Mongolia's 2015 Referendum via Text Messaging:
Engaging Rural and Nomadic Citizens in Public Screen Deliberation

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How can emergent democracies engage rural and mobile citizens in deliberative democracy? This article analyzes the ways that Mongolia's two national referenda, the 1945 vote for independence and the 2015 referendum on mining contracts, attempted to engage pastoral-nomadic citizens in national deliberations via a public screen. The analysis is prefaced by an examination of public political deliberation and the role of referenda in both settled and emergent democracies. This is followed by an assessment of Mongolia's ICT development, which enabled the 2015 referendum to be held via short message service text messages and deliberated about over Twitter. I conclude that, although the 2015 referendum did not result in a clear policy mandate, the method of using text messaging to distribute a national referendum shows great promise as a way to reach and engage even the most rural and mobile citizens.

Keywords: Mongolia, public sphere, public screen, democratization, referendum, pastoral nomads

This study examines the use and implications of cellular phones in the political deliberations of rural and pastoral-nomadic herders in Mongolia. By focusing on Mongolia, a nation of 3 million people and 3.2 million active mobile subscribers, I ask how cellular phones may enable new deliberative spaces in emergent democracies. Although many civil society scholars and activists have promoted new and social media as a way to broaden the public sphere in highly developed societies (Bijker, 2006; Gastil, 2008; Pfister & Godana, 2012), little research has examined the structural configuration of interactions and transactions facilitated by new and social media in rural and developing democracies such as Mongolia (Dalaibuyan, 2013; Tencic, 2015).

My analysis begins with the role of public political argument and deliberative technologies in established and emergent democracies. Referenda are seen as a tool both to draw citizens into deliberations and for politicians to declare that a political topic has been decided. Then I conduct a comparative case study of Mongolia's two national referenda, occurring in 1945 and 2015. Although much time passed between these referenda, and the format of the referenda differ, I argue that a comparison of these events illustrates the ways that rural and mobile communities have been engaged in national decision making. Drawing from the reports of government officials, national media, international observers, and, in the case

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of the 2015 referendum, Mongolian deliberation via Twitter, I examine questions of national and international referendum validity to understand how national referenda can encourage or foreclose public deliberation. A qualitative analysis of tweets posted during the 2015 referendum is used to explore the reasons for citizen participation in and rejection of the 2015 referendum. The article concludes with and examination of the technological and democratic entanglements in holding a national referendum by short message service (SMS).

Public Political Argument

Zarefsky's (2009) work concerning public political argument assesses topics that are necessarily public, and for which it seems that a debate will continue for a long period of time. He contends that long-term debate is advantageous, but government agents will at times attempt to artificially constrict public debate in ways that consolidate governmental power. For example, citizens may want to take more time to study and debate a political topic, while a politician facing an election may desire an immediate vote. In this study of Mongolia, I examine the ways that politicians have attempted to foreclose long-standing deliberations in two cases: the 1945 referendum on independence and the 2015 referendum on mining policy. At first glance, each case seems to be a singular question of whether the nation should or should not act; however, argument scholars such as Mohammed (2016) indicate that public political arguments are often multipurposive activity types (p. 221), meaning that the officials who call for a vote, and the citizens who engage in deliberation and voting, are participating in a diversity of argumentative exchanges and outcomes.

In the 1945 referendum, many citizens had already determined that Mongolia was and should be independent. Holding the referendum signaled Mongolia's decision to be independent from China, worked to define Mongolian national unity, and smoothed relations between China and the Soviet Union. The situation was very different in 2015, when Prime Minister Saikhanbileg declared that Mongolians must decide whether they would sign or reject a mining contract with Oyu Tolgoi. Although members of the government and international mining corporations may have been ready to sign a contract, this article demonstrates that the public had not yet reached a consensus. Undecided Mongolian voters voiced a plethora of opinions during the 2015 referendum. This heterogeneous group of citizens was separated by both their different opinions and different starting points in the debate over mineral policy. Some voters had long-term interests in Mongolian mineral rights, while others only entered the debate when they received the government's text-message referendum. This means that their engagement in this public argument meant different things for different participants. As a result, Mongolian voters did not reach the cohesive decision desired by the government but instead demonstrated the heterogeneous public commonly found in situations of dissensus (Zarefsky, 2009 p. 118).

Evidence of the Mongolian voting public's dissensus was found through new and social media such as Twitter. As DeLuca and Peeples (2002) argue, public screens encourage a shift from rationality and consensus to publicity, distraction, and dissent (p. 125). In the second part of this article, I follow the argument of DeLuca, Lawson, and Sun (2012), that public screens have changed the methods and production of political deliberation and activism, and analyze the ways that Mongolians used Twitter to respond to the referendum during and immediately following the vote. To understand how this shift from

public spheres to public screens has affected Mongolia, I juxtapose the 1945 and 2015 referenda. This juxtaposition highlights the ways that social media has allowed Mongolians to move beyond the constraints of older media.

In studying how Mongolians approached, deliberated about, participated in, and responded to the national referenda of 1945 and 2015, I aim to better understand political deliberations in emergent democracies. This is important for scholars who are interested in Mongolia or other emergent or rural democracies that may also experiment with SMS referenda. For readers from more established democracies, particularly Western democracies, I point to Zarefsky's (1992) "Spectator Politics," in which he reminds readers of the irony that Western political deliberators have become "couch potatoes" (p. 413) while emergent democracies such as Mongolia are experimenting with direct political deliberation. He suggests that by studying distant democracies, Western scholars might realize how truncated their public spaces have become and search for emancipatory methods for revitalizing public sphere deliberations.

This analysis begins with an overview of the role of referenda in both Western-style and emergent democracies. Then, utilizing a close reading of archival documents alongside social media posts, I examine Mongolia's 1945 and 2015 referenda. I compare the two referenda by presenting the reason for holding a vote, the political milieu at the time of the vote, voter participation, international reports, and vote outcome. To understand the use of Twitter during the 2015 referendum, I apply qualitative analysis and clustered argumentative groups. After examining each referendum separately, I compare the events to understand both the long-term effect of each referendum and the ways that contemporary Mongolian political deliberation can inform international democratization efforts.

Referenda

Referenda have been studied in Canada (Lea, 2006), Denmark (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004), England (Burnap, Gibson, Sloan, Southern, & William, 2015; Qvortrup, 2006), the European Union (Fossum & Menéndez, 2005), New Zealand (Aimer & Miller, 2002), the United States (Gastil, 2008) and U.S. territories such as Guam (Na'puti & Hahn, 2013). These studies address a range of questions from local policy to national independence. In each instance, scholars emphasize the need for quality public participation and debate before calling for a vote (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). In many nations, voters have been excluded from these deliberations due to their gender identity, race, or political status (Gastil, 2008). Yet, because these referenda have occurred in long-standing democracies, scholars are able to assume that many of the voters have experience with a democratic system and have received critical thinking training during their formative education.

Such democratic background and training is not a given in emergent democracies, such as Mongolia, where nearly half of the population was educated during a period of one-party, centralized socialist governance. The implications of this educational and social history are apparent in studies of referendum use in emergent and transitional democracies in Africa—specifically in Kenya (Pflanz, 2010), Egypt (Wing & Kassim, 2011), and South Sudan (Høigilt, Falch, & Rolandsen, 2010). For example, Pflanz's report of Kenya's 2010 referendum illustrates the ways that SMS and Twitter were used to monitor volunteers and officials at referendum polling locations. Using the online platform *uchaguzi* (Kiswahili for "election"), election monitors

reported that politicians were attempting to influence voters, prompting international reports and investigations with the aim of limiting future illegal election practices and violence. Studies have also addressed early attempts to hold SMS polling in emergent post-Soviet democracies, such as Kyrgyzstan (Husky & Hill, 2011) and Armenia (Harutyunyan, 2014). For example, a referendum sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme was successfully deployed in Armenia, but it received lower than expected participation, even after citizens agreed in advance to participate (Harutyunyan, 2014). These studies from across the former Soviet Union and eastern Africa point to external factors—from election violence, to technological failings, to exceptionally low turnout—that are not unheard of in settled democracies but that put a strain on emergent democracies that are working to not only carry out a referendum but also to establish a national voting habit.

Mongolia has held national, democratic elections since 1992. As Sabloff (2002) writes, Mongolian scholars look back to Chinggis Khaan's (AKA Genghis Khan) reign to situate their democracy as a "logical outgrowth of their history" (p. 20) and differentiate Mongolia from other postsocialist nations. Using text messages to participate in deliberation fits well into this history of mobile communicative networks. Mongolia's peaceful transition to democracy and multiparty political participation stand out among mass protests and at times violence that have occurred in other emergent democracies from the Soviet bloc (Ginsburg, 1995; Oleinik, 2012; Rossabi, 2005; Soni, 2004). For example, the only instance of election violence occurred in 2008, when protesters occupied the capital's square, violently demonstrating and destroying numerous state buildings and archives. Oleinik (2012) has linked these protests to institutional exclusion. The 2015 referendum may be framed as a way in which even the most rural Mongolians could be drawn into national deliberations.

Yet asking citizens for their opinions may not be enough to guarantee that all citizens would participate in a referendum (Gastil, 2008; McBride, 2005). Deliberative democracy also requires open and informed public participation (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). The use of new technologies in emergent democracies might be transitioning from Larry Diamond's "liberation technology" into "deliberation technology" (Pfister & Godana, 2012). The use of these technologies also requires that citizens trust government collection and use of data (Susanto & Goodwin, 2013) and requires caution among election forecasters who may be tempted overinterpret social media participation (Huberty, 2014). Citizens who feel excluded from government institutions are unlikely to offer their trust the first time that they are engaged or when a new technology emerges. As Sabloff's 2013 report indicates, many Mongolians express democratic ideals but do not anticipate democratic policies (Sabloff, 2013). Yet continual attempts at engagement, backed by sound democratic governance, may build the networks necessary for political engagement and deliberation. For example, in 2017, the Mongolian parliament met to discuss a constitutional reform that would legalize the use of deliberative polling. The work of trust building alongside technological development has the potential to engage Mongolia's remote and mobile citizenry in new forms of deliberative citizenship.

Mongolian Communicative Technologies

Mongolian scholars trace the integration of new technologies into pastoral-nomadic lifestyles to Chingghis Khaan and his adaptation of mobile technologies during military campaigns (Bold, 2014; Enkhtuvshin, n.d.). Juxtaposing modernity and tradition, these scholars explain that pastoral-nomadic

communities have a strong future outlook and work to adopt new technologies to enhance their traditional lifestyles (Diener, 2011.) Outside observers, however, have framed Mongolian and North Asian use and development of technology as stagnant. For example, Mumford (1963) alludes to Tibetan Buddhist monks (many Mongolians are or were Tibetan Buddhists) when he writes, "Western monks gave rise to more fertile and complex kinds of machinery than prayer wheels" (p. 35). Similarly, Adas (1989) writes that Marx believed "Asiatic societies, burdened by bloated and despotic but highly centralized governments, had stagnated for centuries and fallen behind the West" (p. 238).

Marxist technological determinism focused on communication and transportation infrastructure, as is evident in Mongolia's quick integration of electronic media (Myagmar, 2001). With the support of the Soviet Union, Mongolia invested in national radio (1934) and television services (1967). The use of these technologies was guided by Soviet media theory, which argued that public ownership of media should be designed to serve the interests of the working class. Communicative technologies were designed to disperse information to the public in a one-directional flow of information, with little attention paid to how the public might send information back to government authorities (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1963).

Rural Mongolian communities, however, did not lack deliberative opportunities. During the socialist period, groups such as families, schoolmates, coworkers, and *neg nutgiinkhan* (people from the same homeland) functioned similarly to the Russian *blat*, enforcing personal obligations and the norms of informal networks in formal contexts (Jargalsaikhan, 2012; Ledeneva, 2008). *Neg nutgiinkhan* included people who had moved to distant pasturelands or cities and tied them to communicative networks based on attachment to a pastureland traditionally used by their families. As such, the *neg nutgiinkhan* allowed private or sensitive information to travel across long spaces but confined trusted networks to historic connections as opposed to government officials or contemporary local communities. This practice facilitated private spheres of communication, but it could not inspire the type of public, inter-enclave deliberation necessary for a new democracy.

The democratic transition (1990–1992) was soon followed by Internet access. Access expanded rapidly in cities, but development in the countryside was slower. I first worked in Mongolia in 2004, and at that time we took satellite phones with us on trips to the countryside. These phones could be used for a few hours each day via cellular signals bounced off the signals transmitted by cruise ships. This cost-prohibitive method put cellular phones out of reach for most of Mongolia's rural population. When they needed to make a call, rural citizens traveled to the local post office to use a landline—a journey that required both extensive travel and time (because they had to wait at the post office for a free line and for the operator to connect their call).

By 2011, rural residents were no longer reliant on post office phone lines. Due to the successful implementation of the "E-Mongolia" program and funding from the World Bank, all rural and urban districts have mobile phone service. Rural herders now have access to satellite-based public phone service, and 34 of the largest districts have broadband Internet access (World Bank, 2011). The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2012) Asian media barometer reports that ownership of cell phones worldwide has stayed at a constant 80%. However, in Mongolia, 120% of the population owns a cellular phone. This unlikely statistic indicates

that many Mongolians own multiple cellular phones, which enables users to separate personal and business calls as well as to navigate the coverage and pricing schemes provided by competing cellular companies.

Because many Mongolian phones accommodate multiple SIM cards, offices such as the Communications Regulatory Commission of Mongolia count SIM cards rather than cellular phones. Its 2015 report indicates 3,068,200 active mobile subscribers in a nation of 2.9 million citizens. Of those mobile SIM cards, 2.2 million had 3G access and 1.9 million were used in smartphones (Communications Regulatory Commission of Mongolia, 2016). As a result of this expansive cellular coverage, Mongolia ranked 84th in the 2015 information and communication technologies rankings—a rank only two places below China (82) and well above other democracies with large pastoral-nomadic communities such as Kenya (124), India (131), Nepal (136), Pakistan (143), Afghanistan (156), and Tanzania (157).

Rural herders use their phones to access commodity price information and weather forecasts (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2012; Hay, 2014) as well as to access medical services (World Bank, 2014), receive storm warnings (Hahn, 2017; Mercy Corps, 2016), and find educational information (UNICEF, 2013). The World Bank, the Dutch government, and Xac Bank (Mongolia) have offered microloans for training and installation of solar panels throughout Mongolia. By 2014, more than 100,146 solar panels had been installed throughout Mongolia (Hay, 2014), allowing rural herders to charge their phones far from the electrical grid.

Mongolia's quickly expanding ICT infrastructure has enabled a break with Soviet media theory, giving control of the infrastructure to private ICT suppliers and resulting in bidirectional engagements between citizens and the government. The use of cell phones enables the government to send information to rural citizens and enables citizens to send requests or demands back to the government. Mongolia's development of bidirectional communicative networks is unique and remarkable among post-Soviet and Central Asian nations, which tend to concentrate political power and discourage public discourse (Fish, 2001). Many post-Soviet nations expanded their ICT networks, but, as Vanderhill (2015) notes, an open ICT network when coupled with an authoritarian government does not result in democratization. Mongolia stands out as a post-Soviet democracy that uses ICT networks to create programs such as the "11-11" program, a phone line developed in 2012 for citizens to call and express their opinions (Geismar, 2015). Additionally, between 2013 and 2014, the mayor of Ulaanbaatar called for three SMS referenda on the issues of car regulation and recycling (Dierkes, 2015; Zoljargal, 2013). The success of these city-based referenda was used as preparation for the 2015 national referendum via text messaging.

Mongolian Referenda of 1945 and 2015

1945 Referendum

Mongolians date their independence from China to 1911, when Chinese officials were driven out of the country and a group of Mongolian lords and lamas declared independence from the Qing Empire. However, a series of Russian and Chinese treaties brought this sovereignty into question (Mansvetov, 1945). For example, "while the 1924 Sino-Soviet treaty gave China sovereignty over Outer Mongolia, the Soviets didn't actually agree to remove their troops from Mongolia" (Baabar, 1999, p. 257). This political stalemate continued throughout World War II, and China renewed its attempts to reclaim Mongolia in 1945. It is for

these reasons that the Yalta Agreement specifically recognized Outer Mongolia. Although Chiang Kai-shek was reluctant to accept this portion of the Yalta Agreement, he agreed to do so "after a face-saving formula of a Mongolian referendum" (Haining, 1991, p. 38). Today, Mongolians mark the 1945 referendum as their first democratic vote (Amarsaikhan, 2015). Investigating this referendum not only provides a window into the development of Mongolian political participation but also creates a baseline from which to understand the successes and failures of the 2015 referendum.

For a month before the 1945 vote, the Mongolian-Soviet referendum committee organized local commissions in all districts of Mongolia. Seminars and meetings were held with local commissioners, the Socialist Party, the Revolutionary Youth, women's groups, and union groups. Men and women over age 18 were eligible to vote ("Mongolian Plebiscite Begins," 1945), and both nomadic and settled Mongolians were encouraged to participate (Pravda, 1945b, p.4). It is estimated that 60,000 Mongolians participated in these voter education sessions (Ivanov & Prikhodov, 1945, para. 19). One thousand polling places were established throughout Mongolia, allowing rural and urban participation ("Mongol City Votes Freedom," 1945). A report sent to the Soviet commissar of foreign affairs by the Soviet ambassador to the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR), I. A. Ivanov, and the advisor to the Mongolian Communist Party, Prikhodov, summarizes the success and failures of these preparations in the MPR.

> Many of the polling stations witnessed spontaneous mass demonstrations, and the voters arrived at the stations with flags, banners, and portraits of comrade Stalin and the leaders of the MPR. After the voting many *bagas* [neighborhoods] and *soums* [districts] witnessed spontaneous people's festivities, which saw horse racing, archery and wrestling competitions, etc. The best horses and horsemen were selected to deliver the results of the voting to *soums* [districts] and *aimags* [provinces]. The delivery of the voting registers was considered to be an honored task and every messenger considered it a matter of honor to arrive earlier than the others. (Ivanov & Prikhodov, 1945, para. 26)

Li Fazhang, deputy internal minister of China, was sent by Chiang Kai-shek to observe the referendum vote (Batbayar, n.d.). Fazhang's committee, which had sent observers to both rural and urban voting locations, indicated approval of the results. This led to Chang Kai-shek's formal acceptance of the referendum and Mongolian independence as an autonomous satellite state of the Soviet Union. Speaking with a reporter, Fazhang said, "After this plebiscite, Mongolia's status will finally be legally formalized. I'm very pleased" (Pravda, 1945c, p. 4).

Although the referendum was accepted as valid, reporters and scholars have grappled with voting irregularities. *Pravda*, the official paper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, gave glowing reports of voter participation. However, international press coverage and government reports such as those filed by Ivanov and Prikhodov give a more complex view of voter participation. "There were cases of eyewashing, when local commissions, desiring to show their 'good' work, without asking the voters, marked their opinions in the voting lists and even faked signatures to prove the 'hundred percent' participation of the voters in the plebiscite" (Ivanov & Prikhodov, 1945, para. 29). *The New York Times* asserted that the "results of such plebiscites, conducted under Russian auspices, are forgone conclusions. This referendum differed from most

others held in disputed territory only in being absolutely unanimous" ("One-Way Vote in Mongolia," 1945, p.18). Baabar (1999), a Mongolian historian, writes:

> Voters had to sign either the word "approve" or the word "refrain" printed onto the ballot papers, or else put one's finger print on either of the two, which required supervision. The staging of such a political farce greatly tarnished the substance and the essence of the referendum. (p. 412)

Despite these irregularities, the 1945 referendum ensured Mongolia's independence. Later, the 1950 Sino-Soviet treaty "affirm[ed] complete guarantee of the independent status of the Mongolian People's Republic as a result of the referendum of 1945" (Ballis, 1951, p. 176). For many post–World War II Chinese and Soviet officials, the Mongolian referendum was the one topic on which they were willing to agree (Atkinson, 1947).

Participation in the 1945 Referendum

Few reports of the 1945 referendum provide detailed accounts of citizen participation. One example that goes beyond the general reports of national excitement and unity is a field report that was published in *Pravda* on October 22, 1945. It provides representative quotes from a retired person, a worker, a poet, and a professor. For example, a 63-year-old retired Mongolian is quoted saying, "What happy faces everyone had today! I along with everyone, am happy" (Pravda, 1945a, p.4). A few days later, *Pravda* (1945c) reported that the referendum indicated citizens' devotion to independent Mongolia. It is important to note that quotes included in *Pravda* were selected and approved by government propaganda officers, who were unlikely to select unflattering quotations. They are cited here because they are among the few reports of citizen response to the referendum.

2015 Referendum

Although Mongolia began holding democratic elections in 1992, the country did not hold another national referendum until 2015. This gap in the use of referenda can be attributed to many factors, including socialist policy making, a reliance on Soviet political advisors, and increasing centralization of Mongolia's government during the socialist period of 1924–1990. When Mongolia transitioned to democracy in 1990, there were calls for referenda. For example, O. Dashbalbar's (2008) 1990 speech to parliament, "A Referendum," calls for a vote on foreign ownership of Mongolian lands. While a referendum was not held at the time, a provision for referenda was included in Mongolia's 1992 democratic constitution, paving the way for the 2015 vote. It should be noted, however, that the 2015 referendum was neither constitutionally nor legally binding. Rather, it was a question posed to the public by the government.

The Mongolian political milieu of 2015 was much different than that of 1945. The 1945 referendum was held among a citizenry who were largely illiterate, unaccustomed to voting, and facing numerous political upheavals. Contemporary Mongolia's 97.5% literacy rate, peaceful transition to democracy in 1990, improving economy, and expansive digital communicative network set the foundation for high rates of

political participation, even among the most rural of citizens. But reliance on the ICT infrastructure also may have caused politicians to overlook the value of public voter education used in 1945.

The 2015 referendum was called in response to national conflicts over mining rights, herding spaces, and landownership of the Oyu Tolgoi mine located in the south Gobi Desert. L. Bold (2014), Mongolia's minister of foreign affairs (2012–2014), has described this issue as "so hotly debated because it was our very first strategic business agreement with a multinational corporation" (para. 6). While Bold signaled openness to mining, other Mongolians argued that the country must stop mining and deliberate before committing to future mining contracts. The resulting argumentative clash raised questions about who has the right to speak, protest, and sign mining contracts in Mongolia (Bulag, 2009; Jackson, 2014; Suzuki, 2013). The 2015 referendum responded to these questions by asking all citizens to vote on the status of the Oyu Tolgoi contract. In January 2015, Saikhanbileg announced a four-day-long referendum by SMS that would ask Mongolians whether they preferred foreign direct investment at Oyu Tolgoi or a period of austerity. In conducting this poll, government officials stood to gain significant political capital by both proving that citizens support mining and indicating a willingness to listen to their constituents (Dierkes, 2015).

When the 2015 referendum by SMS was announced, Mongolian government officials and media spokespeople were careful to specify that the referendum was neither politically nor legally binding and that it was intended only as a way for the public to express their opinion about mining policy. Yet national and international observers framed Mongolia's 2015 referendum as a legitimate vote, providing fodder for both citizen deliberation among those who were prepared for a vote and those who understood the referendum as the beginning (not end) of political deliberation. These multiple starting points for deliberation about the Oyu Tolgoi contract are evidence of a situation of dissensus (Zarefsky, 2009). The referendum did not solidify public opinion. Yet, by holding the vote, Mongolia may have produced a test case for understanding how mobile technologies might encourage more comprehensive political participation among both pastoral-nomadic and settled Mongolian citizens (Tencic, 2015).

2015 Participation

The 2015 referendum occurred over a four-day period, between January 31 and February 3, 2015, when every cell phone number, except for very recently acquired numbers, received one vote that could be sent free of charge. The referendum question, as translated by the University College London (Geismar, 2015) stated:

> Together let's choose our pathway of development for Mongolia 2015–2016:
>
> 1. Set the price [meaning to reverse the depreciation of the Mongolian currency, the tugrik, or MNT, and rising inflation] by deciding on Oyu Tolgoi [a copper and gold mine] and other big construction projects.
> 2. Set the price by reducing our spending and consumption, and discipline the economy.
>
> Please send the number in front of your response to 15151111.

Announcing the referendum on national television, Saikhanbileg stated:

> I think it is not [a] bad thing to ask the public about solving problems. The people are actually the decision-makers. They vote and choose the members of government and parliament. There is no wrong thing to ask the public once. I want the public to be very active on this poll and the economists must hear their views. If this measure really works successfully, I am ready to give the plan of works that shows a list of measures to be taken through the first or second options. I hope it will help to solve the problem, and will ease the issues for MPs to make their decisions. (cited in Onorzul, Purevsambuu, Khuder, & Amarsaihan, 2015, para. 59)

Saikhanbileg's statement indicates an openness to debate and citizen participation. However, as Mohammed (2016) argues, public political arguments such as Saikhanbileg's have multiple goals, both individualistic and collective (p. 228). Mongolian and international analysts identified Saikhanbileg's collectivist goals in calling for a referendum as an attempt to engage voters (Barradas, 2015) and to demonstrate that the government was reaching out to Mongolian citizens (Dierkes, 2015). Other scholars suggested that Saikhanbileg had individual goals in calling for the referendum, such as demonstrating political capital (Wilson & Hornby, 2015), decentralizing responsibility for a (potentially failing) mining policy (Batbileg, 2015; Geismar, 2015), and increasing international investor confidence (Edwards, 2015a).

Although the vote was sent to 3 million SIM cards, only 356,841 votes were cast and 302,008 votes counted. Just over 56% of voters were in support of option one—signing the Oyu Tolgoi contract. Some scholars and commentators attributed the low participation rate to a poorly phrased question; others deplored the lack of mutual exclusivity between the voting options (Dierkes, 2015; Geismar, 2015; Tsenddoo, 2015) or explained that the second option actually constituted a threat of national and financial ruin (Geismar, 2015). Unlike the 1945 referendum, for which we are reliant on government and scholarly reports to understand the perspective of citizens, there is a large body of comments from citizens who participated in the 2015 referendum.

The next section presents an analysis of the ways that Mongolians debated the merits of both holding a referendum via SMS and the specific 2015 referendum question. This analysis draws from tweets marked with either the hashtag #15151111 (the phone number to which voters were to text their vote) or #саналасуулга (the Mongolian word for "referendum," "survey," or "poll"), which were posted between January 29 and February 4, 2015. Location data posted by tweeters indicates that online discussants are from across Mongolia and represent both urban and rural citizens. Utilizing close reading and cluster analysis, I have identified four argumentative clusters among these tweets: (a) support for the referendum, (b) calls for a third option, (c) satire, and (d) rejection of the referendum.

Support for the Referendum

Many Mongolians supported the referendum and worked to ensure that citizens were engaged in the vote. Some tweeted screenshots of their vote for option 1 (OBT, 2015). Others, such as Shagi

(2015), voiced support for option two, by tweeting "1. Not working, MNT goes up 2. IMF [International Monetary Fund] healing, MNT goes down let's select #2 #PM #15151111." These tweets were commonly short and posted by individuals who included information about their mining-sector, government, or advocacy jobs in their Twitter profile.

Calls for a Third Option

When he announced the referendum, Saikhanbileg indicated that "there is no third option" (City Hall of Mongolia, 2015). Yet several Mongolians criticized the referendum for either providing non-mutually exclusive options or not presenting a third option. Tweeters such as Deni G. (2015) and Batjargal (2015) suggested that voters should choose both options one and two. Others suggested voting between the options, such as texting 1.5 (Zuulaakk, 2015) or refusing to vote because neither option was satisfactory (Jambaldorj, 2015). The computer program used to tabulate referendum votes was designed to cancel any vote that reported a number other than 1 or 2, so votes for 1.5 and 3 were not counted in the final tally. This may partially account for why 356,841 votes were cast but only 302,008 votes counted in the final tabulation.

Satire

Not all tweeters directly engaged the referendum topic. A comparison picked up by the international press was between the referendum and the television program *The X Factor* (Baika, 2015)—the allegation being that the vote was a mere popularity contest. Others tweeters rephrased both options and warned other voters that neither option was correct (Baatulga, 2015; Dayaderrkh, 2015). Other satirical posts demonstrated the highest level of social media acumen, utilizing memes or clever verbal twists along with photographs (Marzan, 2015). As many satirists only posted once using the hashtags identified by this study, it is difficult to determine whether their satire was an attempt to avoid entering deliberation or was a reflection of long-term deliberation regarding the Oyu Tolgoi contract.

Rejection of the Referendum

Finally, a group of tweeters specifically rejected the 2015 referendum. This rejection was specific to the 2015 vote, not the method of SMS referendum. An example is ErikF's (2015) tweet, posted on February 2, 2015, two days into the voting period: "Saikhanbileg surveys 3 million people, 160,000 answered, 90% of citizens resisted. This was a stupid question." Similarly, a commenter responding to Geismar's (2015) online report of the referendum wrote that the "majority of public did not respond because the poll itself was followed with scare tactic, [do] not choose No. 1 [because there is a] possibility the public will more suffer" (Tsogt, 2015, para. 1).

Other commentators called for politicians to reject the referendum's outcome. This rejection was based on the possibility that foreigners and teenagers were casting votes, which led to the perception of illegality or fraud in the vote (Namkhaijantsan, 2015). And some tweeters questioned whether the referendum itself was legal, though they did not specify the cause of their doubt (Dashzebeg, 2015; Unurbayar, 2015).

Domestic and International Media Reports

Results from the 2015 referendum were announced through national and international media channels and were received differently by the Mongolian and international public. The Mongolian media proclaimed the vote to be a "flop," and reporters emphasized the low voter turnout and the small margin of error between votes for options one and two (Graubner, 2015). Some international news agencies agreed with this interpretation. For example, Oman Daily Observer (2015) reported that "netizens ridiculed the exercise, decrying the poll as a 'sham' and an 'obvious attempt by the government to divert liability.'" (para. 5). Keen (2015), a reporter for *Mineweb*, suggested that the 12% gap between voters supporting options one and two was not a disaster, but it did indicate the need for caution among investors.

Reports written for an international audience with an emphasis on mining took a different angle. In these publications, the vote was reframed as proof that Mongolians support international mining. For example, in an interview with Reuters, B. Anhbayar, the Mongolian Investment Group chief executive officer, indicated that Mongolia was about to approve the Oyu Tolgoi contract (Edwards, 2015b). And *Mining.com*, an online mining journal, ran an article titled "Mongolian Text Poll Impact: Dust Off Your Exploration Plans" (Els, 2015, para. 1). *The International Business Times* similarly reported that the vote gave Saikhanbileg a mandate to negotiate the mining contract (Neicho, 2015). *Bloomberg News* interviewed Dale Choi, head of Independent Mongolian Metals and Mining Research, who stated, "I give [the prime minister] credit for going to the public because the one thing that all these people will listen to is the public opinion" (Kohn, 2015, para. 10).

This misalignment of national and international reporting could have significant impacts for Mongolia. Following the 2015 referendum, Saikhanbileg proceeded as if he had the political capital to finalize a contract with Oyu Tolgoi. Zarefsky (1992) argues that it is risky to interpret election outcomes as ending a debate and establishing a political mandate, and this risk seems to have been played out in Mongolia. While Saikhanbileg interpreted the referendum as an end point of political discussion regarding the Oyu Tolgoi contract, for many citizens, such as those who responded to the referendum on Twitter, it may have been just the beginning or an interesting waypoint in the deliberation.

Lessons From Mongolia's 1945 and 2015 Referenda

By calling for a referendum in 2015, Mongolian politicians (perhaps unintentionally) pressed the limits of Soviet media theory and explored the use of two-way direct communication between citizens and the state. Cellular and online deliberation cannot replace traditional networks such as the *neg nutgiinkhan*, but they do utilize a public screen to facilitate public political argument among distant communities that were previously unconnected. Whereas in 1945, the Mongolian government provided education for citizens followed by a mandatory unanimous vote, the 2015 referendum occurred quickly, with little preparation or time for citizen deliberation. This lack of time for deliberation before the vote may explain why voter participation was low and the margin of success was minimal. Yet, following Zarefsky's (2009) assessment of diverse and undecided publics, we can see that low voter turnout might not have indicated a lack of interest, but rather that voters were not yet ready to conclude the debate over an Oyu Tolgoi contract. The

diversity of tweets posted during the voting period does, however, indicate that voters were ready to engage in deliberation.

As Mohammed (2016) has argued, public political arguments are multipurposive activity types. This diversity is seen in the 1945 referendum, which confirmed Mongolia's independence as a Soviet-satellite state and smoothed relations between China and the Soviet Union. This event was neither designed nor did it serve to facilitate formal public political deliberation among the Mongolian public. The 2015 referendum offered a similar diversity of goals, from easing tensions with foreign mining corporations to (attempting) to provide political capital for Prime Minister Saikhanbileg's economic agenda. Both events also had unintentional, long-term implications. Although the 1945 referendum was not designed to facilitate rural public deliberation, a report of the event and accompanying images of herders at polling places is commonly found in Mongolian schoolbooks, functioning as a touchstone for democratic voting. A similar touchstone was established by the 2015 SMS referendum, which proved to even the most rural citizens that the national government can directly engage rural and mobile populations. As a herder interviewed by Tencic (2015) describes,

> If you are receiving a message on your mobile phone from the municipality, this sort of a buzz makes you feel good that your municipality is making an inquiry from you personally, so this can drive you to respond. People get inspired, they really think their voices can reach the government and something can take place. (para. 18)

Additionally, the 2015 referendum encouraged citizens to turn to other social media platforms such as Twitter to engage other citizens, expanding communicative networks via public screen deliberations. By holding a referendum via SMS, the Mongolian government may have set new a precedent for public political argument and voting. In January 2016, the Mongolian parliament announced that it was working on a law on public referenda. The drafted law would put any issue that had not been resolved after three parliamentary sessions to a public referendum (Khuder, 2016). Through these developments, Mongolia is setting an example for political discourse among mobile and rural populations. Nations from Kenya to Kyrgyzstan, may find Mongolia's experiment informative for their own use of digital screens to encourage public deliberation. SMS referenda, which encourage new deliberative networks and utilize ICTs that are already in the hands of rural citizens, may provide pathways to political engagement previously reserved for rich and urban citizens. From herders' and social media users' statements, it is evident that even if the 2015 referendum was a flop, the experience will have a long-lasting impact on public political discourse in Mongolia and other developing democracies.

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