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Do voters turn out more under proportional than majoritarian systems? The evidence from Swiss communal elections

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Abstract

What is the impact of the electoral system on voting turnout? Due to the restricted number of countries and their heterogeneity, cross-national studies do not allow for the required statistical analysis of this much-discussed question. Because they use different electoral systems and exercise important powers, the Swiss communities (communes) offer a useful set of comparable political entities using either a PR or a majority system. Our study of these communities reveals evidence supporting the thesis that participation is higher under PR systems. As expected, PR also goes in hand with more political parties, but only in the smaller communities. This is not the case in the larger communities, yet there is still a positive, though more modest association between PR and turnout in community elections. However, in those PR communities voting turnout is also higher for cantonal and national elections where there are no differences concerning the voting system. This leads us to suggest that there must be more behind PR voting than a simple “mechanical effect”. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Introduction

How does the electoral system affect political participation? Political scientists generally agree that there is a link between the voting system used and the rate of political participation (Nohlen, 1989: 307). And the available evidence appears to weigh on the side of Proportional (PR) systems. According to Lijphart, “recent comparative studies have estimated that the turnout boost from PR is somewhere between 9 and 12 percent” (Lijphart, 1997: 7). We know that countries with proportional systems such as Germany and Austria have high turnout rates in national elections compared to majority countries like the United States and Canada. Yet there are anomalies. One is to be found the country featured in this study. The lowest turnout rate among Western democracies in national elections is found in Switzerland, a PR country. In the 1995 election to the Swiss Lower House (the National Council), the voting turnout was only 42.3 per cent.

The question raised by such anomalies defies the comparative analysis used in existing studies. We do not know for certain whether the “boost” associated with PR is causal, or whether it is due to “cultural” factors causally linked both to a country’s political participation and to its selecting a PR electoral system.

The well-known logic for a causal relationship between PR and higher turnout is certainly plausible. It is argued that the large disproportion between votes and seats in majority systems instils in many citizens the feeling that their vote is not important and thus discourages them from turning out. This is especially true of supporters of weaker parties, which are then themselves discouraged from making an effort. The result is fewer parties and thus less choice, which, in turn, discourages voters from participating.

Yet after summarizing these arguments, Freitag (1994: 27 ff), presents counter-arguments that could lead one to expect a higher rate of participation in majority elections. First, the mechanisms of majority voting are easier to understand and therefore stimulate participation; and second, elections in majority systems may in fact matter more to citizens as they can be expected to lead to clear majorities in government rather than to an unpredictable process of coalition formation within a highly fragmented party system. Whatever the merits of these arguments, they do signal the importance of the party system as an intervening variable (see for example Duverger, 1951; Rae, 1971; Katz, 1980), a factor we shall attempt to take into account in our own analysis.¹

The main problem is not so much logical as empirical. These arguments and counter-arguments are based on empirical evidence consisting of average rates of turnout in national elections in countries with different voting systems. While comparative cross-national analysis has much to recommend it as a research design, its limitations

¹ To assume a simple causality voting system → party system is probably misleading. In culturally heterogeneous contexts proportional voting might not be a cause so much as a consequence of a multi-party system.

come into relief here, most importantly, our inability to isolate the effect of the voting systems from other important variables both institutional and cultural.

An alternative research design based on municipal voting

Comparative analysis takes the high street of political science, following a tradition going back to Aristotle and using a methodology that places a given country in a wider critical perspective that can potentially lead to results valid well beyond the borders of that country. Because of this, comparative analyses are often regarded as quasi-experimental, adding to knowledge under controllable conditions analogous to those in the natural sciences (Berg-Schlosser and Müller-Rommel, 1987: 9). A new development in comparative analysis, though still young when compared to cross-national studies, are comparisons based on subsystems—states (in federal systems) and municipalities; these have now become a recognized form of comparative research (Berg-Schlosser and Müller-Rommel, 1987: 11; Imbeau and Lachapelle, 1993).²

Such studies potentially overcome certain problems inherent in cross-national comparisons. First is the limited number of countries, which tends to make cross-national comparisons unsuitable for research requiring highly sophisticated statistical analysis. This is compounded by the fact that it is often difficult to obtain comparable relevant data for certain of the already limited number of countries. Finally, there are usually significant differences among countries, making it difficult if not impossible to isolate the explanatory variables by controlling intervening variables. On this latter point, the advantages of comparing national subsystems are obvious, as these usually have much more in common than do different countries. They thus meet the demands for a “most similar systems research design” (see Przeworski and Teune, 1970: 31 ff.). In short, comparing subsystems more readily allows for *ceteris paribus* situations: the influence of a single variable is more easily testable and the regularities for theory building more readily identifiable.

Among subsystems, municipalities have the advantage of being far larger in number than states in federal systems. A particularly useful set of comparable local political entities is to be found in the almost 3000 Swiss communes (municipalities) due both to their high number and relative autonomy. The high number means that it is possible to control for the substantial socio-structural (e.g., size, occupational structure) and cultural (language, religion, etc.) differences.

The relative autonomy of Swiss communes is important for this study for two reasons. The first is that participating in Swiss local elections is, less than elsewhere, an election of the “second-order” (see Lijphart, 1997: 5–7), as indicated by the fact that, unlike every other country of which we are aware, turnout is not significantly

² An analysis of the articles in two comparative journals “Comparative Politics” and “Comparative Political Studies” in the years 1968 to 1981 shows that about one fifth of the studies on a single country compare subsystems (regions, cities, communities) (Sigelman and Gadbois, 1983: 284).

lower in local than national elections; in fact it is even higher in small communities. Secondly, the relative autonomy extends to political institutional choices. Hence Swiss communes differ considerably as far as the size of their executives and their voting systems are concerned. An additional useful characteristic, when it comes to explaining turnout in local elections is that communal elections do not take place at the same time as cantonal and national elections, as is the case in some other countries and regions.

The data used in this study stems from the first of two research projects at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Zurich: a 1988 survey of the communal secretaries of all Swiss municipalities (see Ladner, 1991a) and a similar survey conducted in 1994 and financed by the Swiss National Foundation. In the first survey, 81.6 per cent of the 3000 communes responded to the questionnaire; in the second survey, just over 70 per cent responded. Responses to the first survey, which have now been fully processed, provide a sufficiently large and representative enough data base to carry out a statistical analysis and, if need be, control for such factors as size, region and language. In addition to the responses to the questionnaires, the database has been supplemented by information taken from the 1990 census.

It might strike the reader as odd that we use survey data for voting participation. Unfortunately there are no official records bringing together in one place the results of all communal elections in any Canton, let alone for Switzerland as a whole. Fortunately, as our respondents are communal secretaries there are no reasons to doubt the accuracy of their responses. We use the data from the 1988 survey, because the 1994 survey included no questions on voting participation. But in our next survey, planned for the end of 1998, we will ask these questions again.

After describing the voting system in Switzerland, we examine the data to see if any link can be found between the voting system for the communal executive and the rate of participation in these elections. In doing so we seek to contribute to existing knowledge of the relationship between turnout and electoral system choice; at the same time, we hope to further interest in the great potential for comparative research to be found in data from the Swiss communes. Our contribution to knowledge using the Swiss data is not without political relevance, as it is frequently claimed by political actors in Switzerland that changing from majority voting to proportional representation would raise the (unacceptably low) level of political participation.

The Swiss voting system

Compared to other democratic societies, elections are of lesser importance in Switzerland, since the citizens can rationalize non-voting by the fact that undesirable government decisions can be revoked by recourse to referenda and issues neglected by politicians can be brought forward through initiatives. But this does not mean that low Swiss voting turnout should not be a matter of concern: the voting system is not just a means of decision making, it is also a means of integration and legitimiz-

ation (Jost, 1976: 203).³ The electoral system structures the political process and influences the formation of political groups.

An electoral system consists of two key components: the way in which electoral districts are set up and the manner in which votes are cast and counted. Voting districts can be single or multi-member. The geographical division is complicated by the goal of having each seat represent the same number of residents, citizens or eligible voters, while not placing given parties at a disadvantage (“gerrymandering”) by drawing the boundaries around an area where a given party is especially strong. In addition, Swiss practice provides for preserving voting districts based on historical reasons even at the costs of having districts of somewhat unequal size (Aubert, 1981: 222).

For the purposes of this study, which looks at elections to the communal executive, the district for the election is the community itself, which means that—except for by-elections—there are, at a minimum, three seats being contested with the commune forming the single electoral district.

Exceptionally, in certain heterogeneous communities, there are requirements entailing that there be more than one electoral district in order to ensure that minorities (at least geographically concentrated ones) are able to take part in the government.⁴ More often, however, this objective is achieved through informal agreements (see the discussion of “voluntary proportionality” below).

As far as the voting system is concerned, in Switzerland we find both majority and proportional systems. Under the majority system, the voter casts up to as many votes as there are seats. To allocate the seats the majority system takes two different forms: if the candidates winning a plurality of the votes are elected, it is called a “relative majority” or single-ballot system, because it always produces winners (except in the very rare case of a tie). In the second form, the “absolute majority system”, a candidate needs a minimum percentage of the votes, equivalent to 50% plus 1 of the votes cast per seat, to be elected. If the first ballot does not fill all the seats, a second ballot based on a relative majority takes place for the remaining ones, with the candidate(s) winning the highest number of votes elected.

In proportional elections the votes do not go to candidates but to political groups (parties). The seats are allocated to each group in accordance to their share of the votes through either the Hagenbach-Bischoff/d’Hondt or Hare quota method. In some cases the groups can set up a combined list (“Listenverbindung”). Voters can also register their preferences among candidates from the lists which will affect who in fact gets elected: candidates can, in many cases, be moved from one list to another (“Panaschieren”) or doubled (“Kumulieren”) (see Nohlen, 1989: 78 ff.; Farrell, 1997: 76–7).

Proportional elections are more recent than majority elections. They were “discovered” in the middle of the last century and were adopted by certain cantons as early

³ See Ladner (1991a: chap. 4).

⁴ See for example special minority agreements in the canton of Berne or the delegation of executive members of local communities to the executive of the municipal community in Thurgau.

as the 1890s (Aubert, 1981: 223). Neuenburg and Tessin were the earliest to use proportional representation in their elections to the cantonal parliaments. In the case of Tessin it was the federal authorities that imposed the change as a measure to reduce the conflict resulting from the disproportionate election results. In 1892 Geneva also changed to proportional representation in order to give the Catholics better representation as the bare majority of Protestants clearly dominated Genevan governments under the majority system (Lakeman and Lambert, 1959: 169). The most recent moves to PR were Waadt in 1948 and Schaffhausen in 1954, leaving only the rural German-speaking Cantons of Appenzell-Innerrhoden, Appenzell-Ausserrhoden, Uri, and Graubünden with a majority system for their cantonal elections (Kriesi, 1995: 143), and leaving us with too small and unrepresentative a group to use cantonal voting turnout for our comparative purposes.

In many European countries proportional voting was introduced after World War I along with the introduction of universal suffrage. It was thus closely linked to the restructuring of the traditional party system as a consequence of the rise of working-class parties (see Nohlen, 1989: 247). We see this in Switzerland at the national level in the first PR elections which took place in 1919 and which considerably altered the balance of power (Table 1). The Radicals (FDP) lost almost half of their seats to the Social Democrats (SP) and the Agrarian party (SVP).

More widely, proportionality is a principle engrained in the workings of Swiss consociational democracy (“Konkordanzdemokratie”). Indeed, the phenomenon of “voluntary proportionality” (“freiwilliger Proporz”) plays an important if usually unnoticed role. At the communal and cantonal level where majority electoral systems are in use, the leading party often abstains from presenting a full slate of candidates to make room for opposition party candidates to win seats. At the national level, the “Zauberformel”, the informal agreement which since 1959 has effectively guaranteed 2 seats to the Radical Democrats (FDP), Christian Democrats (CVP), Social Democrats (SP) and one to the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) on the federal executive, is nothing else but a form of a voluntary proportionality. Only in this case, as the members of the Federal Council are not elected directly by the citizens (as at the cantonal and communal level), but by Parliament, the responsibility lies entirely in the hands of the parties and their MPs.

Table 1

The introduction of PR and its effect on the balance of power in the national council

Seats	1917	1919
Radical Democrats (FDP)	104	58
Christian Democrats (CVP)	41	41
Social Democrats (SP)	19	41
Liberal Party (LPS)	13	9
Swiss People’s Party (SVP)	0	31
Others	12	9
Total	189	189

Source: Kriesi (1995: 142).

Of course, in smaller communities abstaining from running for all seats is not always voluntary, as it can be difficult to find suitable candidates for each available seat. Better also sometimes to present fewer candidates and thus avoid the risk of possible defeat, especially when running against incumbents. One common strategy is for the leading party to abstain from running for all seats, but only under certain conditions. The smaller parties are offered a number of seats in accordance to their strength when and if their candidates are approved by the governing party.

Voluntary proportionality is a principle that goes back many years. When democratic elections with majority voting began in the middle of the last century, the parties typically chose candidates to reflect the distinct linguistic and religious composition of the districts (Gruner, 1984: 149). The next step toward the Swiss consociational system was for minority parties to take part in cantonal governments. The consociational principle can be set against the logic of majority systems which reduces the constraints on government's ability to decide and act. Majority systems favour large parties because only they are able to mobilize the high percentage of votes needed. In contrast, proportional systems favour greater integration of the different political forces and a wider sharing of power and responsibility. Nevertheless, practical concerns do enter here in the use of "quorums": to keep small, unrepresentative groups from winning seats, a number of jurisdictions using PR have adopted a minimum of 5, 8 or even 10 per cent of votes needed to gain a seat. Quorums are more common in the French speaking Cantons.

Oponents of the use of PR to elect the executive argue that it results in a heterogeneous executive less able to govern efficiently. Hence there are frequent calls in Switzerland for the executive to be elected through a majority system and the legislature in a PR-System. The reasoning is that a certain degree of variety and conflict is welcome in the legislature but disruptive in the executive, which, in order to act coherently, needs to be homogeneous. Yet the present pattern, especially at the level of the commune, is far more complex than this logic would lead us to expect.

- The National Level. Election to the lower house ("Nationalrat") is proportional. However, five cantons (Uri, Obwalden, Nidwalden, Glarus and Appenzell-Innerrhoden) have only one seat in the National Council ("Lower house"), making election to it necessarily based on a majority vote. All members of the Ständerat ("Upper house"), except for those from Jura, are elected by majority vote.
- The Cantonal Level. For the cantons Tessin and Zug the elections for the executive follow PR; in the cantons Appenzell-Ausserrhoden, Appenzell-Innerrhoden, and Graubünden the assembly is elected in a majority vote (see Stadlin, 1990; Lutz and Strohmman, 1998).
- The Communal level. Most communal executives are elected via majority systems, but the proportional system is much more widespread than it is usually thought. Nearly 30 per cent of the Swiss communes elect their executive in a proportional system (see Table 2). In addition, about 17 per cent of the communities have a parliament as well as an executive, of which 77 per cent of the parliaments are elected through PR. Typically the 23 per cent using majority voting for parliament elections are quite small in size. Hence we concentrate on executive

Table 2
Electoral system for communal executives

	Percentage	Number of communities (<i>N</i>)
Majority voting	71.6	1695
Proportional system	28.4	671
Total	100.0	2366

Source: Communal Secretary Survey (1988), see Ladner (1991a).

elections which take place in all communities, with a sufficient number of communities with both majority and PR elections.

As a rule, the electoral system of the communes is governed by cantonal legislation. But several cantons either leave the matter entirely up to the communes or allow them to choose between majority and PR voting. There are two cantons in which all communal executives are chosen via the PR system, Zug and Tessin, while 16 others impose the majority system. In the remaining Cantons—Bern, Fribourg, Solothurn, Basel-Land, Graubünden, Thurgau, Wallis, and Jura—some communes use PR and some use majority systems of election (see Table 3). In four of these, the Valais, Solothurn, Jura and Freiburg, more than half the communes use PR to elect their executives. PR is also significant in the canton of Berne, but quite rare in the remaining three.

Generally speaking, we find a connection between the voting system chosen and

Table 3
Voting system for the communal executive

Cantons where the majority system is used in all communities:

Zurich, Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Obwalden, Nidwalden, Glarus, Basel-Stadt, Schaffhausen, Appenzell-Ausserrhoden, Appenzell-Innerrhoden, St. Gallen, Aargau, Vaud, Neuchâtel, Geneva

Cantons where the proportional system is used in all communities:

Zug, Tessin

Cantons with both systems (in per cent):

	Majority system	PR system	Responding communities (<i>N</i>)
Wallis	21	79	123
Solothurn	26	74	104
Jura	42	58	71
Fribourg	47	53	191
Berne	60	40	341
Basel-Land	83	17	65
Thurgau	95	5	106
Graubünde	99	1	151

Source: Communal Secretary Survey (1988), see Ladner (1991a).

the size of the community, a connection that we would expect. The fact that a proportional system requires political parties or at least organized groups of citizens to present a list demands a degree of political organization smaller communities can find it difficult to attain.⁵ In general, given the choice between PR and majority systems, the smaller communes choose the latter and the larger ones the former to elect their executives. As Table 4 indicates, while only 15 per cent of the smallest communities use PR, a figure that rises to 70 per cent in the larger communities, those with 5000 or more inhabitants. These latter do not seem especially concerned about having their more heterogeneous population proportionately represented in the executive.

Table 4

Voting system for the communal executive and size of the community (in per cent)

(a) All communities			
	Majority	PR	No of responding communities
1–249	78.7	21.3	450
250–499	73.7	26.3	429
500–999	72.1	27.9	441
1000–1999	66.4	33.6	425
2000–4999	70.4	29.6	372
5000–9999	68.1	31.9	135
10 000–	66.7	33.3	99
Total	71.9	28.1	2351
(b) Only in those cantons in which the communes can choose between the two voting systems (Berne, Fribourg, Solothurn, Basel-Land, Graubünden, Thurgau, Walllis, Jura)			
	Majority	PR	No of responding communities
1–249	82.9	17.1	269
250–499	70.4	29.6	243
500–999	60.6	39.4	218
1000–1999	45.1	54.9	195
2000–4999	33.3	66.7	141
5000–9999	25.6	74.4	43
10 000–	22.9	77.1	35
Total	59.4	40.6	1144

Source: Communal Secretary Survey (1988), see Ladner (1991a).

⁵ This difficulty is not insurmountable, as demonstrated by the canton of Tessin, where even the very small communities use PR.

The electoral system and participation in Swiss communal elections

The overall average turnout in communal elections in the over 2300 municipalities in the survey conforms to initial expectations. Participation in the 28 per cent of the communities using PR averaged 72 per cent, compared to only 53 per cent in the 72 per cent of communities using a majority system. Such a difference is, of course, statistically highly significant. It remains significant—58 per cent in majority communities compared to 73 per cent in proportional communities—after we eliminate from our survey the approximately 15 per cent of the (as a rule very small) communities in which executive elections take place not at the polls but at a communal assembly (town meeting) (see Ladner, 1991a: 68). The average participation rate at communal assemblies is, as expected, much lower than for votes cast at the polls, since the costs of participation are much higher.

As noted above, community size has been a significant factor governing the selection of electoral system. The literature on political participation offers two different and contradictory theses concerning the effect of size (Verba and Nie, 1972). According to the “mobilization model”, participation increases with the size of the community as there are more numerous and more powerful political organizations mobilizing the citizens and politicizing the decision-making process. According to the “decline-of-community model” direct participation in the more anonymous cities is lower than in the smaller towns because the citizens are less integrated into the life of the community.

The Swiss data seems to support the latter model. On average, participation is significantly lower in the cities than in the towns (see Ladner, 1991b: 76). Clearly, then, to see the real influence of the electoral system on political participation we shall need to control for the size of the community. Moreover, given Switzerland’s regional cultural differences, differences that could very well affect the rate of participation, we begin by controlling for these variables by limiting our observations to those cantons in which both voting systems are in common use, here defined as having a minimum of 20 per cent of communes using each system. These are the five cantons of Berne, Fribourg, Solothurn, Wallis and Jura.

Without controlling for size, the differences in the rate of participation for the elections of the executives in the five cantons under the two systems conform to our overall finding: PR elections have a noticeably higher degree of participation: the average turnout for majority elections is about 50 per cent, while for PR elections it is 71 per cent (see Table 5). Size, as noted above, is clearly a factor in the 5 cantons, as Table 5 shows, unlike larger ones, smaller communities usually choose majority voting.

In the five cantons we find only 15 cities with over 5000 inhabitants, and of these, only 4 use a majority system. While turnout is still higher in the 11 PR cities, it is not statistically significant given these low numbers. For the smaller communities, however, the differences between majority and PR communities are considerable (above 20 per cent at least). But before drawing any conclusions, we must exclude those with communal assembly voting which we know to be most common in the smaller communities and to lead to lower participation than voting at the polls (see

Table 5

Voting system and participation at the elections for the communal executive in the five cantons and the size of the communities

	Majority average %	N =	PR average %	N =	Difference	Significance
All communities	50	341	71	432	21	**
1–49	56	216	78	109	22	**
500–1999	38	101	75	180	37	**
2000–4999	39	20	67	93	28	**
5000–9999	51	2	58	30	7	n.s.
10 000–	48	2	52	20	4	n.s.

*Significance (F) 0.05; **Significance (F) 0.001

Source: Communal Secretary Survey (1988), see Ladner (1991a).

Ladner, 1991b: 75). This means excluding a number of smaller communities from the large Canton of Berne, since, of the five mixed cantons included in the analysis, it is only Berne which allows elections to be held either at communal assemblies or at the polls.

The results are presented in Table 6. Because majority communities are concentrated among the high-turnout small towns and villages, and the PR systems in the low-turnout cities, the average difference between majority communities and PR communities voting at the polls is only 5 per cent (see Table 6). But if we control for size by comparing communities of more or less equal size, the differences—while remaining significant—increase, at least for the communes smaller than 5000 inhabitants where the difference is between 9 and 13 per cent.

Thus our results for Swiss communes conform quite closely to the predictions

Table 6

Voting system and participation at the elections for the communal executive in the five cantons and the size of the communities, controlled for the place of elections

	Majority average %	N =	PR average %	N =	Difference	Significance
Polls	67	185	72	428	5	**
Communal ass.	30	156	29	4	– 1	n.s.
Polls	67	185	72	428	5	**
1–499	69	134	78	107	9	**
500–1999	63	35	75	178	12	**
2000–4999	56	12	67	93	13	*
5000–9999	51	2	58	30	7	n.s.
10 000–	48	2	52	20	4	n.s.

*Significance (F) 0.05; **Significance (F) 0.001

Source: Communal Secretary Survey (1988), see Ladner (1991a).

derived from the cross-national literature. In the smaller communities in the Cantons that use both systems, about 10–12 percent more people turn out to vote at the polls to choose their communal executives under PR than under majority electoral systems, just the turnout boost identified by Lijphart. This is an important step forward since it allows us to look elsewhere than for cultural differences to account for the higher participation under PR voting.

Party mobilization as intervening variable

Our data allows us to examine another possible explanation mentioned in the introduction, namely the relationship between the electoral system and the party system. In PR systems, the hurdles that must be overcome to win a seat are lower, hence one can expect candidates from a larger number of political groups to compete under PR. This proves to be clearly the case when one looks at the averages of all Swiss communities. Excluding the communities that elect their executive at communal assemblies, Table 7 shows that, on average, there are just under twice as many parties in PR than in majority communities. We know also that in PR communities the presence of parties other than the four parties forming the government on national level (Bundesratsparteien) is twice as frequent, 20 per cent of majority communities compared to 40 per cent of PR communities (see Ladner, 1991a: 171). Yet, interestingly, the positive effect of the PR system on the representation of smaller parties holds only in smaller communities. Table 8 shows that the relationship between the number of parties and the electoral system vanishes once a certain threshold of size is attained.⁶

Table 7

Voting system and the number of political parties, by size of the community, only communities with elections at the polls

	Majority		PR		Significance
	Average No.	N =	Average No.	N =	
All communities	1.5	199	2.9	442	**
1–499	1.2	144	1.8	112	*
500–1999	1.8	38	2.7	187	**
2000–4999	3.2	12	3.4	93	n.s.
5000–9999	5.5	2	4.4	30	n.s.
10 000–	6.7	3	6.6	20	n.s.

*Significance (F) 0.05; **Significance (F) 0.001

Source: Communal Secretary Survey (1988), see Ladner (1991a).

⁶ This observation partly contradicts, of course, Duverger's Law that majority voting leads to two party systems. One explanation lies in the fact that the parties are physically present due to proportional elections at higher levels combined with practice of "voluntary proportionality" mentioned above. Majority elections in Switzerland are thus not really winner-take-all elections.

Table 8
Voting system, participation at the elections for the communal executive and number of parties

	Majority			PR			Difference participation	Significance.
	Average participation	Parties	N =	Average participation	Parties	N =		
5000–9999	43	5.0	90	60	4.4	46	18	**
10 000–	42	6.9	61	50	6.6	34	8	**

*Significance (F) 0.05; **Significance (F) 0.001

Source: Communal Secretary Survey (1998), see Ladner (1991a).

A story is thus beginning to emerge from our data. When we look at elections for the executives in the communities where voting takes place at the polls in the five Swiss cantons in which both majority and PR systems are used, proportional systems do have a positive influence on voting participation. The only uncertainty relates to whether the effect declines to insignificance for the larger municipalities. Moreover, this effect is also linked to the party system, what has been termed the mobilization effect. Whereas in smaller communities PR goes hand in hand with more political parties (and thus more candidates), we do not see evidence of this mobilization effect for the larger communities where even the smaller national parties have good reason to organize under either system. Since we know that the turnout boost coming from PR is highest in the smaller communities, it can be tentatively concluded that, independently of the electoral systems, the number of parties affects turnout. Where parties are numerous to begin with, a PR electoral system is more limited in its effect on turnout.

Is there a boost to turnout due to PR unrelated to party mobilization?

Our discussion concerning the effects of PR on the larger communities is marred by the small number of such communities to be found in the five mixed cantons, especially of those using majority electoral systems. We have thus chosen to gather (in Table 8) the data on turnout and the number of parties for the larger communities (5000 plus inhabitants) in the entire country. The information is comparable to that in Tables 6 and 7 except it is for all Swiss cities, not just those in the five cantons. In doing so, of course, we are no longer controlling for “cultural differences”. Nevertheless, since, more often than not, the larger towns and cities are the more heterogeneous, the impact of such cultural differences on turnout is likely to be somewhat mitigated. This is especially true of the largest municipalities, those with over 10 000 in population. These 95 provide us with an especially useful sub-sample since, 61 and 34 respectively, use majority and proportional elections.

The numbers for larger towns and cities in Switzerland as a whole in Table 8 are quite revealing. Once again we see no sign whatsoever of greater numbers of parties

taking part in PR than in majority elections—if anything, it is the other way around—but we do see higher turnout in the PR cities in the range expected by the cross-national literature. This is still the case if we limit ourselves to the 95 cities with over 10 000 inhabitants, for which we get a modest but still significant average difference of 8 percent.

Why is there higher turnout in the PR cities?

However, before concluding that PR boosts turnout directly and not just through mobilizing more political parties, we should stop to consider whether, compared to the majority cities, there is anything to distinguish the PR cities which might explain the high-turnout. Is it possible that they concentrated in regions that are culturally predisposed toward higher political participation, an argument parallel to that advanced in the discussion of the cross-national data?

Fortunately the Swiss data affords us a means of testing this claim by comparing the national and cantonal-level election participation rates with those for the communal executive elections for the two groups of cities. If the explanation is cultural, then we should see the same differences in participation appear at these other two levels. The data is found in Table 9 below.

The results are interesting indeed. There is a “cultural” factor at work, since those communities using PR to elect their communal executives not only have higher turnout than those using majority systems in these elections, but also in cantonal⁷ and national legislative elections where the electoral system used is the same. We are

Table 9
Voting system and turnout at communal, cantonal and national elections

	Level	Majority	N	PR	N	difference	significance
2–4999	communal	50	237	68	110	18	**
	cantonal	45	234	54	105	9	**
	national	46	231	53	108	7	**
5–9999	communal	43	90	60	46	17	**
	cantonal	41	89	51	42	10	**
	national	43	88	50	43	7	**
10 000	communal	42	61	50	34	8	**
	cantonal	41	61	46	32	5	*
	national	43	60	47	33	4	*

*Significance (F) 0.05; **Significance (F) 0.001

Source: Communal Secretary Survey (1998), see Ladner (1991a).

⁷ We tested to see if cantonal voting level differences might be attributed to differences in electoral systems at that level since there are five cantons that use a majority system for their cantonal elections and all five are predominantly rural German-speaking cantons. This was done by redoing Table 9 excluding the majority cantons. The results remained pretty much the same.

not in a position here to investigate what the basis of this “cultural” difference might be. It could indeed be that the cultural difference is an artifact of the workings of the electoral system, that is, that the tendency toward higher participation at the communal level has found its way to voting at the other levels.

Whatever the case may be, there is more than this “cultural” factor at work. As we see in Table 9, the average difference in turnout at the national and cantonal level is not as great as that for voting at the communal level. In the 2000 to 5000 population category, the average difference is twice as high or more in communal level voting; it is 10 and 7 percent versus 17 in the 5000–10 000 category, and 4 and 5 versus 8 at the 10 000 plus level. The effect of PR versus “cultural” differences seems to lessen as size increases, but it does not disappear. Taking the smaller of the differences, PR is seen to boost turnout between 3 and 7 per cent.

Conclusion

Although Switzerland offers quite unique data to investigate the relationship between voting system and political participation, we are not fully able to answer all the questions posed at the outset. We found that in our more homogeneous sample composed of the communities of five mixed cantons, for the smaller communes (up to 5000 inhabitants), voting participation is significantly higher under PR systems. We also found that for a subset of smaller communities (up to 2000 inhabitants), PR voting clearly leads to a higher number of parties. Once we get to bigger communities, there is still a higher level of participation in cities with PR systems, yet no greater number of parties. Moreover, this boost cannot be attributed entirely to cultural factors: additional turnout in the order of 3 to 7 per cent seems to be attributable to the electoral system in and of itself. We say “seems” only because, due to the number of cities involved, the differences are not quite large enough to allow for a definitive statement.

We shall be in a position to test these assertions against the numbers from the next survey scheduled for Fall 1998. For now we can offer as a tentative conclusion that both those who see a causal link between PR and high turnout are right—but so, to some extent, are their critics. PR does boost the level of participation, but that boost is lessened once we control for the effect of cultural differences. In addition, an important part of that boost is affected through increasing the number of parties taking part. Hence, if other mechanisms affect the number of parties when it comes to parties participating in local elections, as is the case for the larger Swiss communes, then the effect of PR is reduced.

In the cross-national comparisons, however, the number of parties participating is, as a rule, very closely related to the electoral system, which is part of the explanation for the statistical relationship between PR and higher turnout. Is the rest cultural? Our data suggests that some of it is—but not all of it. What is the mechanism of that relationship? The standard explanation has to do with the fact that there are far fewer “wasted” votes under PR. Milner (1997) argues that it is something more profound—having to do with PR contributing to a more politically informed population. If nothing else, our study shows that these are fruitful areas for further investigation.

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