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# The Influence of Direct Democracy on Political Interest, Electoral Turnout and Other Forms of Citizens' Participation in Swiss Municipalities

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**ABSTRACT** *Based on the data of a survey conducted among Swiss municipalities, this article inquires into the relationship between different institutional settings of local democracy and the amount of political interest of citizens as well as electoral participation and new forms of citizen participation like participatory planning or local agenda 21. The study identifies six distinct settings of local democracy in Switzerland, ranging from pure direct democracy to representative democracy. The analysis shows that the institutional setting of local democracy has no impact on the political interest of the citizens. It also reveals that instruments of direct democracy do not significantly weaken representative democracy as far as electoral participation is concerned. New forms of citizen participation are predominantly used alongside with means of direct democracy.*

**KEY WORDS:** Swiss local government, electoral participation, variants of Swiss local democracy, direct democracy, institutional settings of Swiss local democracy

## Introduction

Across European countries, local democracy is being changed and reinvented: means of direct democracy are tested and introduced alongside with other participative and deliberative instruments. Hybrid models of local democracy with a broader institutional repertoire for citizen participation emerge (Loughlin *et al.* 2010). The common goal of most of these attempts is to improve the quality of local democracy and to increase citizen participation. Hence, representative democracy, the predominant model of local democracy,

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is challenged. Up to now, however, it is an open question whether these shifts to more participative forms of local democracy really meet their ambitious expectations. Do they really have a long-lasting positive impact on citizens' interest in local politics and are they likely to increase participation, for example, in local elections? What is the link between the different patterns of democracy and other forms of political participation?

The approximately 2,600 Swiss municipalities offer a unique possibility to shed light on these questions<sup>1</sup>. Some of them dispose of a long tradition of direct democratic involvement of citizens into political decision-making, whereas others rely on more representative forms of local democracy. Switzerland therefore represents, as Schmidt (2008, p. 342) puts it rightly, a quasi-experimental context to analyse such questions.

Involving citizens directly into the shaping of public policy, a positive correlation between direct democracy and the political interest of citizens is usually stated (Schmidt 1989, Zimmermann 1999, Lassen 2005, Tolbert and Bowen 2008). As far as the impact of direct democracy on electoral participation is concerned, existing studies show ambiguous results. On the one hand, authors examining the effects of direct democracy on electoral turnout on the local and the state level of the United States found positive effects of initiatives and referendums on electoral participation (Smith 2001, Hajnal and Lewis 2003, Tolbert and Smith 2005). According to these findings, a vivid direct democracy will enhance electoral participation. On the other hand, studies in the context of Switzerland point into another direction: In a study of the 26 Swiss cantons, Freitag and Steffen (2010) found evidence for a negative relationship between direct democracy and electoral participation, and findings for the local level show no evidence of a strong, positive or negative relationship between direct democracy and electoral turnout (Joye 1999, Ladner and Bühlmann 2007). One explanation for the different observations made in the US and the Swiss context could be found in the timing of direct democratic votes: In the United States citizens often have elections and direct democratic decisions scheduled on the same day, whereas Swiss citizens usually will have to go to the ballot box on two separate weekends, one for the elections and the other for direct democratic decisions. Nevertheless, it remains an open question whether direct democracy has a substitutive effect by giving the citizens more possibilities to influence politics and therefore lowering the importance of elections and electoral turnout, or whether it has a mobilising effect by increasing general interest in politics and political participation *tout court*.

Using a comprehensive set of data covering the totality of the Swiss municipalities, this paper shall contribute to a better understanding of the link between direct democratic institutions and both political interest and electoral participation. It starts with a presentation of the different forms of democracy in Swiss municipalities and identifies six institutional settings of local democracy. Subsequently, it addresses the following questions: How do different local democratic settings affect citizens' interest in politics and

their electoral participation? Additionally, we will have a look at the relationship between different institutional settings of local democracy and the spread of new participative instruments such as participative planning or budgeting, round tables or the local agenda 21. The data we use stems from our latest survey among all Swiss municipalities conducted in 2009 and with a response rate of about 58 per cent.

## 1. Institutional settings of local democracy in Switzerland

When looking at the institutional setting of local democracy in the 2,596 Swiss municipalities, we identify a remarkable diversity of solutions (Ladner 2008) ranging from pure representative democracy to some of the most advanced forms of direct democracy to be found anywhere. The abundance of different democratic settings is due to the large local autonomy of the municipalities, which includes also the organisation of their political systems (see Fiechter 2010). Basically, there are two important criteria to distinguish: The first concerns the organisation of the legislative function (assembly or parliament), the second the existence and the use of different means of direct democracy (referendums and initiatives).

### 1.1. Criterion I: citizen assembly or local parliament?

In terms of institutional settings the most drastic distinction among Swiss municipalities is the one between local assemblies and local parliaments. The huge majority of Swiss municipalities (81.9%, *see table 1*) have a municipal

**Table 1.** Frequency of instruments of direct democracy among Swiss municipalities

	Percentage of municipalities with either an assembly system or a local parliament			Percentage of municipalities with direct democratic instruments (referendum and/or initiative)		
	Assembly	Parliament	N=	Existence	Use	$N_{\text{exi}}/N_{\text{use}}=$
<i>by population:</i>						
up to 249	94.9	5.1	119	55.5	23.2	119/69
250–499	88.0	12.0	175	65.7	11.7	175/120
500–999	86.3	13.7	256	78.1	24.5	256/204
1,000–1,999	82.5	17.5	279	79.5	30.4	279/237
2,000–4,999	83.5	16.5	309	83.2	43.2	309/266
5,000–9,999	76.4	23.6	110	90.0	51.5	110/103
10,000–19,999	40.7	59.3	59	94.9	75.9	59/58
20,000 and more	10.5	89.5	19	100.0	85.0	19/20
<i>by region:</i>						
German	94.8	5.2	889	84.9	36.7	889/782
French	62.3	37.7	361	64.5	28.8	361/243
Italian	23.7	76.3	76	60.5	46.2	76/52
All municipalities	81.9	18.1	1,326	77.9	35.4	1,326/1077

assembly, generally called the *Gemeindeversammlung* in the German-speaking, *assemblée communale* in the French-speaking and *assemblea comunale* in the Italian-speaking municipalities. These assemblies are gatherings or meetings of (in theory) all citizens entitled to vote and usually take place two or three times a year. They represent a form of pure direct democracy in the tradition of Rousseau and the ancient Greeks. Recently, local assemblies have been criticised because of the low and presumably selective mobilisation of citizens and the potentially distorted decisions resulting from this situation.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, questions on the quality of deliberation in citizen's assemblies have been raised. As Held puts it, '... the idealisation of face-to-face decision-making in small communities is itself misplaced because the potential defects of small, relatively homogeneous communities – a tendency to conformity, intolerance, and the personalisation of politics – risk being reproduced in all forms of direct political life' (2006, p. 236). Fishkin adds that 'the deliberative competence of mass publics is suspect. It is a dubious accomplishment to give power to the people under conditions when they are not really in a position to exercise that power... aroused publics might, on occasion, be vulnerable to demagoguery' (1991, p. 21). However, in contrast to all theoretical scepticism, no trend away from this form of decision making has been observed in the last 30 years. This is only partly due to the small size of most municipalities; much more important is that citizens trust this form of local democracy.

A minority of Swiss municipalities (18.1%, see Table 1) have a local parliament, usually called the municipal or city council (Ladner 2008, p. 6). The local parliament is a body of between 10 and 125 (for the city of Zurich) representatives, elected – mostly in a proportional representation (PR) system – by the citizens entitled to vote in the municipality. Local parliaments – and the same is true for citizen assemblies – do not produce laws but local ordinances.

A look at some characteristics of the municipalities preferring either system (*table 1*) shows that local assemblies are more prevalent among the small and mid-sized municipalities and among the municipalities in the German-speaking regions. Large municipalities<sup>3</sup> and municipalities in the French- and the Italian-speaking regions rely more often on local parliaments.

### 1.2. Criterion II: direct democratic instruments

A second important distinction can be made between those municipalities offering their citizens the possibility to influence political decisions through means of direct democracy such as the popular initiative and the referendum and those who do not offer these options. We focus on these two instruments because they are institutionalised and direct forms of citizen participation (see Buse and Nelles 1975, Kaase 1997), which lead to binding decisions. This is not the case for the recall – another instrument of direct democracy. The recall allows citizens to remove a public official from office

under certain circumstances (Cronin 1989, p. 2). Additionally, we do not consider the direct election of executive officials to be an act of direct democracy. The members of the executive are in almost all Swiss municipalities directly elected by the citizens.<sup>4</sup>

The popular initiative can be considered as an *accelerator* within the political system since it allows for bringing new topics on the political agenda, which otherwise would not have been treated. The referendum, on the contrary, works as a *break* within the political system because it can prevent decisions by the executive council (or the assembly and parliament) of being implemented (see Linder 1999, Feld and Kirchgässner 2003, p. 6). On the local level, three major types of referendum can be distinguished: First, certain decisions can be subject to a *mandatory referendum* (e.g. change in the local tax-level). Secondly, citizens can demand a *facultative referendum* on certain other decisions (e.g. local planning). Thirdly, public expenses can be subject to a *financial referendum* (mandatory or facultative) when they surpass a certain amount, be it for one-time or for recurring expenses.

As Table 1 also shows, 77.9 per cent of the municipalities know either the referendum or the initiative or both of them<sup>5</sup>. There is also a clear link between the size of municipalities and the existence of these means of direct democracy. In the very small municipalities, all decisions not delegated to the executive are taken within the local assembly. The data also shows that direct democracy instruments are more common in the German-speaking regions as compared to the French- and Italian-speaking, where the institutional settings are traditionally more based on representative democracy.

Assemblies and parliaments do not only formally exist but they are also regularly in use to reach political decisions. Means of direct democracy on the contrary, are an additional possibility to influence political decisions. Whether these direct forms of citizen participation (see Barnes and Kaase 1979) are used, depends – most of the time – on the citizens. However, there are two factors that might have an impact on the use of the direct democratic instruments. First, to successfully claim a vote at the ballot box – be it in form of an initiative or a referendum – the citizens need to collect a certain amount of signatures within a defined period of time. These prerequisites vary across municipalities. Accordingly, the hurdle for launching an initiative or referendum is higher in certain municipalities as compared to others. Second, according to Dahl and Tufte (1974), the complexity of a local political system grows together with the size of a community. This leads to more political activity and in the end to an increased use of instruments of direct democracy (Bützer 2007, p. 32).

Our survey shows that only about a quarter of the municipalities have been confronted with local referendums and initiatives within the last five years.<sup>6</sup> Taking initiatives and referendums together, about 65 per cent of the municipalities were not at all confronted with such direct democratic

activities within the last five years. Additionally it can be said that in a clear majority of the votes on initiatives and referendums, the citizens support the position of the government (see Trechsel 1999).

The use of direct democracy is clearly linked to the size of the municipalities as stated above (see again *table 1*). In municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants, the figures amount to more than 80 per cent. Further data analyses show that in the French-speaking parts of the country the means of direct democracy are not only less widespread but they are also used to a lesser extent when they exist. The Italian-speaking municipalities show the highest use of referendums and initiatives.

### 1.3. Six institutional settings of local democracy

By combining the two criteria and adding the use of the means of direct democracy we can distinguish the following groups of municipalities (see Table 2): Most widespread (about 43 per cent) are municipalities which practice the assembly system and in which there are formally also further direct democratic possibilities to influence political decisions. These possibilities, however, have not been used for the last five years. Of similar importance – about 19 per cent for each group – are assembly municipalities without further means of direct democracy and such where these means exist and are also used by the citizens. Municipalities with a local parliament and additional means of direct democracy are subsumed in two groups – according to the use of direct democracy by the citizens. Both groups account for about 8 per cent of municipalities. Finally, a small group (about three per cent) has a local parliament and no means of direct democracy.

In terms of different patterns of democracy, we have on the one side a pure assembly democracy without any other possibilities to influence local

**Table 2.** The different democratic settings in Swiss municipalities

Legislative body and democratic setting	Means of direct democracy (initiative & referendum)		Number of municipalities	
	Existence	Use	% of all	n=
<i>Assembly</i>				
Setting I	no	–	19.2	254
Setting II	yes	no	43.1	572
Setting III	yes	yes	19.6	260
<i>Parliament</i>				
Setting IV	yes	yes	7.6	101
Setting V	yes	no	7.6	101
Setting VI	no	–	2.9	38
			100.0	1,326



politics at the polls and on the other side we have – although very seldom – local democracies relying entirely on a parliament. Municipalities disposing of additional means of direct democracy without using them in both groups are closer to the two ideal types, whereas municipalities in which initiatives and referendums are used represent some sort of hybrid cases in between.

The crucial question now is whether there are differences between the six identified patterns of local democracy, as far as the citizens' attitudes towards and their involvement in local politics are concerned. In order to get hold of these differences, we do have to keep in mind – as we have seen – that the size of a municipality as well as the language area might be interfering variables. In the next section, we will ask whether different patterns of democracy have an influence on the citizen's interest in politics.

## **2. Institutional settings and citizen interest**

Despite the importance attributed to political interest in democratic theory, remarkably few studies which seek to explain political interest in different contexts can be found. As van Deth and Elff note (2004, p. 478), this may in part be due to the fact that most approaches to political interest are dominated by psychological or socio-psychological theories not taking into account societal or economic factors. But it may also be due to the fact that the analytical position of political interest is often seen as being at the very beginning of a chain of variables explaining various political orientations and political behaviour. Political interest is thus commonly treated as an independent variable rather than as a dependent variable to be explained. Political interest in this sense becomes a prerequisite of political participation. 'Without a minimum of curiosity about politics, citizens would not even be aware of the political process or of the opportunities to defend their well being and contribute to collective decisions' (van Deth and Elff 2004, p. 478). In our study we shall treat political interest differently and look for variables, which may account for differences as far as the political interest of the citizens in a municipality is concerned. Political interest becomes a dependent variable and we are interested to what extent the institutional setting of local democracy influences the political interest in a municipality.

In general, the local sphere is relatively well suited to generate or attract the political interest of the citizens, or, as Pateman put it, 'It is doubtful if the average citizen will ever be as interested in all the decisions made at national level as (s)he would be in those made nearer home' (1970, p. 110). Clearly people have more knowledge, and are more interested in, those problems and issues which have a direct impact on their lives (Held 2006, p. 213; see also Ladner and Bühlmann 2007). On the other hand, Pateman herself relativises the possibility of wide-scale political interest among citizens by concluding – on the basis of large empirical investigations – that 'the outstanding characteristic of most citizens, more especially those in the

lower socio-economic status (SES) groups, is a general lack of interest in politics and political activity and further that widespread non-democratic or authoritarian attitudes exist, again particularly among lower socio-economic status groups' (2003, p. 40). Thus, besides being hard to reach, a large-scale political interest could (according to Pateman) also create problems for the democratic system. Nowadays, however, additional means of citizen participation are considered in order to prevent further political apathy – which can also cause problems for the democratic system (Putnam 2003, p. 161) – rather than to pursue the goal of full-scale involvement. The idea that every citizen can become politically interested and active seems utopian and does not comply with our individualised societies. Therefore we do not think that Pateman's concerns can be brought up in today's discussion on the widening of citizen involvement into (local) politics – also because at first, we do not know whether additional means of citizen participation lead to a generally higher political interest at all. Based on our six institutional settings of local democracy, we would like to inquire into this question.

Which relationship between the institutional settings and the degree of political interest do we expect to find? The following (somehow concurring) assumptions seem plausible:

- Direct democracy brings political deliberation and decision-making closer to the citizens and thus fosters their political interest.
- Representative democracy leads to more intermediate actors, which bring political debates closer to the citizens and help foster political interest.
- Political interest is likely to be higher in municipalities which show a regular use of initiatives and referendums.

According to the statements above, it is hard to tell whether the political interest of the citizens will be higher in a direct or in a representative democratic institutional setting (setting I or VI). In hybrid models (settings III and IV), in which the means of direct democracy are used, political interest should be higher than in the respective models without direct democracy. In formally hybrid models without use of direct democracy (settings II and V), political interest is likely to be the same as in the settings with assembly or parliament only.

However, there is also evidence that means of direct democracy do not *per se* help to (re-) engage citizens into the political process as stated above. In Switzerland, the long standing tradition of direct democracy has not lead to more political equality – meaning that lower socio-economic classes are even more underrepresented than in other (representative) democracies (Trechsel 1999, p. 564). As a conclusion, direct democracy could also be seen more as a gain for already politically interested citizens than as a means to foster political interest among otherwise disengaged citizens.

Especially as far as the hybrid model (setting IV) is concerned, one should also take into consideration the possible impact of direct democratic instruments on representative democracy and its actors. According to Schmidt (2008, p. 349), direct democracy affects the distribution of power in a democratic system: Direct democratic instruments weaken the status of political parties and elected representatives as intermediate actors. Therefore, in the hybrid model, the possible positive effects of representative democracy on citizens' political interest could be less important than in the purely representative setting (VI). However, direct democracy also allows for new actors (and veto players) to enter the political debate and to bring politics closer to the citizens. In fact, in a hybrid model, the benefits for political interest stemming from direct democracy can be considered more important than the loss of influence of the representative institutions. A higher political interest (and knowledge) of citizens can also be considered a prerequisite for direct democracy because instead of delegating decisions on political issues to their representatives, the citizens actually take the decisions themselves. This requires knowledge and political interest since the issues at stake can sometimes be quite complex.

We have seen that there are no clear indications as to how an institutional setting of democracy will affect citizens' interest in politics. However, we assume that the hybrid model can unite the potentially positive influence of both direct and representative democracy and helps to foster the political interest of citizens. Therefore, political interest is supposed to be highest in the municipalities with a mix of representative and direct democracy (setting IV) and lower in the municipalities with purely representative (V, VI) or direct democratic settings (I, II and III). Due to the relatively low attendance at local assemblies, we assume that the political interest of citizens is higher if additional instruments of direct democracy exist beside the local assembly. Therefore political interest should be higher in municipalities of setting III (assembly and referendum and/or initiative) as compared to the municipalities of setting I (assembly only) and setting II (assembly but no use of direct democratic means).

Besides the difficulty of formulating expectations on the degree of political interest under different institutional settings, there is also the problem of quantifying political interest. To measure political interest is not an easy task on individual level. In this study we are interested in the aggregate political interest in a municipality, i.e. to what extent the citizens altogether are interested in politics. As a proxy we asked an 'objective' observer (the local secretary) to estimate the overall interest of the citizens in local politics. We thus use a form of perceived interest in politics. For several reasons, however, we believe that the local secretaries are perfectly able to make a trustworthy assessment of the political interest in a municipality.

Political interest as an overarching concept reveals itself in many different situations. Electoral turnout, which in Switzerland is traditionally low, is

but one indicator for the political interest in a community. Besides the fact that elections take part only once in four years (or five in some cantons), citizens possess many more opportunities to express their political interest on the local level; among others, they can speak at the local assembly, contact their executives or the administration directly, organise in associations or parties, launch petitions, initiatives and referendums. In short, to make a complete list of indicators measuring political interest is an aim hard to reach and if reached, one would still have to rely on partly 'subjective' indicators.<sup>7</sup>

The specific position of the local secretaries makes them reliable persons to survey. They lead the administration of a municipality. They work at the intersection between the administration and the executive (and legislative) body, usually not affiliated to a political party. Furthermore, there is much less fluctuation on the position of the local secretary than, for example, among local executives<sup>8</sup>. Therefore we believe that local secretaries – through their past experiences and their daily contacts with the citizens, the administration and the political representatives – are totally able to make a valid assessment of the political interest in a municipality. A similar study on local autonomy in Switzerland has shown, for example, that the assessment of local autonomy made by the same local secretaries was highly correlated to autonomy as measured by more objective factors such as legal dispositions or decentralisation of the administration (see Fiechter 2010).

Looking at all municipalities together, there are only a few of them with very low or very high levels of interest in local politics (see Figure 1). Most of the municipalities score somewhere in between. The average of 3.8 is slightly

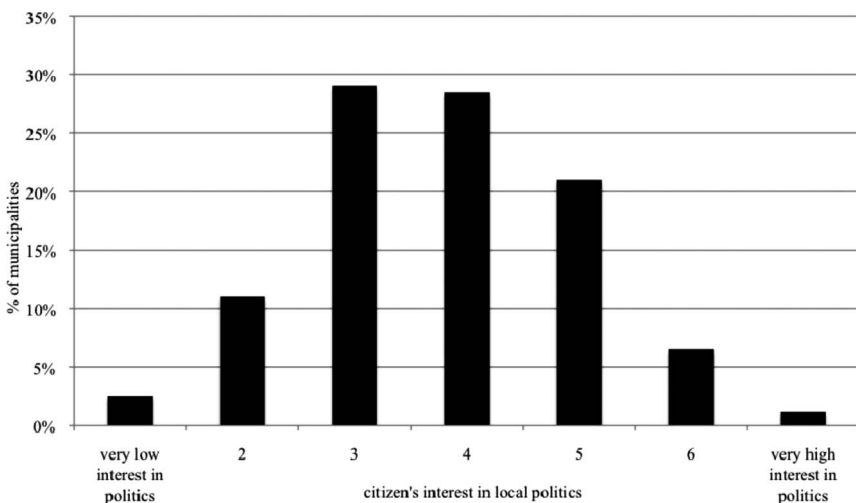
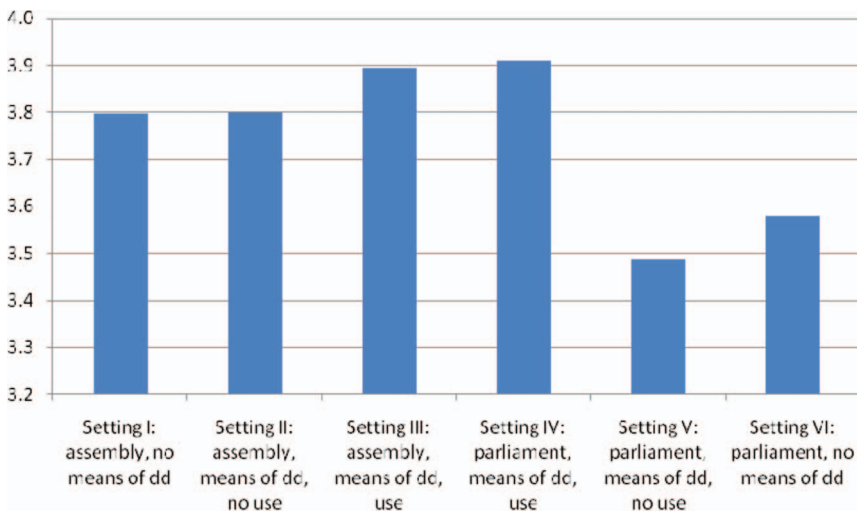


Figure 1. Citizens' interest in local politics, all municipalities. Note: N = 1,395.

below the median value of 4. Interestingly, there is no strong correlation between size and political interest (Pearson corr. =  $-0.10$ , sig =  $.703$ ,  $N = 1,395$ ). Only in the largest municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants is the political interest considerably higher (4.3 in average,  $n = 20$ ). There are, however, differences between the linguistic regions. Political interest is highest in the German-speaking region (3.9;  $n = 919$ ), followed by the Italian-speaking region (3.7;  $n = 83$ ) and the French-speaking region (3.6;  $n = 393$ ).

At first sight, the institutional setting of local democracy seems to matter for the political interest of citizens. Taken all together, the interest is higher in assembly municipalities than in municipalities with a parliament, which supports the idea of the further reaching, more direct and stronger involvement of citizens in assembly systems (see Figure 2). Hybrid systems, in which the means of direct democracy are used, score much more than settings without use or with no means of direct democracy. The best score results for municipalities with a parliament and the use of direct democracy (setting IV). Similarly, the combination of a citizen assembly with additional means of direct democracy (setting II) generates a very high political interest. However, the differences between the different settings, apart from the municipalities with a parliament and no use or no existence of additional means of direct democracy, are not very important and the results might be distorted by other variables such as size and language. In the next step, we shall therefore control for additional variables in a regression model.



**Figure 2.** Institutional setting of local democracy and average interest in local politics.

Note: Y-axis: Citizens' interest in local politics; means; min = 1, max = 7; Ns between 38 and 568.

As a matter of fact, the regression model in Table 3 reveals that neither the existence of a parliament or an assembly, nor the mere existence of additional means of direct democracy, have an impact on political interest. There remains only a slight positive impact of the use of the means of direct democracy on political interest. It is the size of a municipality (with a lower interest in larger municipalities), and first of all the region (with higher interest in the German-speaking region), which explain political interest. The explanatory power of the model, however, is very limited.

**Table 3.** Political interest: regression model

IV:	Standardised regression coefficients
<i>Constant</i>	4.227
Dummy: Means of direct democracy (existence of initiative and/or referendum)	-0.009
Dummy: Use of direct democracy (yes)	0.073*
Dummy: Parliament (not assembly)	0.053
Size of municipality (ln)	-0.092 **
Dummy: German-speaking municipalities (not F, I)	0.151 ***
$R^2$ adj.	0.017 ***
N=	1,023

\* = significant on the 10%-level; \*\* = significant on the 5%-level; \*\*\* = significant on the 1%-level.

The results of our analysis reflect the contradictory expectations about the impact of direct democratic instruments on political interest as described in the introduction to this section. The differences in political interest depend on regional aspect and not entirely on the political setting. There is, however, a slight link between the use of direct democracy and political interest. The question remains open, whether interest is higher because of the use of direct democracy or whether direct democracy is used because citizens are particularly interested in politics. At least we tend to believe that whenever direct democratic instruments are used, citizens are also more interested. If they do not exist, they cannot be used. In this sense they can be considered as a possible prerequisite for higher political interest and surely not as a hindrance. In a next step, we will now analyse the relationship between the institutional settings and electoral participation.

### 3. Institutional settings and electoral participation

Decreasing electoral turnout is in most democracies not only a major concern, but also one of the driving forces of the search for new ways to

attract citizens to politics and to make them participate. Hence, the link between institutional settings of local democracy and electoral turnout is of vital interest. From a Swiss perspective, expectations that direct democracy and – as we will see later on – other forms of citizen participation will have a positive impact on electoral turnout, are rather surprising, since the country – despite its far reaching direct democracy – has a rather low (in general less than 50%) electoral turnout.

There are two different lines of arguments when it comes to explaining the link between direct democracy and electoral turnout. A first model can be called the *mobilisation model*. Direct democracy offers citizens more possibilities to take part in politics. This consequently raises their interest in politics and makes them participate more frequently in elections.<sup>9</sup> The results from the previous section point in this direction, at least when the existing means of direct democracy are also used. The second model can be called the *decreasing importance of elections model*. Extensive possibilities to influence politics directly reduce the attractiveness of elections. In the end, it is always the citizens who have a say. According to the first model, we might expect higher turnout in institutional settings that are more direct democratic, whereas according to the second model, turnout should be lower under these conditions.

In a small-scale study, Joye (1999) has looked at the impact of direct democracy on electoral participation in six Swiss cities. All the cities analysed had institutional settings of local democracy that included direct democratic instruments. However, these instruments were not equally accessible to the citizens of the different cities – meaning that the number of signatures required for a referendum or initiative was higher in certain cities and that fewer political decisions were set to be the subject of a referendum. In his study, Joye found no evidence for the assumptions that direct democracy (in extensive use) will lower electoral participation (1999, p. 99). Accordingly, electoral turnout was not higher in the cities with a stronger representative democracy.

Which level of electoral turnout do we expect in our six institutional settings of local democracy? If political interest is a prerequisite for political participation we should expect a similar pattern for electoral participation as we have found for political interest. In accordance to the *decreasing importance of elections model*, on the contrary, turnout should be slightly lower in municipalities where additional means of direct democracy (initiative and/or referendum) exist. Thus, electoral participation is expected to be lower in setting III (assembly and additional means of direct democracy are used) as compared to setting I (assembly only), and higher in setting V and VI (parliament only and parliament and no use) compared to setting IV (parliament and use of direct democracy).

The dependent variable in this case – electoral turnout in local (executive) elections – has to be handled with care, since there are a number of other variables which might also influence turnout, such as whether the elections

**Table 4.** Electoral participation on local level: different groups of municipalities

	Average turnout (%)	n=		Average turnout (%)	n=
<i>by population:</i>			<i>by region:</i>		
up to 249	48.1	95	German	40.2	840
250–499	45.4	142	French	54.0	299
500–999	46.2	217	Italian	64.9	62
1,000–1,999	46.9	273			
2,000–4,999	44.4	300	<i>by form of ballot:</i>		
5,000–9,999	39.7	99	Election at assembly	25.0	171
10,000–19,999	37.5	57	Ballot box	48.2	997
20,000 and more	39.9	18			
All municipalities	44.9	1201	<i>by electoral system:</i>		
			Majority voting	41.8	863
			PR-voting	53.0	318

take place in the citizen's assembly and the electoral system in use (majority-vs. PR-voting). Additionally, in municipalities with means of direct democracy, local elections might take place together with a popular vote on a contested referendum or initiative. In this case, the popular vote might mobilise additional citizens for the election as well.

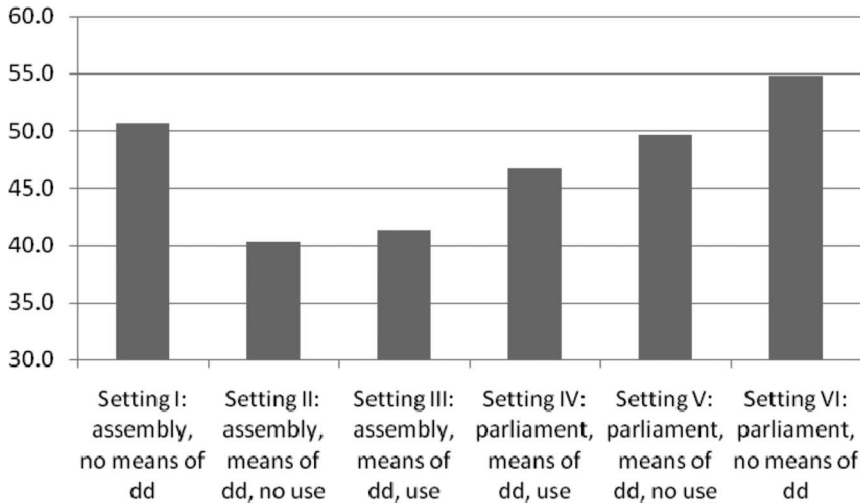
Table 4 reveals an average electoral turnout of 44.9 per cent. Turnout is considerably higher when elections take place at the ballot box (not in an assembly) or in a PR system (see also Ladner and Milner 1999, Ladner and Milner 2006). Turnout decreases with increasing size, and it is considerably higher in French- and Italian-speaking municipalities.

Looking at our six types of institutional settings of local democracy, we find a completely different pattern for electoral participation compared to the one we found for political interest. The existence and also the use of direct democracy (referendum and/or initiative) are likely to lower electoral turnout (see Figure 3).

This is true both for municipalities with an assembly and for municipalities with a parliament. In the municipalities where the parliament decides on everything (setting VI) electoral turnout is highest. The increased decisional power of the parliament in municipalities with no means of direct democracy is likely to increase the importance of elections and thus leads to a higher turnout. If the additional means of direct democracy are also used in municipalities with a parliament, turnout is even a bit lower. In municipalities with an assembly, the use of direct democracy does not go hand in hand with lower turnout. However, in order to make sure that these findings hold true, we have to control for all the other interfering variables as mentioned above.

The regression model in Table 5 supports the previous findings on the negative effect of direct democratic instruments on electoral turnout only partially. There is slight negative tendency of the use of direct democracy if we control for the other variables. The influence, however, is very small compared to the other elements of the political system such as the place the





**Figure 3.** Institutional setting of local democracy and average electoral participation. Note: Y-axis: Electoral participation at local elections in %; Ns between 32 and 501.

**Table 5.** Electoral participation: regression model

IV:	DV: Participation in local executive elections
	Standardised regression coefficients
<i>Constant</i>	97.932
Dummy: Means of direct democracy (existence of initiative and/or referendum)	-0.003
Dummy: Use of direct democracy (yes)	0.056*
Dummy: Parliament (not assembly)	0.062
Dummy: PR-voting (not majority)	0.185***
Dummy: Election at ballot box (not in assembly)	-0.556***
Size of municipality (ln)	-0.330***
Dummy: German-speaking municipalities (not F, I)	-0.183***
$R^2$ adj.	0.426***
N=	866

\* = significant on the 10%-level; \*\* = significant on the 5%-level; \*\*\* = significant on the 1%-level.

elections take place (ballot box vs. assembly) or the electoral system (majority- vs. PR-voting) and compared to the contextual variables covering the size of population, the local population and the region the municipalities belong to. The explanatory power of the model is quite satisfactory ( $R^2$  adj. = 0.43).

Having a parliament instead of an assembly or having additional means of direct democracy can not therefore be seen as important institutional

provisions to foster electoral participation. Variables more directly related to the elections seem to be more important. On the other hand, however, the data do not give any hint to explain low electoral participation through the existence of direct democracy.

#### **4. Institutional settings and new forms of citizen participation**

In various countries, different new forms of integrating citizens into the political decision-making process have become increasingly popular. Instruments like participative planning or budgeting, face-to-face or town meetings, citizen's panels, district budgets or attempts to live up to the standards of the local agenda 21 are discussed and implemented. All these participative instruments have in common that they are applied by local or regional governments – for it is at the local level of the state that an increase in citizen participation is most likely to occur (Lowndes 1995, p. 165).

To what extent do these new forms of citizen participation also exist among Swiss municipalities and how are they linked to direct democracy? On the one hand, it can be argued that it is the openness of the direct democratic culture which fosters other forms of citizen participation. On the other hand, it might well be that direct democracy makes such instruments of participative democracy to be of lesser importance or even obsolete, since the integration of the citizens into the decision-making process is much stronger through the citizen's assembly, the popular initiative and the referendum. In the first case, we expect a positive correlation between the new forms of citizen participation and direct democracy. In the second case, the correlation should be negative.

In our survey, we asked the local secretaries which forms of integrating citizens into the decision-making process (beside the initiative and referendum) existed in their municipality. Additionally, they had to indicate the importance of these forms (see Table 6). If we look at the existence of these forms, the results are quite impressive. Almost 90 per cent of the municipalities hold meetings to inform their citizens and around 40 per cent claim to practice participatory planning and to organize round tables. About one third of the responding municipalities practise mediations, organise workshops on the future of their municipality or has implemented a local agenda 21. If we look at the importance of these instruments, however, it is only the informative meetings that score above medium importance. All the others are of rather weak importance. To simplify further analysis we construct an indicator combining the six variables in Table 8 by the means of a factor analysis<sup>10</sup>.

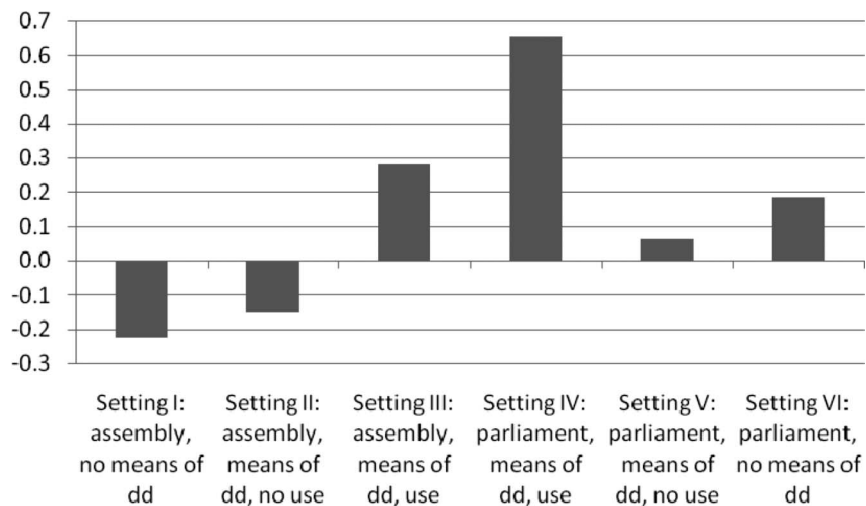
If we compare again the importance of these forms of citizen participation in the municipalities with different institutional settings of local democracy

(see Figure 4), we can see that they are most popular in municipalities with a parliament and additional means of direct democracy which are also used (institutional setting IV). Even among the municipalities with a parliament and no means of or no use of initiatives and referendums (settings V and VI), these instruments are more popular than among assembly municipalities without means of or use of direct democracy (settings I and II). In the assembly municipalities however, the use of direct democracy also seem to foster the importance of other forms of participation. Therefore the importance of other forms of citizen participation seems to depend on the existence of a parliament (and not a citizen assembly; see criterion I) and is – to a lesser extent – also more likely in municipalities which know additional means of direct democracy (initiative and referendum; see criterion II). However, these first results again have to be treated with care, since here as well there might be other interfering variables.

**Table 6.** New forms of citizen participation: existence and average importance

Form of citizen participation	Existence (% of municipalities)	Importance (1–5*)
Information evenings	88.9	3.3
Round tables	43.7	2.3
Participatory planning	40.5	2.6
Mediation	36.9	2.0
Future workshops (Zukunftswerkstatt)	31.5	2.3
Local agenda 21	29.9	1.8

\*1 = not important at all; 5 = very important; N = 1,397.



**Figure 4.** Institutional setting and other forms of participation (factor scores, means). Note: Y-axis: Importance of new forms of citizen participation (factor scores); Ns between 37 and 545.

The bi-variate correlations with the two contextual variables ‘size’ and ‘language’ reveal that these other participatory possibilities are clearly more popular in larger municipalities and slightly more popular in the German-speaking part of the country (see Table 7). The correlations also confirm the positive ‘effect’ of the existence of a parliament and – to a lesser extent – the existence of additional means of direct democracy.

Interesting to note in the above Table 7 is the positive correlation between the aggregate interest in local politics and the existence of other means of participation, in contrast to the lack of similar significant correlation with

**Table 7.** Correlations between different independent variables and the existence of new forms of citizen participation

	Existence of new forms of citizen participation (index-value based on factor scores)
Size of municipality (ln)	0.353***
Dummy: German-speaking municipalities (not F, I)	0.074***
Dummy: Parliament (not assembly)	0.154***
Dummy: Means of direct democracy (existence of initiative and/or referendum)	0.093***
Use of means of direct democracy	0.233***
Institutional setting (1 = direct dem. only, 4 = representative dem. only)	0.158***
Citizen's interest in local politics	0.158***
Turnout in local elections (all municipalities)	0.002
Turnout in local elections (ballot box only)	-0.068*
<i>n</i> =	936 to 1,312

\* = significant on the 10%-level; \*\* = significant on the 5%-level; \*\*\* = significant on the 1%-level.

**Table 8.** New forms of citizen participation: regression model

IV:	DV: Existence of new forms of citizen participation (index-value based on factor scores)
	Standardized regression coefficients
<i>Constant</i>	-2.164
Dummy: Means of direct democracy (existence of initiative and/or referendum)	0.044
Dummy: Use of direct democracy (yes)	0.134***
Dummy: Parliament (not assembly)	0.077
Dummy: German-speaking municipalities (not F, I)	0.042
Size of municipality (ln)	0.283***
$R^2$ <i>adj.</i>	0.142***
<i>N</i> =	977

\* = significant on the 10%-level; \*\* = significant on the 5%-level; \*\*\* = significant on the 1%-level.

electoral participation. This correlation becomes even negative when we look at municipalities with ballot box voting only.

Our regression model finally leaves us with two significant variables (see Table 8) – the size of the municipality and the use of direct democracy. Additional forms of citizen participation are obviously more interesting for municipalities which are bigger; when there is a political culture using the means of direct democracy, there are also other forms of political participation to be found. These forms of citizen participation can help improve representative democracy as they may also belong to the more direct assembly democracy.

## **5. Conclusions**

The remarkable variety of democratic settings in Swiss municipalities allows for analysing the influence of specific patterns of democracy on political interest, electoral turnout and other forms of political participation. The results are not spectacular but rather comforting. The change from an assembly democracy to a local parliament, or the introductions of additional means of direct democracy such as initiatives and referendums, neither fundamentally change the citizens' interest in politics nor does it increase or lower electoral participation in a dramatic way. There are other variables such as the electoral system, the elections themselves or the political issues at stake which are more important. Direct democracy on its own can therefore – this is the first conclusion – not be seen as a panacea against the growing disenchantment of citizens with politics, at least if the enchantment is measured through interest and turnout. Or in other words, there is no clear mobilisation effect for political interest and electoral participation to be found.

Direct democracy does secondly – at least in the Swiss case – not endanger representative democracy. There is no strong evidence for the assumption that elections seriously lose importance if citizens dispose of (and use) additional means of direct democracy. Thus there is no substitutive effect to be found either. The absence of a significant impact of direct democracy on electoral participation confirms the results of previous studies made in the local context of Switzerland (Joye 1999, Ladner and Bühlmann 2007) and – not surprisingly – differs from the findings made in the American context (Smith 2001, Hajnal and Lewis 2003, Tolbert and Smith 2005).

Thirdly, in municipalities with an extensive use of direct democratic instruments, there are also more often other (new) forms of political participation at hand for the citizens. It is in larger municipalities knowing additional means of direct democracy that participative instruments are most common and reach the highest importance. Although they are institutionalised and produce binding decisions, means of direct democracy do not seem to be an obstacle for the introduction of participative instrument with a consultative function only. Of course, the actors of the representative institutions could be tempted to introduce participative

instruments in order to prevent the use of the referendum and initiative, which interfere much more with the decision-making power of the parliament – but this is an unproved allegation. It is more likely that direct democracy and other forms of citizens' participation are – taken all together – a sign of a more vital local democracy in terms of quality rather than in terms of quantity involving many more people.

## Notes

1. The municipalities represent the third and lowest level of the Swiss federal state. They are territorial entities subordinated to the legal regimes of the 26 cantons, which represent the intermediate level in the Swiss federalism.
2. The attendance averages between 2 and 20 per cent of the citizens entitled to vote. Our data reveal that the average attendance is higher in small municipalities.
3. When talking about small, mid-sized and large municipalities in Switzerland, one has to be aware that half of the Swiss municipalities have a population of below 1,000 inhabitants and only 4.5 per cent of all municipalities count more than 10,000 inhabitants (however, they account for 42% of the Swiss population). In a European context, Swiss municipalities are very small.
4. It is only in the Canton of Neuchâtel where municipalities can choose between a direct election or election through the local parliament. Most of them have opted for the direct election.
5. About 60 per cent have the possibility of a referendum and in about 75 per cent of the municipalities the citizens have the right to launch an initiative.
6. The use of referendums within the last five years: never = 75.1%, once = 16.4%, twice = 4.7%, three times and more 3.8% (N=871). The use of initiatives within the last five years: never = 76.4%, once = 14.4%, twice = 4.7%, three times and more 4.4% (N=1,013).
7. Further analyses show a weak significant correlation between political interest and electoral participation or the use of direct democracy, which not only attests the appropriateness of using political interest as a separate concept but also the competence of our respondents that evaluate the political interest in a municipality.
8. See the methodological appendix for detailed information on the function of the local secretary and on the survey we conducted.
9. In a similar way, it can be argued that direct democracy also strengthens, instead of weakens, political parties because it offers them more possibilities to campaign and mobilize their rank and files (see Ladner and Brändle 1999).
10. The factor analysis (varimax) results in a single factor containing 42.6 per cent of the variance. The strongest factor loadings stem from the two variables 'round tables' and 'participatory planning'. The factor scores are saved using the procedure 'regression'.

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## Methodological appendix

### Data source

The data for our study stem from the 5<sup>th</sup> National Survey of Local Secretaries that we have conducted together with fellow researchers between October 2009 and February 2010 and which was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). Prior similar surveys were conducted in 1988, 1994, 1998 and 2005.

The survey was carried out in a written form. In a total of 54 questions, we asked municipalities to provide us information on several aspects of the local political and administrative system including: the local tasks and the provision of services; political and administrative reforms; horizontal and vertical relations and collaborations as well as amalgamation projects; local political institutions and local politics.

There are several good reasons for our choice of the local secretaries as the target group for the questionnaire: First, because of their position at the intersection between the political and the administrative sphere. The local secretaries lead the administration and at the same time take part in the meetings of the local executives. Therefore they possess both administrative and political knowledge. Second, the function of the local secretary can be found in all municipalities. Third, unlike the members of the local executive, the secretaries are usually not affiliated to a political party. Hence, we can expect them to have a more objective (administrative) view on the functioning of their municipality than the members of the executive would have. Fourth, the large amount of small municipalities makes it a reasonable choice to target the local secretaries since even in the smallest municipalities the position of the secretary exists. Moreover, in the political and administrative institutions of small municipalities, the local secretary often is the only person fulfilling his



**Table A.** Participation in the local secretary survey 2009/10 according to size and region

	Number of municipalities	Municipalities Participating (n)	Response rate (in %)
<i>by population:</i>			
up to 249	317	148	46.7
250–499	383	208	54.3
500–999	517	283	54.7
1,000–1,999	525	315	60.0
2,000–4,999	531	336	63.3
5,000–9,999	188	121	64.4
10,000–19,999	101	65	64.4
20,000 and more	34	21	61.8
<i>by region:</i>			
German speaking	1,622	979	60.4
French speaking	785	434	55.3
Italian speaking	189	84	44.5
All municipalities	2,596	1,497	57.7

functions on a part- or fulltime employment basis. Fifth, the local secretaries had proven in the past to be a reliable target group for local surveys. The high response rates and the quality and reliability of the collected data in the previous surveys of 1988, 1994, 1998 and 2005 have shown that the choice of the local secretaries as target group is as good as it gets.

The questionnaire was sent to the local secretaries of all 2,596 Swiss municipalities in the end of October 2009. After six weeks, a follow-up letter was sent to the municipalities who had not yet handed in the questionnaire. Finally in the beginning of 2010, the whole questionnaire was sent once again to the remaining municipalities.

In the end, out of the 2,596 local secretaries, 1,497 have responded to all (or most of) our questions. Our study therefore relies on a comprehensive data base containing information on 57.7 per cent of all Swiss municipalities. As Table A shows, participation was slightly lower among secretaries of the smallest municipalities with less than 250 inhabitants (46.7%). Still, more than half of the municipalities with less than 1,000 inhabitants participated in the study and the response rate is of 60 per cent and more for the larger municipalities. There is some variance in the response rate when looking at the linguistic regions: German speaking municipalities participated more often in the study (60.4%) than the French speaking (55.3%) and especially the Italian speaking (44.5%) municipalities.

Further data analysis shows that the response rates are also on comparable levels between the municipalities of different cantons and of different socioeconomic categories. The high number and the equal distribution of respondents lead to the assumption that our results are not only valid for the participating municipalities but also to a high degree for all Swiss municipalities.