



## **Can PR Voting Serve as a Shelter Against Declining Turnout? Evidence from Swiss Municipal Elections**

HENRY MILNER AND ANDREAS LADNER

**ABSTRACT.** To assess the impact of electoral systems on voting turnout, cross-national studies can be usefully complemented by studies of turnout in local elections in countries using more than one electoral system at that level. In this article, we look at data from a 1998 survey of Swiss municipalities to revisit the findings of our earlier study. This previous study, based on a 1988 survey, concluded, in particular, that there exists a positive relationship between proportional representation elections, party politicization, and voter turnout. The moment is opportune since, in the interval, turnout has markedly declined in Swiss municipalities, as elsewhere. By testing whether municipalities with proportional representation voting were more or less successful in stemming the decline, we learn more about the relationship among these three phenomena. We use the results for those Swiss municipalities which participated in both surveys as our primary source.

**Keywords:** • Local political parties • Municipalities • Participation  
• Proportional representation voting • Voting system • Voting turnout

---

### **Introduction**

In this article we seek to contribute further to the debates over the effects that electoral systems have on voter turnout. Blais and Carty (1990) in their analysis of 509 elections in 20 countries, for example, come to the conclusion that turnout rates in proportional representation (PR) systems are definitely higher than in plurality or majority systems and that the average positive impact lies somewhere between 5 percent and 7 percent. Arend Lijphart (1997) in his 1996 presidential address to the American Political Science Association summarizing the comparative literature, arrived at an even higher estimated turnout boost of 9–12 percent due to PR. Furthermore, a somewhat similar estimate is offered by Franklin, who calculates that there is a boost of 0.6 percent in turnout for every

percent by which the distribution of seats in the legislature approaches proportionality with the distribution of votes (1996: 226).<sup>1</sup> However, there are also authors (for example, Crewe, 1981) who question the existence of the positive effect of PR on turnout.

Our own analysis of turnout in Swiss local elections, on balance, supports findings that PR has a positive impact on turnout – a relationship most clearly manifested in the smaller municipalities (Ladner and Milner, 1999). In this article, we would like to address the question of whether PR serves as a shelter against turnout decline as it has been experienced in most countries and across all levels (see, for example, EU, 2000; Wattenberg, 1998). In doing so, we hope to shed light on the still insufficiently understood mechanisms underlying the relationship between electoral institutions and voter turnout. It will allow us to probe more deeply into the suggestion made at the end of our earlier study, namely, that to the extent that PR has a direct, positive effect on turnout, it is due not only to its making more individual votes count toward the outcomes, but also, indirectly, to its being conducive to a more politically informed citizenry. If this is the case, citizens under PR could be expected to be less affected by the processes of decreasing interest in conventional politics, which is usually blamed for the decline in participation. Accordingly, we should find electoral turnout to have declined less under PR. If, however, no difference is to be found, turnout decline should be viewed as a phenomenon outside the reach of electoral institutions; whereas, should we find a higher turnout decrease in PR systems, it would point toward elements which fostered higher participation in PR systems in the first place losing their mobilizing capacity in the context of changing citizen attitudes toward politics.

As in our first study (Ladner and Milner, 1999), we are able to diminish the problems inherent in cross-national comparisons, namely, that higher average turnout under a given type of institutional arrangement may be due to aspects of national political cultures that favor such arrangements, by analyzing turnout in subunits in the same country. It is admittedly difficult to find countries which have both significant institutional variation in local electoral systems and sufficiently differentiated data. Along with Switzerland, only Australia serves this purpose, but Australian data are limited in their applicability by the use of compulsory voting in local elections in the most populous states. In Switzerland, voting is not compulsory and there are a large number of municipalities using both majority and proportional local electoral systems. Since there are no official statistics assembling turnout rates in local elections and providing systematic information about municipal electoral institutions in Switzerland, we have to rely on data stemming from nationwide surveys in 1988, 1994, and 1998. Our analyses therefore only cover municipalities that provided the necessary data in the corresponding surveys, hence the number of municipalities varies slightly depending on the variables included. Fortunately, as the Appendix sets out, participation in the surveys was impressively high.<sup>2</sup>

This article first gives an insight into the electoral systems used in Swiss municipalities and, using data from 1988, shows to what extent PR influenced turnout. We then look at turnout decline in the time between 1988 and 1998 and its relationship to the voting system. This is followed by an analysis of certain intervening factors, most notably, the presence or absence of political parties, in an effort to explain the relationship.

### **The Voting System in Swiss Municipalities and its Impact on Turnout**

The electoral district in Swiss municipalities is always the municipality itself.<sup>3</sup> In each municipality, the executive (the local government) usually consists of five or seven members. About 70 percent of Swiss municipalities elect their executive through majority systems, compared to 30 percent using PR. Under Switzerland's somewhat unusual majority system, the voter casts up to as many votes as there are seats. To be elected, a candidate needs a minimum percentage of the votes, equivalent to 50 percent plus one of the votes cast per seat. If the first ballot does not fill all the seats, a second ballot based on a relative majority takes place for the remaining ones. In proportional elections, the votes go not to candidates, but to political groupings or lists. These are usually the local units of the Swiss political parties, but in some cases they are locally organized groups, unattached to any wider party organization. The seats are allocated to the different groups according to the percentage of the votes obtained. Majority voting favors personalities and the big parties; PR fosters the representation of smaller parties.<sup>4</sup>

In 18 of the 26 cantons, cantonal legislation governs the local electoral system: two impose PR (Zug and Tessin), while 16 impose the majority system. Of particular interest are the remaining eight cantons (Bern, Fribourg, Solothurn, Basel-Land, Graubünden, Thurgau, Wallis, and Jura), where some municipalities use PR and some use majority systems. While the latter are found in large numbers of municipalities in all eight cantons, PR is commonly (that is, in at least one-third of the municipalities) used only in five: Valais, Solothurn, Jura, Freiburg, and Berne.<sup>5</sup>

In our first article based on the 1988 survey (Ladner and Milner, 1999), we found a clear relationship between turnout and the use of PR to elect executives to municipalities of all sizes (though the relationship was not significant for the largest cities, given the small number of such municipalities). Moreover, as expected, except in the larger cities where the presence of political parties was unrelated to the electoral system used, a clear intervening factor was party politicization: PR voting led to more political parties. It was the presence of these parties, we concluded, that explained a good part of the greater turnout in the PR municipalities.

Table 1, based on the 1988 survey data, reveals the positive impact of PR voting on turnout for all municipalities using ballot votes to elect their municipal executives.<sup>6</sup> There is also an overall positive influence on turnout due to the presence of organized political parties. Further analyses have shown that this influence is not statistically significant in every size group of municipalities. Two other interesting results emerge from the regression analyses in Table 1. The size of the municipality has a negative impact on turnout, and turnout at cantonal elections (all of which take place under proportional systems, on a date separate from municipal elections) has the strongest influence on turnout in local elections.<sup>7</sup> This latter relationship suggests that in order fully to explain the difference, we will need to look beyond political institutions in the localities to what we term "cultural" factors, that is, factors related to cantonal and regional political culture.

In the interval since 1988, as we shall see, turnout has declined. The question to be posed in assessing data from the 1990s is what the relationship is between the electoral system and turnout decline, if any. We know that the decade has been a period marked by an observable weakening (and questioning) of the role of political parties in Swiss local politics (Ladner, 1996). In this regard, the data on

TABLE 1. *Positive Impact of PR Voting on Turnout in 1988*

Dependent variable: turnout in municipal elections (%)	All municipalities with ballot votes	
	Standardized coefficients beta	Significance
Population (1990, log.)	-0.309	0.000
PR voting system	0.263	0.000
Organized local parties	0.068	0.000
Turnout at cantonal elections	0.531	0.000

Note: R2adj. = .606, N = 1848.

the presence of organized political parties enable us to also pose the question of the possible effect of the electoral system upon the relationship between the declining legitimacy of political parties and reduced voter turnout in local politics.

### An Era of Declining Turnout

In the decade since the late 1980s, voter turnout levels have not stood still. As a general rule and at all levels of elections, turnout has declined, in some cases continuing a long-term secular development and in others marking a new and sharp change (Wattenberg, 1998). From data gathered by the European Union (EU) Committee of the Regions and published under the title *Voter Turnout at Regional and Local Elections in the European Union, 1990–1999* (EU, 2000), we know that a similar pattern holds at the lower levels: the general trend is one of declining turnout. For example, in France, participation in elections to the regional councils declined from 77.8 percent in 1986 to 68.6 percent in 1992 and to 58.1 percent in 1998 (see also Bréchon, 1998), while in local elections in Germany, voter turnout in the eight *Länder* which staged local elections in 1999 declined by an average of more than 10 percent from the previous round. In the Netherlands, at the regional level, voter turnout declined from 66.3 percent in 1987 to 45.6 percent in 1999 and, at the local level, from 73.2 percent in 1985 to 58.9 percent in 1998. Somewhat less marked declines are reported for Sweden,<sup>8</sup> Finland, Britain, Austria, and Ireland. Only Denmark and Spain, among those reported countries without compulsory voting, appear to have held steady.<sup>9</sup>

European countries outside the EU also experienced similar declines: Norwegian regional and local average election turnout decreased, respectively, from 70.0 percent and 72.1 percent in 1986 to 56.8 percent and 60.4 percent in 2000 (Björklund, 2000). This brings us back to Switzerland, which also witnessed a considerable decline in voting turnout at the local and cantonal levels between 1988 and 1998, as it did at the national level (see Table 2). As a result, the overall level of participation remains low compared to other countries, a phenomenon related to the frequent recourse to referenda, which reduces the importance of elections and causes voter fatigue (Jackman and Miller, 1995: 483).

Using average turnout rates (for municipalities having provided reliable data in both surveys), the decline in local-level voting is greater than at the other two levels. However, average turnout figures have to be treated carefully, especially in the case of an uneven distribution of the population. If we weigh these figures by the population of the municipalities, the decline proves to be greatest in cantonal elections.

TABLE 2. *The Swiss Case: Average Turnout at the Three Levels, 1988 and 1998*

	National level	Cantonal level	Local level	N
	All municipalities			
1988	50.6	52.7	62.5	1271
1998	45.6	46.5	54.7	1271
Change	-5.0	-6.2	-7.8	
	All municipalities (weighted)			
1988	46.2	45.5	49.9	*
1998	42.1	40.1	45.2	**
Change	-4.1	-5.4	-4.7	

*Notes:* National level and cantonal level: elections for the legislative.

Local level: elections for the executive.

N: municipalities electing their local executive at the polls and having provided reliable data for 1988 and 1998.

\* 1271 municipalities, weighted by population 1990 = 4,154,371.

\*\* 1271 municipalities, weighted by population 1997 = 4,251,057.

The explanation for the differences between weighted and unweighted figures emerges when we compare the extent of the decrease in different sized municipalities. Figure 1 shows two rather similar patterns for turnout in cantonal and national elections, with the greatest decrease in medium-sized municipalities. Local elections are distinct, with a considerably greater decrease in both very small municipalities (less than 1000 inhabitants), where only a small part of the population lives, and medium-sized municipalities. This fact, combined with the greater decrease for cantonal elections in the larger municipalities (more than 10,000 inhabitants), explains the inverse order in the average and weighted figures.

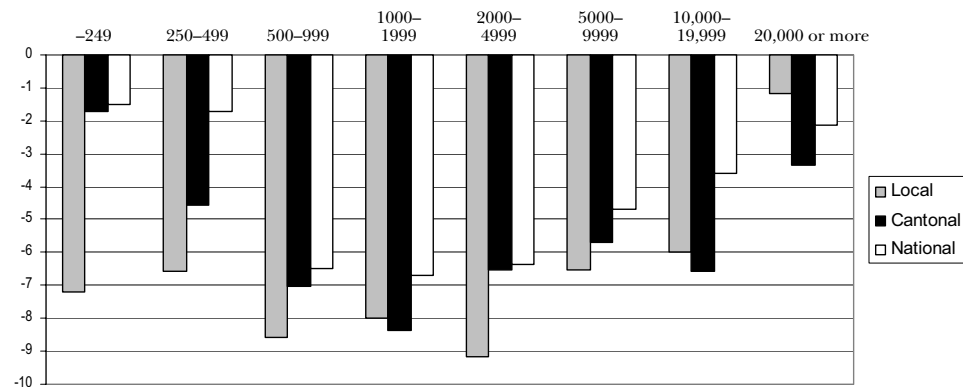


FIGURE 1. *Decrease in Turnout Between 1988 and 1998 According to Size. (Average Percentage for Each Size Group in 1998 Minus Average Percentage in 1988)*

*Note:* N = municipalities electing their local executive at the polls and having provided reliable data for 1988 and 1998.

Local level: elections for the executive.

National and cantonal level: elections for the legislative.

### Turnout Decline and Voting System

Given these differences, an analysis of the 1998 data, and the changes from the 1988 results, allows us to address the question of the relationship between the electoral system and voter turnout in this era of apparently accelerating turnout decline. Starting with the link between PR and turnout, three possible relationships can be envisaged: the first is that PR serves as a shelter against declining turnout; the second that it has no effect; and the third that it exacerbates decline. If the explanation for the decline lies in aspects unrelated to the electoral system, then the second hypothesis should prevail. If, on the other hand, the development is due to factors operating in a different direction from that of the electoral system, then PR should serve as some sort of shelter. But if the factors affecting the decline undermine those aspects accounting for the positive relationship with PR in the first place, then we can indeed expect a larger decline in those cities and towns employing a PR system than in those employing a majority system.

To test these possibilities, we first recall the logic of the relationship as it emerged from our study of the 1988 data. For those municipalities able to choose between the two voting systems, size has a clear effect on the electoral system adopted. About 15 percent of the smallest communities use PR, a figure that rises to 70 percent for those with 5000 or more inhabitants. The connection between the size of the municipality and the voting system chosen is understandable: smaller communes, with sometimes only several hundred inhabitants, often lack the human and organizational resources to put together the lists required under PR.<sup>10</sup>

As noted, we know from our previous study that size of municipality is related to both the choice of voting system and to turnout. In 1988, we found that (excluding those communities in which elections take place at a town meeting) participation averaged 58 percent in majority electoral-system municipalities compared to 73 percent in proportional ones, but that the difference was reduced once we controlled for size. Here we control for size from the outset, using data from the 1370 municipalities that participated in both the first and the latest study to test whether PR voting has a positive effect. Table 3 provides the turnout figures from 1988 and 1998 broken down by electoral system as well as by size.

TABLE 3. *Turnout in Municipal Elections in 1988 and 1998 by Electoral System and Size*

	PR			Majority		
	1988	1988	N	1988	1988	N*
1–249	71.7	73.6	32	63.4	72.8	108
250–499	75.0	78.0	56	61.7	69.3	128
500–999	70.4	77.2	90	53.9	63.4	148
1000–1999	64.6	73.5	103	49.8	57.4	173
2000–4999	54.1	65.8	117	42.8	50.2	204
5000–9999	54.0	61.0	46	36.4	42.5	78
10,000–19,999	46.1	51.8	22	35.4	41.8	43
20,000 or more	45.2	48.3	8	41.4	41.4	14
Total	62.6	70.2	474	50.2	58	896

*Note.* \* Municipalities electing their local executive at the polls and having provided reliable data for 1988 and 1998.

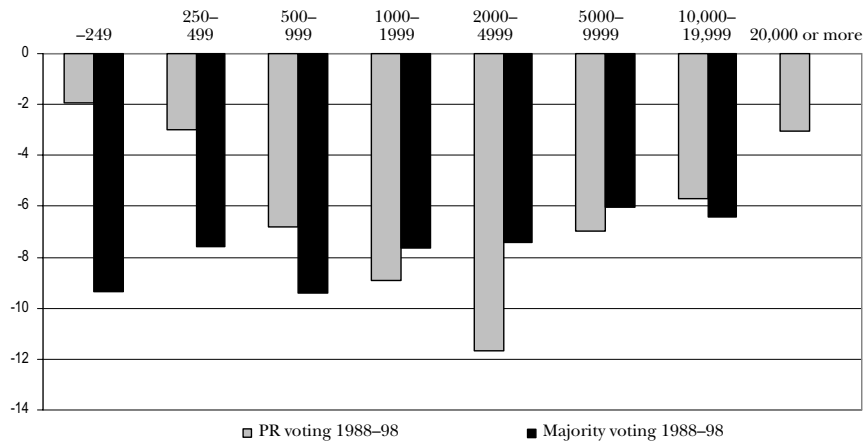


FIGURE 2. *Decline in Turnout, Size of Municipality, and Electoral System (Average Percentage for Each Size Group in 1998 Minus Average Percentage in 1988)*

Note: N: municipalities electing their local executive at the polls and having provided reliable data for 1988 and 1998.

There is a large measure of consistency. In 1998, as in 1988, average turnout was higher under PR than under majority electoral systems, and turnout varied inversely with size – except for the two smallest categories of PR municipalities, where turnout increases with size (which is likely due to the fact that in the smallest municipalities there is seldom a sufficient number of candidates to allow for competitive elections). Moreover, Table 3 shows that only one group managed to hold steady against the winds of turnout decline, namely, the large majority municipalities that averaged the same level of turnout in 1988 and 1998.

Clearly, there is no overall sheltering effect of PR elections against declining political participation. In the PR municipalities, the average turnout declined from 70.2 percent to 62.6 percent. In the majority municipalities, it declined only slightly more, from 58.0 percent to 50.2 percent. It appears that, overall, the second hypothesis (that is, no effect either way) is correct. It would be premature, however, to conclude that the electoral system is unrelated to turnout decline. Once we reintroduce size, the relationship to the decline becomes more complex. As is starkly illustrated in Figure 2, in both the smallest and the largest PR municipalities, the drop in turnout between 1988 and 1998 has been particularly low. In addition, in the small municipalities (less than 1000 inhabitants), where PR municipalities dropped considerably less than majority municipalities, PR thus appears to act as a kind of shelter. In contrast, and perhaps most surprisingly, in the cities PR municipalities fared worse than majority ones, which saw no average drop at all. Here it is the majority voting system that appears to serve as a shelter – a matter to which we shall return below.

Figure 2 illustrates the main point. The sharp decline in voter turnout over the decade left average turnout in PR municipalities higher than in majority municipalities. But broken down by size, we see that in the very small municipalities the decrease in PR municipalities was much lower, in contrast especially with medium-sized municipalities, but also with large municipalities. In the large municipalities, the decrease under PR, while fairly low, is still larger than

in the majority municipalities, where it disappears entirely in the largest group (more than 20,000 inhabitants). Thus, if PR is likely to serve as a shelter against declining turnout, it is in the small municipalities. In the remaining parts of this article, we bring to bear other variables in an effort to shed light on these phenomena and to test the robustness of the institutional effects.

### **The Effect of Political Parties**

How do political parties fit into these relationships? Their influence can be seen both in the form of an intervening factor (see, for example, Blais and Carty, 1990: 173) or in the form of a direct influence. In the former, the larger number of parties can either lead to a richer choice for the electorate and thus a higher turnout or make the outcome of elections less decisive and clear and thus depress turnout. In the latter, political parties have a direct effect on turnout by mobilizing voters. As noted, in our previous study (Ladner and Milner, 1999: 246), in seeking to distinguish the effect of the presence of political parties from any “pure” effects of proportional representation, we found that, in the smaller Swiss municipalities especially, PR voting goes hand in hand with more political parties and that their presence is the main factor in boosting turnout. Along the same lines, we noted in the previous section of this article that among the small PR municipalities the decline in turnout in the 1990s was lower. To what extent are political parties responsible for the lower turnout decline? In an effort to answer this question, we need to take a closer look at developments affecting the presence of Swiss political parties in local politics in recent years.

There is mounting evidence (Ladner, 1996) that the overall position of political parties in Swiss local politics is weakening. Comparatively speaking, in Switzerland political parties have played an important role in local politics (Ladner, 1997, 1999), especially if we take into account the smallness of the Swiss municipalities. Perhaps not surprisingly, the recent decline in the role of parties has been most pronounced in these small municipalities. This is a phenomenon observers link both to the general decline in the legitimacy of political parties in western democracies and to a growing sense that parties are out of place in local politics, especially in the smaller Swiss municipalities.

Table 4 sets out the proportion of municipalities in which there are organized political parties, broken down by the size of the municipality and the type of electoral system. As expected, the larger the size, the more likely are municipalities to have political parties present. PR municipalities, in general, are more party politicized, while majority municipalities, especially the smaller ones, are less so. There are also some smaller PR municipalities without political parties. In these municipalities, the voters vote for lists of candidates, but there are no party organizations behind these lists.

Table 4 also shows that between 1988 and 1998 the presence of political parties declined more rapidly in PR municipalities than in majority municipalities, the only exceptions being the very small and the largest municipalities. In these two groups, as we observed above, turnout decline was also a little bit smaller. It appears that PR voting boosted the percentage of smaller municipalities having organized political parties in the 1970s and 1980s, but since then, it is precisely in these municipalities that political parties have most frequently disappeared. On a related indicator it can also be shown that it is especially in the smaller municipalities that the percentage of nonparty members in the local executives has increased considerably.<sup>11</sup>



TABLE 4. *Organized Political Parties in Municipalities by Size and Electoral System*

	Majority				PR			
	1988	Nm1988	1998	Nm1998	1988	Npr1988	1998	Npr1998
1–249	36.6	161	10.9	165	56.2	49	37.8	37
250–499	42.3	156	17.8	169	83.8	62	50.9	51
500–999	56.4	195	36.8	185	97.4	76	63.5	85
1000–1999	85.5	193	76.1	184	100.0	94	77.7	99
2000–4999	93.8	194	90.7	183	100.0	95	76.9	108
5000–9999	98.5	69	93.8	65	100.0	37	78.0	41
10,000–19,999	100.0	37	92.6	41	100.0	24	90.0	20
20,000 or more	90.9	11	100.0	9	100.0	5	83.3	6
All municipalities	68.6	1016	52.9	1001	92.7	442	69.1	447

*Note.* Nm = number of majority municipalities.  
Npr = number of PR municipalities.

This suggests that the lower turnout decline in smaller PR municipalities cannot be fully explained by the influence of political parties, since these parties are losing their influence or are about to disappear.

### Parties, Electoral Systems, and Turnout Decline

We now return to voter turnout, seeking to link what we have learned about the changes in the role of political parties to the changes in participation. First, to get an overview of the possible effects of the different factors, in Table 5 we reproduce Table 1 except that we apply it to the results of the 1998 survey. Comparing the two tables, we observe a basic stability in the relationships, both for 1998 as well as for 1988. Overall, PR still has a positive effect on turnout, while the “cultural factor” introduced by the level of turnout in cantonal elections remains the strongest predictor of turnout. Size continues to have an overall negative effect on turnout, while the effect of the presence of political parties remains small, though it changes from being slightly positive to slightly negative.

Table 6 directly addresses the difference between turnout in 1988 and 1998. The dependent variable is the decrease in turnout (turnout in 1988 minus turnout in 1998). We again use a simple multiple regression to test the effect of the electoral system on the degree of turnout decline, and control simultaneously for

TABLE 5. *Positive Impact of PR Voting on Turnout in 1998*

Dependent variable: turnout in municipal elections (%)	All municipalities with ballot votes in 1998	
	Standardized coefficients	Significance
Population (1997, log.)	–0.253	0.000
PR voting system	0.199	0.000
Organized local parties	–0.052	0.003
Turnout at cantonal elections	0.636	0.000

*Note.* R<sup>2</sup>adj. = .682, N listwise = 1975.

TABLE 6. *Explaining the Decrease in Turnout 1988–98, All Municipalities and Different Size Groups*

	All municipalities			Less than 1000			1000–9999			10,000 or more inhabitants		
	B	Beta	Significance	B	Beta	Significance	B	Beta	Significance	B	Beta	Significance
Size 1997 (log.)	-7.188	-0.298	**	-8.148	-0.160	**	-9.997	-0.217	**	-3.693	-0.102	Not significant
PR voting	-4.490	-0.157	**	-5.280	-0.153	**	-3.553	-0.142	**	-1.067	-0.050	Not significant
Organized political parties	-3.793	-0.134	**	-6.591	-0.196	**	-5.939	-0.182	*	-2.326	-0.067	Not significant
Disappearance of local parties	-2.411	-0.071	*	-0.687	-0.020	n.s.	-8.145	-0.233	**			
Turnout at local elections in 1988	-0.389	-0.507	**	-0.448	-0.432	**	-0.376	-0.521	**	-0.380	-0.409	**
Decrease in turnout at cantonal elections	0.404	0.360	**	0.429	0.408	**	0.347	0.287	**	0.534	0.314	**
N = / R2	1014	0.330		405	0.393		546	0.301		63	0.262	

*Note:* Dependent variable: decrease in turnout (turnout in 1988 minus turnout in 1998)

\* = significance 0.05.

\*\* = significance 0.01.

whether there is an independent party effect. We also control for the decrease in turnout in cantonal-level elections and the initial level of local turnout (in 1988), thus distinguishing a drop from 80 percent to 70 percent from one from 40 percent to 30 percent. Lastly, we run these analyses for all municipalities together as well as for different size categories (small, medium, and large).

The results show that overall, in analyzing all municipalities together, PR does seem to serve as some sort of shelter against a decrease in participation. Size also remains a significant factor, with a greater level of decrease in the larger municipalities. Where there are organized political parties, the turnout decrease tends to be lower, but surprisingly, when local parties disappear, there is not necessarily a decrease in turnout. Greater participation in 1988 tends to magnify the decrease in turnout, as does the level of turnout decline at the cantonal level.

But, as indicated in Figure 2, the curvilinear effect of size in PR communities means that we need to be careful in attributing a shelter effect to PR: aggregation can conceal other important relationships. When we disaggregate by size of community, things change for the largest municipalities. For municipalities with less than 1000 inhabitants and for those with between 1000 and 10,000 inhabitants, the variables operate in the same direction as in the regression for all municipalities. For those municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants, however, the influence of the voting system disappears, along with size and the presence of political parties.

This leads us to suggest that the institutional impact of PR voting is, once more, a phenomenon manifested especially, and perhaps some day only, in small political communities. While traditionally high-turnout municipalities and those experiencing a significantly declining turnout at the higher political levels face greater turnout decrease, it is likely that this decline would be even greater if there were no political parties and a system of majority voting.

### **The Personalization of Politics and Its Effects**

The overall picture emerging from the numbers cited in this article complements what is generally known about recent political developments affecting political participation in Switzerland (and elsewhere). The decline in voter turnout in Swiss municipalities is a manifestation of a wider “cultural” phenomenon associated with a decline in the legitimacy of traditional forms of political participation, especially among young people. More than anything else, in Switzerland at least, such traditional political participation is associated with voting for the “old” national political parties. In contrast, observers point to a new wave of participation, new forms of participation in single-issue organizations, or “alternative” parties, which are valued as potentially overcoming the depersonalizing effects of the “old” politics. This applies to the green-alternative groups that emerged in the 1980s, but also and increasingly to a number of more pragmatic and less ideological groups concerned with local needs and problems that were spawned in the 1990s (Ladner, 2003).

This latter phenomenon is also related to what might be called a “re-personalization” of politics. As traditional parties and ideologies decline in legitimacy, citizens identify with individuals who personify their political goals and objectives (Ladner, 2005). Personalization, however, plays out differently in small towns and large cities. We can see this in the different combined effect of the electoral system and the presence of political parties in each.

Compared to all other categories, the small municipalities show continuity in a period of rapid change. PR not only continues to be linked to higher turnout, it serves as a shelter against voter-turnout decline. While PR fosters turnout initially through promoting the presence of political parties in the smaller municipalities, such party politicization per se does not shelter the small PR municipalities from the decline in participation, except when combined with the use of PR. This suggests that there is something inherent in the use of a proportional electoral system, something distinct from the existence of political parties that fosters participation. In the case of the smaller municipalities at least, there is evidence that its presence to some extent stems the decline. This fits well with the suggestion posed at the outset, that to the extent that PR has a direct positive effect on turnout, it is due not only to its making more individual votes count toward the outcome, but also, indirectly, to its being conducive to a more politically informed citizenry.

In the cities (that is, the very largest municipalities), we see another effect: turnout decline seems to be unaffected by the electoral system or even show signs of a relationship going in the opposite direction. As noted, not only did the large majority municipalities evidence a smaller decrease in turnout than the PR cities in the same category, they constituted the only category of Swiss municipalities that in fact showed no decline at all, that is, acted as a full shelter against decline. It is here that the factor of the personalization of politics enters most clearly.

The most important feature distinguishing small municipality from large city politics (and increasingly so) it appears, has to do with the role of the media, and the electronic media in particular. In recent years, media coverage has been gaining importance in its impact on local politics in large Swiss cities. Under such circumstances, the more personalized majority elections can be seen as better suited to attracting interest and thus participation (or, at least, stemming their decline) in electoral politics. Personalization through the electronic media places emphasis on leaders and a few other highly visible elected officials, who come to dominate the political arena. The process feeds on itself in that the capacity of candidates to defend their (party's) cause on television becomes an increasingly important qualification for public and party office (Ladner, 2005).

In the large cities, the parties' presence is assured irrespective of the electoral system. On the other hand, any personal link to the candidates is weak due to the size and impersonal nature of life in a large city, and here the electoral system is a factor. The majority system thrusts individuals forward into the public view, playing into the media's desire to play up this dimension, which is more likely to be frustrated under PR. Under such circumstances, it is plausible to suggest that the process of personalization through the media under majority voting may be bringing a sufficient number of potential voters to the polls to counterbalance losses due to the wider cultural factors de-emphasizing the importance of voting in elections.

In a small municipality, the situation is different. Personalization is present as a matter of course (people know each other), but it is personalization not mediated by the media. As long as the personal element is secure, the positive effect (that is, civic-literacy-enhancing effect [Milner, 2002]) of PR elections can remain salient in a period of overall declining politicization. In that sense, we can interpret developments in the smaller municipalities as indications that under certain circumstances PR mitigates against wider cultural developments reducing voter participation. We should not be impressed too much by this, however, since small municipalities, though more important in Switzerland than in comparable countries, are themselves becoming increasingly marginal.

### Conclusion

The increasing importance of individuals and the diminishing salience of parties have been serving to buttress the arguments of groups in Switzerland who would like to see majority voting replace PR. They argue, as did the Christian Democrats before the elections in the canton of Zug,<sup>12</sup> that citizens nowadays want to vote for “faces” instead of a party program. They welcome a development they associate with majority voting, namely, that electoral clashes are seen as conflicts among individuals rather than among different political programs or ideologies. This, they claim, is what attracts the interest and participation of citizens.

We would caution against generalizations of this kind. Our findings suggest that fostering voter turnout by adopting majority voting, under the circumstances witnessed in the past decade, can have a positive effect in certain larger cities, but is likely to have the opposite effect in the smaller municipalities. More profoundly, however, if we are right in suggesting a long-term relationship between PR elections and the level of political informedness, then short-term turnout gains from the personalization of politics due to use of majority electoral systems could prove ephemeral, counteracted by the secular decline in civic literacy.

It goes without saying that more research is needed to go any further along this line of thought. Aggregate data, such as that on which this article is based, cannot ultimately be used to test any explanation linked to individual attitude-based developments such as the personalization of politics. One fruitful course of action using aggregate data would be detailed and more qualitative analysis of relevant cases. It would consist of selecting a group of municipalities similar in size and differing in their electoral system from among those where turnout has declined most sharply and conducting case studies of the actual political, as well as institutional, developments in those cities and towns.<sup>13</sup>

Of particular relevance are those municipalities which changed their voting system between 1988 and 1998. Since there are no official statistics, we do not have precise figures for overall numbers, but on the basis of our survey, we can estimate the number of municipalities having changed from majority to PR voting as roughly 50 and the number of municipalities having changed in the other direction at around 25.<sup>14</sup>

There are revealing stories to be told, stories which, when set within the context of the wider developments described here, contain lessons about changing voter turnout and the effect of electoral systems.

### Appendix

The data presented in this article stem from the Institute of Sociology at the University of Zurich and the Institute of Political Science at the University of Berne, which on three occasions (1988, 1994, and 1998) surveyed the communal secretaries of every Swiss municipality.<sup>15</sup> The response rate to the three surveys is provided in Table 1A. The 1994 survey did not specifically ask questions in relation to electoral participation, but its results are relevant to the discussion of the importance of political parties. As far as turnout is concerned, we thus limit ourselves to comparing the 1988 and 1998 results, tracing developments in the interval.<sup>16</sup> The representativity is quite high for all size groups.

TABLE 1A. *Swiss Data: 1988, 1994, and 1998*

	Number of municipalities	Responding municipalities	Percentage
Survey 1988	3022	2466	81.6
Survey 1994	3017	2082	69.0
Survey 1998	2914	2465	84.6
Having taken part in all three surveys		1592	54.6
Having taken part in 1988 and 1998		2056	70.6

### Notes

1. Franklin's (2004) analysis of turnout in 22 democracies points to the importance of the effect. Franklin shows that the most important factor explaining turnout is the "character of elections," consisting of the electoral system, the fractionalization of the party system, the time elapsed since the previous election, and the closeness of the outcome. Changes in the character of elections, he finds, largely accounts for the average 7 percent turnout drop in the past 30 years among the 22 countries.
2. The respondents were the communal secretaries, the highest officials in the municipal administration. They were asked, among other things, to provide information about the turnout rates at local, cantonal, and national elections in their municipality.
3. Hence the district magnitude, another factor linked to the effects of proportional electoral systems, is as wide as it can be.
4. Since the lists under PR are open and allow for *panachage* (the ability to divide one's vote between candidates from different parties), personal factors do enter the process, though less than under majority voting.
5. About 17 percent of the communities also have an elected council (legislative), the large majority of which (77 percent) are, like the cantonal assemblies and the federal parliament, elected through PR, with only some small communities using majority voting.
6. About 17 percent of the municipalities elect their executive in town meetings rather than at the polls. Since town-meeting attendance is much lower than turnout at the polls (as it makes a substantial difference whether one simply has to cast a vote or whether one has to attend an assembly for a couple of hours in the evening), these municipalities are excluded here.
7. See Rallings and Trasher (1990: 80), who in their work on voting in local elections in Britain, introduce such a variable to control for a traditional or cultural propensity to participate more actively.
8. This phenomenon has been of much public concern in Sweden. Toward the end of the 1990s, a high-profile investigatory commission held public hearings and published a series of analyses of the question based on work carried out by 116 researchers. After the 1998 election, the government named a Minister for Democracy, mandated to propose reforms to foster enhanced democratic participation. In February 2000, the commission published its 13-volume report, which analyzes every aspect of the situation and calls, notably, for local elections being held on separate days from national ones – a recommendation which, so far, has failed to find favor with the government.
9. It should be noted that in some European countries an additional factor has emerged that helps to explain part of the decline. In recent years, the franchise for local elections has been extended to citizens of other EU countries as well as to immigrants who have lived in the municipalities for some time. Both groups tend to have a lower turnout. Switzerland is not part of the EU and its local governments, with two exceptions, have not enfranchised EU citizens in local elections. Concerning the two exceptions, in the canton of Neuchâtel non-Swiss residents have been entitled to vote at the local level for

- about 150 years and at the beginning of the 1970s the newly founded canton of Jura also extended political rights at the local level to immigrants who had lived in the municipality for an extended period.
10. This difficulty is not insurmountable, as demonstrated by the canton of Tessin, where even very small communities use PR. Moreover, due to PR voting, the canton of Tessin has an astonishing high percentage of political parties in its small municipalities.
  11. Overall, in comparable municipalities (having taken part in all three surveys) only two-thirds of the members of municipal executives were affiliated to one of the four big parties in 1998 compared to four-fifths 10 years earlier. The others are members of one of the smaller parties or local groups or are not affiliated at all. The percentage of this latter, unaffiliated group rose from less than 15 percent in 1988 to almost 20 percent in 1998.
  12. See, for example, *Tages-Anzeiger* (1997).
  13. In this regard, mention should be made of the next stage of the research (currently being completed), which examines about 300 reform projects in Swiss municipalities, looking at the effects of, among other things, new public management reforms, new forms of collaboration between municipalities, and amalgamation of municipalities. An analysis of the reforms occurring in local political systems is planned, which should allow a more in-depth investigation of the impact of a change of electoral system on political participation.
  14. Among the municipalities that took part in the two surveys (1988 and 1998), the percentage using PR systems went up from 29.3 percent to 30.4 percent. (The overall percentages are slightly lower because the smaller, largely majority-voting municipalities are slightly underrepresented.) Applied to the municipalities in only those five cantons where municipalities have the right to change from one voting system to another, the net change in the direction of PR voting amounts to just less than 2 percent, which still is very little. This results in a net change of about 25 municipalities in the direction of PR voting, which is less than 1 percent of the nearly 2800 municipalities.
  15. The 1994 and 1998 surveys were financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation, the latter as part of the Priority Programme for the Social Sciences (SPP) "Switzerland: Towards the Future."
  16. More detailed information on the results of the 1988 survey is to be found in Ladner and Milner (1999).

## References

- Bjorklund, Tor (2000). "The Steadily Declining Voter Turnout." Paper presented at the conference on Local Elections and Representation in Italy and Europe, Naples, October.
- Blais, André and Carty, R.K. (1990). "Does Proportional Representation Foster Voter Turnout?" *European Journal of Political Research* 18: 167–81.
- Bréchon, Pierre (1998). *La France aux Urnes: Cinquante Ans d'histoire électorale*. Grenoble: Les Etudes de la documentation Française.
- Crewe, Ivor (1981). "Electoral Participation," in D. Butler, H. Penniman and A. Ranney (eds), *Democracy at the Polls: A Comparative Study of Competitive National Elections*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.
- EU (2000). *Voter Turnout at Regional and Local Elections in the European Union, 1990–1999*. Luxembourg: Committee of the Regions.
- Franklin, Mark N. (1996). "Electoral Participation," in Lawrence Leduc, Richard Niemi and Pippa Norris (eds), *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Franklin, Mark N. (2004). *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies Since 1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jackman, Robert and Miller, Ross A. (1995). "Voter Turnout in the Industrial Democracies During the 1980s," *Comparative Political Studies* 27: 467–92.

- Ladner, Andreas (1996). "Die Schweizer Lokalparteien im Wandel. Aktuelle Entwicklungstendenzen gefährden die politische Stabilität," *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Politische Wissenschaft* 2, spring: 1–22.
- Ladner, Andreas (1997). "Die Schweizer Lokalparteien: Eckpfeiler der politischen Stabilität," *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 23(1): 165–93.
- Ladner, Andreas (1999). "Local Parties in Switzerland: An Active Pillar of the Swiss Political System," in Martin Saiz and Hans Geser (eds), *Local Parties in Political and Organizational Perspective*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Ladner, Andreas (2003). "Verbreitung und Bedeutung der Lokalparteien in den Gemeinden," URL: [http://socio.ch/par/ladner/lad\\_03.pdf](http://socio.ch/par/ladner/lad_03.pdf). Zürich: Universität Zürich, Soziologisches Institut.
- Ladner, Andreas (2005). "Mediendemokratie: Herausforderungen und Chancen für die politischen Parteien," in Patrick Donges (ed.), *Politische Kommunikation in der Schweiz*. Bern: Paul Haupt.
- Ladner, Andreas and Milner, Henry (1999). "Do Voters Turn Out More Under Proportional Than Majoritarian Systems? The Evidence from Swiss Communal Elections," *Electoral Studies* 18: 235–50.
- Lijphart, Arend (1997). "Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma," *American Political Science Review* 91(1): 1–14.
- Milner, Henry (2002). *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens can Make Democracy Work*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.
- Rallings, Collin and Trasher, Michael (1990). "Turnout in English Local Elections: An Aggregate Analysis with Electoral and Contextual Data," *Electoral Studies* 9: 79–90.
- Tages-Anzeiger* (1997). "Zurück zum Majorz?" June 9.
- Wattenberg, Martin P. (1998). "Turnout Decline in the U.S. and Other Advanced Industrial Democracies," Research Paper. Irvine: University of California, Center for the Study of Democracy.

---

### Biographical Notes

HENRY MILNER is Professor of Political Science at Vanier College, Visiting Professor of Political Science at Umeå University in Sweden, Adjunct Professor at Université Laval, and Research Fellow at the Institute for Research in Public Policy (IRPP) in Montreal. In 2004–5, he held the Chair in Canadian Studies at the Sorbonne. He has also been a visiting professor or researcher at universities in Finland, Australia, and New Zealand. His recent books include *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work* (2002), *Social Democracy and Rational Choice* (1994), and *Sweden: Social Democracy in Practice* (1989). He has edited two books on electoral reform: *Making Every Vote Count: Reappraising Canada's Electoral System* (1999) and *Steps Toward Making Every Vote Count: Electoral System Reform in Canada and its Provinces* (2004). He is co-publisher of *Inroads*, the Canadian journal of opinion and policy. ADDRESS: 3777 Kent, Montreal QC, H3S 1N4, Canada [email: [henry.milner@capp.ulaval.ca](mailto:henry.milner@capp.ulaval.ca)].

ANDREAS LADNER is an Assistant Professor at the Centre of Competence for Public Management at the University of Bern. His areas of research include political parties, municipalities, and institutional change. He has conducted several major research projects for the Swiss National Science Foundation. He has published articles in, among others, *West European Politics* and *Electoral Studies and Party Politics*. He regularly comments on Swiss politics in the media. He is the author of



*Stabilität und Wandel von Parteien und Parteiensystemen. Eine vergleichende Analyse von Konfliktlinien, Parteien und Parteiensystemen in den Schweizer Kantonen* (2004) and co-author, with Michael Brändle, of *Die politischen Parteien im Wandel. Von Mitgliederparteien zu professionalisierten Wählerorganisationen?* (2001). ADDRESS: Kompetenzzentrum für Public Management, Universität Bern, Falkenplatz 9, CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland [email: andreas.ladner@kpm.unibe.ch].

*Acknowledgments.* An earlier version of this article was presented at the Comparative Representation and Electoral Systems Research Committee (ESRC) sessions at the IPSA Conference, Québec, Canada in August 2000.