

Contented citizens vote against change

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US citizens who have a high quality of life are more engaged in the direct democracy process, according to Ryan Yonk from Utah State University and Professor Shauna Reilly from Northern Kentucky University in the US. Their study, looking at the effects of quality of life on voter participation in direct democracy elections, demonstrates that quality of life is a strong predictor of voter turnout. However, interestingly, voters with a higher quality of life are less likely to support changes in public policy through direct democracy. They appear satisfied with their current form of government and prevent ballot measures that would disrupt the status quo. Yonk and Reilly's work is published online in Springer's journal, *Applied Research in Quality of Life*.

Direct democracy allows citizens a larger role in policy making. In its ideal, it provides citizens with the opportunity to voice their opinions and enables them to contribute to policy outcomes by circumventing the standard legislative process.

In the US, political participation comes through three types of elections that allow citizens to vote directly on policy choices: initiatives proposed by individuals, or groups, that appear on the ballot after the circulation of a petition for a popular vote; referenda in the form of either legislative referenda where laws are passed by the legislature and put before voters to determine whether they are adopted, or popular, citizen-driven referenda used to appeal a specific legislative act; and recall elections.

The authors looked at the effects that quality of life has on election participation, as a measure of participation in direct democracy. They used publically available data from the 2005 mid census estimate for all US states, and the National Center for Educational Statistics.

They found strong evidence of a link between quality of life and participation in direct democracy. Specifically, in states where there is a high level of quality of life, participation in direct democracy is highest. This participation does not result in the passage of more measures, rather the opposite: ballot measures are less likely to be passed in states where there is a high quality of life.

To explain the motivations behind these voting decisions, Yonk and Reilly took an in-depth look at petitioners in Oregon. Their analysis confirmed that those with a high quality of life are more likely to actively place items on the ballot for direct democracy decisions, and when quality of life is high, they prefer the status quo.

The authors conclude: "Our research explains why there may be some inconsistency between voters and [policy choices](#), because there are other factors involved that may play a larger influence than just policy preferences. When voters are happy with their status quo, they may choose to maintain the status quo rather than to vote to change policy - even though the voters themselves may have put these policies on the ballot."

More information: Yonk RM & Reilly S (2011). Citizen involvement: quality of life in a time of direct democracy. Applied Research in Quality of Life. [DOI 10.1007/s11482-011-8142-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-011-8142-x)

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