

CITIZENS AT THE POLLS: DIRECT DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD, 2022-2023

*Ciudadanos en las urnas: La democracia
directa en el mundo, 2022-2023*

Ahead of Print

ISSN: 0718-090X

Revista de Ciencia Política

cienciapolitica.uc.cl

**DAVID ALTMAN** 

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

NAOMI ALTMAN 

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

ABSTRACT

While there has been an explosive and statistically significant increase in the use of mechanisms of direct democracy (MDDs) since the early 1900s, the global trend has taken a negative turn since 2010. However, the years 2022 and 2023, with a combined total of 73 MDDs, appear to have broken with the declining tendency observed in recent years, showing an increase of almost 45% compared to 2020 and 2021. Of these 73 national MDDs, approximately half were obligatory referendums (32), a quarter were referendums against recently approved legislation (18), a fifth were authorities' plebiscites (15), and about a tenth were popular initiatives (8). The first section of this work focuses on one of the most striking trends in the evolution of direct democracy, which is its close alignment with global electoral democracy levels. The second section examines the contemporary uses and trends of direct democracy, while the third section provides illustrative examples of contemporary direct democracy. We then conclude.

Keywords: direct democracy; plebiscites; popular initiatives; referendums; democracy

RESUMEN

Mientras que desde principios del siglo XX ha habido un aumento explosivo y estadísticamente significativo en el uso de los mecanismos de democracia directa (MDDs), la tendencia global ha tomado un giro negativo desde 2010. Sin embargo, los años 2022 y 2023, con un total combinado de 73 MDDs, parecen haber roto con la tendencia decreciente observada en los últimos años, mostrando un aumento de casi el 45 % en comparación con 2020 y 2021. De estos 73 MDDs nacionales, aproximadamente la mitad fueron referendums obligatorios (32), un cuarto fueron referendums contra legislación recientemente aprobada (18), una quinta parte fueron plebiscitos promovidos por las autoridades (15) y alrededor de una décima parte fueron iniciativas populares (8). La primera sección de este trabajo se centra en una de las tendencias más llamativas en la evolución de la democracia directa, que es su estrecha relación con los niveles globales de democracia electoral. La segunda



sección examina los usos contemporáneos y tendencias de la democracia directa, mientras que la tercera sección ofrece ejemplos ilustrativos de la democracia directa contemporánea. Finalmente, concluimos.

Keywords: *Democracia directa; Democracia; Plebiscitos; Iniciativas populares; Referéndums.*

I. INTRODUCTION

This research note provides an overview of global trends in all mechanisms of direct democracy (MDDs) at the national level in 2022 and 2023. The analysis of MDDs in these couple of years, along with a closer examination of some significant instances, offers a valuable opportunity to explore the dynamics of contemporary democracies. These democracies are grappling with increasing public dissatisfaction with their representative mechanisms.

Following Altman (2011: 7), we define a mechanism of direct democracy as a formally recognized, institutionalized process through which citizens in a region or country —irrespective of the democratic nature of their regime— express their choices or opinions on specific issues through a ballot with universal and secret suffrage. This definition encompasses initiatives, referendums, and plebiscites, as commonly understood in the literature. It excludes unofficial votes (such as those made by secessionists in the three southern states of Brazil in 2017),¹ deliberative assemblies or other forums where votes are not secret, as well as elections for public officials (representatives or executive authorities), or the potential revocation of their mandates through recall.²

In the absence of universally accepted terminology for direct democracy, we predominantly adhere to Swiss terminology. However, as Swiss jargon does not encompass all relevant subtypes of mechanisms of direct democracy (MDDs), we include additional terminology to encompass most of these subtypes. Our approach broadly categorizes MDDs into two main groups: ‘citizen-initiated’ or ‘bottom-up’ mechanisms (initiated through signature gathering) and ‘top-down’ mechanisms (triggered by the existing legislative assembly, executive officers, or constitutional mandates).

The first group, known as citizen-initiated mechanisms of direct democracy (CI-MDDs), consists of mechanisms initiated through citizens’ signature collection. This category includes popular initiatives (PI) and referendums (RF).

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-41541063> (accessed July 25, 2024).

² The literature is evenly divided between those who consider these institutions a subgroup of the direct democratic world, e.g., Fernando Tuesta Soldevilla (2014), and those who think them to be a completely different species, such as Bruno Kaufmann et al. (2010). The recall as an institution, as Bobbio mentions, originates in an understanding of representation as a delegation rather than a fiduciary relationship; see chapter II of Norberto Bobbio (1987).

It's important to note that there is a crucial distinction between popular initiatives and referendums. Popular initiatives usually aim to change the status quo, while referendums are designed to prevent such changes.³

The second group encompasses top-down mechanisms of direct democracy (TD-MDDs), which are initiated (directly or indirectly) by authorities. This category includes obligatory referendums (OR) and plebiscites (PL). It's essential to distinguish between these two, as plebiscites often involve one representative institution bypassing another (typically the executive bypassing the legislative branch), relinquishing responsibility for contentious policies, or seeking to legitimize existing policies.⁴ Plebiscites serve as a prime example of a subtype of MDD that doesn't exist in Switzerland, often considered the global standard for direct democracy.⁵

This paper is divided into three main sections. The first section offers aggregate data on the usage of direct democracy since the beginning of the twentieth century and draws conclusions regarding the nearly perfect alignment between direct democracy and global electoral democracy. In the second section, we delve beyond aggregate statistics, providing context and details on the different types of mechanisms of direct democracy (MDDs) conducted at the national level worldwide. The third section, through a selected group of iconic cases, enables the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the intricacies of these events in 2022 and 2023. Finally, we present our conclusions.

II. PERFECT TRACK

There is suggestive evidence that the growth of democracy has stagnated, and some signs indicate that democracy may be in retreat (e.g., Diamond 2021; Ding and Slater 2021; Chull Shin 2021; Papada, et al. 2023; Nord, et al. 2024). In such a context, one might expect to see an increase in experimentation with democratic innovations such as direct democracy either because citizens are frustrated with the functioning of representative institutions or because populist leaders are thought to abuse them despite the enormous ongoing discussions on the topic; see e.g., Angelucci, Rojon, & Vittori (2024). However, this does not seem to be the case. In this section, we will explore whether there is a relationship

³ A popular initiative is a bill, statute, or constitutional amendment supported by citizens that offers an alternative to the status quo. Optional referendums allow citizens to reject a law passed by the legislature (the "people's veto" in US jargon, also sometimes called a "popular referendum.")

⁴ The distinction between CI-MDDs and TD-MDDs is an analytical artefact, as MDDs may have a mixed origin and purposes. On the one hand, the fact that we observe TD-MDDs in a particular context does not necessarily mean that societal actors view the process antagonistically. Although rare, collective actors (such as unions, students, NGOs, and business associations) may press authorities to trigger a popular vote on a given matter. On the other hand, not all CI-MDDs generate pristinely from simple, unorganized citizens' inorganic political desires. In this regard, see Serdült and Welp (2012).

⁵ These are, in most cases, limited to certain topics in the constitution or —as in Switzerland, Uruguay, and even all but one of the American states (Delaware)— to an amendment of the constitution. It is a defensive right or a veto right. Plebiscites allow authorities to pose a question to the citizenry.

between direct democracy and the overall level of democracy worldwide. To start, let's discuss the methods used to measure the level of direct democracy.

Some scholars have attempted to identify patterns of direct democracy expansion in various regions of the world by using the frequency of MDDs as a crucial empirical tool.⁶ We argue that using the frequency of MDD use as a proxy for diffusion is problematic, especially when considering CI-MDDs. To begin with, the credible threat of triggering a CI-MDD, be it a reactive referendum or a proactive popular initiative, plays a crucial role in moderating political decisions and influencing the political landscape, even before the process of signature gathering commences (e.g., Gerber 1996; Papadopoulos 2001). The problem then lies in quantifying something that occurs infrequently but has a significant impact on political life.

Counting the occurrence of MDDs is, therefore, inadequate for accurately measuring the potential for direct democracy in each country. Such an approach would disproportionately favor divided societies where political compromise is more challenging, compelling politicians to resort to alternative institutional tools like popular initiatives to achieve their objectives.⁷ Conversely, a society where political resolutions are often reached before lawmakers employ their most powerful institutional weapon, i.e., an MDD, would be disadvantaged by such a measure. Conceptually, two different places might have the same "amount" of direct democracy, but in "A," numerous MDDs are held annually, while in "B," MDDs are rarely triggered, even though the threat remains ever-present (Altman 2013: 622).

To what extent is direct democracy achieved in current political systems? To address this question, we utilize the *Direct Popular Vote Index* (DPVI), which is applied to 200 political entities worldwide. The DPVI results from the weighted aggregation of the four most important subtypes of MDDs within a given country and year.⁸ Each of the sub-indices (pertaining to popular initiatives, rejective referendums, obligatory referendums, and plebiscites) comprises three essential components: the ease of initiation, the ease of approval, and the significance of the vote if approved.

The ease of initiation is measured by the existence of that type of MDD, and, in the case of CI-MDDs, such as popular initiatives or referendums, it also includes the number of required signatures and time limits for signature circulation. The ease of approval is determined by the interaction among the quorums

⁶ Vanhanen (2000) takes a similar approach in counting MDDs as a complement of the participation index in "Measures of Democracy 1810-2008." Ignoring the direct democracy paradox, he departs from the risky assumption that plebiscites "have usually been held in nondemocratic countries" (Vanhanen 2003: 63).

⁷ This type of approach was taken by Tolbert et al (2001).

⁸ The complete rationale behind this index's construction and operationalization is fully explained in Altman (2017). Alongside with Civil Society Participation index, Local Government index, and Regional Government index, Direct Popular Vote Index is one of the constitutive subcomponents of V-Dem's Participatory Democracy index. Michael Coppedge et al. (2011). See data and codebook: Michael Coppedge et al., (2024b).

related to participation, approval, supermajority, and district majority. The consequentiality of the vote is assessed by the legal status of the decision (binding or consultative) and the threat potential of the MDD under consideration. The threat is a decaying function that reflects the time that has passed since the last occurrence of a particular MDD and its success.⁹

The DPVI measures the potential for, and the use of, direct democracy in a specific time and place. On a global scale, the DPVI closely mirrors global democracy trends, increasing in the 1970s, a significant surge in the 1990s, and a recent leveling off with a slight downturn (see Figure 1). The correlation between V-Dem's polyarchy (v.14) and DPVI is remarkably strong, with a coefficient of 0.922, and highly statistically significant ($p < .000$).

In recent years, both measures appear highly correlated, suggesting that countries with higher levels of overall democracy (measured by the Polyarchy index) also tend to have greater institutional capacities for direct democracy and use it more (measured by the DPVI). This pattern may reflect a global expansion of democratic rights and institutions, indicating that democratic reforms have included improvements in both political representation and direct citizen participation. The divergence in certain periods might reflect different adoption rates of direct democracy mechanisms compared to other democratic reforms.

The close relationship in recent times suggests that democratic consolidation is based not only on representative elections and institutional stability but also on the citizens' ability to participate directly in decision-making. This trend points to a general strengthening of democracies, where both representation and direct participation are valued. Of course, this relationship warrants closer examination soon and does not preclude these democracies from grappling with increasing public dissatisfaction with their representative mechanisms or fluctuations in the level of polyarchy globally. In summary, the figure indicates a strong relationship between the level of democracy and direct democracy in recent years, probably reflecting a trend towards more participatory political systems.¹⁰

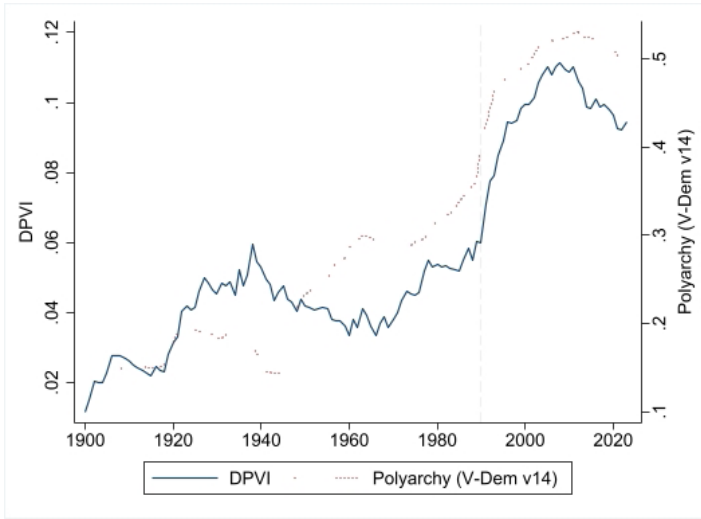
⁹ Each polity is measured four times yearly, corresponding to each subtype of MDD. So, for example, in country x in year t , we study whether MDD subtype i (e.g., referendum) existed (\exists), the required signatures (S), their circulation time (CT), its quorums for approval (SQS and AQ), the consequentiality (D), and the threat potential (T). Within the formula, each term works like a chain defined by its weakest link, and the aggregation provides an equal weighting to each. In other words, the ease of initiation is as important as the ease of approval. From the perspective of aggregation, DPVI becomes a complex index, and it is aggregated using this formula:

$$DPVI_{xt} = \sum \left[(\exists_{xti}) (1 - S_{xti}) (CT_{xti}) + \left(\frac{1 - SQS_{xti}}{0.5} \right) (AQ_{xti}) \right] (D_{xti}) (T_{xti})$$

where x refers to country, t to a particular year, and i to a particular MDD.

¹⁰ It is important to remember that the DPVI reflects a score that combines all types of mechanisms of direct democracy, including popular initiatives, rejective referendums, obligatory referendums, and plebiscites. It is likely that not all of these institutions have a similar impact on the level of democracy. There is suggestive evidence that while some types of MDDs, such as popular initiatives, have a positive effect on democracy, others, such as plebiscites, may have a different or even negative effect. However, this particular distinction falls beyond the scope of this work.

Figure 1. DPVI and Polyarchy since 1900

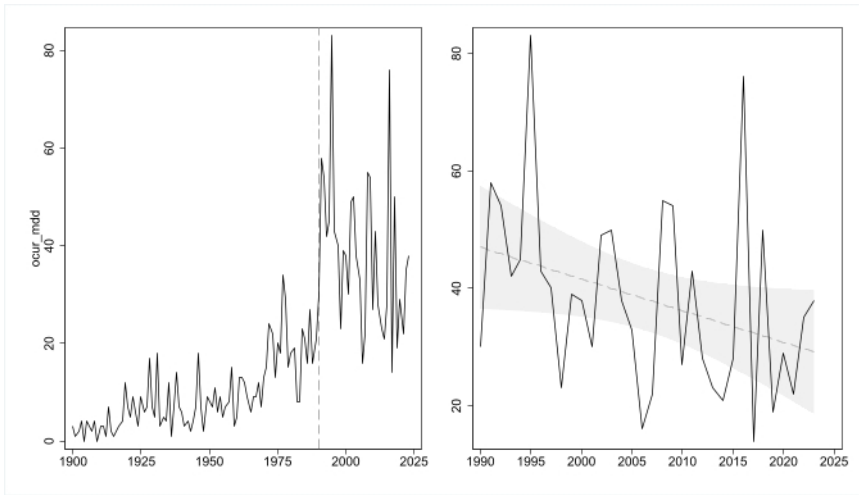


When we refer to the practice of MDDs, we are encompassing the cumulative count of all popular votes at the national level in every country worldwide during a given period. Even when voters have multiple issues to decide on the same day, each question is considered as a separate MDD.¹¹

While there has been a statistically significant increase in the annual number of MDDs since the early 1900s, the last 30 years have seen a period of greater stability. If we examine the evolution of all popular votes held at the national level each year since 1900, the overall trend is positive and statistically significant (see Figure 2a). However, when we focus on the last 30 years (see Figure 2b), the trend becomes negative, although it remains statistically indistinguishable from zero. Notably, there is a substantial fluctuation in the number of MDDs, ranging from 20 to 80 MDDs per year. In 2022, there was a notable increase of over 50% compared to 2021, and 2023 even more. Nevertheless, it still falls short of the record year of 1995 when 83 MDDs were recorded.

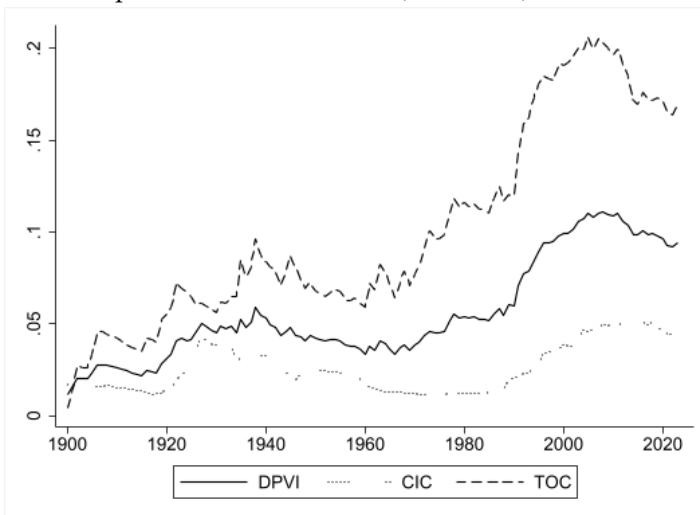
¹¹ In cases when citizens had to vote on a series of questions, each question was coded as a unique MDD unless the choices were mutually exclusive.

Figure 2. Amount of MDDs since 1900 and since 1990



One of the advantages of DPVI is its ability to offer a concise overview of the state of direct democracy in a specific context. However, this strength can also be seen as a significant limitation, as it is too general. Nevertheless, the index allows us to delve deeper into specific subtypes of MDDs, such as plebiscites, or work within a middle ground, considering both top-down and bottom-up MDDs. Figure 3 illustrates the evolution of the DPVI on a global scale since 1900, which represents a weighted average of OR, PL, PI, and RF. It also presents the aggregated level of the citizen-initiated component (CIC, a combination of PI and RF) and the top-down component (TOC, a combination of PL and OR).

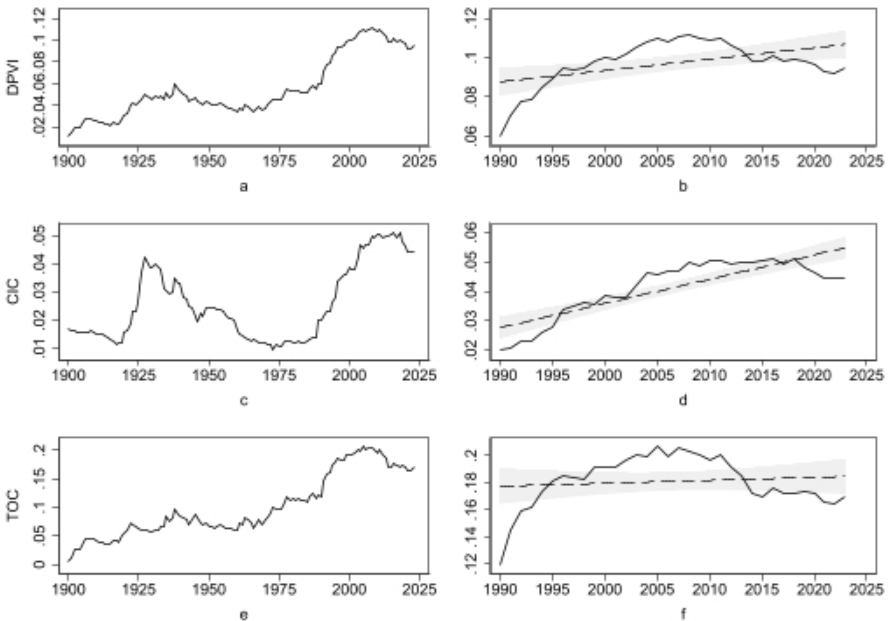
Figure 3. Direct Popular Vote Index, DPVI (1900-2022)



In Figure 3, we can observe a substantial nearly fourfold increase in top-down direct democracy since the beginning of the twentieth century (indicated by the segmented line representing TOC). On the other hand, the expansion of bottom-up mechanisms is more modest (indicated by the dotted line representing CIC). The current level of bottom-up mechanisms is roughly 20% higher than its peak in the late 1920s, which was the apex in the 20th century. DPVI, being a weighted average of the four subtypes of MDD within a given country-year, and therefore of CIC and TOC, falls somewhere in between the two approaches.

However, as we did earlier, Figure 4 zooms in on the last thirty years. In this case, the situation is the reverse of the previous figure covering the last 120 years. Over the past three decades (1990-2023), the statistical increase in the overall DPVI, as shown in 4b, is primarily attributed to a significant expansion in the level of bottom-up mechanisms of direct democracy, as depicted in 4f. From a technical standpoint, there has been no growth in TD-MDDs, as indicated by the segmented regression line and its confidence interval in 4d. In essence, the regression line for DPVI, as seen in 4b, remains positive, driven by the growth in popular initiatives and rejective referendums.

Figure 4. Direct Popular Vote Index (and its components) since 1900 and since 1990



An acute reader might question whether the increase in the number of MDDs observed is due to the expansion of provisions for MDDs in national constitutions. More broadly, one might ask if there were any changes in the availability

of MDDs during the analyzed time frame. In other words, is the ability to use MDDs shrinking or expanding? These questions are interrelated.

To explore this dimension, we decided to calculate the institutional capabilities of MDDs using the institutional features of DPVI. Specifically, we examined whether an MDD subtype *i* (e.g., referendum) existed (\exists), the required signatures (*S*), their circulation time (*CT*), the quorums for approval (*SQS* and *AQ*), and the consequentiality (*D*). Unlike the “complete” DPVI, this analysis does not consider the threat potential (*T*) of that subtype of MDD. (To clarify, *T* is a decaying function reflecting the time since the last occurrence of a particular MDD and its success.)

If the increase in MDDs is related to the expansion of provisions for MDDs, we would expect to see a relationship between the institutional capability and their respective DPVI. However, this is far from the case. Figure 5 reveals the relationship between institutional capability and occurrences, showing no significant correlation. In fact, there are instances where the relationship is paradoxically negative, such as the remarkable growth in the institutional capability of launching plebiscites (1990-2000) and the actual number of plebiscites.

Figure 5. Institutional Capabilities and Occurrences of Different MDD since 1990

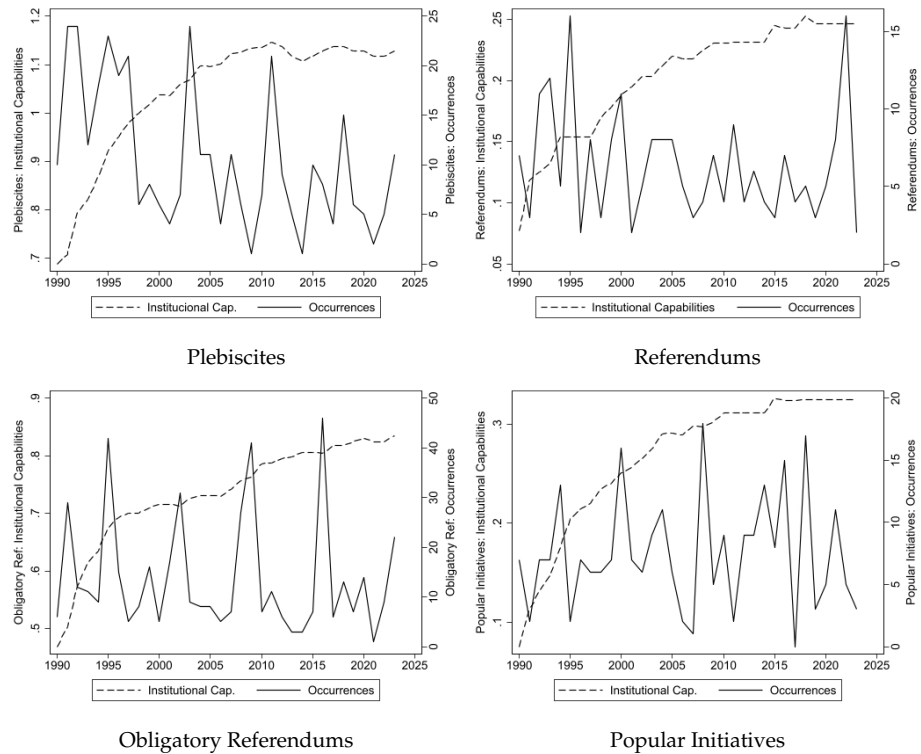


Figure 5 clearly shows that most measures of the institutional capabilities of each MDD subtype have remained quite stable over the last +10 years. Therefore, the explanation for sudden increases or decreases in the use of MDDs should be sought elsewhere. Beyond the typical fluctuations seen in measures like these (including regular national elections), exogenous events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, may have caused delays in several MDDs and their recent increase could be attributed, at least in part, to the normalization of their scheduling.

III. CONTEMPORARY USES AND TRENDS OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY

In 2022 and 2023, a total of 73 MDDs were conducted at the national level worldwide, consisting of:

- Thirty-one obligatory referendums (nine in Micronesia, eight in Ecuador, two in Chile, two in Switzerland, and one each in Australia, Belarus, Central African Republic, Cuba, Denmark, Mali, Serbia, Taiwan, Tunisia, and Uzbekistan)
- Eighteen rejective referendums (eight in Switzerland, five in Italy, three in Slovenia, and one each in Liechtenstein, and Uruguay).
- Fifteen authorities' plebiscites (five in Venezuela, four in Hungary, four in Poland, and one each in Chad, and Kazakhstan).
- Eight popular initiatives (three in Switzerland, two in Liechtenstein, and one each in Ecuador, Mexico, and Slovakia).
- One legislative counter-proposal (in Switzerland).

Out of the twenty-four countries that held an MDD, nine are classified as "liberal democracies" by the V-Dem's 2024 Democracy Report (Australia, Chile, Denmark, Italy, Liechtenstein, Micronesia, Switzerland, Taiwan, and Uruguay);¹² Ecuador and Poland are coded as electoral democracies; Mexico falls in the "democratic grey zone" (between an electoral democracy and the autocratic grey zone); Slovakia and Tunisia are located in the autocratic grey zone (between and electoral autocracy and the democratic grey zone); six countries are classified as "electoral autocracies" (Belarus, Central African Republic, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Serbia, and Venezuela), and four coded as "closed autocracies" (Chad, Cuba, Mali, and Uzbekistan). Of course, we must take this crisp categorization of regimes with a grain of salt, as these categorizations overlap in the regime continuum, see (Nord, et al. 2024: 46-47).

¹² The coding of Liechtenstein and Micronesia comes from Freedom House as they are not included in V-Dem Database (Coppedge, et al. 2024a) and therefore, nor in the Democracy Report (Nord, et al. 2024).

However, during 2022-2023, the use of MDDs was more dispersed among various types of regimes compared to previous years. If we were to numerically code democratic levels according to the V-Dem's Democratic Report (ranging from six for liberal democracies to one for closed autocracies), the democratic average of countries that have used authorities' plebiscites is 2.4, obligatory referendums is 3.78, popular initiatives is 4.8, and rejective referendums is 5.8. Despite being employed in various contexts, MDDs continue to be predominantly associated with democratic practices, particularly those that are citizen-initiated.

In 2022, eight obligatory referendums were conducted in eight different countries, each with distinct implications and outcomes:

- Serbia approved a Constitutional reform related to the judiciary to align it with European Union legislation, particularly regarding the selection of judges and prosecutors.
- Belarus held a vote, ordered by President Lukashenko in January, aimed at consolidating his regime's power following the mass protests in 2020 and 2021.
- Denmark held an obligatory referendum to decide on an opt-out from the bloc's common security and defense policies, prompted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- In Tunisia, President Kais Saied successfully solidified his power one year into a political crisis that began on July 25, 2021, effectively ending hopes of a democratic transition.
- The Chilean vote resoundingly rejected the proposed Constitution drafted by the Constitutional Convention, marking the final step of a constitutional revision process initiated in October 2020.
- In Switzerland, citizens approved a measure to stabilize the revenue of the Old-Age and Survivor's Insurance (OASI), involving an increase in VAT rates from 2.5% to 2.6% (reduced rate) and from 7.7% to 8.1% (standard rate).
- Cuba accepted the Family Code, with one of its most contentious topics being same-sex marriage.
- Finally, Taiwanese voters participated in the 8th Constitutional Amendment, aimed at lowering the voting age from 20 to 18.

The year's popular initiatives yielded a variety of outcomes. Among the five initiatives held, two were related to social values in Switzerland: one proposing a ban on animal and human experimentation, the protection of children and young people from tobacco advertising, and the banning of intensive farming, including imported products. Of these, only the initiative related to tobacco advertising was approved. In Liechtenstein, citizens supported an exemption

for pensioners from paying the annual deductible of the national health insurance. Notably, the Mexican vote, although technically a popular initiative, had strong plebiscitary elements, as it was orchestrated by the president himself and ultimately ended in failure.

Overall, the outcomes of the sixteen rejective referendums held in the year were as mixed as the policies they addressed. Only two of them resulted in clear governmental defeats: the Swiss *Withholding Tax Law* and Liechtenstein's *New Health Law*. In Slovenia, three referendums on the reorganization of the bodies governing the public broadcasting service *RTV Slovenija*, deferring the long-term care act (Nursing Law), and amending the new Government Organization Act (adding three new government ministries) failed to reach the participation quorum.

Similarly, none of the five rejective referendums in Italy were approved due to low participation. These referendums concerned the Abolition of the Severino Law, Pre-trial detention, Separation of the functions of magistrates, Vote of the lawyers on the Judicial Councils, and the popular Election of the judges of the High Council of the Judiciary. Switzerland saw the defeat of five other rejective referendums, in which the governing coalition successfully maintained its agenda. These referendums included the AVS Act (which increased the retirement age of women from 64 to 65), Swiss contributions to FRONTEX, the Film Act (commonly known as the "Netflix Law"), Federal Act of June 18, 2021, on a package of measures in favor of the media, and the Federal Stamp Duty Act. Finally, the most intense MDD of the year, the Uruguayan referendum against 135 articles of the Ley of Urgent Consideration was also defeated.¹³

During 2022, there were five authorities' plebiscites, with four taking place in Hungary and one in Kazakhstan. In Kazakhstan, the vote involved 56 amendments to the Constitution, which were voted on as a block. This plebiscite followed violent civil unrest in early January. Political commentators believed that the amendments would reduce the influence of the executive branch, grant more powers to the Parliament, and eliminate the powers that former president Nursultan Nazarbayev had retained after resigning from office in 2019.¹⁴ In Hungary, the plebiscite centered on LGBT topics in public education, but, as has become common in Central Europe in recent years, it failed to meet the required participation quorums.

Lastly, there was one legislative counterproposal, which took place in Switzerland and concerned the Transplantation Act. Before the vote, it was possible to remove organs from a deceased person if they had explicitly given their consent beforehand. The accepted proposal allowed for the presumption that

¹³ Intensity in this context refers to the product of percentage of valid votes of the registered by 100 minus the absolute difference between both sides of the contentious. The closer to 100 the more intense the vote.

¹⁴ The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/06/kazakhstan-vote-nazarbayev-privileges-referendum-constitution> (Accessed August 14, 2024).

everyone consents to organ donation unless they express their preference to the contrary while still alive.

In terms of the general ideological trends of the year, there appears to be a balance between the liberal and communitarian poles.¹⁵ For eighth out of the 73 events, it is not appropriate to assign a particular ideological direction. Among the remaining cases, the divide was relatively even, with 29 (45%) leaning toward liberalism and 36 (55%) toward communitarianism.

Regarding the prevalent topics, 40% of the initiatives had an impact on the institutional order, 27% addressed social values and moral questions, 36% touched on political-economic issues, 16% influenced national life within their respective polities, and 19% were related to foreign policy.¹⁶ When considering the different types of MDDs, their ideological leanings, and their thematic nature, 2022-2023 were undeniably diverse.

Assessing whether MDDs limit or expand civil liberties is more demanding than other potential divides, such as liberal-communitarian. In other words, fewer cases have a clear tilt to either side. In any case, the recent MDDs show a mix of expanding and curtailing civil liberties. Some measures aim to protect and extend rights, especially those related to environmental protection, recognition of minority groups, and public health. However, other measures impose restrictions, particularly in areas related to emergency powers and social policies affecting LGBTQ+ rights. This demonstrates that MDDs are not always used for the benefit of everyday citizens and can have varied impacts depending on the context and specifics of each measure.

Figure 6 displays all the results from 2022 and 2023. As discussed elsewhere (e.g., Côte-Real and Pereira 2004; Aguiar-Conraria and Magalhães 2010; Altman 2017), one way to represent MDD results is by illustrating the percentage of registered citizens who voted in favor and those who opposed using an isosceles right triangle.¹⁷ While this graphical representation doesn't encompass all dimensions of electoral results (e.g., blank or null votes, which may offer valuable information), it efficiently portrays the participation and competitiveness of each popular vote. Unless there are participation, approval, or supermajority quorums, any pair of coordinates falling above the bisector (segment OM) indicates acceptance of the question, while those falling below indicate rejection.¹⁸

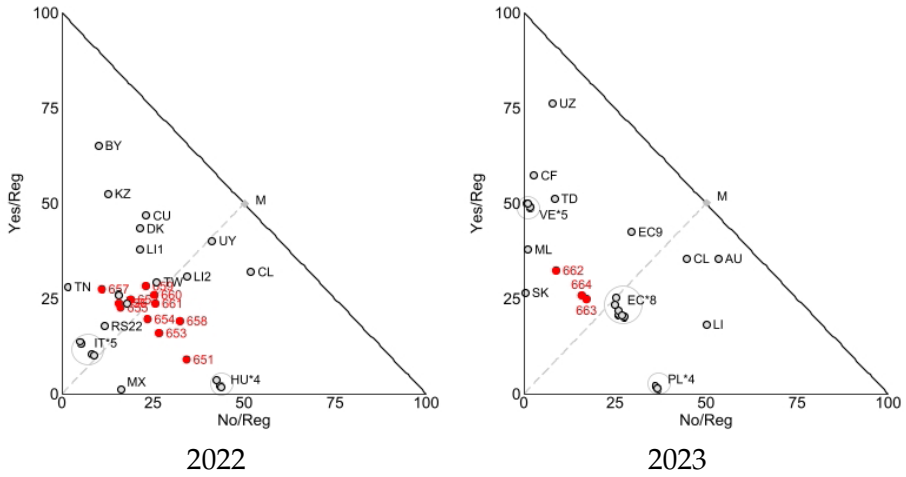
¹⁵ Liberal MDDs prioritize the individual's well-being over the community, privileging individual and economic freedoms over other concerns. Conversely, communitarian MDDs prioritize the common good over personal matters, which usually means subordinating individual and economic freedoms to the end of social and cultural cohesion.

¹⁶ It is highly unlikely that a popular vote could be framed in a crisp, clear-cut theme. Most of the time, MDDs touch on several topics simultaneously. In this regard, see Altman (2019: 210).

¹⁷ The rationale behind these geometrical depictions is fully explained in Altman (2017). See also Aguiar-Conraria et al. (2020).

¹⁸ Point M represents the unique, virtually unattainable pair of coordinates with the higher turnout and competition possible. Point M constitutes an implicit benchmark of comparison of any possible pair of coordinates. Its leverage probably echoes the enormously influential work of Robert Dahl, for whom democracy is a regime with high levels of competition and participation (Dahl 1971).

Figure 6. MDDs results¹⁹



IV. ILLUSTRATIVE USES OF MECHANISMS OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY 2022-2023

From this universe of seventy-three cases, this section focuses on a handful of MDDs that illustrate different but fundamental dimensions of popular votes: participation, competitiveness, purpose, and context. We decided to highlight iconic cases that stand out in Figure 6, with special attention to Latin American examples. For instance, Chilean cases are included due to the enormous expectations generated after the social upheaval of 2019. The Uruguayan case is closest to point M (see Footnote 16). We also included the Cuban and Venezuelan cases, despite their significant differences, to remind the reader that direct democracy—as understood in this work—is not necessarily exclusive to democracies. Hungary and Poland are closest to the coordinates (0, 100).²⁰

Chile – First Constitutional Draft

On the 4th of September 2022, Chile held an obligatory referendum to determine if the public agreed with the drafted constitution by the Constitutional Convention. The vote was widely nicknamed as “exit plebiscite” (*plebiscito de salida*) by the country’s public, as it was the outgoing referendum after there was an initial vote. It was set to decide whether a new constitutional text would be formulated in the first place and, if so, who was going to be drafting the doc-

¹⁹ Red dots correspond to Swiss votes and their respective identifiers (number of the vote) according to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office.

²⁰ Providing details of every MDD that occurred in 2022 and 2023 falls well beyond the scope of this piece despite the fascinating and unique history each popular vote has.

ument (elected representatives, or a mix of representatives and acting members of congress). The referendum took place a year and a half after the first vote and approximately two years after the mass protests of 2019, which were the catalyst for the constitutional process. The demonstrations, although initially triggered by a hike in Santiago's subway fares, transformed into a platform for the public to express their widespread grievances. The protests intensified and quickly turned violent. Some civil groups burned down public infrastructure and transport and looted many businesses, forcing the government to declare a national emergency and implement curfews. On the other hand, security forces violated human rights as a significant number of people were injured, and even some fatalities occurred due to police and military brutality. All in all, the "social upheaval" (*estallido social*) represented a traumatic turning point for Chile, prompting authorities to recognize that the national *status quo* had undergone a significant transformation. Such realization forced Chile's political elite to resort to institutional outlets to appease civilians, which resulted in the broadly agreed upon constitutional process.

The Constitutional Convention was comprised of 155 members who were elected in a non-obligatory election, and was primarily composed of leftist and independent representatives. Throughout the writing process, the convention faced criticism due to inappropriate acts and controversial members, which was extensively covered by mainstream media. Polling by *La Tercera*, one of the largest newspapers in the country, showed that in May 2021, just before the drafting began, 77% of Chileans felt optimistic about the convention, compared to only 44% feeling optimistic by September of the same year.²¹

On the day of the "exit plebiscite" (*plebiscito de salida*), most predictions expected the constitutional draft to be rejected, albeit by a slim margin. Unlike the first referendum, the vote on September 4 was mandatory, which forced a large fragment of the population who had not voted in the first referendum to participate in the decision-making process. This led to the most extensive electoral participation in over a decade, with 85.7% of the electorate showing up to the ballot boxes.²² Voters who rejected the proposal constituted 61.9% of the ballots, while the "Approve" alternative received 38.1% of the votes.²³ The margin of victory of the "Reject" option far exceeded the expectations of most observers, in a massive blow to Boric's then new government.

Uruguay- Government survives opposition's challenge

On March 27, 2022, a Rejective Referendum was held in Uruguay, where citizens and permanent residents were tasked with deciding whether to reject

²¹ https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Chile%E2%80%99s%20Constitutional%20Convention_A%20Bumpy%20Start%2C%20Much%20Work%20Ahead.pdf

²² <https://www.bcn.cl/portal/noticias?id=historica-participacion-plebiscito-2022>

²³ Idem.

135 articles of a law passed in 2020. The law N° 19,889, also called the Urgent Consideration Law (known as LUC in Spanish), was approved by the Uruguayan Parliament in July 2020 after Luis Lacalle Pou's government put it forth. The legislation was nicknamed *Ley Ómnibus* in Spanish, or "Bus Law", alluding to the extensive number of articles and topics that it comprised, which would otherwise be legislated separately. The law encompassed 476 articles encompassed several issues, including education, public safety, and housing norms.²⁴ Given the broad number of issues it covered, some articles received widespread support, whilst others were particularly contentious. Some of the contentious topics included expanding the right of self-defense, eliminating the semi-liberty of minors who committed grave crimes, and what the opposition labeled as the privatization of education, even though no article explicitly mentioned such a policy.²⁵

Given the considerable controversy that the LUC aroused in the opposition, the opposition party Broad Front (*Frente Amplio*), alongside the PIT-CNT (Inter-syndical Plenary of Workers and National Convention of Workers of Uruguay), collaborated to repeal several articles, calling for a Rejective Referendum. The Broad Front coalition announced that they would support the rejection of the articles they voted against when the law was being passed in Parliament.²⁶

The law's adversaries had two available possibilities to call for a referendum: the so-called "long way" and the "short way." The "long way", ultimately chosen for this instance, requires those seeking to challenge the law to collect the signatures of 25% of the country's electorate. The "short way" stipulates that the signatures of 2% of the electorate would be enough to allow a vote, provided that at least 25% of the country's voters supported the call for a referendum.²⁷ In accordance with the "long way", the Broad Front and its allies needed just over 650,000 signatures and successfully collected 797,261.²⁸

On the day of the vote, there were 2,684,131 registered voters countrywide and 2,298,937, or 85.65%, turned out to cast a ballot, resulting in an average participation rate for Uruguay. Those who voted "No", meaning against the abrogation of the 135 articles, accounted for 50% of the votes, while supporters of the repeal comprised 48.7%. Blank votes amounted to 1.31% of the total, and invalid ones 3.61%.²⁹ Out of the 19 departments in Uruguay, its administrative regions, only three voted in favor of the measure despite the narrow re-

²⁴ <https://www.impo.com.uy/bases/leyes/19889-2020>

²⁵ <https://ladiaria.com.uy/politica/articulo/2021/6/luc-un-analisis-de-los-articulos-en-15-areas-tematicas/>; <https://www.lr21.com.uy/comunidad/1452853-fenapes-explico-por-que-la-luc-privatiza-la-educacion>

²⁶ <https://www.subrayado.com.uy/frente-amplio-y-pit-cnt-buscan-el-mayor-consenso-posible-el-referendum-contra-la-luc-n690632>

²⁷ <https://www.impo.com.uy/bases/leyes/16017-1989>

²⁸ <https://www.elobservador.com.uy/nota/comision-anuncio-que-supero-la-meta-y-recolecto-mas-de-763-mil-firmas-para-el-referendum-contra-la-luc-20217812576>

²⁹ <https://referendum2022.corteelectoral.gub.uy/ResumenResultados.htm>

sult.³⁰ Two of the three are part of the capital's metropolitan area, traditionally a left-leaning bastion.

Cuba - Same-sex marriage enshrined in the constitution

On September 25, 2022, Cuba held an obligatory referendum to decide whether a new Family Code was to be adopted. Despite its extensive content, comprising 474 articles and over 100 pages addressing a wide range of issues, the Family Code primarily revolved around two contentious topics: same-sex marriage and the accompanying question of same-sex adoption.³¹ Cuba has traditionally been a staunchly conservative country regarding social norms.

In 2019, the Cuban government published a new constitution that replaced the 1976 text, which constituted marriage as “the voluntarily established union between a man and a woman” (article 36).³² Since the previous *Magna Carta* explicitly impeded same-sex marriage, the introduction of the new constitution provided an opportunity to advocate in favor of gay marriage. This effort was spearheaded by LGBT organizations and Mariela Castro, MP and daughter of the country's former leader, Raúl Castro.³³ Initially, it seemed that their efforts would succeed, as the government included language that explicitly allowed for same-sex marriage in the early drafts of the new constitution. However, the proposed inclusion generated significant controversy and public debate. It drew intense criticism from traditionally conservative sectors of the population, particularly Evangelical churches and their followers. In response, the government decided to take an intermediate approach by using neutral language, leaving open the possibility of gay marriage. The administration finally determined that same sex-marriage and same-sex adoption were to be codified into a new Family Code, which would be subject to a mandatory referendum.³⁴

At the time the vote was held the total electorate of the country was just below 8.5 million people, including registered nationals abroad. The turnout was 74.1%, which was lower than Cuban referendums held in years past. However, compared to previous uses of MDDs in Cuba, this election was far more competitive. Excluding blank and invalid ballots, 66.89% of the population voted for the “Yes” option, supporting the new Family Code.³⁵ The new family charter was consequently implemented, with its publication in the official gazette

³⁰ <https://www.elpais.com.uy/informacion/politica/voto-a-voto-mira-todos-los-resultados-del-referendum-de-la-luc>

³¹ <https://www.minjus.gob.cu/sites/default/files/archivos/publicacion/2022-09/goc-2022-o99.pdf>

³² https://www.cubanet.org/htdocs/ref/dis/const_92_e.htm

³³ <https://elcomercio.pe/mundo/latinoamerica/cuba-hija-raul-castro-impulsa-matrimonio-igualitario-noticia-517696-noticia/?ref=ecr>

³⁴ <https://www.local10.com/news/2018/12/19/cuba-eliminates-gay-marriage-language-from-new-constitution/>

³⁵ <https://c2d.ch/referendum/CU/63bd1b6aa52c3995043a93a6>

two days later.³⁶ Some onlookers consider it one of Latin America's most progressive regulations.³⁷

Hungary - LGBT in Education Plebiscites

On April 3, 2022, Hungarian voters turned to ballot boxes across the country to cast their votes in a particularly controversial set of plebiscites held alongside the parliamentary elections. Although the vote concerned Hungary's child protection law, in essence, its eventual approval was set to prohibit material that covered themes related to the LGBT community (in particular homosexuality and transgender issues), alongside any display of pornographic content, to minors in educational settings.³⁸ The public was asked the next set of questions:

- "Do you support the teaching of sexual orientation to underage children in public education institutions without parental consent?"
- "Do you support the promotion of sex reassignment therapy for underage children?"
- "Do you support the unrestricted exposure of underage children to sexually explicit media content that may affect their development?"
- "Do you support the showing of sex-change media content to minors?"

The decision to hold the plebiscite came with broad parliamentary support. The governing Fidesz party and its allies, led by Viktor Orbán, unanimously voted in favor of the motion, while opposition parties abstained from voting. Consequently, the decision to hold the vote was ratified with 129 tallies in favor to none against.³⁹ The approval of the legislation immediately brought widespread criticism from international players, such as the European Union and civil organizations. The European Commission quickly started legal action against the law with an infringement procedure. It viewed its passing as a direct breach of "equality and the protection of fundamental rights."⁴⁰ Moreover, alongside other NGOs, the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (TASZ) rallied with the opposition and called upon voters to cast invalid votes to nullify the popular vote.⁴¹

Predictably, on the day of the suffrage, a significant number of voters purposely cast invalid ballots (around 20%). Although the turnout was relatively high, at around 70%, the combined number of invalid votes and the percentage of

³⁶ <https://www.minjus.gob.cu/sites/default/files/archivos/publicacion/2022-09/goc-2022-o99.pdf>

³⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/24/cuba-same-sex-marriage-referendum/>

³⁸ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/hungary-referendum-lgbtq-1.6407448>

³⁹ <https://www.euronews.com/2021/11/30/hungary-s-parliament-approves-2022-referendum-on-lgbt-issues>

⁴⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_3668

⁴¹ <https://hungarytoday.hu/child-protection-referendum-invalid-result-outcome-hungary/>

voters who did not participate was sufficient to invalidate the plebiscite. Hungarian law dictates that for any MDD to be binding in the country, it must have 50% of the electorate cast valid votes. The average percentage of votes cast in the four questions was around 47%. Notably, since those who opposed the vote abstained from casting their ballot, the yes/no ratio was overwhelmingly in favor of the Child Protection Law, with the No answer oscillating between 92% and 95% of votes, depending on the question.⁴²

Poland - Circumventing funding restrictions or truly conservative?

On October 15, 2023, Poland held a tremendously contentious parliamentary election. Alongside the vote to elect its representatives for the Sejm and Senate, the country also carried out a set of plebiscites that consisted of four questions. Parliament's ruling party called them in August of the same year⁴³ and covered a wide range of issues that appealed to the government's Law and Justice Party (PiS) voters. They put forth the following questions⁴⁴:

- “Do you support selling of the state-owned assets to foreign entities that results in Poles losing control over strategic sectors of the economy?”
- “Do you support increasing the retirement age, including reintroduction of the increased retirement age of 67 for women and men?”
- “Do you support removing the barrier at the border between Poland and Belarus?”
- “Do you support the admission of thousands of illegal migrants from the Middle East and Africa in accordance with the compulsory relocation mechanism imposed by the European bureaucracy?”

Opposition members and outside observers widely condemned all four proposals since they were perceived as deliberately leading questions designed to inflict damage on the opposition's status. Moreover, some suggested that the primary purpose of this plebiscite was to increase the participation of Law and Justice supporters in the parliamentary elections, as well as “a way to circumvent electoral funding restrictions for the government”.⁴⁵

Due to the aforementioned viewpoints and the fact that for a plebiscite or referendum to be binding in Poland there is a 50% participation quorum, opposition members advocated for a boycott of the measure as a way to dissuade

⁴² <https://hungarytoday.hu/child-protection-referendum-invalid-result-outcome-hungary/>

⁴³ <https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/08/14/referendum-to-ask-poles-if-they-support-eu-imposing-thousands-of-illegal-immigrants/>

⁴⁴ <https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/diced/2023/10/18/the-sovereign-has-spoken-polish-election-results-11-17-october-2023/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/15/voting-opens-for-polish-elections-as-pis-hopes-to-win-third-term>

voters from participating. The extent of the call for a boycott was so broad that even the former head of the National Election Commission (NEC), Wojciech Hermeliński, advised that voters should “refuse to take a ballot paper for the referendum while still accepting those for the elections.”⁴⁶

On the day of the vote, only about half of those who attended the parliamentary elections decided to take a plebiscite ballot. The turnout for the election was 74.38%, the highest attendance in Polish history, and the participation on the plebiscite was just 40.91%, making the results non-binding as it did not surpass 50%. Those in the electorate who did participate were overwhelming supporters of the PiS, its allies, and its ideological counterparts. The “No” voters of the four questions ranged between 94.61% and 96.79%, in line with the government’s position.⁴⁷ The participation in the plebiscite reflected the national election result as the PiS lost its first election since 2015 and simultaneously lost their set of plebiscites.⁴⁸

Chile – Second Constitutional Draft

On December 17, 2023, an obligatory constitutional referendum took place in Chile, just a year and three months after the colloquially dubbed “exit plebiscite” (*plebiscito de salida*). This referendum was called after the Chilean Congress propelled the country into an entirely new constitutional process after the defeat of the 2022 proposal.

The 2021-2022 Constitutional Convention (CC) was primarily made up of leftist and independent members who were elected with extensive support of those who participated. The marked difference between the results of the vote to elect the members of the CC in May 2021 and the results of the “exit plebiscite” in September 2022 can be explained by the fact that the former was a voluntary vote and the latter mandatory.

The ideological shift of the electorate can be further ascertained when analyzing the second constitutional process that Chile was subject to. After intense congressional debate and the withdrawal of some parties from the discussion, the legislature settled on a new system for the second draft attempt. Members of the new process were separated into three independent bodies, two of which redacted the draft and one controlled the legality of the proposals. The “Expert Commission” was composed of 24 members nominated by Congress, 12 by the opposition, and 12 by government forces. Each of the 12 nominations included six men and six women, providing gender parity and ideological balance.

⁴⁶ <https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/08/16/ex-head-of-electoral-commission-calls-for-boycott-of-polish-governments-referendum/>

⁴⁷ <https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/diced/2023/10/18/the-sovereign-has-spoken-polish-election-results-11-17-october-2023/>

⁴⁸ <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/12/11/europe/poland-pis-confidence-vote-tusk-intl/index.html>

The Commission was tasked with drafting an initial proposal, which was unanimously approved amongst them, that would later be subject to adaptation and approval by the popularly elected “Constitutional Council”. In stark contrast to the CC, the Council comprised a sizable right-wing majority, in which 23 out of 50 members were from the brand-new far-right Republican party, and only 16 seats went to the left-wing coalition. Astonishingly, the median representative in the Council was from the UDI party, traditionally the furthest right party of the country before the emergence of the Republicans.

Naturally, the rightward drift when establishing the Constitutional Council resulted in the final draft being undoubtedly more conservative and *laissez-faire* than the 2022 proposal. Most observers also understood it as being more right-wing than the current constitution.

Despite a well-established disillusionment in Chilean civil society regarding the constitutional process, participation in the obligatory referendum was scantily lower than in the “exit plebiscite”. Those who cast ballots amounted to 84.52% of the electorate, and 95% were validly emitted. In accordance with most polls, the results favored the “Against” option. Those who rejected the draft corresponded to 55.77% of voters, and those who approved were 44.23%.⁴⁹ Gonzalo Winter, a representative allied with Boric, said the results were “not a victory of the government, rather a defeat for the opposition.”⁵⁰ The fact that the electorate rejected both conservative and progressive proposals proved that the median voter was significantly more centrist than reflected in both processes and the mainstream actors in Chilean politics. The government and opposition agreed that the Constitutional replacement project should end, and no further attempts should be endeavored.

Venezuela - Rally ‘round the flag?

On December 3, 2023, Venezuela held a set of consultative plebiscites regarding the territorial dispute over the Essequibo Region with its neighbor, Guyana. Like Poland’s plebiscites, Nicolás Maduro’s government put forward five leading questions intended to cement the country’s lengthy claim over the territory.

Venezuela has laid claim to the zone for centuries. The Captaincy General of Venezuela was established in 1777 and comprised all the land west of the Essequibo River; however, amid the War of Independence, the British took over the territory and incorporated it into the colony of British Guyana, while Venezuela still demanded its return. The Essequibo was then unsettled for decades, and amidst a contest for the borders between Venezuela and then British Guyana, international arbitrators were called and ended up granting the land to the Brit-

⁴⁹ <https://provisorios.servei.cl/>

⁵⁰ <https://www.theclinic.cl/2023/12/21/diputado-gonzalo-winter-cs-en-tres-preguntas-nadie-puede-garantizar-que-la-constitucion-no-cambie/>

ish in 1899.⁵¹ In 1966, the year of Guyana's independence, the newly founded country, Britain, and Venezuela signed the Geneva Agreement. They resolved that there was a legitimate contest over the territory that would be peacefully settled. Up until 2015, the dispute over the Essequibo remained in the background of both countries' priorities. That ended that same year when oil was discovered in the sea off the Essequibo coast, which Guyana's government estimated to total around 700 million barrels.⁵² The territory encompasses about two-thirds of Guyana and is home to 120,000 people out of a total population of nearly 800,000.⁵³

Given the discovery of oil and previously known assets such as natural resources and minerals, Maduro's government saw the opportunity as an effective and relatively simple way to concentrate support across the political spectrum considering the contentious upcoming electoral year, in which Maduro is aiming for reelection. The following are the five questions asked:⁵⁴

- "Do you agree to reject by all means under the law, the boundary line fraudulently imposed by the arbitration decision of Paris of 1899 that is meant to dispossess us of our Guayana Esequiba?"
- "Do you support the Geneva Accord of 1966 as the only valid legal instrument that can reach a practical and satisfactory solution for Venezuela and Guyana in terms of the controversy over the territory of Guayana Esequiba?"
- "Do you agree with Venezuela's historical position of not recognizing the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice in resolving the territorial controversy over Guayana Esequiba?"
- "Do you agree to oppose by all means under the law, Guyana's attempts to unilaterally manage a maritime area, yet to be delimited, in an illegal manner and in violation of international law?"
- "Do you agree with the creation of the state of Guyana Esequiba and an accelerated plan to integrate the current and future population of that territory including, among other acts, the provision of citizenship and Venezuelan identification cards, according to the Geneva Agreement and international law, thus incorporating the aforementioned state into the territorial map of Venezuela?"

Electors gave all five questions overwhelming support, ranging from 96,35% in the least-backed question (3) to 98,27% in the most-supported question

⁵¹ <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2023/12/02/historia-disputas-essequibo-reino-unido-guyana-venezuela-orix/>

⁵² <https://www.britannica.com/place/Essequibo>

⁵³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/04/maduro-venezuela-guyana-essequibo-referendum-vote-turnout>

⁵⁴ <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/4300/>

(2). According to the National Electoral Council (CNE), the participation was 51,01% or about 10.5 million electors.⁵⁵ However, according to Guyanese intelligence, the “actual turnout was fewer than 1.5 million people”, under 10% of the country’s population.⁵⁶ Guyana and its allies saw the approval of these non-binding plebiscites as a direct threat to their sovereignty, and Essequibo’s English-speaking residents warily eye future developments.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the use and trends of mechanisms of direct democracy (MDDs) worldwide in 2022 and 2023, highlighting significant findings and implications for contemporary democratic practices. While the global trend in the use of MDDs has declined since 2010, 2022 and 2023 marked a notable resurgence with 73 MDDs conducted, representing a 45% increase compared to the previous two years. This resurgence indicates a renewed interest in direct democracy mechanisms despite the overall downward trend observed in the past decade.

A critical observation from this study is the strong correlation between the level of overall democracy (measured by the Polyarchy index) and the institutional capacities for direct democracy (measured by the Direct Popular Vote Index, DPVI). This suggests that countries with higher levels of representative democracy also tend to have robust mechanisms for direct citizen participation. This pattern may indicate that mature democracies increasingly integrate direct democracy tools into their political systems, reflecting a broader trend towards enhancing citizen engagement and participatory governance. This shift is likely a response to perceived weaknesses in the functioning of contemporary democracies, such as diminished trust in political institutions, a sense of disconnect between elected officials and their constituents, and the desire for more immediate and direct involvement in decision-making processes.

The analysis underscores the complexity of interpreting the frequency of MDDs as a straightforward indicator of democratic health or diffusion. The credible threat of triggering a CI-MDD, such as a popular initiative or reactive referendum, plays a significant role in shaping political decisions and can influence the political landscape even before the process formally begins. Therefore, merely counting occurrences may not fully capture the impact or potential of direct democracy mechanisms within a given political system.

From the 73 cases, this study focused on a handful of iconic MDDs that illustrate different but fundamental dimensions of popular votes: participation, competitiveness, purpose, and context. For instance, the Chilean cases high-

⁵⁵ <https://www2.cne.gob.ve/rc2023>

⁵⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/04/maduro-venezuela-guyana-essequibo-referendum-vote-turnout>

lighted the enormous expectations generated after the Social Upheaval of 2019, while the Cuban and Venezuelan cases demonstrated that direct democracy is not exclusive to established democracies. The Uruguayan case, closest to point M, and Hungary and Poland, closest to the coordinates (0, 100), further exemplified the diverse contexts in which MDDs operate.

The findings highlight the need for continued research and nuanced analysis to understand the evolving dynamics of direct democracy and its role in strengthening democratic governance worldwide. As democracies grapple with public dissatisfaction and the challenges of representative mechanisms, the integration of direct democracy tools offers a promising avenue for enhancing citizen engagement and fostering more participatory political systems. However, the explanation for sudden increases or decreases in the use of MDDs should be sought beyond institutional capabilities, considering broader political, social, and exogenous factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In summary, the recent increase in the use of MDDs is a positive sign, yet it is essential to look beyond aggregate measures and consider the broader contexts influencing these mechanisms. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of direct democracy in contemporary political systems, advocating for a balanced approach that values both representation and direct citizen participation.

Acknowledgments:

This work is framed within FONDECYT Grant 1230221. We thank the three anonymous referees of RCP.

REFERENCES

- Aguiar-Conraria, Luís and Pedro C. Magalhães. 2010. "How Quorum Rules Distort Referendum Outcomes: Evidence from a Pivotal Voter Model." *European Journal of Political Economy* 26(4): 541-557.
- Aguiar-Conraria, Luís, Pedro C. Magalhães and Christoph A. Vanberg. 2020. "What Are the Best Quorum Rules? A Laboratory Investigation." *Public Choice* 185(1): 215-231.
- Altman, David. 2013. "Bringing Direct Democracy Back In: Toward a Three-Dimensional Measure of Democracy." *Democratization* 20(4): 615-641.
- Altman, David. 2019. *Citizenship and Contemporary Direct Democracy*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Altman, David. 2011. *Direct Democracy Worldwide*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Altman, David. 2017. "The Potential of Direct Democracy: A Global Measure (1900-2014)." *Social Indicators Research* 133(3): 1207-1227.
- Angelucci, Davide, Sebastien Rojon and Davide Vittori. 2024. "Do Populist Parties Promote Direct Democracy? An Empirical Assessment in 29 Countries in the Last Two Decades." *Contemporary Politics* 30(4): 473-493.

- Bobbio, Norberto. 1987. *The Future of Democracy: A Defence of the Rules of the Game*. New York: Polity.
- Chull Shin, Doh. 2021. "Democratic Deconsolidation in East Asia: Exploring System Realignments in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan." *Democratization* 28(1): 142-160.
- Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, Steven Fish, Allen Hicken, Matthew Kroenig, Staffan I. Lindberg, Kelly McMann, Pamela Paxton, Holli A. Semetko, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jeffrey Staton and Jan Teorell. 2011. "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: A New Approach." *Perspectives on Politics* 9(2): 247-267.
- Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Michael Bernhard, Cecilia Borella, Agnes Cornell, M. Steven Fish, Linnea Fox, Lisa Gastaldi, Haakon Gjerløw, Adam Glynn, Ana Good God, Sandra Grahn, Allen Hicken, Katrin Kinzelbach, Joshua Krusell, Kyle L. Marquardt, Kelly McMann, Valeriya, Mechkova, Juraj Medzihorsky, Natalia Natsika, Anja Neundorf, Pamela Paxton, Daniel Pemstein, Josefine Pernes, Oskar Rydén, Johannes von Römer, Brigitte Seim, Rachel Sigman, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jeffrey Staton, Aksel Sundström, Eitan Tzelgov, Yi-ting Wang, Tore Wig, Steven Wilson and Daniel Ziblatt. 2024a. "V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset V14." *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project*.
- Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Michael Bernhard, Cecilia Borella, Agnes Cornell, M. Steven Fish, Linnea Fox, Lisa Gastaldi, Haakon Gjerløw, Adam Glynn, Ana Good God, Sandra Grahn, Allen Hicken, Katrin Kinzelbach, Kyle L. Marquardt, Kelly McMann, Valeriya Mechkova, Anja Neundorf, Pamela Paxton, Daniel Pemstein, Oskar Rydén, Johannes von Römer, Brigitte Seim, Rachel Sigman, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jeffrey Staton, Aksel Sundström, Eitan Tzelgov, Luca Uberti, Yi-ting Wang, Tore Wig and Daniel Ziblatt. 2024b. "V-Dem Codebook V14." *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project*.
- Côrte-Real, Paulo P. and Paulo T. Pereira. 2004. "The Voter Who Wasn't There: Referenda, Representation and Abstention." *Social Choice and Welfare* 22(2): 349-369.
- Dahl, Robert A. 1971. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Diamond, Larry. 2021. "Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective: Scope, Methods, and Causes." *Democratization* 28(1): 22-44.
- Ding, Iza and Dan Slater. 2021. "Democratic Decoupling." *Democratization* 28(1): 63-80.
- Gerber, Elisabeth R. 1996. "Legislative Response to the Threat of Popular Initiatives." *American Journal of Political Science* 40(1): 99-128.
- Kaufmann, Bruno, Rolf Büchi and Nadja Braun. 2010. *Guidebook to Direct Democracy in Switzerland and Beyond*. Bern: Benteli Hallwag Druck AG.
- Nord, Marina, Martin Lundstedt, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Cecilia Borella, Tiago Fernandes, Ana Lisa Gastaldi, Good God, Natalia Natsika and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2024. *Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot*. V-Dem Institute: University of Gothenburg.
- Papada, Evie, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Lisa Gastaldi, Tamara Köhler, Martin Lundstedt, Natalia Natsika, Marina Nord, Yuko Sato, Felix Wiebrecht and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2023. "Defiance in the Face of Autocratization." *Democracy Report 2023*: University of Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem Institute).
- Papadopoulos, Yannis. 2001. "How Does Direct Democracy Matter? The Impact of Referendum Votes Upon Politics and Policy-Making." *West European Politics* 24(2): 35-58.
- Serdült, Uwe and Yanina Welp. 2012. "Direct Democracy Upside Down." *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 8(1): 69-92.
- Tolbert, Caroline J., John Grummel and Daniel Smith. 2001. "The Effects of Ballot Initiatives on Voter Turnout in the American States." *American Politics Review* 29(6): 625-648.

- Tuesta Soldevilla, Fernando (ed.^eds.). 2014. "Una Onda Expansiva: Las Revocatorias En El Perú Y América Latina." Lima: Jurado Nacional de Elecciones - Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú.
- Vanhanen, Tatu. 2003. *Democratization: A Comparative Analysis of 170 Countries*. London: Routledge.
- Vanhanen, Tatu. 2000. "A New Dataset for Measuring Democracy, 1810-1998." *Journal of Peace Research* 37(2): 251-265.

Received: April 26, 2024.

Accepted: November 7, 2024.

David Altman is a professor of political science at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. He is the Project Manager for the "Varieties of Democracy" research collaborative and Director of the V-Dem Regional Center in Latin America. Email: daltman@uc.cl.

Naomi Altman is a student at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, naltmanc@estudiante.uc.cl.