

SG du mardi 3 décembre 2019 / Sylvain BROUARD

The dual effect of referendums on voters' satisfaction with democracy: An experimental approach

Abstract:

Along with the global wave of populism, calls for the use of referendums are growing in many representative democracies, from the yellow jacket protesters in France to AfD MPs in Germany. Demands to introduce or facilitate the use of referendums are often justified based on the democratic legitimacy of direct citizen participation. However, based on existing scholarship it is not clear that public support for institutions of direct democracy actually derives from intrinsic procedural preferences rather than instrumental motives. The extent to which referendums are preferred by citizens for intrinsic rather than instrumental reasons shapes the capacity for institutional reforms to cope with citizens' current dissatisfaction with democracy. Using a survey experiment conducted in a representative sample of French voters, we provide new evidence about the impact of referendums in this respect. Our experimental design varies theoretically relevant features of the policymaking process across multiple policy issues. It distinguishes different types of referendums and captures the possibility that a referendum decision is not implemented by elected politicians. We display evidence of a dual effect of referendum: a positive effect on democratic satisfaction, even among policy losers, provided decisions are implemented; if not, a negative effect on democratic satisfaction among policy winners and losers. Our analysis speaks to scholarship and public debates on the promise and perils of institutional reform on democratic legitimacy.