To vote or not to vote? How the Context Shapes Selective Turnout*

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Abstract: This paper analyses the determinants of selective participation in direct democratic votes. Previous research shows that the electorate divides itself into frequent voters, abstainers and selective voters. In line with the literature on habitual voting, scholars have mostly focused on the first two groups and have neglected selective participation. This paper contributes to fill this gap, by studying under what circumstances selective voters turn out. We use official data on individual turnout from Switzerland covering more than 20 direct democratic votes on the federal level from 1999 to 2005. We estimate two-level models in which we interact the usual (past) individual participation with context-level characteristics, such as the intensity of the related referendum campaign in the media, the distribution of party appeals for a given vote, the complexity of the policy proposal and the policy issue(s) at stake.

Keywords: turnout, participation, context, campaign, direct democracy

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How the Context Shapes Selective Turnout

Introduction

Participation literature usually distinguishes between participants and abstainers, and argues that turnout in elections is habitual (Aldrich et al. 2011; Bendor et al. 2003; Denny and Doyle 2009; Fowler 2006; Gerber et al. 2003; Green and Shachar 2000; Plutzer 2002; Verba and Nie 1972). According to the habituation thesis, the turnout experience that citizens make early in their life has a decisive and durable influence on their subsequent pattern of participation or abstention. Once they have established themselves as voters, people no longer need to decide whether they will vote or not each time there is an election. Rather, they are likely to participate because that is what they usually do.

The habituation thesis has been mainly developed in the context of U.S national elections, which take place only episodically. In countries or states offering direct democratic tools such as referendums and initiatives in addition to elections, voters are frequently called to the poll. Moreover, direct democratic votes display specific features that speak against the habituation thesis, and against the resulting twofold categorization of voters and abstainers (Veseli and Steenbergen 2014). While the salience of national elections for offices is relatively stable (and high), direct democratic votes may strongly differ from each other with respect to the salience of the policy issue and the intensity and frame of the political campaign (Damore and Nicholson 2014; Donovan et al. 2009; Kriesi 2005, 2011; LeDuc 2002; Nai 2013). This favors the emergence of a third category of voters, those who participate selectively (Linder 2010; Mottier 1993; Sciarini et al. 2015a; Serdült 2013). While habitual voters (abstainers) tend to participate (abstain) in any case, selective voters will decide anew at every direct democratic vote whether they will participate or not, depending on the characteristics of the policy proposal and on the mobilization efforts on the part of the elite.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this paper is to identify the conditions under which selective voters end up voting. To that end, we apply two-level models on a unique dataset of official turnout covering 23 direct democratic votes from 1999 to 205 in the canton of Geneva, Switzerland. While survey data notoriously overestimate turnout (e.g. Selb and Munzert 2013), our official data provides information about actual participation of individuals across the 23 votes.
To characterize the ballot context we rely on post-vote surveys, newspaper ads, and political parties’ voting recommendations.

In the next section we develop our argument regarding selective participation and the role of project- and campaign-related factors in direct democratic votes. From that we derive hypotheses about the influence of the context on the activation of voters in general, and of selective voters in particular. Section three presents the data and the model. Empirical tests appear in section four. Section five concludes.

**Theoretical framework**

**Habitual voting vs. selective participation**

The habituation thesis dates back to Verba and Nie’s 1972 pioneering work on political participation in the U.S. According to these authors, voting is a habit. Once citizens have established themselves as voters or abstainers, they do not need to decide anew at each election whether they will participate. They will vote or abstain because that is what they always do. The habituation thesis is hence premised on a binary conception of citizens as either voters or abstainers and, relatedly on the stability over time of voting patterns. As Fowler (2006: 432) puts it, “most people either vote all the time or abstain all the time”. From the perspective of the habituation thesis turnout is mainly the result of routines developed early on in life. Among the factors accounting for these earlier experiences are individual features such as citizens’ years of education or cognitive ability (Denny and Doyle 2009: 28-29) and socioeconomic resources (Plutzer 2002).\(^1\) In addition, life events such as marriage, home ownership, and having school going children increase the likelihood that nonvoters become habitual voters (Plutzer 2002). Conversely, residential mobility tends to exert disruptive effects on individuals’ turnout habit (Alfaro-Redondo 2014).

On the contextual level, the characteristics of the first election and related campaign in which a young citizen participates are also said to influence her initial behavior and, therefore, her subsequent behavior (Franklin 2004: 120). Analyzing the impact of past turnout on current

\(^1\)Citizens with strong voting habits prove to be less sensitive to the standard cognitive-based determinants of turnout (Aldrich et al. 2011).
turnout in the same type of election, Green and Shachar (2000) found strong persistence in turnout behavior for presidential elections. By contrast, participating in midterm elections has much less influence on the likelihood to participate in the next presidential election. Relying on a field experiment, Gerber et al. (2003) come to a similar conclusion. They find that past voting substantially increases the likelihood to vote in the future, and even exceeds the influence of standard determinants of turnout such as age or education. The habituation thesis informs our hypothesis 1 that higher past participation increases the likelihood of turnout.

While the habituation thesis may accurately capture voting reality in representative democracies, the question arises whether it is also appropriate in a direct democratic context, where voters are often called to the poll. On the one hand, the distinction between voters and abstainers also makes sense in a direct democratic context. There, too, are presumably lots of citizens who either always vote or always abstain. On the other hand, in such a context a third category of voters is arguably of utmost importance, that of selective or à la carte voters, who participate in some votes but not in others.

In previous work we examined the extent of selective participation in the Swiss direct democracy, and the socio-demographic and political characteristics of selective voters (Sciarini et al. 2015a). We found that selective participation was a sizeable phenomenon. Strictly speaking, citizens who neither always abstain nor always participate constitute the bulk of the Swiss electorate: roughly two thirds if we look at ten successive direct democratic votes and up to four fifths if we extend the number of votes to 30. Unlike permanent voters or permanent abstainers, selective voters form a heterogeneous group in terms of socio-demographic characteristics. They do not display a distinct profile with respect to age, gender, marital status, residence duration, citizenship status or education. By contrast, selective voters show political characteristics that lean more towards those of permanent abstainers. Selective voters, as permanent abstainers, tend to be over-proportionally represented among people with low interest in politics, low political competence, weak partisanship and weak ideology (ibid.). In other words, selective voters hold political attitudes that at first glance would lean them to abstain. The latter result draws our attention to the importance of the context in which a direct democratic vote takes place for the
activation of selective voters. If the political profile of selective voters is conducive to abstention, it is difficult to understand why selective voters sometimes end up voting, and sometimes not. Context-related factors, such as the characteristics of the policy proposal submitted to the vote and related referendum campaign, presumably contribute the missing link, by providing selective voters with incentives to mobilize.

In that sense, selective participants are likely to be most sensitive to project- and campaign-related factors. On the one hand, habitual voters and abstainers are unlikely to be influenced by the context of the vote. They will presumably vote or abstain, because this is what they usually do. On the other hand, selective voters will decide anew at each vote whether they will participate, depending on the intrinsic characteristic of the policy proposal submitted, and on the ability of the elite’s campaign to activate their interest. According to our hypothesis 2, context effects matter more for selective voters than for permanent voters and abstainers. More specific hypotheses regarding contextual moderators are formulated in the next subsection.

**Context and participation**

For a long time, electoral research has concentrated on individual determinants of voting. In recent decades, though, a certain revival of including contextual influences can be observed (for an overview see for instance Dalton and Anderson (2011) or (Marsh 2002)). The theoretical basis of this trend lies decades ago in the Columbia studies that already highlighted the relevance of the (social) context for the voting decision (Berelson et al. 1954). By taking into account the context, one follows Curtice’s (2002: 164) claim that one should “regard elections as independent events whose political context needs to be measured and impact evaluated”. By so doing, we are not only able to understand the impact of the context on the turnout or outcome of the vote, but also whether and how the context moderates the effects of individual-level determinants.

The connection between the individual and contextual level has been already studied in related fields, e.g. regarding the effect of socio-demographic variables on party choice. For instance, Carmines and Huckfeldt (1998: 228) state that “(p)olitical preferences are connected to social characteristics in one way at one place, but in quite another way at another place”. The
same mechanism may apply to turnout in relation to other individual factors, e.g. the usual participation rate of a person, and the underlying conditional impact of vote specific contextual characteristics. Baron and Kenny (1986) formalized this relation in defining a “moderator” (here the election specific context) that influences the direction and/or strength a predictor variable has on the outcome of interest (in our case turnout) (see also Anderson (2007)).

Besides substantial reasons to include contextual effects and related interactions with individual variables, the explicit modeling of context effects is also crucial for theoretical and statistical reasons. Farkas (1974) argues that the inclusion of contextual variables in a model is important on theoretical grounds, even if the additional explained variance is small. Marsh (2002) provides a more technical reason for the inclusion, as ignoring contextual variables may be conducive to omitted variable bias. A first example of a study on the “search of a curve” is by Przeworski and Soares (1971). The authors criticized earlier research for dealing with variables linked to voting behaviour only in simple additive and thus linear terms. In their view, equal attention should be devoted to the substance of a theory and the form of a relation. Otherwise it is difficult to derive valid statements regarding voting behaviour.

Context can represent very different factors, but most studies treat the context in a geographical way (for an overview of types of contextual effects see Books and Prysby (1988, 1991) or Lazarsfeld and Menzel (1980)). In contrast, we will focus on contextual differences in the sense of the specific characteristics of the political campaign preceding a direct democratic vote, and of the policy proposal submitted to the vote.

Campaign effects in direct-democratic votes have received increased attention in the last few years (Schmitt-Beck and Farrell 2002; Hobolt 2007; Kriesi 2005, 2011; LeDuc 2002, 2007; de Vreese 2007; Sciarini and Tresch 2009, 2011). According to a widespread view, “referendum campaigns are likely to influence more voters than are election campaigns” (Schmitt-Beck and Farrell (2002: 193); also LeDuc (2007); de Vreese (2007)). This is because referendums are said to involve less deeply held beliefs and cleavages and, therefore, lead to higher volatility, a smaller role of party identification and later decision making than elections. According to earlier studies (Bowler and Donovan 1998; Kriesi 2005; Sciarini and Tresch 2011), campaign effects
overall increase with the intensity of the campaign messages. Intense campaigns enhance both the quantity of information delivered to voters and the incentives to search for information, and to participate. Bowler and Donovan (1998: chap. 8) have shown this for the case of referendums in the US: spending does not simply convert voters’ opinions, it also changes the context of their decisions, bringing more attention to an issue and increasing voters’ awareness of the ballot proposals.\(^2\) In the same vein, survey-based studies of direct democratic votes in Switzerland have found that participation increases with the intensity of the referendum campaign (Kriesi 2005; Nai 2013).\(^3\) This informs our hypothesis H3a that citizens’ likelihood of turnout increases with campaign intensity.

A consensus among the partisan elite may have the same detrimental effects on citizens’ mobilization as a political campaign of low intensity. If all political parties agree on a given policy proposal, then the outcome of the vote is very much likely to be in line with the elite’s consensus (Kriesi 2005, 2006). In a situation where the outcome of the vote is to a large extent known in advance, citizens will have little incentives to turnout. Conversely, in case of conflict among the elite, with political parties dividing in two roughly equal camps, citizens will be submitted to two opposing messages and will have hard times figuring out the outcome of the vote. This should stimulate their participation. From that we derive our hypothesis H3b that citizen’s likelihood of turnout increases with higher levels of partisan conflict.

Turning to ballot project-related characteristics, two factors are especially likely to influence voters’ mobilization: the importance and the complexity of the ballot proposal. Starting with the latter, direct democratic votes raise policy proposals that differ from each other in terms of complexity. While some issues are familiar to voters, others are inherently complex. If citizens feel overwhelmed by the project submitted to them, they will have hard times forming an opinion, and may prefer to abstain. Earlier studies in the Swiss context support that view (e.g. Kriesi

\(^2\)Similarly, but in the context of US senate election campaigns, Kahn and Kenney (1999) have shown that intense election campaigns lead voters to regard their choice as more important and encourage them to make more sophisticated decisions about competing candidates. By contrast, when campaign intensity is low, information about the election is scarce and voters have few incentives to mobilize and/or to make complicated judgements.\(^3\)In addition, Kriesi (2005) finds a substitution effect between campaign intensity and project complexity: The impact of campaign intensity on turnout is lower when the complexity of the policy proposal is low; or, to put it differently, a highly intense campaign may compensate for the demobilizing effect of a complex policy proposal.
Hence, our hypothesis H3c states that citizen’s likelihood of turnout decreases with the complexity of the policy proposal.

Finally, the importance of a policy proposal is perhaps the most intuitive determinant of citizens’ decision to turnout. As already mentioned, the importance of policy proposals may strongly differ from one direct democratic vote to the next. Differences in importance, in turn, will influence the incentive to participate: The higher the importance of the ballot proposal, the higher citizen’s likelihood of turnout (H3d).

**Data and Method**

**Data**

To test our hypotheses we use individual and context level data. For the voter level we use official turnout data from the canton of Geneva, Switzerland. The dataset contains validated participation in direct democratic votes of the entire population of eligible voters in Geneva. In the time period under study (1999-2005) there are 23 ballots each with roughly 200’000 data points. Individuals have an identification code throughout the whole time period allowing us to recreate each citizen’s history of participation. Besides participation the data provides information on gender, age, civil status, residence duration, and Geneva citizenship.

On the contextual level we rely on three sources. Nai (2014) gathered information on the media campaign of all ballots between 1999 and 2005. For the complexity we use post vote surveys (VOX surveys), which are conducted during the two weeks following a vote. Information about partisan conflict comes from Swissvotes. This government-funded project gathers macro-information on all popular votes since 1848.

For the analysis we merge the datasets. In order to deal with the amount of data points on the individual level we draw a 10% sample of the original datafile. The analyses are based on 407’185 data points (roughly 18’000 data points, i.e. persons, for each vote).

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6Data and codebook available on [http://swissvotes.ch/nodes/iframe/about_project](http://swissvotes.ch/nodes/iframe/about_project).
Operationalisation

Participation Our dependent variable is a citizen’s participation in a given vote. This indicator represents the validated participation on any voting day. We cannot distinguish between several ballots on a given day (if taking place), but only have the information that a person participated in at least one of the ballots. In contrast to many other studies, though, this information is highly reliable as the participation is registered through an electronic reading of the voting card of each eligible voter in Geneva. The estimations furthermore contain the following explanatory variables:

Past participation Our main independent variable of interest is the past participation record of a citizen. To divide the population into abstainers, selective voters and permanent voters we consider the official participation in the five preceding votes of a given election day. A person potentially could have participated in none or up to all five preceding votes. We only include people who had the opportunity to participate in all five votes. This coding results in six dummy variables indicating the number of times a person participated (0-5). The measure is not deterministic in the sense that, e.g., a person remains an abstainer throughout all 23 voting days, but may move up (and down again) in the voting behavior. These changes may be also partly systematic due to socio-demographic profiles of people, e.g. a higher participation for middle-aged and/or married persons, which our flexible coding of past participation may capture. The two extreme groups of abstainers and permanent voters comprise on average around 26 and 24 percent, respectively. The four groups of selective voters comprise each between 11 and 15 percent on average per vote.\footnote{Furthermore, the two extreme groups are not only the biggest groups, but display also the highest consistency in terms of staying in that group throughout the 23 ballots. Almost 92 percent of abstainers remain abstainers. Similarly, more than 90 percent of permanent voters maintain their consistent participation. Unsurprisingly, selective participants vary in their group belonging much more. For instance, on average only around 52 percent of the group with a past voting record of 3 out of 5 remain in that group between two votes.}

Control variables We include the following individual level control variables in our models:

\textit{Sex} is measured with a dummy variable where women take the value 1. \textit{Civil status} distinguishes three groups: singles, married and divorced/widowed citizens. We further
include a centred variable for age plus a squared term to account for the well-known curvilinear relation between age and political participation (e.g. Norris 2002). To ease the interpretation we recode a continuous measure of residence duration into three groups (less than ten years, between ten and twenty years and more than twenty years). Geneva citizenship identifies Swiss who were born in Geneva or had acquired the Geneva citizenship.

**Relative intensity of political campaign** This variable measures the ratio of ads published by the smaller camp (yes or no) versus the ads published by the bigger camp. The data on ad size comes from Nai (2014) who analysed six major Swiss journals (Tribune de Genève, Le Temps, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, TagesAnzeiger, Regione and Giornale del Popolo) during a period of four weeks prior to each vote. Each add is allocated to the yes or the no camp. For our final measure, we divided the total ad sizes from the smaller camp (independent of yes or no slogan) by the total ad sizes from the bigger camp. This results in a score between zero and one. Zero stands for a highly unequal campaign where only one camp published political ads, whereas one stands for a balanced campaign with equally strong advertising by both camps. If more than one ballot takes place on one day we use the average ratio of all ballots.

**Intensity of partisan conflict** This variable is an alternative way to measure the intensity of the political competition by looking at the equality of (party) camp sizes. We look at the vote share of parties that recommend accepting a ballot and those who recommend rejecting it. Again this results in a score between zero and one. Zero means no party conflict as all parties propose to reject/accept the ballot. One stands for a strong party division with both camps representing the same amount of voters in the Swiss Lower House. In case of multiple ballots we again use the average ratio of all ballots that took place on that day.

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*A camp can consist of parties, but also of associations from different fields such as the economy or the society, or even influential individuals.*

*The vote share is measured with the percentage of people who elected the party in the last general election.*
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Complexity After each vote the VOX survey asks people about the perceived difficulty to decide on the ballot(s) of the day. We aggregate the responses of all participants and use this score as a measure of complexity of the ballot. In case of parallel ballots, we take the average of all ballots of the day. The variable varies between 21.5 and 52.1 with higher values standing for a higher complexity.

Ballot topics Finally, we group ballots according to their topic (Nai 2014: 86), and use this grouping as a measure of ballot importance. We are especially interested in two types of issues. A first group concerns international politics, security and immigration, which have become highly important in Swiss politics during the last three decades (Fischer and Sciarini 2014; Sciarini et al. 2015b). A second group comprises all ballots around energy, environment and land use. Since the 1970s Switzerland experienced an increase in direct democratic votes on these so-called second-dimension issues (Leemann 2015). Compared to first-dimension issues, which prompt the classical distributive conflicts on the left-right dimension, second-dimension issues typically pit the conservative right against the center-right and the left. We thus include two dummy variables in our model taking the value one if at least one ballot on a given day concerned the respective topic. On three occasions Swiss citizens voted on both international politics and environment at the same day. For more information about the distribution of all contextual variables in our 23 ballots see table 2 in the appendix.

Empirical model

We argue that the context of a vote is crucial for explaining why selective voters turn out. While we expect frequent voters and abstainers to be unimpressed by the contextual characteristics of a vote, e.g. the intensity of the media campaign or the complexity of a vote, these variables determine whether a selective voter turns out. Given our data structure we fit a logit random-intercept multilevel model where both individual factors and the contextual setting of a vote
predicts individual turnout:\textsuperscript{10}

\[ Pr(y_{ij} = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\beta_0 + \beta_{1-5}pp_{i-5} + \beta_{6-13}X_i + \gamma_jcont_j + \alpha_{1-5}pp_{i-5} * cont_j + \mu_{0j}) \]

Where citizen \( i \)'s probability of turning out at vote \( j \) is a function of individual and contextual factors (for \( i = 1, \ldots, I \); for \( j = 1, \ldots, 23 \)). \( \beta_0 \) is a global average for the citizen to participate. \( pp^{1-5} \) are the five dummy variables for past participation. The reference category is no participation in the last five votes. \( X \) is a vector for the control variables gender, age, civil status, residence duration, and Geneva citizenship. \( cont \) (=context) is a vote level predictor. We estimate models with campaign intensity, partisan conflict, complexity, and ballot topics. \( \mu_{0j} \) covers context-dependent differences, i.e. the differences between the 23 random intercepts and the fixed global estimate \( \beta_0 \). \( pp^{1-5} * cont \) are the interactions between the context and the dummies for the record of participation. These terms allow us to assess whether the impact of the frequency of past turnout varies with the context.

Because of the nonlinearity of the logistic curve, coefficients in (hierarchical) logistic regressions are difficult to interpret. For the most part of the empirical part we therefore rely on predicted probabilities and related first differences. This moreover avoids false reading of the (in)significance of interaction terms. Several scholars demonstrate that for multiplicative interactions the interpretation of p-values can be highly misleading (for a detailed discussion see Brambor et al. (2006), Friedrich (1982) and Kam and Franzese (2007)). According to these authors, a more appropriate interpretation is possible by graphical presentation of interactions.

For the interpretation of our results the use of first differences is beneficial as it includes the uncertainties in the estimated probabilities that derive from uncertainties in the estimated coefficients (King et al. 2000). In our case first differences show how much the probability of turning out changes as a function of a change in context (e.g. the intensity of the political campaign). This is done in four steps: First, we set our explanatory variables to their median.

\textsuperscript{10}Since the citizens participate in multiple votes (up to 23), we should group each decision to turn out on a citizen level as well. However, as neither the votes, nor the citizens are a perfect subset of each other we would have to estimate a non-nested (cross-classified) model (Gelman and Hill 2007: 244). We refrain from doing so for two reasons. First, the non-nested models converge very poorly. Second, the model fit does not improve if we include this additional level.
The standard voter is a 49 year old married woman, Geneva citizen and long-term resident. The variable of interest “context” is fixed on its minimum (e.g. low intensity of media campaign). With these initial settings ($Z_s$) we calculate the probability to turn out ($Pr(\tilde{y}_s = 1)$). In a second step we set the values of the context variable on its maximum ($Z_e$) and approximate $Pr(\tilde{y}_e = 1)$. Third, we estimate the difference between the two predicted probabilities ($Pr(\tilde{y}_s = 1)$) and ($Pr(\tilde{y}_e = 1)$). By repeating this algorithm 1’500 times we compute the first difference. Finally, we sort the values and cut the lowest and highest 2.5 percent of the values to calculate the 95 percent confidence interval.

**Results**

Table 1 shows five regression models. Let us begin with the first model containing only individual level variables. All five dummies for past participation are positive and significant. Thus, compared to citizens who did not participate in any of the last five votes (reference category), people who participated at least once are more likely to turn out. The effects increase in size with each dummy which indicates that the more frequently a voter participated in the past, the more likely she is to turn out. Predicted probabilities help to grasp the effect of the participation record more clearly. Former abstainers have a probability of only 9 percent to participate. This value raises to 31 percent if a citizen participated once in the last five elections. With each additional past participation, the probabilities of turnout increase by around 15 to 20 percentage points until it reaches a score of over 90 percent for those who participated in all past five votes.$^{11}$ This basic model strongly supports our first hypothesis – and the habituation thesis – that past participation increases the likelihood of turnout. The control variables paint an unsurprising picture (e.g. Sciarini et al. 2015a). We find a curvilinear relationship between age and the likelihood to turn out. Married citizens are more probable to turn out than singles and divorced or widowed citizens. Residence duration and being a Geneva citizen both increase participation. Finally, women are less likely to turn out than men.

$^{11}$Exact scores: 0/5 = 9%, 1/5 = 31%, 2/5 = 49%, 3/5 = 66%, 4/5 = 81%, 5/5 = 93%.
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Table 1: Multilevel logistic regression models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1) Individual</th>
<th>(2) Campaign intensity</th>
<th>(3) Party conflict</th>
<th>(4) Complexity</th>
<th>(5) Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past participation 1</td>
<td>1.479***</td>
<td>1.462***</td>
<td>1.394***</td>
<td>1.465***</td>
<td>1.479***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
<td>(0.013)</td>
<td>(0.020)</td>
<td>(0.021)</td>
<td>(0.018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past participation 2</td>
<td>2.259***</td>
<td>2.254***</td>
<td>2.156***</td>
<td>2.169***</td>
<td>2.259***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
<td>(0.013)</td>
<td>(0.019)</td>
<td>(0.021)</td>
<td>(0.020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past participation 3</td>
<td>2.890***</td>
<td>2.904***</td>
<td>2.856***</td>
<td>2.851***</td>
<td>2.890***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
<td>(0.013)</td>
<td>(0.014)</td>
<td>(0.016)</td>
<td>(0.014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past participation 4</td>
<td>3.752***</td>
<td>3.757***</td>
<td>3.670***</td>
<td>3.577***</td>
<td>3.749***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.016)</td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
<td>(0.013)</td>
<td>(0.012)</td>
<td>(0.014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past participation 5</td>
<td>4.842***</td>
<td>4.775***</td>
<td>4.758***</td>
<td>4.842***</td>
<td>4.842***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
<td>(0.014)</td>
<td>(0.014)</td>
<td>(0.014)</td>
<td>(0.014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign intensity</td>
<td>1.395***</td>
<td>(0.596)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party competition</td>
<td>1.442</td>
<td>(0.049)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity</td>
<td>-3.215***</td>
<td>(0.944)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International politics</td>
<td>0.707**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>0.382</td>
<td>(0.294)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Individual control variables

- Woman: -0.029***, -0.029***, -0.029***, -0.029***, -0.029***
- Civil status (ref. singles): 0.02**, 0.02**, 0.02**, 0.02**, 0.02**
- Divorced/widowed: -0.178***, -0.177***, -0.178***, -0.177***, -0.178***
- Age: 0.008***, 0.008***, 0.008***, 0.008***, 0.008***
- Age2: -0.0003***, -0.0003***, -0.0003***, -0.0003***, -0.0003***
- Residence duration: 0.022, 0.022, 0.022, 0.022, 0.022
- Gender: 0.061***, 0.061***, 0.061***, 0.061***, 0.061***
- Interaction terms between past participation and context variable (depending on model)

Observations: 407,185

Log Likelihood: -177,632.500 – 177,854.900 – 177,821.200 – 177,824.200 – 177,821.000
Akaike Inf. Crt: 351,693.000 – 351,879.900 – 351,842.400 – 351,860.100 – 351,895.900

Notes: standard error in parentheses; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
Past participation 1 stands for one vote in the first five elections; past participation 2 for two out of five, etc.
The interaction context variable is the one included in the respective model. For the issue model the first five interaction terms represent the issue of international politics, the second five the issue of environment.
How the Context Shapes Selective Turnout

Figure 1: Probability to turn out depending on past record of participation and varying levels of political campaign intensity. First differences (Δ) with * are significant on the 0.05 level.

In a next step we investigate how the characteristics of a specific vote influence the effect of past participation. We overall argue (hypothesis 2) that the context matters the most for the group of selective participants (voters who participated one to four times out of five elections). Abstainers and permanent voters should not alter their habit with varying context. The second model in table 1 includes the relative campaign intensity and its interactions with the participation record. Figure 1 plots the probability to turn out against increasing campaign intensity for all past participation groups. Independent of the level of campaign intensity, the chart confirms that the probability to turn out raises with increasing past participation. The first differences (Δ) show the change of probability per group if we increase the campaign intensity from its minimum to its maximum. Generally, campaign intensity has as expected (hypothesis 3a) a positive effect on all groups. In other words: regardless of the participation record, the more intensive a campaign, the higher citizens’ probabilities to vote. However, the magnitude of campaign effects depends on past participation. Voters who never participated in the past have a 14 percentage points
higher probability to vote if the campaign is intense (vs. a campaign with low intensity). In line with our hypothesis 2, citizens who in the past participated once, twice, or three times are much more sensitive to campaign intensity. Their turnout probability increases between 33 and 36 percentage points. This increase is slightly lower for voters who voted four times in the last five votes ($\Delta 0.22$). Permanent voters are the least affected by the context ($\Delta 0.11$) as these citizens already participate almost always. Put differently, they do not need the incentive of an intense campaign to participate in the democratic process.

The third model introduces partisan conflict as an alternative measure of campaign intensity. The visualization of the effects in figure 2 resemble the results of campaign intensity. In line with hypothesis 3b, the probability to turn out is higher the more balanced the two (party) camps. Once more, the selective voters are most sensitive to the context. However, the magnitude of the contextual effects is slightly smaller. The probabilities of abstainers and permanent voters to turn out increase each by 8 percentage points if we raise partisan conflict from its minimum to its maximum. For voters who participated between one and four times in the last five votes
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Figure 3: Probability to turn out depending on past record of participation and varying levels of complexity. First differences (Δ) with * are significant on the 0.05 level.

this change in predicted probability is between 16 and 26 percentage points. While these results match our expectations, they have to be qualified as none of the first differences in figure 2 are significant. However, they only fail shortly the significance level of 0.05.

In model 4 we include the complexity of a vote on the contextual level (hypothesis 3c). The results (figure 3) show that complexity reduces participation. All six curves show a downward trend the more complex the vote. The change in probability between the low-complexity and the high-complexity scenario varies between 7 and 23 percentage points. As for our two measures of intensity, complexity has only a limited impact on those who participate or abstain habitually (Δ5 -0.07, Δ0 -0.09). The most striking effect can again be observed for the group of selective voters. Citizens who participated once, twice, or three times in the past five votes are most likely to turn out when complexity is low. High complexity reduces their probability to participate by more than 20 percentage points. Those who participate four out of five times take an intermediate position between habitual voting and the other selective voters. This might be a sign that having
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Figure 4: Probability to turn out depending on past record of participation and ballot subject. First differences (Δ) are in respect to “other issues”. Values with * are significant on the 0.05 level.

missed one of the last five votes is rather an accident than an expression of a clearly distinct profile.

In a final step we turn to the issues at stake. Since the 1970s Switzerland experienced an increase in direct democratic votes on so-called second-dimension issues (Leemann 2015). Compared to first-dimension issues (i.e. distributional conflicts), second-dimension issues comprise immigration, foreign policy and environment. As Leemann shows, the raise of initiatives on these issues peaked around the year 2000. In the following we examine if these two emerging issues have a similar effect on participation as campaign intensity or party competition. Figure 4 is based on the fifth model in table 1 and shows the probability to turn out (y-axis) for median voters with varying participation record (x-axis) and different issue topics. Let us start with the habitual (non-)voters. Abstainers have an overall low probability to participate. While turnout is slightly more probable when a ballot concerns an environmental or international politics topic, the first differences remain marginal (Δ 0.05 and Δ 0.03). The same is true for frequent voters. This
group turns out, regardless of the issue at stake. The probability to turn out increases by 6 percentage points for international politics and 4 percentage points for environmental issues. The most striking differences between the topics concern once again the selective voters. Their increase in turnout probability amounts to 12 to 18 percentage points for international politics (all significant on a 0.05 level). For environmental issues the effects are also positive, but less pronounced and not significant.

Conclusion

Electoral research makes a strong case for habitual voting and claims that citizens essentially divide into voters and abstainers. While elections are central to democracy, many countries and states have additionally developed direct democratic tools, which grant citizens with co-decision rights on concrete policy issues. In a direct democratic context, the high frequency of votes, together with the strong differences in topic, salience, complexity, and campaign characteristics existing across votes, accounts for the existence of a third category of voters, the selective voters.

In line with the habituation thesis, our empirical analysis of official turnout data covering a number of direct democratic votes show that participation tends to be persistent. Past participation has a strong and robust influence on current turnout. More specifically, the higher the frequency of participation in the five previous votes, the higher the likelihood that voters will participate in the vote of interest. Second, and more importantly, we find that selective voters are most sensitive to the context of the vote. To be sure, intense campaigns, conflicting issues, and important and non-complex (i.e. familiar) policy proposals foster participation for all categories of voters. However, the effect of these project- and campaign-related factors on the likelihood of voting is significantly higher among selective voters than among permanent voters or permanent abstainers.

Finally, we may wonder whether and to what extent results from the Swiss case are exportable to other political contexts. It is safe to assume that our findings are valid in other direct democratic contexts such as the U.S. states, where referendums and initiative elections are frequent. Going one step further, we argue that selective participation has a broader relevance,
i.e. that it also holds in non-direct democratic contexts. There are arguably many selective voters in purely representative democracies, too. In these democracies citizens mainly express their opinion through elections, which take place only episodically. Given the relatively small number of ballots it is obviously hard to capture selective participation. However, being unable to evaluate the extent of selective participation does not mean that it does not exist. To the same extent that in a direct democratic context voters are sensitive to project- and campaign-related characteristics, voters in a representative democracy may also (and in fact, do) mobilize to various extent in different types of elections, e.g. in national versus local elections or in presidential versus mid-term elections. In that sense, the results of this paper arguably have broader implications, beyond the Swiss case.

In particular, the result that selective voters are most sensitive to context-related factors may speak to both the habituation thesis and the alternative, rational choice models of turnout. So far, to account for the transition from abstention to vote or vice-versa, supporters of the habituation thesis have focused on individual-level factors, such as life events or residential mobility (Alfaro-Redondo 2014; Plutzer 2002). To our knowledge, they have not looked at the conditional effects of the election context on the instability of citizens’ turnout behavior. Similarly, according to a rational choice, “Downsonian” perspective citizens mainly base their turnout decision on the evaluation of the costs and benefits of voting. However, this evaluation does not take into account the role of context-related factors. Our findings suggest that this role is crucial.
References


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## Appendix

Table 2: Descriptive contextual information about 23 votes under study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Turnout (GE)</th>
<th>Campaign intensity</th>
<th>Party competition</th>
<th>Complexity</th>
<th>Int. politics</th>
<th>Environment</th>
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<td>1</td>
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Note: Turnout represents the validated turnout for Geneva in our dataset. The values for campaign intensity, party competition and complexity show the average values per voting day in case of parallel ballots.