

## Introduction: Consequences of low turnout

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### Abstract

Low electoral turnout has become common in many countries. Whether this is a problem for a democracy depends on—among other things—whether higher turnout would have made other parties more relevant. This introductory article discusses the findings and approaches of previous work on this question and summarizes the findings of the work published in this issue. The various articles, despite using different approaches, looking at different countries and different types of election, all show that any bias in election outcomes is typically rather small and is not in a specific direction: sometimes the left would benefit from higher turnout, sometimes other parties. Therefore the concerns about potential bias consequent on low turnout are generally misplaced.

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*Keywords:* Low turnout; Partisan bias; Democracy

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### 1. Low and decreasing turnout and why it may matter

Countries like Switzerland and the US have long had turnout rates below 50% for national elections, but in recent years low turnout in national elections has become much more widespread. Blais et al. (2004) and Gray and Caul (2000) found a downward trend in national election turnout, and countries such as the UK and Finland, which appeared to have resisted this trend, have experienced a sudden drop in turnout in recent national elections. Most countries also have second-order contests such as European Parliament elections or local elections with particularly low turnout rates.

As turnout falls, concerns about the functioning of democracy are rising. In a much cited article based on his 1996 APSA Presidential address Arend Lijphart calls low turnout a serious democratic problem and democracy's "unresolved dilemma" (Lijphart, 1997, 1), the reason being that it makes the operation of electoral democracy unequal: some voices are heard and others are silent. In the eyes of many democratic theorists (Barber, 1984; Pateman, 1970) participation is essential for democracy and there is a general feeling among many politicians and political commentators that high turnout is important for democracies. It is suggested that the legitimacy of democracy in general and the outcomes of elections in particular are undermined when many citizens do not participate (Cavanagh, 1981, 62; Salisbury, 1975, 326).

While these observations stem in part from a normative commitment to participation in general and voting in particular per se, they also stem from the assumption that, in Lijphart's terms, if they were to speak the

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'silent' would have a different voice to that of the 'heard'. It is this aspect of the possible consequences of low turnout that are the main focus of this special issue. More specifically, we look at whether turnout matters for the outcome of the political process, especially elections. It should not simply be assumed that the preferences of the non-voters are any different than the preferences of the voters and hence greater or even full turnout would make a difference.

The standard view is that low turnout produces a class bias in electoral outcomes. Most studies of participation have found that socio-economic status (SES) is strongly correlated to participation. Education, income, age and sometimes gender are highly significant predictors of whether somebody voted (Franklin, 2002; Norris, 2002, 83ff). If it is assumed that the political system listens more closely to the voices of those who participate, unequal turnout spells unequal influence of the less-well-do citizens (Lijphart, 1997, 1; Verba et al., 1995, 11). Because low SES voters traditionally voted for left wing socialist and social democratic parties, low turnout should lead to a bias against left wing parties and left wing policies in consequence.

At this point it is sensible to review the nature of the puzzle we are trying to solve. We want to find out if low turnout is a problem and we assume that it would be a problem if higher levels of turnout would bring different election or policy outcomes. More particular variations of this question focus on the more specific or directional possibility that left-of-centre parties would do better if turnout increased, as well as how big the difference would be—whether they would be sufficiently substantial to have effects on government formation or policy outcomes—and whether we can predict under which situational and institutional circumstances turnout effects are a factor that is to be reckoned with. Another variation of this question would be to explore what would happen if turnout was to be (even) lower than the current level in an election (see van der Eijk and van Egmond, in this issue). Given declining turnout in many countries, this question might be of even more practical relevance than the question of what would happen if turnout would rise in low-turnout countries.

There are three different underlying aspects of the general problem and they are not of necessity related: (1) Do voters have different party or policy preferences when compared to non-voters; (2) Does lower turnout favour, or harm, some parties; and (3) What would happen if turnout were to rise, or fall (Grofman et al., 1999). We are interested primarily in the third question. As this

is a counterfactual it can be approached only in terms of questions one and two.

Many studies take the first approach and compare preferences of voters and non-voters. They assume that if the party preferences of the average abstainer are different from those of the average voter, then less than complete turnout will have some impact on the outcome of the election. If, on the other hand, abstainer preferences mirror voter preferences, then the level of voter turnout will have no consequences for the election outcome. This argument is flawed (Grofman et al., 1999). When we observe differences between the party preferences of voters and non-voters we cannot logically assume that somewhat higher turnout would favour the party that is underrepresented among the voters. It is not necessarily true that turnout that is a little higher than the current level would benefit the underrepresented party. Higher turnout could mean that additional supporters of the already 'overrepresented' party will vote and that potential supporters of the 'underrepresented' party will still remain at home.

Nor do we know how stable are the preferences of the non-voters. Non-voters' preferences might change if they participated. They might then be more informed. Alternatively, their involvement might result from a change in preferences. Any change in election outcome in the direction of the preferences of erstwhile non-voters is only likely under the assumption that the preferences of the non-voters would not change if they voted (Grofman et al., 1999, 360).

Of course there are other possible worries about low turnout, which are not directly related to electoral and policy outcomes (and which are not subject of this special issue). Low turnout may be problematic for democratic legitimacy because it may be a sign of dissatisfaction with democracy. In fact, much evidence suggests that dissatisfaction is not the main motive for non-voting. Many non-voters are fairly satisfied with how democracy works (Bennett and Resnick, 1990). Citizens do not vote either because they cannot (they lack the resources or capacity), or because they do not want to (they lack motivation) or because nobody asked them (mobilisation) (Verba et al., 1995, 3). Much non-voting appears to stem from a lack of interest in, indifference towards and ignorance of elections or politics in general (Ragsdale and Rusk, 1993; Plane and Gershenson, 2004). Politics is far from being a primary concern; family and friends, work and leisure matter much more for most people's everyday lives. The experience of two countries with notoriously low turnout, Switzerland and the US, moreover show that low turnout is not necessarily related to political instability. On this account there

is little to suggest that low turnout is a sign of democracy in crises.

## 2. Low turnout and its consequences

We can distinguish between direct and indirect effects of low turnout. Direct effects occur when higher, or lower, turnout would lead to an election outcome than that with the current level of turnout. Indirect effects happen when elites lean their policies towards the voters and ignore the needs of the non-voters. While most studies assume a connection, these two effects are not necessarily connected. Even if there is a partisan bias due to low turnout, policy makers might nevertheless take the needs of the non-voters into account. The reverse may also be true: even if there is no observed partisan bias in low turnout elections, policies can be skewed in favour of the preferences of those who vote while those who do not are largely ignored.

### 2.1. Direct effects on outcomes

The articles in this special issue concentrate on the direct links between the outcomes of elections and popular votes and turnout. Much of the attention this question has received in the literature is directed at analysing the relation between election turnout and left-of-centre party (or candidate, as the case may be) vote share. It is assumed that people with lower socio-economic status tend to be less educated and less participative than the middle class; the latter, in contrast, tend to support more right-leaning parties. In addition, in the United States, but arguably not only there, this bias takes on ethnic and racial dimensions. Blacks, for example, who on average have lower socio-demographic status than whites, tend to support Democratic candidates, but they abstain at higher rates than middle-class whites (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980, 90–91; Verba and Nie, 1972, 170–171). Similarly, educational attainment is positively correlated with voting propensity (Avey, 1989; Burnham, 1987; Piven and Cloward, 1989; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). While this logic is arguably most applicable to low turnout countries such as the United States, where socio-demographic differences in participation are particularly pronounced, a class-bias in turnout has been reported for other countries and regions in the world as well (e.g. Dalton, 2002, 49–51). It appears to follow then, that if more people voted, left-of-centre parties and candidates would fare better in elections than they do at present.

One approach to resolving the question of who loses and who benefits from low turnout involves regressing

the vote share of left-of-centre parties and candidates on aggregate turnout and a variety of control variables. This strategy has been used in relation to presidential, gubernatorial, senatorial, and House elections in the United States with mixed results. Radcliff (1994, 1995) claims that the Democratic vote share in presidential elections increases with voter turnout. However, Erikson (1995a,b) argues that proper specification of Radcliff's statistical models shows the relation between turnout and presidential Democratic vote share to be indistinct. Nagel and McNulty (1996) find that the relation between turnout and Democratic vote share in gubernatorial and senatorial races has varied over time, sometimes in a manner beneficial to Republican candidates, sometimes to Democrats, but most of the time just being statistically insignificant. Focussing on US House elections, DeNardo (1980) found that there is a conditional positive relationship between turnout and Democratic vote share (see also Tucker et al., 1986), but that the more important consequence of increased turnout is to harm the incumbent. For the rest of the world, Pacek and Radcliff (1995) find, in a cross-national study of advanced industrialised countries, that the vote share of left-leaning political parties increases with voter turnout. Similar findings have been made for cross-national surveys of developing countries (Aguilar and Pacek, 2000) and of post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Bohrer et al., 2000), as well as in single-country studies for Australia (McAllister, 1986), Britain (McAllister and Mughan, 1986), New Zealand (Nagel, 1988).

Studies using this approach estimate the political effect of differential turnout by pooling across a large collection of elections. It is reasonable to suppose, as Nagel and McNulty (1996) do, that turnout effects, if they exist, should be observable in election outcomes. Rather than rely on questionnaire-based information about the attitudes of voters and non-voters, this multiple-election regression approach examines the patterns in election results for evidence of turnout effects. However, it has been argued that this aggregate-level approach obscures the individuals who make voting choices and thus ignores the possibility that individual-specific factors may influence voting and abstention behaviour. The fact that elections reflect individual choices is thus easily lost (Herron, 1998, 6). Furthermore, there is an ecological inference problem inherent in the multiple-election regression approach to estimating turnout effects. Researchers cannot know the types of individuals that abstain in a given set of elections and must instead work solely with abstention rates. And while turnout rates in a group of elections may be

similar, this does not imply necessarily that the types of individuals abstaining are necessarily the same in each of the elections (Grofman et al., 1999; Herron, 1998, 6–7). The appeals made by the same parties may well vary over time, and in fact the character of any party might well vary. This will increase the chance of different groups abstaining at different times, and thus increase the chance of biased inferences. A further problem with this approach is that when we study elections within the same country over time we cannot know from aggregate figures how many individual voters have changed their minds between two elections and how many of the potential voters have voted in both election. The expansion of the studies over time further increases the difficulties. The fact that individual-level studies have tended to produce negative findings (discussed below) while some aggregate-level regression models find positive correlations between turnout and left-of-centre vote share should alert us all the more to the potential gravity of the ecological inference problem.

The second approach to estimating turnout effects uses survey data as a basis for simulating the outcome were turnout to be higher, or lower. There are many ways in which this can be done. However, there is a general methodological challenge stemming from the sampling bias in survey research: survey respondents tend to vote at a higher rate than the real population. Two reasons are responsible for the over sampling. Non-voters tend to be more difficult to interview and some non-voters claim in surveys that they in fact have voted. The first problem can be tackled using weighting techniques in the analysis. The second is more difficult to control. In some countries, like the US, it is possible to correct for this bias because whether a survey respondent actually voted or not can be validated. But in most other countries it is not possible to validate reports of voting. What are the expected consequences of this sampling bias? One consequence is that we may exaggerate differences between voters and non-voters because we may have actual non-voters among the reported voters in a sample. In other words, we are more likely to find possible turnout effects that we would be if our data were to be validated. However, the bias might be counteracted by an opposing bias. We can assume that the most disconnected and transient members of the electorate do not tend to respond to surveys. If this is the case, it leads to a countervailing effect as we then underestimate differences between voters and non-voters. Thus, in general the problem of bias in survey data may not be severe.

Using survey data and comparing party or candidate choices of voters with measured or simulated preferences of the non-voters allows some conclusions to be drawn about the possible consequences of higher turnout (Lutz, 2006). Using data from the 1988 American National Election Study, Herron (1998) found that the Democrat presidential candidate, Dukakis, would have almost certainly won the election if turnout had been 100%. In a similar analysis Citrin et al. (2003) use state-level exit polls and census data to estimate the partisan preferences of non-voters in Senate elections and then simulate the outcome of these elections under universal turnout. They find that while non-voters are generally more democratic than voters, the scarcity of close races means that very few election outcomes would have changed had everyone voted. Thus, although their results suggest that Democrats would fare better in a variety of alternative turnout scenarios, including full turnout of various ethnic, racial and income groups, few elections would actually have produced a different winner. The last word from this approach to date is a study that estimates the impact of differential turnout on the outcome of presidential elections from 1952 to 2000 using data from the National Election Study (NES) (Brunell and DiNardo, 2004). Their estimates are in line with the above findings that non-voters are, on average, slightly more likely to support the Democratic Party. Of the 13 presidential elections between 1952 and 2000 in only two—those of 1980 and 2000—was the lead of the winning party sufficiently narrow that a different final outcome would have been likely. This has been reconfirmed recently by Martinez and Gill (2005).

Tóka (2002) extends this approach to a multitude of countries and elections. Using the June 2000 version of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) integrated micro-level data set, Tóka analyses turnout effects (alongside information effects) on outcomes of eighteen elections in as many countries. With this design he seeks to take into account the extent to which turnout effects may vary with political and institutional context. He reasons that varying correlations of party alignments with social cleavage lines or aspects of the institutional-electoral design may all firstly, influence the extent to which socially unequal turnout occurs in a given polity at a particular time, and secondly, then impacts on electoral outcomes. In order to model these factors explicitly, Tóka simulates election results projected on various counterfactual scenarios including 100% turnout, and then examines whether and to what extent the simulated election results would have systematically increased the weight on election outcomes

of those preferences that are over-represented in groups showing below-average political involvement for reasons other than their political preferences (Tóka, 2002, 13–14). Tóka's analysis reveals only a small change, on average, in left-of-centre party fortunes if turnout increased to 100%, result which he explains in terms of the overlap between the demographic correlates of vote choice and participation (Tóka, 2002, 38).

With its focus on individual elections, this approach allows for the important possibility that differential turnout effects may vary from election to election within one country, as well as between countries. However, there are limitations of this methodology. While it is useful to combine the advantages of individual-level analysis with the enhanced certainty and validity of actual behaviour and election results, this approach is restricted either to analysing one election at a time (Herron, 1998), to several elections of the same type and in one country for reasons of statistical control (Brunell and DiNardo, 2004; Citrin et al., 2003) or to modelling the effects of only a very small vector of variables which influence vote choice (Tóka, 2002). Thus, these studies must forgo either the ability to distinguish systematic and general turnout effects from the situational effects on voting behaviour, trends that persist across a large number of countries and elections, or the capacity to include more than a handful of variables in their model. Ideally we need an analysis of a heterogeneous sample of politics and elections if we are to generalise reliably about turnout effects in any election (Tóka, 2002, 24).

Parties may also respond to unequal participation: if some groups vote more than others, we could expect parties to adjust and put more efforts into mobilizing and targeting groups that are favourable disposed and show signs of higher turnout. There is evidence in US elections, for example, that parties do precisely this: they strategically direct their canvassing efforts to groups with higher turnout rates and higher probabilities to vote for their party (Wielhouwer, 1995). In the US black voters are less likely to be contacted by the Republican Party (Wielhouwer, 2000). Similarly parties canvass in districts where their support is fairly high and leave out districts with only little support for their parties (Huckfeld and Sprague, 1992). Studies have also found that people with higher socio-economic status are more likely to be contacted by parties than those from disadvantaged groups (Gershtenson, 2003) and younger voters are also less likely to be contacted (Wattenberg, 2003).

For actual voters, the mobilizing efforts of parties can have two different effects and these two effects

can also be combined. The first is the effect mobilisation has on turnout and the second is the effect mobilisation has on the direction of a vote. Studies (mainly in the US) have not yet shown clear results. While some studies find that mobilisation has an effect on turnout, though not on the direction of the vote (Caldeira et al., 1985, 1990; Cox, 1999; Jackson, 1996, 1997; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Wielhouwer and Lockertie, 1994), other studies find a smaller effect on turnout and argue that the main effect is on the direction of the vote (Huckfeld and Sprague, 1992; Whitely and Seyd, 1994). If campaigning has a positive effect on turnout we can expect reinforcing consequences: some groups participate more because they are mobilized and because they participate more they are contacted by parties too. Very little research has been done on this outside the US but this question is beyond the focus of this special issue.

## 2.2. *Indirect effects on policies and campaigns*

While some kind of differential turnout can be expected to have some direct consequences for policy, via government formation, there may also be important indirect effects. These effects are indirect because they stem from the behaviour of political elites in response to historical and hence anticipated inequalities in political participation. If some groups are over-represented and others under-represented, this could imply that “public officials hear more from some kinds of citizens than from others and thus jeopardize the democratic norm of equal protection of interests” (Verba et al., 1995, 493). When participation is biased in terms of politically relevant characteristics, such as race or income, then policy outcomes may also be biased. If political elites pay more attention to the policy preferences and policy agendas of the voters, and if non-voters have different policy preferences and policy agendas, this will result in preferences of non-voters being systematically neglected, or at least getting a lower weighting in any democratic calculus. However, there is a counter argument. This is that political elites have to take into account the policy preferences and agendas of non-voters because if they do not care enough about them, these people will show up at the next elections and may vote them out!

One way to examine the potential policy effects of non-voting is to compare political preferences of voters and non-voters. Many studies find little or no difference between the policy preferences of voters and non-voters in opinion polls (Shaffer, 1982; Teixeira, 1992; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980, for the United States,



and Studlar and Welch, 1986 for Great Britain). Gant and Lyons (1993) did find statistically significant differences but did so with respect to less than one-third of policy preference scales. Of the eleven issue dimensions on which voters and non-voters reflected statistically significant differences, eight were social welfare issues, and on all eight of these non-voters were more left-wing than voters. At the very least, they conclude, this suggests the possibility that increased electoral turnout of non-voters could lead to a different composition of the political agenda, or to a set of more left wing options on existing issues, thereby decreasing any class bias in voting and public policy (Gant and Lyons, 1993, 200). Bennett and Resnick (1990), although finding that the differences in policy positions are quite low, also find that there are significant differences on some domestic issues, mainly those dealing with spending on welfare programs (p. 771). But Highton and Wolfinger (2001) find no differences in most policy areas, with the exception of welfare policies.

All of these studies contrast the opinions of voters and non-voters. They do not deal directly with elite behaviour, or the fact that the existence of differences between the policy preferences of voters and non-voters does not necessarily mean that elites respond to those differences when making policy. However, an association between turnout and elite behaviour has been made by Hill and Leighley (1992), who find a negative relationship between an upper class bias in turnout and the generosity of indigenous state social welfare spending (see also Hill et al., 1995; Hill and Leighley, 1996; Ringquist et al., 1997). A similar result comes from a study by Hicks and Swank (1992), who find a positive link between levels of turnout and the welfare efforts of governments in western democracies. Mueller and Stratmann (2003) also find links between participation and income distribution; the higher participation is in a country, the more redistributive are policies (although at the price of lower total income and reduced economic growth). Most recently Martin (2003) found that in the US counties with higher turnout receive larger amounts of federal expenditure.

### 3. New findings of the articles

The main finding of this volume is that turnout does not matter a great deal, no matter what method, dataset or period of time the authors apply. The various contributions each demonstrate that overall effects are minimal. Where they can be observed, they do not point in the originally expected direction that low turnout harms left-of-centre parties. We can conclude that one of the

main worries about low turnout expressed by Lijphart (1997) among others is not born out in empirical analysis.

The articles vary in the types of elections and countries explored, thus broadening the debate beyond the largely Anglo-American basis of most previous research. General elections in Norway, the UK and Canada, referendums in Switzerland and European Parliament elections are all explored, while there are also three extensive comparative studies of general elections.

The contributions vary in the approaches used to explore the consequences of low turnout. Each of the broad strategies discussed above are used. One approach focuses mainly on individuals. Most of our articles use opinion surveys to consider whether voters and non-voters differ in any significant way on the dimension of partisan choice but employ a variety of survey-based evidence, which they use in different ways. Van der Eijk and van Egmond use a direct question to ask about voting in a hypothetical coincident election to explore the impact of low turnout in European parliament elections and Lutz uses a similar survey question to explore the impact of differential turnout in Swiss referenda. Pettersen and Rose use a party thermometer question to probe the partisan consequences of higher mobilisation among non-voters while Bernhagen and Marsh treat the probable vote choice of non-voters as missing data to be inferred from the covariation of the choices of those who did report a vote and their political preferences and socio-demographic characteristics. Finally, Rubenson et al. examine the policy preference of non-voters as one way of assessing vote choice.

In contrast to this individual level approach, a second method involves regressing the vote share of left-of-centre parties and candidates on aggregate turnout and a variety of control variables. As already noted, this strategy has been used in relation to US elections and in cross-national studies. Fisher explores this relationship using both a cross-country time series framework as well as making use of UK constituency level data across a substantial time period and the set of European Parliament elections.

Pettersen and Rose explore the effects of somewhat higher turnout in high turnout elections and van der Eijk and van Egmond look at the effects of declining turnout while the other survey-based articles consider full turnout, or changes up to full turnout. As discussed above, counterfactual estimates of the effects of more modest turnout increases and decreases should not assume that a random process determines which additional voters participate and which voters drop out.

Rosema shows that individual probabilities to participate vary a lot and that there is not always a linear relationship between the different social and political characteristics and probability of voting. Bernhagen and Marsh also take into account different probabilities of voting by way of the stepwise addition of ever less likely voters.

While the methods and data employed in these articles vary, the conclusions reached do not. The articles all agree that possible increases and decreases in turnout have little impact on election results. There is no significant bias against the left that would be redressed if only turnout were higher. We can look at these conclusions in a little more detail, taking the comparative articles first. Bernhagen and Marsh concentrate on effects of 100% turnout on electoral outcomes and conclude that they would be small for the most part. Not surprisingly, the biggest effects tend to be found where turnout is lowest. The main beneficiaries of full turnout would be small parties and non-incumbent parties but in most cases the ‘winners’ remained unchanged and the gains of the smallest parties might still leave them without parliamentary representation. Van der Eijk and van Egmond come to a similar conclusion that effects are generally weak although they examine a smaller range of turnout variation, contrasting turnout in European Parliament elections with that in general elections. Both articles point out that while differential turnout *can and in some instances does* have very significant consequences, such cases are relatively rare. In contrast to Bernhagen and Marsh, van der Eijk and van Egmond find no systematic pattern of winners and losers and they conclude that turnout effects are largely idiosyncratic. Fisher switches the focus to aggregate data and draws on a broad range of comparative data sets. He concludes that while there is superficial support from an OECD data set for the proposition that left parties do better where turnout is higher, the proposition that such parties would do better if turnout were higher—or worse if it fell—could not be sustained since there was no link between *change* in turnout levels and *change* in the left share of the vote. Analysis of European Parliament election results confirmed that pattern, in contrast to earlier results obtained by Pacek and Radcliff (2003) whose methodology is criticised by Fisher. Moreover, Fisher’s extensive analysis of British data also reinforced the weakness of the simple link between left party strength and higher turnout. If these findings are all generally negative, they nonetheless run counter to a widespread acceptance of the positive link between turnout and left leaning forces.

The articles by Rubenson, Blais, Gidengill, Nevitte and Fournier and by Pettersen and Rose both limit the analysis to a particular country. Rubenson et al use Canadian data to explore differences between voters and non-voters and, using policy measures to estimate likely partisanship, find scant evidence for the contention that voters and non-voters hold different views and that election outcomes would be very different with full turnout. Differences between actual outcomes and those simulated under full turnout were typically less than 2%, even for the larger parties.

In contrast to the paper by Rubenson et al., Pettersen and Rose, like van der Eijk and van Egmond (and Fisher) are concerned primarily with the impact on the result of turnout by those that might have been expected to vote, rather than all non-voters. They find, using data from Norwegian national election studies, that nothing much would have changed and that there is little sign of differential turnout by the supporters of a particular party having a significant impact on the outcome. Their results echo those of Bernhagen and Marsh and van der Eijk and van Egmond in showing that falling levels of turnout in practice do seem to create more opportunity for differential turnout to manifest itself, but also reaffirm the conclusions of other articles that turnout effects are generally slight. They also find no evidence that larger parties, more extreme parties or smaller parties would benefit from a somewhat higher turnout. In short, the idea that there are significant pockets of easy-to-mobilise potential support for party leaders to exploit gets no support from this article.

Rosema’s article also takes a comparative approach but focuses more on the way voters make their decisions and the implications of this for our understanding of the functions of elections. He explores whether turnout levels have implications for the relative distribution of different types of voters: those who hold the government accountable or those who vote on ideological grounds as opposed to those whose choice seems more idiosyncratic. The first two types of voters illustrate the working of the classic accountability and mandate functions of elections while the third fulfils only the democratic norm of involvement and participation, perhaps at the expense of the other two. Rosema finds that the impact of levels of turnout on the active electorate in these terms is slight. However, the fact that accountability and ideologically patterned voting is slightly more common when turnout is low suggests that the consequences of lower turnout are not uniformly gloomy from the perspective of the democratic function of elections.

Finally, Lutz shifts the focus from electoral democracy to direct democracy by looking at the impact of differential turnout on Swiss referendums. He also adds information to the mix. He finds evidence of a turnout bias in the outcome of popular votes but shows this is not large, and is smaller in the more ‘important’ votes. Even so, the outcome of some close and important votes could have been different with higher turnout. He does not find any general bias against the more ‘left-wing’ options. Information enters the equation in an interesting manner. Non-voters tend to have less information and are more right wing in their views. Hence higher turnout might benefit the right. However, more informed voters are more left wing and, arguably, higher turnout could only be achieved (short of compulsory voting) by raising interest and information. If so, higher turnout might then benefit the right much less and perhaps the left rather more than might be expected on a simple comparison of voters and non-voters. This last article raises the question explicitly of how turnout is to be raised and whether or not the process of increasing turnout might in itself change our estimates of how people might vote. Lutz suggests that, to the extent that information matters in mobilisation, we may underestimate the impact of increased turnout and so indicates at least one path for further research in this area.

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## Low turnout in direct democracy

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### Abstract

Direct democracy in Switzerland provides a particularly valuable site for the study of the direct policy consequences of low turnout. The analysis of the outcomes of 144 popular votes between 1981 and 1999 shows that the level of information held by voters matters slightly more for the outcome of a popular vote than does the level of turnout, controlling for the levels of information. About 35 percent of votes would have had a different approval rate if all citizens had voted, but even more results would have changed had voters had been much better informed. Counter to the conventional wisdom, in those cases where turnout and information did matter higher levels of turnout tended to work in favour of right-wing parties, whereas higher levels of information tended to work to favour outcomes supported by left-wing parties. Further, the findings suggest that the outcomes of popular votes are most likely to be biased when voters think an issue is unimportant and both levels of turnout and information are low.

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*Keywords:* Direct democracy; Turnout; Information; Switzerland

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### 1. Introduction

Most studies of the consequences of low turnout focus on elections and examine the direct effect of low electoral turnout on electoral outcomes, or possibly the indirect effects on policy (see summary of this literature in the introduction to this issue). Those studies face various difficulties (Grofman et al., 1999). Even when low turnout leads to a partisan ‘bias’, that is, the result is not what would have obtained with full turnout, this does not necessarily lead to a policy bias. A partisan bias generates a policy bias only when further conditions are fulfilled. Low turnout may lead to a biased post-election composition of the government or

government coalitions, with the disadvantaged parties losing out. Different government outcomes may then affect policy choices. However, a causal explanation of the consequence of low turnout for policy outcomes should explain how policies change in relation to turnout levels. If it is to be the non-voters who are disadvantaged, one must assume that parties tend to favour the policy preferences of voters rather than of non-voters. This assumes that politicians know who tends to vote (or at least which social groups tend to vote more frequently). Further, politicians need to know whether particular social groups that are over- and under-represented among the voting public (relative to their respective proportion of the population) tend to vote for their party, if and when they do vote. Only when these conditions are met can policy-makers adjust their policies in favour of their own voters, or in favour of

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voters they would like to attract. Parties and political leaders very rarely have such detailed information. In its absence, parties and politicians tend to act and campaign much more intuitively than one would expect from some theoretical models about elite behaviour.

In this article I try to avoid some of the problems related to the study of policy consequences in representative democracies by using data from some of the numerous direct democratic decisions that are made by the voting public in Switzerland, where the people regularly vote on policy issues such as whether a new road is to be built, a hospital closed down, taxes raised, the army abolished, certain criminals indefinitely incarcerated, or shopping hours to be extended. The frequency of such popular votes in Switzerland allows for the study of policy consequences without needing to take into account whether and how the formation of government and the behaviour of political elites are affected by the level of turnout.

Many studies of the policy consequences of turnout have found little or no significant differences in policy preferences of voters and non-voters (Teixeira, 1992; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). However, Bennett and Resnick (1990) and Gant and Lyons (1993) found small differences, specifically that non-voters were more in favour of welfare policies than voters. Aggregate studies of turnout and policy outcomes have also established a link between the level of turnout and pro-poor, pro-welfare policies (Hicks and Swank, 1992; Hill and Leighley, 1992; Hill et al., 1995; Mueller and Stratmann, 2003). One study of Swiss popular votes 1980–1993 found that the preferences of non-voters differ very much from the preferences of the voters in 20 percent of the cases (di Giacomo, 1993). In that study, no significant bias against pro-poor policies was observed in popular votes, but non-voters tended to show slightly less support for the government position than voters.

## 2. Data and method

In the following section, the size and the direction of the turnout effect in direct democracy decisions will be estimated. Popular votes take place 2–4 times a year in Switzerland. Since 1981 a survey is done after each vote, in which respondents are asked a range of questions about the issues that they just voted on. The resulting data provide the basis for an analysis of a large number of different votes, covering a wide range of issues. Some early surveys are missing, and so those votes are not included in this analysis. Moreover, in 2000 one of the key questions needed for this analysis

(the question about the preference of non-voters) was absent. There remain 144 votes for analysis, covering the period 1981–1999.

The Swiss case is ideal for the study of possible policy effects of low turnout for yet another reason. Turnout has been comparatively low since the 1970s, about 40 percent on average and only twice since 1970 has turnout exceeded 50 percent. This provides for purely mathematical reasons a greater opportunity for turnout effects to be manifested.

The estimation of non-voters' preferences is a major methodological challenge, which different articles in this volume have met in different ways. In the current study use is made of direct reports of the hypothetical behaviour of non-voters who were asked how they would have voted had they done so. However, only non-voters who replied that they would have voted 'yes' or 'no' as distinct from 'don't know', etc. as well as 'would vote blank' (which counts as a valid ballot) were included in the analysis.

There must still be doubt about the reliability of non-voters' preferences, so expressed. Lijphart (1997) argued that calculating policy differences between voters and non-voters does not take into account the fact that non-voters have lower levels of information. Arguably, if they had decided to vote they would have made themselves better informed, a step that might then have led to changes in their policy preference. To take this into account I will control for level of information when calculating possible shifts in policy outcomes with increasing turnout. This leads to some complex problems related to measure information. In order to solve the problem that Lijphart has identified, it would be necessary to establish whether or not somebody has the 'necessary' knowledge about an issue to be able to make a reasoned choice. This should be the decisive criteria to judge voter sophistication (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993; Luskin, 1987). However, this ideally requires information about what the main division on an issue is, as well as the knowledge a voter should have to be able to position herself on one or the other side of the divide, and finally the ability to establish from surveys whether voters have this 'necessary' information. In addition, one would have to control whether specific issue or party related information has been substituted by cues and shortcuts. This amount of information about voter knowledge is simply not available in survey research. However, there are indications of voter information, and they will be used in this analysis.

*Level of knowledge:* Various knowledge questions are available: knowledge of the title of the vote

and of the content of the issue is included in every survey. Knowledge of the government's (federal council's) position and knowledge of the vote outcome ('yes'/'no') is asked in about half the surveys. These questions were used to create a knowledge scale.

*Having an opinion on issues:* In some surveys voters are asked their opinion on various issues related to the topic voted on. Respondents often give no opinion, using the 'don't know/no answer' option. I assume that voters who can give an opinion are better informed than voters who fail to do so.

These two measures are directly linked to the issue being voted on. Since the number of questions in some of the votes varies, and because the questions that have been asked vary as well, I have standardized the two measures, which in the analysis have a 0–2 range where 0 = no information and 2 = full information. In the absence of a better measure of voter sophistication I proceed on the basis that this information indicator reflects voters ability to make a reasoned judgment.

A logit regression model can determine whether participation and information impact on a vote's outcome. The dependent variable is the 'yes'/'no' preferences (voters and non-voters). The main independent variable measures participation (e.g., 'did you vote?'). Also included were the information control variables described above as well as social characteristics such as gender, age, education and income in order to ensure that reported differences in policy preferences are not due to social effects in participation and information (for a similar approach see [Bartels, 1996](#)).

The model takes the following form:

$$\ln \left( \frac{p(y_i = 1)}{(1 - p(y_i = 1))} \right) = \alpha_0 + \beta_1 P + \beta_2 I + \sum \beta_i S_i$$

where  $p(y_i = 1)$  is the probability of a yes preference,  $P$  is whether a respondent participated or not,  $I$  is the level of information and  $S_i$  are the various social indicators. The number of social variables included can vary because the questionnaire has varied over time as well (a list of social indicators used is in the [Appendix](#)).

A particular feature of this analysis is the analysis of participation and information at the same time. This allows for the likelihood that participation might increase as the level of information does so and vice versa, if citizens take steps to inform themselves better once they decide to vote and that citizen preferences might change with more information.

### 3. Turnout and information effects in popular votes

[Table 1](#) summarizes the results of the 144 separate regression for each of the issues (for reasons of space it is not possible to present detailed results of the 144 regressions). Forty-one percent of the popular votes (e.g., cases) show neither a turnout nor an information effect, indicating that voters and non-voters and well and poorly informed respondents did not have significantly different policy preferences. Thirty-five percent of the cases show a significant turnout effect, indicating that voters and non-voters had different preferences. In 41 percent of the cases a significant information effect was observable (but no participation effect), indicating policy preference differences between well- and poorly informed citizens.

Both effects are significant in 17 percent of the cases but in most of these the effects go in opposite directions. That is, while higher turnout would have increased the 'yes', or, depending on the specifics of each case, the 'no' vote, higher overall levels of citizen information would have reduced or even eradicated this effect. Higher turnout and higher information would have moved the outcome of a popular vote in the same direction only in seven popular votes (out of 144).

In order to estimate the size and direction of the different effects I calculate probabilities of 'yes'/'no' preferences for four different scenarios:

- with the actual measured levels of participation and information in each of the 144 cases,
- with the actual measured level of participation and full information,
- with full participation and the actual measured level of information, and
- with full participation and full information.

Table 1

Number of votes with turnout and information effects and directions of the effects

	% of all popular votes with...	<i>N</i>
...no effect	41%	59
...information effects	41%	59
...turnout effects	35%	50
...information and turnout effects	17%	24
in the same direction		7
in an opposite direction		17
Total		144

Notes: The percentage total is not 100% because the cases with both information effects and turnout effects are in the issues with knowledge and information effects only as well.

The differences between (a)–(b), (a)–(c) and (a)–(d) are presented in Table 2. These differences indicate the size of the effect of full information ((a)–(b)), full turnout ((a)–(c)) and full information and turnout ((a)–(d)). Beginning with (a)–(b), the information effect was greater than 5 percent in 69 percent of cases. In other words, the ‘yes’ (or ‘no’) vote with full information, but the same turnout, would have differed from the actual outcome by at least 5 percent. For instance, a 57 percent ‘yes’ win might have been a 52 or a 62 percent ‘yes’ win, depending on the particulars of a given case. Under the same conditions the outcome would have differed by more than 15 percent from the actual outcome in 8 percent of cases, but the norm is a 5–10 percent difference. Turning to (a)–(c), the effects of turnout alone are comparatively small, in no case being above 10 percent and most being below 5 percent. With respect to (a)–(d), Table 2 shows that a difference of up to 15 percent in the outcome as a result of both full participation and perfect information would not be unusual, although a difference of 0–5 percent is rather more likely. Overall, information effects seem to be slightly more important than turnout effects; whether voters have a basic level of knowledge about an issue matters more than whether most voters participate.

Since there are so many issues with either an information effect or a turnout effect it is possible that the two effects affect different types of issues. Table 3 lists the percentage of cases with either significant turnout or significant information effects in different policy areas. On the basis of previous studies here is an expectation that social issues may be particularly affected by a policy bias when turnout is low.

However, there are no clear issue-specific patterns in Table 3. Cultural issues and environmental issues are most likely to show turnout effects (though note that there a very few cases in these two policy areas). Security policy votes also show turnout effects quite often. Significant turnout effects exist in about 30 percent of

Table 3

Votes with significant turnout and information effects according to topic

	% of cases with turnout effects	<i>N</i>	% of cases with information effects	<i>N</i>
Organisation of the state	33	15	47	15
Foreign policy	33	6	67	6
Security policy	55	11	36	11
Economy	30	10	30	10
Agriculture	25	12	42	12
Public finances	17	12	67	12
Energy	33	6	17	6
Infrastructure	37	19	53	19
Environment	63	8	0	8
Social policies	31	32	44	32
Education	13	8	13	8
Culture	80	5	40	5

Notes: The classification of the issues was provided by the Federal Office of Statistics (with many thanks). The classification for this time period is based on the corresponding chapters of the *Année politique Suisse*, a yearbook edited and written at the Institute of Political Science, University of Berne.

cases in most of other policy areas with the exception of educational and public finance issues, where turnout effects are rare. Public finance issues, however, often have information effects as do foreign policy issues. Energy, environmental and once more educational issues show smaller information effects. Public finance and foreign policy issues display the largest information effects.

None of this tells us in which direction the effects work: who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged by low turnout and low information? As detailed in Section 1, several studies of turnout effects indicate that left-wing parties suffer when turnout is low. To determine if there is such a pattern here, that is, whether left- or right-wing parties are consistently (dis-)advantaged by low turnout, I use the vote recommendation (‘yes’/‘no’) that parties publish before a vote to determine

Table 2

Size of the effects; simulation with full turnout and full information

	Information effect a–b (simulated change in the outcome with full information and with actual level of turnout)		Turnout effect a–c (simulated change in the outcome with full turnout and actual level of information)		Total effect a–d (change in turnout with information and full turnout)	
	in %	<i>N</i>	in %	<i>N</i>	in %	<i>N</i>
>15%	8%	5	–	–	4%	1
10–15%	17%	10	–	–	25%	6
5–10%	44%	26	54%	23	13%	3
0–5%	31%	18	46%	27	58%	14
Total	100%	59	100	50	100	24

Notes: Only cases showing at least one significant effect (participation, information) are reported.



the partisan cleavage on an issue.<sup>1</sup> To simplify matters, I look only at the recommendations of the major party on the left (the social democrats – SP) and on the right (the peoples party – SVP). Hypothetically, we can say that the SVP ‘profits’ from low turnout when the more voters have a preference for the policy that the SVP recommends than is the case in the electorate as whole. A high turnout would lower or even reverse that pattern. The same logic can be applied to the government position, or the position of any other party. I will give a real-life example. For a 1993 vote about whether Switzerland should buy new military airplanes, the corresponding survey shows that voters had a ‘yes’ preference of 48 percent whereas the ‘yes’ preference in the sample (voters and non-voters) was 54 percent. One may assume that with a participation of 100 percent, the percentage of ‘yes’ votes would have been higher than 48 percent. The SP favoured this proposal whereas the SVP did not, so the SVP ‘profited’ from the fact that turnout was below 100 percent.

Obviously, this sort of analysis only makes sense when we look at cases where the parties were polarised. Such polarisation is not always manifest since political conflict is not the only reason why a popular vote might take place. There may be an institutional requirement that a popular vote takes place, as in the case of constitutional changes. The recommendations of the various parties show whether there was a conflict in the political elite on a particular issue. If the four main parties, the parties that form the Swiss federal government, the Federal Council, issued the same recommendation, I treated it as a non-contentious vote; if there was any disagreement, a given vote was treated as contentious. This is not the only sign of elite conflict. There are other, smaller parties and interest groups that can be important in particular votes, sometimes even more important than the larger parties. However, it is justifiable to rely on the four main parties because they represent more than 80 percent of the voters. Of the 144 votes, only 40 percent were non-contentious and 60 percent were contentious.

Table 4 shows which political actors (government, left-wing party, right-wing party) would have done better with higher information or higher turnout. An information effect was evident in 28 contentious cases and a turnout effect was evident in 29 contentious cases. The government would have been the

Table 4

Percentage of contentious popular votes with turnout and information

	Higher information	Higher turnout
Government would have done better with...	79%	59%
Left-wing party (SP) would have done better with...	57%	31%
Right-wing party (SVP) would have done better with...	36%	72%
<i>N</i>	28	29

most frequent beneficiary of full information, followed by the SP and, rather less often, the SVP. The government would also have been a beneficiary of the full turnout, but here it is above all the SVP that would be the big winner. The SP would be disadvantaged in comparison. This indicates that, insofar as they have preferences at all, non-voters tend to have right-wing preferences. Overall, the right-wing SVP benefits from low levels of information but not from low levels of turnout. The left-wing SP would have done better had voters been better informed but not if many more had voted. Support for the government’s position, meanwhile, is often, but not always, helped by low information among citizens, as well as by low turnout. It should be emphasised that these results are the reverse of the commonly voiced expectation.

#### 4. Political institutions and distortion in the outcome

The analysis has shown that the outcomes of Swiss popular votes are distorted non-randomly, tending to favour the right-wing party when citizens are ill-informed, and the government and (again) the right-wing party when turnout is low. Links between political–institutional variables and participation and information effects shed light on these findings. According to Scharpf (1970), the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the number and complexity of political decisions and, on the other, the individual capability of the citizens to acknowledge and process information, generates low levels of political participation. In a similar vein, Linder (2005) finds that the probability of abstention increases with the excessive demand on the voters to vote all the time on all kinds of issues, big and small.

This section contains a test of possible institutional and political influences on turnout and information levels, with the aim of trying to find out what tends to

<sup>1</sup> All the parties and many interest groups give recommendations to their supporters and members about each issue to be voted upon. These positions are reported in the newspapers and made public by the campaigners themselves, of course.

lower levels of turnout and information, thus increasing the potential for bias in policy-making:

*Self-reported complexity:* The surveys record how difficult a respondent found it to make a decision with respect to each vote. The more people found an issue difficult, the likelier that vote is to be skewed by low turnout and low information.

*Number of issues:* More than one issue at a time is usually subject to a vote. In the period under observation up to six issues were decided on the same day. The expectation is that the more issues are voted on simultaneously, the greater the likelihood of a distortion affecting at least some of the issues due to lack of information and, consequently, a lower turnout. (One or two such issues might be very high-profile and may raise turnout for if not information on the other votes).

*Importance of issues:* When voters find a decision important it is likely that they inform themselves and participate. Thus there should be a negative correlation between the (subjectively experienced) importance of an issue and the distortion of the outcome.

*Overall level of informedness and participation:* The lower the level of participation and informedness, the higher the likelihood that the outcome would have been different under conditions of higher turnout and information.

*Institutional complexity:* The popular votes in Switzerland have different institutional forms: (1) all constitutional changes proposed by the parliament have to pass a compulsory referendum; (2) with the collection of 50,000 signatures submitted to the government within 100 days after the official publication of a new law, an optional referendum has to take place; and (3) an initiative to change the constitution is submitted to the citizens when 100,000 signatures are handed in to the government within an 18-month period. If differences in the complexity of these forms of popular votes have an impact on voters, I would assume that optional referendums are more complex than initiatives and compulsory referendums. Optional referendums are about entire laws, which can consist of dozens of articles whereas constitutional changes are usually linked to a single constitutional article. In addition, the question on the ballot paper in optional referendums is often difficult to understand because if one wants to support the group that has collected the signatures one has to vote ‘no’ which is potentially confusing. (‘If you support x, vote ‘yes’ is more intuitive than ‘if you support x, vote ‘no’’).

*Elite disagreement:* Political elites and the government give official recommendations prior to every popular vote. Many votes are not contentious, as we have seen, especially compulsory and optional referenda, which are launched by smaller, more exotic groups. Normally voters should experience less decision-making difficulty with respect to uncontentious votes than contentious ones. Moreover, many issues have a clear left-right context, and left-right remains the main political cleavage in Swiss politics. Voters might find issues more complicated when they do not have, or do not only have, a clear left-right meaning, such as when the three large centre-right parties do not all take the same position. Since, apart from the SP, the left-wing parties are quite small, a disagreement among the three large centre-right parties is probably more disconcerting for centre-right voters than a disagreement between left parties are for most left voters.

Table 5 reports the correlation coefficients between the effects on turnout and information and the above factors. There is a strong correlation between self-reported complexity and information effects: the more citizens find an issue complex, the higher the

Table 5  
Correlations between size of information and turnout effects on the outcome and various institutional and political factors

	Size of information effect on outcome	Size on turnout effect on outcome
Self-reported complexity	0.43***	0.27*
Number of issues	0.08	0.08
Importance of issue	−0.33**	−0.25*
Overall level of information	−0.58***	−0.47***
Overall level of participation:	−0.34***	−0.46***
Institutional complexity		
Compulsory referendum (dummy)	0.17	0.28**
Optional referendum (dummy)	−0.13	−0.12
Initiative (dummy)	−0.07	−0.16
Elite disagreement		
No elite disagreement (dummy)	−0.07	0.11
Left-right disagreement (dummy)	−0.01	−0.12
Disagreement within centre-right parties (dummy)	0.08	0.02
N	59	50

\*\*\* Significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed), \*\* significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed), \* significant at the 0.1 level (two-tailed). Only cases with a significant information or turnout effect are included.

information effect. There is a strong negative correlation between information bias and citizens' rating of the importance of an issue, the overall level of information and the overall level of turnout. This means that the likelihood of a biased outcome becomes higher as fewer citizens rate an issue as important and as less citizens know about an issue.

As expected, the overall levels of turnout and information are themselves related to the outcome bias due to low turnout. The lower the turnout, the higher the risk of a turnout effect; the lower the levels of information the higher the turnout effect. To some degree the former is a mathematical artifact but we can assume that there is more to it than that: low levels of information and turnout indicate a lack of interest in a topic, which increases the risk of a biased result.

The institutional indicators do not behave as expected. Optional referenda are not significantly more prone to information effects but compulsory referenda do seem to be prone to low turnout effects. Initiatives on the other hand have a slightly smaller information bias. Surprisingly, it makes no difference whether a vote is contentious or not.

## 5. Conclusion

The question asked at the beginning of this analysis was to what extent low turnout matters in direct democracy. The answer given here is that it does matter, but only sometimes. There is a turnout bias evident in the outcome of popular votes, but it is less important than the bias introduced by the low levels of information that citizens have (and information itself is related to turnout). Low levels of information often, but not always, favours right-wing party positions and especially disadvantages those of the government; low turnout is often harmful for right-wing parties and rather favourable for left-wing parties. Many non-voters tend to have right-wing positions and therefore higher turnout would benefit the right-wing parties, but citizens tend to adopt more left-wing positions as they become better informed. That means that an increased turnout would not necessarily benefit the right. It depends on whether the 'new' members of the voting public have informed themselves. An overall left-wing disadvantage due to low turnout is not confirmed in this study. However, it must be acknowledged that there are cases in which the two effects studied here work in favour of the right-wing parties and harm the left-wing party.

The negative correlations between turnout effects and information effects and levels of turnout, levels of

information and the importance citizens give to an issue indicate that the outcome of the less important issues tend to be more biased and the more important, attention-grabbing issue are less biased. We do not have to be concerned about high-profile votes but rather with the wall-flower issues.

These results raise questions about the practical implications of any expansion of citizens' involvement in decision-making. It involves two risks. First, that the more often people are asked to participate, the less likely they are to do so each individual time, and the less likely they are to be informed about each individual issue. More opportunities to participate could, in other words, lead to the surely undesirable result that fewer people use the numerous opportunities to vote than what would have been the case if the opportunity came less often. The same is true with respect to information. The more decisions somebody has to make, the less informed she or he will be about each single issue, because getting informed is costly and resources are limited. Furthermore, the risk of obtaining biased outcomes seems to increase when turnout is low and citizens are badly informed. Second, that we know that there is a negative correlation between turnout, information and various social characteristics and that citizens with more individual resources tend to participate more than less well-off citizens. Hence, the lower the turnout and the lower are levels of information, the more biased are the outcomes. This finding indicates some disadvantages of direct democracy. Direct democracy — especially in Switzerland — means that voters are asked to go to the polls very frequently. This itself contributes to the low levels of turnout. Furthermore, with an increase in the number of issues for decision, the information costs increase for the voters and so we can expect that the voters will be, on average, less informed. The frequency of the votes because of direct democracy therefore seems to have some negative side effects.

One could argue that the findings presented here cannot be generalised beyond Switzerland and matter only in the case of frequent popular votes. However, there are no strong indications that voting on popular votes is entirely different from voting in an election from the point of view of a voter and voting in a popular vote is certainly not more complex and cognitively demanding than voting in an election.<sup>2</sup> A rational voter in a multiparty election would require a lot of

<sup>2</sup> See Lutz (2006: 39f) for an elaboration on this argument. Of course, there are very important institutional differences but this is not the topic of this article.

information in order to make a fully informed choice. A voter would have to know the positions of the parties, assess her own positions on these issues and finally compare and rank the closeness of her own and the party issue positions. Voters do not do this in the way that the theory assumes. Instead voters rely on cues and shortcuts in order to make a reasoned choice. And the heuristics, shortcuts and cues a voter can use in an election are not different in principle from those that can be used in popular votes.

The above findings should nevertheless not be used as a general argument against direct democracy. Arguments to the effect that direct democracy is too demanding for ordinary citizens and that therefore representative democracy is the preferred political arrangement are not persuasive, because they are illogical. If one believes that citizens have the cognitive abilities to vote in an election, one cannot simultaneously judge them incapable of voting in popular votes. What the results of this analysis do show is that the expansion of direct democracy in any country or other political unit can and does reach its fruitful limits, beyond which it is illusory to think that any added value is achieved by popular votes. This has nothing to do with the nature of direct democracy per se, but with information costs, which naturally increase when many decisions have to be made.

In a stricter sense, turnout and information effects matter only when they change the substance of a political decision — when a ‘yes’ vote turns into a ‘no’ vote or the other way around. This is quite rare but there are such cases. Higher turnout could have reversed the outcome of some prominent popular votes. The introduction of an anti-racism law in 1994 is one such case. It would have been rejected if turnout had been 100 percent. In contrast, the naturalisation law of 1994 would have been approved with full turnout. Higher information levels could also have led to a ‘yes’ result in the 1992 European Economic Area vote, perhaps the most significant of all popular votes in the last 30 years.

This leaves as a final question: what, if anything, can be done to eliminate the biases that have been the topic of this article? Democratic theorists agree that political institutions should be as inclusive as possible that participation and the acquisition of information should be encouraged and facilitated. However, increasing the number of referenda seems to have a negative impact on turnout. Compulsory voting would increase turnout but many politicians in western democracies are not in favour of compulsory voting because they suspect forcing people to vote is

not democratic and, in any case, most parties are not so sure if they would be better or worse off if everyone did vote. Several other institutional elements of electoral systems might have a positive impact on voting, such as weekend or postal voting or PR electoral systems.

It is even more difficult to enhance information levels. It is impossible to make ‘getting informed’ compulsory and impracticable to force voters to acquire more information. Information is usually available to people at a relatively low cost in terms of time and effort. Print and electronic media cover political issues but voters often engage with this information very selectively. Better and more comprehensive campaigns that enhance level of information would surely not go amiss, but it would be unrealistic to suggest that there is more than a limited scope for improvements.

#### Appendix. Social characteristics used in the regression models from the VOX surveys

Age	Numerical variable starting from 18
Sex (male)	1 for male, 0 for female.
Education (low to high)	1 for low education (first level education), 2 for medium education (second level education), 3 for high education (third level education).
House ownership	1 if somebody lives in house he/she owns, 0 otherwise.
Living in detached house	1 for living in a house, 0 for living in rented house.
Household income	Numerical variable, in some of the surveys categorical.
Farmers	Dummy, 1 if respondent or head of household is a farmer, 0 otherwise.
Self-employed <sup>a</sup>	Dummy, 1 if respondent or head of household is self-employed, 0 otherwise.
Private sector employee <sup>a</sup>	Dummy, 1 if respondent or head of household is a private sector employee, 0 otherwise.
Senior employee <sup>a</sup>	Dummy, 1 if respondent or head of household is a senior employee, 0 otherwise.
Public sector employee <sup>a</sup>	Dummy, 1 if respondent or head of household is a public sector employee, 0 otherwise.
Junior employee	Dummy, 1 if respondent or head of household is a junior employee, 0 otherwise.
Worker	Dummy, 1 if respondent or head of household is a worker, 0 otherwise.

<sup>a</sup> The later surveys distinguished between private and public sector employees; the earlier surveys distinguished between employees at a senior and junior level.

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