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Does an Active Use of Mechanisms of Direct Democracy Impact Electoral Participation? Evidence from the U.S. States and the Swiss Cantons

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ABSTRACT *This article investigates the consequences that frequent uses of mechanisms of direct democracy have on electoral turnout, contrasting evidence from the Swiss cantons and states in the United States. It contributes to the existing literature in two senses. First, it constitutes the very first cross-national comparative study on the topic and, therefore, it allows for examination of hypotheses the literature previously advanced for single cases (mostly, but not wholly, confined to the U.S. and Switzerland). Second, in contrast to previous research, it delves into the world of direct democracy and shows that not all MDDs are the same, nor do they have the same political effects in terms of electoral participation. I demonstrate that the previous U.S.-based knowledge does not resist empirical testing when contrasted with Swiss evidence: active use of citizen-driven initiatives have no statistically significant effects on turnout. Nonetheless, voter turnout rates are significantly lower in states and cantons with more top-down measures on the ballot.*

KEY WORDS: Direct democracy, Switzerland, United States, turnout

Though it has not traditionally been a major topic of democratic theory, the debate between supporters and detractors of direct democracy has been extensive, and is of increasing theoretical and practical relevance. These discussions have fostered numerous themes for exploration; one of these critical points refers to whether direct democracy fosters or undermines the representative game through enlightening citizens or alienating them from participating at representative elections. For some, if citizens' concerns and demands can be addressed (and solved) directly by them at the ballot box,

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then why bother electing authorities? For others, an active use of direct democracy not only bolsters representative democracy through enhancing electoral participation, but also increasing citizens' political awareness, making them virtuous, and in some way, 'freerer' (Mansbridge 1999, Qvortrup 2002). If this is so, then direct democracy could serve as the 'medicine' needed to cure the presumed current maladies representative democracies face nowadays (civic disaffection and alienation, low trust in government, and so forth).¹ Nonetheless, if frequent uses of direct democracy 'burn' citizens, we must reconsider the claims for further expansion of direct democracy.

Thus, the main questions of this paper are rather straightforward: does an active use of mechanisms of direct democracy impact electoral participation at national races? If so, what does this relationship look like? Direct democracy is a rather elastic concept and clearly defining it becomes essential. I define a mechanism of direct democracy (MDD) as a *publicly recognised institution where citizens decide or emit their opinion on issues – other than through legislative and executive elections – directly at the ballot box through universal and secret suffrage*. Starting from this definition, I further make the distinction between those MDDs that are 'citizen-initiated' (through the gathering of signatures),² and 'top-down' (triggered by the sitting legislative assembly, the executive power, or constitutionally mandated). This differentiation is crucial because habitually, from a cross-national perspective, top-down MDDs (hereafter TD-MDDs) usually represent plebiscitary means either for bypassing other representative institutions, disengaging from the responsibility of tough policies, or simply as mobilisation/legitimisation populist tools.³ This research examines the use of MDDs and not the constitutional provisions for direct democracy.

This paper theorises that an active culture of direct democracy has a significant effect on electoral participation. This effect is dissimilar across types of MDDs (citizen initiated v. top-down), and is not necessarily linear – as previously demonstrated by the literature. While I expect CI-MDDs to foster electoral participation in general elections, I also anticipate finding a 'saturation effect' after a certain threshold of use is reached. In other words, the use of citizen-initiated mechanisms of direct democracy fosters citizen participation but crossing certain thresholds, direct democracy becomes inimical in bringing citizens to the ballot box in elections for authorities. Therefore, an inverse U-shaped relationship is expected.

Simultaneously, I presume that frequent uses of top-down mechanisms of direct democracy (i.e. plebiscites) alienate citizens from the electoral game in general elections. In other words, when authorities systematically call citizens to the ballot box, this action is alienating, and produces lower turnout in general elections. This paper is the very first to pursue a cross-national study on the impact different types of direct democracy have on electoral participation in general elections.

Research design

Understanding the reasons behind electoral participation is a complex endeavour and it can be even more difficult to isolate the effects of a particular variable (uses of MDDs) – controlling for all other relevant variables – on the dependent variable (electoral participation at general elections). One way to assess this relationship (if there is one), would be to find very similar countries (to control for other potential unobservables) with different degrees in the use of MDDs and to assess whether their respective turnouts follow any specific pattern. Yet, finding countries where we could control for the plausible independent variables affecting electoral participation is almost impossible. From a cross-national perspective I am limited by the fact that those countries that use CI-MDDs at the national level are rather few: from 1985 until 2005, just 15 countries held a CI-MDD.⁴ If we omit those countries with less than one million inhabitants, the list is further reduced to just 12 countries worldwide.⁵ Attempting to control for all possible reasons accounting for differences in electoral participation rates between, say Lithuania and Bolivia or Hungary and Uruguay, is – to say the least – an exercise in futility.

Another strategy would be to find a country that shifted from a pure representative democracy to the coexistence of representative and direct democratic institutions. We could then analyse the changes in electoral participation under both scenarios. This would be ideal in terms of controlling for several of the variables the literature has put forward. However, *endogeneity* becomes a quandary because of the fact that direct democracy has been either included or excluded in a particular time, thus something else might already have been ‘going on’ that could explain different turnout levels even before the inclusion or exclusion of MDDs. Therefore, another research design is required.

Given these limitations, I follow the literature and proceed in studying sub-national uses of MDDs and their impact on electoral participation. This research uses the U.S. states and Swiss cantons as units of analysis. Even with all the flanks opened with such a comparison, both countries and their respective sub-national units provide an interesting contrast because there are a large number of potential independent variables that are constant among states and cantons respectively, but concomitantly, these sub-national units use direct democracy in unlike fashions in both nations. I delve into this point in the next section.

While classified within the so-called developed world, the U.S. and Switzerland are located at the far bottom of that list according to electoral participation at general elections.⁶ Despite this fact, they still present enormous variation in the use of MDDs within each country’s federal units.⁷ Thus, encouraged by this literature, I anticipate that states and cantons with more frequent use of CI-MDDs, measured as the number of CI-MDDs appearing on the state/cantonal ballot in every election, will have

higher electoral turnout than states/cantons with fewer or no such measures on the ballot; otherwise for top-down MDDs.

Electoral participation and uses of direct democracy in the U.S. and Switzerland

While the American literature has recently demonstrated that citizen-initiated mechanisms of direct democracy foster citizen participation in general elections, the Swiss literature has been much more eclectic – to say the least. Yet, as soon as one delves into this body of literature, one realises that methodological differences among all these works – some rely on public opinion, or electoral results, and others on controlled experiments – make it very difficult to determine where the best explanation is located. Moreover, while both the Swiss and the American works rely on comparisons among subnational administrative units (states in the U.S. and cantons in Switzerland), a review of this literature reveals an interesting fact: no study has breached the national divide so far.

Within the American context, the first empirical analyses on this topic showed no significant relationship between ballot measures and electoral turnout (Everson 1981, Magleby 1984). Yet, with new methodological tools and a renewed cycle of uses of direct democracy in the U.S. in the last two decades, Tolbert and Smith (2005) find that there is a positive association between the number of state ballots and electoral participation in both midterm and presidential elections.⁸ However, this positive view of the side effects of direct democracy is challenged by other studies in the literature, even the American one. For instance, Schlozman and Yohai (2008) on the one hand and Cebula (2008) on the other hand claim that voter initiatives in American states have restricted effects on turnout. Grummel (2008), however, finds that ethical policy ballot measures generate higher turnout in midterm elections but not in presidential elections. Dyck and Seabrook (2010) find that mobilisation via direct legislation occurs as a consequence of partisan campaigns and not because of an increase in participatory fervour.

But it is not only the American literature that has challenged this positive association. For example, revising how different degrees in the uses of mechanisms of direct democracy at the cantonal level in Switzerland impact on electoral participation, Freitag and Stadelmann-Steffen (2010) show a negative relationship between both. They claim this is due to voters' fatigue – as Hill (2003) has already done for the Australian case – and explain this arguing that intensive use of direct democracy makes regular national elections less significant than they would be without direct democracy. Of course, this argument on the significance of elections was first advanced by Jackman and Miller (1995), and constitutes an already-'classic' explanation for the extremely low rate of electoral participation in Switzerland; see also Bühlmann and Freitag (2006).⁹

Without doubt, the Swiss modern institutional architecture was strongly influenced by the American structural design (i.e. federal states, great local autonomy), (Fleiner 2002, Vatter 2007b). At the same time, they maintain certain important differences. While for example in one canton there is compulsory voting, there is none in any of the American states; while all Swiss are registered automatically there is no such a thing in the American milieu; while one is characterised by consensus executives *Konkordanz*, and legislative proportional representation, the American design looks exactly the opposite (Lutz 2007). Also, inter-state and inter-canton differences are huge. Let me exemplify with one of the most obvious parameters: population. The ratio between the largest and the smallest states in the U.S. is about 70 (California v. Wyoming), in Switzerland this ratio is even larger: 87 (Zurich v. Appenzell-Innerrhoden). To be blunt, as Vatter (2007a) shows, the mere number of administrative employees in Zurich exceeds the number of inhabitants in Appenzell-Innerrhoden. Yet, intra-country similitudes are evident: for instance, all cantons and all states have the same type of representation.

In terms of uses of direct democracy, in all the 26 Swiss *cantons* there is the possibility of triggering CI-MDD, while the same is true in about just half of the states. However, their use differs greatly mainly because of the entry hurdles (such as time available for signature gathering, amount of signatures, and the like). In the States, the direct democracy rights vary significantly. Although all states permit legislative measures (plebiscites) and all states – except for Delaware – require constitutional amendments to be approved by the voters at large, just fifteen states allow for popular initiatives, constitutional popular initiatives and facultative referenda. Seven allow popular initiatives and referendums but not constitutional popular initiatives and just three allow only facultative referendums, and three for constitutional popular initiatives. The other 23 states do not have CI-MDDs despite that, in some states, legislatures place nonbinding advisory measures on the ballot.

As one starts to analyse the amount and type of mechanisms of direct democracy at the sub-national level in both the U.S. and Switzerland the very first impression is that we are talking about an institutional feature used much more than common knowledge suggests. Plotting MDDs at the state level in the U.S. looks like an electrocardiogram more than anything else, but of course, it has an explanation. Many, if not most MDDs, are held concurrently with general elections (legislative and executive). In Switzerland, the use of direct democracy is much more evenly distributed over time and there is almost no relationship between general elections and the uses of MDDs; see Figure 1 below.

In both countries, just one in every three MDDs belongs to the realm of citizen-initiated mechanisms of direct democracy (indeed, in both countries 32% of all MDDs are CI-MDD). In the U.S. there is an average of 40 citizen-initiated mechanisms of direct democracy per year within the

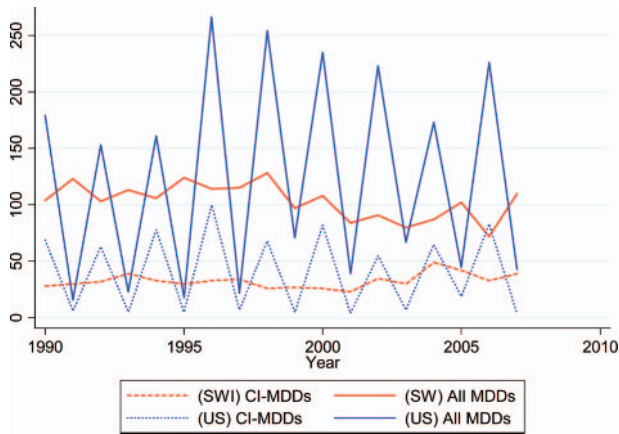


Figure 1. Amount and type of MDDs in the U.S. and Switzerland (sub-national) since 1990.

universe of a bit over 123 MDDs per year; in Switzerland this relationship is 33 within 103. These numbers are, however, strongly influenced by certain states and cantons. For instance, the state with the highest amount of CI-MDDs was Oregon in 2000 ($n = 20$) and the state with the most TD-MDDs was California in 1990 ($n = 27$). In Switzerland the canton with the most CI-MDD was Zurich in 2003 ($n = 10$) and, on the other hand, the canton with the most TD-MDDs was Graubünden in 2000 ($n = 24$).¹⁰

In the overall statistics, both countries perform rather similarly. Considering the turnout at the sub-national level, the U.S. has an average of 48% and Switzerland 45%. The average of the maximum value of turnout in the U.S. and Switzerland is 67 and 65 per cent respectively, and the minimum average is 36 v. 23 per cent. Figure 2 below shows the most and least participative state/canton since the beginning of the 1990s. In Switzerland, cantonal data of electoral participation is used for the five elections for *Nationalrat* (parliament) since 1991 ($n = 5$), and in the States five presidential and five congressional midterm elections are used. In the case of Switzerland cantonal differences in electoral participation could reach almost 40 percentage points in the very same election. In the States, despite not attaining the Swiss magnitude, the gap is systematically over 20 points' difference.¹¹

Alternative explanations for variations in state and canton voter turnout

There is a clear tension between expanding the universe of analysis and the depth of variables included (Sartori 1970). A unified Swiss-American model of electoral participation is much more complicated than it appears, and the major problem is due to the enormous variations of the control variables used for both countries in the literature. For instance, while in the US voter

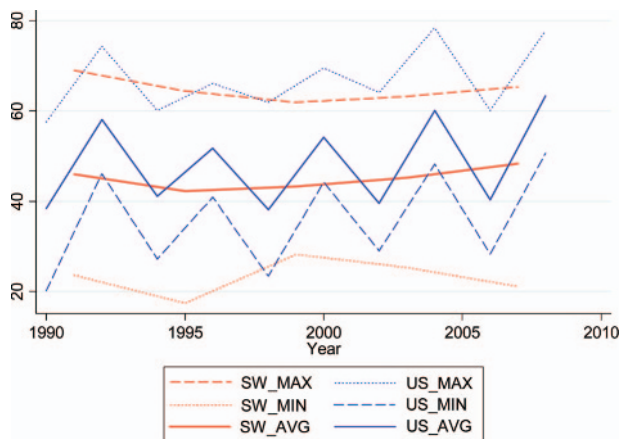


Figure 2. Electoral participation rates in the U.S. and Switzerland (sub-national) in legislative and presidential elections since 1990.

registration procedures are systematically significant for explaining different state levels of turnout, they are meaningless in Switzerland as all Swiss are registered automatically (Lutz 2007). Of course, there are some common variables that travel without problems between both worlds (such as per capita income or social heterogeneity). Let me first address these variables.

An important portion of the literature on electoral turnout stresses the value of explanatory variables coming from classical modernisation theory; a theory that is linearly and directly related to economic development and democracy. Thus, I control for state and cantonal income per capita. These data come from the *U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA)* and the *Swiss Federal Statistical Office*. These measures are calculated yearly in constant U.S. dollars or Swiss francs respectively. I also control for population size and population density of each state/canton. With a view to *population size*, researchers assume that less densely populated areas will display lower electoral participation, since a scattered population is more difficult to mobilise and relevant information is less accessible (Blais and Dobrzynska 1998). It is also argued that the larger the size of the population, the lower the likelihood that a single vote made the difference; thus the expected utility of the vote decreases (Blais and Carty 1991, Geys 2006, Owen and Grofman 1984). Also Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995) show that once individual characteristics are controlled for, there is more associative life and social activity in smaller communities. Nonetheless, given the important differences in sizes of populations (within both cantons and states), I believe that having overcome a certain threshold, it does not matter whether a country has 5 or 20 million inhabitants. Thus, I have opted to calculate and include in the model the natural log of population.

More socially heterogeneous states have lower turnout because minorities tend to vote less, for reasons such as their lower socioeconomic status; more

racially diverse states also tend to have poorer white populations and, again, lower socioeconomic status is associated with less participation (for whites as well as minorities). Furthermore, Hill and Leighley (1999) demonstrate that racial diversity is strongly associated with lower levels of voter turnout, weaker mobilising institutions, and more restrictive voter registration requirements. State racial and ethnic diversity is measured with data from the population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau and, inspired by Alesina *et al.* (2003), Hero (1998) and Hero and Tolbert (1996), I calculate social heterogeneity as a yearly index that subtracts the white non-Hispanic population from the whole state population [$1 - (\text{white non-Hispanic})$]. In Switzerland a similar argument has been advanced and I use data from the *Swiss Federal Statistical Office*. This calculation, however, takes into consideration German language because of its higher explanatory power than religion (Kriesi 2005). The non-German cantons have minority status at the national level. We therefore suggest that individuals living in these cantons concentrate more on cantonal than federal politics, and thus tend to exercise their national voting rights less intensively.¹²

The literature is also rather strong in claiming, additionally, that the more *competitive* the election is expected to be, the higher the probability that one vote affects the outcome, which increases the expected utility of voting and thereby voter turnout.¹³ The empirical record seems to solidly support this hypothesis not only in the American context (Cox and Munger 1989), but also beyond its borders (Blais 2000). Inspired by Caldeira and Patterson (1982, 1983), then followed by Cox and Munger (1989), I operationalise political competitiveness as the absolute value of the difference in percentage votes of the first two contenders in the election. Thus, the smaller this index, the smaller the electoral gap between the most important competitors, the greater the competence; I call this variable political uncompetitiveness.¹⁴

It would be practically impossible to address each and every independent variable the literature uses to control for turnout at the state level in the US. Indeed, a cursory review of the U.S. literature in this matter accounts for more than 40 different independent variables to explain what is called the 'vote paradox,' even to a degree of including (lately) genetic/hereditary factors among the explanations.¹⁵ Still, there is one variable that excels in these studies: the electoral registration procedures (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). This variable is one of the most important determinants of state level turnout and usually is operationalised as the number of days before the election one must register to vote in each state. In this research I use an additive index developed by Bowler and Donovan, which identifies ten laws that affect how easy it was to vote and/or have a vote counted (Bowler and Donovan 2004). For the Swiss cantons this index acquires the value of zero, meaning there are no barriers to voter registration and participation. Also, following the work of Everson (1981), and Tolbert and Smith (2005), I control for southern states as defined by the United States Census Bureau.

There are two other variables that typically appear in the Swiss literature on cantonal turnout and that were not addressed above; these are the classic district magnitude and compulsory vote. In regard to the electoral system, it has been argued that *district magnitude* (M) has a relevant effect on participation because single member districts do not produce the necessary incentives for presenting candidates in all districts and mobilise voters within them (Jackman 1987, Karp and Banducci 2008, Pérez Liñán 2001, Powell 1986). The cross-national evidence is quite strong that *compulsory voting*, which is the degree to which voter appearance at the polls is mandated by national legislation, ‘works’ (Blais 2006, Jackman 1987, Power and Garand 2007). It has been traditionally captured with a dichotomous variable. Of course, in this research this is almost a residual variable given that only one canton (Schaffhausen) has compulsory voting.

Explaining the electoral participation at the state/cantonal level

The activity in the use of MDD is measured, in both countries, by the number of CI-MDDs appearing on the ballot every two years.¹⁶ Also, anticipating that ‘too many initiatives on the ballot can decrease voter turnout’, as Bowler and Donovan (1998), and Magleby (1984) already warned, I include a squared term for the number of initiatives on the ballot in my models. The last five elections for the national executive are considered in each country, five presidential elections in the U.S. (1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008) and elections for the *Nationalrat* in Switzerland (1991, 1995, 1999, 2003, 2007). For the cantons of Appenzell Inner Rhodes, Appenzell Outer Rhodes, and Glarus, no data are available on yearly uses of CI-MDDs. For Obwalden and Nidwalden no data is available before 1996 and 1999 respectively because they had the *Landsgemeinde* (vote by show of hands) and, therefore, they do not fulfill the definition of MDD provided above. I use multivariate regression to control for the mentioned factors that might also affect voter turnout over time. More specifically, the data are analysed using *cross-sectional time-series regression with panel-corrected standard errors*. The dependent variable is average state and cantonal turnout (VEP in the US).

The critical question becomes whether to use in this study all American States or just those that allow for CI-MDDs. While most previous researches include all 50 states in their models, there are important concerns in terms of their endogeneity. In other words, it is not that the use of CI-MDDs increases turnout among citizens of these states, but that because of some unknown factor they turnout more, regardless of whether they have CI-MDDs or not. Some scholars claim that this underlying factor could be called political culture (Elazar 1984). Thus, limiting the analysis to just those states that allow CI-MDDs provides a much more solid analysis by minimising the endogeneity problem.

This stage of the research is divided into two clusters. The first relates to all CI-MDDs; the second considers all top-down MDDs (those that are not triggered by citizens, but by institutions, either because the constitution demands it, or because of the will of executives, legislatures, or both). In the first cluster (CI-MDDs) three models are tested (two for the U.S., and one for Switzerland). In Table 1, Model 1 studies the states' turnout considering all 50 states regardless of whether CI-MDD prerogatives exist. This model checks consistency with previous findings in the literature. The results are consistent with similar studies, especially that of Tolbert and Smith (2005), despite some different control variables used here and there. Nonetheless, some relevant differences arise. The most evident is the square term of CI-MDDs. While this term became statistically discernible from zero in all their models, no significance whatsoever is attained in mine. Thus a shadow of

Table 1. Impact of citizen-initiated mechanisms of direct democracy on voter turnout, evidence from the U.S. states and Swiss cantons

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	U.S.A. (50 States)	U.S.A. (CI-MDD States)	Switzerland
Number of MDDs	0.3184*	0.1493	− 0.0067
	0.1380	0.1856	0.2410
Number of MDDs²	− 0.0142	− 0.0061	0.0148
	0.0102	0.0113	0.0168
Natural log of population	− 0.5373**	− 0.7667*	3.1666***
	0.1747	0.3085	0.9395
Population density	0.0010	0.0059	− 0.0007***
	0.0011	0.0087	0.0002
Social heterogeneity	− 19.063***	− 17.624***	− 1.9896
	1.5804	2.3934	1.9823
Per capita income	0.0005**	0.0004*	0.0001***
	0.0002	0.0002	0.0000
Political uncompetitiveness	− 0.1081**	− 0.0839	− 0.0348*
	0.0380	0.0435	0.0146
Registration requirements	− 0.4435***	− 0.6043**	−
	0.1365	0.1983	−
Southern state	− 2.3602**	− 1.8010**	−
	0.7594	0.6676	−
Compulsory vote	−	−	19.5610***
	−	−	1.2761
District magnitude	−	−	− 0.3968***
	−	−	0.0466
Constant	58.8946***	62.4653***	28.5919***
	3.7929	5.9221	4.3765
N	255	135	109
Number of groups(i)	51	27	23
Obs. per group (avg)	5	5	4.73
Wald X ²	10503	2462	223256
R ²	0.4876	0.4205	0.3529

Model: Time-series cross-sectional data; unstandardised regression coefficients (in bold) with panel corrected standard errors (PCSE).

*** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05

doubt is cast in terms of the saturation effect our colleagues placed. Yet, in harmony with their results, this model indicates that each citizen-initiative occurring in the previous two year period in each state has a positive effect on the turnout in the considered election (about a third of a percentage point increase). Given the endogeneity concerns explained above, Model 2 runs the very same Model 1 but only for those states with CI-MDDs. Here, the number of CI-MDDs loses its significance while, interestingly, all the other variables retain their slopes and statistical significances.

Model 3, which just considers the Swiss cantonal experience, contradicts many of the findings for the U.S. None of the critical independent variables come close to statistical significance (in its linear or non-linear specifications). At this stage one might be tempted to run a joint-model accounting for all cantons and states. Yet, I question the utility of mixing

Table 2. Impact of top-down mechanisms of direct democracy on voter turnout, evidence from the U.S. States and Swiss cantons

	Model 5	Model 6
	U.S.A. (50 States)	Switzerland
Number of MDDs	-0.6338** 0.2390	-0.9799*** 0.1035
Number of MDDs ²	0.0408** 0.0135	0.0351*** 0.0057
Natural Log of Population	-0.6097*** 0.1793	3.6614*** 0.9345
Population density	0.0006 0.0011	-0.0007*** 0.0001
Social heterogeneity	-17.8206*** 1.8763	-4.9642** 2.0920
Per capita income	0.0005*** 0.0001	0.0001*** 0.0000
Political uncompetitiveness	-0.1098** 0.0374	-0.0324* 0.0160
Registration requirements	-0.4850*** 0.1235	-
Southern state	-2.9781*** 0.6947	-
Compulsory vote	-	21.6458*** 0.6812
District magnitude	-	-0.4430*** 0.0961
Constant	61.0964*** 3.5297	31.9176*** 2.8105
N	255	109
Number of Groups(i)	51	23
Obs. per group (avg)	5	4.73
Wald X ²	6256	189428
R ²	0.5062	0.4091

Model: Time-series cross-sectional data; unstandardised regression coefficients (in bold) with panel corrected standard errors (PCSE).

*** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05

all these sub-national units into the same model, and I am also unsure about the usefulness of interpreting the results of such a mixture of realities. Given that it is impossible to account for every aspect that might influence electoral participation, a good first step would be to include a dummy variable to differentiate between the two national environments we are dealing with. Indeed, this is basically what I have done here.

Given that most top-down MDDs are constitutionally required to be held concurrently with general elections in the Swiss cantons and the U.S. states, the consistency for the next three models should be high. Indeed, Models 5 and 6 are highly statistically significant, consistent with one another, and coherent with my expectations. Voter turnout rates are significantly lower in states and cantons with more plebiscites on the ballot, *ceteris paribus*. Each plebiscite appearing on a state's ballot reduces turnout by two-thirds of a percentage point, and in Swiss cantons this effect is even larger (about one percentage point decrease).

Conclusions

By studying the effects that the frequent use of mechanisms of direct democracy has on electoral turnout, this work contributes to the existing literature in two senses. First, this study constitutes one of the very first cross-national comparative studies on the topic and, therefore, it allowed for the examination of established ideas the literature previously advanced for single cases (mostly, but not confined, to the American and Swiss cases). While some scholars claim that turnout effects of citizen-initiated MDDs are well established both in the U.S. and cross-nationally, each of these works, though amazingly influential, takes into consideration a single nation (Tolbert and Smith 2006). Enlarging the universe of analysis has provided not only a methodological challenge, but more importantly, a test for the previous path-breaking works. Second, in contrast to previous research, it delves into the world of direct democracy and shows that not all MDDs are the same, nor do they have the same political effects.

The political implications of these findings are relevant in an era when more often than not we hear cries for more direct democracy coming from rather diverse origins (from President Chávez in Venezuela all the way to the influential magazine *The Economist*; see for instance Alvarez 2008, The Economist 1996). Many politicians and advocates who are concerned with the increasing disaffection and cynicism of citizens call for the re-invention of government through a more intense use of direct democracy as a way to address, at least in some small way, the 'democratic deficit'. Paradoxically, if the findings of this research are solid enough, an intense use of direct democracy, when triggered 'above,' could increase citizen alienation from the electoral game, and maybe from the whole representative game of democracy. Thus, serious consideration is essential before engaging in any attempt to mobilise citizens to decide on topics that, maybe, should have

decided in the legislature or the executive by themselves. More than ever, the popular expression ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,’ acquires a larger significance.

The impact of MDDs on electoral participation in general elections is clearly context-sensitive. This research shows that the American evidence in terms of how citizen-initiated MDDs affect turnout does not necessarily travel well to other cases. This proposition has not to be read as a call for halting the use of mechanisms of direct democracy whatsoever. To the contrary, while the use of top-down direct democracy seems to reduce participation at elections, the use of citizen-initiated mechanisms of direct democracy may have other positive effects, which might overwhelm the participation dimension; for instance, greater majority rule (Matsusaka 2004), improvement in economic performance (Feld and Savioz 1997), or better provision of public services (Vatter and Rüefli 2003), and even an increase in human happiness (Frey and Stutzer 2000, Olken 2010). Of course, all these works also rely on single case studies and therefore much more research is needed before any conclusive evidence is proposed.

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Notes

1. See, Hajnal and Lewis (2003), Lacey (2005), Smith (2001).
2. By citizen-initiated mechanisms of direct democracy I understand *popular initiatives* (laws or constitutional amendments initiated by citizens and the put to a popular vote) and *referendums* (law initiated by the legislature and then ratified or rejected by voters).
3. Of course, I am not trying to equate the cantonal constitutionally mandated popular votes (triggerred by authorities) to those triggered by other types of ‘authorities’ such as Chavez, Ceausescu, or Lukashenko, to mention just a few. Nonetheless, as in any place, also in Switzerland political considerations are taken into account before a party or group of parties propose a change in the constitutional regulations of a given canton (exactly the same than in the US states, and for this matter, all over). Nonetheless, why authorities lunch a TD-MDD in a particular place and time is beyond the scope of this piece. Here I limit myself to the impact these popular votes have on turnout
4. These are the following: (1) Switzerland, 133; (2) Italy, 49; (3) Liechtenstein, 24; (4) Lithuania and Uruguay, 11; (5) Hungary, 7; (6) Slovakia, 5; (7) Micronesia, San Marino and Ukraine, 4; (8) New Zealand, 3; (9) Colombia, Latvia and Slovenia; 2; (10) Bolivia and Venezuela, 1 (Author’s data). It seems to be an expansion of the possibilities of using direct democracy in the globe and in some areas in particular such as Eastern and Central Europe,

- Latin America, and Western Europe. See, Scarrow (2001); Bützer (2001); Breuer (2007, 2009); and Mendez, Mendez, and Triga (2009).
5. This is frequently done in the literature because it is presumed their politics have a completely different dynamic.
 6. Given the peculiarities of some states and cantons, I have to soften the claim that in both, the U.S. and Switzerland turnout is so low. Political participation and turnout cannot be equated, particularly in the Swiss milieu. Though Switzerland is usually pointed as one of the countries with lower turnout in general elections in the western Hemisphere (along with the U.S.), it does not mean that Swiss do not participate in politics whatsoever, or that they participate less than in other countries. Probably, they do so much more than in many other Western democracies as, every year, Swiss citizens see an average of 6.42 CI-MDDs and 2.69 TD-MDDs for a combined 9.12 instances of Federal MDDs (Altman 2011, p. 73). If we include cantonal MDDs, the numbers increase drastically. For instance, citizens from the canton of Zurich have also to decide on an average of 3.42 CI-MDDs and 7.05 TD-MDDs, for a combined 10.47 cantonal MDDs (average calculated for the 1990–010 period). Without considering local (municipal MDDs) a citizen of the canton of Zurich votes 19.59 instances of MDDs a year.
 7. Since the mid-1980s, the electoral participation at national elections in Switzerland was 45.9%, in the Presidential elections in the U.S. participation had an average of 56.2%. At the other extreme it is possible to find in Denmark 84.9% and Sweden 82.7%. Note that these Scandinavian countries do not have compulsory vote whatsoever.
 8. See Wagschal (1997); Mendelsohn and Cutler (2000); Bowler and Donovan (2002); Hajnal and Lewis (2003); Hero and Tolbert (2004); Smith (2009).
 9. See also Anduiza *et al.* (2008).
 10. Note that while these numbers seem to be very large, these findings are not so rare from a cross-national perspective. For instance, just recently Azerbaijan held 29 plebiscites simultaneously in March 2009, Colombia 15 in October 2003, and Ecuador 14 in May 1997.
 11. Participation (turnout) is calculated as the percentage of votes over voter eligible population (VEP) instead of the classic measure of voter age population (VAP). Data was gently provided by Michael McDonald. VEP turnout rates are adjusted to remove noncitizens and convicted felons, which are included in VAP data. See, McDonald and Popkin (2001), Tolbert and Smith (2005). Data for Switzerland were retrieved from the Swiss Federal Statistical Office at http://www.politik-stat.ch/nrw2007KT_fr.html.
 12. Unlike the US, where the most sophisticated theoretical and methodological perspectives are found, Swiss political science just recently started to make a systematic effort at empirical research on electoral participation as clearly stated by Bühlmann, Nicolet, and Selb (2006). In any case, the Swiss literature is advancing at a fast pace, and shows that while the traditional cleavages are losing relevance lately, they are still having an effect on turnout; see Trechsel (2007).
 13. Downs (1957), Matsusaka and Palda (1993), Aldrich (1993), Riker and Ordeshook (1968).
 14. For a variety of specifications see Ranney (1965), Settle and Abrams (1976), Holbrook and Van Dunk (1993), or Hill and Leighley (1993).
 15. In large populations, the probability that a single vote affects the results of an election, regardless how close it is, is rather little implying that even very small costs to the individual typically outweigh the expected benefits he or she would receive from voting. Thus, trying to answer the question of ‘Why do people vote?’ has been a leitmotiv in the U.S. literature on turnout (Fowler, Baker, and Dawes 2008, Fowler and Dawes 2008).
 16. U.S. data on CI-MDDs comes from the National Council of States Legislatures (NCSL) and data from Switzerland from the Center To Democracy (C2D) of the University of Zurich.

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