

Political parties which operate in a direct democratic context tend to have a higher number of members

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party has seen him crowdsource questions for his weekly parliamentary question time with David Cameron, with many praising both this and his other attempts to democratise the Labour Party's operations. Here, **Yvette Peters** looks at the impact of direct democracy on party membership, finding that political parties which operate in a direct democratic context tend to have a higher number of members.*



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Over the past years, political parties have changed, and they have changed in such a way that they are increasingly governors, rather than representatives of popular will. Peter Mair [analysed](#) this change, and found that the evolving role of the party has resulted in a hollowing out of democracy—while parties used to be organisations that connected citizens to the state, they have become part of the state. As a result, it has become more difficult to include and involve citizens in the governing of their country. For democracy, where citizens are supposed to have at least a minimal control over what is decided for them, this is a problem.

One thing that has been sometimes mentioned as a possible answer to this problem is the expansion of direct democracy. This may be one way through which citizens can be included more in the policies made by governments. Indeed, it seems that direct democracy and referendums have been discussed more the past few years. Just some years ago, for example, the UK held a referendum on a possible change of the electoral system, and this June there will be one on the UK's membership of the European Union. These are important and big issues where British citizens can vote directly on.

Direct democracy can be implemented practically in several ways. The referendum maybe one of the most obvious institutions of direct democracy, but also citizen initiatives or agenda initiatives can be included in the concept. More specifically, one can distinguish between *bottom-up* and *top-down* institutions of direct democracy: those institutions

that are activated by citizens or the political elite, respectively. Moreover, the institutionalisation of direct democracy does not necessarily imply its usage, adding yet another element dimension to the concept of direct democracy. Looking at the institutionalisation and usage of direct democracy, there is substantial variation. While Germany, for example, does not have any national possibilities to hold a referendum, Switzerland has many possibilities—and indeed uses these instruments frequently.

The question is whether this development will further undermine political parties in politics, since citizens seem increasingly able to determine policies directly themselves. [Ladner and Brändle](#) as well as [Fatke](#), among others, considered different ways that direct democracy could influence political parties. On the one hand, this is indeed what we might expect. Political parties may simply not be so necessary in a more direct democratic context. For one, these contexts are also more open to smaller groups and single-issue parties to participate in referendum campaigns, making it more difficult for parties to compete.

These various groups are often more specialised on the questions that they campaign on, while political parties generally would need to compete on a multitude of issues because they tend to offer an overarching ideological framework. It becomes increasingly difficult for political parties to compete with groups that are specialised on few issues while having also fewer responsibilities. Moreover, people might just prefer not to commit to a package of policy positions, but want to have the possibility to pick and choose who they support in referendum elections. And with experience in referendums, citizens gain knowledge and become better politically informed—they may simply need parties less to guide their participation behaviour. The negative effects of direct democracy on political parties' role in politics would thus be reinforced with the more frequent use of referendums. The direct democratic context is increasingly underlined: effects would be stronger when these mechanisms are more frequently used.

On the other hand, we may expect that political parties' support (in terms of membership) is strengthened with a more expansive direct democratic context. It may expand their repertoire. Political parties can use referendums to promote their ideas more frequently, and referendums give parties a more continuous platform. Political parties are evidenced to still play a key role in determining the outcome of the referendums, suggesting that people do take parties serious in these elections.

Further, direct democratic contexts open the political arena for smaller political parties—these increase the competition, forcing parties to engage citizens, and help to place new issues on the agenda. More specifically, a direct democratic context provides more incentives for both individuals to become, and parties to recruit, members. This is also the case when referendums are not actually held that frequently. The mere possibility of having a referendum can make parties—and possible members—behave differently. Parties may be more interested in recruiting members as they are a good source of information about people's preferences, making them more competitive. At the same time, being a member of a party gives people increased influence over that party's policy positions, especially in a direct democratic context and when referendums are held more frequently. Members can thus be ever more involved in determining the parties' positions, but can even co-determine whether a referendum needs to be triggered. It becomes more attractive for citizens to be a member of a party in this fashion. Again, this effect may be highlighted with the increase usage of referendums.

I tested these claims in my article [\(Re-\)join the party! The effects of direct democracy on party membership in Europe](#). Based on a panel of 16 European countries and four points in time (1980-2008) I found that political parties in more direct democratic contexts also tended to have a higher number of members. This was true for both the top-down and bottom-up types of direct democratic institutions as outlined above, although in different ways. The top-down institutions increased membership in a diminishing fashion, so that the increase becomes smaller with every increase of direct democracy.

For the bottom-up institutions, it becomes clear that it is specifically the citizen initiative that helps boost membership – not the agenda initiative. What was surprising, however, is that the frequency of holding referendums does not contribute to this effect. While the effects of the context are slightly more pronounced when referendums are held more frequently, the results do not clearly indicate that the usage of referendums indeed amplifies the effect of the

direct democratic institutions.

In sum, political parties may benefit from a more direct democratic context. It will allow them to promote their issues, but also encourages them to take citizen preferences more seriously. They can benefit by involving citizens more, and citizens have more opportunities to help set the agenda within the party. Direct democracy may help parties to again fulfil their more traditional role of connecting citizens to the state. It remains of course the question whether citizens will be involved equally through direct democracy: Arndt Leininger, for example, argues [here](#) that direct democratic institutions mainly encourage the already active citizens to become more active, but do not pull in the politically disengaged. Moreover, the implementation of direct democracy needs to be done carefully, so that it indeed offers citizens and parties an opportunity to co-design policies constructively and possibly more deliberatively, as Lawrence LeDuc argues [here](#).

In designing the institutions, we need to be careful not to design institutions that legitimises bad policies based on majority popular preferences, and that they do not become an excuse to exclude parts of society from politics.

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Yvette Peters is a Postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Comparative Politics, the University of Bergen in Norway. She works in the field of comparative politics, and her research interests include (different forms of) democracy, political participation, political representation and unequal responsiveness, comparative research methods, and institutional change; she focuses on the general question of how institutions and institutional changes affect the citizenry as well as the core elements of democracy.