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Disentangling Referendums and Direct Democracy: A Defence of the Systemic Approach to Popular Vote Processes

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ABSTRACT

What is the relationship between referendum and initiative processes and democracy? The dominant understanding is that these popular vote processes are institutions associated with a model of direct democracy that stands in opposition to representative democracy. However, this pervasive approach is rarely justified and appears to limit the study of popular vote processes by focusing on implausible ideals, obscuring that many democratic institutions face similar challenges, and encouraging overgeneralising claims that neglect institutional variation in referendum and initiative processes. Previous criticisms of the association of popular vote processes with direct democracy have failed to clearly articulate an alternative. We trace the emergence of a democratic systems approach to popular vote processes and argue that it provides a better conceptual framework to empirically study and normatively discuss these processes.

1. Introduction

Popular vote processes[1] – a term that we use to refer to a variety of referendum and initiatives processes that allow citizens to vote on policy issues – have been used to make many major political decisions in recent years, ranging from issues such as marriage equality in Ireland, peace agreement in Colombia, political institutions in Italy, and European Union membership in Great Britain. This 'referendumania' (The Economist, 2016) has prompted renewed public and academic debates about the appropriateness and democratic legitimacy of including referendums and initiatives alongside representative institutions in democratic systems. Indeed, the 'value [of popular vote processes] in terms of democratic principles still needs to be established' (Weale, 2007, p. 105; see also e.g., Chambers, 2009, p. 331; Garrigou, 2016; Held, 2006, p. 284; Saward, 2000, p. 5).

Most existing assessments of popular vote processes take these institutions to be 'direct democratic' devices that fundamentally differ from institutions of representative democracy (see e.g., Buchanan, 2001; Budge, 1996; Gastil & Richards, 2013; Held, 2006; Leib, 2006; Neblo, Esterling, & Lazer, 2018; Offe, 2017; Saward, 1993). On this view, popular vote processes are evaluated in terms of their capacity to promote the realisation of a specific model of democracy: direct democracy. Direct democracy is usually understood

to stand in opposition to a model of representative democracy, suggesting that there is an inherent tension between popular vote processes and representative institutions. We refer to this way of framing the relationship between popular vote processes and democracy as the 'direct democracy approach' (DDA). Its key tenets have been criticised as 'outdated' (Budge, 2006, p. 2) or caricatural (Tierney, 2012, p. 14). Critics allege that the DDA has led scholars to focus on irrelevant questions (Grynaviski, 2015, p. 238; Hug, 2009) and limited our understanding of popular vote processes (Saward, 2001).

Despite these criticisms, the DDA remains widely influential in both empirical and theoretical research, and surprisingly little work has been done to outline an alternative. Yet the foundations of an alternative approach can be found in a long dormant but now resurgent line of inquiry that seeks to understand how popular vote processes are integrated with other institutions in democratic systems and how these interactions contribute to, or undermine, the realisation of democratic ideals (see e.g., Cheneval & el-Wakil, 2018a; Leemann, 2015; McKay, 2019; Parkinson, 2009; Prato & Strulovici, 2017; Setälä, 2006, 2011). To date, however, there has been no explicit articulation of the underlying normative and conceptual presuppositions of this new approach, which we call the democratic systems approach (DSA).

This article has two complementary goals. First, to reconstruct the often implicit and unargued assumptions that are at the heart of existing approaches to popular vote processes. In sections 1 and 2, we draw on prominent illustrations of the DDA and DSA, respectively, in order to highlight the shared underlying premises that inform discussions of popular vote processes. Because these two approaches are often seen as simply part of the existing conceptual terrain, the authors of the examples that we provide may not see themselves as using the DDA or DSA. Nonetheless, our goal is to make these paradigms explicit in the hope of encouraging active reflection and evaluation of their suitability for approaching and judging popular vote processes.

Our second goal is to assess whether the DSA is a viable alternative that can avoid some of the DDA's shortcomings. In section 3, we draw on constructivist theories of representation to develop a critique of the DDA that is more fundamental than previous efforts. We then outline two problems that result from using the DDA – a neglect for shared solutions to democratic challenges and overgeneralisations about popular vote processes – and illustrate how they affect research with examples from the literature on citizen competence and minority oppression. We argue that the DSA avoids these problems and thus provides a productive alternative for both political theorists and empirical political scientists that opens a new research agenda on popular vote processes. We conclude by giving practical advice to minimise the pervasive influence of the DDA and implement the DSA.

2. The Direct Democracy Approach to Popular Vote Processes

Democratic theorists and empirical political scientists generally discuss initiative and referendum devices as mechanisms of direct democracy.[2] Characterising popular vote processes in this way suggests that these devices are being evaluated through the lens of the DDA. In this section, we reconstruct this approach and its underlying framework, which have impacted thinking about popular vote processes by both opponents to and proponents of these processes. The DDA entails, at its core, the widely held belief in a conflict between direct and representative models of democracy. While there is

considerable variation in how, precisely, different theorists present this conflict, the primary point of contention is whether the presence of representation is beneficial or detrimental to democracy. The DDA's association of popular vote processes with direct democracy thus suggests that they are devices that stand in opposition to representation. While key aspects of the DDA have been criticised as unrealistic, we demonstrate that most attempts at addressing these problems have only led to modifications of the DDA, not to its rejection.

'Direct democracy' has been defined in numerous ways. Some take it to designate models of democracy in which elected representatives act as delegates and closely follow the will of their constituents (Fishkin, 1995) or in which the governing authorities are randomly selected (Manin, 1997). These understandings however remain marginal compared to the widely shared conception of direct democracy that underlies the DDA, namely a *model of democracy in which assemblies open to all citizens make all the political decisions by vote in the absence of representation* (see e.g., Cohen, 1986; Dahl, 1989; Dupuis-Déri, 2016; Goodin & Spiekermann, 2018, p. 244; Kioupkiolis, 2017; Lacey, 2017, pp. 36–37; Miller, 1978, p. 3; Papadopoulos, 2012, p. 126; Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 123; Sartori, 1987; Urbinati, 2006).

This model of direct democracy contains two institutional features, namely open-ended, large scale, and face-to-face legislative assemblies in which all eligible citizens can participate and majoritarian popular votes to make decisions on legislation. Yet these institutional arrangements are only valuable to the extent that they enable the realisation of the third feature, the absence of representation, which serves as the normative core of the direct democracy model. The absence of representation does not merely point toward a political system without institutions of representative government, such as elected legislatures, but suggests that political participation ought to be entirely unmediated by representation (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2001). As Hug (2009, p. 252, fn 5; see also Altman 2011, p. 7, fn 11; Urbinati, 2006, p. 113) puts it, 'the term direct democracy in its original sense […] [is] the opposite of representative democracy. Consequently, in a direct democracy representative institutions do not exist'. For Sartori (1987, p. 111), direct democracy is 'a democracy without representatives and without representational transmission belts'. The model of direct democracy is thus fundamentally relational in that it is defined by its comparative absence of representation – and, thus, by its dichotomous opposition to a model of representative democracy.[3] In other terms, 'representative democracy' is 'indirect' while 'direct democracy' is 'direct' by virtue of the absence of representation (see e.g., Butler & Ranney, 1994, pp. 12–13; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, pp. 30–31; Weale, 2007, p. 31).

How does this model of direct democracy relate to the study of popular vote processes? It represents the conceptual and normative framework against which these processes are evaluated and studied. Broadly, we conceive of the DDA as an approach to the study of popular vote processes that (1) accepts the absence of representation as the normative core of direct democracy, taken as a model irreconcilable with representative democracy and (2) conceives of popular vote processes as direct institutions opposed to representative ones.

We can distinguish between strong and weak versions of the DDA depending on the extent to which popular vote processes are identified with the model of direct democracy. The strong DDA subsumes discussions about popular vote processes in debates about

direct *versus* representative democracy (see e.g., Goodin & Spiekermann, 2018, p. 244; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, pp. 30–31; Held, 2006, p. 4). In other words, the practice and institutional design of popular vote processes are ignored because these questions are seen as secondary in comparison to questions about which democratic ideal is preferable. Debates thus focus on comparing direct and representative democracy, and the result of these comparisons are taken to say something about popular vote processes: proponents of direct democracy broadly approve of all direct democratic mechanisms attached (see e.g., Budge, 1996; Chollet, 2011; Saward, 1993), while those who favour representative democracy broadly reject them (see e.g., Cohen, 1997; Urbinati, 2006; Weale, 2007).

A number of scholars, primarily in empirical research, have contended that the strong DDA is unrealistic. They insist that, in practice, direct democratic mechanisms exist within democratic systems that also include representative institutions. Their proposed solution is to acknowledge that 'direct democracy is […] *mediated* by political organisations and their representatives' (Kriesi, 2005a, p. 7) and to call initiative and referendum processes 'semidirect' for they entail 'institutional intermediation' (Altman 2011, p. 7, fn11). As such, instead of disentangling popular vote processes from direct democracy, they propose adopting what we refer to as the weak DDA. The weak DDA highlights the tension between practice and the theoretical model of direct democracy, but retains this model as the regulative ideal to which these processes should aspire. Popular vote processes are thus still conceived as fundamentally opposed to representative institutions. This can be seen, for instance, in Neblo et al.'s (2018, p. 9) claim that 'direct democratic reformers seek to make representative democracy less representative', which implies a trade-off between direct participation and representation. Similarly, Offe (2017, p. 18) suggests that the 'plebiscitarian methods' of Brexit 'came at the price of undermining the authority of Parliament'.

In both its weak and strong variants, the DDA's emphasis on the conflict between 'direct' and 'representative' models of democracy permeates evaluations of popular vote processes by both critics and advocates. As Hug (2009, p. 253) puts it, 'much of the continuing debate on referendums focuses on opposing representative democracy to referendums'. In normative discussions, the value of direct democracy and its devices has been argued to reside in the fact that they enable citizens to 'directly' decide on issues, which is 'more democratic than representative democracy' (Saward, 1998, pp. 83–84; see also Budge, 2006, pp. 1–2; Butler & Ranney, 1994, p. 15). This claim mainly relies on the 'intuitive' (Lagerspetz, 2016, p. 128; Tierney, 2012, p. 19) argument that direct democracy restores 'the absolute sovereignty of the people' (Bourne 1912, pp. 3–5; as cited in Achen & Bartels, 2016, p. 51) and realises the essence of democracy (Bogdanor, 1981, p. 93), the freedom for citizens to govern themselves without transferring their decision-making rights to others (Chollet, 2011). Supporters of representative democracy have replied that direct democratic regimes produce epistemically suboptimal (Goodin & Spiekermann, 2018, pp. 251–254; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 31) or simply undesirable, tyrannical, unrealistic or inconsistent political outcomes due to the unmediated character of decision-making and the limited competence of citizens (see e.g., Burke, 1790, p. 103; Offe, 2017; Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 132). Representative democracy, by avoiding these pitfalls, provides in their view a preferable democratic ideal (Mansbridge, 2003; Plotke, 1997; Urbinati, 2006). In empirical studies, research on popular vote processes has largely focused on better understanding whether ordinary citizens can learn and

make informed decisions (see e.g., Colombo, 2018; Kriesi, 2005a; Lupia, 1994), whether these processes harm minorities (see e.g., Christmann, 2013; Hajnal, Gerber, & Louch, 2002; Marxer, 2012), or whether the influence of interest groups can manipulate the 'will of the people' (see e.g., Boehmke, 2005; Gerber, 1999; Matsusaka, 2004).

While there are many critiques of the model of direct democracy, largely from the perspective of representative democracy, explicit critiques of the DDA itself, as an approach to popular vote processes, are rare. Indeed, contestations of the ideal of direct democracy promoted in the DDA do not amount to criticising the relevance of direct democracy for the study of popular vote processes. It is tempting to see Budge's (1996, p. 84) call to examine the 'actual functioning of referendums and initiatives' rather than trying to resolve disputes between direct and representative democracy as an early critique of the DDA. However, his criticism of direct democracy seeks to redefine the concept to include mediation by political parties, rather than focusing on an absence of representation, and to see direct and representative democracy as 'two ends of a continuum rather than a sharply opposed dichotomy' (1996, p. 175, 181); as such, he preserves an opposition between the two models that suggests unavoidable trade-offs – and a conception of popular vote processes as direct democratic mechanisms (1996, p. 85).[4] Ultimately, Budge diagnoses potent shortcomings of the DDA but his theorised alternative is simply one version of the weak DDA.

Still, some authors have called for disentangling debates about popular vote processes from debates about direct versus representative democracy. Mendelsohn and Parkin explicitly open their book with the hope of opening up 'a path whereby research on the referendum is no longer structured around a debate between the comparative advantages and disadvantages of two opposing systems of democracy: representative and direct' (2001, p. 1). Their account remains relatively brief and does not fully justify the choice to adopt this approach rather than the prevailing DDA. In the next section we flesh out an alternative approach to the DDA – the democratic systems approach (DSA) – while the following section argues that the DSA should replace the DDA as the dominant way of conceiving the relationship between popular vote processes and democracy.

3. The Democratic Systems Approach to Popular Vote Processes

Although its explicit characterisation as a unified approach is lacking, we suggest that a more systemic approach to popular vote processes has developed in parallel to the DDA.[5] This approach has several notable precursors (see e.g., Condorcet, 1793; Dicey, 1911) but appears to be enjoying a resurgence in both political science and political theory[6] (see e.g., Cheneval & el-Wakil, 2018a; Freitag & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2010; Le Bihan, 2018; Leemann & Wasserfallen, 2016; McKay, 2019; Parkinson, 2009; Peters, 2016; Prato & Strulovici, 2017; Setälä, 2006).[7] This evolution coincides with a broader systemic turn in democratic theory (Mansbridge et al., 2012; Owen & Smith, 2015; Warren, 2017), which we draw upon to reconstruct the core features of the DSA to popular vote processes. We identify two main features of the DSA: (1) it evaluates popular vote processes according to their capacity to further general democratic values and (2) it is attentive to how these processes are implemented in practice and how they interact with other political processes in democratic systems, including representative ones.

Precursors to the contemporary DSA for instance defended popular vote processes as tools for citizens to incentivise responsiveness from their representatives and secure against misrule (Bruno, 2017; Elster, 2013; McCormick, 2001). A.V. Dicey argued that the referendum could give citizens veto power, allowing them to block 'the passing of any important Act which does not command the sanction of the electors' (1911, cix). Similarly, early twentieth century supporters of popular votes in Oregon did not want to 'destroy representative government' but wanted to keep the initiative and referendum 'for emergency use' (Ford 1912, p. 70; cited in Achen & Bartels, 2016, p. 69). More recent versions of the DSA can be found in research that investigates how popular vote processes are integrated in democratic systems. They have theoretically and empirically researched these processes' potential to focus public deliberation on specific issues (Lacey, 2017, pp. 192–194; Setälä, 2006, p. 703), encourage political authorities to be more responsive to voters (Saward, 1998, p. 83; Smith, 2009, p. 119; Vatter, 2009), improve turnout in elections (Freitag & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2010; Peters, 2016), and increase the legitimacy and stability of strongly binding decisions (Chambers, 2001; Parkinson, 2009).

What distinguishes the DSA most clearly from the DDA is that it abandons the models-thinking that has shaped much research about popular vote processes. The recent systemic turn in democratic theory criticises models for reducing democracy to one specific practice and 'over-simplify[ing] the complexity of democratic practice' (Owen & Smith, 2015, p. 231).[8] The systems approach recognises that democracy requires a division of labour because different practices – disentangled from specific models – are particularly well-suited to addressing different types of democratic problems (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012; Saward, 2003; Warren, 2017). The DSA, too, tends to reinstate democracy without adjectives – rather than direct democracy – as the highest-level normative ideal and to acknowledge that it might be realised by the complementary presence of various practices, including both voting and representation. These various practices are combined both within and across institutions in order to fulfil a number of functions common to democracy in general, such as the three key normative functions defined by Warren (2017, pp. 43–45), namely empowered inclusion, collective agenda and will formation, and collective decision making.

The DSA presupposes that popular vote processes are better understood as part of a broader democratic system and that the nature of other related institutions and differences in the designs of popular vote processes interact in complex ways. Smith's (1976, p. 8) analysis of how popular vote processes interact with other democratic institutions, such as political parties, and evaluation of them on their 'supportive capacity towards the system' over time is an example of this feature of the DSA. Setälä's (2006) assessment of different referendum processes' capacity to enhance the accountability of elected representatives similarly attends to the design of both popular vote processes and other institutions. While the practice of distinguishing 'between various types of referendums, their design and use' (Hollander, 2019, p. 28) is not new, the DSA explicitly pursues a more holistic view of how these institutional differences are integrated with other institutions in pursuit of democratic outcomes (Altman, 2018; Hollander, 2019; Setälä, 2006).

4. The Two Approaches Compared

Which approach to popular vote processes should be favoured? In what follows, we argue that the DDA has three fundamental limitations and that it should be abandoned. We examine how the core features of the DSA lay the basis to address these limitations.

4.1. The Implausible Core of Direct Democracy

The strong version of the DDA emphasises the absence of representation in ways that are generally considered, by both critics and advocates of popular vote processes, to be unrealistic for contemporary democracies. Despite widespread agreement that a complete absence of representation is unfeasible in large-scale, modern societies (see e.g., Cohen, 2009, p. 34; Lacey, 2017, pp. 37–38; Plotke, 1997, pp. 25–26), the weak DDA maintains the absence of representation as a regulative ideal. We suggest here that recent constructivist theories of representation, which view representation as a practice of claim-making that is not reducible to electoral politics (see e.g., Kuyper, 2016; Montanaro, 2012; Saward, 2006), highlight that representation is not merely *practically* unavoidable, but is *conceptually* inseparable from democracy. If this is the case, it suggests that the DSA has an advantage, for its willingness to abandon models of democracy does away with the DDA's fixation on the absence of representation in favour of focusing on how various practices, such as representing, can contribute to democracy.

Saward (2006, p. 302) describes representation as a process in which 'would-be political representatives […] make claims about themselves and their constituents and the links between the two'. Without going so far as to argue that 'representation is democracy' (Plotke, 1997), we note that there is agreement that these claims are virtually inescapable in democratic politics, as they are necessary to shape interests, create and mobilise constituencies, and set the agenda (Disch, 2011; Mansbridge, 2003). This makes it possible to theorise various forms of non-electoral representation, which 'is a pervasive and persistent phenomenon' (Kuyper, 2016, p. 310), and which operates, as Saward (2006, p. 316) notes in passing, 'in regimes of "direct democracy" no less than in regimes of "representative democracy"'. That is, even if elected representatives do not play prominent roles in popular vote processes, representation of some kind seems to remain unavoidable.

This insight suggests that the core feature of direct democracy, namely the absence of representation, is untenable. As a result, the crux of the disagreement between representative and direct models of democracy – the idea of democracy without representation – is shown to be fundamentally misguided. This does not mean simply that representative democracy has triumphed over direct democracy. In fact, Landemore (2017, pp. 57–58) argues that the inability to avoid representation in democratic politics provides one of several reasons to 'move entirely past and beyond "representative democracy"' as a model of democracy. While these models have usefully emphasised the importance of particular practices for democracy, we suggest that the DDA's models-thinking is now more of a liability than an asset. The question should no longer be whether we should have representation or direct participation, but how, where, when, and why we should institutionalise particular practices. The DDA is not well-suited to answering these questions. Instead, it prevents productive comparisons between, for instance, elections and

popular vote processes and encourages overly broad conclusions about popular vote processes based on particular examples or subtypes.

4.2. 'Direct Democratic Mechanisms' and the Problems of Generalisation

Theorising about popular vote processes as 'direct democratic mechanisms' within the framework of a debate between models of direct and representative democracy can lead – and has led – to two more specific kinds of problems. The first problem is that the DDA makes it difficult to conceive of how different models might face similar problems or establish common solutions. In this sense, it leads to under-generalising the scope of specific democratic problems. The second problem is that the DDA's tendency to think in terms of models is that findings about particular institutions are often overgeneralised as findings about a particular model. We illustrate these two problems with examples from two prominent topics in popular vote process research. The first topic is the question of whether citizens are competent to make decisions through popular vote processes (see e.g., Fabbrini, 2001; Topaloff, 2017; Weale, 2007). The second topic is the question of whether popular vote processes allow minorities to be oppressed in a way that is unlikely in representative governments (see e.g., Bellamy, 2018; Mendelsohn & Parkin, 2001, p. 17; Smith, 2009, p. 118).

The first problem of the DDA visible in these two topics is that it minimises the extent to which representative institutions face these problems too: representative governments also violate the rights of minorities (Matsusaka, 2005, p. 168), and that voters are incompetent could be said of voters in elections for representative governments (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Grynaviski, 2015). The DDA also pushes researchers to neglect how solutions associated with representation might actually address criticisms of popular vote processes. For instance, just as elected representatives are commonly seen to compensate for deficiencies in citizen competence by being more reflective, compromise-driven, and informed (Bellamy, 2018; Mansbridge, 2003, p. 515; Urbinati, 2006), forms of representation embedded in popular vote processes might mitigate the lack of information or incompetence of voters in popular votes (Kriesi, 2005a; Lupia, 1994). As such, the DDA's emphasis on conflicts between direct and representative models of democracy perpetuates an artificial divide between 'problems of direct democratic processes' and 'problems of representative processes'. It supports a double standard instead of encouraging researchers to acknowledge that these problems are actually challenges to democracy writ large. In contrast, the DSA encourages researchers to compare how different institutions fare with regards to the same objections and with the same theoretical framework, and how each might be redesigned to address common problems of democracy.

The second problem of the DDA illustrated by research on the two topics mentioned is that of overgeneralisation. Allegations of citizen incompetence and minority oppression are used to dismiss all popular vote processes, independently of their institutional differences. To be sure, the literature usually distinguishes four main institutional popular vote designs – mandatory referendums, top-down referendums, facultative referendums, and popular initiatives (Altman 2011, p. 11; Setälä, 2006, pp. 705–707) – that can be implemented in various ways (el-Wakil & Cheneval, 2018). From this perspective, the involvement of representatives, which in turn varies depending on whether popular votes are triggered in a bottom-up or top-down way and on specific campaign regulations,

has been shown to impact voters' levels of knowledge on issues put to popular votes (see e.g., Goldberg, Lanz, & Sciarini, 2019; Reidy & Suiter, 2015; Sciarini & Trechsel, 1996). And while empirical evidence does suggest that minority oppression is more common in jurisdictions that allow for popular initiatives (Dyck, 2016; Lewis, 2013),[9] other popular vote processes might actually empower minorities (Chambers, 2018; Cheneval & el-Wakil, 2018a). The DDA's framing of these processes as 'non-representative', as a homogeneous category of 'direct democratic processes' that can all be rejected or promoted at once, obscures these differences.

This faulty conceptualisation of popular vote processes causes problems in empirical research on the use of popular vote processes. For instance, much of the literature on process preferences follows Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's distinction between 'direct democrats' and 'institutional democrats' despite the fact that their process scale provides few specifics about institutions (2001; see also e.g., Allen & Birch, 2015). The literature on popular support for 'direct democracy' is similarly vague, often asking respondents questions such as 'Are referendums a good way to decide important political questions?' even in cases where samples are drawn from multiple countries in which popular vote processes take on different forms (Bowler, Donovan, & Karp, 2007, p. 355). A more nuanced understanding of public support can be found in Dyck and Baldassare (2009), who focus on a specific popular vote process – the initiative process in California – and ask questions about institutional details and possible reforms.

This tendency is also visible in problematic generalisations from single popular votes to all of the various existing procedures. While both California's Proposition 13 and Brexit referendums are invoked by those who oppose direct democracy (Achen & Bartels, 2016, pp. 81–85; McCarthy, 2017, pp. 34–35; Offe, 2017, p. 17; Shapiro, 2017, p. 82), too little is said about whether it is popular vote processes themselves or their particular institutional forms that are to blame for their democratic shortcomings (Daly, 2015, p. 31; Hollander, 2019, p. 7). Moreover, these cases provide little information about the democratic value of other popular vote processes, like facultative referendums, that might be maligned by critics due to their alleged association with direct democracy (el-Wakil, 2017). Finally, by focusing only on single instances of popular vote processes, researchers fail to account not only for the effects of popular vote mechanisms on democratic systems in the long term, but also for failed attempts to organise such popular votes. The DDA and its homogenising conception of popular vote processes exacerbates these problems, as it encourages papering over the multiple differences in institutional designs for popular votes (e.g., Offe, 2017, p. 17).[10]

5. Conclusion: Towards the DSA

By explicitly engaging with the underlying normative and conceptual assumptions of existing studies of popular vote processes, we have argued that there are good reasons to disentangle these processes from the notion of direct democracy, understood as unmediated, non-representative politics. The DDA limits the success of discussions about popular vote processes and their democratic potential in the following ways: it proposes an untenable notion of direct democracy as normative framework, which makes all processes attached to it easily dismissed; it prevents researchers from seeing similarities

between processes categorised as 'direct' and processes categorised as 'representative'; and it entails a homogeneous conception of popular vote processes.

We have suggested that the DSA provides students of popular vote processes with an alternative approach to answering the question of what place popular vote processes can and should have in democratic systems. It leaves aside interminable debates about models of democracy to highlight the commonalities between popular vote processes and other democratic institutions while acknowledging the institutional variation within the former. However, we have also shown that the DDA is both pervasive and persistent in ways that can undermine attempts to approach popular vote processes from a different perspective. Even what we take above as instances of the DSA sometimes fall back on the DDA's shortcomings. For instance, it is not uncommon to find claims about 'referendums' in general based on findings or considerations about only popular initiatives (see e.g., Gastil & Richards, 2013, p. 255; Leemann, 2015, p. 613). While making the DSA more explicit should help address this problem, we propose two practical recommendations for those who wish to move past the DDA.

A first recommendation is to explicitly approach popular vote processes as political processes that are not *a priori* hostile to, or subordinate to, representative institutions, and thus with similar normative and theoretical tools as other political processes. Such a process has already happened to popular assemblies. While they remain sometimes attached to the notion of 'direct democracy' (see e.g., Gastil & Richards, 2013, p. 255; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2001), there is widespread agreement that models of democracy are inadequate as a way of approaching these institutions (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014, p. 33; de Sousa Santos, 1998, p. 487; Novy & Leubolt, 2005, p. 2027). We argue that popular vote processes should similarly be disentangled from the model of direct democracy, and reconceptualized as simply one sort of institutional arrangement among the different procedures for citizens' participation, such as elections, town hall meetings, mini-publics, and others. This reconceptualization makes it possible to draw on theories and insights from the study of other democratic institutions in order to better understand popular vote processes and the role that they can play in democratic systems (see e.g., Grynaviski, 2015; Lang & Warren, 2012; Setälä, 2006) – but also to use theories and insights about popular vote processes to study other processes (see Setälä, 2011).

A second recommendation is to change the way in which we talk about initiatives and referendums in order to highlight the importance of institutional variation. Scholars who acknowledge the differences between types of popular vote processes or point to the importance of moving past models of democracy should stop framing their findings in terms of 'direct democracy' (see e.g., Bauer & Fatke, 2014; Marien & Kern, 2018; Peters, 2016). While the term 'referendums' extricates popular vote processes from the shadow of direct democracy and acknowledges that they are simply one sort of institutional arrangement that might be put toward democratic ends and points to their substantive difference, namely that voters choose primarily between policies rather than candidates (see e.g., Altman, 2015, p. 3; Lacey, 2017, p. 24; Uleri, 1996), using 'referendums' as a general category that includes specific initiative and referendum processes carries the risk of continuing to make overgeneralised claims about popular vote processes. The term 'popular vote processes' similarly disentangles debates about direct democracy from debates about specific institutional designs and does away with confusions resulting from the fact that, while popular votes can be democratic, they can fail basic democratic

norms and can be deployed for non-democratic ends (Altman 2011, pp. 88–109; Qvortrup, 2017; Topaloff, 2017; Walker, 2003). However, unlike 'referendums', it better accounts for the variation in the implementation of referendum and initiative processes as it makes it possible to distinguish the general family of procedures that culminate in votes on policies from specific referendum procedures, such as facultative or mandatory referendums. Finally, it recognises that the popular vote is not the only relevant part of these institutions. These processes empower different actors depending on the way in which they can be triggered – whether through the collection of signatures or governmental decision; they launch different kinds of discourse depending on popular vote campaign regulations; they induce different post-vote chains of events depending on the binding character of the vote (for more dimensions of variation, see el-Wakil & Cheneval, 2018); and they distribute empowerments even when no popular vote takes place, for instance because petitioners failed to collect enough signatures or courts challenged top-down referendum projects.

Undertaking these and further steps towards adopting the DSA makes it possible to get beyond biased questionings about direct democracy to find new relevant research puzzles: what kinds of popular vote processes can best realise which democratic functions? What role can popular vote processes play in a democratic division of labour? When are representative relationships strengthened by popular vote processes? What innovative coupling can help making popular vote processes contribute to democratic functions? We cannot answer these questions here. But we hope to have shown that the DSA provides a sound, coherent and appealing basis for addressing them in normative and empirical research.

While our argument has focused on approaches to popular vote processes in scholarly research, we believe that public conversations would also benefit from a shift away from the DDA.[11] The DDA can serve the interests of strategically-minded political entrepreneurs who might manipulate the procedures of popular vote processes in an attempt to bring about their desired outcomes. Claims that these processes are 'direct democratic' hides such manipulation attempts by suggesting that representatives' role is minimised and pre-judges the democratic character of these processes. While both right-wing populist parties (Müller, 2016, p. 29) and progressive movements, parties, think tanks, or elected officials (Scarrow, 2001, pp. 652–653) have called for 'more direct democracy,' the DDA also conceals that these actors propose different processes for very different reasons. For instance, while populist political parties like UKIP may endorse top-down referendums as ways of circumventing allegedly corrupt politicians, movements like the Yellow Vests advocate for the adoption of bottom-up referendums as a way of also allowing citizens to set the agenda for a popular vote. The general slogan of direct democracy hides this diversity, and the necessity to distinguish better from worse implementations of popular vote processes and better from worse reasons to adopt or reject them. It may also generate expectations that are unlikely to be met: recent research shows that, while citizens support popular vote processes in theory, they are frequently disappointed in practice (Bowler & Donovan, 2019). Moving towards acknowledging the practice and diversity of popular vote processes might generate, for both researchers and political actors, more appropriate expectations regarding what these processes can and cannot achieve in democratic systems.

Notes

1. We refrain from using the broadly adopted terms of 'referendums' and 'direct democratic mechanisms' to designate all the processes leading to a popular vote on issues, and follow Cheneval and el-Wakil (2018b) in using the term 'popular vote processes'. While they only introduce and use the concept, we provide a defense of this term in the conclusion of the paper.
2. The category of direct democratic mechanisms encompasses more than popular votes, typically including other practices such as face-to-face assemblies or recall elections, and political systems that include some or all of these institutions are often called 'direct democracies' (see e.g., Budge, 1996, p. 2; Kriesi, 2005b; Saward, 1998, p. 83).
3. The term itself only started to be used in the first quarter of the 20th century in English, French and German, according to Schorderet (2005, p. 8), perhaps in response to a growing distinction between representative government and what was previously referred to as 'democracy' or 'pure democracy' (Hindess, 2000).
4. For other attempts to redefine direct democracy and keep it opposed to representative democracy, see e.g., Fishkin, 1995; Manin, 1997; Urbinati, 2000.
5. Partial developments of the approach's underlying theory can however be found in Hug (2009), Bellamy (2018), and Cheneval and el-Wakil (2018b).
6. Warren (2017, p. 41) contends that the systems approach to democratic theory is not new, but a 'rediscovery'. We suggest that this is true of the systemic approach to popular vote processes too.
7. The use of this alternative approach is not necessary reflected in the terminology, as contributions to this approach sometimes preserve the language of 'direct democratic mechanisms'. However, and while this exemplifies the lack of explicit reflection about how to approach popular vote processes, the contributions mentioned here disentangle popular vote processes from the normative model of direct democracy.
8. For instance, theories of deliberative democracy tend to reduce democracy to deliberation; minimalist theories of democracy tend to reduce democracy to elections; and direct democracy tends to reduce democracy to a system devoid of representation.
9. In the case of Switzerland, Vatter and Danaci (2010; see also Moeckli, 2011, p. 779) however show that not all minorities are equally impacted. Those whose rights are the most endangered are minorities perceived as out-groups.
10. Sometimes in full knowledge of the fact that they are ignoring these differences: Miller (2014, p. 437, fn2) for instance notes that he will not name the Swiss popular vote on the minarets' ban an initiative (the appropriate name for this popular vote procedure), but a referendum 'as the term commonly used to describe popular votes of this kind'.
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