

Partisan, not ignorant: citizens' use of arguments and justifications in direct democracy

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How competent are citizens in direct democracy? While the popularity and use of direct democratic instruments is growing throughout the democratic world, criticism persists that ordinary voters lack the necessary competence to make complex policy decisions. The Brexit referendum and the Italian constitutional referendum are only the two most recent examples of controversial policy decisions taken by citizens directly at the ballot box. In times of increasing polarization, where the talk is of post-truth politics, fake news, and echo chambers, it is particularly important to assess to what extent citizens base their decisions in direct democracy on the consideration of different, policy-related facts and arguments.

The thesis assesses citizen competence by measuring the complexity of citizens' political thinking. Analysing data from Swiss referenda and from the Scottish independence referendum, the thesis finds, first, that most voters know at least some arguments concerning the policy proposals. The complexity of their political opinions varies, however, along personal as well as contextual factors. In particular, intensive media campaigns and the involvement in political discussions with people who are not like-minded help to increase citizen competence in direct democracy. Furthermore, with complex and technical questions, citizens are significantly less competent than with more familiar proposals which are close to their everyday life. Finally, while most voters have some information and are aware of arguments, they tend to process these arguments in a biased way, preferring partisan information which is promoted by their preferred party while rejecting contrary information.

The thesis includes three studies. The first analyses citizens' justifications for their vote decisions in 34 direct democratic votes in Switzerland. A content analysis of open-ended survey answers where voters are asked for their main reasons for voting yes or no finds that 70% of voters are able to mention at least one policy-related argument. 22% of voters are not able to mention any reason for their decision, and another 8% refer to recommendations, such as their preferred party's recommendation. Voters are particularly competent in direct democratic decisions where the media campaign is intensive. They are least competent when they have to decide on complex and technical issues.

A second study¹ analyses two direct democratic votes in Switzerland more in depth by using panel survey data (i.e. the same citizens are surveyed three times during a referendum campaign). Here, we find that policy arguments shape people's vote decisions. However, during the campaign voters tend to align their opinions and arguments with their preferred parties' position. Thus voters seem not to be ignorant of facts or arguments, but they tend to process information in a way that is biased by their partisan attitudes.

Finally, in a third study, I conducted an opinion experiment during the Scottish independence referendum campaign in 2014. 179 Scottish residents were invited to write down their opinion on Scottish independence after having read a set of arguments pro and contra independence. When these individuals were told that they would have to take part in a group discussion where they would have to justify their opinion, they wrote significantly more complex opinion-texts. This suggests that being involved in deliberations with citizens holding different views might foster complexity of political thinking.

¹ This study is co-authored with Hanspeter Kriesi