The Case for Direct Democracy

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Abstract: The most common case for direct democracy is that it makes government policy manifest the will of the people. Referendums makes ordinary people authors of the law. The normative ideas behind this argument, however, have been ill-understood. Once we understand them properly, it is clear that the case crumbles in the face of an old objection: citizens are too ignorant to autonomously author government policy. But democracy in general is not valuable just because it conduces to citizen autonomy. It also conduces to their equality. I show that the value of equality supports a much stronger case for direct democracy than that of autonomy. The best case for direct democracy is that it reduces power asymmetries between ordinary citizens and government officials. And this, so I show, supports a distinctively radical form of direct democracy.

Keywords: Referendums · the initiative · autonomy · equality · political ignorance · motivated reasoning · popular control

1. Introduction

A major strand, perhaps *the* major strand, in the Progressive case for direct democracy was that it would help government policy manifest public opinion. As Theodore Roosevelt put it, "the initiative and referendum are popular devices for giving better and more immediate effect to the popular will" (Roosevelt 1911). Or, in the words of Woodrow Wilson, "the initiative is a means of seeing to it that the measures that the people want shall be passed" (Wilson [1913]1961, 140). The idea was ultimately Rousseauvian in origin. As Rousseau said, "the people, subject to the laws, ought to be their author" (Rousseau [1762]1968, 2.6.10). The thought was that democracy is, in part, about ordinary people's desires driving government policy. The institutions of direct democracy, specifically the initiative and referendum, would allow ordinary people to vote directly on government policy. And that would connect policy with our desires.[1] Between 1898 and 1918 nineteen U.S. states adopted the initiative—this line of thought helped buoy the great wave of adoption of direct democracy that swept the United States.

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[1] For similia accounts of the history, see (Cronin 1989, ch.3; Smith and Tolbert 2004, ch.1; Achen and Bartels 2016, 68–73).

This is also a, perhaps the, major strand in contemporary arguments for direct democracy. Lucas Leeman and Fabio Wasserfallen base an argument for direct democracy on "the normative idea that public policies should reflect the majority will of the electorate" (Leemann and Wasserfallen 2016, 750). David Altman rests his defense of direct democracy on the grounds that "government should be responsive to voters' preferences" (Altman 2019, 149). John Matsusaka, probably contemporary academia's most steadfast advocate for direct democracy, says that "giving people more control over policy decisions is the main attraction of direct democracy (Matsusaka 2020, 7), and so "it is time to let the people rule" (Matsusaka 2020, 239). The idea is the Rousseauvian one filtered through the Progressives: we should adopt direct democracy to allow citizens to rule themselves, to be autonomous author of what their government does.

This work is disconnected from contemporary normative theory. This is unsurprising when it comes to the Progressive politicians. Teddy Roosevelt, obviously, did not cite political theorists in his speeches. But, more troublingly, academic advocates of direct democracy also eschew political theory. That disconnect is thrown into sharp relief by the efflorescence in democratic theory over the last thirty years. Today, we have a much better understanding of what makes democracy intrinsically valuable than we did at any time during the twentieth century. In part, that has involved a deeper understanding of what it is for government policy to manifest the will of the people—of the value of democratic autonomy, or self-rule, that the Progressives and contemporary political scientists invoke. [2] And, just as importantly, it has involved an understanding that this is not the only democratic value. Democracy is also, and some think primarily, valuable because it facilitates equality. In democracies, everyone gets one vote, and so all are equal.[3] Our understanding of these two core aspects of democracies value, autonomy and equality, is far fuller than it was at the time of Wilson and Roosevelt. And yet it is largely ignored by contemporary defenders of direct democracy.[4]

The main aim of this paper is to show that this efflorescence forces us to rethink the case of direct democracy. I'll start, in section 1, by showing how it must mold our understanding of the Progressive argument for direct democracy. Then, in section 2 to 4, we'll see that the normatively tenable version of this argument is empirically untenable. The problem is well-known: citizens don't know enough about politics to author policy. A proper understanding of democratic autonomy

[2] For some of this work, see (Stilz 2019; J. L. Wilson 2021; Lovett and Zuehl 2022).

[3] For this kind of view, see (Christiano 1996; Kolodny 2014b; Viehoff 2014; 2019).

[4] There has been some interesting work connecting direct democracy to the ideal of deliberative democracy (Parkinson 2020). I'm not an advocate of this ideal, and so I leave discussion of it aside in this paper.

shows that this problem is fatal. In section 5 to 9 we'll turn to how, nonetheless, this efflorescence furnishes us with a strong argument for direct democracy. Direct democracy reduces the power of state officials and empowers ordinary citizens—it thus reduces the inequality between the two. My main claim, then, is that the strongest case for direct democracy is that it promotes equality, rather than autonomy. That matters for two reasons. For a start, it helps us better assess the overall argument for direct democracy—and so better assess whether we really do have weighty reasons to promulgate referendums. Equally, it helps us assess what *kind* of direct democracy we should adopt. How easy should it be for citizens to put a proposal to the popular vote and for it to win passage? Egalitarian considerations, so I'll argue in section 10, systematically favor more radically liberal procedures than do autonomy-based considerations. So the nature of the best case for direct democracy determines what institutions we should adopt.

Let me make one final preliminary point. Both arguments for direct democracy I'll consider are rooted in *intrinsic* democratic values. These are things that make democracy valuable in itself, regardless of its causal consequences. Some people think that we should adopt direct democracy for instrumental reasons: they think it has good causal consequences. This instrumental argument is largely orthogonal to my interests. But my reading of the evidence is that this argument is fairly weak too. Several authors have argued that when you let citizens vote directly on policy, they'll be more interested in politics, learn more about it, and have greater trust in government (Smith and Tolbert 2004; Altman 2019, 151–55). But the most up-to-date studies provide weighty evidence against this, and indeed suggest that direct democracy erodes trust in government (Voigt and Blume 2015; Dyck and Lascher 2019). Some authors think that direct democracy will lead to better government (Blomberg, Hess, and Weerapana 2004; Asatryan and De Witte 2015). But the evidence is mixed—many careful studies find the opposite (Dalton 2008; Tessin 2009; Blume, Müller, and Voigt 2009). The jury is still out on whether direct democracy has good or bad consequences. That itself suggests that the effects, good or bad, are not enormous. So we need to know whether there is an argument for direct democracy rooted in intrinsic values.

1. The Case from Autonomy

Let's say more about how contemporary writers have connected direct democracy with self-rule. The main idea here is that "congruence…is a central value of democracy" (Matsusaka 2010, 160). Government policy is congruent with citizen preferences when the two match: governments do what their citizens want them to do. Thus, Matsusaka (2004) argues that levels of government spending in U.S. states with the initiative better match popular opinion than in those without. Matsusaka (2010) supports the same conclusion for more policy issues. Leeman

and Wasserfallen (2016) also emphasize congruence in their defense of direct democracy. They observe that, in some Swiss cantons, it's easier for citizens to initiate a referendum than others—signature requirements, for example, are lower. They find that policy in such cantons better matches the preferences of citizens of those cantons, at least when citizen preferences differ from those of elected officials. And David Altman (2019, 149–50) cites this work to support his own claim that direct democracy is desirable.[5] The central normative claim here is that should understand the Rousseauvian idea that "policies should reflect the will of the voters" (Leemann and Wasserfallen 2016, 750) in terms of congruence.[6]

This idea is false. Congruence doesn't suffice for citizen authorship of government policy. To see this, consider the following case. Suppose we were ruled by a dictator. The dictator makes all the laws, and there is no real chance of overthrowing him. But this specific dictator firmly believes that good government involves congruence between citizen preferences and government policy. So he does a lot of polling. He takes representatives samples of his subjects and asks them about what they think about tax policy or abortion law or foreign relations. He makes sure to adjust his policies to the preferences of the majority. Thus, government policy is perfectly congruent with citizen preferences. Citizens in a dictatorship-by-opinion-poll do nor rule themselves in any way we should think valuable. The issue is that self-rule requires a causal connection between what citizens want and what the government does. In the dictatorship-by-opinion-poll most citizens are never polled, and so most citizens have no causal influence on government policy.

To reinforce the point, consider a variant of the case. Suppose the dictator comes to doubt the sampling methodology in his polls. But he realizes there is another way to ensure that citizens get what they want out of government. He can affect what citizens want. So he kicks his propaganda agency into gear to mold citizen preferences. His aim is to ensure that citizens come to support whatever the government is doing—even if they didn't support it initially. The project is a roaring success, and citizens do come to support government policy. In this case, we again have perfect congruence between government policy and citizen preferences. But do we have anything like the sort of self-rule that makes

[5] This is all disputed in Lax and Philips (2012). Overall, my own judgement is that the evidence that direct democracy increases congruence is inconclusive.

[6] Obviously, part of what is going on here is that these authors are doing empirical analysis, and in such analyses, one needs some way to operationalize self-rule. Still, there is no trace in their work that the operationalization might less-than-perfectly capture the concept operationalized.

democracy valuable? No. So we shouldn't understand this value in terms of congruence—congruence is not a central value of democracy.[7]

How then should we think of the Rousseauvian value these writers aim to capture? We must, I believe, think of it in terms a of autonomous authorship.[8] To see the idea, notice that it is valuable for you to be the autonomous author of your own life. It is valuable for you to decides who you marry or where you live or what career to pursue. If someone else arranges your marriage for you, or if you drift between jobs sans direction, then you are less that author of your own life—and that is a substantial loss. You are worse off, less autonomous, because of your lack of authorship. Such authorship clearly requires more than congruence between how you want your life to look like and what it looks like. It requires that the former causes the latter: that your desire to be an academic (rather than a lawyer or a banker) caused you to do a Ph.D., is crucial to your being author of your career choice. If you'd done your Ph.D. due to parental pressure, or simply drifted into it, you are less the author of your own life. The idea is that the life well-lived is in part the autonomous life, and the autonomous life is the life in which you are the autonomous author of your personal affairs.

The key further thought is that not only can you be autonomous author of your individual affairs, but also of your social and political affairs. Your social and political affairs consist of the important features of your society and political system. They include what the government does and the consequences of such governmental action: the nature of the economic system, the extent of inequality, the degree of prosperity, the way your society treats criminals. When these things manifest your will, you enjoy autonomous authorship over them. Yet for these things to manifest your will, it is necessary for there to be a causal connection between what you want to happen in your society and what does happen. You don't author anything you have no causal influence on. Democracy facilitates such a causal connection. And so democracy enables you to be autonomous author of your social and political affairs. This is the proper understanding of the value of self-rule, self-government, of popular control of policy. We should think of these all in terms of autonomous authorship, not congruence.

Let us now connect this to direct democracy. The central institution of direct democracy is the popular vote, or the referendum—this is a vote on whether some bill should be law. Sometimes, this vote will be on whether a new proposal becomes law. Sometimes, it will be a "veto referendum"— a vote on whether a proposal passed by the legislature remains law. A state has "the initiative" when

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[7] For more on this point, see Kolodny (2014a, 206–9).

[8] This view is defended at length by Lovett and Zuehl (2022). For similar views, see (Stilz 2019; J. L. Wilson 2021).

citizens initiate this popular vote. When not initiated by citizens, referendums are usually initiated by government. Sometimes, such a referendum is optional—the government might initiation to avoid splitting their party or to mobilize their supporters. At other times, a referendum is mandatory—some policies (e.g. constitutional changes) can only happen when agreed upon in a referendum. Our question is what the best argument is for these kinds of institutions.

We can now see the proper form of the autonomy-based argument for direct democracy. The key point is that by having people vote on some of the laws directly, one creates a closer causal connection between what those people want and what the government does. One does this in two ways.[9] For one thing, when a policy is passed due to a referendum individual voters make more of a causal contribution to that policy than when it is passed by representatives. Many factors besides voter preferences influence representatives, and these factors crowd out the influence of ordinary voters. For another, representatives simply do not always enact the policies their constituents want. When the majority of voters enact such a policy in a referendum, bypassing representatives, they are author of a policy when they would not otherwise be. If such autonomous authorship of policy is valuable, we should thus adopt the institutions of direct democracy. Referendums help enable ordinary citizens to autonomously author government policy.

We should now have a good grip on the autonomy-based case for direct democracy. Unfortunately, as I'll show in the next section, this is a weak case for direct democracy.

2. The Objection from Ignorance

George Haynes, a critic of direct democracy, pointed out that "the great majority of us, when we go to the polls, have altogether inadequate information for forming a just opinion" (Haynes 1907, 485). This is an early version of the objection to direct democracy from political ignorance. But Haynes didn't say exactly why we should find voter ignorance troubling. A few years later, in criticizing a Tory proposal to allow the House of Lords to call referendums, Clifford Sharp suggested that "the average elector has neither the time nor the knowledge nor the will to consider details" (Sharp 1911, 15). He said that this mattered because thought, when legislating, "the object [is] to reach a right decision" (1911, 16). The thought was that, if voters were ignorant, referendums would likely lead to wrong decisions. This has been the most common way to conceptualize the objection from voter ignorance.

[9] Indirectly, direct democracy may also be "the gun behind the door" that increases the responsiveness of representatives to ordinary citizens. I'll leave that aside throughout the paper.

From today's perspective, this is not too worrying an objection. Most importantly, there simply isn't good empirical evidence that direct democracy leads to worse policy outcomes than purely representative democracy. As I've said, the evidence here is genuinely mixed—some studies suggest direct democracy leads to better, more efficient, government, others suggest it leads to worse, less effective, government.[10] Whatever the truth of the matter, such inconsistent findings suggest a less-than-enormous effect size. Second, there are well-known reasons to doubt that the ignorance of individuals implies that their majority verdict will be incorrect. This is a central plank in John Matsusaka's defense of direct democracy (Matsusaka 2005, 193–94; 2020, 165, 174). As he says "aggregating the opinion of a million voters can be highly accurate by the laws of large numbers even if each person's chance of being right is small" (2005, 193). This is a simple invocation of the Condorcet jury theorem. So there are good replies to the instrumental objection from voter ignorance.

In this section, I argue that voter ignorance is still deeply troubling to the case for direct democracy. It undermines normatively tenable version of the case for direct democracy in the contemporary literature: that referendums will help citizens be autonomous authors of their political affairs. Let me summarize the argument. The basic idea is that one cannot make an autonomous choice unless one knows about the consequences of one's options. If one has no idea about the consequences of voting "yes" or "no" on a proposal, one's choice is not autonomous. But voters rarely know much about the consequences of their choices in the ballot booth. And so referendums will rarely give voters much autonomous authorship of government policy. Direct democracy sometimes helps some voters be a little more autonomous. But it doesn't help many voters achieve any substantial degree of autonomy. That greatly weakens the case for direct democracy from autonomy.

I'll start by pointing to the empirical facts. As Philip Converse summarized the evidence "where political information is concerned, the mean is very low and the variance is very high" (Converse 2000, 331). Since the 1950s, study after study has found that voters don't know much about their political institutions, about the policies of different parties, about the impact of different policy choices.[11] Most interesting, for us, is voters lack of knowledge about policies. In 2004, for example, fewer than forty percent of U.S. voters claimed to have even "some" information about the USA PARTIOT Act or knew that defense spending had contributed to the growth in the federal government's deficit (Somin 2013, 29).

[10] For the former see (Blomberg, Hess, and Weerapana 2004; Asatryan and De Witte 2015) and for the latter see (Tessin 2009; Blume, Müller, and Voigt 2009; Dalton 2008).
[11] For some comprehensive surveys, see (Delli-Carpini and Keeter 1996; Somin 2013)

In 1996, most Americans thought that the (tiny) level of foreign aid spending was a major factor holding back the economy (Caplan 2007, 58). Most also thought that too much immigration was damaging the U.S. economy (2007, 59). One could go on—when you ask people questions about the content or effects of policies, they get them wrong. As Converse said, "we hardly need to argue about low information levels any more" (Converse 2000, 331).

This ignorance extends to policies that are put to a popular vote. Noah Carl, Lindsay Richards and Anthony Heath (2019) asked British voters about their knowledge of EU after the Brexit Referendum. Of fifteen "yes/no" questions, British voters answered on average 8.8 correctly—they'd be expected to answer 7.5 correctly by chance.[12] Similarly, Johan Elkin and Richard Sinnott (2015) tested Irish voters knowledge around the referendum on the 2008 Lisbon Treaty. Only about a third of voters knew that Ireland would retain control over corporate tax rates and abortion policy if the treaty was approved. A third of voters believed that the Lisbon Treaty introduced conscription. More comprehensively, Céline Colombo (2018) looked at the knowledge of those who actually voted in thirty-four Swiss referendums. Forty-five percent of such voters couldn't elaborate on a single reason for why they voted as they did.[13] Voters in referendums, it seems, know very little about the nature or consequences of the policies they are voting on.

Let's turn to why this matters normatively.[14] The key point here is that there are epistemic constraints on autonomous choice. The less relevant knowledge I have about my options, the less autonomous my choices are. If I have no such knowledge, my choices are wholly nonautonomous. This is obvious from cases of personal autonomy. Suppose, for example, that I'm deciding what career to pursue. Imagine that I'm a twenty-one-year-old who has just left college—I need to decide whether to take an analyst job in banking or do a Ph.D. But I have no idea what either career path involves. I don't know that banking involves long hours but high pay. I don't know that academia involves intellectual freedom but poor job prospects. I'm completely ignorant about the nature and consequences of each option. Here, I cannot make a very autonomous choice. My ignorance impairs my autonomy. The same is true if I'm deciding where to live, or who to marry, or whether to have a child. If I have no idea about what my options entail, then I cannot make a very autonomous choice.

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[12] For example, "Is Austria in the European Union?".

[13] 9% pointed to heuristics (e.g. party cues). More on this in section 3. 15% could restate what the policy they voted on was. 22% percent could give no reason for how they voted at all.

[14] I develop this line of thought in my Lovett (2020).

What counts, here, as relevant knowledge? A fact is not relevant knowledge just because I believe it is relevant. Suppose I think that that the fact that I like TED talks is highly relevant to whether to be an academic. That doesn't mean that knowing this fact, about what I like, does put me in a good position to decide whether to be a banker or an academic. Instead, we should construe relevant knowledge as knowledge that bears on whether an action will help us satisfy our core desires. If I want economic stability and a big house, learning about the high pay in banking is very relevant to whether I should choose to be a banker or an academic. If I want my Friday nights off, learning that academics can work when they want is relevant to my career choice. The picture is that we all have certain core values: in these prudential cases, we have a way we want our life to look. Our choices are autonomous insofar as we have knowledge that bears on which of our actions will help realize those core values.

We now apply this to the political case. The problem is simply that, when voters turn up to vote in referendums, they have little knowledge about the policies that they're voting on. They often cannot say what the bills they're voting on do. They can only very rarely identify the economic, geopolitical, or social consequences of accepting or rejecting such bills would be. But voters have core values that implicate such consequences. American voters, for example, care most deeply about how policy affects the size of government, the upholding of traditional moral standards, and the muscularity of foreign policy (Goren 2013). Voters lack knowledge that determines whether a policy will conduce to these values. So they cannot make very autonomous decisions when asked to vote on such policies. Direct democracy, thus, does little to really achieve democratic autonomy.

Let me clarify two points about this argument. First, I don't claim that every voters' choice in the ballot booth is completely nonautonomous. I claim only that voters minimal knowledge diminishes their autonomy. I'm presupposing that autonomy is scalar—a choice can be more or less autonomous. My claim is that most voters exercise relatively little autonomy when they vote in the ballot booth. Second, I don't claim that autonomy-based considerations give no support to direct democracy. Many voters have a little policy knowledge, and so direct democratic democracy will facilitate their autonomy a little bit. Some voters have a lot of policy knowledge. Direct democracy may facilitate their autonomy a lot. I claim only that the objection from ignorance saps the strength of the autonomy-based case for direct democracy from autonomy. We'll only get a little more citizen autonomy by having regular referendums.

In the next section, we'll turn to the best reply to this version of the objection from ignorance. But first I want to make explicit why pointing to miracles of aggregation is no reply to the objection from ignorance. As I say above, miracles of aggregation show how individual citizens can be deeply ignorant, but a majority

choice in a referendum still be very likely correct (Matsusaka 2005, 193–94; 2020, 165, 174). I've just argued that, because individual citizens are deeply ignorant, they have very little autonomy when voting in a referendum. It's irrelevant to this argument whether, if we aggregate a lot of nonautonomous choice, we're likely to get one that is overall beneficial. That does nothing to show that the individual choices were autonomous after all. So the Condorcet jury theorem is immaterial to the present argument. Let us look at a more material reply.

3. The Reply from "Information Shortcuts"

Advocates of direct democracy are well aware that widespread political ignorance poses a serious challenge to their arguments. Probably the most prominent reply to this challenge rests on the idea that "voters may be able to cast a vote that reflects their underlying interests and values by using information cues or shortcuts, such as recommendations from trusted individuals or organizations" (Matsusaka 2005, 198).[15] The idea is that voters without any knowledge about the specifics of a bill might still know whether their party, or interest groups they trust, support or oppose it. This may lead them to support or oppose the bill. The hope is that knowledge about the positions of different individuals or organizations can entirely substitute for knowledge about the policy itself. If so, the objection from ignorance errs in assuming that lack of policy-specific knowledge means lack of relevant knowledge. Voters may have voluminous relevant knowledge, but about positions rather than policies.

An immediate point to make about this reply is that that voters *can* use such information shortcuts does not imply that they *do*. To really reply to the objection from ignorance, we need to show not only that elite cues might in principle be able to substitute for policy-specific knowledge, but that they in practice regularly do so. The evidence for that is weak. By far the most cited study here is a study by Arthur Lupia of an 1988 referendum on car insurance regulation in California (Lupia 1994). The referendum asked voters to vote on five different propositions about how to regulate insurance markets. Lupia, in an exit poll of three-hundred and thirty-nine voters from Los Angeles County found that voters who supported each proposition but lacked policy-specific knowledge voted almost exactly the same as voters who had both kinds of knowledge. This study is the only direct evidence I know of that information shortcuts substitute for policy knowledge. Several studies evaluate what information shortcuts voters use.[16] But there are few

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[15] For this sentiment, see also (Bowler and Donovan 1998; Lupia and Matsusaka 2004, 467–70; Matsusaka 2020, 171–74).

[16] Bowler and Donavan (1998) is the most influential example.

other direct evaluations of whether shortcuts actually make policy-specific knowledge redundant.

This is a thin reed from which to reply to the objection from ignorance. For a start, Lupia's own data shows that, for each proposition, only about half of voters were able to identify which group supported it. Voters often lack the knowledge to make use of information shortcuts. Additionally, Lupia's bar for having high policy-specific knowledge is very low. He tests this by asking voters four simple questions about what each proposition did.[17] Being able to state the content of each proposition is not the same as being able to work out the consequences of its passage—whether it will, for example, leave one better off or worse off. Yet the latter kind of knowledge is most important to autonomy. So that voters can use information shortcuts to vote as if they knew the content of a proposition does not tell us whether such voters have much relevant knowledge. Third, most importantly, nobody has any idea whether what goes for three-hundred and thirty-nine Los Angelenos in 1988 generalizes to anyone else. The problems of external validity are obvious and very serious. It is foolhardy to think that Lupia's study showed that voters regularly substitute information shortcuts for policy-specific knowledge in referendums.[18]

Some work bears more indirectly on the utility of information shortcuts. Some researchers have evaluated how many voters in referendums vote "correctly." Nai (2015) is the most relevant study. He finds that, across seventy-five Swiss referendums, 63% of voters without policy-specific knowledge voted as they probably would have done had they had such knowledge.[19] Nai (2015, 474) suggests that this is "rather encouraging." But I'm inclined to demur. There's a 0.5 chance that a voter voting entirely randomly, by flipping a coin, will vote as they would have voted were they fully informed. So these results would be straightforwardly explained if 75% of uninformed voters voted randomly, while about 25% used information shortcuts to vote as if they had policy-specific knowledge. That suggests that only a quarter of uninformed Swiss voters actually use information shortcuts to make up for their lack of policy-specific knowledge. That Swiss voters can use information shortcuts does not mean they do.

[17] E.g. "Which proposition(s) limit attorney contingency fees?".

[18] For a similar assessment, see Achen and Bartels (2016, 80–81).

[19] Milic (2012) identifies much higher rates of "correct voting." But his conceptualization of correct voting is whether people's vote choice matched their assessment of arguments for and against a policy. That is irrelevant to whether information shortcuts make up for a lack of knowledge. Lauener (2020), more relevantly, finds that about 75% of Swiss voters vote in a way that seems to be in line with their core values. But he only evaluates referendums (twenty-seven of them) in which it is especially easy to link one's core values to one's vote—presumably, fewer voters vote correctly in other referendums.

This pours empirical cold water on the idea that information shortcuts wholly answer the objection from ignorance. I suspect, in practice, most voters don't use such shortcuts in referendums, and so such shortcuts cannot rescue the autonomy of most voting decisions. But I really care about a more normatively interesting problem with the reply from "information shortcuts."

4. The Problem of Motivated Reasoning

What happens in a voter's head when they use the position of their party or a trusted interest group to guide their vote in a referendum? One hypothesis here is that what happens is the conscious use of evidence. Voters are explicitly engaging in something like the following chain of reasoning: "My party shares my core values. So, if my party opposes this bill, then this bill likely conflicts with core values. So, I will vote against the bill."[20] But voters probably aren't generally doing this. That is because voters are unaware of how much party cues (for example) influence their policy preferences. Geoffrey Cohen's (2003) provides good evidence of this. He presented Americans with some policy and asked them whether they supported it. He found that when he said the Democratic Party endorsed a policy, Democrats said they supported it too. When he said the Republican Party endorsed a policy, Republicans said they supported it. Crucially, the influence of party endorsements was opaque to subject—when asked, most said party endorsement had little influence on their policy preference. If voters generally use party cues as a premise in conscious reasoning, they would be aware of the influence of party endorsement on their policy positions. We are, definitionally, aware of inferences we consciously make.

There are two other hypotheses about the mechanism by which elite cues affect vote choice. One hypothesis is that elite cues provide a fast and frugal system-two heuristic which voters use to form their policy preferences. The idea is that voters are trying to minimize the amount of effortful, conscious, cognition they need to do in deciding how to vote. Elite cues provide an unconscious shortcut via which voters do this. This mechanism is usually emphasized in discussions of information shortcuts.[21] A second hypothesis is that elite cues trigger motivated reasoning. The idea here is that voters are strongly motivated to believe things that show their party side, or interest groups they identify with, in a good light. It's a bad look for a group to endorse bad policies. So, when faced with their party's endorsement of a policy, voters will convince themselves that it is a good policy. We're motivated not by getting accurate beliefs, but rather by minimizing

[20] This is close to Levy's (2022) view.

[21] For important versions of this hypothesis, see (Popkins 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1993).

any dissonance between our party affiliation and our policy attitudes. Elite cues, on this view, trigger such motivated reasoning.[22]

Some evidence suggests that motivated reasoning is more prevalent. Crucially, these hypotheses have different implications for how long voters should take to come to a policy position after being presented with a party cue. If voters use fast and frugal system-two heuristics, giving them a party cue should cut down how long they take to come to a policy position. If voters engage in motivated reasoning, then cue-giving should elongate it—voters need to reason themselves into supporting their party's position. In the lab, several studies have found that presenting voters with cues elongates their reasoning (Petersen et al. 2013; Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014). This suggests that elite cues often trigger motivated reasoning. And there is evidence, from Céline Colombo and Hanspeter Kriesi (2017), that motivated reasoning also happens in referendums specifically. Using panel survey data on two Swiss referendum campaigns, they show that voters' assessment of the arguments for and against policies comes more in line with their parties' stance on the issue as the campaign goes on. This is aptly explained, Colombo and Kriesi think, by "motivated reasoning processes" (2017, 249). So a lot, perhaps most, of the influence of elite cues in referendums probably occurs via motivated reasoning.

Why does that matter? It matters because motivated reasoning is irrational. If you form beliefs and intentions simply because you're trying to make your party side look good, the beliefs and intentions are unjustified. They violate basing requirements. Your beliefs should be based on the evidence. You should believe that something is a good policy on the basis of the facts that are evidence for it being good policy. Your intentions should be based on practical reasons. You should intend to vote for some policy only on the basis of the reasons that speak in favor of voting for that policy. Basing is a causal notion—roughly, when one attitude causes another via some non-deviant mechanism, the latter attitude is based in the former.[23] When I come to support a policy due to motivated reasons, my belief that that policy is good and my intention to vote for it (e.g. in a referendum) are based on my desire to believe my part or interest groups I support only support good policies. And that desire is not evidence for my belief, and nor is it a reason that counts in favor of the policy. So attitudes based on motivated reasoning are irrational.

This itself matters because irrationality undermines autonomy. We can see that in personal cases. Imagine you form an intention to become a banker. You don't care about the long hours, and you want a big house. But you suffer from deep

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[22] For this hypothesis, see Lodge and Taber (2013).

[23] For more on this account of basing, see Korcz (2000).

failures in instrumental rationality. Despite intending to become a banker you cannot bring yourself to taking the entry-level analyst job. You start on a Ph.D. instead. Here your instrumental irrationality undermines the autonomy of your career choice. This goes for other kinds of irrationality too: if you suffer from akrasia, or believe conspiracy theories, or have contradictory intentions, your autonomy is impaired. More generally, when a choice is taken due to rational failings, that choice is of diminished autonomy.

This point applies to voting in referendums. Suppose I form the intention to vote for some proposal, but that intention is the product of motivated reasoning. It is not based on the merits or demerits of the proposal passing. It is instead based on my aversion to any dissonance between my actions and the belief that my party knows best. This basis makes my intention irrational. But irrationality undermines autonomy. So my ultimate voting decision is irrational. Thus, insofar as information shortcuts affect voters by triggering motivated reasoning—and it's likely that they very often do—the use of such shortcuts won't redeem voter's autonomy in the ballot booth. That dramatically weakens the "information shortcuts" reply to the objection from ignorance. Perhaps a quarter of uninformed voters actually make use of such shortcuts. But many of those use them irrationally, and so their use will often not make their voting decision autonomous.

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Let me take stock. I've argued that the only normatively tenable version of Progressive argument for direct democracy conceptualizes it in terms of autonomy, rather than congruence. Direct democracy helps make citizens author of more policies. But this argument, I've argued, is not empirically tenable. The problem is that autonomy is quite demanding. It requires not only that there is a causal connection between voter preferences and policy, but also that voters have relevant knowledge about policy and make their vote choice rationally. And they don't seem to do either. So it is doubtful that referendums really do much to augment citizen autonomy. The autonomy-based case for direct democracy is weak. We now turn to whether there is a better case for direct democracy.

5. The Case from Equality

Let's go back to democratic values. Democracy is valuable, in part, because it enables ordinary citizens to be autonomous author of government affairs. But that is not the only aspect of democracy's value. Democracy is also valuable because it is distinctively egalitarian. Contemporary political theorists generally understand this value in relational terms. Think about the relationship of master to slave, lord to peasant, or husband to wife in a patriarchal marriage. These are all relationships of subordination or domination. And they're all intrinsically objectionable. People

have a right against being subjected to such relationships. These relationships seem to be in part constituted by asymmetries of power. The slave is subordinated to the master in part because the master has asymmetric power over the slave. So we all have a right against being subjected to asymmetries of power. The crucial further thought, for democratic egalitarians, is that democracy helps eradicate asymmetries of power. It does this because, in a well-functioning democracy, everyone has one vote. Insofar as the important political decisions are made by voting, this gives everyone equal power. We have a right to equal power—a right against being subordinated—and so a right to democratic government. A core part of democracy's value, then, is that it helps minimize relationships of subordination.[24]

I believe that this egalitarian conception of democracy's value grounds a strong case for direct democracy. To see that, we start by simply observing that in real-world democracies, not all the important decisions are made by citizens voting. Two things prevent this.[25] The first is the extent of the administrative state. As of 2024, around three million people work for the federal government in the United States. The U.S. federal state takes about 28% of GDP in taxes. In 1900 it employed 15,00 people and took about 3% of GDP. Across the world, the twentieth century saw a similarly huge expansion in the reach of government. This gives an enormous amount of power to the people who administer such mighty entities. Administrators in the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) decide whether we can build new factories. Administrators in the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) decide where we can take new medication. Administrators on the Federal Reserve Board (FRB) decide how much it will cost to borrow. These are all very important decisions. Ordinary voters have no direct power over any of them. So not all important decisions are made at elections.

Second, all actual democracies are representative democracy. Citizens usually vote for people or parties, rather than policy. These entities decide on policy. Perhaps that would be anodyne if candidates committed ahead of time to a certain set of policies, and only ever enacted those policies. But this never happens. In part, that is because officials have to react to events. Democratic leaders didn't commit ahead of time to how to deal with a pandemic yet had to react to the coronavirus. In part, it's simply because there's no way to force candidates to implement the policies they ran on. U.S. presidential candidates, for example, express support for hundreds of policies over the course of an ordinary campaign. In office they have to focus on a limited number of those policies. It's impossible to adjudicate

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[24] For this kind of view, see (Anderson 1999; Kolodny 2014a; 2023; Viehoff 2014; 2019; Lovett and Zuehl 2022). For a related view, see Christiano (1996).

[25] Both are discussed at length in Matsusaka (2020). In my view he identifies the right phenomena, but mistakenly connects them to self-rule rather than to equality.

whether those they focus on were the most prominent ones in the campaign. So elected officials make many important decisions themselves, independent of ordinary voters.

On the face of it, that means our actual democracies are deeply inegalitarian. Administrators and representatives—I'll call them "officials"—have much more power than ordinary citizens. The case for direct democracy is that it can help equalize this maldistribution of political power. It does this in three direct ways. First, it helps reduce the power of officials. Officials have power by virtue of their influence over what the government does. Representatives decide on the laws. Administrators frame regulations and make decisions on concrete issues. An official's power is a function of how likely they'll be able to enact the policies they try to enact. The institutions of direct democracy reduce this likelihood because they disrupt the official's strategy for enacting policy. Veto referendums allow ordinary citizens to veto any laws passed by representatives. The initiative allows citizens to overturn regulations promulgated by administrators. Mandatory referendums can prevent officials writing the lawbooks. Direct democracy reduces the power of officials by disrupting their ability to enact policy unilaterally.

The second is that direct democracy, when it takes the form of the initiative, increases ordinary citizens' ability to change the direction of policy. Consider, for example, the referendum on proposition 13 in California. This proposition, which was approved, reduced and fixed property taxes, ultimately reducing taxes throughout the region The ability to directly initiate such a policy change increases the chance each Californian was able to change policy if they try to do so. So it increases their power. Third, when there is a referendum on an issue, voters have more power to determine what happens with that issue. This true regardless of whether they initiate the policy change or not. Consider, for example, the 2016 Brexit Referendum in the United Kingdom. This gave every voter in the U.K. a little bit of influence over whether the United Kingdom stayed in the European Union, which gave them a bit more political power than if they had to simply entreat their representatives for policy change. It meant they were more likely to be able to determine what happened in this policy domain. Generalizing, the more issues are put to referendum, the more power ordinary voters have. Referendums of any sort augment the power of ordinary voters.

That generates a very straightforward egalitarian argument for direct democracy. We all have a right against subordination—we have a right against being subjected to power asymmetries. This is a central democratic right. Yet in all our actual democratic states, power is distributed quite unequally. Direct democracy helps equalize that distribution of power. So we have weighty reason to institute direct democracy. Adopting direct democracy helps alleviate the subordination of ordinary citizens. It promotes equality.

Let me clarify two things about this argument. First, it doesn't conclude that we should institute direct democracy whatever the consequences. We have weighty reason not to subject people to power asymmetries. But if subordinating people were the only way to avoid catastrophe, we might have all-things-considered reason to subordinate them. Yet, as I've pointed out several times, the evidence about the instrumental effects of direct democracy is mixed. Certainly there's no systematic evidence that it causes catastrophe (anecdotes like Brexit aside). So I doubt instrumental concerns outweigh egalitarian considerations. Second, this egalitarian argument is a general argument for direct democracy. It implies that U.S. states without the initiative should adopt it. But it also implies that other countries should employ direct democracy to a far greater degree than they do. France, Germany, the United Kingdom, India, and so on all have good reason to adopt more direct democracy. The argument is for more use of direct democracy at both national and subnational levels worldwide.

Democratic egalitarians have noticed this argument before. But, almost invariably, they try to avoid its implications: they try to constrain or modify the democratic demand for equal power in order to make it completely safe for representative democracy.[26] I think this is a mistake. To see why, we now address the most serious objections to this egalitarian case of direct democracy.

6. The Objection from Justification

The egalitarian case for direct democracy rests on the idea that asymmetries of power are generally objectionable. One might dispute this. One might think that asymmetries of power are only objectionable when they're not justified in the right way (cf. Viehoff 2019). The idea is this. In Medieval Europe, Imperial China, pre-Hispanic Peru, political power was justified by ideas of moral inequality. The thought was that French kings, say, were morally superior to ordinary Frenchmen. The king's interests were more important, and their commands had more intrinsic authority, than those of their subjects. In contrast, the idea goes, in contemporary democracies inequalities of power are not justified in that way. They're justified by (i) the fact that everyone's interests matter equally and substantially, and (ii) the empirical claim that the administrative state and representative democracy makes us all better off. So asymmetries of power in actual democracies, being justified in the right way, are not objectionable.

[26] See, for example, Kolodny (2014a, 317–20). Dworkin (2000, ch.4) and Wilson (2019, ch.3) think it is a reason to drop the "equal power" conception of equality. For an exception to this trend, see Van Crombrugge (2021).

This is a normatively untenable view. Asymmetries of power can be objectionable regardless of how they're justified. To see this, consider Singapore. Singapore is an autocracy. It's rulers, however, routinely justify their asymmetric power by the claim that their rule conduces to the public interest. In some autocracies (North Korea, say) this would be a ridiculous claim. But it isn't in Singapore—Singapore's history from 1965 is one of the world's most extraordinary growth stories. Singaporeans went from an income of around $500 per year on average to one of around $85,000 a year—with all the benefits to health, working conditions, material prosperity that that entails. This was in large part down to extremely effective Singaporean government. Still, I think, and any democratic egalitarian should think, that Singaporean autocracy is objectionable. That Singaporean rulers have deeply asymmetric power over ordinary Singaporeans subordinates the latter to the former. So the mere fact that an asymmetry of power is justified without reference to moral inequalities, and in terms of benefit to those with less power, does not suffice to make that asymmetry of power anodyne.

7. The Objection from Control

Let us look at another way to dispute the idea that asymmetries of power in modern states are objectionable. Several authors have suggested that asymmetries of power are unobjectionable when their exercise is somehow constrained (Lovett 2021; Ingham 2021). The general thought here is that when how I use my power is under the control of some external entity, then my having power over you does not subordinate you. Imagine, for example, that I'm a police officer and I meet you on the street. I could arrest you unjustifiably. But suppose that if I do so I'll be punished by the police chief. The thought is the fact that my use of power is under the chief's control means my power over you isn't subordinating. The further thought is that elections constrain official's exercise of power. If representatives don't do what their constituents want, then they'll be thrown out of office. That puts representatives under the control of their constituents. And that means representatives power over the rest of us is not objectionable. More generally, if elections put officials under perfect popular control, the egalitarian objection to modern states is wholly disabled.

Unfortunately, it is wholly implausible that elections put all officials under perfect popular control. To begin with, administrators are not directly elected. So elections would put them under popular control only if they were perfectly under the control of elected officials. But administrators are obviously not perfectly under the control of elected officials—in many political systems, elected officials cannot even remove civil servants from their post. So elections do not solve egalitarian worries about the administrative state. Equally, elections evidently don't put representatives under perfect popular control. Representatives often act

in ways the majority of their constituents oppose (Achen and Bartels 2016, 46–49). That connects to the lack of political knowledge we talked about previously. Voters don't know enough about their representatives to exert perfect control over them. So actual democracies are very far away from perfect popular control of officials.[27] In actuality, the power asymmetry between ordinary citizens and officials remains seriously objectionable. Thus, the reply from popular control at most only slightly weakens the egalitarian case for direct democracy.

8. The Objection from Spending

I've just argued that there really are egalitarian objections to the modern state. One might think, however, that direct democracy does little resolve these objections. One motivation for this concern is the idea that direct democracy exacerbates other asymmetries of power. David Broder, for example, claims that in California "wealthy individuals and special interests…have learnt too well how to subvert [the initiative] to their own purposes" (Broder 2000, 243). The worry is that those with money can determine the outcome of referendums via campaign spending. Thus, the worry goes, direct democracy exacerbates the inequality of power between rich and poor—it doesn't, overall, make our societies more politically equal at all.

There are two responses to this concern. The first is that wealthy groups or individuals have at least as much influence over legislatures as they do over referendums. They can spend money on campaign advertising, and thus affect the outcome of both elections and referendums. But when it comes to representative democracy and the administrative state, they can also hire lobbyists to influence decisionmakers more directly. So deciding more issues by referendum probably decreases rather than increases the political power of wealthy groups and individuals.[28] Second, one can straightforwardly address the worry that direct democracy increases the power of the rich. One can institute strict limits on total campaign spending and constrain how much any group or individual can spend. Studies of actual referendum campaigns suggest that these effectively prevent the domination of such campaigns by wealthy groups or people (Tierney 2018). The same is, of course, true for electoral campaigns: in most of the world, campaign finance is essentially a solved problem. We must not confuse a peculiarly American pathology for a more general problem with democracy.

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[27] For more on this point, see Lovett (2021, 191–96).
[28] For much more on this point, see Matsusaka (2018).

9. The Objection from Knowledge

My main criticism of the case for direct democracy from autonomy was the political ignorance of ordinary voters: we don't know very much about politics. Yet one might think that widespread political ignorance is also a worry for equality. Here's the idea. I have power over you only insofar as I know how to affect your behavior. Imagine that you've been hypnotized, and if I say your trigger word ("abracadabra") you'll do anything I want. This only gives me power over you if I know what your hypnotic trigger word is—if I don't, then I don't have power over you. I've suggested that, when they vote on referendums, voters don't know much about the policies that they're voting on. So they don't know how their vote will affect their fellow citizens. So one might think that having such a vote doesn't give them power over officials, and so doesn't equalize asymmetries of power.

This concern can be fully addressed. To do so, first remember that I identified three ways in which direct democracy reduces power asymmetries. On the one hand, it increases the power of ordinary citizens by giving them the ability to initiate policy and vote in referendums. But, on the other hand, it decreases the power of officials by reducing the likelihood they'll get their policy preferences enacted when they try to enact policy. The objection from knowledge, at most, is an objection to the idea that direct democracy empowers ordinary citizens. It is not relevant to whether it disempowers officials. Even if voters were entirely ignorant about policy, and every referendum result was the equivalent of flipping a coin, referendums would disempower officials. To see that, imagine that in order to enact policy you have to craft a bill, pass it through the legislature, and *then* have to flip a coin to determine whether it gets made into law. Here you have less power to enact policy than if you don't have to flip a coin. So, the objection from knowledge, at most, somewhat weakens the egalitarian case for direct democracy.

But I doubt the weakening is substantial. That is because it is incorrect that I only have power over you if I know how to affect your behavior. If I don't know how to affect your behavior but can easily inform myself about how to do so, then I still have power over you. If I don't know what your hypnotic trigger is, but the information is in a box next door that I know I can easily access, I have a lot of (subordinating) power over you. Voters are in this kind of situation when it comes to referendums. Voters don't know a lot about the policies they're asked to vote on. But they could easily gather such knowledge. They could easily look up different campaign's arguments for or against certain proposals, they could seek out media coverage of the issues, they could discuss them with friends and family members. They could simply carefully really the information pamphlets they get in the ballot both. Most voters do not do this. But (I conjecture) they know that they could do it. If that is correct, voters' ignorance about policy poses little

problem for the egalitarian argument for direct democracy. Because voters know they could easily inform themselves, referendums still empower them. The lesson here is that ignorance is a lot less destructive to equality than it is to autonomy.

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We've seen that there is a strong prima facie case for direct democracy from the value of equality. I've just addressed four objections to this case. The first two objections claim that there is no egalitarian problem in our actual democracies. This, I think, is clearly false. The second two objections claimed that direct democracy does not help solve this egalitarian problem. This is false too. Even collectively, these objections do very little to weaken the case for direct democracy. So the egalitarian case for direct democracy seems much stronger than the autonomy-based one. It establishes weighty reason to adopt direct democracy.

10. What kind of direct democracy?

I've argued that the best case for direct democracy rests on equality rather than autonomy. Practically-minded readers will wonder: so what? Does this make any real difference to how we should design our institutions? In this final section I will show that it does. Egalitarian and autonomy-based considerations differ pervasively on fine-grained questions of institutional choice. Exactly how we motivate direct democracy, then, substantially affects how we should design directly democratic institutions.[29]

10.1 Who initiates?

The biggest difference between directly democratic mechanisms is in who can initiate a popular vote. In most places, only the government can initiate a referendum. In some places—Switzerland, California—citizens can also initiate a referendum, if they gather enough voter signatures on a petition. Is one of these preferable to the other? Autonomy-based considerations at best fail to much support citizen-initiated referendums over government-initiated ones. That is because only a small number of citizens will ever actually initiate referendums. So only a small number of citizens will gain more autonomous authorship of their political affairs by being able to initiate such a vote. The rest of us only gain such authorship by actually voting. So, from the perspective or promoting autonomy. what really matters is simply having referendums—not how they are initiated. That's not so from the point of view of equality. All of us gain political power by

[29] My discussion here is in the spirit of "differentiated" analysis of referendums advocated by Cheneval and el-Wakil (2018).

having the ability to initiate a vote. And so the egalitarian argument for direct democracy strongly supports citizen-initiation.

10.2. Citizen-Initiation Restrictions

Consider polities with citizen-initiated referendums. These differ in how difficult it is for citizens to initiate a referendum. One difference is in how many people need to sign a petition for it to be put to the vote. In Switzerland it's only about 2% of the population. In Lithuania, 12.5% (Morel 2018, 49). Another difference is in how long citizens have to gather these signatures. In Switzerland it's eighteen months. In Lithuania, three months. Higher signature requirements and shorter time-windows for gathering those signatures are more restrictive: they make it more difficult for citizens to initiate a referendum on a bill. Accordingly, they reduce the number of referendum: there are about ten Swiss referendums yearly but only one Lithuanian referendum each year (Morel 2018, 53).

Autonomy-based considerations favor more restrictive requirements, for they favor restricting the number of referendums. The problem with having a lot of referendums is that it reduces citizens knowledge of any particular proposal. Citizens cannot learn about hundreds of different policy issues. The more issues there are on the ballot paper, the less they'll have learnt about each one (Nicholson 2003). So to ensure that voters know about the most important issues, one should restrict referendums to those issues. Very permissive requirements for citizens initiation are incompatible with such a restriction. Thus, autonomy-based considerations favor relatively high signature requirements and short time-windows for gathering those signatures. Indeed, they tell against allowing citizen-initiation at all. It is better for a trustworthy government to carefully curate the most important issues to put to the popular vote, rather than allowing citizens to initiate too many referendums.

The opposite is true for egalitarian considerations. Being able to more easily initiate a referendum increases each citizen's ability to affect public policy, and so increases their political power. And simply having more issues on which citizens have a direct say increases citizens' power. At the same time, voter ignorance matters much less for equality than it does for autonomy. As long as voters know how to gather information about the issues on the ballot paper, having little such knowledge does not much reduce their power. Egalitarian considerations support much more permissive requirements for citizen initiation than do considerations of autonomy.

10.3. Quorum Requirements

Some countries require a minimum turnout in referendums for the result to pass into law. Other countries require that at least certain proportion of voters must approve a proposal for it to pass into law. Egalitarian considerations tell against such quorum requirements. Quorum requirements make it more difficult for citizens to initiate a successful change in policy. That mutes the extent to which direct democracy augments the power of ordinary citizens. And they make it more difficult for citizens to veto laws passed by representatives. That mutes the extent to which direct democracy reduces the power of representatives. So quorum requirements are bad for equality. But, from the perspective of autonomy, there is a good rationale for quorum requirements. Often, turnout in referendums is low. So referendums can end up overturning policies supported by the majority. In some of these cases, many people might have played a causal role in the enactment of those popular policies—by, for example, electing a government that enacted them. So when these policies are overturned by a minority, we see a loss rather than a gain in people's overall authorship of government policy. Quorum requirements prevent that. Thus autonomy-based considerations tell in favor of some sort of quorum requirement (perhaps a minimal approval quorum).

10.4. Campaign Finance

How strictly should spending on referendum campaigns be regulated? Above, I suggest that egalitarian considerations support very restrictive campaign finance regulations. Hard constraints on how much private entities can spend on campaign advertising prevent referendums from empowering the wealthy. But the matter is less clear when it comes to autonomy-based considerations. That is because more intense referendum campaigns are more informative (Nai 2015). Money spent on campaign advertising helps educate citizens about the issues,[30] which increases the autonomy of their choices in the ballot booth. Thus, ceteris paribus, autonomy-based considerations support much looser constraints on campaign finance regulations than do egalitarian considerations. For an egalitarian perspective, there is very little reason to allow private spending on referendum campaigns; from the perspective of autonomy, such spending helps citizens by increasing their knowledge.

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Egalitarian and autonomy-based cases for direct democracy support different kinds of directly democratic institutions. Generally, autonomy-based considerations support more constraining procedures while egalitarian considerations support more liberal ones (except when it comes to campaign

[30] See Pevnick (2016, 59–60) for more on this point.

finance). So which consideration matters more determines the kind of direct democracy we should adopt.

11. Conclusion

Senator Jonathan Bourne, Jr, one of the leading Progressive advocates of direct democracy, said that "the chief function of the initiative and referendum is to restore the absolute sovereignty of the people" (Bourne 1912, 3). He was expressing a line of thought that has stretched from fellow Progressives, like Wilson and Roosevelt, to contemporary political scientists. I've argued that this line of thought is misguided. The best case for direct democracy is not that it promotes popular sovereignty, or self-rule, or democratic autonomy. It is, instead, that it promotes equality. Referendums empower ordinary citizens and disempower officials. That provides us with a case for instituting a distinctively radical form of direct democracy—with citizen-initiated referendums, low signature requirements, no quorum requirements and strict campaign finance regulations. More generally, this shows how sophisticated, empirically-informed, normative theory is essential to working out what institutions to adopt.

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