

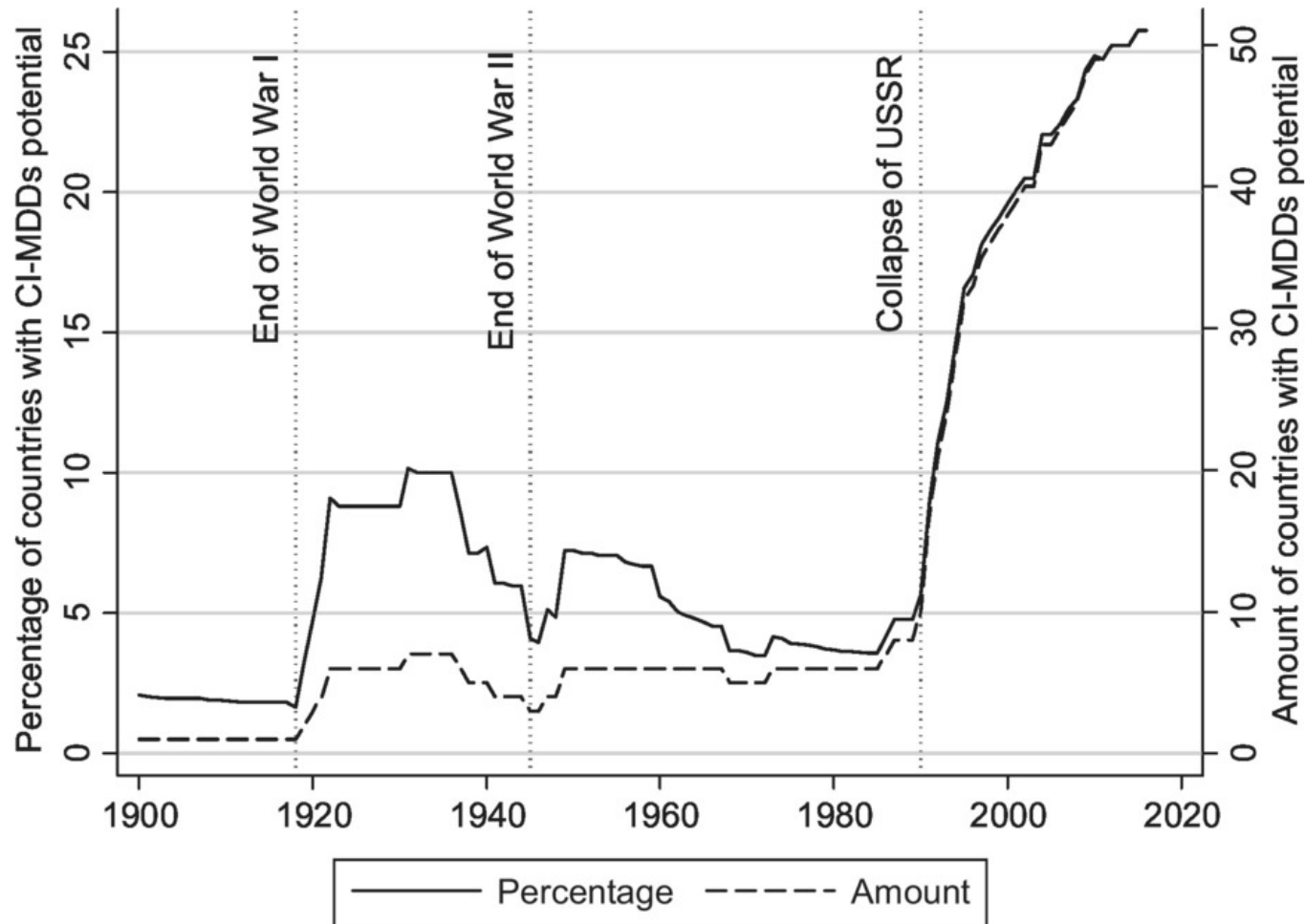
Citizens' initiatives in Europe: Trust in the people's judgement and trust in institutions

Daniel Moeckli, University of Zürich

daniel.moeckli@uzh.ch

Aarauer Demokratietage, 12 March 2026

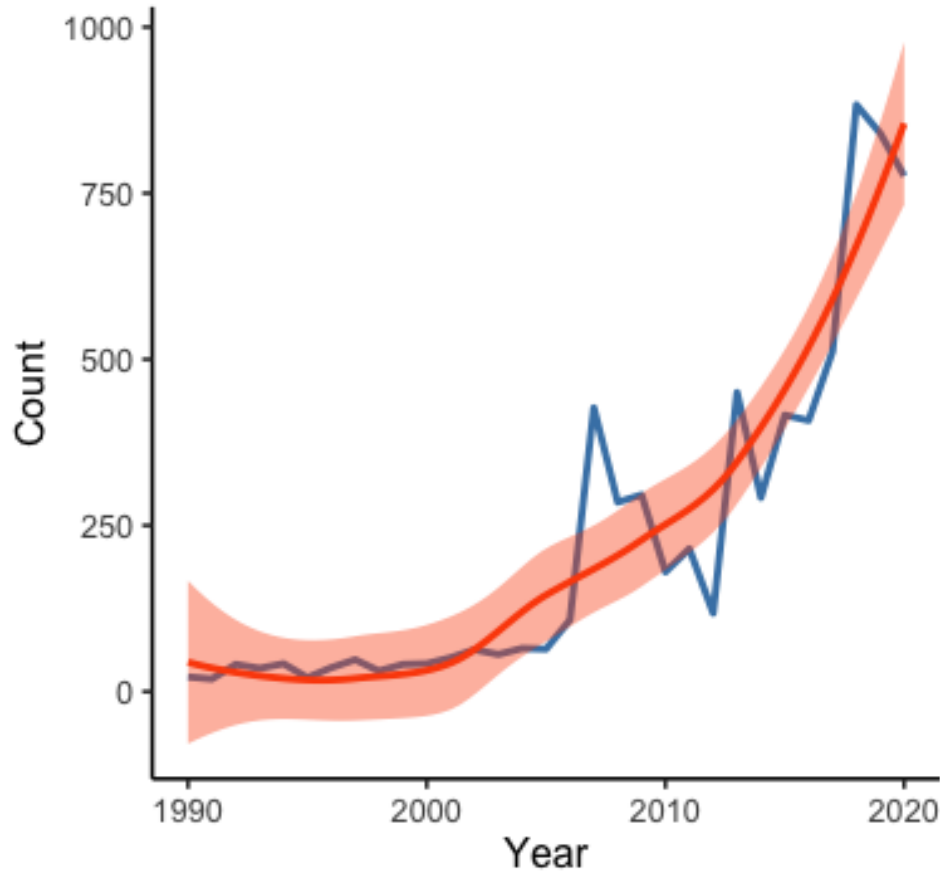
The rise of bottom-up direct democracy (1/2)



Countries in the world with citizen-initiated mechanisms of direct democracy (CI-MDDs)

D. Altman, *Citizenship and Contemporary Direct Democracy* (CUP, 2019) p. 62

The rise of bottom-up direct democracy (2/2)



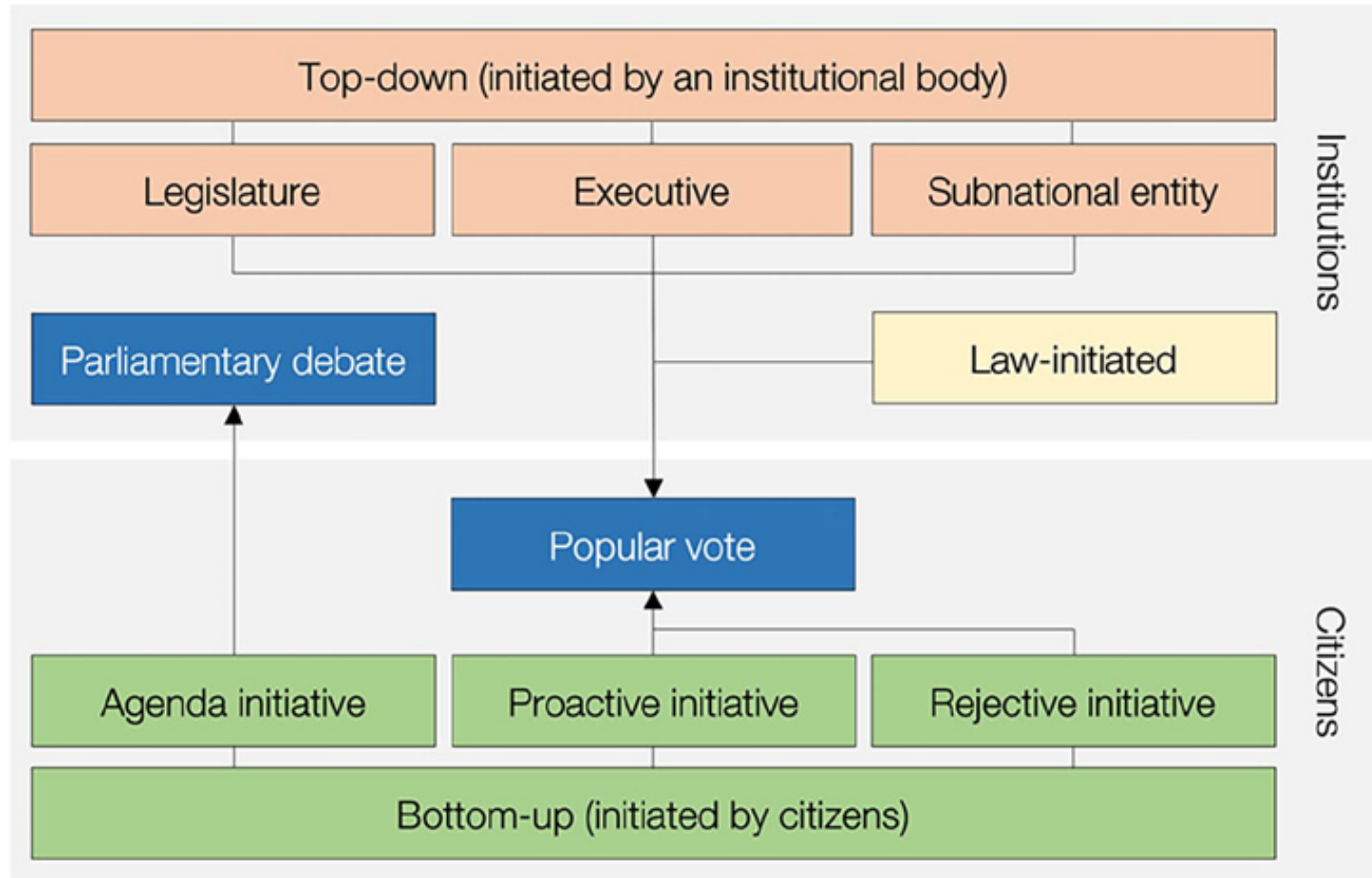
Citizens' initiatives launched per year across European countries

D. Moeckli et al, 'Mapping the European Landscape of Citizens' Initiatives', *Political Studies* (2025)

Direct democracy and political trust

- Declining trust in representative institutions is an important driver of demands for more direct forms of decision-making
 - E. Ouattara & T. Van Der Meer, 'Distrusting democrats: A panel study into the effects of structurally low and declining political trust on citizens' support for democratic reform', *European Journal of Political Research* (2026)
 - A. Schuck, & C. Vreese, 'Public support for referendums in Europe: A cross-national comparison in 21 countries', *Electoral Studies* 38 (2015), 149
- Availability of (bottom-up) instruments of direct democracy may foster trust in political institutions
 - F. Kuhn & B. Torgler, 'Empowering the Principal: How Direct Democracy Shapes Trust in Institutions', *BITA Working Paper No. 14* (2024)
 - P. Bauer & M. Fatke, 'Direct Democracy and Political Trust: Enhancing Trust, Initiating Distrust – Or Both?', *Swiss Political Science Review* 20 (2014), 49

Typology of direct-democratic instruments



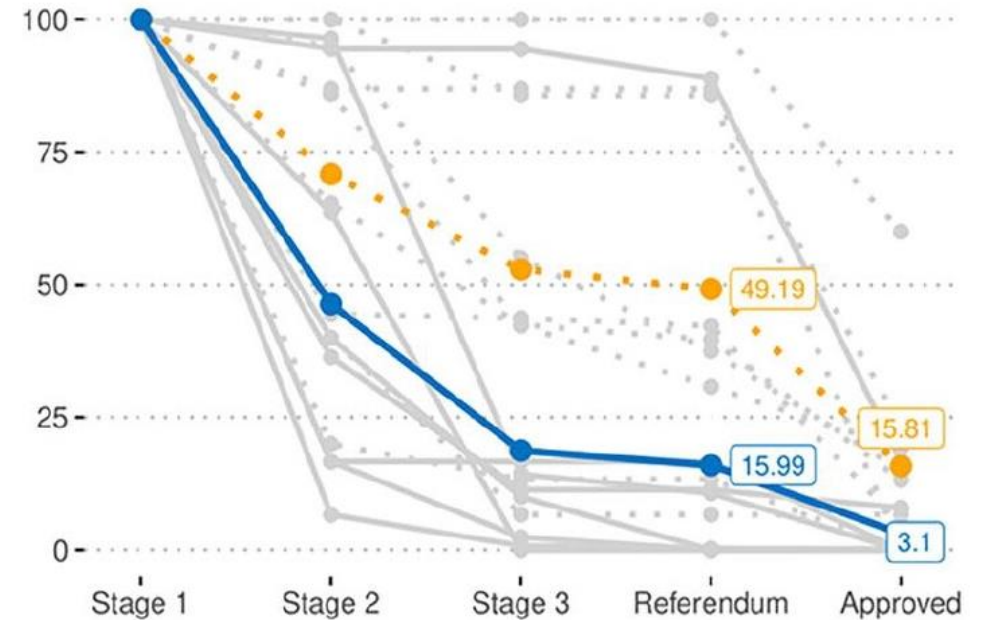
Impact of citizens' initiatives

TABLE 4.2 Success rates (SR) of MDDs by agenda-setters and policy preferences (1980–2016)

	Policy Preference		
	Status Quo	Change	Total
Agenda-Setter Authorities	36 3.16 (SR = 66.66)	667 58.46 (SR = 72.86)	703 61.61 (SR = 72.54)
Citizens	197 17.27 (SR = 35.02)	241 21.12 (SR = 19.50)	438 38.39 (SR = 26.48)
Total	233 20.42 (SR = 39.91)	908 79.58 (SR = 58.70)	1141 100 (SR = 54.86)

Key: Frequency, cell %, Success Rate
[This table does not include micro-states]

D. Altman, *Citizenship and Contemporary Direct Democracy* (2019), p. 96



Admissibility test ● After ● Before

D. Moeckli et al, 'Mapping the European Landscape of Citizens' Initiatives', *Political Studies* (2025)

60%

Success rate for Hungary

0.15%

Admissibility requirements for citizens' initiatives

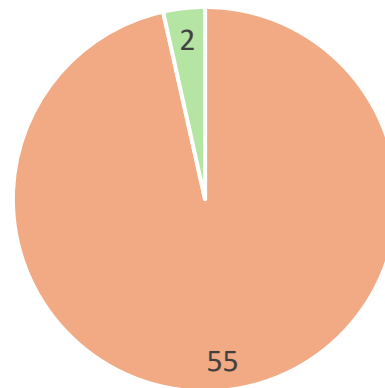
Formal requirements

- Concern the formulation of the initiative
- Requirements of clarity, unity of substance etc.

Substantive requirements

- Concern the content of the initiative
- Topic prohibitions

Bottom-up instruments



■ Admissibility requirements

■ No admissibility requirements

Trust in the people's judgment?

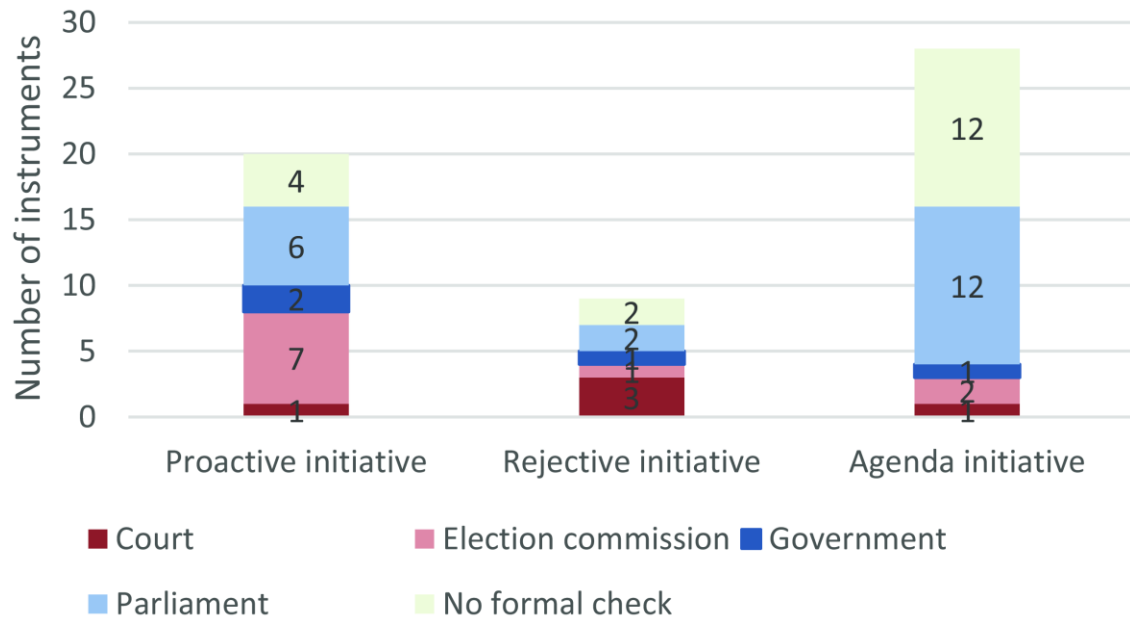


Substantive requirements for bottom-up instruments: Prohibited subject matters

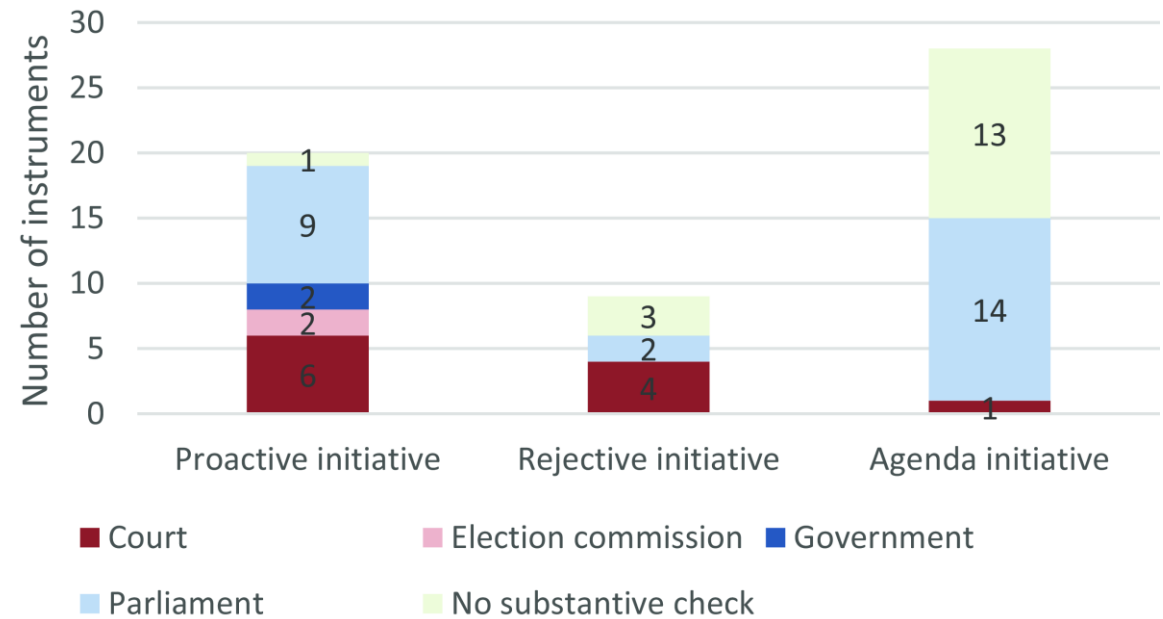
D. Moeckli, 'Beyond the Reach of the People? Admissibility Requirements and Procedures for Citizens' Initiatives in Comparative Perspective', *EuConst* (2025) 230, p. 245

Trust in institutions?

Formal admissibility check



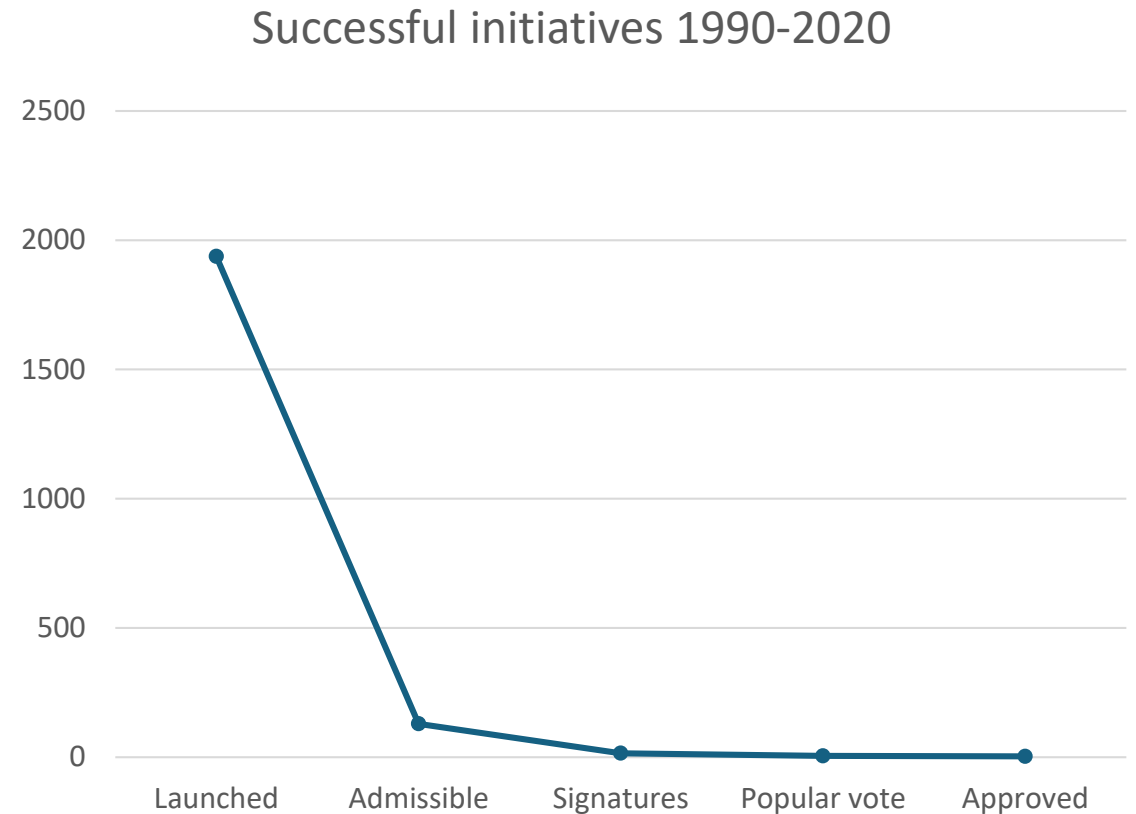
Substantive admissibility check



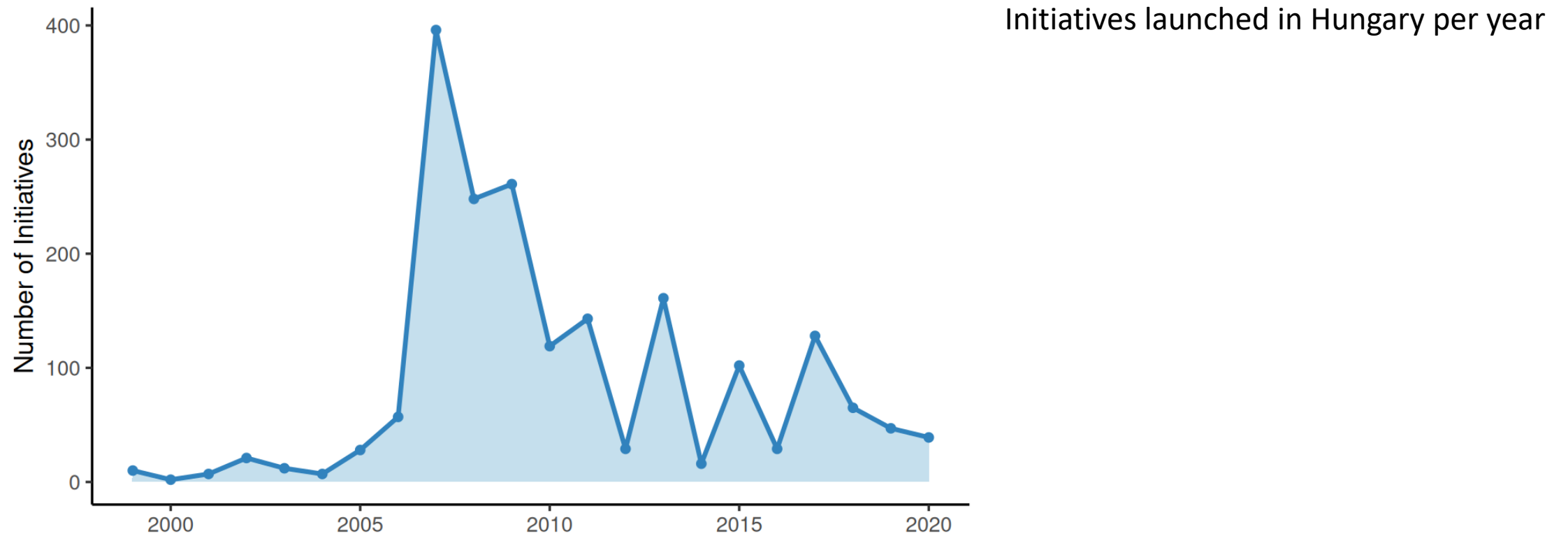
D. Moeckli, 'Beyond the Reach of the People? Admissibility Requirements and Procedures for Citizens' Initiatives in Comparative Perspective', *EuConst* (2025) 230, p. 257

Trust in institutions? The case of Hungary

- Strict formal and substantive admissibility requirements
- Checked by National Election Commission – Curia – Constitutional Court



Bottom-up direct democracy relies on trust



Thank you!



Our research on direct democracy



European Research Council
Established by the European Commission