

Dugfrisk forskning: Can Voting be Un-democratic? **A talk with Alice el-Wakil**

af Aksel Hvid Bagge og Benedikte Huber

It's a sunny Friday afternoon and campus is buzzing as people are hurrying to get their first sip of beer. Meanwhile, in a very pink room in building 2, Aksel has arranged a tea party for three. It is time for the very first installment of 'Dugfrisk Forskning', as Aksel and Benedikte have caught up with one of the newest members of our academic staff: Alice el-Wakil. They have invited her to a talk about her current working paper, the process behind academia and much more. But who is Alice el-Wakil?

The Classic Tale of an Uncertain Stud.scient.pol.:

el-Wakil started studying political science in Geneva, which is her hometown: "I didn't know what to study and it seemed like political science is something that gives you a very broad outlook. I did

the first year, but I wasn't really convinced." However, during her second year at university she attended her first classes in political theory: "for me, that was really when it clicked". She highlights: "I remember we read this book by Peter Singer where he compared the lives of pigs to the lives of babies. I had no clue what to do with this, because all we had been told before was statistics and how to measure, find proxies and so on. The book was very confusing but also extremely interesting."

The Paper: Popular Vote Processes and Voter Accountability

In her paper, el-Wakil dismisses the so-called 'accountability-objection' to referendum and initiative processes. This objection states that the ability to hold legislators accountable is a core principle of democracy, and that referendums violate this principle: legislators must be 'accountable to the people', and this isn't possible when the legislators are ordinary citizens instead of ele-

About Alice el-Wakil

BA and MA in political science in Geneva. Term abroad at the European University Institute in Florence and the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Erasmus in Berlin & Toronto. PhD in Zürich, post.doc in Zürich and Konstanz and assistant professor at the University of Copenhagen.

cted representatives: "In a referendum, a decision is made on a specific policy; yet, there is no one you can sanction for this decision, and no one who can give you reasons why this decision was made. You cannot go to your neighbor and hear what they voted, tell them that they voted wrongly or ask them for reasons and so on. And many see this as something that makes referendums very undemocratic."

The first part of the paper undertakes the task of deciding if a lack of accountability is a good reason to dismiss referendums and other kinds of direct democracy.” I try to show that you only can make this objection to referendums if you consider that voters don’t need to be accountable in regular elections. Otherwise, you would need to get rid of elections. And I don’t find any convincing arguments why there is a difference between elections and referendums. It is two kinds of mass voting that have a lot in common”.

el-Wakil’s argument goes as follows: since voters legislate both in elections and in referendums the accountability objection would also result in voters lacking accountability regarding elections. Describing the outcome of elections as a matter of choosing representatives and the outcome of referendums as a matter of ‘legislating’ is a false dichotomy – in both cases, voters are deciding between alternative policies and representatives. Furthermore, as voters aren’t selected to participate in referendums and make no claims

of representing the people, there is no fundamental difference between referendums and elections, when it comes to voters ‘acting as representatives’. Thus, if one were to follow the logic behind the accountability objection both referendums and popular votes should be deemed undemocratic. Yet, in the second part of the paper, el-Wakil defends the democratic character of both kinds of mass votes: democracy does not require to hold ordinary voters accountable – even if they have some responsibility in legislating: “I argue that there shouldn’t be voter accountability, because even if they share a part of the responsibility for the outcome of the vote, they share it with the elective representatives and other actors who shape the process. What is more important, is to provide people with opportunities to vote responsibly.” In the third part of the paper, el-Wakil argues that more responsible voting could possibly be achieved through frequent referendums – “As they provide more information and ways to correct bad decisions”.

Voter accountability is one thing, voter responsibility another. But are voters really responsible, as individuals, for the results of elections and referendums? After all, they are not setting the options put to the votes. They are usually also not taking a prominent role

in the campaigns before these votes. We felt inclined to also question the degree to which the individual voter even should be held responsible for their actions at the ballot box. Luckily, el-Wakil was able to provide us with some clarity: “People do not know what to think about specific issues that are important at the moment, and so representatives and interest groups play a big role in shaping those opinions and preferences that emerge. This whole framing is happening outside of voters – so there is this shared responsibility that needs to be acknowledged. Yet, I would still emphasize that in the end, it is voters who are casting ballots. People want to express something with their vote, they are deciding, and I think saying they have no agency would be very wrong”. In sum, the fact that we cannot hold voters accountable doesn’t mean that voters are not responsible on an individual level. The degree to which an individual is responsible for their (voting) behaviour is closely related to the question of how much agency an individual has. How much of our vo-

ting behaviour is decided by circumstances that are beyond our control?

OM ARTIKELSERIEN 'Dugfrisk forskning' er en ny artikelserie af Aksel og Benedikte, der giver spotlight til noget af alt den spændende forskning, der kommer fra instituttets videnskabelige personale. Gennem udtalelser fra forfatterne og uddybende kommentarer fra os, håber vi at bygge bro mellem kommunens klistrede gulve og kommunehospitalets øverste gange.

And to what degree are we responsible for acting in a certain manner if our behaviour is a product of (or merely constrained by) structural conditions?

A Long and Winded Process

As students, most papers we write focus on questions that have been chosen by our professors. Much like voters, our agency is constrained. It can therefore be difficult to imagine how one goes about writing a 'real' academic paper. We asked el-Wakil about the paper's inception and the overall writing process: "At my PhD defence in December of 2019, one of the questions I received about the thesis was: Yeah, but what about accountability? This wasn't something I had really thought of including before. So that paper started being thought of at this moment. [...] My favourite part is always when I start working on something. When the question is new and crispy. What is not so exciting is revising and revising and revising. It is an essential part of the process if you want to get published. [...] My father was very interested in questions of democracy. I think he kind of put the idea in my mind

actually. He was French and became Swiss later on and he was always puzzled by the many referendums and initiatives in Switzerland, things I didn't necessarily question myself because I grew up with them; Of course, we vote every four months on a number of issues and of course, there is no campaigning and so on. [...] Hopefully, this might get published in a special issue, so I need to have a pre-last version in January - knowing that this is a process that is never over. You send it to a journal, which sends it to an anonymous reviewer, who can then reject it or send it back with notes or editing."

Since the article is still a work in progress, you sadly won't be able to read it yet. However, we will notify you when the article is published on MED ANDRE ORDs social media!