

## Public sphere, public opinion formation, and direct democracy

**Öffentlichkeit, öffentliche Meinung und direkte Demokratie – Eine Fallstudie zur Verfassungsreform in Liechtenstein. F. Marcinkowski, W. Marxer. Liechtenstein Politische Schriften, 47. Verlag der Liechtensteinischen Akademischen Gesellschaft (2010)**

In the preface to this case study on the controversial constitutional reform of the principality of Liechtenstein in 2003, Frank Marcinkowski, professor of communication science at the *Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität in Münster*, addresses the both long and difficult formation of this publication. For almost a decade, Frank Marcinkowski and co-author Wilfried Marxer, research director at the *Liechtenstein Institut*, examined both the distinct media system of the microstate Liechtenstein and the related process of public opinion formation in the context of direct democratic popular vote.

Their initially intended comparative approach across a number of policy fields, however, was modified and delayed mainly due to the disputed constitutional reform dominating the domestic political agenda from 2000 to 2003. Thus, Marcinkowski's and Marxer's research became both a very detailed analysis of a factual plebiscite in a microstate and an impressive as well as topical account on public sphere, public opinion formation and democracy in general.

The publication of this examination is divided into seven chapters completed by useful appendices and a list of references. While the first introduces the subject and the relevant complex of research questions, the second chapter provides the theoretical foundations and concepts for an empirical assessment of political communication and public opinion formation. In order to examine the latter in the socio-political context of the small state of Liechtenstein, the third chapter depicts the distinct institutional and socio-cultural framework of political and public communication. Chapter four constitutes the first empirical unit describing the political process of the disputed constitutional reform. The fifth chapter analyses the development of the political actors' communication and framing strategies whereas the following section is then devoted to public reception and individual opinion formation. The concluding chapter summarises the core results and discusses related implications.

On 16 March 2003, two referenda – one initiated by the Liechtenstein dynasty and one by 202 citizens of the principality – faced each other. After a very high percentage of the eligible voters, namely 87.7 per cent, went to cast a vote that day, 64.3 per cent endorsed the sovereign's proposal for a constitutional amendment whereas only 16.6 per cent approved the motion of the initiative committee.

According to Marcinkowski and Marxer, this electoral decision was highly predisposed. The pronounced faith in the monarchy and, at the same time, a noticeable reservation about politics – party politics in particular – combined with a prevalent societal value orientation, such as patriotism, conservatism and authoritarianism, predetermined the individual voting. Neither political nor public communication was able to change the persisting political attitudes among the majority. This phenomenon cannot simply be attributed to voters' avoidance of public communication, quite the contrary, the available channels of information and forums were intensely used. The people of Liechtenstein were indeed exposed to the arguments of both sides. Nevertheless, by strategically applying the concepts of framing and priming, the campaign of the dynasty successfully managed to activate underlying societal and cultural values as well as the semantic and visual fear of losing the societal, political and, of course, the material status quo arguably guaranteed by the monarchy.

In their further analysis of electoral behaviour, Marcinkowski and Marxer noticed a remarkable pattern: the victory of the sovereign's campaign was mainly due to the wide approval of sections of the population with lower or moderate political competence and at the expense of the population group with higher formal training, strong political interest, intense media use and higher factual knowledge.

Thus, the case study of the publicly disputed constitutional reform and related political campaign and public communication in the small state of Liechtenstein perfectly illustrates the problematic connection between the public and direct democracy in a media society in general: apparently, people do not vote on a definite draft bill, but on what they consider to be the essence of the problem; issue-related rational arguments remain widely unheard and ineffective. Hence, the public appearance of factual issues and their construction and framing in political and public communication respectively are crucial in a direct democracy. This requires a functioning democratic public, which, in turn, is most notably comprised of independent media as political correctives able to set an alternative agenda.

This extensive though accessible research by Frank Marcinkowski and Wilfried Marxer not only constitutes a significant contribution to the existing literature on public sphere, public opinion formation, and direct democracy, but also an introductory and illustrative read reaching beyond an academic audience.

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