

Second-order direct democracy in Switzerland: How sub-national experiences differ from national ballots

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1 Introduction

Direct democracy can be understood as an effective complement to representative institutions, adding the electorate as an additional veto player to policy-making processes (Kriesi & Trechsel 2008; Hug & Tsebelis 2002). Direct democratic institutions change the game of political decision-making, since all players' agreements are necessary for a change in the political status quo. The introduction of referendums and initiatives results thus, on the one hand, in a higher number of veto players, making changes to the status quo more difficult. But on the other hand, political outcomes tend to better approximate the preferences of the median voter if the possibility of a ballot vote exists. While quite a lot of attention has been paid to the design and use of these institutions at the national State level, less is known about them at subnational levels of government.

In this chapter, I will focus on the key characteristics of direct democratic institutions in Swiss cities in order to identify similarities and dissimilarities with regard to national direct democracy. The aim of these analyses is to better understand direct democratic mechanisms at subnational state levels. Which institutions are most relevant at subnational state levels, how do their institutional implementations vary with regard to national institutions, and what are the most striking differences between state levels regarding ballot outcomes? The paper is divided into three parts. In the next section, I will outline the theoretical arguments and develop four key hypotheses. Section three presents the direct democratic experience in Switzerland, by comparing the national, cantonal and communal state levels. In section four, I will empirically test the hypotheses with a large and unique dataset of Swiss ballot votes.

2 Theoretical argument and hypotheses

In their seminal article, Reif & Schmitt (1980) developed the argument as to why, in the eyes of political parties and the public, elections for national governments are more salient than European elections. It is argued that national elections offer voters the critical choice of who should govern the country (Norris 1997). Elections for officials at EU or subnational state level are considered less important – hence the term *second-order elections*. Second-order elections are held at the national level or in a part thereof, but there is less at stake for voters than in first-order elections. The theoretical rationale behind this claim is that (i) there are fewer incentives to turn out and vote in second-order elections, (ii) one is freer to vote for minor parties that have no realistic chance of forming the government, and

(iii) there is less point in collecting or using information about the specific political arena when making decisions. Moreover, voting behaviour in second-order elections is in general strongly influenced by first-order considerations (Marsh 1998). Governing parties may fare better or worse in second-order polls, since voters can use the opportunity to voice their support for or protest against the ruling administration.

The second-order election model has also been applied to direct democratic ballots, notably to European Union referendums (see e.g. Hug 2002; Garry et al. 2005). In addition to first-order considerations and the salience of a referendum issue, Hug (2002) emphasises that the institutional context affects how strong second-order factors are likely to be. The distinctions as to whether the government decides to hold a referendum or is constitutionally required to do so, and if a ballot vote is legally binding for government or not, are, however, less relevant in the Swiss context. In this country, the vast majority of ballots occur indeed independently of the will of government, and almost none are not legally binding (Papadopoulos 2001). The key distinction in Swiss direct democracy is made with respect to the actor who *triggers a ballot vote* and to the actor who *decides on the ballot wording*. A ballot vote can occur because of constitutional requirements after a political proposal is passed by Parliament, or because political minorities specifically asks for a ballot vote. In the latter case, two situations can be discerned: on the one hand, a group of voters themselves propose a measure in form of an initiative petition, or alternatively, they decide to challenge a governmental proposal with a referendum petition. On the other hand, a political minority in Parliament (or in citizen assemblies) may be granted the right to challenge an already adopted proposal and submit it to the citizens' appreciation.

In contrast to EU (supra-national) referendums, and because of the Swiss federalist state structure, national considerations (e.g. satisfaction with national parties) are likely to be less prominent for voting predictions in subnational ballot votes. Common multi-polar party systems further distance the Swiss case from the second-order voting logic (Reif 1997). Notwithstanding, when combining salience and institutional considerations (Garry et al. 2005) several hypothesis can be derived with respect to voting behaviour in sub-national ballot votes. Independent of state levels, general levels of satisfaction with governing political elites are likely to play a weaker role when votes occur 'automatically'. Voter support for governing majorities is also expected to rise in subnational ballot votes. Voters are expected to have fewer direct incentives to show their disapproval of governing parties when votes come to polls because of legal requirements, and they are also expected to show less interest in subnational ballot proposals. As opposed to this, the voters' interest is likely to rise if ballot votes are triggered by the people or by a dissenting political minority, and governing elite support is expected to decline. Minority viewpoints are, however, more likely to be supported in subnational ballot votes, since voters are supposedly less critical and well-informed on subnational political issues, and feel more free to vote for a measure with no realistic chances of being accepted.

The hypothesis that there is normally less at stake in voter decisions at subnational state levels than in national ballots, and that this has an impact on turnout and ballot outcomes, certainly deserves a closer inspection. I will therefore propose to test the second-order voting model for subnational direct democratic ballots in Switzerland. More precisely, I will compare turnouts, occurrences and outcomes of ballot votes from Swiss cities and cantons to those from the federal level. Do voters treat these two (or three) sorts of ballot votes the same way, or are there systematic and understandable differences between them? Systemat-

ic comparisons of ballot vote experiences from different State levels should then allow me to assess predictions of the second-order voting model in the direct democratic arena. Based on the arguments of Reif & Schmitt (1980), four specific propositions that characterise the aggregate voting behaviour in national and subnational elections will be tested in the context of direct democratic votes:

1. Hypothesis: Controlling for simultaneous ballot vote occurrences at all State levels, turnout is lower in city and cantonal votes than in national votes. Since less is at stake, voters have fewer incentives to participate in subnational ballots.
2. Hypothesis: City and cantonal governments have greater ballot support rates than the national government, because subnational ballot votes are less important and there is less point for voters to collect and use information critically.
3. Hypothesis: Ballot support for government is generally higher for compulsory proposals than if they are triggered by a political minority, because compulsory voting proposals tend to be more consensual and less salient, which is why voters generally have fewer incentives to show their disapproval at the polls.
4. Hypothesis: Ballot support levels for uncontrolled proposals (optional referendums and popular initiatives) are higher in subnational than in national polls. Similarly to the preference for smaller parties in subnational elections, voters are freer to vote for minority point of views.

In the next section, I will describe some historical elements and my classification of direct democratic institutions. For the sake of simplicity and comparison, only three broad direct democratic institutions are distinguished. Moreover, before testing my hypothesis, I will describe direct democratic experiences at all three state levels in more detail. Ballot vote occurrences in subnational entities will be discerned according to political-legal traditions (city-state, rural, Latin). Vote trends between 1990 and 2000 will be presented according to direct democratic institutions for all three state levels. In order to better assess the mechanisms that shape direct democratic outcomes, I will conclude my analyses by presenting a model measuring the impact of governing elite consensus on the probability of ballot vote acceptance in the three different arenas and for each institution separately.

3 Direct Democracy in Switzerland

3.1 Definitions and general overview

After Napoleon's invasion in 1798 and the end of the old Confederation, modern political institutions were gradually implemented during the 19th century, first in the cantons and subsequently at both the federal and communal levels of government (Buetzer 2007).¹ The

¹ The Swiss political system is undoubtedly one of the most complex western democracies. Although three of its key features – neutrality, federalism and direct democracy – are not exclusive to Switzerland, it is their combination inside the same polity which renders the Swiss case so interesting in comparative perspective. More importantly, the combination of the three institutions account for Switzerland's status as the paradigmatic case of consensus democracy, offering a structure with a very large number of veto possibilities. By focussing on one of these feature in this chapter – direct democracy – some readers that are less familiar with the Swiss case might

introduction of referendums and initiatives was facilitated by a strong popular distrust of elected officials. However, direct democratic institutions were not traditionally understood as alternative, but rather as a complement to representative or assembly democracies (Buetzer 2005). The introduction of *compulsory referendums* aimed at legitimising governmental proposals by the people, either through legal regulations or by a majority decision of government. *Optional referendums* (proposed by Government, triggered by Parliament or the electorate) allow a political minority to question and eventually to abrogate governmental decisions. With *popular initiatives* (proposed and triggered by electorate), the most spectacular instrument, a group of voters directly places an issue on the political agenda by proposing a new policy measure.²

From a game-theoretical perspective, direct democratic institutions add the electorate as a veto player to the policy-making process (Hug & Tsebelis 2002). This can not only lead to important policy consequences in case of a ballot occurrence, but influences more generally the way policy decisions are elaborated. In other words, direct democracy changes the contextualised game of political decision-making, since all veto players' agreements – open or tacit – are required for a successful change of the legislative status quo. On the one hand, the introduction of referendums and initiatives results in a higher number of veto players, making changes to the legislative status quo more difficult, since more (diverging) interests need to be taken into account. But on the other hand, final outcomes will be less determined by minority viewpoints and tend to better approximate the preferences of the median voter if the possibility of a ballot vote exists (Hug 2004). Direct democratic institutions can therefore be seen as effective complements to representative institutions, reinforcing the median voters' weight in political decision-making.

At this point, I would like to shortly elaborate on the notion of *political elite*. In Gordon Smith's famous distinction of referendums (Qvortrup 2000), political elites are referred to as the governmental and parliamentary majorities that shape and determine political processes. Ballot outcomes can either be *in line* (pro-hegemonic, successful) or *not in line* (anti-hegemonic) with their recommendations. I will rely on votes in parliament as indicator for the governing elite's consensus and position. Swiss voters are asked to cast their votes on federal, cantonal and city ballot proposals three to four times a year. Representatives and voters thereby co-decide over a wide range of legislative and administrative proposals. At the federal level, the inclusion of citizen in political decision-making is focused on the most important and salient political matters, which are essentially constitutional or legislative in nature. With other political functions and tasks to accomplish in cantons and cities, the electorate is increasingly included in political process for other matters and is called to decide on many administrative issues at the polls as well. At the city level for instance, the building of a big infrastructure project, such as a new school, is more likely to be a potential ballot object as is a proposal for a revision of the city charter. The effect of these differences on direct democratic experiences will be discussed below.

The complementary character of direct democracy resulted in complex interdependencies between representative political bodies and the electorate (Papadopoulos 2001). In order for Swiss governing elites to accommodate ballot threats hanging over political pro-

want to read more about other key institutions, or about the Swiss political system in general, for which I strongly recommend Kriesi & Trechsel's seminal Book „The Politics of Switzerland“ (2008), especially chapters 3-5.

² Note that I have included parliamentary counter-proposals to popular initiatives into the category of compulsory referendums.

cesses, the functioning of the political system was gradually reshaped. One indirect system effect attributed to direct democracy lies with the consensus-seeking strategies in legislative procedures. In order to prevent an ulterior defeat at the polls, governing majorities co-opt all important political actors at an early stage in political processes. The aim of this inclusion strategy is to find broadly accepted compromises, which should, in turn, guarantee the absence of a referendum petition or a successful ballot outcome, since no major group has an interest in opposing the parliamentary compromise in the plebiscitary arena. A second indirect effect – partly attributed to direct democracy – relates to the concordant government composition. At the federal level, the same four political parties are represented in the Federal Council according to their relative vote share in parliament³. Likewise, concordant governments are important features in cantonal and city politics, with all major political parties represented in government according to their relative vote share. At the subnational level, however, governmental party compositions often differ from the federal level and change from one canton or one city to another, because of local or regional parties.

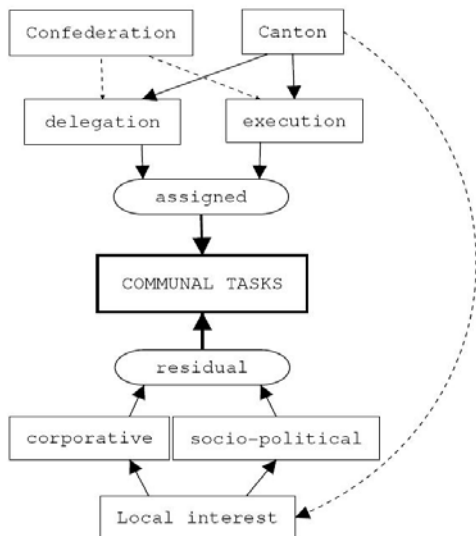
Several legal characteristics for the analysis of subnational direct democratic experiences need to be mentioned as well. Firstly, the subsidiarity principle in Switzerland has led the cantons to be sovereign in all policy fields where the federal level was not expressly granted the competence. As a consequence, public entities at the communal level are neither regulated by Federal law, nor do they enjoy the same autonomy status as the cantons. As a matter of fact, they totally depend on cantonal regulations. Generally speaking, cantonal governments (and to a lesser extent the Federal government) either (i) define communal tasks exhaustively, (ii) partly assign communal tasks, or (iii) leave the circumscription of communal tasks largely to the communes themselves. What is more, depending on the distributional arrangement of competencies between the different government layers, the respective competencies may vary considerably between cantons and communes according to the different policy fields. Latin cantons generally grant their communes relatively few legal tasks, while competencies are rather extensive for communal governments in the German-speaking cantons. Figure 1 summarises the attribution and description of communal tasks.

Similarly, direct democratic regulations for Swiss communes depend almost exclusively on cantonal laws, but the communes' autonomy for citizen engagement mechanisms varies again considerably between regions and cantons. While communal direct democratic regulations are sometimes almost exhaustively decided by the cantons, other communes enjoy far-reaching possibilities to complement and extend their direct democratic framework. Generally speaking, the Swiss cantons follow two logics to define communal direct democratic regulations, either (i) by providing minimum requirements, which can be altered and complemented rather freely by communes, or (ii) by defining regulations that can barely be altered by communes, often with extensive positive lists (final enumeration of both legal requirements and possible types of ballot proposals). In both cases, the cantons may also expressively exclude some items from a ballot vote (negative lists). To sum up, the scope of direct democratic participation varies tremendously among government levels, between policy fields, according to specific cantonal and communal regulations, as well as among the communes of the same canton. This complexity represents a major obstacle for compar-

³ After the national elections in November 2003, this governmental „magic formula“ was slightly changed for the first time in more than forty years.

isons (not the least because of individual terminologies) and requires first and foremost a coherent analytical framework.

Figure 1: Scheme for the attribution and description of communal tasks in Switzerland



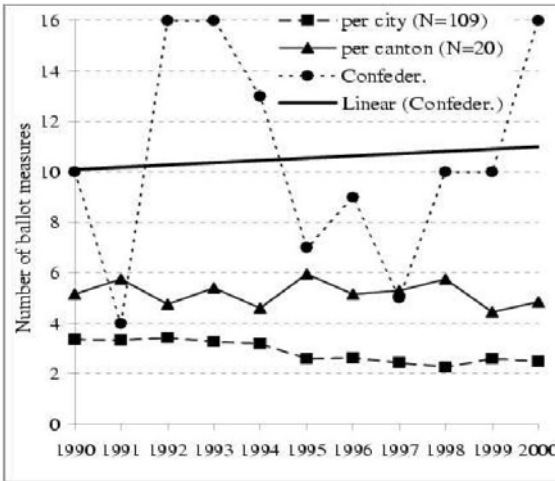
While the use of direct democratic institutions and the occurrence of ballot votes have been rising steadily all over the world (Auer & Buetzer 2001; Gallagher & Uleri 1996; Scarrow 2001), Swiss direct democratic institutions have been playing an integral part of modern political decision-making at all state levels for more than a century. The national level represents the most important political arena, but cantons and – to a lesser extent – communes assume important political roles and functions, too. Unlike most other European countries, subnational state units have maintained a considerable autonomy, especially in certain policy domains (Buetzer 2007; Ladner 1991). What is more, citizenship and political rights are granted at the local level in Switzerland, contributing to a strong personal identification with subnational politics. Overall, while there is less at stake at subnational state levels than in national politics in Switzerland, cantons and communes remain important political entities and enjoy an extensive functional autonomy.

3.2 Vote trends at three state levels

In order to gain better insights and a clear picture of direct democratic experiences at all three State levels during the nineties (1990-2000), I will now describe ballot vote trends, differences among political traditions of cantons and cities, as well as ballot vote occurrences according to direct democratic institutions. First of all, my focus lies on the average number of ballot measures at each state level and their evolution during my observation period (see figure 2). On average, the most ballot measures came to the polls at the federal level, with about ten ballot measures per year (Confederation linear), followed by the can-

tons (N=20) with between five and six ballots per year, and the cities (N=109) with about three to four votes. When comparing direct democratic activities at the three state levels, the Confederation is thus by far the most important state level, with an average of more than double the number of ballot measures as the cantons per year, and about three times the average number of communal ballot measures per year.

Figure 2: Average number of ballot measure at three Swiss state levels



Differences between the three state levels appear also with regard to vote trends. At the city level, the number of ballot measures that came to the polls has slowly declined, from around four ballot measures per year in 1990 to about three in 2000. By contrast, the vote trend in the cantons appears to be relatively stable over that same period, remaining on average in between five to six ballot measures per year. However, not only did most ballot measures come to the polls at the federal level, but in addition a slightly increasing vote tendency could be observed during the nineties. At the beginning of the decade, the number of ballot measure first increased, and then slowly went down, before resurging towards the end of the millennium. To sum up, average direct democratic activities are highest at the federal level, where we also observed a slightly increasing vote tendency, and lowest at the city level, with a declining tendency. Cantonal direct democratic experiences lie in between these two levels.

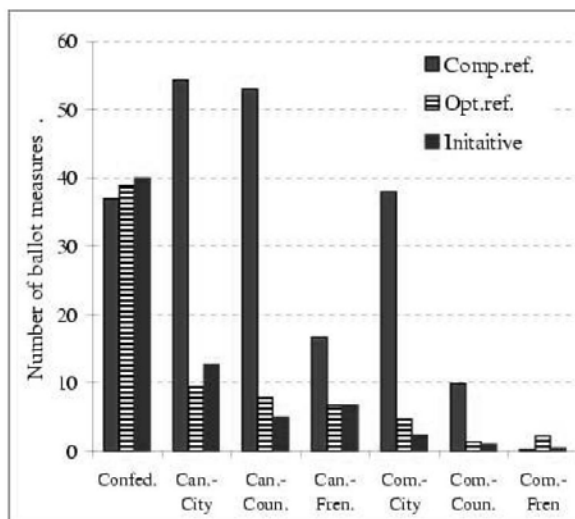
3.3 Ballot votes and political traditions

Direct democratic competencies are distributed unevenly according to state level at hand, with administrative issues gaining in importance in cantons and cities. Subnational political systems must, furthermore, also be differentiated with respect to traditional characteristics. Unlike European countries, Swiss cantons were relatively free to institutionalise their own state conceptions when first implementing modern political systems. Broadly, three subna-

tional political traditions can be distinguished (Buetzer 2005): German-speaking assembly democracies, pluralist parliamentary democracies in German-speaking city-states, and more elitist representative democracies in cantons and communes of the Latin-French tradition. Roles and functions that direct democratic instruments play in a particular political system vary significantly from one tradition to another. An important impact of political traditions on occurrences of ballot votes can indeed be identified, as shown in figure 3.⁴

My first observation relates to the use of different institutions at the three state levels. It appears that all institutions under observation are almost equally used at the federal level, while compulsory referendums clearly represent the category with most ballot measures at subnational state levels. The use of optional referendums and popular initiatives is comparatively more common at the federal level than in cantons or cities. At subnational state levels, uncontrolled ballot votes often come to the polls in entities of the city-state tradition, foremost in form of popular initiatives in cantons, and in form of optional referendums in cities. Contrasting sharply with all other experiences, the use of direct democratic instruments is limited to a few ballot votes on optional referendums in cities of the Latin-French tradition. Other striking differences can be observed between political traditions of cantons and cities. Occurrences of cantonal ballot votes are in all traditions more frequent than in cities of the same tradition, with Latin-French entities showing considerably less ballot votes than entities of the other traditions. Thus, ballot votes are essentially concentrated in German-speaking entities at the cantonal, and in the city-state tradition at the communal level.

Figure 3: Average number of ballot votes according to state level, institution and political tradition (1990-2000)

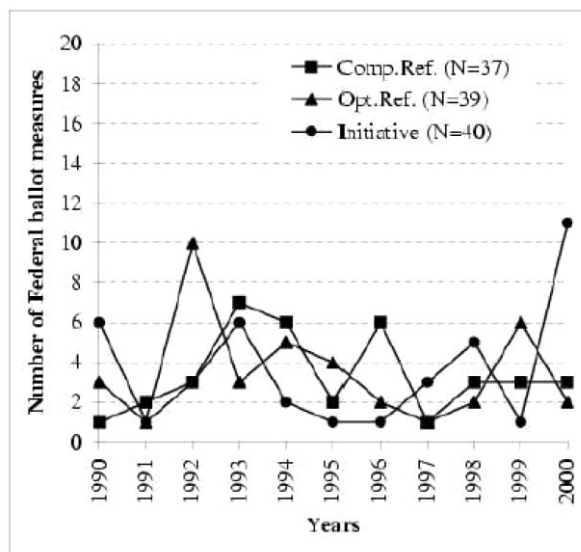


⁴ At the cantonal level, city-states are the cantons of Bern, Basel-City, Lucerne, St.Gallen, Schaffhausen, Solothurn, Zurich, while all other German-Speaking cantons belong to country-side tradition, and all Italian and French cantons to the French tradition (N total=20). Cities enclose all communes with more than 10'000 inhabitants and were classified accordingly, namely German-speaking communes with a parliament (city-states N=52) or an assembly system (country-side N=29), and all remaining cities to the French tradition (N=22).

3.4 Ballot vote trends and institutions

Coming back to the evolution of ballot votes during the nineties according to state level, direct democratic experiences differ with respect to the Federal state on the one hand, and the cantons and cities on the other. As already seen above, all three direct democratic institutions were fairly equally used at the federal level (see figure 4), whereas in cantons (figure 5) and cities (figure 6), the compulsory referendum is by far the dominant ballot institution. In other words, compared to the absolute number of compulsory referendum votes, popular initiatives and optional referendums play a less prominent role in cantonal and city politics, but are as important as compulsory referendums at the Federal level. The main reason for these differences lies in the fact that voter competencies are directed towards other issues at subnational state levels as well (foremost administrative and financial). Similarly to the Federal state, voters in cantons and cities regularly decide on constitutional and legislative measures.

Figure 4: The use of direct democracy in the Federal state (1990-2000)



When comparing vote trends between 1990 and 2000, experiences in cities are to be distinguished from those in cantons and the Federal state. The overall ballot frequency is indeed rather stable at both the Federal level and the cantons, but distinctly declining in cities. Three possible explanations can be invoked for this decline. First, faced with difficult economic situations in the nineties, several cities have thoroughly reformed their institutional frameworks (Kübler & Ladner 2003). Institutional changes to popular rights included the introduction of optional referendums instead of compulsory ballots for largely undisputed proposals, underlying a general tendency to concentrate citizen engagement on 'important' city matters (Buetzer 2005). A second reason for the declining local vote frequencies is linked to the loss

of local autonomy. The shift of political power to the Federal state and cantons leaves cities with fewer competencies and with fewer issues to decide autonomously. Finally, another reason for the declining number of city votes might lie in the evolving decision-making structures at the local level. Metropolitan issues are increasingly addressed by regional committees, often limiting citizen involvement in decision-making processes.

Figure 5: The use of direct democracy in 20 Cantons (1990-2000)

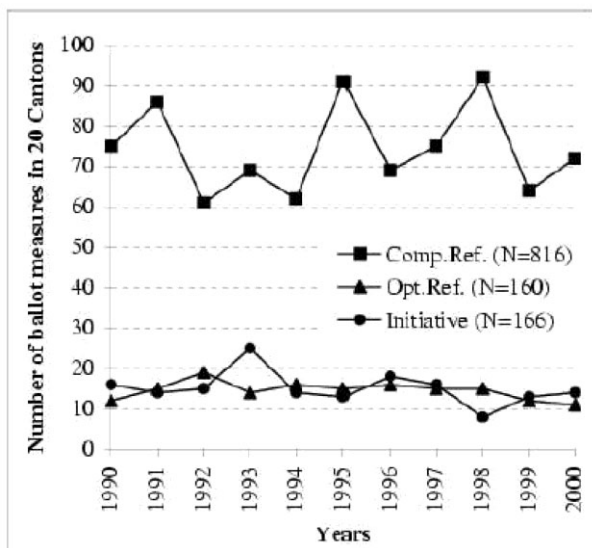
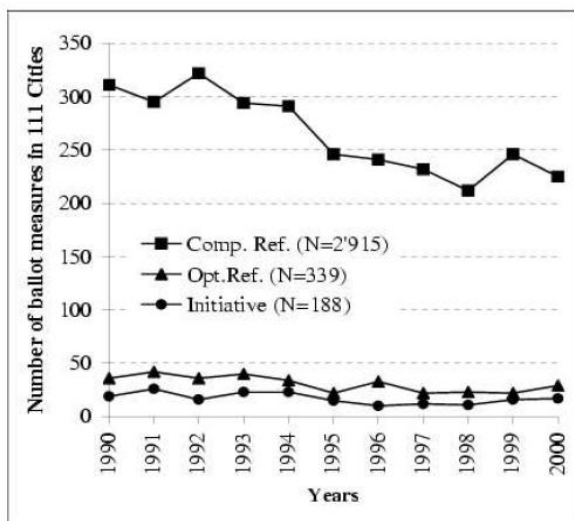


Figure 6: The use of direct democracy in 111 Cities (1990-2000)



4 Subnational ballot votes in perspective

So far, the description of ballot vote occurrences in Swiss cities, cantons and the Confederation showed an astounding diversity of direct democratic experiences at the three state levels. All three institutions under observation were frequently used at the federal level, unlike experiences in cantons and cities, where compulsory referendums are quantitatively by far the most important institution at the polls. Generalisations about the use of direct democratic institutions become, however, much more tricky at subnational state levels, especially in cities, since big differences appear between political traditions. What is more, vote tendencies also show an uneven picture, with the most notable development being a sharp decline of compulsory referendum votes at the city level. Bearing in mind that in view of all these diversities, aggregate analyses must be taken with the necessary precautions, I will now continue my analyses with testing my four hypotheses with regard to the second-order voting model.

4.1 Turnout in ballot votes

For the first hypothesis, I am comparing turnout rates for city, cantonal and federal ballot votes, while controlling for simultaneous ballot votes at each state level. My analyses of turnout rates focus on both the distribution of voting weekends⁵ and number of ballot measures voted on at each state level. When considering subnational ballot votes, one has to consider that communes and cantons are strongly encouraged to let their ballot dates coincide with national votes (or elections, which I did not consider here). In addition to substantive cost reductions, the key reason for holding votes at the same time is to stimulate a high turnout rate. Table 4.1 gives us a comparative picture regarding the coordination of ballot votes and the impact on voter turnout. In absolute numbers, more than *two thirds of all ballot measures* are decided at federal voting weekends, about a quarter comes to the polls in coordinated voting weekends at subnational state levels (cantons and communes). The remaining tenth of ballot measures are more or less equally divided between cantonal and city votes.

The positive impact on turnout rates, when holding ballot votes at all three state levels simultaneously, distinctly emerges in federal voting weekends, with the average turnout rate standing at more than 44 percent of the electorate. Interestingly, the highest average turnout rate in such voting weekends actually lies at the city level, with over 45 percent, followed by the cantons with over 42 percent and the federal level with less than 42 percent. As opposed to this, the average turnout rate declines to about 32 percent of the electorate if a vote takes places simultaneously at the cantonal and city level⁶, or if a ballot vote takes place at one level (cantonal or city) only. With regard to our hypothesis, this leaves me with some mixed results. On the one hand, average turnout rates are clearly lower in

⁵ Note that almost all cantons know postal voting procedures. Normally, the ballot material is sent out to voters about three weeks prior to the polls, and they can send it back as of its reception. The few people that actually still go to the polls can do so from Friday to Sunday on the voting weekend.

⁶ I distinguished only whether a ballot vote took place at one state level, independent of how many entities were concerned (1 to 20 cantons, 1 to 109 cities), and independent of a city's affiliation to a canton. This explains why there is no bandwagon effect for simultaneous ballots in cantons and cities (e.g. ballot votes of canton X are aggregated with those of a city from canton Y).

subnational ballot votes if not held in federal voting weekends. If less is at stake in the direct democratic arena, voters have less incentive to participate and turnout in subnational ballots is indeed lower than in federal ballots. On the other hand, however, if subnational ballot votes are held simultaneously with federal ballots, average turnout rates are actually slightly higher in subnational ballots.

Table 4.1: Voting weekends and average turnout rates in ballot votes at three state levels (1990-2000)

| | Turnout | Week-ends | N mea-sures | ϕ - rate. | federal ballot | canton ballot | city ballot |
|-----------------------|---------|-----------|-------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|
| Ballot measures in | | | | | | | |
| Federal+cantonal+city | | 33 | 2'941 | 44.76 | 41.86 | 42.36 | 45.66 |
| cantonal+city | | 47 | 1'052 | 31.11 | | 30.55 | 31.28 |
| cantonal only | | 17 | 36 | 32.67 | | 32.67 | |
| city only | | 100 | 327 | 32.14 | | | 32.14 |

The coordination of subnational ballot votes with those at the national level is in any case an efficient and winning strategy to increase turnout rates at all state levels, but especially in cantonal and city ballots. It is therefore all the more astonishing that federal voting weekends – approximately three per year (33 over eleven years) – represent only about one sixth of all ballot voting weekends in my observation period. Cantons and cities go to the polls much more often than at the federal level, either in individually organised or in coordinated ballots. More precisely, in almost all cantons and cities, one additional voting weekend to federal ballots took place on average over eleven years. This general affirmation certainly has only limited practical implications, especially because of the huge inter- and intra-group differences regarding subnational ballot occurrences. Nevertheless, this last results underlines that direct democracy at subnational state levels shows an impression vitality and independence from political developments at the federal level.

4.2 Elite recommendations and ballot outcomes

After observations as to how voters participate in direct democratic votes, I would now like to show to what extent elites' responses to permanent ballot threats have proved useful for controlling political processes. More precisely, I will focus on vote recommendations of governing elites and ballot outcomes of federal, cantonal and city votes. I could show significant differences in ballot occurrences between state levels, according to institution and political tradition. To what extent do these differences impact upon ballot outcomes? For *compulsory referendums*, which take place at the end of the political process, a 'yes' vote always signifies an endorsement of the governing elite's position. The approval of a com-

pulsory referendum at the polls therefore represents a success for governing elites.⁷ As we can see in table 4.2, elite success rates for compulsory referendums are very high⁸. Independent of state level and number of ballot votes, political elites can be very confident when a compulsory referendum comes to the polls. At the federal level, eight out of ten compulsory referendums represent a success for governing authorities, while this ratio is even climbing to nine out of ten in cantons and cities. This result herewith confirms my second hypothesis.

The interpretation of vote outcomes for the two other institutions is less straightforward. Government and parliament both give out vote recommendations for every ballot measure (they are normally the same), calling either for the acceptance or rejection of a specific proposal. If both governing elites and the people accept (or reject) a proposal, ballot vote outcome represent an elite success. If there is disagreement between the two, ballot outcomes can be unsuccessful for elites. More precisely, governing elites are almost always in favour of optional referendums, since such proposals originate from within their ranks and are adopted by them with a majority decision. By contrast, elites usually oppose popular initiatives, because they represent a challenge to their power to set the political agenda. A rejection of an initiative at the polls thus generally represents a success for governing elites. At subnational state levels, with more administrative ballot proposals, vote recommendations sometimes differ from these assumptions, and governing elites can support an initiative once in a while.

Table 4.2: Acceptance and success of ballot measures in the Federal State (1947-2000), Cantons and Cities (1990-2000)

| Level | Institution | Comp. Ref. | Opt. Ref. | Initiative | Total |
|----------------------|-------------|--------------|------------|------------|--------------|
| <hr/> | | | | | |
| Federal state | | | | | |
| accepted in % (N) | | 79.2 (144) | 58.8 (85) | 5.9 (101) | |
| Success in % (N) | | 79.2 (144) | 58.8 (85) | 96.0 (101) | 79.1 (330) |
| <hr/> | | | | | |
| Cantons (N=20) | | | | | |
| accepted in % (N) | | 90.6 (816) | 53.8 (160) | 29.5 (166) | |
| Success in % (N) | | 91.4 (455) | 62.7 (51) | 84.8 (79) | 83.2 (1'142) |
| <hr/> | | | | | |
| Cities (N=111) | | | | | |
| accepted in % (N) | | 87.1 (2'904) | 39.1 (338) | 28.2 (188) | |
| Success in % (N) | | 87.3 (1'193) | 41.2 (177) | 78.1 (96) | 81.1 (1'466) |
| <hr/> | | | | | |
| Average success in % | | 85.9 | 54.2 | 86.3 | 81.1 |
| <hr/> | | | | | |

⁷ Time spans for the Federal and subnational levels differ in these analyses, as the number of observations for federal ballots decreases considerably. Acceptance levels for federal ballots in the nineties do, however, not change significantly (Comp.Ref. 83.8 % (N=37), Opt.Ref. 66.7% (39), Initiative 7.5% (40)).

⁸ The declining numbers of observations for success measures at subnational state levels are due to the lack of reported vote recommendations in cantonal and city parliaments. Data sources: Federal ballots (Federal Chancellery, www.admin.ch), cantonal ballots (Alexander Trechsel, University of Geneva) and city ballots (Swiss National Science Foundation, research grant no. 11-59366.99).

Success rates for *optional referendums* are significantly lower than those for the two other institutions, with only half of optional referendums a success for governing majorities (see table 4.2). At the federal level and in cantons, on average six out of ten ballot votes turn out to be in line with elite recommendations, this rate even dropping to four out of ten votes in cities. Compared to the two other institutions, optional referendums must thus be considered the institution with the highest outcome uncertainty for governing elites, since only one in two such referendums are a success for them. Unlike our observations for the second hypothesis, ballot vote support rates for governments are highest in cantonal and national politics with six out of ten proposals a success, and decline significantly to four out of ten ballot measures in cities. So although there is the ‚least at stake‘ in communal politics, ballot vote successes in optional referendums are not easier for local governing elites to obtain. This finding actually represents a confirmation for hypothesis number four: Chances for voters to successfully challenge a policy proposal of governing majorities are significantly higher in communes than in cantons or the Confederation, since voters feel freer to support minority viewpoints.

For *popular initiatives*, differences appear between the federal level and the subnational state levels. At the former, initiatives are both very rarely supported by elites and accepted at the polls, which leads to an extremely high elite success rate for initiatives.⁹ By contrast, in cantons and cities, the chances of acceptance for initiatives are significantly higher, with three out of ten winning approval at the polls. Since elites at lower state levels tend to support subnational initiatives more often, their success rate also amounts to a high 80 percent of initiative ballots. This finding again corroborates the fourth hypothesis, with chances for voters to successfully pass an initiative proposal at the polls being significantly higher at subnational state levels than at the federal level.

To sum up, elite control of direct democratic processes varies considerably with respect to institutions at stake. In compulsory referendum and initiative ballot votes, political elites are very successful at the polls, whereas vote outcomes for optional referendums are more unpredictable. When comparing overall success rates for governing elites, only small differences appear between the three state levels. Indeed, four out of five ballot measures turn out to be a success for governing elites, independent of the state level and the number of ballots that were voted on at this level. This result thus contradicts my second hypothesis, according to which ballot vote support rates are generally higher at subnational state levels.

4.3 Probability of ballot vote approval at the polls

By enlarging my analyses, I propose to assess these high success rates for political elites with some further explanations. As indicated above, Swiss political elites have developed consensus-seeking strategies in the pre-parliamentary stage of political processes. While the overall elite success in ballot votes turns out to be high, I would like to address in more detail if this success is in fact due to the elites' strategy of forging large consensus. For this purpose, I will present three logistic regressions for ballot vote outcomes at each state level,

⁹ It must be added that popular initiatives – especially at the federal level – often exert important indirect effects on political processes, for instance by forcing elites to place an issue on their agenda or by reformulating an existing proposal. Institutionally, elites can elaborate a counter-proposal to a popular initiative, which may be put on the ballot in conjunction with or as an alternative measure to the initiative.

in distinguishing the three direct democratic institutions under observation. The dependent variable in all regressions is the probability of a ballot measure approval at the polls, while the independent variable constitutes the degree of elite consensus. The predicted statistical relationships are presented graphically in figures 7, 8 and 9.

It turns out that except for optional referendums, consensus seeking strategies are an efficient way for governing elites to win a ballot vote at the polls, independent of the state level. The higher the consensus in parliament, the more likely a ballot vote is accepted at the polls. For compulsory referendums and initiatives, relationships are straightforward. If 80 percent of the members of the Federal parliament are in favour of a proposal submitted to compulsory referendum, the chances of the ballot outcome being successful for governing elites are equally high (80 percent). Likewise, if 80 percent of parliament opposes an initiative proposal, the likelihood of the latter being rejected at the polls is even higher (95 percent). The same observations can be made for cantonal and city votes. However, initiatives are more likely to win popular approval in cantons and cities, as exemplified by the flatter curves for initiatives at subnational state levels.

Figure 7: Probability of ballot vote approval in Federal polls (1947-2000)

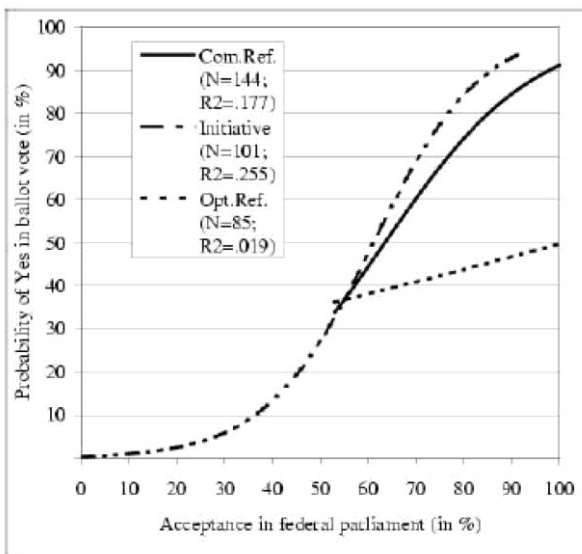


Figure 8: Probability of ballot vote approval in cantonal polls (1990-2000)

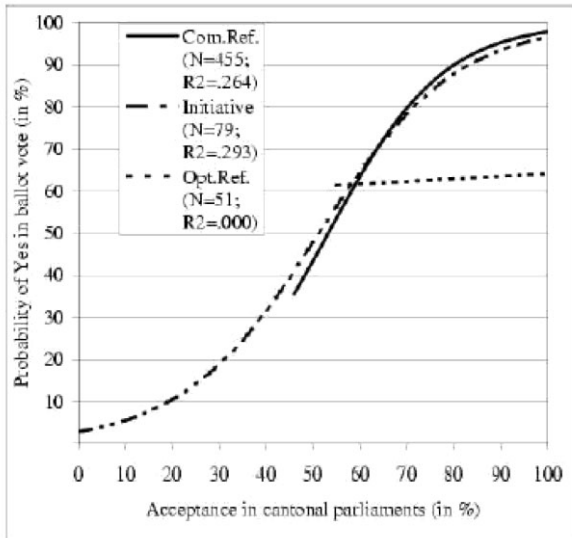
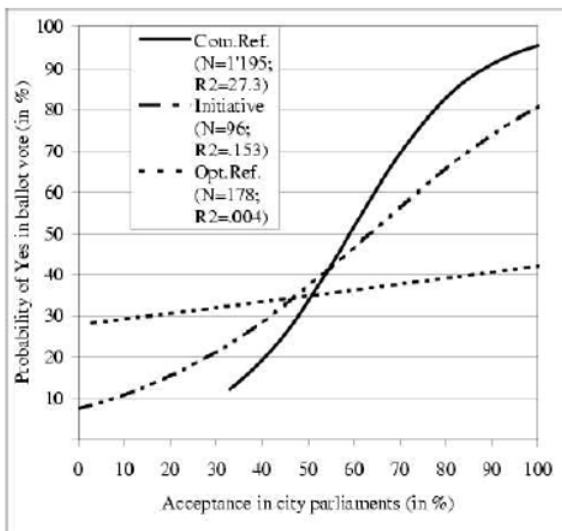


Figure 9: Probability of ballot vote approval in city polls (1990-2000)



For optional referendums, the relationship between elite and popular support is not statistically significant at any state level, implying that consensus of parliament has no impact on outcomes of optional referendum votes. Nonetheless, as has been shown by Trechsel & Sciarini (1998), parliamentary consensus strongly influences the initiation of referendum

petitions at the federal level. On average, in only seven percent of all measures subject to the optional referendum is a petition actually launched.¹⁰ Hence, the probability of a successful launch of an optional referendum is strongly related to elite consensus in parliament. The higher the consensus, the lower the chances of a successful launch of a referendum. Once an optional referendum is successfully placed on the ballot, however, parliamentary consensus has no effect on ballot outcomes.

By comparing direct democratic experiences at three state levels, it is interesting to observe that the impact of elite consensus on ballot outcomes follows the same logic in all contexts. Direct democratic outcomes depend largely on parliamentary consensus. In the case of compulsory referendums and popular initiatives, the higher the elite consensus, the more likely it is that voters will approve a measure at the polls. The likelihood of losing a vote increases significantly if elite consensus falters. For optional referendums, elite consensus has no impact on vote outcomes, but affects the probability that items will be placed on the ballot in the first place.

More specifically, even though legal regulations, the implementation and the use of direct democratic institutions differ significantly between state levels, direct democratic processes and ballot outcomes are surprisingly similar across State levels. For compulsory referendums, in eight out of ten ballot votes at the Federal state, and nine out of ten in cantons and cities, political elites successfully control direct democratic processes. Similar ballot success rates can be observed for popular initiatives, with an increased direct impact of initiatives at subnational units. Finally, the launching of optional referendums can effectively be prevented with high inter-parliamentary consensus, but once items reach the ballot, outcomes are unrelated to elite consensus in all units. In sum, with the strategy of forging large parliamentary compromises, Swiss political elites have successfully reduced ballot uncertainty at all state levels.

5 Conclusions

The occurrence of subnational ballots differs from the use of direct democratic instruments at the national level in systematic ways. Second-order voting theory can at least partly explain some of these differences in voting behaviour. In general, Swiss political elites responded to the threat of direct democracy by developing consensus-seeking strategies in the parliamentary stages and by forging large coalition governments at all three state levels. As a result, four out of five of all ballot measures turn out to be successful for governing majorities, at all State levels. To be sure, occurrences of ballot votes depend on institution at hand, as well as the political tradition of an entity. Voter support of governing elites also changes with respect to direct democratic institution and, more importantly, in some cases between national and subnational state levels. However, empirical evidence from subnational state levels casts doubts on claims that elite control on direct democratic processes

¹⁰ While comparable data is largely unavailable for subnational units, self-collected evidence from three Swiss cities suggests that the same processes are at work there. In the city of Arbon, 65 measures were subject to optional referendum between 1990 and 1997, but in only one case a petition was initiated. Similarly, in the city of Worb, 16 measures were subject to optional referendum between 1990 and 1994, and only one petition was launched. In the city of Schaffhausen, in six out of nine years between 1991 and 1999, 52 measures were subject to optional referendum, and four petitions were launched.

decreases with a higher ballot frequency. Direct democratic processes and ballot outcomes broadly follow the same logic and pattern at all state levels.

The implications with regard to the implementation of direct democratic instruments at subnational state levels are threefold. First, direct democracy adds the electorate as an additional veto-player to decision-making processes. Political decisions are thereby expected to better approximate the median voters' preferences in a given entity. On the subnational state levels, the use of these institutions depends very much on political tradition of an entity. The mechanisms that lead to ballot vote occurrences, however, seem to be pretty much the same among state levels. Thus, ballot occurrences are largely dependent on institutional arrangements and traditions, but also on elite consensus in case of compulsory referendums and popular initiatives. In case of optional referendums, the most unpredictable institution for governing majorities, elite consensus is important for the launching of a referendum petition (occurrence), but has no impact on ballot outcomes.

Second, chances for voters to successfully challenge governmental proposals are significantly higher in cities than at higher state levels. Chances for winning an initiative proposal at the polls are also higher in both cities and the cantons than at the federal level. Ballot vote success rates for compulsory referendums are, likewise, slightly higher on average in cantons and cities than at the federal level. Another striking effect according to second-order voting theory could be observed with respect to turnout rates in ballot votes. Average turnout rates are significantly higher if subnational ballot votes are coordinated in federal voting weekends compared to ballot votes at subnational state levels. Finally, absolute numbers of ballot occurrences do of course not tell us anything about the *political impact of a ballot vote*, that is, consequences for policy-making. Thus, what can be voted on (as well as other institutional arrangements) need to be more properly analysed and be an integral part in all future discussions about direct democratic institutions and experiences.

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