

Panel proposal for NIG Annual Work Conference in Maastricht, 9-10 November 2017

Topic: Referendum practices at home and abroad

Panel organizers: Martin Rosema (University of Twente)
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Panel description

The aim of this panel is to bring together scholars who study the practice of referendums in the Netherlands and abroad at any level of government. In the Netherlands the political debate about the value of referendums has been strongly influenced by the referendum about the treaty between the EU and Ukraine, while abroad the so-called Brexit referendum has caught much attention. However, the referendum experience is much broader: at the local level in the Netherlands referendums have frequently been held, providing a rich basis to study the functioning of referendums as instruments of democracy. Furthermore, throughout Europe most countries by now have some experience with referendums, albeit there are strong differences between them. All in all, there seems to be fruitful soil for scholars to study how referendums work in practice and this panel offers a stage to share these insights.

There are five themes that we hope to cover with the papers, albeit papers on other themes related to referendums are also welcome: (a) the formal rules of referendums; (b) initiatives for organising referendums; (c) referendum campaigns; (d) referendum outcomes (turnout and vote choice); (e) referendums and democracy. The first theme concerns the formal legislation, which includes the conditions of holding a referendum and rules regarding the validity of the outcome. The second theme focuses on the initiatives to actually hold referendums on specific topics, including the motives behind them. The third theme is the campaigns by all actors involved, so the initiators as well as government, political parties, and civil society organisations. The fourth theme addresses the question of participation (who votes and who abstains) as well as the choices made: why do citizens vote in favour or against the topic on the ballot paper? The fifth and final topic is the relationship between referendums and democracy more in general, such as whether a referendum is compatible with representative democracy and how they impact democracy in the European Union.

The panel is open for scholars who wish to present a theoretically oriented paper as well as empirical studies of referendums addressing any of these or related topics.

Linkage to NIG Research Programme

This proposal links up closely to the third theme in the NIG research programme, “Political Institutions and Democracy”. Especially against the background of seemingly decreasing levels of electoral turnout and political trust, referendums and other forms of citizen participation have often been put forward as potential solutions to those problems. Furthermore, the panel theme also links up to the first theme, “Multi-Level Governance and Europe”, because European integration is a popular topic for referendums and these have the potential to seriously affect political decision making in the European Union. The referendums about Brexit and about the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine are clear examples of this.

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