PREFACE

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Today, general elections, referenda, and alternative practices of political voting are confronted with diverse critiques and concerns. As authoritarian political forces worldwide increasingly mobilize a plebiscitarian political rhetoric, voting becomes aligned with exclusionary political agendas. Political theory, which has long warned to reduce the spirit of republicanism to that of majority rule (Tocqueville, 1835; Arendt, 2006), now points out that majority voting is but one instrument of achieving democratic legitimacy (Rosanvallon, 2010). And yet, the imaginary of having the people vote still massively informs projects of political and social transformation, as can be seen in the mobilization of referenda in settings as diverse as the Brexit referendum in 2016 (Susen, 2017; Thornhill, 2017), the Catalan independence referendum in 2017 (Cetrá et al., 2017), the constitutional referendum in Turkey in 2017 (Esen and Gümüşçü, 2017), the general referendum over the peace process in Colombia in 2016 (Mendes et al., 2020), and ongoing attempts to

introduce a new legislative framework for referenda in Ukraine despite the conflictive role they played at the beginning of the armed conflict (Podolian, 2015).

This *Topos* special issue sets out to continue the interdisciplinary discussion about voting not only as part of the institutionalized political system but also as a social practice and a powerful lever of social imaginaries. While incorporating debates in political theory about the relationship between voting and democracy, it addresses questions regarding the invocation of voting as a symbolic device in political processes both within and without liberal democracies and investigates the social and cultural embeddedness of the practice of voting based on the example of historical and contemporary configurations.

This conceptual agenda runs through the articles collected in this special issue and crystallizes at three interrelated conceptual moves. First, political-theoretical and historical concerns voiced about voting, and potential practices alternative to voting, are addressed with a view to their social embeddedness. Seen from this angle, the participation in elections and referenda is a context-specific practice of relating to society, not only to the institutionalized political system – a practice that might have more to do with generalized and implicit understandings of social conduct than with a rational and reflective decision over competing political agendas (Taylor, 1985, 2002; Langenohl, 2019a, 2019b). What is at stake is thus a political and cultural sociology of voting and elections that investigates into their qualities as social and cultural acts (Moffitt, 2016; Wagner-Pacifici, 2017).

Second, voting has to be conceptualized as a potential high-stakes situation, for instance, in the context of referenda about vital societal and political concerns (e.g., referenda concerning the establishment of constitutions or the regulation of fundamental societal relationships). These contexts transcend the logic of institutionalized political routine, instead being characterized by powerful invocations of competing social imaginaries and political constituencies. Not least, this shifts the attention to the notion of elections as a political spectacle, recasting the respective roles of politicians as actors on a stage and voters as an audience watching (Moffitt, 2016; Green, 2010).

Third, the practice of voting will be analyzed in political and societal configurations beyond the liberal democratic imaginary, most notably, in (post-)Soviet but also in imperial contexts. While the institution of the general election, and of voting more generally, is often seen as the core and the prerogative of liberal democracies, political anthropology and political history have observed it also in other historical and regime contexts, like state-socialist societies or imperial monarchies (Flaig, 2013a, 2013b). This perspective will be instrumental in continuing the discussion about the saliency and meaning of voting as a social practice outside a liberal institutional framework (Richter and Jessen, 2011; Langenohl, 2019a), as well as about the adjacency of practices of voting with other modalities of political decision-making.

It goes without saying that the selection of contributions to this special issue do not cover the research agenda in any exhaustive or even representative way. Rather, they form exemplary case studies that hold specific insights pertaining to this special issue's agenda, covering a historical period from the late 19th century to the present. A certain regional focus is placed on Eastern and Eastern Central Europe (Poland, Ukraine, and Russia), thus shifting the historical and regional grounds on which western political theory has often placed its emphasis. Other contributions deal with configurations of voting and elections in Western Europe, East Africa, and the Americas, focusing on the ways in which the significations and meanings of democracy in those specific contexts have been articulated and modulated through situating voting in the context of other societal institutions.

The papers thus address the question of how practices of voting, and discourses about them, relate to, and rearticulate, conceptions of democracy more generally. Based on the example of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky and his party *Servant of the People*, Sophie Schmäing reveals how the significance of referenda increases in political constellations with heterogeneous constituencies. She argues that by drawing on "direct representation" through referenda and polls, Zelensky means to substitute the mobilization of dividing cleavages and monitor his popularity. In contrast to this exploitative use of referenda, *Servant of the People*, together with a broad coalition of civil society organizations, made substantial attempts to broaden avenues of citizen participation by adopting new innovative legislation on referenda.

Renée Wagener presents a history of referenda in Luxembourg since the early 20th century, giving an exemplary insight into the ways that the device of the referendum was used to negotiate the very meaning of democracy within a context that was from the beginning a Europeanized one. Based on an in-depth analysis of the referenda in 1919, 1937, 2005 and 2015 Wagener furthermore reveals broader tendencies of Luxembourgish politico-societal developments between modes of agitation and appeasement.

Ralf Jeremias's paper on the institution of the Primary Elections in the U.S. exposes interactions, among them contradictions, between the semantics of republicanism and of democracy (in Hannah Arendt's terms): While primaries were established with the aim of limiting the impact of party organizations on candidate selection, thus advocating political participation beyond formal institutionalization, they have tended to privilege wealthy individuals, thus aggravating the social-structural bias in the U.S. political system.

Yanina Welp examines the reduction of citizen participation in constitution-making processes in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador to the majority vote. She argues that while in all three cases referenda and direct elections of constitution-making bodies were introduced, citizens fulfilled the role of legitimizing observers having little influence

on the drafting processes itself. These processes were characterized by power struggles and violations of the law. The constitutions echoed claims for participatory democracy yet diminished check and balances at the same time.

Moreover, practices of voting become significant as devices that crystallize social imaginaries and political constituencies in specific ways. Andreas Langenohl reconstructs the role of elections in the Polish transition from state socialism to democracy and liberal capitalism, placing an emphasis on the symbolic and political displacement of elections as truly foundational acts in the context of neoliberal 'shock therapy' that was presented as having no alternative. Thus, the case exemplifies how elections can be functionalized as political technologies, at the expense of any foundational political quality.

As an example of how the colonial imagination sustainably haunts even contemporary electoral processes in Africa, Julius Heise traces the impact of imperial interests and neo-colonialism in referenda in Western Togoland (1956) and Ghana (2018). He argues that today's conflictual constellations can only be properly understood when taking into account the role of the United Nations, which supervised the 1956 referenda while being heavily influenced by Britain and France as colonial powers.

Valeria Korablyova makes a case for a general shift in the theory of democracy toward a notion of popular political participation and involvement as spectatorship. Based on the example of recent developments in Ukraine and other post-Soviet contexts, she discusses several theoretical suggestions that conceptualize the relation between citizens and political actors and institutions as one between a political stage and an audience, thereby differing with respect to the question whether that audience can be attributed a constitutive meaning for the political process or whether it rather serves as a mere source of a government's political legitimacy. Finally, Dmitry Mukhin's historical analysis describes local peasant assemblies and their decision-making practices in late 19th century Russia. He argues that these practices were deeply embedded in peasants' conditions of everyday life while at the same time configuring a complicated, imagined and "real", relationship between these conditions and the state authorities.

The most obvious absence that this selection of papers shows is that of Belarus, a state and society with a particular recent history of referenda and elections in an authoritarian context where massive social protests against the official interpretations of the last general elections in 2020, and equally massive attempts to quell these protests, have been materializing while we were preparing this special issue. We are therefore particularly grateful that renowned specialists on Belarus, both from a contemporary and a historical viewpoint, have agreed to contribute to a panel discussion on Belarus: Tatiana Shchyttsova, who initiated the idea to conjoin the panel; Andrei Yahorau; Thomas Bohn; and Piotr Rudkousky. Their reflections concern the social

constituency of the protest movement and the political viewpoints of different groups and milieus, as well as the role of the international contextualization and resonances triggered by the protest movement and by the current government's attempts to quash it. What is evident from these contributions is that the Belarusian protest movement invokes not only political but also conceptual questions that relate to the fundamentals of contemporary notions of democracy: conceptions of participation and of the political constituency; the international and transnational embeddedness and ramifications movements for democracy; as well as the requirement to reflect together on political, economic and social forms of marginalization and oppression.

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