Direct democracy can theoretically help to overcome some of the shortfalls of representative democracy because it gives voters a direct influence on policy making. However an analysis of the policy-making process in the Swiss political system with expanded direct democratic rights shows that parties strongly control the process of direct democracy from the beginning to the end. Parties very frequently launch initiatives and challenge laws passed by a parliamentary majority even when they are part of the grand coalition government in Switzerland. Furthermore the representative system in Switzerland reflects the preferences of the voters fairly well. Governments and parliaments have a high approval rate. At a party level, voters of a party very often follow the position of the party leadership too. Nevertheless direct democracy can have an impact on the legislative process, likely making legislative processes more responsive to the peoples needs and closer to the median voter preference.
1 Introduction

Criticism on parties has been widespread because parties fail to adequately represent citizens’ interest and hence the normative functions of parties and what parties do in reality seems to drift apart more and more. Parties, according to van Biezen (2004), “are loosing relevance everywhere as vehicles of representation, instruments of mobilization and channels of interest articulation and aggregation”. There is a more general dissatisfaction with representative democracy, increasing scepticism towards politicians, political parties and political institutions (Norris 1999, Dalton 2002). Nevertheless, political parties are key actors in every democracy and therefore the discussion about the role of parties in theory and practice is essential to understand how and if parties help to make democracy work.

Direct democracy has been identified as one of the possible solutions to overcome the shortfalls of representative democracy (Dalton, Cain, and Scarrow 2003; Scarrow 2003) because it allows a direct link between citizens preferences and policy outcomes. Theoretically elections and representative democracy is supposed to be the playground of political parties, while direct democracy gives citizens a direct influence. However one should not have unrealistic views about how direct democracy works. Direct democracy always coexisted with representative democracy and there are mutual interactions between the two institutional elements of democracy and especially between the political actors in both forms of democratic decision-making. Direct democracy is never as direct as some theorists see it and with hardly any exception the direct democratic process is mediated by parties and governments at various stages. This paper discusses the role of parties in democracies with elements of direct democratic decision making in Switzerland where direct democracy is an essential part of the everyday political process at the national and local level.

The paper will look at the role of parties in direct democracy from two separate angles. First I will discuss the role of parties at the various stages of the direct democratic process. Second, direct democracy allows testing how well parties represent the voters on different policy issues. Overall there is congruence between political elites and the people when a parliamentary proposal is not rejected at the polls. On every issue, parties recommend publicly how people should vote. The party preferences can then be compared to the preferences of the voters that expressed partisanship. The broad availability of survey data in Switzerland allows exploring how well and in which cases the parties preferences reflect the preferences of their voters.

1 I will refer in the following paper to party influence even when in fact only a small number of parties is involved, usually parties that are in government or that form a majority in parliament.
While some authors stress that the number of direct votes has increased in the last 30 years (Scarrow 2003), most of the increase comes from Switzerland. Other countries such as Italy and Ireland have direct democratic decisions on a regular basis too, however in no other country than Switzerland direct democracy is as much part of everyday political life in national politics. Therefore it is difficult to study the role of parties in direct democracy in a systematic way comparatively and the focus of the paper is primarily on Switzerland.

2 The role of parties in direct democracy in Switzerland

2.1 Historical interactions of parties and direct democracy

The first Swiss constitution of 1848 already defined that every constitutional change proposed by the parliament had to be approved by a popular vote\(^2\) too. In Switzerland the first constitution was replaced in 1874 and the optional referendum was introduced that allowed to challenge every law adopted by parliament. When a group collected at least 30’000 signatures a popular vote on the law had to take place. In 1891 direct democracy was further expanded. Through collecting 50’000 signatures any group was allowed to propose any partial change of the constitution with hardly any restrictions what could become subject of an initiative. The political parties played a major role in the introduction of direct democracy. Until the late 19\(^{th}\) century the party system of Switzerland consisted of two parties, the dominant liberal party that controlled the government entirely until the introduction of proportional representation in 1919 and the conservative party that was in a minority. The conservative party was in favour of the introduction of the new popular rights, while the majority of the liberal party was against it, because it meant that the liberal party will loose power and make the decision making process more difficult to control. However due to a split in the liberal party, where a minority was in favour of the new rights mainly for ideological reasons, there was a sufficient majority in parliament that allowed to introduce the new direct democratic rights. In reverse, direct democracy played an essential role in the formation of a national party structure (Gruner 1977). In the 19\(^{th}\) century parties at the national level were rather lose coalitions that formed mainly around party groups in the national parliament. Speaking about parties in the 19\(^{th}\) century is incorrect in the sense that the national level rather party families with different internal divisions than unified strong parties existed. The liberal party family was more heterogeneous than the conservative party. Direct democracy and the increasing frequency of direct decision forced the par-

\(^{2}\) I will use in the term “popular vote” for direct democratic decision knowing that parts of the literature rather uses the word referendum. However in Switzerland the word referendum is used for proposals that have been adopted by parliament already, either constitutional changes – mandatory referendum – or laws that are challenged by a group of people – optional referendum.
ties to form strong party structures at the national level because it became necessary to run national campaigns. Elections on the other hand took place in the many constituencies and at the national level parties were only important in the legislative process.

The process of introduction of direct democracy in Switzerland was different from other countries, especially the US states. At the end of the 19th century dissatisfaction with representative democracy grew in the US because of a widespread public feeling that legislatures were corrupted by special interests. Referring to the introduction of direct democracy in Switzerland, the US political reform movement postulated the introduction of direct democratic decision making as a mean to limit the power of legislative assemblies and the influence of special interests (Goebel 2002).

Due to the history of the introduction of direct democracy the role of parties in direct democracy developed quite differently. While in the US states direct policy voting undermined the influence of parties, in Switzerland and a few other countries direct democracy coexisted with parties and legislatures (Budge 2001). In the aftermath of the introduction, the new democratic rights were mainly used by minority parties, first the conservative party and around the turn of the century by the growing socialist movement as a tool to influence decision making. This example shows that the relation between parties and direct democracy depend both on the historical process of the introduction of the new rights and, even more important, on how the different systems of direct democracy work in detail, which will discussed in the next section.

2.2 Forms and procedures of direct democracy

There is not one form of direct democracy but many and depending on the form, the role and possible influence of parties and governments varies. Most important it needs to be distinguished who is allowed to initiate a popular vote. According to Budge (2001) the main dimension for the classification of forms of direct democracy is the degree of governmental control: what control does the government have over the agenda, the issues and the political process in direct democracy?

In some countries a vote only takes place when called by the government. For example in Sweden a popular vote takes place only when the parliamentary majority wants it and furthermore the outcome of the vote is usually not binding. The referendum in this case is of purely consultative nature (Ruin 1996). Thus a referendum only takes place in Sweden when there is an internal, unsolvable split in the ruling government. In several other countries constitutional provisions demand a referendum in specified situations (e.g. in Ireland). In this case government control is still high because the government can determine what changes will be proposed. A form of medium control is when citi-
zens can try to veto a decision of government and parliament. The agenda-control is still in the hand of the government but this agenda can be challenged. Some countries have introduced some form of initiative where organized groups can initiate a policy change independent of the government, however this form is very rare and if they exist there are very high thresholds. Initiatives allow forcing issues ignored by parliament on the public agenda.

Table 1  Form of referendum, government control and party mediation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Referendum called when and how government wants</th>
<th>Government control</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Referendum required by constitution</td>
<td>Medium-High</td>
<td>Ireland, Mandatory referendum in Switzerland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referendum can be forced by the people</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>The optional referendum in Switzerland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiatives are allowed</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Initiative in California, Italy, Switzerland</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the exception of Switzerland and some US states and maybe Italy, in most cases with direct democratic rights referendum play a minimal role in the every day political live and the control of the process is primarily in the hands of the governments and parliamentary majorities (Scarrow 2003). Therefore the usual form of direct democracy has a rather plebiscitary form and is not so much a citizen’s right.

In Switzerland three different forms of direct democracy exist.

Mandatory referendum: Constitutional changes can be proposed by the government and the parliament and have to pass the parliamentary decision before there is a mandatory popular vote.

Optional referendum: Any political group through collecting 50’000 signatures can challenge a law passed by a parliamentary majority and if the sufficient amount of signatures is collected there will be a popular vote. These two forms of popular votes have the character of a decision-controlling veto instrument. The issues themselves and the detailed legal regulations of a law are subject to the legislative procedure while only the entire law and not only parts of it can be challenged.

Popular initiatives: In a third form, the popular initiative, any group can force a partial constitutional change by collecting 100’000 signatures. In these cases the agenda is not set by the government but by the group that launches the initiative. However the government and the parliament are not entirely excluded. The government declares in all cases its position towards the proposal – in most cases negative – and the parliament debates the issue and votes on it in a parliamentary vote which is communicated as a
recommendation to the voters. Furthermore the parliament can make a counter-proposal to an initiative. Counter proposals are made when the government and the parliament see the initiative as a threat because it might be too radical but they recognised the issue itself as important. Counter-proposals tend to be less radical than the initiatives and in-between the claim of the initiative and the status quo. Counter-proposal are often made for strategic reasons. Counter-proposals can be indirect – in a law, that then is subject to an optional referendum – or direct and propose a constitutional change too and then there will be a mandatory referendum at the same date as the initiative. The function of counter proposal is usually to decrease the likelihood of an initiative to pass. Often it leads to a withdrawal of the original initiative if the major issues of an initiative are taken into in the counter proposal.

The process of legislation in Switzerland can be divided into three different stages: a pre-parliamentary phase, a parliamentary phase and a post-parliamentary phase. Based on a parliamentary motion or based on a government request the government proposes a partial or total revision of a law or a partial constitutional change. In this pre-parliamentary stage the government, respectively the responsible branch of the administration, drafts a first version, organizes expert hearings and a first proposal goes into a broad consultation process prior to the parliamentary stage. In the consultation process parties, the cantons and other stakeholders can express there opinion on the first draft. After the revision of the first draft the proposal is submitted to the parliament and the parliamentary phase begins. Following a committee discussions the plenary sessions of the two chambers discuss and decide on the final version of a bill.

Once approved by both chambers, the post-parliamentary phase starts. In case of constitutional changes a popular votes takes place in any case and the government decides about the date of the ballot. For optional referenda 50’000 signatures within three month need to be collected in order to have a vote. If the signatures are handed in in time, the government sets a date when the vote on the bill takes place.

With an initiative any group can propose any partial constitutional change through collecting 100’00 signatures within 18 month. If the sufficient amount of signatures is collected, the government writes a report and makes a suggestion on behalf of the parliament whether the parliament should propose to adopt or reject an initiative (with very few exceptions the government proposes to reject an initiative). The parliament then debates the issue and possibly makes a counter proposal. After the parliamentary vote,
which has the significance of a recommendation, the government sets a date when the popular vote takes place.

2.3 Party influence at various steps of the process in Switzerland

Parties are involved in direct democracy at various steps. First they are involved in the pre-parliamentary consultation process. Parties as well as the cantons and major interest groups are included in all consultations. Major issue specific other interest groups are allowed to participate in the consultation process when an issue is within their primary interest. The influence of the parties in changing the propositions at this stage has not been measured so far, however it is likely that the government takes the party position into serious consideration because otherwise the proposal will be changed in parliament again (Blaser 2003). As in any other democracy the parliament is the main arena for political decision making and majorities have to be found in legislative procedures in order to pass proposals for constitutional change and revision of laws. Laws then are subject to a optional referenda.

There is a need for collecting signatures in two of the three forms of direct democracy in Switzerland, for initiatives and for optional referenda. Signature collections needs knowledge, logistics and resources. Resource means a certain amount of money and even more important volunteers who are willing to collect signatures for many hours. Only groups with a high level of national organization tend to fulfil these conditions. However, in many cases it is hard to determine who is the main force behind an initiative. Legally an initiative is launched by a group of individuals that form a committee. It is very common that most of the members of a committee are well known politicians although it remains sometimes unclear who finances an initiative. For optional referendums it is even more difficult to determine who is behind the referendum, because a postal address is sufficient in order to organise a signature collection, there is not even a need to have identifiable persons. While it is not always clear who finances a signature collection – there is no control of whatsoever of the money flow in politics in Switzerland, neither for elections nor popular votes – it usually becomes clear who are the main driving political forces behind a signature collection because of media coverage. The few analysis that have been made indicate that parties are in fact the main actors in signature collections.

Table 2 shows who has launched the initiatives between 1891 – 1991. Most frequently parties have been the driving force behind initiatives, followed by interest groups. Not all parties launch initiatives frequently. At the national level most of the initiatives have

\[4\] It has not been common yet in Switzerland that professional signature collectors are payed for their signatures, although the number of cases where this happens has become more frequent.
been launched by the Social Democratic party, followed by smaller left groups. In Switzerland it is common that governmental parties launch referendums and initiatives too. Most frequently direct democracy is a tool of the Social democrats however other governmental parties have been using direct democracy too in order to get a different majority than in parliament.

Table 2  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiator of an initiative</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest groups</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ad-hoc groups with party affinity</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ad-hoc groups other</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source (Wili 1991).

An other study looked at the cantonal level and found that between 1979-1996 about the 37% of the initiatives and referenda have been launched by parties followed by short term ad-hoc committees (30%) usually consisting of several parties (Vatter 2002). 20% were initiated by interest groups and the remaining by parties in combination with an interest groups, rarely by individuals, new social movements and others. There is variation between parties too. Most frequently left parties are behind an initiative or optional referendum.

There are several reasons why parties are so dominant in the direct democratic process. One of them is that they fulfil several positive criteria for collecting signatures. They are established organisations with a base of party members that can potentially volunteer in collecting signatures. Furthermore they have the knowledge how to do so. Most critical is that parties have limited resources in Switzerland. Parties in Switzerland entirely depend on private funding from individuals and companies. However it seems that raising funds is easier for parties for issue specific campaigns than for financing party activities.

Parties have several reasons why they are so heavily involved in direct democracy. First, and still most important, parties that were in a minority in the legislative process try to win a majority in through a popular vote. That’s one of the reasons why the strength of the left parties is one of the strongest predictors for the frequency of initiatives and referenda in the cantons (Vatter 2002) and many initiatives and optional referendums are launched by the left. However other parties use direct democracy too if

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5 There has been hardly any volatility between the political blocks in Switzerland for the last 85 years. Since PR was introduced at the national level in 1919 left parties had around 30% of the vote share nationally.
they were in a minority in parliament. Secondly sometimes parties launch an initiative or an optional referenda because they want to force a public debate and/or influence the public agenda although they know that they will very likely loose the vote. Connected to that is a third reason: more and more frequently parties use direct democracy as a mobilising tool for electoral campaigns. Launching an initiative can show the voters that the party is actively doing something to change policies and it can put issues favourable for the party on the public electoral campaign agenda. Last but not least parties use initiatives and referenda to activate their own members and activist inbetween two elections.

In the final step of the direct democratic process the parties are even more dominant than during the signature collection phase. Campaigns prior to a popular vote are almost entirely in the hand of established politicians for several reasons. As we have seen even for initiatives there is a parliamentary debate where politicians discuss an issue. Later in the process parties always give recommendations on every issue to their voters and established politicians are most present in the media. Furthermore there is a strong personal linkage between the major interest groups and political parties anyway. Because being an MP at the national level is only a part time job, many national politicians are involved in an interest group in one way or the other and key figures of many major interest groups are members of the national parliament too.

2.4 The effects of direct democracy on parties

One of the key questions that has been discussed theoretically is whether direct democracy weakens political parties or not. The overall feeling is that political parties are weakened through direct democracy (Kobach 1993). The main argument is that direct democracy demonopolizes the role of parties in the processes of interest articulation and interest mediation (Neidhart 1986). According to Beyme (1982) direct democracy in Switzerland has favoured interest organizations rather than political parties. The arguments on the negative impact on parties can be summarized as followed (Ladner and Brändle 1999):

- Direct democracy forces broad consensus beyond political parties. Interest groups are more directly integrated into policy making than in representative democracy.
- Direct democracy introduces greater conflict between parties because they are forced to decide constantly on political issues.
- Direct democracy puts excessive demands on parties that have limited resources anyway. They lack money and professional staff to constantly engage in political campaigns.
• Direct democracy makes partiers unimportant because the important questions are decided directly by the voters anyway.

However there are counter arguments too.

• According to Papadopoulos (1991) direct democracy leads to a greater openness of the political system mainly for smaller parties.

• Direct democracy gives parties a public platform for their ideas and helps them to set the agenda. Not surprisingly in Switzerland many parties launch initiatives around elections as a mean to influence the public campaign agenda.

• While elections only take place every four years, direct democracy helps to maintain a high level of activity. Campaigning can be a good motive for mobilizing party members in between elections.

• Last but not least direct democracy can give parties a greater role in interest mediation because parliaments are still the main arena where interest mediation takes place and parties play the central role in this process.

Empirical studies that tried to measure the effect of direct democracy on political parties are rare, mainly because comparative studies face several methodological problems. Ladner and Brändle (1999) in a comparison between direct democracy and party strength in Swiss cantons conclude that direct democracy rather strengthens than weakens political parties. They find a positive correlation between the number of popular votes and the professionalization of parties and the formalized membership. Furthermore they find a positive correlation between the number of non-governmental parties and the frequency of popular votes as well as between the number of parties and the electoral volatility and the number of popular votes. Vatter (2002) comes to similar conclusions and finds an additional correlation between the strength of green parties and the number of popular votes in a canton.

3 Parties and policies in direct democracy

A central criticism against party democracy is that parties fail to represent voters interests adequately. One of the requirements of representation is, that the policy preferences of the representatives should represent the policy preferences of the people, or as Pitkin (1967) puts it, representatives should be “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them”. We know that this is not always the case in representative democracy. Only a limited number of issues can be relevant for voters in elections and voters may even have to choose parties that differ in some of the voters preference because there is no party that reflects all the individual voters preferences.
Direct democracy offers a good opportunity to study policy congruence between parties and voters because we can study real behaviour of voters and elites instead of having to rely on general policy preferences measured in opinion polls. We can study when, how often and in which cases elites and voters differ from each other in general and for partisans of the different parties in particular. If we find full congruence between elite behaviour and voters one could make the argument that direct democracy is not necessary.

Table 3  Forms of direct democracy in Switzerland and approval rate 1848-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Approved</th>
<th>Approved in %</th>
<th>Rejected</th>
<th>Rejected in %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mandatory referendum</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optional referendum</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>48.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiatives</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>91.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counter proposals</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Federal office of statistics, Neuchâtel, Switzerland.

A disagreement obviously takes place when a majority decision of parliament is challenged successfully in a referendum (see Table 3). This is the case when a mandatory or an optional referendum is not approved by the people, because there would not have been a popular vote without a majority decision in parliament. In about 25% of the mandatory referenda the people do not follow the decision of the parliament, about 50% of the optional referendum are not successful, which means that a bill is finally rejected by the people. However this figure is partly misleading. Only 7% of the 2108 bills that could have become potentially subject of a referendum and hence a popular were challenged between 1874 and 2003 (Linder 2005). If about half of these bills are rejected it means that about 3.5% of the bills that have passed the parliament are not approved by the people, the other 96.5% of the proposals are not challenged or not successfully challenged. These disapproval figures for optional referendum seem to be overall relatively low although it says nothing about the importance of the rejected proposals. It could well be that among the 3.5% rejected bills are the most important bills, while the approved or unchallenged bills are of minor importance.

Over time we can see that there has been some variation (see figure 1). While in the 19th century initiatives had an approval rating of around 30% this figure dropped in 1930-1939 and an approval of an initiative is a seldom and rare event today (see figure 1). Optional referendum had periods of much lower approval rates. Especially in the periods of 1920-1939 and after World War II the number of challenged bills that were approved by the people was below 30%. This has changed after the Social democrats were fully included into the grand coalition in 1959. Ever since the approval rate has increase to over 60% and has a been as high as 70% since 2000. Mandatory referendum have had a history of very high approval with the exception of the period of the second world war
and recently constitutional changes have not been very successful since the beginning of the new century.

*Figure 1* Approval rate by institutional form of direct democracy over time 1848-2003, 10-year periods.

In a next step it will be interesting to find out whether all parties represent their voters equally or whether there are differences between the parties. For this part of the paper I used survey data from about 60 opinion polls on 180 issues between 1981 and 2003, the so called Vox-surveys, and I compare the party preferences with the policy preferences of the respondents that expressed some partisanship. Surveys are regularly conducted after each vote in Switzerland. I will look in the analysis only at the citizens that have expressed partisanship with one of the four major parties in Switzerland, the social democrats (SP), the Christian-Democrats (CVP), the Liberals (FDP) and the Peoples Party (SVP). Those four parties have seats in the seven member government too. Respondents had the opportunity to say that they have handed in an empty ballot. These will be excluded from the study because the number of respondents that claimed that they have handed in an empty ballot by far exceeds the actual number of empty ballots. The main reasons why this figures are so much higher is because respondents do not want to reveal their choice in a survey.

Party preferences are measured through the party recommendation of every party prior to a popular vote. Although this may not capture the reality of party preferences fully, we assume that the party speaks with one voice and the parties are not internally split.

*Source: Federal office of statistics, Neuchâtel, Switzerland.*
Table 4  Percentage of popular votes where the voters with partisanship followed the recommendation of their party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Recommendation followed</th>
<th>Mean percentage of partisans in when approved (Stdv)</th>
<th>Recommendation not Followed</th>
<th>Mean percentage of partisans in when not approved (Stdv)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FDP</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>77.8% (11.7)</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>33.9 (10.6)</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CVP</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>74.2 (10.9)</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>35.4 (8.5)</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>74.7 (14.0)</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>38.0 (10.9)</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SVP</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>77.7 (12.8)</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>34.3 (10.9)</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 4 shows the number of cases where parties managed to mobilize their voters and how well they did. In 80-90% of the votes the parties followed the recommendation of their parties and they did so with more than just a narrow margin. The party approval rate was on average between 74 and 79%. However there are small differences between the parties. The right wing SVP was slightly less successful in mobilizing their voters than were the other parties. Figure 2 shows that there is some variation over time. Interestingly enough the approval rating of the Social democrats fell in the period under observation while issues where the members of the FDP did not follow their leadership became very rare. The SVP voters have followed their leadership less frequently than the voters of the other parties expect in the last period between 1999-2003.

Figure 2 Approval rating per party over time 1983-2003

We expect to find some differences depending on the form of direct democracy. Table 5 shows in which cases the partisans did not follow their leadership depending on the form of direct democracy. For the three centre and/or right parties, the CVP, the FDP and the SVP the figures look roughly the same. Frequently the partisans of those two parties had a different opinion in mandatory referendum closely followed by optional referendum. For three parties such a situation occurred usually when the party leadership was in favour of a proposal while the voters of the party rejected the proposal, which means that the party leadership was in favour of a change while the voters favoured the status quo. It hardly ever happened the other way around that the party leadership was against a mandatory or optional referendum and the voters voted in favour of such a proposal. For the social democrats the situation was a bit different. The partisans did not follow their leadership in several usually rather radical left wing popular initiatives where the party leadership was in favour while the social democratic partisan voters voted against an initiative.

**Table 5  Disapproval rate per party and form of direct democracy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of Direct Democracy</th>
<th>FDP</th>
<th>CVP</th>
<th>SP</th>
<th>SVP</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mandatory Referendum</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optional Referendum</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiatives</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Vox-surveys 1981-2003, own calculations.*

**Table 6  Disapproval rate per party depending on whether the party recommend a yes or a no**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party says</th>
<th>FDP</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>CVP</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>SP</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>SVP</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Vox-surveys 1981-2003, own calculations.*

Table 6 shows the disapproval rate in relation to whether the party said yes or no. The picture from above is confirmed: for the right and center parties much more often the voters did not follow their elites when the elite was in favour of a proposal, most frequent for the peoples party, the SVP. In almost 1/3 of the issues where the party said yes, the voters voted against it. For the social democrat this ratio is more even. Finally table 7 shows the disapproval rate by type of conflict among the political elites. In very many cases the four major parties in government tend to have the same position, so there is no elite disagreement. In about as many cases the conflict in a popular vote is between the social democrats and the three other centre-right governmental parties. In these cases where there is full elite agreement, the voters of the FDP, the CVP and the
SP tend to follow the recommendation of their party elites while the voters of the SVP tend to disagree and say no. With popular votes where there is a left-right cleavage, voters of the SP frequently tend not to follow their own party leadership. In cases where the right wing SVP opposes the other parties, the voters of the FDP, which is more right wing than the Christian democrats very often do not vote with their party leadership.

Table 7  Disapproval rate depending on conflict type between the four parties in government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict Type</th>
<th>FDP</th>
<th>CVP</th>
<th>SP</th>
<th>SVP</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full elite agreement among governmental parties</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left (SP) - right (FDP, CVP, SVP)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SVP against FDP, CVP, SVP</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In sum these analysis reveal some interesting patterns and differences between the parties in cases where there is a deviation between party elites and voters. While overall the partisans often follow the recommendation of their party leaders fairly well, the SVP voters often say no to proposals where their leadership says yes. The voters of the social democrats tend to be less radical than their party elite, because they tend not to follow the recommendations in initiatives where the party elite were in favour of a proposal.

4 Conclusion

Parties in direct democracy in Switzerland play an important, almost decisive role. They are central at every stage of the direct democratic process. They set the policy agenda on most issues, they launch many of the initiatives and referenda and they control the political campaigns. Furthermore, the analysis on the congruence of party and voter preferences have shown that the voters in very many cases follow the recommendation of their voters, hence parties tend to reflect the preferences of the voters fairly well.

The conclusions from these findings can be very different depending on whether one would like to argue in favour of direct democracy or against the dominant role of parties in contemporary democracy. One of the main critics against direct democracy has been that it becomes open to populism and even undemocratic tendencies. Arguing from the angle of criticism in favour of direct democracy, one has to conclude that direct democracy in Switzerland is not as direct and uncontrolled as some theorists suggest. What Bowler and Donovan (2005) conclude in a very recent paper about the impact of direct democracy on parties in the US states is valid for Switzerland too: “Even though direct democracy may have lasting, tangible effects on parties, parties may be able – at times -
to blunt the impact. Possibly even turning aspects of the ballot process to their own ends: parties may in fact adapt to the initiative” (p. 15).

From the angle of party criticism direct democracy may not serve very well as a mean to limit the power of parties. For those that see direct democracy as a possibility to correct the shortfalls of representative democracy the findings should be frustrating.

However a bit more in detail some findings show an opposite effect. While Switzerland has always had a clear right wing majority, the left very often used referenda and initiatives to challenge the majority position of parliament. Most of the optional referenda and the initiatives have been launched by left parties that have always been in a minority position in Switzerland. Direct democracy leaves any other party or group a possibility to potentially change a decision made by parliament or, in the case of initiatives to put an issue on the political agenda. Although most of the initiatives and a majority of optional referenda have not been successful the few cases where they have been successful they can be important in general or for the specific group. In any case direct democracy has helped to bring political conflicts into institutional boundaries, because any new political and social movement in Switzerland very soon started to use direct democracy to set the political agenda or to challenge the “establishment” and there was no need to use any other form of protest.

Furthermore direct democracy can have several other indirect effects. Some studies suggest that direct democracy has a big impact on legislative processes. In Switzerland interest mediation in the pre-parliamentary and parliamentary stage of the decision-making process takes place under the threat of direct democracy. Especially the interests of the larger pressure groups, the cantons and or the major parties – forces that have the capacity to launch referendums and initiatives or that could be very influential in a campaign - have to be taken into account (Papadopoulos 2001). Although it is difficult to measure how policy outcomes would have been with or without direct democracy (see for a methodological discussion Gerber and Hug 2001), studies suggest that direct democracy is positively related to some macro-economic indicators such as low state budgets, low budget deficit or low tax levels (Freitag, Vatter, and Müller 2003; Kirchgässner, Feld, and Savioz 1999; Vatter 2002). At least for some policies, direct democracy seems to lead to policies closer to the median voters than purely representative systems (Gerber 1996). However there are more negative views on the indirect effects too. According to Immergut (1992), referendums have a status quo bias, and legislatures tend to have a preference for strong interest groups in direct democracy when mediating between different interests. While nobody disagrees that strong and well organized special interests have a greater impact in direct democracy, it would neverthe-
less need to be proven that they had a smaller influence in purely representative systems.

Irrespective of these controversies on the indirect effect of direct democracy on the actual effect on policy outcomes, direct democracy confronts parties and political elites with a constant reality check. Despite the strong influence of parties in direct democracy there are many examples where initiative and referendums broadened the political elites within parties because key figures in campaigns became elected and direct democracy helped to form new parties in the last 90 years. New issues were put on the political agenda where in other countries a similar process took much longer. Partially direct democracy takes power away from a small circle of political actors that control the political agenda and dominate the political process as it is the case in some countries with purely representative democracy.

Despite these possible positive effects reform towards more direct democracy is not likely to occur. The academic interest in direct democracy has increased a lot in recent years but at the national level the introduction of direct democracy is still very rare and where it is introduced institutional mechanisms guarantee a high control of parties and governments. The purpose in these cases is rather to consult the people than to give power away in reality (Scarrow 2001). Governments are still resisting strongly in giving away power or making policy outcome less controllable through direct democracy. The fears for political elites are understandable when taking into account the irreversibility of such political reforms. Once introduced it is very difficult to take away the rights that were given to the people once.

5 References


