

# Vox Populi: Popular Support for the Popular Initiative

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**D**irect democratic institutions are often introduced by popular vote, but there is little research on what motivates voters to support these new instruments. Using a unique dataset on the ideological positions of voters and members of parliament, this article examines support for the introduction of the initiative right in a popular vote. We find that voters support the initiative right when they are inadequately represented in parliament. Moreover, the analysis shows that the voting behavior is consistent with voters understanding the strategic implications of adopting the popular initiative. We demonstrate that voters support its adoption if they are ideologically more proximate to the median voter than they are to the median legislator. Finally, the article shows that ideological distance matters for voters of the ruling party as well, which helps explain why a majority of voters support a political institution that limits the ruling party's room for maneuver.

## INTRODUCTION


**D**irect democratic institutions diffuse once-concentrated power. They are “a strong consensus-inducing mechanism and the very opposite of a blunt majoritarian instrument” (Lijphart 1999, 231). In the case of popular (or citizens’) initiatives, they limit the agenda-setting power of political authorities (Leemann and Wasserfallen 2016; Matsusaka 2004; Romer and Rosenthal 1979). Initiatives allow voters to put policy proposals to popular votes (subject to signature requirements and collection periods) without requiring the approval of legislative or executive bodies. If approved at the ballot box, proposals must be implemented. Popular initiatives thus amend purely representative systems, disperse power among political actors, and encourage more inclusive decision-making processes (Hug 2009; Linder and Mueller 2021; Vatter 2007).


What makes voters support the adoption of direct democratic institutions? While there is a rich literature on the effects of these institutions (e.g., Emmenegger, Leemann, and Walter 2020; Gerber 1996; Matsusaka 2014; Romer and Rosenthal 1979), there is surprisingly little research on their *origins*. Moreover, existing research on the origins of direct democratic institutions rests at the macro level or explores


the attitudes of political elites (Bowler, Donovan, and Karp 2002; Chacón and Jensen 2020; Gherghina, Close, and Carman 2023; Smith and Fridkin 2008). In contrast, there is, to the best of our knowledge, no research on popular votes on the adoption of direct democratic institutions.

This is an important lacuna because most direct democratic institutions are adopted via *popular votes*. For instance, in the United States, among the 20 states adopting the popular initiative in the period from 1898 to 1918, 75% did so by popular vote. However, voters did not always support their adoption. Among the states having popular votes on the adoption of the initiative, the introduction was rejected in 25% of the cases (Smith and Fridkin 2008, 335). Similarly, in Switzerland, new direct democratic institutions were typically adopted by popular vote (Kölz 2004), although voters did not always favor the expansion of direct democratic institutions (e.g., the rejection of the “legislative initiative” in 1961). Hence, whereas existing research can explain under what conditions legislatures opt to delegate to citizens the power of the initiative, we do not know why some voters accept this invitation, while others do not.

In recent years, a rapidly growing literature has explored popular attitudes toward direct forms of democracy (e.g., Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Bowler et al. 2017; Dalton, Bürklin, and Drummond 2001; Donovan and Karp 2006; Werner and Jacobs 2022). Next to highlighting intrinsic motives to support direct democracy, this literature argues that citizens also endorse direct democratic institutions for instrumental reasons (Brummel 2020; Gabriel 2013; Landwehr and Harms 2020; Smith, Tolbert, and Keller 2010; Werner 2020). Most notably, people support these institutions if they believe to be part of the majority (i.e., in agreement with the *median voter*) or if they believe to be badly

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represented in parliament (i.e., ideologically distant from the decisive member of parliament, the *median MP*).

The literature on instrumental motives to support direct democratic institutions offers numerous insights, but important questions remain. Do people who believe to be badly represented also objectively suffer from bad representation? And what is the relationship between distance to the median MP and proximity to the median voter? Do people who are badly represented in parliament also favor direct democracy if their ideological position is even further away from the median voter? Or do they favor direct democracy only if they are closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP?

This article examines the drivers of popular support for the adoption of the popular initiative in a “real action” context.<sup>1</sup> In 1891, Swiss voters were asked to cast their vote on the adoption of the popular initiative at federal level.<sup>2</sup> Roughly, 60% of the voters approved the proposal, while a sizable minority of 40% opposed it (Linder, Bollinger, and Rielle 2010, 70). Two years later, the first popular initiative was approved at the ballot box. In the period from 1891 to 2023, 356 popular initiatives were successfully submitted at the federal level.<sup>3</sup>

Our dependent variable is the yes-shares for the 1891 vote on the introduction of the popular initiative at the municipality level (1,859 observations). We explain variation in support with an item response model that measures the ideological positions of all municipalities and MPs in a common space. We measure how far away a municipality is from the median MP (the winner in a parliamentary vote) and how far away a municipality is from the median municipality (weighted by the voting eligible population), which we use to capture the ideological position of the median voter (the winner in a direct democratic vote). We expect voters to support the adoption of the popular initiative if they are ideologically closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP.

To measure the ideological positions of municipalities and MPs, we rely on referendum votes. Already in 1848, Switzerland had adopted the mandatory referendum for constitutional revisions. Moreover, in 1874, Switzerland adopted the law (optional) referendum, which allows citizens to challenge laws previously passed by parliament (subject to signature requirements and collection periods). Depending on data availability, we observe for all referendums the vote shares for each municipality. Moreover, because referendums challenge acts of parliament, there is, for all referendums, both a vote in parliament and a popular

vote on the exact same question, which we can use to identify the ideological positions of any municipality, the median voter (i.e., the weighted median municipality), and the median MP.

The empirical analysis demonstrates that voters support the adoption of the popular initiative if they are badly represented in parliament. However, support for direct democratic institutions is not simply an act of protest. Instead, voters understand the strategic implications of adopting the popular initiative. Direct democratic institutions are primarily useful for gaining political influence if voters are ideologically closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP. Only in this case can voters realistically hope for a more positive outcome in a direct democratic vote compared to a parliamentary decision. In contrast, if voters are closer to the median MP than they are to the median voter, there is little benefit in adopting the popular initiative. The empirical analysis demonstrates that support for the popular initiative is significantly higher among voters that are ideologically closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP. Importantly, these instrumental motives remain robust predictors of support for direct democratic institutions when controlling for alternative explanations such as intrinsic motives and local party vote shares. Additional analyses show that relative ideological distance, rather than mobilization effects, is the main driver of support for direct democratic institutions.

In addition, we show that ideological distance also matters for voters of the ruling parties. The ruling parties’ voter bases are often surprisingly heterogeneous. This heterogeneity is the result of strategic voting and candidate entry, as voters are incentivized to support ideologically more distant alternatives if their preferred candidate has little chance to win (Cox 1997). We demonstrate that at all levels of the ruling parties’ electoral support, municipalities closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP display higher levels of support for the popular initiative.

This article adds to the literature on the origins of direct democratic institutions in three ways. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study examining voter behavior, although in most cases, such institutions were adopted by popular votes rather than parliamentary decisions. Second, we demonstrate the relevance of instrumental motives for supporting direct democratic institutions. By differentiating between the voters’ ideological distance to the median MP and the median voter, we show that underrepresentation in the parliamentary arena—rather than simply being at the periphery of politics—is a key driving force for supporting the popular initiative. Finally, based on a customized item response model, we provide precise and nonsubjective indicators of underrepresentation that are robust predictors of support for direct democratic institutions.

This article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on instrumental and intrinsic motives to support direct democratic institutions. Subsequently, we develop our own theoretical argument. The next two sections discuss why it is

<sup>1</sup> Trüdinger and Bächtiger (2023) show that whereas some respondents display high levels of support for direct democracy, they are not necessarily more likely to participate in direct democratic votes. For this reason, it is important to examine whether people who claim to favor direct democracy indeed support its adoption.

<sup>2</sup> Because adopting the initiative required a constitutional reform, it had to be put to a popular vote.

<sup>3</sup> Source: [https://www.bk.admin.ch/ch/d/pore/vi/vis\\_2\\_2\\_5\\_9.html](https://www.bk.admin.ch/ch/d/pore/vi/vis_2_2_5_9.html) (accessed on February 7, 2024).

realistic to assume that voters had sufficient information to identify their relative ideological position and introduce our case. In the empirical sections, we first introduce the data and subsequently discuss the results. A final section concludes.

## WHO WANTS DIRECT DEMOCRACY?

Despite the broad interest in the effects of direct democratic institutions on political outcomes, there is surprisingly little literature on their origins. Most contributions to the literature on institutional origins emphasize the conflicting interests of ruling and non-ruling political elites. For example, Smith and Fridkin (2008) argue that legislative competition, the organizational strength of parties, and third-party presence explain why state legislatures choose to devolve institutional power by delegating to citizens the power to amend state constitutions. In this argument, electoral competition and third-party strength are indicators of how easily members of the majority can be forced into supporting reform (see also Scarrow 1997). In a similar vein, Chacón and Jensen (2020) argue that political elites benefiting from the overrepresentation of their districts oppose direct democratic institutions because such reforms would threaten their ability to further their political interests (for the Swiss case, see Kriesi and Wisler 1999; Leemann 2023). Focusing on elite support for direct democratic institutions, Bowler, Donovan, and Karp (2002, 747) find that politicians from nonruling parties are more likely to support direct democracy, whereas politicians from the ruling party coalition “are significantly less supportive of expanding the scope of direct democracy in their nation” (see also Gherghina, Close, and Carman 2023).

In short, the existing literature on the institutional origins suggests that political groups dominant in the representative arena have little interest in adopting direct democracy, because such reforms reduce their level of political control. In contrast, nondominant groups support reforms that disperse political power. This literature, however, suffers from an important deficit. Little attention has been paid to the fact that direct democratic institutions are often introduced by *popular vote* (Kölz 2004; Smith and Fridkin 2008). Whereas existing research can explain under what conditions legislatures opt to delegate to citizens the power of direct democracy, we do not know which citizens accept this invitation.

The rich and growing literature on popular attitudes toward direct forms of democracy offers important insights into this question. Initially, this literature emphasized that intrinsic motives drive democratic innovations. Intrinsic motives concern considerations of procedural justice or normative conceptions of democracy, which value political procedures as such and not because of the expected outcome effects (Landwehr and Harms 2020, 878–9). At first, the debate centered around the question whether highly engaged and educated “critical citizens” or less interested “alienated citizens” are more likely to push for

direct democracy (Coffé and Michels 2014; Dalton, Bürklin, and Drummond 2001; Donovan and Karp 2006; Font, Wojcieszak, and Navarro 2015; Norris 1999; Webb 2013). More recently, this literature has explored whether there is a relationship between populist attitudes and support for direct democracy (Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Bowler et al. 2017; Gherghina and Pilet 2021; Mohrenberg, Huber, and Freyburg 2021; Werner and Jacobs 2022).

In parallel, research has begun to examine instrumental motives for supporting direct forms of democracy. In case of instrumental motives, democratic innovations are interpreted as a “result of a cost-benefit analysis, with individuals preferring one procedure over another if it is likely to produce outcomes that further their material interests or substantial policy preferences” (Landwehr and Harms 2020, 880). Similar to the literature on institutional origins discussed above, these contributions emphasize that citizens endorse democratic innovations because of perceived representation deficits and because of the belief that other procedures for collective decision making will bring about the desired outcomes. For example, using survey experiments, these contributions show that respondents are more likely to support direct forms of democracy if they believe to be part of the majority (Brummel 2020; Landwehr and Harms 2020; Werner 2020). Put differently, these respondents endorse direct democratic procedure because they expect to win in such votes. Other contributions highlight that long-term losers in electoral politics are more likely to favor direct democracy (Gabriel 2013; Smith, Tolbert, and Keller 2010). Hence, these respondents believe to be inadequately represented in parliament and seek alternative decision making procedures to align political outcomes with their substantial policy preferences.

There are thus interesting parallels between the recent literature on popular attitudes toward direct democracy and the literature on institutional origins, but two main questions remain. First, is there an objective basis for this perceived lack of representation? Or is this perception as well as support for direct forms of democracy the result of a third variable, for instance, an alienation from the institutions of representative democracy? Second, do people who are badly represented in parliament only favor direct democracy if they believe to be ideologically closer to the median voter? Put differently, in their support for direct democracy, do they also consider their own position relative to the median voter?

## REPRESENTATION DEFICITS AND SUPPORT FOR DIRECT DEMOCRACY

In this section, we develop our argument to explain popular support for the adoption of direct democratic institutions. We argue that direct democratic institutions find the most support among voters that are inadequately represented in parliament *and* ideologically closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP.

Electoral systems can suffer from significant biases. Calvo (2009, 257–8) differentiates between majoritarian and partisan biases of electoral systems. Majoritarian biases denote the additional seats parties obtain as a result of the winner-takes-all properties of majoritarian electoral systems. Partisan biases denote the seat benefits that a particular party obtains beyond those expected by any other party with an equivalent vote share. Such biases are common in majoritarian systems (Becher and Gonzalez 2019), but they can also be found in proportional representation (PR) systems (Walter and Emmenegger 2023). They can be the unintended consequence of electoral geography (Calvo and Rodden 2015), but they can also be the deliberate result of malapportionment or gerrymandering (Grofman 2016). In short, the composition of parliament might *not* be representative of the voters. If the electoral systems' biases are substantial, the discrepancy between the median voter and the median MP can be large. Moreover, in case of partisan biases, underrepresented groups are likely to struggle to overcome these biases.

The biased transmission from the median voter's ideological position to the median MP's ideological position cannot be attributed solely to mechanical distortions in the vote-to-seat translation. If minority groups' preferred candidates have only a low chance of winning because they are systematically disadvantaged, some voters will desert these trailing candidates in favor of more promising but ideologically more distant alternatives. In other cases, minority candidates might not enter electoral contests with low chances of winning, leaving voters with less preferred candidates. In these ways, strategic voting and candidate entry exacerbate biases that advantage the ruling party (Cox 1997). By implication, strategic voting makes the ruling party's constituency ideologically more heterogeneous, especially as the electoral system's biases increase. Consequently, there might be significant gaps between the ideological position of ruling party's median MP and the ideological position of some of the party's voters.

Direct democratic institutions offer underrepresented voters the opportunity to overcome these electoral biases. In direct democratic votes, the median voter prevails. If the composition of parliament is largely representative of the population, voters who feel badly represented have little reason to believe that the population would be more receptive of their political ideas. However, in case of electoral biases, underrepresented voters may be ideologically closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP. For such voters, direct democratic institutions offer the potential to break the political dominance of overrepresented groups by circumventing parliament and addressing voters directly. By having direct democratic institutions at their disposal, underrepresented voters gain the opportunity to have direct success against political authorities, force parliament into negotiation on policies, and mobilize new issues and political tendencies (Linder and Mueller 2021). In short, direct democracy has the potential to force political representatives

to pay more attention to underrepresented voters (Leemann and Wasserfallen 2016).

Importantly, however, this logic applies only to voters who are closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP. These voters have a better chance to win a direct democratic vote (where the median voter prevails) than their representatives are to win a vote in parliament (where the median MP prevails). In contrast, this logic does not apply to voters who are ideologically far away from the median MP but even further away from median voter. Although these voters might also be badly represented, they are not better off under direct democracy, because—in terms of ideological distance—the median voter is even further away than the median MP. For such voters, there is little benefit in adopting direct democratic institutions.

We argue that the relative ideological distance to the median voter and to the median MP matters for popular support for the adoption of direct democratic institutions. In contrast, the division between supporters of opposition and ruling parties is of secondary importance. Certainly, in biased electoral systems, supporters of opposition parties are more likely to favor the adoption of direct democratic institutions. However, direct democracy can also be interesting for voters of ruling parties. Especially voters who support ruling parties for strategic reasons might experience significant gaps between their own ideological position and the ideological position of the median MP (Cox 1997). For such voters, direct democracy can help align policy-making more with their own ideological position. Therefore, we expect that support for direct democratic institutions does not exclusively divide voters of opposition and ruling parties. Rather, our argument should also apply to supporters of the ruling party.

## WERE VOTERS ABLE TO MAKE AN INFORMED DECISION?

Voters ideologically closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP should be more supportive of direct democratic procedures. But is it realistic to assume that voters at the time understood where they stood ideologically relative to the median voter and the median MP? We believe that it is.

Our empirical analysis examines the adoption of the popular initiative in Switzerland in 1891. All adult males were invited to participate in the popular vote. They had access to detailed information on political debates and discussions. Voting results were made publicly available at the level of municipalities. In fact, in our analysis, we rely on the same publicly available information (see Figures 7–9 in the Supplementary Material for examples). In addition, at the time of the vote, literacy levels were comparatively high in Switzerland, as nation-wide examination results demonstrate. All Swiss males had to attend compulsory initial military training where their reading and writing skills were tested. Among the 1879 cohort, only 1.6% of the servicemen were considered illiterate. By 1913, this share had declined to 0.04% of the cohort (Grunder



2015). Baten (2022, 6) shows that in comparative perspective, Switzerland had one of the highest levels of school enrollment and literacy in Europe in 1900. Newspaper coverage was also high. In 1896, Switzerland had 339 different newspapers, which corresponds to one newspaper per 8,600 inhabitants (Ritzmann-Blickenstorfer and Siegenthaler 1996). For comparison, the corresponding number for Germany, the “birthplace” of newspapers, is one newspaper per 15,700 inhabitants (Wilke 1991, 76).

In the public debate preceding the vote, the representation deficit was highlighted as the primary motivation for demanding the popular initiative. As the proponents argued, there was an “alienation” between the government and its people, with the government no longer understanding what the people really want (Michel 2021, 262). In contrast, the opponents bemoaned the weakening of parliament, questioned the population’s ability to formulate policy proposals, and warned that the popular initiative would be mostly used by peripheral groups to push for extreme policies (Kölz 2004, 640; Linder, Bolliger, and Rielle 2010, 70–2; Michel 2021, 256–64). Consequently, organized groups, most notably political parties, tried to mobilize voters with reference to questions of representation. In this way, political parties were an important source of information about representation deficits and the relative positions of the median MP and the median voter.

Most importantly, however, Swiss voters had access to a simple heuristic that allowed them to compare their position to the median voter and the median MP. Since 1848, Swiss voters are regularly voting on constitutional revisions. Moreover, in 1874, Switzerland adopted the law referendum, which allows citizens to challenge laws previously passed by parliament. By 1891, Swiss voters had voted on several dozens of direct democratic proposals. Each referendum offers widely available and easy-to-understand information that allows voters to compare their own ideological position to the median voter and the median MP. The informational requirements for these comparisons are low. Any referendum that voters *support* indicates that they are ideologically distant from the median MP (who, by definition, must have supported the law/constitutional revision in parliament). Moreover, any referendum that voters *support and win* indicates that they are also part of the majority in the voting population. Put differently, they are ideologically closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP. In contrast, any referendum that voters *oppose and lose* indicates that they are ideologically closer to the median MP than they are to the median voter. In short, every referendum provides voters with easy-to-understand information on where they stand ideologically relative to the median voter and the median MP. Voters simply need to compare their own vote (yes/no) to the widely published referendum outcomes (yes/no).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Moreover, given that we work with the municipality as our unit of analysis, it is in fact sufficient if voters within a municipality on average arrive at adequate conclusions about their relative distance to the median voter and the median MP.

In the period under investigation, referendums covered a wide range of topics, from questions about civil rights, public health, and domestic commerce to issues related to transportation, government operations, and macroeconomics (see Table A1 in the Supplementary Material for a list of referendums considered in the analysis). However, only about 7% of all laws passed by parliament are challenged by law referendums, although law referendums have an almost 50% chance of being successful (Linder and Mueller 2021, 131). This small share of challenged acts of parliament should not be surprising though. Law referendums are a costly political action. To launch a law referendum, political groups had to collect 30,000 signatures (today 50,000 signatures) within 100 days (Kölz 2004, 617). In the late nineteenth century, this number of signatures amounted to about 5% of the vote-eligible population. For this reason, law referendums only challenged the most salient and important acts of parliament. For the same reason, turnout in law referendums was on average higher than in elections (by 3.1 percentage points).<sup>5</sup> In short, referendums do not only provide clear signals on voters’ ideological positions relative to the median MP and the median voter, they also do so in case of the most salient political issues.

## THE ADOPTION OF THE POPULAR INITIATIVE IN SWITZERLAND

In the period before the adoption of the popular initiative, Swiss politics was characterized by a conflict between radical-liberal groups (called the “left”) and conservative groups (called the “right”). These two camps structured political competition along a simple left-versus-right dimension and subsumed new issues into this primary dimension (Rovny and Whitefield 2019).<sup>6</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, the Socialists were still a marginal group. In the 1890 election, socialist candidates ran in only 19% of all electoral districts and obtained only 3.4% of the vote (Gruner 1978, vol. 3, 387), and none of their candidates was elected to parliament.<sup>7</sup> The Socialists would become a relevant political force only in the twentieth century. With the Socialists’ emergence, the use of “left” for the radical-liberal coalition was discontinued. In the 1891 vote, the (still marginal) Socialists supported the introduction of direct democratic institutions because, like the

<sup>5</sup> Turnout numbers are compared for the period from 1878 to 1890 (elections) and 1879 to 1891 (law referendums). 1879 is the first year for which turnout at the national level is available for referendums. Turnout for mandatory referendums was lower. These referendums do not require political mobilization but are triggered automatically in case a section of the constitution is being adapted.

<sup>6</sup> Thus, we argue that the Swiss political space was one-dimensional in the late nineteenth century. In the next section, we provide empirical evidence to support this expectation. Moreover, Lachat (2018) shows that even if *party* competition is two-dimensional, voters still think of this competition in one-dimensional terms.

<sup>7</sup> Jakob Vogelsanger, later the first socialist MP, was still elected as a representative of the Democrats in 1890 (Gruner 1978, vol. 3, 213).

Conservatives, they were suffering from partisan gerrymandering by the ruling radical–liberal coalition (Emmenegger and Walter 2021).

In these years, the radical–liberal coalition benefited from the electoral system’s biases and controlled a majority in parliament. Convinced to be politically underrepresented, the Conservatives regularly accused the ruling radical–liberal coalition of resorting to partisan gerrymandering to cement their political dominance (Emmenegger and Walter 2021; Gruner 1978; Natsch 1967). In the 1880s, the Conservatives recognized that direct democratic institutions might be a way to gain political influence.<sup>8</sup> In 1884, three prominent Conservatives submitted a parliamentary motion, demanding from the government to develop a proposal for the adoption of a popular initiative. Importantly, in this parliamentary motion, they explicitly lamented the biases resulting from the majoritarian electoral system and the, from their point of view, politically motivated design of electoral districts (Kölz 2004, 639–40). Put differently, the Conservatives believed to be ideologically closer to the median voter than they were to the median MP who was a representative of the radical–liberal coalition in this period.<sup>9</sup>

The Federal Government and the radical–liberal majority in parliament opposed the proposal. However, in line with the literature on why members of the majority group in parliament opt to delegate to citizens the power of the initiative (Smith and Fridkin 2008), not all members of the radical–liberal coalition were equally opposed. First, the radical–liberal coalition was heterogeneous. As the dominant political force of the time, it combined a variety of groups, representing, among others, the manufacturing industry, crafts, salaried employees, and farmers. Especially, farmers were dissatisfied with party leadership (Junker 1968). Second, in some cantons, members of the coalition ran against each other in elections (Gruner 1978). Hence,

<sup>8</sup> The federal popular initiative empowers the national median voter and thus reduces the competencies of the cantons. However, voters in small cantons did not oppose its adoption because it was often voters in the small, conservative cantons, which believed to be underrepresented in federal politics. Moreover, the double majority requirement for initiatives to be accepted (a majority of voters nation-wide and majorities of voters in a majority of cantons) offers some form of protection for the smaller cantons. Table A14 in the Supplementary Material shows that controlling for cantonal population size does not affect our findings.

<sup>9</sup> In this ambition, the Conservatives were joined by the left wing of the Radicals, the so-called Democrats. The Democrats had emerged from organized local elites, which were in opposition to the politically dominant Radicals and Liberals (Schaffner 1982). They bemoaned a concentration of political power in the hands of a small elite. For them, direct democracy promised to break this elite’s control over political power and democratize the political system (Kriesi and Wisler 1999). However, the Democrats were not in general opposition to the Radicals. In fact, already in 1878, the Democrats rejoined the Radical parliamentary group, and in 1894, Democrats and Radicals together founded the Radical Democratic Party (Gruner 1978). Most Liberals also entered the new party, although the Liberals in the Western part of Switzerland decided to form an independent party. However, this reduced Liberal Party was relegated to the status of a fringe party with a vote share of less than 5% by the time of the First World War.

there were considerable, region-specific tensions within the radical–liberal coalition. Finally, the coalition had reasons to believe that more direct democracy was popular among voters. Legislators facing strong electoral competition in their districts had incentives to support direct democratic institutions (Kölz 2004, 643).

Ultimately, thanks to some renegades from the radical–liberal coalition, the popular initiative found a majority in the lower chamber.<sup>10</sup> The popular initiative gave the population the possibility to propose and vote on constitutional articles if 50,000 male citizens of voting age sign the proposal (circa 8% of the voting population).<sup>11</sup> However, given that the adoption of the popular initiative required changing the constitution, it was subject to a popular vote. On July 5, 1891, Swiss voting-age males were asked to cast their vote. The decision proved to be contentious. While 60.3% of the voters approved the adoption of the popular initiative, a sizable minority of 39.7% rejected the reform (Linder, Bollinger, and Rielle 2010, 70).

## MEASUREMENT AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The data we use in this article stem from a large data collection effort of municipality-level support for direct democratic proposals. In addition, we rely on roll-call votes that have been previously collected by Bolliger and Zürcher (2004). In the next section, we first describe the customized item response theory (IRT) scaling model we use and how we measure ideological positions. We then describe in the subsequent section the other variables we use in the analysis (for replication data, see Leeman, Emmenegger, and Walter 2025).

### The IRT Model

Our main variables are the ideological positions of municipalities and members of parliament (MPs) on a liberal-conservative dimension. Using these variables, we measure how far away a municipality is from the center of gravity, that is, how much a municipality differs from the weighted median municipality, which we use to capture the median voter, and the median MP. To derive such measures, we need to scale municipalities and MPs in a common space and need votes to

<sup>10</sup> The federal popular initiative may only change the federal constitution, not propose an ordinary law. However, in practice, this limitation plays little role, because there are virtually no restrictions as to what can be the focus of a popular initiative. Consequently, popular initiatives typically focus on policies that are normally the subject of laws or ordinances, and not the constitution.

<sup>11</sup> The radical–liberal coalition managed to blunt the new direct democratic instrument by allowing for parliamentary counter-proposals and disallowing a “double yes.” Parliamentary counter-proposals are proposals formulated by a parliamentary majority on the same topic as the popular initiative and are subject to a popular vote on the same day. Voters are allowed to reject both the popular initiative and the parliamentary counter-proposal, but they are *not* allowed to accept both proposals. Parliamentary counter-proposals thus split popular majorities in favor of change. The prohibition of the “double yes” was abolished in 1987.

do so. We can rely on referendum votes for which we can observe vote shares for each municipality but also how the MPs voted on them in parliament. We use these referendum votes on a large variety of topics because they are also voted upon in parliament, thus providing *bridging votes* that allow us to map ideological positions of municipalities and MPs into the same space. Put differently, for each of these referendums, there is both a vote in parliament and a popular vote on the exact same question, which we can use identify the ideological positions of the median voter and the median MP. We include all votes for which we have data, which took place up until 1891 (see Table A1 in the Supplementary Material for a list of the 22 votes used in the analysis). The parliamentary votes always precede the popular votes.

Hence, in our analysis, we infer individual behavior from group-level data. However, we find it unlikely that our analysis suffers from an ecological fallacy. For starters, most municipalities were small and ideologically homogeneous.<sup>12</sup> In addition, it is hard to imagine that voters who are well represented in federal politics but reside in badly represented municipalities would support the adoption of the popular initiative when the federal government itself was openly critical of the new direct democratic institution. Finally, as a robustness test, we have reestimated all models using only ideologically homogeneous municipalities. We dropped all municipalities from the sample in which the top two partisan returns were within 20 percentage points of each other. Table A10 in the Supplementary Material shows that our results are not affected.

We build on standard IRT models that are frequently used in political science (e.g., Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers 2004). These models are often applied to legislative behavior where we observe only a yes or no vote. When working with direct democratic ballot decisions, we of course observe the vote share per municipality. Therefore, we derive an alternative IRT estimator, which is based on outcome data either following a Bernoulli distribution or a binomial distribution. For the legislative votes, we can use the standard IRT model and define the probability of a yes vote on bill  $i$  as

$$P(y_{ij} = 1) = \Phi(\beta_i \cdot \theta_j - \alpha_i),$$

where  $\theta_j$  is the ideal point of legislator  $j$ ,  $\beta_i$  is the discrimination parameter of bill  $i$ , and  $\alpha_i$  is the difficulty parameter of bill  $i$ . Where we depart from the standard model is when we derive the model for the municipalities. Here, we formulate it as a binomial model, which allows us to retain the same bill parameters. This

enables us to locate municipalities in the same political space as the MPs.

To describe the distribution of municipality votes, we define  $k$  as the number of percentage points a ballot issue received,  $n$  is set to 100. We further define the probability of an individual vote by a citizen from a municipality to also be  $P(y_{ij} = 1) = \Phi(\beta_i \cdot \theta_j - \alpha_i)$  and this leads to the following model:

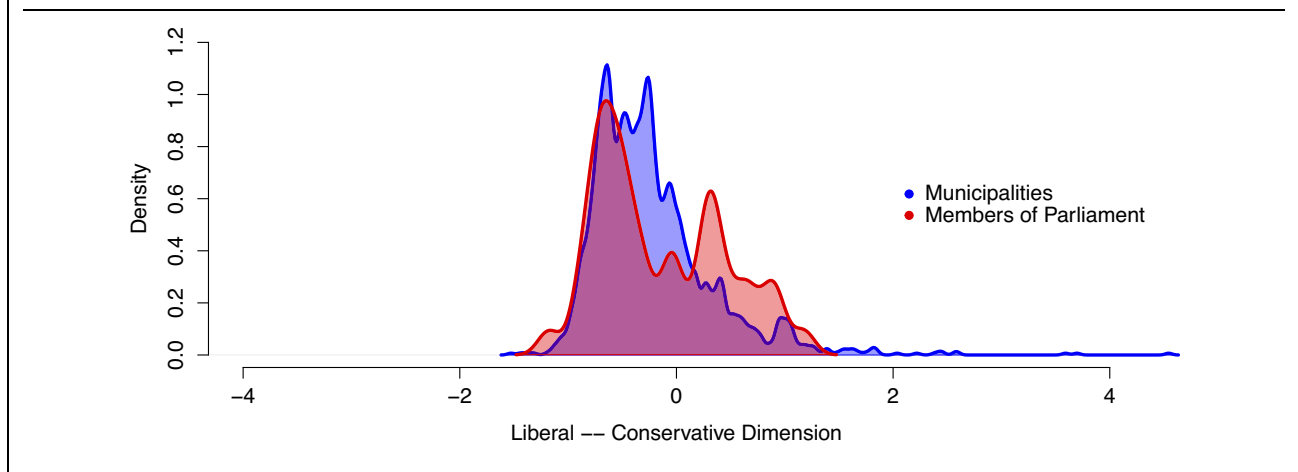
$$P(y) = \begin{cases} \Phi(\beta_i \cdot \theta_j - \alpha_i), & \text{if } i \text{ is a MP,} \\ \binom{n}{k} \Phi(\beta_i \cdot \theta_j - \alpha_i)^k (1 - \Phi(\beta_i \cdot \theta_j - \alpha_i))^{n-k}, & \text{if } i \text{ is a municipality.} \end{cases}$$

This model has the attractive feature that we estimate the same difficulty and discrimination parameters for a specific bill, regardless of whether it was voted upon in parliament or at the ballot box. We provide full details on identification and implementation in the Supplementary Material (see Section A1.2.1 of the Supplementary Material). The model assumes that there is one main dimension of political conflict. A factor analysis of all votes used in the analysis supports this assumption (see Figure 4 in the Supplementary Material). The scree plot of the eigenvalues shows that the different votes load strongly on the first factor, while no other factor achieves an eigenvalue of one or more. In addition, we inspect the discrimination parameters to ensure that there are no issue areas that do not load on this main dimension. We find among the five votes with the smallest absolute values for the discrimination parameter issues ranging from the state's alcohol monopoly, the federal state's right to print money, regulations for employing factory workers, or allowing the federal state to legislate on accident and health insurances. Some of these proposals featured a broad partisan consensus. Others already foreshadow the slowly emerging conflict between capital and labor (see Section A1.2.2 of the Supplementary Material). To show the robustness of the results, we later also present our estimation models based solely on data from municipalities where no socialist candidate ran for office (see Table A9 in the Supplementary Material).

In addition, we carry out two further robustness checks. First, we dichotomize the municipality data and run a standard binary IRT model (see Section A1.2.4 of the Supplementary Material). Second, we split the samples and estimate separate models for MPs and municipalities to see whether it is sensible to project both actors in the same political space (see Section A1.2.5 of the Supplementary Material). Both robustness checks are in line with our measurement strategy.

The converged model provides us with an ideological measure of municipalities and national MPs in the same political space. Figure 1 shows the distribution of ideal points of both groups. Whereas municipalities seem to follow a rather unimodal distribution with a large conservative tail, the MPs show a different picture. MPs fall into two modes, which correspond to the two main political groups at the time: a large progressive

<sup>12</sup> In the 22 votes we analyze, the median turnout across all municipalities was 100 voters, while the median size of the minority within a municipality was 17.0% (i.e., 17% of the voters did not vote with the majority). For the most recent 24 votes (June 2021 to June 2023), the corresponding numbers are a median turnout of 12,610 voters and a median minority of 38.5%, which indicates that today, municipalities are much larger and ideologically less homogeneous.

**FIGURE 1. Ideological Position of MPs and Municipalities in Common Space**

group to the left of most municipalities and a sizable conservative group. Figure 1 is in line with descriptions of political factions in parliament at the time. Numerically, the progressive Radicals dominate, whereas the Conservatives are the main opposition group. Between the Radicals and the Conservatives, there is a small group of Liberals, at the time sometimes referred to as the “Center” due to their centrist position between the Radicals and the Conservatives (Gruner 1978). Although there were relevant political differences between the Radicals and the Liberals, they were united in their opposition to the Conservatives (Altermatt 2020, 81). Together, the Radicals and the Liberals formed a center-left majority coalition in parliament, while the Conservatives were in a permanent minority position. There were no Socialists in parliament yet.

Based on these ideological positions we can derive our ideological measures:

- Absolute ideological distance between the municipality and the median MP ( $\text{abs}(\theta_{\text{mun}} - \theta_{\text{median MP}})$ ): To account for how far away a municipality is from parliament, we derive the absolute distance to the median MP. This variable captures how well (low values) or how bad (high values) a municipality fares under a purely representative system.
- Absolute ideological distance between the municipality and the median voter ( $\text{abs}(\theta_{\text{mun}} - \theta_{\text{median voter}})$ ): We derive the position of the median voter by locating the median municipality. To do this, we weight each municipality’s ideal point by the size of the voting-eligible population.<sup>13</sup> In this way, the weighted median municipality captures the ideological position of the median voter. Subsequently, we measure the distance of each municipality to this weighted median.
- Relative ideological distance ( $\text{abs}(\theta_{\text{mun}} - \theta_{\text{median MP}}) - \text{abs}(\theta_{\text{mun}} - \theta_{\text{median voter}})$ ): Our main independent variable puts the two absolute ideological distance

measures into relation. This variable captures whether a municipality is ideologically closer to the median voter (positive values) or ideologically closer to the median MP (negative values).

### The Full Dataset

In this section, we introduce the other variables that we use to explain the level of support for the introduction of the popular initiative. The unit of observation is the municipality. More specifically, in our models, we consider two main alternative explanations for supporting the adoption of the popular initiative: intrinsic and partisan motives.

Intrinsically motivated voters value direct democratic procedures as such and not because of the expected outcome effects. We capture such motives in two ways. First, we use the historical direct democracy index for 1890 (Leemann 2023) to measure whether municipalities had a tradition of direct democratic procedures for decision making at the subnational level. We assume that such traditions reflect a general preference for direct democratic institutions (Head 2002; Kölz 2004). Second, we control for general anti-government political preferences. For this, we create a dummy variable that captures whether a municipality is among the 25% ideologically most distant to the median MP. In this way, we can examine whether support is concentrated among the ideologically most extreme municipalities and does not reflect strategic considerations.

In case of partisan motives, voters decide on the adoption of the popular initiative based on their party-political orientation. As mentioned, Radicals and Liberals opposed the popular initiative, whereas the other parties supported it. If citizens vote in line with their party preferences, we should expect municipalities with high vote shares for Radicals and Liberals to display lower levels of support for the popular initiative, because the proposal was clearly meant to weaken the radical-liberal coalition’s firm grip on power. In our models, we control for the vote shares at

<sup>13</sup> For reasons of data availability, we use the number of citizens as an approximation of the voting eligible population.



municipality level of Radicals, Liberals, Conservatives, Democrats, and Socialists in the 1890 election for the lower chamber (last election before the popular vote).<sup>14</sup> We use the vote share of the Liberals as reference category. Please note that our argument assumes that parties were an important source of information about representation deficits. Controlling for the electoral strength of political parties at the municipality level should therefore weaken the effect of ideological distance on support for the popular initiative. However, controlling for electoral strength should not eliminate the relationship, because the ideological distance is a more precise indicator of underrepresentation and voters have also other sources of information.

Finally, we include two variables capturing the size of the agricultural and industrial workforce in the overall employment structure. Several studies have noted that the demand for direct democratic institutions originated from rural social movements (Kriesi and Wisler 1999; Schaffner 1982; Smith and Fridkin 2008). We therefore control for the municipalities' economic structure. The data are taken from the first occupational census in 1905 (BFS 1911), which provides information on sectoral employment at municipality level. We provide summary statistics of all variables in the Supplementary Material (see Table A2 in the Supplementary Material).

## EMPIRICAL RESULTS

All regression models are hierarchical linear models where the municipality-level vote share for the introduction of the popular initiative is the outcome variable. We recognize that municipalities are nested in districts and districts are nested in cantons. To account for this data structure, we include random effects for electoral districts and cantons. Table 1 presents all model specifications (the complete regression table is provided in Table A3 in the Supplementary Material). We also present various robustness tests in the Supplementary Material where we add interactions, additional control variables, or use fixed effects for electoral districts to show that the results are nonsensitive to model specification.

Adopting the popular initiative empowers the median voter relative to the median MP. Therefore, we expect support for the popular initiative to increase when voters are ideologically closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP. Model 1 in Table 1 presents the purely ideological specification with our relative ideological distance measure (positive scores indicate that voters are ideologically closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP) plus the

two control variables for the local labor market structure. Model 2 adds the dummy variable for ideologically extreme municipalities. In Model 3, we add information on the current extent of subnational direct democracy. Finally, in Model 4, we add vote shares of the different political parties based on the elections in 1890.

We find that support for the adoption of the popular initiative is higher among voters who are ideologically closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP. Models 2 to 4 show that these results hold regardless of the precise model specification, although—unsurprisingly—the effect becomes somewhat weaker when we control for party vote shares (which are important sources of information for voters about their possible underrepresentation). These findings suggest that voters understand the strategic implications of the adoption of the popular initiative in terms of furthering their political goals. The popular initiative is primarily useful for voters to gain political influence if their ideological distance to the median MP is higher than their ideological distance to the median voter. Only in this case can voters realistically hope for a more positive outcome in a direct democratic vote (made by voters) compared to a parliamentary decision (made by MPs). Our results suggest that voters are aware of these strategic considerations. To illustrate the effect size, one can look at what happens when the difference in distances increases by one standard deviation and compare that to a one standard deviation change in the vote share of Conservatives. The model-predicted increase in the yes-share for ideology is half the size of the modeled increase for one standard deviation increase of the conservative vote share.

Figure 2 explores whether our argument about differences in ideological distances also applies within groups. Table 1 has already shown that the effect of our relative ideological distance measure holds when controlling for electoral support at the municipality level. Figure 2 now zooms in on supporters of the Radicals. The Radicals were the politically most powerful group of the time and arguably the most advantaged by the contemporary electoral system's biases. Supporters of the Radicals are thus particularly important in the context of this vote on the adoption of popular initiative. As argued above, we expect supporters of the Radicals, like all voters, to be more supportive of the popular initiative if their own ideological position is closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP.

Figure 2 shows that support for the adoption of the popular initiative (*y*-axis) decreases with the vote share of the Radicals (*x*-axis). More importantly, however, Figure 2 shows that across the full range of vote shares for the Radicals (from 0% to 100%), municipalities ideologically closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP (blue dots and LOESS curve) show stronger support for the popular initiative than municipalities that are closer to the median MP than they are to the median voter (red dots and LOESS curve). Even at very high levels

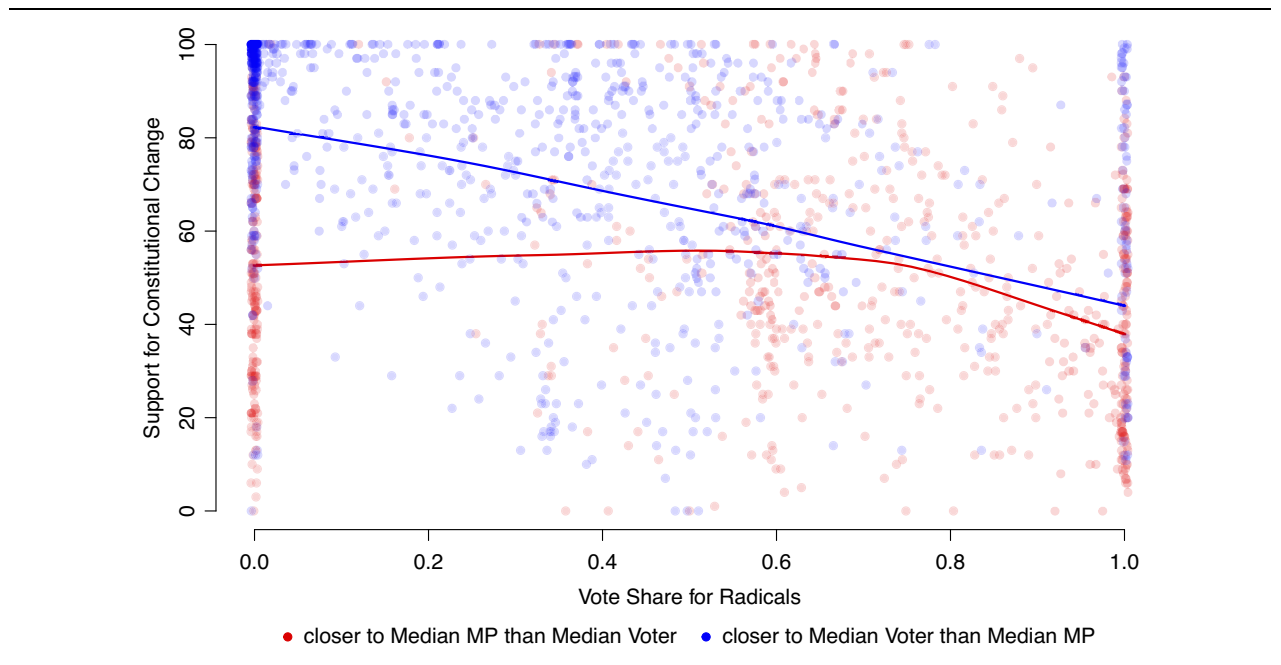
<sup>14</sup> Due to data limitations, we only have data from about 83% of all municipalities. We have data from all cantons and missingness is mostly uniformly distributed across cantons with the exception of the canton of Bern where we have data on only about 30% of all municipalities.

**TABLE 1. Strategic Vote for the Adoption of the Popular Initiative**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
$( \theta_{mun} - \theta_{med MP}  -  \theta_{mun} - \theta_{med Mun} )$	107.43*** (7.66)	89.68*** (7.51)	89.37*** (7.51)	66.01*** (7.92)
Labor market structure	✓	✓	✓	✓
Extreme municipality	x	✓	✓	✓
Historical direct democracy index	x	x	✓	✓
Party votes shares	x	x	x	✓
Canton RE	✓	✓	✓	✓
District RE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Log likelihood	-7,931.56	-7,859.80	-7,857.28	-7,004.80
No. of municipalities	1,783	1,783	1,783	1,622
No. of electoral districts	44	44	44	43
No. of cantons	24	24	24	24
$\sigma^2_{ElectoralDistrict}$	96.07	83.83	86.44	71.89
$\sigma^2_{Canton}$	210.56	195.18	182.62	219.66
$\sigma^2_{Municipality}$	404.42	374.06	374.06	318.79

Note: Labor market structure: Local employment shares in first and second sectors. Party vote shares for Radicals, Conservatives, Democrats, and Socialists, and others (ref: Liberals). Constant included but not shown. \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.1$ .

**FIGURE 2. Support for the Initiative and Radical Vote Share**



Note: We show average support for the popular initiative in municipalities closer to the median MP (red) and closer to the median voter (blue). We added a jitter factor to the x-values to make the figure easier to read.

of electoral support for the Radicals, we can still observe this effect of relative ideological difference to the median voter and the median MP.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Figure 2 is based on the entire population of municipalities. We therefore abstain from displaying confidence intervals.

**Robustness Checks**

We carry out several robustness tests (all tables are in the Supplementary Material). As mentioned above, we present estimation results of the same substantive models but rely on district fixed effects rather than random effects (see Table A4 in the Supplementary

Material). In Table A11 in the Supplementary Material, we add random disturbances to the ideological measures and show that the relative ideological distance measure is still significant. In Table A12 in the Supplementary Material, we include the ideological distance between municipalities and their local MP, and in Table A14 in the Supplementary Material, we add cantonal population size. In Table A5 in the Supplementary Material, we further control for an interaction effect between ideological distance to the median MP and ideological distance to the median voter to control for ideologically extreme municipalities. All the results are unchanged and we see the same significant relationships as presented in Table 1. This lends further evidence to the finding that support for the adoption of the popular initiative is not simply the result of political alienation—with most support at the fringes of the political spectrum—but also reflects strategic considerations.

In Table A6 in the Supplementary Material, we control for the municipality-level shares of the largest minority groups. At the time of the vote, there were three main minority groups with voting rights: the Catholic minority, the emerging workers' movement, and the non-German-speaking population (about 30% of the population).<sup>16</sup> We use data from the national census in 1888 to account for the share of the German speakers and the share of Catholics in a municipality. In addition, we use the logarithm of a municipality's population density (from the 1888 census) to capture urbanization and thus the potential for a working-class vote. Especially, the shares of Catholics and German speakers have strong effects on support for the popular initiative, but the effect of relative ideological distance holds when controlling for the municipalities' socio-demographic structure.

An additional possible critique is that by analyzing yes shares at the ballot box, one may not just pick up differences in preferences but also turnout effects. To that end, we estimate the same models as above but with turnout as the dependent variable.<sup>17</sup> Table A7 in the Supplementary Material shows that in Model 1, there is a weak positive coefficient for the relative ideological distance measure, but in Models 2 to 4, this coefficient is not significant anymore. We also reestimate the models in Table 1 but add turnout as an additional explanatory factor. The results are virtually unchanged (see Table A8 in the Supplementary Material). These findings show that the main results are not driven by turnout dynamics but reflect ideological distances, which increases our confidence that the results in Table 1 indeed reflect preferences for institutional design.

<sup>16</sup> The non-German-speaking population was rather well-represented at federal level because electoral districts often overlapped with language regions. For this reason, large parts of the popular press in the French-speaking regions of Switzerland opposed the introduction of the popular initiative (Michel 2021, 254).

<sup>17</sup> For many of these early votes, the number of eligible voters is not known. To capture turnout, we took for each municipality the number of cast votes in the 1890 elections over the number of cast votes in the 1891 vote on the adoption of the federal popular initiative.

We also estimate the same models but rely on subsamples of the data. First, we look at the set of municipalities with little political competition in the national legislative elections of 1890. We exclude any municipality in which the top two partisan returns are within 20 percentage points from each other. In this way, we reduce the sample to municipalities that are comparatively homogeneous, which should alleviate fears of the ecological fallacy. Based on this subset, which consists of most municipalities, we find the same substantive results as in the main models (see Table A10 in the Supplementary Material).

Second, we exclude all municipalities in electoral districts with socialist candidates. Above, we have argued that nineteenth century Swiss politics was dominated by the conflict between conservatism and liberalism, whereas the emerging Socialists were still a marginal group. In fact, in the 1890 election, not a single socialist candidate was elected to parliament. This robustness test, excluding all electoral districts with socialist candidates, serves to further alleviate concerns that the political space may not be unidimensional. In the 1890 election, roughly 8 months before the vote on the adoption of the popular initiative, socialist candidates ran in 19% of the electoral districts. By excluding these districts, we reduce the sample to those municipalities where even a skeptic would accept the liberal-conservative dimension as the structuring principle. The estimation results show substantively identical results to the main models (see Table A9 in the Supplementary Material).

Finally, we also present a set of models where we break the main explanatory variable into its components and enter the distance from the median municipality and the difference to the median MP as separate terms (see Table A13 in the Supplementary Material)—also this operationalization shows the same substantive results.

## CONCLUSION

What makes people support the adoption of the popular initiative—an institution that constrains elected representatives' room for maneuver, limits the agenda-setting power of parliament, and promises to disperse power more broadly among political actors? This article argues that demand for more direct democracy is fueled by voters' desire to align political outcomes with their policy preferences. Due to the biases of electoral systems, the ideological position of the median voter can be very different from the median MP. Large shares of the voting population might thus be ideologically closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP. For such voters, the adoption of the popular initiative is a promising institutional innovation because it offers the potential to force the ruling parties to pay more attention to underrepresented groups and strive for higher levels of policy congruence.

In the empirical analysis, we rely on a customized item response model and referendum votes to observe the voting behavior of MPs and the population on the

same issues. Based on these measures, we can identify the ideological position of voters and capture how far away voters are from the median MP and the median voter. The statistical analysis shows that support for the adoption of the popular initiative is higher among voters who are ideologically more proximate to the median voter than they are to the median MP.

These results suggest that voters understand the strategic implications of adopting the popular initiative. This direct democratic right is useful for gaining political influence only if voters are ideologically closer to the median voter than they are to the median MP. Only in this case can voters hope for a more positive outcome in a popular vote compared to a parliamentary vote. In contrast, voters who are ideologically closer to the median MP than they are to the median voter are unlikely to benefit from direct democracy—independent of their absolute ideological distance to the median MP. Importantly, representational deficits do not only affect minority party voters, but also the pool of ideologically heterogeneous voters of the ruling parties, potentially resulting in support for direct democracy among the majority of all eligible voters.

More generally, our study emphasizes the important role of instrumental motives for supporting direct democratic institutions (Brummel 2020; Gabriel 2013; Landwehr and Harms 2020; Smith, Tolbert, and Keller 2010; Werner 2020). Voters suffering from representation deficits opt for more direct democracy to create an alternative entry into the political arena. While similar arguments exist for elite behavior (Chacón and Jensen 2020; Leemann 2023; Smith and Fridkin 2008), this is, to the best of our knowledge, the first time that this has been empirically demonstrated for the behavior of the population. The evidence is consistent with citizens having a clear understanding of the policy consequences of institutional change.

Our results suggest that electoral reforms that reduce representation deficits weaken popular demand for direct democratic institutions. This concerns first and foremost the adoption of PR systems, which are less likely to suffer from electoral biases (Calvo 2009). In fact, proposals to adopt direct democratic institutions were often linked to questions of electoral system choice. For example, Cridge (1895) identified direct democratic institutions and the adoption of PR as two complementary ways to reduce representation deficits and fight electoral engineering by means of gerrymandering in the United States. In Switzerland, the parliamentary motion that demanded the introduction of the popular initiative explicitly referred to the adoption of PR as an alternative (Kölz 2004, 639–40). In his analysis of direct democratic reforms in Swiss cantons, Leemann (2023) shows that once the introduction of PR had removed the largest representation deficits, the appetite for more direct democracy often disappeared.

These considerations suggest that popular support for direct democratic institutions is higher in case of majoritarian electoral systems. However, it is important to keep in mind that also PR systems can suffer from substantial representation deficits (Bochsler, Hänni, and Grofman 2024), while fairer district maps

and independent boundary commissions can reduce representation deficits in majoritarian systems. Moreover, the literature on “cartel parties” suggests that representation deficits may have increased across all electoral systems, as governing parties increasingly detach themselves from voters and become part of the state (Katz and Mair 2018). From this perspective, support for more direct forms of legislation should be increasing in most democracies and independent of the number of parties. From the point of view of the cartel party thesis, the rise of populist parties and calls for direct democracy are two sides of the same coin (Bowler, Donovan, and Karp 2006).

In this article, we have also found some evidence for the role of intrinsic motives on support for direct democratic institutions, although substantively, the effect of instrumental motives seems more important. In any case, our focus on instrumental motives is not to question the relevance of intrinsic motives. Intrinsic motives also play an important role in explaining cross-national differences. In general, we expect the instrumental motives examined in this article to travel to other contexts and places. When taking a position on the adoption of direct democratic institutions, voters take their ideological position relative to the median voter and the median MP into account. However, we expect them to do so from different starting points. Due to positive historical experiences, Swiss voters may attach a high intrinsic value to direct democratic procedures. In other countries, by contrast, average levels of support for direct democracy might be lower (Dalton, Bürklin, and Drummond 2001).

Another barrier to the adoption of direct democratic institutions concerns the political process that precedes the popular vote. Although most direct democratic institutions were ultimately adopted by popular vote, it is typically up to legislatures to decide whether they want to allow such a vote in the first place. The question why legislatures sometimes opt to grant citizens direct democratic rights has been the topic of a sophisticated literature (e.g., Bowler, Donovan, and Karp 2002; Chacón and Jensen 2020; Smith and Fridkin 2008). Less is known about the reasons why voters (and which voters in particular) accept this invitation, which has been the topic of this article. However, in general, we should expect legislators to be reluctant to share power (although there is important variation; see Gherghina, Close, and Carman 2023). In any case, once voters decide on the adoption of direct democratic institutions, we expect instrumental motives to play an important role.

Is the story, we tell specific to Switzerland or to this period? We do not think so. Certainly, Switzerland is an exceptionally important case because no other country awards direct democratic institutions such an important role in policymaking at the national level (Qvortrup 2017). Moreover, institutional developments in Switzerland have been an important inspiration for other countries and political groups, including the progressive movement in the USA (Cridge 1895; Goebel 2002; Rappard 1912).

Admittedly, Switzerland has a long history of direct forms of democracy, but so do many other countries in



Europe and beyond (Stasavage 2020). In addition, previous experiences with direct democracy could have both strengthened or weakened support for the adoption of the popular initiative—depending on the experiences made. Instead, we argue that Switzerland's experience with direct democracy before 1891 offers one key advantage for our analysis. Previous referendum votes gave voters a clear indication where they stood ideologically relative to the median voter and the median MP, thus reducing information costs.

What about countries in which available information about relative ideological positions is less abundant? In such cases, we would expect voters' estimates of their own ideological position relative to the median MP and the median voter to be less precise. Moreover, there might be a larger gap between the perceived and the real representation bias. However, even in the absence of referendums, voters have several ways to inform themselves about their ideological position relative to the median voter and the median MP. In most countries, parliamentary votes are documented and discussed in the media. In all majority votes, the position of the median MP is easy to identify. Representational biases are likely to be articulated by political parties, and they can also be experienced locally. Moreover, population surveys, if available, can inform voters about the median voter's position. Overall, we would expect voters to rely more strongly on party cues and local information. However, when forming a position on the desirability of direct democratic institutions, we would nevertheless expect them to take relative ideological distances into account.

In addition, the Swiss vote took place in a rather different context. For example, in 1891, women were not allowed to participate yet. However, there is little evidence on gender differences in the motives to support direct democratic institutions (Landwehr and Harms 2020; Smith, Tolbert, and Keller 2010; Werner 2020). Certainly, the political issues were different ones in the late nineteenth century, but our argument emphasizes representation deficits, not specific issues or conflicts. Moreover, as mentioned above, our argument is not tied to the existence of a specific electoral system or a small number of parties, although the statistical complexity of course increases with the number of issue dimensions that have to be considered in the analysis. Hence, while we caution against sweeping generalizations and invite future research to test our argument on more recent reforms, we believe that our analysis shows that instrumental motives have to be taken seriously in research on democratic innovations.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424001400>.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the American

Political Science Review Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/YZUTTK>.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

## ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors affirm this research did not involve human participants.

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