

# Does Direct Democracy Enhance Politicians' Perceptions of Constituents' Opinions? Evidence from Switzerland

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## Abstract

Elected members of parliament (MPs) are supposed to represent their constituents and, thus, to have an accurate perception of citizens' policy preferences. It is often assumed that direct democracy instruments, such as the popular initiative and the referendum, have a positive impact on MPs' perceptual accuracy. This study assesses whether direct democracy has the expected positive effect in Switzerland. It measures how accurately MPs perceive their constituents' opinions on a variety of policy proposals through a parallel survey of 97 national MPs and 4677 citizens. Empirical evidence shows that MPs perceive policy proposals that have been subjected to a direct democracy vote more accurately. Furthermore, MPs have a higher perceptual accuracy if the policy proposal submitted to a popular vote was conflictual with a narrow ballot outcome. Direct democracy thus fosters political representation as popular votes constitute an important source of information and sustain MPs' ability to accurately assess citizens' preferences.

## Zusammenfassung

Gewählte Parlamentarier:innen sollten ihre Wähler:innen vertreten und daher die politischen Präferenzen der Bürger:innen richtig einschätzen können. Es wird oft

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angenommen, dass direktdemokratische Instrumente wie die Volksinitiative und das Referendum einen positiven Einfluss auf die Richtigkeit dieser Wahrnehmung der Parlamentarier:innen haben. Diese Studie untersucht, ob die direkte Demokratie in der Schweiz diesen positiven Effekt hat. Wir messen, wie richtig die Parlamentarier:innen die Meinung ihrer Wähler:innen zu einer Reihe von politischen Vorschlägen einschätzen, mittels einer parallelen Befragung von 97 nationalen Parlamentarier:innen und 4'677 Bürger:innen. Unsere Resultate zeigen, dass die Parlamentarier:innen die Meinung ihrer Wähler:innen dann exakter einschätzen, wenn über politische Vorschläge abgestimmt wurde, und insbesondere dann, wenn der Vorschlag in der Abstimmung umkämpft war und das Abstimmungsergebnis knapp war. Die direkte Demokratie fördert somit die politische Vertretung, da Volksabstimmungen eine wichtige Informationsquelle darstellen und die Fähigkeit der Abgeordneten unterstützen, die Präferenzen der Bürger:innen genau einzuschätzen.

### Résumé

Les député·e·s élu·e·s au Parlement sont censés représenter leurs électeurs·trices et, par conséquent, avoir une perception précise de leurs préférences politiques. On suppose généralement que les instruments de la démocratie directe, tels que l'initiative populaire et le référendum, ont un impact positif sur l'exactitude des perceptions des député·e·s. Cette étude analyse si, en Suisse, la démocratie directe induit un tel effet positif. Par le biais d'une enquête parallèle auprès de 97 élus parlementaires fédéraux et 4'677 citoyen·ne·s, elle mesure la précision avec laquelle les député·e·s perçoivent l'opinion de leurs électeurs·trices sur une variété de propositions politiques. Les constats empiriques montrent que les député·e·s perçoivent plus correctement les préférences de leurs électeurs·trices sur des propositions politiques qui ont été soumises à un vote de démocratie directe, et ceci surtout lorsque les propositions sont conflictuelles et le résultat du vote populaire est serré. La démocratie directe favorise donc la représentation politique car l'issue des votes populaires constitue une source d'information importante pour les

élus parlementaires et renforce leur capacité à évaluer avec exactitude les préférences des citoyens.

#### KEYWORDS

citizens' votes, direct democracy, elite survey, parliament, representation

## INTRODUCTION

Elected Members of Parliament (MPs) are expected to represent their constituencies. Theoretically, this duty can be fulfilled in different ways (Pitkin, 1967), but is most often assessed by examining substantive representation, i.e., MPs' responsiveness to changes in public opinion (Stimson et al., 1995: 548), and the policy congruence between citizens' interests and their representatives' policy decisions at a given point in time (Lax & Phillips, 2012: 148). The research on substantive representation paints a rather optimistic picture of the relationship between citizens and MPs, reporting high levels of agreement in terms of policy outputs (Erikson et al., 2008; Page & Shapiro, 1992; Soroka & Wlezién, 2010) and correspondence between the public's general ideological disposition and that of its representatives (Wessels, 2007). In general, MPs tend to act according to their constituencies' preferences, provided they have this kind of information (Butler, 2011), and might even adapt their own position to that of their constituents (Sevenans, 2021).

However, in the literature there is little consensus on the origins of MPs' responsiveness and policy congruence and the underlying mechanisms. Miller and Stokes' (1963: 49) seminal article suggests two routes to substantive representation. The first consists in electing MPs who share voters' opinions and preferences; the second comes down to MPs' desire to enact policies in line with their constituents' preferences because they want to get re-elected, which leads them to invest in correctly gauging public opinion.

This second route requires MPs to have an accurate perception of what their constituents want. Existing research suggests that perceptual accuracy, i.e., the precision with which MPs estimate citizens' preferences, cannot be taken for granted (Belchior, 2014; Clausen et al., 1983; Hedlund & Friesema, 1972). Studies show that MPs' parliamentary roles (Hedlund & Friesema, 1972), the policy issues at stake (Miller & Stokes, 1963), the nature of public opinion (Clausen et al., 1983), parties' issue ownership (Varone & Helfer, 2021), the information delivered by public interest groups (Eichenberger et al., 2021), and social projection (Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996; Pierce & Converse, 1986; Sevenans et al., 2021) are all important factors influencing MPs' perceptions of public opinion. Building on these insights, we focus on the information on public preferences with which previous ballot outcomes provide MPs.

Institutions shape how MPs and citizens interact and, more importantly, how well political outcomes reflect the constituents' will. Direct democracy instruments provide voters with a means to correcting particular elite-voter preference gaps because they always concern specific policy issues (Coate & Besley, 2000). In this participatory vision of democracy, voters assume the role of veto players in the policy-making process (Bützer, 2011: 138; Hug & Tsebelis, 2002) and thus contribute to the political discourse in a dynamic, deliberative, and meaningful way (Sager & Bühlmann, 2009: 190). As such, the mere existence of direct democracy instruments is said to be beneficial for policy congruence (Gerber, 1999; Leemann & Wasserfallen, 2016; Matsusaka, 2010; Pommerehne, 1978). Direct democracy instruments allow citizens to establish substantive representation on an issue-by-issue basis (Matsusaka, 2004; Sager & Bühlmann, 2009: 202; Smith & Tolbert, 2004).

Building on Miller and Stokes' (1963) argument, this study investigates a mechanism through which policy congruence is likely to come about in direct democracy systems: MPs' more accurate perceptions of their constituencies' opinions. If MPs' perceptual accuracy is an essential link between citizens' preferences and MPs' responsiveness and policy congruence, we should also be able to measure the influence of direct democracy empirically through MPs' ability to more precisely estimate their constituencies' preferences.

Many countries and sub-national entities around the world are familiar with direct democracy procedures. Beyond the emblematic example of Switzerland, where citizens' rights to self-determination are most developed and used worldwide (Altman, 2011; Leemann & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2021; Vatter, 2016: 359), over 70 percent of Americans live in cities or states that allow popular initiatives (e.g., Boehmke, 2005; Bowler et al., 1998; Gerber, 1999; Tolbert & Smith, 2006: 25). Direct democracy is a political reality even at the supra-national level. For instance, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI, introduced in 2011) seeks to give a voice to European citizens and to facilitate their active participation in policy-making (Tosun & Varone, 2020). Direct democracy instruments have repeatedly been proposed as a possible remedy to the divide between citizens and politicians. Our study empirically tests the argument that direct democracy instruments can serve as a beneficial "add-on" to standard liberal representative democracy (Held, 1996; Kriesi, 2005: 2–8).

The rest of this article is organized as follows: the next section summarizes the existing research on direct democracy, policy congruence and perceptual accuracy and introduces our hypotheses. The third section details the data – gathered through parallel surveys of citizens and MPs in Switzerland – that we use to test these hypotheses; our operationalization of the relevant variables and our methodological choices. The fourth section presents the main results of the analysis: The empirical evidence shows that ballot votes on specific issues contribute to MPs' perceptual accuracy and, thus, to the "perceptual path" to substantive representation that Miller and Stokes identify. The last section discusses these results and draws more general conclusions.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND EXPECTATIONS

Direct democracy instruments affect the entire policy process. With the constant threat of an optional referendum pending like the Sword of Damocles over the whole decision-making process, finding large majorities by cooperating with influential political actors is a necessity in a direct democratic system like Switzerland (Kloeti et al., 2007; Lehbruch, 1967; Linder, 2012; Neidhart, 1970; Papadopoulos, 2001; Sciarini, 2004; Vatter, 2016). Because of the possibility of an ex-post referendum, the government and MPs strive to resolve conflicts of interests before a new law is passed in an effort to avoid a defeat by referendum in the future. Thus, all parties and groups theoretically capable of launching a referendum, i.e., endowed with the material resources necessary to collect valid signatures, are included in the decision-making process (Linder, 2012; Neidhart, 1970). The emphasis on interest groups suggests that even if political actors are influenced by instruments like the referendum, policy responsiveness might be selective to specific groups (Eichenberger & Varone, 2020). Just like in the US system, the mobilization of affluent interest groups can actually cause policy outcomes that do not match citizens' preferences (Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Gilens & Page, 2014; Miler, 2007).

Nevertheless, several US studies have produced evidence that suggests that the initiative process has a positive effect on policy congruence and on the equal representation of all interests. For example, Gerber (1999) found that, on the issues of parental consent laws and the capital punishment, initiatives actually tend to bring policy outcomes closer to the preferences of the median voter. In a similar vein, Matsusaka (2010: 145) showed that policy congruence is

significantly higher in those US states that offer the initiative process than in those that do not. Direct democracy instruments like the initiative thus help promote majority rule. Progressive US scholars have also claimed that direct democracy has an educational effect on elected representatives and interest groups (Smith & Tolbert, 2004). Indeed, the initiative process makes it possible to counteract the undue influence of business groups, which could distort MPs' perceptions about citizens' preferences (Eichenberger et al., 2021). The mere existence of direct democracy instruments creates incentives for citizen groups to mobilize (Boehmke, 2005: 148; Smith & Tolbert, 2004: 96–102). Furthermore, the advocacy activities of not-for-profit organizations contribute to a more equal representation of all policy interests and, consequently, to MPs' responsiveness to citizen majorities. In other words, narrow and special interests are unable to subvert the initiative process and to distort MPs' perceptual accuracy and policy decisions at the expense of the public good: “the initiative appears to promote the interests of the many rather than the few” (Matsusaka, 2004: 3). However, one notable study on ballot initiatives, state policies and public opinion that compared the responsiveness of US jurisdictions that allow for direct democratic involvement with those that do not, concluded that the “presence or absence [of an initiative] has very little effect on the correspondence of public policy with public opinion” (Lascher et al., 1996: 761).

In the Swiss context, many scholars have argued that direct democracy has a positive effect on congruence (e.g., Pommerehne, 1978). More recently, Leemann and Wasserfallen (2016) found that referendums and initiatives have a positive impact on policy congruence and that this effect increases the more elite and voter preferences diverge. The reason is that if direct democracy instruments are available to the electorate, political elites might identify and follow the majority position regardless of their own, anticipating their ideological differences with voters. The authors call this “the main democratic power of direct democracy” (Leemann & Wasserfallen, 2016: 761).

Although studies regularly link direct democracy with increased policy congruence, empirical tests of how exactly this relationship comes about are rather scarce. It seems plausible that perceptions of public opinion might at least partially account for it. First, direct democracy instruments could lead politicians to be generally more attentive to their constituencies' opinions given the threat of a potential corrective. Second, being a direct source of information about public opinion, popular votes (initiatives or referendums) provide MPs with direct information about their constituencies' opinions. These two mechanisms potentially explain the aforementioned relationship. This study focuses on the second mechanism and expects that direct democracy votes positively affects the precision of MPs' perceptions of their constituents' opinions.

Few scholars have used direct democracy votes to directly explain policy congruence. At best, previous popular ballot votes have appeared as a control variable: For instance, Leemann and Wasserfallen find no evidence of a relationship between direct democracy votes and policy congruence on specific topics (Leemann & Wasserfallen, 2016). Focusing on direct democracy votes as an information provision tool, we expect past ballots to affect MPs' perceptions of their constituents' opinions. In keeping with information accessibility theory (Miler, 2007), it is logical to assume that binding ballot outcomes (i.e., the share of citizens supporting a new law or constitutional amendment) are an easily accessible source of information for MPs. When citizens participate in a ballot vote such as a referendum or an initiative, they provide representatives with important information about their policy positions. Thus, the presence of previous votes should have a positive effect on MPs' perceptual accuracy – assuming that MPs use these votes to correctly estimate citizens' preferences on the same topic. Accordingly, Hypothesis 1 considers ballot outcomes as sources of information and posits that *MPs' perceptual accuracy for policy issues that have been subjected to a previous ballot vote is significantly higher than their perceptual accuracy for policy issues that have not been subjected to a vote.*

In addition to the mere existence of a previous popular vote, the amount of conflict during the voting campaign and, relatedly, the uncertainty about the ballot outcome might be relevant. Previous studies have shown that MPs estimate their electorates' preferences more accurately if they can identify a clear majority (Clausen et al., 1983: 468), building further on the seminal study by Miller and Stokes (1963: 51). At the same time, a clear majority can arguably make the vote less interesting and might therefore not have a lasting impact on MPs' perceptions. For one, the media's selection logic makes the coverage of a conflictual vote, where campaigns fight for every vote in an effort to win the majority, much more appealing. The media therefore increase the political conflict and the public controversy around the issue at stake and raise the vote among large segments of the population. Moreover, MPs find it logical to engage with a vote if there is a chance to sway the public. Because of their limited resources, it does not make sense for them to devote time and staff to a campaign that will bolster (or go against) their positions. Consequently, Hypothesis 2 postulates that *MPs' perceptual accuracy is higher for past conflictual ballot votes than for ballot votes that have been won with a clear majority.*

In addition to this very direct influence of direct democratic votes, we also test for a number of related mechanisms focusing on MPs. For example, studies have highlighted the impact of issue saliency on MPs' perceptual accuracy (Hedlund & Friesema, 1972; Miller & Stokes, 1963): The more important an issue is for an elected representative, the more she invests in the issue, which in turn makes information more accessible and easier to recall (Miler, 2007). Therefore, we expect that direct democracy votes are particularly informative and effective in increasing MPs' perceptions of their constituents' preferences if they concern issues that are important to the MPs. Accordingly, hypothesis 3 investigates this possible moderating effect of saliency. Specifically, we expect that *a previous vote's positive effect on perceptual accuracy increases the more salient the issue is for an MP.*

Finally, we build on Leemann and Wasserfallen (2016) and also check whether the causal deviates from that of the citizens he/she represents: Hypothesis 4 expects that *a direct democracy vote only improves an MP's perceptual accuracy if the MP and his/her district disagree on the issue at stake.*

## DATA AND METHODS

The methodological design of this study consists of a survey of the Swiss population, a face-to-face survey of members of the federal parliament, and the combination of both surveys. The survey respondents received specific policy proposals on various national policy domains with varying levels of visibility and constituency opinion distribution (e.g., "The pension age needs to be raised to 67" or "Switzerland needs to buy new fighter jets"; see the full list of policy proposals in Supporting information). Citizens were asked to agree or disagree with each policy proposal. In addition, we asked MPs to estimate the percentage of citizens in their district that agreed with each policy proposal. Comparing the answers to the citizens' survey and the MPs' estimations allows us to measure MPs' perceptual accuracy for each policy proposal.

We know of one study that investigates MPs' perceptions of public opinion in the context of direct democracy using an actual vote (Pereira, 2021). However, the focus of our paper – to investigate the informational function of direct democracy instruments – requires us to compare respondents' perceptions on issues that have already been subjected to a vote in recent years to those that have not. Our design follows this logic: only some of the policy proposals for which we asked MPs to estimate their constituencies' opinions had recently been up to a direct democracy vote.

We focus on Switzerland as a country with a long-standing tradition of direct democracy. Three kinds of direct democracy instruments are available at the national level. The popular initiative allows citizens to suggest an amendment to the Federal Constitution by collecting

at least 100,000 valid signatures within 18 months. A mandatory referendum is required to approve revisions of the Constitution, entry into international organizations and urgent laws under certain conditions. It is also possible to launch an optional referendum – 50,000 citizens or eight cantons may launch one for federal statutes, urgent statutes that have been valid for more than one year, and, under certain conditions, for international treaties. Similar direct democracy instruments exist at the subnational levels (i.e., for cantons and municipalities). In some cantons, citizens can also challenge large public investments through a financial referendum (Linder, 2012; Vatter, 2016: 369). In sum, the use of these direct democracy instruments is one of the most developed worldwide (Leemann & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2021), making Switzerland a prime case for studying the effects of direct democracy on MPs' perceptual accuracy. At the national level, citizens are invited to express their preferences on a diverse range of topics about four to five times a year.

## Data collection

Our online citizen survey was carried out between May 28 and July 16, 2018, among a random probability sample of 10,268 individuals provided by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (which excluded the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino). We sent out letters asking respondents to access an online survey and included a check for CHF 10 as an incentive. The second reminder letter included a paper version of the survey. A total of 4677 respondents participated in our survey, making for a cooperation rate of 46 percent.

Our sample can be considered representative of Switzerland as a whole (see Supporting information). To ensure that our estimates per district are reliable, we follow other recent studies that estimate scores for sub-national entities based on national-level survey data. In such instances, multilevel regressions with post-stratification (MrP) yield more reliable predictions for discrete sub-units (e.g., Lax & Phillips, 2009; Leemann & Wasserfallen, 2016, 2017). We rely on post-stratification to create a weight that uses the joint distribution of age, gender and education variables per district. We then use iterative fitting, which considers the joint distribution from the previous step and parties' strength in the last general election in each district as a marginal distribution, to also weigh for partisanship. We thus weigh our citizen sample for each district on age, gender, education, and partisanship.<sup>1</sup>

Our MP survey targeted all members of the Swiss Federal Assembly (i.e., both the National Council and the Council of States) with the exceptions of the members who represented the single Italian-speaking district. Our population thus numbered 236 MPs. Each member was first contacted via mail (our initial letter disclosed all relevant information about the study) and then called personally to schedule a meeting. The meetings followed a clear protocol: After a brief introduction by the interviewer, MPs were asked to take the survey on a tablet the interviewer had brought. Two MPs filled out paper versions of the survey (they were then manually added to the data gathered from the tablets). In total, we collected data on 151 representatives, which translates into a cooperation rate of 64 percent. Participants are generally representative of the whole parliament in terms of age, gender, and political experience and political parties do not vary systematically in their response rates (see Supporting information).

The final N of MPs analyzed in the models is slightly lower for different reasons. We did not include MPs from districts for which we could not obtain reliable estimates of district opinion through the procedure explained above ( $n = 9$ ). We also had a number of MPs who filled out an abbreviated version of the survey, which did not ask them to estimate the

<sup>1</sup>To obtain comparably reliable district opinion estimates, we defined a threshold of 30 respondents per canton to estimate a constituency's opinion. As a result, a few small districts (AI; AR; GL; JU; NW; OW; SH; UR) had to be excluded from our analysis.

constituency opinion in their districts ( $n = 39$ ). This was mainly due to the time pressure that the face-to-face meeting put on MPs (the meeting usually took around 45 min).<sup>2</sup> We opted for this elaborate procedure to ensure that MPs themselves – and not their staff – took the survey. Finally, we had some missing data for some of the variables in our models ( $n = 6$ ). Thus, we ran our analyses with data from 97 MPs, which yields a response rate of 41 percent for the Swiss parliament and cuts across the whole political spectrum. Our unit of analysis is not the MP, but each policy proposal on which an individual MP estimated his/her constituency's opinion. We elaborate on how we construct our dependent variable in the next section.

## Dependent variable: MPs' perceptual accuracy

This study relies on the most common approach to measuring MPs' perceptual accuracy – the “distance agree”-formula. The latter is derived when an MP's estimate of his/her constituency's agreement with a policy proposal is subtracted from the actual percentage of agreement obtained through the constituency survey (e.g. Belchior, 2014; Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Pierce & Converse, 1986).

Our dependent variable, MPs' perceptual accuracy measured in percentage points, is thus based on combining our citizen and MP surveys. Citizens were asked about their opinions on nine policy proposals, all of which focused on a different issue (see Supporting information for a list). They indicated their agreement with each policy proposal on a scale from 1 to 4 (whereby 1 = not at all in favor, 2 = quite not in favor, 3 = quite in favor, 4 = completely in favor) or signaled that they did not know or did not have an opinion. We coded those ‘quite’ and ‘completely in favor’ as agreeing with the policy proposal and weighted by district, as explained in the discussion above. The MPs were asked to rate the district opinion on the same selection of policy proposals in percentages (“What percentage of the citizens in your district, who have an opinion, quite agrees or totally agrees with the policy proposal?”). Like the citizens, the politicians also received nine policy proposals which clearly fell within the federal government's jurisdiction. The actual percentage of citizens agreeing with each policy proposal was then compared to the MPs' estimates, resulting in a discrepancy score which we then subtracted from 100 to obtain the accuracy score, our dependent variable ( $M = 76.22$  percentage points,  $SD = 15.77$ ).

Examining this (seemingly) high level of perceptual accuracy, we should be aware of the effects of chance and, thus, ask whether MPs are able to make estimations that are better than random. Indeed, if citizens' opinion is perfectly divided on both sides of the policy proposal MPs had to estimate (with 50 percent of citizens agreeing and 50 percent disagreeing with it), then the maximum mean absolute error an MP can make is 50 percentage points and random answers will generate a mean error of 25 percentage points. When citizens' opinion leans to one side, the maximum error on the minority side becomes bigger than 50 percentage points, but this is compensated by a smaller maximum error on the majority side. Even then, randomly estimating citizens' opinion produces a mean error of 25. Turned upside down, a random estimator would have a perceptual accuracy score of 75 percentage points. This benchmark should be kept in mind when we evaluate the actual MPs' accuracy

<sup>2</sup>MPs who filled out the short version of the survey were not targeted specifically and there is no indication of substantive differences: MPs who participated in the short version of the survey do not differ significantly with regards to age or the importance they attribute to a policy statement ( $M = 5.54$  normal version and  $M = 5.42$  short version, with  $t(1,278) = 0.587$ ,  $p = 0.558$ ). However, the proportion of male MPs is slightly larger in the group that filled out the short survey, although the difference is not significant in a Chi-square test (80%,  $n = 31$ , who filled out the short version vs. 71%,  $n = 73$  in the normal version).



scores (76 percentage points in this study) and, also, when we discuss direct democracy's impact on MPs' perceptual accuracy.

Furthermore, we want to explicitly address the seeming conceptual mismatch of asking *national* MPs to estimate *district* opinion, i.e., of those living in the MPs' respective cantons. While some works have also examined whether MPs correctly perceive the opinions of their party electorates (Belchior, 2014; Clausen et al., 1983; Eichenberger et al., 2021; Varone & Helfer, 2021), most previous studies focus on the constituency at the level of the electoral district (e.g., Brookman & Skovron, 2018; Hedlund & Friesema, 1972; Miller & Stokes, 1963). This research design is appropriate in the context we examine because some national MPs are elected in majoritarian elections (e.g., the MPs sitting in the Council of States) and not in PR elections. Furthermore, even MPs elected in a PR system have to consider potential swing voters, in addition to their core party voters. This is particularly true in Switzerland, where we observe increasing electoral volatility with the rise of the Swiss People's Party and, more recently, the Green parties. Moreover, much like in the US, Swiss national MPs are elected in their districts (cantons). Hence, they have a strong incentive to know their constituents' opinions because national laws naturally affect their districts. When a national law is submitted to a popular vote, national MPs frequently participate in the referendum campaigns at the cantonal level. In Switzerland, political debates are generally decentralized due to cultural – e.g., linguistic, urban, religious – and political differences across cantons. For example, cantonal party sections regularly diverge from the national party's position and political majorities and alliances are very fluid. Thus, national MPs frequently have to explain the national laws to their cantonal constituents and to legitimate their own positions on them. Moreover, direct democracy votes whose passage requires a so-called “double majority” of both Swiss citizens and Swiss cantons are also held regularly (i.e., for amendments to the national constitution). All of these institutional incentives encourage national MPs to know the preferences of their cantonal constituents, and hence have to be accounted for in our investigation of the effects of direct democratic votes.

## Independent variables

In our models, we include a number of explanatory variables. We code some of them using independent sources of information, while others are derived from our survey of MPs.

We record whether there has ever been a *direct democracy vote* on the exact topic of each policy proposal. We include votes that took place up to six years before the period of our data collection (i.e., between July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2012, and July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018). We chose this time frame assuming that MPs would remember the results of the votes that took place a few years back, i.e., from their current and their previous term in office, but not those further in the past (for a complete list of ballot votes associated with each proposal, see Supporting information). Overall, we have had direct democratic votes in 45 percent of all proposal-MP combinations ( $n = 191$ ). We also include the result of the ballot; specifically, whether *a vote was conflictual or not*. If the percentage of citizens agreeing with the proposal fell under 60 percent or over 40 percent, the vote is classified as conflictual. Out of the 191 observations in our data, the results suggest that 83 percent ( $n = 158$ ) of all votes that took place were conflictual. After we prompted MPs to estimate their constituencies' opinions, we asked them to rate the importance of each issue on a scale from 0 (very unimportant) to 10 (very important) in order to measure their *individual issue salience*. On average, a policy proposal's salience is around 6.07 points (SD = 2.99). Finally, following Leemann and Wasserfallen (2016), for each policy proposal we coded whether MPs' opinions were in line with the opinions of the majority in their districts. The variable has a value of 1 if the MP and the majority in the district disagree on the issue at stake which happens in 36 percent ( $n = 154$ ) of our observations.

## Control variables

A number of other factors related to MPs affect the relationship we are studying. In addition to *age* ( $M = 51.7$  years,  $SD = 10.7$  years) and *gender* (28 percent female,  $n = 27$  MPs), we also control for MPs' *focus of representation*. MPs who do not consider their districts as relevant to their political work are likely to care less about their constituencies' opinions, making them systematically less accurate. To capture this variation across MPs, we asked them: "Which groups are most important for you to represent?" MPs could rank order five different foci of representation: all people in the country, all people who voted for the MP's party, all people in the electoral district (canton), a "specific group in society," and, finally, all people in the MP's linguistic region. Here, we focus on the rank MPs assign to representing the people in their electoral districts, which ranges from 1 (lowest rank) to 5 (highest rank). On average, the importance of the cantonal constituency is 3.49 ( $SD = 1.24$ ).

We also control for MPs' *perceptions of their political role*. While some MPs consider it important to execute exactly what their voters think at any time (i.e., to serve as delegates), others are more lenient in how they interpret their assignment from their voters and think that they should act according to their own best judgment in their political work (i.e., act as trustees). Subsequently, this belief affects their perceptual accuracy (Holmberg, 1997). Therefore, we asked politicians: "Some people believe that elected officials should follow citizens' preferences exactly. Others argue that MPs should follow their own convictions while pursuing citizens' interests. What do you think is the right balance a politician should strike?" The scale ranged from 0 (follow citizens' preferences exactly) to 10 (follow MPs' own convictions while pursuing citizens' interests) and the results show that many MPs place themselves at the upper end of the scale ( $M = 8.28$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ).

Finally, we include two variables to account for district-level differences. We include *district size* because studies suggest that MPs elected in small districts that are granted fewer seats in national parliament are more likely to vote in line with the majority of their constituencies, regardless of their party membership (Portmann et al., 2012: 605). District size is measured by a numerical variable that reflects the number of seats a canton is permitted to fill in parliament at the time of data collection (min.: 2 in multiple cantons to max.: 35 in Zurich). Moreover, to control for the *use of direct democracy*, we rely on the number of votes that have taken place in each district between 1990 and 2015, based on Vatter (2016: 371). On average, there were 111 votes per district ( $SD = 41$ , min: 42 in Fribourg, max: 260 in Zurich). We capture the remaining variation at the district level by including random effects in our models (see below).

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

As the previous section explained, each participating national MP estimated his/her districts' opinions on several policy proposals. Therefore, our data are structured hierarchically: Our lowest level is the individual policy proposal. Those are then nested by MP because each MP evaluated multiple policy proposals, some of which were subjected to a direct democracy vote. At the highest level, we have the district (i.e. canton) because several MPs from each district participated in our study. We use multilevel models to account for the ensuing correlation in our data. Specifically, we estimate mixed effects models with predictor and control variables at all three levels and a continuous dependent variable, using MLE with the following intercept-only model for the three-level data ("empty" or "unconditional" model):

$$Y_{ijk} = \gamma_{000} + v_{0k} + u_{0jk} + e_{ijk},$$

Whereby  $Y_{ijk}$  is the observed perceptual accuracy for a given policy proposal  $i$  for MP  $j$  in district  $k$ ,  $\gamma_{000}$  is the regression coefficient for the intercept,  $v_k$  is the effect of canton  $k$ ,  $u_{jk}$  is

the effect of MP  $j$  within district  $k$ , and  $e_{ijk}$  is the residual error term. The random effects and residual errors are assumed to be independent of one another and normally distributed with means = 0 and constant variances. We include random effects at the MP and at the district levels. The coefficients of all models discussed below and plotted in Figures 1 and 2 can be found in Supporting information.

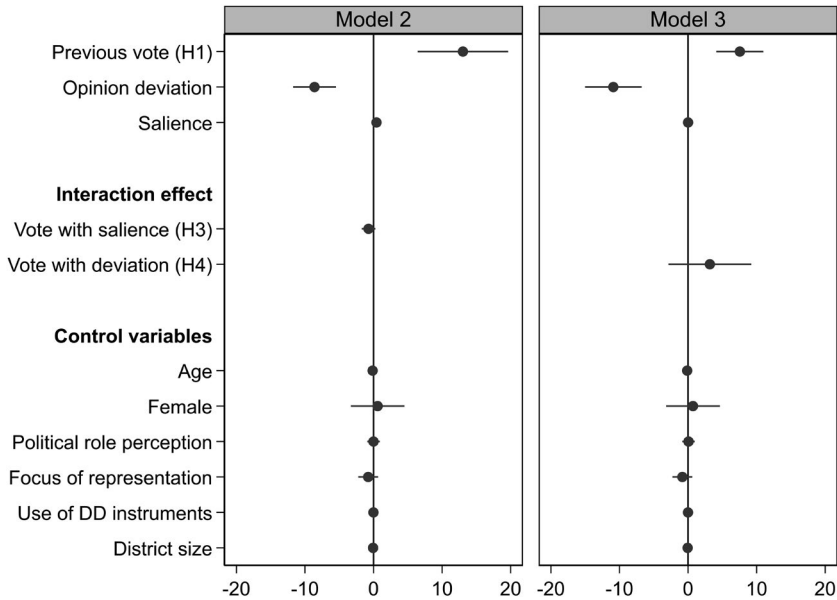


FIGURE 1 Hierarchical regression model predicting MPs' perceptual accuracy of their districts' opinions ( $n = 429$  from 97 MPs)

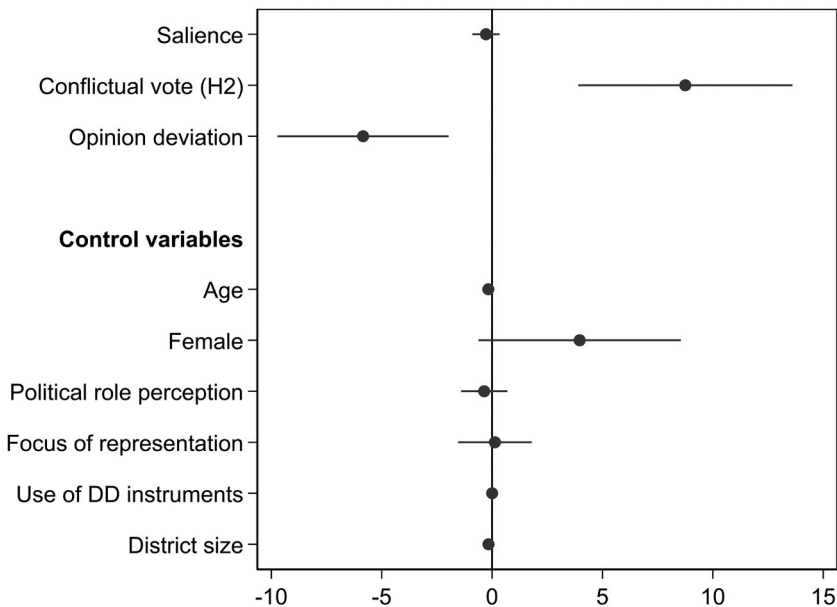


FIGURE 2 A conflictual vote's effect on perceptual accuracy based on a sub-set of policy statements that have already been subjected to a direct democratic vote ( $n = 191$  from 97 MPs)

What do our findings show? Our main premise is that direct democracy votes on national policy issues provide MPs with information on their constituencies' opinions. We expect that MPs' perceptual accuracy for policy issues subjected to a previous ballot vote is significantly higher than MPs' perceptual accuracy for issues that have not been subjected to a vote (H1). Our estimations show that this is indeed the case. MPs' estimations are significantly more accurate on policy issues that have recently been featured in a vote (no vote:  $M = 72.75$ ,  $SD = 16.47$ , vote:  $M = 80.54$ ,  $SD = 13.73$ ,  $t(427) = -5.24$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This association is robust and substantial in a regression model as well ( $b = 8.66$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). MPs predict the majority opinions in their districts much more accurately when there has been a ballot vote on the issue in the past.

One explanation might be that MPs mostly pay attention to votes that are particularly conflictual. Specifically, we expect that MPs' perceptual accuracy is higher for issues whose previous ballot votes were contested than for issues whose ballot votes yielded clear majorities (H2). To address this hypothesis, we focus on the subset of proposal-MP combinations that have been subjected to a direct democracy vote (there are 191 MP-proposal dyads from the same 97 MPs). We find a significant relationship between conflictual votes and politicians' perceptual accuracy. MPs' perceptual accuracy is higher on policy issues for which there had been a conflictual vote (conflictual:  $M = 80.43$ ,  $SD = 14.45$ ; not conflictual:  $M = 75.00$ ,  $SD = 13.73$ ,  $t(321) = -3.35$ ,  $p = 0.001$  one-sided). Figure 2 shows that this mechanism is stable ( $b = 8.75$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Moreover, our robustness checks show that controlling for the number of months that has passed since the vote (10–54 months,  $b = 0.11$ ,  $p = 0.040$ , see Figure D2 in Supporting information) does not affect the positive association between level of conflict and the accuracy of MPs' perceptions ( $b = 10.17$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , Figure D2).

Furthermore, direct democracy votes might not affect all MPs equally. In other words, what matters might not be the information provided by the vote itself (as H1 and H2 postulated), but the MPs' motivation to engage with the policy issue at stake. Specifically, the more salient an issue is for an MP, the more likely it may be that a vote leads to higher perceptual accuracy (H3). In order to carry out this comparison between accuracy on issues with and without a vote, we rely on our complete data set and include an interaction effect. The results in Figure 1 show that the interaction effect is not significant ( $b = -0.73$ ,  $p = 0.153$ ). We do not find evidence that MPs know their constituents' opinions significantly better when they consider the issue of the direct democracy vote to be particularly important. In fact, the absence of a significant main effect shows that saliency does not seem to play a role in the relationship we study (Figure 1).

Finally, we focus on the corrective mechanism of direct democratic votes: are MPs more (or less) accurate when they hold an opinion which is not in line with the majority in their electoral districts (H4)? Following Leemann and Wasserfallen (2016), we expect that in such cases the corrective potential of a direct democracy vote is particularly large. To test our hypothesis, we include another interaction effect: whether a vote has been held and whether MPs and their districts' majorities hold diverging opinions.

Our results show no indication of such a mechanism (see Figure 1, Model 3). The interaction effect is not significant ( $b = 3.18$ ,  $p = 0.303$ ). The effect of a direct democracy vote on MPs' perceptual accuracy is not larger if the preferences of the MPs deviate from those of their districts' majorities. Rather, if we look at the main effect of our preference deviation variable, we see that MPs' perceptual accuracy is significantly lower if their opinions are not in line with those of their electorates ( $b = -10.90$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Social projection (Allport, 1924), i.e., projecting one's own opinion onto others, is a well-established psychological phenomenon that also appears in the context of MPs' perceptions of public opinion (e.g., Sevenans et al., 2021). In the next section, we discuss this and how our findings relate to those of Leemann and Wasserfallen's (2016) work, whose theoretical model we based our expectations on. Nevertheless, before we proceed, we would like to briefly mention our control variables: none of them exerts a significant effect on MPs' perceptual accuracy. Judging from the random effects in our models (see Supporting

information), the variation is largely concentrated at the policy statement level and not at the MP or district level.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has focused on the “perceptual path” to substantive representation (first suggested by Miller & Stokes, 1963) and provided evidence that helps account for MPs’ perceptual accuracy. It contributes to the literature by analyzing whether direct democracy votes might help MPs obtain more accurate perceptions of their constituencies’ opinions by supplying MPs with additional information. We have tested the mechanisms most commonly advanced by the literature and find that direct democracy votes improve MPs’ estimates of their districts’ opinions (H1) and whether a vote was contested (H2) also affects MPs’ perceptions. MPs’ perceptual accuracy is thus significantly higher when past direct democratic votes did *not* pass with clear majorities. This seems logical from an informational perspective, but contradicts Clausen et al.’s (1983) evidence for Sweden. They found that representatives estimated their electorates’ preferences more accurately if it was possible to identify a clear majority opinion in their constituencies. This might be true when we ask MPs about the opinion of the majority. However, if we go beyond the perceptions of the majority and focus on the precision of their perceptions (in percentage points), the informational function of direct democracy campaigns carries more weight. In a direct democracy system like Switzerland, narrow votes (almost 50/50) result from more heated and conflictive campaigns. Such campaigns in turn render issues more memorable for MPs – an argument in line with accounts that see direct democracy votes as information sources and with Prospect Theory, which overestimates the costs of a negative vote and policy loss (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979).

In contrast, we do not find evidence for the corrective effect of direct democracy (H4) proposed by Leemann and Wasserfallen (2016). The latter theorized that the more the MPs in the district’s parliament disagree with their constituents, the higher the effect of direct democracy on congruence. However, our data show that if an MP’s opinion is not in line with that of his/her district’s majority, past direct democratic votes do not increase his/her perceptual accuracy. The most straightforward explanation for this difference is simple: the two studies focus neither on the same level of analysis, nor on the same stage of the policy process. While Leemann and Wasserfallen (2016) examined the divergence between citizens’ and politicians’ *opinions* at the aggregate level, we study MPs’ perceptions of their constituencies’ opinions. They thus focus on a *prospective* corrective mechanism, whereby the sheer threat of direct democracy makes MPs more accurate. Meanwhile, our study focuses on MPs’ actual *perceptions* of their constituencies’ opinions after these corrective mechanisms have already taken place, i.e., the public has had a say in the policy decision and has thus affected MPs’ perceptions of majorities’ preferences. In fact, our findings actually support the “social projection” hypothesis (Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996; Pierce & Converse, 1986; Sevenans et al., 2021). Information on public opinion, such as ballot votes’ outcomes, does not reduce the impact of social projection.

Another important factor in the literature on perceptual accuracy is the salience an issue holds for an MP (Hedlund & Friesema, 1972; Miler, 2007; Miller & Stokes, 1963). In the context of direct democracy votes, salience could mean that MPs only pay attention when an issue that is highly relevant to them is concerned (H3). We find some evidence that direct democracy votes do matter: issues that were previously subjected to a direct democracy vote are generally perceived as much more salient than issues that were never voted on (no vote:  $M = 5.82$ ,  $SD = 2.98$ ; vote:  $M = 6.40$ ,  $SD = 2.99$ ,  $t(427) = -2.01$ ,  $p = 0.022$ ). This, however, does not in and of itself translate into more accurate perceptions of constituencies’ opinions when we control for the presence of a vote, which leads us to reject our third hypothesis.

Taken together, our findings provide an important empirical basis for several expectations about the corrective mechanisms of direct democracy instruments that the literature has voiced for several decades. From a broader perspective, this study contributes to the normative debate about the relationship between various models of democracy. Our study shows that the use of direct democracy instruments seems to make MPs more accurate, probably by supplying more information about citizens' preferences. Our results thus lend support to previous studies that underline positive effects of direct democracy on political representation (Gerber, 1999; Matsusaka, 2010; Pommerehne, 1978), but contradict other works (Lascher et al., 1996; Leemann & Wasserfallen, 2016).

Naturally, the relationship between direct democracy and MPs' perceptual accuracy – as a necessary but not sufficient precondition for policy responsiveness and congruence – is just one of several possible consequences of popular votes on specific issues. Direct democracy instruments have been found to affect citizens' satisfaction with democracy (Stadelmann-Steffen & Vatter, 2012) or its outcomes (Johnson et al., 2019). Future studies should examine the larger chain of representation to address this relationship by combining MPs' perceptions of their constituencies' opinions with their legislative behavior and outputs. As we noted above, we need studies encompassing the full 'perceptual path' suggested by Miller and Stokes (1963) to address how and when policy responsiveness and congruence come about.

Moreover, it is also necessary to engage in comparative research and include other countries with direct democracy institutions. Such designs would allow us to investigate the (indirect) threatening effect of direct democracy instruments. The institutionalization of direct democracy instruments creates an intense culture of political participation and deliberation, in which citizens are more interested in participating and voicing their opinions (Tolbert et al., 2003), although its universal effects have also been questioned (Fatke, 2014). Thus, as many have argued before us, the sheer existence of direct democracy instruments encourages MPs to produce congruent laws in an effort to avoid a future defeat at the ballot box, e.g., by a referendum against the law or by a popular initiative proposing a new law or even a constitutional amendment (Linder, 2012). One could thus argue that in systems where launching a referendum is not very costly, MPs will devote more time and attention to keeping track of their constituents, which might in turn affect MPs' perceptual accuracy. We need comparative studies focusing on sub-national variation in institutional provisions, such as the US, to examine this hypothesis (for an example, see Leemann & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2021).

In sum, direct democracy can certainly be a very powerful corrective. Indeed, it has been described as “a means of institutionalized checks and balances” (Sager & Bühlmann, 2009: 202) and can thus constitute a useful “tool” compensating for the suggested drawbacks of representative democracy, such as the possibility of especially vocal or well-off voters influencing legislators' opinions in their favor (e.g. Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Gilens & Page, 2014; Miler, 2007) or selective voters (Sciarini et al., 2016). Building on these insights, we find that MPs have more accurate perceptions on policy statements that have been subjected to a vote, especially particularly conflictual votes. However, we need more research to better understand how exactly direct democracy affects individual politicians' decisions and the policy making process as a whole.

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## OPEN RESEARCH BADGES



This article has earned an Open Data badge for making publicly available the digitally-shareable data necessary to reproduce the reported results. The data is available at <https://doi.org/10.26037/yareta:vuv3pj6wfwelblwu4b3i3occgi>.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Yareta at <https://doi.org/10.26037/yareta:vuv3pj6wfwelblwu4b3i3occgi>.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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