

The Underexplored Species: Selective Participation in Direct Democratic Votes

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Abstract: *While electoral research usually distinguishes voters from abstainers, in the Swiss direct democratic context one needs to take into account a third category of citizens, the selective voters, who decide anew at each vote whether they will participate or not. This article offers an investigation of this common but under-researched form of participation. To that end, we take advantage of a unique data-set linking official turnout data with survey data. Our results show that selective voters constitute the bulk of the electorate. While they form a heterogeneous group in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, selective voters lean more towards abstainers than towards permanent voters with respect to political variables. We argue that this is not necessarily bad news in terms of democratic theory.*

KEYWORDS: Political participation, selective participation, official turnout data, direct democracy, Switzerland

Introduction¹

Participation literature usually distinguishes between voters and abstainers. This binary categorization makes sense in representative democracies, where elections take place only episodically.² Whether it can accurately capture voting reality in direct democratic contexts is, however, questionable. In Switzerland, the prime example of direct democracy (Butler and Rainey 1994, Qvortrup 2014), citizens are called three to four times a year to the poll to vote on concrete policy proposals. This has favored the emergence of a third category of voters, the selective voters, who decide anew at each vote whether they will participate or not (Gruner and Hertig 1983, Linder 2010, Mottier 1993, Qvortrup 2002, Serdült 2013).

Selective voters are important for both empirical and theoretical reasons. First, according to earlier studies, selective voters constitute a sizable share of the electorate and account for the ups and downs of aggregate turnout in Swiss direct democratic votes (Linder 2010: 112). Whether they participate or not may therefore decisively influence the outcome of a ballot. Second, from the perspective of democratic legitimacy, it is crucial to assess whether selective voting contributes to the equality of participation. While Switzerland is a low-turnout country, the multiplicity of votes may help to reduce the risk

¹ We wish to thank Simon Hug for his methodological help and the three anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.

² A growing body of literature argues that turnout in elections is habitual (e.g. Aldrich et al. 2011, Denny and Doyle 2009, Green and Schachar 2000, Plutzer 2002).

that some specific groups of voters systematically exclude themselves from the voting process.

The contribution of our paper is threefold. First, we take advantage of a rich data-set of official turnout data covering almost 20 years of direct democratic votes from the canton of Geneva to evaluate the extent of selective participation. While survey data notoriously overestimate turnout (e.g. Selb and Munzert 2013),³ our data provide information about actual participation for the entire cantonal electorate (roughly 200'000 citizens). The panel structure of our data is ideally suited for an analysis of the frequency of participation, as it enables us to track citizens' participation records across a number of votes.

Second, we investigate the socio-demographic and political characteristics of selective voters and test whether and to what extent they differ from those of permanent abstainers and permanent voters. The official data only contains a handful of socio-demographic variables. To overcome this limitation, we complement the data-set with survey data. While official data on individual turnout is rare, being able to match official turnout data to survey data is even rarer. In that sense, the data-set at our disposal is fairly unique.

Third, unlike previous studies we refrain from setting arbitrary thresholds to separate selective voters from abstainers and permanent voters. Instead, we estimate ordinal logit models on cumulative participation across ten successive votes. This helps us to identify the variables that discriminate the frequency of turnout and to assess in how far participation in direct democratic votes meets the requirement of equal participation. In addition, the treatment of ten votes in an ordinal way allows us to identify clusters of voters with similar characteristics and to compare our results with groupings of voters used in earlier studies.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. In the next section, we develop our argument regarding selective participation and why it matters for democratic theory. Based on a review of literature we then formulate a general hypothesis regarding the socio-demographic and political characteristics of selective voters. In the third section we present our data, the procedure that was used to link official and survey data, and our model. The empirical analysis appears in section four. In conclusion, we summarize our results and discuss their implications for politics and democratic theory, and sketch avenues for future research.

Theoretical framework

On the importance of (selective) participation

Switzerland is a country with low turnout in comparative perspective (Blais 2014, Franklin 2002, Lutz and Selb 2007). From the perspective of democratic theory, participation is desirable to the extent that it helps to ensure equal consideration of the preferences and needs of each citizen (Teorell 2006, Teorell et al. 2007). In that sense, low turnout is not necessarily a problem, as long as abstention is evenly distributed among the population (Schäfer 2013). A legitimacy problem arises if participation is unequal, that is, if specific social groups are underrepresented. A development of this theory, the "procedural perspective of participation" (Teorell 2006: 799), claims that participation should be *resource-insensitive*. Teorell (2006) lists different types of resources such as income, time,

³ Turnout bias in post-election surveys stems from both the overrepresentation of active voters among survey respondents and vote overreporting of respondents who say they participated while they actually abstained.

education, political knowledge or social networks. Following the axiom of resource-insensitivity, ideally resources should not impact on democratic participation at all.

With this study on selective participation we offer new insights into this procedural view of participation. Thus far equality has mainly been addressed from the perspective of inter-group differences in a single ballot. Broadening the view and looking at a series of ballots may change the picture. Equal participation may not be at work in a given ballot, but the situation may be different if we take a number of (successive) ballots into account. Similarly, while the binary distinction between voters and abstainers may be driven by differences in resources, considering the possibility to participate selectively may level out these differences.

The determinants of participation

The equality principle is a primary concern in classical empirical studies of political participation (e.g. Verba and Nie 1972, Verba et al. 1978 and 2005, Lijphart 1997). Aware of the threat of unequal participation, electoral research has extensively dealt with the social profile of voters and abstainers. Since the pioneering studies of the 1950s, research has highlighted a series of determinants of participation, such as socio-economic status (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944), political competence (Campbell et al. 1976), civic culture and political motivation (Almond and Verba 1963, Dalton et al. 1984), or social integration (Verba and Nie 1972).

Starting with *socio-demographic* determinants, participation varies with age (Verba and Nie 1972, Norris 2002, Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). It is lowest among citizens under 30 and highest for middle-aged to mature people. Educated people and people with high income are also more likely to turn out (e.g. Verba et al. 1978, Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, Franklin 2002, Verba et al. 2005). Furthermore, there is evidence of higher participation among married citizens, as a result of their higher levels of social stability and social integration (Leighley and Nagler 2014, Stoker and Jennings 1995). While men used to participate more than women (e.g. Verba et al. 1978), the gender gap has closed (Norris 2002). Women's access to higher education and the job market and the related gains in terms of occupational status and social integration account for this change (Inglehart and Norris, 2000).

A second string of determinants can be summarized under the terms *civic culture* (Almond and Verba 1963) and *political attitudes*. Citizens who are interested in politics, politically sophisticated, close to a party, and who trust the political system and consider the government as efficient participate more (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993, Franklin 2002, Kriesi 2005, Norris 2002).

Participation in Switzerland

In Switzerland, citizens are called to the poll on the federal, cantonal, and local level three to four times a year. In many cases, several projects are submitted on the same day. In addition to direct democratic votes, general elections are held every four or five years on the three levels of the federal state. Therefore, while voting requires little initiative and resources in comparison with other forms of political participation (Leighley 1995, Norris 2002, Verba and Nie 1972), it is fairly demanding in the Swiss context.

Not surprisingly, turnout at federal votes hardly exceeds 40% on average, albeit with strong variations from one vote to another. These variations strongly depend in the

participation or abstention of selective voters. While permanent voters tend to participate on every occasion and permanent abstainers to abstain in any case, selective voters decide at every vote whether they turn out or not. This decision may be influenced by individual and/or project-specific factors. In this article we focus on the former and look at the socio-demographic and political determinants of participation.⁴

In most studies, selective participation is measured with a survey question asking respondents how frequently they would participate, assuming ten popular votes take place in a year (Gruner and Hertig 1983, Mottier 1993, Linder 2010). In a second step, answers are recoded into permanent voters (those who say they would vote in all ten votes), abstainers (e.g. zero to two votes) and selective voters (e.g. three to nine votes). Research based on survey data shows that permanent voters and abstainers display very distinct socio-demographic profiles (Mottier 1993, Tawfik and Horber 2010). Women and young people are overrepresented among abstainers and underrepresented among permanent voters. The opposite holds for men and the elderly. Furthermore, people with low education are more likely to be abstainers, whereas people with a high-school or university degree are more likely to belong to the group of permanent voters. Abstainers and permanent voters also display different political attitudes. Politically interested and competent citizens vote very frequently, whereas uninterested and incompetent citizens often abstain. People who self-locate at the center of the left-right scale or who are not able to position themselves on the scale, and people without party identification, are also overrepresented among abstainers (Mottier 1993: 141–142).

The profile of selective voters is less distinct (*ibid.*). Selective voters do not display specific characteristics in terms of gender, education, or socio-economic status. The only factor that seems to matter is age. Selective participation is less common among citizens over 70, who are strongly represented among both abstainers and permanent voters. Generation effects, life cycle effects and ageing effects may jointly explain this. On the one hand, civic duty is more strongly felt among older cohorts. In addition, social integration and political experience increases with age, at least up to a certain threshold. As a result, there are lots of permanent voters among older citizens (Kriesi 2005: 122). On the other hand, illness or social isolation prompts very old people to withdraw from political participation and to join the group of abstainers.

Some recent studies have analyzed selective participation using real turnout data instead of survey data. Serdült (2013) describes the frequency of participation in seven successive votes in the city of St-Gallen, but does not look at the determinants of participation. Heer (2010) investigates participation for a sample of citizens in a Swiss commune (Bolligen). His results suggest that turnout increases with residence duration, income, and professional status. Married citizens are more likely to participate frequently than singles. Based on data for the same commune and for the city of St-Gallen, Dermont (2014) finds that selective participants are younger than the average and have a middle income. Gender and civil status do not affect the probability of being a selective participant.

Expectations

Both, studies using self-reported participation measures and studies relying on official turnout data have a hard time pinning down the profile of selective participants. By

⁴ In a companion paper, we investigate the effect of project and campaign-related characteristics on the mobilization of selective voters.

contrast, abstainers and permanent voters have very distinct socio-demographic and political profiles. In line with previous research we expect selective participants to be an in-between and heterogeneous group. That is, we hypothesize that individual resources associated with factors such as gender, age, marital status, residence duration, level of education, party identification, political ideology, interest in politics, and political knowledge do not play a role among selective voters, especially for those participating in about half of the possible votes. By contrast, the impact of these factors should become more decisive the more extreme the voting behavior gets (i.e. the more we move to permanent abstention or permanent voting). In line with Qvortrup (2002: 31) and Smith (2009: 137), we further expect political variables to be more influential than socio-demographic variables.

Data, model and operationalization

Data

Since 1996, the administration of Geneva has systematically collected data on official turnout of individuals, alongside with a handful of socio-demographic variables (Sciarini et al. 2001).⁵ This data-set comprises the entire population of eligible voters in the canton of Geneva and hence includes a very large number of observations (roughly 200'000 for each ballot). It provides information about citizens' actual participation in all ballots held in Geneva from 1996 to 2013. Given that each citizen is identified through an anonymous code, we can track his or her past participation record. In addition to turnout at federal direct democratic votes, our data-set would thus also allow us to include turnout at national, cantonal and local elections, and at cantonal referendums. However, in the present paper we focus on federal direct democratic votes, firstly to increase the consistency of the ballots under study and to avoid mixing the different levels and institutional types of votes, and secondly for reasons of comparability with survey-based measures.⁶

In comparison to the aforementioned studies also using official turnout data (Heer 2010, Dermont 2014, Serdült 2013), our study has two main strengths. First, our official data includes a larger number of ballots. In the empirical section, we will provide descriptive statistics about selective participation across 30 successive votes. Second, and more importantly, we are able to link the official turnout data with survey data. This allows for a more in-depth study of the characteristics of selective voters, one that includes political factors in addition to socio-demographic factors.

More specifically, we linked our data on official turnout with two surveys. The first survey took place in the context of the 2011 Swiss national elections, and the other one year later in the aftermath of a compulsory referendum on the new cantonal Constitution. In both cases the cantonal administration drew a random sample of Geneva citizens from the official vote registry. This served as the basis for the survey.⁷ After the fieldwork was completed, the cantonal administration replaced respondents' names by the corresponding anonymous

⁵ We thank the Service of Votes and Elections (SVE) and the Statistical Cantonal Office (OCSTAT) for providing us with the official turnout data.

⁶ See Tawfik et al. (2012) for the analysis of the conditional effect of the institutional type and level of vote on individual-level determinants of turnout. As already mentioned, we investigate the role of the context on the activation of selective voters in a companion paper.

⁷ The initial sample comprised 1'500 individuals in the first survey and 2'500 in the second. 392 people responded to the first survey and 1'231 to the second. The response rate (AAPOR RR1) was thus much higher in the second survey (49%) than in the first (26%).

codes. This enables us to enrich the basic socio-demographic information included in our official turnout data-set with additional information taken from the surveys.

Model

For both comparative and methodological reasons, we will use the frequency of citizens' participation in the ten successive votes from 2010 to 2013 as the dependent variable of our analysis. First, focusing on ten successive votes enables us to compare our results with earlier survey-based studies (Mottier 1993, Tawfik and Horber 2010). Second, as we will explain in more detail below, increasing the number of votes under consideration would bias the composition of the population under study. In addition, given that the two surveys took place in 2011 and 2012, extending the set of votes backward (i.e. prior to 2010) would increase the number of missing data by excluding respondents that were too young to vote or did not yet reside in Geneva.

Our analysis of selective participation departs from existing (survey-based and registry-based) studies with respect to the operationalization of the dependent variable. Grouping citizens in a small number of categories entails important information loss, especially with respect to the category of selective voters we are primarily interested in. In addition, setting thresholds is a difficult task and almost necessarily implies some arbitrary decisions. For example, it is open to discussion whether a citizen participating in one or two popular votes out of ten should better be seen as an abstainer or as a selective voter. Therefore, in our analysis we use the initial variable comprising all eleven categories (from zero to ten votes out of ten).

Given that the frequency of participation across ten votes is inherently an ordered categorical outcome, we rely on an ordered logit model. This model is frequently presented as a latent variable model involving both a structural and a measurement model (Long and Freese 2006). Our structural model defines the latent (unobservable) variable y_i^* and looks as follows:

$$y_i^* = \mathbf{x}_i\beta + \mathbf{z}_i\gamma + \varepsilon$$

where \mathbf{x} is a vector including socio-demographic variables – and possible interactions terms among them – that are likely to influence the frequency of vote, \mathbf{z} is a vector including variables measuring political attitudes, β and γ are the vectors of regression coefficients that have to be estimated and ε is a random error. The measurement model divides y_i^* into 11 ordinal categories according to the following equation:

$$y_i = m \text{ if } \tau_{m-1} \leq y_i^* < \tau_m \text{ for } m = 1 \text{ to } 11$$

where the thresholds τ_1 through τ_{10} are also estimated.

As it transpires from the equation of the structural model, the ordered logit model assumes identical effects for variables across thresholds. This assumption is known as the parallel regression assumption. We performed a Brant test on the full model including socio-demographic and political attitude variables to ensure that this assumption is not violated.

Operationalization

We take information regarding citizens' socio-demographic characteristics (sex, age, marital and citizenship status, and residence duration) from the official vote registry. These

variables are key factors in participation research, as they all relate to individual resources and capacities that influence political participation (Verba and Nie, 1972). *Marital status* distinguishes four categories of single, married, separated/divorced and widowed people. Our indicator of *citizenship status* distinguishes people who are citizens of Geneva from those who are not (i.e., who are entitled to vote in Geneva but are citizens of another canton). The measure of *residence duration* counts the number of years since arrival in the canton of Geneva. For analytic purposes we recode this into an ordinal variable distinguishing citizens having lived in Geneva for less than ten years, between ten and 20 years, and for more than 20 years.

Survey data provide information about one additional important socio-demographic variable, namely respondents' level of *education* (low, medium or high). They additionally include four political variables, namely political interest, ideology, partisanship, and competence. *Political interest* distinguishes four groups of people who are very, rather, rather not or not at all interested in politics. *Political competence* is a scale based on three factual knowledge questions about the national (2011 survey) or cantonal (2012 survey) political system. We recoded this variable into three categories representing high, medium and low political competence. *Ideological preference* is a dummy variable stemming from respondents' self-location on the left-right scale (0–10). More specifically, it distinguishes people who self-locate on either side of the scale, i.e. on 0 to 4 (left) or on 6 to 10 (right), from those who either self-locate in the middle of the scale (5) or do not locate themselves at all. *Party preference* includes all respondents who report a party preference, as opposed to those who do not.

Empirics

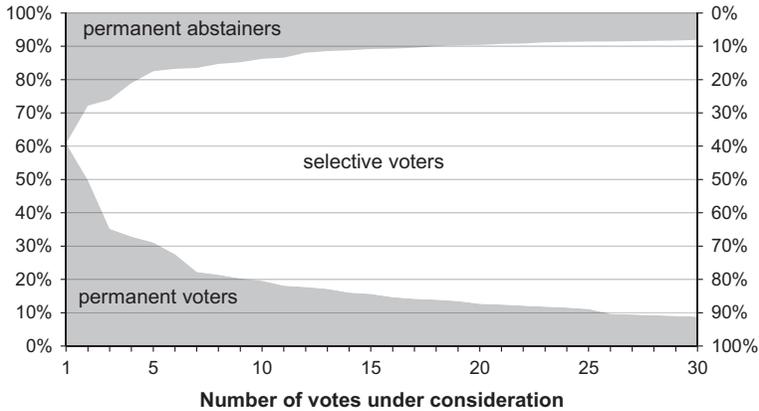
Descriptive analysis of actual frequency of participation

To get a first view of the importance of selective participation, we provide descriptive statistics of the frequency of participation. We do this firstly for a series of 30 successive direct democratic votes from 2004 to 2013, whereby we focus on the two “extreme” categories of permanent voters and permanent abstainers, and on the broad category of selective voters (figure 1). We will then narrow the number of successive votes to ten, but show in more detail the frequency of participation across these ten votes (table 1).

Studying participation across a number of votes requires that we focus on voters who had a chance to participate in all votes. That is, we must exclude citizens who received their voting right in Geneva after the first ballot, as well as citizens who left Geneva (or died) during the period under consideration. This has important implications. For example, covering 30 successive votes from 2004 to 2013 means that at the last vote in 2013 youngest citizens under study are 27 years old; citizens aged 18 to 26 are excluded.⁸ Moreover, we cannot control for changes in marital status (e.g. from singlehood to marriage) that may affect voting behavior over time. Therefore, while our data would allow us to show the frequency of participation across 55 successive direct democratic votes, focusing on a shorter time frame leads to a more stable sample with less bias due to

⁸ Of course, this also means that the population under study gets smaller. For the set of 30 votes appearing in figure 1, focusing on citizens who had their voting right all along reduces the number of observations from 210'393 (number of citizens who were entitled to vote in the first ballot of 2004) to 151'558.

Figure 1: Share of citizens who voted (left axis) or abstained (right axis) in all 30 successive federal direct democratic votes (2004–2013)



Source of the data: SEV/OCSTAT, our calculations

changes in variables directly related to the voting decision (age, marital status, residence duration, etc.).

Figure 1 shows the share of citizens who participated in all, some, or none of the 30 votes from 2004 to 2013. The grey zone at the bottom of the figure shows the share of permanent voters, and the grey zone at the top the share of permanent abstainers. While turnout rate at the first ballot under consideration was unusually high (60%), the share of permanent voters then falls abruptly – to 35% after three votes and to less than 20% after ten votes. The share of permanent voters decreases further with the inclusion of additional votes, albeit at a lower pace. The share of citizens who never vote shows a similar downward trend. It falls below 20% after five votes, below 10% after 20 votes, and then continues to decrease imperceptibly. In fact, we see that both curves have an asymptotic character, which means that the inclusion of additional votes would hardly further reduce the share of permanent voters or of permanent abstainers.

Seen from the perspective of “cumulative participation” (Serdült 2013), the share of permanent abstainers barely reaches 10%. This is an important result, which qualifies the conventional view of Switzerland as a country with a very low turnout. While abstention in single federal ballots usually exceeds 50%, official turnout data shows that less than every tenth citizen always abstains and completely excludes him- or herself from direct democratic votes. More generally, according to our longitudinal analysis the two groups of permanent abstainers and permanent voters constitute a tiny share of the electorate (less than 20%).

Table 1 provides a finer-grained view of cumulative participation. It reports the share of citizens who participated in none, one, two, . . . , or ten votes out of the ten votes from 2010 to 2013. These are the ten votes on which the analysis of the determinants of selective voters will be based.⁹

From 2010 to 2013, citizens have participated in almost five direct democratic votes out of ten, on average. The share of citizens who did not take part in any vote amounts to

⁹ We calculated the same frequencies for two other sets of ten votes – one at the beginning of the time period covered by our data (1996–1999) and one in the middle (2003–2006) – and found very similar results.

Table 1: Frequency of participation in ten successive federal direct democratic votes (in %)

	2010–13	cumulative
0 vote	20.2	20.2
1	8.6	28.8
2	6.6	35.4
3	5.9	41.3
4	5.7	46.9
5	5.7	52.6
6	6.0	58.6
7	6.8	65.4
8	7.9	73.3
9	10.8	84.1
10 votes	15.9	100.0
Total	100.0	
mean	4.93	
N		195'936

Source of the data: SEV/OCSTAT, our calculations

20% and the share of citizens who participate in all ten votes amounts to 16%. Therefore, even if we focus on ten successive votes (rather than 30, as in Figure 1), the group of voters who neither always participates nor always abstains is by far the largest (64%).

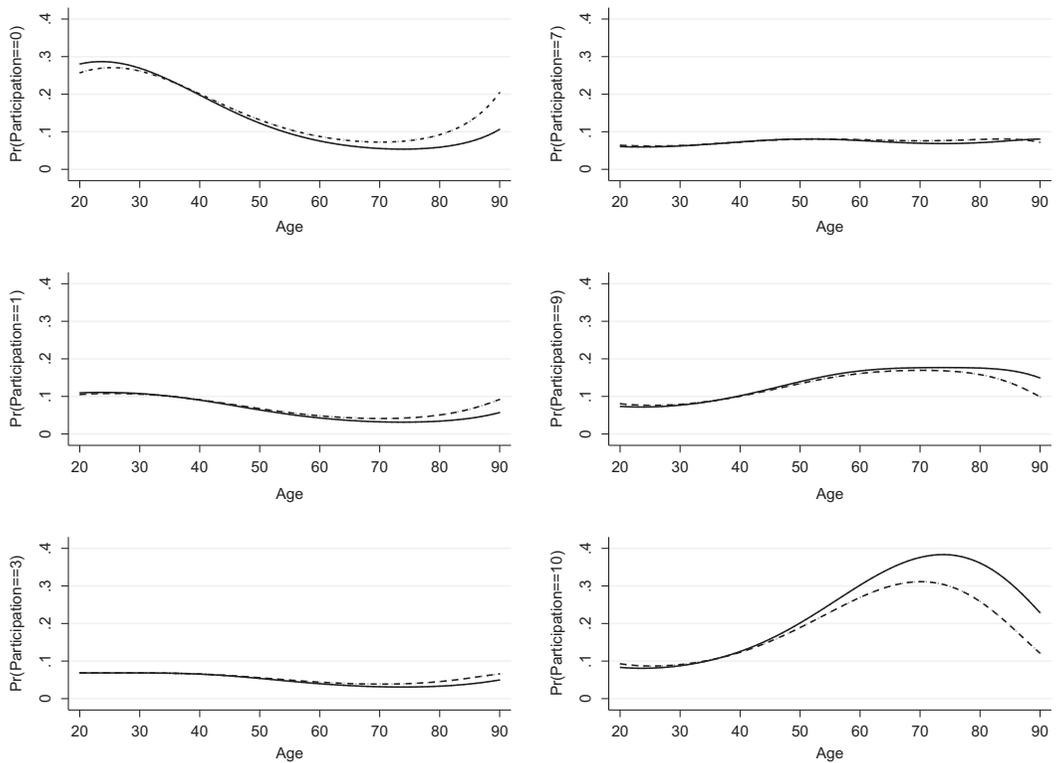
The socio-demographic characteristics of selective voters

To identify the socio-demographic and political characteristics of selective voters we analyze participation in the ten votes of the 2010–2013 period. For starters we look at the entire electorate and run an ordinal logit model including only socio-demographic variables (see table A1 in the appendix). Ordinal logit models are difficult to interpret based on coefficients, especially when the model includes interaction terms. Therefore, we turn directly to a graphical presentation of the results. Figure 2 shows the predicted probabilities of participation frequency as a function of age and sex. For space reasons we focus on a sub-set of outcomes, namely participation in zero, one, three, seven, nine and ten votes.¹⁰

A cursory look at the six graphs shows that age has a strong effect for those who never vote (top-left graph) and those who always vote (bottom-right graph). The probability to be a *permanent abstainer* decreases from about 30% for people aged 20–30 to less than 10% for people aged 60–75. It then increases among the oldest people, especially among women. The curve for *permanent voters* is a sort of reverse mirror to that of abstainers. The probability to be a permanent voter increases from 10% for people aged 20–35 years to about 30% for people aged 60. It increases further among men aged 70–75, whereas it stagnates and then strongly decreases among women older than 75. To account for the latter result, one may point to the fact that Swiss women received their voting right only in 1971, which still exerts adversarial effects among oldest cohorts (Kriesi 2005, Sciarini et al. 2001).

¹⁰ We do not show the confidence intervals, since they are close to 0.

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities to participate in zero, one or three votes out of ten (left hand-side), or in seven, nine or ten votes out of ten (right hand-side), as a function of age for men (full-line) and women (dashed-line), 2010–2013

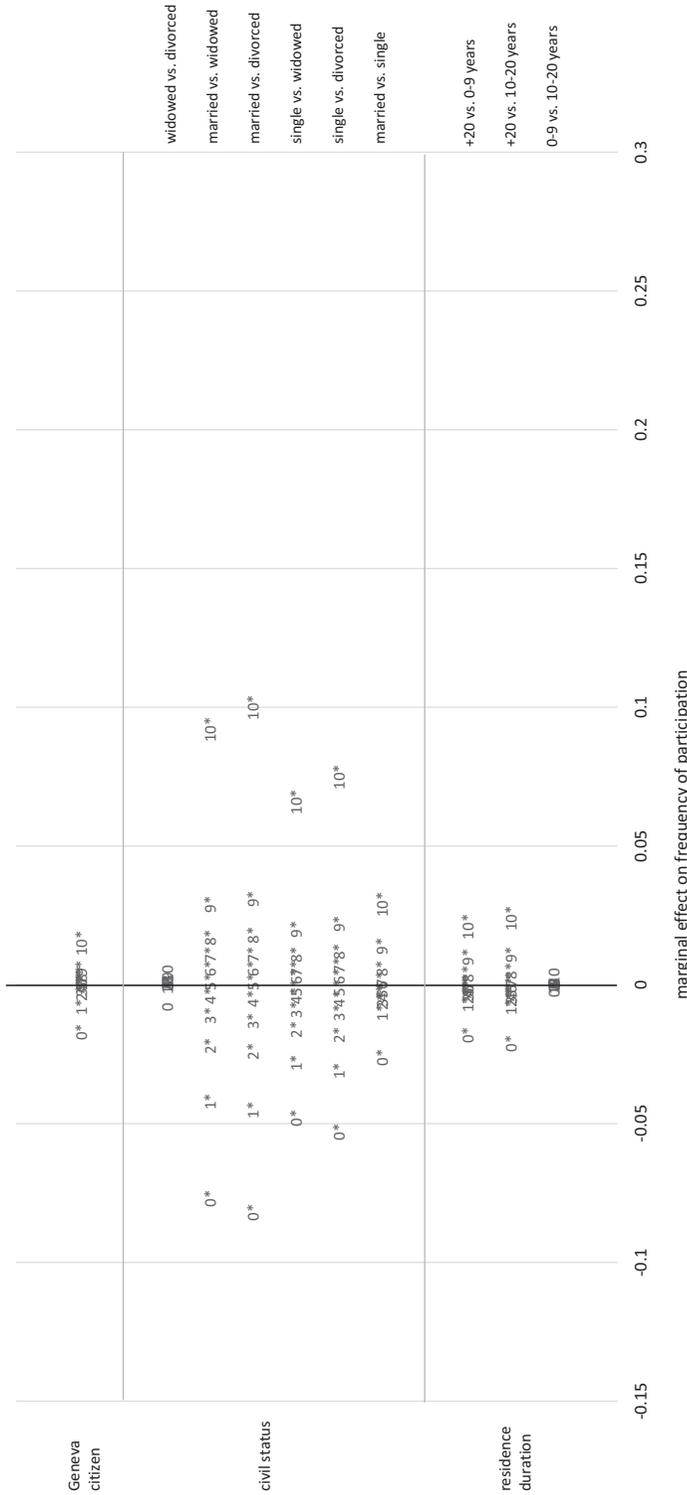


Note: The predicted probabilities appearing in figure 2 are calculated from table A1 for a “standard” citizen with the following characteristics: married, Geneva citizen and residence duration of more than 20 years.

As expected, the likelihood to participate *selectively* is far less influenced by age and sex. The graph regarding participation in one vote is very different from that of permanent abstainers that we have just discussed, and is fairly similar to the next graph showing the probabilities to participate in three votes; the probability to participate in one or three votes out of ten hardly varies with age or sex. The curve regarding participation in seven votes is even flatter. The only curve that shows some patterns is the one for participation in nine out of ten votes, but even here the differences across age do not exceed 10 percentage points. These differences are far smaller than those in the last graph for permanent voters.

Figure 3 shows the effects of the remaining socio-demographic variables. It reports the predicted probability to belong to one of the 11 categories of participation frequency for the different contrasts. Significant probabilities (on the 0.01 level) are marked with a star. As a reading example, the first row shows that the probability to be an abstainer (zero vote) is 1.7 percentage point lower among Geneva citizens than among non-Geneva citizens. Conversely, the probability to be a permanent voter (ten votes) is 1.5 percentage point higher among the former than among the latter. These differences are small, and

Figure 3: Predicted probability of participating in zero, one, two, ..., ten votes out of ten (socio-demographic factors)



Note: The reference category is a “standard” citizen with the following characteristics: woman, married, Geneva citizen, with residence duration of at least 20 years and mean age.

they are even nearly inexistent for the intermediary categories of voters participating in one to nine votes. The same holds with respect to residence duration. Only the two extreme categories of abstainers and permanent voters stand out. Compared to long-term residents, citizens who have lived in Geneva for less than ten years or for ten to 20 years have a lower probability to be an abstainer and a higher probability to be a permanent voter.

Permanent abstainers and permanent voters also display a distinct profile in terms of marital status. Singles and – even more so – separated/divorced and widowed people have a higher probability to be permanent abstainers and a lower probability to be permanent voters, than married people. Selective voters again appear as a rather heterogeneous group. For each contrast, the difference in probability to participate in one to nine votes out of ten is small.

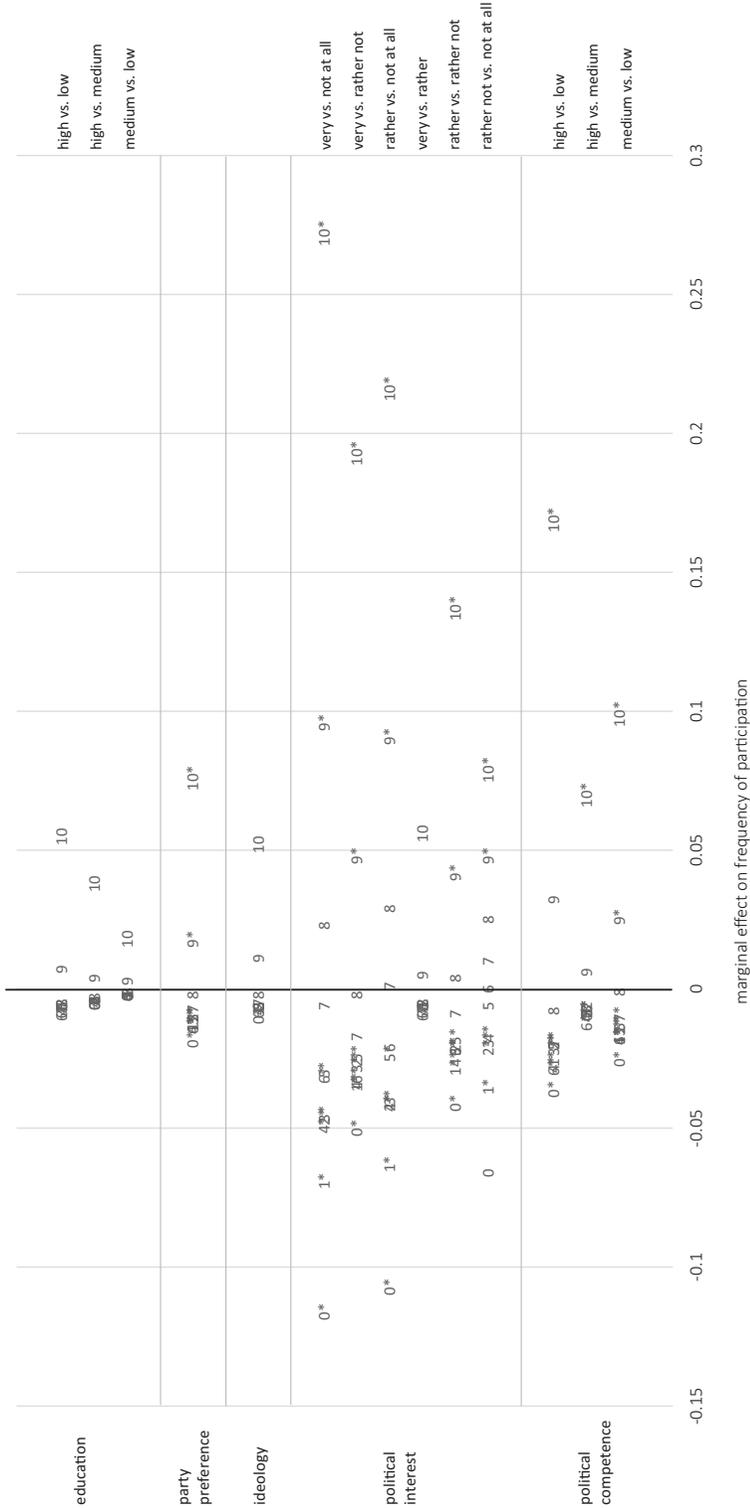
In sum, figures 2 and 3 provide two important insights into selective participation. First, as anticipated voters who participate selectively do not exhibit a distinct socio-demographic profile. Second, and relatedly, our results run counter to the threefold categorization used in earlier studies, which have typically considered as selective voters those voting in three to eight or nine votes out of ten. According to our analysis only the two extreme groups of permanent abstainers and permanent voters have a clear profile, whereas the nine categories of selective voters are highly heterogeneous. In fact, figure 3 shows that for each socio-demographic factor the distribution is concentrated around the median category of voters who participate in five votes out of ten. In addition, the distribution is also evenly balanced, meaning that voters who participate in less than five votes are located on the left hand-side of the graph, and voters who participate in more than five votes on the right hand-side.

We now turn to our survey data. We complement the analysis of the socio-demographic profile with another classic determinant of turnout, namely education. Additionally, we look at the effects of classic political determinants of turnout. As in the previous section, our dependent variable is the frequency of participation across the ten federal votes held between 2010 and 2013 according to our official turnout data. However, while our analysis so far was based on the entire Geneva electorate, we now focus on citizens who responded to either the 2011 or the 2012 survey (see table A2 in the appendix).¹¹

We again base our interpretation on the predicted probabilities reported in figure 4. Starting with education, we see that this variable hardly influences the frequency of participation. While the probability of participating in ten votes out of ten is higher among well-educated citizens than among citizens with middle or low education, the difference between these categories is small and not significant on the 0.01 level. Interestingly enough, low educated people are not overrepresented among permanent abstainers. More importantly, education does not make any difference among selective voters either. This result is in line with the findings of the previous sub-section and supports our hypothesis regarding the socio-demographic heterogeneity of the group of selective voters.

¹¹ In additional analyses not reported here, we replicated for this subsample the regression appearing in table A1, that is, a regression focusing on socio-demographic factors. The estimates are similar to the ones for the entire Geneva electorate. Due to the much smaller number of observations many coefficients are no longer significant, but the direction and magnitude of the effects remain the same, except with respect to residence duration.

Figure 4: Predicted probability of participating in zero, one, two, ..., ten votes out of ten (socio-demographic and political factors)



Note: The reference category is a “standard” citizen with the following characteristics: woman, married, Geneva citizen, with residence duration of at least 20 years and mean age, medium education, high political interest, medium-low political competence, with an ideological preference, and supporting a party.

The political characteristics of selective voters

Political variables have a substantial influence on the frequency of participation in direct democratic votes.¹² This influence is strongest for permanent voters. Feeling close to a party, having a political ideology, being politically competent and, even more so, being politically interested substantially increases the likelihood to belong to the group of permanent voters – and it reduces the likelihood to be a permanent abstainer, albeit in a less systematic and weaker way.

Political interest is the variable that has the most discriminating effect on participation frequency. While the differences in predicted probabilities are especially strong between very interested and not at all interested citizens, they are also substantial between very interested and rather not interested citizens, and between rather interested and not at all interested citizens. Political competence also plays a role. The probability to be a permanent voter is much higher among highly competent than among medium or – even more so – among low competent citizens. This result confirms the findings of earlier studies that incompetence prompts citizens to self-censure and to refrain from participating in direct democratic votes (Passy 1993, Kriesi 2005).

Turning to selective voters, the results regarding political factors confirm the heterogeneous character of these voters, who form a big cluster without clear political characteristics. However, while in figure 3 selective voters were evenly distributed on the positive (right) and negative (left) side of the graph, in figure 4 most categories of selective voters (i.e., those participating in one to seven or even eight votes) are located on the left hand-side of the graph. This means that voters participating in six, seven or even eight votes out of ten display political characteristics that lean more towards those of permanent abstainers, than towards those of permanent voters.

In short, the political profile of selective voters is closer to that of permanent abstainers than to that of permanent voters. Selective voters, as permanent abstainers, tend to be over-proportionally represented among uninterested, low competent, non-partisan and non-ideological people. These findings lead to a refinement of our hypothesis. On the one hand, our results confirm that selective voters form a heterogeneous group. On the other hand, they appear as an in-between group in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, but less so in terms of political characteristics. While the socio-demographic characteristics of selective voters do neither predispose them to vote nor abstain, their attitudinal characteristics would rather lead them to abstain.

The latter result again questions the relevance of the threefold categorization of voters used in earlier studies and suggests that the thresholds that should be used to separate selective voters from permanent voters or abstainers differ depending on the independent variable at stake.

Conclusion

The strong case for selective participation in the Swiss literature stands in stark contrast with the twofold categorization of voters and abstainers on which electoral research commonly relies. The high frequency of popular votes in a direct democratic context calls for the inclusion of a third category of selective voters, who decide anew at each vote

¹² Including the political variables in the model as we do in table A2 strongly reduces the impact of socio-demographic variables.

whether they participate or not. This article has offered an investigation of this common but under-researched form of participation. To that end, we have used a unique data-set combining official turnout data and survey data.

Our results show that selective participation in the Swiss direct democracy is a sizeable phenomenon. Strictly speaking, citizens who neither always abstain nor always participate constitute the bulk of the electorate: roughly two thirds if we look at ten successive direct democratic votes (over four years) and up to four fifths if we extend the number of ballots to 30 (over ten years). While Switzerland is known as a country with low turnout, political participation is higher than usually assumed, provided one takes into account a series of ballots rather than separate ballots. Seen from the perspective of “cumulative participation”, only a tiny share of the electorate completely excludes itself from political participation (one tenth if we consider 30 consecutive votes).

Furthermore, our results highlight the limitations of the classification used in earlier survey-based and registry-based studies. While these studies have applied more or less arbitrary thresholds to classify citizens in broader categories, our finer-grained analysis of the frequency of participation across ten votes does not show systematic differences between, say, voters who never participate and voters who participate in one out of ten votes. Instead, the thresholds that would lead to a meaningful categorization vary between the independent variables. The only category that repeatedly displays specific features is that of permanent voters. In that sense, our results call for a disaggregated analysis of the frequency of participation, one that refrains from classifying voters in broader categories.

Finally, linking official turnout data with survey data has enabled us to make another important step forward by highlighting the importance of political factors. Unlike permanent abstainers and permanent voters, selective voters form a heterogeneous group in terms of socio-demographic characteristics. Heterogeneity also dominates with respect to political attitudes. However, in terms of political interest, political competence, partisanship and ideology, selective voters display characteristics that lean towards those of abstainers.

This important finding is not necessarily bad news in terms of democratic theory. First, with respect to equality of participation our results are reassuring in the sense that in many respects people who never vote do not appear as a distinct category. According to our data, abstainers have fairly similar political characteristics as citizens who participate occasionally – and even as citizens who participate fairly frequently. The heterogeneous character of selective voters and the similarity of their political profile with that of permanent abstainers suggest that many citizens who are likely to abstain occasionally end up voting. To put it differently, political characteristics fostering abstention actually lead to complete exclusion from direct democratic votes to a lesser extent than suggested by studies evaluating the equality of participation based on a single ballot.

Second, while resource-sensitive factors influence the likelihood to be an abstainer, a selective voter or a permanent voter, this is not too much worrisome. On the one hand, factors that one can hardly influence such as age, marital status, residence duration or education have a small impact on participation frequency, and their impact vanishes when political factors are included. On the other hand, other factors such as political interest or competence have a strong influence on the frequency of participation. However, these are resources that one may attempt to foster, e.g. through civic education or communication activities.

Third, and relatedly, our results highlight the importance of the context in which a direct democratic vote takes place for the activation of selective voters – and, possibly, of

abstainers. As already mentioned, based on their political profile it is difficult to understand why selective voters sometimes participate. Context- and project-related factors presumably provide the missing link, by counter-balancing the “abstention-prone” political attitudes of selective voters. For example, we know from earlier studies that participation in direct democratic votes increases with the intensity of the referendum campaign (Kriesi 2005). In that sense the elites’ mobilization efforts may substantially contribute to activate selective voters. They may also have virtuous effects in the longer run, by raising citizens’ political competence (ibid.). Therefore, studying more closely the influence of factors such as the intrinsic importance of the ballot proposal, the closeness of the race or the intensity of referendum campaigns on the activation of selective voters appears as the natural step forward.

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Appendix

Table A1: Socio-demographic determinants of participation frequency (regression coefficients)

Age (centered)	0.058*** (0.001)
Age ²	−7.15e-05*** (1.86e-05)
Age ³	−3.09e-05*** (9.37e-07)
Woman	−0.075*** (0.011)
Woman*age	−0.007*** (0.001)
Woman*age ²	1.09e-04*** (2.40e-05)
Woman*age ³	−3.77e-06** (1.19e-06)
<i>Marital status (ref. married)</i>	
Singles	−0.205*** (0.012)
Separated/Divorced	−0.680*** (0.012)
Widowed	−0.633*** (0.020)
<i>Residence duration (ref. > 20 years)</i>	
10–20 years	−0.167*** (0.012)
<10 years	−0.143*** (0.016)
Non-Geneva citizen	−0.120*** (0.008)
Observations	195,936
Pseudo R ² (McFadden)	0.03

Standard errors in parentheses, ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05

Table A2: Socio-demographic and political determinants of participation frequency (regression coefficients)

Age (centered)	0.058*** (0.009)
Age ²	2.19e-04 (2.34e-04)
Age ³	-2.14e-05* (1.09e-05)
Woman	0.163 (0.133)
Woman*age	-0.002 (0.011)
Woman*age ²	-2.54e-04 (2.89e-04)
Woman*age ³	-1.29e-05 (1.44e-05)
<i>Marital status (ref. married)</i>	
Singles	0.056 (0.150)
Separated/divorced	-0.461*** (0.142)
Widowed	-0.330 (0.232)
<i>Residence duration (ref. > 20 years)</i>	
<10 years	0.381 (0.214)
10–20 years	-0.118 (0.144)
Non-Geneva citizen	-0.081 (0.097)
<i>Education (ref. medium)</i>	
Low	-0.098 (0.126)
High	0.192 (0.129)
Political Interest	0.904*** (0.113)
<i>Political competence (ref. medium)</i>	
Low	-0.537*** (0.131)
High	0.312** (0.109)
Ideology	0.256* (0.104)
Party preference	0.418*** (0.104)
Observations	1,454
Pseudo R ² (McFadden)	0.07

Standard errors in parentheses, ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05

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