

Research Workshop

**Voting over contested issues – voting as contested issue:
Historical and contemporary perspectives on referenda and elections**

20-21 February 2020, Justus Liebig University Giessen

Call for papers

Representative democracy is in crisis. Politicians and parties encounter increasing distrust and have more and more trouble to represent all citizens.. While it is evidently challenging to respond to highly particularised interests in today's diversified societies, 'populist' and right wing parties try to mobilise citizens by presenting seemingly easy solutions to pressing issues. At the same time, we see an increased use of measures of direct democracy, especially referenda. In the recent years, a number of controversial and hotly debated referenda was implemented. The Brexit referendum in 2016, the Catalan independence referendum 2017, the constitutional referendum in Turkey in 2017 and the migrant quota referendum in Hungary in 2016 are only a few cases in point. These examples reveal two important characteristics of recent referenda, first, that they are implemented in quite different political figurations, from established democracies to authoritarian states. Second that they are failure-prone, since they do not always have the outcomes their initiators expect.

How, then, can we explain the growing popularity of referenda in these different settings and their polarising effects at the same time? How does the increased use of referenda relate to the crisis of representative democracy and the rise of populist rhetoric? What are the consequences for our understanding of (democratic) legitimacy and how it is ascribed? How is legitimacy negotiated and constructed in discourses around referenda and elections? Most generally, what does it entail to address referenda, elections, and voting in general not from a standpoint of normative political theory, but as social practices and political technologies?

The workshop seeks to situate findings from empirical studies into the broader literature of political sociology, political theory and related fields dealing with the crisis of representative democracy, the uses of practices of direct democracy, and challenges to political legitimacy. Also, it wants to create a venue to connect contemporary debates on democratic voting and its discontents with studies investigating practices of voting in a historical perspective – for instance, histories of majority decision making, historical alternatives to it, and more generally the interconnection of technologies of decision making and the politico-cultural representation of society. Therefore, we welcome theoretical, empirical, and historical contributions.

Please submit your paper abstracts (max. 300 words) to Andreas Langenohl and Sophie Schmäing (andreas.langenohl@sowi.uni-giessen.de, sophie.schmaeing@sowi.uni-giessen.de) by **31 October 2019**.