

## Interests and information in referendum voting: An analysis of Swiss voters

THOMAS CHRISTIN<sup>1</sup>, SIMON HUG<sup>2</sup> & PASCAL SCIARINI<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Political Science, University of Geneva, Switzerland & Institute for Political Studies, St Gallen University, Switzerland;* <sup>2</sup>*Institute for Political Studies, St Gallen University, Switzerland;* <sup>3</sup>*Graduate Institute of Public Administration (IDHEAP), Lausanne, Switzerland*

**Abstract.** Referendums impose considerable informational demands on voters. Recent theoretical and empirical research has emphasized the different shortcuts and heuristics they may employ in deciding how to vote. Relying on a substantial series of votes at the national level in Switzerland, we provide empirical tests on how Swiss voters cope with the informational demands in referendum voting. We combine simple heuristics, like partisan cues and endorsements, with indicators of instrumental interests to explain citizens' choices in a series of votes.

### Informational demands in referendum voting

Referendums are commonly criticised for placing considerable demands on voters' informational capacities. How can voters form an informed opinion on diverse, often highly complex, issues in their spare-time? Most authors agree that the opportunity costs alone mean we may never expect citizens voting in a referendum to be completely well-informed. Consequently, opponents of referendums often focus on these informational deficiencies and reject proposals aimed at securing a wider participation of citizens in political decision making. Given that a perfectly informed decision is only to be expected among a rare few voters, the question arises whether referendums are of any use. Yet, in the realm of referendum voting, it seems largely irrelevant whether voters know in detail all aspects of a given ballot measure, including its expected policy consequences, as long as they can use available information to reach a decision that reflects their (broadly defined) interests. More precisely, theoretical models show that endorsements by interest groups and political parties may give important information about the issues at stake in a referendum. In addition, interest groups and parties seldom have any incentive to misinform voters on their own preferences. Similarly, a referendum often allows voters to learn important things from simple informational short cuts. For instance,

the particular character of the *status quo* as default solution often provides voters with some information about the 'riskiness' of particular policy options (Bowler & Donovan 1999: 33–35).

This argument has stimulated innovative research on referendum voting. For example, Lupia (1994) shows, in the case of some rather complex ballot measures in California, that voters with some information on endorsements but no knowledge of the content of the ballot proposals voted similarly to those with detailed knowledge. Similarly, Bowler and Donovan (1998) find several effects of the informational demands on voting behaviour. For instance, abstention often increases as one advances on the frequently rather lengthy referendum ballots in the United States. They also find evidence for low-cost strategies if informational demands are high, which consist of voting for the *status quo* and of observing cues and endorsements as well as economic conditions.

In the literature on referendum voting, these theoretical ideas have led to research focusing on information cues that voters might use. Often endorsements by political parties or interest groups give relevant information about the interests at stake in a given ballot measure. Consequently, such cues might help poorly informed voters to reach 'reasonable' decisions. In this article we show that this happens to some degree in referendums in Switzerland. First, we show that poorly informed voters often adopt a strategy leading them to reject new and untested proposals. Second, we find in a series of ballot measures that poorly informed voters were able to imitate well-informed voters simply by knowing what a political party was endorsing. Consequently, at least for some referendums, it seems that informational gaps are not too important, provided that endorsements and cues are widely available.

We start our argument by discussing the general question of how informational demands in referendums might affect voting behaviour. In the second section of the article, we evaluate the findings of research on referendum voting in Switzerland and, more particularly, the level of information that voters have when they make their choices in the voting booth. Based on this discussion, we then present an empirical analysis focusing on the *status quo* bias in referendum voting among poorly informed voters. More precisely, the literature suggests that poorly informed voters might reject innovations since existing policies are better known. Finally, we explore how voters with varying levels of information differ in their voting decisions. More precisely, we test whether knowing what positions a political party endorses might influence the voting decision of the individual. If, on the basis of such endorsements, poorly informed voters often behave very similarly to well-informed voters, then the availability and quality of such cues might enhance the quality of referendum voting.

## Information and referendum voting in Switzerland

While aggregate data analyses of referendum voting in Switzerland have sometimes used economic indicators to see whether they have an impact on referendum outcomes (Schneider 1985) or whether voters behave in a narrowly economic sense (Vatter 1994), few have looked at how voters cope with informational demands. This is despite the fact that Swiss voters remain the unchallenged champions in voting in national referendums. No other country votes so frequently on various issues. In addition, since 1977, regular voter surveys have been carried out after each referendum vote. These surveys include questions testing the knowledge of respondents about the ballot measures. Thus, Gruner and Hertig (1983: 56), relying on data covering the first 12 surveys and 41 ballot measures, find that less than 20 per cent of voters are well informed on the issues at stake. Research covering more recent votes, and reported in Kriesi (1993), suggests a more optimistic view, since more than 80 per cent of the voters are apparently competent (Passy 1993: 223). However, this more optimistic view is hardly surprising since it is based on much more lenient criteria than those used in the earlier research. Nevertheless, Passy (1993: 223–227) finds that incompetent voters vote more strongly against a ballot measure and that, in at least two proposals, these negative votes of incompetent voters decided the outcome of the referendum. A similar result appears in Buri and Schneider (1993), who also find that lack of information explains in part the vote against ballot measures. Kriesi (1994) and Trechsel and Sciarini (1998), on the other hand, find that the use of some sources of information may affect the vote of an individual in different ways. Finally, Marquis and Sciarini (1999) adapt Zaller's (1994) model of opinion formation to referendum campaigns. They find both a polarisation effect, if the political elite is split on an issue, and a mainstream effect, if the elite is reunited behind a project, and these effects are functions of citizens' levels of information.

Besides these more specific studies on the role of information in referendum campaigns, the literature on referendum voting is rather eclectic. While VOX surveys cover each ballot measure since 1977 and contain a short report focusing on the voting behaviour of the respondents, few generalisations seem to be on solid ground. The research reported in both Gruner and Hertig (1983) and Kriesi (1993) aims at some generalisations, but these remain very tentative. Similarly, Buri and Schneider's (1993) exploration of three explanatory frameworks – namely a sociological approach, a rational-choice approach and a value-change approach – allows for few generalisations.

Nevertheless, we rely on the analyses reported in these contributions to assess the effect of informational demands on voting behaviour in referen-

dums. Here we use two simple indicators. First, respondents are asked to give the titles and the subjects of the various ballot measures. Second, after having stated whether the respondent has voted in favour or against a particular ballot measure, she is asked to state reasons for her vote in favour or against the proposal. In this open question, respondents may give (and are prompted to give) up to two different justifications for their vote. We combine these two measures in an indicator which takes the value of 1 if a respondent can give both title and subject of a ballot measure and justifies her voting decision with two reasons. For all other individuals the indicator takes a value of 0.

Table 1 reports simple descriptive statistics for these three measures for the period 1981–1999. We have information on 140 ballot measures for this period. As the first three rows illustrate, voters normally know at least the title and the subject of a ballot measure. The ballot measure for which voters were best informed concerned the ratification of the treaty to join the European Economic Area (EEA) in December 1992. For that ballot measure, 99.4 per cent of all voters were able to state both title and subject, while only 0.6 per cent were able to state only one of these two elements. Apart from this extreme case, there are also votes where the information level of the voters is less glorious. However, on average, across all 140 votes almost two-thirds of all voters indicate correctly the title and the subject of the ballot proposal.

A less rosy picture appears for the reasons respondents give for justifying their voting decision. Again, the referendum on the EEA treaty appears as a case apart since only 4.5 per cent of all voters could give no justification for their vote in favour or against.<sup>1</sup> There are, however, ballot measures for which almost all voters were unable to give a clear indication for the reasons for their voting choice. On average, the percentage of voters unable to justify their votes is slightly above 30 per cent, while 50 per cent give one reason for their vote. Thus, 20 per cent of voters give two reasons for their choice. While these results give us some indication about the general knowledge Swiss voters have in referendum campaigns, we refrain from judging these results on normative grounds (echoing Johnston & Lupia 2001). We may also question whether politicians are necessarily much better informed on all the proposals on which they vote in Parliament. What is important to note from this analysis is that voters are hardly perfectly informed on all ballot measures, and that there is considerable variation across voters and across ballot measures. Thus, it is meaningful to test the following two hypotheses which relate to information short cuts that voters might use in voting on referendum proposals:

- H1: Voters with less information on the contents of a ballot proposal tend to vote for the *status quo*.

Table 1. Information level of voters on 140 ballot measures (1981–1999, with official titles in French)

Information measures		Min	Vote (min)	Max	Vote (max)	Mean	Median	N
Percentage of respondents knowing title or subject of ballot measure or none	None	0.0	47.1 Arrêté sur l'intégration de la Suisse à L'Espace économique européen	50.9	61.3 Arrêté fédéral concernant la suppression de la régle des poudres	17.3	13.9	140
	Title or subject	0.6	47.1 Arrêté sur l'intégration de la Suisse à L'Espace économique européen	68.0	62.2 Arrêté fédéral concernant l'initiative populaire 'Jeunesse sans drogue'	23.3	22.4	140
	Title and subject	10.5	58.4 Suppression de l'obligation de rachat des appareils à distiller et de prise en charge de l'eau-de-vie	99.4	47.1 Arrêté sur l'intégration de la Suisse à L'Espace économique européen	59.5	60.7	140
Percentage of respondents giving 0, 1 or 2 reasons for their vote choice	0	4.5	47.1 Arrêté sur l'intégration de la Suisse à L'Espace économique européen	91.0	66.4 Loi fédérale sur l'aménagement du territoire (LAT), Modification du 20 mars 1998	32.4	30.5	140
	1	6.2	66.4 Loi fédérale sur l'aménagement du territoire (LAT), Modification du 20 mars 1998	74.1	27.1 Arrêté fédéral sur l'harmonisation du début de l'année scolaire dans tous les cantons	47.4	48.9	140
	2	1.4	30.2 Contre-projet à l'initiative en faveur de la culture	52.8	47.1 Arrêté sur l'intégration de la Suisse à L'Espace économique européen	20.2	18.5	140
Percentage of respondents knowing both title and subject indicate and two reasons for vote choice	Yes	0.7	51.4 Arrêté fédéral sur les impôts de consommation spéciaux (transformation des droits de douane en impôts)	53.5	47.1 Arrêté sur l'intégration de la Suisse à L'Espace économique européen	15.9	13.75	136

- H2: Voters with less information on the contents of a ballot proposal, but who know the positions taken by their preferred party, tend to vote like well-informed voters rather than other less well-informed voters.

### ***Status quo bias***

Most choices in politics are framed in terms of a new proposal being pitted against the *status quo*. As numerous authors have shown both theoretically and empirically, the *status quo* in such situations is often at an advantage (Ingberman (1985) and Samuelson & Zeckhauser (1988) review this extensive literature, while Brunetti (1997) discusses the *status quo* bias in the context of Swiss referendums). New policies always involve uncertainty over whether they will achieve their goals and whether they will have any unintended consequences. Under the assumption that voters are risk-averse, new proposals will be systematically at a disadvantage when pitted against the *status quo*. In the voting literature, the important difference is between the incumbent candidate and the challenger. The incumbent already has a track record on which she may be judged, while the challenger often is at a disadvantage (see, e.g., Bernhardt & Ingberman 1985). This effect will be stronger among poorly informed voters. Not knowing too many things about the new policy proposal will decrease considerably its expected value for these voters (cf. O'Neill 2001). While the same applies to the *status quo* policy, given its particular status it is likely to be better known than the new policy. Hence, *ceteris paribus*, voters with little knowledge should vote more in favour of the *status quo*.

Despite variations in the institutional procedures or referendums in Switzerland, almost all proposals appearing on the ballot involve changes to the *status quo*. Hence, for all types of referendums, we hypothesise that voters with scant knowledge about the ballot measure should, on average, vote more strongly against it (i.e., in favour of the *status quo*) than well-informed voters. For this analysis, we measure knowledge by the degree to which individuals could give two reasons for their vote and knew the title and content of the ballot measure. Respondents who failed on either of these two criteria appear as uninformed voters in all the subsequent analyses.

Figure 1 illustrates the results of this analysis for the 136 ballot measures between 1981 and 1999 on which we have all the necessary data. For uninformed individuals, we depict how much less (or more) likely they were to vote in favour of the measure on the ballot than their informed fellow citizens. Figure 1 shows overwhelmingly that citizens with little knowledge about a particular ballot measure voted against it. In 43 out of the 136 ballot measures on which Figure 1 relies, the negative relationship between knowledge

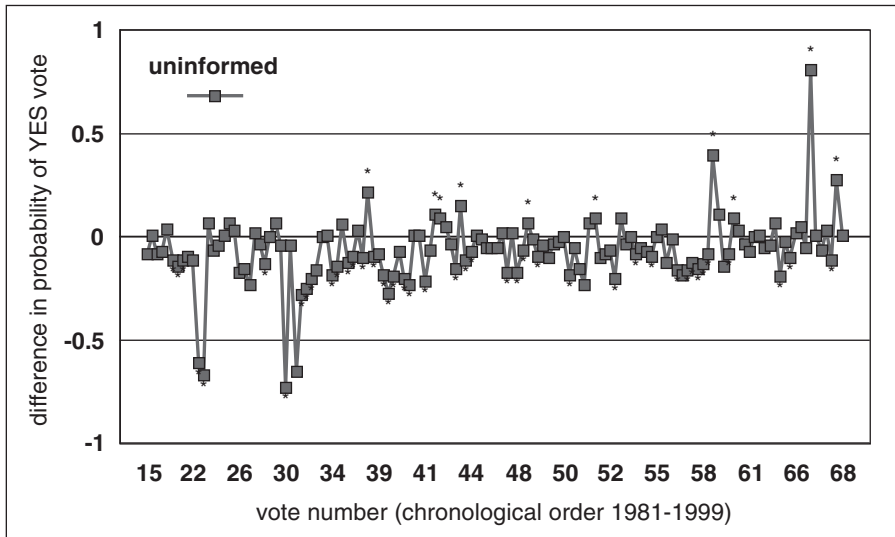


Figure 1. Status quo bias among voters giving no or only one argument for their vote.

and *status quo* vote is significant at the 0.1 level.<sup>2</sup> In only ten of the 136 ballot measures do we find a statistically significant relationship which goes against our first hypothesis. Interestingly enough, most of these negative findings appear for ballot measures that have occurred relatively recently.<sup>3</sup> These votes share a number of characteristics. Half of them are initiatives proposing solutions to problems which the government and Parliament have failed to tackle. Hence, one might be tempted to argue that uninformed voters vote against the government. However, this relationship does not hold systematically across the whole period, and it also fails to hold for some of the more recent initiatives.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the most deviant cases at the end of the period were not initiatives – the last three peaks in Figure 1 correspond in order to a constitutional amendment centralising purchasing of military equipment, a federal law on land use and another federal law on insurance for handicapped individuals.

### Employing partisan cues

Voting in favour of the *status quo* when being modestly informed about a particular ballot measure is a very low information strategy. Yet even without much information about the ballot measure, an individual could still make a 'reasoned choice'. Endorsements and cues are often widely available in the

public sphere and may help voters to reach a 'reasoned' decision (Lupia 1992, 1994). In the case of Switzerland, most proposals appearing on ballots are widely discussed in the media. Unlike most campaigns in American states, political parties also intervene extensively in campaigns. Parties, as well as interest groups, adopt endorsements which are often reprinted in the press and also appear in some *cantons* in the information booklet that each voter receives at home. Hence, endorsements as cues are clearly visible in Swiss referendum campaigns.

Despite this considerable presence of cues and endorsements in the referendum campaigns, their effects on voting behaviour have proved to be rather elusive. Gruner and Hertig (1983: 125) find that only about 30 per cent of the respondents know the endorsement of their preferred party. In the same vein, Kriesi (1994: 67) suggests that only 6 per cent of the voters are close to a political party, know its endorsement and state that this endorsement was the most important viewpoint influencing their voting decision. Nevertheless, these results are likely to underestimate quite heavily the effect of endorsements. First, the effect of these endorsements does not have to be direct, but may be transmitted indirectly through the media. Second, Lupia's (1992) theoretical model suggests the effect of endorsements is not limited to those given by the organisations a voter supports; endorsements by interest groups with opposed interests may also provide her with cues.

To test Lupia's (1992) model and our second hypothesis on the impact of partisan cues in the context of Swiss referendum voting, we rely on a basic empirical model explaining as well as possible the voting behaviour of informed voters. The effect should be similar for the voters who are less informed but know an endorsement. Differences should only appear for the effects of the variables between the informed voters and those uninformed voters who are ignorant of endorsements.<sup>5</sup> To test this hypothesis we employed the following empirical model:

$$p(\text{yes}_i) = f(X_i, \text{cued}_i * (1 - \text{knowledge}_i) * X_i, (1 - \text{cued}_i) * (1 - \text{knowledge}_i) * X_i) \quad (1)$$

where  $X_i$  is a set of sociodemographic and attitudinal variables presumed to be related to the voting decision,  $\text{cued}_i$  and  $\text{knowledge}_i$  are dummy variables – on each one the respondent scores 1 if she knows the endorsement of her preferred party (or the government) and if she is perfectly informed about the ballot measure. Strictly speaking, the set  $X_i$  also includes a constant such that the complete model also includes the terms  $\text{cued}_i * (1 - \text{knowledge}_i)$  and  $(1 - \text{cued}_i) * (1 - \text{knowledge}_i)$ . This specification implicitly controls for the *status quo* bias that less informed voters might have.<sup>6</sup>



Consequently, the empirical model has three components. The first part estimates the effect of the sociodemographic and attitudinal variables on the voting decision of all voters. The second part estimates any differences that might exist between the perfectly informed voters and those uninformed but knowing a partisan cue. The third part estimates the difference that might exist between the perfectly informed voters and those uninformed and ignoring partisan cues. The theoretically derived expectation is that the coefficients found for the variables in the second set should hardly differ from 0. If these estimated coefficients were all equal to 0, we could not distinguish the effect of the sociodemographic and attitudinal variables on the voting decision between informed and cued voters. Similarly, we expect the estimated coefficients for the variables in the third set to be often different from 0. This would indicate that voters who are uninformed and ignorant of partisan cues behave differently to perfectly informed voters.

In the set  $X_i$  we include a series of sociodemographic and attitudinal variables which reflect all cleavages presumed to be still politically relevant in Switzerland. We use these measures because there is little theoretically grounded empirical research on referendum voting in Switzerland. Hence, the variables used to explain voting behaviour in referendums change as a function of the content of ballot measure. For this reason we rely on measures of cleavages that have been demonstrated in the literature to be related to electoral behaviour in Switzerland (see, e.g., Lijphart 1979; Trechsel 1995).<sup>7</sup> We also include a measure based on a left-right scale. Apart from the left-right measure, all of these indicators are cleavages studied by Trechsel (1995). The operationalisation of these variables follows closely Trechsel's (1995) work. The knowledge measure corresponds to the one discussed above, while the cued variable measures whether the respondent recalls her party's endorsement. We estimate the relationship presented in Equation 1 above with a logit model.

Overall, the results we obtain do not provide systematic evidence for the hypothesis that voters informed about partisan endorsements may mimic perfectly informed voters. While such effects clearly appear for some of the ballot measures we studied, for other ballot measures the effects either dissipate or point in another direction. Employing a very crude approach we find that, in 14 out of the 23 ballot measures, at least one estimated coefficient for the uninformed voters who are ignorant of their preferred party's endorsement is statistically significant. For the uninformed voters who know their preferred party's endorsement, this same number is only 10 out of 23.<sup>8</sup> When using the fact that voters knew the government's endorsement, we found very similar results. Interestingly enough, the strongest effects of cues, either from parties or the government, appear largely for the same set of votes (the results of

these additional analyses are available at <http://www.ipw.unisg.ch/org/ipw/web.nsf/wwwPubInhalteEng/ipsa00?opendocument>). Hence, there appears some stronger support for the tested hypothesis than for its opposite. Nevertheless, given the small sample sizes and their variation, these results should be taken with some caution. For this reason we only present some of the stronger results obtained for the various ballot measures.

Probably the strongest result appears for a ballot proposal which attempted to rule out a controversial stretch of the national freeways. While voters rejected this initiative, their votes were closely related to their position on a left-right scale. This effect is particularly strong among the well-informed voters and only slightly less so among the uninformed voters who knew their preferred party's endorsement. Among uninformed voters who ignored partisan cues, the effect of the ideological scale disappears. We illustrate this strong relationship in Figure 2, where we plot the predicted probability of a vote in favour of the initiative as a function of respondents' position on the left-right scale. The depicted probabilities correspond to those that the estimated model predicts for a Protestant respondent belonging to the working class and living in the country in the German part of Switzerland.<sup>9</sup>

Similar differences in the effect of the left-right scale appear for another ballot measure – namely the proposal on transaction fees on stock trading. Figure 3 illustrates again that, among well-informed voters and among those

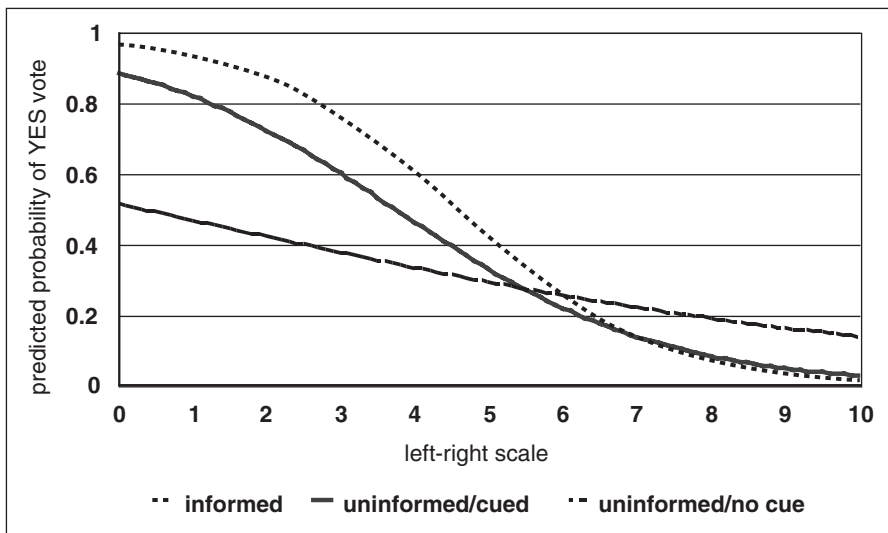


Figure 2. Effect of partisan cues on the relationship between left-right scale and voting decision: Initiative to stop highway construction (vote number 39.1).

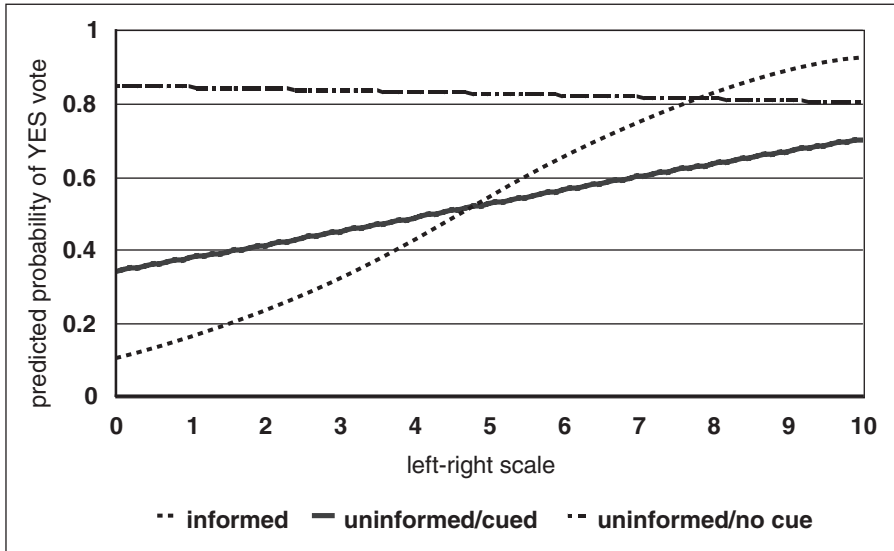


Figure 3. Effect of partisan cues on the relationship between left-right scale and voting decision: Fees on stock transactions (vote number 46.5).

knowing their preferred party's endorsement, the left-right scale influences considerably the voting decision.<sup>10</sup> Among voters positioning themselves on the left, the predicted probability of a YES vote is below 0.5, while for voters on the right it exceeds 0.5. The effect of the ideological position of the respondent is slightly weaker among voters relying on cues than among those who are well-informed. Among uninformed voters, however, the left-right scale has no effect since, irrespective of their ideological position, they vote overwhelmingly in favour of the proposal.

While the two examples depicted in figures 2 and 3 lend support to the theoretical contention that uninformed voters with a cue may imitate the decisions of well-informed voters, others go against this hypothesis. Figure 4 presents the predicted probabilities of a vote in favour of a reform of Parliament introducing procedural changes in the relationship between the upper and lower houses. While the results show again a relationship between the likelihood of voting in favour of this reform and the respondent's position on the left-right scale, the differences among our three groups of voters go against our second hypothesis. More precisely, Figure 4 shows strong relationships between the left-right position and the voting decision, both for well-informed voters and those who ignore partisan cues. In addition, the curves depicting the predicted probabilities of a YES vote for these two groups are very similar for much of the ideological spectrum. The same relationship between ideo-

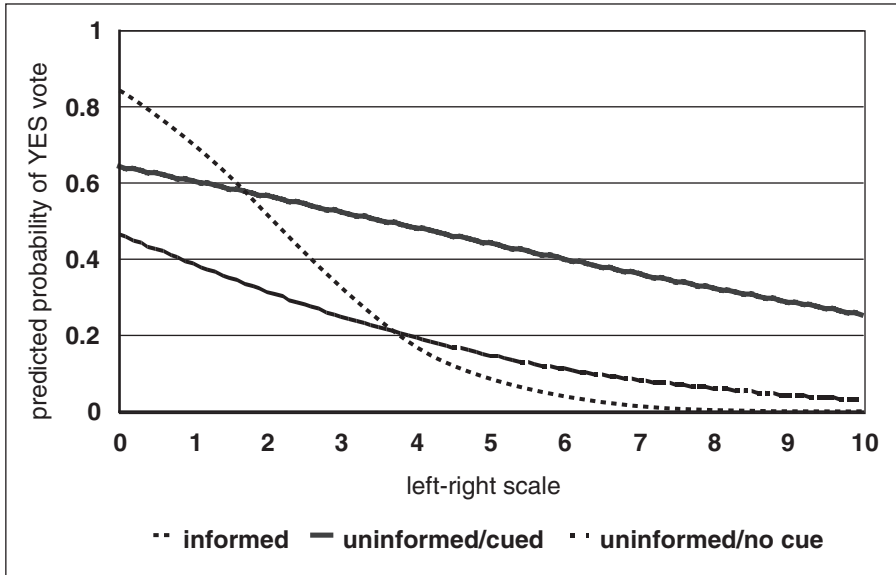


Figure 4. Effect of partisan cues on the relationship between left-right scale and voting decision: Reform of parliament, procedures (vote number 46.2).

logical position and the probability of voting in favour of the reform of Parliament is weaker for uninformed voters who know the endorsement of their preferred party. The curve depicted in figure 4 also shows that, almost independently of her ideological position, a respondent with a partisan cue is 0.2 more likely to vote in favour of the reform than a well-informed voter.

While in the three examples depicted in figures 2 to 4 the most important explanatory factor was the respondents' position on the left-right scale, in other cases other independent variables, such as social class, appear as strong predictors. Overall, our results suggest that for some ballot measures we find the expected relationships, indicating that uninformed voters may 'mimic' the voting behaviour of their well-informed fellow citizens, provided they know a party's voting recommendation. For others, however, this expected relationship fails to materialise. In part these mixed results are probably due to imperfect measurements of the cues that respondents know about and use. Also, the small sample sizes make our inferences much more haphazard. Nevertheless, in Table 2 we list all ballot measures we were able to analyse and classify them according to whether the results lend strong or mixed support to the theoretical model. Strong support corresponds to models where uninformed/uncued voters vote significantly different from the informed and uninformed/cued voters. Weak support corresponds to votes where we cannot distinguish

Table 2. Support for theoretical model and contextual information

Vote number	Title of ballot measure	Mean level of complexity (1: low, 2: high)	Type	Conflict level (0: low, 1: high)	Date
<i>Ballot measures with strong support for theoretical model</i>					
39.1	Initiative to stop highway construction	1.27	I	0.47	1/4/1990
39.2	Initiatives to abandon construction of three freeways	1.27	I	0.55	1/4/1990
39.3	Law on wine production	1.53	F	0.95	1/4/1990
41.1	Right to vote and be a candidate at age 18	1.16	O	0.00	3/3/1991
44.6	Military law	1.30	F	0.03	17/5/1992
46.5	Fees on stock transactions	1.50	F	0.32	29/9/1992
<i>Ballot measures with weak support for theoretical model</i>					
39.4	Law on judicial organisation	1.49	F	0.51	1/4/1990
43.1	Medical insurance	1.49	I	0.17	16/2/1992
44.1	Swiss participation at Bretton Woods	1.59	F	0.17	17/5/1992
44.4	Counterproposal on reproductive and genetic techniques	1.45	X	0.06	17/5/1992
44.5	Civil service for opponents of military service	1.16	O	0.06	17/5/1992
46.1	New railway link through the Alps	1.33	F	0.10	29/9/1992
46.6	Law on land property	1.55	F	0.48	29/9/1992
<i>Ballot measures with no support for theoretical model</i>					
41.2	Initiative to encourage public transportation	1.37	I	0.52	3/3/1991
42.1	Law on federal finances (introduction of VAT)	1.55	O	0.09	2/6/1991
42.2	Revision of military code	1.29	F	0.54	2/6/1991
43.2	Animal testing	1.36	I	0.52	16/2/1992
44.2	Law for the protection of water	1.36	F	0.39	17/5/1992
44.3	Initiative to protect water	1.39	I	0.52	17/5/1992
46.2–46.4	Reform of Parliament	1.54	F	0.13	29/9/1992
47.1	European Economic Area Treaty	1.55	O	0.32	12/06/1992

between the three sets of voters, while no support appears if the informed vote significantly different from the uninformed/cued voters.

For each ballot measure, we also report the average complexity of the proposal as assessed by the respondents in the respective survey, the type of referendum (I: initiative, F: facultative or optional referendum, O: required or obligatory referendum, X: counterproposal to an initiative) and the conflict level derived from the parties' voting recommendations (0: no conflict, 1: high conflict) (based on data collected and analysed in Papadopoulos 1994). With respect to these four contextual indicators, we fail to find any systematic relationship to support the theoretical model. More precisely, we find initiatives, required and non-required referendums lending support to the theoretical model, but we also find the same type of ballot proposals among the votes failing to support the theoretical model. Similarly, while many of the ballot measures for which we find support for the theoretical model are assessed by the voters as being not too complex, some, like the reform of Parliament and the change in the fees for stock transactions, are assessed as rather complex. Finally, while some of the ballot proposals lending support to the theoretical model were hardly controversial with all parties supporting the proposal, others were much more conflictual with an even split among the parties. Part of the explanation for the absence of any clear pattern with respect to these contextual variables might be found in more general theoretical work by Lupia and McCubbins (1998), who demonstrate that the effect of endorsements is dependent on how individuals assess the knowledgeability of the endorser and whether the endorser is perceived as having common interests. While our restriction to partisan cues of the party closest to the respondent should ensure in part that respondent and endorser have common interests, we cannot assess whether perceived knowledgeability (and, in part, also the common interests) varies across votes.

## Conclusion

Informational demands on citizens in referendum votes are incontestably quite important. However, this does not imply that citizens voting on ballot measures vote stupidly or against their interests. Too often, researchers and observers alike are tempted to reject referendums since they yield results going against their own beliefs and preferences. In this article we attempted to eschew this normative bias by focusing on how voters cope with the informational demands imposed on them. Relying on recent theoretical and empirical work focusing on the effect of cues and endorsements, we tested two simple hypotheses on the basis of a series of proposals having appeared on

the ballot between 1981 and 1999 in Switzerland. First of all, we found that quite systematically uninformed citizens vote more strongly against ballot measures if they imply a change to the *status quo*. We interpret these negative votes as support of the *status quo* solution. This is completely in line with the behaviour of risk-averse voters. Most likely, uninformed voters have more information about the current solution to a particular problem than a new one proposed on a ballot. Provided that they are risk-averse, this should result in, on average, a higher probability of voting for the *status quo*.

Second, we found mixed support for the hypothesis that uninformed voters might mimic the behaviour of well-informed voters, provided they know the endorsement of a political actor. While we found evidence for some ballot measures in which knowing a partisan cue or endorsement allowed uninformed voters to vote almost like their well-informed fellow citizens, in others these effects failed to appear. Most likely, these mixed results are due to two factors. First, the measure of knowledge we employed to distinguish between informed and uninformed voters is quite crude. A much more precise measure would rely on a stricter evaluation of the reasons respondents advance when justifying the way they vote. Most likely, a considerable number of these reasons are hardly related to the ballot measure under consideration. Hence, the dividing line between informed and uninformed voters may not be sufficiently clear in our empirical analyses. Second, the measure we employ for partisan cues is only partly satisfactory – we also need to know whether individuals recall the endorsements of a whole set of actors and not only the cue of the party they prefer. Such information would allow for a much more adequate test of this second hypothesis.

Better tests of this second hypothesis would most likely demonstrate that the usefulness of cues and endorsements is dependent on the context in which a particular vote takes place. While we explored several contextual elements, these failed to be related to the level of support we found for the second hypothesis. Hence, controlling for contextual differences might lead to a much better assessment of the role partisan cues and endorsements play in referendum voting. In addition, the effect of partisan cues and endorsements are easier to demonstrate where we have a good model explaining the voting behaviour of well-informed voters. Unfortunately, such a model is difficult to come up with for a whole set of ballot measures since most of them are idiosyncratic. Hence, as our results show, the effect of the various sociodemographic and attitudinal variables that we employ vary considerably from one vote to the next without any general patterns emerging. Moreover, our analyses are also hampered by small sample sizes. Consequently, future research efforts should attempt to rely on better measurement of these crucial variables. The results obtained in such research would probably give us additional

insights about when partisan cues and governmental endorsements allow uninformed voters to 'mimic' well-informed citizens. Here the contextual factors of the referendum campaign are likely to play an important role.

## Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this article was presented in a panel discussion at the annual meeting of the International Political Science Association, Québec, Canada, 1–4 August 2000. We wish to thank the participants in that panel, as well as Tobias Schulz, two anonymous reviewers and the editors of this Special Issue of *EJPR* for their helpful comments on the first version of this article.

## Notes

1. We need to note, however, that the coding of this variable does not distinguish between well-grounded arguments and those unrelated to the ballot measure. Hence, it is likely to overestimate the informational capabilities of voters.
2. Here, as well as in subsequent figures, we report these significant relationships with \*s. Nevertheless, since the sample sizes differ considerably over time, comparisons of statistical significance should be treated with some caution here.
3. Employing a different knowledge measure – namely whether an individual could cite the title of the ballot measure and roughly its content – yielded weaker results and, in addition, a slightly different trend. Both for measures at the beginning of the period and for those at the end of the period, we found relationships contrary to our hypothesis.
4. Interestingly, Passy (1993: 224) finds that, on average, the *status quo* bias disappears for the incompetent voters only in ballot measures of the popular referendum type. We suspect that this average cancels out some quite considerable swings around the mean.
5. This approach differs from the one employed by Lupia (1994), who introduces (as independent variables in his empirical model) two dummies measuring whether a voter knows the endorsement of two groups, as well as interactions between these dummies and his knowledge measure. Since the endorsements in the Swiss case are mostly partisan and the number of parties is quite considerable, such an approach would reduce the degrees of freedom quite considerably. For this reason, we followed this simpler approach, under the assumption that the remaining variables account for the differences in the party endorsements.
6. The coefficients obtained for these dummy variables give us some indication whether any of the two groups vote more heavily for the *status quo*. We refrain from interpreting these coefficients in what follows because the non-linearity of the empirical model, combined with the various interaction terms, makes an assessment of any remaining *status quo* bias difficult.
7. In the research reported in Kriesi (1993), some sociodemographic and attitudinal variables are employed to explain voting behaviour. Similarly, Buri and Schneider (1993) test, among other things, a sociological and a value-change model for referendum voting.



However, these analyses combine a large set of ballot measures, a procedure likely to wash out any significant effects specific to certain ballot proposals.

8. We also tested the overall contribution of letting the effect of the various sociodemographic variables differ among groups. For five, respectively six, ballot measures these overall differences are significant for the uninformed/uncued voters, respectively the uninformed/cued voters.
9. We chose this category of voters for two reasons. First, it is the intersection of all the largest groups defined by the various sociodemographic variables. Second, and relatedly, we chose these categories as the base categories in our logit models.
10. As in figure 4, the predicted probabilities refer to those of a Protestant working-class respondent living in the country in the German part of Switzerland.

## References

- Bernhardt, M.D. & Ingberman, D.E. (1985). Candidate reputations and the 'incumbency effect'. *Journal of Public Economics* 27(1): 47–67.
- Bowler, S. & Donovan, T. (1998). *Demanding choices*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Brunetti, A. (1997). Der 'Status quo Bias' und die bremsende Wirkung des fakultativen Referendums. in S. Borner & H. Rentsch (eds.), *Wieviel direkte Demokratie verträgt die Schweiz?* Chur: Verlag Rüegger, pp. 167–182.
- Buri, C. & Schneider, G. (1993). Gründe und Scheingründe für das Schweizer Abstimmungsverhalten. *Revue suisse de sociologie* 19: 389–417.
- Gruner, E. & Hertig, H.-P. (1983). *Der Stimmbürger und die 'neue' Politik*. Bern: Haupt.
- Ingberman, D.E. (1985). Running against the status quo: Institutions for direct democracy referenda and allocations over time. *Public Choice* 46(1): 19–44.
- Kriesi, H. (ed.) (1993). *Citoyenneté et démocratie directe. Compétence, participation et décision des citoyens et citoyennes suisses*. Zürich: Editions Seismo.
- Kriesi, H. (1994). Le défi de la démocratie directe posé par les transformations de l'espace public. in Y. Papadopoulos (ed.), *Présent et avenir de la démocratie directe. Actes du colloque de l'Université de Lausanne*. Geneva: Georg, pp. 31–72.
- Johnston, R. & Lupia, A. (2001). Are voters to blame? Voter competence and elite maneuvers in public referendums. in M. Mendelsohn & A. Parkin (eds.), *The impact of referendums on liberal democratic institutions: A comparative perspective*. London: Macmillan.
- Lijphart, A. (1979). Religious vs. linguistic vs. class voting: The 'crucial experiment' of comparing Belgium, Canada, South Africa and Switzerland. *American Political Science Review* 73: 442–457.
- Lupia, A. (1992). Busy voters, agenda control, and the power of information. *American Political Science Review* 86(2): 390–404.
- Lupia, A. (1994). Shortcuts versus encyclopedias: Information and voting behavior in California insurance reform elections. *American Political Science Review* 88(1): 63.
- Lupia, A. & McCubbins, M.D. (1998). *The democratic dilemma: Can citizens learn what they really need to know?* New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Marquis, L. & Sciarini, P. (1999). Opinion formation in foreign policy: The Swiss experience. *Electoral Studies* 18: 453–471.

- O'Neill, B. (2001). Risk aversion in international relations theory. *International Studies Quarterly* 45(4): 617–640.
- Papadopoulos, Y. (ed.) (1994). *Elites politiques et peuple. Analyse des votations fédérales 1970–1987*. Lausanne: Réalités sociales.
- Passy, F. (1993). Compétence et décision politique. in H. Kriesi (ed.), *Citoyenneté et démocratie directe. Compétence, participation et décision des citoyens et citoyennes suisses*. Zürich: Editions Seismo, pp. 213–232.
- Samuelson, W. & Zeckhauser, R. (1988). *Status quo-bias in decision making*. *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty* 17: 59.
- Schneider, F. (1985). *Der Einfluss von Interessengruppen auf die Wirtschaftspolitik*. Bern: Haupt.
- Trechsel, A.H. (1995). *Clivages en Suisse. Analyse des impacts relatifs des clivages sur l'électorat suisse lors des élections fédérales*. Geneva: Department of Political Science, University of Geneva, Research Study 31.
- Trechsel, A. & Sciarini, P. (1998). Direct democracy in Switzerland: Do elites matter? *European Journal of Political Research* 33(1): 99–124.
- Vatter, A. (1994). *Eigennutz als Grundmaxime in der Politik?* Bern: Haupt.
- Zaller, J. (1994). *Nature and origin of public opinion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*Address for correspondence:* Thomas Christin, Institute for Political Studies, St Gallen University, Dufourstrasse 45, CH-9000 St Gallen, Switzerland Phone: (+41 71) 224 2600; Fax: (+41 71) 224 2974; E-mail: thomas.christin@unisg.ch