When considering the history of democracy, Ancient Athens is perhaps the culture that came closest to direct democracy. Although they excluded women, slaves and foreigners, the democratic system required all citizens to vote on all major issues in a general assembly. The boule consisted of 500 citizens commissioned to carry out these decisions and run the city. Even the verdict of every court case was decided by a vote of the Assembly. With this system, all citizens were actively and constantly involved in the running of all political life.

Since the French Revolution, representative democracy has spread throughout most of the world. These governments consist of complex structures, in which the legislature is carried out by a parliament. With the influence of media and the overall advancement of technology, such as the Internet, the voting behaviour of citizens in contemporary democracies has caused many transnational bodies, such as the EU, to question the sovereignty of each country and its chosen representatives. As a result, one could ask what structures of direct democracies can exist in such a time where the conditions have changed drastically since old Athens? Furthermore, do they constitute meaningful alternatives to representative democracy?

For this investigation, a line needs to be drawn between the different types of instruments used by direct democracies. In the first part, I will focus on instruments of direct democracies that influence the executive branch. In the second part, I will focus on instruments of direct democracies that influence the legislative branch, mostly carried out by referendums. Within this study, I will also distinguish between decision promoting, decision controlling and imposed referendums by a government.

Notably, people have an enhanced influence on the decision making process when they get the opportunity to be directly involved. This is particularly true in the process of choosing representatives and thus controlling the executive. For example, in primary elections in the United States of America, a voter can select the candidate for the [presidential](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/pres1.htm) nomination from the two major parties. With this, the system allows a broader participation of voters to express their views on who should represent the party at the next election, since you do not have to be a party member to vote in most primaries.

In many European parlamentaristic democracies, citizens do not vote for specific candidates, but rather they vote for parties that have a fixed numbered list pertaining to their candidates. The more votes the party receives, the more candidates are elected. This already ordered list of candidates separates citizens from the political decision-making and the direct choice of representatives, who carry out the executive.

To implement direct control of the people over the party constellations, the Italian Five Star movement party and the German Pirate Party employed online primaries that allow citizens to choose the list of candidates by themselves. The names that appear on the lists on the ballot papers are decided via online polls (*parlamentarie*),in which the members of the movement can vote for those who have put themselves forward as potential candidates.

Another very important factor of direct democracy is the involvement of the people in the legislature itself. This is commonly achieved in form of:

1. Participation in the process of law development,
2. a vote by the citizens to promote their own decisions by initiating a new proposal,
3. controlling the decision of the parliament in which case the citizen performs the role of a veto player,
4. a referendum organized by the government to consult the citizens for their opinion about specific topics. Such a referendum can be optional or constitutionally required.

Between the four different possibilities of referendums, it is necessary to distinguish whether the outcome vote of the population is binding for the government or just of an advisory nature.

A prominent example how citizens can shape politics with their own expectations on an international level is the European Citizen Initiative, which was introduced in 2012. This initiative enables one million [EU citizens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizenship_of_the_European_Union%22%20%5Co%20%22Citizenship%20of%20the%20European%20Union) to call directly on the [European Commission](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Commission%22%20%5Co%20%22European%20Commission) to propose a legal act in an area where the member states have [conferred](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Union%22%20%5Cl%20%22Politics%22%20%5Co%20%22European%20Union) powers onto the EU level. This right to request the Commission to initiate a legislative proposal puts citizens on the same footing as the European Parliament. The Commission holds the [right of initiative](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Right_of_initiative_%28legislative%29%22%20%5Cl%20%22Legislative_initiative_in_the_European_Union%22%20%5Co%20%22Right%20of%20initiative%20%28legislative%29) in the EU.

Only the constitutions of a small number of states worldwide envisage referendums, which are important weapons against political class and take often place at the request of a number of voters. This, in turn, enables a set of number of voters to bring about a popular vote. For example, in Switzerland, the citizens can sign a petition calling for a vote on amending the constitution or on rejecting a bill recently passed by the parliament. If the number of prescribed number of citizens is reached, which can vary from 50,000 to 100,000, depending on the nature of the proposal, a vote takes place.

Italy is the only other western European country that allows such initiatives. Engaged citizenry brought about many popular votes between 1980s and 1990s, but the use of initiatives has declined drastically since then. Some post-communist countries have provisions for initiatives in their constitutions. Nevertheless, up until now, the people have had no ability to mobilize the population and call for a vote, which makes the right for initiatives superfluous.

In the case of a referendum, the citizens have the ability to strike down an existing law or constitutional provision. It is, therefore, called a “Rejective Initiative,” which controls decisions previously implemented by the government, as it can prevent a proposal from passing into law or becoming a part of the constitution. Again, the Swiss particularly make use of Rejective Initiatives most often. Until ninety days has passed after the parliament’s approval of a bill, a group of at least 50,000 citizens has the ability to launch a challenge by calling for a popular vote. However, only a minority of parliamentarians in Denmark and Spain or a number of regional councils in Italy have the opportunity to call for a “Rejective Initiative” on certain proposals.

Another instrument of direct democracy to the above initiative is an imposed referendum by a government, which asks the people to vote on a political question. The voting can either be mandatory or optional. In 1972, Denmark and Ireland held a mandatory referendum on whether to join the European Community. Both countries constitutions specified the necessity for a referendum regarding an issue with such major implications for sovereignty and declared it to be mandatory. However, the French and Dutch referendums of 2005 on the proposed EU constitution were optional, as it was not legally or constitutionally necessary that a referendum needed to be held.

An investigation into alternatives to a representative or parliamentary democracy is reasonable if these demonstrate weaknesses. In many countries, this is assumed to be the case. The German newspaper *die Welt* noted in 2008 that “it [the future] looks bad for democracies,“ particularly if one believes the outcome of a current survey on the behalf of ARD and WELT ONLINE, 57% of German citizens are less or not satisfied with the current democratic system.

Twenty-nine US states use a system of voting in open or blanket primaries. The voters in a state, regardless of their party affiliation, can participate in one of the party’s primary elections in the open or in both parties’ primary elections in the blanket primaries. In my opinion, this system risks the disfigurement of the actual will of the people, as some people do not always to vote for the candidate they assume will be the most competent or vote for their own party. Closed primaries can avoid this phenomenon by allowing only voters who have declared an affiliation to a party to participate in the party’s primary. In this case, the primary is limited as an instrument of direct democracy, as the allowance of participation is limited to the supporters of the party

Lawrence Lessing suggests that the influence of the primaries overall is limited, because the candidates are more dependent on the support of the funders who finance the campaign, rather than the people who vote in a primary. As a result, it is argued that the candidates are almost obligated to represent the opinion of the 132 Americans who make up 60 percent of all their donations, rather than the entire American population. With the help of private donations, a candidate has broader possibilities for advertisements and, thus, reaches more people with a petition to vote for him. The candidate’s agenda is, therefore, more determined to represent the needs of a private funder, instead of the average citizen.

Primaries can be an effective tool of direct democracy, if the closed primary method is employed. In an open or blanket primary, the voter is encouraged to exemplify a dishonest representation of his opinion. Nevertheless, the significance of the primaries is undermined as a whole, provided that Lessings assumption is true that the private funders of candidates play a more significant role on the outcome of the selection of the candidate. Therefore, the primary would become obsolete and an insufficient tool of direct democracy in a representative structure.

In the online primaries, it is indisputably true that the people have a direct effect on the selection of party candidates. However, critics argue that the numbers of those who have participated in the online primaries of the Italian Five Star movement have been too small for the process to have sufficient democratic legitimacy. The current leader Beppe Grillo, on the other hand, argues that these online polls constitute an important improvement with respect to the often unclear procedures. The Internet offers new possibilities surrounding direct democracy and is a new interactive medium between voters and candidates. In Grillo’s blog, *[beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it/)*, the communication is enhanced, and voters can address questions directly. In reality, it is only a matter of time until the number of voters will increase, as people need time to adjust to the new election method.

These measurements of direct democracy may ensure that the right candidate is chosen as the representative. Nevertheless, it does not reflect the direct representation of values and desired policies of the citizens. It can be argued that the individual voters, when electing parliament members or president, are influenced by many factors when casting their ballot. Some voters may not support all the policy promises or manifestos the candidate stands for. The casted vote simply states that the majority of the promoted policies were preferred in comparison to the other candidates.[[1]](#footnote-1)

When an elected government tries to implement a certain policy, there is no explicit mandate for it. Only through a referendum will one know if a certain policy is supported by the public and will gain the full legitimacy to carry out the proposal. In my opinion, it is unrealistic to question the validation of every policy adopted by the parliament. The referendum should only be considered for major choices facing the affected society. For instance, the secession of Norway from Sweden in 1905, Iceland from Denmark in 1944 and Montenegro from Serbia in 2006 were all put to and approved in referendums. When a significant change to a political institutional regime or moral ethos of society is made, many voters feel that elites do not have the authorization to make such decision on their behalf, particularly if the proposal did not feature prominently in the preceding election or the implementation is irreversible.[[2]](#footnote-2) As a result, referendums might be able to reduce the feeling of disengagement from the political process by involving people directly in the decision making. It can be a powerful legitimiser of political decisions. The outvoted minority has less valid reasons for grievance, as their view has been considered, and the public might accept more readily a law they voted for themselves.

In the case of the European Citizen Initiative, the argument of participation in politics remains troublesome. First of all, the Commission is not obliged to propose legislation as a result of an initiative. After a million votes have been gathered, the people are only allowed to present their initiative at a public hearing in the European Parliament. Only when the Commission decides to adopt the proposal does it become the law.[[3]](#footnote-3) The European Citizen Initiative, therefore, is a very limited instrument of direct democracy, because it advises and not shapes the European Union’s decision making. Up until today, only two initiatives have been answered by the Commission since the launch of the European Citizens Initiative in 2012.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Another important aspect is that issues that predominantly concern minority groups often have voting turnouts that are too low to be validated by the parliament. This results in significant controversy as referendums can cause exclusion as readily as inclusion. The general public will, for instance, not cast a vote on hunting regulations, as they feel the regulation does not affect them personally. Although 90% of the voters demanded a restriction on hunting in Italy in 1990, the referendum did not obtain the quorum and was declared as invalid. [[5]](#footnote-5)

Furthermore, a referendum is a majoritarian device that can result in the infringement of the rights of minorities. An example of a referendum that did not consider each need of the members of the community was the referendum in Switzerland in 2009, in which people voted 57 to 43 to ban building any more minarets.[[6]](#footnote-6) Legislatures must be aware of the need for balance and toleration among groups. The British politician James Bryce once said that parliamentarians may be ignorant, but not as ignorant as the masses. However, well-organized minority groups and resourced pressure groups can influence a representative government at the expense of the public weal.[[7]](#footnote-7)

However, one cannot neglect that majorities have rights too, and minorities can be satisfied due to a referendum that is able to express their vote, but fairly overrules. In the end, it is a common dispute of how greatly one measures the importance of achieving the satisfaction of the whole, at the expense of a minority, or tries to equally fulfil the needs of each individual, which implies that the majority will be less satisfied.

Nevertheless, current democracies found systems to avoid both extremes of preferring the majorities or minorities in an immoderate manner to achieve the best direct representation of the people. Federal countries, such as Australia or Switzerland, introduced the idea of a double majority. It states that a proposal support of majority voters and the majority within half of the federal units is needed to abolish a law or pass a new proposal. Referendums, in most countries, are restricted, and the legislature always has a veto right to still refuse a proposal. In the case of parliament non-involvement in referendums, as is the case in the US, the constitutional court takes over the veto role.[[8]](#footnote-8) In this case, I find that direct democracy cannot be considered as an alternative system, as they need a secondary system, such as a court or parliament that defends the rights of minority groups

One of the main arguments that question instruments of direct democracy as opposed to a representative one is the capability of people to represent their individual opinions on the matters at stake. Enhanced participation could educate voters about important current political issues, which could make the society more stable. However, on the contrary, it is hard to imagine that a largely indifferent populace will be turned into engaged citizens, simply by exposing them to a broad range of referendums, which is particularly true when the issues are complex and require people to have particular education and extensive knowledge. Furthermore, also worth noting is the fact that in some countries, as was the case in the Netherlands and France in 2005, swillwill ,, o, base it

Generally, political scientists, such as Giovanni Sartori, claim the ‘cognitive incompetence of most citizens’ makes them unable to make objective judgements on issues. Citizens are easily swayed, as they base the information predominantly on partisan sources or simplistic coverage by tabloids or broadcastings. Therefore, those who control the media have the power. The argument arises that, in the end, the voter does just cast a vote on the decision they are lobbied for by the media. This can be further compounded when the public is unable to follow a strict plan to reach long-term aims when holding referendums. Political parties could lose control over political agendas when they are routinely racked by random decisions on policies from an unpredictable electorate.

Finally, it can be observed that democracies that employ the most direct democracy instruments, such as Liechtenstein and Switzerland, are economically well performing and are democratically on par other western European or North American countries. While the population might be more easily influenced, less informed, untruthful regarding their feelings and inconsiderate towards minorities, instruments of direct democracies are still important. They enhance the individual’s identification with the political decisions, and thus, the citizens are more supportive with and satisfied with the government, which strengthens in return the democracy.

In comparison to ancient Athens, all existing instruments of direct democracy today could not replace a system of developed representative democracy. The direct democratic instruments can only be beneficial for a society if employed within a representative democracy that can veto referendums by a court or parliament. While there are no reasonable alternatives, these could be a valuable addition to contemporary [parliamentary](http://www.linguee.de/englisch-deutsch/uebersetzung/parliamentary.html) systems. I find that direct democracy instruments should be further enhanced when it comes to the election of representatives within a party with the help of online primaries. Overall, the Internet does offer new possibilities in future for elements of direct democracy as people can share their opinions more with their government and have access to information to educate themselves on political issues. Provided these chances are properly realized, there is good hope that Winston Churchill’s statement will be valid within the next 2.500 years. “'Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried.” [...]

**END OF SAMPLE**

**Copyright notice: All information contained in this document is copyrighted. No part of this document or any of its contents may be reproduced, copied, modified or adapted, without the prior written consent of the author.**

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. P. 1048 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)