

Stumbling block or stepping stone? The influence of direct democracy on individual participation in parliamentary elections

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A B S T R A C T

This paper evaluates whether direct democracy supplements or undermines traditional representative democracy. While a first approach assumes that a culture of active direct democracy stimulates citizens' political interest and ultimately bolsters participation in parliamentary elections, a competing hypothesis proposes a negative relationship between the frequency of ballot measures and electoral participation due to voter fatigue and decreased significance of elections. Our multilevel analysis of the 26 Swiss cantons challenges recent studies conducted for the U.S. states: In the Swiss context, where direct democracy is more important in the political process than the less salient parliamentary elections, greater use of direct democratic procedures is associated with a lower individual probability to participate in elections. Furthermore, by distinguishing between short and long-term effects of direct democracy, we show that the relationship observed is of a long-term nature and can therefore be seen as a result of adaptive learning processes rather than of instantaneous voter fatigue.

Keywords:

Direct democracy
Electoral participation
Voting turnout
Switzerland
Institutions

1. Introduction

With regard to direct democracy, much scholarly attention has recently been devoted to the educative effect of popular rights (Smith and Tolbert, 2004). In this vein, salient ballot propositions and the use of direct democratic processes are associated with increases in voters' political information, knowledge, and interest (Altman, 2002, 2008; Benz and Stutzer, 2004; Lassen, 2005; Mendelsohn and Cutler, 2000; Smith, 2002; Smith and Tolbert, 2004; Tolbert et al., 2003; Tolbert and Bowen, 2008; Wagschal, 1997) as well as with higher levels of political efficacy or confidence in government responsiveness (Bowler and Donovan, 2002; Hero and Tolbert, 2004; Mendelsohn and Cutler, 2000).

However, concerning voter turnout, existing empirical studies have shown to be somewhat inconclusive with regard to the relationship between direct citizen involvement and electoral participation. The first set of findings assumes that a culture of active direct democracy indeed bolsters

representative democracy (Hajnal and Lewis, 2003; Lacey, 2005; Smith, 2001; Tolbert et al., 2001). Using the number of initiatives on the ballot to measure saliency, Tolbert and Smith (2005), for example, conclude that an additional initiative may boost a state's turnout in presidential elections by almost one percent and by almost two percent in mid-term elections, all other factors held constant. In contrast to this enhancing effect of referendums and initiatives (found mainly for the American States), some studies of the Swiss context indicate a negative relationship between direct and representative democracy due to voter fatigue and the decreased significance of elections (Bühlmann et al., 2003; Linder, 2005). In this view, it is argued that increased opportunities for direct participation undermine a system's ability to present salient elections and also foster electoral fatigue at the expense of the electoral democracy. It is at this point of controversy that we begin our examination and strive to provide more conclusive evidence in resolving this debate.

This paper evaluates the relationship between direct and representative democracy, asking whether direct democracy serves to supplement or undermine representative democracy. Our investigation goes beyond the existing literature in two ways: First, we differentiate between the short and long-

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term effects direct democracy has on an individual's propensity to vote in parliamentary elections. Second, in contrast to extant empirical work, we use Bayesian multilevel analysis in order to provide an analysis that is more systematic, as well as methodologically sounder. Most existing investigations have attempted to explain direct democratic aspects of electoral participation *either* at the individual level or at the aggregate level (Anduiza, 2002; Anduiza et al., 2008; Bühlmann et al., 2003; Everson, 1981; Freitag, 2005; Smith, 2001; Tolbert and Smith, 2005). While some have indeed highlighted the need for multilevel data in order to scrutinize the effect of direct democracy on voters' attitudes and behavior, they have failed to apply the appropriate method (Bowler and Donovan, 2002; Hero and Tolbert, 2004; Lacey, 2005; Smith, 2002; Smith and Tolbert, 2004; Tolbert et al., 2003). By employing the proper research design and a more sophisticated estimation technique, our investigation provides an improved approach to analyzing the micro-macro phenomenon at hand.

The units of our quantitative comparison are the federal states of Switzerland – the cantons. As most industrialized countries make little to no use of direct democratic instruments, international comparisons of direct democracy's effects on representative democracy are difficult. However, the Swiss cantons present a suitable alternative. These 26 sub-national units provide an excellent opportunity to test the impact of direct democracy – one of Switzerland's unique institutional arrangements (Altman, 2008; Kriesi, 2005). While some cantons witness extensive use of direct democratic rights, reflecting a participatory political culture, others are much more strongly oriented toward a pure representative democracy (Freitag, 2006; Linder, 2005: 272; Vatter, 2002). In methodological terms, Switzerland, with its more than two-dozen cantonal units, offers many clear advantages: "Because the Swiss cantons are entities within the same national political system, there are many characteristics which they have in common, and which may therefore be treated as constants" (Lijphart, 2002: 3). In this sense, the Swiss cantons are particularly well-equipped to meet the demands of a most similar systems research design (Vatter, 2002; Vatter and Freitag, 2007). Given that a real experimental situation cannot be achieved in the context of our research question, the analysis of the Swiss cantons can be seen as the best alternative available (e.g. Lijphart, 1975; Przeworski and Teune, 1970: 31 et seqq.; Shadish et al., 2002: 13 et seqq.; Snyder, 2001).¹ Additionally, the 26

cantonal democracies provide a sufficiently high number of investigative units for a quantitative research design (Vatter, 2002: 2).

Interesting patterns of similarities and differences between Switzerland and the United States of America can be observed at the sub-national level. While the differences mainly concern the governments and party systems, the Swiss cantons and U.S. states exhibit noticeable parallels such as strong federalism, direct democracy, and a relatively low degree of state intervention. In particular, it has to be noted that the 26 Swiss Cantons are comparable to the 24 American states with the initiative, about which much of the previous work has been conducted. Keeping this in mind, our choice of the Swiss cantons as the units of our analysis becomes even more relevant, as our results differ from those found by recent studies on the U.S. states (Tolbert and Smith, 2005; Tolbert et al., 2001, 2003).

Our main findings can be summarized as follows: The empirical analyses show that extensive direct democracy is not associated with an increased individual probability to participate in elections (as suggested for the U.S. states), neither in the short nor in the long term. Quite to the contrary, the increased exercise of popular rights tends to hinder individual participation in cantonal parliamentary elections, all else being equal. Put simply, direct democracy seems to *detract*, rather than attract more voters.

The following comparative analysis of the relationship between direct and representative democracy in the Swiss cantons will occur in four stages. First, voter turnout in cantonal parliamentary elections is reviewed and an overview of the uses of direct democracy in the Swiss cantons is presented. Second, we discuss the theoretical considerations and hypotheses regarding the relationship between direct democracy and electoral participation. Following the presentation of the contextual and theoretical background, the methodology and influencing variables are introduced and the various hypotheses are subjected to the scrutiny of systematic statistical evaluation. Keeping the outcomes of past studies in mind, is exposure to direct democracy associated with increased or decreased participation in parliamentary elections? This question is further developed by measuring both short and long-term outcomes as well as by applying an appropriate research design. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the findings.

2. Direct democracy and voter turnout in the Swiss cantons

Table 1 depicts the use of direct democracy in the Swiss cantons from 1995 to 1999 and the average voter turnout rate between 2000 and 2003.² It should be noted that official statistics regarding voter turnout rates in cantonal parliamentary elections for the cantons Appenzell Inner

¹ We are of course aware of the fact that a sub-national analysis of Switzerland cannot completely overcome the problems of analyzing the causal effect direct democracy has on voter turnout. While internationally we do not find any countries with a similarly high level of direct democracy as in Switzerland, *within* Switzerland we do not have the fully counterfactual outcome, i.e. no direct democracy at all (see Rubin, 1974). However, focusing on the actual use of direct democratic instruments some cantons come very close to the counterfactual outcome in that they exhibit almost no use of direct democratic rights (see discussion on page 6). Individuals in these cantons can therefore serve as our – non-randomly assigned – control group (Achen, 1986; Campbell and Stanley, 1963). Moreover, following King et al. (1995: 477) it is important for the evaluation of causal explanations in political science to test a given hypothesis in different contexts and confront the respective findings. Because previous research on direct democracy's impact has largely focused on the U.S. states, adding empirical data for the Swiss case can therefore be seen as a further step toward causal inference.

² The selection of these time periods corresponds to the empirical analyses of the influence of direct democracy on individual voter turnout – the variable to be explained.

Table 1
Use of direct democratic instruments and participation in elections in the cantons.

Canton	Average annual number of total ballot measures (1995–1999)	Short-term use of direct democracy			Avg. participation rates in cantonal elections (2000–2003)
		Ballot measures six months prior to elections	Concurrent cantonal ballot measures	Concurrent national ballot measures	
ZH	15.0	7	0	0	37.2
BL	13.6	1	0	0	33.5
SO	10.8	3	1	1	49.8
SH	9.8	7	0	1	59.2
GR	7.4	0	0	0	–
AG	7.0	7	0	1	39.4
AI	6.8	1	0	0	–
AR	6.2	1	0	0	–
GL	5.6	14	0	1	44.7
UR	5.2	2	1	1	50.4
NW	5.2	1	0	1	54.4
GE	5.0	0	0	0	37.0
SG	4.8	1	0	1	37.8
SZ	4.8	3	0	1	47.3
OW	3.8	4	0	1	50.9
BS	3.4	0	0	0	41.4
ZG	3.4	1	0	0	45.9
LU	3.2	1	0	0	50.4
BE	3.0	1	0	0	30.1
TG	3.0	1	0	1	31.6
VD	2.8	3	0	1	37.2
TI	2.5	1	0	0	64.2
NE	2.3	2	0	0	42.5
VS	2.0	1	0	1	62.3
FR	1.6	2	0	0	42.1
JU	1.0	0	0	0	54.4
Av.	5.4	2.5	0.1	0.5	45.4

Note: Ordered according to the average number of ballot measures decided upon annually. Source: *Année politique suisse* (various years); Abbreviations of the cantons: Argovia (AG), Appenzell Inner Rhodes (AI), Appenzell Outer Rhodes (AR), Basel-Country (BL), Basel-Town (BS), Berne (BE), Fribourg (FR), Geneva (GE), Glarus (GL), Grisons (GR), Jura (JU), Lucerne (LU), Neuchâtel (NE), Nidwalden (NW), Obwalden (OW), Schaffhausen (SH), Schwyz (SZ), Solothurn (SO), St. Gall (SG), Ticino (TI), Thurgovia (TG), Uri (UR), Vaud (VD), Valais (VS), Zug (ZG), Zurich (ZH). Official statistics regarding voter turnout rates in cantonal parliamentary elections for the cantons Appenzell Inner Rhodes, Appenzell Outer Rhodes, and Grisons are unavailable.

Rhodes, Appenzell Outer Rhodes, and Grisons are unavailable.

As illustrated in Table 1, the average voter turnout rate for all cantons between 2000 and 2003 amounts to 45.4 percent. While the turnout rate in parliamentary elections is comparatively low in Switzerland, considerable variation nevertheless exists between the cantons. In some cases, variances of more than 30 percentage points can be observed between the cantonal democracies. Because voters in the Swiss cantons vary substantially in terms of their propensity to participate in cantonal elections, the question surfaces as to *why* these disparities exist.

At the same time, the data also portray a considerable degree of cantonal variance in terms of ballot measures, i.e. the average number of yearly (facultative and mandatory) referendums and initiatives that took place.³ Overall, Zurich boasts the most frequent exercise of cantonal direct

democracy; the cantons of Jura, Fribourg, and Valais are the most reserved in this respect. Further inspection of Table 1 clearly illustrates that the Swiss cantons also exhibit a marked variance in terms of short-term usage of these popular rights. While citizens in the cantons Glarus, Schaffhausen, Argovia, and Zurich decided on 7–14 ballot measures six months prior to the cantonal parliamentary elections, no ballot measures were voted on during this time period in four cantons (Grisons, Geneva, Basel-Town and Jura). Finally, in 12 cantons citizens had to decide on national ballot measures concurrent to cantonal parliamentary elections, while both cantonal parliamentary elections and cantonal ballot measures were decided upon on the same day in only two of the 26 cantons (Solothurn and Uri) (between 2000 and 2003).

3. Theories and hypotheses regarding the influence of direct democracy on electoral participation

This article evaluates the relationship between direct and representative democracy. Viewed analytically, this inquiry forces us to take hierarchical structures into account, as the assumption is posited that a macro-level condition (direct democracy) is related to micro-level behavior (the decision to participate in an election).

³ The most common forms of referendums in the Swiss cantons are mandatory referendums, which account for more than 80 percent of all cantonal referendums (Trechsel, 2000: 33). Because of the rare occurrence of facultative referendums, we do not distinguish between mandatory and facultative referendums in the Swiss cantons and use the total annual number of referendums.

Theoretically, interactions with one's social surroundings can shape individual choices; however, an individual's behavior can also be traced back solely to the observation of one's environment. A specific incentive offered by the individual's economic and socio-political surroundings can influence the individual to act in a particular manner (e.g., Huckfeldt et al., 1993; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1987).⁴ From the perspective of neo-institutionalism, political institutions have the ability to mold individual preferences and stimulate or limit behavioral options by means of certain incentive mechanisms (Hall and Taylor, 1996; Immergut, 1998; Mayntz and Scharpf, 1995). In other words, contextual conditions, such as direct democratic institutions, act as opportunity structures and influence individual attitudes and personal behavioral patterns (Anderson and Singer, 2008). According to comparative studies on voter turnout, incentive mechanisms encompass aspects of the electoral, party, and government systems, as well as electoral organizational arrangements (e.g., aspects of electoral law or the existence of compulsory voting). This type of institutional research perspective places a broad critical focus on incentives or possible institutionalized barriers that coincide with participation in an election (Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Franklin, 2004; Jackman and Miller, 1995; Ladner and Milner, 1999; Norris, 2004).⁵

With respect to the influence of direct democracy on individual participation in parliamentary elections, two competing hypotheses can be formulated. The first approach assumes a culture of extensive and intensively exercised direct democracy that stimulates citizens' propensity to participate in elections (*boost-hypothesis*). For instance, Smith (2001), in contrast to Everson (1981), points out that in U.S. states where important issues are often brought to the ballot box, higher voter turnout rates can be observed. Tolbert et al. (2003: 25) conclude that this boost-effect of direct democracy is strongest in the context of elections with low turnout and low voter information and with fewer sources of mobilization. In such elections, marginal voters may be particularly sensitive to those few existing sources of mobilization, such as ballot measures. Similarly, direct democracy can provide information about and generate interest in an election, which in turn may be related to higher voter participation. In most of these studies it is assumed that the existence and exercise of direct democracy fosters debate and communication among citizens, aids in developing political efficacy and competencies, and ultimately stimulates voters' political interest (Anduiza et al., 2008). Furthermore, in direct democracies, regular participation in the democratic process fosters the

development of a participatory political culture in which the information costs of upcoming elections are reduced and the act of voting is considered to be a value in and of itself (Hajnal and Lewis, 2003; Mendelsohn and Cutler, 2000; Smith, 2002). Additionally, the stimulating effect of ballot measures on voter turnout is said to vary according to the time period between such procedures and subsequent parliamentary elections (see Benz and Stutzer, 2004): The shorter this period, the stronger the effect. The stimulating force of direct democracy on voter turnout is highest when decisions on ballot measures and elections are concurrent – when they take place on the same day (see also Geys, 2006: 652). From these assessments, we formulate the following working hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a. The more frequently ballot initiatives and referendums are voted upon, the greater the likelihood that an individual will participate in a parliamentary election (long-term effect).

Hypothesis 1b. The stimulating effect of ballot measures on participation becomes stronger if such procedures occur shortly before or concurrent to elections (short-term effect).

The antithesis to these essentially positive conjectures would then suggest a negative relationship between direct and representative democracy (*trade-off hypothesis*). There are at least two theoretical streams supporting this hypothesis: First, the structural argument posits that both ballot initiatives and referendums limit the competencies of government, parliament, and political parties. In other words, increased opportunities for direct participation (as offered by a particular system) can undermine that system's ability to present salient elections (Anduiza et al., 2008; Jackman and Miller, 1995; Linder, 2005). The voter recognizes that he or she is in a position to make authoritative, binding decisions on important issues, independently and without recourse to traditional legislators. From this perspective, the content of policy is determined primarily during the initiative process, and not during (less salient) elections. In other words, what role do legislative elections play at all if important legislative matters will be directly decided by the citizenry anyway? According to this reasoning, the more effective a direct democracy is, the lesser the need for electoral democracy. This creates a strong direct democratic political culture: Due to motivational reasons and an unfavorable cost-benefit-ratio, one could expect lower turnout in legislative elections in those cantons where direct democracy is quite frequently exercised (Bühlmann et al., 2003; Linder, 2005: 320–323). Second, when multiple access points of the shared decision-making process exist, it is conceivable that a certain electoral fatigue could arise with regard to ballot measures and elections, mainly at the expense of the (less salient) latter (Bowler and Donovan, 1998; van Egmond et al., 1998; Franklin, 2004; Jackman and Miller, 1995: 483; Rallings et al., 2003). Selb (2008: 333) recently demonstrated that in the case of a high number of concurrent ballot measures voters are "limited in their information-processing capacities". Therefore and according to the aforementioned arguments, increased opportunities for the voter to exercise his or her voice in direct democratic decision-making should lead to an overload of participatory avenues and further hinder his or her willingness to participate. Given the high-salience of

⁴ Institutions are of course the result of citizens' collective action and may therefore be endogenous to individual behavior in the long-run. We argue, however, that institutional arrangements can still be seen as exogenous framework conditions that cannot be changed by an individual in the short and medium-run; instead, they influence individual preferences and behavior patterns (see Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1987: 1200).

⁵ This neo-institutional perspective is related to Kanazawa's (1998, 2000) stochastic learning model. Here voters are conceived to be "backward-looking adaptive learners, rather than forward-looking utility maximizers" whose (voting) behavior is influenced by their experiences with their environment. In this vein, voters learn from their experiences with the (direct democratic) political system and adapt their voting behavior accordingly.

ballot measures and the low-salience of elections, we argue that a potential withdrawal from political participation should foremost come at the expense of the relatively unimportant elections. Smith and Tolbert (2004: 42–44), for example, find that a very intensive use of the initiative decreases turnout in elections in the context of the U.S. states. Accordingly, Bowler et al. (1992) advise caution in the use of direct democratic instruments, for an overuse of such processes may be problematic in terms of voter fatigue. Moreover, with regard to the timing, elections held shortly after ballot measures should reinforce voter fatigue for several reasons: First, the act of voting incurs direct personal costs to the voter. These costs may be sufficient to tip the balance away from increased electoral accountability and toward greater voter apathy. Second, quickly ensuing elections will deplete party funds and consequently restrict campaign intensity with regard to the ballot measures. Third, it could be argued that elections held shortly after ballot measures may alienate voters. Increased frequency of opportunities to vote may give them the impression that their opinion is trivialized by politics. In this vein, voters may not feel the same inclination to make their voices heard as they would if the most recent ballot measure had been held some time in the past.

Hypothesis 2a. The more frequently ballot initiatives and referendums occur, the higher the likelihood that the individual will abstain from voting in cantonal elections (long-term effect).

Hypothesis 2b. The inhibiting effect of ballot measures on participation in elections becomes stronger if such procedures occur shortly before or concurrent to elections (short-term effect).

4. Data, methodological approach, and variables

In the following section, the hypotheses derived are empirically tested. The dependent variable is the reported individual participation in cantonal parliamentary elections.⁶ These data were obtained by the 2003 Swiss Electoral Study, specifically from responses to the following question: “Last year,⁷ parliamentary elections took place in your canton. Can you tell me whether you participated in these elections or not?” The final sample consists of 4835 individuals in the 26 Swiss cantons.⁸

⁶ As a measure of individual participation, recall data tend to over-report actual turnout rates. In the Swiss case, in contrast to the official turnout of 45 percent, 68 percent of the respondents claim to have participated in the national election of 2003. Moreover, over-reporting varies among the cantons.

⁷ This question varies depending on the date of the last cantonal election: “last year,” “two years ago,” or “three years ago.”

⁸ During the Selects Survey, 5891 persons were interviewed, of which 386 refused to answer the question concerning cantonal election participation and are therefore excluded from the analysis. Another 670 respondents could not be included due to missing values on the independent variables. The number of respondents per canton are: Zurich (537), Berne (462), Lucerne (545), Uri (24), Schwyz (33), Obwalden (29), Nidwalden (29), Glarus (29), Zug (35), Fribourg (77), Solothurn (63), Basel-Town (45), Basel-Country (63), Schaffhausen (546), Appenzell Outer Rhodes (32), Appenzell Inner Rhodes (30), St. Gall (108), Grisons (31), Argovia (514), Thurgovia (53), Ticino (439), Vaud (523), Valais (75), Neuchâtel (41), Geneva (452), Jura (20).

As indicated by the research question, we are dealing with hierarchical data structures, i.e., individuals nested within institutional contexts that are thought to exert an influence on them. Therefore, we apply random intercept models, implying that individual behavior can vary between cantons (Jones, 1997; Steenbergen and Jones, 2002). Additionally, such a multilevel model allows for the modeling of macro-level characteristics (in the present case, the direct-democratic context), which explain the variance at the macro-level (the variance between cantons). As the dependent variable is dichotomous, individual participation in cantonal elections is transformed to a logit structure. We apply a Bayesian estimation approach, which, particularly when employing logistic multilevel models and faced with a small number of level 2 units, has been shown to be an appropriate method (Browne and Draper, 2006).

For the purpose of explaining individual participation in cantonal elections, we integrate contextual as well as individual characteristics into the analysis. We use the values of the contextual factors measured prior to each cantonal election to assure that the potential cause precedes the effect. In order to measure *direct democracy*, the frequency of ballot measures is integrated into the analysis (see Table 1). To operationalize long-term use of direct democracy we draw on the average number of yearly cantonal ballot measures between 1995 and 1999. To measure the short-term use of direct democratic procedures the number of occasions citizens were called to the polls during the six months prior to the cantonal parliamentary elections is taken into account.⁹ Moreover, two dummy variables are integrated into the analysis: If national or cantonal votes on ballot measures were concurrent to the cantonal parliamentary elections, these dummies take the value of one.¹⁰

In our endeavor to explain electoral participation in the Swiss context, a number of other potential influencing variables from the macro and micro-levels beyond the influence of direct democracy should be considered. On the contextual level and based on earlier studies (Bühlmann et al., 2003; Freitag, 2005), the most important of these variables include compulsory voting, the degree of party competitiveness, and Catholicism. Among the Swiss cantons, compulsory voting exists only in Schaffhausen, where citizens can be compelled to vote by means of retroactive penalties.¹¹ According to participation theory,

⁹ It must be stated that the term ‘long-term’ has a rather relative meaning in this context. It denotes the average use of direct democracy during a period of five years, as opposed to the ‘short-term’ use of direct democracy, which refers to use very proximate or even concurrent to elections. From the perspective of individual behavior and timeframes, we find this distinction to be a logical one. Our understanding of long and short-term is not however comparable with studies in which long-term effects may cover several decades (e.g., Kobach, 1993).

¹⁰ Unlike ballot measures in the U.S. in only 2 of the 26 cantons (Solothurn and Uri) (between 2000 and 2003) were both cantonal parliamentary elections and citizen-initiated legislation decided upon on the same day (see Table 1).

¹¹ See electoral law 160.100, Article 9 of Schaffhausen’s Code of Law: “Participation in federal, cantonal, and local votes and elections, and in citizens’ municipal assemblies, is compulsory up to the age of 65. Any person who neglects this duty without a valid excuse shall be obliged to pay three francs.” According to information provided by the Schaffhausen State Chancellery, this fee is collected by the respective municipalities.

institutionally regulated and regular participation in the democratic process fosters certain political competencies and the development of an active political interest and increases the expected costs of not voting (Blais, 2006; Franklin, 2004; Geys, 2006: 651 et seq.; Pateman, 1970). Looking at the situation in Switzerland, one can observe that the citizens of Schaffhausen exhibit a relatively high level of political interest and are comparatively well informed. Previous studies also argue that the competition within the party system (or in other words, the closeness of the election outcome) is relevant to electoral participation (Blais, 2006; Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998: 249; Geys, 2006: 646 et seq.). Whereas elections with foreseeable outcomes can serve to reinforce voter apathy and ignorance, robust inter-party competition is supposed to stimulate voter turnout. At the same time, it is argued that the importance of individual votes increases with the uncertainty of electoral outcomes. Particularly in the Swiss case, Catholicism is often underscored as a significant and historically bequeathed socio-political influence on electoral participation (Freitag, 2005; Geser, 2004). Following the defeat of the Catholic coalition at the end of the *Sonderbundkrieg* (a brief civil war, 1847), the Catholic population began to perceive itself as a minority subordinate to secular forces, consequently withdrawing itself into pseudo-isolation under the stronghold of the Catholic cantons (Altermatt, 1989: 97 et seq.; Linder, 2005: 37–38). Federal structures guaranteed the continuation of Catholic conventions and customs in these cantons. In the predominantly Catholic cantons (such as Valais, Lucerne, and Ticino), elections are perceived as opportunities to defend the bastion of Catholicism and essential Christian values. This perception, together with the often clientelistic entanglements between party and ideology, is thought to act as a mobilizing force for electoral participation. It is worth mentioning that we do not control for differences between the German-speaking and the Latin part of Switzerland that have shown to be important in various areas of Swiss politics. Language region and direct democracy are highly correlated, meaning that direct democracy is much more pronounced in the Latin than in the German-speaking cantons (Freitag, 2006; Linder, 2005: 272). This relationship is accompanied by severe multicollinearity problems in the empirical models. While we have strong theoretical arguments as to why direct democracy should be related to individual political participation, there is no theoretical argument as to why language *as such* should influence participation in elections. For this reason alone, linguistic differences should therefore be excluded from the model (Rubin, 1974: 699). Moreover, linguistic differences can theoretically even be attributed to the institutional differences, i.e. direct democracy, which we explicitly model in our analysis. Finally, further analyses not presented here strongly support this reasoning and thus provide empirical justification for the exclusion of this variable: If linguistic culture had a direct and independent impact on voter turnout, we should then find differences in turnout rates between French and German-speaking districts within the bilingual cantons of Berne, Fribourg, and Valais. District data on cantonal parliamentary elections however show that this is clearly not the case: In all three cantons we find

a comprehensive “cantonal level” of participation independent of language region. While differences in turnout between cantons are significant, the margins between French and German-speaking districts within the cantons are not.¹²

At the individual level we include variables based on different models that are prominent in the literature regarding turnout in mature democracies, i.e., the cognitive mobilization (Dalton, 1984), modified rational choice and general incentive (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Whiteley et al., 1994), civic voluntarism, and social capital (Verba et al., 1995) models. Higher degrees of education as well as high socio-political integration (e.g. residential stability, being married, informal involvement, membership in political associations) tend to increase the likelihood of voting. Moreover, high political interest, strong party ties, political efficacy as well as the perception of voting as a civic duty increase the probability that an individual will participate in an election. Older citizens and men also demonstrate an above-average willingness to participate in elections. The same applies to persons who essentially and broadly support the political system, as well as to persons who are dissatisfied with the performance of the economy (Bühlmann et al., 2003; Kerr, 1983: 11). Comparative voter turnout could also be explained by individual participation in cantonal direct democracy; however, as this information has not been collected, our empirical analyses instead draw upon individual participation in decisions on national ballot measures. More detailed information on the variables (their operationalization and sources) can be found in the Appendix.

5. Empirical findings

In this section, we present a two-stage procedure to examine the relationship between the direct-democratic context and an individual's electoral participation. In the first analytical step, we present a basic model containing the individual and contextual variables that have been shown to be important in earlier studies (Table 2). In the second step, the direct-democratic contextual variables are added to expand the model (Table 3). Some preliminary analyses not presented demonstrate that individual voter turnout systematically varies between the cantons, even when controlling for individual variables. This provides support for multilevel analysis.

Initially, the following results – which largely correspond to previous findings – can be concluded from Table 2: Increased age, a greater degree of political interest, party ties, membership in political associations, and a stronger belief in being able to affect political change increase the likelihood that an individual will participate in his or her canton's parliamentary election. Additionally, individuals who perceive voting as a civic duty, are married,

¹² We also forgo including *cantonal voter turnout rates* as a contextual attribute for two reasons: First, the cantonal voter turnout rates are greatly influenced by compulsory voting ordinances and the Catholic culture (see Freitag, 2005). Second, official data for voter turnout rates in cantonal parliamentary elections are not available for the cantons of Appenzell Inner Rhodes, Appenzell Outer Rhodes, and Grisons.

Table 2
Basic model (Model 1) for the explanation of individual electoral participation.

	Posterior mean	Percentiles	
	(SD)	10%	90%
Fixed effects			
Constant	-6.77 (0.39)	-7.27	-6.28
<i>Individual level</i>			
Sex (ref. cat.: female)	-0.02 (0.09)	-0.13	0.09
Age	1.72 (0.26)	1.39	2.05
Education	0.57 (0.14)	0.39	0.74
Internal efficacy	0.86 (0.24)	0.54	1.17
Duty to vote	1.05 (0.30)	0.81	1.30
Party ties	0.28 (0.09)	0.16	0.40
Political interest	1.41 (0.20)	1.15	1.67
Marital status (ref. cat.: single)	0.56 (0.09)	0.44	0.69
Residential stability	1.44 (0.18)	1.21	1.67
Trust in parliament	0.19 (0.25)	-0.13	0.51
Informal involvement	-0.09 (0.15)	-0.29	0.10
Membership in political associations	0.23 (0.11)	0.10	0.37
Satisfaction with performance of economy	-0.08 (0.05)	-0.15	-0.01
Participation in national ballot measures	0.42 (0.02)	0.40	0.44
<i>Contextual level</i>			
Compulsory voting	0.58 (0.29)	0.22	0.93
Catholicism	0.95 (0.27)	0.60	1.28
Party competition	-0.18 (0.44)	-0.74	0.38
Random effects			
Contextual level variance	0.05 (0.05)	0.01	0.11
<i>N</i>		4835 (26)	
<i>Deviance</i>		3577	
<i>DIC</i>		3607	

Note: Estimated in MlwiN and WinBUGS. 50,000 iteration (2 chains), burn-in: 10,000, diffuse gamma-priors. No signs of non-convergence.

and have maintained a long-term residence are also more likely to participate. In contrast, individuals who are more satisfied with the performance of the economy are less likely to participate in cantonal elections. If we look at individual voter turnout regarding ballot measures it becomes clear that the act of voting for or against national ballot measures is significantly and positively related to the likelihood that an individual will participate in cantonal elections.¹³ Finally, on the contextual level, while the existence of compulsory voting and a Catholic environment is associated with higher individual voter turnout, party competition does not influence citizens' propensity to vote. Due to the small number of cases at level 2, party competition will therefore not be further integrated into the analysis.

In our next step, we examine the extent to which the direct-democratic context in a canton influences individuals' electoral participation. For the sake of clarity and

¹³ Individuals' turnout in elections and for ballot measures can be understood as two sides of the same coin – two aspects of an essential willingness to participate. In this vein, the positive influence of participation in ballot measures on electoral participation cannot be seen as evidence of a positive relationship between electoral and direct democracy; instead, we are interested in whether the direct-democratic context has an impact on electoral participation, even if we control for an individual's general predisposition for political participation.

because the posterior means and credible intervals are highly consistent with those presented above, the individual level variables – although included in the model – are not shown in Table 3.

Model 2 in Table 3 shows that the actual practice of direct democracy is systematically related to electoral participation. We can observe a trade-off between cantonal direct democratic culture (a high average use of direct democratic instruments) and individual participation in parliamentary elections: An increase in the frequency of ballot measures decreases the likelihood that an individual will participate in cantonal elections. It is also worth mentioning that while the number of referenda primarily determines the frequency of ballot measures, initiatives are rarely placed on the ballot in the Swiss cantons (see Table 1).

Because only the long-term use of direct democratic instruments is related to individual electoral participation, we can however conclude that there is no evidence for short-term effects. In fact, the frequency of referendums and initiatives shortly before an election is not associated with lower voter turnout. Moreover, national and cantonal ballot measures that are decided upon concurrent to cantonal elections do not affect individual electoral participation. Voter fatigue therefore does not appear to be an instantaneous phenomenon, but rather one of a systemic, long-term nature.

Further models not presented here support the robustness of our findings. First, one can assume that the effect of direct democracy will be underestimated if individual level variables are included in the models that lie on the causal pathway from direct democracy to participation in elections. Political interest and trust in parliament, in particular, are expected to be positively affected by extensive direct democracy and could therefore capture a potential "educative effect" of direct democracy. The exclusion of these variables does not however substantially influence the estimates for the long-term use of direct democracy, which still remains negative (see Model 3, Table 3). Moreover, the posterior distribution for concurrent national ballot measures is shifted to the left, that is, the credible interval for this variable no longer contains zero. This additional model thus further strengthens our previous interpretation: We find no support for a positive, educative effect of direct democracy in Switzerland; rather, a strong direct democratic culture is associated with lower electoral participation, all other things held constant.

Second, it seems reasonable to assume that the number of (facultative) referendums and initiatives that actually reach the ballot depends on the number and type of provisions placed on the initiative and referendum process that could act as undue hurdles to direct democracy. Indeed, the Pearson correlation coefficient for the annual number of ballot measures and the signature thresholds is 0.50 for legislative initiatives and facultative referendums and 0.54 for initiatives amending the constitution. Therefore, and following the Swiss tradition of measuring direct democracy (Frey et al., 2001; Frey and Stutzer, 2000; Stutzer, 1999), we also tested the influence of legal requirements to launch initiatives and referendums, i.e. the ease of getting measures on the ballot. While a model including both the legal hurdles as well as

Table 3

The long-term and short-term influence of the use of direct democratic procedures on individual electoral participation.

	<i>Model 2</i>			<i>Model 3</i>		
	Post mean	Percentiles		Post mean	Percentiles	
	(SD)	10%	90%	(SD)	10%	90%
Fixed effects						
Constant	-6.54 (0.43)	-7.10	-5.99			
<i>Individual level</i>						
		<i>Models control for individual level variables as in Table 2</i>		<i>Models control for individual level variables as in Table 2, but not for political interest and trust in parliament</i>		
<i>Contextual level</i>						
Compulsory voting	0.73 (0.34)	0.31	1.14	0.69 (0.31)	0.31	1.05
Catholicism	0.80 (0.30)	0.42	1.15	0.79 (0.27)	0.45	1.11
Average number of total cantonal ballot measures per year	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.06	-0.00	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.06	0.00
Total number of cantonal ballot measures six months prior to cantonal elections	0.02 (0.04)	-0.03	0.06	0.02 (0.03)	-0.02	0.07
Concurrent cantonal ballot measures	0.14 (0.42)	-0.39	0.68	0.15 (0.40)	-0.35	0.66
Concurrent national ballot measures	-0.22 (0.20)	-0.47	0.03	-0.24 (0.18)	-0.46	-0.01
Random effects						
Contextual level variance	0.07 (0.06)	0.00	0.05	0.05 (0.05)	0.01	0.11
<i>N</i>		4835 (26)			4961 (26)	
<i>Deviance</i>		3576			3720	
<i>DIC</i>		3607			3784	

Note: Estimated in MlwiN and WinBUGS. 100,000 iteration (2 chains), burn-in: 10,000, diffuse gamma-priors. No signs of non-convergence.

the use of direct democracy involves a high degree of multicollinearity, the estimations showed that the latter variable – in accordance with our hypothesis – is the better predictor in the model. While the posterior distribution for the long-term use of direct democracy is only marginally influenced by the integration of the institutional variable, the legal hurdles to launch initiatives and referendums are not systematically related to participation in elections (posterior mean: -0.09; SD: 0.35; percentiles: -0.50 (10%), 0.34 (90%)).

Third, what we have tested so far are uniform effects of direct democracy on individual electoral participation. One could however argue that different groups of individuals may react differently to the direct-democratic context. In particular, the level of political sophistication could moderate the relationship between direct democracy and individual voter turnout.¹⁴ This hypothesis has been tested by modeling cross-level interactions between different indicators of political sophistication (educational achievement, political interest, and internal efficacy) and the direct-democratic context. While the marginal effects of direct democracy tended to be slightly stronger for less politically sophisticated individuals than for highly

sophisticated ones, neither the interactions nor the differences in marginal effects proved to be relevant.

Finally, we performed outlier analyses that demonstrate that the results presented are not sensitive to the exclusion of particular cantons (e.g., Zurich and Basel-Country, which are the clear leaders in terms of direct democratic instruments, or Fribourg and Jura, which exhibit the least direct democracy).

6. Conclusion

What influence does direct democracy have on an individual's willingness to participate in elections? Contrary to recent findings for the U.S. states, our multi-level analyses of the 26 Swiss cantons furnish empirical support for a negative relationship between direct and representative democracy. In this regard, ballot initiatives and referendums do not stimulate individual electoral participation; a more vigorous exercise of direct democratic instruments is instead associated with a decreased individual turnout in cantonal parliamentary elections. In other words, an individual living in a canton with intense direct democratic exercise has a lower probability of participating in parliamentary elections than a person with the same individual characteristics but who lives in a canton where only few cantonal ballot measures are decided upon.

Our findings suggest that direct democracy has a predominantly long-term effect on voter turnout. Participation in elections is related not to the frequency of cantonal ballot measures immediately prior to elections, but to the general degree of direct democracy. These results correspond with Smith's (2002) conclusions for the U.S. states: The influence of direct democracy on the

¹⁴ Theoretically, this moderating effect could however be quite complex. For citizens exhibiting low political sophistication, for instance, costs of frequent ballot measures are particularly high, meaning that they will be more likely to abstain from voting. At the same time, it is also reasonable to believe that these individuals could profit most from a potential "educative effect" (Smith and Tolbert, 2004), as they are the ones that need to be "educated." Similarly, highly politically sophisticated citizens could either be particularly open to stimulation due to their high propensity for participation (stronger positive effect) or be less affected by high costs of frequent ballot measures (weaker negative effect).

voting population will “need some time to materialize” and therefore is of a primarily long-term nature. Furthermore, these findings can be related to the core arguments of Kanazawa’s (1998: 991) stochastic learning model: A learning process is not an immediate, instrumental response to the institutional context; it “takes longer and lags behind.”

Nevertheless and with regard to the direction of the relationship, our findings challenge recent studies which state that the enhancing “turnout effects of ballot propositions are well established both in the US and cross-nationally” (Tolbert and Smith, 2006: 33). Some of these studies also suggest that the influence of direct democracy depends on the electoral context – the effect of ballot initiatives is strongest in low information and low turnout elections (Tolbert et al., 2003: 24). We assume that this may indeed be the case in a presidential system, where elections are important for government formation. In the Swiss consensus democracy, however, parliamentary elections in general rarely affect the balance of power, neither in the parliament nor in the executive government and, compared to ballot measures, are therefore less salient. In this context of markedly less salient elections, direct democracy is not associated with higher voter turnout, but rather seems to act as a substitute for electoral participation.

All in all, our analysis of direct democracy’s effects on representative democracy contributes to and enriches the global dialogue on the introduction of direct democratic procedures (Scarrow, 2001). The different outcomes for the U.S. and Switzerland demonstrate that the influence of

direct democracy may not only depend on the electoral context *within* a country (Tolbert et al., 2003: 24), but also *between* countries or political systems. In particular, the relationship between direct democracy and voters’ participation in elections will be moderated by the structure of the political system and particularly by the respective significance of elections and direct democracy within that system.

We must however underscore that our results are only suggestive and explorative. Although they are a step in the right direction, we need more investigations that empirically scrutinize the causal mechanism between direct democracy and voter turnout in order to provide a more confident base if we indeed wish to speak of a causal relationship. This certainly is a limitation of our study that we would like to address in future research. Additionally, the general problem of how to approach the arguments presented in a comparative perspective remains. Because they differ in terms of local democracy, the Swiss cantons seem to provide a good research environment; however, the question about the relationship between direct democracy and voter turnout in international comparison remains. At present, an empirical analysis of this kind at the national level seems almost impossible, as there are but a scant handful of comparable cases. Against this background, the tendency in western democracies to redesign institutions in ways that give citizens more opportunities to exercise direct control over political decision-making may provide new prospects for future research.

Appendix: Variables, hypotheses, and operationalizations

Variable	Hypothesis	Operationalization/source ^a
<i>Dependent variable</i>		
Individual participation in cantonal elections		Last year, parliamentary elections took place in your canton. Can you tell me whether you participated in these elections or not? (Question varies according to the date of the last cantonal election: “last year”, “two years ago” or “three years ago”)
<i>Independent variables – individual level</i>		
Sex	Men participate in elections more frequently than women	Dummy: 0 = women; 1 = men
Age	Older individuals are more likely to vote than younger ones	Age (in years) of the persons interviewed, standardized on a scale of 0–1
Educational level	The higher an individual’s level of education, the more likely he/she is to participate in elections	Highest completed level of education, 13 categories, standardized on a scale of 0–1
Internal efficacy	Individuals with more “political self-confidence” are more likely to vote than individuals with lower “political self-confidence.”	Factor consisting of an individual’s degree of information as well as his/her perception of the complexity of politics, 0–1
Duty to vote	Individuals who consider voting to be a civic duty are more likely to vote than individuals who do not	Standardized on a scale of 0–1; the higher the value, the stronger the individual’s agreement with the statement that voting is a civic duty
Party ties	Individuals who have stronger party ties are more likely to vote than individuals without party ties	Dummy: 1 = feels tied to a party; 0 = does not feel tied to any party
Political Interest	The more developed an individual’s political interest, the more likely he/she is to participate in elections	General political interest standardized on a scale of 0–1, where 1 stands for “very interested”

Appendix (continued)

Variable	Hypothesis	Operationalization/source ^a
Marital status	Individuals who reside with at least one other person are more likely to vote	Dummy: 1 = married/lives with partner; 0 = single, widowed, divorced/separated
Residential stability	Individuals who have maintained a long-term residence are more likely to vote than those who have not	Number of years spent living in same place, standardized on a scale of 0–1
Trust in parliament	The stronger an individual's trust in parliament, the more likely he/she is to participate in elections	Trust in parliament on a scale of 0–10, standardized on a scale of 0–1
Informal involvement	Stronger integration into one's neighborhood tends to increase the likelihood of voting	Frequency of neighborly help, standardized on a scale of 0–1
Membership in political associations	Members of associations vote more frequently than non-members	Dummy: 1 = member of trade unions, employers' associations, consumers' associations, automobile associations, political parties; 0 = non-member
Satisfaction with performance of economy	The more satisfied an individual is with the performance of the economy, the less likely he/she is to participate in elections	Satisfaction with the performance of the national economy, standardized on a scale of 0–1
Participation in national ballot measures	The more frequently an individual votes on national ballot measures, the more/less likely he/she is to participate in cantonal elections	How many times the individual cast a vote during the last 10 national ballot measures
<i>Independent variables – contextual level</i>		
Compulsory voting	The likelihood of individual electoral participation is higher in cantons with compulsory voting	Dummy: 1 = compulsory voting in a canton; 0 = no compulsory voting (Vatter, 2002)
Catholicism	The higher the proportion of Catholics in a canton, the more likely an individual is to participate in elections	Proportion of Catholics in the cantonal population (Federal Statistical Office: population census 2000, www.admin.ch)
Party competition	The greater the degree of party competition in a canton, the more likely an individual is to participate in elections	Difference between the two strongest parties' shares of votes in the National Council elections in 2003 (Federal Statistical Office, www.admin.ch)
Average number of total cantonal ballot measures	A greater frequency of cantonal ballot measures reaching the ballot tends to increase/decrease the likelihood that an individual will vote	Average number of cantonal ballot measures per year, 1995–1999 (Année politique suisse, various years)
Total number of cantonal ballot measures six months prior to cantonal elections	A greater frequency of cantonal ballot measures reaching the ballot shortly before cantonal elections tends to increase/decrease the likelihood that an individual will vote	Total number of cantonal ballot measures six months prior to cantonal elections (Année politique suisse, various years)
Concurrent cantonal ballot measures	Individual electoral participation is higher if cantonal ballot measures are decided upon concurrently to cantonal elections	Dummy: 1 = cantonal ballot measures were decided upon on the same day as cantonal elections; 0 = non-concurrent cantonal ballot measures (Année politique suisse, various years)
Concurrent national ballot measures	Individual electoral participation is higher if national ballot measures are decided upon concurrently to cantonal elections	Dummy: 1 = national ballot measures were decided upon on the same day as cantonal elections; 0 = non-concurrent national ballot measures (Année politique suisse, various years)

^a Source is specified only for the contextual variables. All individual variables are taken from the 2003 Swiss Electoral Studies (Selects) data.

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