



**University of
Zurich^{UZH}**

Political Science Department

Direct Democracy Promises and Challenges

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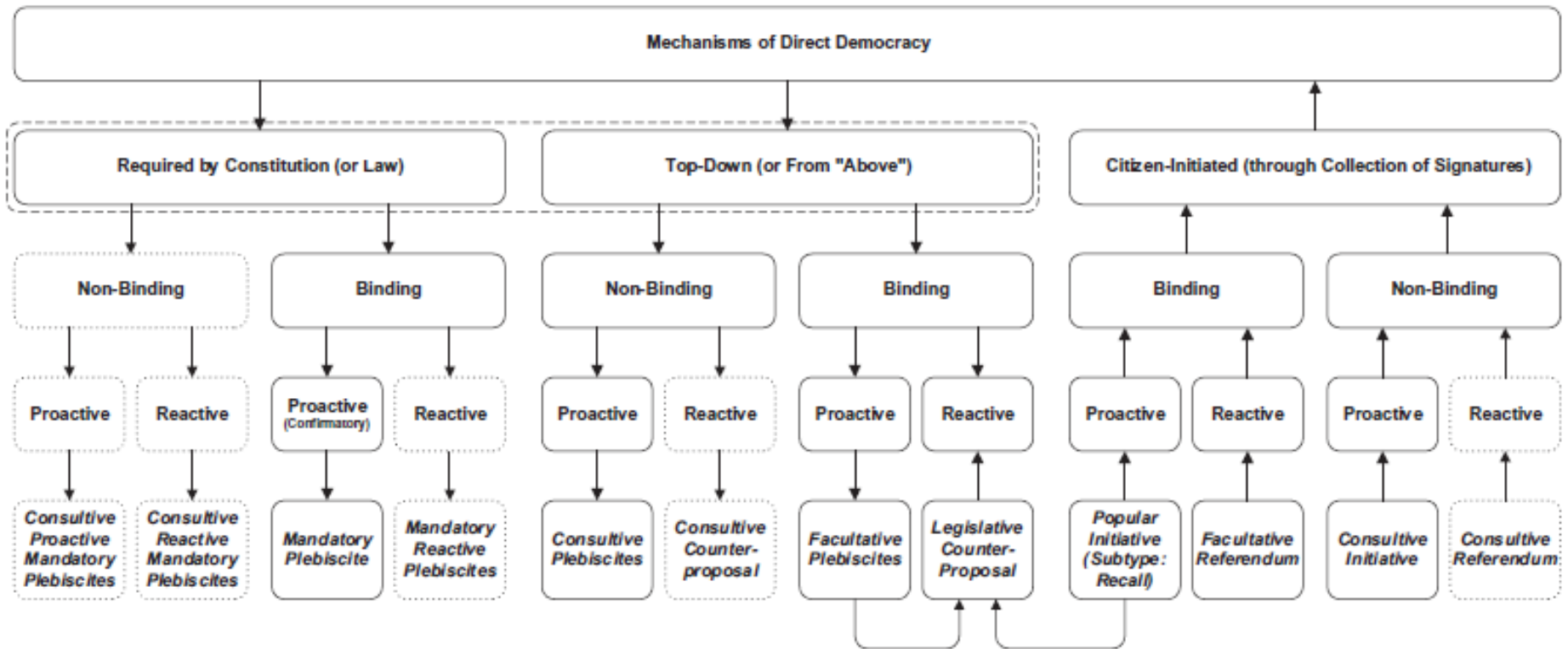
**Local-level citizen consultations. Democracy without mediation
Barcelona, 18 June 2018**

Overview

1. Why direct democracy? **Promises & Challenges**
2. Direct democracy in **Switzerland**
3. Does direct democracy change **policy outcomes**?
4. The question of **citizen competence & the role of the elite**



Typology of Direct Democracy by David Altman



- 1) Who initiates the vote?
- 2) Is it binding?
- 3) Is it proactive or reactive?

Why Direct Democracy? Promises & Challenges

- 2 models of democracy: representative vs. participatory
- Direct democracy as one form of participatory democracy:

„Direct participation of the active citizenry in deciding substantive political issues“

(Marxer and Pállinger 2007, 14)

Why Direct Democracy? Participatory Democracy Theory

2 aims of participatory democracy

Instrumental

- Direct translation of „people's“ will
- Responsiveness
- Better representation of all strata

Emancipatory

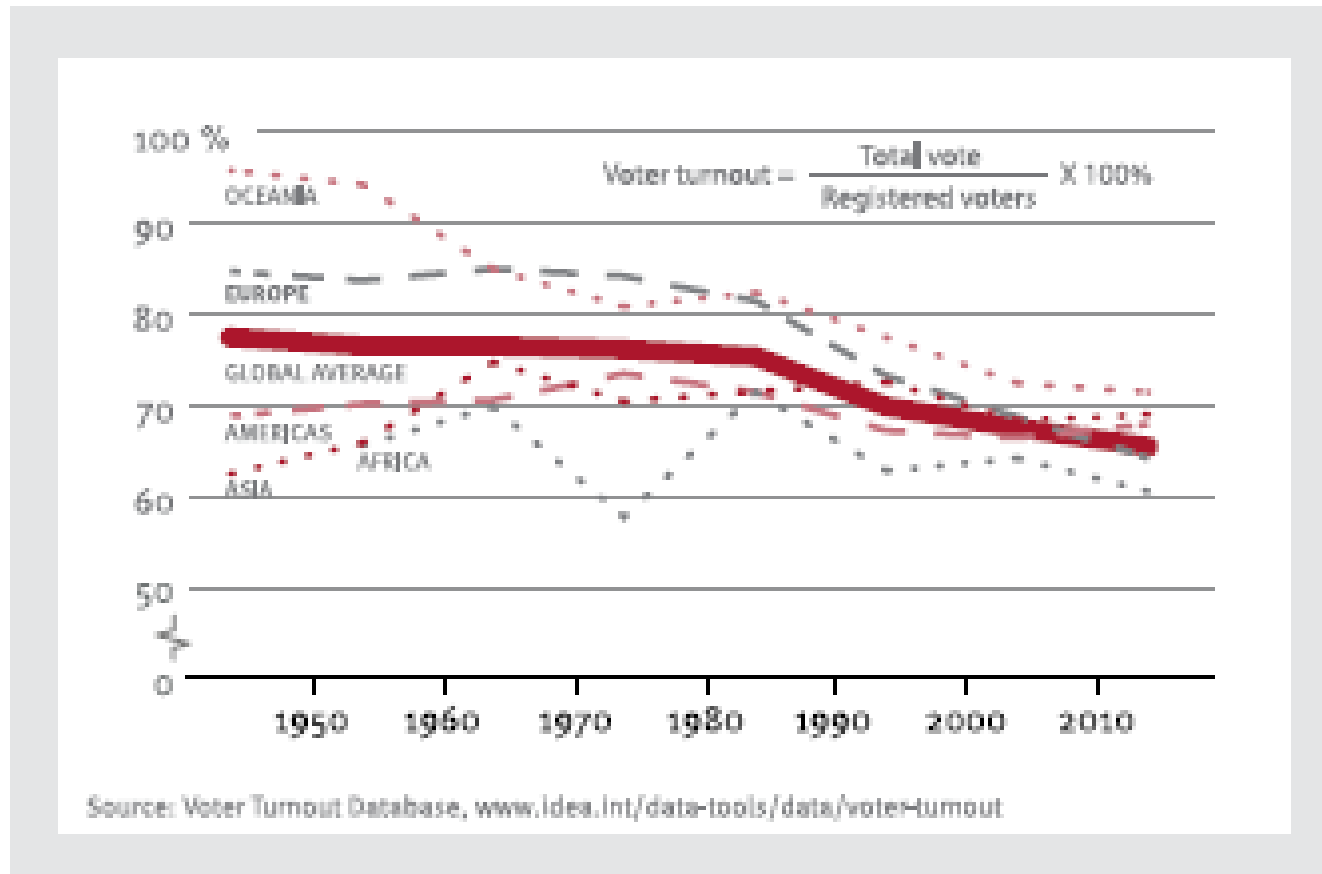
- Liberty, autonomy and individual development
- Education: Competence and sense of efficacy
→ trust

Why Direct Democracy? Promises of direct democracy today

- More accurate representation of voters' preferences
- Remedy for increasing political alienation → decline in electoral turnout, party membership, trust in institutions
 - Increase in political trust & engagement
- Check on unaccountable elites between elections
 - additional veto point
 - agenda-setting device for minority groups and social movements

Why Direct Democracy? Decline in electoral turnout

Global voter turnout by region, 1945-2015

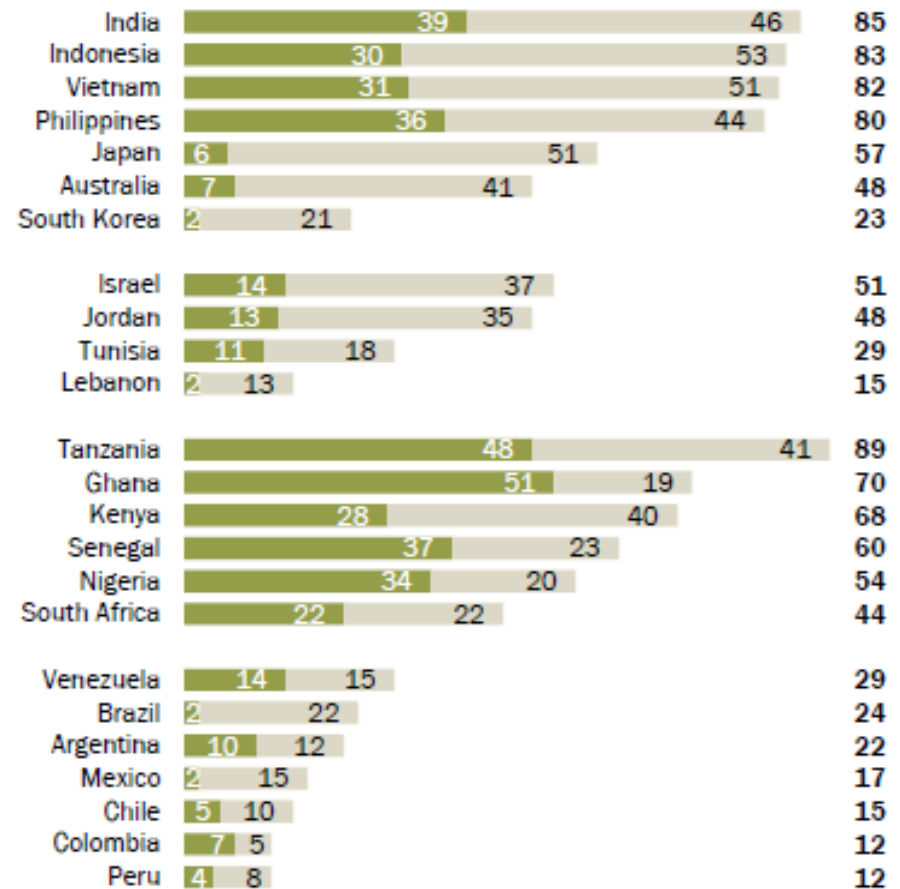
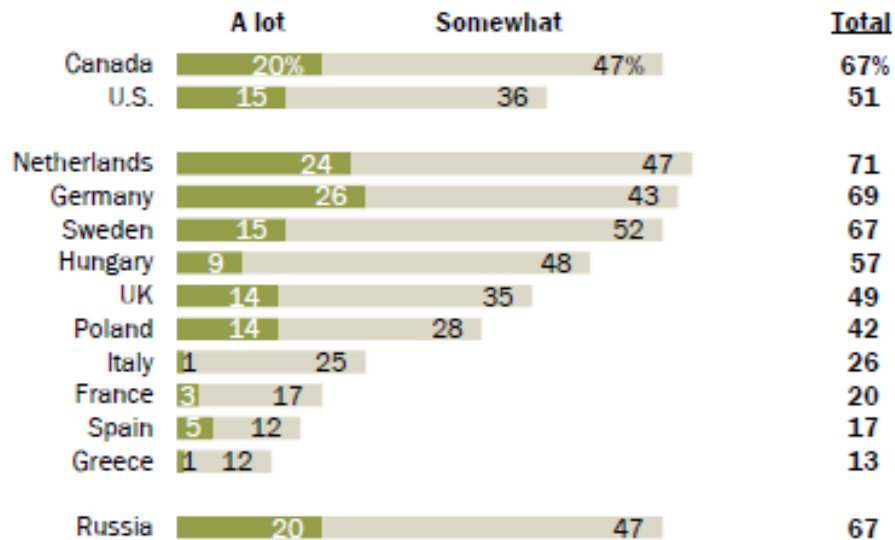


Notes: Data is for Legislative (Lower House) Elections that took place across the globe since 1945 and covers 1,833 elections in total.

Trust in national government, Pew Research October 2017

Few worldwide have a lot of trust in their government

How much do you trust the national government to do what is right for our country?



Note: Question not asked in Turkey.

Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey. Q4.

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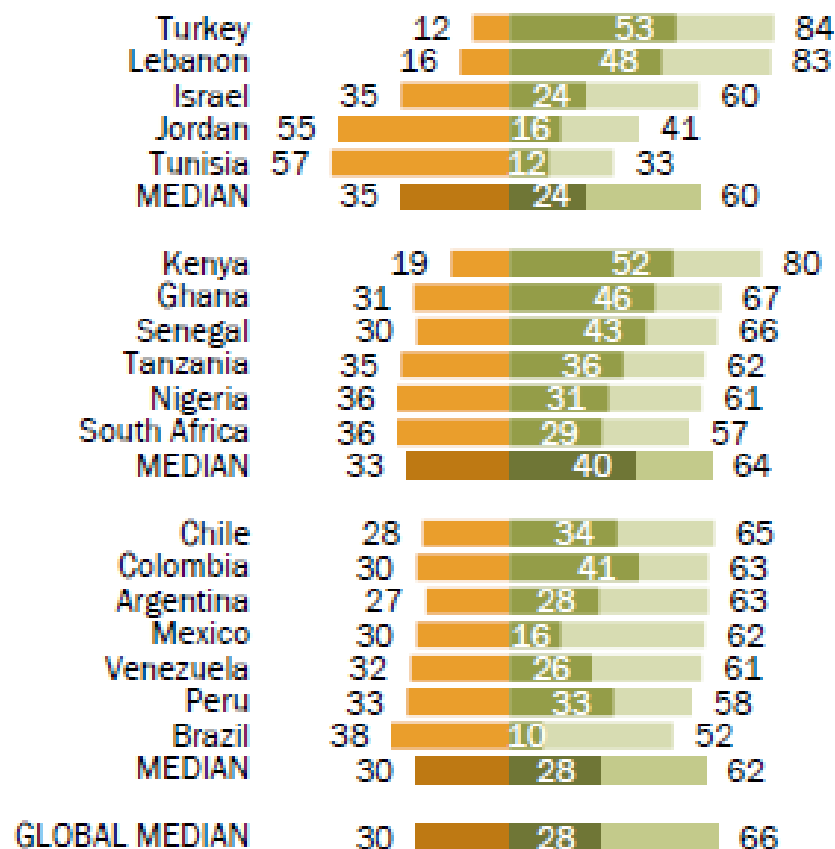
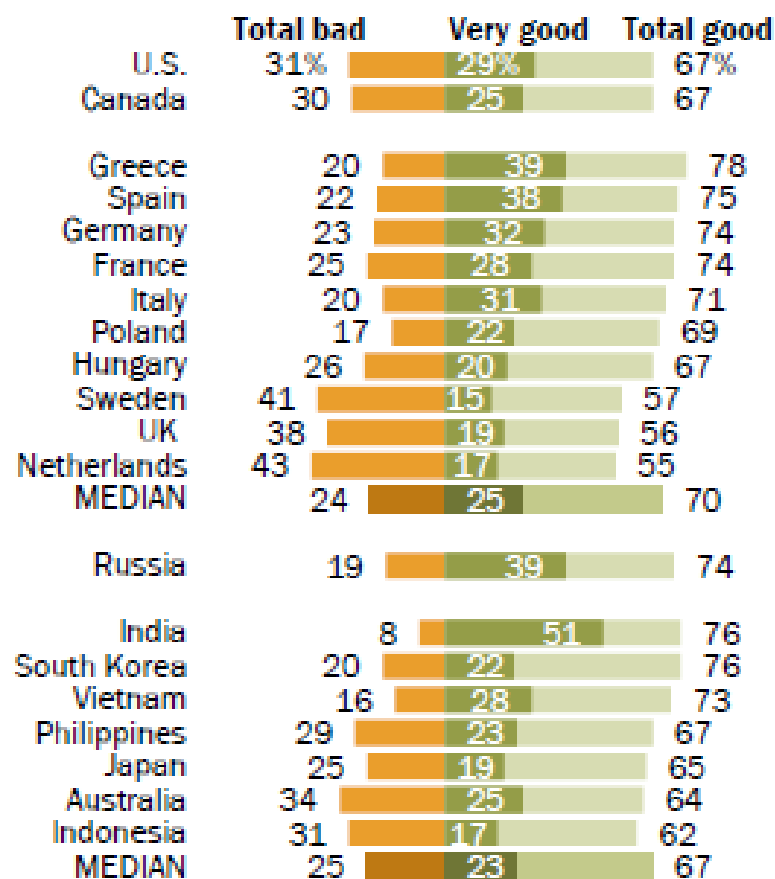
Why Direct Democracy? Challenges & Criticisms

- Does direct democracy undermine representative channels?
- „Tyranny of the majority“
- Referendums subject to elite manipulation and misuse
 - Governments
 - powerful interest groups
- Lack of citizen competence and deliberation

Worldwide support for direct democracy

Widespread backing for citizens voting on major national issues

Would a democratic system where citizens, not elected officials, vote directly on major national issues to decide what becomes law be a good or bad way of governing this country?



Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey. Q29a.

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The Case of Switzerland

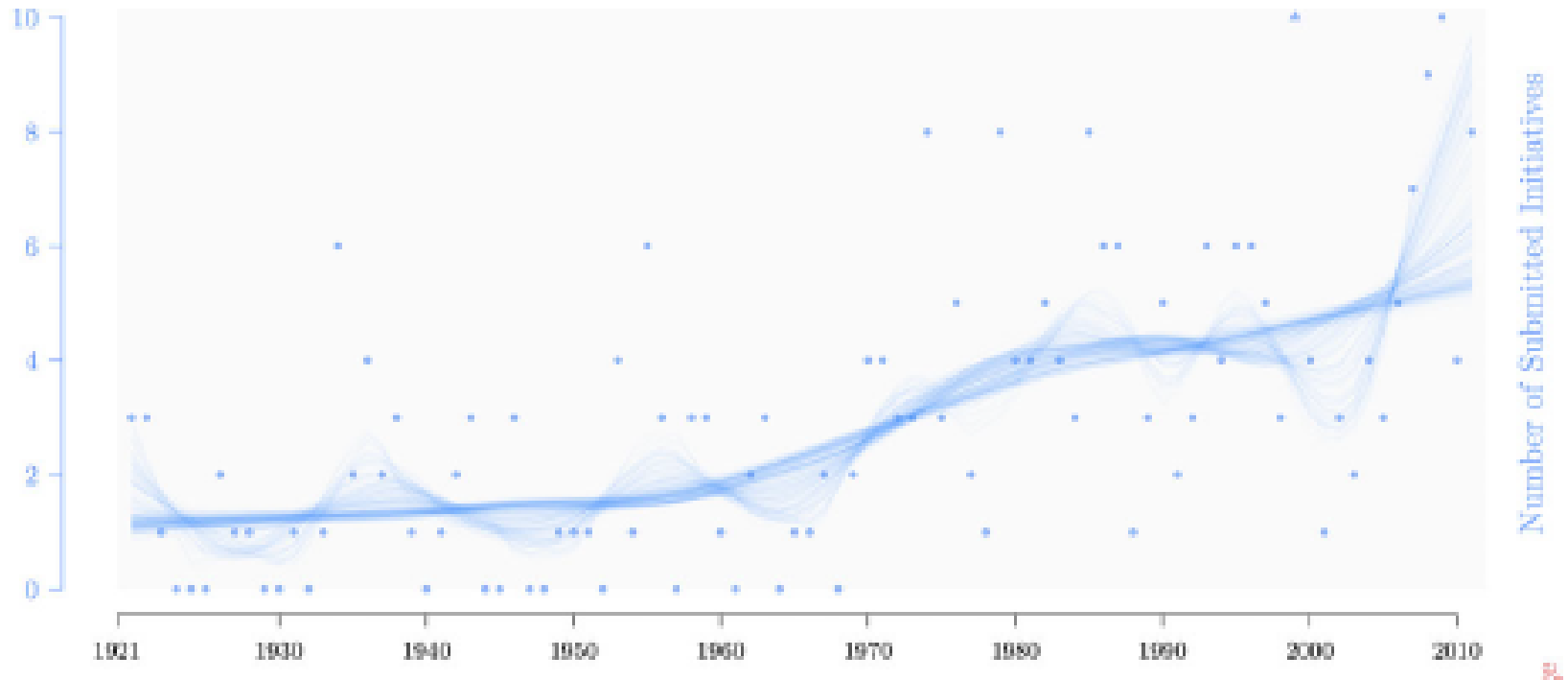
The Swiss Case: Types of Direct Democracy

Instrument	Year	Initiator	Purpose	Approval quorum
Mandatory constitutional referendum	1848	Constitution	any constitutional amendment	double majority of votes and cantons
Optional (facultative) legislative referendum	1874	50,000 citizens or 8 cantons	all federal laws	simple majority of votes
Popular initiative for a total revision of the constitution	1848	100,000 citizens	total revision of constitution	simple majority of votes
Popular initiative for a partial revision of the constitution	1891	100,000 citizens	constitutional amendment (formulated in general or specific terms)	double majority of votes and cantons
Counterproposal to a popular initiative for a partial revision of the constitution	1891	Federal Parliament	constitutional amendment (formulated in general or specific terms)	
Popular general initiative	2003–2009	100,000 citizens	constitution or law	simple majority; Parliament decides on implementation

Direct Democratic Voting Schedule 2017: Zurich

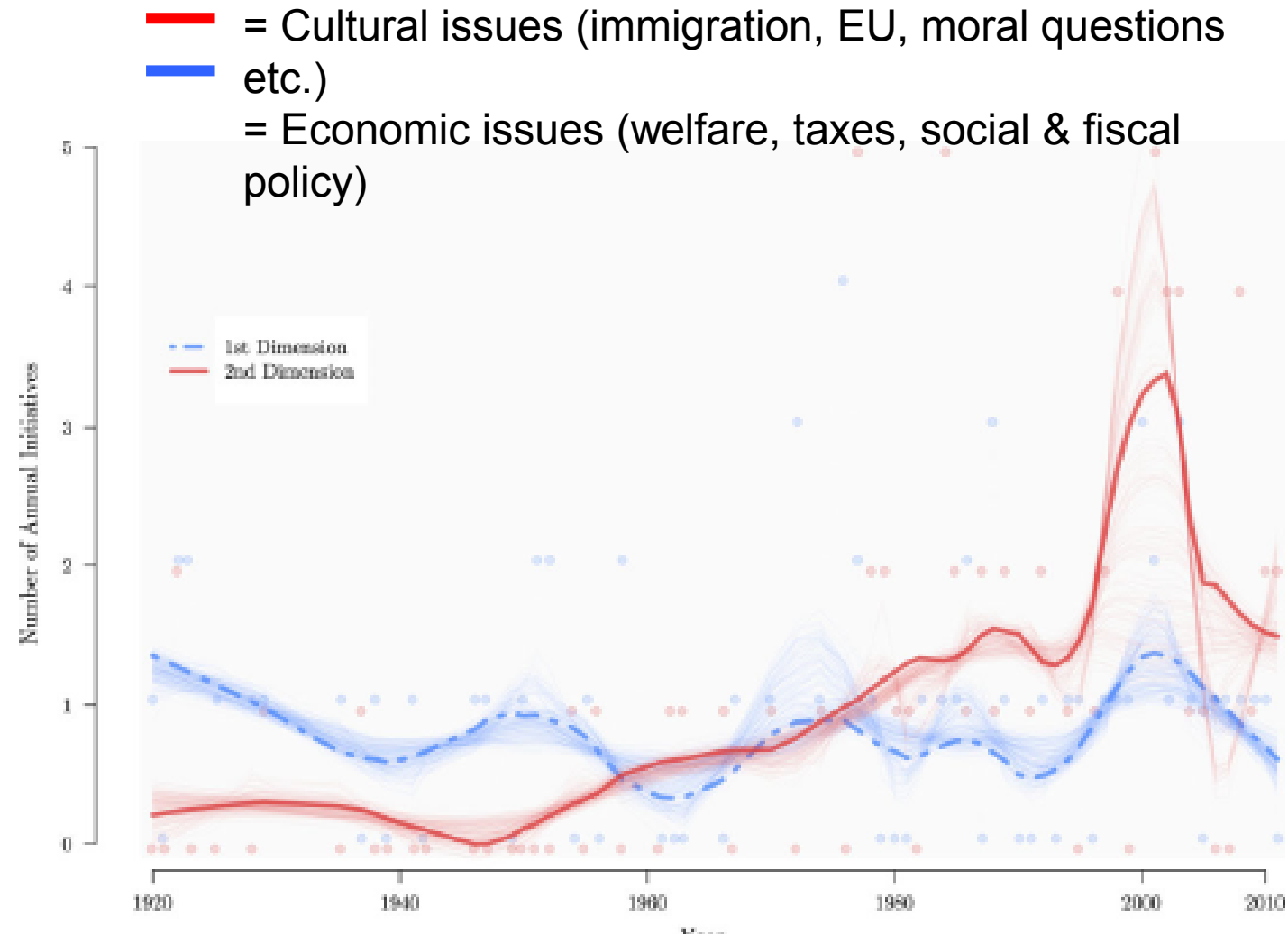
Date	National Level	Cantonal Level	Municipal Level
12. 02.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Corporate tax - Naturalizations - Transport policy 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Voting law - Public space - School building
21.05.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Energy law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cantonal hospital - Psychiatric clinic - Foreign language teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Housing - Public parcs - „Tanzhaus“
24.09.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pension reform - VAT reform - Nutrition initiative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social security - Tax law - Youth homes - Transport policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Asylum center - Electricity supply - „Cabaret Voltaire“
26.11.			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public Schools - School building - Electricity supply - Nursing home - Nutrition initiative

Switzerland: Number of Initiatives over Time



Source: Leemann, Lucas (2015): Political Conflict and Direct Democracy: Explaining Initiative Use 1920-2011. *Swiss Political Science Review* 21(4), 596-616.

Switzerland: Number of Initiatives over Time



Source: Leemann, Lucas (2015): Political Conflict and Direct Democracy: Explaining Initiative Use 1920-2011. *Swiss Political Science Review* 21(4), 596-616.

Switzerland: Controversial referendums & limitations of direct democracy



Lifelong Detention Initiative (2004)



Minaret Ban Initiative (2009)



„Mass Immigration“ Initiative (2012)

⚡ **ECHR:** regular review of detention grounds

⚡ **ECHR:** Religious freedom
Swiss constitution: ban on discrimination

⚡ **Bilateral treaties with EU:** Free movement of people

The Swiss Case: current discussions on reforms

- Judicial pre-review of popular initiatives
compatibility with international law
→ BUT: new SVP „*Self-determination initiative*“
- Extension of reasons of invalidity of initiatives
incompatibility with basic constitutional principles
- Adaptation of signature requirements
(8% of population required in 1891, <2% today)
→ average turnout: 45%

Impact of Direct Democracy on Policy Outcomes

Impact of DD on Policy Outcomes

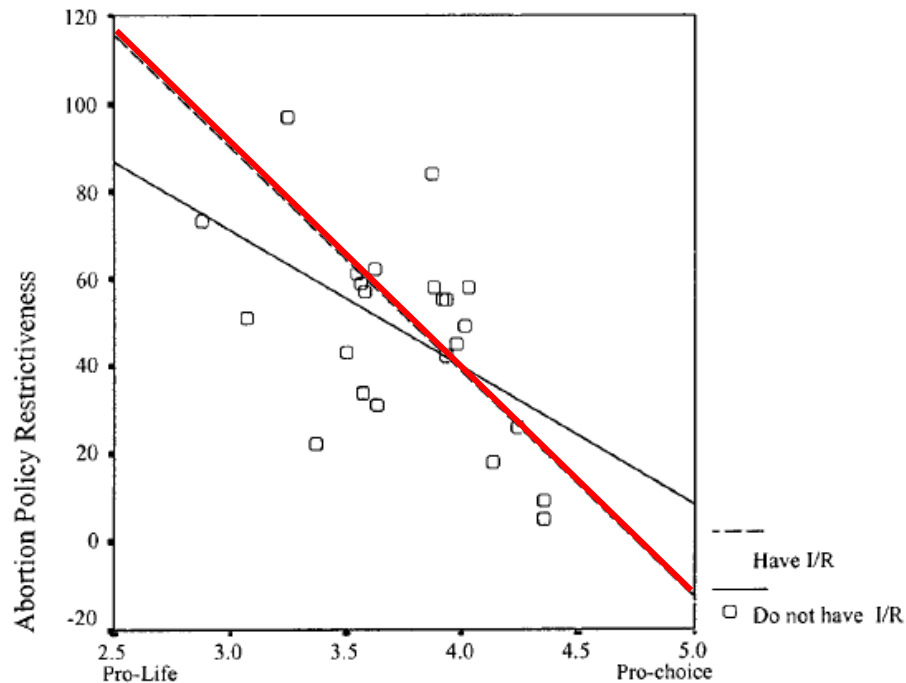
3 possible answers:

- 1) No effect
- 2) Conservative effect
on fiscal & social policy
- 3) „Median-reverting“ effect:
DD moves policy-output closer to median voter.

→ Consider indirect effects!

Impact of DD on Policy Outcomes

Abortion policy US states



State Abortion Attitudes

Source: Arceneaux, K. (2002). Direct democracy and the link between public opinion and state abortion policy. *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*, 2(4), 372-387.

Spending preferences US states

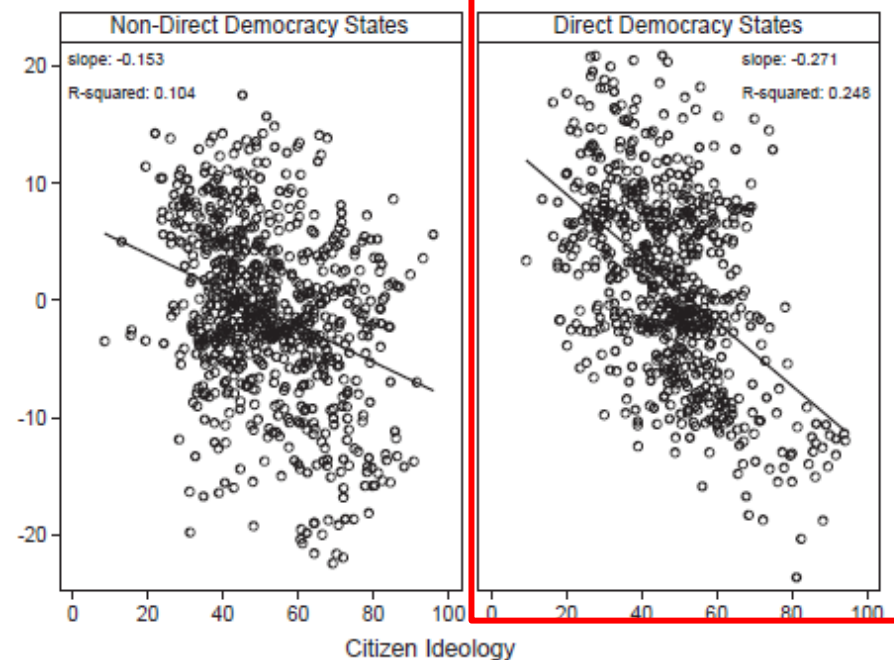
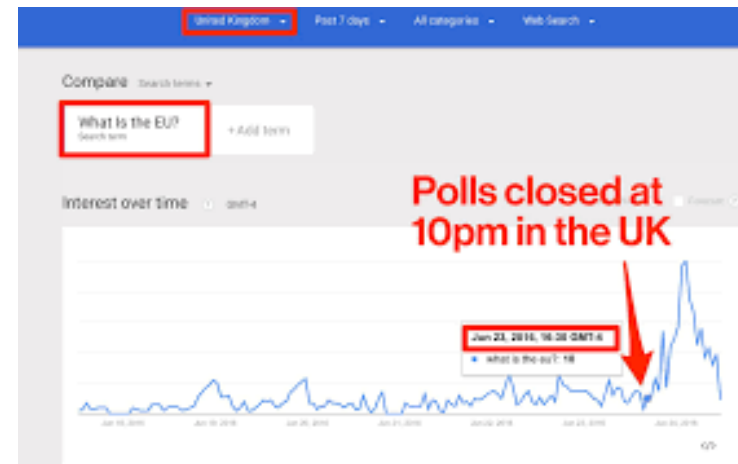


Fig. 3. Policy priorities vs. citizen ideology, 1982–2011.

Source: Lewis, D. C., Schneider, S. K., & Jacoby, W. G. (2015). The impact of direct democracy on state spending priorities. *Electoral Studies*, 40, 531-538

The Question of Citizen (In)Competence & the Role of Political Elites in Direct Democracy

The Question of Citizen Competence



But: What is Citizen Competence?

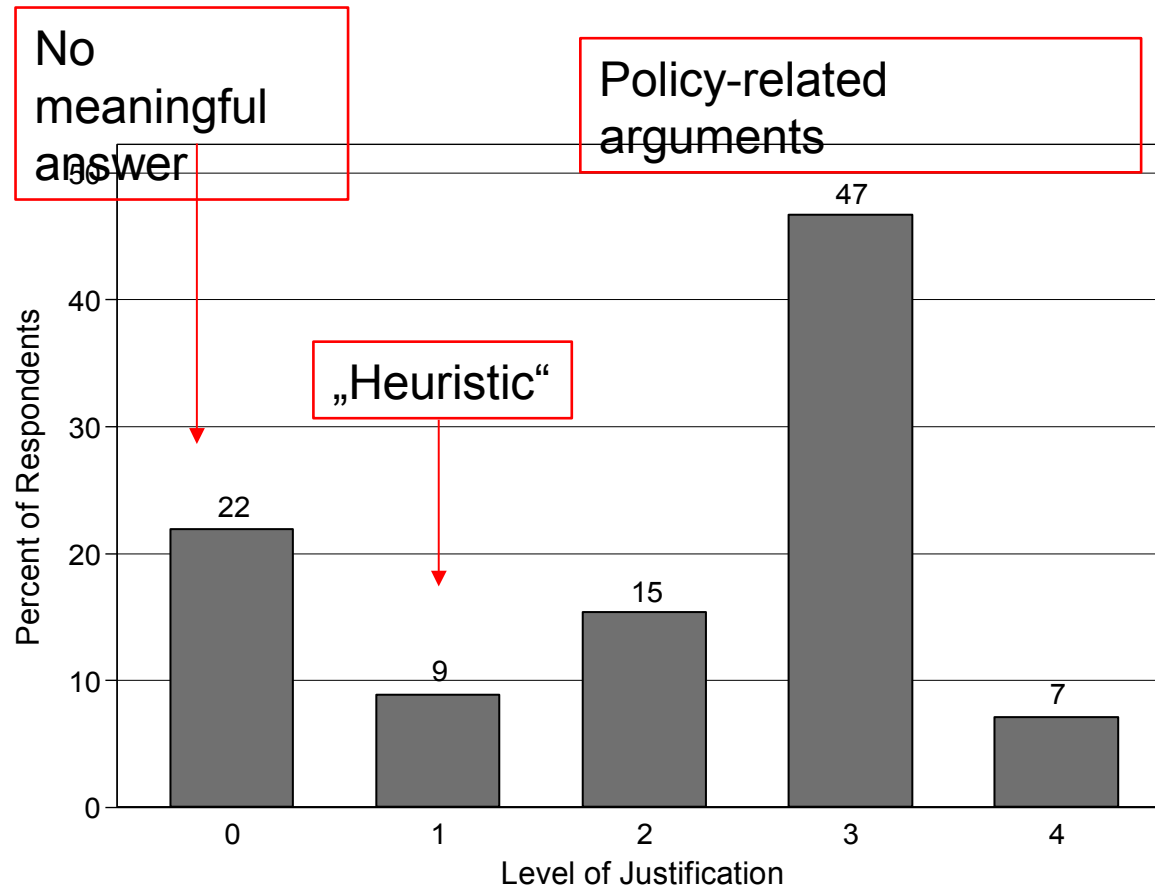
- High political knowledge levels?
- Deliberation & Debate?
- Heuristic use?



Issue-specific Knowledge in Swiss Direct Democracy

Post-ballot surveys, 34 votes, 2008-2012 (>26'000 voters)

Question: „***What were your main reasons for voting yes/no?***“



The Role of Elites & Campaigns

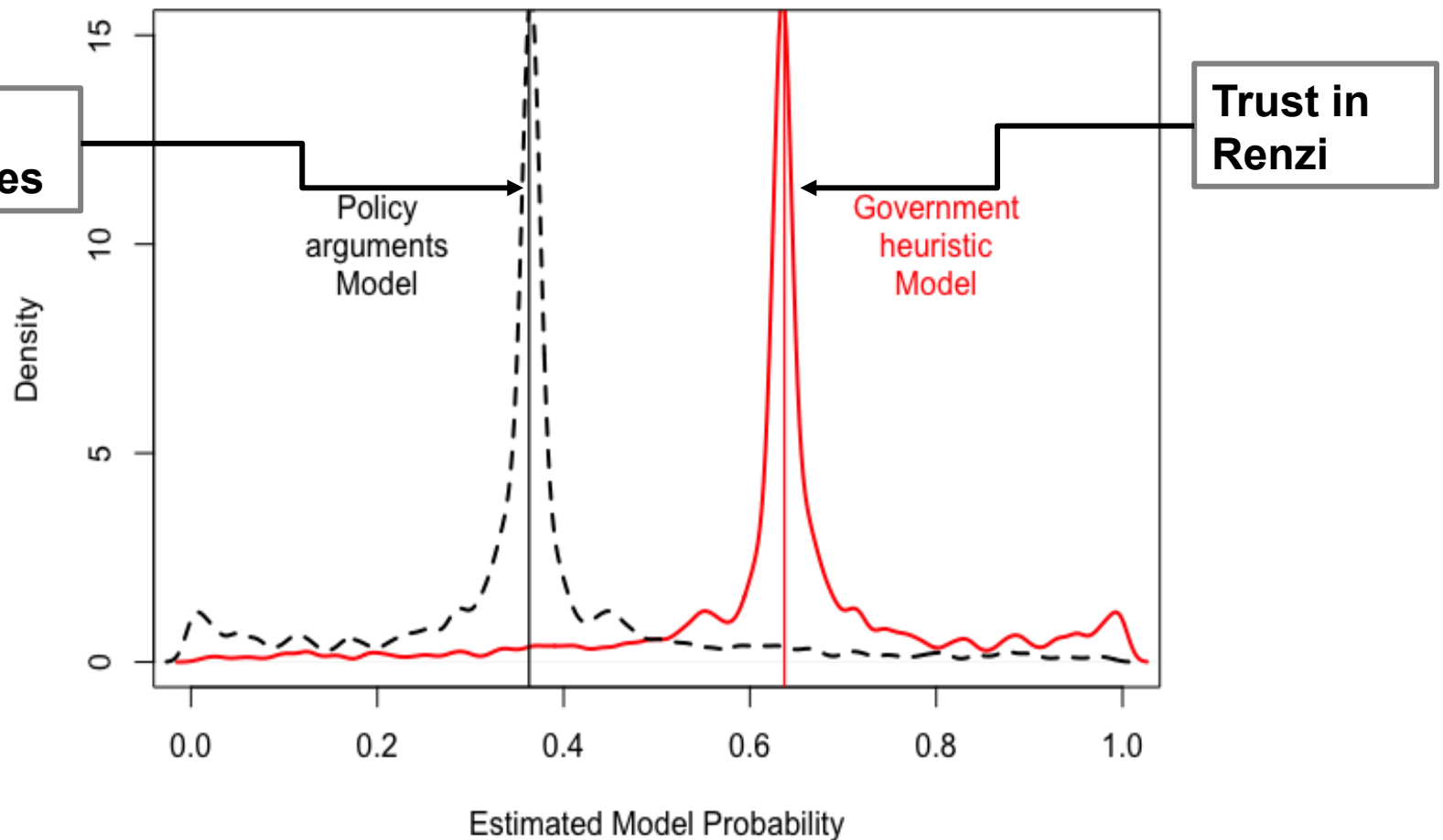


PAROLEN ZUM ENERGIEGESETZ		
BDP	JA	
CVP	JA	
EVP	JA	
FDP	JA	
GRÜNE	JA	
GLP	JA	
SP	JA	
SVP	NEIN	



Italian Constitutional Referendum 2016

Voters voting on their preference for the Renzi government vs.
Voters voting on the policy-content of the reform



Elite influence on different levels:

- Designing institutions of direct democracy
- Launching of referendums & initiatives
- Coalitions & Campaigning:
 - arguments, information, framing
 - elite cues & signals
- Implementation of accepted measures



Conclusions

- Direct democracy comes with promises & challenges
- Policy outcomes in direct democracy are closer to the median voters' preferences
- Citizen competence depends crucially on the context
→ institutions of direct democracy and elites guide public opinion formation
- **Not so different from representative democracy after all?**

THANK YOU!

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