

Popular Attitudes towards Direct Democracy

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Abstract

Initiative and referendum use has widespread public support in many established democracies. We use data from four nations to test hypotheses about approval of direct democracy. We find that people see similar flaws in representative and direct democracy, and that their support for direct democracy is a function of how they assess the relative power of special interests in each arena. Many people believe representatives (but not voters) are influenced by interests, and these people are more likely to approve of direct democracy. Attitudes about direct democracy are also structured by opinions about voter abilities, and by preferences for a delegate model of representation. Our findings contradict the Hibbing and Theiss-Morse “stealth democracy” thesis. We contend that citizens recognize the importance of elected officials, and that they want ordinary people to vote on matters of policy. We suggest people see the voting public, participating via direct democracy, as a check on the power narrow interests have in legislative settings.

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Introduction:

How do citizens view direct democracy? Several lines of research suggest that contemporary citizens are interested in having more direct say in governing, and possibly a lot more say. Other research suggests people want less involvement. In this paper we test hypotheses about mass support for direct democracy by examining the determinants of support in four nations: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. This allows us to determine how attitudes towards direct democracy vary across different political contexts. We argue that attitudes about direct democracy are contingent on views of representative government, and use data from California to demonstrate that citizens have critical perceptions of direct democracy that are not uniformly distinct from their views of representative democracy. We find that support for direct democracy is based largely on reasoning about flaws in legislative politics. Most people believe that special interests have a more damaging effect on decisions made by elected officials than on decisions made by voters. They accept the need to delegate decision-making to elected officials, but also expect ordinary people to play a fundamental role in deciding matters of policy. Many citizens may view direct democracy as a check on powers delegated to the legislature. From this perspective, rather than a retreat from politics, popular acceptance of direct democracy reflects something of a realist's perspective among citizens who wish to remain engaged with democratic politics.

Direct Democracy and Delegation

Direct democracy does not exist in isolation from representative democracy but works alongside, and possibly in competition with, legislatures and executives. Direct democracy links voters and policy outcomes in a quite different way than representative institutions. When we consider the link between voters and representatives we are all familiar with the terms trustee and delegate. Burke's notion of the legislator as "trustee" was someone to whom voters grant a great deal of discretion and freedom of action. The role of "delegate," however, is a representative who stays close to the will of the voters. It is not for the delegate to exercise independent judgment so much as to simply reflect the views of his or her constituents. Direct democracy – initiative, referendum and recall - helps to reinforce the delegate principle, which presumes that if voters do not perceive their representatives acting in their interest, then voters can take matters into their own hands.

Discussion of the institutions of direct democracy can generate quite extreme views that often circle back onto a few persistent themes that are hard to settle. One is the normative question of whether legislators should act as delegates or as trustees. This question has, at yet at least, no precise, let alone definitive, answer. Debate thus settles on related questions that we investigate here: How do peoples' ideas about representation affect what they think about democracy? More specifically, how much say do they really want over policy via direct democracy?

Observers such as David Broder (2000) view giving policy-making power directly to voters as a potentially dangerous practice in part because it challenges the trustee role of legislators (also Shrag 1998; Haskell 2001; Ellis 2002; Smith 1998). Such

views are under-scored by the work of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse who argue that there is, in fact, very little desire among the public to take a direct role in policy making. That is, “the people’s passion to stamp out self-interest in politics frequently leaves the impression that they want to empower ordinary people but this populism is largely, if not entirely, chimerical” (Hibbing and Theiss Mores 2001a:3). Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2001a:2; 2001b, 2002) also cite anecdotes and journalistic accounts from California (Broder 2000) to claim that “people often feel manipulated and inadequate and think the wording on ballot initiatives and referenda baffling.” These scholars, and others such as Cronin (1989), note that most citizens do not want to take over decision making from elected officials.

At one end of a spectrum, then, are those who argue that citizens think in terms of a trustee model of representation, where the public really has little taste for politics and their attachments to direct democracy are weak or superficial. At the other end of this spectrum are those who would argue, in a possibly more populist vein, that there is popular support for greater citizen engagement with politics, and a popular desire to broaden and deepen the institutions of direct democracy. Some of the enthusiasm for greater participatory democracy stems from political theory (Barber 1984; Fishkin 1991); and others point to generational and demographic changes in advanced democracies. As post-material values spread (Inglehart 1977; 1991) or, more simply still, as a more educated, critical and media-savvy citizenry develops (Budge 1996; Norris 1999) there may be a growing demand for greater direct participation in governing from voters themselves. Along with these social changes come “new” populist parties in many

nations that often champion the institutions of participatory (if not plebiscitary) democracy (Dalton et al. 2001; Bowler, Denmark and Donovan 2003).

Both these perspectives occupy relatively extreme positions on the question of how much of a say voters want to have. Implicitly the answer to this question casts light on how much freedom of action voters are willing to grant legislators. Given that views of direct democracy would seem to be tied to views of representative democracy, what voters may wish to delegate to legislators may well depend both on how they view the legislature.

At least in historical terms, the introduction of direct democracy was associated with a profound dissatisfaction with the performance of representative institutions (Hicks 1931; Hofstadter 1955; Cain and Miller 2001). This opens up the possibility of a somewhat different interpretation of the willingness of voters to delegate to legislators than either perspective offered above - one grounded in the performance of legislatures. Citizens may, quite simply, be prepared to grant legislators more of a trustee role where they see legislators perform well, and be more willing to restrict legislators (and grant a bigger role for direct democracy) where they see them behaving poorly. The voters' choice between trustee and delegate role is not absolute – there is not a “one size fits all” solution to the problem of the principal-agent relationship between voters and legislatures. The relationship might rather be much more contingent: voters may be willing to grant more leeway to representatives if they are seen as competent and acting in the public interest.

Voter demand for direct democracy, then, is likely to be keyed to evaluations of representative democracy and not simply reflect an automatic or generational mood of

support or opposition. In contrast, much of the existing literature sees attitudes about direct democracy largely in broad sociological terms. For example, views towards direct democracy could be seen to be linked to education: for some (Budge, Norris) more highly educated voters will demand greater direct democracy than others. For others (e.g. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse) greater education may be associated with a better understanding of politics and hence lower demand for direct democracy.

The explanation we offer here is that attitudes about direct democracy are structured largely on how voters think about representative democracy. That is, for those people who see the legislature as acting in the public interest we can expect fewer demands for direct democracy. The reverse may also be true: people who see legislators as especially captured by special interests are expected to be more approving of direct democracy. Moreover, it is conceivable that people – particularly those with negative assessments of the voting public - do not want or expect policy to be made by direct democracy.

One important point, however, is the degree to which voters do see direct and representative democracy as quite different forms of government. Our discussion so far has followed the convention of the academic literature to date – including our own work – in assuming that the two forms of democracy direct and representative are necessarily in opposition to each other (for an exception, see Briffault 1985). This may not, however, be how citizens see things. If voters see the two kinds of democracy as being subject to similar failings – or see both as having their own unique failings - then we may not expect to see them embracing direct democracy as an “alternative” to representative government. An important consideration for people when assessing the role of direct

democracy versus delegating power to a legislature is how they balance the (perceived) failings of one form of democracy relative to the other. Popular perceptions of the failings of one does not necessarily imply support for the other. Rather, voters could see both kinds of politics in a similar light and, hence, be disappointed (or pleased) by both.

Putting these propositions together we have the following. We argue that support for institutions of direct democracy is driven by evaluations of politics, and especially evaluations of where “special interests” or the “general public” are better served. We do not, however, expect to see that all voters reason about democracy in the same manner – particularly since many voters do not make a clear distinction between the failings of representative and direct democracy (as do many analysts). Rather, support for direct democracy is tempered by the voters’ evaluations of the relative failings of democratic processes themselves. That is, voter support for or opposition to direct democracy can be viewed in terms of a broader literature on the logic of delegation in democratic systems (e.g. Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Voters are more willing to delegate when and where they can trust the legislature relative to the voting public.

Modeling Public Support for Direct Democracy

Mass opinion surveys in the US show that overwhelming majorities of Americans respond they want more say, rather than less, in politics. As an example, in 1999 when a random sample of Americans were asked the question, “How much more say should people have?” over 80% replied “more say than now” (COPA 1999). Thomas Cronin found nearly identical sentiments in 1987 (Cronin 1989:80). Research also demonstrates that legislators in several established democracies offered positive assessments of

referendum use when surveyed (Bowler, Donovan and Karp 2002; Bowler, Denmark and Donovan 2003).

As Table 1 illustrates, public opinion polls from several nations find widespread approval of the use of referendums and initiatives. Our measure of support for direct democracy in Table 1 come from questions we placed on national surveys in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand; and on state-wide surveys in California and Washington. Substantial proportions of citizens have positive views of direct democracy. In contrast, few offer negative assessments. Rather, those who are not positive about initiative and referendum use are largely ambivalent. It is important to note that these political contexts differ in how direct democracy is employed. We have altered our question wording in each place slightly to account for this (see Table 1). In Australia and Canada, citizen initiatives are not used, but national constitutional referendums are used (at the discretion of the government).¹ In New Zealand, a few non-binding national initiatives have been used since the mid 1990s, but these are easily ignored by government (Karp and Aimer 2002).² In contrast, citizen initiatives play a major role in California and Washington. Despite contextual differences across these places, solid majorities of respondents in each setting agreed that referendums and initiatives were good things.

Table 1 about here

At the same time, however, scholars argue that the public actually wants “stealth democracy” – and that their taste for direct democracy reflected in poll results shown in Table 1 is superficial (e.g. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse). Legislators who claim ballot

¹ Provincial referendums are more common in Canada, and rules for initiative use do exist in one province. State and territorial referendums are also used in Australia. Australia’s federal constitution is amended by national referendum.

² New Zealand also has a longer history of local referendum use.

measures are “good things” also reveal widespread dissatisfaction with many specific aspects of the initiative process (Bowler et al. 2001; Bowler, Donovan and Karp 2002). What then, do high levels of support for direct democracy actually reflect, and what does it say about how much democracy people ‘really’ want? We begin to answer these questions by examining who supports direct democracy. Following this, we develop models of how people reason about direct democracy.

There is little published research that tests specific hypotheses about who supports direct democracy. Dalton et al. (2001:145) provide one of the only attempts at generating systematic hypotheses about what they see as a shift in the European electorate toward greater enthusiasm for direct democracy. They offer two broad explanations that have different implications for our understanding of what support for direct democracy actually reflects. The “new politics” explanation is largely derived from the work of Dalton (1984) and Inglehart (1977; 1991), and holds that direct democracy is most valued by citizens with new democratic values, who have the skills required to be more engaged with politics. They also advance a rival “political disaffection” hypotheses, which “argues that unease with the way representative democracy currently functions ... may be stimulating support for direct democracy as an alternative” (Dalton et al 2001:145). We add to these a third instrumental hypothesis derived from elite attitudes about referendum use. This proposes that people view direct democracy from the political context they reside in – their support for it is thus contingent on whether their party controls government or not (Bowler, Donovan and Karp 2002).

The first of these hypotheses is based on the idea that large portions of contemporary electorates now hold “post-materialist” values that include a desire for a

more participatory role in politics and a retreat from hierarchy in politics. Lacking direct measures of citizen values, the new politics hypothesis would find support if direct democracy was more popular among supporters of post-materialist parties such as the Greens, among well-educated citizens, and the young (Dalton et al. 2002:146). Better educated citizens may also be expected to be more supportive of direct democracy, since they may be more likely to have the skills and resources needed to navigate policy decisions placed on ballots. We also offer a political efficacy hypothesis that is related to the new politics idea: those who think that politics is not too complicated should also be more supportive of using direct democracy.³

The political disaffection hypothesis would find support if attitudes about shortcomings of elected officials are related to approval of direct democracy. Likewise, support for alternatives to elected legislatures might reflect a spillover from economic anxieties. Indeed, direct democracy has been championed by leaders of “populist” parties who tap into economic discontent in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand (Bowler, Denmark and Donovan 2003). If the disaffection hypothesis is to find support, we would expect supporters of populist parties to be more likely to embrace direct democracy, as well as people with negative evaluations of the economy. Since most of the successful populist parties of the 1990s are typically described as “right wing,” we also include a measure of conservative ideology in our models. Furthermore,

³ In Australia and New Zealand respondents were asked if they thought that “referendums were too complicated” for most voters. In Washington, they were asked if they considered themselves “well qualified to participate in politics.” In California, they were asked how much of the time they thought voters knew enough about the propositions they vote on.

support is expected to be greater among people who have negative evaluations of their government and/or elected officials.⁴

The test of our instrumental hypothesis is quite straightforward. It will find support if supporters of parties in government are less sympathetic to direct democracy, regardless of national context. Related to this instrumental thesis, we expect that people who see initiatives and referendums as being effective ways to get government to be more responsive will also be more supportive of direct democracy.⁵

We are fortunate to have been able to place several questions about direct democracy on surveys in Australia, (the 2001 AES) New Zealand (the 1999 NZES) and Washington (the 2000 Washington Poll) similar to those used to on a survey that measured attitudes about direct democracy in California (a 1999 Field/California Poll). Descriptive data from these surveys that are displayed in Table 1 are used as our dependent variables in the hypothesis tests summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

A summary of logistic regression estimates of data from Australia, New Zealand, and the United States are displayed in Table 2. Those respondents who claimed direct democracy was a good thing are coded as 1, and other respondents are coded as 0.

Logistic regression models were used to test hypotheses about support for direct

⁴ These evaluations were measured with items quite similar to the standard ANES trust in government question. Where this item was unavailable (in the California survey) we included evaluations of elected officials. Models were also ran with different measures of disaffection (for Australia and New Zealand), with the same effects found as reported in Table 2.

⁵ These sentiments were measured in Australia and New Zealand with agreement/disagreement with the question: “Referendums enable citizens to get the attention of the political parties.” In California, the question asking if ballot proposition elections make the state government more responsive, less responsive, or no difference.

democracy.⁷ Table 2 illustrates that there is only weak or mixed support for these hypotheses, with some results contingent upon context. We find that the disaffection hypothesis fails to find much support in every context. In fact, in Australia and New Zealand, the coefficients for political cynicism are significant in the direction opposite of what the hypothesis predicted. In this context, people who distrust government tend to be more likely to reject their nation's use of direct democracy – possibly due to their associating referendum use with the government (in Australia) and with government ignoring initiatives that voters approve (in New Zealand). Populist voters in Australia (One Nation Party), New Zealand (NZ First) were no more likely to voice support for direct democracy than other respondents, but they were in Canada (Reform/Alliance). In fact, beyond Canada, all of our tests of the disaffection thesis failed to reject their null hypotheses.

There is consistent evidence, however, that people who see voters as competent and those who see politics (or referendum voting) as not complicated are more likely to express support for direct democracy. This is somewhat consistent with the new politics hypothesis, but it may also reflect the effect of narrower attitudes about voter abilities and personal efficacy. Other tests of the new politics hypothesis found little support. Green voters were no more supportive in the two places where they were in our samples, but the effect was in the right direction and at $p = .17$ in New Zealand. Youth was expected to be related to approval of direct democracy, but it was unrelated everywhere apart from in

⁷ Since the number of variables was limited on the Canadian survey reported in the top of Table 1, estimates reported in Table 2 use data from the 2000 Canadian NES. The wording of this question is reported in Table 1. Test using Canadian data were done using OLS (with the variable listed at the bottom of Table 1), and with logistic regression. Both models produced the same substantive results.

Australia, where older voters were significantly more approving (contrary to the new politics thesis). Well educated voters, as expected, were more approving of direct democracy in Australia and New Zealand - but not in Canada, California or Washington.⁸

Other hypotheses also fared poorly. The mass public seems to reason differently about direct democracy than legislators. Our previous research found legislators from the party in power were less supportive of direct democracy, since, we assume, they see it as a threat to their ability to control the political agenda. Findings in Table 2 demonstrate that citizens do not look at direct democracy in such instrumental partisan terms. The mass public may nonetheless view this instrumentally: those who think initiatives and referendums “get the attention” of parties (or government) were more approving of direct democracy in Australia, New Zealand and California (the only places where this question was available).

These results leave a great deal unexplained and say little about how voters might reason about direct democracy. The only consistent result we find is that attitudes about the nature of representation affect approval of direct democracy. We now turn to data from California to better understand how voters might reason about direct democracy. There are two main reasons for focusing on California. First, Table 2 illustrates that, at least in terms of attitudes about representation, we may be able to generalize from the California case. The models demonstrate that despite differences in the context of how direct democracy is used, factors affecting support for it in California are not all together different than those in Australia, New Zealand and Washington. Second, the uniqueness

⁸ Although high educated voters were more approving of initiatives in New Zealand, they were less supportive of the idea that “voters, rather than Parliament, should have final say in making laws.”

of the Californian case merits attention, as Californians have had as much experience with direct democracy as citizens anywhere in the world (other than parts of Switzerland, perhaps). California thus proves fertile ground for modeling attitudes about direct democracy.

Opinion data from California in Table 3 offer some details about the attitudes that we believe shape perceptions of direct democracy. These data illustrate that many people see faults with direct democracy *and* representative government, and that they need not see these as two forms of democracy as black and white opposites. Table 3 illustrates that they believe voters frequently have limited information when it comes to voting for representatives, as well as for initiatives. More people, however, actually believe voters are better informed when deciding on initiatives than on elected officials. Table 4 shows that a near plurality see that outcomes from ballot measures reflect what special interests want. A large majority thinks the same of the legislature.

Table 3 about here

At the same time, the lower part of Table 3 shows that Californians – for all their enthusiasm about direct democracy – actually have a fairly high regard for their elected representatives. There is one striking exception to this in Table 3: people trust the voting public more than elected officials “to do what is right” more often, and trust the voting public more than representatives to consider the public interest (as opposed to “special” interests) when making decisions. Thus, we see public regard for representative democracy co-existing with two things: high-levels of support for direct democracy and a sense that special interests can dominate all arenas of democratic politics.

Table 4 about here

Table 4 offers further perspective to help us understanding this apparent paradox, and illustrates how voters might reason about direct democracy. Forty-five percent of Californians, having great experience at direct democracy, appear to see that outcomes of ballot proposition elections reflect what “special interests” want. Over two-thirds of them see that special interests dominate the decisions of the legislature, however. But not all voters have the same perceptions of the role special interests play in each democratic arena. In Table 4 we cross-classify respondents based on their responses to these two questions. One question asked if outcomes of decisions made by the legislature reflect what “most people want” or “special interests.” The second asked the same about outcomes of ballot proposition elections. This allows us to illustrate, for example, how many people replied that outcomes of both representative and direct democracy reflected special interests; how many thought that neither process favored special interests, etc. We find that a plurality of respondents (37%) said that outcomes from both direct and representative democracy tended to reflect special interests, rather than “what most people want.” A smaller proportion (16%) said that neither arena was dominated by special interests. Another 25% believed legislative outcomes, but not direct democracy, are dominated by interests, where just 6% said special interests only dominate direct democracy outcomes (but not the legislature). As we see in the next section, these comparisons between representative and direct democracy play a fundamental role in structuring how people think about direct democracy.

Building Models of Voter Reasoning about Direct Democracy

The limited power of our initial ‘new politics’ and disaffection hypotheses, plus our description of opinion data from California, illustrate that attitudes about the nature of representation may play a fundamental role in structuring approval of direct democratic practices. We suggest that voters may see institutions of direct democracy and representative government as complimenting each other – rather than as rival institutions that they must choose between. In this section, we seek to build a better model of attitudes about direct democracy by “unpacking” some of the attitudes about representation that proved to predict support for direct democracy in Table 2.

We suggest that support for direct democracy need not reflect a rejection of representative democracy, but rather a balancing of assessment about the relevant institutional setting where a person believes that “special interests” may have more clout than the general public.⁹ If voters reason such that they see outcomes of their legislature reflecting what special interests want, and direct democracy reflecting what “most people want,” then we expect they will be more likely to approve direct democracy. In contrast, if they believe special interests get their way with the voting public in initiative contests, but not in the legislature, we expect these people to be less supportive of direct democracy. These first two hypotheses may seem rather obvious, but it is less clear how people reason when they fail to make distinctions about the role that special interests play in direct and representative democracy. That is, we do not know, a priori, how voters reason if they think *neither* outcomes of their legislature or the voting public favor

⁹ We leave aside, for now, judgments of whether the public has “accurate” perspectives of what “special interests” and the public good may be. Our point here is to model how people might reason, not judge the accuracy of their perceptions. We will return to this question in the discussion.

special interests. Likewise, we do not know a priori if those who think both institutions are dominated by interests end up being more (or less) supportive of direct democracy.

In Table 5, we test a model of support for direct democracy that builds on the model presented in Table 2. The first dependent variable here remains the same as that estimated in Table 2. However, we add four dummy variables to our model designed to measure the different ways people balance their assessment of the legislature relative to their assessment of direct democracy. One variable reflects the category of people from Table 4 who think outcomes of both institutions tend to favor special interests; a second reflects those who think just outcomes of the voting public (the initiative process) favor special interests (but not those of legislature); a third reflects people who think that just outcomes of the legislature (but not the initiative process) favor special interests; and a fourth represents those who had mixed perceptions of where special interests dominated (and those who said “it depends”). The reference group for these categories are those people who think outcomes of neither institution favored special interests. We also include measures of attitudes about the instrumental effects of initiatives (a dummy variable coded 1 for those who agree that ballot propositions make government more responsive). In addition, we include measures of respondents’ assessments of how competent voters are when deciding on ballot measures and legislative candidates. Standard controls and demographic variables used in Table 2 are included as well.

We also use this new model to estimate responses to another question that taps attitudes about direct democracy. As seen in the lower part of Table 3, respondents were asked whom they trusted more often to do what is right, elected representatives or the

voting public.¹⁰ Those replying that they trusted the voting public more than elected officials are coded 1 on the second dependent variable in Table 5.

Table 5 about here

Results in Table 5 are consistent with our expectations. Compared to those who think neither institution is controlled by special interests (our reference category) those who think that just the legislature is dominated by interests are significantly more likely to favor direct democracy, and are more likely to trust voters (rather than representatives) to do what is right. Conversely, people who think that just outcomes from the voting public tend to reflect special interests are less likely to embrace direct democracy. Those who think special interests dominate outcomes both institutions are not more likely to support direct democracy, but they are significantly more likely think voters will do right, when compared to legislators. Other results in Table 6 also demonstrate that supporters of direct democracy are those who believe ballot measures make government more responsive, and those who believe that voters are competent enough to make decisions on matters placed on the ballot.

Public attitudes about direct democracy in California are thus largely a product of reasoning about the nature of voters, representation and democratic institutions. Our results suggest that the attitudes structuring support for direct democracy are based on something much more complex than simple disaffection with politics or representative government. We offer one final test here to determine how citizens' perspectives on the nature of representative government structure their attitudes about direct democracy. In 2000, we commissioned a survey of voters in the state of Washington that included

¹⁰ Only these two response categories were read.

questions about direct democracy, as well as questions designed to measure if voters thought that their representatives should act as delegates or trustees. As discussed above, direct democracy is in large part a rejection of the Burkeian, trustee model of representation. We expect that voters who hold a “delegate” perspective of representation will be most likely to support direct democracy, as they may see it as an institutional mechanism to insure that the actions of their representatives are in tune to their own policy preferences.¹¹ Voters who prefer that representatives assume more of a trustee role, in contrast, are expected to be less enthusiastic about direct democracy.¹²

Table 6 about here

Table 6 provides support for this hypothesis. It shows that people who agree with the delegate model of representation are significantly more supportive of direct democracy than other voters. Once again, we see that specific ideas about preferred models of representation, and about voter competence, predict approval of direct democracy.

Discussion & Conclusion

Journalists, pundits and scholars may be missing the point when they seek to determine if citizens want “more” or “less” democracy. Some have suggested that mass support for direct democracy reflects a desire for “more” democracy, and for fewer

¹¹ See Gerber (1999) for evidence that the initiative process may produce such effects.

¹² To measure if people preferred a “delegate” model of representation, we asked if people agreed or disagreed (strongly or not) with the following statement: “Representatives should do what their district wants them to do even if they think it is a bad idea.” We measured support for the trustee model of representation with the statement: “Representatives should do what they think is best for everyone and not just their district.”

intermediaries between the public and government (Inglehart 1977). We suggest that support for initiative and referendum reflects a political realism (or perhaps a sophisticated cynicism), more than demands for any radical increase in the scope and number of decisions that voters make.

As we have shown here, widespread support for direct democracy is based on some relatively complex reasoning about democracy. We find that people see realistic flaws in both representative and direct democracy, and that these flaws are based on a sense that special interests have a disproportionate role in affecting political outcomes. On balance, however, more people are worried about the influence these interests have over elected officials than they are worried about their influence over the voting public. These perceptions, plus preferences for a delegate model of representation and optimism about the average voter's abilities, condition how people view direct democracy. Put simply, most people are cynical enough to believe either that their representatives are influenced by special interests, or they think that *both* elected officials and the voting public are influenced by special interests. Citizens with either of these perceptions, however, are more likely to trust the voting public than elected officials to “do the right thing.” It is worth trust in the voters and support for direct democracy is reduced among those who think only the voters are influenced by interest groups. However, baseline levels of trust in the voters (68%) and support for direct democracy (67%) are high, and few (9%) believe that only the voting public is influenced by special interests.

Higher levels of public cynicism about elected officials than the voting public – while perhaps overestimating the frequency that legislative decisions are dominated by special interests - seem somewhat sophisticated given scholarship demonstrating that

narrow economic interests thrive in arenas where rules limit the scope of conflict and the number of actors making decisions (e.g., Bernstein 1955; Schattschnieder 1960; Olson 1964; Lowi 1969). Research also demonstrates that narrow interests usually fail to pass measures they put on statewide ballots (Campbell 1997; Donovan et al 1998:60; Gerber 1999:111). The US Supreme Court struck down campaign finance regulations on ballot measure campaigns using a logic similar to what we see here in the mass public. In its 1978 *Bellotti* decision it ruled that “the risk of corruption” it perceived “involving candidate elections is not present in a popular vote on a public issue.” Put badly, many citizens seem to reason in a manner similar to prominent jurists and political scientists: they assume that private economic interests – business groups, professional associations, powerful corporations – have more success when lobbying for narrowly tailored benefits from elected officials than when asking for them directly from the voting public.¹³ We assume that when people respond to questions about “special interests,” that these narrow economic interests are what many are thinking of.

These attitudes about democracy might also be seen as a sophisticated form of cynicism given the popular support we find for elected officials’ ability to make coherent laws, and given popular support for the idea that elected officials are better than voters at reviewing laws and deciding legal matters. Such sentiments coincide with perceptions of interest group influence. Most people trust voters to “do the right thing,” but they also recognize that elected officials are critical to making government work. Positive attitudes about elected officials coexist with the belief that their decisions often serve special

¹³ As a crude example, imagine how targeted tax credits, farm subsidies, sector-specific trade protections, or energy policies would fare if decided by a legislature versus by a national referendum.

interests. How do we reconcile these attitudes, and surveys showing that most voters want “more say”?

Contrary to unsubstantiated claims by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2001a:8, 2001b) that citizens seek to dilute the power of elected officials, and that they “desire to keep ordinary people out of the political process,” our data demonstrate that citizens see the voting public, participating via direct democracy, as a check on the power that narrow interests have generally in politics. It is clear that, regardless of political context, citizens want ordinary people to have the ability to vote on matters of policy. Our data illustrate that most people believe the voting public is less corrupted by the power of special interests than elected officials. This suggests that people are not seeking a “stealth” democracy dominated by un-elected experts. Rather, they want value from the effort they put into politics. That is, they want to be sure that any effort they do put into has some effect. It is unlikely that people feel their vote for elected officials provides much “say” if they believe their representatives’ decisions often benefit “special interests” over what they think most people want.

In contrast, if people see outcomes of initiatives and referendums as more likely to reflect their perceptions of what most people want, then direct democracy may be where they think they have a meaningful say in politics. People want sovereignty, and many feel that they have a better claim to this when direct democracy acts as a check on their representatives.¹⁴ It should come as little surprise then, that American voters living where there is more frequent use of initiatives are often more likely to vote (Smith 2001;

¹⁴ Putting these ideas a bit differently – we cited polls showing that 80% of Americans want “more say.” This doesn’t mean they want to spend much more time – if any - involved with politics. Rather, they want the same amount of time to yield dividends they have confidence in.

Tolbert et al 2001) and more likely to believe they have a say in government (Bowler and Donovan 2002).

Finally, it is worth noting that much of our results are based on data from California. This raises an obvious question: how much can we generalize about how people reason about direct democracy from the California case? California may likely represent an extreme case for the influence that narrow economic interests have over ballot measures. Outside of California, more people might hold idealistic notions about direct democracy being free of interest group influence. However, if they have similar levels of cynicism about their legislatures, there could be an even greater likelihood of their embracing direct democracy as something less tainted by the “special interests” they perceive dominating legislative outcomes. The results we report here thus might even be more pronounced for non-Californians.

Table 1: Public Support for Direct Democracy in Four Nations

	Australia	Canada	New Zealand	USA(CA)	USA (WA)
Good Thing	65%	55%	65%	67%	80%
Bad Thing	2	8	1	8	3
Neither Good nor Bad	32	36	34	25	17

Note: Question wording in Australia, “Overall do you think that referendums are good things, bad things or don't you think they make much difference?” In New Zealand: “Are citizen-initiated referendums good things, bad things, or do they make no difference?” In Canada, “Overall, do you think referenda are good things, bad things, or do they not really make much difference?” In California and Washington, “Are ballot proposition elections good things, bad things, or neither good nor bad?”

Sources: Australia, 2001 Australia Election Study. Canada, Queens University Survey 1999; New Zealand, 1999 New Zealand Election Study. California, 1999 California/Field Poll. Washington, 2000 Washington Poll/Applied Research Northwest.

Public Support for Direct Democracy in Canada.

Regularly:	21%
Occasionally:	42%
Rarely:	25%
Never:	9%

(unweighted)

Note: Question: “Do you think that referendums on important issues should be held regularly, occasionally, rarely, or never.”

Source: 2000 Canadian Election Study

Table 2: Who supports Direct Democracy? Summary of hypothesis test results from results from logistic regression estimates.

	AUS	CAN	NZ	CA	WA
New Politics					
Refs. / politics not complicated	yes	n/a	yes	yes	yes
Age	no	no	no	no	no*
Education	yes	no	yes	no	no
Green voter	no	n/a	no	n/a	n/a
Disaffection					
Distrust govt / MPs out touch	no*	no	no*	no	no
Personal finances worse	no	yes	no	no	no*
National /state economy worse	no	no	no	no	no
Populist party voter / ID	no	yes	no	n/a	n/a
Instrumental					
Support party in govt	no	no	no	no	yes
Refs / initiatives get attention	yes	n/a	yes	yes	n/a
Controls					
Female	no	no	neg	no	no
Union HH	pos	no	pos	no	n/a
Conservative	pos	no	no	no	no
Fit (Naglekerke R ²)	??	.03	.32	.26	.10

Yes = Coefficient for this variable was significant and in direction predicted by hypothesis in a logistic regression model including all variables listed here.

No = Coefficient for this variables was not significant, or was significant in direction opposite of what hypothesis predicted.

n/a = Variable was not available in the dataset to test hypothesis.

* = Effects was significant, but in the opposite direction predicted by the hypothesis.

Table 3: Citizen Evaluations of Voters and Elected Representatives (California).

Voters know enough to vote for:

	Leg. candidates	Ballot measures
Hardly ever	32.8	18.9
Some of the time	48.1	53.5
Most of the time	14.7	21.7
Nearly all the time	4.5	5.9

	Elected Representatives	Voting Public
Who enacts more coherent policies?	61.3	38.7
Who better suited to decide legal policy?	73.0	27.0
Who more thorough review of proposed law?	68.3	31.7
Who more influence by special interests?	77.0	23.0
Who more often trusted to do what is right?	31.4	68.6
Who considers broad public interest more?	34.3	65.7

Table 4: Citizens' Perspectives on Special Interest Influence over Political Institutions. (California).

<i>Outcomes of decisions by voting public reflect:</i>				
	what most people want	special interests	mixed/ depends	total
<i>Outcomes of decisions by legislature reflect:</i>				
what most people want	16%	6%	1%	23%
special interests	25%	37%	6%	67%
mixed/depends	4%	2%	3%	9%
total	44%	45%	10%	

Note: Cell frequencies are percentages, reflecting responses to two separate questions.

Source: Field/California Poll 9902.

Table 5: Citizen Reasoning about Direct Democracy (California).

	Direct democ. a good thing?		Trust voters more than elected reps?	
	b	s.e.	b	s.e.
Mixed perceptions of outcomes from voters and legislature	0.62	0.31 *	0.42	0.28
Both voters and legislature outcomes reflect special interests	-0.03	0.23	0.54	0.23 *
Just voters' outcomes reflect special interests	-0.85	0.37 *	-0.49	0.35
Just legislature's outcomes reflect special interests	0.48	0.23 *	0.50	0.24 *
Ballot propositions make government respond	1.99	0.18 **	-0.23	0.18
Voters know enough when selecting candidates	-0.01	0.12	-0.25	0.11
Voters know enough when deciding on ballot props.	0.34	0.12 **	0.30	0.12 *
Evaluation of state's economy	-0.05	0.13	-0.24	0.13
Evaluation of R's personal finances	-0.12	0.12	-0.08	0.12
Female	0.19	0.17	0.16	0.17
White	0.21	0.19	0.53	0.19 **
Republican	0.02	0.22	0.09	0.22
Democrat	-0.22	0.20	-0.37	0.19 *
Age	-0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01
Education	-0.02	0.04	-0.05	0.04
R lives in union household	-0.01	0.22	0.48	0.22 *
Constant	-0.87	0.51 *	0.66	0.49
Number of cases	877		788	
Percent correctly predicted	75.50		71.2	
Nagelkerke R2	0.31		0.11	

** = significant at $< .01$; * = significant at $< .05$ (two-tail).

Note: Logistic regression estimates.

Source: California Poll 9902.

Table 6: Effects of Attitudes about Representation on Support for Direct Democracy (Washington).

	b	s.e.
Delegate role for representatives	0.24	0.10 *
Trustee role for representatives	-0.01	0.14
State economy worse off	-0.37	0.36
R's personal finances worse off	-0.64	0.33 *
R trusts government	-0.01	0.12
Politics not too complicated	0.33	0.11 **
Age	0.17	0.08 *
Education	0.02	0.13
Democrat	-0.06	0.30
Republican	0.28	0.41
Conservative	0.56	0.38
Constant	0.36	0.69
Number of cases	376	
Percent correctly predicted	79.3	
Naglekerke R2	0.13	

** = significant ant < .01; * = significant at < .05 (two-tail).

Note: Logistic regression estimates.

Source: Washington State Poll. 2000. Applied Research Northwest.

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