municipalities can no longer reject wind energy projects through local votes.

Drawing on the Swiss experience, what do you see as the most significant consequences of direct democracy for public policies and political life? Under what conditions are these effects most pronounced?

ISS: I would highlight two main consequences. Firstly, with regard to policymaking, direct democracy can be seen as an additional barrier to rapid reforms. The population can act as an extra veto player, and given that many of today's debated reforms involve visible 'costs' (e.g. lower pensions, higher taxes, or more immaterial costs such as behavioural restrictions or environmental impacts), citizens quite often exercise that veto power. The second main consequence is that direct democracy influences the manner in which political debates are conducted. Campaigns on emotional issues such as climate change, migration and pension policy have the potential to further politicize the issue, but they can also provide an outlet for resolving latent conflicts in an orderly manner. I would argue that both consequences are gaining importance in a context of strong (or stronger) polarization and an uncertain global context.

In your view, is direct democracy — particularly at the local level — vulnerable? What conditions might help to strengthen it?

ISS: Overall, I would say that direct democracy at all federal levels in Switzerland is deeply embedded in the political culture and institutions, and therefore not vulnerable. However, this strong institutional and political embedding makes it difficult to reform current instruments, even where certain adaptations to current developments could be reasonable. As I mentioned, the case of the energy transition often sees local veto power in conflict with overarching national policy goals. Another area for reform would be adapting the signature threshold to growing populations and digitalization. Such reforms are politically challenging because they require direct democratic decisions. Therefore, they can only succeed if the population itself imposes higher signature thresholds or restricts its own right to local referendums.

Should other countries consider adopting a Swiss-style system of direct democracy? Could you explain why or why not?

ISS: Direct democracy has desirable properties, but it also has its weaknesses. It is not necessarily a superior form of democracy to a purely representative system. Most importantly, it is crucial to consider that the 'Swiss-style' of direct democracy is, in reality, a particular institutional combination of direct democracy, federalism, and consensus democracy. These three elements are intertwined, and together they define the 'Swiss-style' system. As we discussed in Heidbreder et al. (2018)⁸, countries should not simply adopt (Swiss-style) direct-democratic instruments without considering how they are embedded in and interact with the existing political system.

What are the key considerations to keep in mind when implementing direct democracy at the subnational level?

ISS: This is related to the previous question. There is no 'right way' to implement direct democracy at the subnational level. The key consideration is therefore to reflect on the purpose of implementing direct democratic instruments and the design most likely to achieve these goals, given the context-specific political and institutional conditions. Consequently, the ideal design may differ from country to country.

2.4. United States

In the United States, direct democracy exclusively exists at the subnational level. Despite periodic debates, efforts to introduce direct legislation at the federal level have consistently failed to gain traction. The country exhibits a great diversity in direct democracy designs—a variation likely stemming from the absence of a federal template that localities might otherwise emulate. While local direct democracy in the United States drew initial inspiration from Swiss practices, the Swiss model shaped American experiences only partially, leaving considerable room for local adaptation and innovation.

⁸Heidbreder, E. G., Stadelmann-Steffen, I., Thomann, E., & Sager, F. (2019). EU referendums in context: What can we learn from the Swiss case? *Public Administration*, 97(2), 370-383.

2.4.1. Direct democratic institutions at the state level

Direct democracy in the United States operates through six state-level institutions, whose availability varies widely across states. The most common is the mandatory referendum—known as the legislatively referred constitutional amendment—used in every state except Delaware. A related tool, the legislatively referred state statute, allows legislatures to submit ordinary laws to voters, typically for major or contentious decisions.

Citizen-initiated instruments differ sharply across states. Some allow constitutional initiatives, while others restrict initiatives to statutory proposals. Initiated state statutes can be altered by the legislature, except in Nevada, where the “statute affirmation” rule prevents legislative changes without voter approval. The veto referendum, available in 23 states, enables citizens to challenge recently enacted laws. Statewide recall elections, though not always classified as direct democracy, allow voters to remove elected officials before the end of their term.

Eight states - Arizona, California, Colorado, Michigan, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, and Oregon - offer the full set of six major direct democratic institutions, giving citizens broad influence over both constitutional and statutory law. Florida adds a distinctive feature through its Constitution Revision Commission and its Taxation and Budget Reform Commission, both empowered to place constitutional amendments directly on the ballot.

This classification excludes more specialized mechanisms, such as citizen petitions to convene grand juries in six states, as well as the extensive array of local-level instruments—initiated ordinances, charter amendments, and town meetings—used across municipalities and counties.

2.4.2. Historical development of direct democracy in the United States

Direct democracy in the United States developed along two intertwined paths: one governing constitutional change and the other regulating ordinary legislation. From the founding era, Americans accepted that constitutional matters required direct popular approval. Early referendums in Massachusetts (1780) and New Hampshire (1783) established the principle that fundamental law must rest on voter consent. After the Revolution, new states routinely submitted their constitutions to voters, and by the mid nineteenth century popular ratification had become standard. Constitutional amendments followed a similar trajectory: beginning with Connecticut in 1818, states increasingly required voter approval, and today only Delaware allows constitutional change without a referendum.

Applying direct democracy to ordinary legislation proved far more contentious. Early proposals for legislative referendums were rejected, but specific policy areas gradually became subject to popular votes as states sought to curb legislative corruption. After the financial crises of the 1830s, many states required voter approval for public debt, bank charters, or even the location of state capitals—policy decisions embedded in constitutional provisions but aimed at preventing legislative abuse.

The major transformation came during the Populist and Progressive eras (1880–1920), when citizens gained the power to place issues directly on the ballot. South Dakota pioneered the initiative and referendum in 1898, followed by Utah and Oregon, where voters first used the initiative in 1904. By 1918, twenty-two states had adopted direct democracy tools, and the modern landscape was largely in place.

This history reveals a clear pattern: constitutional referendums emerged early from principles of popular sovereignty, while statutory initiatives arose much later as reforms to counter legislative capture and corporate influence. The distinction between constitutional and statutory instruments thus reflects two different historical trajectories and levels of political acceptance.

In 2025, the context is difficult for direct democracy. State legislatures introduced more than 150 bills restricting the ballot measure process, tightening signature requirements, shortening campaign timelines, and raising geographic

distribution thresholds. In South Dakota, for example, Senate Bill 92 added a pre-screening administrative layer requiring constitutional review before signature gathering; House Bill 1256 imposed further restrictions; and HJR 5003, which would raise the constitutional amendment approval threshold from 50% to 60%, passed both chambers and will go to voters in November 2026.

2.4.3. Comparative analysis of local designs in the United States

Two uniquely US aspects in the design of direct democratic institutions overall, compared to European models: the requirement of supermajorities, and the fact that signature thresholds are determined by the turnout of the last general or gubernatorial elections. The latter can be interpreted as consistent with a conception of direct democracy as a remedy to representation failure — the lower the support of elected officials, the easier it is for citizens to trigger referendums. In this section, we further document these specificities, starting with mandatory referendums.

2.4.3.1. Mandatory referendums

Mandatory referendums are triggered in a two-staged manner. First, the legislature needs to approve the constitutional change; then a referendum is organized. The process can be more or less demanding depending on the state concerned. Four states — Connecticut, Hawaii, New Jersey and Pennsylvania — foresee two procedures. The constitutional amendment is put to the ballot after one session if it gathers the support of 75% of both chambers. If this supermajority is not reached, votes have to be organized in two consecutive sessions before being submitted to a referendum. The other states that require two parliamentary votes are: Indiana, Iowa, Massachusetts, Nevada, New York, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia and Wisconsin. Note that Vermont is the only state that distinguishes between the two chambers. The amendment must gather 66.67% in the Senate and 50.01% in the House during the first session.

All other states only provide for one legislative session, followed by a referendum.

Figure 2.4.1 below displays the referendum requirements in all states that provide for a popular ratification of the constitutional amendment. Most states provide for a simple majority of votes cast on the measure; a few apply this majority to the votes cast in the last state-wide election. Colorado, Florida and New Hampshire provide for a supermajority. Illinois, Tennessee, Massachusetts and Mississippi foresee an approval quorum, representing a share of the votes cast in the last state-wide election.

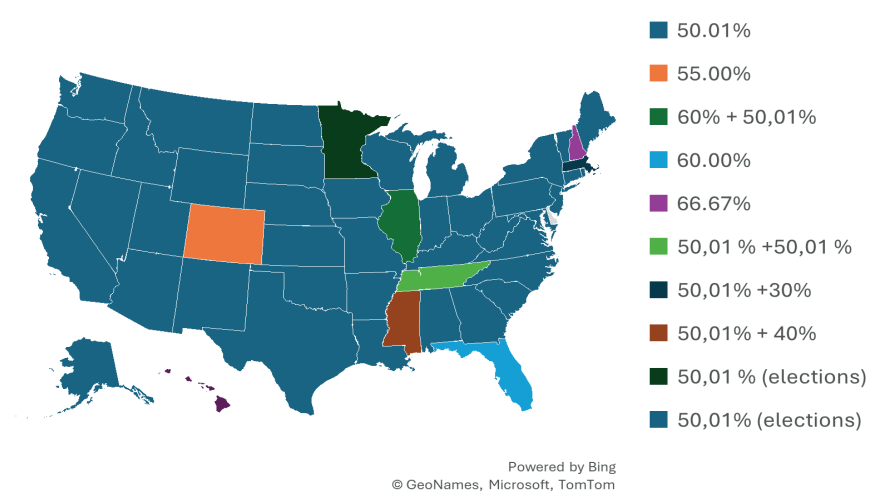


Figure 2.4.1. Referendums requirements for mandatory referendums in US states (Source: Ballotpedia, own rendering)

2.4.3.2. Citizen-initiated constitutional amendments

Among the states that allow citizen-initiated constitutional amendments, the design varies considerably across three key dimensions: signature thresholds, signature collection rules, and ratification requirements at the ballot (see table 2.4.2. for an overview)⁹.

On signature thresholds, most states tie the requirement to turnout in the last gubernatorial election rather than to the size of the registered electorate. The dominant threshold is 10% of votes cast for governor, used by Arkansas, Michigan, Montana, Nevada, Ohio, and South Dakota. California and Oregon sit at 8%, Colorado and Arizona at 5% and 15% respectively — Arizona’s threshold being among the highest. Nebraska is the main outlier, setting its threshold at 10% of registered voters regardless of turnout, a design rare in the US but common internationally.

On collection rules, the time window varies enormously and has a measurable effect on activity. Arizona, Oregon, Nebraska and Florida allow two years, the longest period available, while Michigan allows only 180 days — which helps explain its comparatively low referendum count despite a moderate threshold. Colorado adds a geographical distribution requirement (2% of registered voters across each of its 35 Senate districts), which significantly constrains collection even though the headline threshold appears low. Eight states in total impose such geographical constraints.

On ratification at the ballot, most states require a simple majority of votes cast on the measure. Several, however, apply more conservative rules. Colorado and Florida require supermajorities (55% and 60% respectively), and Arizona adds a 60% supermajority for tax-related measures. Nebraska uses an approval quorum — the amendment passes only if a simple majority representing at least 35% of registered voters approves it. Nevada is the slowest of all: a constitutional amendment must win a simple majority in two successive general elections, meaning the process takes a minimum of four years from the ballot stage alone.

When comparing the ratification requirements applied to citizen-initiated constitutional amendments and legislature-referred amendments, two patterns emerge.

First, in most states, the ratification rules are identical regardless of how the amendment reached the ballot - a simple majority of votes cast on the measure is sufficient in both cases. Second, two states stand out for special requirements they impose on citizens. Nevada provides double-ballot for citizen constitutional initiatives versus single-ballot for legislative constitutional initiatives. Nebraska adds an approval quorum - requiring a simple majority that also represents at least 35% of registered voters - to the citizen initiated amendments only.

Country	Initiative rule	Referendum vote	Number of referendums 1990-2024
California Oregon	8% of votes cast in the last gubernatorial election	Simple majority	199 150
Colorado	5% of votes cast in the last secretary of state election	Supermajority of 55%	151
Arizona	15% of votes cast in the last gubernatorial election	60% for tax increase-related measures; Simple majority for other initiated constitutional amendments	92
Florida	8% of votes cast in the last gubernatorial election	Supermajority of 60%	68

⁹Three states—Mississippi, Massachusetts, and Illinois—have citizen-initiated constitutional amendment processes so limited that they are excluded from our classification. Massachusetts requires approval from at least 25% of legislators in two successive sessions before an amendment can reach the ballot, while Mississippi is hamstrung by an unfixable signature-distribution rule tied to obsolete congressional districts, a problem the Supreme Court has said only a constitutional amendment can resolve. Illinois, meanwhile, allows initiatives only on amendments to Article IV concerning legislative structure, leaving citizens with an extremely narrow and largely symbolic role.

Nevada	10% of votes cast in the last gubernatorial election	Simple majority at two successive general elections	59
North Dakota	4% of the population at the last census	Simple majority	58
Missouri	8% of votes cast in the last gubernatorial election	Simple majority	51
Montana	10% of votes cast in the last gubernatorial election	Simple majority	54
South Dakota			66
Ohio			38
Michigan			33
Arkansas			45
Oklahoma	15% of votes cast in the last gubernatorial election	Simple majority	37
Nebraska	10% of registered voters	35% of approval quorum	41

Table 2.4.2. Design of initiated constitutional amendment in U.S. States¹⁰

2.4.3.3. Veto and facultative referendums in US states: design and accessibility

Beyond citizen-initiated amendments and statutes, US states offer two additional institutions through which citizens can intervene in the legislative process: the veto referendum and the legislative referendum. While both allow citizens to challenge legislation passed by the legislature, they differ fundamentally in their logic, their accessibility, and the constraints they impose on proponents.

The veto referendum: a short and reactive window

Twenty-three US states allow citizens to veto a law. Such referendums almost universally impose a window of 90 days — triggered not by a filing decision that proponents’ control, but by an external legislative event, typically the adjournment of the session at which the targeted bill was passed. This makes the veto referendum a uniquely time-pressured instrument: campaigns must be organized rapidly, often before the public has had time to become aware of a new law, let alone mobilize against it.

A handful of states deviate from this 90-day baseline in instructive ways. Utah imposes the shortest window at just 40 days, with the additional constraint that signatures must be submitted on a rolling 14-day basis — making it arguably the least accessible veto referendum design in the country. Idaho allows 60 days. Montana, on the other extreme, grants six months, making it the most accessible in terms of timing. Maryland operates a two-stage system in which one third of the required signatures must be submitted by an early deadline, with the remaining two thirds due shortly after — a design that front-loads the organizational burden. Nevada and New Mexico stand apart from the rest by tying their deadline not to session adjournment but to the electoral calendar, requiring signatures to be filed a fixed number of days before the next general election. This makes the effective window highly variable depending on when a law is passed during the legislative cycle.

Signature thresholds for veto referendums follow the same distinctly American logic as initiative thresholds: they are generally tied to turnout in the last gubernatorial or general election rather than to the size of the registered electorate. Thresholds typically range from 4% to 10% of votes cast, with Wyoming standing out at 15% - the

¹⁰The table is based on Egger, C., & Magni-Berton, R. (2026). *Direct Democracy Institutions in a Globalized World: The New Democratic Frontier*. Routledge.

highest in the country for this institution. An important additional feature in several states is the suspension effect: once enough signatures are certified, the targeted law is automatically suspended pending the vote. A notable exception is Alaska where the collection of signatures does not lead to the suspension of a law.

The legislative referendum: rarer, more varied, less accessible

Twenty-one states allow citizens to initiate statutes directly, either through a direct initiative — where the proposal goes straight to voters — or an indirect initiative — where it is first submitted to the legislature, which may adopt it before it reaches the ballot. Fourteen states provide for direct initiatives, and nine for indirect ones, with two states providing for both.

Signature thresholds tie requirements to turnout in the last gubernatorial election, typically ranging from 5% to 10% of votes cast. Michigan and South Dakota sit at 8%, California and Oregon at 5%, while Oklahoma and Wyoming require 15%, the highest thresholds for this institution. Nevada and Colorado set their statutory initiative threshold at the same level as their constitutional amendment threshold — an unusual design choice that could in theory incentivize citizens to go straight for constitutional entrenchment rather than ordinary legislation. Nebraska again stands apart, setting its threshold at 10% of registered voters rather than votes cast, making it more stable across election cycles but also more demanding in low-turnout environments. Signature collection windows vary enormously and have a measurable effect on citizen activity: Michigan allows only 180 days, which helps explain its comparatively modest referendum count despite a moderate threshold, while Arizona, Oregon, Nebraska and Arkansas allow two full years. Oklahoma sits at the opposite extreme with just 90 days — the same compressed window as its veto referendum — making it by far the most time-constrained statutory initiative process in the country. Several states add geographical distribution requirements on top of the headline threshold, most notably Colorado, which requires signatures from 2% of registered voters across each of its 35 Senate districts. Eight states in total impose such geographical constraints, significantly raising the effective difficulty of collection even where the nominal threshold appears accessible. Finally, the indirect pathway introduces an additional institutional layer: in states like Massachusetts, Michigan, and Maine, the legislature has an opportunity to adopt the initiative before it reaches the ballot, potentially defusing campaigns but also adding procedural uncertainty for proponents.

2.4.4. Building a global movement around direct democracy: interview with Joe Matthews

US direct democracy is not only a subject for scholarly analysis. It also requires champions who can carry its lessons across borders and into public conversation. Joe Matthews is one of those rare figures who combines the rigor of a seasoned journalist with the energy of a genuine movement-builder.

Joe Matthews is a journalist, author, and democracy advocate. He is the founder-publisher of Democracy Local, a democracy fellow at the Berggruen Institute, and a syndicated California columnist at Zócalo Public Square. Since 2008, he has served as co-president of the Global Forum on Modern Direct Democracy, organizing thirteen public forums across five continents. He is a member of Democracy International, IOPD, and the Democracy R&D network. His last book is *The U.S. vs. Us: Essays from California As It Leaves America* (Ostrich Farm Press, 2025).



In your view, what are the most effective practices in local direct democracy in the US today? Why?

JM: Local direct democracy has been no match for the new American dictatorship. Local governments are under attack from the Trump administration—literally. Federal funds appropriated to localities by Congress are held back, unlawfully, by the administration. Trump declares that he can cancel local sovereignty and laws. And the

regime is using federal homeland security authorities—and military occupation—in local communities to systematically violate the rights of immigrants and US citizens. Against this onslaught, local direct democracy has been defenceless. Local ballot measures still provide protection for taxpayers—bonds still need to be approved by the people in all states except Delaware—but they offer little protection against an authoritarian president and a Supreme Court that permits his lawlessness. Worse still, many localities are ruled by “mini-Trumps” who rule their communities as dictators.

How do you see direct democracy evolving in the United States over the next few years?

JM: Direct democracy has been in a slow decline, with the rollback of rights to petition for initiatives in states like Florida, Mississippi, and North Dakota. That decline is likely to accelerate. The prevailing dynamic is polarization. As one political party or the other comes to dominate the governorship and legislature of a state, the ruling party weakens direct democracy to prevent use of initiative and referendum tools by the opposition. In many cases, Republican states are making processes impossible to use to prevent the people from restoring women’s rights and reproductive rights cancelled by the U.S. Supreme Court. But Democrats restrict the process, too. In California, ruling Democrats have increased initiative filing fees from \$200 to \$2,000, and restricted the times when citizen initiatives may be considered to just once every two years.

What challenges and opportunities do you anticipate?

JM: One opportunity involves the possible breakup of the country. Polls in Democratic states show mounting support for greater autonomy or even outright separation from the United States. The most likely strategy for achieving autonomy or declaring independence is a vote of the people. These independence referenda could bring more attention to direct democracy—putting the breakup of the United States on the ballot. But they also could accelerate efforts to restrict or eliminate direct democracy. Those efforts might be achieved with partisan ballot measures, backed by ruling parties in states. With political violence accelerating, direct democracy campaigns could become theatres of civil conflict or, if fighting escalates, civil war.

Could you share a vote, initiative, or referendum that left a strong impression on you?

JM: In the fall of 2025, Prop 50 offered a new map of California Congressional districts, gerrymandered to give Democrats all but 4 of the state’s 53 seats. The measure attracted international attention, and tens of millions in campaign spending.

I’ve never been so torn about a ballot measure in my life. In the end, I decided that I could not vote for the measure because it was anti-democratic. But I decided I couldn’t vote against it, because of Trump’s backing of the Prop 50 opposition. So I returned by mail a blank ballot.

Why was it significant, and what lessons should we take from it?

JM: Proposition 50 in California showed the power and peril of direct democracy under the new, rapidly consolidating presidential dictatorship. Prop 50 showed what direct democracy can still do. Governor Gavin Newsom called a special election to consider it. And the measure was passed overwhelmingly by California’s Democratic electorate as a tool to counter Trump’s efforts to redraw maps in Texas and other states to further consolidate his tyranny in the 2026 elections. Prop 50 demonstrated the power of direct democracy, when backed by a state or local elite, to fight back against a dictator.

But Prop 50’s content also demonstrated how direct democracy can badly damage democracy when it is used as a weapon against tyranny. The measure was deeply anti-democratic. It essentially fixed Congressional elections for Democrats in California—in order to count Trump’s similar efforts in Republican states. And the measure eliminated, at least for the next three elections, one of the great triumphs of California direct democracy: the independent, citizen-led redistricting commission that drew fair districts. That commission was approved in two different ballot measures in 2008 and 2010, after decades of failed attempts and democratic debate.

Today, my state is fighting Trump more strongly, but it has left me with far less democratic power, and no real choices in Congressional elections.

2.4.5. Pioneering the study of the effects of direct democracy: interview with John G. Matsusaka

The United States offers a remarkable natural laboratory to study direct democratic institutions; roughly half of American states have adopted initiative and referendum institutions while the other half have not, creating a quasi-experimental setting that allows for rigorous comparative research. No one has exploited that opportunity more productively than our guest.

John G. Matsusaka holds the Charles F. Sexton Chair in American Enterprise at the University of Southern California, where he is Professor of Finance, Business Economics, and Political Science. He is widely regarded as the most influential scholar working on direct democracy, best known for his finding that ballot initiatives tend to align policy with majority preferences rather than empower narrow special interests — a conclusion that cut against decades of received wisdom. He is also Executive Director of USC's Initiative and Referendum Institute, which maintains one of the most extensive archives of ballot measure data in the world and promotes comparative research through its sister organization, IRI Europe. His most recent book is *Let the People Rule: How Direct Democracy Can Meet the Populist Challenge* (Princeton University Press: 2020).



To what extent can federal state policies affect direct democracy at the state level and, similarly, can state policies affect direct democracy at the municipal level?

JGM: Every country is different. Focusing on the United States, the relations between the national and subnational governments are complicated and multifaceted. The United States is one of very few countries in the world that has never held a national referendum, while at the same time, its state and local governments are among the most active users of direct democracy in the world. Every U.S. state holds at least occasional referendums, every state but one requires referendums on constitutional amendments, approximately half of the states allow initiatives or veto referendums, and over 80 percent of cities allow initiatives.

Policy issues can spill over from one level of government to another, in both directions. In 1978, California voters approved an initiative titled Prop. 13 that cut and capped property taxes. This set off a nationwide tax revolt, resulting in similar ballot measures and legislative bills in many other states, and it launched a major tax cutting effort at the national level that crystalized when Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980.

An issue that spilled over horizontally was same-sex marriage. The issue came onto the national radar in the late 1990s when state courts in Hawaii and Massachusetts declared a right to same-sex marriage. This prompted other states to preemptively amend their constitutions to state that such a right did not exist in their state.

Finally, issues can also flow from the national to the state level. A prominent recent example is abortion policy. As a result of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court established a national abortion policy; this meant that unlike almost all other democracies, abortion law was set by unelected judges and not by elected representatives or referendum. The 2022 *Dobbs* decision overturned *Roe v. Wade*, removing judges from abortion policy, and calling for abortion laws to be determined democratically by the Congress and states. This has led many states to hold referendums on abortion policy, either to establish new rules, or to repeal laws passed by elected officials.

Based on the US experience, what are the most significant consequences of direct democracy in policies and political life?

JGM: At the national level, as mentioned above, there is no direct democracy. I have argued in my book *Let the People Rule* (2020) that this is unfortunate because allowing the people to vote on national issues, as in other countries, would alleviate the growing public opinion that the government does not care about the view of

ordinary people. This lack of federal responsiveness to popular concerns has been one contributor to the populist energy that has been driving U.S. politics for some years now and continues to grow.

At the state and local level, direct democracy is used to resolve every constitutional issue in every state but one, and in many states is used to approve bonds, approve taxes, and handle a wide array of issues. The issues covered run from government reform (redistricting, term limits, primary elections, campaign finance) to social policies (abortion, welfare, same-sex marriage) to taxes and spending and government administration. The most important use of direct democracy has been to structure democratic institutions and practices, what might be thought of as establishing the core institutions.

You recently provided evidence of direct democratic backsliding. Do you think direct democracy, particularly at the local level, is vulnerable? Are there conditions that could strengthen direct democracy?

JGM: My study on direct democracy backsliding (published in the Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy) quantified the number of laws that rolled back or restricted initiative and referendum rights over the last 70 years in the American states. I found that there has been a steady drumbeat of anti-direct-democracy laws over this period, and that anti-direct-democracy laws outnumber pro-direct-democracy laws. However, I do not find an unusually high level of backsliding recently. Laws that undermine direct democracy invariably originate with elected officials, and the data suggest that elected officials – across states and decades – generally do not like it when citizens make laws themselves. These officials are continually chipping away at initiative and referendum rights. Interestingly, although both parties do this, the Republicans typically display a greater hostility to citizen lawmaking. I conjecture that Republicans are more prone to subscribe to a “trustee” model of democracy which holds that the decisions should be made by representatives based on their own judgements rather than a “delegate” model which holds that representatives are mainly the agents of voters.

Should all US states adopt direct democracy? Should this also be adopted at the federal level? Can you explain why?

JGM: I argue in my book that direct democracy is a useful addition to the democratic toolkit for any state. If democracy is ultimately the rule of the people, it’s a good idea to involve them directly in policy decisions, and important to give them a way to override their elected officials if those officials wilfully ignore the interests of their constituents. It wouldn’t be a good idea for the people to make every decision, or even most decisions – and most citizens don’t want to be involved in government at such an active level. But they should be consulted periodically, especially on major issues that have a big impact on the community.

At the national level, the US Constitution does not allow voters to make laws or amend the constitution by referendum. So any sort of binding referendum would require a constitutional amendment. In my book, I argue that we should start by holding advisory referendums. An advisory referendum is a vote on a policy matter by the people that is not binding on the government and does not itself create law. The UK’s Brexit referendum is an example. Congress could call for a national advisory vote on an issue simply by passing law, without requiring a constitutional amendment. Holding a vote on contentious issues (such as immigration?) would allow the people to express their views and feel part of the process, and would probably create pressure for Congress to find compromise solutions that are aligned with voter preferences. After holding several advisory referendums, the country will be in a position to better understand the pros and cons of referendums at the national level, and decide if allowing voters to make laws directly by referendum would be beneficial.

2.5. German Bundesländer

2.5.1. An overview of direct democracy in the German Bundesländer¹¹

Germany has a long-standing tradition of direct democracy that began during the Weimar Republic, was interrupted during the Third Reich, and was gradually reintroduced in a few states (Bundesländer, or, more simply, Länder) at a

¹¹ This text owes much to the advice and proofreading of Frank Rehmet, who greatly improved the work. Brigitte Geissel's proofreading was also very helpful. However, any errors remain our own.

local level following the drafting of the first local constitutions in 1946. A large wave of democratization occurred in Germany in the 1990s, after the integration of five new Länder (former GDR) into the Federal Republic. These new Länder had rapidly introduced direct democracy into their new constitutions. During this period of democratization, not only in Germany but around the world, direct democracy was also improved or introduced in three western states, including Hamburg, which today has one of the most dynamic direct democratic systems in Germany. Its neighbouring Länder Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein also adopted direct democratic systems during this period. Furthermore, citizens' initiatives were introduced at municipal level in almost all states during this decade: Berlin in 2005 was the last Land to introduce it at municipal level.

Interestingly, one specifically German principle that has been implemented from the outset and is enshrined in all the states' constitutions without exception - even though their strictness varies¹² - is that direct democracy does not apply to the budget. The principle of parliamentary budgetary power (*das Budgetrecht des Parlaments*) means that fiscal issues are the exclusive domain of parliaments, whether federal or regional. Therefore, all Länder constitutions prohibit initiatives directly (and often indirectly) related to budgets. However, this fiscal taboo (*Finanztabu*) does not involve prohibiting the revision of state constitutions through initiatives. This means that the taboo is not necessarily unchangeable. Take the Bavarian Constitution, for example. Article 73 states that there can be no referendum on the state budget. As the Bavarian Constitution permits citizen initiatives for constitutional revisions, this article could potentially be repealed or amended directly by citizens¹³. However, so far, no initiative has reached the required threshold to trigger a referendum on article 73. The Bavarian case is not unique; in all the federal states, the fiscal taboo could be broken, and in most of them, this could be achieved through a popular initiative. It is unclear how radical a reform would be consistent with federal law, but no such attempt has yet been made.

Ironically, studies led by Zareh Asatryan and his colleagues have shown that this fiscal taboo actually leads to higher public spending¹⁴. Many studies conducted in Switzerland and the United States have demonstrated that mandatory referendums and citizen initiatives in Swiss cantons and American states reduce taxes and public debt¹⁵. In other words, when citizens can vote directly on tax, debt and spending issues, these are lower. However, in Germany, initiatives have the opposite effect. Citizen initiatives increase municipalities' annual per capita expenditure by up to 8%. This suggests that fiscal taboo prevents citizens from reducing public spending. This problem is exacerbated by German 'cooperative' federalism, whereby the funding of states and municipalities originates from a 'common pool' of nationwide taxpayers. Increasing spending can be funded by citizens in other jurisdictions, which breaks the cost/benefit balance that usually leads citizens to avoid excessive public spending.

2.5.2. German Direct democracy institutions

Focusing on direct democracy at the Länder level, we can conclude that it is much less developed here than in Switzerland or the United States. Since the end of World War II, only 66 binding referendums associated with direct democracy¹⁶ have been held in the sixteen Länder, and in about 70 cases initiatives achieved full success without referendum. This relatively low number of referendums is because, beyond the fiscal taboo, the institutions of direct democracy are predominantly what we call 'soft direct democracy': almost nowhere the citizens have simultaneously initiative rights (constitutional citizen initiative) and veto rights (mandatory referendum). However, there are exceptions. Notably, Bavaria is the only state where citizens can propose constitutional amendments, and no constitutional amendment can be ratified without a popular vote. Unsurprisingly, this Land produces the highest number of referendums at both Länder and municipal level. The Bavarian direct democracy, however, is far from

¹²The variance is described in *Mehr Demokratie (2025) Volksentscheidsrangung*.

¹³This is what *Mehr Demokratie* ask in their document "Das bayerische Demokratiepaket: Forderungen zur direkten Demokratie in Bayern".

¹⁴Asatryan, Z. (2016). *The indirect effects of direct democracy: Local government size and non-budgetary voter initiatives in Germany*. *International Tax and Public Finance*, 23(3), 580-601. Asatryan, Z., Baskaran, T., Grigoriadis, T., & Heinemann, F. (2017). *Direct democracy and local public finances under cooperative federalism*. *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 119(3), 801-820.

¹⁵John G. Matsusaka published the first literature review about this issue in 2018, entitled "Public policy and the initiative and referendum: A survey with some new evidence" and published in *Public Choice*, 174(1), 107-143.

¹⁶We include as direct democratic instruments only mandatory referendum and citizen-initiated referendums.

being one of the best models. In the United States, 15 states have constitutional citizen initiatives and obligatory referendums, and in Switzerland, citizens in all 26 cantons can initiate and veto constitutional amendments. Of all these subnational regions, Bavaria has the most restrictive conditions for citizens to initiate a constitutional amendment: signatures from 10% of registered voters must be gathered in 14 days and collected in town halls. The threshold is one of the highest, the signature-collection period is the shortest.

Mandatory referendum. Only two states require a popular vote for any constitutional amendment. This represents 12.5% of all states, compared with 98% in the United States and 100% in Switzerland. This institution, which grants citizens the right to veto their most fundamental laws, was introduced very early after the war—in 1946—in both Bavaria and Hesse. As in most mandatory referendums, no quorum or supermajority was required to validate them. It should be noted, however, that in Berlin a referendum is automatically held when constitutional provisions on direct democracy are amended, representing a minimal form of a mandatory referendum. Interestingly, as was also the case abroad, citizen initiatives became very popular in the 1990s, whereas mandatory referendums did not. One of the most symbolic examples of this trend is the sweeping constitutional reform carried out in Bremen in 1994. Among the many amendments adopted, those concerning direct democracy abolished the mandatory referendum without a quorum and introduced a more accessible initiative procedure subject to an approval quorum¹⁷. This reform was approved by a large majority, and it marked the last mandatory referendum ever held in Bremen. One indication of the importance of mandatory referendums for direct democracy is that Bavaria and Hesse are by far the states in which the greatest number of state-level referendums have been held.

Citizen-initiated constitutional amendments. Technically, Hesse is the only German Land that does not allow citizens to initiate constitutional revisions. However, where such procedures exist, the regulations differ greatly and are generally very demanding. Two main models emerged during the early postwar period (1946–1950).

The Bavarian model, introduced in 1946, is difficult to initiate but relatively easy to win. It requires signatures from 10% of voters within 14 days, but, as we wrote above, the referendum required only the simple majority of voters. In 2006, the Parliament introduced a comparatively low approval quorum of 25% of registered voters. Despite its relative success, this model was never widely adopted by other Länder.

The second model, by contrast, is both difficult to initiate and difficult to win. It was adopted in the city-state of Bremen (1946), Rhineland-Palatinate (1947), and North Rhine-Westphalia (1950). In all three Länder, constitutional initiatives required signatures from 20% of registered voters within a very short period (between 9 and 14 days), and referendum approval depended on an absolute majority of registered voters (a 50% approval quorum). Non-voters were therefore effectively counted as voting against the proposal. Therefore, until the 1990s, direct democracy in practice was almost exclusively confined to Bavaria.

During the 1990s, these three Länder evolved in different directions. Bremen significantly lowered both the signature threshold (to 10% within three months today) and the referendum approval quorum (to 40%). Rhineland-Palatinate reduced the signature requirement (currently 300,000 registered voters within six months) but retained the absolute majority approval quorum. North Rhine-Westphalia, by contrast, substantially facilitated the initiative process (8% of signatures within one year today) while simultaneously reinforcing the referendum requirements by adding a two-thirds supermajority to the absolute majority rule, making successful validation virtually impossible.

The Cold War period (1951–1989) saw little development in direct democratic institutions. Only two federal states introduced new constitutional provisions during this time. In 1974, Baden-Württemberg adopted a second-model type constitutional initiative, requiring a very high signature threshold (16.7% within 14 days) and an absolute majority of registered voters to approve the referendum. Although the initiative process was facilitated in 2015 (10% of signatures within six months), the approval quorum remains unchanged. Saarland followed a similar path, initially requiring 20% of signatures within 14 days and an absolute majority in the referendum. Like North Rhine-

¹⁷Bremen's mandatory referendum was not strictly mandatory since it could be avoided if parliament reached a unanimous decision, which is an exceptional condition. Please note that a new, limited form of referendum was reintroduced in Bremen in 2013, but only for privatization purposes. It is suspensive if it has been approved by two-thirds of the legislature, and it is only mandatory if it has been approved by a simple majority.

Westphalia, Saarland later lowered the signature threshold considerably (7% within three months since 2013) but reinforced the referendum requirements by adding a two-thirds supermajority to the 50% approval quorum. In the 1990s, nine federal states introduced direct democracy into their constitutions. Schleswig-Holstein was the first, in 1990, to adopt a new model characterized by an easy initiative process combined with an extremely difficult referendum. The signature threshold was low (5% in 1990; today 80,000 signatures—less than 4%—within six months), while the referendum required both an absolute majority and a two-thirds supermajority. This third model was influential. Beyond North Rhine-Westphalia and Saarland, it was also adopted by three of the five new Länder of the Federal Republic: Brandenburg (80,000 signatures today, less than 4% within six months), Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (initially 140,000 signatures, reduced to 100,000 since 2016, or less than 8% within five months), and Saxony-Anhalt (250,000 signatures within six months, now 7%).

By contrast, Thuringia adopted the second model (14% within four months, followed by a 50% approval quorum) and, like Bremen, gradually facilitated both the initiative process (10%) and the referendum quorum (40%). Saxony also adopted the second model, requiring 450,000 signatures (currently around 13% within eight months) and an absolute majority of registered voters to enact the referendum. Berlin also adopted the second model, with a 20% signature requirement within four months and an absolute majority approval quorum. Lower Saxony followed a similar approach in 1993, introducing a 10% initiative threshold within six months and maintaining an absolute majority requirement for referendums.

Hamburg was the last federal state to adopt direct democracy, in 1996. Initially, the signature threshold was set at 10% and the approval quorum for constitutional amendments at 50%. In 1998, a popular initiative seeking to lower these hurdles gathered 18.4% of signatures and nearly met the approval quorum. The referendum was held on the same day as the federal parliamentary election (Bundestag), resulting in high turnout. Although 74% of voters supported the proposal and turnout reached 66.7%, the 50% approval quorum was not met, as only 45% of registered voters voted in favour. Nevertheless, the result was politically significant and led to several years of debate involving Hamburg Parliament and civil society organizations. In 2009, both the signature threshold and the approval quorum were reformed. Today, constitutional initiatives in Hamburg require the support of 5% of registered voters within 21 days, and constitutional amendments are approved by a two-thirds majority of voters, without any turnout quorum. Moreover, Hamburg is the only Land with an extended suspensive referendum for electoral and direct democracy legislation, allowing citizens to vote on such laws if 2.5% of eligible voters sign in favour within three months.

The moral of this German tale is not particularly satisfying. After World War II, five Länder introduced instruments of hard direct democracy, with widely varying outcomes. The Bavarian model proved the most successful in terms of the number of citizen initiatives and citizen-initiated referendums. Its key feature—the combination of a citizen constitutional initiative with a mandatory referendum—helped maintain a relatively low approval quorum. Although demanding, the initiative process remained feasible.

By contrast, Hesse introduced only mandatory referendums, while Bremen, Rhineland-Palatinate, and North Rhine-Westphalia adopted a model with only citizen-initiated constitutional amendments both difficult to initiate and difficult to enact. This “second model” of direct democracy combined high signature thresholds with strict approval quorums and no mandatory referendum. In practice, this model revealed to be too difficult to use and, prior to 1990, constitutional initiatives were launched only in Bavaria.

Over time, and despite growing experience, most Länder converged toward this second model, leaving the Bavarian model isolated (see figure 2.5.4). While many states progressively lowered signature thresholds, they maintained—or even strengthened—the conditions required to validate referendums. As a result, initiatives are now more frequently launched but almost systematically fail at the referendum stage. It is as if the prevailing ideal were to adopt direct democracy—but a form of direct democracy designed not to succeed.



Figure 2.5.1. Mandatory referendums and citizen-initiated constitutional amendments in Germany (Source: Mehr Demokratie)

2.5.3. A German driving force for direct democracy: Interview with Frank Rehmet

Mehr Demokratie e.V. is a German non-governmental organization (NGO) that promotes direct democracy in Germany. The association plays a major role in many reforms aimed at improving democratic institutions at a local, state and national level. The association accompanies reforms of direct democracy, drafts legislation, develops campaigns and initiates referendums. It also systematically collects data on direct democracy in Germany – together with the University of Wuppertal.



All of the data used here was produced by Frank Rehmet from Mehr Demokratie e.V. In his publications on participation and direct democracy, he collected an impressive body of information on the rules and practices of direct democracy in Germany. His most recent book is *Volksabstimmungen in Europa: Regelungen und Praxis im internationalen Vergleich* (Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2019 with Wagner N. and Weber T.).

In your view, what are the most effective practices in local direct democracy today in Germany? Why?

FR: We find the best DD regulations in the states of Thuringia, Bavaria,

Bremen and Saxony. The largest number of practices can be found in Bavaria, accounting for around 40% of all municipal direct democracy procedures in Germany. The procedure itself was established by a statewide referendum in Bavaria in 1995 (30th anniversary in 2025), initiated by the citizens, and successful at the ballot box. This contributes to making the procedures well-known and user-friendly. Moreover, Bavaria is the largest state in Germany and includes 2,056 municipalities, many of them small (below 10,000 inhabitants) – in contrast, North Rhine-Westphalia has only 426 municipalities.

How do you see direct democracy evolving in Germany over the next few years? What challenges and opportunities do you anticipate?

FR: I will focus on the local level: Germany will continue to use and practice direct democracy as direct democracy is established in all 16 states at the local level (and also in all states at the Länder level). In Länder like Bavaria, where the regulations are good, there will be of course more practice over the next years. One of the challenges is to encourage the German “hesitating” states to lower the obstacles for more participation. Another challenge is digitalisation (for example: e-signing). The future will probably see more combinations of direct democracy with other tools/procedures of participation like citizens’ assemblies.

Could you share a vote, initiative, or referendum that left a strong impression on you? Why was it significant, and what lessons should we take from it?

FR: For the local level, it is very difficult to pick up one vote as there are more than 9,000 procedures counted.

Many of these have been very impressive - engaged people, debating, deciding and having an impact. Learning a lot. Also, there are many good examples where local direct democracy had an impact without a referendum – in several cases, the initiative was adopted by the local council or a compromise was found - after negotiations. All of them left a strong impression on me.

2.5.5. A productive German academic research on direct democracy: interview with Prof. Brigitte Geissel

Following in the footsteps of Swiss and American scholars, many German scholars have also made significant contributions to our understanding of direct democracy in Germany and beyond.

One of the most influential is Prof. Dr. Brigitte Geissel, Professor of Political Science and Political Sociology and Head of the Research Unit Democratic Innovations at Goethe University Frankfurt. Her research focuses on democratic innovations, new forms of governance, and political actors. She recently published *The Future of Self-Governing, Thriving Democracies: Democratic Innovations by, with and for the people* (Routledge, 2023).



To what extent can federal state activity affect direct democracy at the state level? To what extent can state policies affect direct democracy at the municipal level?

BG: Rules on direct democracy on the state level and on the municipal level are decided at the state level. The respective state governments decide about the rules, which are then applied at state and municipal level. Direct democracy at the state level is decided only by the respective state government. The German Basic Law (federal constitution) only mentions obligatory referendums in case the borders of states are changed. The federal legislature (Bundestag) cannot directly change the state laws on direct democracy. The rules on direct democracy are under the jurisdiction of the states. But the Bundestag can change the federal constitution / Basic Law. In doing so, the Bundestag can change the rules at the state level. A 2/3 majority at both Houses would be necessary for this move.

Based on the German experience, what are the most significant consequences of direct democracy in policies and political life? Under what conditions are the consequences more salient?

BG: By far the most direct democratic decisions happen at the local level at smaller issues. The consequences are local, e.g. urban planning. Direct democratic decisions at state level are also not very significant for the whole of society and cover for example smoking bans in restaurants or minor changes in the school system. Significant policy changes are extremely rare. Significant policy changes would be more likely, if direct democracy would be allowed also at the federal level. But up to now no federal government introduced such a law.

Do you think direct democracy, particularly at the local level, is vulnerable? Are there conditions that could strengthen direct democracy?

BG: In some states, the state governments have already decided to take back and cut municipal direct democratic options. E.g. in Hessen, the state government makes it more difficult to initiate a local citizens' initiative for a direct democratic referendum. Accordingly, I would say, yes, direct democratic is under threat and vulnerable in Germany. There are many conditions that could strengthen direct democracy. Most importantly politicians who support the engagement of citizens.

Should all German Länder increase direct democracy? Should this also be implemented at the federal level? Can you explain why?

BG: Sure, all German Länder should increase direct democracy, and direct democracy should be implemented at the federal level. I have discussed this at length in my book. In Germany the gap between government and citizens seems to increase dramatically. People are already very dissatisfied with the new government. They don't feel represented. Direct democracy would help to make policy making more democratic and closer to citizens' interests and preferences.

What are the main points to keep in mind when implementing direct democracy at the subnational level?

BG: I don't see that the subnational level requires other points other than the national level. At all levels, it would be useful to ensure a deliberative process within society before a referendum takes place. Such a deliberative phase might be longer at the national level than at the local level, because topics of national scope are in general more complex and need more comprehensive discussions.

2.6. Conclusion

This comparison of the three countries that give the greatest role to local direct democracy reveals very different models.

The Swiss model is built on the premise that political responsibility begins at the cantonal level and is transferred to the federal level only when necessary. In every canton, citizens possess a powerful veto through mandatory referendums, allowing them the final say on constitutional revisions and, in many cases, on major public expenditures. Suspensive referendums extend this control further by enabling citizens to suspend the implementation of ordinary legislation. Alongside these veto rights, cantons also recognize initiative rights at two levels: constitutional initiatives, which parallel the federal model, and legislative initiatives—an instrument that has disappeared at the federal level but continues to shape cantonal lawmaking. Overall, signature thresholds are low, and a simple majority of voters is typically sufficient to validate a referendum.

The American model of direct democracy is far less homogeneous. The most common instrument is the mandatory referendum, used in every state except Delaware. Suspensive referendums are available in 23 states, and popular initiatives in 21 states, of which 14 include constitutional amendments. While simple majorities, approval quorums, or supermajorities may be required, a distinctive feature of the U.S. system lies in signature thresholds, which are almost always determined by turnout in the most recent general or gubernatorial election. These thresholds are, on average, higher than in Swiss cantons, but in many cases they remain accessible.

Finally, the German model is much more restrictive. Despite some variation across Länder, several common features stand out: a strong fiscal taboo, the near absence of mandatory referendums (with the exception of Bavaria and Hesse), and the use of variable approval quorums in referendums, sometimes combined with supermajority requirements of up to 75%. Signature thresholds are generally high, although they have been decreasing in some regions.

Comparing these three models, we can observe that the earliest forms of direct democracy typically included mandatory referendums combined with simple majority rules. Most systems developed before the Second World War shared these features, with some exceptions in the United States. In Germany, similar arrangements were also introduced before 1950. After the Cold War, however, mandatory referendums became less prominent, while citizen initiatives expanded. In response, legislatures often introduced higher quorums and supermajority requirements to limit citizens' capacity to challenge or control local constitutions.

3. KEY POPULAR VOTES IN 2024 & 2025

This chapter examines the national popular votes organized in 2024 and 2025. It distinguishes two families of votes: direct democratic votes and non-direct democratic votes.

The family of direct democratic votes includes cases where citizens exercise their veto powers or initiative rights. This encompasses constitutional referendums - whether mandatory referendums (a form of veto power) or citizen-initiated constitutional amendments (an exercise of initiative rights) - and non-constitutional referendums, including suspensive referendums (veto power) and legislative citizens' initiatives (initiative rights).

The family of non-direct democratic votes includes referendums that do not allow citizens to exercise veto or initiative rights. The initiative always rests with the executive, sometimes supported by a parliamentary majority. The referendum is not legally required to validate a decision: citizens vote only because their representatives choose to let them. We distinguish within this family between legal plebiscites, which follow a specific constitutional procedure, and ad hoc plebiscites, organized outside any standing legal framework.

Interestingly, all direct democratic votes have been held in countries that meet the basic requirements of liberal regimes. By contrast, only 55% of non-direct democratic votes took place in such regimes. This is not surprising: when referendums provide citizens with initiative and veto rights, they contribute to strengthening the rule of law. When referendums are not associated with additional rights for citizens, they remain compatible with authoritarian regimes. This is the case for Gabon, Guinea, Kazakhstan, and Qatar.

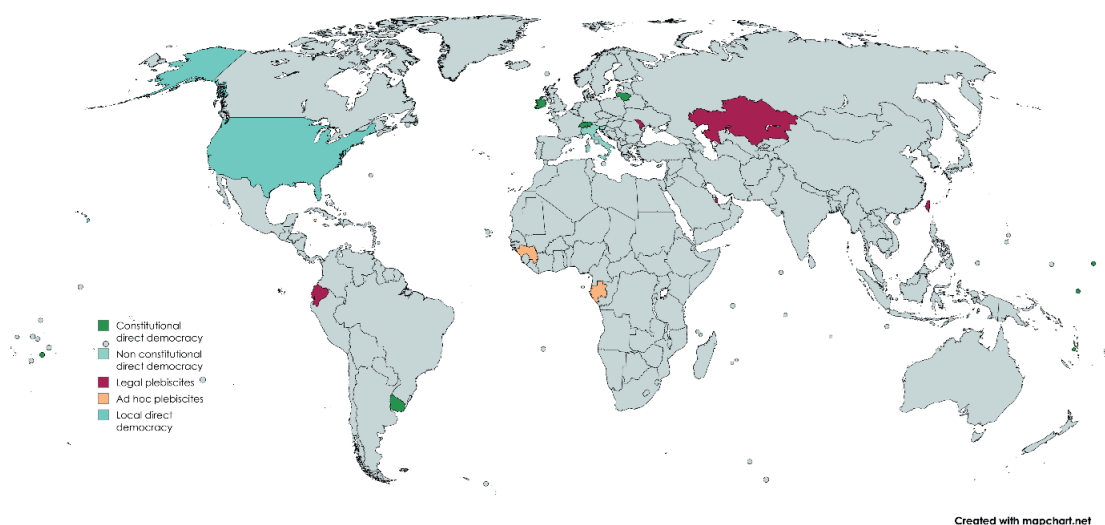


Figure 3.1. Geographic distribution of key votes held in 2024 and 2025, per types (Source: authors' data, own rendering)

Figure 3.1. above shows where such votes were held. Countries shown in green — Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Uruguay, Ireland, Vanuatu, Niue, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Italy, and Slovenia — held direct democratic votes in 2024 or 2025. Countries in dark green held votes in which citizens exercised genuine (constitutional) veto or initiative rights at the national level, while light green indicates exclusive non-constitutional votes. The United States is shown in turquoise, indicating that votes took place only at the local level. Some countries, such as Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and Uruguay, combine both initiative and veto mechanisms and represent mature cases of direct democracy. Others, such as Ireland, Vanuatu, and Niue, grant citizens only a veto over constitutional change. Countries shown in red — including Ecuador, Gabon, Guinea, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Qatar, Slovenia, and Taiwan — held non-direct democratic votes: referendums in which citizens had no initiative or veto power. Legal plebiscites are shown in dark red, while illegal plebiscites appear in orange. Finally, Haiti illustrates a different type of failure: a constitutional referendum that had been planned for years was repeatedly postponed and ultimately cancelled in 2025, as state collapse made any genuine popular consultation impossible.

3.1. Mandatory Referendums

3.1.1. Two Constitutional Referendums in Ireland: Family and Care (2024)

On 8 March 2024, Irish voters decisively rejected two proposed constitutional amendments on family and care. The Thirty-ninth Amendment would have extended constitutional protection to families founded on ‘durable relationships’ — a term critics found legally undefined, raising concerns about knock-on effects in family law, succession, taxation, and immigration. The Fortieth Amendment proposed replacing the Constitution’s explicit reference to women’s role in the home with a gender-neutral provision committing the State to ‘strive to support’ family carers — language widely criticized as non-justiciable and potentially weaker than what it replaced. Despite broad political support and favourable polling, both amendments were rejected by large margins: 67.7% No on the Family amendment, 73.9% No on the Care amendment — among the strongest rejections in Irish referendum history. Exit polling pointed to a common cause: voters were uncomfortable with legal vagueness and wary of expanding judicial discretion. The outcome underscores that constitutional change requires not only political consensus but textual clarity and enforceability.

3.1.2. Referendum in Uruguay on Nighttime Police Searches (2024)

On 27 October 2024, Uruguayan voters rejected, by approximately 60%, a proposed constitutional amendment that would have authorized judicially supervised night-time home searches. Article 11 of the Constitution provides one of the strongest protections of domestic privacy in comparative constitutional law, prohibiting nocturnal entry without the occupant’s consent. The reform — advanced by two-fifths of the General Assembly, with the Frente Amplio as the sole major opposition — sought to replace this absolute prohibition with a judicial authorization model, in response to growing concern about organized crime. A similar proposal had already failed in 2019 (47%). The 2024 rejection confirms a persistent constitutional culture in Uruguay favouring explicit, restrictive safeguards over broader grants of state authority, even on security grounds.

3.1.3. Two Constitutional Referendums in Vanuatu on Representative Mandates (2024)

On 29 May 2024, Vanuatu held its first-ever constitutional referendum, approving two amendments by around 60% each. Article 86 of the Constitution requires a referendum only for changes to the national languages, the electoral system, and the parliamentary system — the category into which these amendments fell. Both addressed chronic parliamentary instability caused by frequent party-switching and coalition collapses. The first amendment (Article 17A) provides for the automatic loss of a parliamentary seat if an a member of parliament (MP) leaves or is

expelled from the party under whose banner they were elected. The second (Article 17B) requires MPs elected as independents to join a multi-member party within three months of a new legislature or forfeit their seat.

Critics warned that both provisions entrench party elites and weaken representative pluralism. The referendum process itself was contested — opponents challenged the government’s exclusive funding of the Yes campaign and its delayed publication of amendment texts — though the Supreme Court dismissed all challenges before polling day. This first experience with a constitutional referendum in Vanuatu is therefore ambivalent; a small island state that faces the existential threat of rising sea levels has nevertheless shown the capacity to use constitutional referendums to address chronic governance failures.

3.1.4. Four Niuean Constitutional Referendums (2024)

On 31 August 2024, Niue submitted four proposed amendments to its 1974 Constitution to a popular vote. Under Article 35, constitutional amendments require approval by a two-thirds parliamentary majority in two votes separated by at least thirteen weeks, followed by a popular referendum. Two amendments were approved: renaming the head of government from ‘Premier’ to ‘Prime Minister’ (51%), and clarifying that the New Zealand Auditor-General serves as Niue’s constitutional auditing authority (58%). Two were firmly rejected: increasing Cabinet size from four to six ministers (69% against), and extending the parliamentary term from three to four years with immediate effect on the sitting legislature (71% against). The pattern is clear — voters endorsed symbolic and technical changes while firmly rejecting reforms that would expand executive power or allow legislators to entrench themselves.

3.1.5. Constitutional Referendum in the Marshall Islands (2025)

On 25 April 2025, the Marshall Islands held a mandatory constitutional referendum, submitting to voters seven amendments proposed by Parliament and approved by the constitutional convention elected in 2017. Originally scheduled to coincide with the 2023 general election, the vote was delayed by two years. Six of the seven amendments received the required two-thirds majority and were approved; the one rejected amendment — on citizenship — failed narrowly with 64% in favour, just short of the threshold.

The amendments addressed a range of institutional questions: the establishment of a national Ombudsman; an expansion of the Traditional Rights Court’s jurisdiction to include original jurisdiction over land disputes based on customary law; a clarification of the Attorney General’s power to prosecute senior officials; a redefinition of citizenship by birth; and the extension of citizenship to certain long-term residents based on marriage. The rejected citizenship amendment would have tightened registration conditions, increasing the minimum residency requirement from three to ten years.

The referendum was characterized by very low turnout — only around 10% of registered voters cast a ballot. This raises questions about democratic legitimacy even as the constitutional threshold of a two-thirds majority of votes cast was formally met. The Marshall Islands case illustrates a recurring tension in small Pacific island states: constitutional procedures are scrupulously followed, yet participation can be so low that the popular mandate for change is thin. The large Marshallese diaspora, primarily in the United States, is largely absent from domestic electoral processes.

3.1.6. Constitutional Referendum in Nauru (2025)

On 11 October 2025, Nauru held a constitutional referendum alongside parliamentary elections, asking voters whether to approve the Constitution (Amendment) Bill 2025 and extend the parliamentary term from three to four years. A two-thirds majority was required. The proposal was firmly rejected: 4,601 votes against and 3,714 in favour, representing 44.7% support — well short of the threshold.

Nauru's 19-member Parliament is elected from eight multi-member constituencies using the Dowdall ranked voting system, with all candidates running as independents; there are no political parties. Voting is compulsory for citizens aged 20 and above. The Pacific Islands Forum deployed an official observer mission, which praised the transparency and integrity of the process.

The result closely mirrors the Niuean case of 2024, in which an identical proposal was rejected by 71% of voters. Both outcomes point to a consistent pattern across small Pacific island democracies: electorates are willing to use mandatory referendums to block institutional self-entrenchment by their legislatures. Notably, Nauru had previously used a constitutional referendum in 2021 to disqualify naturalized citizens and their descendants from running for Parliament — a reminder that the same mechanism can serve very different political purposes depending on the question put to voters.

3.2. Citizen-Initiated Constitutional Amendments

3.2.1. Nine Constitutional Initiatives in Switzerland (2024 and 2025)

In 2024, Swiss voters decided on six citizen-initiated constitutional popular initiatives across three voting days (3 March, 9 June, and 22 September), addressing pensions, healthcare financing, bodily integrity, and environmental protection. Five of the six were rejected, often by substantial margins.

Two initiatives concerned the old-age pension system (AHV/AVS). The Pension Initiative proposed a gradual increase in the statutory retirement age to 66, linked to life expectancy — decisively rejected. By contrast, the Initiative for a 13th AHV Pension, which sought to add an extra monthly pension instalment without altering eligibility, was approved on 3 March 2024 by nearly 58% of voters and a majority of cantons — the only success of the year. Its passage illustrates a key feature of Swiss constitutional practice: popular initiatives succeed when they offer clear, bounded extensions of existing social rights without pre-empting legislative discretion on financing.

Four further 2024 initiatives addressed healthcare and rights. The Premium Relief Initiative, which would have capped health-insurance premiums at 10% of household income, and the Cost Brake Initiative, which proposed limiting healthcare cost growth, were both rejected for fiscal reasons. The Initiative for Freedom and Physical Integrity, drafted in the wake of COVID-19, was rejected as redundant. The Biodiversity Initiative, seeking to expand protected areas and conservation requirements, was rejected over concerns about its impact on agriculture and energy infrastructure.

In 2025, Swiss voters decided on three further citizen-initiated initiatives across two voting days (9 February and 30 November), all rejected — in two cases by exceptionally large margins.

Supported by the youth wing of the Green Party, the Environmental Responsibility Initiative proposed that Switzerland reduce its economic activities and consumption to sustainable levels within ten years, bringing them within planetary boundaries as measured by Switzerland's share of world population. The Federal Council estimated this would require a two-thirds reduction in overall environmental impact and a 90% cut in emissions. The initiative specified no implementation measures, a vagueness critics found alarming. It was rejected by 69.8% of voters; no canton achieved a majority in favour, with rejection most emphatic in Schwyz (84.6%) and closest in Basel-City (54.7% against).

The Civic Duty Initiative proposed replacing compulsory military service for men with a universal civic duty for all citizens, to be performed in the military, civil protection, or an equivalent service. Proponents framed it as a question of gender equality. The government countered that doubling the pool of recruits would far exceed operational needs and double costs; trade unions argued that extending unpaid service to women would deepen rather than reduce gender inequalities. The initiative was rejected by around 84% of voters — one of the most extreme results in a quarter century of Swiss popular votes.

Put forward by the youth wing of the Socialist Party under the slogan „tax the rich, save the climate,” the Initiative for a Future proposed a 50% inheritance tax on fortunes above CHF 50 million — affecting an estimated 2,500 households — with projected revenue of six billion francs annually directed toward climate transition measures. Swiss President Karin Keller-Sutter declared after the results that „the population understood that taking 50 percent of an inheritance would not be a tax, but a hold-up by the state.” The initiative was rejected by over 78% of voters.

Turnout on 30 November 2025 was 43%, and the scale of both rejections surprised even those who had expected defeat. All three 2025 initiatives were driven by youth wings of left and green parties — a generational mobilisation that succeeded in placing major questions on the national agenda but found no majority in an electorate that continues to prefer incremental reform over constitutional mandates for structural transformation.

3.2.2. Constitutional Initiative in Uruguay on Pension Reform (2024)

On 27 October 2024, Uruguay held a constitutional referendum on pension reform, concurrently with the general elections. The initiative was promoted by the PIT-CNT, Uruguay’s main trade union confederation, through the mechanism of popular constitutional initiative. With nearly 90% turnout, only 41% voted in favour. The proposal was rejected.

The initiative sought to replace Article 67 of the Constitution with a provision defining social security as a fundamental human right, abolishing privately managed pension funds (AFAPs), fixing the minimum retirement age at 60, and guaranteeing all benefits at least equivalent to the national minimum wage. Critics — including the incumbent government, former presidents across the political spectrum, and a group of Frente Amplio-aligned economists — argued that constitutionalizing such detailed policy choices would impose rigid constraints on future democratic decision-making and risk long-term fiscal unsustainability. The outcome reflects Uruguay’s cautious constitutional culture: broad consensus on the importance of social security as a public responsibility, but resistance to entrenching a single model at the highest normative level.

3.2.3. Constitutional Referendum in Lithuania on Dual Nationality (2024)

On 12 May 2024, Lithuania held a constitutional referendum on dual nationality, concurrent with the first round of the presidential election. Initiated by 60 of the 141 Seimas deputies — a ‘minority constitutional referendum’ under Lithuanian law, which allows either 300,000 citizens or 25% of parliament to trigger such a vote — the proposal sought to remove the constitutional prohibition on dual citizenship in Article 12, delegating to parliament the authority to define citizenship conditions by ordinary legislation.

A similar amendment had failed in 2019 (73% in favour, but below the 50%-of-all-registered-voters quorum). The 2024 result was almost identical: 74.5% voted yes, but this represented only 43.4% of registered voters — again short of the required quorum. Following the failure, the Seimas Presidency submitted a draft law to allow Lithuanians with EU or NATO citizenship to retain their Lithuanian nationality, seeking partial legislative relief. The case illustrates the structural tension in Lithuanian constitutional design: a quorum requirement so demanding that it effectively immunises the constitution against change on issues where there is majority but not overwhelming support.

3.2.4. Constitutional Initiative in Liechtenstein on Direct Election of the Executive (2024)

In February 2024, Liechtenstein voters rejected a popular initiative known as the ‘Involvement of People in the Appointment of Government,’ brought forward by the Democrats for Liechtenstein. The initiative sought to amend the 1921 Constitution to introduce direct popular election of government members, transferring part of the appointment power from the Landtag to the electorate. After sufficient signatures were gathered, the proposal

was put to a referendum on 25 February 2024, and decisively rejected by approximately 68% of voters, leaving the parliamentary appointment system intact.

3.2.5. Subnational Constitutional Initiatives in the United States: Abortion and Others (2024 and 2025)

2024 was the year of abortion in the United States. Following the Supreme Court's 2022 ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overturned *Roe v. Wade* and returned abortion regulation to the states, ten states held popular votes on the issue. In eight of them the initiative came from citizens; in Maryland and New York, the legislature referred the amendment, making those votes mandatory referendums.

The results were broadly favourable to abortion access: Colorado (61%) voted to legalize abortion and permit public funding for it; Arizona, Maryland, Missouri, Montana, and New York constitutionally protected abortion until foetal viability; Nevada approved the amendment with 64%, with a required second vote scheduled for 2026. Florida achieved 57% support but fell short of the required 60% supermajority, so the amendment was rejected. Nebraska produced a split outcome: voters rejected a ban on abortion until legal viability (51%) but constitutionalized access during the first trimester (55%). South Dakota was the only state where voters rejected legal abortion outright.

Beyond abortion, North Dakota Measure 1 — the Congressional Age Limits Initiative — was a citizen-initiated constitutional amendment setting a maximum age of 81 for candidates to the U.S. House and Senate in state law. Approved by 61%, it is currently blocked from enforcement by the Supreme Court. The political context was unmistakable: Biden was 82 during the 2024 presidential campaign and Trump will reach 82 before the next presidential election.

In 2025, citizen-initiated measures at the U.S. state level were exceptionally rare. The only two citizen-initiated ballot measures in the entire country appeared on the November 4 ballot in Maine — the sole state with statewide citizen initiatives in 2025. Both were indirect statutory initiatives, not constitutional amendments: under Maine law, citizens may initiate statutes and veto referendums, but not constitutional amendments.

Question 1 proposed requiring photo voter identification for in-person and absentee voting, while simultaneously restricting absentee ballot access. It was rejected by 63.9% to 36.1%. Question 2 proposed establishing an Extreme Risk Protection Order (red-flag) process for temporary firearm access restrictions. It passed, making Maine the 22nd state to enact such a law.

3.3. Veto Referendums and Legislative Initiatives

3.3.1. Eight Facultative Referendums in Switzerland (2024 and 2025)

In 2024, Switzerland held six facultative referendums across three voting days. These allow citizens to contest laws passed by the Federal Assembly before they enter into force, provided 50,000 signatures are collected within 100 days. Of the six referendums, two were approved and four rejected.

On 9 June 2024, the Federal Act on a Secure Electricity Supply from Renewable Energies — triggered by environmental organisations concerned about landscape impacts — was approved by 68.7% (turnout 45.4%). On 22 September, the Occupational Pension Reform (BVG Reform) was rejected by 67.1% after trade unions and left-leaning parties argued it would cut pensions and disproportionately harm part-time workers and women.

The four November 2024 referendums produced mixed results. The National Road Network Expansion (CHF 4.9 billion for additional motorway lanes) was narrowly rejected (47.3% yes). Two tenancy law changes — on subletting and termination for personal use — were both rejected (48.4% and 46.2% yes respectively). The Federal Act on Uniform Financing of Healthcare Services (EFAS) was narrowly approved (53.3% yes).

In 2025, two further facultative referendums were held on 28 September, both approved.

The Federal Act on Electronic Identification Services (e-ID Act) establishes the legal foundation for a state-issued digital identity, allowing individuals to verify their identity online and for physical interactions. Swiss voters had already rejected a previous e-ID scheme in March 2021 (64.4% against), primarily because it relied on private-sector issuance. The revised 2025 law placed issuance entirely under federal government control. Opponents nonetheless launched a new referendum — led by Mass-voll and the Piratenpartei, supported by the Federal Democratic Union and the youth wing of the Swiss People's Party — collecting 55,638 signatures. Voters narrowly approved the e-ID Act with 50.4% in favour, one of the closest results in recent Swiss referendum history. The result had an unusual aftermath: the referendum committee filed an appeal with the Federal Supreme Court alleging that Swisscom had donated CHF 150,000 to a pro-e-ID committee while concealing its involvement. Until the Court rules, the formal enactment remains on hold, and the Federal Council has instructed the Federal Office of Justice to incorporate opponents' criticisms into the implementation framework before launch, now expected no earlier than December 2026.

The second referendum concerned a parliamentary amendment abolishing Switzerland's imputed rental value tax — a charge on homeowners based on the notional rental income of their property, in place since 1934 — while restricting related mortgage interest and maintenance deductions. The reform was also extended to second homes. The Social Democrats and Greens opposed it on grounds of lost tax revenue and distributional concerns; a majority of voters supported it. The reform was approved by 57.7%.

Taken together, the eight Swiss facultative referendums of 2024 and 2025 confirm the instrument's continuing vitality. The e-ID case is particularly instructive: a close 'yes' result forced immediate government commitments to incorporate critics' concerns into implementation, illustrating how the facultative referendum shapes policy even when the government formally wins.

3.3.2. Five Facultative Referendums in Liechtenstein (2024)

In 2024, Liechtenstein held five facultative referendums in which citizens challenged Landtag-approved laws by collecting signatures under Articles 66 and 66b of the constitution. Two rejected energy laws (mandatory photovoltaic panels on non-residential buildings; updated building energy standards aligned with Swiss and EU directives) were voted down in January on grounds of technical and economic feasibility, despite support from the governing coalition and environmental groups. Three later referendums approved: additional financing of CHF 6.04 million for Vaduz's new hospital (54% YES, June); accession to the International Monetary Fund (56% YES, September), supported by the government, the Prime Minister, and Prince Regent Alois; and refinancing of the state enterprise pension scheme (53% YES, December), despite opposition from the Democrats for Liechtenstein.

3.3.3. Slovenia: Abrogative Referendum on Assisted Dying (2025)

Slovenia was the most active European country in citizen-initiated veto referendums in 2025. On 23 November 2025, voters decided on a binding abrogative referendum on the Assisted Voluntary End of Life Act, passed by the National Assembly in July 2025 and allowing terminally ill, mentally competent adults to request medically assisted death. The law followed the June 2024 consultative referendum (see below), in which 55% of voters had backed such legislation. A citizens' initiative led by conservative activist Aleš Primc, backed by the Catholic Church and the right-wing opposition, collected 46,000 signatures - exceeding the required 40,000 - to trigger a binding abrogative vote.

On 23 November, 53.4% of voters rejected the law. Crucially, the No votes also represented more than 20% of eligible voters, meeting the threshold required under Slovenian law for the result to be binding. Turnout was 40.9%, barely above the minimum needed for the rejection to take effect. The law is therefore suspended, and parliament cannot return to the same issue for twelve months. The case illustrates a distinctive feature of the Slovenian system: a nonbinding consultative plebiscite in 2024 prompted legislation, and that legislation was then challenged and blocked through a binding citizen-initiated abrogative referendum in 2025 — the electorate producing opposite outcomes in the two votes.

3.3.4. Italy: Five Abrogative Referendums (2025)

On 8–9 June 2025, Italy held five popular abrogative referendums, concurrent with the second round of local elections. Four questions concerned labour law, seeking to repeal provisions of the 2016 Jobs Act and strengthen worker protections on dismissal rights, fixed-term contracts, and subcontracting liability; these were promoted by the CGIL trade union confederation, which gathered over four million signatures. The fifth question, initiated by the More Europe party with over 637,000 signatures, proposed halving the residency requirement for non-EU nationals to apply for Italian citizenship from ten to five years — a change that could have allowed approximately 2.5 million foreign nationals to apply.

None of the five referendums reached the required 50%+1 turnout quorum: only approximately 30% of eligible voters participated. Prime Minister Meloni publicly declared her opposition; senior coalition figures actively encouraged voters to abstain rather than vote No. This boycott strategy proved effective. The result extends a well-established pattern: between 1974 and 1995, eight of nine Italian referendums reached the quorum; since 1995, only four of 34 have done so. A further constitutional referendum on judicial reform is anticipated in 2026, triggered by citizen signatures after parliament adopted the measure without a two-thirds majority.

3.3.5. Legislative Initiative in Liechtenstein (2024)

Legislative initiative is rare at national level: where constitutional initiative is available, citizens tend to prefer it; where it is not available, legislative initiative is absent. Switzerland abolished its federal legislative initiative in 2009 after six years of existence and zero uses. At national level in 2024–2025, only one case can be documented: a citizen initiative in Liechtenstein on electronic health records, led by Gabriele Haas and supporters of the Democrats for Liechtenstein. The initiative proposed replacing the automatic opt-out system for electronic health records with an opt-in system, so that records would be created only at the individual's request. It gathered sufficient signatures to trigger a vote, was rejected by parliament, and was put to a referendum on 21 January 2024, where voters rejected the proposal (53.95% against).

3.4. Legal Plebiscites

3.4.1. Constitutional Plebiscites in Ecuador (2024 and 2025)

On 21 April 2024, Ecuador held a constitutional plebiscite on eleven proposals introduced by President Daniel Noboa, including a partial constitutional revision, four constitutional amendments, and six government bills. Nine of the eleven were approved, most notably measures authorizing the armed forces to assist police in domestic security operations and allowing extradition of Ecuadorian citizens for serious crimes — responses to an escalating organized crime crisis linked to drug cartels. Although submitting these reforms to a referendum was not legally

required, Noboa used the plebiscite strategically to combine popular security measures with contested structural changes. Citizens rejected two proposals: one on the labor code, one on international involvement.

In November 2025, Ecuador held a second government-initiated referendum — which became Noboa’s first major electoral defeat. Voters rejected all four proposals: eliminating the constitutional ban on foreign military bases (60.8% against), removing public financing for political parties (58.3% against), reducing the number of lawmakers from 151 to 73 (53.7% against), and convening a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution (61.8% against). Turnout exceeded 80% under compulsory voting. The contrast with April 2024 is instructive: while security-related measures won broad approval, structural constitutional reforms were convincingly rejected. The Ecuador sequence of 2024–2025 illustrates how the legal plebiscite can function both as an effective governing tool and as a political gamble — one that, at sufficient hubris, the government can lose.

3.4.2. Consultative Plebiscites in Slovenia (2024)

On 9 June 2024, the Golob government held a multi-question consultative plebiscite on four legislative proposals: the legalization of euthanasia, the introduction of preferential voting in parliamentary elections, the legalization of medical cannabis, and the legalization of recreational cannabis. The referendum has no constitutional basis but is provided for in the Referendum and Popular Initiative Act (ZRLI); it was non-binding, leaving Parliament free to legislate or not. The referendum was held on the same day as European elections, a timing the opposition challenged unsuccessfully before the Constitutional Court.

All four proposals received majority support: euthanasia (54.9%), preferential voting (70.9%), medical cannabis (66.7%), and recreational cannabis (51.6%). The government subsequently announced legislative drafts; implementation of preferential voting would require a qualified parliamentary majority. The euthanasia legalization law, passed by the National Assembly in July 2025, was then challenged and rejected in a binding citizen-initiated referendum in November 2025 (see Section 3.1.3. above) — demonstrating how a nonbinding consultative plebiscite can trigger legislation, which can then be blocked by citizens through the veto referendum. This type of plebiscite is best understood as an improved poll: government-initiated, non-binding, useful for gauging public sentiment but carrying no direct legal obligation to act.

3.4.3. Constitutional Plebiscite in Moldova on European Union Integration (2024)

On 20 October 2024, Moldova held a binding constitutional referendum alongside the first round of the presidential election, asking voters whether to enshrine EU membership as a constitutional aspiration, legally constraining future governments from reversing the country’s pro-European course. The referendum was initiated by parliament following a 54-to-0 resolution. Turnout exceeded the 33.33% legal threshold, making the result binding.

The campaign was deeply polarized. President Sandu actively promoted the ‘yes’ option; pro-Russian opposition parties, including the banned Șor Party, campaigned against. Gagauzia demonstrated strong resistance. The referendum occurred amid documented foreign interference: Moldovan authorities reported vote-buying and bribery channeled through Russian-linked networks; EU cybersecurity teams were deployed. The final result was 50.35% in favour against 49.65% — a margin of roughly 10,000 votes out of 1.5 million cast. Diaspora voters proved decisive. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) noted professional administration but highlighted media bias and misuse of public resources. The result constitutionally entrenches Moldova’s pro-European orientation, limiting future reversal, while exposing deep domestic divisions that will shape the accession process.

3.4.4. Plebiscite in Kazakhstan on Nuclear Power (2024)

On 6 October 2024, Kazakhstan held a national referendum on the construction of its first nuclear power plant, to be built at Ülken near Lake Balkhash. The initiative was championed by President Tokayev, motivated by the need

to reduce fossil fuel dependence, address persistent power shortages, and leverage Kazakhstan’s position as the world’s largest uranium producer. The question — ‘Do you agree with the construction of a nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan?’ — was approved by a majority.

The plebiscite relied on the Constitutional Law on the Republican Referendum, amended in July 2024. Government hearings in 20 cities preceded the vote, though reports indicated that dissenting voices were sometimes silenced and opposition figures barred from speaking. Ecologists raised concerns about environmental risks to Lake Balkhash. The referendum reflected the government’s stated commitment to public consultation on major strategic decisions, though the conditions under which it was organised placed it firmly in the category of a legal plebiscite rather than direct democracy.

3.4.5. Constitutional Referendum in Qatar: Increasing Executive Powers (2024)

On 5 November 2024, Qatar held a constitutional referendum approving amendments to the 2004 Constitution that strengthened the powers of the Emir and eliminated the direct election of Advisory Council members. The revised constitution replaces the partially elected Council with 45 members appointed solely by the Emir, removes the requirement for the Emir to swear in before the Council, and allows him to dissolve it at any time. The Emir justified the change as necessary to prevent inter-tribal tensions that had surfaced during the 2021 elections — the first since the Constitution’s adoption.

The referendum was based on Article 75 of the Constitution, which allows the Emir to call a binding referendum at his discretion. Results reported over 90% approval with 84% turnout, though detailed vote counts were not published. The revision took effect on 6 November 2024. The Qatar case is a clear instance of a constitutional plebiscite that formally involves citizens while structurally consolidating executive power — the opposite of what direct democracy is designed to achieve.

3.4.6. Legislative Plebiscite in Taiwan (2025)

On 23 August 2025, Taiwan held its first legislature-initiated national referendum, on whether the Maanshan Nuclear Power Plant should continue operating, subject to safety assessments. The referendum was proposed and approved in the Legislative Yuan by the Taiwan People’s Party and the Kuomintang — the first Taiwanese referendum held without public petition. Despite 74.2% of participating voters supporting the proposal, it failed because affirmative votes fell short of the legally required threshold of 25% of all eligible voters; overall turnout was only 29.53%. The result illustrates how a legislature-controlled plebiscitary instrument can produce a nominally decisive popular result while still being voided by a participatory threshold — a pattern familiar from Italy and Lithuania, and one that raises recurring questions about whether quorum requirements protect democratic legitimacy or merely enable obstruction by non-participation.

3.5. Ad Hoc Plebiscites

3.5.1. Cayman Islands: Three-Question Consultative Referendum (2025)

On 30 April 2025, the Cayman Islands held a non-binding government-initiated referendum alongside the general election, asking three questions: whether to develop cruise berthing infrastructure, whether to introduce a national lottery, and whether to decriminalize the consumption and possession of small amounts of cannabis. The referendum was initiated under the Referendum (Cruise Berthing Infrastructure, Gambling and Cannabis) Act 2025. Under the Cayman Islands Constitution Order 2009, only referendums triggered by a petition of at least 25% of registered voters are legally binding; government-initiated referendums carry no such obligation.

Results were split: 64.15% rejected cruise berthing facilities — an emphatic defeat for the tourism industry lobby that had championed the project for years — while 55.64% supported cannabis decriminalization and 51.24% approved a national lottery. The new government referred the cannabis and lottery questions to the Law Reform Commission for recommendations while acknowledging it was not legally required to act. The Cayman case is a clear example of the advisory plebiscite in a small island jurisdiction: government-initiated, non-binding, and used to gauge public sentiment on contested policy questions rather than to produce legally enforceable decisions.

3.5.2. Constitutional Plebiscite in Gabon (2024)

The Gabonese constitutional referendum of 16 November 2024 followed the 2023 coup d'état in which Brice Oligui Nguema replaced President Ali Bongo after disputed elections. Nguema promised a return to civilian rule and a new constitution. A national dialogue in May 2024 proposed a two-year transition; a draft constitution was finalised in October 2024 after a Constituent Assembly recommended 802 amendments, though the junta retained ultimate authority over the text.

The referendum was organised by the Ministry of Interior rather than the electoral commission, under a nighttime curfew. Results were decisive: 91% in favour, 53% turnout. The new constitution establishes a presidential system in which the president serves as both head of state and government. It takes effect after the next presidential election. The Gabon case follows a recognisable post-coup pattern: a military junta uses a constitutional referendum not to restore democracy but to institutionalise its transition to civilian-dressed power.

3.5.3. Constitutional Plebiscite in Guinea (2025)

On 21 September 2025, Guinea held a referendum on a new constitution — following the same post-coup script as Gabon's 2024 referendum. The new constitution extended presidential term limits, introduced a Senate, and removed a prior ban on junta members contesting elections, clearing the way for transitional President Mamady Doumbouya — who seized power in a coup in 2021 — to run for the presidency. Authorities reported 89.4% support with 86.4% turnout, though these figures were not independently verified.

Nearly all major political parties called on their supporters to boycott the referendum, describing it as a staged exercise. The Africa Center for Strategic Studies concluded that it fell far short of electoral best practices for fairness, transparency, and participation. Guinea, alongside Gabon in 2024, confirms a recurring pattern in sub-Saharan Africa of post-coup regimes using constitutional referendums not to restore democracy, but to institutionalize military rule.

3.5.4. Slovenia: Cancelled NATO Referendums (2025)

A second Slovenian referendum episode in 2025 concerns two proposals that never materialized but generated significant political turbulence. Following the NATO summit in The Hague in June 2025, at which alliance leaders committed to raising defence spending to 5% of GDP, the junior coalition partner Levica tabled a parliamentary motion for a consultative referendum on whether to raise Slovenian defence spending to 3% of GDP. The motion passed 46 to 42, deepening rifts within the governing coalition. Prime Minister Golob responded by announcing a second consultative referendum on Slovenia's NATO membership itself — framing the choice as binary: remain in the alliance and meet its obligations, or leave.

Neither referendum was ever held. On 18 July 2025, the National Assembly annulled both decisions by 44 votes to 7, following intense domestic and international pressure. The episode illustrates how the referendum instrument can be weaponized for intra-coalition tactical manoeuvres — and how the same governments that initiate referendums can cancel them just as quickly when the political calculus shifts.

3.5.5. Haiti: Failed Constitutional Referendum Attempt (2021–2025)

Haiti's long-running attempt to hold a constitutional referendum represents one of the most protracted and ultimately unsuccessful referendum processes of the decade. President Jovenel Moïse announced in 2021 that he would submit a new draft constitution to a popular vote. The proposal was immediately controversial: the 1987 Haitian Constitution explicitly prohibits referendums as a method of amendment, and critics — including Harvard, NYU, and Yale Law School clinics — characterized the process as unconstitutional and as an instrument for concentrating executive power.

The referendum was scheduled for June 2021, then postponed to September, then November, before being indefinitely delayed following Moïse's assassination in July 2021 and a devastating earthquake. Successive governments continued to plan the vote, postponing it to February 2022, then 2023, and again to May 2025. The proposed constitution contained significant structural changes: abolition of the Senate, replacement of the Prime Minister with a Vice President, shift to a full presidential system, and modification of term limits. The Venice Commission issued repeated opinions highlighting the process's lack of legitimacy and the impossibility of holding a credible vote under near-total gang control of Port-au-Prince and widespread displacement. In October 2025, the project was formally cancelled. Haiti thus ended the period 2021–2025 without holding a single referendum — the starkest illustration of the impossibility of direct democracy under conditions of state collapse.

4. LATEST SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE ON DIRECT DEMOCRACY

Research on direct democracy published in 2024 and 2025 followed several converging paths. Scholars continued to examine who supports direct democracy and under what conditions it is adopted; they also expanded inquiry into the effects of direct democratic instruments on public policies and on citizens' behaviour and attitudes. The two years together produced new conceptual work, important historical scholarship, and a growing body of comparative empirical evidence. While Switzerland and the United States remain the most frequently examined cases, research now covers a wider range of countries, and direct democracy is increasingly studied in cross-national surveys—including in countries that lack initiative or referendum institutions.

The 2025 literature deepened and, in some respects, complicated the picture emerging from 2024. Several new themes came into focus: the strategic use of referendums by political parties, the dynamics of voter opinion formation during campaigns, the risks of elite manipulation, and the relationship between direct democracy and social unrest. At the same time, perennial debates - over inequality of political influence, the relationship between populism and direct democracy, and the effects on public policy - were revisited with new data and new methods.

4.1. Conceptualizing, strengthening and protecting direct democracy

The Oxford Handbook of Swiss Politics, published in 2024, includes a chapter on direct democracy by Isabelle Stadelmann-Steffen and Lucas Leemann (2024). Beyond the richness of its empirical detail, the chapter introduces a useful hierarchical view of the sources of law in Switzerland: "Citizens participate in all major decisions, especially constitutional matters; Parliament decides on laws, unless citizens request a referendum; and the government is responsible for decrees, which are considered least significant" (pp. 156-157). This hierarchical vision - also highlighted in the Global State of Direct Democracy 2024 Report - forms the basis of Raul Magni-Berton's (2025) argument that such a system reinforces liberal government. Raul Magni-Berton proposes a "hard" definition of direct democracy centred on citizens' initiative and veto rights, contrasting with David Altman's (2024) broader "soft" definition, which includes all mechanisms enabling citizens to express preferences at the ballot box through universal and secret suffrage on matters beyond electing representatives. Yanina Welp (2024) has argued, that the inclusion of non-representative individuals in the constitutional process should not be understood as an "epistemic superiority of the people", but rather as a method to organize the plurality of interest.

Using data from 103 countries drawn from the Navigator for Direct Democracy, Eike-Christian Hornig and Christian Frommelt (2024) also adopt a broad definition but evaluate institutions in terms of their functions. Surprisingly, this leads them to rank Italy as more direct democratic than Switzerland.

Debates on the nature of direct democracy were revived after Ohio voters rejected, in August 2023, a proposal to raise the approval threshold for constitutional amendments from a simple majority to 60 percent. Some legal scholars, such as Mark Wagoner (2024), argue that allowing simple majority amendments turns the Ohio Constitution into a “super-legislative” document defined largely by popular decision-making. Others, including Steven Steinglass and Ernest Oleksy (2024), trace the origins of Ohio’s system to show why simple majorities are an essential part of the state’s democratic tradition.

Also in 2025, a systematic literature review by Şimşek and colleagues synthesized 43 articles published between 2016 and 2023 with ‘direct democracy’ in the title, offering a panoramic overview of the field’s development. Their synthesis highlights three key themes: direct democracy is framed as a way to reduce democratic deficits and enhance legitimacy; adoption is driven by political dissatisfaction and failures of representative institutions; and outcomes depend heavily on institutional design, information environments, and political context. The review’s central conclusion—that direct democracy is not inherently democratizing but conditional in its effects—is certainly due to the fact that the studies bring together institutions of a very different nature (including plebiscites, citizen initiated referendums as well as mandatory referendums)

Few debates have focused on how to improve direct democracy. In 2025, Walter Babeck offered a practitioner-oriented contribution by developing a modular framework for constitutional design of direct democratic elements. His chapter reviews the factors that shape the hurdles and outcomes of referendums, including whether they are proactive or reactive, the levels at which they operate, the role of parliamentary oversight, and the design of quorums and approval thresholds. John Matsusaka, contributing to the Elgar Encyclopedia of Public Choice, argued for greater scholarly and policy attention to direct democracy in light of sustained citizen demand for such mechanisms.

Debates about improving direct democracy touched on the challenges and opportunities posed by artificial intelligence. Illia Roskoshnyi (2024) offered one of the first systematic treatments of these issues, advocating a model that integrates AI tools with direct democratic instruments, including quadratic voting. This theme was enriched in 2025 by Maud Reveilhac and Davide Morselli, who tested ChatGPT on four real Swiss ballot initiatives. They found that the model’s political stances varied meaningfully by version and prompt language, that GPT-3.5 was more willing to take explicit positions than GPT-4, and that neither version reliably predicted actual vote outcomes. Their conclusion—that large language model outputs are more contextually contingent than previously assumed—cautions against both excessive fear and excessive confidence in AI’s influence on referendum campaigns.

A distinct conceptual theme emerging in 2025 is direct democracy backsliding. Matsusaka’s empirical study (2025) covering 70 years of U.S. state-level data documents a continuous erosion of direct democratic rights: legislatures proposed on average 2.2 restrictive amendments per two-year electoral cycle, with four restrictive amendments for every one that expanded direct democracy. Republican control of state legislatures was the strongest predictor of anti-direct-democracy proposals. Separately, Brian Wishnie-Edwards (2025) analyzed court challenges to such restrictions, identifying legal doctrines that may offer citizens some protection. These contributions add a new and urgent dimension to the study of institutional design: not only how to build direct democracy, but how to defend it.

4.2. Direct democracy and public policy

A consistent finding across both years is that policies in direct democracies tend to align more closely with citizens’ preferences than those produced by purely representative systems. In 2024, Guadalupe Correa-Lopera’s formal model identified conditions under which representative systems yield similar outcomes to direct democracy: when

voter preferences over policy implementation are homogeneous, and when party preferences strongly diverge. This may help explain high political satisfaction in Scandinavian countries despite the absence of strong direct democratic institutions.

Several recent studies analyse the effects of direct democracy on equality and basic rights. In a cross-national comparison, Brigitte Geissel, Anna Krämling, and Lars Paulus (2024) show that citizens' referendum preferences are not consistently for or against equality. Focusing on equal rights, Anna Maria Koukal, Patricia Schafer, and Reiner Eichenberger (2024) examine Swiss referendums on lowering the voting age from 20 to 18. They find that direct democracy tends to reinforce the rights of already enfranchised groups, reducing their willingness to extend rights to others. Other rights, however, may be better protected through direct democracy. Patrick O'Mahen (2024) demonstrates that restrictions on abortion - an issue on which most Americans support access - are less likely to pass where direct democratic mechanisms exist. Jane Schacter (2024) similarly shows that abortion debates are deeply intertwined with debates about direct democracy. Regarding vulnerable minorities, Anna Krämling (2024), examining more than 500 referendums, finds that ethnic and sexual minorities benefit from the use of direct democracy, especially when votes are binding and no quorums or supermajorities apply.

The 2025 literature adds important nuance. Markus Wagner's study of Switzerland - using an original dataset of 399 survey questions linked to policy outcomes between 1972 and 2017 - finds that direct democracy partially equalizes political influence. Popular initiatives democratize the agenda-setting process by responding to the preferences of median-income and median-educated citizens rather than elites alone. Referendums also prevent elites from monopolizing the power to block unwanted change. However, when it comes to which proposals actually become law, only the preferences of the affluent and highly educated exercise a statistically independent effect—mirroring findings from every other country studied. Direct democracy, Wagner concludes, is a corrective, not a cure.

Laboratory experiments by Di Liddo, Giuranno, and Morone (2025) provide complementary evidence from a different angle. Their controlled comparisons of direct and representative democracy show that strategic voting is more pronounced under representative institutions, leading to greater distortions in fiscal policy. Tax progressivity, their key outcome variable, is more susceptible to manipulation by the strategically pivotal voter under delegation than under direct decision-making. These findings underscore how institutional design shapes not just policy outputs but the incentives citizens face when voting.

Studies on housing policy add a less optimistic note. Miley Liu's (2025) examination of nearly 1,000 U.S. cities between 2006 and 2018 finds that cities adopting direct democracy are more likely to implement restrictive land-use policies that favor anti-growth interests. Effects are especially pronounced in lower-income cities, where the balance of power between homeowners and renters strongly shapes outcomes. This contribution challenges any assumption that direct democracy reliably advances progressive or redistributive goals; institutional effects are mediated by the socioeconomic composition of the electorate.

4.3. Direct Democracy and political behaviour

4.3.1. Voting Behaviour, Civic Virtues, and Well-Being

A comprehensive review of voting behaviour in Switzerland's direct democracy was published by Pascal Sciarini and Anke Tresch (2024). Nevertheless, relatively few 2024 studies examine how citizens vote. One exception is a Taiwanese case study by Cheng-hsin Tsai (2024), identifying an emotional mechanism through which receiving information increases turnout. Another contribution by Toine Paulissen (2024) investigates political party behaviour in Ireland's mandatory referendums. Parties' financial involvement in referendum campaigns depends on issue salience, the nature of the topic, and party characteristics such as resources and government status.

Most 2024 research focuses instead on the attitudes and behaviours shaped by direct democracy. Traditional theories claim that direct democracy fosters political knowledge and civic virtues, as individuals seek information when their choices matter and become more politically engaged.

Laurent Bernhard (2024) offers the first systematic review of this literature. Based on 67 studies, he finds that evidence generally supports positive effects on turnout, political efficacy, political knowledge, subjective well-being, and satisfaction with democracy, but also shows an increasing number of mixed or negative findings.

Markus Freitag and Alina Zumbrunn (2024), focusing on the United States and Switzerland, investigate who becomes more politically interested when direct democracy is widely used. Overall, direct democracy does not directly increase political interest, but interest rises among individuals with neurotic personality traits—those prone to negative emotions like fear, anger, shame, envy, or depression—who otherwise tend to participate less in politics.

Using a narrative approach, Tobias Kindler (2024) shows that Swiss direct democracy motivates social workers to engage more actively in policy advocacy for social justice.

Although debates continue regarding civic virtues, the effect of direct democracy on individual happiness appears well established. Daniel Kübler (2024), reviewing the Swiss case, argues that direct legislation fosters consensual politics, favourable economic conditions, and high citizen satisfaction. Similarly, Francesco Bromo, Alexander Pacek, and Benjamin Radcliff (2024) analyse five dimensions of democracy across 103 countries and conclude that only the participatory dimension - which includes initiatives and referendums - is associated with higher life satisfaction.

Research on voting behaviour in direct democracy expanded considerably in 2025. Cheryl Boudreau and Scott MacKenzie conducted three studies during real-world direct democracy elections in the United States, showing that citizens regularly choose ballot alternatives closest to their ideological positions—even in the absence of additional information. A survey experiment further demonstrated that political information (party cues, policy descriptions, and spatial maps) improves spatial voting, strengthening the alignment between citizen preferences and vote choices. This provides a direct empirical response to longstanding scepticism about voter competence in direct democratic settings.

Antoine Petitpas and Pascal Sciarini's (2025) panel study of opinion formation during four ballot campaigns—two in California and two in Switzerland—offers a dynamic view of how voters learn during campaigns. Their results are mixed but mostly encouraging: voter knowledge increases as campaigns progress, and this learning leads to more consistent and informed voting. Crucially, voters become better able to connect their underlying policy preferences to their vote as the campaign unfolds. The authors find that both cue-taking (following party signals) and substantive policy learning contribute to this dynamic, with Swiss voters showing higher levels of knowledge acquisition—likely due to the stronger involvement of political parties in that context. The study also finds that a complex multi-ballot environment, as in California, can reduce voting consistency, highlighting how institutional context shapes the quality of democratic decision-making.

Barbieri, Petitpas, and Sciarini (2025) investigate motivated reasoning in a California citizen initiative on online sports betting. Their survey experiment shows that voters who change their vote intentions tend to follow party cues regardless of the direction of policy information—even when the cue contradicts their initial position. This partisan bias in information processing complements the more optimistic findings above: while voters can and do learn, their updating often runs through partisan channels rather than pure policy reasoning.

Questions of political equality in participation were addressed by Sciarini and Walder (2025), who analysed 300 Swiss votes between 1985 and 2020 and found a consistent educational gap in voting choices: low-educated voters

are less supportive of government positions, with particularly large divergences on immigration, asylum, and foreign policy—issues where the ‘globalization cleavage’ is sharpest. While the declining share of low-educated voters limits their aggregate veto power, their opposition has at times been decisive in government defeats. Gherghina and Qvortrup (2025), examining constitutional referendums worldwide between 1980 and 2022, show that compulsory voting, economic conditions, and voter mobilization are important predictors of referendum support. Contrary to findings in more generic referendum studies, there is no evidence of a ‘honeymoon’ period in constitutional referendums.

4.3.2. Legitimacy and Referendum Outcomes

Arnesen and colleagues (2025) present experimental evidence from multiple European countries showing that the perceived legitimacy of referendum outcomes is strongly contingent on the attributes of the referendum itself - specifically the voting margin and turnout. This finding holds across countries with widely different historical experiences with referendums, suggesting that legitimacy is constructed through the procedural features of the vote rather than inherited from prior democratic culture.

Doyle (2025) offers a constitutional theory of referendum failure, framing constitutional change referendums as a form of legislation in which both representatives and voters must agree on legal change. Failure occurs when there exists an alternative constitutional arrangement that could satisfy both parties’ intentions but is not realized - a situation that worsens the democratic deficit of constitutionalism by making plausible reforms impossible to achieve.

The Irish abortion referendum of 2018 was revisited in a network analysis by Pena, MacCarron, and O’Sullivan (2025), who examined polarization and information diffusion on Twitter. Using community detection methods, they identified opposing sides of the debate with high accuracy (90.9%) and found that very little information spread between polarized communities—a finding that bears on the quality of deliberation in referendum campaigns and echoes concerns raised in the broader literature on direct democracy and political polarization.

In 2025, the relationship between direct democracy and social unrest came back to the scientific agenda. David Altman’s cross-national panel study, the first to empirically examine this relationship, finds that countries with greater access to citizen-initiated mechanisms of direct democracy experience lower levels of both violent and non-violent resistance campaigns, even after controlling for economic factors. By providing institutional ‘safety valves’ for the expression of grievances between elections, these mechanisms appear to reduce frustrations that might otherwise escalate to large-scale protests. The author acknowledges, however, that these mechanisms can be co-opted by populist or extremist actors—a risk that qualifies the overall positive finding.

4.4. The Strategic Use of Direct Democracy

A largely new theme in the 2025 literature concerns the strategic use of direct democracy by political elites and parties.

Buisseret and Van Weelden’s (2025) formal model challenges the conventional ‘lightning rod’ account, which holds that parties use referendums to take contentious issues off the table and relieve internal pressure. Their key distinction is between binding referendums, which parties must implement, and non-binding ones, where parties simply observe voter preferences and reposition accordingly. For binding referendums, the conventional wisdom holds: a party benefits from settling a cross-cutting issue through direct vote when it has a strong partisan base but is internally divided on that issue. Non-binding referendums, however, open a different and more dangerous strategic logic: a sufficiently disadvantaged party may deliberately initiate a referendum to fracture its stronger opponent’s coalition, betting that the revealed result will convert a single-issue election into a multi-issue contest. Crucially, a close referendum result always produces a multi-issue election, since parties with internally divided majorities will continue to disagree after the vote.

The model also shows that direct democracy does not reliably improve the alignment between policy and voter preferences. While binding referendums improve congruence on the specific issue subject to the vote, they can simultaneously reduce alignment on other issues. Non-binding referendums can reduce alignment on both issues—not because of special-interest capture or voter ignorance, but through strategic party repositioning. The cases of Brexit, California’s Proposition 187, and French EU referendums under Pompidou and Mitterrand are offered as illustrative examples.

Matt Qvortrup’s (2025) book-length treatment synthesizes evidence across many cases to argue that the referendum is often an instrument in the hands of governments rather than citizens. Ad hoc referendums called by governments tend to favour elite agendas; constitutionally mandated referendums and citizen-initiated votes are more likely to serve as genuine checks on power, though they too can be appropriated. The Italian abrogative referendum that ended Silvio Berlusconi’s legal immunity and the Ohio abortion rights initiative of 2023 are offered as cases where citizens successfully used direct democracy against unrepresentative elites.

4.5. Who Supports Direct Democracy? Trust, Populism, and Self-Interest

The long-standing debate on who supports direct democracy remained active in 2024. Traditional research identifies a link between populist attitudes and support for direct democracy, a finding still observed by Patricia Rehus and Steven Van Hauwaert (2024).

However, recent studies nuance or contradict this relationship. Nina Wiesehomeier and Saskia Ruth-Lovell (2024), using surveys in five countries, show that populism does not inherently lead to support for bottom-up direct democracy. Davide Angelucci, Sébastien Rojon, and Davide Vittori (2024), analysing 29 countries, find that populists favour direct democracy only when they are “political losers”—that is, when they lose elections.

In Germany, Anne Küppers (2024) finds that belief in conspiracy theories correlates with support for direct democracy, possibly because conspiracy believers often perceive themselves as political outsiders. In the United States, Daniel Biggers and Alexander Ross (2024) show that out-of-power partisans support direct democracy more strongly, especially when referendums yield outcomes they prefer. In Germany and Austria, Marco Fölsch and colleagues find that support for direct democracy relies mainly on instrumental rather than normative considerations, and is not linked to populism.

Studying South Dakota’s 1898 referendum establishing the first statewide initiative process, John Dinan and Jac Heckelman (2024) show that the most supportive groups were those that are disadvantaged in various ways by existing representative institutions and perceive advantages in creating direct democratic institutions capable of bypassing representative processes. In short, the literature suggests that people support direct democracy primarily for instrumental reasons. When ideology plays a role, populism is not a relevant variable after controlling for their position in the representative system.

Turning to political elites, Saskia Ruth-Lovell and Yanina Welp (2024) show that populist presidents in Latin America are more likely than non-populists to introduce direct democratic institutions—though only when they enjoy strong public support, enabling them to use these mechanisms strategically. However, their definition of direct democracy is broad and includes top-down referendums, often used to weaken checks and balances.

Using the Comparative Candidates Survey, João Gaio e Silva and Marco Lisi (2024) find that populist candidates express lower satisfaction with democracy, more negative views of elections, and stronger support for direct procedures. Yet in another study, João Gaio e Silva (2024) compares party manifestos in five Southern European countries and concludes that populism does not explain party democratic agendas; ideology plays a far more decisive role. Globally, there are signs that what is true for citizens is also true for political parties.

The 2025 literature adds further evidence on the role of financial and organizational interests. Liu's (2025) study of out-of-state donations to U.S. direct democracy campaigns—the first of its kind—finds that such contributions have increased over time, with notable spikes in recent election cycles. Most individual out-of-state donors give small amounts to measures related to social issues and substance use regulation. The pattern of donations suggests that individual out-of-state donors are motivated primarily by a combination of ideological and consumption-oriented considerations, rather than strategic or material self-interest in a narrow sense.

The question of whether citizens want to supplement direct democracy with deliberative alternatives was addressed by Kübler and colleagues (2025), drawing on a conjoint experiment with 3,700 Swiss respondents. Citizens generally hold positive views of deliberative mini-publics, preferring formats that address salient topics, allow unconstrained participation, and operate within manageable timeframes. However, they strongly oppose replacing existing direct democratic institutions with mini-publics. Support for such a replacement is associated with trust in fellow citizens and dissatisfaction with direct democracy—both normatively and instrumentally. Citizens were notably sceptical of sortition as a recruitment procedure, suggesting that the legitimacy of mini-publics remains an open question even among citizens highly familiar with participatory institutions.

4.6. Global Trends and Cross-National Patterns

David Altman's longitudinal overview of direct democracy worldwide in 2022–2023 documents a notable rebound after a declining trend since 2010: 73 national direct democratic votes worldwide, a 45% increase over the previous two years. The growth was driven primarily by obligatory referendums and rejective referendums rather than popular initiatives. Altman and his co-author show a remarkably strong correlation (0.922) between a country's level of democracy and its capacity for direct democracy, while noting that direct democratic votes cross regime types: of the 24 countries holding votes in 2022–2023, ten were electoral or closed autocracies.

The divergence between citizen-initiated and government-initiated mechanisms is highlighted as central to understanding these patterns. Citizen-initiated mechanisms - popular initiatives and rejective referendums - are most associated with democratic regimes and have been the main driver of growth in direct democratic capacity over the past three decades. Plebiscites called by authorities, by contrast, tend to appear in more authoritarian contexts and can be weaponized for mobilization rather than genuine consultation. Cases like Hungary and Poland's plebiscites (both invalidated by low participation) and Venezuela's Essequibo referendum (featuring disputed turnout figures and nationalist framing) illustrate how the same institutional form can serve opposite democratic functions.

Matsusaka's (2025) evidence of systematic direct democracy backsliding in U.S. states - four restrictive legislative amendments for every one that expands direct democratic rights - raises the question of whether the global rebound documented by Altman reflects durable institutional strengthening or a more fragile and contested trend. The finding that Republican state legislatures are the strongest predictor of anti-direct-democracy proposals points to the partisan embeddedness of these dynamics, at least in the American context.

4.7. History of Direct Democracy

Historical scholarship on direct democracy was active in 2024. Lucia Rubinelli examined the intense debates in France between the 1848 Revolution and Napoleon III's 1852 coup, a period when direct legislation became a central political issue that influenced movements across Europe and the United States. Richard J. Ellis documented the influence of Victor Considérant - who drew inspiration from Prussian thinker Moritz Rittinghausen - on Benjamin Urner, an American socialist who played a key role in introducing direct democracy in the United States. Can Mert Kökerer showed that the young Karl Marx viewed direct democracy as a promising path from capitalism toward socialism, an idea he later abandoned in favour of proletarian revolution.

In 2025, Todd Murphy offered a rhetorical history of the direct democracy movement that emerged around the turn of the twentieth century in the United States. His analysis identifies themes from that period—citizen empowerment, anti-corruption, and deliberative aspiration—that remain relevant to contemporary debates about the relationship between direct and deliberative democracy. Murphy argues that the initiative and referendum movement was not merely procedural but represented a distinctive rhetorical tradition that enriched early twentieth-century democratic discourse and can still inform current practice.

Conclusion

Taken together, the scholarship of 2024 and 2025 presents a richer but more conditional picture of direct democracy than earlier literature. The case for direct democracy as a mechanism that aligns policy with citizen preferences, fosters civic engagement, reduces social unrest, and constrains elite dominance over the political agenda finds broad empirical support. At the same time, the evidence is clear that these effects are not automatic: they depend on institutional design.

Several themes deserve attention in future research. The interaction between artificial intelligence and direct democracy remains in its infancy as a scholarly field, yet practical developments are moving rapidly. The relationship between direct democracy backsliding and broader democratic backsliding warrants systematic cross-national analysis. The conditions under which deliberative mini-publics can complement rather than compete with direct democratic institutions is an open and policy-relevant question. And the strategic logic of referendum initiation—long undertheorized—has now received formal treatment that invites empirical testing across a wider range of cases and contexts.

References reviewed

- Altman, D. (2024). *Direct democracy*. In *Handbook of Comparative Political Institutions* (pp. 276–293). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Altman, D. (2025). *Decompressing to prevent unrest: political participation through citizen-initiated mechanisms of direct democracy*. *Social Movement Studies*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2025.0000000>
- Altman, D., & Altman, N. (2025). *Citizens at the Polls: Direct Democracy in the World, 2022–2023*. *Revista de Ciencia Política*.
- Angelucci, D., Rojon, S., & Vittori, D. (2024). *Do populist parties promote direct democracy? An empirical assessment in 29 countries in the last two decades*. *Contemporary Politics*, 30(4), 473–493.
- Arnesen, S., Broderstad, T. S., Johannesson, M. P., & Linde, J. (2025). *Beyond the Ballot: The Impact of Voting Margin and Turnout on the Legitimacy of Referendum Outcomes in Europe*. *Political Studies*, 73(2), 795–816.
- Babeck, W. (2025). *Direct Democracy (Popular Referendum)*. In *Writing Constitutions: Volume 3: Constitutional Principles* (pp. 159–179). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Barbieri, A., Petitpas, A., & Sciarini, P. (2025). *Betting on partisanship: biased information processing and opinion change on a citizen initiative*. *Political Behavior*, 1–19.
- Bartholomaeus, J., & Strelan, P. (2025). *A fair go? How belief in a just world shaped attitudes, intentions, and behaviors before and after the Australian referendum on a First Nations voice to parliament*. *Political Psychology*, 46(3), 586–602.
- Bernhard, L. (2024). *Does direct democracy increase civic virtues? A systematic literature review*. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, 1287330.
- Biggers, D. R., & Ross, A. (2024). *Strategic considerations and support for direct democracy in the United States*. *Electoral Studies*, 87, 102716.
- Boudreau, C., & MacKenzie, S. A. (2025). *Ballot Box Representation: Spatial Voting and the Effects of Information in Direct Democracy Elections*. *Political Behavior*, 47, 711–736. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-024-09964-4>
- Bromo, F., Pacek, A. C., & Radcliff, B. (2024). *Varieties of democracy and life satisfaction: Is there a connection?* *Social Science Quarterly*, 105(4), 1152–1163.
- Buisseret, P., & Van Weelden, R. (2025). *Pandora's ballot box: Electoral politics of direct democracy*. *American Journal of Political Science*, 69(2), 501–515.

- Christensen, H. S., & Setälä, M. (2024). Do populists want direct democracy? Examining how thick and thin populist attitudes are associated with the Finnish Citizens' Initiative. *Contemporary Politics*, 30(4), 534-552.
- Di Liddo, G., Giuranno, M. G., & Morone, A. (2025). Strategic voting on tax policy: Direct vs representative democracy in the laboratory. *European Journal of Political Economy*, 102661.
- Dinan, J., & Heckelman, J. C. (2024). The Roots of Direct Democracy in the United States: South Dakota's 1898 Referendum Creating the First Statewide Initiative Process. *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*, 24(4), 432-446.
- Doyle, O. (2025). After the referendum: analysis of failure. *Comparative Constitutional Studies*, 3(2), 181-188.
- Ellis, R. J. (2024). Benjamin Urner, utopian socialism, and the origins of direct legislation. *American Political Thought*, 13(3), 337-370.
- Fölsch, M., Dolezal, M., Heinisch, R., Wegscheider, C., & Werner, A. (2024). Cue-taking, populist attitudes, and support for holding a referendum: evidence from survey experiments. *Contemporary Politics*, 30(4), 553-575
- Freitag, M., & Zumbunn, A. (2024). Direct democracy, personality, and political interest in comparative perspective. *Politics*, 44(3), 469-485.
- Gaio e Silva, J., & Lisi, M. (2024). Populism and democratic attitudes: Comparing populist and non-populist candidates' views on democracy and its alternatives. *Party Politics*, 13540688241306420.
- Geißel, B., Krämling, A., & Paulus, L. (2024). Direct democracy and equality: context is the key. *Acta Politica*, 59(4), 916-940.
- Gherghina, S., & Qvortrup, M. (2025). Compulsory voting, economic conditions and turnout: explaining the outcome of constitutional referendums. *West European Politics*, 48(2), 352-370.
- Hornig, E. C., & Frommelt, C. (2024). The system functions of direct democracy—a ranking of 103 countries in the world. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 5, 1146307.
- Kindler, T. (2024). Political institutions and social work: How Switzerland's direct democracy, Federalist structure and consensus system affect social workers' policy engagement. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 54(1), 437-455.
- Kökerer, C. M. (2024). Marx's three different conceptions of political change under capitalism: Direct democracy, proletarian revolution, or self-government under proletarian leadership. *Constellations*.
- Koukal, A. M., Schafer, P., & Eichenberger, R. (2024). Empowering the next generation: The role of direct democracy in youth enfranchisement. *European Journal of Political Economy*, 81, 102507.
- Krämling, A. (2024). *Tyranny of the Majority?: Implications of Direct Democracy for Oppressed Groups in Europe*. Verlag Barbara Budrich.
- Kübler, D. (2024). Citizen participation through direct legislation: a road to success? A perspective from Switzerland. *Global Public Policy and Governance*, 4(2), 184-196.
- Kübler, D., Gut, R., Heimann, A., Stojanovic, N., & Colombo, C. (2025). Who supports deliberative mini-publics in a context of direct democracy? The role of trust and dissatisfaction. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 91(3), 427-447.
- Küppers, A. (2024). Anything but Representative Democracy: Explaining Conspiracy Believers' Support for Direct Democracy and Technocracy. *Politics and Governance*, 12.
- Liu, M. (2025). The varied impact of direct democracy on local housing policies: unravelling the role of socioeconomic context. *Local Government Studies*, 1-33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2025.2517102>
- Magni-Berton, R. (2024). Direct democracy as a liberal political regime. *International Political Science Review*, 1, 12.
- Matsusaka, J. G. (2025). Direct Democracy Backsliding, 1955-2024. *Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy*, 6(2), 249-276.
- Matsusaka, J. G. (2025). Direct Democracy. In *Elgar Encyclopedia of Public Choice* (pp. 228-234). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Murphy, T. A. (2025). Initiating a More Deliberative Rhetoric: The Rhetorical Dimensions of Direct Democracy Past and Present. *Journal for the History of Rhetoric*, 28(2), 115-132.
- O'Mahen, P. N. (2024). Abortion access, public opinion, direct democracy, and state political institutions in the United States. *World Medical & Health Policy*, 16(4), 767-773.
- Paulissen, T. (2024). Direct democracy and party behaviour in the Republic of Ireland: a campaign finance perspective. *Irish Political Studies*, 39(4), 570-593.

- Pena, C. B., MacCarron, P., & O'Sullivan, D. J. (2025). Finding polarized communities and tracking information diffusion on Twitter: a network approach on the Irish Abortion Referendum. *Royal Society Open Science*, 12(1).
- Petitpas, A., & Sciarini, P. (2025). The Dynamics of Public Opinion in Direct Democracy Campaigns. *British Journal of Political Science*, 55, e172.
- Qvortrup, M. (2025). Understanding referendums: the comparative politics of direct democracy. In *Understanding Referendums*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Rehus, P., & Van Hauwaert, S. M. (2024). Dissatisfied but still democratic: How populist citizens understand democracy. *Political Studies*, 00323217251346271.
- Reveilhac, M., & Morselli, D. (2025). ChatGPT as a voting application in direct democracy. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 31(3), 511–532.
- Roskoshnyi, I. (2024). Direct democracy and AI as a way to revitalize the health of the Federal Commonwealth. *JeDEM-eJournal of eDemocracy and Open Government*, 16(1), 1-27.
- Rubinelli, L. (2024). Democracy and direct legislation during the French Second Republic. *Modern Intellectual History*, 21(4), 783-806.
- Ruth-Lovell, S. P., & Welp, Y. (2024). Are Latin American populists more likely to introduce direct democracy?. *Contemporary Politics*, 30(4), 456-472.
- Saragih, G., Putra, R., Ishwara, A., Nugroho, A., & Ivory, J. (2025). Comparison of the Principle of Meaningful Participation in the Process of Law Formation in Indonesia, Switzerland, and Sweden. *JUSTISI*. <https://doi.org/10.33506/js.v11i3.4346>
- Schacter, J. S. (2024). Direct Democracy after Dobbs: Paradox, Irony and the Coming Recalibration. *University of Illinois Law Review*, 1497.
- Sciarini, P. and Tresch, A. (2024). Direct-democratic votes. *The Oxford handbook of Swiss politics*, 410-429.
- Sciarini, P., & Walder, M. (2025). Unequal Voices: The Educational Gap of Voting Choices in the Swiss Direct Democracy. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 31(4), 833–844.
- Silva, J. G. E. (2024). Populist parties and democracy reforms: a quest for transforming representative democracies? *Acta Politica*, 1-25.
- Şimşek, C., Limão, J., Campos, I., Fuchs, D., & Schlipphak, B. (2025). Recent insights on direct democracy: Arguments, drivers, effects and conditions. *Open Research Europe*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.20444.1>
- Stadelmann-Steffen, I., & Leemann, L. (2024). Direct democracy. *The Oxford handbook of Swiss politics*, 157-73.
- Steinglass, S. H., & Oleksy, E. M. (2024). Direct Democracy: Ohio Style. *Cleveland State Law Review*, 73, 101.
- Tsai, C. H. (2024). Information, emotion, and direct democracy: evidence from a survey experiment on Taiwan's nuclear power plant referendum. *Political Science*, 76(1), 92-113.
- Wagner, M. (2025). Unequal responsiveness and direct democracy. *Socio-Economic Review*, mwaf073.
- Wagoner, M. (2024). A Proposal to Rebalance Direct Democracy in the Ohio Constitution. *Cleveland State Law Review*, 73, 26.
- Welp, Y. (2024). Three fallacies undermining participatory constitution making. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 57(2), 259-262.
- Wiesehomeier, N., & Ruth-Lovell, S. P. (2024). Trust the people? Populism, trust, and support for direct democracy. *Politics and Governance*, 12.
- Wishnie-Edwards, B. (2025). Protecting Direct Democracy. *BU Public Interest Law Journal*, 34, 58.

5. DEVELOPMENTS TO FOLLOW IN 2026

In the Global State of Direct Democracy Report 2024, we pointed to possible developments in Chile, the Netherlands, Micronesia, and Taiwan. Since then, no significant direct democratic institutions have emerged in any of the constitutional projects submitted to a vote in Chile. In the Netherlands, the reform process has been extremely slow. In Micronesia and Taiwan, no major developments have occurred, although both places continue

to hold potential for expanding direct democratic practices. In 2026, with the possible exception of Chile, all these countries could still generate relevant news regarding direct democracy.

New countries are also likely to provide insights into the state of direct democracy worldwide. In Thailand, a new constitution is expected to be drafted and submitted to a referendum. While the establishment of a representative system less influenced by the military would already constitute positive news, public debates have also mentioned the introduction of direct democratic mechanisms. In many contexts—particularly in Eastern Europe and Latin America, but also in Italy—forms of “soft” direct democracy have been introduced following periods of authoritarian rule. This is not uncommon, and a similar development could occur in Thailand.

In France, strong criticism of the current institutional design has generated numerous proposals for constitutional reform. Given the preferences of various political parties, the most likely reform would be the introduction of mandatory referendums.

At the local level, the most probable improvements to direct democracy concern the rules in the German Länder, where there is strong demand to lower signature thresholds and quorums and to simplify procedures for collecting signatures.

5.1. Thailand: the road to democracy?

Thailand faces a potentially pivotal moment with the February 2026 general election and referendum on whether to draft a new constitution. The key question is whether this process can genuinely democratize the country — and whether it might introduce stronger forms of direct democracy. Since the end of military rule in 2019, Thailand has held competitive elections, yet democratic governance remains constrained. The 2017 military-drafted constitution embeds a powerful “veto architecture”: a Senate with influence over constitutional amendments and key appointments, a Constitutional Court with authority to dissolve parties and remove elected leaders, and high amendment thresholds that protect entrenched interests. As a result, electoral mandates can be overridden by unelected institutions. Democratization therefore requires more than another election; it requires altering the institutional rules that limit elected governments.

The February referendum is only the first step in a multi-stage constitutional rewrite process. Even if voters approve drafting a new constitution, Parliament must pass an enabling amendment (with Senate support), and further referendums may be required to approve both the drafting framework and the final text. Each stage can be delayed or diluted, meaning a “Yes” vote does not guarantee structural reform. Much will depend on post-election coalition politics and whether reformist parties can reduce the power of unelected veto players. Beyond institutional reform, civil society movements are pushing for a “people’s constitution” that embeds enforceable rights, especially environmental and community rights. Activists argue that the 2017 constitution downgraded protections and insulated top-down development planning from democratic challenge. They call for a justiciable right to a healthy environment, stronger community participation, and mechanisms such as people’s initiatives and referendums.

Direct democracy is therefore part of the debate. However, a 2025 Constitutional Court ruling limits how far constituent power can be directly transferred to the people, signalling resistance to fully democratized constitution-making. While referendums are central to the rewrite process, there is no clear political consensus yet to institutionalize robust citizen-initiated referendums or initiatives. Thailand can democratize, but only if constitutional reform meaningfully reduces unelected veto power and strengthens popular sovereignty. The 2026 process is an opening — not a guarantee — and whether direct democracy expands will depend on how power is ultimately redistributed in the new constitutional design.

5.2. Will the mandatory referendum be introduced in France?

There is a credible possibility that France could introduce a mandatory referendum for all constitutional amendments in the coming years. Four structural and political factors make this reform plausible. First, France has a long-standing and recurring debate about constitutional legitimacy. Although Article 89 of the Constitution already allows for constitutional amendments to be approved by referendum, in practice almost all revisions are adopted by Parliament meeting in Congress. This has generated criticism that constitutional change is too elite-driven and insufficiently validated by citizens.

Second, since the Yellow Vest movement, demands for stronger direct democratic mechanisms — including the “Référendum d’initiative citoyenne” (RIC) — have become embedded in public debate. While the RIC itself remains controversial among the political elite, the broader idea that constitutional change should require direct popular approval has gained cross-partisan resonance.

Third, France already has a referendum culture and established legal procedures for national referendums. Making referendums mandatory for constitutional amendments would not require inventing a new instrument but rather repealing one paragraph to remove the parliamentary-only option. In this respect, France would be not the first country to do it, since Madagascar (2010) and Mali (2023), whose constitution was inspired by the French one, already repealed this paragraph making their referendum mandatory.

Finally, in a context of political fragmentation and declining trust in representative institutions, requiring mandatory referendums for constitutional change could be presented as a democratic safeguard — a way to reinforce popular sovereignty without fundamentally restructuring the political system.

For these reasons, if a future institutional reform package emerges in response to political crisis or constitutional debate, introducing a mandatory constitutional referendum in France would be both legally feasible and politically defensible.

5.3. Towards an increase of successful referendums in Germany?

Given this report focuses on local direct democracy, we decided to finish it with the main perspectives of development of local direct democracy. The debates are still rich in Switzerland and in the United States – notably about digitalization of vote and signatures - and local adjustments of direct democracy are so common that they cannot be considered an event. In the United States, many attempts to restrict direct democracy exist in states where direct democracy is less practiced, such as Arkansas, South Dakota, Florida, Missouri, Ohio and Utah.

In Germany, digitalization is debated as well, especially in the Länder that use direct democratic institutions the most, such as Berlin, Hamburg, and Bavaria. However, a second important debate concerns lowering signature thresholds (in Bavaria) and participation quorums (in Berlin, Brandenburg, or Hamburg). Some proposals aim to make initiatives more accessible to grassroots movements. There are also discussions about clarifying which policy areas may be subject to local referendums, particularly in Bavaria, Berlin, and North Rhine–Westphalia. While the fiscal taboo is not massively rejected, many groups ask for more opportunities to vote around budgetary issues.