Political Conflict and Direct Democracy:
Explaining Initiative Use 1920-2011[*]

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Abstract: *Political competition is the engine for representative democracy. Within the representation mechanics I look at the political space, the dimensionality of political conflict, and how parties try to affect the relative salience of different dimensions by using direct democratic institutions. The leading question is how we can explain initiative use. The paper asks how the costs and benefits of using initiatives affect parties when they decide whether to use this instrument or not. The major argument is that when party competition increases, we will see higher initiative frequencies because parties try to affect the saliency of specific issues to increase their electoral bases. I analyze annual submission rates, the content of proposed initiatives, and the changing share of partisan actors behind initiatives. The findings highlight that the consequences of direct democratic institutions go beyond changing policy outcomes. For the specific case at hand, Switzerland from 1920 to 2011, it is shown that despite numerous opposite claims, there has been no underlying change in strategy or equilibrium but just a slow evolution of underlying factors such as institutional requirements and partisan competition.*

1. Introduction

One of the visible changes in Swiss democratic practice over the last thirty years has been the increased use of direct democratic institutions. This paper focuses on *one* form of direct democratic institutions and asks how we can explain the frequency of initiatives. The main argument is that parties use the initiative to change the relative saliency of issues in pursuit of their electoral goals.

Direct democracy is an institution to which many effects have been ascribed and a large body of literature describes how direct democracy affects various outcomes. Prominent examples are the effect on political knowledge (e.g., Smith and Tolbert, 2004), the moderating effect on taxes and expenditures (e.g., Matsusaka, 2004), a potentially positive effect on policy congruence (Leemann and Wasserfallen, Forthcoming), and how direct democracy limits legislators from pursuing overly extreme goals (e.g., Neidhart, 1970; Gerber, 1996). Unlike these studies, the present paper does not focus on the relationship between direct democratic institutions and a specific policy outcome but

rather looks at how the presence of direct democracy may alter and change processes within the representative system. In doing so, it responds to a claim by Hug (2009) that there is little literature that "[h]as addressed the issue how referendums affect the representative governments that prevail in all democratic states around the world" (2009: 252). This paper describes how direct democratic institutions also affect what is debated. By doing so it does not focus on policy effects but rather shows the systemic consequences of direct democratic institutions.

To evaluate the argument I rely on the national occurrence of direct democratic initiatives in Switzerland since 1920. The Swiss case is exceptionally well suited, as it is one of the few cases where citizens and civil society groups have the right to collect signatures and propose changes on the national level. While many other entities know the initiative process (e.g. half of all US states and German Länder), the Swiss case combines a national party system with direct democracy on a national level. Since the argument hinges on the structure of the multidimensional political space and on partisan actors, it is crucial to have a case where direct democracy exists at the same level as that in which political space is created and maintained as well as where the party system constitutes itself. The initiative in Switzerland has experienced increased popularity and is being used more and more. By relying on the theoretical argument, this paper is capable of explaining the varying use.

Empirically, I show how increased partisan competition, via changes of the multidimensional policy space, fueled the use of the initiative during the last 100 years in Switzerland. This analysis deepens our understanding of party competition under direct democracy and is also capable of explaining the frequency of initiatives. Finally, while a considerable amount of the literature regards direct democratic institutions as beneficial for parties (e.g., Gruner, 1977; Scarrow, 1997), and another highlights potential deficiencies (e.g., Phillips, 2008), this contribution rather shows which parties may gain and which may lose and how debates and conflicts are changed in the presence of direct democracy.

The next section of the paper presents a univariate analysis looking at how the usage of the initiative has changed during the last century. Section 3 outlines the theoretical argument that increased party competition leads to an increased usage of the initiative. In section 4, I present an empirical test of the main argument and also supply empirical evidence for two theoretical implications. Section 5 provides an outlook, built on the results presented, and I argue that we will likely keep seeing rather higher levels of initiative usage.

2. A First Glimpse: Swiss Initiatives from 1920 to 2011

Since 1891, when the initiative was introduced, any Swiss citizen (before 1971 only men) has been allowed to propose a change to the constitution. If a sufficient number of signatures is collected, the proposed change is put to a vote. Up until 1977 it sufficed to collect 50,000 signatures, and thereafter 100,000 signatures. In principle, any group of citizens can propose a change to the constitution, and there are examples of successful use where no political party or organization supported the initial steps (e.g. the initiative proposed by parents and relatives of a young girl who was the victim of a sex crime, *Verwahrungsinitiative* 2004).

The use of the initiative at the national level in Switzerland has witnessed different periods of ebb and flow. Nowadays politicians and other public actors express the opinion on a somewhat regular basis that direct democratic institutions are being *over*-used. This is

not a unique or new phenomenon. In every annual report of the *Année Politique* from the 1970s there exists references to debates that the usage of initiatives and referendums was perceived to be too high and there were discussions on how to change that (APS, 1970, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977). There is a notion that the institution is being abused (e.g., Senti, 2013) and there are attempts, by politicians and lobbyists, to change the rules governing the direct democratic institutions.[1]

Before I present the theoretical argument and empirical analysis supporting it, I first want to turn attention to the usage of the initiative over the last 100 years. The purpose of this exercise is to take a close look at the actual usage and see if there are major changes over the last century. I will rely on a Bayesian change point model which enables the identification, in an objective way, of different periods of initiative usage (Park, 2010). The different periods are identified by estimating the probability that one period ends and a new period starts in any given year.

The Bayesian change point model allows us to describe the probability that the underlying data generating process changes based on the parameter estimates. In this case the model is based on a Poisson process, which is suitable for a count variable. The Bayesian change point model is an extension in which one can estimate, for example, a Poisson model with a structural break creating two different data generating processes, each for a different time period. Several different models can the be estimated that only differ in the number of structural breaks they incorporate (Gill, 2007). Finally, the model with the highest data fit will yield a disciplined and data-driven answer to the question of whether there are any structural breaks in the data and if so, when they most likely occurred.

Comparing the Bayes factors of each model allows adjudication between the different models. The Bayes factor is the ratio of probabilities that a specific model produced the observed data. Technical details for this analysis are provided in the appendix (see online appendix A1). For the five models (no change, one change, two changes, three changes, and four changes) the estimated results indicate that the two-break model fits the data best, closely followed by that with one structural break. The two-break model indicates that there is an early regime that lasts until the mid-1920s. After that there is an almost 50-year period for the second regime, and finally in the late 1960s there is the onset of a third regime lasting until 2011. While the first regime has on average 2.4 initiatives per year, there is a clear drop to about 0.8 for the second regime, and a steep increase to 3.2 in the third regime. The first period, up until 1925, is very short, and the remaining almost 90 years can be understood as two periods. Hence, we will focus on the big structural break in the late 1960s.

Figure 1 shows the frequency of initiatives and the estimation results from the model with two regime changes (or structural breaks). The upper panel shows the raw data as well as the superimposed *lowess* functions. Because the lowess function is somewhat sensitive to the exact smoothing parameter, I draw thin lines for a wide range of smoothing parameters (Cleveland, 1979). The lower panel shows transition probabilities indicating the two structural breaks in the 1920s and the late 1960s. The first and second regime are not very different, which coincides with the results from the model comparison (the one-break model without the first break is almost as good as this two-break model) as well as the average number of submitted initiatives. The two structural breaks coincide with larger political phases, such as the post-WWI period, when many fundamental

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[1] More than 20% of the members of the lower house (*Nationalrat*) have demanded that the government evaluates measures to limit the number of initiatives (Friedli, 2013).

Figure 1.: Change Point Model: National Initiatives 1920-2011
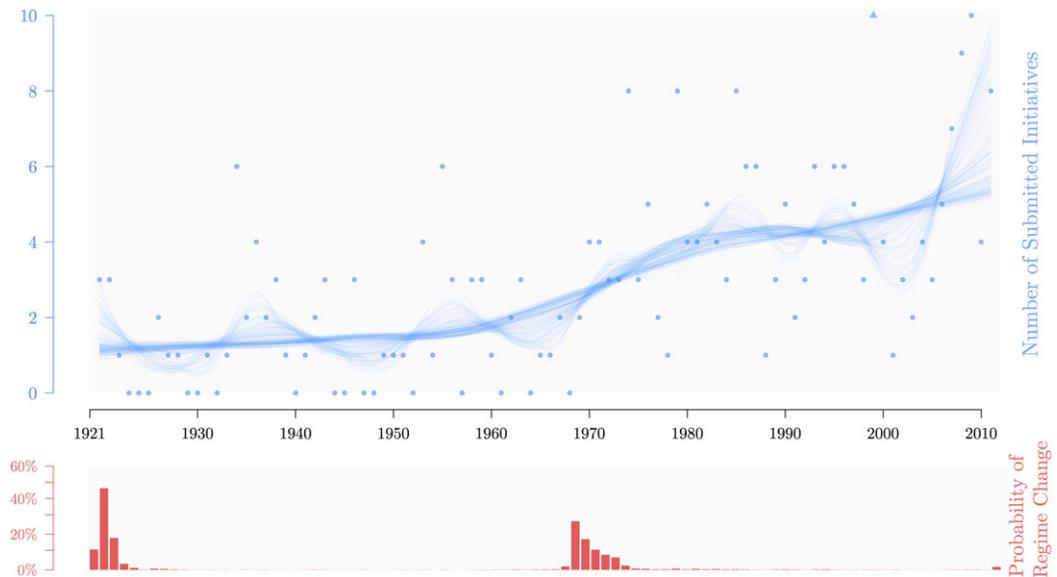
Notes: The dots in the top panel show the number of initiatives submitted in a given year. The various lines show different locally weighted polynomial regression lines. The lower panel shows the probability of a regime transition in a given year. Data is based on all submitted initiatives.

institutional changes were implemented.[2] The second structural break around 1970 coincides with a number of different processes. Kriesi et al. (2006), for example, mention five different changes: secularization, value change, increased education, increased wealth, and sectoral change which fundamentally affect and alter the political conflict. From a macro-historical perspective these structural breaks are clear and explicable.

   The initiative is used regularly up to 1970, at which point there is a clear shift and parties start using it to catch "political attention" ("*politische Aufmerksamkeit*"; Senti, 2013). Contrary to this result, I will argue in the remainder of the paper that there was not a sudden shift of strategies or a breakdown in cooperation that led actors to pursue different strategies leading to a new equilibrium. I argue that there was an increase in the use of initiatives that occured gradually and was predictable. Rather than actors changing their strategies, I show how the circumstances changed and eventually as a consequence there was an increase in initiative use. The next section lays out the theoretical argument of this paper.

3. Dimensionality of Politics - Politics of Dimensionality

The idea of describing political conflict with reference to a spatial model is almost as old as democratic thought. Possibly the earliest reference to a spatial model of political competition is found in works from Aristotle assuming that the worldviews of citizens can be aligned along one dimension, and "[t]his dimension is wealth or class" (Hinich and Munger, 1997, 22). A frequent description of the political space in Western Europe is that

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[2] In 1919 Switzerland used for the first time a system of proportional representation to elect the lower house.

it can be described by two dimensions: the first accounts for the distributional conflict, and the second represents cultural issues (Kriesi et al., 2008; Marks et al., 2006).[3] The precise meaning of the second dimension varies and has been described as the conflict between materialistic and post-materialistic values (Ingelhart, 1977), the tension between authoritarian and libertarian positions (Kitschelt, 1994), and the conflict between green-alternative-libertarian and traditional-authoritarian-nationalist positions (Marks et al., 2006).

The structure of the political space can be altered over time as well as the content of the second dimension. Bornschier (2015) shows convincingly how for Switzerland the meaning of the second dimension changes over time. While originally the second dimension mostly mirrored the religious divide, it transformed and became more closely associated with the conflict between libertarian and traditional positions. At first it was the new Left that increased the second dimension's salience, but the reaction followed no later than in the 1990s from the Right and is closely linked to Switzerland's relationship with the European Union and immigration (Bornschier, 2015).

3.1. Political Parties and Political Dimensions

Political parties can be separated by positioning them along an axis representing the different meaningful positions that can be taken on an issue. The familiar left/right dimension carries a lot of meaning, and even without knowing a country, one immediately forms specific expectations when a party is labeled as left or right. A left-wing party is expected to be more in favor of economic redistribution and often also more universalistic than the right-win party. Hence, the left/right continuum is somewhat of a *super-issue* (Gabel and Huber, 2000). A more nuanced description may rely on a two-dimensional space with a *distributional* conflict (first dimension) and an additional axis that is partly independent from the first and is about *identity politics*, *environmental politics*, and *individual freedoms* (second dimension). Lachat (2009) provides an analysis that relies on a two-dimensional model but shows that citizens tend to be placed on a curve. One particular insight is that center-left voters hold mostly similar views on the cultural dimension but different views on redistributive questions. Center-right voters, on the other hand, hold similar points of view on economic questions, while they diverge on cultural questions. This creates different incentives for different parties regarding which issues to raise and how to affect the saliency of the two dimensions.

Where does this second dimension come from, and how do new issues enter the system? De Vries and Marks (2012) distinguish two different general approaches; the sociological and the strategic approach. Sociological explanations assume that dimensions exist independent of parties and that they are rather *forced* on the parties. The strategic viewpoint, on the other hand, tends to think of parties *forcing* new issue and dimensions into the political system. One way to distinguish these two different conceptions of the emergence of new dimensions is that if one models parties and their actions on the sociological perspective, new dimensions emerge exogenously, while for the strategic account the dimension is a consequence of intentional action. Both accounts agree that political parties may compete over more than one dimension, but they differ on how these dimensions enter into existence.

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[3] Note that Bakker et al. (2012) find three distinct dimensions, where questions pertaining to the European Union constitute a distinct dimension.

In the previously mentioned work by Kriesi et al. (2008), it is globalization that causes the underlying economic and sociological structure to change. A consequence of this change is the emergence of new issues that may be folded into the second dimension. This creates incentives for parties to campaign on new issues, and in this way the new issue enters into the political debate. The social choice literature provides the concept of *heresthetics* which accounts for the strategic manipulation of the dimensions (Riker, 1990). Political actors are assumed to emphasize a specific issue or dimension if they expect to be more competitive on that dimension. An established party that has an unfavorable position on a new issue will try to protect the current structure and can either remain unclear about its position or try to prevent the new issue from arising and becoming aligned with the second dimension. The former strategy, taking an unclear position, is sometimes referred to as *position blurring* (Rovny, 2012). Newer parties in particular may be interested in raising and introducing a new issue. The faith of newer groups in representative systems hinges on the response of established groups (Hug, 2001; Meguid, 2005). But if direct democratic institutions are available, established parties are taken the option of dismissing an issue entirely. This is one way by which direct democracy may alter contestation.

3.2. Direct Democracy and the Dimensionality of Politics

Initiatives provide political actors with a strong instrument to affect the public debate. Any group, capable of collecting a sufficient number of signatures, can force a plebiscite on a constitutional amendment. This gives groups, especially smaller and newer groups, a disproportionally strong influence to introduce new topics to public political debate. Established groups, on the other hand, can rely on initiatives to affect the relative saliency of a dimension. It has long been recognized that the initiative offers unique opportunities to political actors (parties or associations) to introduce a new issue into the political arena and/or to claim topic leadership (see e.g. Gruner, 1978). Parties can use the initiative to alter the political debate in their favor in general, and this is not restricted to smaller or newer parties.

The initiative allows a party to distinguish itself from competitors. The initiative is uniquely well-suited, as the proposer can freely choose the topic to be proposed. This allows parties to select issues on which their own electorate is fairly homogenous but the electorate of competitors is split (Budge et al., 1987; Smith and Tolbert, 2004). Further, by deciding how extreme a proposal is, the party can construct an ideal conflict. Choosing *wedge issues* will force the competitor to take a position that comes with an electoral cost. Another potential incentive is that an actor can change the salience of issues and emphasize policy areas on which the actor expects to be judged as more competent than the other competing parties (Nicholson, 2005). It might be a prime example of *heresthetics* and corresponds nicely to the description by Riker (1990) that "Heresthetics has to do with changing the space or constraints on the voters in such a way that they are encouraged, even driven, to move themselves to the advantage of the heresthetician" (1990: 47). Following the description of voter positions in the late 1990s and 2000s by Lachat (2009) and Leimgruber et al. (2010) – that center-left voters vary on the first dimension and that center-right voters vary on the second – expectations about party competition can be formulated. Parties tapping into the center-left voter base will differentiate each other on economic issues. We would expect to see, for example, Social Democrats proposing initiatives which touch on the redistributive dimension to win over

left-leaning voters of the center parties. Similarly, we would expect that parties competing over center-right voters will differentiate each other on the second dimension. The Swiss People's Party regularly launches initiatives on immigration issues and questions pertaining to the relationship with Europe. By doing so, the Swiss People's Party has successfully attracted former liberal and conservative voters that take a more conservative stance on these issues.[4] This serves to illustrate that parties can strategically use initiatives to affect salience and attract voters from other parties.

A direct implication of this is that the initiative may be beneficial to the proposer even when there is eventually no change in policy. One problem for formal theories of the initiative is that they struggle to explain why one observes initiatives even when there is little to no hope that the measure would achieve popular approval.[5] After all, the costly action would only be beneficial if the policy were eventually changed. But taking into account that proposers might use the initiative not to affect policy directly but rather to change public discourse and campaign for the upcoming elections provides an argument that rests on the assumption that the costs of using the initiative – understood as net gain/ loss apart from the actual policy – might also be negative and hence the campaign itself the goal. Simply put, political parties may use the initiative not because they expect to change policy outcomes directly (i.e. the initiative reaches a popular majority and a majority in half the cantons and is hence passed) but as a means to take a political position in a very visible way and to campaign.

3.3. Explaining Initiative Frequency

Initiative frequency cannot be explained solely by partisan behavior. But I argue here that a large part of the variation in initiative usage can be explained by focusing on the incentives faced by parties. Parties use initiatives strategically. When using an initiative promises more benefits, a party becomes more likely to use the initiative. When the costs of using an initiative are lower, parties would rather rely on this instrument.

Benefits are higher when economic and sociological changes create new potential dimensions of political conflict. There will be political actors who benefit from increasing the salience of these new dimensions of conflict. Direct democratic institutions allow parties to circumvent the classic law-making process and present a measure directly to the people via the ballot, thereby attracting voters from other parties and redirecting attention to these newer issues. This will provide more electoral gains when the voter-party relationship is out of equilibrium, e.g. when voters agree with their preferred party on one dimension but not necessarily on the other.

New issues or rapidly changing issue salience can erode an equilibrium and lead to heightened party competition. Bartolini (1999, 2000) defines four distinct dimensions of political competition, and the argument at hand is most closely related to what he termed "availability" and "vulnerability". Availability requires that voters actually will switch their vote or party attachment. Vulnerability, on the other hand, focuses on the incumbents actually being threatened. Changing issue salience or new emerging issues

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[4] In other policy areas, the Swiss People's Party sought legislative coalitions to change policies rather than opting for a direct democratic campaign (Afonso and Papadopoulos, 2015).

[5] Since 1891 only 19 out of 182 initiatives have been accepted. Sometimes the government pitches a counter-proposal against the citizen's proposal. Taking this into account there are still less than one in four attempts where policy outcomes are changed successfully (see also Rohner, 2012).

impact on both these dimensions – making voters more likely to switch and also potentially hurting parties that have a base that is split on these new questions.

Following the above argument, two predictions can be derived. First, the increase in political competition among parties should lead to an increased frequency of initiatives. Parties will try to increase salience by using the initiative on issues that benefit them. The second implication pertains to the content of the proposed initiatives. If the competition is driving initiative usage, we expect to see many initiatives being submitted that pertain to the second dimension because its meaning is in flux, and parties will try to emphasize issues as they arise to benefit from altered content of the second dimension.

A final benefit for parties is found in connecting the electoral campaign with the process of signature collection. This allows parties to mobilize its base for a cause and also to signal to voters that the party is actively trying to correct a perceived wrong. If partisan calculation can explain initiative frequency, we should see more initiatives being submitted closer to elections.

Initiatives are more likely when the cost of launching them is lower. The costs to launch an initiative are the resources needed to collect the necessary signatures to overcome the threshold (Hug, 2004). Switzerland knows an absolute threshold (50,000 until 1977 and 100,000 thereafter), but the size of the voting-eligible population has changed dramatically over time. A larger population means potentially more people collecting signatures and more people to collect them from. The share of required signatures of the total eligible population is a standard measure of how easy or hard the access to direct democratic institutions is (Stutzer, 1999). Eder et al. (2009) find in a cross-sectional design for German Länder a clear relationship between signature requirements and usage. For U.S. states, (Matsusaka, 1995, p.592) has shown the relationship between signature requirements and number of initiatives. Barankay et al. (2003) present mixed results depending on the exact model specification and institution they look at. I will return to the question whether signature requirements and changes thereof could affect the number of submitted initiatives in subsection 5.1.

To sum up, the consequences of increased partisan competition is that we see the frequency of initiatives increase. The initiative has given marginalized groups a potential entry into the political debate. Social movements have used the initiative as well as newer parties to walk onto the political stage (Kriesi, 1998). But the above argument lays out why also established parties have an incentive to use this institution. If the argument holds, we should observe that most of these initiatives pertain to issues of the substantively fluid second dimension.

4. Empirical Assessment

This section presents three different analyses. First, I present a regression-based model which allows me to illustrate the explanatory strength of different factors that contribute to initiative frequency. I show that partisan competition, institutional requirements, and proximity to the next election are powerful predictors of initiative frequency. These results are not strictly causal but only correlational in nature. To further strengthen the empirical case for the argument, I test two implications of the main theoretical claim. If parties exploit the emergence of new issues to submit initiatives, we should see that they pertain to these new issues. We should also see that the share of second-dimension initiatives increases with the post-material wave toward the end of the 1960s. The second implication is that a large share

of initiatives should be of partisan origin rather than being submitted by civil society groups. Again, politicians should be especially dominant from the end of the 1960s on.

My strategy is as follows: I first show that partisan competition drives initiative usage. After establishing correlational association, I show that two implications of the argument are empirically supported. First, the majority of initiatives submitted in the boom period touch on issues pertaining to the second dimension. Second, the increase in initiative usage can be mostly attributed to politicians and political parties rather than an increased involvement of civil society groups. Taken all together, this section provides empirical support for the argument.

The analysis in this section is based on all initiatives submitted between 1920 and 2011. The starting point, 1920, is given by a constraint on the measure of electoral competition – only after the change of the electoral system to proportional representation can we compare all years on that variable. The dataset ends in 2011, ensuring that we can distinguish between initiatives that were eventually voted on and those that have been pulled back. The dataset covers 274 initiatives, of which 176 were put up for a vote – the basis of the data is a comprehensive collection by the Année Politique Suisse (APS, 2013).[6] The outcome variable is the number of national initiatives submitted per given year. The main variables used in this section are the degree of electoral competition, the signature requirements, and proximity to the next election. The next section presents the operationalization and analysis.

4.1. Analyzing Initiative Frequency

There are two *main* factors that can explain the frequency of initiatives on a national level. On the one hand, the institutional rules affect how costly it is for an actor to submit an initiative. First and foremost, the number of signatures required affects these costs. The second aspect is the degree or extent of partisan competition. The higher the competition, the more parties are inclined to try to win over supporters of another party or to try to reinforce the attachment of existing voters. Finally, I also use proximity to the next election to control for electoral cycle effects.

Electoral Competition
As political issues, which do not align well on the first dimension, enter the political arena, political opportunities emerge. Fundamental changes to the multidimensional structure of political competition create additional incentives for some parties or interest groups to submit initiatives. In times of heightened political competition, parties will struggle more over issue and dimension saliency. To measure political competition, I rely on electoral volatility in the previous election. The main operationalization is the sum of absolute changes on the cantonal level of party vote in the *last* national elections. The dataset covers the period immediately after the introduction of proportional representation.[7] When voters are less attached to parties and change more frequently, we will see higher

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[6] In addition, information on content and proposers was collected from the official records of the Federal Statistical Office and the Federal Chancellery.

[7] Covering the period prior to the introduction of proportional representation would lead to the problem of changes in party shares before and after not being comparable, and hence I restrict myself here to the period for which I can rely on a consistent measure of volatility.

levels of electoral volatility. Periods marked by higher volatility increase the potential gains for parties occupying new issues or positions.

A second variable related to electoral competition is the *proximity to next election*. Launching an initiative requires the party to collect signatures, which helps to mobilize its base as well to connect the signature collection with the electoral campaign. This business-cycle argument can be understood as an extension of the electoral competition argument above. Parties are more likely to submit initiatives leading up to elections. To take this into account, I will code election years as well as pre-election years and expect that more initiatives are submitted leading up to an election.

Institutional Requirements

Analyzing the use of initiatives also requires taking into account any potential institutional changes that occurred during the last one hundred years. The most relevant cost incurred by actors when submitting proposals is the requirement to gather a significant number of signatures (Matsusaka, 1995). Up until 1977 the constitution required 50,000 signatures for an initiative to be submitted. As a consequence of the introduction of women's suffrage (1971), the signature requirement was adjusted in 1977 such that now initiatives have to gather the support of 100,000 citizens. Nevertheless, the requirement is formulated as a fixed number of signatures rather than a constant share of the citizenry.[8] In 1891, right after the introduction of the initiative at the national level, the requirement meant obtaining signatures from 7.6% of all voting-eligible citizens. Some eighty years later, in 1977, this was almost three times less, as 50,000 signatures only amounted to roughly 2.5% (Degen, 2013). And even the change of formal institutions, the increase to 100,000 signatures, only raised the requirement back to the level it had been, six years earlier, right before women's suffrage was introduced. Nowadays 100,000 signatures is less than 2% of the voting-eligible population. This steady decrease is a central factor in how easy or hard it is to submit an initiative.

Table 1 shows the estimation results for five different negative binomial regression models.[9] The two main variables are *electoral competition* and *signature requirement*. Apart from these two variables, there are additional models with alternative specifications, including indicator variables for election years and pre-election years.

In all model specifications there is a negative and significant effect for the signature requirements. As the requirement is lower in terms of the percentage of the voting-eligible population, the number of submitted initiatives increases. Electoral competition is itself positively related to the frequency of initiatives. Finally, more initiatives are submitted in election years than three or four years before an election. But there is no significant difference for election and pre-election years.[10] These results are in line with the argument that partisan behavior can explain variation in initiative frequency.

To verify how robust the estimation results are, I provide an additional sets of models. The outcome variable, that is, the number of submitted initiatives, is replaced by the number of submitted initiatives that were eventually put on the ballot. The reason for doing so is that part of the initiatives are being submitted not with the intention to put

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[8] The state of California, for example, requires 5% of the total vote cast in the last gubernatorial election (see California Constitution, art. II, 8(b), http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/.const/.article_2).

[9] There is no correction for serially-correlated errors since a regression of Pearson residuals on lagged values reveals that they are not correlated.

[10] Based on Model 5, it is possible to test whether the two coefficients, $\hat{\beta}_{election}$ and $\hat{\beta}_{pre.election}$, are different. The difference is not significant (test statistic is 0.56 and the $p-$value is 0.58).

Table 1. : Competition and Signature Effects

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Electoral Competition	0.43***		0.21**	0.22**	0.22**
	(0.09)		(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Signature Requirements		−0.55***	−0.43***	−0.42***	−0.43***
		(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Election Year				0.29*	0.40**
				(0.16)	(0.17)
Pre-Election Year					0.29*
					(0.18)
Constant	1.00***	0.95***	0.94***	0.85***	0.74***
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.12)
McFadden R^2	0.20	0.30	0.34	0.36	0.38
N	92	92	92	92	92
LR test	26.79	46.83	56.20	62.12	65.41
p	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Outcome variable: Number of Initiatives submitted in year j. Standard errors in parentheses; *$p<0.1$, **$p<0.05$, ***$p<0.01$; Negative binomial model. All variables (except dummies) are standardized. "LR test" stands for likelihood ratio test.

them to a vote but rather to pressure the legislature. It is hard, based on these purely quantitative measures, to distinguish which initiatives served the purpose of strengthening a negotiation position in the parliament and which did not. Initiatives, which are used to strengthen a negotiation position, are usually submitted and once the legislature adopts a bill that is sufficiently closer to the desired outcome (closer than it would have been without a threat via an initiative), the proposers usually pull back the initiative and it is not brought to a vote.[11] The estimation results illustrate the the robustness of the findings (online appendix, A2, Table 3). The only substantive change to the results in Table 1 is that the estimate for pre-election years is not statistically significant anymore. Electoral competition, signature requirements, and election years remain significant.

The measure for electoral competition is based on cantonal electoral returns. I also constructed the same measure but based on the electoral returns at the national level. The estimation results again remain unchanged with the exception of the estimate for pre-election years, which is not statistically significant (see online appendix, A2). Finally, I also lagged the electoral competition variable even further. The electoral competition variable shows the volatility in the last election. I lag this variable further, by an additional electoral cycle, and use the results from the elections prior to the preceding national election. The results are in line with Table 1, and all four variables are statistically significant (see online appendix, A2 and A3). All these alternative specifications serve to show that the results do not depend on narrow operationalization decisions.

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[11] Article 73.1 of the Federal Act on Political Rights grants any committee proposing an initiative to withdraw said initiative up until the parliament fixes a voting date. One of the earlier examples of this mechanism is found in the initiative seeking to abolish any separate judiciary powers within the army. The government started to reform the law only months before the Social Democrats submitted 119,000 valid signatures, which they started to collect clearly before the reform was initiated (Sigg, 1978, p.122). But in this case the initiative was not pulled back, and this highlights that there is no easy way of adjudicating between motivations.

The more relevant concern is the direction of the causal arrow between party competition and direct democracy usage. After all, increased use of the initiative should also increase competition. Hence, the results in Table 1 could be biased due to endogeneity. One way to address this issue is to rely on even further lagged values of competition to predict future number of submitted initiatives (see above). It is potentially of interest to test any additional implications of the argument instead. While the first dimension (economic distribution) remained constant in substantive terms, the second changes over time (see Bornschier, 2015). If initiatives are often submitted to affect the relative salience of issues and for parties to signal topic leadership, we would expect to see most initiatives touching on the second dimension of the political space. In the next section I analyze the content of the initiatives.

4.2. Empirical Implications I: Content of Initiatives

The results so far show that initiatives become more frequent when the cost of launching them decreases and when politicians and political parties can use them to position themselves. Hence, initiatives are used more frequently in election years, and as political competition tightens, the number of initiatives goes up. The statistical results reported so far support all these statements. The argument also has two more qualitative implications that we can evaluate. One looming question is whether these results support the main argument of the paper with regard to dimensionality. After all, in the age of mass parties and constant campaigns, one might expect such a pattern irrespective of the dimensionality of conflict (Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Norris, 2000). To strengthen the argument that it is the second dimension that drives the competition and thereby the frequency of initiative, it is necessary to look at the substance of the ballot proposals. The new emerging issues are expected to pertain to identity, immigration policies, environmental questions, and post-material values.

What issues do the submitted initiatives touch on? Is there, as argued, a rise in second-dimension issues such as environmental issues and universal rights? To answer these questions, I analyze all initiatives which were subject to a vote between 1920 and 2011. Within this period of almost 100 years there were 176 votes. I coded each vote according to its content and the debate it inspired as a *first-dimension issue* (distributional conflict), a *second-dimension issue* (identity and moral conflict), or an *institutional question*.

Distributional conflicts (economic questions) are coded as first-dimension, while questions pertaining to environment, culture, and immigration are coded as second-dimension votes. One immediate question is whether it is possible to think of conflict dimensionality as something stable that has not changed over the last 100 years. While I do make this assumption here, I believe that it is not generally the case, but that it holds for the period from 1920 to 2011. The first claim is that the economic dimension was already the main line of conflict in 1920. While it is true that there were still some discussions that were a product of the *Kulturkampf*, the tension had mostly disappeared. After all, it was in 1920 that the Swiss government allowed the Vatican to reinstall the apostolic nunciature (Jost, 2006, p.759). In 1919 the largest strike in Swiss history, the *Landesstreik*, pitched young army recruits vis-à-vis workers in a number of cities (Maissen, 2010). The time between 1920 and 1930 was marked by the highest frequency of strike in Swiss history.[12] Initiatives that touched

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[12] Strike data is based on BfS (http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/03/05/blank/data/00.html) as well as Ritzmann (1996), see also http://www.fsw.uzh.ch/histstat/main.php.

on moral issues or were based on clashing identities, such as the role of Switzerland in Europe (see also Jenni, 2015), are coded as second-dimension or cultural issues.

To code the initiatives, I started with the encyclopedic contribution of Linder et al. (2010) which provides a summary of the emergence, campaign, and outcome of the vote. In addition to other sources that were relevant for one or two votes, the book by Sigg (1978) provided detailed information on many votes from the first half. One problem that occurred was that there were votes that sought to change the institutional order. While some were broad changes such as the introduction of proportional representation and served not a specific policy goal but rather a general political goal, there are also other questions. A vibrant issue seems to be the construction of hydroelectric power stations. An initiative in 1956 attempted to make it mandatory for the national parliament to explicitly give permission for new hydroelectric projects rather than the executive. While this was an institutional change, it was made with the pure intention of making it harder to build hydroelectric power stations, and thus it is coded as an environmental issue (second dimension). When in doubt, I also looked at who was submitting initiatives. An example of how this helped to categorize an initiative is from 1993, when the people voted on whether a national holiday should be an official, and hence paid, holiday. This could be an economic issue, as it gives all employees an additional day of paid vacation, or a second-dimension question. Given that it was proposed by a small right-wing party (*Schweizer Demokraten*), it is coded as second dimension.

Figure 2 shows the number of submitted initiatives for each year for first- and second-dimension issues. The dots in the background show the actual counts, and the lines present different *lowess* functions. It is striking how constant the number of economic initiatives is; on average there is slightly less than one per year. The second dimension – comprising mostly environmental, immigration, and foreign policy questions – is less important up until the 1960/1970s but thereafter accounts for more than half of all submitted initiatives.[13] This plot strongly supports the main argument that a large part of the observed increase in initiatives is due to second-dimension issues.

After showing that electoral competition is strongly and significantly related to the number of initiatives submitted and also that there is a large increase of second-dimension politics for exactly the period in which there is a large increase of initiatives overall, there is one question remaining. Is it the change of dimensionality that increases electoral competition and opens avenues for political parties to introduce wedge issues? Alternatively, it could also be that electoral volatility coincidentally increases parallel to the emergence of the second dimension. That is to say that the relationship between electoral competition and initiative frequency could be spurious. But if the argument of this paper holds, one should see that party involvement in initiatives increases - the initiative frequency surges because politicians strategically use the initiative to exploit new opportunities given by the fundamental changes unfolding after the post-materialist revolution. To shed light on these aspects the next subsection looks at who has submitted these initiatives.

4.3. Empirical Implications II: Origin of Initiatives

A second implication is that we should be able to observe that a large portion of the initiatives are actually submitted by politicians and political parties rather than civil

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[13] In Figure 3 of the online appendix the same plot is shown with the addition of institutional questions. After WWII almost no broad institutional questions were brought up in initiatives anymore.

Figure 2.: Primary and Secondary Conflict in National Initiatives 1920-2011
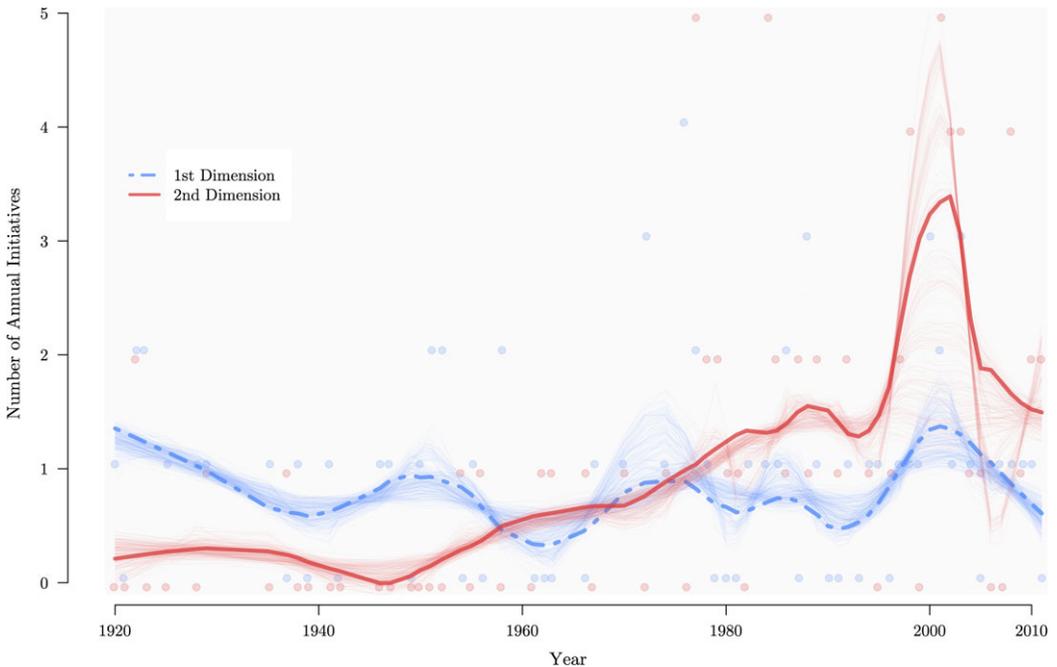
Notes: Development over time of 1st and 2nd dimension issues submitted as initiatives. Thin lines represent alternative weighted polynomial regression lines. Dots in the background show actual counts. The plot is based on all initiatives submitted between 1920 and 2011 that were eventually voted on.

society groups and local ad hoc issue committees. The quantitative evidence so far has shown that when political competition increases, the number of initiatives submitted grows. If the causal mechanism is competition driving parties to increasingly rely on the initiative to engage in a constant campaign, we should expect to see that over time the parties start using the initiative much more frequently and that politicians are submitting them rather than civil society groups.

I examined every initiative that was submitted and voted on and coded its origin. An initiative could either emerge from a civil society group (usually an ad hoc or non-partisan issue group) or be submitted by politicians. Unlike Serdült and Welp (2012), who distinguish between opposition and government parties, I have only identified whether an initiative was launched by a national politician or a group of national politicians. The coding was created based on the entries in Linder et al. (2010) and Sigg (1978). Whenever there was no clear political origin, the federal report (Bundesblatt) was consulted, which often revealed the names of all members of the committee who submitted the initiative.[14] Initiatives launched by committees that had national politicians as members were counted as having a political origin. If the initiative was launched by local politicians who were members of neither the national parliament nor the national party elite, it was coded as having a civil society origin.[15] As an additional quality control, I also compared my

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[14] See online appendix (A7) for an example of such an entry.

[15] A list of members of the lower chamber of Switzerland can be found here: http://www.parlament.ch/ d/suche/seiten/ratsmitglieder.aspx?export=excel.

Figure 3.: Political Origin vs. Civil Society
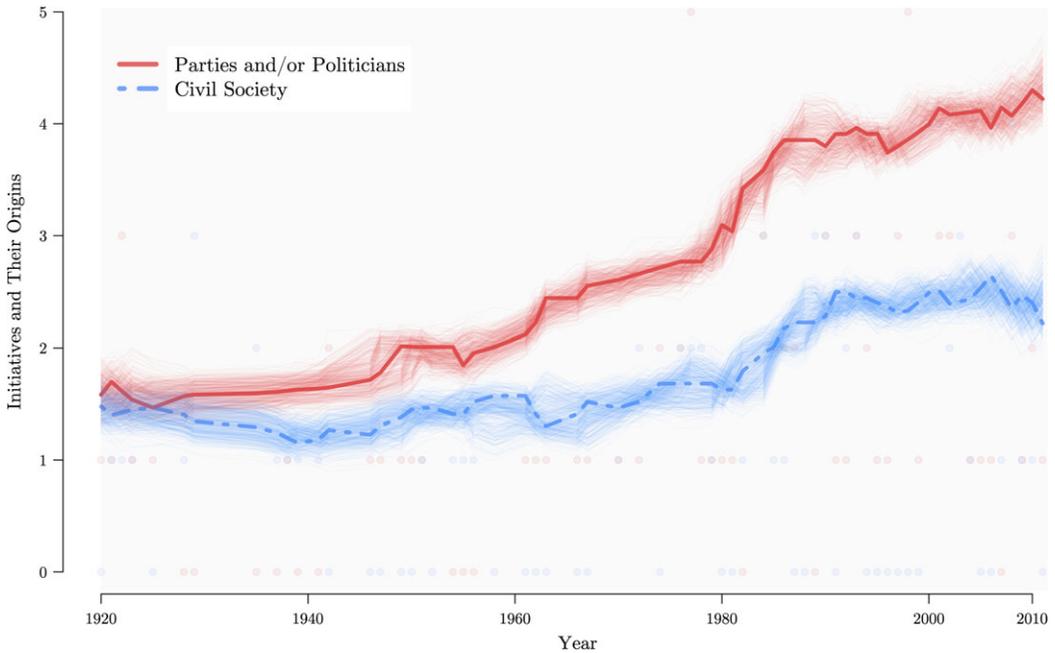
Notes: Illustration of variation over time in number of initiatives originating from civil society groups and initiatives with a political origin. Thin lines represent alternative weighted polynomial regression lines. Plot is based on all initiatives submitted between 1920 and 2011 that were eventually voted on.

codings to those presented in Serdült and Welp (2012) and Rohner (2012). The coding is mostly identical with few differences. Some differences emerge because Serdült and Welp (2012) rely on a more legalistic or formal definition of political origin. These two authors, for example, code an initiative from the communication workers' union as being a civil society project despite the fact that more than two-thirds of the committee that drafted the initiative and submitted it are national legislators.[16] Another motivation for this coding is that even if a formally nonpartisan group, e.g. a union, launches an initiative, this might very well be with the implicit backing of a party or factions of a party. It becomes possible to separate originators who might have electoral goals from those who have none. This coding also allows us to see how many initiatives can be counted as bottom-up and how many are rather categorized as top-down.

The argument states that the increased competition leads parties and politicians to increasingly use the initiative to further their electoral goals. So far it has been shown that as political competition increases, so does the number of initiatives. Yet another derivation of the argument implies that we should see that a large share of the initiatives were launched by politicians.

Figure 3 shows the moving average of annually submitted initiatives by civil society groups and politicians. The red line shows the average number of initiatives submitted by

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[16] The *Postal services for all* initiative had twelve active or former members of parliament in the committee (more than two thirds). Unlike Serdült and Welp (2012) I code this initiative as having a political origin.

politicians or political parties, while the blue line represents civil society groups. The number of initiatives that originate from the broader public slightly increases and contributes somewhat to the overall surge in initiatives. But the largest driver in the increased number of initiative submissions is found in political parties and politicians. There is a steady increase that accounts for most of the submitted initiatives. Almost twice as many initiatives are being submitted by politicians and political parties. This is in line with the theoretical argument that as new issues emerge, parties and politicians will use direct democratic institutions to further their electoral goals.

4.4. Sudden Change or Steady Development?

At the outset, I showed that a univariate analysis of the initiative frequency identifies a first break in the early 1920s and a clear break around 1970. One way of thinking about this break is that there is some form of external shock, e.g. a fundamental change in values that may affect the frequency of initiatives. But after establishing a model that relies on electoral competition and signature requirements as explanatory variables, we can reevaluate this structural break. Do we still find a basic shift of the data generating process when we use a model with explanatory variables? The short answer is no. Once we use the explanatory variables in a model, we do not find any structural breaks (see online appendix, A4).

   The implication of this finding is that the frequency of initiatives develops in line with electoral competition and signature requirements. While a first look at the data seems to show a break - and many contemporary observers noted that break - it is wrong to assume that something fundamental changed. Rather, the signature requirements and the political competition changed and led in consequence to more initiatives. Hence, the increase of initiative usage did not occur suddenly as a qualitative change in the way parties behave but rather steadily in response to the changing costs and incentives of using the institution. The changing use of the initiative then follows nicely the overarching theme of this special issue about larger changes in the political system (see, in particular, Wasserfallen, 2015; Traber, 2015; Bochsler and Bousbah, 2015; Bailer and Bütikofer, 2015).

4.5. Summarizing the Empirical Results

The results indicate that initiative usage did not suddenly change but rather that there was a gradual increase. This increase is partly due to its lowered cost which decreased further with the growth in voting-eligible population. The second factor is the incentive for parties to use the initiative to force wedge issues on the other parties. Hence, a strong predictor for the number of initiatives to be submitted is the degree of partisan competition: as competition increases, parties and politicians become more active and submit more initiatives. In the 1920s there was a higher usage than for the four decades thereafter, but that was also a time of intense political competition as the parliament had just been elected for the first time by proportional representation which led to severe changes in the partisan makeup. Neidhart has already claimed that the frequency of initiatives can be understood as the consequence of the political cycle (*politische Konjunktur*; Sigg, 1978, p.82).

   The results show that the frequency of initiatives is a consequence of the larger political landscape. As it becomes less costly to use initiatives, their frequency increases. Beyond

this somewhat mechanical factor there is also a second major factor driving the use of direct democracy. Political competition increases the stakes, and politicians as well as political parties will increasingly rely on initiatives as a means of constant campaigning.

5. Implications and Outlook

The previous sections provide the possibility to formulate some informed guesses on how the number of initiatives will change in the near future. The two main driving forces are partisan competition and signature requirements, whereas there is a significant but weak effect for election years. The signature requirement has received a lot of attention in recent debates and has even been the subject of a parliamentary motion. The next two sections provide some reflection on what each factor is likely to contribute and how this would affect the overall numbers of submitted initiatives.

5.1. Changing the Signature Requirement

While the empirical section in this paper shows a clear correlation, there is skepticism whether this effect actually exists and whether a change of the signature requirements would lead to fewer initiatives. An alternative approach is to exploit the signature variation in Swiss cantons and rely on a cross-sectional design. When doing so a clear pattern emerges (see online appendix for details). Regardless of the exact model specification – whether as linear regression, Poisson model, or negative binomial count model – the signature requirement is always negatively and significantly related to the number of initiatives. This is also good news for a large part of the academic literature that uses the signature rules as proxy for the costs of using the initiative (Stutzer, 1999).[17] Where a lower percentage of the eligible citizenry has to sign in order for an initiative to be put to a vote, we observe more initiatives.

To illustrate the size of the effect, we can look at the number of expected initiatives in 2011 while first using the actual signature requirement and then creating a prediction using the signature requirement as it was in 1920 (about 5.2% of the voting-eligible population). This is equivalent to asking what would happen if one required about 267,000 signatures for an initiative in 2011. In 2011, eight initiatives were submitted, and the model predicts 7.74 initiatives. Once we change the signature requirement to the hypothetical value, we estimate an expected value of 2.1 submitted initiatives. The substantive effect of the signature requirement is strong.

Two cautionary remarks are in order. First, the effect in the national data (about 1.75 initiatives per 1% signature requirement increase) over time is almost twice as large as that found in the cantonal data (about 0.95 initiatives per 1% signature requirement increase). A second point is that given the prevalence of partisan initiatives nowadays, there is no reason to expect parties not to adapt and spend more money on collecting signatures. It is important to note that the simple statistical model from Table 1 does not take into account the changing nature of proposers and hence limits its predictive abilities. Taken together, an increase in the signature requirement most likely lowers the number of initiatives, but to a lesser extent than suggested by the statistical model.

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[17] To be clear, the cost of using the *referendum* should not necessarily be related to the number of referendums we see. The reason for this is that in the strategic interaction between parliamentary majority and minority the costs are anticipated (see e.g. Hug, 2004). But with the *initiative* the strategic interaction is likely to unfold only after it has been launched, and hence the costs are not part of the strategic interaction.

5.2. Political Competition: Inherent Instability

What is the impact of political competition? To see this effect, we can make a prediction for 2011 and then repeat the prediction step but assume there are low electoral competition levels. Post-war Swiss elections were marked by stability, and we include the competition measure based on the elections in 1955. Again, the model prediction for 2011 with real values is 7.74 initiatives, and once we change the electoral competition to the lowest value in the sample, we find a predicted value of 3.2 initiatives. Electoral competition displays a clear and substantively significant effect.

But how likely is it that electoral competition would return to post-war values? Social choice theory actually points to the opposite – we should not expect this struggle over salience to change very quickly. In principle, the McKelvey chaos theorem shows that there is no policy outcome in a two-dimensional space that is a Condorcet winner (McKelvey, 1976). The struggle over relative dimensional salience is not the same but shares a common feature with the chaos theorem: Under most circumstances there will be an actor who has an incentive to change the relative saliency of the dimensions, and hence no stability can be expected.

As long as there is a party that gains from higher salience in one dimension while another prefers prefers higher salience in another dimension, no change is likely. But even if the political space fundamentally changed and could be described as a one-dimensional space, one should not expect a significant change in the number of submitted initiatives. The reason for this is that as long as parties have potential followers that overlap on a dimension, there is an incentive to propose wedge issues that put a party leadership on the *wrong* side of a debate. It is no coincidence that the populist right-wing party in Switzerland relied extensively on questions pertaining to the relationship with the EU and immigration - on both those topics their immediate competitors (the Conservatives and the Liberals) held positions that were not fully backed by their supporters.

As long as the political competition remains at current levels, one cannot expect any change. This competition is also not likely to change given the two-dimensional policy space since political entrepreneurs should always be able to find new issues that will lead to dealignment.

6. Conclusion

This paper asks how the frequency of initiatives can be explained. The late 1960s and 1970s mark a period for most Western countries during which fundamental changes in values and political attitudes took place. Such structural changes gave rise to political opportunities, and there were political actors who seized the moment. The initiative offered a very potent instrument to such actors by guaranteeing a public debate and press coverage.

In this sense, this institution increases contestation and democratizes the subjects that are up for debate (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). The empirical case I analyze is the use of initiatives at the national level in Switzerland since 1920. The initiative is being increasingly used, and at least since the 1970s there is an ongoing discussion on whether this instrument is being *overused*. I analyze annual submissions and the content of the launched initiatives and identify the actor or actors behind these projects. I show that the increase is due to two factors; first, the cost of launching an initiative has constantly

decreased and second, the party competition leads parties to try to increase the salience of different dimensions by way of using initiatives.

The implications of this is that not only direct democratic institutions complement representative systems in terms of citizen involvement but also that parties can strategically use these institutions. This is especially visible for times of change, as we find in the post-materialism wave of the 1970s. The presence of direct democratic institutions lowers the agenda control of dominant partisan actors and thereby changes the content of the political discussion and increases contestation. This paper shows that direct democratic institutions directly affect not only policy outcomes but also the issues that are subject to political discussions and conflicts.

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