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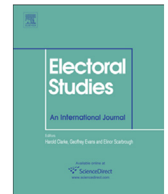

Bring the state (information) in: Campaign dynamics in the run-up to a German referendum

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses exposure to different sources of campaign information, and their effects on citizens' feeling of being informed about referendums. The analysis is based on an innovative rolling panel study that allows for a rigorous tracking of campaign dynamics in the run-up to the referendum. Using a referendum on a large-scale infrastructure project in the German state of Baden-Württemberg, empirical findings show that official information provided by the government had the greatest effect in reaching citizens and also had the strongest impact on their feeling of being informed. The article demonstrates that the state plays a crucial role in providing an appropriate information environment prior to a referendum.

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1. Introduction

All over the world, the use of mechanisms of direct democracy, especially referendums, has become increasingly popular. This trend towards citizens taking more and more political decisions directly has inspired a lively debate concerning the prerequisites and the overall evaluation of such mechanisms. The central questions revolve around whether citizens are well enough informed to take policy decisions on their own, whether citizens cope with the information provided in the course of a campaign and who is responsible for informing the electorate and ensuring that adequate information is available for citizens?

Germany is a case in point here. The Federal Republic of Germany was founded as a "super-representative state" after World War II; its constitution – the "Grundgesetz"– basically does not provide for any means of direct democracy. Concerning the federal level, there is still a normative debate about whether (or not) it might make sense to include such mechanisms in a constitutional reform. However, the picture is very different on the local and state levels. All of Germany's sixteen states have provisions concerning referendums and the same applies to the local level. At least some states not only have a legally granted opportunity to hold referendums, but actually, and quite frequently, use them, especially at the local level. The most prominent case is the southern state of Bavaria. Moreover, since German unification in 1990 there has been a steady increase in the use of referendums throughout the country. Accompanying this trend of increased use of referendums, research on those in Germany has also risen, often inspired by Switzerland. Most of the research focuses on the (different) institutional arrangements in German states (Decker, 2010, 2012; Eder, 2010; Eder and Magin, 2008; Eder et al., 2009); but recently there have also been some micro-level studies (Gabriel, 2013; Schoen et al., 2011a, 2011b; Schoen, 2012, 2013).

Notwithstanding that, questions remain unanswered, when it comes to the information context of referendums and processes of information distribution, acquisition and processing in the run-up to them (Bowler and Donovan, 2000; Donovan et al., 2009; Kriesi, 2012a, b). We still know rather little about referendum campaign dynamics in Germany and beyond – how people make up their minds in

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referendum campaigns, to put it in Lazarsfeldian terms. Part of the explanation why rather few studies exist is methodological: To study these aspects requires very specific and complex research designs that allow for the capturing of pre-referendum campaign dynamics. Unfortunately, such data is rarely available. This article aims to make a contribution to exactly this field. Making use of a recent (dynamic) study conducted in the run-up to a prominent referendum on a large-scale infrastructure project in a German state, the article deals with two research questions: First, which information sources actually reached citizens over the course of the campaign? Second, which of these sources contributed to citizens' subjective level of information concerning the referendum in question? In answering these empirical questions, I would like to contribute to the discussion on what kind of informational infrastructure is actually needed in the context of direct democracy and critically, who is responsible for informing the electorate?

The article proceeds as follows. First, I provide an overview of the ongoing discussion concerning campaign communications and the processes of how people become informed. Next, given the requirements for dynamic campaign studies, I briefly discuss issues of data necessities, followed by the presentation of the actual case in point (i.e. the referendum to be analysed) and the data and operationalizations used in this paper. I then present my empirical findings, first based on visual inspections of trends that occurred in the course of the campaign with regard to information acquisition and its effects, and subsequently based on modelling the respective dependent variables. In closing, I discuss the implications of my findings.

2. Campaigns, information, and direct democracy

Politics means making decisions that are binding for society. Democratic politics means that these decisions are made under democratic conditions, which requires that all citizens must have the opportunity to participate in a free and fair competition of ideas (Dahl, 1971). Direct-democratic politics means that these opportunities are not only restricted to the election of (party) representatives, but that the citizens themselves can take political decisions directly, for instance, in the form of a referendum. If citizens are given the right to make direct political choices, these decisions should be based on an educated foundation. They have to understand the object, the alternatives, and have to weight up the advantages and disadvantages (see LeDuc, this issue; Kriesi, 2005). In short: They need to be well informed about the specific issue at stake to make a good decision.

Of course, there is a long-standing discussion on whether citizens are well enough informed to make good choices (see also discussion by Bowler, this issue). This discussion is not restricted to direct-democratic choices, but also applies to elections in general. Converse's (1990) two simple truths about the distribution of information in the US electorate – 'the mean is low and the variance is high' – is a classic here. Lazarsfeld et al. (1968) as well as Dalton (1984) have also long ago proposed typologies of citizens that are based on different levels of expertise and involvement in politics, with the latter pointing towards two principal options for getting people involved, namely cognitive and partisan mobilization. Krosnick (1990) has made a more specific point: the existence of 'issue publics' consisting of people not necessarily interested in politics in general, but in specific policy areas.

Hence, it is well known that there are strong individual-level correlates of being involved in and informed about politics. This is also reflected in Verba et al. (1995: 271) as they argue that citizens are not involved in politics 'because they can't, (or) because they don't want to'. In a similar vein, Luskin (1990) argues that ability and motivation are key individual-level factors in explaining inter-individual differences in political knowledge. In the context of direct-democratic decision-making, however, we have to ask the question: Can we accept such differences on normative grounds? Or should measures be taken to counter these differences?

In fact, Verba et al. (1995) as well as Luskin (1990) use threefold typologies when describing key determinants of involvement and knowledge, in both cases pointing to an interaction of supply and demand. In the case of Verba et al. (1995), 'nobody asked' is the third element, in Luskin's case, it is 'opportunity'. 'Nobody asked' clearly puts elites (and their agencies) under pressure: It is their responsibility to get people involved, especially those who are not already involved based on their own motivations and abilities. Luskin's 'opportunity' is more specific: In order for people to learn about politics and policies, appropriate information must be available. This is especially true in the run-up to mechanisms of direct democracy, when potentially very specific policy questions are at stake (see also Kriesi, 2005).

What, then, are the potential sources of political information? In abstract terms, there are three possible ways of getting information – and this also applies to (direct-) democratic contexts, namely mass media, personal conversations, and organizational communication (for further information see Schmitt-Beck, 2000). The latter includes parties (Budge, 2001; Hobold, 2006; Selb et al., 2010), but also interest and civil society groups (Lupia, 1994). Moreover, as especially the Swiss example shows, "politics" and ultimately "the state" play an important role in terms of providing information as well. The 'voting booklet', which includes the wording of the referendum question as well as conflicting arguments, is an established institution in the run-up to referendums on the Swiss federal level. In addition to parties and groups, state-based information is considered as a third form of organizational communication.

A differentiated demand for information regarding an upcoming direct democratic decision is obviously met by a differentiated supply. Still, neither the information itself nor the information sources are objectively equal nor are they subjectively equal in the eyes of potential recipients. A number of variables have been identified in the literature on political communication that play a role here: Some information sources are more political or (supposedly) have a greater political expertise than others, some are considered to be more trustworthy than others (see e.g. Druckman, 2001; Lupia 2002). No doubt, these are important intervening variables when it comes to the effectiveness of political messages. However, for these variables to play a role, a link between the information source and the recipient must be established in the first place. Actually

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