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HOW ELECTIONS SHAPE CAMPAIGNING EFFECTS IN DIRECT DEMOCRACY

Simon Lanz and Alessandro Nai

Introduction

Direct democracy has the capacity to affect electoral dynamics. Research has shown, for instance, that when individuals perceive issues voted through direct legislation as salient, their subsequent participation in elections is significantly higher (Lacey, 2005; Tolbert and Smith, 2005). Furthermore, strong evidence exists that direct legislation enhances citizens' political knowledge (Tolbert *et al*., 2003; Nicholson, 2003; Lupia and Matsusaka, 2004) and the sentiment of political efficacy (Smith and Tolbert, 2007; Bowler and Donovan, 2002), which in turn have direct effects on electoral outcomes. In this sense, direct legislation has an intrinsic democratic value in that it encourages a stronger public engagement (Qvortrup, 2013). In Switzerland, citizens are significantly better informed when they have more extended political participation rights (i.e., when they live in cantons with larger direct-democratic opportunities; Benz and Stutzer, 2004). Moreover, Marquis and Bergman (2009) highlight that citizens' general knowledge on political issues – a strong predictor of participation in elections – is directly related to the nature of political campaigns during direct-democratic ballots. On the other hand, when citizens are asked to vote too frequently, their aggregate mobilization drastically goes down; existence of such 'voters' fatigue' has been confirmed for both elections (Rallings *et al*., 2003) and direct legislation (Nicholson, 2003; Kriesi, 2005). At the structural level, political parties and interest groups rely on direct legislation and policy propositions to put issues on the political agenda (Kriesi, 1994; Bowler *et al*., 2006), which could strategically strengthen their electoral position and ownership of specific issues. The November 2009 'minarets initiative' in Switzerland represents a perfect example in this sense. The initiative, launched in 2007 and carried by a right-wing party coalition under the lead of the Swiss People's Party (SVP), banned the construction of any new minarets on Swiss territory, and was accepted by an undisputable 57.5 per cent of voters (Hirter and Vatter, 2009). Beyond the shockwaves generated by this unexpected result, which can probably be compared – at a smaller, Swiss scale – to the 2016 Brexit vote and the 2016 US Presidential election (at least for the feeling of powerlessness of liberal elites), the 'minarets initiative' is instructive here because of the proximity of its launch (early 2007) to the federal elections of October of the same year. Many doubts were indeed raised that

the 'minarets initiative' was simply proposed by the SVP in order to frame the electoral debate and put on the electoral agenda the issues of immigration control, Islam, and cultural assimilation of foreigners – issues on which the SVP has a clear ownership (e.g., Lachat, 2014; Lanz and Sciarini, 2016) and thus could easily transform into electoral grains.[1] These issues were at the core of the 2007 elections, in which the SVP increased its parliamentary presence (Dardanelli, 2008).

All in all, a substantial body of evidence highlights that elections and direct legislation are closely interconnected and, more particularly, what happens in direct legislation has a strong potential to affect the subsequent electoral outcomes. But *do elections influence direct democracy*? If we exclude Nicholson's (2003) research on citizens' awareness as a function of the electoral cycle, to the best of our knowledge virtually no evidence exists that elections have the power to change the dynamics at play during direct democratic votes. This is precisely what this chapter will demonstrate, by showing that the proximity of elections alters campaigning effects on turnout in direct democracy.

We test this assumption through individual and contextual data for Swiss direct-democratic votes between 1999 and 2005. Switzerland, 'the only nation in the world where political life truly revolves around the referendum' (Kobach, 1994: 98), is a perfect case study to test the analysis of interdependence between elections and direct democracy. At the federal level, elections take place every four years to renew both chambers of Parliament; Swiss citizens do not directly elect the executive body at the national level (the composition of the collegial Government is decided by a vote within the Parliament), so federal elections probably represent one of the most salient moments of the Swiss political agenda (Sciarini *et al*., 2003; Dardanelli, 2008). On top of that, about four times a year direct-democratic consultations are held at the federal level (consultation at the cantonal or communal levels also exist). During those votes, Swiss citizens are asked to decide on constitutional or legislative amendments (often several simultaneously). The frequent use of direct democratic instruments has a defining role for the whole Swiss political system. First, it creates an arena of debate between citizens and political actors (and especially political parties) on specific issues – from international relations to fiscal policies, from immigration to land use (Trechsel and Sciarini, 1998). Second, it introduces uncertainty into the political process, which bounds the control of elites on the political processes in a twofold way (Trechsel and Sciarini, 1998): through popular initiatives it opens up the political process to actors outside the political establishment, either opposition parties or ad-hoc citizen committees and interest groups; through optional referendums, it forces the establishment and governmental elites to moderate their propositions (new laws, constitutional amendments), since those can quite easily be attacked and potentially blocked.

Prior to those votes, a widespread, often passionate (occasionally very dull), and multifaceted campaign takes place. Political parties, trade unions, interest groups, and even the government itself (Germann, 1996) participate in the campaign. Posters trying to convince citizens to vote 'yes' or 'no' to this or that project suddenly appear everywhere, from downtown major cities to town squares of small villages. All citizens receive in their mailbox an official leaflet that details the objects on which they will be asked to vote, and presents the arguments put forward by both camps. Newspapers are now filled with political ads (Nai, 2014a) and, while political propaganda per se is forbidden in Swiss radio and TV, talk shows and other political analysis broadcasts are the norm. The most important projects receive special coverage in the media, and nationwide polls make the headlines in the weeks before the vote (Nai and Sciarini, 2015). On voting day (always a Sunday), special broadcasts are scheduled on public and private channels, and results are commented on as they come in. The extravagant effervescence that happens in every country for national elections is the

norm in Switzerland for direct democratic votes – and constantly. Assuming a four to six weeks' campaign before each vote, and four votes a year, up to five to six months *every year* are characterized in Switzerland by the presence of direct democratic campaigns.

It comes then as no surprise that the effects of those campaigns have received strong attention in the literature (see, e.g., Kriesi, 2005; Sciarini and Tresch, 2009, 2011; Nai, 2013, 2015; Lanz and Nai, 2015; Nai and Sciarini, 2015). What this literature is surprisingly silent about, however, are the mediation effects played by other recurring events in the political calendar. We fill this gap by assessing if and how the proximity of elections alters campaigning effects of turnout in direct democracy.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Political campaigning and turnout

Even though the magnitude of campaigning effects has been the subject of debate, consensus as of today points towards the idea of political campaigns as relevant forces that shape voters' attitudes and behaviours (e.g., Iyengar and Simon, 2000; Farrell and Schmitt-Beck, 2002; Brady and Johnston, 2006; Claassen, 2011; Arceneaux, 2006). Campaigns, first, have under certain circumstances the ability to shape the belief structure that voters set up to justify their choices. Individuals have limited cognitive abilities to process the infinite and complex amount of information they are exposed to (they are 'cognitive misers', Sniderman *et al*., 1991), and are thus forced to pay attention to information selectively. In this context, political campaigns are able to 'frame' the information they provide in a way that those who are exposed to it pay attention to specific bits of information and selected sound bites; if this happens, then campaigns might be able to reshape the structure of opinions and beliefs, that, on a given issue, citizens might rely upon to take a decision ('priming' effect; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990; Iyengar and Simon, 1993). Being exposed to political communication might also, under some conditions, increase issue knowledge and overall political sophistication (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Kriesi, 2005; Jerit *et al*., 2006; Marquis and Bergman, 2009). It is not a surprise, then, that political campaigns have the power to shape electoral choices (at the individual level) and electoral results (at the actors level), as shown in countless studies worldwide (see, e.g., Jacobson, 1990; Cox and Thies, 2000; Whiteley and Seyd, 2003; Lachat and Sciarini, 2002; Finkel and Schrott, 1995; Carty and Eagles, 1999).

Next to the psychological underpinnings of opinion building and final choice, an element stands out as crucial within political game: *turnout*. From an elitist perspective (e.g., Schumpeter, 1979) low turnout is not a problem but simply an indication of 'citizens' basic satisfaction with the performance of the political system' (Anduiza Perea, 2002: 645; see also Rosema, 2007). However, most scholars support the idea that abstention and political passivity from the electoral process is a concerning development in today's democracy (e.g., Amnå and Ekman, 2014), as political participation can compensate for socioeconomic inequality and avoid exclusion of already underprivileged social groups (e.g., Verba and Nie, 1972). Low turnout, described as democracy's principal 'unresolved dilemma' by Lijphart (1997), affects the electoral process negatively. Why do citizens decide not to vote? The abundant research on the reasons why citizens decide to turn out in elections and referendums has focused both on individual determinants (see, e.g., Smets and van Ham, 2013 for a meta-analysis) and contextual dynamics (see, e.g., Geys, 2006 for another meta-analysis). Within this second strain of literature, two components of political campaigns have been shown to affect citizens' electoral participation: *intensity* and *negativity*.

Intensity

The intensity of political campaigns deals with the quantitative coverage of the campaign. Intense campaigns cover higher amounts of the public space, which means that the quantity of information available on a given topic is bigger, if not necessarily richer. More intense campaigns signal that something big is at stake. If political actors are willing to spend money and time to turn the tide, then, from the standpoint of voters, they logically must have good reasons to do so. The direct consequence is that intense campaigns activate the interest of citizens on the topics, motivate their participation, and enhance their attention (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995; Bowler and Donovan, 1998; Kriesi, 2005; Wolak, 2009; Sciarini and Tresch, 2009, 2011; Nai, 2015). Intense campaigns stimulate attention and translate 'into the greater availability of (or ease of obtaining) information' (Lau *et al*., 2008: 398). More intense campaigns should thus encourage citizens to take into account a wider range of arguments and issues, which should 'stimulate personal interest, attentiveness, a sense of accountability […]. They can make citizens feel something personal is at stake' (Kam, 2006: 933). When confronted with intense campaigns, citizens should thus react with an increased likelihood to participate in the political game. We thus have:

H1: More intense campaigns lead to higher turnout in direct democratic votes.

Negativity

Negative campaigning, broadly speaking, refers (for a political actor) to the act of verbally attacking his opponents. Definitions of the 'tone' of political campaigns in the literature abound (see for instance Johnson, 2012; Nai and Walter, 2015) and sometimes put more weight on different aspects, but all share a core principle: going 'negative' means attacking your opponent (their programme, their values, their policy propositions, their record, their character, and so on) instead of advocating your own programme, values or record. Over the years, research on the consequences of negative campaigning has produced a wealth of results on a wide range of attitudes and behaviours (see, e.g., Nai and Walter, 2015). To give just some examples, negative campaigning has been shown to affect attention to and memorability of information (Lau, 1982), strength of issue ambivalence (Nai, 2014a, 2014b; Lanz and Nai, 2015), approval of US Congress (Globetti and Heterington, 2000), information search and correct voting (Lau and Redlawsk, 2015; Nai, 2015); support and affect for the attacker (Arceneaux and Nickerson, 2005; Kahn and Kenney, 2004), affect for the target (Fridkin and Kenney, 2004; Kahn and Kenney, 2004; Pinkleton, 1997), cynicism (Valentino *et al*., 2001; Yoon *et al*., 2005), political trust (Pinkleton *et al*., 2002; Brader, 2005), and issue ownership (Seeberg and Nai, 2017). But does negative campaigning affect mobilization (turnout)? In this case as well, research is abundant; it yields, however, conflicting results.

On the one hand, early work by Stephen Ansolabehere, Shanto Iyengar and colleagues has led to the 'demobilization' theory (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995; Ansolabehere *et al*., 1994, 1999), according to which negativity is one of the leading causes of the current disaffection among citizens with the political elites. Voters 'become fed up with the mudslinging and decide to stay at home on Election Day. Attacks that last the length of a long campaign may spill past assessments of the candidates and alter citizens' views of the political system. […] Citizens may begin to readjust their attitudes toward politics in general, become less trustful of government, less politically efficacious and less interested in politics' (Fridkin and Kenney, 2012: 178–179). In this case, voters become 'disenchanted with the business of politics as usual' (Ansolabehere

et al., 1994: 835), which should naturally depress turnout. This overall negative effect has been confirmed in several studies (e.g., Wattenberg and Brians, 1999; Lemert *et al*., 1999; Lawton and Freedman, 2001), but has also been hotly contested. On the other hand, in fact, another strand of research points toward opposite findings; they show that negative campaigning produces higher turnout (e.g., Finkel and Geer, 1998; Freedman and Goldstein, 1999; Kahn and Kenney, 2004; Jackson and Carsey, 2007). The rationale behind such 'mobilizing' effect, says Martin (2004: 549–551), is threefold: first, negative campaigns might arouse anxiety, which has shown to stimulate attention and involvement (Marcus and MacKuen, 1993; Marcus *et al*., 2000, 2006; Brader, 2006; Brader *et al*., 2008; Nai *et al*., 2016). Second, from a rational choice perspective, negative campaigns might be perceived as indicators of close races, cases in which the marginal utility for individuals to participate in the electoral process increases. Third, negative campaigns, by putting the spotlight on problematic issues, might stir the shared public concerns over the future of their country, thus activating the patriotic duty of voting. It might be seen as potentially paradoxical to advocate attack politics as a way of increasing civic duty, but negative campaigning is an important part of the political game today; you don't go to see a heavy metal band and ask them to turn the music down.

Recent research has shown that the way negative campaigning affects turnout might depend on intervening or conditional factors such as the type of attacks (e.g., person-based vs. policy-based attacks; Kahn and Kenney, 1999; Lau and Pomper, 2004; Min, 2004; Geer, 2006), the civility or incivility of attacks (Brooks and Geer, 2007; Fridkin and Kenney, 2011), the relevance of attacks (Fridkin and Kenney, 2011), and even the overall direction of the campaign: negativity in campaigns defending the status quo ('no campaigns') decreases turnout, whereas negativism in campaigns defending policy changes ('yes campaigns') increases it (Nai, 2013). Research highlighting those conditional effects is however still in its infancy, and for this we will simply enunciate two hypotheses based on the opposite rationales described above:

H2a: More negative campaigns lead to lower turnout in direct democratic votes.
H2b: More negative campaigns lead to higher turnout in direct democratic votes.

How elections shape campaigning effects

Testing for those effects (H1, H2a and H2b) is, however, not the principal objective of this chapter. We postulate here that, beyond those effects, an overarching mechanism is at play, one that moderates the magnitude of such effects according to an overarching and exogenous condition: the evolution of the *election* calendar. More specifically, we postulate here that referendum campaigns should have stronger effects at the peak of electoral cycles, when citizens' attention to elites is at its maximum, which drives information acquisition and processing.

Elections represent a peculiar moment in any given political system, in that they embody a direct relationship between the citizens and the political elite. This relationship is, naturally, two-sided: 'elections are primarily viewed as an opportunity for citizens to influence political leaders, but they also serve as a means by which parties and candidates can mobilize support for democratic processes' (Banducci and Karp, 2003: 443). In this sense, elections might be seen as the most important political landmark in a given country.

In this chapter, we test for the presence of spill-over effects from elections towards direct democratic votes when it comes to the relationship between citizens and the elite. More specifically we expect and confirm that, because of the centrality of elections within the political game, at the peak of election cycles political campaigns in referendums and popular initiatives

have stronger effects on citizens. Political campaigning during direct democracy votes has received strong attention recently (e.g., Kriesi, 2005; Sciarini and Tresch, 2009, 2011; Nai, 2013; Lanz and Nai, 2015; Nai and Sciarini, 2015), and it is now admitted that campaigning effects in direct democratic votes are similar than campaigning effects in elections (e.g. Nai, 2013). This chapter will demonstrate that campaigning effects during direct democratic votes are *even stronger* when the electoral cycle is at its peak (that is, when elections are close). The underlying rationale supporting this overall expectation is rather straightforward: due to their centrality within the political game, elections coincide with a peak in citizens' overall attention to elites; this increased attention to elites naturally leads to a stronger exposure to political communication and to an increased processing of such communication messages. In a nutshell, at the peak of the election cycle, citizens are generally more attentive and receptive towards messages from the elite, which creates favourable conditions for stronger campaign effects in direct democratic votes taking place during election peaks.

Elections have the power to reshuffle the cards on the table and significantly alter the political landscape – consider the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election. Beyond their structural effects for the political system, elections as political events produce a series of attitudinal effects at the individual level. Thus, evidence exists that, at the peak of the election cycle, citizens experience higher levels of political knowledge (Markus, 1982), political efficacy (Clarke and Acock, 1989), support for the political system (Banducci and Karp, 2003), social capital (Rahn *et al*., 1999), and attention to media (Banducci and Karp, 2003). Due to their centrality within the political game, elections more than any other political event have the power to captivate the attention of citizens, media and the public at large. We postulate here that elections are especially likely to arouse the overall level of *need for cognition*, loosely defined as a psychological and usually unconscious motivation to acquire information on a given issue or topic (Cacioppo *et al*., 1996: 197; see also Cacioppo and Petty, 1982; Cacioppo *et al*., 1986; Rudolph and Popp, 2007). Distinct but related to cognitive *abilities*, need for cognition refers to a need 'to structure relevant situations in a meaningful integrated way [and] to understand and make reasonable the experiential world' (Cohen *et al*., 1955: 291), a desire to know more about the issues at stake that naturally increases for novel and uncertain events (Polich, 2007). The relevance of need for cognition in our rationale is that it simply provides a meaningful bridge between increased saliency of the political landscape and increased exposure to (and treatment of) political information. Research in social and cognitive psychology shows that need for cognition leads to a more complex and comprehensive information search and, overall, activates motivational efforts to acquire relevant information (Verplanken *et al*., 1992). Need for cognition leads to higher attention to the issues at stake and a stronger desire to find information relevant to the issue at stake – for instance Ahlering (1987) shows that citizens higher in need for cognition were more likely to watch the televised debates before the 1984 US presidential election. Beyond exposure to (and the search for) information, need for cognition also leads to higher information *processing* (Cacioppo *et al*., 1983; Ahlering and Parker, 1989). Research in dual process models (e.g., Chaiken and Trope, 1999; Nai, 2016) highlights that attitudes and behaviours of individuals high in need for cognition 'are more likely to be affected by issue-relevant thinking (central route), whereas the attitudes of individuals low in need for cognition are more likely to be influenced by peripheral cues (peripheral route)' (Cacioppo *et al*., 1986: 1038); similarly, high need for cognition leads more easily to systematic than to heuristic information processing (Chaiken, 1980). In other words, need for cognition is a strong predictor of information processing, as shown for instance by Rudolph and Popp (2007) with data for the 2000 and 2004 US presidential elections.

To put it concisely, higher need for cognition leads to greater exposure to political information and a more comprehensive processing of such information. This creates a set of conditions in which political information – in our case, any given referendum campaign – has an overall stronger effect on those who are exposed to it. In other words, we expect the effects described above for campaign intensity and negativity to be particularly strong at the peak of the election cycle, when elections loom. We thus have:

> **H3a:** The strength of the (positive) effect of campaign intensity on turnout is conditioned by the closeness of the election: the closer the election, the stronger the (positive) effect of campaign intensity.
> **H3b:** The strength of the (positive/negative) effect of campaign negativity on turnout is conditioned by the closeness of the election: the closer the election, the stronger the (positive/negative) effect of campaign negativity.

Note that the mediation effect of need for cognition – an increase in electoral stakes leading to an enhanced need for cognition, which produces both an increased attention to and processing of information in referendum campaigns – will not be tested here due to lack of data.[2]

Methods

Data and covariates

The data for this analysis comes from two sources. On the individual level, we employ survey data containing roughly 1,000 Swiss citizens per ballot day (VOX data). Context-level data contains information on the campaign of each project (Nai, 2013, 2014a, 2015). We investigate the time period between 1999 and 2005, where a total of twenty-three votes and two national elections were held. Note that usually more than one project is put to the vote on the same day. To cope with this, we focus on the main project of the day, the so-called 'motor project' (Joye and Papadopoulos, 1994).

Participation

The outcome variable of this study is individual turnout at a federal vote. It takes the value 1 if the survey participant voted and the value 0 if no vote was cast. Individuals with missing values on this variable are excluded from the analysis.

Campaign intensity

Campaign intensity is a project-level variable. It measures the overall size of campaign ads that appeared during the four weeks prior to the ballot day. The measurement covers six major newspaper outlets in all three linguistic regions of Switzerland (*Tribune de Genève*, *Le Temps*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Tages-Anzeiger*, *Regione*, and *Giornale del Popolo*). It is important to highlight that Swiss law prohibits political advertising in radio or television programmes. Due to this limitation, newspaper advertisement is among the most important tool in the toolbox of political campaigners. Moreover, newspapers have a large audience among Swiss citizens. Eighty-five per cent of the voters declared that newspapers were a vital source of information when forming an opinion about the projects. Fifty per cent mentioned explicitly that they used newspaper ads in the decision-making process. Overall, we argue that while

newspaper ads cannot capture the whole campaign effort, they provide a good indicator for the intensity of a referendum or initiative campaign (for a similar measure, see Kriesi, 2005). The indicator used in the empirical part standardizes the overall campaign ad size so it takes values between 0 (low campaign intensity) and 1 (high campaign intensity).

Campaign negativity

Like our measurement for intensity, negativity is based on newspaper ads. It reflects the presence of negative political advertisement during the four weeks prior to the vote. The operationalization follows two steps. First, we identify each ad containing at least one explicit and personal attack on a political adversary. Simply attacking the position of the opposing camp is not labelled as negative since this is usually the essence of the political discourse in direct democratic campaigns (Nai, 2013). In a second step, we calculate the percentage of attack ads in a campaign and standardize the measure. The final indicator ranges from 0 (absence of negativity) to 1 (high level of negativity).

Election years

The third input variable measures the phase of the electoral cycle. Swiss national elections fall once every four years. In these elections, the entire lower and upper houses are replaced. Usually, four popular votes are submitted to the vote each year. In the election year, the vote in the third quarter is replaced by the national election. Our indicator distinguishes popular votes held in the election year or the year prior to the election from votes held in the first, second, or third year after the election.

Control variables

Previous studies have pointed to different individual-level variables shaping the participation in Swiss popular votes (Nai, 2013; Sciarini *et al*., 2015). These covariates are introduced as control variables to the regression models. *Female* measures the gender and is 1 for female survey participants and 0 for male participants. *Age* is an ordered variable with six categories (18–25 years, 26–35 years, 36–45 years, 46–55 years, 56–65 years, 66 years and older). *Education* measures three levels of education (primary, secondary, tertiary). *Political interest* describes a voter's self-declared interest in politics. It distinguishes four levels of interest (low interest, medium low, medium high, high).

All variables used in the empirical tests are summarized in Table 20.1 (individual-level variables) and Table 20.2 (context-level variables).

Empirical model

Let us now turn to the estimation strategy. All empirical models approximate individual turnout. Due to the binary character of this variable, we rely on multilevel logistic regression models. The full model is specified as follows:

$$\Pr(y_i = 1) = \boldsymbol{logit}^{-1}(\beta_0 + \gamma_1 X_i^T + \delta_1 campa_{j[i]} + \delta_2 campa_{j[i]} + \delta_3 campa \times eyear_{j[i]} + \mu_{j[i]})$$

Where citizen *i*'s probability of participating in vote *j* is a function of individual and contextual variables (for $i = 1, \ldots, I$; for $j = 1, \ldots, 23$). β_0 is a global average for the citizen to

Table 20.1 Descriptive statistics (individual covariates)

Variable	*Percentage*	*Observations*
Participation		
– No	40%	9,281
– Yes	60%	14,126
Total	100%	23,407
Interest in politics		
– Not at all	10%	2,339
– Not much	25%	5,892
– Rather	45%	10,639
– Very	19%	4,537
Total	100%	23,407
Education		
– Primary/Apprenticeship	63%	14,722
– Secondary	17%	4,055
– Tertiary	20%	4,630
Total	100%	23,407
Age		
– 18–25	9%	1,992
– 26–35	17%	4,038
– 36–45	22%	5,062
– 46–55	16%	3,840
– 56–65	16%	3,742
– 65 and older	20%	4,733
Total	100%	23,407
Sex		
– Male	48%	11,317
– Female	52%	12,090
Total	100%	23,407

Table 20.2 Descriptive statistics (context covariates)

Variable	*n*	*Min.*	*Max.*	*Mean*	*Std dev.*
Campaign: intensity	23	0	1	0.39	0.32
Campaign: negativity	23	0	1	0.22	0.27

participate in the vote. $campa_{j[i]}$ informs either about the intensity of the campaign (hypotheses 1 and 3a) or the negativity of the campaign (hypotheses 2 and 3b). $eyear_{j[i]}$ describes whether the vote was held close to the election. The interaction term $campa \times eyear_{j[i]}$ shows whether the effect of the campaign-specific variables is contingent on the closeness to the election. X_i^T is a matrix for the following control variables: sex, age, education, and interest in politics. Finally, $\mu_{j[i]}$ covers *j*-dependent differences, that is, the differences between the random intercepts for each vote and the global estimate β_0.

The interpretation of the results is mostly based on graphical presentation of predicted probabilities and first differences (differences in predicted probabilities). *Predicted probabilities* are estimated in line with King *et al.* (2000): first, we define a scenario of interest by fixing values for all variables. While we let the main input variable (e.g. campaign intensity) vary

from its minimum to its maximum, the control variables are fixed at their median.[3] We then estimate the probability of turn out for all levels of campaign intensity. We repeat this algorithm 1,500 times with predictors sampled from their distribution. The average of these values is what we refer to as predicted probability. *First differences* are differences in predicted probabilities. To estimate first differences, we fix two scenarios of interest (e.g. high intensity and low intensity) and approximate 1,500 predicted probabilities for each scenario. A first difference is the average difference between all these sampled values.

Results

Let us first turn to the descriptive statistics summarizing the main variables: participation, campaign intensity and campaign negativity. The left-hand panel in Figure 20.1 shows the level of participation across all twenty-three votes. A list of all votes included in the analysis is provided in Table 20.3. The results show that participation rates vary considerably across different popular votes. The difference between the highest and the lowest turnout rate is roughly thirty percentage points. The turnout does not evolve in a specific way over time. Nothing seems to point towards an increase or decrease of self-reported turnout across the period investigated. More importantly for the present study, turnout rate follows a specific dynamic across the electoral cycles. For instance, the mid-election period (e.g. 2001 and 2002) is one of constant ups and downs with regard to participation. This indicates that closeness to the election is not a driver of participation *per se* (which is in line with our assumptions).

The right-hand panel in Figure 20.1 visualizes the intensity (dashed lines) and negativity (solid lines) of the campaigns across all twenty-three votes. The picture is again one of great volatility. Intensity peaks in the middle of the electoral cycle, and so does negativity. Both pre-election periods do not see above-average levels of intensity. A possible explanation for this is that, facing resource-intensive elections, political actors are reluctant to open their war chests. Negativity does not seem to be linked to campaign intensity. In fact, often intensity and negativity seem to follow opposite trends. An exception in this regard is the most intensive campaign, which is also the most negative campaign.

Let us now turn to the regression analysis (Table 20.4). The first model (1) contains all control variables, a variable indicating if the vote was held in the two years preceding the

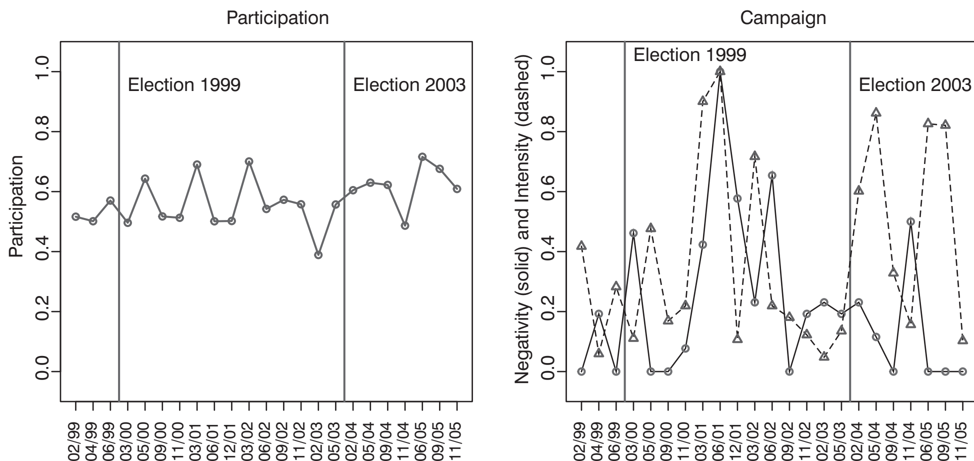

Figure 20.1 Descriptive statistics of participation and campaign

Table 20.3 Projects

Project 662	07.02.1999	House ownership for everyone (popular initiative)
Project 671	18.04.1999	New Swiss constitution (compulsory referendum)
Project 685	13.06.1999	Federal law on maternity insurance (optional referendum)
Project 695	12.03.2000	Halving motorized road traffic (popular initiative)
Project 701	21.05.2000	Sectoral agreements with the EU (optional referendum)
Project 714	24.09.2000	Regulating immigration (popular initiative)
Project 722	26.11.2000	Flexible retirement age (popular initiative)
Project 731	04.03.2001	European Union membership (popular initiative)
Project 741	10.06.2001	Federal law on the military amendment (optional referendum)
Project 753	02.12.2001	Security policy and abolishment of the army (popular initiative)
Project 761	03.03.2002	United Nations membership (popular initiative)
Project 771	02.06.2002	Amendment on abortion (optional referendum)
Project 781	22.09.2002	Surplus of gold reserves into pension fund (popular initiative)
Project 782	22.09.2002	Counterproposal on gold reserves (counterproposal)
Project 791	24.11.2002	Restricting asylum policies (popular initiative)
Project 802	09.02.2003	Cantonal contribution to hospital medicine (optional referendum)
Project 813	18.05.2003	Motor-vehicle-free Sundays (popular initiative)
Project 821	08.02.2004	Counterproposals to motorway initiative (counterproposal)
Project 833	16.05.2004	Federal law on taxation (optional referendum)
Project 842	26.09.2004	Citizenship rights of third-generation immigrants (compulsory referendum)
Project 853	28.11.2004	Research on stem cell (optional referendum)
Project 871	05.06.2005	Schengen/Dublin Agreement (optional referendum)
Project 881	25.09.2005	Agreement on free movement of persons (optional referendum)
Project 892	27.11.2005	Labour law (optional referendum)

election, and information on the intensity of the campaign. The positive value for intensity shows that high campaign intensity increases an individual's probability of participating in a popular vote. This is in line with previous findings on the influence of campaigning on participation (e.g., Bowler and Donovan, 1998), and provides empirical support for our first hypothesis (H1). The results indicate moreover a positive effect of proximity to the election on individual turnout. However, this effect is far from being statistically credible. This finding supports our hunch from Figure 20.1 that participation is not directly influenced by the electoral cycle. Model 2 additionally contains an interaction term between the two project-specific indicators. Since these coefficients are hard to grasp and easily lead to false interpretation, we turn to graphical presentation of the results (Figure 20.2).

The left-hand panel in Figure 20.2 plots the probability of participation in a federal vote across different levels of campaign intensity. The solid line simulates the effects for votes close to the election; the dashed line represents the votes held after the election. The carpet of grey ticks on the *x*-axis indicates how the observations are distributed across the input variable campaign intensity. Both lines have an upward slope indicating that high campaign intensity fosters individual participation. However, the effect is considerably stronger for the projects put to the vote close to the election. Here, the difference in predicted probability between low and high campaign intensity amounts to twenty-nine percentage points. In non-election years, the effect of campaigns on the vote is less drastic (thirteen percentage points). This finding provides support for our expectation, according to which the effect of campaign intensity on turnout is a function of the election cycle (H3a).

Table 20.4 Random-intercept logic regression

	(1)	*(2)*	*(3)*	*(4)*
Individual level				
Female (ref. male)	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010
	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.032)
Age 18–25 (ref. age 36–45)	–0.547***	–0.547***	–0.547***	–0.547***
	(0.061)	(0.061)	(0.061)	(0.061)
Age 26–35	–0.254***	–0.253***	–0.252***	–0.253***
	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.048)
Age 46–55	0.331***	0.331***	0.331***	0.331***
	(0.049)	(0.049)	(0.050)	(0.049)
Age 56–65	0.68***	0.683***	0.683***	0.684***
	(0.052)	(0.052)	(0.052)	(0.052)
Age 66 and older	0.600***	0.600***	0.601***	0.601***
	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.048)
Education medium (ref. basic and apprentice)	0.300***	0.300***	0.300***	0.300***
	(0.043)	(0.043)	(0.043)	(0.043)
Education high	0.317***	0.317***	0.318***	0.318***
	(0.043)	(0.043)	(0.043)	(0.043)
Political interest: low (ref. medium low)	–2.291***	–2.291***	–2.291***	–2.291***
	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.059)
Political interest: medium high	–1.271***	–1.271***	–1.271***	–1.271***
	(0.036)	(0.036)	(0.036)	(0.036)
Political interest: high	0.82***	0.821***	0.821***	0.821***
	(0.049)	(0.049)	(0.049)	(0.049)
Contextual level				
Closeness to election	0.042	–0.233	–0.168	–0.303
	(0.144)	(0.206)	(0.162)	(0.214)
Campaign intensity	0.807***	0.627**		
	(0.227)	(0.235)		
Closeness × intensity		0.961		
		(0.543)		
Campaign negativity			–0.385	–0.527
			(0.302)	(0.333)
Closeness × negativity				0.6752
				(0.724)
Constant	0.269*	0.354*	0.746***	0.781***
	(0.142)	(0.142)	(0.130)	(0.133)
Variance (project)	0.092	0.081	0.136	0.131
	(0.304)	(0.284)	0.369	(0.362)
Nr. citizens (projects)	23,407 (23)	23,407(23)	23,407 (23)	23,407 (23)
Log Likelihood	–12,796	–12,794	–12,800	–12,800
AIC	25,621	25,620	25,629	25,631

Notes: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001. Unstandardized coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses.

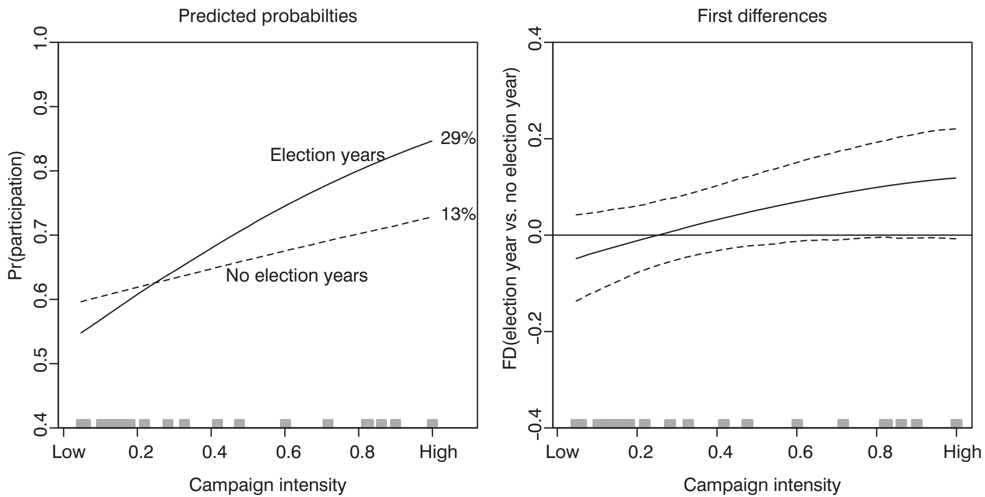

Figure 20.2 Campaign intensity: predicted probabilities and first differences

The right-hand panel in Figure 20.2 goes one step further and plots the differences between the predicted probabilities. It shows whether, for a given level of campaign intensity, individual turnout is significantly less probable in election years than in non-election years. This is not the case. The dotted ninety-five per cent confidence interval never crosses the value zero (black reference line). While the difference between election years and non-election years is substantial at high levels of campaign intensity, there is still a narrow possibility that the effect is in fact inverse.

In our next step, we turn to campaign negativity (models 3 and 4 in Table 20.4). The basic model without interaction points to a negative effect of negativity on participation, thus providing evidence that goes in support of the 'demobilization theory' (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995; Ansolabehere *et al.*, 1994, 1999; Wattenberg and Brians, 1999; Lemert *et al.*, 1999; Lawton and Freedman, 2001). While this is in line with previous findings, the effect is far from being statistically significant. Put differently, the consequences of negative campaigns for individual turnout are ambiguous, which leads us to reject H2a and H2b.

To interpret the interaction between the electoral cycle and campaign negativity, we again rely on graphical presentation of the results (Figure 20.3). The predicted probabilities show that the negativity decreases turnout in non-election years (–12 percentage points) but has no virtually no effect in election years. However, the observed decrease (in non-election years) is not significant on a ninety-five per cent level. Presumably, this is also due to the low variance of negativity across the period under study. Nine out of the twenty-three projects did not see any negativity at all (see Figure 20.1).

We now turn to the first differences visualized in the right-hand panel of Figure 20.3. The results show that at no level of campaign negativity are voters in election years significantly more likely to go to the ballot box than voters in non-election years. This leads us to reject our expectation on the differential effect of negative campaigning as function of the election cycle (H3b).

Discussion and conclusion

Direct democracy and elections are important cogs within the complex system of representative governance. Both mechanisms allow the translation of the popular will into executive (or

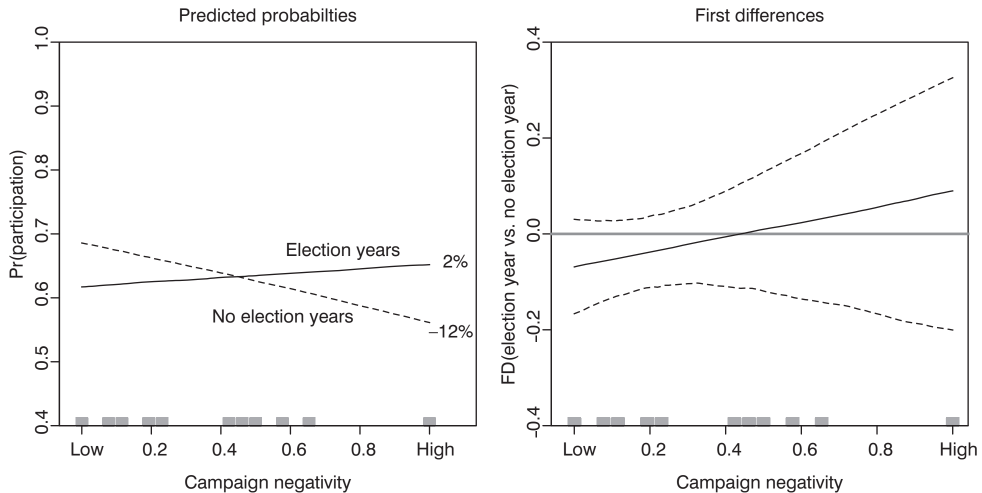

Figure 20.3 Negative campaigning: predicted probabilities and first differences

executable) decisions, either directly through initiatives and referendums or indirectly through electing those who will be in charge of the executive or legislative governance. Within this complex machinery, elections and direct democracy are closely interconnected, rather than separate and independent mechanisms; the ticks and spins of one affect not only the outcomes of the whole machinery, but also the smooth turning of the other.

Concerning the interconnection between elections and direct democracy, however, only part of the story has received the attention it deserves. Evidence exists that direct democracy has the capacity to affect electoral dynamics: perceived salience of direct legislation increases turnout in elections (Lacey, 2005; Tolbert and Smith, 2005), and participation in direct democracy fosters political knowledge (Tolbert *et al*., 2003; Nicholson, 2003; Lupia and Matsusaka, 2004; Benz and Stutzer, 2004) and political efficacy (Smith and Tolbert, 2007; Bowler and Donovan, 2002). However, surprisingly little is known about the opposite mechanism – that is, if and in which ways the evolution of the election cycle affects dynamics within direct democratic votes.

This chapter was a first attempt at this exercise, by showing that the proximity of elections alters the campaigning effects of turnout in direct democracy. Certainly our analyses failed to show any effects for the *content* of campaigns, and more specifically for the use of negative messages. Whether or not political parties and other actors go negative on their opponents, this does not seem to influence turnout differently across the election cycle. Negative campaigning is an endemic phenomenon of modern campaigning techniques (Strömbäck, 2007; Plasser, 2000), and it is here to stay (Nai and Sciarini, 2015). Showing that its effects are not a function of the election cycle should not be seen as an indication that attack politics does not matter for direct democracy – quite the opposite: its effects on citizens' attitudes and behaviours are profound and widespread (see, e.g., Nai, 2013, 2014b, 2015; Lanz and Nai, 2015).

More encouraging, and in line with our expectations, were the results for campaign intensity. Quite simply, our analyses reveal that more intense campaigns foster participation, and that this effect *is even stronger when elections are closer*. This result represents, to our knowledge, the first step towards an integrated framework that models campaigning effects in direct democracy also as a function of election dynamics. In countries whose political life revolves both around direct and representative legislation, such an integrated framework seems to be particularly required.

Beyond covering new ground and filling the compulsory gap in the literature, these results have important implications for our understanding of the relationships between citizens and political elites.

From the citizens' perspective, our results highlight that the structure of constraints that bounds their political actions acquires an additional layer. Not only their decision to participate or not (in this case, turn out in federal votes) can be modelled as a function of campaign content, but this effect itself depends on overarching forces (the election cycle) that should naturally be completely exogenous to the dynamics at stake. The voice of citizens is but an echo of what elites do and say (Key, 1966), and this echo deepens and weakens following cycles over which citizens have but little control.

From the elites' perspective, our results indicate that political parties willing to shape popular votes should *not* stop paying attention to their referendum campaigns when elections are close. Of course elections are costly affairs, and the resources of political parties are not unlimited. In this configuration, it might be tempting, when elections loom, to invest less money and energy in direct democratic campaigns to secure higher resources for the upcoming electoral contest. From a limited resources perspective, this decision might seem reasonable and pragmatic, but it might come with severe consequences. Our results show that parties get more 'bang for their buck' when they invest energy and money in referendum campaigns that are close to elections – at the peak of the election cycle, campaign intensity matters more for citizen mobilization. Devoting less energy might thus ease the task for the opposite camp – losing a referendum battle just months before an important federal election could worsen the situation, and lead to dire unforeseen costs in the election war.

From a systemic perspective, finally, our results confirm the importance of elections as cornerstones of the political game, even in a context where elected legislators are not the only ones responsible for fostering legislative changes. Elections not only directly shape the political landscape, but their influence indirectly spills over into other components of the political machinery – to the point that the mere temporal proximity of elections alters the rules of the game and allows political elites to get their messages across more efficiently.

Notes

1 In a BBC article on the topic, the journalist argues that 'if the minaret campaign is, as some suspect, a vote-grabbing ploy ahead of October's general election, then it is a successful one; the party is riding high in the opinion polls'. I. Foulkes, 'Swiss move to ban minarets', BBC News, published on 28 May 2007 (available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6676271.stm Accessed 11 August 2017).

2 Testing for the mediation effect of need for cognition would require ideally a longitudinal set of data, a precise battery of questions allowing us to measure need for cognition efficiently (e.g., Huddy *et al*., 2005), and ideally also an experimental setting in which the variations of need for cognition (and the subsequent effects on exposure to and treatment of information) can be controlled. Unfortunately, none of this is available in our case, which is why we only postulate here the mediating role of the need for cognition as an underlying rationale.

3 The median voter is a female citizen, thirty-six to forty-five years of age, with a primary education and a medium low interest in politics.

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