

36 When Does a Local Assembly Accept Advisory Referendum Results?

37 Survey Experiment Approach

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43 [SYNOPSIS]

44 In recent years, referendums have often been used as a means of direct democracy,  
45 especially in developed democracies. Referendums have been frequently held by local  
46 governments since the 2000s in Japan. In particular, referendums were one of the most  
47 important tools of decision-making during the period of the Great Merger of Heisei.  
48 Since the 2010s, referendums have been used not only for municipal mergers but also  
49 for decisions on public projects such as the construction of city halls.

50 While representative democracy exists with local assemblies, it is difficult to  
51 determine how to utilize the direct democracy tools like referendums. This is because  
52 different decisions might be made on a single issue, and the legitimacy of the two  
53 may conflict. For this reason, research on referendums not only seeks to improve the  
54 direct democratic instrument itself, but also examines the appropriate institutional  
55 design based on the relationship with representative democracy.

56 In this study, based on this trend of research, we used an online survey experiment to  
57 analyze how people perceive the competition between representative democracy and  
58 direct democracy. The method used was a conjoint experiment in which respondents  
59 were randomly assigned attributes such as the topic of the referendum, the size of the  
60 majority, the level of voter turnout, and who was the proponent, and then asked  
61 whether they perceived the outcome of the referendum or the decision of the local  
62 council as legitimate. We observed the effects of independent variables on people's  
63 perceptions of legitimacy and examined whether there were differences in the effects  
64 among groups with different demographics traits and political attitudes.

65 The results of the analysis showed that the legitimacy of referendum is recognized to  
66 be high when people's preferences are important, such as the construction of a city  
67 hall, while the legitimacy of representative democracy is more important when  
68 collective action issues are concerned, such as the establishment of a waste disposal  
69 facility. Those involving other governments, such as municipal mergers and the  
70 establishment of bases, fall somewhere in between. While the size of the majority  
71 increases legitimacy, as expected, we observe that high voter turnout has no effect or  
72 a negative result on the legitimacy of the referendum. We were not able to identify  
73 any significant effect for proponents.