

# Why do Parties Participate in Referendum Campaigns? Evidence from Switzerland

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## Biographical Note

*Toine Paulissen* is a Post-Doctoral Researcher funded by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) at the KU Leuven Voting & Democracy Research Group. His research focuses on comparative and European politics with a special interest for direct democracy, political communication, polarization, political finance, party behavior and the European Union.

## Data Availability Statement

The dataset on party participation in Swiss referendum campaigns generated and analyzed during the current study is available in the Open Science Framework repository at the following DOI:

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# **Why do Parties Participate in Referendum Campaigns? Evidence from Switzerland**

## **Abstract**

This study examines how political parties engage strategically with referendum campaigns, a less-explored aspect of their broader referendum involvement. Building on referendum instrumentalization studies as well as cognate literatures, an analytical framework identifies five potential strategic factors that might explain why parties participate in referendum campaigns and formulates corresponding hypotheses regarding their effect. The framework is applied to 33 recent Swiss referendums, using social media and newspaper advertisements as a proxy for party participation. Binomial logistic regression reveals that public attention for a referendum, its issue's salience to a party, and (to a lesser extent) a party's initiator status significantly favor the likelihood of campaign participation, suggesting that Swiss parties primarily leverage referendum campaigns for policy-seeking and image-building strategies. This study therefore contributes to understanding of the interplay between referendums and party strategies in contemporary political contexts, and allows for the expansion of instrumentalization perspectives to include non-initiating parties.

**Keywords:** Direct Democracy; Political Parties; Party Behavior; Campaigning; Swiss Politics

**Word Count:** 7998

## Introduction

Contemporary democracies have seen a proliferation of referendums<sup>1</sup> over the last few decades (Qvortrup, 2024) and an expansion of the policy issues to which they are applied (Silagadze and Gherghina, 2020). Scholars have often attributed this development to a discontent with the functioning of representative democracy (see Hollander, 2019: 3–4), but more recently it has become clear that referendums are firmly “embedded within” its institutions (Kriesi, 2006: 600). Specifically, research has highlighted the fundamental role of political parties in their increased use (see for instance Morel, 2001; Topaloff, 2017), and how their procedural control led to these mechanisms being ‘instrumentalized’ to achieve specific institutional, organizational, electoral or policy goals (Bjørklund, 1982; Closa, 2007; Gherghina, 2019b; Hollander, 2019; Morel, 2001; Oppermann, 2013; Qvortrup, 2007; Rahat, 2009).

These works have highlighted the importance of initiating referendums for political parties, but less dedicated attention has been paid to their engagement with subsequent *campaigns*, despite existing studies generally acknowledging that this can result in various strategic benefits. Firstly, referendum campaigns are considered as more influential than their electoral counterparts (de Vreese, 2016). Voters are required to make a binary choice on multi-faceted and complex issues and questions, while political actors generally offer more ambiguous cues (de Vreese and Semetko, 2004: 3). Parties, as key information providers (Hartliński, 2019), can benefit from this by delivering strong and clear cues to voters, which have been found to be influential in determining referendum outcomes (see for instance de Vreese, 2006; Silagadze and Gherghina, 2018; Suiter and Reidy, 2015; Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2004) and can thus lead to preferential policy outputs. Additionally, investing resources in a campaign has been argued to aid referendum instrumentalization beyond its outcome (Gherghina et al., 2024), for instance to boost later electoral success (Gherghina, 2019a; Nemčok and Spáč, 2019; Stoychev and Tomova, 2019). Other works from the field have hinted at how referendum campaigns might allow parties to enhance their popularity and legitimacy (Gherghina, 2019b), including for peripheral parties (Gruner, 1977; Møller, 2002), but also that it is a strategic decision where, occasionally, non-participation might be preferred (Hollander, 2019).

The literature thus embraces that parties participate in referendum campaigns for a variety of strategic reasons, but the question of why they concretely elect to do so is yet to be examined empirically. As

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, ‘referendums’ refers to all direct democratic instruments that require a popular vote on a specific question/legislation/policy decision, and is often used interchangeably with the term ‘votes’. In the case of Switzerland, this contains mandatory referendums, optional referendums, and popular initiatives.

shown above, existing scholarship on referendum campaigns by parties has been occupied primarily with how these can affect voter behavior. When studies do touch upon the *why* of party campaigning, they rarely move beyond brief and fragmented theorizations. This paper sets out to bridge this research gap by examining referendum campaign participation by political parties through a case study of Switzerland. In doing so, this work presents two key innovations to the referendum instrumentalization literature. Firstly, systematically studying why parties participate in campaigns can bring to the field benefits of scope. This is because non-initiating parties also participate in referendum campaigns, while the existing literature on instrumentalization focuses solely on initiators. As such, focusing on campaign participation contributes to a deeper understanding of parties' strategic engagement with these direct democratic mechanisms by allowing examination of *all* parties in a polity. Equally, it opens the door for new cases to be studied within this paradigm, i.e. referendums where parties were not involved in their initiation at all. Secondly, the focus on Switzerland presents an empirical innovation, as the case has largely been omitted from contemporary referendum instrumentalization literature, despite its extensive national referendum tradition (Brüggemann et al., 2023).

In order to foster understanding of how parties look to leverage referendum campaigns for their own benefit, this paper attempts to uncover the *strategic* factors explaining party participation. An analytical framework is constructed that identifies five potential determinants based on referendum instrumentalization studies and cognate literatures. Corresponding hypotheses are formulated regarding their effect on the likelihood of party participation in a campaign and tested through the aforementioned case study of Switzerland. Campaign participation is operationalized as whether or not a party published advertisements on Meta platforms (Facebook, Instagram) or newspapers. Data is collected through the Meta Ad Library API for digital ads, while newspaper advertisements were provided by the *Année Politique Suisse* (n.d.) Swissvotes advertising project. The final dataset details six major Swiss parties and their participation in 33 federal referendum campaigns organized between September 2020 and June 2023. Hypotheses are tested using binomial logistic regression analyses, which include additional *contextual* variables to control for other factors potentially influencing campaign participation.

In what follows, a first section details recent insights regarding referendum instrumentalization and illustrates how they imply the strategic importance of campaigning, before discussing the analytical framework, its factors, and corresponding hypotheses. Next, the research design gives additional justification for and background of the Swiss case, after which the operationalization of the dependent, independent, and control variables are discussed. The penultimate section details the results of the binomial logistic regressions, the key findings of which are coupled back to the analytical framework in

the discussion and conclusion. Additional attention is paid here to their wider implications, as well as potential avenues for future research.

## Referendum Instrumentalization and Campaigning

Referendum instrumentalization perspectives embrace that referendums are initiated rationally by parties (Møller, 2002) to address problems and justify solutions (Butler and Ranney, 1978), and to achieve benefits within party competition (Walker, 2003). Studies uncovering party goals when pledging referendums have recently been synthesized into two typologies with differing analytical dimensions. First, Hollander (2019) brings together earlier theoretical considerations (Bjørklund, 1982; Closa, 2007; Morel, 2001; Oppermann, 2013; Qvortrup, 2007; Rahat, 2009) into a framework that distinguishes between act-contingent and outcome-contingent motives (based on Jacobs, 2011) depending on whether the referendum's initiation by itself, or its outcome is expected to be beneficial. Second, Gherghina's (2019b) typology builds on additional theoretical and empirical perspectives (de Vreese and Semetko, 2004; Gruner, 1977; Ladner and Brändle, 1999; Møller, 2002; Walker, 2003) to develop two analytical dimensions along which party goals are classified: policy-based vs. institutional goals, and party-oriented (providing benefits to the initiator) vs. opponent-oriented action (improve the pledger's position vis-à-vis other parties).

Both frameworks and the studies they build on offer valuable insights into the ways in which parties seek advantages “by using a tool that is in theory designed to provide citizens a relevant say in the decision-making process” (Gherghina, 2019b: 687). However, similar perspectives on the interaction of parties with referendum processes once they have been initiated are yet to be provided, despite the fact that these works often hint at the importance of referendum campaigns as avenues for parties to achieve the strategic goals and benefits they set out. For one, Hollander (2019) argues that parties can initiate referendums to deal with controversial issues that create conflict within a party/government coalition (*conflict mediation*) or with its supporter base (*depoliticization*). These strategies can deter a party from participating in the subsequent campaign. For instance, in the United Kingdom (UK), the Conservative Party pledged the 2016 Brexit referendum with these goals in mind, but then abstained from the campaign and let its politicians and members join independent campaign groups (Hollander, 2019: 190–192). When it comes to *policy-seeking*, an outcome-contingent goal aimed pursuing policy not expected to pass parliament, the opposite is true, especially considering that strong elite cues can play a decisive role in referendum outcomes (de Vreese, 2006; Silagadze and Gherghina, 2018; Suiter and Reidy, 2015; Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2004).

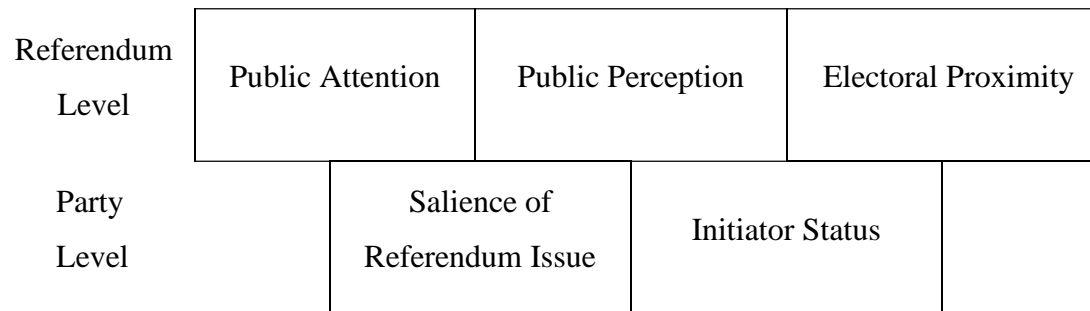
Similarly, Gherghina (2019b: 682) conceptualizes parties as turning to referendums for “free publicity and higher visibility”. As such, referendum campaigns are arguably instrumental when they look to advance and promote their agenda, enhance their legitimacy and popularity, gain electoral benefits, or overcome issues regarding weak party organization. The empirical findings of the studies that underpin the typology further compound this argument: for instance, the use of referendums as an election weapon in Lithuania (Møller, 2002) undoubtedly results in their campaigns becoming issue-specific battlegrounds, where the two major parties cannot afford being absent due to fierce and polarized competition. Similarly, the fact that peripheral parties in Latvia (Møller, 2002) and Switzerland (Gruner, 1977) use referendums to more efficiently mobilize supporters implies the use of campaigns as platforms to address citizens on a large scale regarding salient issues.

## **Towards an Instrumentalization-Based Framework for Explaining Party Participation in Referendum Campaigns**

The literature thus clearly hints at referendums’ strategic importance for parties beyond their initiation: investing in their campaign can equally deliver strategic benefits that can go beyond the policy decision that is up for vote. In referendums pledged with conflict mediation/depoliticization goals in mind, non-participation might also be a strategic decision. The referendum instrumentalization lens can thus be helpful towards explaining referendum campaign participation by political parties. As such, this paper presents an analytical framework that identifies a set of strategic factors potentially explaining party participation in referendum campaigns based on referendum instrumentalization studies and cognate literatures, and a set of hypotheses is formulated concerning their expected effects. The framework distinguishes between referendum-level and party-level characteristics that are considered to affect the likelihood of campaigning simultaneously and to differing extents. Observing which ones are more influential within a specific polity, as well as the direction of their relationship, can then arguably provide indications regarding the underlying strategic motivations shaping the decision to participate. As such, applying the framework fosters understanding of why parties get involved in referendum campaign, as well as the strategic benefits they try to pursue. Figure 1 provides a schematic overview of the strategic factors making up the analytical framework, and in what follows, the reasoning behind their inclusion is discussed and their corresponding hypotheses are formulated.

Firstly, the framework identifies two closely-linked referendum-level factors, *public attention for* and *public perception of the referendum*, which are based on what Bromley-Trujillo and Poe (2020: 283) argue to be the two components of the public salience of a policy issue, i.e. issue attention and issue problem status. Policy issues might receive a lot of attention without being negatively perceived and vice-versa, and both aspects are argued to contribute to how publicly salient a specific issue is. This

**Figure 1. Instrumentalization-based framework explaining party participation in referendum campaigns**



conceptualization of public salience is important for this paper because it can mitigate a theoretical tension regarding its effect on party behavior in referendums. On the one hand, in Switzerland, where average referendum turnout is relatively low due to the frequent use of the instrument (Serdült, 2024: 214), high public salience has been found to drive turnout (Goldberg and Sciarini, 2023). In the same vein but in a different context, research has shown the opposite occurring when a referendum is perceived as less important (Gherghina et al., 2019). This suggests that voters in Switzerland and beyond care more about salient referendums and are more likely to pay attention to the campaign. While this seems straightforwardly appealing to parties, studies on the Irish case suggest that parties prefer to stay away from more publicly salient referendums in order to not get ‘burned’ by a potentially divisive topic (see for instance Reidy, 2020; Sinnott, 2002). Separating this concept into two components allows for a clearer argument. A referendum receiving much public *attention* incentivizes parties to become active in their campaigns: they can take advantage of the free publicity and visibility they bring, (Gherghina, 2019b: 682), while smaller parties can overcome party organization issues regarding supporter mobilization (Gruner, 1977; Møller, 2002). However, if the public *perception* of a referendum is negative, this is likely to both deter parties from participating and moderate the attraction of a referendum with high public attention, as parties might be fearful of how the problematic status of the referendum rubs off on their image. As such, I formulate the following hypotheses:

*H1: High public attention for a referendum favors campaign participation from parties.*

*H2a: Negative public perception of a referendum limits campaign participation from parties.*

*H2b: Negative public perception of a referendum limits the favoring effect of public attention on campaign participation from parties.*

One should be aware of an endogeneity problem regarding H1: if the hypothesized effect is indeed found, it could be the result not of public attention driving party participation, but of the reverse. Kriesi (2005) previously argued that in Switzerland, intense campaigns by political elites signal to citizens that the referendum in question is important (in turn leading to higher turnout). As such, the public might become more aware of the referendum if parties are actively campaigning, resulting in higher levels of attention. This problem of reverse causality needs to be taken into account when testing this hypothesis, and more attention is paid towards it during the discussion of the results of the analyses.

A third referendum-level factor relates to the *electoral proximity* of the referendum, i.e. how close it is to the next elections. Empirical scholarship shows that referendums are often initiated with consequent elections in mind, particularly to mobilize voters (Nemčok and Spáč, 2019; Stoychev and Tomova, 2019). Additionally, parties have been argued to intentionally organize referendums at the same time as elections, making them a “direct political advertisement” for the initiating party (Gherghina, 2019a: 795). One might argue that in Switzerland, this would play less of a role. Here, elections are often considered to be less consequential than in purely representative systems, with the country’s frequent referendum usage and relative stability in government composition contributing to comparatively very low turnout numbers (Bühlmann et al., 2006: 1-2).<sup>2</sup> More specifically, the many referendums are argued to offer Swiss citizens widespread opportunities to exert political influence beyond traditional parliamentary channels, while the seven seats of the Swiss executive (Federal Council) follows a stable division among parties (the so-called ‘magic formula’) that rarely changes between election cycles. However, research by Leemann (2015) indicates that electoral proximity *does* inform Swiss party behavior regarding referendums. For one, from 1920 until 2011 the majority of popular initiatives (where a group of citizens can propose a change to the constitution) are initiated by political elites, and that they are more frequent near elections. Additionally, it is argued that electoral competition is at least partly responsible for this, as parties sometimes seemingly initiate votes not to directly affect policy, but “to change public discourse and campaign for upcoming elections” (Leemann, 2015: 602).

As such, if parties have visibility, legitimacy, or voter mobilization as their goal, they will be more likely to participate in campaigns for referendums that are organized close to or concurrently with elections since these are most likely to result in electoral benefits, even in Switzerland. Smaller parties with less resources would also be more likely to participate since they can reduce their organizational and

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<sup>2</sup> Bühlmann et al.’s (2006) argument holds ground today, as low turnout numbers remain prevalent in contemporary Swiss elections (46.7% in 2023).



opportunity costs by running a joint campaign for both the referendum and the elections. In contrast, when there is a large period of time until the next election, the aforementioned benefits will arguably dissipate as voters tend to forget about the referendum campaign. As such, one can intuitively define H3 as follows:

*H3: Closer proximity of a referendum to elections favors campaign participation from parties.*

Moving on to the party level factors, the framework firstly identifies *salience of the referendum issue to the party*. This is an intuitive but nonetheless vital aspect to take into account, as it incorporates the fact that parties can also strategically use referendum campaigns for policy-seeking motives. Yet, this does not exclude other potential benefits, as argued by the aforementioned study by Leeman (2015) with regards to Switzerland. Here, parties sometimes seemingly forego direct influence on policy when using popular initiatives, and instead strategically select issues “on which their own electorate is fairly homogenous but the electorate of competitors is split” (Leeman, 2015: 601), thus forcing the competitor to take a position that comes with an *electoral* cost. At the same time, the initiative allows parties to make more publicly salient those issues on which they expect to be judged as more competent, which can also lead to electoral benefits. Issues that are homogenous within a party’s electorate and on which they are likely to be considered as more competent are arguably highly salient to that party, and one can expect that similar strategic considerations are at play when deciding whether to campaign in a referendum.

Taking a more general view, this is linked to the notion of associative issue ownership, i.e. “the spontaneous association between issues and parties in the minds of voters” (Walgrave et al., 2012: 779). Research has shown that this can affect vote choice, but primarily if the issue in question is also important to the voter (see for instance Lachat, 2014; Walgrave et al., 2012). Importantly, it is the result of “a long-standing politicization of an issue by a party” (Tresch et al., 2015: 196). This makes it likely that an issue that is salient for the party becomes associated with that party over time. At the same time, as Tresch et al. (2015) argue, it is a relatively stable party characteristic that is not prone to change within a single campaign, meaning that other parties cannot as easily claim another party’s issue as their own. On the contrary, parties are more likely to reinforce their reputation as the associative owner of an issue. In other words, if a referendum is on a topic that is salient for the party, they could be more likely to campaign in order to strengthen associative issue ownership amongst voters, thereby legitimizing their position as the owner of the issue and create long-term electoral benefits. Additionally, if the referendum also receives a lot of attention in the public sphere, this effect will arguably be amplified as it allows additional opportunities for parties to solidify issue ownership, while the reverse is equally conceivable as parties can couple visibility with policy-related goals. As such, I hypothesize as follows:

*H4a: Salience of a referendum issue for a party favors campaign participation of that party.*

*H4b: Salience of a referendum issue for a party and high public attention for that referendum amplify each other's favoring effect on campaign participation by those parties.*

Finally, the framework identifies *initiator status*, i.e. whether a party was involved in the initiation of the referendum, as a potential explanatory factor. As discussed before, if a party pledges a referendum in order to mediate internal conflict or to depoliticize a controversial issue, parties will likely refrain from participation in its subsequent campaign (Hollander, 2019). However, there are also multiple compelling reasons for an initiating party to get involved in a referendum campaign, for instance in Switzerland if parties indeed primarily use popular initiatives to affect public discourse around or the salience of issues and thus essentially campaign for consequent elections (Leemann, 2015). Beyond the Swiss case, participation also emphasizes the initiator's ownership of a referendum, and can contribute to a successful outcome, particularly if there exists a large parliamentary majority supporting the referendum (Silagadze and Gherghina, 2018). Incumbents can reap additional popularity gains if they establish ownership of a successful referendum and can attribute it to their merit (de Vreese and Semetko 2004). Arguably, the issue being salient to the initiating party will be instrumental in this regard, because if it is not, it is more likely that the referendum was called with the aforementioned conflict mediation or depoliticization goals in mind, therefore limiting the likelihood of campaign participation. As such, I formulate the following:

*H5a: Initiator status of a party for a referendum favors campaign participation of that party.*

*H5b: A referendum issue not being salient to the party that initiated it limits campaign participation by that party.*

Non-initiators are not inherently less likely to participate, however. If a party looks to attribute a referendum's success to its merit and then loses the vote, it can be detrimental to their public image (de Vreese, 2006), which might make it attractive for other parties to campaign for the opposite side. Additionally, if a referendum is salient enough in the public sphere, or close enough to another election, non-initiating parties as a whole are arguably more likely to participate in a referendum campaign in an attempt to weaken the ownership claim of the initiator and contend for some of the perceived benefits.

## Research Design

Hypotheses are tested with evidence from Switzerland, which is well-suited for such an exercise due to its extensive national referendum tradition and practice (Brüggemann et al., 2023). The federal level allows for three types of referendums, all of which are legally binding. Mandatory constitutional referendums are triggered when Parliament wishes to amend the constitution, as well as for joining supranational organizations or organizations for collective security, and for urgent federal decrees that have no constitutional basis. Popular initiatives allow for any (collection of) legal or private person(s) (i.e. parties, citizens, ...) to initiate a vote on an amendment to the constitution. This requires the initiator(s) to first collect 100,000 signatures. Finally, optional referendums are initiated in order to *prevent* the adoption of new legislation or the amendment of an existing law that has already passed Parliament. Because political elites can thus technically initiate any of these mechanisms and debate every referendum in parliament, Switzerland is considered a “semi-direct democracy” (Serdült, 2024: 200). This indicates ample opportunity for parties to strategically use referendums, but besides the aforementioned considerations by Leemann (2015), Switzerland has been largely passed over by recent referendum instrumentalization research. Research nevertheless shows that parties get involved in referendum campaigns (Hornig, 2024; Kriesi, 2006; Selb et al., 2009) and that their presence can affect voting choices (Sciarini and Tresch, 2011). Additionally, Switzerland’s extensive referendum tradition makes it a deviant case from a referendum instrumentalization perspective, where studies tend to focus primarily on polities where the mechanism is an anomaly.

The dependent variable, *party participation in a referendum campaign*, is operationalized as having published referendum-related advertisements in newspapers or on social media. For the latter, the API of the META Ad Library was used to examine whether parties published ads on Facebook or Instagram. Here, data was available from the September 2020 referendums onwards. I therefore focused on the 33 questions that were asked from then up to June 2023, limiting the cases to a single legislative term (February 2019-October 2023).<sup>3</sup> I examined advertisements within the 12 weeks leading up to each polling date, and coded them as originating from one of six main national parties: the Swiss People’s Party/Democratic Union of the Centre (SVP), the Social Democratic Party (SP), The Centre, The Liberals (FDP), The Green Party, and The Green Liberal Party (GLP). In total, 1,995 ads were identified as party ads, which were supplemented by 295 newspaper advertisements that were coded as originating from

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<sup>3</sup> There were 34 referendums in total, but in September 2022, two questions were asked regarding retirement age reform for women, which are therefore treated as a single referendum.

these parties in a raw dataset made available by the *Année Politique Suisse* (n.d.). Note that up to July 2022, Swiss parties could decide themselves whether or not to include their advertisements in the Meta Ad Library (Meta, 2022). The combination with newspaper ads is thus even more essential, but there are nevertheless reasons to believe that the online data from before this change is useful. For one, while online participation rates go up after the change (20/36, 55%, vs 62/162, 38%) this is also reflected in newspaper participation rates (8/36, 22%, vs 20/162, 12.3%), suggesting that it is related to more than just data incompleteness. Furthermore, every party except for the SVP shows online participation at least once before the change. A robustness test controls for a potential effect of data completeness. Additional information regarding the reasoning for the operationalization, party selection, coding and selection of advertisements, as well as which party participated in each campaign, can be found in the supplemental materials (Sections B.1 and B.2).

To test H1 and H2a-b, I follow Epstein and Segal's (2000) argument that media-based measures/indicators offer a robust method to assess whether political actors indeed perceive a specific issue as publicly salient. *Attention* is therefore operationalized as the number of editorial contributions that appeared in 25 online and print media outlets in Switzerland during the 12 weeks prior to the referendum (as presented by Udris, 2023). *Perception* is measured by a tonality index (see Udris, 2023), the value of which ranges from -100 to +100 which is calculated by subtracting the number of negative posts from the number of positive posts, dividing that by the number of all posts and finally multiplying the number by 100. Lower values thus indicate more negative public perception. H3 is tested by operationalizing *electoral proximity* as the number of months a referendum is removed from the general elections in October 2023. For H4a-b, *salience of referendum issue to party* indicates whether a referendum's topic falls under the key issues for a party based on the 'Salience and Mobilization' (*v2pasalie*) variable in the V-Party Dataset (V-Dem Institute, 2019). This asks experts to select up to three issues out of a list which they consider as most relevant for the party's effort to gain and keep voters. I consider an issue as salient to a party if indicated by all experts as relevant. Finally, a binary variable will indicate a party's *initiator status* to test for H5a-b, i.e. whether or not a party was involved in the initiation of a referendum. For popular initiatives and optional referendums, a party is considered an initiator when it is a co-author of the initiative, if one of its politicians is a member of the initiative committee, or if it supported the signature collection. In the case of mandatory referendums, the parties

that supported the proposed constitutional amendment in Parliament are considered initiators.<sup>4</sup> This is informed by the Swissvotes dataset (Année Politique Suisse, n.d.), complemented where necessary with archived webpages from the initiative committees. Note that with optional referendums, the initiators are *against* the law on which is being voted; as such, initiators of these referendums should not be conflated with supporters of the law, unlike in the other types.

In terms of control variables, several contextual determinants are included that also offer some potential explanatory value regarding party participation in referendum campaigns. The reasoning for their inclusion (and why some were excluded), as well as their operationalization, are discussed in the supplementary materials (section B.2). On the level of the voting occasion, I control for the *number of votes* that were submitted to the public on each occasion. For the referendum level, the analyses control for *the expected closeness of the vote*, as well as the *type* of referendum. On the party level, controls include two measures indicating party strength, i.e. their *age* and *seat share*. A binomial logistic regression model tests the relationships between the factors and the likelihood of party participation in a referendum campaign. All analyses are done in *RStudio* (version 2024.12.1+563).<sup>5</sup> Public attention and party age are first transformed by their natural log, after which all continuous variables are grand-mean centered. While the data shows a hierarchical structure, with 198 party spending amounts (Level 1) nested into 33 referendum campaigns (Level 2) nested into 10 voting occasions (Level 3), the amount of Level 3-units is too low for Multilevel Modeling (MLM). For standard MLMs, small sample risks can be mitigated by using Restricted Maximum Likelihood in combination with a Kenward-Roger correction, but a binomial logistic regression requires a larger sample size, or the use of a Taylor series expansion, which is known to be biased (Hox and McNeish, 2020: 219). As an alternative, I consider *electoral proximity* and *number of votes* as proxies for the voting occasion, while the referendum-level independent and control variables act similarly for the referendums. Party fixed effects are included in a separate analysis as a robustness check.

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<sup>4</sup> The two referendums that count as one (cf. footnote 3) see all parties considered as initiators. The mandatory referendum was a result of a constitutional amendment supported by the FDP, SVP, GLP and Centre, while the concurrent optional referendum was initiated by the SP and the Greens.

<sup>5</sup> The codebook is available in the Supplementary Materials A.

## Results

Six parties make 33 decisions each regarding their participation in referendum campaigns, resulting in 198 total observations that on 89 occasions (45%) show party participation.<sup>6</sup> When examining the frequency of campaign participation per party, it partially follows along the main ideological groups of Switzerland's main parties (Zollinger and Traber, 2023). On the left, the SP and the Greens position themselves as universalist and pro-state, while the far-right consists of the strongly particularistic and economically liberal SVP. In between are the electorally weaker center-right Centre and the FDP, who have "ceded their positions as the major right-wing parties opposing the left" (Ibid.) to the SVP in part because of the recent emergence of the GLP. This party is more socially progressive, but occupies roughly the same ideological space in that they are also economically liberal. Regarding their referendum campaign participation, the left-wing parties are practically omnipresent, with the Greens and SP campaigning for 30 and 28 referendums respectively. The centrist GLP (13), Centre (5) and FDP (6) and far-right SVP (8), on the other hand, lag strongly behind them. Because of this, I will consider the ideological dimension as an additional control variable, distinguishing between left-wing (SP and Green), and other parties (GLP, FDP, Centre, SVP).

Table 1 displays the results of the binomial logistic regression estimating the odds that a party campaigns for a referendum. Model (1) tests the aforementioned strategic variables, Model (2) includes the control variables, and Model (3) also factors in the ideological dimension, which is justified due to the considerable jump in pseudo- $R^2$  value. Due to low sample size ( $N=198$ ), I consider  $p<0.1$  as significant. Public attention for the referendum emerges as a significant positive predictor for campaign participation likelihood: in eight of the ten referendums with the highest levels of attention, at least half of the studied parties participated, while in five referendums it was four or more, and it was never lower than two. In contrast, six out of the ten referendums with the lowest amounts of attention saw two or less parties participate, and it was never higher than three. This provides robust empirical support for H1, but the same cannot be said for H2a or H3 as no effect was found regarding a referendum's public perception or electoral proximity.

In contrast, both party-level factors are significantly positive predictors of party participation. If a referendum is on important issue to the party (H4a), they become two to three times more likely to campaign. Parties participate around 56% (or 33 out of 59 observations) of the time if the referendum issue is salient to them, compared to 40% (56/139) if not. From a within-party perspective (excluding the

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<sup>6</sup> See Supplementary Materials B.1.

**Table 1: Binomial Logistic Regression Estimating Likelihood of a Party Participating in a Referendum Campaign**

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Participation in the Campaign of a Referendum		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Media Attention (log)	<b>2.581</b> <sup>***</sup> (0.356)	<b>2.615</b> <sup>**</sup> (0.388)	<b>4.748</b> <sup>***</sup> (0.518)
Problem Status	0.997 (0.009)	0.997 (0.012)	0.992 (0.016)
Proximity to Elections (Reverse)	0.976 (0.017)	<b>0.966</b> <sup>*</sup> (0.020)	<b>0.948</b> <sup>**</sup> (0.026)
Issue Salient1	<b>2.113</b> <sup>**</sup> (0.334)	<b>2.218</b> <sup>**</sup> (0.345)	<b>2.693</b> <sup>**</sup> (0.440)
Party as Initiator1	<b>2.827</b> <sup>***</sup> (0.371)	<b>3.011</b> <sup>***</sup> (0.414)	2.018 (0.583)
Nr. of Votes		1.128 (0.170)	1.169 (0.221)
Expected Closeness of the Vote (Reverse)		0.988 (0.011)	0.980 (0.014)
Popular Initiative1		1.051 (0.892)	0.510 (1.126)
Optional Referendum1		1.149 (0.824)	0.770 (1.006)
Party Age (log)		<b>0.682</b> <sup>*</sup> (0.230)	<b>0.537</b> <sup>**</sup> (0.292)
Party Seat Share		4.052 (3.458)	1.166 (4.492)
Left-Wing Party1			<b>41.194</b> <sup>***</sup> (0.510)
Constant	<b>0.514</b> <sup>***</sup> (0.203)	0.451 (0.846)	0.221 (1.065)
Observations	198	198	198
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.133	0.166	0.577
Log Likelihood	-125.854	-123.098	-80.333
Akaike Inf. Crit.	263.708	270.196	186.665

*Note:* coefficients are expressed as odds ratios. <sup>\*</sup> p<0.1; <sup>\*\*</sup> p<0.05; <sup>\*\*\*</sup> p<0.01

effectively omnipresent SP and Greens), the FDP have the majority of their participation occur in referendums on issues salient to them, while for the SVP and Green-Liberals this is (just below) half. The Centre, on the other hand, is the only party that does not participate in any of the referendums that could be considered salient to them. Finally, being the initiator (H5a) also makes a party about two to three times more likely to participate in a campaign, although the significance of the effect does fade when taking into account party ideology. Initiators participate around 64% of the time (28 out of 44), compared to 40% (61 out of 154) for non-initiators, and from a within-party perspective, this appears largely driven by the SP, Greens, and Green-Liberals, who participate in close to every referendum they initiate (9/10, 9/10 and three). In contrast, the FDP, and Centre participate in less than half of the referendums they initiate (both two out of five), and the SVP in only three of the ten it has initiated. This last result is particularly surprising, but the SVP generally shows quite low participation rates. It could potentially be related to the aforementioned incompleteness of online data, but, as is discussed later on, controlling for this does not meaningfully change the result of the analysis.

Few of the contextual determinants contribute to the likelihood of party participation. There is a very strong effect of a party's being left-wing, but the reason for that is unclear as the literature has paid little attention to how such ideological differences affect referendum support. One explanation could be that it is a response to the combined legislative strength of the right-wing parties. The SP and Greens may use referendums as an avenue to either contend with right-wing policies through optional referendums, or pursue their own agenda through (supporting) popular initiatives. Party age also becomes a significant predictor in model (3), limiting the likelihood of party participation by about 30 to 50% despite the omnipresent SP (founded in 1888). This can likely be attributed to the relatively young Green Party (1983) and the GLP (2007), the second and third most active parties in the sample. Three additional models were fitted to check H2b, H4b and H5b but not reported as the interaction terms were always non-significant. Similarly, none of the robustness tests are reported as none showed meaningfully different results. The respective models are available in the supplementary materials, Section C.

## Discussion & Conclusion

This study set out to determine the strategic factors driving referendum campaign participation by political parties using data on newspaper and social media ads for six main Swiss parties and their participation in 33 federal referendum campaigns between September 2020 and June 2023. The results indicate, firstly, that *public attention* for a referendum significantly improves parties' likelihood of participating in its campaign. As additional analyses ruled out reverse causality, this result confirmed H1. However, contrary to expectations, *public perception* appeared largely uninfluential, including in its



expected interaction with public attention. As such, both H2a and H2b were rejected. Similarly, *electoral proximity* had but a minor and non-significant effect, thereby leading to the rejection of H3. Next, if a referendum issue was *salient to a party*, that party was more likely to invest in its campaign, thus confirming H4a, but the expected interaction effect with public attention (H4b) found no supporting evidence. Finally, *initiating parties* were also more likely to participate in referendum campaigns (although less robustly), providing evidence in favor H5a without fully confirming the hypothesis. Once again an expected interaction effect, this time with party-specific issue salience (H5b), was not observed.

These findings imply two main strategies driving referendum campaign participation of Swiss parties. A first one, *policy-seeking*, is derived from the positive effect of referendum issue salience to the party and aligns with the homonymous instrumentalization motivation identified by Hollander (2019). It suggests that parties campaign to pursue or prevent policy change on issues important to them. Referendum initiators being more likely to participate compounds this argument, as parties likely want the referendum to succeed and achieve their desired policy outcome. The second strategy, *image-building*, is based largely on the driving influence of public attention regarding campaign participation likelihood. Parties might indeed be sensitive to the “free publicity and higher visibility” (Gherghina, 2019b: 682) that referendums with high public attention bring to campaigners, even if these are publicly perceived as problematic (thereby contradicting arguments from Reidy, 2020; Sinnott, 2002). The positive (albeit less robust) effect of initiator status once again supports this, as initiating parties might look to attribute a successful referendum to their merit and thus reap popularity benefits (de Vreese and Semetko, 2004). There is an argument to be made that (long-term) electoral benefits underly both these strategies, despite electoral proximity not being influential. For one, the latter could be because no referendums were organized concurrently with elections, since these are most likely to be used as direct political advertisements for parties. Second, image-building might have as its end goal to attain more votes in future election cycles. Finally, the positive effect of referendum issue salience to the party might also be the result of attempts to strengthen associative ownership of that issue (Tresh et al., 2015), thereby legitimizing them as their owner and achieving long-term electoral benefits.

As a whole, this study offer multiple contributions to referendum instrumentalization literature. Firstly, it shows that strategic behavior with regards to these instruments expands beyond initiating parties, which have been the primary focus in contemporary studies. Instead, all parties seem to be drawn to referendums for reasons that go beyond the policy decision they represent, and that are apparently appealing enough to offset the organizational and opportunity costs required when participating in a campaign. Additionally, the study represents one of the first examinations of referendum instrumentalization in Switzerland, which has long been an overlooked case despite the central position of

direct democracy in its political system. Finally, the results indicate that Swiss political parties use referendums to pursue strategic goals extending beyond their immediate outcomes, thereby expanding on earlier results from Leemann (2015) that focused solely on popular initiatives. In doing so, the findings give empirical backing to some of the brief theorizations in the literature on the ways referendum instrumentalization extends beyond their initiation and into their campaigns. It provides evidence suggesting investing resources in a campaign indeed aids referendum instrumentalization (Gherghina et al., 2024), specifically regarding party agenda, popularity and legitimacy (Gherghina, 2019b; Gruner, 1977; Møller, 2002) and, more indirectly, later electoral success (Gherghina, 2019a; Nemčok and Spáč, 2019; Stoychev and Tomova, 2019).

Nevertheless, the study also presents with some limitations that should be addressed in future research. For one, the jump from influential factors to underlying strategies would need additional qualitative research in order to be more robust. The quantitative results offer a strong, generalizable indication of what strategic motives drive parties to participate in referendum campaigns, but interviews with party officials or analysis of the messaging in these campaigns can provide greater certainty. Additionally, the paper possibly deals with data incompleteness in the Meta Ad Library data before July 2022. While there are reasons to believe it is nevertheless a strong indicator, particularly when combined with newspaper ads, future research should include more recent referendums to see if the results can be replicated in a large enough sample for which Meta Ad Library data is complete. This would also allow for examining the impact of variation in legislative terms. Finally, party campaign participation is only one part of the story; the extent to which they are present can offer additional insights into the strategic use of referendum campaigns for parties. The framework presented in this paper can act as departure point for studying this, both for parties but equally for other actors involved in the campaign. All in all, this study fosters understanding of how these direct democratic tools designed for citizens become instruments for political elites, and how this strategic interaction extends beyond their initiation.

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