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“We the people” favour stronger democracy

Mention the idea of “direct democracy” and you often get a rapid reply such as “Oh, that’s about referendums”. Many people seem to know little more. A few are armed with objections, such as, “We don’t want to have referendums all the time, like the Swiss.” or “Let the people decide and soon we’ll get capital punishment back.” or “We have a Burkinian system, our parliament is sovereign and so the people cannot overrule government or parliament in referendum”.

These counter arguments – I call them prejudices – have obviously failed to put off many, many people in a lot of countries, some of them very similar to ours. This is shown by a dramatic increase in direct democracy in recent decades. During the period from late 19th century until 1950, there were 215 referenda in countries of Europe. From 1951 until 2003, the number almost tripled to around 628. Switzerland hosted a large number of these “plebiscites” (decisions of the people) but especially in recent decades other countries have begun to catch up. These figures show the country-wide referenda. At other levels of government such as region, county, city, town, district and village there have been numerous referenda (sometimes also called ballots). One example is the federal state of Bavaria, in Germany. After 1995 when the regulations for “citizens’ direct democracy” CDD were introduced, until 2005, there were 1416 citizens’ proposals (“initiative”, German: Bürgerbegehren). In 869 of these cases, a referendum followed, a decision made by the electorate. The themes of these proposals, in accord with the law, all fell within the areas of responsibility of the city, district or village council. Such things as traffic control, building and land development, sports amenities were unsurprisingly featured. Also, disputes about public versus private ownership of service companies, water suppliers and even whether to accept nuclear powered electricity, were also themes of these direct-democratic proposals and action.

In order to use citizens’ direct democracy, you need a set of guidelines for the “tools” or procedures. One of these procedures is known as the “initiative”. This allows an agreed, fairly large number of people, eligible to vote in elections, to put forward a public proposal. This might be to make or change a law, or to veto a public decision. To ensure compliance with the regulations, clarity and “understandability” of the proposal, a public office for elections or democratic affairs commonly is expected to check the proposal. Then for the proposers comes the task of contacting and convincing fellow-citizens to endorse the proposal. A lot of signatures are needed and there may be a time limit for their collection. If there is success, the next stage of the initiative often involves the local council or parliament, which is obliged to examine and debate the proposal within a reasonable period of time. The council can reject the proposal, put forward an alternative or accept and enact the proposal. If rejected, the proposal, plus alternative if there is one, goes before the whole electorate in a referendum. The result, decided by majority decision, becomes law.

With minor exceptions, in Scotland and the UK, all referenda – there have been very few – were imposed by government (formally a law of parliament is required) or council. The authority decides on the topic, formulation of the proposal or question, timing and, indeed, whether or not to respect the decision made by the people! Not so with “citizens’ direct democracy”. In a growing number of countries these procedures, such as the initiative, the citizen-triggered referendum, the obligatory referendum (matters of constitution and international treaties) and the option to veto governmental acts by referendum, have been introduced in recent decades. At the level of country or nation state, Lithuania and Slovakia have a “full tool-kit” of the democratic procedures just described. Hungary lacks the obligatory referendum but has the others. Italy has the obligatory referendum and a form of people’s veto (abrogative referendum which can be used to strike out a law or part of one), Ireland has the obligatory referendum (which allowed the Irish to vote against the European treaty of Nice), Denmark has a similar procedure. In Scotland and the United Kingdom none of these tools of citizens' direct democracy are available to the people.

What do “ordinary” people think about this citizens' direct democracy?

We love it. In most countries which have been studied, a large majority are in favour of holding more referenda on important public matters and agree that citizens should be able to trigger a referendum by collecting a large number of endorsements (signatures) in support of a proposal. In UK-wide surveys, already in 1991 and 1995, the respected opinion researchers at MORI showed that 77 percent favoured referenda on a particular issue when raised by citizens’ proposal.

So, what has been getting in the way of effective democracy reform?

One problem is that the public campaign to introduce citizens’ direct democracy (CDD) has not so far become strong enough to successfully reach a broad public and to lobby parliament. Another barrier is that the major political parties, most members of parliament and many local councillors are against CDD, or are prepared to accept only weak reform of our democracy. In this important matter our political representatives do not respect the wishes of their electors.

How can we achieve the introduction of “full” CDD? For instance, inform yourself, start discussing the need for reform, support the campaigners and – if you can – join in! Try to persuade politicians to introduce law for this democracy reform. Vote only for parliamentary and council candidates who agree to support and work for the introduction of CDD.

You can obtain information, advice and help from
I&R ~ GB Citizens' Initiative and Referendum
Campaign for direct democracy in Britain
<http://www.iniref.org/>