

**NIG Annual Work Conference 2016,
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Panel 3: Referendums as instrument of democracy

Panel organizers:

Martin Rosema (University of Twente)
Kristof Jacobs (Radboud University) Panel description

In the 20th century the experience with referendums in the Netherlands was limited to the local level of government. However, the national referendum in 2005 about the Constitutional Treaty of the European Union (EU) and the referendum in April 2016 about the EU's Association Agreement with Ukraine have changed this. Due to this development, combined with the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and several other eye-catching plebiscites across Europe, referendums as instrument of democracy have been put in the spotlight again. Initiatives to conduct more referendums on the basis of the Dutch Referendum Act, which became valid in July 2015, have already been started. Much more experience with referendums has been gained at the local level, where dozens of referendums have been held in the past decades. The situation in Belgium is comparable: whereas at the national level the experience is scarce – the only referendum was held in 1950 – in local politics much more experience has been gained. The aim of this panel is to bring together studies about the most recent national referendum in the Netherlands about the treaty with Ukraine, as well as scholarship about referendums more in general, including local referendums in both low countries.

There are four themes that will be central in this panel, albeit papers on other themes related to referendums are also welcome: (a) the formal rules of referendums; (b) referendum organisation and campaigns; (c) referendum turnout and voting; (d) referendums and democracy. The first theme concerns the formal legislation, which includes the conditions of initiating a referendum, rules regarding the validity of the outcome, and limits to the topics about which referendums can be held. The second theme is the organisation and campaigning by all actors involved, so the initiators as well as government, political parties, and civil society organisations. The third theme addresses the question of participation (who votes and who abstains) as well as the choices made at the ballot; i.e. why do citizens vote in favour or against the topic that is listed on the ballot paper? The fourth and final topic is the relationship between referendums and democracy more in general, such as whether a referendum is compatible with the basic principles of representative democracy, which delegate political decision makers to politicians. Another relevant matter fitting the final theme is how the effects of national referendums about EU topics have an impact on 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 at any level of government.

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 most recent referendum about the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine is a clear example of this.

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PANEL PROGRAMME: Not available yet.