

Local referendums in Germany 1956–2022

Factsheet / Key Facts

1. Quantity and frequency

- From 1956 to 2022, there were a total of 8.958 procedures at the municipal level. This resulted in 4.503 referendums.
- In the past five years, an average of 300 new procedures were initiated per year. In 2022, there were 245, slightly fewer than in previous years. This is probably due to the Corona pandemic, which, among other things, made it more difficult to collect signatures.
- The 8.958 procedures are divided into two types of procedures: 7.448 citizens' initiatives (“Bürgerbegehren”) were initiated “bottom-up” by citizens, 1.510 council referendums (“Ratsreferendum”) were initiated “top-down” by the respective municipal council.
- About 40 per cent of all recorded procedures took place in the federal state of Bavaria.

2. Topics

- Most of the procedures concerned economic projects (20,1 per cent), public social and educational institutions (19,6 per cent) and traffic projects (16,0 per cent). Which topic arises how often varies from federal state to federal state. One important reason for this is that in several states, local urban land use planning, which affects many subject areas, is not permitted or only permitted to a limited extent.

3. Results and chances of success

- 39,2 per cent of all completed procedures were successful in the meaning of the initiators. A referendum is not necessarily required for success: 1.039 of the 7.448 citizens' initiatives (14,0 per cent) led the municipal council to adopt the demands of the initiative – so no referendum was necessary.
- Looking at the referendums, 52,0 per cent of them were successful in the meaning of the proposal. Council referendums had a higher success rate of 56,3 per cent than citizen-initiated referendums with 50,1 per cent.
- 2.126 of the 7.448 citizens' initiatives were declared invalid (28,5 per cent).
- In a nationwide comparison, the federal state of Berlin has the lowest proportion of invalid citizens' initiatives at 10,6 per cent. In Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Rhineland-Palatinate, Lower Saxony, Saarland, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia the proportion is more than 35 per cent. These differences are due to the different legal regulations in the federal states, for example the exclusion of topics.

4. Referendums

- The average turnout for referendums was 50,9 per cent. The turnout in small municipalities is significantly higher than in larger cities and rural districts.
- Nationwide, every eighth referendum (12,0 per cent) did not reach the approval quorum. Although the initiators' proposal received the majority of votes, the proposal failed because the approval quorum was not reached. Such an approval quorum exists in most federal states.

5. Local referendums and climate protection

- A total of 387 procedures took place on climate protection topics in the period under review from 2013 to 2022. This is 13 per cent of all procedures.
- 244 of the 387 procedures related to climate protection (63,0 per cent) had a *positive* target direction for climate protection, 140 had a *braking* target direction (36,2 per cent) and three procedures had no target direction.
- The number of procedures with a *positive* objective increased over the years. From 2013 to 2015, there were eleven such procedures per year, and from 2020 to 2022, 48 procedures per year were initiated.
- Of the procedures with *positive* objectives, 47,1 per cent were successful, i.e. they accelerated the implementation of climate protection measures. The success rate for procedures with a *slowing* objective was 46,4 per cent, i.e. they had a slowing down effect on climate protection.
- With regard to the success, there was a major change over the years: in the period from 2013 to 2017, 42,9 per cent of the procedures with a *positive* objective were successful, while procedures with a *slowing* objective were successful in 51,8 per cent of the cases. From 2018 to 2022, 49 per cent of the procedures with a *positive* objective were successful and only 35,3 per cent of the procedures with a *slowing* objective.
- This development was even more pronounced in procedures on the much-discussed topic of wind power, especially when it came to referendums. From 2013 to 2017, only 45 per cent of referendums were in favour of more wind power, whereas from 2018 to 2022, 74 per cent were in favour of wind power.

Source: Mehr Demokratie e. V., Bürgerbegehrensbericht 2023, German language:

https://www.mehr-demokratie.de/fileadmin/pdf/2023/Berichte/230531_MD_Buergerbegehrensbericht_2023_web.pdf

Translation: Frank Rehmet & Jan Renner, Mehr Demokratie e. V. with the aid of DeepL.