

## Size and direct democracy at the local level: the case of Switzerland

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Received 11 November 2001; in revised form 11 April 2002

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**Abstract.** After a brief look the most important characteristics of Swiss municipalities, this paper describes the municipalities' organization according to the principles of direct democracy and means of decisionmaking. Drawing on empirical findings, it then examines size effects more closely. Whether legislative decisions are taken in a direct democratic assembly or in a representative parliament largely depends on the size of a municipality: smaller municipalities have an assembly, larger ones a parliament. By contrast, direct democratic instruments such as initiatives and referendums are not necessarily more widespread in larger municipalities. The use of initiatives and referendums is higher in larger municipalities, but assembly attendance and election turnout clearly decreases with increasing municipal size. The strength of the size effect varies considerably depending on the different variables of direct democracy under scrutiny.

### Introduction

This paper focuses on direct democracy in Swiss municipalities, and more particularly on the relationship between size and direct democracy at the local level. After a brief look at some of the most important characteristics of the Swiss municipalities it describes the extent to which the municipalities are organized on the principles of direct democracy and what kind of direct democratic means of decisionmaking exist. Drawing on empirical findings, it then reviews the effects of size on the organization of the local political systems, the existence of direct democratic instruments and their use, and on the participation of the citizens. The results hopefully shed some light on two fundamental assumptions concerning direct democracy. The first concerns Rousseau's argument that direct democracy is necessarily linked to smallness, and the second is that direct democracy has a positive impact on participation. In the first argument the effect of size is directly addressed, whereas in the second, size is seen as a conditioning variable which is related to direct democracy and also affects participation.

Direct democracy at the local level has been of particular interest in recent years. If there is anything like a trend towards direct democracy, it takes place in the municipalities. Here, direct democracy is seen as a panacea for the increasing disenchantment with politics, politicians, and political parties (for Germany see, for example, Evers, 1991, page 8; von Alemann, 1996, pages 7f; for Great Britain see *The Economist* 1996). In Germany, a country where direct democratic elements are traditionally weak and the representative strong at the national level (Luthardt, 1994; Schmidt, 2000, page 355), direct democracy plays an increasingly important role in the municipalities (Gabriel, 1999). In Britain the Blair government has committed itself to a modernization of local government in which enhanced local democracy plays an important part (see Blair, 1998). Italy is another European country, where debates about the extension of direct democracy at the local level also took place in the 1990s (see Rotelli, 1999).

Together with the US state of California (Holman, 1999), Switzerland remains the country with the most intensive use of and the most far-reaching forms of direct democracy. Wollmann (2001, page 39) is probably right when he concludes that it is

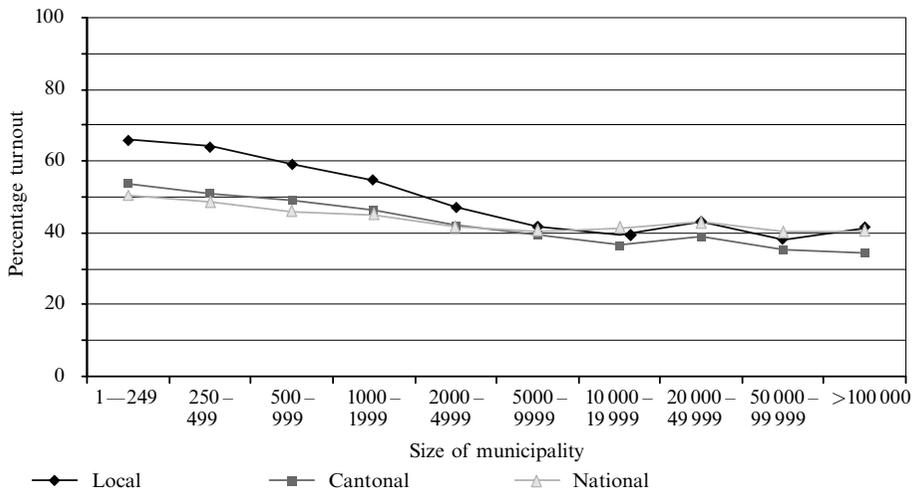
not only institutional reasons (for example, entry hurdles), but factors related to political culture which have brought this about.

Because there are no official statistics available on Swiss direct democracy on a local level, we have to rely largely on survey data. The data presented here stem from three nationwide surveys of local secretaries, that is, municipal chief officials who provide the link between the elected executive and the administration. These officials usually have the best insight into local politics.<sup>(1)</sup>

### Swiss municipalities

The most significant feature of the 2900 Swiss municipalities is their small size. More than half of them have fewer than 1000 inhabitants. However, such municipalities account for only a small percentage of the population. In practice, almost half the Swiss population lives in municipalities with more than 10 000 inhabitants. These larger municipalities, however, account for only 4% of all municipalities.

The small size of Swiss municipalities provides an important analytical advantage. Size effects are likely to be especially salient in lower size brackets. An examination of turnout figures at local elections, for example, supports this argument (see figure 1). It is precisely in municipalities with fewer than 5000 inhabitants where size effects are strongest. In many other countries such small municipalities have disappeared. There is also a threshold effect similar to the one Dahl and Tufte (1973, page 63) reported for a Swedish study whereby size effects disappear in municipalities with between 5000 and 8000 inhabitants. Figure 1 finally reveals another interesting result: Switzerland belongs to those countries where turnout is higher at the lowest political level.



**Figure 1.** Turnout on all three levels and size of municipality. At the national and cantonal level, elections are for the respective parliaments; at the local level, the elections are for the local executive.

<sup>(1)</sup>The 1998 survey was part of a larger research project on reforms at the local level supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation in the course of the priority programme for the social sciences (SPP) "Switzerland: Towards the Future". The survey used a questionnaire sent to the local secretaries of all Swiss municipalities in the three language areas; 84.6% of the secretaries returned the questionnaire (for results and method see Ladner et al, 2000). Prior to this survey in 1998 two similar surveys were conducted, one in 1988 (Ladner, 1991a) and the other in 1994 (Geser et al, 1996). Here the response rates were 81.6 and 69.0%.

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The number of Swiss municipalities has hardly changed since they were established in the middle of the 19th century.<sup>(2)</sup> Despite their small size, there have been almost no amalgamations, let alone far-reaching territorial and communal reforms and reorganizations which elsewhere (for example, Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia) led to the disappearance of a large number of municipalities in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1850 Switzerland had 3205 municipalities: in 2000 there were 2896. Although substantial changes in the number of municipalities are not expected in the future, amalgamations might become more significant in the cantons of Freiburg, Solothurn, Graubünden, and Tessin, all having a large number of very small municipalities.

Despite their small size, the Swiss municipalities enjoy extensive autonomy as to how they undertake their responsibilities. Under the subsidiarity principle, all activities which are not assigned to higher political levels remain within the municipal level. The main activities include issuing a communal code, appointing the executive and the administrative authorities, administration and control of the communal finances, assessing the tax rate, care for elderly people (constructions of homes for the aged), social security and public health (hospitals), schools, education, waste, sewerage, electricity, water and gas supply, local roads, culture, communal citizenship, and maintaining municipal property.

What distinguishes Swiss municipalities from those in many other countries is their far-reaching fiscal autonomy. They not only set up their own budgets according to their financial needs, they also fix the tax rate. Transfers from higher political levels are comparatively low, with only 18% being transferred down (Council of Europe, 1997). The municipalities' main sources of funding are local taxes (46%) and fees and charges (24%). Local taxes paid by the citizens amount to about one third of total individual taxation and are paid directly to the municipality. Taxes differ considerably between municipalities in different cantons and even within a canton.

Swiss municipalities also enjoy remarkable freedom as to how their political institutions and administration are organized, resulting in a number of distinct local political systems throughout the country (see Ladner, 1991a). Municipal political organization is not governed by national but by cantonal legislation. Consequently the twenty-six different cantons each have laws providing the municipalities with limits and opportunities to organize their political systems, for example, with regard to the size of the political institutions, the organization of the legislative function, and the electoral system. Among these twenty-six cantonal legislations important differences leave varying degrees of municipal autonomy. As a general rule, however, legislation regarding municipal political systems is more explicit in the French-speaking cantons, leaving them less freedom in their political institutions.

At the local level, the Swiss political system also distinguishes between executive or administrative and legislative functions, the latter being undertaken in either a direct democratic or a representative fashion.

### **Local-level direct democracy in Switzerland**

The very essence of direct democracy in Switzerland is based on the idea of making binding political decisions. Swiss local democracy is not designed to learn about peoples' attitudes, to raise their political interest, or to integrate them into the planning of political projects. It is the *citizens* who decide what the authorities can or should do. Thus, Swiss direct democracy has clearly to be distinguished from plebiscitary or consultative forms of decisionmaking.

<sup>(2)</sup> At this point residence rather than citizenship became the basis for organizing the municipalities (see Ladner, 1991a, pages 30f).

As far as the instruments of Swiss direct democracy are concerned, a distinction has to be made between initiatives and referendums. Referendums concern decisions taken by a local parliament and/or government. They enable citizens to say 'no' to a new law or a political project. Inherent in their nature is a status quo orientation. By contrast, initiatives propose changes. They provide an input into the political system and offer interest groups an opportunity to submit their own proposals. It is often said that initiatives play the role of a safety valve.<sup>(3)</sup> Though mayors are directly elected, such elections are not usually considered to be a form of direct democracy in Switzerland. Local executives (which range from three to thirty members—average six, including the mayor) are also directly elected.<sup>(4)</sup>

Two fundamentally different political institutions are found at the local level, depending on whether the municipality has a parliament or a local assembly. In the first case, direct democratic instruments direct and control a representative legislative and the executive. In the second case there is a direct democratic legislature (that is, an assembly of all citizens) with additional direct democratic instruments.

The double function of the assembly makes direct democracy in assembly systems more complex. On the one hand, an assembly involves direct democratic decision-making with instruments very similar to initiative and referendum. On the other hand, it serves as a form of a directly democratic legislature whose decisions can be questioned by other means of direct democracy. In municipalities with an assembly, direct democratic instruments are not only effective at two different levels, but exist in three forms: between the citizens and the assembly, between the citizens and the executive, and between the assembly and the executive. By contrast, in municipalities with a parliament the direct democratic instruments are addressed directly to the decisions of executive or parliament.

Given the small size of most of the Swiss municipalities, a local parliament may seem irrelevant. However, about 20% of municipalities have a local parliament and most are in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, where representative democracy is more widespread (see Ladner, 1991a, pages 81f). In the French-speaking cantons of Geneva and Neuchâtel, for example, all municipalities, even the smallest, have a parliament. In the German-speaking part, local parliaments are more often found in municipalities with 8000 to 10 000 inhabitants, but some municipalities with well over 10 000 inhabitants still have a local assembly.<sup>(5)</sup>

#### **Direct democracy in municipalities with a parliament**

In municipalities with a parliament, citizens have basically the same direct democratic instruments as at the national level: initiatives, together with compulsory and optional referendums (see, for example, Kriesi 1995; Linder, 1994). But at cantonal and local levels the scope of these instruments is more far reaching: in some cantons an obligatory referendum is held for most laws and important financial decisions (for example, large-scale investments). In others the referendum is optional for financial decisions up to a certain amount of money, and the initiative covers not only changes to the cantonal constitution but also cantonal laws. There are, of course, differences between the cantons and even within the cantons.

<sup>(3)</sup> For more thorough analyses see Neidhart (1970).

<sup>(4)</sup> The only exception is the canton of Neuchâtel, where the executive is elected by the local parliament. The recall, which is sometimes also considered to be a form of direct democracy, is not known in Swiss municipalities.

<sup>(5)</sup> There are also remarkable differences as far as the size of the local executive (see Ladner, 1991a) and the electoral system (see Ladner and Milner, 1999) are concerned.

Zürich illustrates the far-reaching direct democratic instruments at the local level. The biggest Swiss municipality with about 360 000 inhabitants, out of which 210 000 (58%) are entitled to vote, has a local parliament (*Gemeinderat*) with 125 seats and a local executive (*Stadtrat*) with nine seats. The citizens of Zürich have four different forms of direct democracy: the compulsory referendum, the optional referendum, the popular initiative, and the personal initiative.

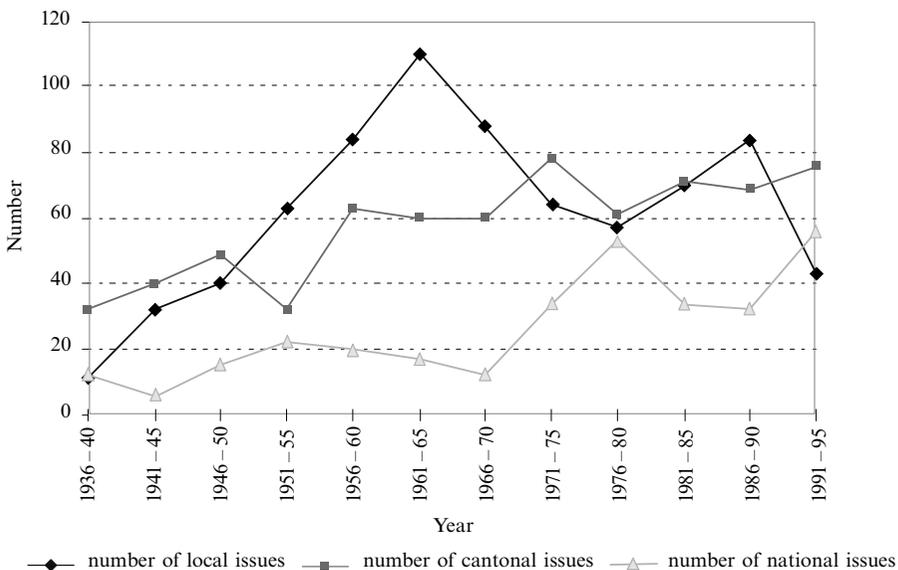
1. *The compulsory referendum*: changes to the local code (*Gemeindeordnung*, the local 'constitution') and important public expenditure have to be brought to the polls. Any expenditure or projects exceeding 10 million Swiss francs or current expenditure of more than 500 000 Swiss francs have to be approved by the citizens.

2. *The optional referendum*: a (positive) decision by the city's parliament can be questioned with a referendum (a) when a majority of the members of parliament decide so during the same session, (b) when within twenty days after the official announcement of this decision at least 4000 citizens demand a vote, and (c) when within twenty days one third of the members of parliament asks for a vote in writing.

3. *The popular initiative*: within a six-month period 4000 citizens (those entitled to vote) have to sign a request. If this request concerns something which is in the domain of the compulsory referendum, it is put to a vote of the citizens. If it concerns something which is in the domain of the optional referendum, the decision is in the hands of parliament. The parliament's decision can be questioned by a referendum.

4. *The personal initiative*: a written request by any citizen is put on the political agenda of the local parliament. In the next three sessions to come, it has to get the temporary support of at least forty-two of the 125 members of parliament. If this is achieved, the initiative is passed to the executive or to a commission. The executive has to work out a proposal within eighteen months, which is followed by a debate in parliament. If there are fewer than forty-two members supporting this initiative now, it is declared invalid. If the personal initiative wins final support, it follows the same route as a popular initiative.

The number of such local issues reached its peak in the late 1950s and early 1960s (figure 2), in a time of economic growth and large scale infrastructural state investments.



**Figure 2.** Number of referendums and initiatives on the three state levels in the City of Zürich.

The number of national issues has been increasing since the 1970s. Taken all three levels together, an 80 years old Swiss man, having spent his whole life in Zurich, has been asked to decide on about 1800 issues over the last 60 years (see Ladner, 1999, page 219).

### **Direct democracy in municipalities with an assembly**

In municipalities with an assembly (*Gemeindeversammlung*; *Einwohnerversammlung*),<sup>(6)</sup> the whole process of decisionmaking is directly democratic already, because it is the citizens themselves who decide. Local assemblies are held once or twice a year to agree the local budget and the financial accounts. Occasionally, other assemblies are held to decide on special issues, proposals, and projects. All Swiss citizens living in the municipality and entitled to vote can express their opinions and propose amendments. When it comes to deciding, voting is usually by show of hands in an open ballot. In some cantons a minority of the people present can ask for a secret ballot, in others a majority is needed (Lafitte, 1987, page 13).

In almost all the cantons, a local assembly on special issues can be called by between 5% and 30% of the people entitled to vote (see Lafitte, 1987, page 10). Such a procedure is very similar to an initiative in parliamentary systems. Similar to an initiative are proposals put forward by the citizens during discussions in the assembly, or proposals to put a new issue on the agenda of the next assembly.

All assembly decisions within the assembly are a form of compulsory local referendum. One important difference is that only the citizens taking part at the assembly decide whether they accept a proposal or not: absentees have no direct say. However, in over half the municipalities, an issue normally decided within the assembly can also be brought to the polls at the request of between 5% and 40% of the people entitled to vote. In some cantons (for example, Zug, Zürich, Berne) an issue can be taken to a vote after the final assembly decision (see Lafitte, 1987, page 14), something which has to be seen as an optional referendum against a direct democratic decision taken in the assembly.

Similar to the direct democratic instruments at cantonal and national levels, and in those municipalities with a parliament, assembly-based systems also have their direct democratic instruments such as initiatives and referendums, and which, in the case of the referendum, can be directed against a municipal executive decision.

### **Size and local-level direct democracy in Switzerland**

Apart from rather generally arguing, as did the ancient Greeks and Rousseau (see also Schmidt, 2000, page 355), that smallness goes hand in hand with ideal, direct, or participatory democracy, there are few empirical investigations into the relationship between size and direct democracy. Analytically, four different aspects of direct democracy can be distinguished at the local level in Switzerland, which cannot be expected to be equally dependent on size.

The first aspect is an institutional one and relates to the organization of the legislative function in the municipality, that is, whether this function is organized on a representative or on a direct democratic basis. Following the arguments of Rousseau and the ancient Greeks that direct (ideal) democracy is the organizational form of small units, we would expect smaller municipalities to have a local assembly whereas the large ones would have a local parliament.

<sup>(6)</sup> At the cantonal level, this direct form of legislative decisionmaking in assemblies still existed in a small but decreasing number of small cantons such as Appenzell-Ausserrhoden, Appenzell-Innerrhoden, Glarus, and Obwalden. Here it is called *Landsgemeinde*. Towards the end of the 1990s Appenzell-Ausserrhoden and Obwalden abolished the *Landsgemeinde*.

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Second, there are such direct democratic instruments as referendums and initiatives regardless of whether there is a parliamentary or a direct democratic legislation. If the idea of direct democracy is part of the political culture and the existence of a local parliament is a mere question of size, there is no reason why citizens in smaller municipalities should have more possibilities to decide matters than citizens in bigger ones, and no relationship should be expected between size and the existence of direct democratic instruments such as initiatives and referendums.

Third, we can expect variation in the use of direct democratic instruments. Larger municipalities are more complex and reveal greater diversity. The larger a municipality, the greater are the number of organizations and subunits and the more complex the policymaking process (Dahl and Tufte, 1973, page 40). We would expect more political actors to be involved and more political issues to arise, leading to an increased use of direct democracy. The expectations here come close to the mobilization model of Verba and Nie (1972).

Fourth, there is political participation. This aspect has been widely investigated, although mainly with regard to electoral participation and sometimes other forms of participation (Barnes et al, 1979). The theoretical arguments for citizens' participation in direct democratic decisionmaking follow the arguments for other forms of participation. One set is based on rational choice and considers costs (time, energy, money, embarrassment, and so on) and benefits (importance and satisfaction of the expected results). Other arguments are based on institutional and sociostructural factors which are also related to size, such as voting procedures or population characteristics. Dahl and Tufte, (1973, page 65) come to the conclusion that, although in general terms (national-level) political participation does not depend on size, within a country local governments (smallness) nurture participation by the virtue of their greater accessibility and ease of understanding. They also point out that this effect may especially hold in the lower size categories (fewer than 10 000 people).

Verba and Nie (1972, chapter 13) suggest two different models. First, the mobilization model predicts more political activity in the bigger (urban) settings. Second the decline-of-community model predicts the decline of participation as we move from the smallness and intimacy of town or village to the massive impersonality of the city (Verba and Nie, 1972, pages 270f). However, on the basis of the electoral turnout data presented in figure 1 we should expect a negative correlation between size and direct democratic participation, both for assembly attendance and for voting in initiatives and referendums.

Unfortunately we do not have data available on all the questions of interest here, and we have to limit ourselves to the existence of local assemblies and parliaments (form of the legislature), the existence of local initiatives and referendums and the possibilities for bringing assembly decisions to the polls (direct democratic instruments), the use of local initiatives and referendums and the frequency with which assembly decisions are brought to the polls (use of direct democracy), and attendance at local assemblies and decisionmaking in the assembly (participation). At the end of the section a synoptic table sums up the results and presents a more differentiated view of the impact of size on direct democracy.

#### **Size and the direct democratic organization of the legislative**

Oddly enough, there is no official list showing which Swiss municipalities have a local assembly and which have a local parliament. In some cantons those municipalities with a local parliament are well known, because there are only a few large ones. In other cantons, like Ticino or Vaud, however, small municipalities can have a local parliament. For our purpose here, we have to rely on the results of the three local secretary surveys.

**Table 1.** Percentage of municipalities with a local parliament, according to the size of the municipality (source: local secretary survey 1988).

Size of municipality	All municipalities	German-speaking municipalities	French-speaking and Italian-speaking municipalities
1–499	6.0	0.0	11.3
500–999	17.7	0.7	43.7
1 000–1 999	19.0	1.6	60.3
2 000–4 999	18.2	2.1	73.7
5 000–9 999	29.7	16.1	83.9
10 000–19 999	58.0	49.2	93.8
20 000–49 999	100.0	100.0	100.0
50 000–99 999	100.0	100.0	100.0
≥ 100 000	100.0	100.0	100.0
All municipalities	17.4	5.7	37.3
Number of parliaments	405	83	322

Taking all municipalities together, there is a strong link between size and the form of the legislative function (see table 1). For all municipalities, regardless of linguistic area, local parliaments are found more frequently in large municipalities. But in the French-speaking and Italian-speaking municipalities such parliaments are more popular, even among smaller municipalities. Two cantons in the French-speaking part of Switzerland (Geneva and Neuchâtel) have local parliaments in all municipalities, even in the very small ones. Thus, whether a direct democratic or a parliamentary form is preferred is not only a question of size, but also a matter of political preferences or political culture, with the German-speaking areas much less in favour of a representative form of democracy.

#### **Size and direct democratic instruments (initiatives and referendums)**

When it comes to direct democratic instruments, the distinction between municipalities with a local assembly and those with a parliament becomes important. The 1994 local secretary survey reveals the percentage of municipalities which have both local initiatives and referendums.<sup>(7)</sup>

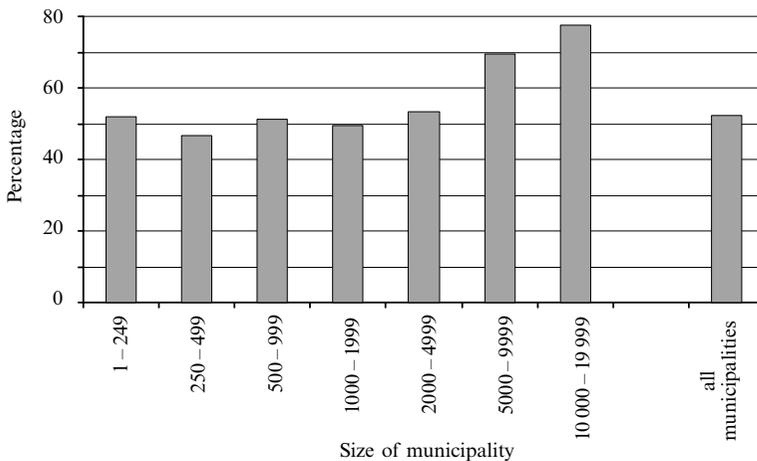
Among municipalities with a local assembly almost 90% state that they have local initiatives and about 75% have a local referendum (see table 2). For the former there seems to be a size effect whereas for the latter no clear tendency can be found. However, cantonal legislation may be more influential than size. In the case of initiatives, it seems likely that bigger municipalities offer political parties and interest groups more opportunities to make an external input into the decisionmaking process. The power to launch an initiative, however, seems to be the rule in large municipalities. In municipalities with a parliament, only a very small minority stated that they did not have such instruments and no size effects could be found.

In more than half of the Swiss municipalities with a local assembly the citizens attending the assembly can decide whether a decision should be taken to the electorate. By doing so, the number of citizens who can take part increases, and the decision might be seen as more legitimate. In this case no strong relationship with size can be found (figure 3). It is only in the larger municipalities (more than 5000 inhabitants)

<sup>(7)</sup> It has to be noted however, that the results must be treated carefully, because the questions did not specify the different forms of referendums and initiatives, as the main interest of these questions was simply to find out whether there has been an increase in the use of direct democratic participation.

**Table 2.** Percentage of municipalities (assembly or parliament system) with initiative and referendum, according to size (source: local secretary survey 1994).

Size of municipality	Municipalities with assembly		Municipalities with parliament	
	initiative	referendum	initiative	referendum
1–249	81.6	77.1	100.0	100.0
250–499	81.9	74.0	97.2	97.2
500–999	89.7	77.0	96.5	98.3
1000–1999	92.0	80.3	94.6	100.0
2000–4999	94.2	70.8	91.7	100.0
5000–9999	96.5	76.2	93.3	96.7
10 000–19 999	96.0	64.0	97.3	97.3
≥ 20 000	100.0	100.0	89.5	100.0
All municipalities	88.5	75.7	94.8	98.6
<i>N</i>	1535	1516	290	291

**Figure 3.** Percentage of municipalities having the possibility to bring assembly decisions to the polls, according to size (source: local secretary survey 1988, municipalities with local assembly only,  $N = 1526$ ).

where such referendums occur frequently, reflecting the fact that in these municipalities the percentage of citizens deciding important issues at the assembly is very low.

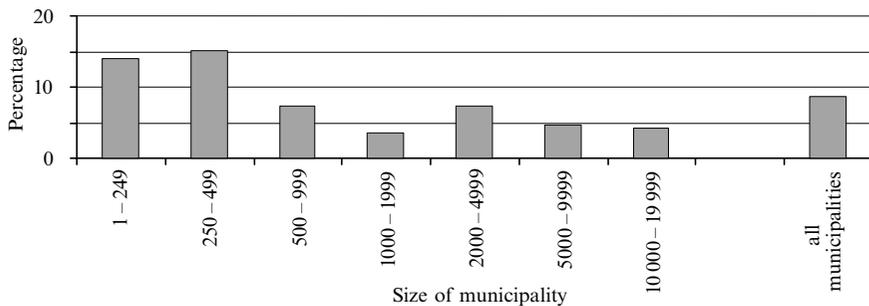
#### Use of local initiatives and referendum

Few official data exist on initiatives and referendums at the local level. Except for a few exceptions like Zürich, we have no data on the numbers of initiatives and referendums per year and municipality. Nevertheless, the 1994 survey did ask whether the use of these instruments has increased recently.

Initiatives and referendums have occurred more frequently recently in larger municipalities with both assembly and parliament systems (see table 3, over). However, the size effect does not seem to be a linear one, especially in municipalities with a parliament. Nevertheless, it is surprising to see the small percentage of municipalities which claim that the use of direct democratic instruments has increased, which contrasts markedly with the increase in their use at national level. But Geser et al (1996) show that locally citizens have recently addressed their complaints and claims to the political authorities directly rather than demanding a referendum or initiative vote.

**Table 3.** Percentage of municipalities (assembly or parliament system) with an increased use of referendums and initiatives in recent years, according to size (source: local secretary survey 1994).

Size of municipality	Municipalities with assembly		Municipalities with parliament	
	initiative	referendum	initiative	referendum
1–249	5.2	0.9	0.0	14.3
250–499	10.1	2.6	2.9	8.6
500–999	8.1	4.5	12.7	10.5
1000–1999	10.2	8.3	11.3	7.3
2000–4999	13.7	10.2	11.4	14.3
5000–9999	15.9	12.5	25.0	31.0
10 000–19 999	45.8	12.5	25.0	30.6
≥ 20 000			23.5	15.8
All municipalities	10.5	5.7	14.2	15.3
<i>N</i>	1358	1148	275	287

**Figure 4.** Percentage of municipalities, in which assembly decisions are brought to the polls at least once a year and size, according to size (source: local secretary survey 1988; municipalities with local assembly, in which decisions can be brought to the polls,  $N = 762$ ).

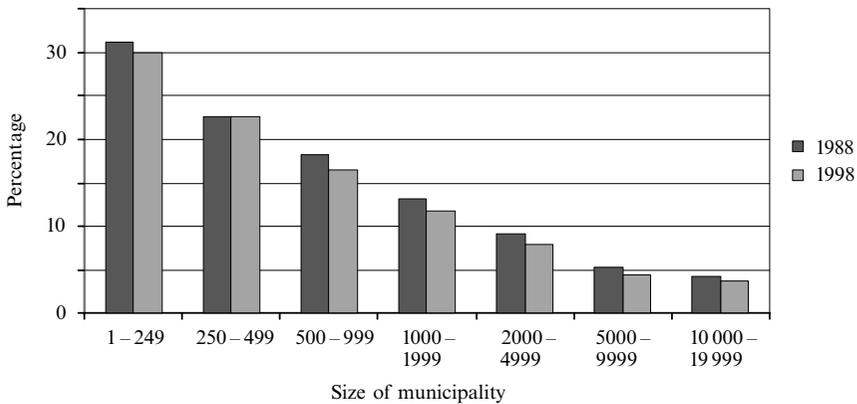
Similarly, citizens attending a local assembly are not very often inclined to bring absentees into decisionmaking by taking issues outside the assembly. This happens once a year in less than 10% of the municipalities where such a possibility exists (see figure 4). We can note, but not explain, that this happens more often in very small municipalities.

In taking decisions to the polls, do citizens frequently change decisions made by the local assembly? The 1988 local secretary survey suggests that it occurs infrequently. Over 85% of municipalities reported no such case within the last five years. No strong size effect can be found. Thus, it cannot be concluded that decisions taken in assemblies of bigger municipalities, at which only a small percentage of the citizens participate, are much less in line with the preferences of an extended electorate.

#### Participation in direct democratic decisionmaking at the local level

Though we have no data on turnout at local referendums and initiatives in relation to size, there are some survey data for assembly attendance and the ways decisions are reached in local assemblies.

Taking all local assemblies for which we have data for the years 1988 and 1998 ( $N = 1335$ ) the average rate of participation in 1998 was 16.5%. This is a little bit lower than in 1988 when the average participation was 17.5%. Figure 5 illustrates the strong correlation between size and turnout rate. The figure also reveals that between 1988 and 1998 the decline occurred in all size groups, except in the municipalities with 250–499 inhabitants.



**Figure 5.** Assembly attendance (percentage of the people entitled to vote) in 1988 and 1998, according to size of the municipality (source: local secretary survey 1988 and 1998).

Not all assemblies throughout the year are of equal interest and importance. According to the 1988 survey, the average turnout for assemblies with a weak participation is only 11.3%, compared with an average participation of 18.1%, whereas the average turnout for high-mobilizing assemblies amounts to 26.2% (see table 4). But the negative size effect remains unchanged, however important the assembly agenda. In smaller municipalities, nevertheless, a higher percentage of people attend the assembly regularly (about 75% of participants) than in bigger municipalities (about 50% of participants). Last, in larger municipalities attendance at controversial assemblies is about three times higher than in normal assemblies, but in smaller municipalities attendance only doubles at controversial assemblies. Size appears to lower individual propensity to participate regularly but allows for a higher percentage of people to be mobilized occasionally in the context of generally lower turnout rates in larger municipalities.

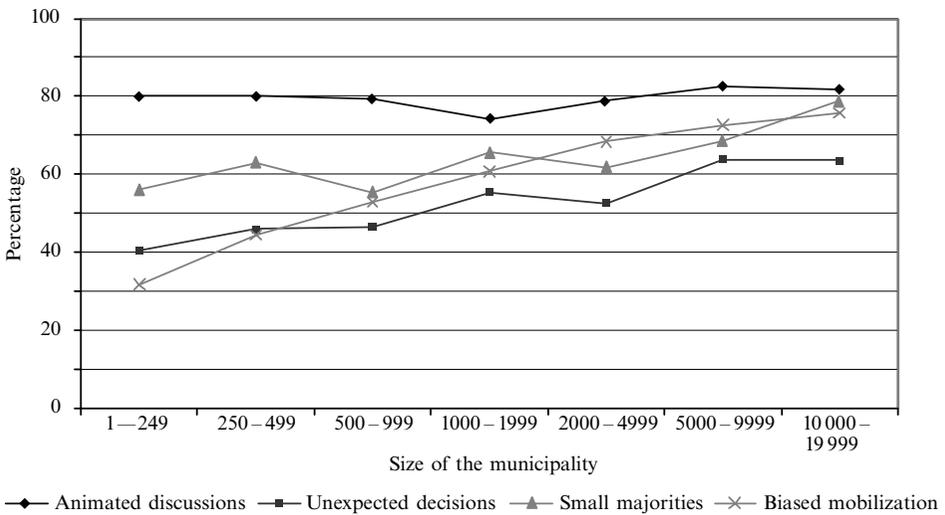
The 1988 survey also offers some insight into the decisionmaking process in local assemblies. In about 80% of municipalities assembly discussions are animated. In half the municipalities unexpected decisions are occasionally taken at the assembly. In about 60% of the municipalities the decisions are sometimes taken by small majorities. In just over 50% of the municipalities there are occasions when people make an extra effort to bring supporters to the assembly in order to win the vote.

**Table 4.** Different forms of participation (average turnout) at local assemblies, according to size in 1988 (source: local secretary survey 1988; Ladner, 1991b).

Size of municipality	Average turnout	Weak turnout	High turnout	Regulars <sup>a</sup>	Mobilization potential <sup>b</sup>
All municipalities	18.1	11.3	26.2	62.7	2.4
1-249	31.8	21.4	41.7	74.1	1.9
250-499	22.7	13.7	31.2	66.2	2.1
500-999	16.6	9.9	25.9	61.5	2.5
1 000-1 999	11.6	6.9	19.4	58.5	2.7
2 000-4 999	8.3	5.0	14.5	55.2	2.9
5 000-9 999	5.5	2.9	10.1	51.5	3.3
≥ 10 000	3.8	2.0	7.7	51.5	3.3

<sup>a</sup> Percentage of regulars compared with average.

<sup>b</sup> Ratio of high turnout/weak turnout.



**Figure 6.** Decisionmaking in the assembly: percentage of municipalities in which there are animated discussions, unexpected decisions, small majorities and biased mobilization, according to size of the municipality.

The data do not provide support for those who think that political debates ideally take place in smaller contexts. Size has no influence on whether an assembly is animated or not (see figure 6). However, decisionmaking seems to become less predictable. The bigger the municipality the easier it is to bias voter mobilization. Similarly but less markedly, large municipalities also tend to have a higher percentage of unexpected decisions, and to have small majorities. However, this does not lead to a more frequent contesting of assembly decisions at the polls, as we have seen in figure 4.

#### **Established and suspected size effects: synopsis**

Although far from ideal, the data offer some insight into the relationship between size and direct democracy at the local level and allow us to test our assumptions with regard to the influence of size on the different aspects of direct democracy. It was expected that size would have a negative effect on the existence of a local assembly, no effect on the existence of direct democratic instruments such as initiatives and referendums, a positive effect on the use of direct democracy, and a negative effect on citizens' participation. Table 5 summarizes the possible relations to be tested and the general tendencies found.

#### *Institutions*

Whether the legislative decisions are taken in a direct democratic assembly or in a representative parliament depends on the size of a municipality: smaller municipalities have an assembly, larger ones a parliament. But the example of the French-speaking cantons Geneva and Neuchâtel where all municipalities have a parliament shows that the choice of legislative forum can also depend on the prevailing political culture.

#### *Existence of direct democratic instruments*

Direct democratic instruments such as initiatives and referendums are not necessarily more widespread in larger municipalities of either assembly or parliamentary type. Again a cultural element, namely the differences between the cantons, seems to be more important.

**Table 5.** Size effects on direct democracy at the local level (synopsis)

Form	Size effects
<b>Institution</b> Local assembly versus local parliament.	If the municipalities are free to choose: big municipalities have a local parliament, small ones a local assembly.
<b>Instruments</b> <i>In municipalities with a local parliament</i> Optional and compulsory referendums, initiatives.	No size effects, survey data not very reliable, presumably depending on cultural differences (that is, further reaching possibilities in German-speaking areas).
<i>In municipalities with a local assembly</i> Possibility to bring assembly decisions to the polls from within the assembly. Possibility to launch a kind of initiative within the assembly. Possibility to launch a kind of referendum against a decision of the assembly. Possibility to launch an initiative.	Increase with size in bigger municipalities (more than 5000 inhabitants). No data available. No data available, size influence possible, cultural influence likely, depending on cantonal legislation. In smaller municipalities this possibility exists less often than in bigger ones.
Possibility to launch a referendum.	No size effect is found, data not very reliable.
<b>Use of direct democracy</b> <i>In municipalities with a local parliament</i> Number of compulsory and optional referendums, number of initiatives.	Depending on cultural factors, entry hurdles, decisional competences of executive and parliament, in bigger municipalities there might be more issues to be decided (see, for example, the City of Zürich).
Increase in the use of local initiatives.	On a low level in bigger municipalities, increase stronger.
Increase in the use of local referendums.	No clear size effect, perhaps bigger in larger municipalities.
<i>In municipalities with a local assembly</i> Number of assemblies to be held a year. Frequency of assembly decisions brought to the polls. Increase in the use of local initiatives. Increase in the use of local referendums.	No data available, there might be more assemblies in bigger municipalities. Higher in very big municipalities. Increase with size (at a very low level). Increase with size (at a very low level).
<b>Participation</b> Percentage of citizens voting.	No reliable data available, difficult to establish, participation depends on importance of issues and often issues on local, cantonal, and national level are brought to the polls the same day.
<i>In municipalities with a local assembly</i> Assembly attendance.	Very clear and strong negative size effect, fewer regulars and higher potential mobilization potential in bigger municipalities.
Controversial assemblies (animated discussions). Unexpected decisions. Small majorities. Biased mobilization. Correction of an assembly decision at the polls where possible.	No influence. Moderate influence (increase). Moderate influence (increase). Strong influence (increase). In small municipalities (fewer than 250 inhabitants) it happens very seldom, in others seldom.

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### *Use of direct democratic instruments*

The use of initiatives and referendums is higher in larger municipalities. There are more issues to be decided, and again larger municipalities have more political actors such as parties and interest groups all trying to influence political decisions.

### *Participation*

Assembly attendance and election turnout clearly decrease with the increasing size of a municipality. No reliable turnout figures are available which would permit comments on performance in local referendums and initiatives.

The strength of the size effect varies considerably depending on the different variables of direct democracy under scrutiny. In some cases the effect is linear, whereas in others differences can only be found between very small and large municipalities, or between the largest and all other municipalities.

### **Size and local direct democracy—what can be learned from the Swiss case?**

Recently a growing number of publications have explicitly or implicitly argued that small size should have a positive influence on political participation or that a more participative form of society relies heavily on smaller units. In the search for a new sense of community (*Gemeinschaft*), communitarian writers such as Etzioni (1993) point out the importance of family, neighbourhood, and intermediate organizations. Similarly, the term ‘civil society’ (Hall, 1995) refers to a dense network of intermediate organizations, negotiating between individuals and the state. Social capital (Putnam 1993), new political culture (Clark and Hoffmann-Martinot, 1998), or civic literacy (Milner, 2002) also contain elements which seem to be best met by smaller units, thus supporting ideas about the “decline of community” (Verba and Nie, 1972, chapter 13).

Empirical evidence from Switzerland strongly suggests that municipal size is important as far as participation is concerned. Assembly attendance and electoral participation are much higher in smaller municipalities. Size effects are particularly strong in the very low size categories. Theoretical explanations can be found in the political economy and social psychology literature suggesting that:

- (a) The influence of individuals on the outcome of elections or votes is larger in smaller constituencies, because they offer quite strong incentives to participate.
- (b) There is a higher identification with municipal matters in smaller municipalities, and therefore a higher rate of participation.
- (c) Social control in smaller municipalities is higher. Political participation is more likely to be considered as a social duty in smaller municipalities, resulting in higher levels of participation.

In the case of assembly attendance, technical reasons add to the diminishing influence of the individual’s vote. Assemblies with more than 400 participants may lead to the very essence of direct participation being lost. Participation in such meetings diminishes rapidly with increasing size, if only for the simple reason that the capacity of meeting halls is limited and because larger municipal size implies most people having to travel further to the meeting place. Furthermore, larger municipalities tend to limit the competence of the communal assembly to very few matters (budgetary decisions) and transfer other decisions to the ballot voting procedure.

The decline-of-community model also fits well with explaining the lower assembly attendance in bigger municipalities. Social ties are certainly more important for the more demanding assembly attendance than for individualistic voting. It can be argued that voting participation in very small municipalities is stabilized at a high level by mechanisms of social control and personal acquaintance between voters and

candidates and is not very much affected by sociodemographic characteristics or political organization and political processes. With increasing size, individual characteristics of the voting population as well as political factors (political parties, election rules, interparty competition) become more important.

Apart from the change from a direct democratic assembly system to a representative parliament system, size has a (slightly) positive influence on the existence of direct democratic instruments and their use. Although there may be technical reasons for this effect, larger municipalities make both power sharing and the integration of political minorities more difficult. This is because:

1. More issues have to be decided in larger and more complex political units.
2. A counterbalance to the representative parliament is needed. The more powerful the political authorities, the more often direct democratic instruments are needed or used.
3. There may be more political actors (parties, interest groups) who are not well integrated into the political system.

To what extent are the findings in the Swiss case of interest to other countries? In at least three respects any generalization has to be met with caution. First, Swiss municipalities are particularly small. Some size effects only exist in the very low size brackets. Second, Swiss municipalities enjoy a considerable amount of autonomy and discretion. Many decisions taken at the local level are important and directly influence taxation levels. Third, direct democracy has a long tradition in Switzerland. It is a broadly accepted form of sharing power and responsibilities between the political authorities and citizens. Citizens do not have to place their trust in politicians entirely, whilst politicians have to decide matters in consultation with citizens.

However, the Swiss case not only helps to provide a more complex picture of direct democracy at the local level, but also indicates that the relationship with size variables is not necessarily linear over the whole range of size categories. The increased use of direct democracy in larger municipalities, together with lower turnout rates, could lead one to believe that the mobilization effect is counterbalanced by the decline-of-community model. Because citizens are asked to participate more frequently in large municipalities, there might be a negative impact on turnout, as voter fatigue sets in (see Jackman and Miller, 1995, page 483; Papadopoulos, 1987, page 149).

**Acknowledgements.** I am especially grateful for the helpful comments of Jorgen Elklit and the members of the "Size and local democracy team", Larry Rose, Bas Denters, Mike Goldsmith, Poul Erik Mouritzen, and Annie Gaardsted Frandsen.

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