

Local Identities and Development of Truth's Perception¹

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Abstract

In this study, we addressed the question how perception of identity, citizen's role and participation motives can be found in local newspapers within the discourse about specific municipal conflict issues. We defined a model of the relation between group- identity and citizenship as a condition for participation. In addition, we wanted to discover how the perception of "truth" is set in political communication and which role it has in a local referendum campaign in order to derive our empirical model from our data. Hence, we took local referendum cases in three German cities Dresden, Bonn and Potsdam from our database local referenda in Germany (<http://datenbank-buergerbegehren.info/>) and built a corpus of newspapers' (online) reporting on each referendum. Thus, we could examine a public debate as strategic discourse in the form of "argumentation budgets", repeated statements and reasons, connected to both sides of referendum proponents. On the one hand, these statements are strongly connected to the perception defining "local identity". On the other hand, these statements are expressed to motivate to vote for one option or the other or act otherwise as a citizen with regard to the referendum proposal. Finally, we tested the hypothesis that truth is a constitutive component of (group-) identity which itself is a constitutive component of participation. The results underline that there is a significant relation between identity, citizenship and participation. Furthermore, the comparison between the three local referenda in Dresden, Potsdam, and Bonn showed that there is a common structure of what can be seen as public part of identity-building and truth-setting.

Keywords

local identity, participation, truth perception, text mining, citizenship

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Introduction

As part of the deliberations of the “Parlamentarischer Rat” (Parliamentary Council), the thesis was developed that direct democracy had contributed by an incentive to demagoguery to destabilise the Weimar Republic. This thesis has been reproduced within the public discourse in Germany ever since (Holtkamp 2016). One argument in this context is that political decision could suppress the freedom of minorities (Scarrow 2001; Holtkamp 2016, p. 245). Another argument in debates against direct democracy is that citizens are not able to grasp the complex problems and challenges within a society (not competent, costs too high) (Prato/Strulovici 2015). According to this point of view, representative democracy and direct democracy are contradicting polity structures (Kirchgässner 2015,

p. 13). Furthermore, a common argument is that a low turnout may result in small proportions of voters deciding as random majorities. This is interpreted as a lack of legitimacy (Holtkamp 2016, p. 245; Kirchgässner 2015, p. 11). Moreover, it is possible to observe that decisions in the process of direct democracy often appear in an emotional debate which is led by fear and sorrow (Altman 2009, p. 23). In contrast, direct democracy procedures have been implemented on the local level in the bylaws in all federal states within Germany since the peaceful revolutions from 1989/90. In the meantime, they are seen as a positive measure in order to increase participation of the local voters. Concerning direct democracy, we should mention the advantages of participation, the advantage that professional politicians have a closer contact with the citizens, so that they are able to understand the fears, sorrows, and wishes of the citizens. Thirdly, with a high participation the contact between the professionals and citizens may lead to a “high legitimacy” (Geissbühler 2015, p. 91).

In times of “voter fatigue” elements of direct democracy increase the level of participation and enriches representative democracy by giving citizens the possibility to decide on political issues themselves (Garmann 2017). According to newer research, the combination of representative democracy and elements of direct democracy has “positive effects” (Holtkamp 2016, p. 243). Hence, some citizen-initiated referenda can be summarised under the term of “Not-In-My-Backyard” (NIMBY) or “locally unwanted land use” (LULU) initiatives, which describe the opposition of citizens to political issues in their local area (Inhaber 2017; Schively 2016; Mihaylov/Perkins 2015). A very crucial example of such an NIMBY initiative is the project “Stuttgart 21”, which is a railway project planning Stuttgart’s infrastructure by building a new main station (Gabriel/Harald/Faden-Kuhne 2014). It is important to emphasise that the NIMBY does not only describe a project on topics like traffic, but as it points out that while citizens follow their own personal interests, the decision often works against a city’s interest (Holtkamp 2016). The NIMBY-effect is crucial for direct democracy on a local level in Germany and has effects that “[...] some investors [...] avoid the municipal district were a referendum take place [...]” (Rode 2014, p. 86).

In this paper, we address the question: “How support and success of referenda can be observed?” Hence, we figure out that (local) identity builds a fundamental condition for the probability of a certain success in a referendum which is connected to the participation motives of voters. For that reason, we assumed that truth is a constituent component of (group-) identity which itself is a constituent component of participation. In general, these questions lead us to the relationship between identity and political culture and to what we may call *development of truth’s perception*. Hence, we took local referendum cases in the three German cities Dresden, Potsdam, and Bonn from the database and built a corpus of newspapers’ (online) reporting on each referendum. Thus, we could examine a public debate as strategic discourse in form of “argumentation budgets”, repeated statements and reasons, connected to both sides of the referendum proponents, whose “identity of group” we reconstructed by analysing the corpus.

Referendum in Germany

In Germany, the local referendum is an instrument of direct democracy, which is held on a municipal level. Hence, it is possible to call for a local referendum (“Bürgerbegehren”) in municipalities (Gemeinden), in districts (Bezirken), and in administrative districts (Land- kreisen) (Huber 2001). Accordingly, it is necessary to phrase each item on the referendum (financial proposal) using unambiguous language and collect signatures depending on the state and municipality size from about three to 15 percent of the eligible voters. Provided that the initiators collect enough signatures within the statutory deadlines, the council has to verify the signatures, has to prove if the formal legal provisions have been met and if no exclusion reason is provided in the bylaws. After this step, the council schedules the referendum (Bürgerentscheid) (Marchenko 2016a, p. 353).

Under this consideration, the procedure of the local referendum appears mostly as a two- stage process, except for the federal states of Berlin, Bremen and Thuringia which require a three-stage process with a previous application step. In general, it is important to emphasise that each state sets their own level of essential signatures (signature quorum), which means that the range is between three (Hamburg) up to 15 percent (Saarland) of the population which is eligible to vote (Mittendorf 2008). Besides this, there is also a catalog of exclusion for subjects and questions, which cannot be part of the citizen initiative (Marchenko 2016a, pp. 353–54). Based on daily work with local referenda, it is useful to distinguish between the initiators, who can be categorised into two groups as a first step: initiation by the citizens or by the council. Second, it is possible to differentiate the citizens’ initiatives in the groups of initiation reasons: correction, self-initiative, and council. These three groups lead to two possible reasons for a citizens’ initiation: initiation of something new (peoples’ initiative) and preventing a decision which was done by the council (facultative referendum) (Mittendorf,

2009).

The distinction between these two reasons is important because it is connected to the deadline, which is given in order to request an initiation or correction of a referendum. Even-though the distinction is clear by the terms, in the process it is not obvious to differ in initiation or correction. Furthermore, some states use a catalogue which determines the amount of required signatures, which are classified by the size of the municipality and city (Ewert 2005, p. 12; Kirchgässner 2015, p. 7). There are four types of subjects excluded in all bylaws in all the catalogues in Germany: the general budget, decisions which belong to the field of the mayor's sole competence, decisions on the organisation of the municipalities administration, and decisions about appellate proceedings.

Theoretical Framework

We use the concept of “the civic culture” by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1989) and after this, we present the concept of “identity of groups” by Michael L. Schwalbe and Douglas Mason-Schrock (1996).

Civic Culture

“The civic culture” is a concept which was first introduced by Almond and Verba in the 1950s in order to understand why democratic attitudes in Germany diminished in the end of the Weimar Republic and what type of attitudes foster the institutions of stable democracies (Almond/Verba 1989; Gabriel 2010). Especially after the already mentioned peaceful revolutions from 1989/90, the scientists started to intensify research in the field of civic culture in East Europe (Marchenko 2016b). The main focus is set on the political orientation, which is expressed in terms like opinion, attitude, and value. In principle, Almond and Verba (1989) define civic culture as follows: “civic culture [is] based on communication and persuasion, a culture of consensus and diversity, a culture that [permits] change but [moderates] it” (p. 8). Furthermore, they distinguish four elements of attitudes into the terms of 1. introspection within the political system, 2. general attitude and opinion towards the political system, 3. assessment of the probability to participate in this political system, and 4. valuation of the results, which have been achieved within the political system (Almond/Verba 1989). According to these variables, Almond and Verba derive four types of political cultures: 1. *parochial political culture*, where people abstain from political processes and do not have any tendency to participate in the input process. 2. *subject political culture*, where people are not empowered to influence the input process, but they do accept and are willing to be subject to the output of the political system, 3. *participant political culture*, where people are keen to participate in the political input and making demands on the political system, and 4. *civic culture* as a stable mixture of it. The process of direct democracy with the element of citizens’

initiative is expressed in the third and fourth category of elements: the *assessment of the probability to participate* and the *valuation of the results*. It is quite obvious that local peoples' initiatives are more likely to occur where people are willing to express demands on the input of the political system and to accept its outputs. But also, local identity and local political culture may be expressed in the local media and in public to distinguish different kinds of local political cultures in debates on local referenda.

Identity

First, we used the approach, which regards identity work as a group process by Michael L. Schwalbe and Douglas Mason-Schrock (1996) in order to build the theoretical frame for an understanding of local identities. In their paper the two authors argue that groups own the social process of creating actively “signs, rites of affirmation and boundaries upon which the existence and maintenance of shared identities depend” (1996, p. 113). Furthermore, they argue that this group process “consists of four essential parts: defining, coding, affirming, and policing” (Schwalbe/Mason-Schrock 1996, pp. 113–115). The process of *defining* describes “the creation of a social representation that brings an identity to existence”, which is here the definition of a social problem that is the main goal of the citizens' initiative (Schwalbe/Mason-Schrock 1996, p. 123). Next, *coding* means “the creations of a set of rules”, while *affirming* describes the “the creation of opportunities for enacting aims” (Schwalbe/Mason-Schrock 1996, p. 123). The process of *policing* points out “the protection of the meaning of the identity” and underlines the active part of constructing identity.

The subject of identity is a wide field in science, which is examined in lots of disciplines like psychology, sociology, political science, science of education, and so on. The focus on identity-research is on several levels like the nation level, the regional level, the city level, and the local level for perspective on groups (Shao, 2014). In contrast, researchers with interest in examining the identity of a nation are studying the symbolic meanings, which are visible in “many forms, objects and events, monuments and ceremonies, [that] all contribute meaningful symbols to the national identity” (Vale, 2008). In contrast, the regional identity often is defined as a “social construction” that “could be simply a regional inferiority complex or regional pride, or more intensely it could be expressed in a certain sense of belonging” (Shao 2014, p. 26). The city identity is more complex as it “provides the linkages between the physical and spiritual” and connects the lifestyle by the urban praxis (Shao, 2014). This is important, because cities like Berlin and Paris have more in common than Berlin and a usual German village, which points out the complex character of a city identity. Thus, the “historical content, social activity and aesthetic characters also need to be considered, which mainly contributes to the spiritual dimension of the urban identity” (Shao, 2014). A smaller scale for examining identity is the local identity, which sets the focus on

city quarters and streets for representing “neighbourhood” empirically (Shao, 2014). Accordingly, the definition of local identity includes the following elements: the personal, the culture, the community, the place, and the landscape identity (Shao 2014, pp. 43–44).

Related Works

In this case study, we work with the perspective of the civic culture, which was introduced by Almond and Verba. The main interest in this approach is the attitude of citizens, the behaviour, the opinions etc. Following this, Reese et al. (2018) focus on the relative impact of demographics, political ideology, and civic culture. Based on the concept of NIMBY (Buffoli et al., 2016), researchers examine the grassroots activism from the perspective of psychology (Mihaylov/Perkins 2015) and the activism of citizens towards renewable-energy technologies (Batel/Devine-Wright 2015).

On the other hand, there is some research on local identity (Tartaglia/Rossi 2016) which points out the importance for political culture, because the local identity influences the praxis of social interaction (Amit, 2017). For example, in research on urban area, local identity plays a role as this concept helps to understand the different developments in global cities as they have a structural similarity (Bennett, 2018). Others examine the “Civic Engagement Related to Personal Identity and Social Identity”, which means that the authors describe participation in different stages of adolescence (Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2018). In general, the instrument of the referendum has some results in different parts of the world. Hence, in Western societies it is often used as a tool of opposition, whereas in the Eastern countries it is used as a tool of sovereignty and power (Pöppel 2018).

With regard to the perception of truth, some papers examine the role of truth in a so-called “post-truth-world” (Pavic/Sundalic, 2017). The main interest in this research is on finding out what groups and citizens believe to be true (Hoffman/Singh/Prakash, 2015). Since 2010, this development influences the political system in the way of changing the quality of language. Moreover, the established system is set under pressure in a new way, because of a lack of legitimacy (Sartori, 2005).

Methods

In this study, we used different methods for examining the research question. We have chosen this approach in order to obtain the data, which is needed to test our hypothesis. Thus, we took three cases from our database referenda (i.e., Dresden, Potsdam, and Bonn). The database contains all the information that has been collected about the several cases and are stored in over 100 relational data tables.

Apart from this, we took the collected newspaper articles and created text

corpora. Consequently, we have three different corpora in which more than 100 hundred articles are combined. As a first step, we took the corpora and used a QDA approach based on the ideas of Grounded Theory (Glaser/A. L. Strauss/Paul, 2010; Reichertz, 2011; A. Strauss/ Corbin, 1997). Henceforth, we examined categories for several actors, different argumentation budgets and their aims, which we derived from those argumentation budgets. In addition, we also took the three different text corpora for a quantitative Statistical Analysis of Text with the help of the text mining method (Bennett, 2018; Puchinger, 2016; Black et al., 2012).

Database

The project *citizens' initiatives* (“Datenbank Bürgerbegehren”) identifies data and compiles reports on the practice of citizen requests and referenda in Germany. The data was collected in surveys at the ministries of the interior, the provincial diets, local umbrella organisations and district administrations, and since 2000, they have been identified by ongoing media documentation. Furthermore, additional data was collected through questionnaire surveys in districts and municipalities. Another share of data comes from verified self-reports by initiators, media representatives and committed citizens. Since no official statistics are kept, and in most federal states, there is no statistical recording of use cases at all, the data cannot be exhaustive. However, using all available sources of information and maintaining a maximum standard in the source documentation, this constitutes the most comprehensive available statistic on this subject in Germany.

Model

In this paper, we are working with an explanatory empirical model, which makes a distinction between five elements. We identified these elements as substantial in the process of the citizens' referendum campaign and use them for the analysis of our data. The model aims to explain the role of group-identity as a part of truth's perception.

The area of *local identity* describes the character of a social group, which is based on a local area and which belongs to one of the actors in the process of the referendum (initiator, councillor, stakeholder). The term *citizenship* describes the formal rights, which are guaranteed by law (voting, protesting, initiation of a referendum). Furthermore, the *participation* describes the wilful behaviour of the local social movement by using their guaranteed rights actively. Within the process of the citizens' initiative, the actors use different types of *argumentation* in order to justify their interest. These arguments are a part of the strategic discourse of the both sides of the referendum proponents. At last, the *truth's perception* labels a process of deriving an interpretation of circumstances, which is offered by one of those proponents.

According to the formal process of the citizens' initiative and to the procedure of

the local referendum, the explanatory model describes the interdependency of these elements as the local praxis sets the tone for the local identity. If a political decision is perceived as negatively influencing the local identity, a group of citizens will use their rights of citizenship in order to realise participation by correcting the decision. Within this process, the groups will use several arguments in order to emphasise their point of view. We call this bundle of arguments “argumentation-budgets” which are the preliminary stages of the truth’s perception within this process of the citizens’ initiative. Altogether, we will apply this model on the three referendum cases Bonn, Potsdam and Dresden in order to reconstruct the “argumentation budgets” and the perception of truth. This model makes it possible to classify the different opponents and arguments within the debates in order to examine the relation of group-identity and perception of truth. This model gives an empirical setting for checking the mechanisms, which are described in the concept of a social problem.

Data and Results

The presentation of the data and the results illustrates this case study and displays some types of campaigning during the process of the citizens’ initiative. Before elaborating on the three referendum cases of Dresden, Potsdam, and Bonn, we will introduce each city and each case for creating the needed context. Accordingly, we describe the important actors and arguments in each of the debates, which we obtained by applying quantitative and qualitative methods.

Dresden

The city Dresden is the capital of the federal free-state Saxony, which is one of the five new federal states of Germany, that has been re-established in the 1990s. The population is

547.172 residents after Leipzig the second biggest city in Saxony. Furthermore, Dresden is also the political centre of the free-state, because the government and the Landtag are located here.

With regard to the citizens’ initiative, we do emphasise the following aspects as an important context of the referendum’s case. In the middle of the 1990s, a conflict started about building a new bridge, which was intended to be an addition to the already existing bridge over the Elbe (Hildebrand 2007). The council put the idea together under the decision and project-name “traffic Waldschlößchenbrücke”. The citizens’ initiative had the position to build the *Waldschlößchen Bridge*, because they perceived it to be important to support the development of traffic flows by car and other motorised individual traffic in Dresden. They opposed the perception of the local administration which was in favour to develop other types of transportation. The local referendum took place on 27th of February, 2005 with a voter turnout of n=202323 in total (about 50%

turnout). The final referendum resulted in building the new *Waldschlößchen Bridge* by 68.00% in favor of and 32.00% against the project. This means, the election result is equal to the aim of the citizens' initiative. As a consequence, the city started to construct the bridge in November 2007, which was the primary reason for the UNESCO to strip Dresden of the title of World Heritage Site "The Dresden Elbe Valley" and delist the city in 2009, which already was listed as a "World Heritage in Danger" since 2006 (Schoch, 2014).

Potsdam

The second city in our case study is Potsdam, which is the capital as well as the largest city of the federal state of Brandenburg with approximately 171,810 inhabitants. Brandenburg is also one of the new federal states with a long tradition as the residence of the Prussian kings. Therefore, the cultural heritage is rich (Heckmann 1994, p. 23).

In 2015-16, a citizens' initiative started to demand the maintenance of some buildings which were built during the time of the German Democratic Republic in Eastern Germany. Hence, it is about making the sale of communal land around the Old Market and the demolition of existing buildings in the middle impossible. The demands are directed towards the current decision of the city parliament. The initiative's slogan "No sell-out of the Potsdam Center", underlines that the demolition plans for the three buildings are to be stopped. It is about the common question of whether municipal areas are privatized or remain in public hands (Siegel 2003, p. 32; Burkhardt 2018). The date of decision of admissibility by the council was the 14th of September, 2016. The administrative court of Potsdam has now declared the referendum to be inadmissible. The demands of the initiative are not sufficiently clear. Therefore, the referendum cannot be accepted. After that, the citizens' initiative was not able to submit a new, correct version of their request. In August 2018, the city demolished the last parts of the buildings, which the initiative wanted to refurbish and keep them as a cultural heritage from the old times.

Bonn

Next, we examined Bonn as the third city in which the local identity played an important role in the process of the citizens' initiative. The city is located in the biggest federal state in Germany, North Rhine-Westphalia, and it has generally 325.490 inhabitants. Bonn was the capital of Western Germany from 1949-1990, which supported the city's development of a high global interconnection (Stiftung Haus der Geschichte 2014, p. 95).

On 19 June 2015, the city council of Bonn decided to sell a municipal property on Viktoria Avenue to the Signa Holding with the votes of the CDU, SPD, FDP and BBB. The company wants to build a shopping centre there. The key property, the

former Dahm house on the corner of Stockenstraße/Rathausgasse already belongs to Signa. Here is the access to the gallery-like shopping centre. Opponents of the project criticised the fact that the construction of the shopping centre would make further apartments a victim of retail. They see this as a contradiction to the concept of revitalising the city centre in the evening. It is also criticised that customers should be able to enter the centre only via a main entrance. The citizens' initiative was registered on July 15th, 2015. The signature collection started in September 2015. In October 2015, the initiators submitted 16.417 valid signatures to the city. Hence, the city council had joined the referendum in November 2015 and decided to implement a citizens' workshop for the development of the *Viktoriakarree*.

Conclusion

In this paper we analysed *local identity and truth's perception* on the basis of three referendum cases (i.e., Dresden, Potsdam, and Bonn) between 2005 and 2016. One aim of the paper was to analyse the meaning of identity for the probability of the citizens' referendum success on a local level. We elaborated a working term of identity for classifying the proponents' political process. In order to analyse the text corpora we reconstructed the leading arguments, groups, and actors by examining the public debate as strategic discourse in the form of "argumentation budgets", repeated statements and reasons, which are connected to both sides of the referendum proponents.

First, we examined the term "civic culture" by Almond and Verba in order to describe the element of attitude, which we analysed. Hence, we worked with what they called "assessment of the probability to participate in this political system, and valuation of the results, which have been achieved within the political system." With respect to the process of the citizens' initiative, the local referendum represents this types of attitude empirically. According to this, we could examine the local referendum in the perspective of "the civic culture" that emphasises the attitude and behaviour of citizens (Almond and Verba, 1989). This perspective enables us to consider the process of the citizens' initiative against the setting of the group identity as a working process since the two groups of proponents are officially part of the instrument of direct democracy.

The results of the data show that in Dresden three actors rule that initiative: the pro and contra Wadlschlößchen bridge as well as the environmentalist. The argumentation budgets of each group are: the identity of being a citizen of Dresden (historical argument). We could examine that both groups applied the local identity communication style, because the size of the city Dresden leads more to an urban identity. Nevertheless, as the turnout suggests (50%), the initiatives could only mobilise these citizens to participate in the referendum. This shows that the local identity was used as a representative for the urban identity. In Potsdam, it was possible to observe that there in general have been two main

actors who showed their interests: the city which wants to sell the buildings and the citizens who do not want to sell the old buildings, which are historic landmarks of the German Democratic Republic. Thus, the initiative referred to the cultural importance of these buildings as the identity constitutional subject. Third, the main actors in the citizens' initiative in Bonn were the city and investment company. In contrast, the citizens were the other interest group by achieving the restoration of buildings. Similar to the other cases, the initiative in Bonn also used the local identity communication style by referring to the neighbourhood. Again, we assume that it is not enough to argue with the concept of NYMBY, as the analysis showed a higher reference to identity than to rational self-interest of the "backyard".

Concerning the empirical data, we could argue that if the local identity is strong, the probability of success in the citizens' initiative will be higher, because the local identity contributes to the group's identity. As we pointed out before, we argue that the concept of identity is more useful in order to describe the social movement of a citizens' initiative, which is an element of direct democracy. The local identity contributes to the identity work that helps to evoke a positive attitude towards the initiative's project. Furthermore, it was possible to show that the actors derive the "argumentation budgets" in all cases from the local identity (i.e., that the initiatives in the three cases Dresden, Potsdam, and Bonn used parts of local identity as a tool for the initiatives' identity work). The linkage of the local identity and the initiatives' group identity marks the condition for what is seen to be true by the citizens. If the level local identity is high, than the probability for citizens' participation is higher, because citizens start to act for the "neighbourhood".

We underline clearly, that this concept differs from the concept of the NIMBY, even though the term of *neighbourhood* may lead to a similar direction. Thus, the perception of truth is connected to the local identity and is a constituent of the direct democratic tool of the referendum, as this process shows its own social dynamics. In order to understand the process of the local referendum and the process of changing the urban environment positively, it is necessary to examine participation in the highest resolution. In comparison to the related work, we underline the results that in our case study, the referenda was part of an opposition campaign. Hence, from the perspective of political culture, it is an instrument, which is used by the citizens. Second, the perspective of the NIMBY concept appears too one-sided concerning the three referenda cases of Dresden, Potsdam and Bonn. Thus, we emphasise the term *identity* which underlines the potential that lies in direct democracy on a local level, as it gives a new perspective for creating and influencing the urban environment.

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