6 Direct democracy and political participation from a cross-national perspective

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Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a worldwide increase in the number of referendums (Leduc 2003: 21). However, it would be premature to envisage this development as a move towards a more participatory democracy or as an increase in the quality of democracy in general. In most states where referendums were submitted to a vote on a national level, they were initiated by the political majority on issues and at a time politically opportune for that majority. The referendum thus served as a plebiscite (Moeckli 2003).

It is important to distinguish between two main types of procedures involving direct democracy: direct democracy by plebiscite and direct democracy by minority action.1 Strictly speaking, direct democracy refers only to the latter situation, where a minority of qualified voters or members of parliament can bring an issue before the electorate against the will of the political majority. This is what I call minority direct democracy. A further precondition is that putting an issue to referendum does not face excessively high hurdles. Only with low hurdles can direct democracy evolve into a routine procedure; where barriers are high, direct democracy remains an exceptional recourse. If a political majority holds a referendum on an issue that it could decide on its own, this constitutes a plebiscitary direct democracy.

On the basis of the strict standard stated above, only a few political systems worldwide qualify as minority direct democracies. Only Switzerland, Liechtenstein and about half the member states of the United States occupy the highest rung of this ladder, while Italy, Denmark and a few new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe qualify for the next-highest rung.2

If we examine the level of political participation in minority direct democracies, it becomes immediately apparent that participation is lowest where the opportunities for participation are greatest – in Switzerland and in the member states of the US. Do we have to conclude due to this observation that direct democracy is not conducive to greater participation, but, on the contrary, encourages abstention from political engagement? My argument is that this would be an oversimplified view of the matter. It is the contention of this analysis that, on balance, direct democracy has had a positive impact on the

References


electorate's involvement in political decisions and on the political system's responsiveness to the electorate. Voter turnout for specific referendums does not accurately gauge this impact. With respect to Switzerland and the US in particular, we must also keep in mind how frequently voters are asked to cast a ballot and how many issues are decided at the ballot box at all governmental levels. Furthermore we must take into account the anticipatory effects of direct democracy institutions as well as their side effects within the entire political decision-making process.

Structure and methodology

This analysis is structured in the following way: I will start out with hypotheses regarding the relationship between the form of government and political participation. I will then test these hypotheses in light of global data on voter participation. In a next step I will study in detail participation in referendums and elections in states with minority direct democracy and with plebiscitary direct democracy. I will also enter into a short discussion on the relationship between authoritarian political systems and political participation.

An interim finding is that more opportunities for participation do not lead to greater actual participation in the stage of decision-making. This finding calls for an explanation. I will elucidate the effects of minority direct democracy with the help of a model of the political decision-making process. I will investigate how the design of direct democracy affects political participation in the various stages of the political decision-making process (functions of direct democracy). I will also shed some light on the longer-range ramifications of direct democracy on the structure of the political system and demonstrate that the lower level of participation characterizing minority direct democracy at the decision-making stage is counterbalanced by a greater involvement of the electorate in the total decision-making process and by the political decision-makers' greater responsiveness to the electorate. Another signpost of greater voter involvement is the frequency with which voters are called to the ballot box and asked to decide specific issues at all governmental levels.

My approach will be empirical as well as theoretical. The only explanatory variable that is easily quantifiable is voter participation. It is easily demonstrated – from an examination of specific votes cast at the national level – that direct democracy does not lead to a higher participation in referendums and elections. In fact, the opposite is true. In the context of this study, on the other hand, we can give only theoretical support to the contention that, on balance, electoral participation and responsiveness to voter preferences are higher under minority direct democracy.

Participation in referendums and elections in a comparative perspective

Hypotheses

Under ideal-typical conditions we would expect that an increase in participation opportunities would induce a concomitant rise in electoral participation and that this participation would remain at a consistently high level as long as these opportunities remain available to citizens. We would anticipate that where the rights of direct democracy are added to the right to vote for officeholders, voter participation would be enhanced. Conversely, we would expect a somewhat lower participation in authoritarian systems, inasmuch as the results of (unfree) elections and referendums hardly impinge on the position and decisions of the ruling class. In Table 6.1 we use arrows to formulate these expectations as hypotheses and to demonstrate the results of testing these hypotheses with empirical data.

The conclusion of Table 6.1 is that empirical evidence does not confirm the hypotheses stated in it. Participation is not linked to the quality of democracy in free states. In free states and in states with minority direct democracy, voter participation declined in the last decades, while it rose in partially free and in unfree states.

According to data from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), voter participation – as defined by the ratio between voters and registered voters – remained within the 75 to 80 percent range.

Table 6.1 Regime type and electoral participation: hypotheses and empirical findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regime type</th>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Empirical findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Electoral participation (cross-section)</td>
<td>Trend (longitudinal section)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All states</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>→↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free states</td>
<td>→↑</td>
<td>→↑↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partly free states</td>
<td>→↑↑</td>
<td>↓↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not free states</td>
<td>↓↑</td>
<td>→↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>States with minority direct democracy</td>
<td>↑</td>
<td>→↑↑</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes

a See databank by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). Here electoral participation is defined as the ratio of voters to the "voting age population," that is, the resident foreign population is included. In my data I use "persons eligible to vote" as a standard, unless otherwise specified.
b Until 1989.
c After 1989.
e Under exceptional circumstances.
between 1945 and 1980 worldwide. Since then, voter participation has gradually declined to barely 70 percent.

Between 1945 and 1970, voter participation in 36 established democracies stayed consistently above 80 percent, but since that time it has declined to 72 percent. In all other states, participation prior to 1979 was barely above 70 percent but climbed to 80 percent by 1989. It has subsequently declined again to 70 percent. It can be generally stated that voter participation has declined since 1990 worldwide. Two explanatory factors can be cited for this decline. The first is that voter participation in Central and Eastern European states declined after their democratization in 1989. The second factor is the increase in the number of “electoral democracies” from 41 percent in 1988 to 61 percent in 2003 (117 states as an absolute number), partially because developmental aid was made contingent on political democracy. Paradoxically, participation in unfree states has gradually risen from 50 percent in the early 1970s to 65 percent at the end of the 1990s.5

**Voter participation and ballots cast in nine states with direct democracy, 1970 to 2000**

If one assumes that components of direct democracy enhance the quality of democracy by providing additional means to participate, one might be inclined to argue that participation would increase under direct democracy. This assumption will be put to a test in a comparative analysis which covers nine states. I will first examine variations in terms of the percentage of ballots cast over a period of 30 years, the number of times voters went to the polls and the number of referendums submitted. In a second step, these data will be analyzed in terms of voter participation.

California is included in this comparison, even though it does not constitute a sovereign state. However, with 22 million qualified voters, it is the largest political system in terms of population in which various instruments for direct democracy exist.

In the case of Switzerland and California, there seems to be a (negative) relationship between the number of times that votes are cast and voter participation (Table 6.2). It must be kept in mind that both political systems are formally organized, so that the national level is not the only one under consideration, and that voters go to the polls for additional elections and referendums at a lower governmental level. In the November 1988 general election, for instance, qualified voters in Berkeley (California) were asked to decide on 58 ballot items in all. Two years later, the number of items on the ballot had risen to 72 (Moeckli 1996a). In Switzerland, voters on average go to the polls five times a year and each time decide on a multitude of issues at the national, cantonal and community level. Additionally, in 85 percent of the 2,800 communities, annual participation in a citizens’ assembly on a community level has to be added. The Swiss went to the polls on 264 occasions between 1848 and 2004, with 514 measures on the ballot. Since 1970, they have gone to the polls 103 times and have had to decide on 295 measures (57 percent of the total since 1848). Direct democracy has increased markedly in intensity in the last few decades.6

Participation in the four French referendums varied strongly, depending on the issues at stake.7 Average voter participation is remarkably high in Italy – considering that Italians went to the polls 54 times. However, it must be kept in mind here that an abrogative referendum can be approved only if at least 50 percent of qualified voters cast their ballots. This quorum was not attained in the voting on 21 May 2000 (29.4 percent).8 Average participation was also high in the eight referendums in Denmark. Six of these referendums dealt with the issue of its relationship with the European Community, subsequently the European Union.9 Ireland provides for an automatic referendum for constitutional changes; the fact that participation is only average indicates that it is viewed as a routine procedure. With only two referendums held in Austria between 1970 and 1990, the evidence is insufficient for any conclusions. The 1994 referendum on membership in the European Union resulted in a very high participation (82.4 percent). Liechtenstein is a special case, in that it has several direct democracy privileges, like Switzerland, but their scope is limited by ducal prerogatives. The duchy is divided into two political camps, and election campaigns are therefore often quite adversarial. In addition, voting is compulsory, although non-compliance is no longer subject to sanctions. High voter participation in constitutional referendums in Australia is explained by the fact that compulsory voting is enforced.

On specific occasions, very controversial initiatives may increase voter participation. This remains to be an exception in California – as in the case of Proposition 13 in 1978 – because the simultaneously held presidential and congressional elections usually guarantee a stable and relatively high level of

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**Table 6.2** Number of times voters go to the polls (excluding elections for officeholders), number of referendums, and average voter participation from 1970 to 2000 on a national level (or on the state level in the case of California)".

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>No. of times voters go to the polls</th>
<th>No. of referendums</th>
<th>Average voter participation (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>63.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>81.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liechtenstein</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>94.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: a In California, referendums are always timed to coincide with elections. The level of participation in referendums is thus the same as the level of participation in elections.
participation. In Switzerland, voter participation was especially high in 1922 in the context of an initiative on a one-time capital levy (86.3 percent participation), in the 1974 initiative to limit admission of foreigners (70.3 percent), the 1989 initiative about eliminating the Swiss army (68.6 percent), and the 6 December 1992 referendum on the European Economic Area Agreement (78.3 percent).

**Participation in elections and referendums in states with minority direct democracy and in states with plebiscitary direct democracy, 1970 to 2000**

From an ideal-typical point of view, participation in elections and referendums should be higher in minority direct democracies than in states with a plebiscitary direct democracy. The facts do not support this assumption.

According to a country-rating by the Initiative and Referendum Institute Europe (IRI) (Kaufmann and Waters 2004), the European countries with the most extensive direct democracy tools are Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Italy, Slovenia, Lithuania, Ireland, Denmark and Latvia. Table 6.3 includes only those states with a longer tradition of direct democracy. Political structures and procedures in states where minority instruments are of recent vintage have not yet been able to adapt sufficiently to them. It is therefore premature to evaluate them. This is particularly true of the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, which in some cases have introduced minority instruments (Slovenia, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary). In all six states under consideration the average participation in parliamentary elections is higher than the participation in referendums. In Italy, Ireland and Liechtenstein, the difference amounts to 20 percent.

**Table 6.3 Average participation in the election of officeholders and in referendums 1970–2000 on the national level (or on the state level in the case of California)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Average electoral participation (%)</th>
<th>No. of ballot items</th>
<th>Average participation in balloting (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California *</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>63.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark *</td>
<td>86.8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>81.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>72.3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liechtenstein</td>
<td>91.7</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>70.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes

a Electoral participation = years with presidential elections; participation in balloting = years with presidential elections.

b Denmark has a minority direct democracy tool in the form of a parliamentary legislative referendum. It takes only one-third of the parliament to request a referendum. Although this right has been invoked only four times, it probably had a considerable anticipatory effect on the decision process (Svensson 1996).

With the exception of Norway, participation in parliamentary elections is higher in all five states with plebiscitary direct democracy compared with participation in referendums (Table 6.4). The difference in participation is not as high as in states with minority direct democracy – with the exception of France. It must be noted, however, that in all the states under consideration there were very few referendums.

No clear picture emerges from a comparative analysis of participation in elections and participation in referendums in minority direct democracies and plebiscitary direct democracies. Participation tends to be higher when the number of occasions for going to the polls is less frequent, but Italy and Liechtenstein confirm that participation in referendums can be high even when polling is frequent. France on the other hand illustrates the fact that participation in referendums can be low even if voters do not go to the polls frequently, as long as the referendums are not on very controversial issues.

**Comparative analysis of Switzerland and California**

Switzerland stands alone in category 1 in the IRI’s country-rating as “The Radical Democrats.” No sovereign state in Europe or elsewhere in the world with the exception of the mini-state of Liechtenstein – is comparable with Switzerland in the comprehensive and long-standing use of direct democracy tools as well as in the frequency of their application. However, several member states of the United States of America, which surpass Switzerland in population and territory, are level with Switzerland with respect to direct democracy (Cronin 1989; Glaser 1997). Although these states are admittedly only parts of a larger sovereign federal state, a comparison with the American states is more meaningful than a comparison with sovereign states whose direct democracy is far less developed quantitatively and qualitatively than Switzerland’s. For this reason, I will compare Switzerland and California regarding participation in elections and referendums over time (Figure 6.1).
In Switzerland, there is a striking jump in the degree of electoral participation in 1919 at the time of the introduction of the proportional election system. Participation rose by 20 percent compared with 1917 and by as much as 34 percent compared with 1914. As a consequence, between 1919 and 1990, participation in elections was on average higher than participation in referendums. In the past ten years, the two are showing signs of convergence. There is an analogous trend when we go back in history, namely declining participation after the 1930s and stabilization at a 40 to 50 percent level since the 1980s. The reason participation in referendums fluctuated more sharply than participation in elections lies in the greater frequency with which citizens go to the polls to vote in referendums. There is less fluctuation in participation in referendums between 1950 and 1970 compared with other periods, but nevertheless the gradual decline reflected the trend of the preceding 20 years. There is a strong correlation of 0.72 between participation in elections and in referendums.

Turning to California, it is noticeable that there is lower participation in primary elections as well as in elections and referendums that do not coincide with presidential elections. There is a correlation of 0.6 between participation in main and primary elections. As is the case in Switzerland, there has been a downward trend in participation since the mid-twentieth century and stabilization at a lower level since the 1980s.

A comparative analysis of Switzerland and California indicates a sharp increase in electoral participation in the early part of the twentieth century. In Switzerland this is due to the introduction of proportional voting. In both political systems, voting remained at a high level until the end of the 1930s. Since then we observe a downward trend and a process of convergence towards similar absolute levels of electoral participation. For this reason there is a strong correlation (0.67) between Swiss electoral participation and participation in the general elections in California.

A comparison between Switzerland and California regarding participation in referendums reveals startling similarities. Until the end of the 1930s participation increased in both systems, with Switzerland at a higher level than California. The 1930s were a time when political conflict in both systems was intense. Between 1940 and 1970 we observe a gradual decline in both systems and a process of convergence towards about the same absolute level. Since 1970 participation has stabilized at a low level, with upward and downward spurts. The low-level participation after 1970 may also be related to the growing intensity of direct democracy, that is, the strong increase in the number of times when voters went to the polls.

**Participation as an indicator for political pressure**

According to Arend Lijphart, voter participation is an excellent indicator of democratic quality (Lijphart 1999; see also Vanhanen 1997: 36). His comparison between 36 states shows that electoral participation is 7.5 percent higher in consensus democracies than in majoritarian democracies.

Lijphart’s argument clearly does not apply to elections and referendums in authoritarian systems. In these cases, high participation does not demonstrate the exercise of popular sovereignty and the control of the power of the state. This is because in authoritarian states citizens do not participate in voluntary and autonomous ways, free from state interference; what it does indicate is the pressure from above to participate and the fear of sanctions if one fails to do so. History gives all too many examples of plebiscites and elections controlled by the government, with nearly 100 percent participation or approval.

Voter participation is also within established democracies a questionable indicator for the quality of democracy. Dahrendorf (1975: 77) voices his skepticism with the following statement: “Contrary to the naïve expectation that high political participation is a ‘healthy’ sign of consolidated and politically reliable (or even democratic) conditions, research shows that it is symptomatic of either political disturbances or of political coercion.” As far as Switzerland is concerned, it has been said half-jokingly that participation in referendums either below 10 percent or above 90 percent is a sign of danger. If Switzerland had a 90 percent participation, that might well signal a political crisis.

**Interim results**

No unambiguous conclusions can be drawn from the data about participation in elections and in referendums in various states and over various periods of time.
It is not possible to divide up states into different categories regarding the level of participation, nor do simple categorizations offer any useful explanations. It would seem that participation in referendums cannot be explained by a few variables and simple causal connections. Moreover, participation in elections and referendums is insufficient by itself as an indicator of the electorate’s engagement in the political decision-making process.

International IDEA has always understood voter turnout to be just one dimension of political participation. It has emphasized that no linear relationship exists between voter turnout and democratic development. It is true that turnout is simply one indicator of political participation – which is indeed a very complex term – and not always the most suitable one.

(Pintor and Gratschew 2002: 14)

A conclusion based on the available empirical data can be stated as follows: more direct democracy does not increase the level of participation; a more comprehensive system of direct democracy actually leads to a decline in participation, as demonstrated by the Californian and Swiss cases. A comparison between the American states provides additional support for this argument. In 34 states in the northern part of the US with and without voter initiatives, average voter participation was the same between 1960 and 1980: 63 percent in years with presidential elections and 46 percent in the off-years. This observation leads to the conclusion that “no evidence exists for the claim that initiatives will increase turnout over time” (Magleby 1984: 97f.).

In short, the data on participation alone cannot provide an adequate foundation for evaluating political participation and the effects of direct democracy. Rather than focus exclusively on the decision-making phase that takes place during elections and referendums, one must consider all aspects of political activity, all occasions for voting, all ballots cast, the entire decision-making process, as well as the effects of direct democracy on the structure of the political system. For this reason I shall refer to a model to elucidate the dynamic aspect of direct democracy.

Participation and responsiveness in the process of decision-making

Participation without minority direct democracy tools

In the following model (Figure 6.2), I make a distinction between five stages of the political decision-making process: input, throughput, output, outcome and feedback. What opportunities for participation exist in a purely representative democracy with the right to vote in elections only for citizens without affiliation to any political party? In terms of input, participation consists of determining the composition of the parliament at fixed intervals and, indirectly, the formation of the government. In some states, it might also be possible to vote directly for the country’s head of state. In federally organized states, there are additional elections at a lower governmental level. In the throughput stage, which is characterized by political debate about substantive questions, the ordinary citizen has no say. In stage 3 (the output phase), the political actors will be mindful of the views and attitudes of parts of the electorate – to win the next elections. Those parts of the electorate left out will be left disgruntled. In stage 4 (the outcome) political decisions will be met with different degrees of acceptance among the electorate. The feedback resulting from the effects of the political decisions in the social realm will be reflected in the election outcome and will thereby influence the input.

In cases where the electorate is convinced that the input provided by elections has a pronounced effect on the output and where elections are the only form of institutional participation, voluntary voter turnout will be high. It is involuntarily high when – in authoritarian systems – the electorate fears that lack of participation will lead to sanctions. However, there is no feedback between output and input, and in the process of implementing decisions, massive pressure is usually applied.

In cases where there are plebiscitary direct democracy institutions unconnected with elections it is possible for the electorate to make political decisions in stage 3 (either consultatively or decisively, depending on the constitutional provisions). Substantive debate does not enter into stage 1 (input) and is triggered by political actors only in stage 2. Nevertheless, if a plebiscite decision contradicts the stand taken by the political majority, the legitimacy of the political actors will be undermined.
Participation with minority direct democracy tools

How does the electorate's situation differ in a political system in which minority direct democracy tools are available at all governmental levels (Figure 6.3)? I distinguish between five functions and five dysfunctions that cannot be elucidated here in detail (Moeckli 2001). I shall limit myself to the effects on political participation. In stage 1 (input), qualified voters can inject their demands directly into the political system on several governmental levels. If direct initiatives exist, as it is the case in California, citizens can even submit their concerns directly to the electorate as a ballot measure, circumventing non-governmental and political actors altogether.

In the case of referendums, qualified voters can decide on issues after parliament has taken action. Whenever parliament takes up proposals concerning the constitution or legislation, it must always consider whether these proposals would have the support of a majority of qualified voters. This has two consequences for political participation: first, parliamentary elections and hence participation in them becomes less important because qualified voters can, if necessary, repudiate parliamentary decisions; second, political actors are under greater pressure to take minority demands into account, if they wish to increase the likelihood of sustaining their decision in a possible referendum. In the long run, this leads to a consensus-oriented decision-making process. If political decisions have a broad-based support, they will generate less intensive conflict, and this in turn will lead to lower participation. A further factor in this is the intensity of direct democracy. As a result of the frequency of consultations and decisions, voter turnout tends to be high, when direct democracy is intense, voter turnout tends to be low” (Riklin and Kley 1981: 79f).

Tools for minority direct democracy have functions in the decision-making process that go beyond the function of legitimizing governmental policies. They serve to educate and socialize the electorate, they stimulate political actors to look ahead not only to the next election but to the next referendum and they multiply the points of contact between the electorate and the elected officials.

There is no reason to assume that well-organized interest groups and the special interests they represent are the major beneficiaries of low average voter participation in Switzerland and in US states. Interest groups are eager to voice their concerns, but they are not particularly eager to increase the overall input into the political system. The major political interest groups are not among the most ardent proponents of direct democracy. The reason is that their core aims may well be endangered by intervention by opposition groups via direct democracy. The successful initiatives in California to raise tobacco taxes and to reduce insurance on motor vehicles are a case in point.

For small opposition groups, grassroots public interest groups and individual political actors, the initiative is an optimal tool to articulate their concerns to the public and the government. The Swiss experiences with direct democracy offer perfect examples in this respect: on 8 February 2004, an initiative to keep extremely dangerous criminals locked up won a surprising victory. Two affected women launched this initiative all on their own. Powerful interest groups usually have no need for direct democracy, as they can exert influence through many other channels. It is true that in Switzerland direct democracy encourages cooperative structures by giving an impetus to negotiated settlements. However, cooperative forms of organization arose not so much as a result of direct democracy as through mechanisms for coping with a war economy during both world wars. At the same time, direct democracy also serves as an instrument for oppositional groups to break down these cooperative structures.

Figure 6.3 Model of the political process with minority direct democracy.
Low overall voter participation and selective participation of large parts of the electorate do not necessarily strengthen the hand of a short-range interest-based policy. For one thing, the direct democracy process moves slowly, so that temporary political moods cannot be rapidly converted into election outcomes. In Switzerland, moreover, selective participants are those who can be mobilized to go to the polls over and above the regular voters which account for approximately 30 percent. Their behavior at the polls is far less predictable than that of regular voters who are likely to be well-informed and loyal to their party. On 16 May 2004, a tax package of the federal government with tax relief of 2.7 billion euros was rejected by a two-third majority because many selective participants were under the impression that this tax relief would benefit only a small minority and that the cantons would later have to pay the bill.

The effects of minority direct democracy mentioned above—consensus-oriented decisions along with lower levels of participation—have surfaced most clearly in Switzerland. Figure 6.4 highlights how direct democracy has forced all the elements in the political system to work together and the extent to which, over time, repudiation of parliamentary proposals has declined.

A high level of participation among all relevant political forces in the negotiation stage within the political system is incompatible with high electoral participation; in fact the opposite is true. Interest groups that are able to voice their concerns within the framework of an inclusive decision stage. Under these conditions, low voter participation is not an indicator of low political participation; in fact the opposite is true.

In California the political decision process is not characterized by the same consensual pattern as it is in Switzerland because of differences in institutional design and social prerequisites. Most important, the political party system in California is essentially a two-party system, while in Switzerland it is highly fragmented on the basis of linguistic and religious cleavages. The pressure to reach a consensus is high in California as well for various reasons: the government is elected directly by the people; it cannot be brought down by the legislature; constitutional changes enacted by the legislature require a two-third majority and direct democracy strengthens the awareness regarding minority demands. While direct democracy also represents a danger for these very minorities, constitutional review is a strong corrective to this danger.

In line with this model, lower participation in single referendums and elections—compared with elections in purely representative democracies—must be evaluated in light of the larger number of options for qualified voters in a minority direct democracy, the frequency of voting, the large numbers of ballot decisions, the greater responsiveness in the political sphere, and the tendency towards consensus-oriented decisions. A new American study concludes that in US states with direct democracy, politicians respond more rapidly to changes in public opinion and do so, in fact, in anticipation of potential interventions via direct democracy (Matsusaka 2004).

Conclusion

International and longitudinal comparisons show that the relationships between political regimes and political participation are anything but clear-cut. The degree of political participation is influenced not only by the design of political institution but by distinct politico-cultural variables. Even in Switzerland political participation differs in different parts of the country and in different cantons. In plebiscitary direct democracies, participation in elections and referendums is higher than in minority direct democracies. However, one cannot conclude anything about the quality of democracies on the basis of the level of participation.15

It is easy enough to prove empirically that (greater) direct democracy does not lead to greater electoral participation. On the contrary: when coupled with frequent elections and ballot decisions, minority direct democracy turns into a routine procedure and encourages a tendency toward lower voter turnout. Only in isolated cases does minority direct democracy increase institutional political participation when prior attempts at reaching a compromise solution about controversial issues have failed.

The model sketched above makes a theoretical argument that supports a positive relationship between direct democracy and participation. It argues that under direct democracy the participation of qualified voters in the decision-making process is improved as a whole, both in terms of participation and in terms of consultation, and that the responsiveness of decision makers is greater than in a purely representative democracy. It is no accident that neither the US nor Switzerland has any direct financing for political parties. that fav nor Swiss
members of parliament is moderate by international standards, and that many US states have rigorous disclosure rules. Direct democracy makes it very difficult for politicians to dip cavalierly into public funds. Men and women who go to the polls are more inclined to be guided by the common good than are professional politicians. This is not because they are intrinsically more high-minded but quite simply because they have less at stake, and therefore their actions are less costly to them (von Amim 2001: 373f.).

Minority direct democracy broadens the input stream into the political system and during the preparatory phase of the decision-making process exerts pressure to reach a broad consensus and to involve a large number of actors. As a result, conflict is less intense in the decision-making phase, and this lesser degree of intensity in turn reduces participation in elections and referendums. The pressure toward consensus is increased on the output side by the veto possibilities offered to minorities. Minority direct democracy increases political participation in scope, plebiscitary direct democracy increases it at any given point in time.

Direct democracy can revitalize political activity in two ways: it provides political actors outside the established political institutions with new tools for participation and it compels political elites to be more attentive to voter preferences; political elites can no longer limit themselves to worrying about winning the next elections but must envisage winning a possible referendum. The decision makers must show much more concern for their “base,” thereby increasing participation outside the institutional channels of elections and referendums.

Notes
1 See the elaboration of these concepts in S. Moeckli (1996b: pp. 10, 16).
4 Freedomhouse, Freedom in the World 2004, www.freedomhouse.org (accessed 10 January 2006). However, in the 2004 report only 86 states were categorized as “free,” which means that 29 states with free and fair elections were designated as only partly free. In 1988, 69 states were electoral democracies, but only 58 states were designated as “free.” The number of “part-free” electoral democracies thus increased by 18 in the period between 1988 and 2003. According to Freedomhouse, both free and part-free states are included among the “electoral democracies.” Diamond (1997: 7f.), on the other hand, defines “formal” or “electoral” democracies as political systems in which the most important legislative and executive offices are filled by means of regular, competitive elections. However, there remain military or political “power reserves” on which election results exert no influence; there is hardly any horizontal division of power among officeholders; the power of the executive is only partially limited by the rule of law; basic rights and minority rights are not consistently guaranteed; there is access to the media, but no pluralistic media system.
5 Participation is defined here as the ratio of voters to the population of voting age.
6 The increase in the number of referendums on the national level in the last decades is largely attributable to the increase in ballot measures in Switzerland.
7 In the referendum of 24 September 2000 on abbreviating the national president’s term of office, participation was 30.2 percent, but in the 23 April 1972 referendum on the expansion of the European Communities, it was 60.7 percent. In two referendums where there was broad political consensus on the issues, participation was below 40 percent.
8 Anyone who wants no change in the status quo can urge his supporters to stay home. In the referendum of 7 October 2001 and of 16 June 2003, the requisite participation quorum was not attained either.
10 Ireland has no minority instruments, but it is included in our analysis because of its compulsory constitutional referendum, which has no participation and approval quorum.
11 In California, referendums are always timed to coincide with elections. The level of participation in referendums is thus the same as the level of participation in elections.
12 For the 29 November 1987 referendum in Poland, participation was 67.3 percent. In 1984 participation in elections to the National Council and to the Sejm still had the customary participation of 99 percent. This change implies that by 1987 Poles had lost their fear of abstaining from an election or referendum because of greater political openness. In the 15 October 2002 referendum, Iraq’s head of state Saddam Hussein got himself re-elected for an additional seven-year term. The next morning, news had already spread that, according to official figures, he had gathered all 11,445,838 votes, or 100 percent of the votes.
13 In Switzerland there exists only an indirect initiative, which is initially addressed to the parliament, which then takes a stand on it. The parliament may work out a counterproposal which it submits to the electorate along with the initiative.
14 Parliamentary elections are also less important when a president is directly elected by the people. Thus in the US in “off years” (without simultaneous presidential election) participation in congressional elections is about one-third lower than in years with presidential elections. Elections to the European Parliament also have a lower turnout than national parliamentary elections.
15 “Other dimensions of political participation are less amenable to quantification, therefore presenting substantial difficulties for cross-national or regional comparisons. Whether voter turnout in countries or regions is high or low, whether there are changes in one direction or another, whether these differ by country or by region or by old and new democracies is interesting data per se, but it does not reveal much about the state of democracy in the countries that are being compared. In other words, one can hardly extrapolate from higher or lower electoral participation to other characteristics of these democracies. In synchronic comparisons of countries, the limitations are immediately evident when consolidated democracies with relatively low voter turnout are compared to new democracies with relatively high voter turnout. Historical data of voter turnout for one country or region over time is a more meaningful basis for drawing conclusions or comparisons” (Pintor and Gratschew 2002: 14f.).

References