The Use of Partisan Cues in Direct Democracy: Registration of the experimental design.

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1 Introduction

This document presents the use of partisan heuristics in vote choice for direct democratic ballots. We will present our research design which consists of a survey experiment that aims to evaluate the causal effect of partisan heuristic on vote choice. The experiment is conducted in Switzerland on a representative sample of 2000 respondents with the survey company Link. Additionally, we run the survey through a local newspaper website (Bielertagblatt) on Facebook and with a list of email we collected in previous surveys[1]. The survey concerns a single ballot issue on which the Swiss people will have to vote on the 9th of February 2020. The ballot is an initiative that aims to increase the supply of affordable housing.

In the following, we will first present a general theoretical overview and the research question we aim to contribute to with this study. In a second step, we present our research design and formulate our expectations. Finally, we present the survey questions and the coding scheme.

2 Theory and Expectations

In this section, we will first present a theoretical framework before stating our expectations based on the theory.

2.1 Partisan Heuristics in Direct Democracy: the Role of Knowledge

The debate about the viability of direct democracy centers on the question whether people are sufficiently aware to take well-informed decisions (Bowler et al., 1998; Lupia and Matsusaka, 2004). The elaboration-likelihood model considers two types of paths to arrive at them: a systematic and a heuristic one (Kriesi, 2005). While ideal decision making should be done through systematic information processing, it requires high cognitive capacity and is very demanding in time and resources. Hence, this type of decision making is not realizable in many situations. Alternatively, voters can try to make rational decisions by mobilizing heuristics. Heuristics are cognitive shortcuts that allow for decision making that is less demanding in time, resources or

[1] In surveys that are conducted via other channels than through the professional survey company Link (i.e. Facebook, Bielertagblatt and email) we ask additional questions that are not presented in this paper. This paper only focuses on the questions in the core questionnaire that is common to all the channels through which we collect responses.

cognitive ability than systematic information processing. Hence, arguably a majority of voters base their decisions on heuristics. The key question, it follows, is whether the use of heuristics allows for reasonable decision making. While optimists argue that heuristics allow voters to emulate the decision of well-informed voters (Lupia, 1994; Lupia and Johnston, 2001), pessimists worry that citizens would use heuristics without worrying about their accuracy (Kuklinski et al., 2000). In the latter case, the use of heuristics would simulate an ill-informed and not a well-informed decision.

We can distinguish two general sorts of heuristics in the literature. First, people can base their decision making based on the statuts quo. For example, if they are highly risk averse, they might always opt for the status quo instead of risking change. This status quo heuristic demands few cognitive abilities and little information processing (Kriesi, 2005: 138; Bowler and Donovan, 1998). Second, people can take cues from the elites' position on direct democratic ballots. This means that voters might be differently influenced in their decision-making when elites convey the message that the project is positive or negative for the country. These elite cues can be taken from a variety of actors such as interest groups (Lupia, 1994), the government or the different parties (Kriesi, 2005). From all the cues people can take from the elites, Kriesi (2005, p. 139) argues that the partisan heuristic "constitutes the quintessential shortcut in direct democratic votes". Consequently, in this paper, we focus on the use of partisan heuristics.

While there is a large consensus that party cues are important for vote choice, the moderating effect of knowledge on the use of this heuristic remains unclear. Lupia (1994) finds that less knowledgeable people make more use of elite cues to take a decision than politically aware voters. This is in line with the theoretical argument which suggests that people rely on heuristics if they cannot process the information systematically. When people have more knowledge, they rely less on heuristics since they possess the information that they need to process.

Lupia (1994) assumes that taking cues from the lobbies of the industry should have a uniform effect on voters, that is to say, increase their support for the ballot proposal. This means that voters should all believe that the preferred outcome for these lobbies is also preferable for themselves. This assumption is suspicious mostly due to the fact that lobbies are organizations known to defend specific interests. Nevertheless, this assumption might be true in contexts where the lobbies simply describe a position that is considered preferable by everyone who processes the information systematically. This holds only if we assume that the most knowledgeable people

were all reaching the same conclusion regarding the preferable outcome. In this case, the lobbies would just carry on a message widely accepted by all the elites and taking cues from any actor would have a the same effect. In contrast, if the elites are divided regarding the preferable outcome, then not all information direct the voters towards the same vote choice. Instead, it can lead to opposite conclusions (more support VS more opposition) depending on the group of elites voters trust more to guide them in their decision making. This is precisely what Kuklinski et al. (2000, p.8) argue for the case studied by Lupia (1994). According to them, most economist experts adopted the opposite positon than the lobbies.

From the debate above, we can summarize that if we do not consider the attitudes towards a group when evaluating the effect of the position of this group on the outcome, it is difficult to argue that people made use of heuristics. Indeed, if someone is a strong opponent of the industry group, their position on the proposal might influence this person to vote in the opposite direction. However, in this case, the voter still used the position of the industry as a cognitive shortcut to take a more informed decision. Hence we do not know if voters carefully grasp the information about the industry position to make a reasonably informed decision or if they blindly adopted the position of the industry to cast their ballot. In this paper, we argue that in order to evaluate the causal effect of elite cues on voting decisions for direct democratic ballots, voters should be able to recall the position of a given group and to place themselves toward this group. Only then it is possible to assess the causal effect of heuristics and to assess whether people use these heuristics to simulate a well-informed decision making or not. Therefore, in contrast to Lupia (1994) we propose to investigate the effect of knowledge on the use of heuristics by voters by considering the attitude toward the elite group they take cues from.

While Lupia (1994) argues that information on elite position mostly affects voters that are less politically aware, Kriesi (2005) argues that the use of heuristics, specifically the partisan heuristic, requires some level of issue-specific awareness. This is because it requires some specific knowledge to know the party position. When voters do not know the position of parties they cannot use the partisan heuristic and hence, the use of partisan heuristic is limited to voters that have at least some level of issue-specific awareness. Indeed, while in elections the link between parties and candidates is often evident, in direct democracy the vote recommendations of parties might not reach all voters. In line with his argument, Kriesi (2005) found that people that are more politically aware are more likely to vote in line with their preferred party. However, his finding is based on a causal interpretation of the correlation between the party positions of

the voters' preferred party and their vote choice. This might be problematic for two reasons. First, the correlation might be based on omitted variables that can simultaneously influence both party preference and vote choice on direct democratic proposals. Second, the correlation might to some extent be driven by post-rationalization when respondents in surveys try to give consistent answers to the questions on party preference and vote choice.

2.2 Expectations

In this section, we summarize the three main expectations derived from our theoretical framework.

- Partisan Cues Hypothesis

In a direct democracy, the use of partisan heuristic implies that party identifiers are more likely to vote in line with party positions. Therefore, we expect that voters vote more in favor (against) a direct democratic proposal when their preferred party support (is opposed to) the project.

- Lupia's Hypothesis

Contradicting expectations leave the question about the moderation of awareness on the use of partisan cues open. Lupia (1994) finds that less knowledgeable people make more use of elite cues to take decisions than more informed voters. Accordingly, we should expect that people with more knowledge about a policy proposal mobilize less elite cues to form an opinion on a policy proposal (Lupia hypothesis). While we expect that Lupia was right, we also test the counter hypothesis of Kriesi which state that more informed voters rely more on party cues to take a decision on direct democratic ballots (Kriesi's hypothesis).

Since the relationship between party position of the preferred party and vote choice as well as its moderation through political interest remains an open question, we will investigate it empirically. As the previous discussion shows, to resolve it, we need a causal research design. This is what we will present in the next section.

3 Research Design

To test our hypotheses, we will conduct a survey experiment with several questions. First, we ask respondents a set of pre-treatment variables about their political predispositions and more precisely about their political interest and their trust in the government. The question on political interest is used to operationalize political awareness. The trust in government is used as a control variable. Both of these variables are ordinal. Political interest is coded from 1 (not at all interested) to 4 (very interested) and the trust in government is in five categories from 1 (Don't trust) to 5 (Definitively trust).

In a second step, we ask respondents about their vote intention for the next ballot proposal after exposing them to the treatment. The treatment consists in a random allocation of parties' positions for this ballot based on their vote in the National Parliament on the same issue. Overall we treat respondents with the position of the five main Swiss parties (Greens, SP, CVP, FDP, and SVP) and follow up by asking their vote intention. Additionally, we have a control group in which we do not give respondents any indication on parties' positions.

In a final step, we ask respondents about their support for the five main parties on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means that the respondent is a strong opponent to the party and 10 means the respondent is a strong supporter. Additionally, we ask respondents about their position on a left-right axis where 0 means all left and 10 means all right.

3.1 Questions Wording

3.1.1 Political Interest

German Wie interessiert sind Sie im Allgemeinen an der Politik?

- Sehr interessiert
- Eher interessiert
- Eher nicht interessiert
- Nicht interessiert
- Weiss nicht

French Dans quelle mesure vous vous intéressez à la politique, en général ?

- Très intéressé(e)
- Plutôt intéressé(e)
- Plutôt pas intéressé(e)
- Pas du tout intéressé(e)
- Ne sais pas

3.1.2 Trust in government

German Wie sehr vertrauen Sie dem Bundesrat?

- Vertraue überhaupt nicht
- Vertraue eher nicht
- Weder noch
- Vertraue eher
- Vertraue vollständig
- Weiss nicht

French À quel point faites-vous confiance au Conseil fédéral?

- Pas du tout confiance
- Pas vraiment confiance
- Ni confiance, ni pas confiance
- Plutôt confiance
- Totalement confiance
- Ne sais pas

3.1.3 Vote intention (and treatment)

The question on vote intention is made of three parts. First, we have an *introduction* that aims to introduce the question on vote intention to respondents. Second, we have the *treatment* that consists of a randomly assigned piece of text about one of the five main parties' position, and the control condition in which this part is absent. Finally, we ask people about their *vote intention*.

Introduction German

Am 9. Februar wird die Schweizer Bevölkerung über die Initiative "Mehr bezhalbare Wohnungen" abstimmen.

Introduction French

Le 9 février prochain, le peuple Suisse doit se prononcer sur l'initiative "Davantage de logements abordable".

Treatment German

a. FDP

Basierend auf dem Stimmverhalten der Nationalräte wissen wir, dass die FDP gegen die Initiative ist.

b. CVP

Basierend auf dem Stimmverhalten der Nationalräte wissen wir, dass die CVP gegen die Initiative ist.

c. SVP

Basierend auf dem Stimmverhalten der Nationalräte wissen wir, dass die SVP gegen die Initiative ist.

d. SP

Basierend auf dem Stimmverhalten der Nationalräte wissen wir, dass die SP für die Initiative ist.

e. Grünen

Basierend auf dem Stimmverhalten der Nationalräte wissen wir, dass die Grünen für die Initiative ist.

f. Control

No text

Treatment French

a. PLR

En se basant sur les votes des Conseillers nationaux, nous savons que le PLR est opposé à l'initiative.

b. PDC

En se basant sur les votes des Conseillers nationaux, nous savons que le PDC est opposé à l'initiative.

c. UDC

En se basant sur les votes des Conseillers nationaux, nous savons que l'UDC est opposé à l'initiative.

d. PS

En se basant sur les votes des Conseillers nationaux, nous savons que le PS est favorable à l'initiative.

e. Verts

En se basant sur les votes des Conseillers nationaux, nous savons que les Verts sont favorables à l'initiative.

f. Control

No text

Vote intention German

Und Sie, wenn die Abstimmung über die Initiative "Mehr bazahlbare Wohnungen" mogen wäre, wie würden Sie abstimmen?

Vote intention French

Et vous, si le vote sur l'initiative "Davantage de logements abordables" avait lieu demain, quelle serait votre décision sur ce vote?

Example of treatment question

To formulate our treatment, we couple the introduction with one of the treatments and add the vote intention question. We propose five response categories from definitively in favor to definitively against and leave a "don't know" category. At the end the question looks as follow:

German example, SP in favor

Am 9. Februar wird die Schweizer Bevölkerung über die Initiative "Mehr bezhalbare Wohnungen" abstimmen. Basierend auf dem Stimmverhalten der Nationalräte wissen wir, dass die SP für die Initiative ist. Und Sie[2], wenn die Abstimmung über die Initiative "Mehr bazahlbare Wohnungen" mogen wäre, wie würden Sie abstimmen?

- Bestimmt dafür
- Eher dafür
- Eher dagegen
- Bestimmt dagegen
- Weiss nicht

French example, FDP against

Le 9 février prochain, le peuple Suisse doit se prononcer sur l'initiative "Davantage de logements abordable". En se basant sur les votes des Conseillers nationaux, nous savons que le PLR est opposé à l'initiative. Et vous, si le vote sur l'initiative "Davantage de logements abordables" avait lieu demain, quelle serait votre décision sur ce vote?

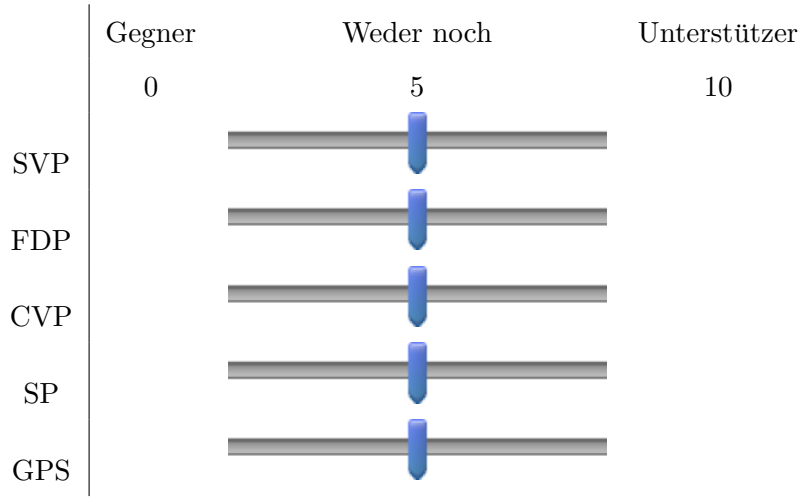
- Définitivement pour
- Plutôt pour

[2]In order for the question to be readable, we drop the "Und Sie" (German) and "Et vous" (French) when respondents are exposed to the control.

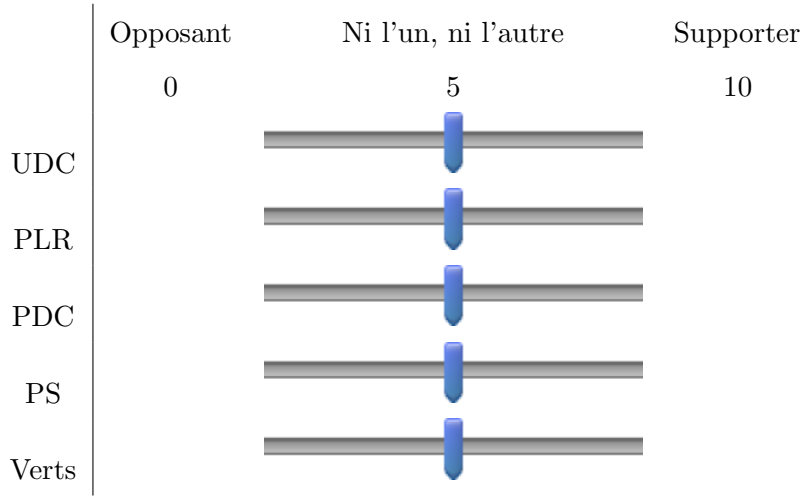
- Plutôt contre
- Définitivement contre
- Ne sais pas

3.1.4 Party support

German Könnten Sie uns sagen, ob Sie sich eher als Gegner oder Unterstützer der folgenden Partei sehen?

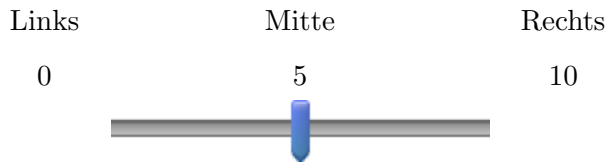


French Pourriez-vous indiquer si vous êtes plutôt un opposant ou un supporter des partis suivants ?



3.1.5 Left-right self-placement

German Können Sie uns sagen, wo Sie sich selber auf einer Skala, auf der 0 ganz links, 5 die Mitte und 10 ganz rechts bedeutet, positionieren?



French Pouvez-vous nous dire où vous vous positionnez sur une échelle où 0 signifie tout à gauche, 5 centre et 10 tout à droite ?

Gauche	Centre	Droite
0	5	10

3.2 Methods

To test our hypotheses, we will conduct linear regressions with vote intention as the dependent variable. The independent variable is the treatment allocation. Based on our argument, we expect our treatment to have a different effect depending of the support respondents have for the party they received the treatment from.

$$Votint_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 i \times Treatment_i + \beta_2 \times Support_i + \beta_3 \times Treatment_i \times Support_i + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Where i represents the survey respondent, $Votint$ is the vote intention of the respondent, $Treatment$ represents the treatment received by the respondent and $Support$ is the support of the rspondent for the party he received the position of. Following this model, β_3 should indicate the effect of the treatment for each type of relationship to the party.

In a second step, we aim to test whether the treatment effect is stronger for respondent with low political interest. To do so, we test the following model:

$$Votint_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 i \times Treatment_i + \beta_2 \times Support_i + \beta_3 \times Polint_i + \beta_4 \times Treatment_i \times Support_i + \beta_5 \times Treatment_i \times Polint_i + \beta_6 \times Support_i \times Polint_i + \beta_7 \times Treatment_i \times Support_i \times Polint_i + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

Where $Polint_i$ represent the interest in politics of respondent i. In equation (2) we will interpret β_7 to see whether the interest in politics decrease the effect of the treatment as expected.

4 Power analysis

To have a general overview of the power we need to conduct our regression, we conducted some power analyses. As mentioned in the research design, overall we have 6 different treatment groups. However, to estimate the treatment effect we acknowledge that we have to differentiate between party supporters, party opponents and respondents that feel neutral towards a party. Therefore, we estimate the required sample size by groups with 6 and 18 (6 treatments times 3 attitudes towards the party) groups respectively for significance levels equals to .01 and .05. Table1 displays the results of the different power analyses.

Table 1: Sample size estimation

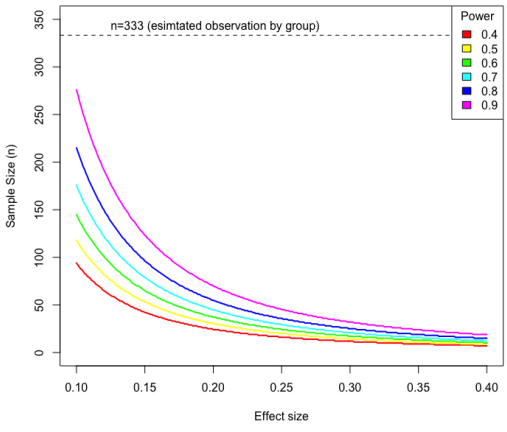
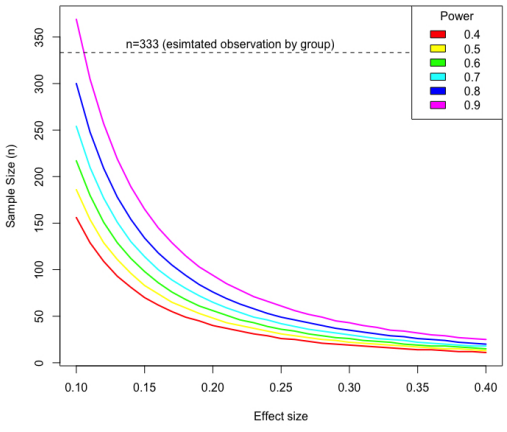
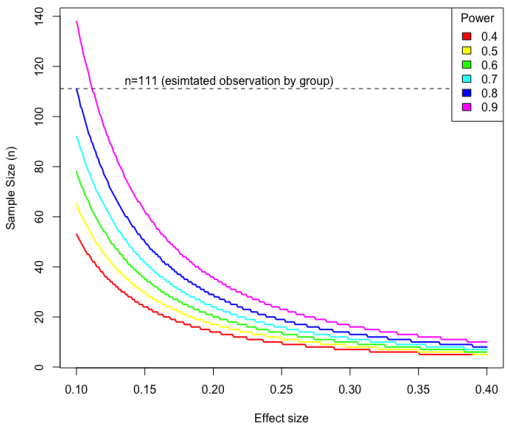
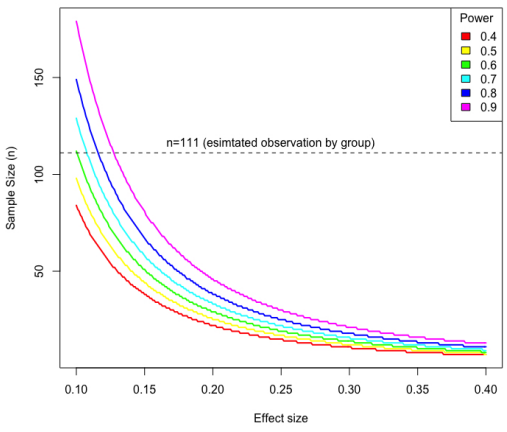
	Sig=.05	Sig=.01
6 groups		
18 groups		

Table 1 shows that the number of observations needed to conduct our analyses should be sufficient. Indeed, even with a conservative evaluation (i.e. a significance level = 0.01 and 18 groups), we should still have sufficient power to run our analyses.

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