

Hanspeter Kriesi
Direct Democracy. The Swiss experience

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Evaluating Democratic Innovations

Curing the democratic malaise?

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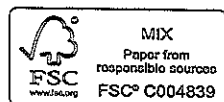
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2 Direct democracy

The Swiss experience

Hanspeter Kriesi

Introduction

Direct-democratic procedures give rise to various hopes and fears. On the one hand, people expect such procedures to make democratic ideals come true. Thus, the adherents of 'strong' or 'participatory' democracy (such as Benjamin Barber 1984) put high hopes in the extension of democratic procedures beyond representative democracy. They assume that active participation in collective political decision making will have an educative and empowering effect on the citizens and will, ultimately, create better citizens. On the other hand, fears are widespread that such procedures would ask far too much of the average citizen. Thus, Giovanni Sartori (1987: 120), one of its most vocal critics, suggests that direct democracy 'would quickly and disastrously founder on the reefs of cognitive incompetence'. Plato, in his treatise on the Republic, already called into question the Athenian direct democracy of his day and suggested that only a minority of intellectual guardians – of 'competent public policy elites', in our contemporary parlance – was fit to govern.

Switzerland is the only country where politics at all levels – including the national level – is decisively shaped by direct-democratic institutions. Thus, more national popular votes have taken place in Switzerland so far than in any other country. Therefore, the Swiss experience with direct democracy is of utmost importance – for its critics as well as for its supporters, even if the pertinence of this experience has been called into question by some of the critics. Schumpeter (1962: 267), unsurprisingly one of the greatest detractors of direct democracy, has, for example, put into question the relevance of the Swiss experience, because, as he argued, 'there is so little to quarrel about in a world of peasants which, excepting hotels and banks, contains no great capitalist industry, and the problems of public policy are so simple and so stable that an overwhelming majority can be expected to understand and to agree about them'. In Switzerland, he suggested, direct democracy could be an effective mechanism of political decision, 'but only because there are no great decisions to be made'.

Admittedly, this was in the early forties. Today, it would probably be difficult to find a serious political theorist who would doubt the relevance of Switzerland for the evaluation of the implementation of direct-democratic procedures.

Contemporary Switzerland is a complex, highly developed modern society, closely integrated into the world economy, and characterized by the coexistence of multiple linguistic cultures and an exceptionally high share of foreigners in the resident population. If Switzerland is a relatively small country and in many ways a special case – among other things precisely because of the importance of the direct-democratic procedures for political decision making – it certainly no longer represents the backward province Schumpeter was making it out to be.

In this chapter, I start out with a brief presentation of the key direct-democratic institutions of Switzerland. Some, even superficial, knowledge of these institutions is indispensable for understanding how direct democracy may be able to function under contemporary conditions. Next, I would like to give an idea of the utilization and the success of the available instruments. Third, I shall present some empirical results about the ways citizens are making their choices in direct-democratic campaigns and about the role the political elites play in pre-structuring their decisions. To conclude, I would like to draw attention to the (largely favourable) economic and social consequences of these procedures in the Swiss context.

The direct-democratic institutions of Switzerland

Institutions define the rules of the game. We should keep in mind that the direct-democratic institutions come in different varieties, with different logics attached (see Budge and Geissel in this volume). One variant is the populist, unmediated form of direct democracy, which best corresponds to the practice in the member states of the US. When the populist and progressive reformers of the late nineteenth century introduced direct-democratic procedures in the US, they did so, above all, to restrict the power of political parties and their political machines, which were in control of the state parliaments at the time (Cronin 1989: 50–7; Bowler and Donovan 1998; Smith and Tolbert 2001: 740, 2004: 112ff.). In the US, the popular initiative, still today, is primarily used by social movements and interest groups to circumvent the state parliaments controlled by the parties. This is possible because the popular initiatives are submitted to the popular vote without the intervention of the state governments and their parliaments. By contrast, the Swiss variety of direct democracy is much more organized and more tightly controlled by the political elites. Both government and parliament have an important role to play in the preparation of the proposals submitted to the voters.

Broadly speaking, we can classify Swiss direct-democratic institutions according to two criteria:¹

- The source of a proposition: elite or citizens.
- The initiation of the vote: required by the constitution or demanded by the citizens.

Combining the two criteria allows us to classify the three basic direct-democratic institutions at the federal level – the popular initiative, the compulsory and the optional referendum (see Table 2.1).² According to the source of the

Table 2.1 Classification of direct-democratic institutions

<i>Voted required by</i>	<i>Source of proposition</i>	
	<i>Government</i>	<i>Citizens</i>
Constitution	Compulsory referendum	—
Citizens	Optional referendum	Popular initiative

proposition, we can distinguish initiatives from referendums: initiatives are propositions ‘from below’, formulated by organizations representing groups of citizens, while referendums concern propositions ‘from above’, that is, legislative acts proposed by the government and adopted by parliament. Accordingly, initiatives and referendums follow entirely different logics. The initiative has an agenda-setting function. It launches a public debate on a given issue and puts the issue on the political system’s agenda. An initiative qualifies for a vote if it is signed by 100,000 citizens (roughly 2 per cent of the current number of citizens) within a period of 18 months. The text of an initiative, which is formulated by the group of citizens who launch it, has to be thematically focused on a single issue, and it may not conflict with international law. Otherwise, there are hardly any requirements to be fulfilled. At the federal level, the popular initiative is only possible for constitutional amendments. In the cantons, however, there is also the legislative initiative that allows a group of citizens to propose a specific piece of legislation. In contrast to the practice in the US, the government and the parliament discuss the text of the initiative before it is submitted to the popular vote, and usually provide it with a voting recommendation that almost always recommends its rejection. Government and parliament also have the option of formulating a direct counter-proposal, which will be submitted to the vote together with the initiative. They also have the option of formulating indirect counter-proposals to initiatives proposing a constitutional change by introducing normal legislation that makes some concessions to the initiative’s proposals.

The referendum, by contrast, concerns a legislative act originating from the government and intervenes only after the members of the political system have taken their decision on the piece of legislation. It comes in two basic versions, which can be distinguished on the basis of our second classification criterion: referendums are required either by the Constitution (in case of Constitutional amendments) or by a group of citizens (in case of regular legislation). Constitutional amendments are subject to compulsory referendum, while regular legislation is subject to optional referendum. Constitutional amendments are quite frequent in Switzerland, where the Constitution has been, on average, amended more than twice a year since the beginning of the 1980s. Such amendments are adopted only if they obtain a double majority – a majority of the people and a majority of the Swiss cantons, that is, the country’s member states. Regular legislation, once adopted by parliament, passes into law by default, if a referendum is not required by a group of citizens within three months after its adoption by parliament.

However, if a group of at least 50,000 citizens sign a petition for a referendum, the legislative act has to be submitted to a popular vote. Legislative acts voted upon in an optional referendum require only a simple popular majority to pass into law.

The referendum has the property of a popular veto that may prevent legislation from becoming effective. This general characteristic of the Swiss referendum has, according to the well known thesis of Leonhard Neidhart (1970), fundamentally shaped political decision making in Switzerland. Neidhart's thesis refers, above all, to the optional referendum, but, analogously, it may also be applied to its compulsory variety. Given the availability of the referendum, it is always possible that a party or an interest group that does not agree with the result of the legislative process launches an optional referendum against a law adopted by parliament, that is, that an organization decides to collect the required signatures to impose a popular vote and to put in danger the result of the legislative process. As a result, the threat of the referendum hovers, like the sword of Damocles, over the entire legislative process (see also Geissel in this volume). To prevent some dissatisfied group from sabotaging a legislative project by launching a referendum against it, all organizations capable of launching a referendum have, according to Neidhart's reasoning, ended up being integrated into the political process – either in the context of extended pre-parliamentary procedures (which closely resemble 'corporatist decision-making'), or in the context of the grand coalition that has governed Switzerland since 1959. In short, according to this reasoning, as a consequence of the direct-democratic opening, the Swiss system of government has been transformed from a 'plebiscitary' into a 'negotiation democracy'.

Even if Neidhart's thesis exaggerates the importance of the referendum for the extension of the negotiating structures in Switzerland – there is, indeed, a series of additional 'institutionalized mechanisms of accommodation' that serve to impose extended negotiating structures (federalism, a two-chamber parliamentary system, a proportional electoral system, a multi-party system, to mention but the most important ones) (Germann 1994). The latent functions of the referendum have nevertheless contributed to the fact that Switzerland constitutes the paradigmatic case of a consensus democracy. Incidentally, Lijphart (1999), who introduced the distinction between majoritarian and consensus democracies, does not at all take into account the referendum in the construction of his influential typology.

Since the creation of the Swiss Confederation in 1848, direct-democratic procedures have been gradually extended. The Constitution of 1848 introduced the initiative for its total revision as well as the compulsory referendum for all other constitutional amendments. In 1874, the optional referendum was introduced, and in 1891 the popular initiative. In the course of the twentieth century, further elements were added: in 1921, the optional referendum was extended to international treaties, and in 1977 the scope of the treaties covered by the referendum was once more enlarged. Since 1949, there has been a referendum for extraordinary decrees, and in 2003, in the context of the latest total revision of the Constitution, the general popular initiative was added to the inventory of direct-democratic procedures. These are the procedures as far as the federal level is concerned. At the cantonal and local levels, the panoply of direct-democratic

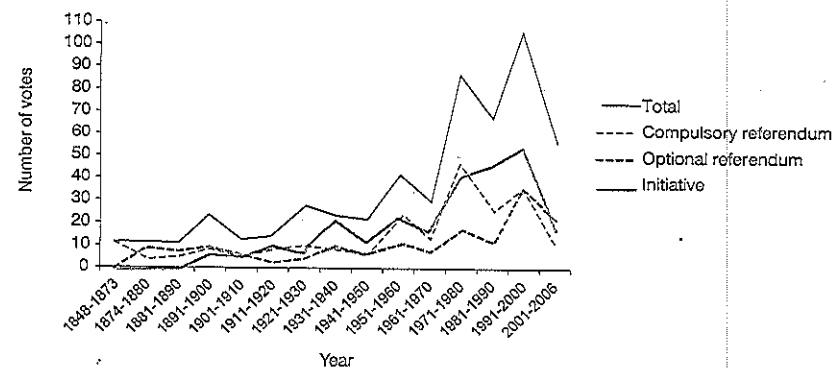


Figure 2.1 Number of popular votes – total and by instrument

Source: Kriesi and Trechsel 2008

instruments is even more elaborate, especially in German-speaking Switzerland. Thus, to give but one example, the yearly budget of the City of Berne, the Swiss capital, has to be approved by the citizens in a popular vote.

Direct-democratic practice: the use of these instruments and their success

From 1848 until the end of 2006, the Swiss citizens have voted on a total of 543 proposals at the federal level. Figure 2.1 shows the numerical development of the popular votes during the entire period. What catches the eye when looking at this figure is the enormous increase in the number of votes since the seventies. More than half of all the votes have taken place during the last thirty-five years. This indicates that the direct-democratic institutions are quite alive in Switzerland, and that their significance has considerably increased in the more recent past. On the one hand, the increase in the number of votes is a result of the increasing legislative activity in an ever more complex world; on the other hand, it results from the increasing use of the direct-democratic instruments by the citizens. Thus, the number of initiatives has increased strongly: more than two thirds of all initiatives, which have been submitted to a vote, fall in the period since the seventies.

Turning to the use of the optional referendum in particular, what strikes the observer is that of all the 2370 legislative proposals that were exposed to the optional referendum in the entire period, only 7 per cent (160 proposals) have actually been challenged by such a referendum (see also Geissel in this volume). Moreover, as Figure 2.2 shows, if the share of the proposals, against which a referendum was launched, was very high after its first introduction and again reached a peak during the thirties, it remained below average after World War II. The share of proposals that have eventually been rejected in a popular vote is even lower, and has continually decreased since the seventies. In the more recent past,

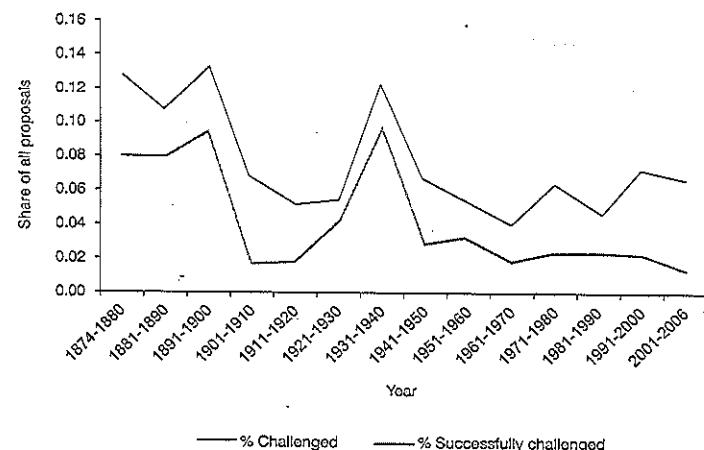


Figure 2.2 Optional referendum: share of proposals against which a referendum has been launched, and which have been attacked successfully

Source: Kriesi and Trechsel 2008

this share does not even reach 2 per cent of all legislative projects. This does not mean, however, that the optional referendum has become more or less irrelevant. As we have seen, it exerts an indirect, system-building effect by its considerable impact on the design of the decision-making processes, and it also deploys its effect in the cases where it is not used. Moreover, the optional referendum has been used, in particular, to attack some of the most important legislative projects of the more recent past.

Traditionally, the optional referendum has primarily allowed the conservatives to prevent the adoption of reform proposals (Kriesi and Wisler 1996). Thus, because of the optional referendum, the development of the Swiss welfare state has been delayed for a long time (Obinger 1998; Armington 2001). Since the eighties, however, the situation has changed: in the more recent past, it has been the left that has had more frequent recourse to the referendum than the right. This is a consequence of the fact that the parliament has tried to avoid far reaching social policy reforms, has only adopted minimalist modifications of the status quo, or has even contributed to welfare state retrenchment. In a period of neoliberal reforms, the optional referendum surprisingly proved to be an effective instrument in the hands of the left to prevent welfare state retrenchment (Bonoli 1999).

However, we should add that the optional referendum has become a less forceful instrument. This could already be seen in Figure 2.2, but becomes even more evident in Figure 2.3, which presents the development of the number of governmental defeats over time. As this figure shows, the optional referendum has provided the opposition with less and less success throughout the post-war period. Especially in the more recent past, that is, in the period where the left has used this instrument more frequently, its forcefulness has diminished. Conversely, the compulsory referendum, which no longer gave rise to governmental defeats

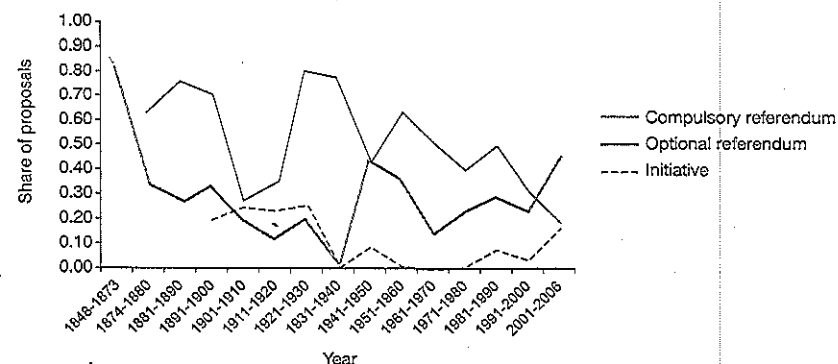


Figure 2.3 Share of governmental defeats, by instrument

Source: Kriesi and Trechsel 2008

in the thirties, has become increasingly menacing for the government and has led, in absolute, but also in relative terms, to more frequent governmental defeats than the optional referendum. As far as the initiative is concerned, it generally appears to be a rather blunt weapon. Roughly a third of the initiatives (30 per cent) have been withdrawn by their sponsors before it came to a popular vote in the first place. In the remaining cases, the electorate generally followed the recommendations of the government, who, as I have already argued, usually decides to reject the corresponding proposals. Overall, only fifteen initiatives (6 per cent) have been adopted in popular votes. As is shown by Figure 2.3, the share of successful initiatives has increased in the more recent past, admittedly based on a smaller number of initiatives submitted. After a period spanning several decades without any success, eight initiatives have been adopted since 1981.

However, in the case of initiatives, one should not deduce from their limited success at the polls that they are generally ineffective. Some initiatives have some success, even if they are not adopted in the popular vote. Their impact is often indirect, as they may influence the legislative process. Their withdrawal is often the result of such indirect effects. Thus, the initiatives of the left had a decisive impact on the reform of the old-age pension system at the beginning of the seventies, which would not have been so generous had it not been for those initiatives (Kriesi 1980).

One question that is often posed concerns the possibility of buying success at the polls. This question has been studied in detail in the US, where it has been shown that a lot of money does not necessarily mean a lot of influence with regard to the outcome of the votes. Although the investment of a lot of money may buy a certain amount of influence, the relationship between money and influence on the vote is much more complex and more limited than many critical observers care to believe. Thus, Gerber (1999) has found that economic interest groups may have the capacity to prevent the passage of propositions they oppose, but

they find it very difficult to pass their own propositions. By contrast, the citizens' groups – grass-roots organizations, public interest groups or social movement organizations – are much more successful at modifying policy through the direct legislation process. Gerber was able to show that initiatives that received majority support from citizens' groups passed at a substantially higher rate than measures that received majority support from economic interest groups. Matsusaka (2004) confirmed these findings by showing that it is the large number of citizens who profit from direct-democratic procedures, rather than the few interest groups.

In Switzerland, too, the relationship in question is more complex than usually suspected, and the Swiss experience generally serves to confirm the American studies. The relationship between the overall direction of campaign expenditures and the outcome of the vote is generally weak. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that almost all initiatives – independently of the financial effort of the adversarial camps – are rejected by the citizens. Figure 2.4 illustrates this relationship by showing that the government is generally successful in the case of initiatives (that is, the initiatives are rejected), independently of the overall direction of the campaign (horizontal axis), and of its intensity (different lines are drawn for the different degrees of campaign intensity). As we have seen, the optional referendum proves to be more dangerous for the government, and the relationship between the financial effort and the success at the polls is somewhat tighter in their case. However, even then, it remains relatively weak. This has, among other things, to do with the fact that the intensive minorities, who typically launch such referendums, usually invest large sums in the voting campaign, even if their chances of success are rather limited. Only when the campaign becomes very intense, and when the government's opponents have a financial advantage in such an intense campaign, can they count upon a good chance of success, that is, they are able to block the government's proposal. In this very special case, financial investments can be decisive, as is shown in the second part of Figure 2.4.

Before concluding that it is possible to buy a vote in some cases, we should, however, not forget that the challengers of the government can often count on broad support from the bourgeois camp. The successful launching of optional referendums often leads to a fragmentation of this camp (Trechsel and Sciarini 1998). Given that this camp possesses a 'natural majority' in Swiss politics, and that it has much more financial resources at its disposal than the left, its fragmentation proves to be particularly dangerous for the governmental position. Based on my own analyses (Kriesi 2005), it is, in the final analysis, the coalitional configuration that decides on the fate of a proposition. This, however, implies that even in those cases where we find a close relationship between the overall direction of the campaign and the outcome of the vote, the financial means did not necessarily prove to be decisive.

From the point of view of the elected representatives of the Swiss political system, the picture that emerges is, therefore, anything but dramatic. Even if they are not able to completely control the direct-democratic procedures, they have succeeded in considerably reducing the uncertainty that is necessarily linked to the direct-democratic opening of the policy-making process. Conversely, from

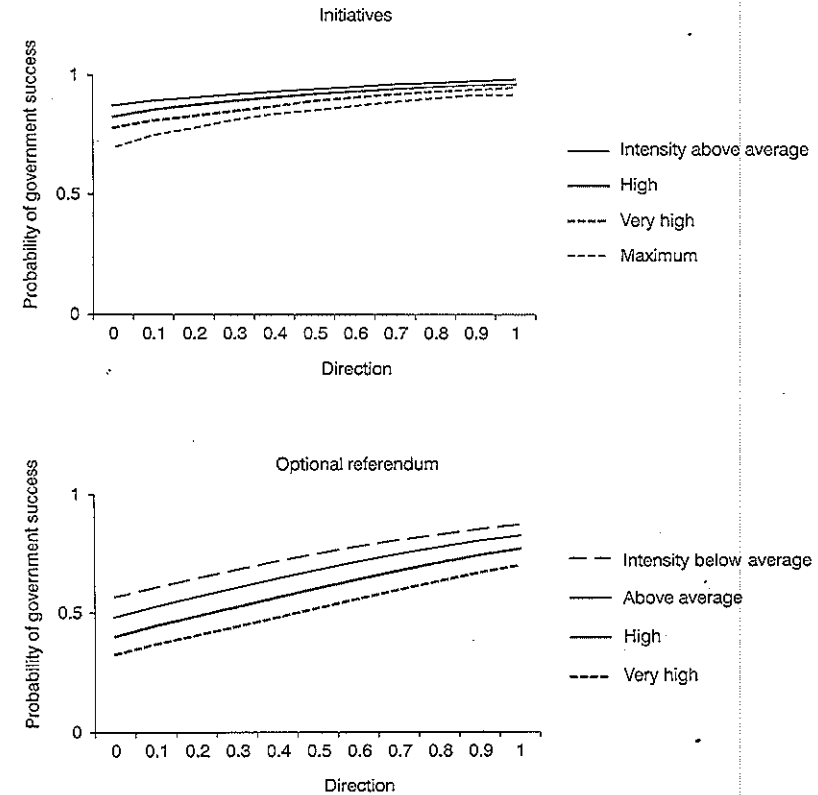


Figure 2.4 Probability of governmental success for initiatives and optional referendums (estimates based on statistical models)

Source: Kriesi 2006

the point of view of the challengers of the government and the parliamentary majority, it seems to be apparent that they are not able to modify fundamentally the procedures of representative democracy. But they may get a hearing for their cause at all levels of the policy-making process and if they don't get a fair hearing, they may sometimes successfully appeal to the general electorate.

The opinion formation and the decision of the citizens

Given the key role of the political elites in the direct-democratic process in Switzerland, we already have a partial answer to the question of how the citizens are able to make reasonable choices at the polls, even if they are politically relatively uninformed. The political elites define the options, which they submit to the citizens' vote; they form the coalitions that oppose each other in the campaign preceding the vote; and the mobilization of these coalitions supplies the heuristic

cues and the systematic arguments that the citizens use for opinion formation during the campaign. The remaining question is whether the citizens are capable of properly using the information supplied to them by the elites, and whether they are able to arrive at a choice that reflects their own preferences.

According to my own study of roughly 150 popular votes, I have come to rather optimistic conclusions in this regard. First of all, the share of the electorate that is moderately to fully aware of the proposals submitted is rather high. The overall average for the 217 federal propositions of the period 1981–2004 reaches a level of no less than 73 per cent. It is true that there are exceptions to this high level of awareness. In almost 10 per cent of the cases, a majority of the electorate was quite unaware of the issues in question. Moreover, the level of awareness has been decreasing over the years, from an average of 80 per cent in the 1980s to an average of 69 per cent in the 2000s. However, citizens who actually participate in the vote prove to be significantly more competent than the electorate overall. This means that the most incompetent usually do not participate in the vote. This mechanism of self-selection of the incompetent reduces in a quasi-automatic way the possibility of an unreasonable decision, which the critics of direct-democratic procedures are so much afraid of. Even if it is true that more intense campaigns mobilize a larger number of voters from all camps, that is, that they also mobilize voters who are usually rather uninformed, the participation of those who are little interested and uninformed remains limited even in such campaigns. This results from a self-correcting mechanism whereby particularly intense campaigns that mobilize large numbers of citizens also serve to raise the general level of issue-specific competence in the electorate at large – in turn, implying that, in such cases, the group of uninformed voters becomes relatively small.

Those members of the electorate who actually participate in the vote have – following a well known theory of social psychology (the so called ‘dual process theory’, Stroebe 2007) – basically two possibilities for arriving at their choice: either they rely on *heuristic cues* such as voting recommendations by parties, trust in the government or defence of the status quo, which allow them, in a short-cut way, to arrive at approximately reasonable decisions. Or they may more systematically rely on the arguments promoted by the adversarial camps. In the real world of opinion formation and decision making in direct-democratic campaigns, however, the two analytically distinct ways of deciding are not so sharply distinct. On the one hand, the effective use of heuristic cues presupposes a certain amount of political knowledge. Thus, one has to know about the general positioning of the political parties in order to be able to make effective use of their recommendations. On the other hand, some of the arguments that are used by the political elites in the course of the campaigns are hardly distinguishable from heuristic cues. Thus, the decision of voters who rely on the often all too simplistic arguments that are promoted in the campaign, will not be much different from a purely heuristically determined decision.

Even if the two paths are not always as clearly distinct as the theory would have it, the results of my study with regard to the citizens’ capacity to arrive at reasonable decisions are nevertheless quite clear-cut. The citizens turn out to

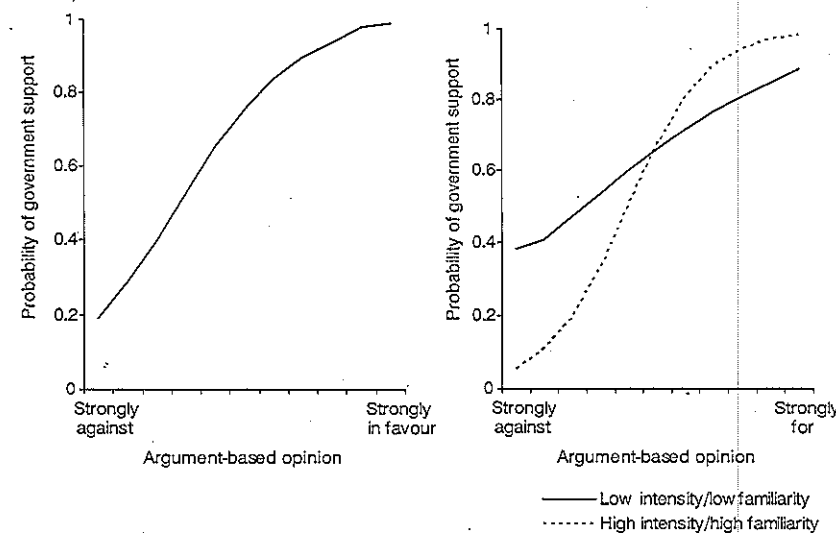


Figure 2.5 Probability of governmental support, as a function of argument-based opinions

Source: Kriesi 2005

be less minimalist than usually assumed: my study confirms the generally great importance of argument-based decisions. It measures argument-based opinions on the basis of a set of questions about the most important arguments exchanged during the campaigns preceding the vote. A voter’s overall argument-based opinion score corresponds to his or her positioning on the central conflict dimension of the campaign-specific debate (which is operationalized by the first factor resulting from a factor analysis of the opinions on the campaign-specific set of arguments). The great importance of argument-based voting is illustrated by Figure 2.5, which shows the general relationship between argument-based opinions and the voting choice, that is, the support of the government’s position: the more strongly citizens support the arguments in favour of the government’s position, the more strongly they also decide in favour of the government’s position at the polls – and vice versa. The relationship is rather tight, which means that we can explain roughly 40 per cent of the variance of individual voting decisions on the basis of the voters’ opinions about the arguments that were prevalent during the campaign.

The importance of arguments varies, however, from one campaign to another depending on its intensity and on the familiarity of the proposal. Compared with these two context characteristics, individual characteristics play a subordinate role for the explanation of argument-based voting. The second half of Figure 2.5 presents the maximum joint effect of the two context characteristics on the relationship. As we can see, the curve is much flatter when both the intensity of the campaign is low and the proposal is unfamiliar. This means that arguments turn out to be much more decisive in highly intense campaigns and for highly familiar

propositions – especially, as the figure also indicates, as far as the challengers of the government's position are concerned. They benefit from intensive campaigns more than the government. While the campaigns are reasonably intense in the large majority of cases, a majority of cases also proves to be rather unfamiliar to significant minorities of the electorate (a third or more). Overall, roughly a quarter of the propositions was both rather unfamiliar and did not give rise to intensive campaigns. These were also the cases where the level of awareness turned out to be particularly low, with an average share of the electorate of only 59 per cent being at least moderately aware.

Systematic and heuristic strategies are to a certain extent complementary. Thus, intensive campaigns increase the relevance of both decision strategies. The two strategies are also complementary in another respect: they are used in the same context, but by different types of voters. While the voters with strong opinions – either on the side of the opposition or on the side of the government – generally decide systematically on the basis of arguments, voters with less explicit opinions, that is, ambivalent, uncertain, neutral or ignorant voters, more heavily rely on heuristic strategies. This is illustrated by Figure 2.6, which is divided into three parts. Left and right from the centre, one finds the voters with strong opinions; in the centre, those with less explicit opinions. In each part of the figure, the relationship between the level of awareness and the support of the government's position is shown for voters with different partisan orientations and different levels of trust in the government. Without going into the details of the figure, one can easily recognize that the lines for voters with strong opinions on both sides of the centre can hardly be separated from one another, which means that they all decide in roughly the same way, independently of their partisan orientation or their level of trust in the government. For the voters with less explicit opinions, by contrast, the lines for the different groups of voters are clearly distinguishable from one another, meaning that these voters more heavily rely on partisan recommendations and their trust in government – two types of heuristic cues – to arrive at their voting decisions. Since the figure refers to propositions that are supported by centre-right coalitions and opposed by the left, the trusting conservative voters support the government most, while the distrusting left voters do so least. Finally, the figure also clearly shows that, for virtually all types of voters, the lines more or less run parallel to the x-axis. This means that the level of awareness has practically no impact on the voting behaviour. Even little-informed voters are, in other words, capable of arriving at decisions that closely resemble those of their well-informed colleagues with similar preferences (that is, party orientations and levels of trust in government).

Consequences of direct democracy

In the final analysis, the question is, of course, whether and how direct democracy functions, and also whether it performs well for the economy and for the citizens' personal situations in everyday life. This question has above all been studied by economists. They have exploited the variations that exist at the cantonal

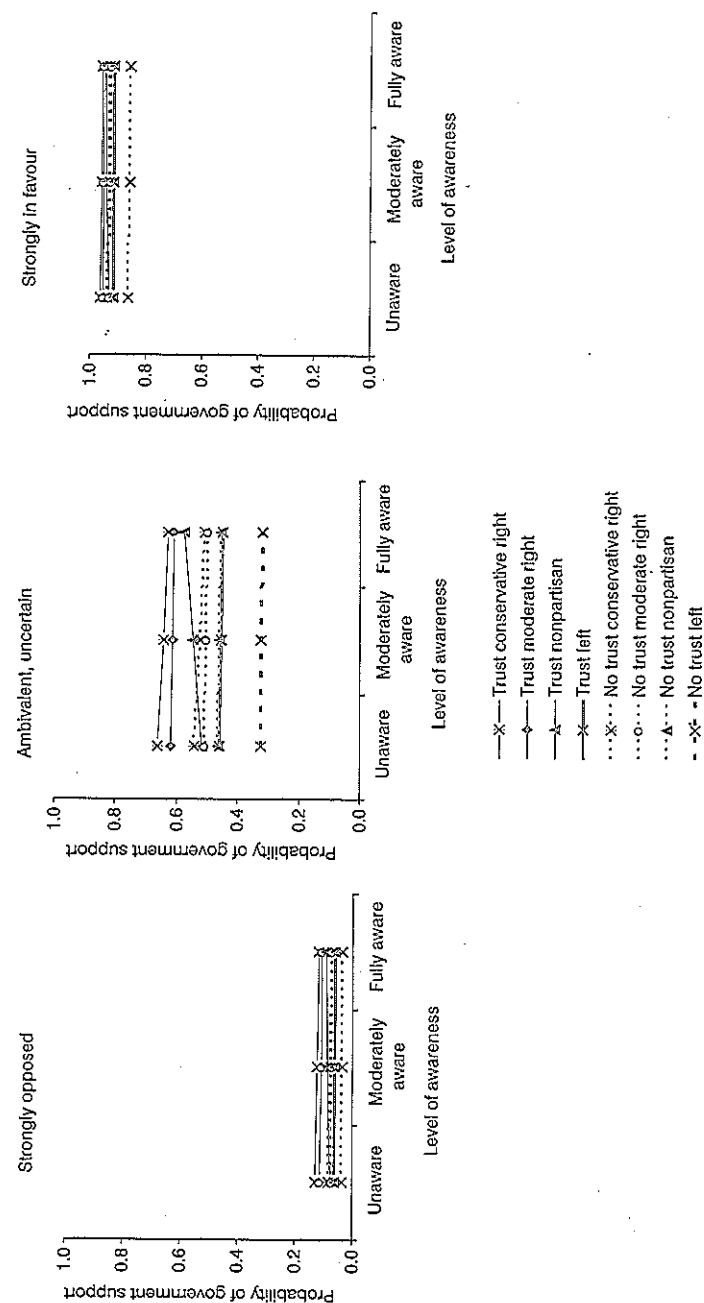


Figure 2.6 Probability of government support, argument-based opinions and level of awareness (for propositions supported by the centre-right and opposed by the left)

(regional) level within Switzerland with regard to the institutionalization of direct-democratic instruments and their practical use. Thus, in some, but not all, cantons there exist direct-democratic instruments in the area of fiscal policy that provide the citizens with the possibility of exerting a direct influence on the taxes and the expenditures of the cantonal states. Based on a comparison of the twenty-six cantons, one can draw conclusions about the consequences of direct-democratic institutions.

Such comparisons lead to the conclusion that direct-democratic institutions have mainly positive effects with regard to the economy (Kirchgässner et al. 1999; see also Geissel in this volume). Thus, they increase the macro-economic performance – the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is higher in cantons that allow for direct-democratic interventions of the citizens in fiscal policy by as much as 3.6 per cent. Moreover, in cantons that apply the referendum in fiscal matters, the public expenditures correspond more closely to the citizens' preferences, and – *ceteris paribus* – they are also lower than in more representative systems. To the extent that they have a right to co-decide about fiscal matters, the citizens apparently deal more economically with their own tax money than their elected representatives. Cantons with elaborate direct-democratic institutions also have a lower public debt, higher tax morale and better public services. Finally, direct-democratic institutions also have a legitimating and an integrative function (Papadopoulos 1998: 156–60; 2001), and they increase the general level of life satisfaction among the citizens. The higher satisfaction with life in states with elaborate direct-democratic procedures not only results from their higher level of public performance, but also, as is argued by Stutzer and Frey (2006), is a direct consequence of the greater legitimacy of public decisions that involve such procedures. Citizens value the possibility of participating in political decision making in and of itself, independently of their implications for the performance of the state, which increases the perceived fairness of political decisions that are taken by direct-democratic procedures. Based on an original comparison of Swiss citizens and foreign residents of Switzerland, Stutzer and Frey succeed in empirically separating the effects of direct-democratic institutions on public performance from their purely procedural effects and to confirm their hypotheses. The opportunity for direct-democratic participation has, indeed, a direct effect on the general life satisfaction of the Swiss citizens. While they could not definitely confirm the positive consequences for the individuals' beliefs about their political influence, the effect on the satisfaction with life proved to be highly robust.

Conclusion

Thus, based on the Swiss experience, the direct-democratic procedures turn out to be highly attractive. On the one hand, and in line with the results of public opinion research more generally (Sniderman 1993), the Swiss experience shows that the voters, in the large majority of the propositions submitted to them, are not really overburdened by the task expected of them. This results, above all, from the pre-structuring of their choices by the way institutions are set up in Switzerland

and by the mobilizing and communicating strategies of the political elites. On the other hand, the Swiss experience also indicates that the citizens doubly benefit from direct-democratic procedures: such procedures not only increase public performance, but also the legitimacy of political decisions and, by implication, the general satisfaction of the citizens with their lives. Taken together, the Swiss experience amounts to a powerful empirical rebuttal of the arguments raised by sceptics like Sartori.

This does not mean that all is perfect in the Swiss variety of direct democracy. While the overall assessment of the Swiss experience with direct democracy lends itself to highly optimistic normative conclusions, several of the results I have presented depend on favourable conditions. Thus, citizens' decisions in the case of votes on unfamiliar propositions with little elite mobilization (about a quarter of the cases in the period studied) rely much less on argument-based opinions. There are even a limited number of propositions where the majority of the individual voting decisions cannot be explained by either heuristic or systematic considerations (Kriesi 2005). In other words, even in Switzerland, with its long experience with direct-democratic votes, the procedures do not always work as intended. Moreover, from the point of view of normative democratic theory, the self-selection of the most incompetent is not unproblematic either. If it solves the problem raised by the conservative critics of direct democracy, it raises instead a problem of social justice that has to be dealt with by measures such as civic education, or the public support of the intermediaries responsible for direct-democratic campaigns.

In my view, the lessons to be drawn from the Swiss experience are twofold. On the one hand, this experience suggests that the political elites have a very important role to play in the pre-structuration of and the mobilization for the vote. If the elites do not engage in intense campaigning preceding the vote, as was the case in the Dutch referendum on the European Union Treaty in 2005, the electorate will not be able to cast an informed vote. The elite-led debate during the campaign preceding the vote proves to be decisive for the quality of the voters' choice. On the other hand, in a properly designed direct-democratic system, the governing majority is not completely disarmed, but it does not have full control over the process either. Groups of citizens may set the agenda by imposing a vote, and the governing majority may not be able to convince a majority of the voters to adopt its preferred solution at the polls. Empowering the citizens by direct-democratic procedures implies the risk of defeat, for reasons that, most of the time, have very little to do with questions of citizen competence, but quite a lot to do with questions of pre-existing political preferences on the part of the citizens and the outcome of the political struggle among majority and opposition.

Notes

- 1 To be sure, there are other criteria to classify direct-democratic institutions, for example, the criterion of whether or not the direct-democratic decision is binding.

Since all Swiss votes are binding, this particular criterion is not very pertinent in our present context.

- 2 For each one of these three types there are different subtypes, but for our purposes it will be sufficient to distinguish among the three general categories.

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