

Political participation at popular votes in Switzerland

Anja Heidelberger

Postdoctoral Researcher
Année Politique Suisse, University of Bern

Congress of Citizen Participation, Donostia-San Sebastian
November 23th & 24th 2017

Structure of this presentation

- ❖ Participation at the local level
- ❖ Direct democratic participation at the national level
- ❖ Why is participation so low? Which factors influence participation in Switzerland?
- ❖ Challenges of direct democracy

Participation on a local level

- ❖ Citizen assemblies in 80% of all Swiss municipalities
 - At least once a year (mostly twice)
 - In 60% of them, the citizen assembly decides on all local matters
 - People vote by open show of hands
- ❖ Parliaments
 - Mostly in cities, bigger municipalities

(Non-systematic) evidence from the local level

❖ Participation

- Low turnout: up to 25% in smallest municipalities; 3-4% in biggest municipalities
- Decreasing participation over time

❖ Representation

- Overrepresentation of older voters, long-time residents, men
- But not of education or income

❖ Quality of Democracy

- Higher values of political interest, trust in authorities, satisfaction with democracy

The Swiss semi-direct democratic system

- ❖ Popular votes: up to 4 times a year
 - popular votes or elections on cantonal or communal level simultaneously
- ❖ Instruments: People have more possibilities for input, when an issue is more important
 - Mandatory Referendum
 - Popular Initiative
 - Facultative Referendum

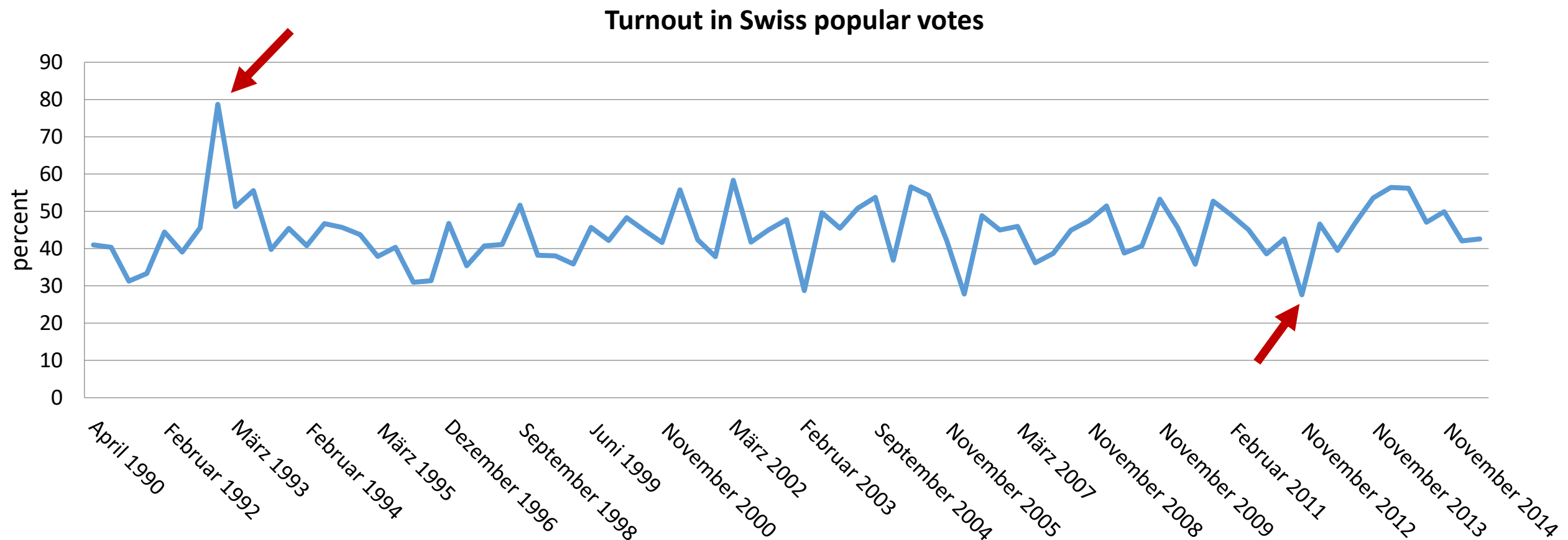
The Swiss semi-direct democratic system

- ❖ Influence of popular votes on the political system
 - Pressure to include strong minorities, consensus democracy (Neidhart 1970)
 - Coalition government: stable composition of government
 - Comparatively low importance of elections (Powell 1982)
 - Low participation in elections (2015: 48.5%) (Freitag & Stadelmann-Steffen 2010)

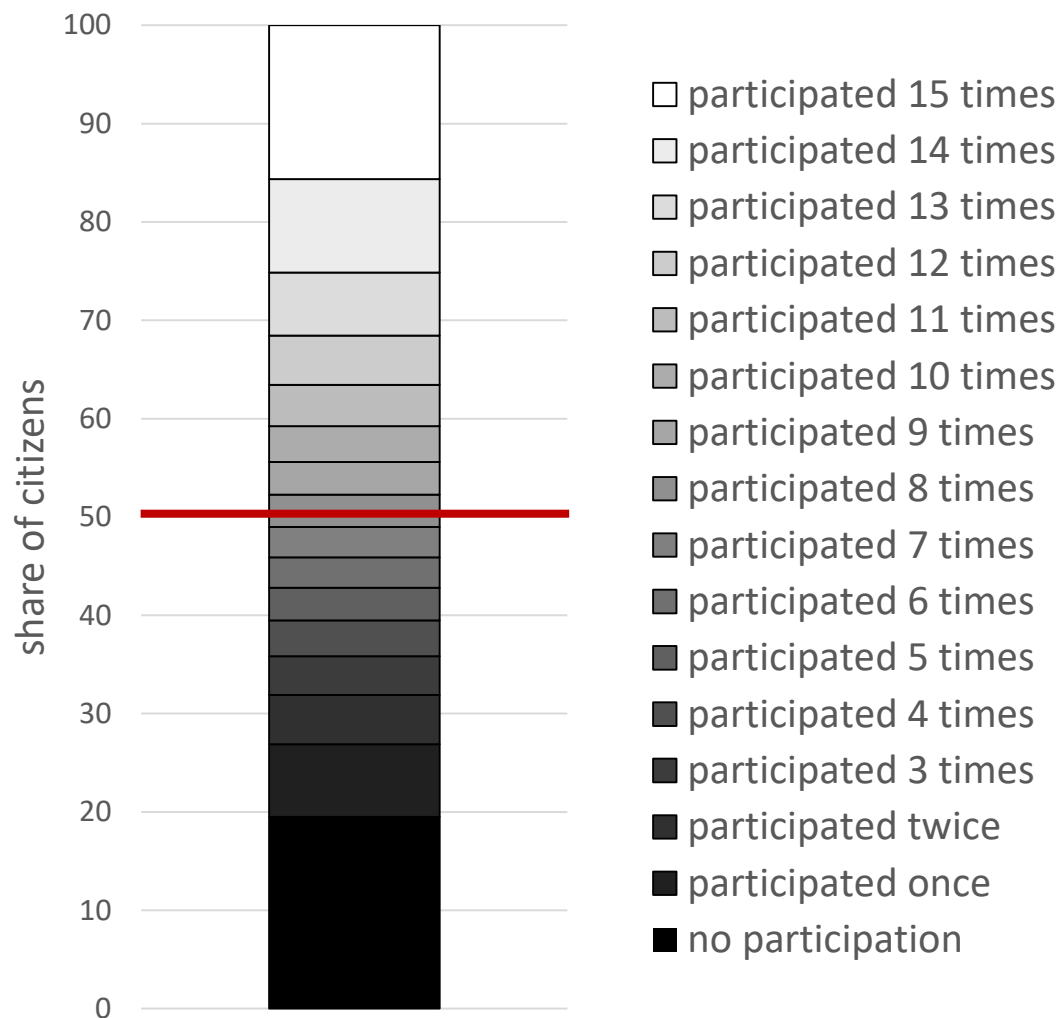
- ❖ High participation at popular votes?
 - Low mean participation rate: 44%, lower than at elections

Why is participation so low?

❖ High variation in turnout between voting days: 27% - 78%



Turnout in several popular votes



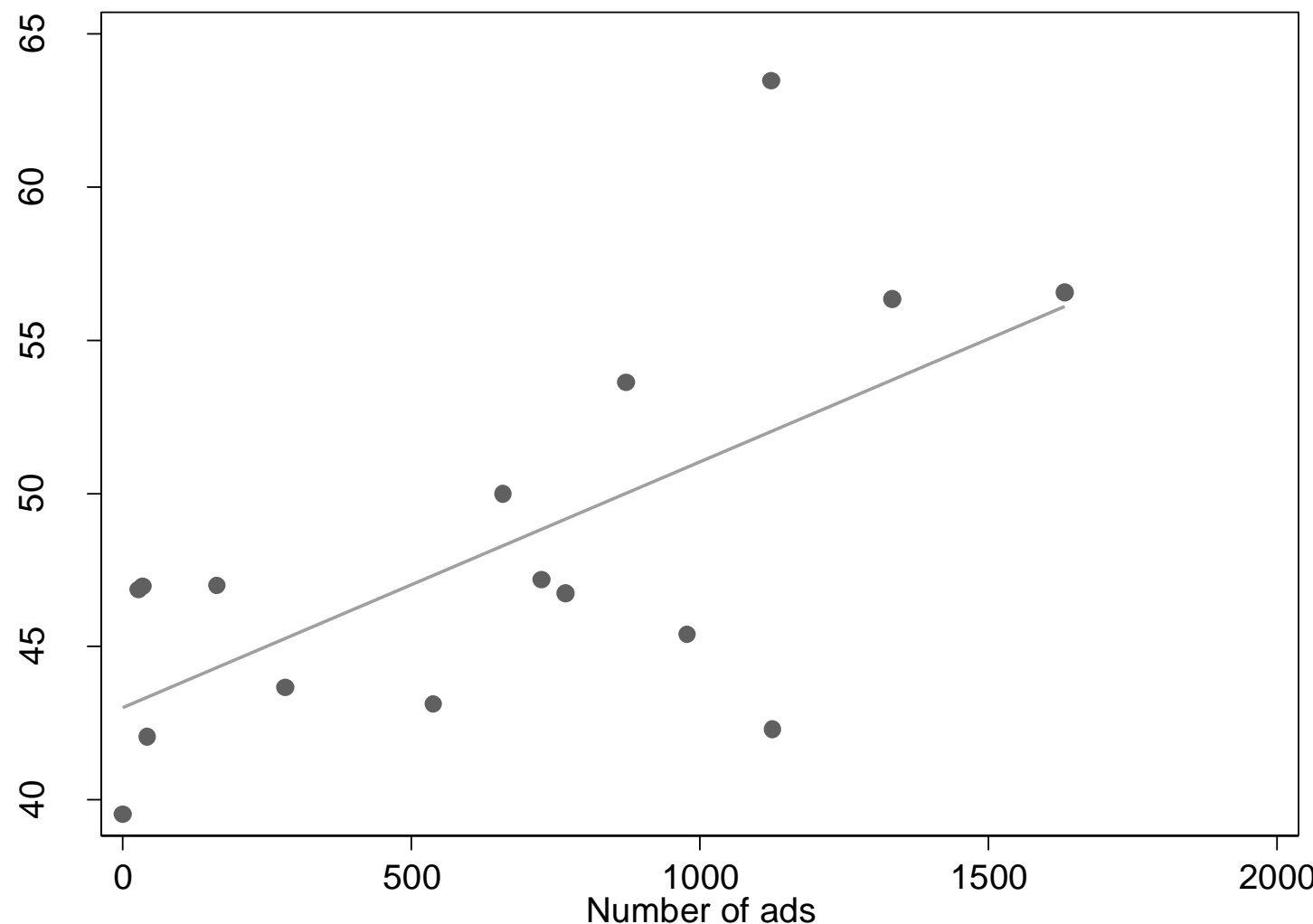
- ❖ Register data from the city of St. Gallen
 - ❖ Almost 20 percent never participate
 - ❖ About 15 percent always participate
 - ❖ 50 percent participate 8 out of 15 times
- About 80 percent of all people participate,
just not at all possibilities they get

Determinants of participation

- ❖ Same individual-level factors as with electoral turnout
- ❖ Ballot specific determinants:
 - Content and topic (Marques de Bastos 1993, Goldberg et al. 2015)
 - Difficulty (Nidegger 1993)
 - Perceived relevance (Goldberg et al. 2015)
 - Instruments: Initiative vs. facultative referendum vs. mandatory referendum (Vatter 2014)
 - Conflict constellation: share of governing parties (Kriesi 2005) : Great coalition vs. center-left vs. center-right coalition vs. “unholy alliance”
 - What about campaigning and finances?

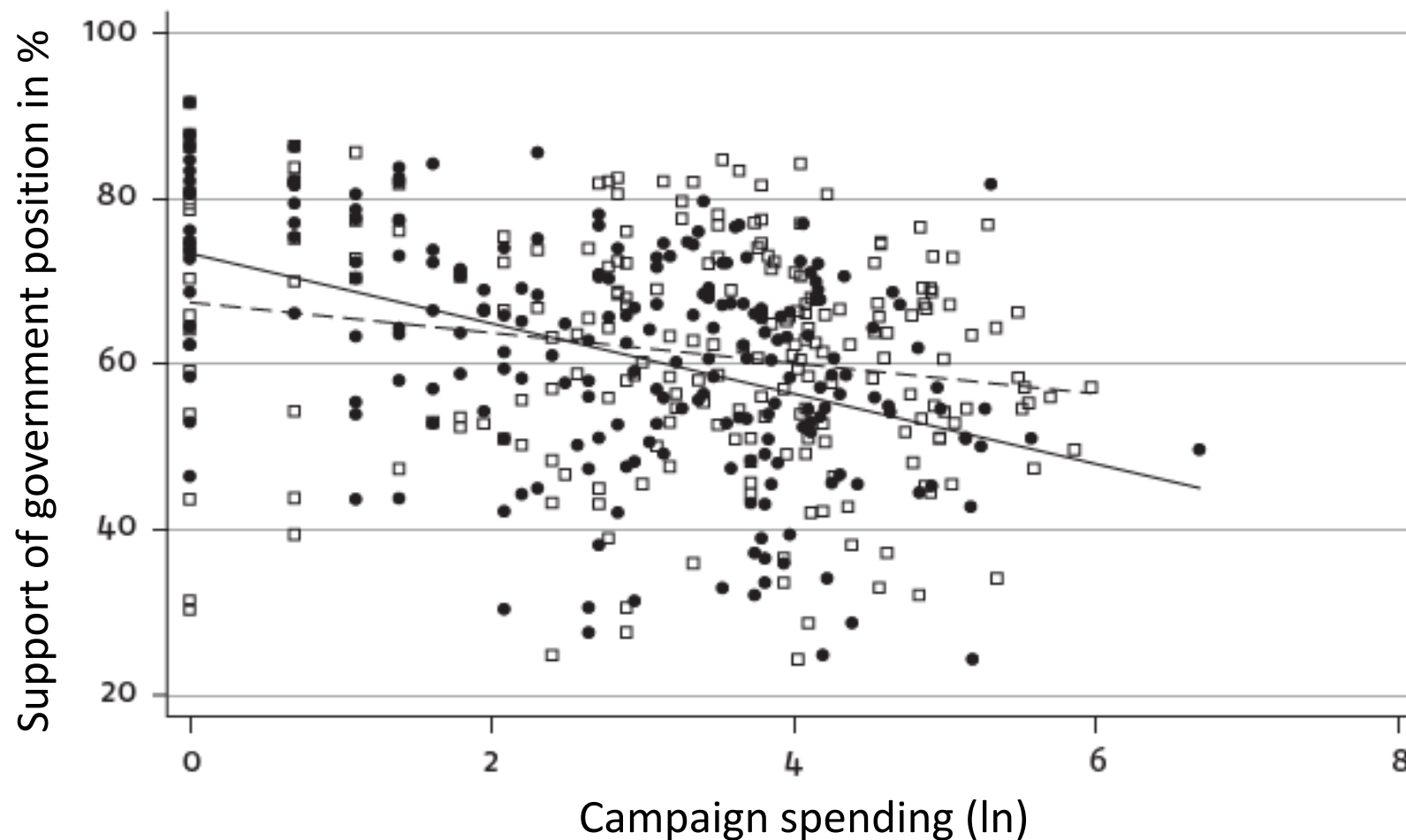
Determinants: Campaign

- ❖ Can attendance at popular votes be bought?
 - ❖ Number of ads in 52 new papers (Année Politique Suisse)
 - ❖ Only main proposals from 2013-2016
- significant relationship



Can results of a popular vote be bought?

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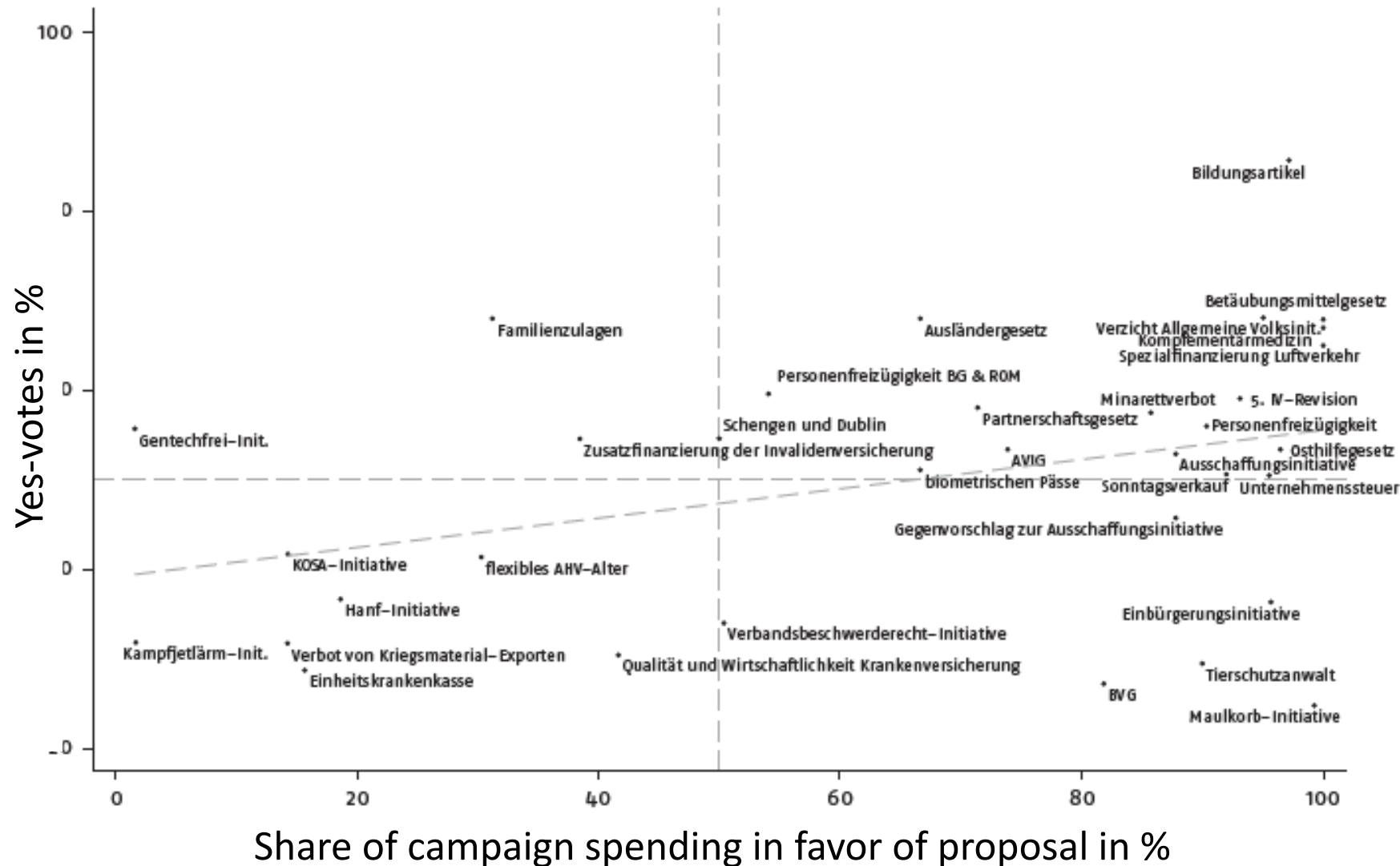


- Challenger
- Government camp

Can results of a popular vote be bought?

- ❖ Complex relationship between success and campaign finances
- ❖ Factors counteracting relationship
 - Campaign managers react to closeness
 - No campaign, when success is certain
 - Predispositions
 - Campaign can help the opponents as well
- ❖ Factors reinforcing relationship
 - ❖ Conflict configuration (share of voters behind a position)
- ❖ Different receptiveness to campaign messages

Can results of a popular vote be bought?



Can results of a popular vote be bought?

- ❖ The empirical literature is not sure
 - Money certainly helps
 - You probably can't gain too much support, but if the vote is close...
 - But: the most disputed proposals are least affected

Challenges of direct democracy: Minority rights

- ❖ Parliament decides upon validity of a popular initiative
- ❖ Only criteria:
 - Consistency of form
 - cohesion of subject matter
 - observance of mandatory international law (*ius cogens*)
- ❖ *In dubio pro populo*

Challenges of direct democracy: Minority rights

- ❖ No formal protection for minorities
- ❖ But: initiatives only change constitution, parliament has to draft the according laws
- ❖ Institutional arrangements: Necessity of cantonal majority

Conclusion

- ❖ Direct democratic institutions have a strong impact on the Swiss political system
- ❖ Benefits: High political confidence & interest, frequent discussion about issues
- ❖ Disadvantages: Tyranny of the majority? Minority rights?

Thank you for your attention!