Political participation at popular votes in Switzerland

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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

Own figure based on data from Dermont (2014: 47)
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 newspapers (Année Politique Suisse)
❖ Only main proposals from 2013-2016 → significant relationship
Can results of a popular vote be bought?

- 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 popolo*
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!