When do election campaigns matter, and to whom? Results from the 1999 Swiss election panel study

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Abstract

Elaborating on earlier work we develop a theoretical model of opinion formation and electoral choice based on individual variables (degree of political sophistication, ideological orientation, party identification, timing of the individual decision) and contextual variables (intensity of the electoral campaign). We test this model with data from the 1999 Swiss election panel study. The three-wave panel carried out in three cantons allows for a comparative analysis of campaign effects on opinion formation. Empirical results provide strong support for our assumption that electoral campaigns matter only for a specific category of voters, namely those who hold no party identification and who make their decision during the campaign. By contrast, irrespective of their political sophistication and other individual characteristics, voters with party identification and "early deciders" are hardly influenced by campaign activities. Also in line with our theoretical expectations, these findings hold when the electoral campaign is moderately intensive. Changes towards highly intensive, respectively towards very little intensive, electoral campaigns are, however, likely to modify the picture.

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1 This paper presents preliminary results of a research project on the 1999 Swiss elections. We thank the Swiss Science Foundation for its financial support (subsidy 5004-056086). We thank Simon Hug for his comments.
Introduction

The influence of electoral campaigns on opinion formation has attracted increased attention in the scholarly community. According to the pioneering studies of the 1960s communication flows and media activities were only contributing to a reinforcement of predetermined voting intentions (Klapper 1960, Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1968). Relying on research in social or political psychology and public opinion, several authors have challenged this classical view and highlighted the numerous effects electoral campaigns can have on the voters’ perceptions (Iyengar 1991; Iyengar and Kinder 1987), on electoral participation (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995), on the criteria used to make an electoral choice (Kahn and Kenney 1999), or even on voting intentions (Gelman and King 1993; Holbrook 1996; Zaller 1992).

This paper offers a contribution to this debate. It is premised on the assumption that the impact of electoral campaigns is not identical across voters, but varies according to a voter’s individual characteristics. In addition, campaign effects are supposed to differ from one context to the other, depending on the intensity of the electoral campaign. Elaborating on earlier work in the field of opinion formation we develop a theoretical model of electoral choice based on individual variables (ideological orientation, level of political sophistication, party identification, timing of the decision) and contextual variables (intensity of the electoral campaign). We test this model with data from the 1999 Swiss election panel study. In the Swiss federal system national elections are essentially a collection of cantonal elections. Therefore, the three waves panel (June, September and November) carried out in three cantons (Geneva, Lucerne and Zurich) allows for a comparative analysis of campaign effects on opinion formation.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section we develop our theoretical argument regarding electoral choice and the impact of electoral campaigns. We start with a general model that envisions opinion as the product of the interaction between political communications, on the one hand, and the citizens’ political predispositions and level of sophistication, on the other. We then argue that the application of the model to electoral choice requires the inclusion of two additional variables, namely whether a voter is close to a party or not, and the moment when she makes a decision. We extend the model accordingly and derive some basic assumptions regarding the impact of the factors under consideration. We also propose a hypothesize on how a change in the intensity of the electoral campaign is likely to modify the cognitive strategies people use to make their choice. The operationalization of the
variables, as well as the presentation of the data and the model appear in section two and set the stage for the empirical part presented in section three. We test our assumptions regarding opinion formation in the three political contexts. We recall our main findings in the conclusion and highlight avenues for future research.

1. A theoretical model of electoral choice

We start with a general model of opinion formation that is rooted in some basic arguments found in the literature. First, we believe that the formation (and change) of opinions in the public is driven by the political messages delivered by the elite and the media. Second, the concepts of political sophistication and ideological orientation play a central role in our model. Political sophistication refers to the individuals’ level of interest in, attentiveness to and knowledge about politics. The higher the level of sophistication, the greater the exposure to political communications. At the same time, however, a greater sophistication also induces people to scrutinize and select these communications in light of their ideological orientation (e.g. McGuire 1968, Ottati and Wyer Jr. 1990, Zaller 1992). Grounded on stable traits such as political beliefs and values, ideological orientation is not likely to be influenced by the political discourse, at least in the short run. Ideological orientation regulates the acceptance or non-acceptance of the political communications a person is exposed to, this in interaction with her level of sophistication. Thus, most sophisticated people are likely to display opinions or to make decisions that correspond closely to their political values, beliefs and interests (Luskin 1994), whereas citizens with a lower level of sophistication are prone to decide according to the dominating messages delivered in the public space. Third, the patterns of opinion formation will differ according to the level of conflict among the elite. When the views among the elite converge, a mainstream effect is likely to occur (Zaller 1992: 98). In that case, popular support increases with the citizens’ level of sophistication, regardless of their ideological orientation. In contrast, when the elite is divided, conflicting arguments are delivered and citizens are exposed to competing flows of communication. This results in a polarization effect among citizens: in this case, support to a given message is expected to increase with the level of sophistication among citizens whose predispositions are consistent with this message, but to decrease among those whose predispositions are not consistent with it. Of course, one would assume that electoral campaigns are almost by definition characterized by sharp conflicts between at least two parties or candidates, typically between incumbent and challenger.
However, there might be cases where the electoral campaign is so strongly biased in favor of one party or one political camp that the messages delivered by the minority camp can only be effective among highly sophisticated citizens. We come back to this specific case and discuss its implications in our empirical work.

As compared to opinion formation in general, the electoral choice displays some specific characteristics that may affect the overall pattern of causal relationships outlined above. We argue that the cognitive process of opinion formation during an electoral campaign brings additional factors into play, which may reduce the possibilities of persuasion. If we want to produce a comprehensive and reliable conception of the cognitive processes underlying the electoral choice we need to extend our model accordingly. Two additional factors are worth considering here.

First, the electoral choice as well as the choice in a referendum obviously differ from opinion issued in response to a survey in one important respect: the very fact that an election takes place implies that at some point a voting choice (and not only a voting intention) has to be made. This choice can occur at the very last moment, that is, a few days before the election day, but it can also occur very early, let’s say, some months before the election day. As Chaffee and his colleagues have shown (Chaffee and Choe 1980, Chaffee and Rimal 1996) the factors influencing the possibilities of persuasion and electoral choice differ according to the timing of the decision. More noticeably, their findings regarding voters who make their decision at the beginning of the electoral campaign or even well before (the so-called "early deciders") suggest that one can be exposed to the campaign without being affected by it. In other words, early deciders may be attentive to or interested in the campaign, but are likely to base their decision on other grounds. Therefore, within this group the strength of the relationship between electoral choice and ideological orientation should not vary across different levels of sophistication.

Second, partisanship presumably plays a central role in electoral choice. As the classical work of the Michigan school reminds us, party identification is a powerful explanatory factor of electoral choice, and one that cannot be influenced in the short run (Campbell, Converse et al. 1960). We know that the traditional ties between parties and their electorate have weakened over time, but we also know that these ties have not entirely disappeared. Party identification
still provides important political cues to voters, especially among the least sophisticated of them (Hamill, Lodge and Blake 1985, Rahn 1993). Against this background, we assume that voters who feel close to a party are fairly immune to the electoral campaign and tend to vote in line with their party identification. In other words, the assumption that we have formulated for "early deciders" also holds for voters with a party identification: both party identification and early decision are supposed to severely limit campaign effects. More specifically, for these two categories of voters we assume that the level of sophistication is deprived of its filtering function in the acceptance/rejection mechanism of political messages. By contrast, voters who do not feel close to a party and who make up their mind during the electoral campaign (the "campaign deciders") are expected to be influenced by the political messages delivered during the campaign.

We can now summarize our assumptions:

Hypothesis 1: Voters who make their decision early (prior to or at the beginning of the electoral campaign) are less likely to be influenced by the flows of political communication than voters who make their choice during the campaign.

Hypothesis 2: Voters with a party identification are less likely to be influenced by the electoral campaign than voters without a party identification.

Hypothesis 3: The electoral campaign has an influence only among voters who hold no party identification and make their decision during the campaign; for this specific category of voters the higher the political sophistication the higher the support for the party closest to their ideological orientation.

It should be recalled here that our underlying model of opinion formation sees opinion formation as the product of the interaction between political discourse, ideological orientation, and political sophistication. Hence, when we say that a specific category of voters is "less likely to be influenced by the electoral campaign" we basically mean that our model does not apply to the same extent, that is, that political sophistication influences less strongly the link between ideology and electoral choice.

Furthermore, we assume that these three hypotheses hold when the electoral campaign is moderately intense. However, changes towards very intense, resp. very low intense, electoral

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2 For instance, various studies suggest that individuals use inferential strategies in order to reach conclusions about, for example, a little-known candidate from more general categories that are associated with him (Conover and Feldman 1989, Lodge and Stroh 1993, Popkin 1994).

3 It should be noted that these two aspects - the early choice and party identification - are not entirely independent from each other. In our three samples, the proportion of party identifiers varies between 56 and
campaigns are likely to modify the picture. For a long time, almost all models of electoral choice were premised on the simplistic assumption that the decision rules voters employ are unresponsive to variations in the electoral campaign. More recent work has tried to overcome this shortcoming and has begun to examine the impact of the campaign context on the voters’ evaluations and opinion formation. Thus, Kahn et Kenney (1999) have shown that the intensity of US senate election campaigns differ dramatically from one another and that these differences have far-reaching consequences for the cognitive strategies used by voters. In addition, they argue that an increase in campaign intensity does not only matter with respect to the quantity of information voters have at their disposal, but also with respect to the incentives it produces among voters. Thus, an intense electoral campaign leads voters to give more importance to their choice and to make more sophisticated decisions about competing candidates (p. 25). By contrast, when campaign intensity is low, information about the election is scarce, and voters have little incentive to make complicated judgments. Rather, they tend to rely more heavily on cognitive shortcuts, such as stereotypes, feelings or easily accessible information (p. 25).

While we agree with this overall distinction we shall refine it to fit our model of electoral choice. More concretely, we assume that highly intensive campaigns lead to a polarization effect also among "early deciders" and among voters with party identification. While hypothesis 2 suggests that party identification reduces the effect of political sophistication in the process of opinion formation, we now assume that this holds less when the electoral campaign is very intensive: under such a setting, even voters close to a party are susceptible to use the messages delivered during the campaign to update their preferences. In other words, intense campaigns are expected to counter the effect of party identification in the process of opinion formation.

This argument is not easily transferable to the case of "early deciders". Indeed, it seems logically difficult to sustain that a voter who took her choice at the outset of the electoral campaign may be influenced by this campaign. However, a particularly intense campaign might be characterized not only by an unusual volume of campaign activities, media coverage, etc., but also by an unusually early start of the campaign. Under such circumstances, it is thus possible that a small polarization effect occurs also among early deciders.

Conversely, we assume that a very little intense electoral campaign has no effects, even among voters without party identification and among "campaign deciders". That is, when campaign

63% among early deciders, and between 22 and 32% among campaign deciders. One can see, however, that the link is far from perfect, which suggests that these two aspects measure partly distinct phenomena.
intensity is low, voters who are not close to a party and who decide during the campaign are not motivated to make a sophisticated judgment about the competing candidates or parties.

2. Data and model

2.1 Operationalization

The data

Our data come from a three-wave panel carried out in three cantons (Geneva, Lucerne, Zurich) in the context of the 1999 Swiss national elections. The first wave was conducted in June with three cantonal samples of 850 citizens each. Of these 850 individuals, roughly 700 were willing/able to take part in the second wave in September. Finally, the third and last series of interviews was conducted immediately after the election day (24 October). Like the two other waves it lasted about three weeks. The overall samples of individuals having participated in all three waves include about 600 citizens in each canton.4

Contextual variables: newspaper adds as a measure of campaign intensity

In the Swiss federalist system, national elections are essentially a collection of national elections (Kerr 1987). Data from various cantons thus provide the ideal grounds for a comparative analysis of the effects of electoral campaigns across different contexts. The choice of the three cantons (Geneva, Lucerne and Zurich) was based on the following criteria. First, these cantons reflect the three "political contexts" that exist in Switzerland (Kriesi 1998a, Klöti 1998): the catholic cantons, the german-speaking and religiously mixed cantons, and the french-speaking, religiously mixed, cantons5. Second, and of particular interest for the present study, these cantons differ dramatically with respect to the intensity of electoral campaigns: Election campaigns are usually heated in Zurich but of very low intensity in Geneva, Lucerne being a somewhat in-between case. Two main sets of factors account for these differences: i) as a result of differences in size (number of inhabitants) and, therefore, in the number of seats each canton sends to the National Council – the lower Chamber of Swiss Parliament – electoral competition is much higher in Zurich (34 seats), than in Geneva (11 seats) or in

4 We relied on a telephone survey. The sample was based on a random random procedure (households and individuals). All results are weighted to correct for the household structure.
5 These three contexts differ with respect to both the party system (number and strength of political parties) and the underlying cleavage structure.
Lucerne (10 seats); ii) it has been shown that federal election campaigns are more intense in the German-speaking cantons than in the French-speaking cantons (Kriesi 1998b). Thus, federal election campaigns are usually more intense in Lucerne than in Geneva, two cantons of approximately the same size. In sum, our three cantons display three distinct levels of campaign intensity, with Zurich ranking first, Lucerne second, and Geneva third.

Data drawn from a study of newspaper ads clearly confirm this ranking for the 1999 election (table 1). In our research project we have carried out a study of party ads in all the major daily newspapers and magazines in the cantons under consideration, this during the six months prior to the election.

[Table 1]

The results reported in table 1 highlight the huge spending that characterized the electoral campaign in Zurich: parties spent 11 times more for newspaper ads in Zurich than in Lucerne, and 20 times more than in Geneva. Even if we control for the differences in size between the cantons and focus on spending per capita, the differences are still considerable: spending were more than 3 times higher in Zurich than in Lucerne, and more than 5 times higher in Zurich than in Geneva. Additionally, table 1 also confirms that campaign spending, as measured by newspaper ads, is substantially higher in Lucerne than in Geneva, despite the fact that the latter is substantially richer than the former. Lastly, the distribution of newspaper ads by political camps suggest that the electoral campaign was overall dominated by parties on the right.

Voting intention and electoral choice

An electoral choice is the outcome of the process of opinion formation and is the dependent variable in our analysis. Given the limited amount of data at our disposal, we refrain from studying electoral choice for each single party. Instead, we group parties according to their ideological closeness. To that end, we use the average position of each electorate on an eleven

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6 In line with the first criterion, it would make sense to include in the analysis one of the smallest cantons that have only one or two seats in the National Council. However, electoral competition often leans towards nil in these cantons.

7 One reason for this lies in the emphasis parties in the french-speaking cantons put on cantonal elections at the expense of national elections.

8 Our data set includes 14 daily newspapers (Blick, Corriere del Ticino, Der Landbote, Der Zürcher Oberländer, Le Temps, Le Courrier, La Tribune de Genève, Le Matin, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Luzern Heute, Tages-Anzeiger, Zürichsee-Zeitung, Neue Luzerner Zeitung, Willisauer Bote), 3 Sunday papers (Le Matin Dimanche,
point left-right scale. For our present purposes we divide political parties into two groups in Geneva and Lucerne (left and right) and into three groups in Zurich (left, center, and right). This grouping is admittedly a simplification, but it will allow us to gain some important insights into the process of opinion formation. It should also be noted that these groups do not necessarily comprise the same list of parties in the three cantons. This is so, firstly, because several parties are not present in all three cantons and, secondly, because of the differences in the average left-right position of a given party’s electorate, across cantons.\footnote{In Geneva, the group of left parties comprises the social democrats, the greens, and far left parties; the right parties consist of the christian-democrats, the radicals, the liberals and the Swiss people’s party. In Lucerne, the left group includes the social democrats and the greens, whereas the christian-democrats, the radicals, the Swiss people’s party, the Christian Social Party and the far right parties make up the right group. In Zurich, the left group is the same as in Geneva; the center group includes the christian democrats, the Alliance of Independents, the Protestant People’s Party and the Christian Social Party; the right group, finally, includes the radicals, the Swiss people’s party, and far right parties.}

\textit{Political sophistication}

Our indicator of a citizen’s level of political sophistication is based on a set of items measuring her general knowledge about Swiss politics and specific information about elections. Three questions regarding general knowledge were used during the first wave of the panel: Respondents were asked to provide the number of parties represented in the Swiss federal government, the name of the current President of the federal government, and the number of signatures required to launch a popular initiative at the federal level. Questions measuring a voter’s specific knowledge about the 1999 election were asked in waves two and three: respondents had to provide the name of the State Council (the higher Chamber of Parliament) candidates in their canton, the number of seats their canton holds in the National Council, and the party name of three prominent National Council candidates in their canton. The resulting scale ranges from 0 (lowest level of sophistication) to 14 (highest level of sophistication).\footnote{Each correct answer adds one point, except for the question on the number of cantonal seats (two points for a correct answer, and one point for figures up to 20\% higher or lower than the correct answer). The question} We then have centered the distribution around the mean in each sample.

It should be added that we do not expect any direct effect of political sophistication on the level of support for a given party. Yet, several authors have shown that the level of sophistication is correlated with other individual characteristics like education, race, or income, whose influence on electoral choice is equally well-documented in the literature (e.g. Neuman Sonntagsblick, Sonntags Zeitung), 4 weekly newspapers (Die Weltwoche, Genève Home Informations, Die Region, Wochenzeitung), and 2 weekly magazines (l’Hebdo, Facts).
In order to avoid a possible specification bias we shall therefore include income and education as control variables in our estimations.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{Political predispositions}

We use self-placement on an a eleven-point left-right scale as an indicator of a citizen’s ideological orientation.\textsuperscript{12} It ranges from $-5$ (left) to $+5$ (right).

\textit{Party identification}

Party identification is a dichotomous variable that is coded 1 for voters who say they feel close to a party, and 0 otherwise.

\textit{Moment of the decision}

To identify the moment when a voter took her decision we rely on information from the panel: voters who held a stable opinion from the second wave onwards are coded as “early deciders”. In contrast, voters who did finally not vote for the party they mentioned they would vote for during the second wave, either because they have changed their mind or because they had no opinion in the second wave, are coded as “campaign deciders”.\textsuperscript{13}

\subsection*{2.2 Model specification}

Our dependent variable is dichotomous in two cantons (Geneva and Lucerne) and is categorical – with three possible values – in the third one (Zurich). In the two former cantons, our hypotheses will be tested using a logistic regression model. In the case of Zurich, we shall turn to a multinomial logistic regression, which can be seen as a simultaneous estimation of several binary logistic regressions.\textsuperscript{14} Some authors have warned that it is based on restrictive assumptions and might, therefore, be inappropriate in some cases (Alvarez and Nagler 1998).

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{11} Since our measure of income was based on income categories, we use as indicator the middle value in each income category (in thousands of Swiss francs). Education takes the form of four dummy variables for compulsory education, diploma or high school, high vocational education, and university, with vocational education as the reference category.
\item\textsuperscript{12} Several studies have shown that the opposition between the left and the right is the most salient in Swiss politics, among both the political elite and the public.
\item\textsuperscript{13} Only in Zurich we admit an exception to this rule, since we consider as "early deciders" the voters who held a stable vote intention across all three waves of the panel. This in order to take account of the earlier start of the campaign in this canton, in comparison to the other two cantons under consideration.
\item\textsuperscript{14} See Liao (1994: 48-59) or Long (1997: 148ss.) for an introduction to this model.
\end{itemize}
More specifically, multinomial logistic regression assumes that the ratio between the probabilities of two alternative choices does not depend systematically on any other alternatives. In our case, for example, the ratio between the probability to vote for a party of the right and the probability to vote for a center party should be independent of the likelihood to opt for a party of the left. The validity of this hypothesis, called the Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives (IIA), can be tested using a Hausman’s specification test (Greene 1997: 920-1; Long 1997: 183-4).\footnote{15} In our case, the results of this test confirm that our data meets the requirements of the model.\footnote{16}

The model we shall test is as follows:

\[ Z_j = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j} \text{soph} + \beta_{2j} \text{lr} + \beta_{3j} \text{id} + \beta_{4j} \text{lr} \cdot \text{soph} + \beta_{5j} \text{lr} \cdot \text{soph} \cdot \text{id} + \beta_{6j} \text{inc} + \sum_{k=7}^{10} \beta_{kj} \text{ed}_{kj} + \varepsilon_j \]  

[1]

with

\[ Z_j = \ln \left( \frac{P(Y = j)}{P(Y = 0)} \right) \]  

[2]

being the natural logarithm of the ratio of the probability of voting for the party \( j \) to the probability of voting for the party chosen as the reference category.\footnote{17} The right-hand side of equation 1 includes political sophistication (‘soph’), ideological orientation (‘lr’), party identification (‘id’), income (‘inc’), four dummies for educational level (‘ed_7’ to ‘ed_10’) as well as two interaction terms.

It can be seen that the moment where a voter takes a decision is not included in the equation. We shall estimate the models separately for early deciders and for campaigndeciders. While it would be possible to endogenize this variable, this would result in a too complex series of interaction terms. In equation 1 the two-way interaction term, that between political sophistication and left-right orientation, is meant to capture the variation of the effect of ideological orientation on electoral choice at various levels of sophistication. If voters (who do not feel close to a party) are influenced by the campaign, the parameter of this interaction should be significant and positive.\footnote{18} The three-way interaction term, on its side, measures

\footnote{15} The Hausman test for IIA compares the estimated parameters of the ‘full’ model with those of a restricted model where one of the choice alternatives is removed. It tests for the presence of any systematic change between the two sets of parameters.

\footnote{16} The value of the Hausman test is asymptotically distributed as chi-square with a number of degrees of freedom equal to the number of parameters in the restricted model. For early and campaign deciders, and for all alternatives in the sample, the result of the Hausman test is either negative or nonsignificant.

\footnote{17} In all three samples, the group of left parties will be used as the reference category.

\footnote{18} In fact, the sign of the interaction term depends on the choice of the reference category and on the coding of the variable for ideological orientation. In our case, it should have a positive sign.
whether this effect also holds for party identifiers. Since we assume that the latter are not influenced by the campaign (see hypothesis 2), the sum of the two interactions’ parameters should equal zero. That is, the coefficient for the three-way interaction should be significant and negative.

Remember that these interaction effects are expected to occur only to the extent that people are influenced by the campaign, e.g. among campaign deciders (see hypothesis 1). Lastly, and as mentioned above, the magnitude of these effects are likely vary according to the campaign intensity.

3. Results

Our empirical tests focus on respondents who said they took part in the election. The results of the model’s estimations appear in tables 2 to 4. It should be recalled that the parameters measure the effect of the independent variables on a transformation of the dependent variable (see equation 2). Hence, their interpretation is hence not straightforward, except in regard to their sign and significance. Therefore, we shall rely on graphical presentations of the predicted probabilities.

[Tables 2-4]

Let us start with the canton that constitutes an in-between case with respect to campaign intensity, namely Lucerne. Regarding early deciders first, we see from table 2 (first column) that two variables (ideological orientation and party identification) have a strong influence on the voting choice: both a move to the right of the ideological scale and party identification strengthen the probability to vote for a party of the right. While the first effect fits conventional wisdom, the second is essentially a result of the higher proportion of citizens identifying with a party of the right rather than with a party of the left. More important for the test of our first hypothesis, table 2 shows that the parameters of the interaction effects are close to zero. In line with our theoretical expectations, these results suggest that among early deciders the effect of ideological orientation hardly varies across different levels of political sophistication.19 These

19 Regarding control variables, it can be noted that an increase in education reduces the probability of voting for a party on the right.
results are all the more convincing when compared to those among campaign deciders. Here, the two interaction effects turn out to be significant. In addition, they have the expected sign. The positive value of the two-way interaction shows that the effect of ideology increases with political sophistication, whereas the negative value of the three-way interaction confirms that this effect does not hold for party identifiers. Therefore, and as hypothesized, the electoral campaign has no effect among party identifiers, irrespective of the moment when they took their decision.

Lastly, it should be noted that the size of the coefficient for ideological orientation is smaller among campaign deciders, than among early deciders.\(^{20}\) This difference is, however, not surprising, given our overall expectation that the latter are influenced more strongly by the campaign, than the former.

Our results are even clearer when we use the coefficients to calculate the predicted probabilities. As an illustration, we present the probabilities to vote for a party of the left among early deciders (figure 1) and among campaign deciders (figure 2). We do so for voters with various positions on the left-right scale, i.e. left (-3), center-left (-1) and center-right (1), with and without party identification, and with various levels of political sophistication. The differences between the two graphs are only too evident. We see from figure 1 that the probability to vote for a party of the left increases as a function of political sophistication among voters with left ideological orientation (lr = -1 or -3). This holds among both party identifiers (gray curves) and non-identifiers (black curves). However, these variations are overall very small when compared to those among campaign deciders (figure 2). In the latter case, the probability to vote for the left increases dramatically with political sophistication, but this only among voters who do not feel close to a party.\(^{21}\) While an upward trend is also present among party identifiers, it is of much smaller magnitude than among non-identifiers. This result provides strong support for our third assumption that voters that are not close to a party and that take their decision during the campaign are more likely to be influenced by the campaign, than party identifiers and early deciders.

\[\text{Figures 1 & 2}\]

\(^{20}\) It should be noted that this effect does not hold for campaign deciders that are close to a party and that have a high degree of sophistication.

\(^{21}\) The very small probability to vote for the left displayed by voters not close to a party and with a low degree of sophistication should not come as a surprise. It is mainly a result of the relative intensity of the electoral
While our assumptions hold up well in the case of a moderately intense electoral campaign (Lucerne), we now turn to a canton in which campaign intensity was low, namely Geneva. Remember that in this case the effect of ideology on voting choice is expected to be stable across various levels of political sophistication. This is so because when campaign intensity is low, people are not induced to reassess their party preferences in light of the new information delivered during the campaign. The results again provide overall support for this additional assumption (table 3). In particular, among campaign deciders the coefficient of the two-way interaction term shows that the joint effect of ideological polarization and political sophistication is hardly significant in Geneva and, in any case, much smaller than in Lucerne. Additionally, and linked to this, in Geneva campaign deciders do not differ substantially from early deciders with respect to the impact of ideology and sophistication on electoral choice.\textsuperscript{22} Furthermore, table 3 shows that in Geneva like in Lucerne ideological orientation has a strong impact on the electoral choice, this especially among early deciders. Also, identification with a political party has a significant effect among early deciders, but this result is mostly due to the difference between the number of right and left identifiers within this group (overwhelming presence of left identifiers).

Once again, graphs offer more fine-grained pictures of the causal relationships. Like in the case of Lucerne, figures 3 and 4 display the probability to vote for the left. For early deciders (figure 3) the picture is quite similar to that in Lucerne: while support for the left tends to increase with political sophistication, this effect is overall very small. Similarly, while a polarization effect also occurs among campaign deciders (figure 4), it is too small to question our previous conclusion.

\[\text{Figures 3 & 4}\]

Last of all, we apply our model to the case of Zurich, a canton characterized by far by the most intensive campaign. Since the political parties were divided in three groups, we use a multinomial logistic regression to estimate the model.

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\textsuperscript{22} The smaller standard error for the two-way interaction in the second case is presumably due to the larger sample size.
At first glance, the results are less clear-cut than in the other two cantons, and only partially fit our theoretical expectations. This is most clearly shown by the fact that the coefficients of the interaction terms do not reach the level of significance. In addition, among early deciders, the coefficients of the two-way interaction have the wrong sign, meaning that an increase in the level of sophistication tends to reduce the effect of ideology. As is suggested by the sign of the three-way interaction, however, this does not hold for voters who feel close to a party. In this group, the effect of ideology does not depend on the level of political sophistication. Unexpectedly, then, an increase in political sophistication results in a decrease in the relationship between ideological orientation and party choice among voters with party identification. As is shown by figure 5, this effect clearly holds for voters of parties of the left: the least sophisticated voters who hold a left ideological orientation but no party identification have a very high probability to support a party of the left; as their degree of sophistication increases, however, this probability diminishes strongly. How can we account for this unexpected result? One possible explanation is that the campaign had already started at the time of our first wave, but was of low intensity. Under such circumstances, only the most sophisticated voters were susceptible to be exposed to it. This, together with the fact that in Zurich campaign activities are usually dominated by the right, might have led the most sophisticated voters with a left ideological orientation (but without clear party ties) to opt for right parties. However, a careful analysis of the electoral campaign is certainly needed to test this hypothesis.

[Figures 5-8]

Turning to campaign deciders (table 4, column 3 and 4), we see that all the interaction terms are close to zero. This runs counter to our assumption that, due to a heated electoral campaign, a strong polarization effect was likely to occur in Zurich, and this even among voters with party identification. However, given that the estimations are now based on three groups of parties, the resulting voting probabilities are pretty hard to grasp without graphical help. Figures 6 to 8 tell a different story. They show that political sophistication has a rather strong influence on the vote - more precisely on the relation between ideology and party choice: irrespective of their ideological orientation, citizens with little knowledge about politics have roughly the same probability to vote for a given political camp; as the level of sophistication increases, however, the differences in voting choice from one position on the
left-right scale to the other become larger. Moreover, this effect also holds for party identifiers. This result strongly supports our hypothesis that when the campaign is highly intense party identifiers are no longer immune to campaign effects but, rather, are induced to update their political preferences in light of the messages they are exposed to.  

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have applied a model of opinion formation and electoral choice to the case of the 1999 Swiss national elections. Panel data from three different cantonal contexts have helped us to highlight when and to whom electoral campaigns matter. In this conclusion, we would like to recall our main findings and to sketch possible extension lines.

At the theoretical level, we have argued that models of opinion formation should be adapted to take account of the specificities of electoral choice. Based on a general model that sees opinion formation as the product of the interaction between the elite’s discourse, on the one hand, and the voters’ characteristics (political sophistication and ideological orientation), on the other, we have hypothesized about the disruptive effects of two additional variables: the moment when a voter makes her decision and party identification. In addition, we have argued that the underlying pattern of causal relationships is likely to be affected by a variation in the intensity of the electoral campaign. Empirical tests overall provide considerable support for our different assumptions.

First, campaign effects are much smaller among early deciders, i.e. among voters who make their decision well before or at the outset of the electoral campaign, than among campaign deciders. This result does not stem from a lower interest in or attention to the campaign among early deciders but, rather, from the fact that the latter base their choice on other factors than those provided by the campaign. There seems, however, to be (at least) one exception to this rule: as is suggested by our results for voters with a left orientation in Zurich, when the campaign is not only highly intense but also starts very early, even voters who make their decision early tend to be affected by campaign activities.

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23 In Zurich, like in the other two cantons, table 4 also reveals that ideological orientation has a very strong impact on the voting choice of early deciders and that this effect is greatly reduced in the other group of voters, namely among campaign deciders. And in Zurich like in Lucerne, education has a strong impact on electoral choice, in the sense that an increase in education leads to higher support for both left and center parties. Note that the very low value of the coefficient for compulsory education in the third column is mainly a consequence of the very small number of observations in that category.
Second, similar results hold for the distinction party identification vs. no party identification: like the early deciders, the voters who feel close to a party are likely to be immune to the electoral campaign. While some of our results revealed an unexpected polarization effect also among early deciders without party ties (in Lucerne and in Geneva), this polarization is of very limited magnitude and, therefore, can hardly question our overall conclusion.

Third, we found strong support for our assumption that campaign effects are highest among voters who display no party identification and make their choice during the campaign. Within this group, the process of opinion formation clearly reflects the expected interaction effects between political sophistication and ideological orientation: for example, support for a party of the left increases as a function of political sophistication among voters with left ideological orientation; conversely, support for the left decreases as a function of political sophistication among voters with right ideology. Again, however, this general finding holds especially when the electoral campaign is moderately intense, like was the case in Lucerne. In contrast, when campaign intensity is very low, as was the case in Geneva, voters who have a party identification and who decided during the campaign have neither opportunity nor incentives to make sophisticated judgments. Consequently, they are unlikely to be affected by the campaign. Conversely, the very intense campaign in Zurich prompted even party identifiers to use information from the campaign to reassess their partisan preferences.

The model we have tested in this paper provides convincing results. Nevertheless, it would certainly benefit from a specification of some points.

First, our conception of the campaign was very basic. The nature of the campaign influence could be better described with more precise data about the content of the media, about the use of media by the voters, or about the evolution of the campaign intensity across time, both overall and across political camps.

Second, it would be particularly interesting to focus not only on electoral choice, but also on the stability of vote intentions. Such a perspective—which can be based on similar models and variables as those we used here—would also lead to a better understanding of the processes of opinion formation during an electoral campaign.
References


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*Source: 1999 Swiss Election Studies*
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* *p < 0.1 ; **p < 0.05 ; *** p < 0.01

### Table 3: Geneva

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### Table 4: Zurich

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Fig. 5: Probability to vote for a left party among early deciders, Zurich

Fig. 6: Probability to vote for a left party among campaign deciders, Zurich

Fig. 7: Probability to vote for a center party among campaign deciders, Zurich

Fig. 8: Probability to vote for a right party among campaign deciders, Zurich