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Campaign Effects in Direct-Democratic Votes in Switzerland

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Sciarini, Pascal; Tresch, Anke Daniela

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Prof. Dr. Pascal Sciarini

Professor in Swiss and Comparative Politics

Department of Political Science and International Relations

University of Geneva, Uni-Mail

40, bd du Pont-d'Arve

CH-1211 Geneva 4

pascal.sciarini@unige.ch

Phone: +41-22-379 83 86

Fax: +41-22-379 83 64

Dr. Anke Tresch

Lecturer in Swiss Politics and Political Communication

Department of Political Science and International Relations

University of Geneva, Uni-Mail

40, bd du Pont-d'Arve

CH-1211 Geneva 4

anke.tresch@unige.ch

Phone: +41-22-379 95 64

Fax: +41-22-379 83 64

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyze the conditions under which referendum campaigns have an impact on voting choices. Based on a model of opinion formation that integrates both campaign effects and partisan effects, we argue that campaign effects vary according to the context of the popular vote (size and type of conflict among the party elite and intensity and direction of the referendum campaign). We test our hypotheses with two-step estimations for hierarchical models on data covering 25 popular votes on foreign, European and immigration policy in Switzerland. Our results show strong campaign effects and they suggest that their strength and nature are indeed highly conditional on the context of the vote: The type of party coalition pre-structures the patterns of individual voting choices, campaign effects are higher when the campaign is highly intense and they are more symmetric when it is balanced.

Key Words: campaign effects; direct democracy; opinion formation; two-step hierarchical modelling; Switzerland; voting behaviour

Introduction

The recent literature has seen a growing scholarly interest in campaign effects in direct-democratic votes (e.g., Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002; Hobolt, 2005, 2007; LeDuc, 2002a, 2002b, 2007; de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; de Vreese 2007a). According to a widespread view, "referendum campaigns are likely to influence more voters than are election campaigns" (Schmitt-Beck & Farrell, 2002a: 193; see also LeDuc, 2007; de Vreese, 2007b). This is because referendums are said to involve less deeply held beliefs and cleavages and, therefore, to lead to higher volatility, a smaller role of party identification and later decision making than elections (LeDuc, 2002b; Schmitt-Beck & Farrell, 2002b). However, there is also a great deal of variation *among* referendum campaigns (LeDuc, 2002a): While some referendums are prone to short-term campaign influence, others articulate traditional, ideological and partisan conflict lines and, therefore, come closer to electoral contests.

Against this background, the purpose of this article is to evaluate the nature and extent of campaign effects and to shed light on the conditions under which they occur. To this end, we develop a model of opinion formation that integrates both campaign and partisan effects and we argue that the former depends on the context of the popular vote.[1] More specifically, we first assume that the coalition that forms among the party elite on a given policy proposal determines the type and amount of conflict and, therefore, pre-structures the process of opinion formation. Secondly, we posit that the extent of voters' reliance on campaign information depends on the intensity of the political messages delivered to the voters: the higher the intensity, the greater the campaign effects. Thirdly, we hypothesize that voters' processing of campaign information varies with the direction of the campaign, namely whether it is balanced or one-sided.

As the country with the most far-reaching experience in direct legislation and referendum campaigns (Kriesi, 2005), the "Swiss laboratory" lends itself particularly well to an analysis

of campaign and partisan effects. While most existing studies using survey data have focused on a handful of referendums,[2] our empirical tests cover the 25 popular votes on foreign, European and immigration policy held in Switzerland between 1992 and 2006. On the one hand, the focus on policy proposals relating to international openness enables us to control for differences across policy domains and, therefore, to increase the homogeneity of the relevant policy proposals. On the other, our selection of votes offers important variations with respect to campaign-related variables. Our Swiss study speaks to both the classic, American literature on elite-masse interactions in foreign policy (e.g., Holsti, 1992; Lippman, 1965) and the more recent, European literature on attitudes towards the EU and on opinion formation in EU referendums (e.g., Hobolt, 2005; Hooghe & Marks, 2005).

Our empirical tests are based on the so-called VOX survey data, which are collected after each popular vote at the national level. The measures of campaign direction and campaign intensity stem from a dataset of newspaper ads published in six daily newspapers during the last four weeks before each popular vote. Methodologically, we conduct two-step hierarchical estimations to test the influence of the campaign context on the voters' decision.

In the next section we present some background information regarding the policy domain and popular votes on which we focus and briefly highlight the related conflict lines in the party system. We then develop our theoretical framework, which allows for the measurement of both partisan and campaign effects. Data, measures and methods appear next and they set the stage for the empirical tests. In conclusion, we discuss the broader implications of our results.

Popular votes on international openness in Switzerland

Although it is a neutral country and not a member of the European Union (EU), Switzerland is nevertheless strongly influenced by structural changes arising at the international or supranational level. First, as a small, open economy Switzerland is heavily affected by

processes of globalization and internationalization. Second, as a wealthy country, Switzerland is an important target for migrant workers and asylum seekers – another aspect of the globalization process. Third, both Switzerland's geographical location in the middle of Europe and the critical importance of the EU market for the Swiss economy account for the close institutional ties that Switzerland has developed with the EU over the last twenty years.[3]

The changes brought about by the globalization and Europeanization processes, together with the importance of direct democratic institutions in Switzerland, have given Swiss citizens an important say on the definition of foreign, immigration and European policy. Between 1992 and 2006, there have been no less than 25 popular votes (referendums or initiatives) in these three policy domains: 13 on immigration and asylum policy, seven on the relationships between Switzerland and the EU[4] and five on foreign policy (see the full list in Table 1 in the Appendix).

While these votes cover three different policy domains, earlier research has shown that votes relating to issues such as Swiss-EU relationships, asylum, naturalization of foreigners or national defence and security all pertain to a similar conflict regarding the desired level of "openness" versus "closedness" of the country. This conflict has become crucial in Swiss politics since the 1990s and it is a major source of division among both political parties and the public (Brunner & Sciarini, 2002; Kriesi et al., 2005). It closely follows a left-right logic, pitting the political left (Social democrats and Greens) against the conservative right (Swiss people's party and small far right parties). While the left advocates openness to the outside world and solidarity with immigrants, the conservative right almost always opposes them. Parties of the moderate right (the Radical Democratic party and the Christian Democratic party) hold a more ambivalent position, sometimes joining the left and favouring openness, sometimes allying with the conservative right against openness.

In sum, the 25 votes examined in our study combine fairly high homogeneity with respect to policy content and conflict lines and substantial variation with respect to campaign-related characteristics. They thus offer a perfect playing field for the study of how and to what extent referendum campaigns influence opinion formation on policy proposals dealing with international openness.

Theoretical framework

To address this question, we need a theoretical model of opinion formation that enables us to anticipate how voters will process the information they receive during a referendum campaign. To that end, we elaborate on Zaller's (1992) model of opinion formation, according to which the reception and acceptance of campaign messages delivered by political elites depend on the interaction between a citizen's level of political competence and his or her political predispositions. First, the reception of elite communication depends on a citizen's level of political competence (or "awareness", Zaller, 1992: 42): the greater a person's political competence, i.e. the greater her attentiveness to and her degree of knowledge about politics, the more likely he or she is to be exposed to and understand a given political message and, therefore, to receive it. Second, political predispositions – defined as stable, individual-level traits such as political values or party attachment (Zaller, 1992: 22-23) – and political competence jointly regulate the acceptance or non-acceptance of the political communications a person receives (Zaller, 1992: 44). More specifically, it is assumed that individuals are more likely to accept political messages that fit with their political predispositions and to resist arguments that are inconsistent with them, but *only if* they possess the contextual information that enables them to assess these arguments in the light of their predispositions. In other words, the most competent citizens are more heavily exposed to elite messages, yet they are also better equipped to scrutinize and select them on the basis of their political

predispositions. Less competent citizens, by contrast, tend to accept uncritically whatever messages they receive. Consequently, competent citizens are more likely to vote in conformity with their underlying political values and party attachments than less competent citizens (Hobolt, 2005; Kriesi, 2005; Sciarini & Marquis, 2000).

Going one step further, Zaller (1992) argues that the reception and acceptance mechanisms operate differently depending on the degree of consensus or division among political elites. If there is a wide consensus among the political elites, people are exposed to converging messages. As a result, citizens do not have much of a choice when making up their minds and they are expected to follow the lead of the united elites. Hence, a "mainstream effect" is likely to occur (1992: 98-100): in that case, popular support for the elites' proposal increases with citizens' level of competence, regardless of their political predispositions. If the political elites are divided, however, citizens are exposed to (typically) two competing flows of communication. The result is a "polarization effect" (1992: 100-102): in this situation, the relationship between the level of political competence and acceptance of a given political message is expected to increase with the level of political competence among citizens whose predispositions are consistent with that message, but to decrease among individuals whose predispositions are not consistent with it.

While we accept the basic thrust of Zallers' model, we believe that it underestimates the importance of political predispositions: in Zaller's model, predispositions do not have a direct impact on political attitudes; their influence is filtered by political competence. This view contradicts pioneering works in electoral research (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960) and persuasion and cognitive response theory (e.g., Greenwald, 1968), which demonstrate the crucial importance of predispositions, such as party identification. It also contradicts the widespread conception that campaigns mainly help voters make decisions in line with their pre-existing predispositions (e.g., Finkel & Schrott, 1995; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). Finally, it is also at

odds with recent studies of Swiss direct democratic votes, which show that partisan orientations act as fundamental predispositions, helping voters to make political judgments and guiding political behaviour (e.g., Kriesi, 2005; Sciarini, Bornstein & Lanz, 2007; Selb et al., 2009).

In light of this discussion, we need to distinguish between two different logics underlying the process of individual opinion formation: a campaign-related and a partisan-related logic. Bearing in mind that in Zaller's (1992) conception a strong effect of political competence is indicative of a process of opinion formation that is driven by the campaign, we can speak of a *campaign effect* if the impact of political predispositions on support for international openness is entirely conditional on an individual's level of political competence. By contrast, we can speak of a *partisan effect* if opinion formation is driven by political predispositions, i.e. if citizens rely on their prior values and vote in accordance with their partisan orientation, regardless of their level of political competence (Kriesi, 2005: 137s).

Empirically, however, we expect opinion formation to result from a combination of both campaign and partisan effects (for a similar argument, see e.g., Kriesi, 2005; Sciarini & Kriesi, 2003). In other words, we assume that political predispositions not only matter in interaction with political competence, but that they also have a direct impact on opinion formation. This direct impact presumably holds especially true in popular votes on international openness, which is a matter of deep contention between the left and the conservative right.

Figures 1a and 1b summarize the theoretical situations resulting from the combination of Zaller's model and our hypothesis regarding the direct impact of political predispositions, i.e. between campaign and partisan effects. For present purposes we limit ourselves to a simple situation with two political camps, the left and the conservative right.

[Figures 1a and 1b about here]

In line with Zaller's theory we distinguish cases of consensus among the elite (figure 1a) from cases of conflict (figure 1b). Bearing in mind that, in Zaller's theory, the mainstream and polarization effects are campaign effects, i.e. they are induced by the elites' political messages, in both figures and for each political predisposition the more competent voters are likely to display different levels of support for international openness than less competent voters. Political competence regulates how citizens process the elites' messages, which results in an upward or downward trend in support depending on the direction of elites' messages and on their related conformity with citizens' political predispositions.

To these campaign effects "*à la Zaller*", figures 1a and 1b add a partisan effect: at each level of political competence, left political predispositions lead to higher levels of acceptance of international openness than conservative right predispositions. If this partisan effect holds, then even non-competent left and conservative right voters, who are not supposed to differ from each other according to Zaller's model, should in fact display a different level of approval of integration policy.

The impact of the campaign context

Going one step further, we specify the context-related characteristics of popular votes that are likely to play a role in the process of individual opinion formation. More precisely, we argue that the nature and strength of campaign effects depend on three campaign-related characteristics: the specific type of conflict among the party elite (and the resulting form of party coalition); the intensity of the referendum campaign; and its direction.

Party coalitions

The theoretical situations depicted in figures 1a and 1b primarily apply to a two-party system with a left-wing and a right-wing party. However, the mere distinction between a case of

consensus and a case of conflict between left and right (or between Democrats and Republicans, or between hawks and doves) is too simplistic in the context of a multi-party system such as the Swiss one. We thus need to take the complexity of coalition formation into account and to specify how it structures the context of a popular vote. As mentioned above, issues relating to international openness (immigration, foreign policy, EU integration) often cause serious divisions in Switzerland and lead to three different constellations of party coalition, depending on the cohesiveness of the four governing parties (see Kriesi, 2006: 603). First, there is one, relatively infrequent case of a "grand coalition" that comes close to a situation of consensus among the political elites. Such coalitions are characterized by the joint support of Switzerland's international openness by all governing parties (Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, Radical Democrats and Swiss People's Party), whereas opposition – if at all –stems only from small, non-governmental parties. Second, cases of elite division can be understood as grand coalitions reduced by one of the governing parties and this gives rise to two different types: a centre-left coalition, in which both the left and the moderate right favour international openness while the conservative right opposes it; and a centre-right coalition, in which the moderate right and the conservative right jointly oppose international openness against the left.

From this we derive a first series of hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1a: Cases of grand coalitions lead to a mainstream effect: support for international openness increases as a function of political competence among sympathizers of all parties.

Hypothesis 1b: Cases of centre-left and centre-right coalitions lead to a polarization effect: acceptance of international openness increases with the level of political competence among left voters and decreases with political competence among conservative right voters.

Hypothesis 1c: Among moderate right voters, the interaction between political predispositions and competence varies according to the type of party coalition: support for international openness increases with political competence in votes with a centre-left coalition and decreases with political competence in votes with a centre-right coalition.

In sum, the type of party coalition is of the utmost importance for two reasons: it determines the expected pattern of vote for moderate right voters (in favour of international openness in a vote with a centre-left coalition, but against openness in a vote with a centre-right coalition) and it also leads to an unusual pattern for conservative right voters in the (rare) cases of consensus among the elite.

Campaign intensity

While the intensity of campaign messages is often said to influence the strength of campaign effects, the direction of this relationship is somewhat contested. On the one hand, some authors (e.g., Dobrzynska & Blais, 2008) claim that the effect of political competence (that is, of the campaign-related effect) is weaker when the campaign is highly intense because in such a context even the least competent voters are able to receive the dominant campaign message and to make the appropriate connections with their underlying political values. On the other hand, other scholars expect campaign effects to increase with the intensity of the delivered messages. From this perspective, intense campaigns enhance both the quantity of information delivered to voters and the incentives to search for information. Bowler and Donovan (1998: chapter 8) have shown this for the case of referendums in the US: spending does not simply convert voters' opinions, it also changes the context of their decisions, bringing more attention to an issue and increasing voters' awareness of the ballot proposals. Similarly, but in the context of US senate election campaigns, Kahn and Kenney (1999) have shown that intense election campaigns lead voters to regard their choice as more important and encourage them

to make more sophisticated decisions about competing candidates. By contrast, when campaign intensity is low, information about the election is scarce and voters have few incentives to make complicated judgements.

We join this second line of reasoning and assume that an increase in campaign intensity encourages voters to reassess their policy preferences in the light of information delivered during the campaign. This should translate into political competence having a stronger influence and political predispositions a weaker influence in the process of opinion formation.

Hypothesis 2: Campaign effects increase with campaign intensity, meaning that the impact of political competence on acceptance of international openness is greater when a campaign is intense than when the intensity of the campaign is weak; conversely, partisan effects are stronger in low-intensity campaigns than in high-intensity campaigns.

Campaign direction

While campaign intensity is informative with respect to the overall amount of information delivered to voters, campaign direction provides information about the relative intensity of messages supporting a given proposal versus messages rejecting it. Regarding the direction of political messages, we take into account the extent of homogeneity of campaign information and we distinguish between one-sided and balanced (or mixed) campaigns (Zaller, 1992: 124-128). When political messages are one-sided, individuals whose opinion is *opposed to* the dominant messages find themselves in an "easy learning" situation. They face a change-inducing message that is easy to receive, even for the least competent voters. Given that the latter tend to accept uncritically the messages they receive, they are particularly likely to accept these messages, even if they run counter to their predispositions. Highly competent voters, by contrast, will recognize the dominant message as being inconsistent with their

predispositions and will therefore resist it. Overall, this should translate into a strong effect of political competence on opinion formation (i.e., a strong campaign effect).

In contrast, individuals whose opinion is *in line* with the dominant message will find their opinion reinforced. They are in a so-called "hard learning" situation, where the countervailing messages are hard to receive, being of a much weaker intensity than the dominant one. In such a situation, only the most highly competent supporters have a chance to fulfil the first requirement for opinion change, i.e. to receive the countervailing message and to update their preferences accordingly. That is, while in standard situations competence increases the resistance against inconsistent messages, its effect is more ambivalent in a hard learning situation. Here, the one-sidedness of political messages is expected to attenuate the polarization effect among competent supporters of the message, thus reducing the impact of political competence on opinion formation.[5]

Hypothesis 3a: Polarization effects are stronger and more symmetric when the information flow is balanced between messages in favour and against international openness, as compared to scenarios where the campaign heavily favours one side or the other.

Hypothesis 3b: If the information flow is one-sided against openness, support for international openness strongly increases as a function of political competence among left voters, whose predispositions are favourable to international openness ("easy learning situation"), and moderately decreases as a function of political competence among conservative right voters, whose predispositions are opposed to openness ("hard learning situation").

Hypothesis 3c: If the information flow is one-sided in favour of openness, support for international openness strongly decreases as a function of political competence among conservative right voters, whose predispositions are against international openness ("easy learning situation"), and moderately increases as a function of political competence among

left voters, whose predispositions are favourable to international openness ("hard learning situation").

Data and measures

We analyze 25 popular votes on foreign, European and immigration policy held in Switzerland between 1992 and 2006.[6] Unlike previous studies that have focused on single cases or a handful of referendums at most, we test our hypotheses on a large, standardized dataset taken from the so-called "VOX surveys" which are completed after each popular vote at the national level (Brunner, Kriesi & Loretan, 2007). These surveys contain information about respondents' characteristics and voting behaviour in each ballot proposal. Initially, there were a total of 29,352 observations. Eliminating respondents who did not participate in the popular vote and those who cast a blank ballot reduces the sample to 14,813 observations. Due to missing answers on some independent variables, we must eliminate almost 600 more cases.

Our dependent variable is the individual *voting decision* in the 25 popular votes. In most cases, voting 'yes' meant approving Switzerland's opening-up towards the outside world (e.g. by joining the United Nations). After recoding the cases where casting a yes vote meant closing the country towards the outside (e.g., by tightening immigration or asylum policy), a value of 1 indicates a vote in favour of international openness, 0 reflects support for closedness.

We measure *political predispositions* by respondents' party identification, complemented when necessary by their self-positioning on a left-right scale (see also Kriesi, 2005). Given the sharp conflict between the left and the conservative right caused by popular votes on international openness (and the more ambivalent position of the moderate right in that respect), party attachment, and more especially the distinction between left, moderate right

and conservative right voters, provides a valid measure of individual predispositions in the cases at hand.[7]

Citizens who identify with the Social Democrats, the Greens, or with other small left parties are coded as left voters, supporters of the Christian Democrats, Radicals and other small parties as moderate right voters and followers of the Swiss People's Party and other small radical right parties as conservative right. Voters who do not identify with a party but position themselves clearly on one side of the left-right scale are added to the corresponding category (Kriesi, 2005: 142), while respondents who do not identify with a party, or do not position themselves on either side of the left-right scale, serve as the reference category. According to this operationalization, 28% of the sample display left-leaning political predispositions, 27% sympathize with the moderate right, 15% identify with the conservative right and 30% are coded as non-partisans.[8]

Following a common conception (e.g., Alvarez & Brehm, 2002; Kriesi, 2005), we use a project-specific indicator of *political competence*. Political competence varies not only across individuals but also across issues. A general measure of political competence would only indicate how informed an individual is about politics in general, whereas an issue-specific measure shows how well-informed the individual is about the specific policy proposal submitted to a direct-democratic vote.[9] Our issue-specific measure of competence is based on three sets of information collected in the VOX surveys. The first set of data measures voters' knowledge of the title of the project submitted to the popular vote and their ability to describe its content. Respondents receive one point for correctly answering each of these two questions. The second set measures respondents' ability to justify their voting choice. This data is based on an open-ended question through which respondents are asked to supply two reasons for their 'yes' (or 'no') vote. Again, they receive one point if they are able to answer the question, even in vague terms – provided that their justification relates to the vote in

question and does not contradict their vote. Finally, our third measure is taken from the respondents' ability to describe their position, answering a set of closed-form questions on the major arguments of the campaign: respondents who answer all these questions receive one point. The combination of these three sets of questions results in a scale of political competence that ranges from 0 to 5.

To account for the *type of party coalition*, i.e. for the threefold distinction between a centre-left, a centre-right and a grand coalition, we focus on "objective coalitions" that form on the basis of national parties' voting recommendations (Ossipow, 1994: 39). While the centre-right coalition is generally dominant in Swiss politics, the centre-left coalition appears frequently in the field of foreign policy (Kriesi, 2005). It is no surprise, therefore, that there are 13 centre-left coalitions in our dataset but only seven centre-right coalitions and five grand coalitions.[10]

As previously noted, our indicators of the direction and intensity of the referendum campaigns are based on an extensive dataset of ads published by the political elites in six Swiss daily newspapers during the month before each popular vote.[11] Newspaper ads are one of the major means used by the political elites in Switzerland to persuade voters. Therefore, they offer a straightforward measure of the campaign information delivered to the public. More specifically, to capture the *intensity* of a campaign, we computed the natural logarithm of the total number of ads and took the median to divide campaigns into low and high intensity campaigns. Accordingly, 13 campaigns are classified as highly intense and 12 as "weakly intense". To measure the *direction* of a campaign we calculated the share of ads in favour of openness. If less than a third of all ads were in favour of openness, the campaign was coded as "one-sided, in favour of closedness" (six cases) and if more than two-thirds were in favour of openness, the campaign was coded as "one-sided, in favour of openness" (eight cases). In between, the campaign was coded as "balanced" (eleven cases).

Finally, we include a series of individual-level *control variables* that previous studies suggest play a role in voters' decisions concerning foreign and immigration policy (e.g., Kriesi *et al.*, 1993): occupation, income, age, gender, education, language, religion and urbanity. Note that all continuous independent variables have been standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 to facilitate comparisons between the estimated coefficients.

Method and models

According to our theoretical framework, opinion formation on issues related to international openness results from a combination of partisan and campaign effects. In addition, we anticipate that these effects vary across votes according to the context of the popular vote: our analysis is grounded on the fundamental assumption that individual voting choices occur in a specific voting context (type of party coalition, intensity and direction of the referendum campaign), which pre-structures the process of opinion formation. Such a framework calls for a multilevel design where individuals are nested in a given popular vote – and a related campaign-context.[12]

Multilevel models are experiencing increased popularity among political scientists, who have mostly used them to examine the impact of geographical units such as countries, regions or districts on individual's electoral behaviour (e.g., Johnston *et al.,* 2007; Jones, Johnston & Pattie, 1992). As is the case in other studies of voting behaviour in Switzerland (e.g., Kriesi, 2005; Sciarini & Tresch, 2009), we do not account for geographical context and instead we focus on the context of the popular vote. Each vote corresponds to an observation at the macro-level unit and for each vote we have a large number of individual-level observations (i.e., between 472 and 863 respondents per vote). In such a case, so-called two-step strategies are preferable to conventional, one-step hierarchical modelling (Achen, 2005; Franzese, 2005; Jusko & Shively, 2005).[13] With two-step strategies, the impact of individual-level variables is

studied separately for each macro-level unit at a first stage and the estimated coefficients from the first level are regressed on macro-level explanatory variables at a second stage.

Accordingly, we first estimate our model separately for each of the 25 votes.[14] In so doing, we obtain for each vote a coefficient for political competence, a coefficient for each political predisposition and a coefficient for the interactive effect of political competence and each political predisposition. As shown by the summary statistics presented in Table 2 in the Appendix, the separate and interactive effects of political competence and political predispositions vary substantially across votes.

At the second stage, then, we test whether and to what extent this variation is related to the campaign-related context. Using ordinary least-square regressions, we predict the estimated individual-level coefficients from the first stage by the type of party coalition, the intensity and the direction of the campaign. We estimate three models, one for each context-level explanatory variable (Table 3 in the Appendix). Given that our estimations rely on only 25 cases (20 when testing the impact of the intensity and the direction of voting campaigns),[15] many coefficients fail to reach statistical significance, but most of them have the expected sign. Because these coefficients are difficult to interpret, we calculate the predicted probabilities of voting for openness for the four categories of voters (left, moderate right, conservative right and non-partisans), depending on their level of competence and according to different context situations. We present these results graphically and discuss them in the next section.

Empirical tests

Figures 2 a-c show how the impact of political predispositions and political competence on the voters' decision varies according to the *type of party coalition*.

[Figures 2 a-c about here]

These results are straightforward and they correspond fairly well to the theoretical situations depicted above. On the one hand, we find evidence for campaign effects of the 'Zaller' type: if all four governing parties campaign together for Switzerland's opening-up towards the outside world (grand coalition, figure 2a), citizens receive converging messages and follow the lead of the united elites. This results in the expected mainstream effect (hypothesis 1a): the vote for international openness increases with higher levels of political competence among sympathizers of all parties and especially among sympathizers of left parties.

By contrast, if the governing parties are divided and align in a centre-right or in a centre-left coalition, citizens are exposed to competing campaign messages, which they process in light of their political predispositions and their level of political competence. In line with our hypothesis 1b, both popular votes with a centre-left coalition (figure 1a) and those with a centre-right coalition (figure 1b) translate into a strong polarization effect: the electorate splits apart and the most competent sympathizers of each of the rivalling camps vote according to their preferred party's line. More specifically, we see that in both figures acceptance of openness increases with higher levels of competence among left voters but decreases with higher levels of competence among conservative right voters. While the difference in the level of support between the least competent left and conservative right voters is fairly small (around 19 percent in cases of centre-left coalitions and about 5 percent in cases of centre-right coalitions), it is very large between the most competent sympathizers of both camps (70 and 64 percent, respectively).

In addition, the variations in the voting patterns of moderate right voters also validate our hypothesis 1c: among this specific category of voters, the impact of political competence on the voters' decision differs according to the type of partisan coalition: support for international openness increases with political competence in votes with a centre-left coalition (when

moderate right parties support openness) but it decreases with political competence in votes with a centre-right coalition (when moderate parties oppose openness). Interestingly enough, a similar pattern also holds for non-partisans: among these voters too, the influence of political competence on the voting choice turns out to be conditional on the type of coalition existing among the party elite. In other words, even voters who at first glance were likely to be immune from campaign effects are in fact influenced by the specific configuration of party coalition and resulting political messages. Non-partisans, like moderate right voters, tend to follow the lead of the dominant coalition.

In sum, our analysis highlights the crucial importance of partisan coalitions for individual voting choices, which influence the pattern of vote of our four categories of voters. Our results are most spectacular for moderate right and non-partisan voters, for whom we witness a reverse pattern in votes with a centre-left or with a centre-right coalition, as well as for conservative right voters (downward trend in votes with a centre-left or a centre-right coalition, but upward trend in votes with a grand coalition). But they are also quite telling for left-leaning voters, whose voting pattern consistently follows the pro-integrative message of their political leaders.

This finding confirms and extends aggregate-level studies which have demonstrated that the type and size of party coalition massively affects the outcome of a popular vote (Kriesi 2005, 2006): if the elite unanimously recommend a yes vote, the outcome is fairly predictable and most ballot proposals are accepted by the people (Kriesi, 2006: 605); if the elites split between a centre-left or centre-right coalition, the outcome of the vote is still rather predictable, but it goes in different directions depending on the specific line-up of the party coalitions.

On the other hand, we also find some evidence of a partisan effect, i.e. for a direct impact of political predispositions on attitudes towards integrative policies. For each type of coalition

and at each level of political competence, we indeed see that the level of acceptance of international openness is usually higher among left voters than among moderate right voters and non-partisans and it is higher among the latter than among conservative right voters. However, this result has to be qualified: in votes with both centre-left and (even more so) centre-right coalitions, conservative voters with little political competence are more in favour of international openness than other categories of voters, which runs counter to the logic of a partisan effect; similarly, in votes with a grand coalition, the least competent voters on the left are less supportive of openness than moderate right voters and non-partisans, which is also at odds with a partisan effect. In other words, while our data confirm to some extent the existence of partisan effects, we must note that these effects are not too strong, and are not as strong as in earlier studies on Swiss direct democratic votes in general (Kriesi, 2005), or on votes in environmental policy in particular (Sciarini, Bornstein, & Lanz, 2007).

Thus, despite the fact that internationalized issues have become a major source of left-right contention in Switzerland, political predispositions hardly determine the voting choices on their own. Rather – and in line with Zaller's claim – voting choices strongly depend on the cognitive ability of citizens to process and filter the information delivered during the referendum campaign. As an explanation for this unexpected result, we may point to the fact that proposals regarding international openness submitted to the voters are cognitively demanding: they are often complex and multidimensional and usually they are far removed from citizens' day-to-day preoccupations. Additionally, we may also note that there were only few popular votes on foreign policy until the 1990s. The resulting lack of familiarity of policy proposals submitted to voters may also account for the high importance of campaign, competence-driven effects in the process of opinion formation.[16]

Figures 3 a-b illustrate how the *intensity* of the voting campaign regulates the probability of voting for international openness in conjunction with political competence and political

predispositions. As seen above, opinion formation among moderate right voters and non-partisans strongly depends on the type of party coalition. Given that we no longer control for the specific line-up of political parties, we expect no clear patterns for these two groups of voters and we deliberately focus on the results for left and conservative right voters.

[Figures 3 a-b about here]

Figures 3a-b provide partial confirmation of our hypothesis 2: campaign effects tend to be stronger in intense campaigns than they are in low-intensity campaigns, whereas the reverse holds true for partisan effects. In cases of high campaign intensity, on the one hand, we find the expected stark and symmetric polarization effect between left and conservative right voters. In other words, the least competent left and conservative right voters have fairly similar opinions about international openness. In contrast, the most competent voters of each camp strongly support the campaign messages of their preferred party and have opposite views about international openness. This strong effect of political competence on opinion formation confirms the assumption that highly intense campaigns increase the salience of the issues in the eyes of the voters and lead them to make more sophisticated judgments. On the other hand, low-intensity campaigns lead to a more mixed picture. Among left-leaning voters, partisan effects dominate as expected: all voters on the left are roughly equally in favour of international openness, regardless of their level of competence. Among conservative right voters, however, we observe a sharp, competence-driven decrease of support for openness, which runs counter to our hypothesis. On the one hand, this again suggests that campaign effects are especially marked in the policy domain at stake. On the other, given that figures 3a-b only look at the effect of campaign intensity without controlling for the – crucial – type of party coalition, we should not worry too much about this result.

Finally, Figures 4a-c highlight the effects of *campaign direction*. While party coalitions reflect the basic structure of conflict among the political elites prior to a popular vote, they do

not inform us – or they do so only partly – about the specific direction of the political messages delivered to the public during the referendum campaign. This implies that we cannot be sure of whether a given referendum campaign was balanced between pro- and anti-openness messages, or whether either camp dominated.

[Figures 4a-c about here]

The findings corroborate our hypotheses 3a-c regarding the direction of the campaign. First, a balanced flow of pro and con messages during the campaign results in a strong and symmetric polarization effect between left and conservative right voters (hypothesis 3a): while the least competent left and conservative right voters have about the same probability of voting for international openness, the preferences of the most competent left and conservative right voters differ considerably (79% against 10% of votes in favour of openness). The overriding importance of political competence demonstrates the strength of the campaign effects induced by a balanced referendum campaign.

When political messages are one-sided for or against international openness, we find the patterns characteristic of hard and easy learning situations. In cases of one-sided campaigns in favour of closedness (hypothesis 3b), voters on the left find themselves in an easy learning situation, meaning that the dominant message runs counter to their political predispositions. Accordingly, this change-inducing message is easy to receive even for the least competent left voters, who have a much higher probability of voting against international openness than the most competent left voters, who recognize the dominant campaign message as being inconsistent with their prior values and beliefs. This explains the sharp increase in the openness vote as a function of political competence among left voters. Conservative right voters, conversely, are in a hard learning situation, meaning that countervailing messages are hardly visible and can only be received by the most competent conservative right voters. This

has the effect of attenuating the impact of political competence on this specific category of voters.

The exact opposite picture holds in cases of one-sided campaigns in favour of openness, in which left voters are in a hard learning situation whereas conservative right voters face an easy learning situation (hypothesis 3c). Correspondingly, the least competent conservative right voters uncritically accept the dominant message and have as high a probability of voting for international openness as left voters do, while the more competent conservative right voters recognize the campaign message as inconsistent with their predispositions and overwhelmingly reject them. The result is a very strong decrease of support with political competence among conservative right voters. By contrast, among left followers the openness vote hardly varies with the level of political competence, because only the most competent voters receive the countervailing message favouring closedness and incorporate it to some extent in their opinion formation.

In sum, the shift in the direction of political messages, from a situation where messages against international openness dominate the referendum campaign, to a situation where pro and con messages are fairly balanced and from the latter to a situation where the campaign is dominated by the pro-integration camp, leads to campaign effects that are fairly complex but nevertheless consistent with Zaller's model.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to analyze when and how referendum campaigns have an effect on voters' decisions. In this conclusion we wish to highlight our contribution and to put our findings in perspective with results from earlier studies, both in Switzerland and abroad.

Our contribution to the existing literature is threefold. First, elaborating on Zaller's (1992) work we have developed a model that recognizes the crucial role of political competence and

related campaign effects in the process of opinion formation, but the model also takes into account the distinct and separate impact of ideology and partisan considerations. On the one hand, we have postulated that opinion formation is driven by the political messages delivered during a political campaign and that their reception and acceptance are regulated by the level of competence of individuals (campaign effects). On the other, we have assumed that there are cases where opinion formation is not so much about political information but rather is linked more closely to political predispositions (partisan effect).

Second, but still at the theoretical level, we have specified the conditions under which referendum campaigns are supposed to influence the voters' decision and the likely nature of this influence. We have argued that campaign effects depend on three variables pertaining to the campaign context: the type of party coalition that forms prior to a popular vote; the intensity of a referendum campaign; and the direction of the campaign.

Third, we have tested our hypotheses against a broad dataset covering 25 referendum votes on international openness in Switzerland. While most previous studies relied on a handful cases at most, pooling together data on a number of votes increases the validity of our empirical tests and our findings are obviously strengthened by their consistency across such a large set of observations. In addition, our two-step strategy has enabled us to highlight both the impact of the context and how this context interacts with individual-level variables.

Overall, we found empirical evidence for our basic claim that voters' decisions result from a combination of partisan predispositions and the Zaller-type interaction between competence and predispositions. However, in contrast to previous studies on Swiss direct democratic votes (Kriesi, 2005; Sciarini et al., 2007) campaign effects clearly outweigh partisan effects in the relevant policy domain.

This result is quite surprising, since issues regarding the desired level of openness of the country – towards international cooperation, supranational integration, migrant workers or

asylum seekers – have become a matter of deep conflict between the left and the conservative right. Despite this, the political information delivered during the referendum campaign plays a leading role in the process of opinion formation. The way voters process this information, in turn, markedly varies according to their cognitive resources, i.e. it varies depending on their level of political competence. In that sense, our study confirms the widespread view that the influence of referendum campaigns on voting choice is high, and possibly higher than that of election campaigns (e.g. LeDuc, 2007; Schmitt-Beck & Farrell, 2002a; de Vreese, 2007b). In the present case, the strength of short-term campaign influence is presumably due to the complexity of policy proposals on international openness and, therefore, due to their demanding character in terms of cognition. It does not follow from all of this that partisan predispositions do not matter; they do matter, but mostly in interaction with political competence.

Next, and more importantly, our analysis demonstrates that campaign effects vary depending on campaign characteristics. Our findings confirm earlier studies based on aggregate data (Kriesi 2005, 2006) and highlight the crucial importance of party coalition. First, when the four governing parties are united and campaign together for international openness, opinion formation results in a mainstream effect. Second, both the votes with a centre-left and a centre-right coalition led to the expected polarization effect between left and conservative right voters. Third, the structure of party competition substantially increases our understanding of the voting pattern of both moderate right voters and non-partisans.

Campaign direction also had the expected effect, with balanced campaigns resulting in strong and symmetric polarization effects, whereas one-sided campaigns led to more asymmetrical patterns. By contrast, results were not as clear-cut with respect to campaign intensity. However, this mixed result is compatible with the ambivalent role granted to the intensity of political messages in the literature. Based on our study we would argue that campaign

intensity plays a role in interaction with other context-related characteristics, such as the type of party coalition.

More generally, given that all three contextual variables included in our analyses in fact matter, a natural step forward will be to test how and to what extent party coalition, the intensity and the direction of campaigns interact and jointly influence opinion formation. In the present article we were not able to carry out such a test, given the limited number of votes that were held on foreign policy, but future work will include additional votes in other policy domains and also to apply our model to popular votes in other contexts.

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[1] In addition, campaign effects are also likely to vary across voters, e.g. depending on the timing of the vote decision (Chaffee & Rimal, 1996; Fournier *et al.*, 2004; Lachat & Sciarini, 2002). However, we do not include voters' heterogeneity in the present article, focussing instead on the role of the context.

[2] Hobolt's (2007) study of 14 EU referendums is the only exception we are aware of. There are, of course, other comparative studies (e.g., LeDuc, 2002b), but these studies limit themselves to aggregate level analyses. In the Swiss literature, by contrast, campaign effects are included in various studies, albeit not as the main focus (e.g. Bützer & Marquis, 2002; Kriesi, 2005; Marquis & Sciarini, 1999; Sciarini, Bornstein & Lanz, 2007).

[3] Since the rejection of the agreement on the European Economic Area in a popular vote in 1992, Switzerland has concluded more than fifteen bilateral agreements with the EC/EU in various fields. The Swiss people had to (and did) ratify five of them in a referendum. As a result, over the last decade Switzerland has reached a level of integration that is characterized as "customized quasi-membership" (Kriesi & Trechsel, 2008: 189).

[4] Ironically, then, while it is not a member of the EU, Switzerland has had more popular votes on European integration than any EU member state.

[5] Note that the expected absence of variations across political competence for voters who are in a hard learning situation may also be interpreted as a partisan effect: the one-sidedness of the campaign, which conforms to their partisan orientations, can only reinforce the role of these orientations; in that specific case, as in the case of an overall low-intensity campaign, opinion formation is mostly driven by political predispositions.

[6] Of these votes, four were compulsory referendums, 15 were optional referendums and six were popular initiatives. We do not account for the institutional logic or the specific policy area because we have no compelling theoretical reason to do so.

[7] It is also a more valid measure than left-right ideology, which does not clearly correspond to the openness-closedness dimension and would hardly enable us to distinguish moderate right from conservative right voters.

[8] While the number of non-partisans varies from vote to vote, the relative proportion of left, moderate right and conservative right voters remains more stable. Variations in their respective share mainly reflect the increasing electoral force of the Swiss People's Party from the late 1990s onwards.

[9] While Zaller (1992) relies on a more general measure of awareness, he does so mostly for reasons of data-availability and as a second-best as compared to a more focused conception.

[10] Note that Swiss parties are known for their cantonal sectionalism. Hence, it is not uncommon to see cantonal sections deviating from the recommendations of their national party. In cases where more than half of all cantonal sections adopted a deviating vote recommendation, we recoded the type of party coalition accordingly. In our sample, three votes were concerned. First, 13 cantonal sections of the Swiss People's Party opposed the Bilateral Agreements with the EU against the recommendation of the national party; hence the vote was classified as a centre-left coalition instead of a grand coalition. Second, 13 cantonal sections of the Swiss People's Party deviated from the national party and rejected the popular initiative for the regulation of immigration, making this vote a case of a grand coalition instead of a centre-left coalition. Third, concerning the popular initiative "Yes to Europe", 18 cantonal sections of the Christian Democratic Party favoured a 'no' vote despite the positive recommendation of the national party; accordingly, the vote was classified as a centre-right coalition instead of a grand coalition.

[11] The newspapers are *Le Matin*, *Le Journal de Genève/Le Temps*, *La Tribune de Genève*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Tages-Anzeiger*, *Blick*. We thank Hanspeter Kriesi for sharing this data with us.

[12] While our model is parsimonious and includes a limited number of variables at the individual level (competence and predispositions), these variables are embedded in a fairly complex set of interactions between them and with context-level variables. This, together with the need to control for additional individual variables and the high number of popular votes included in our analysis, prevents us from relying on more simple techniques such as bivariate or tri-variate analyses.

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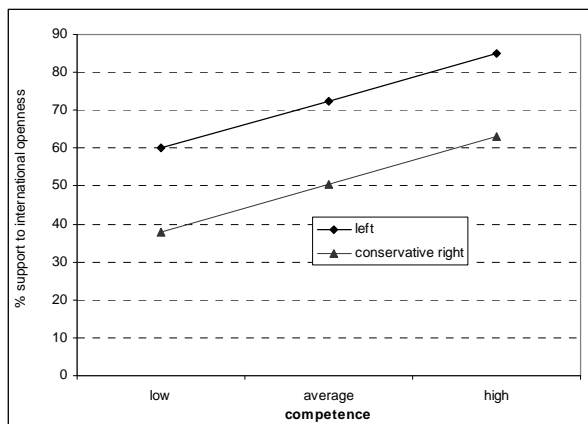
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Figures 1a-b: Theoretical situations of opinion formation, mix of party and campaign effects
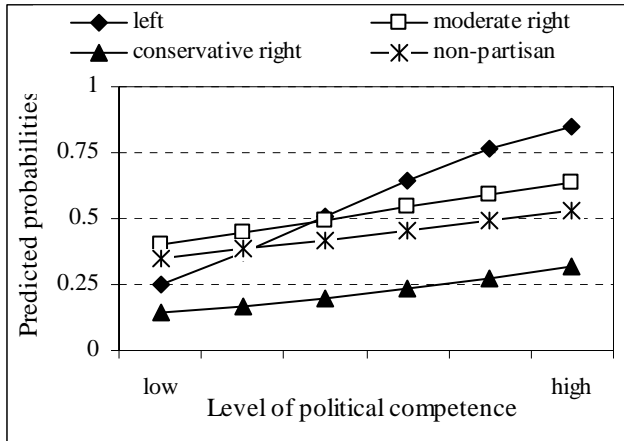
a) Partisan and mainstream effects   b) Partisan and polarization effects   35
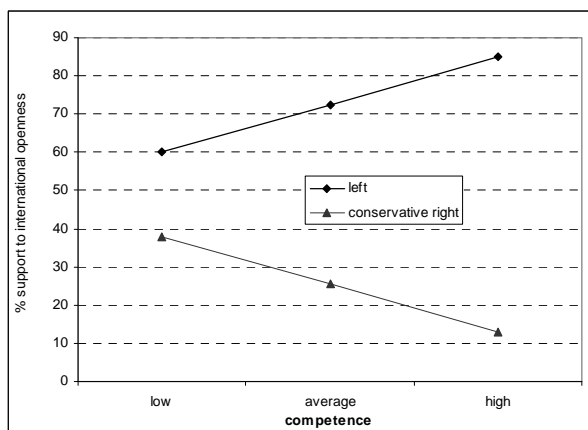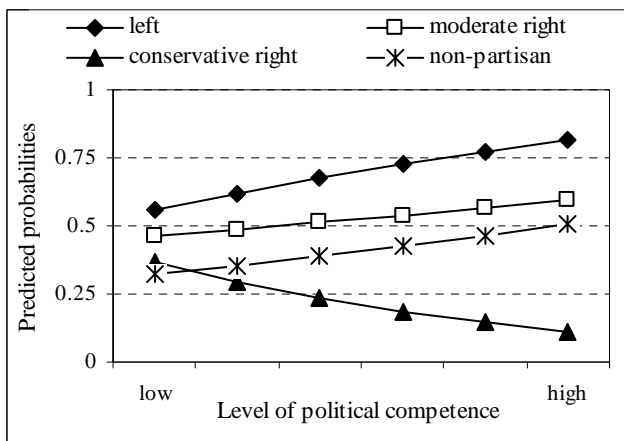
Figures 2 a-c: Predicted probabilities of voting for international openness according to political predispositions, level of political competence and type of party coalition
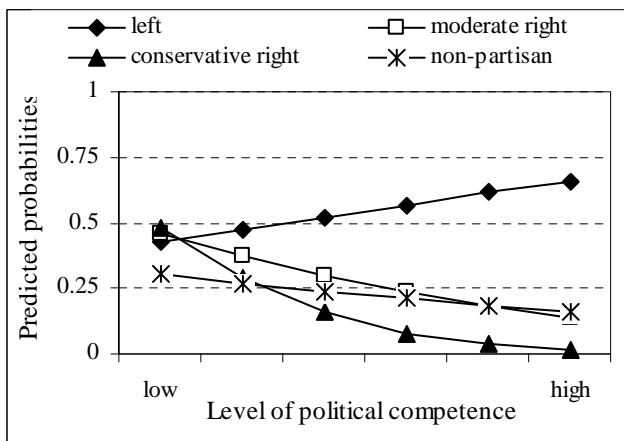
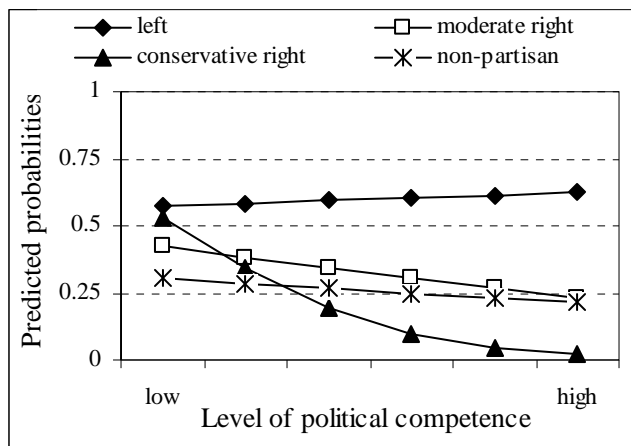a) Grand coalition

b) Centre-left coalition

c) Centre-right coalition
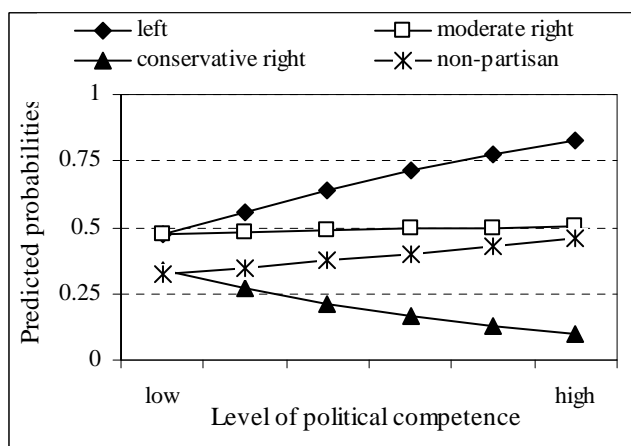
Figures 3 a-b: Predicted probabilities of voting for international openness according to political predispositions, level of political competence and intensity of the campaign
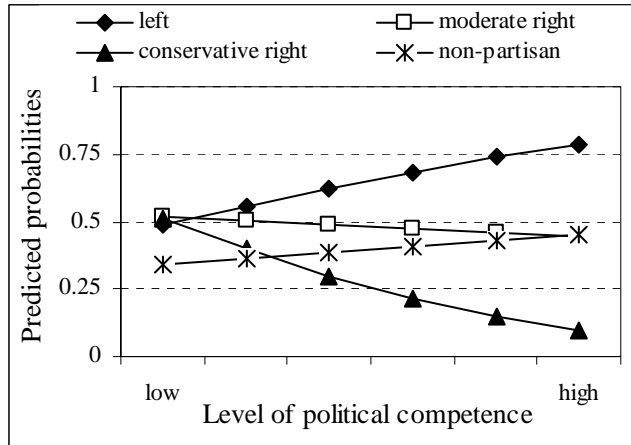
a) Low-intensity campaign
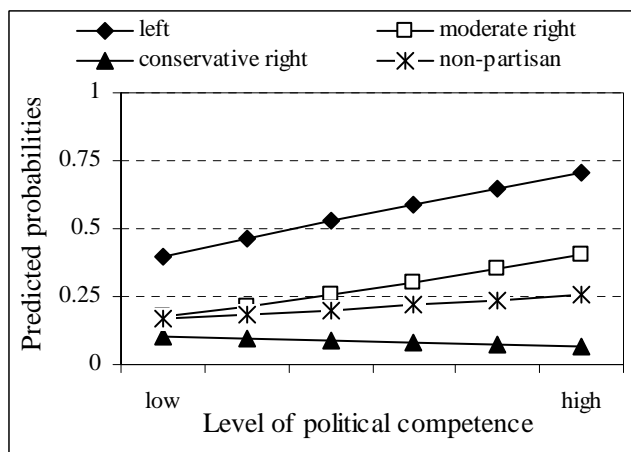

b) High-intensity campaign

Figures 4 a-c: Predicted probabilities of voting for international openness according to political predispositions, level of political competence and direction of the campaign
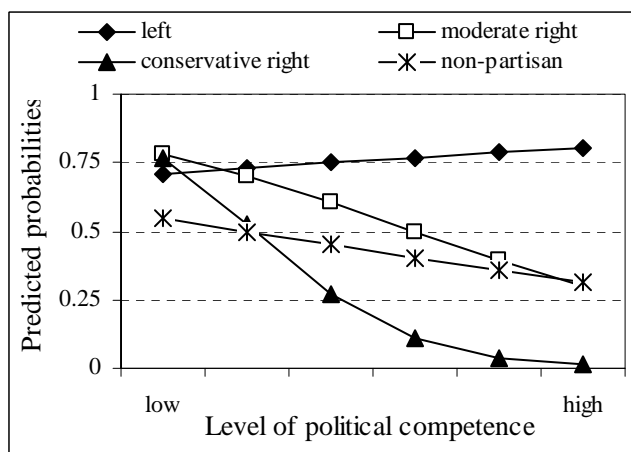
a) Balanced

b) One-sided, in favour of closedness

c) One-sided, in favour of openness

Appendix:

Table 1: List of popular votes on European, immigration and foreign policy in Switzerland (1992-2006)

Date	Name of project
17.05.1992	Federal decree on IMF membership
06.12.1992	Federal decree on EEA membership
12.06.1994	Federal law on Swiss troops for peace-keeping operations (creation of a Swiss Blue Helmets Corps)
12.06.1994	Federal decree on facilitated naturalization for young foreigners
25.09.1994	Federal law on anti-racism
04.12.1994	Federal law on the introduction of compulsory measures in the law on foreigners
25.06.1995	Federal law on the acquisition of real estate by persons abroad (Lex Friedrich)
01.12.1996	Federal decree on the popular initiative against illegal immigration
08.06.1997	Popular initiative "EU membership negotiations: let the people decide!"
13.06.1999	Federal law on asylum
13.06.1999	Federal decree on emergency measures in asylum and migration policy
21.05.2000	Federal decree on the bilateral agreements between Switzerland and the EU
24.09.2000	Popular initiative for the regulation of immigration
04.03.2001	Popular initiative "Yes to Europe!"
10.06.2001	Amendment of the federal law on the armed forces and military administration (armament of Swiss troops abroad)

10.06.2001	Amendment of the federal law on the armed forces and military administration (international cooperation on in-service education)
03.03.2002	Popular initiative "for UN membership"
24.11.2002	Popular initiative against the abuse of asylum law
26.09.2004	Federal decree on the facilitated naturalization for young second-generation foreigners
26.09.2004	Federal decree on the acquisition of citizenship for third-generation foreigners
05.06.2005	Federal decree on the Schengen/Dublin association agreements between Switzerland and the EU
25.09.2005	Federal decree on the extension of the bilateral agreement on the free movement of persons between Switzerland and the EU
24.09.2006	Federal law on foreigners
24.09.2006	Amendment of the federal law on asylum
26.11.2006	Federal law on the cooperation with Eastern European countries

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for the estimated coefficients at the first stage

Variable	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
Non-partisan	-2.467	0.856	-0.532	1.011	25
Left	0.045	2.971	1.358	0.776	25
Moderate right	-0.343	0.933	0.324	0.367	25
Conservative right	-2.514	0.023	-1.288	0.566	25
Competence*non-partisan	-0.675	0.758	0.078	0.345	25
Competence*left	-0.645	1.344	0.290	0.498	25
Competence*moderate right	-0.711	0.721	-0.076	0.397	25
Competence*conservative right	-1.875	0.799	-0.493	0.642	25

Table 3: Campaign effects in direct democratic votes: second level analysis (Unstandardized linear regression coefficients, standard error in parentheses)

	Non-partisan	Left	Moderate right	Conservative right	Competence*non-partisan	Competence*left	Competence* moderate right	Competence* conservative right
Model 1: Type of party coalition (ref: centre-left)								
Constant	-.232	1.082***	0.202	-1.590***	0.186*	0.125	-0.055	-0.560***
	(.247)	(0.196)	(0.254)	(0.306)	(0.086)	(0.135)	(0.112)	(0.164)
Centre-right	-1.151*	-0.733*	-1.503**	-1.176*	-0.384*	0.309	-0.155	-0.212
	(.417)	(0.332)	(0.429)	(0.518)	(0.145)	(0.228)	(0.189)	(0.277)
Grand coalition	.112	-0.258	0.050	0.495	-0.004	0.391	0.110	0.633*
	(.468)	(0.372)	(0.482)	(0.581)	(0.163)	(0.256)	(0.212)	(0.311)
F	4.479*	2.445	6.918**	3.93*	3.844*	1.594	.672	3.150
N	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25
Model 2: Campaign intensity (ref: not intense)								
Constant	-1.147**	0.441	-0.895*	-2.500***	-0.115	0.166	-0.102	-0.836**
	(.387)	(0.298)	(0.427)	(0.470)	(0.136)	(0.185)	(0.144)	(0.234)
Intense	.787	0.591	0.878	0.766	0.256	0.104	-0.011	0.310
	(.480)	(0.369)	(0.530)	(0.583)	(0.169)	(0.229)	(0.178)	(0.291)
F	2.693	2.563	2.745	1.728	2.286	.206	0.004	1.141
N	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20
Model 3: Campaign direction (ref: balanced)								
Constant	-.344	0.878**	-0.133	-1.490**	0.115	0.214	-0.190	-0.673**
	(.330)	(0.257)	(0.383)	(0.385)	(0.115)	(0.158)	(0.109)	(0.180)
One-sided openness	-.119	0.366	-0.029	-1.402	-0.350	0.147	-0.092	-0.445
	(.618)	(0.481)	(0.717)	(0.721)	(0.214)	(0.296)	(0.205)	(0.337)
One-sided closedness	-.892	-0.419	-0.617	1.010	0.021	-0.035	0.332	0.424
	(.539)	(0.420)	(0.626)	(0.629)	(0.187)	(0.259)	(0.179)	(0.294)
F	1.434	1.160	0.530	1.761	1.568	0.172	2.354	2.842
N	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$