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Published online: 13 Nov 2020.

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Introduction to the Special Issue 'Beyond 'Direct Democracy': Popular Vote Processes in Democratic Systems'

Alice el-Wakil [a] and Spencer McKay [b,c]

aChair of Political Philosophy, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland; bWilf Family Department of Politics, New York University, New York, NY, USA; cCentre for the Study of Democratic Institutions, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

ABSTRACT

Despite controversy over recent referendums and initiatives, populists and social movements continue to call for the use of these popular vote processes. Most political and academic debates about whether these calls should be answered have adopted a dominant framework that focuses on whether we should favour 'direct' or 'representative' democracy. However, this framework obscures more urgent questions about whether, when, and how popular vote processes should be implemented in democratic systems. How do popular vote processes interact with representative institutions? And how could these interactions be democratized? The contributions in this special issue address these and related questions by replacing the framework of 'direct democracy' with systemic approaches. The normative contributions illustrate how these approaches enable the development of counternarratives about the value of popular vote processes and clarify the nature of the underlying ideals they should realize. The empirical contributions examine recent cases with a variety of methodological tools, demonstrating that systemic approaches attentive to context can generate new insights about the use of popular vote processes. This introduction puts these contributions into conversation to illustrate how a shift in approach establishes a basis for (re-)evaluating existing practices and guiding reforms so that referendums and initiatives foster democracy.

Introduction

In November 2018, tens of thousands of people started mobilising in France for what would become the Yellow Vests movement. This movement, characterised by an absence of any formal structure and representatives, was at first explicitly motivated by a strong opposition to a decision by elected representatives to increase fuel taxes. But its claims soon progressed beyond this single issue. One claim in particular was increasingly accepted as the main and clearest demand of the Yellow Vests: the introduction of a national-level '*Référendum Initié par les Citoyens*' (citizen-initiated referendum), mostly defended as a way to enable the implementation of 'direct democracy' as an ideal of government by the people, empowering citizens to recover decision-making

power from their distrusted elected representatives. In Parliament, the minority party *La France Insoumise* claimed that the referendum would allow 'the people' to 'claim its right to govern' (AFP, 2019, our translation from French).

This demand for 'More direct democracy!' was met with skepticism or rejected outright. Critics warned that 'mechanisms of direct democracy' (Altman, 2019) would not live up to their promises of empowering citizens to decide in an unmediated way. French authorities alleged that such processes would empower manipulative, populist leaders over an uneducated, selfish, and unreflective crowd. Furthermore, introducing bottom-up popular vote processes would hinder representative democracy or, in President Macron's words (cited in Nadau, 2019, our translation from French), 'kill' it:

> If we said, we can create a citizen-initiated referendum, which can, every morning, question what parliamentarians have voted through, we kill parliamentary democracy. [If we said], because there is a law that did not please us: 'I am not supporting this majority, I do not like it, I want to change things, I want to make a referendum, I come back two months later, or a year later', your representatives, they are no longer useful, we kill representative democracy.[1]

These political events, which unfolded while this special issue was in preparation, illustrate how debates about popular vote processes – a term we use to designate all political processes that involve a popular vote on policy issues, namely mandatory referendums, government-initiated referendums, facultative referendums, and popular initiatives – are more often than not debates about whether we should favour 'direct' or 'representative' democracy. This was also illustrated by the discussions surrounding the referendum on the United Kingdom's (UK) exit from the European Union (EU), Brexit. Critics alleged that this event showed that 'the American founding fathers had it right: Direct democracy is a dead duck' (Gady, 2016) and highlighted the depth of the 'conflict between direct democracy and representative democracy' (Tombs, 2019).

These events reaffirm that how we think about and discuss the role and value of popular vote processes, in both political debates and academic research, is shaped by a dominant framework of 'direct democracy'. But what is 'direct democratic' about referendum and initiative processes that are highly mediated in practice? How should we reconcile the theoretical expectation that these 'direct' mechanisms are inimical to, and fundamentally different from, representative institutions when there is growing empirical evidence that the two can interact with one another – in ways that are sometimes valued? And why should the normative ideal of 'direct democracy' be the right standard to assess their desirability? Could their value in democratic systems not reside in fostering the same principles as other political processes?

These questions motivated the development of this special issue. We take its seven contributions to showcase the value of explicitly engaging with the underlying assumptions of the 'direct versus representative democracy' framework and of moving past it to adopt more systemic approaches to referendums and initiatives. By so doing, they make essential contributions to public debates by debunking unhelpful myths; clarifying what can and should be expected from these processes in terms of normative standards; and setting a basis for reforming referendums and initiatives to better achieve these standards.

These contributions also advance scholarly debates, notably ones started in two previous special issues of *Representation*. The first one, published in 1998 and motivated,

in part, by the decision of the Independent Commission on the Voting System to recommend a referendum on the British electoral system (Fishman, 1998), surveyed the use of referendums *within* various representative systems. The second one, 'Direct Democracy and Representation', came out in 2006 and gathered theoretical and empirical contributions drawing on past and then recent popular vote experiences in Europe and in the United States – some of which explicitly challenged the dichotomy between representative and direct democracy (see esp. Budge, 2006; Lutz, 2006).

The time is ripe to build on this legacy of advancing the study of referendums and initiatives as it relates to representative processes. The demand of the Yellow Vests is not isolated: in recent years, a growing number of political actors all around the world – including right-wing populist actors, progressive movements, parties, think tanks, and elected officials – has called for introducing referendums and initiatives in democratic systems as part of a demand for 'more direct democracy' (Scarrow, 2001, pp. 652–53; Müller, 2016, p. 29) broadly supported by citizens (Bowler & Donovan, 2019; Mendelsohn & Parkin, 2001; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015). A number of significant political decisions have also been made through referendum or initiative processes, such as Scotland's independence from the UK; the UK's exit from the EU; the legalisation of same-sex marriage and abortion in Ireland; and the independence of Catalonia. Innovative institutional designs of popular vote processes have been experienced, combining for instance mini-publics with popular votes. And democratic theory has broadened and deepened its understanding of representation while also acknowledging the need to think in terms of systems. The present issue takes stock of these developments and envisions how they might lead to new insights.

In this introduction, we seek to highlight key insights of each article in this special issue, as well as to draw out observations that emerge when the articles are brought into conversation with one another. We start by presenting the key aspects of systemic approaches to popular vote processes and explaining why they are more appropriate than the 'direct democracy' approach. We then highlight novel insights gained with this approach into the role of representatives (section 2) and citizens (section 3) in systems with popular vote processes from the perspective of representation. Our concluding remarks highlight some of the challenges ahead for continuing democratic systems research on the role of referendum and initiative processes.

Putting Popular Vote Processes in Context

Scholars of popular vote processes have often noted the limitations of the 'direct vs. representative democracy' framework (see e.g. Altman, 2019; Kriesi, 2005; Mendelsohn & Parkin, 2001). But their critiques have generally neither translated into explicit demands to replace it nor led to the development of clear alternatives to reconceive the relationship between popular vote processes and democracy. Two political theory articles in this special issue address this shortcoming. In our contribution to this issue, 'Disentangling Referendums and Direct Democracy: A Defense of the Systemic Approach to Popular Vote Processes', we argue in favour of shifting away from the model of 'direct democracy' and towards seeing popular vote processes as part of democratic systems, following a longstanding but undertheorized tradition (el-Wakil & McKay, 2019). Jäske and Setälä's (2019) article 'A Functionalist Approach to Democratic Innovations'

demonstrates how a democratic systems approach makes it possible to improve the comparative assessment of different democratic innovations, including popular vote processes.

Our article begins by uncovering what most scholars have taken 'direct democracy' to be: a model of democracy in which citizens are empowered to make decisions on policies for themselves through popular votes. This is opposed to 'representative democracy', a model of democracy in which candidates are elected to make political decisions (see Dahl, 1989; Fishkin, 1995; Urbinati, 2006). Conceptualising popular vote processes as 'direct democratic mechanisms' thus assumes, albeit generally implicitly, a model-based paradigm we call the 'Direct Democracy Approach' (DDA). We argue that this approach has unjustifiably limited the study of referendums and initiatives and offer three main reasons to abandon it. First, the model of 'direct democracy' as unmediated self-government by the citizens is an implausible normative standard since democratic politics cannot do without representation. Second, the opposition of this model to representative democracy encourages researchers to ignore how referendums and initiatives raise problems similar to other political processes –such as citizen incompetence or majority tyranny – and prevents comparative analysis of whether they fare *better* or *worse* in coping with these problems. Third, the DDA encourages overgeneralisations about all 'direct democratic mechanisms' that ignore their differentiated character and the differences in their institutional designs.

Jäske and Setälä similarly contend that 'focusing on a single model of democracy and a single democratic innovation does not […] take us very far with the comparison of different institutional devices and their potential role in the democratic system' (Jäske & Setälä, 2019). These different theoretical and normative frameworks have prevented scholars from studying how popular vote processes fare in comparison with other political processes. Drawing on case studies of five different democratic institutions, including the government-initiated referendum on Brexit and deliberative forums used in tandem with popular votes in Oregon and Ireland, they illustrate how this framework facilitates comparative analysis. Their findings suggest that a coherent understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of different devices can provide insight into how these processes might be coupled and sequenced with each other (Jäske & Setälä, 2019).

Both articles explicitly argue that systemic approaches could helpfully reorient both normative debate and empirical research on popular vote processes by adopting two general commitments to the study of popular vote processes, which the contributions gathered in this special issue illustrate. First, systemic approaches enjoin us to turn our attention away from single processes and towards the democratic character of political *systems* (see Mansbridge et al., 2012; Warren, 2017). On this view, there is a need for a division of labour since no process alone can produce the normatively desired functions at a system level. Looking at institutions without taking their interactions with other institutions into account may lead to conclusions that do not hold up when examined in systemic terms (Parkinson, 2020). Political processes should therefore be looked at in their context of implementation, with explicit acknowledgement of their interactions with other parts of these systems – other electoral and innovative processes (Jäske & Setälä, 2019; López & Sanjaume-Calvet, 2020; Suiter & Reidy, 2019).

Second, the systemic turn makes it clear that the political processes that are part of a political system should be assessed and compared by their contributions to shared normative goals, rather than against different normative standards. The articles in this issue

foster this commitment by reconstructing the rationale for popular vote processes without the normative assumptions provided by theories of 'direct democracy'. In particular, they contest the widespread view that popular vote processes are inimical to deliberative democracy (Parkinson, 2020; Suiter & Reidy, 2019) or that popular vote processes can and should express a mythical 'will of the people' (Van Crombrugge, 2020). More empirical contributions also help identify the kinds of popular vote processes that can contribute to general democratic functions and the conditions under which these or other processes are most likely to do so (Jäske & Setälä, 2019; López & Sanjaume-Calvet, 2020; Renwick, Palese, & Sargeant, 2019; Suiter & Reidy, 2019).

The contributions to this issue also illustrate differences in systems approaches. *Deliberative* systems approaches generally focus on the capacity of a system to foster legitimate decision-making processes based on communicative exchange of claims and reasons among citizens and between citizens and their representatives. Parkinson argues that such communication needs to be 'plugged in' to decision-making, but that assessments of such deliberative quality need to be made at the system-level to avoid missing relevant activity (Parkinson, 2020). The *democratic* systems approach, most explicitly articulated by Warren (2017; see also Saward, 2003), mainly differs from the deliberative systems approach in that it takes deliberation as one of many practices that can help political systems fulfil the three broad normative functions that are necessary if a system is to count as 'democratic'. According to Warren, these functions are empowered inclusion, collective agenda-setting and will-formation, and collective decision-making. In this issue, Jäske and Setälä (2019) add a fourth function of accountability, which includes a 'discursive element', and propose that these functions should guide our comparative assessments of the strength and weaknesses of various democratic innovations, including popular vote processes.

Overall, both kinds of systemic approaches highlight how discussing popular vote processes as 'mechanisms of democracy' limits what we can say and learn about them. They make clear that these processes cannot be studied in isolation from the broader context in which they occur and that they should be assessed against the same normative standards as other processes.

Popular Vote Processes and Practices of Representation

Systems approaches thus open the way to reconsidering the practices of representation around popular vote processes. Three articles in this issue uncover opportunities both for practices of representation and for representatives of various kinds created by referendums and initiatives. In 'Are Referendums Necessarily Populist? Countering the Populist Interpretation of Referendums Through Institutional Design', Van Crombrugge draws on democratic theory to suggest that populist representatives serve their own interests when they claim that popular vote processes are instruments that express an unmediated 'will of the people'. He argues that such a conception of popular vote processes may be an obstacle to the development of other conceptions of popular vote processes that are 'not opposed to representation or hostile to pluralism' (Van Crombrugge, 2020). John Parkinson develops an account of the value of referendums and initiatives in deliberative systems, contending that well-designed popular vote processes can have special value in creating focusing moments for public debate that might enable better discursive representation of the

concerns of ordinary citizens in decision-making processes, in 'The Roles of Referendums in Deliberative Systems' (Parkinson, 2020). López and Sanjaume-Calvet's article 'The Political Use of de facto Referendums of Independence: The Case of Catalonia' highlights how such different representative practices and actors interact in practice – as well as the challenges this can raise – with a case study that examines the strategic reasons for organising the 2017 Catalonia referendum.

Van Crombrugge (2020) contests the widespread conception of popular vote processes as instruments for the expression of the 'will of the people'. He argues that populists portray popular vote processes as 'a tool to take power out of the hands of the elite' while actually using these devices in a plebiscitary way to reinforce their influence as the authentic representatives of a homogenous 'people' (Van Crombrugge, 2020). Rather than looking at popular vote processes as the expression of a unified collective will, referendums and initiatives should be valued because they grant citizens equal voting power in a manner that 'respects and legitimates disagreement' (Van Crombrugge, 2020). This highlights that the legitimacy of decisions requires not only equal voting power, but also a process of collective agenda-setting and will-formation that allows disagreement to be channelled through well-functioning processes of representation and of the testing of claims.

Parkinson emphasises this communicative aspect, with a special attention to the way in which popular vote processes can shape processes of representation at the level of deliberative systems. While popular vote campaigns often appear to lack deliberation, they can also encourage a system-wide deliberative quality if they allow citizens to 'connect claims to reasons, listen, and reflect in a visible way' (Parkinson, 2020). Effective representation in this context provides citizens with arguments they can use in their own processes of everyday talk leading up to the moment where they are empowered to decide (Parkinson, 2020). The value of effective discursive representation is not limited to the outcome of the popular vote process since even unsuccessful petitions or 'failed' votes have 'shifted public opinion and forced law changes, sometimes significant ones' (Parkinson, 2020; see also Kousser and McCubbins 2005).

These two articles theoretically expand on empirical studies that have shown that popular vote processes are a strategic tool not only for elected representatives, but also for interest groups (see e.g. Boehmke, 2005; Gerber, 1999; Leemann, 2015). They highlight that popular vote campaigns create opportunities for these non-electoral representatives to emerge and contribute to public discussion.[2] In practice, some of these representatives may make use of unequal funding, spread disinformation, or other democratically questionable activities (Parkinson, 2020; Van Crombrugge, 2020; el-Wakil & McKay, 2019), suggesting that some steps may be necessary to level the playing field. In particular, Parkinson suggests that 'we need some means by which the marginalised are given effective opportunities to make, endorse or challenge narratives and claims' (2020). Under certain conditions, the strategic use of popular vote processes might still strengthen democracy by creating new opportunities for representation.

These theoretical considerations are echoed in López and Sanjaume-Calvet's study of the 2017 'unilateral referendum' of independence in Catalonia. Their analysis illustrates the kinds of interactions that can take place between popular vote and electoral processes and between elected representatives, non-electoral representatives, and citizens over the long-term, across levels of government, and in a highly conflictual setting – with the

Spanish government sending police to prevent the referendum from being held and civil society groups and volunteers hiding ballot boxes to ensure the referendum went ahead. Here, concerns about representation led to demands for a referendum. These demands were challenged by representatives at a different level of government, leading networks of citizens to self-authorize themselves as representatives based around the claim that Catalonians should have a 'right to decide' on the independence of the region via a referendum (López & Sanjaume-Calvet, 2020). López and Sanjaume-Calvet conclude that 'the referendum reinforced existing positions on both sides and produced a stalemate situation with clear costs for the Catalan leaders but also for Spanish democracy' (López & Sanjaume-Calvet, 2020), highlighting the need to further consider the kinds of preconditions that are necessary if popular votes are to enhance representation.

Reconceiving Citizen Participation

Expanding our understanding of the representative processes at stake in popular vote processes entails that our conception of citizens' roles in these processes needs to be adapted, too, in the light of systems approaches. In particular, criticisms of referendums and initiatives based on allegations of citizen incompetence need to more carefully consider the context in which citizens are asked to decide. For instance, the government-initiated Brexit referendum was 'heavily criticised for the lack of public deliberation, political polarisation and the role of misinformation in the referendum campaign' (Jäske & Setälä, 2019). Renwick, Palese and Sargeant, in their article 'Information in Referendum Campaigns: How Can It Be Improved?', outline the kinds of strategies that can be implemented throughout democratic institutions in order to ensure that citizens have access to high-quality information. While many sources of information will be elite-led, Suiter and Reidy highlight how deliberative mini-publics create 'a cohort of citizen representatives who can make public contributions on either side of the discussion' in their article 'Does Deliberation Help Deliver Informed Electorates: Evidence from Irish Referendum Votes' (Suiter & Reidy, 2019).

Renwick, Palese and Sargeant contend that citizens 'cannot make a free choice if they are subject to overwhelming manipulations and distortions during the campaign' (Renwick et al., 2019). They argue that citizens need high-quality information, which they theorise as information that is accurate, balanced, accessible, and relevant (Renwick et al., 2019). Yet, representatives often have strategic incentives to break these norms. This is a problem, although Suiter and Reidy's analysis of recent referendums in Ireland shows that it is not insurmountable. Using evidence from three referendums on potentially polarising issues – children's rights, marriage equality, and abortion – they highlight how mini-publics can bolster voters' capacities to cast correct ballots reflecting their actual preferences in these popular votes. Citizens who participate in mini-publics can become representatives of the broad citizenry themselves and provide an alternative sources of information that helps citizens gain relevant knowledge and connect their values to their vote. Suiter and Reidy thus suggest that the Irish cases demonstrate that the use of popular vote processes 'does not always have to be divisive or deliver a tyranny of the majority which restricts rights' (Suiter & Reidy, 2019).

The success of the Irish referendum processes highlights several of Renwick, Palese and Sargeant's proposed strategies for improving information in referendum campaigns,

namely promoting high-quality discussion, confronting misinformation, controlling campaign finance, and creating and disseminating high-quality information (Renwick et al., 2019). In terms of controlling campaign finance, the 'government is prohibited from spending public money to support one side in a referendum, foreign donations are banned and there are some minimal transparency requirements' (Suiter & Reidy, 2019). Ireland has long had high-quality information provided by a Referendum Commission that sends information to each household about the referendum question and promotes voting. The recent introduction of deliberative mini-publics has promoted high-quality discussion, having a 'transformative' effect on discourse (Renwick et al., 2019; see also Suiter & Reidy, 2019). While misinformation is a notably thorny problem, mini-publics appear to improve citizens' knowledge and might even have a role to play in guiding the actions of fact-checkers who scrutinise the claims of elected and non-elected representatives (Renwick et al., 2019). This finding echoes Parkinson's claim that the institutionalisation of these new forms of representation may effectively disrupt discourses that are advanced by traditionally powerful representatives (Parkinson, 2020).

Despite these successes, Renwick, Palese and Sargeant conclude that it is possible to 'do much more than has been achieved in any democratic polity so far' to improve the quality of information (2019). This suggests a need to revisit the relatively neglected topic of regulating popular vote processes (Cheneval & el-Wakil, 2018; Reidy & Suiter, 2015a) in order to enhance both their normative and perceived legitimacy. If referendums are 'seen to be subject to no ground rules, and as being open to abuse', their capacity to contribute to democratic systems may be limited (Seyd, 1998, p. 199).

Conclusion

In sum, this special issue suggests that, when it comes to understanding and assessing the relationship between popular vote processes and democracy, talk of 'direct democracy' – and the related notions of 'unmediated will of the people', 'elite manipulation', or 'citizen incompetence' – is largely misguided. Popular vote processes cannot be expected to bring about forms of unmediated government and introducing them in democratic systems does not amount to implementing a 'direct' alternative to 'representative democracy' – nor must it 'kill representative democracy'. These dominant narratives artificially detach popular vote processes from representation in ways that limit our understanding of what they do and should do, create false expectations among citizens and even, at times, serve the strategic interests of political elites.

Alternative narratives are needed to discuss whether, when, and how letting citizens vote on specific policies, in interaction with other institutions, can deepen democracy. The contributions gathered in this special issue offer great insights into what such counternarratives might look like, taking advantage of systemic approaches: they suggest that we should value popular vote processes as unique opportunities to inform citizens; as privileged processes to enhance the representation of their interests in public conversations; or as mechanisms that iteratively remind us of the need for pluralism in democratic societies. These clarified normative principles also set a basis to demonstrate the need for reform in the institutional design of referendums and initiatives, and to guide these reforms.

As such, the insights provided by the contributions to this special issue are particularly pertinent at this moment in time, where the need to amend certain existing regulations is increasingly acknowledged. For instance, the Venice Commission's *Code of Good Practice on Referendums* has been the subject of calls for reform to ensure, as expressed in a report of the Council of Europe, that 'referendums should be embedded in the process of representative democracy and should not be used by the executive to override the wishes of parliament or be intended to bypass normal checks and balances' (Gillan, 2019, p. 3). Projects to involve citizens in key design choices around popular vote processes are also on the rise. Prior to its 2014 independence referendum, the government of Scotland published a draft referendum bill to promote consultation; the Canadian province of British Columbia surveyed citizens about format prior to a 2018 referendum on electoral reform; and a 2020 survey by the Constitution Unit at University College London is currently investigating citizens' process preferences for a potential future border poll in Northern Ireland.

Still, these public discussions and the search for best practices can benefit from further systems approach research, notably on the possible trade-offs between normative principles proposed in the contributions to this issue, or on the impact of specific regulations in various contexts. By way of conclusion, we wish to present two notable challenges that might stand in the way of systemic empirical and normative research and for effectively linking the two.

A first challenge of systems approaches is to cope with the complexity of systems thinking. The density of different institutions that distribute 'duties, obligations, and responsibilities, and power' (Warren, 2017, p. 43) – elections, consultations, popular votes, minipublics – among different actors – governments, parliaments, parties, civil society organisations, media, courts, etc – is very high in democratic systems. This attention to institutions and actors needs to be paired with consideration of 'wider contextual factors, or the chaotic nature of the ideational 'soup' in which ideas and actors swim' (Parkinson, 2020). One way of benefitting from the powerful tools that systemic theories offer without being overwhelmed by their complexity is to be guided by important *problems* (Shapiro, 2002; Warren, 2017). In the case of popular vote processes, this entails refining our understanding of the problems they raise; indeed, many of the alleged problems with popular vote processes – such as elite manipulation or voter incompetence – have not been well-contextualized as parts of broader systems (el-Wakil & McKay, 2019). Intensifying the interaction between democratic theory and empirical research – aiming at empirically-informed theory and theory-driven empirical research – can help identify relevant problems and make such research feasible while highlighting possible blind spots and new puzzles (Swift & White, 2008; Van Biezen & Saward, 2008).

A second challenge is raised by the comparative dimension of systems approaches and the kind of data it requires. What data are necessary to assess the quality of popular vote processes ought to be theoretically clarified. In this issue, Renwick, Palese and Sargeant expand the scope of assessing the democratic quality of popular vote processes to include information provision. This complements other useful, but incomplete measures, such as Altman's 'Direct Democracy Practice Potential' (2019, p. 62) and Reidy and Suiter's (2015a) referendum campaign regulation index. Normative theory can also inform our identification of the problems to study and the kind of data that ought to be collected would help in this endeavour. For instance, the growing interest in the empirical assessment of representative claims (e.g. Guasti & Geissel, 2019) could lead to an assessment of whether the narratives and terminologies of elected representatives are

closer to those of ordinary citizens in systems that include bottom-up popular vote processes than in conventional representative systems, as suggested by Parkinson (2020). Such research could in turn serve to refine the theoretical claims.

Furthermore, while there are a number of databases that catalogue popular vote processes (e.g. the Centre for Research on Direct Democracy database[3]), systematic data collection around popular vote processes across countries is comparatively much less developed than for electoral processes. Suiter and Reidy (2019) are not alone in lamenting the 'lack of comparative and longitudinal data on public support for referendums, and in particular on different types of referendum' (Hollander, 2019, p. 280; see also: Reidy & Suiter, 2015b; Vatter, Rousselot, & Milic, 2019). Inspiration could be drawn from the Swiss case, where data is extensively gathered for each national level popular vote on voters' opinions, campaigns, and types of referendums or initiatives used. Systems approaches enjoin researchers to account not only for the parameters immediately impacting popular vote processes, but also for their more distant consequences (Jacquet & van der Does, 2020, p. 8) both in time and in other parts of democratic systems. Researchers have used existing data sources to assess some of the 'indirect effects' of popular vote processes, although broader data collection could be oriented toward more systematically tracing who benefits from certain kinds of popular vote processes and under what institutional and contextual circumstances.

Coping with these challenges entails high rewards. At a moment where democratic ideals and practices are being contested, moving past old debates to better understand what popular vote processes do, how they could respond to these challenges, and in what circumstances, is essential.

Notes

1. This was part of a speech in an episode of the *Grand Débat*, a participatory event organized in reaction to the *Gilets Jaunes* crisis, on January 15, 2019, in Grand Bourgtheroulde.
2. For more on the phenomenon of non-electoral representation and popular vote processes, see McKay (2019, Chapter 5) and el-Wakil (2020, Chapter 5).
3. Available at https://c2d.ch/

Acknowledgements

Disclosure Statement

Funding

Notes on contributors

Alice el-Wakil is a postdoctoral researcher at the Chair of Political Philosophy of the University of Zurich. Her current research focuses on normative democratic theory, and especially on questions about how institutions and political processes (like initiatives and referendums) can help us better translate democratic principles into practice.

Spencer McKay is a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Postdoctoral Fellow. He is currently writing a book on democratising popular vote processes, such as referendums and initiatives.

ORCID

Alice el-Wakil 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3585-1089
Spencer McKay 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5650-4636

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