Taking Turns at the Ballot Box: Selective Participation as a New Perspective on Low Turnout[1]

Clau Dermont

Institute of Political Science

University of Berne

Abstract

Participation research on voting usually considers only one vote or election, and therefore separates citizens into the categories of participants and absentees. Consequently, low turnout often is discussed to mean that citizens are either not interested in or fed up with the political system. This paper argues that this cross-sectional perspective severely underestimates political participation particularly in democracies in which citizens regularly are asked to vote using direct democratic ballot measures. Taking into account not just one but 15 ballot decisions simultaneously, this paper demonstrates that a majority of citizens participates only selectively, and therefore voluntarily chooses to abstain. Using official turnout data, which enables the tracking of individuals' participative behaviour over time in a Swiss commune, this paper demonstrates that selective participation is indeed a relevant empirical phenomenon and presents first conclusions about who participates selectively and when these individuals are mobilized.

Keywords: participation, turnout, selective participation, frequency, direct democracy

Word count: approx. 6'130 (without tables and figures)

Introduction

Swiss citizens regularly have an opportunity to take part in decision making at the local, cantonal, and federal levels and to express their opinions. Nevertheless, voter turnout frequently is lower than 50 per cent, i.e., every second person abstains from participation. Consequently, only a small part of the population determines the decision making on one specific day (Linder 2012: 307f.). As voter turnout started to drop in older, post-industrial democracies in the 20th century (Norris 2002), political scientists began to ask whether democracy was falling into a crisis of legitimation in which fewer and fewer citizens partake in decision making (Armingeon 1994; Feist 1996; Lijphart 1997; Schäfer 2010). This type of participation research usually separates citizens into two blocks of participants and absentees involved with one single vote or election. However, Serdült (2013) and others (Linder, Longchamp and Stämpfli 1991; Mottier 1993; Marques de Bastos 1993; Qvortrup 2002; Smith 2009) have argued for a longer perspective over time and have proposed a third group consisting of selectively participating citizens. By considering several consecutive voting or election days, it is unlikely to assume that the same citizens always participate or abstain. Rather, we should expect to observe that citizens take turns at the ballot box, i.e., they alternate between participation and abstention. These selectively participating citizens are driven by political interest and the relevance of an election or vote, and thus are mobilized at different points in time (Qvortrup 2002; Smith 2009).

The objective of this paper is to investigate voter participation over time rather than at a singular point in time to determine *who* participates selectively. Recent findings concerning selective participation show that a considerable majority of citizens is aware of their political rights and uses them within a certain time frame (Serdült 2013, 2014). However, since Serdült (2013, 2014) has limited his analysis to votes and excluded elections, he has missed the opportunity to describe which citizens participate selectively. Pursuing this research will enable a more differentiated approach to examining the legitimacy of a democracy through participation, since more than the mean turnout is taken into account (Riklin 1981). Selective participation is especially relevant for political systems—local, regional, provincial, etc.—in which citizens have a regular opportunity to partake in decision making through direct democratic voting. While direct democratic instruments are known in various nations and at different levels, in Switzerland and its subnational entities, citizens are regularly asked to cast a ballot, and thus this case is highly relevant for researching participation behaviour. To better understand selective participation, a validated official panel data set is used, which is the most appropriate data structure to capture this phenomenon. Containing information on more than 55'000 citizens for up to 15 elections or votes over 3 years from 2010 to 2013, this unique data set enables a tracking of the change of participation of each individual in a Swiss city. The advantage of the official data lies in the panel structure and the opportunity to observe participation behaviour over several votes and elections without bias. However, data concerning political interests, political efficacy, and ideology are missing, and therefore not available for research, which is a disadvantage of the available data, as well as the limitation on generalizability, as the analysis is based on one specific city.

The organization of the paper proceeds as follows. The first section addresses the theoretical background explaining the frequency of participation, and the second presents the expectations about the socio-demographic characteristics of the selectively participating citizens. The third section describes the particular data and methodology used. The fourth section presents the empirical results, and the conclusion summarizes the results and presents new questions for research.

Theory

On selective participation

In an international comparison, the conventional political participation in Switzerland for elections and votes is, similar to the US, very low (Freitag 1996; Norris 2002; Linder 2012). Turnout for votes and elections has decreased over time to a mean that lies below 50 per cent (Serdült 2013, and for a shorter version see Serdült 2014), although lately, several controversial votes have attracted more citizens. Thus, usually only every second citizen participates, while a majority abstains from decision making. However, the separation of two homogeneous blocs of constant participants and absentees is a delusion (Marques de Bastos 1993: 168).

Estimations based on VOX data assume that 25 to 30 per cent of citizens always use their right to participate, whereas around 20 per cent never take part in decision making (Nicola 1975; Finger and Sciarini 1990; Linder et al. 1991; Mottier 1993; Linder 2012). This data has been collected through polls in which respondents often over-report their actual participation.[2] However, based on these estimates, about half of citizens can be classified as selectively participating, as those who choose to participate "à la carte" (Linder 2012). The decision whether or not to participate is, according to Linder (2012: 310), dependent on the appeal of the most important and contested proposal at stake. Also Blais (2000: 45) argues that the decision to vote is "related to election-specific factors" and is made at the margin, and hence it can be expected that most citizens swing between participation and abstention based on their evaluation of the importance of the vote. According to Qvortrup (2002: 31) "the 'selective participation' thesis states that the turnout in a referendum is a function of political interests," whereas Smith (2009: 137) argues that citizens participate if "they perceive that their interests and values are at stake." Thus, the expectation is that three types of citizens are involved with voting: always participating citizens, consistent absentees, and selective participants (Mottier 1993).

Poll estimations are corroborated by Serdült (2013: 48): based on panel data over seven votes, he reported that 24.8 per cent of the citizens of the city of St Gallen never participated in voting, and 23.3 per cent always took part in decision making. Half of the population participated at least once, but not always, and therefore can be

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[2] Mottier (1993, 127f.) thus classifies 0 to 2 participations as "never," 3 to 9 as "selective," and only 10 as "always." She justifies this classification scheme with the over-evaluation of real participation.

classified as selectively participating citizens. Serdült (2013: 49) showed that the participation rate accumulates over time to 75.3 per cent as citizens take turns at the ballot box.

This differentiated approach to turnout should not be seen as trivial: while a low turnout may raise questions about the legitimacy of a decision, selective participation and a longer time frame relativize this deficit, at least theoretically. Although a majority may not have participated on one specific day, by broadening the view to include consecutive votes and elections, more than three quarters of the population did so. This figure also is comparable to turnout in other countries where citizens have fewer possibilities to participate. To split citizens in the three groups of consequent absentees, selective participants and always participating individuals argues that selective participants are aware of their possibility to participate. They have participated at least once, so their decision to abstain in a certain vote or election reflects a free choice (Eilfort 1994: 59). This decision further implies that the question about whether a low turnout is a sign of normalisation or a crisis in democracy (Roth 1992; Feist 1992) should, at least for Switzerland, be investigated in the context of several votes and elections, rather than only at one specific point in time.

The hypothesis of selective participation assumes that citizens participate only when they want to take a decision, but does not suggest that this participation is arbitrary (Linder et al. 1991: 7). Rather, the number of times a citizen participates is assumed to reflect his/her attitude towards (conventional) political participation. Linder et al. (1991: 7) further divide the selectively participating citizens into three sub-groups: first, *frequently* participating citizens who only miss a vote or election on rare occasions; second, *occasionally* participating citizens who mostly orient their participation on the issue and are most responsive to campaigns; and third, *seldom* participating citizens who usually abstain and participate only with respect to their most important decisions or as a form of protest. When a vote with a low turnout occurs, only the most frequent voters have participated, whereas a higher turnout reflects the mobilisation of the three sub-groups of selectively participating citizens.

Always participating citizens can thus be seen as "model-citizens" who (still) rate participation as a duty (Milic, Rousselot, & Vatter 2014). Frequent participants are similar and usually also take part, although their discipline and likely their sense of duty to always participate is somewhat undermined. Occasionally participating citizens feel no pressure to participate and do so only when the subject at stake is interesting and a campaign can mobilize them. For these citizens, politics is "nice-to-have" but not crucial or near the top of their priority list. Seldom participating citizens and abstainers either don't care, are happy with what politicians and other citizens decide, or are disillusioned by politics and thus usually or always abstain. Moreover, they could be stressed or "fatigued" by too many votes or a repetitive political debate (Blais 2014, Riklin 1981). Only the seldom participating citizens can be mobilized for very important votes or elections or when they have a potential to use their political rights as a means of protest. Thus, these groups of voters not only show how often they participated, but also reflect their attitudes towards political participation, if they feel a duty to participate, what they want to express using this instrument, and how happy they are with the political system.

A question not answered by Serdült (2013) or Linder et al. (1991) is: What is the socio-demographic composition of these selective participation groups? As participation research has extensively shown, socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, residential stability, religion, and civic status are related to the propensity to participate (amongst numerous others see Kleinhenz 1995; Sciarini et al. 2001; Bühlmann 2006; Engeli et al. 2006; Tawfik et al. 2012). However, it also can be expected that not always the same social group abstains from every ballot decision. Rather, it is assumed that the social composition of absentees fluctuates from ballot to ballot (Marques de Bastos 1993: 187). When voting data is collected over time, the group of selectively participating citizens grows as more citizens are added to the group for each vote or election or as they participate for the first time or miss a vote. Thus, their characteristics blend together, and it can be expected that they align over time with the characteristics of the whole population. Therefore, the always and never participating citizens are figuratively the outliers, and it can be assumed that they represent the known patterns of participation research.

Although this paper argues for a view over time and thus more than one vote or election, nevertheless, it can be expected that similar relations exist between the frequency to participate and the known characteristics that foster or hinder participation.

The consequences of selective participation

Selective participation introduces a new aspect to the analysis of individual political participation—*time*. In this sense, selective participation links the cross-sectional analysis of individuals for one or a few elections and an aggregated time-series for rising or falling participation over several years or legislatures. Given a longer time frame, the distinction between certain voter types based on their voting frequency enables a more specific description of these groups. However, the question arises as to which time frame should be used for analysing selective participation: the observed period should be long enough to observe the differences between the groups, but not so long that all citizens fall into the group of selective participants. A pragmatic approach could rely on the political cycle of the observed democracy, i.e., the election cycles of parliament or head of government, so the frequency of participation can be compared to government- and opposition-cycles and cut-offs, which are parallel to institutional periods in the system. Moreover, a time frame defined by political cycles enables a comparison between different political systems in which the institutional context varies.

The separation into groups should be repeated for the time frames that exceed more than one legislature. Instead of characterising all citizens as selective participants in the long view, a view per cycle also enables an understanding of how frequencies change, i.e., whether citizens change their group (e.g., a citizen who is disappointed by a government may turn away from politics and stop participating regularly) or whether the group shares shift from one legislature to the next (e.g., a new politician or party that mobilizes underrepresented, non-participating groups). With a perspective over several legislatures, these political cycles of participation could be analysed based on notions such as trust in government, external efficacy, and

satisfaction with politics. Furthermore, comparisons between political cycles would not only be possible, but also comparisons with other democracies in which citizens have fewer possibilities to participate. A comparison of participation between two democracies with varying possibilities of participation could be done based on a full cycle instead of single votes or elections, which may not represent a complete picture of participation. In this case, an analysis of participation could draw on the concept of alternative participation (Norris 2002; Marien, Hooghe, & Quintelier 2010). Whereas, for democracies, alternative means of participation such as petitions or political movements are potential ways to participate between elections without direct democratic instruments, the alternatives to election participation in Switzerland and other direct democratic systems starts with voting on issues. Likewise, second-order elections (e.g., European elections, subnational elections) could be integrated into an analysis of turnout as a first step of selective participation in other countries. Frequent participants in Switzerland, as mentioned before, could be compared with frequent activists in other countries.

Given selective participation (Serdült 2013), the question arises about what consequence this behaviour has on the *equality of participation*, and more precisely, whether a higher turnout also leads to a more equal participation. While democratic legitimacy often is equated with the highest possible participation (Teorell 2006), this assumption may change considering selective participation. A democracy with representative democracy and elections every 4 years depends on a representative election, which strives for a high turnout (Teorell 2006). However, in a democracy with manifold opportunities to participate and the phenomenon of selective participation, the highest possible turnout is not the best possible result; rather, the best result is a turnout that represents the interests of the population the best and when participative equality rather than formal equality is achieved (Schäfer 2013: 552). As Lutz (2006: 540) argues, it should not simply be assumed that the preferences of absentees differ considerably from participants and that a higher turnout thus necessarily leads to change. Cases in which a higher turnout would have reversed the outcome (from no to yes or vice-versa) are indeed quite rare (Lutz 2007: 631; see also Milic et al. 2014: 395ff). On the contrary, as Lutz (2007) argues, the more citizens are asked to participate, the less likely they always will do so; and the lower the turnout, the higher the risk is to obtain a biased outcome. Given a setting of direct democracy with numerous possibilities to participate, how often a citizen participates should be respected in the analysis of any possible turnout bias. When frequently participating citizens are not representative of a group of voters or when a group of seldom participating citizens is mobilized specifically for an issue, outcomes may be at risk of being biased. While Lutz (2007) estimates turnout effects for a theoretical full participation, in reality, specific mobilization might reach the relevant 5%, which can change the result. In this sense, considering selective participation, it should be questioned whether a vote with a higher turnout is not decided by a more biased mobilization than a "normal" vote with average turnout (Roth 1992). This clarity can be achieved through a clearer perspective on mobilization from different voters, and selective participation might be the analytical perspective that leads to more insights on turnout bias risks.

Method

As mentioned before, the conclusions in this paper rely on official turnout data rather than on polls. The data collected by the city of St Gallen enables the tracking of the real participation behaviour for each individual over 3 years, and thus over different votes and elections. The availability of this kind of panel data is scarce not only in Switzerland. St Gallen has collected this data since the year 2010 (Serdült 2013, 2014; Dermont 2014). The small commune of Bolligen collected the data between 2007 and 2009 both for ballot box decisions and citizens' assemblies (Heer 2010; Dermont 2014; Stadelmann-Steffen & Dermont 2016), whereas on the cantonal level, Geneva has been gathering this kind of data since 1995, which is thus the most extensive official data collection already analysed by Sciarini et al. (2001) and Tawfik et al. (2012). Given the advantage of real participation, the downside of this data is the restriction on generalizability. The analysis is based on one specific city, and the results cannot be expected to reflect the participation of all citizens of Switzerland. However, since all citizens are part of the data, individuals who have no interest in politics or refuse to answer polls also are represented, so the picture of the city may be more complete than that available through traditional polls. Although the sample is specific, it can be assumed that patterns of selective participation are similar to other cities and that differences in level and intensity are likely to vary.

The present paper analyses the data from St Gallen, which includes the whole population of 55'303 individuals at 15 consecutive time points (Fachstelle für Statistik 2010–2013). The participation was recorded for both votes and elections at the local, cantonal, and federal levels between 2010 and 2013. Furthermore, the observations include the variables of age, gender, civil status, residential stability, religious denomination, and country of origin. Note that this analysis is limited to the available individual characteristics in the official data. The data observations are anonymous, so individuals cannot be identified.

At 2 of the 15 time points, only elections were carried out, one of them being at the federal level. At the other time points, citizens were asked to decide on ballot measures and elections were held at different levels of the political system, e.g., local, cantonal and federal. Since no distinct differences in participation between votes and elections are apparent, both types are integrated in the analysis to also capture the nature of the selective participation between votes and elections. To be able to compare selective participation under the same circumstances for each individual, the sample is reduced to individuals for whom data are available for all 15 time points. This approach excludes citizens who gained and lost the right to vote and elect during the time period, e.g., due to death, coming-of-age, or relocation of residence. For 35'523 individuals out of the total sample of 55'303, the data observations are without interruption, and thus this reduced sample was analysed. However, the elimination of individuals without complete observations leads to an overestimation of the turnout of 3–4 % per ballot decision compared to the real turnout (see also Serdült 2013).

The dependent variable is the real participation for 15 consecutive votes and elections, where a 1 means that a citizen participated in a certain decision and a 0 means an absence. Individuals are further grouped in three respectively five frequency groups based on Linder et al. (1991). This approach was used for several reasons.

First, from a theoretical perspective and as mentioned in the last section, participation frequency can be assumed to be driven by factors such as a perceived duty to participate, interest in politics, and happiness with the political system. Thus, the distinction of voter types enabled us to draw conclusions based on a voter's attitude towards participation. Second, a simple ordinal approach in which continuous frequency is analysed assumes that all steps are similar, so a change from 1 to 2 and a change from 8 to 9 are the same. An approach with groups is more responsive to diverging reasons for participation. Third, given the traditional approach with participants and absentees, adding the selective participants "in between" enables us to compare the results with the existing research, which only distinguishes between participation or no participation. To estimate how socio-demographic characteristics shape how frequently individuals in the sample participated, a multinomial logit is applied, which provides a description of the frequency groups and enables a conclusion based on *who* participates selectively. Multinomial logits usually are applied to estimate models in which the dependent variable is not ordered (Long and Freese 2006: 223, 2014). Although the frequency of participation is an ordinal variable, the present paper argues that different mechanisms apply to the decision to participate at least once and the decision to participate once more or less.

The reduction of variance through building groups and the utilization of multinomial logits to estimate differences between groups can be criticized. Multinomial logits usually are considered to estimate the choice of parties in an election (see, for example, Schoen and Schumann 2007) and therefore reflect preferences in a political decision (Long and Freese 2006, 2014). Selective participation argues that participation behaviour is also a preference choice that follows certain principles or rules (Linder et al. 1991: 7), and therefore, multinomial logits provide results that are more relevant to this preference choice than, for example, ordered logit models. A hurdle regression as a further alternative would allow observing differences between participation and abstention, but would in the count part not allow disentangling differences between selective participants and always participating citizens. Still, to forgo the critics that argue that the categories of selective participation are arbitrary, the subdivision of groups has to be determined by theory, which is justifiable in this case by the typology of Linder et al. (1991).

The independent variables are recorded at each point in time and thus are changing over time for each individual (for the operationalization, see Table 4 in the Annex). For a description of the characteristics of the frequency groups, the last time point is considered. Gender and civil status are included dichotomously, and age and stability of residence are categorised. Religious denomination are categorised as Reformed, Catholic, other denominations/religions, or no religion. To account for a migration background, a dichotomous variable is integrated, indicating whether a person was born in Switzerland or another country.

Empirical results: Turnout revisited

Over 3 years, the cumulative participation with at least one appearance at the ballot box comes to more than 80 per cent. Compared to Serdült (2013), the data on St Gallen in Table 1 includes more possibilities for participation and is not restricted to federal votes. Including both elections and votes and various levels is

necessary to support the argument for selective participation: citizens also can select between votes and elections (see Bühlmann, Freitag and Vatter 2006). A longer period of observation consequently leads to a higher share of selectively participating citizens. For each additional vote or election, new citizens are potentially participating respectively missing for the first time, and thus the extreme groups get smaller as the selective group grows. Thus, a limit to cumulative participation is advisable, whereas the time frame for a legislature (4 years) would allow a comparison of turnout with countries that restrict conventional political participation to elections every 4 years.

Table 1: Cumulative turnout in St Gallen.

Frequency of Participation	Absolute	In %	Cumulated
1	2624	7.39	7.39
2	1781	5.01	12.40
3	1408	3.96	16.36
4	1297	3.65	20.02
5	1174	3.30	23.32
6	1094	3.08	26.40
7	1101	3.10	29.50
8	1170	3.29	32.79
9	1183	3.33	36.12
10	1288	3.63	39.75
11	1497	4.21	43.96
12	1780	5.01	48.97
13	2272	6.40	55.37
14	3376	9.50	64.87
15	5553	**15.63**	**80.51**
0	6925	**19.49**	100.00
	35523		

Note: The table shows how often individuals participated in the 15 ballots, e.g., 5553 individuals or 15.63 per cent participated in all 15 ballots, while 80.51 per cent participated in at least 1 out of 15 ballots. *Source*: Fachstelle für Statistik 2010–2013, based on Serdült 2013.

Roughly a fifth of citizens never used their most conventional political rights, whereas 15.63 per cent always participated. These two observations show that a considerable share of the population renounced the use of their rights, whereas, at the same time, a considerable group very actively participated in the political process.[3] The classification of citizens in five groups with different frequencies of participation according to Linder et al. (1991) is shown in Table 2. A one-time participation and a once-missed opportunity are added to the more extreme values so to not overrate cases like the absences caused by holidays, illnesses, or extraordinary

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[3] Elections can be seen as a generally important constituent of suffrage. Of the citizens who participated at least five times, more than fifty per cent (and increasing) also participated in the federal elections. However, some citizens who participated 14 times also abstained in the federal elections. Thus, it is justified to include both votes and elections in the analysis of selective participation.

participations. Furthermore, the selective voters are equally divided into three subgroups of seldom, occasionally, and frequently participating citizens, which each represent a third of the spectrum of frequency.

Table 2: Types of participation.

Frequency of Participation	Type		Ratio in %
0-1	never		26.88
2-5		seldom	15.93
6-9	selective	occasionally	12.80
10-13		frequently	19.25
14-15	always		25.14

Note: The table shows the different types of participation, based on Linder et al. (1991), and their share in the population.

It was found that 26.88 per cent of citizens can be categorized as never participating, and 25.14 per cent as always participating, which constitute the two largest groups. The selectively participating citizens, who are about half the sample, are subdivided into the three groups of seldom (15.93 per cent), occasionally (12.80 per cent), and frequently (19.25 per cent) participating citizens.[4] Hence, the assumed apportionment by Linder (2012: 309) and Mottier (1993) approximately corresponds to the participation patterns of the city of St Gallen.

**Who are the selectively participating citizens?**

It can be assumed that the repartition of individuals into five different frequency groups of participation is not random. The estimation of multinomial logits enables a description of each group under control for the others. The results can be interpreted similar to normal logits (Long and Freese 2006, 2014). The five groups of different frequencies of participation (Linder et al. 1991) are considered as a nominal outcome, and thus the five groups can be compared by "essentially estimating a separate binary logit for each pair of outcome categories" (Long and Freese 2006, 2014). In Table 3, the results are compared to the base category of never participating citizens. As a reading example, individuals in the age category of 61 to 75 years have the highest likelihood of being in the group of always participating citizens compared to the youngest generation and the group of never participating citizens. In Figure 2, which presents both the odds ratios and the discrete change of the dependent variables, all simultaneous computed logits are included. As a reading example for Figure 2, the letter "A" for the always participating group is the largest (i.e., the highest discrete change) and the furthest to the right (i.e., highest odds) for citizens in the age category from 61 to 75 years. This means that they are most likely to be found in the group of the always participating citizens.

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[4] The more strict division where a one-time participation and one-time absence is counted as selective participation would specify 64.87 per cent of the sample as selective participants.

Table 3: Multinomial Logit. Coefficients of the multinomial logit presented in Figure 2.

Base category: Never	Seldom		Occasionally		Frequently		Always	
Age (ref. 18–30 years)								
31–45 years	-0.13	**	-0.11		0.11		0.40	***
46–60 years	-0.20	***	-0.03		0.58	***	1.36	***
61–75 years	-0.30	***	0.07		0.94	***	2.18	***
76+ years	-0.54	***	-0.39	***	0.54	***	1.77	***
Female	0.04		0.04		-0.08	*	-0.32	***
+10 years residential stability	0.06		0.02		0.09	*	0.20	***
not born in Switzerland	-0.26	***	-0.46	***	-0.65	***	-0.79	***
Denomination (ref. other/none)								
Reformed	0.05		0.29	***	0.38	***	0.51	***
Catholic	0.07		0.31	***	0.33	***	0.45	***
married/in partnership	0.32	***	0.50	***	0.76	***	1.16	***
cons	-0.55	***	-1.07	***	-1.20	***	-1.87	***
N	35523							
Pseudo R2	0.0575							

Note: *** $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, * $p \leq 0.001$. *Source*: Fachstelle für Statistik (2010-2013).
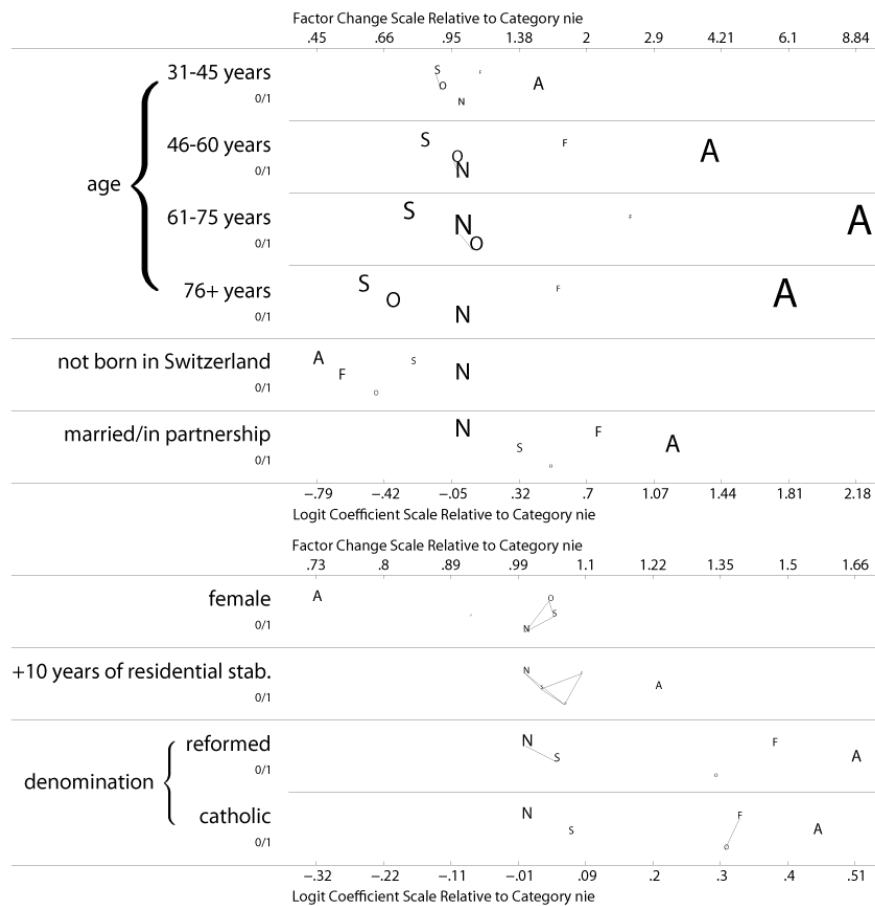
Figure 1

Plot of the results of the multinomial logit. For each variable the odds ratios and discrete change is displayed. A: Always, F: Frequently, O: Occasionally, S: Seldom, N: Never. Somebody who is older than 76 is, compared to the 18 to 30-years olds, more likely to participate frequently or always (N < F < A), but also more likely to never participate rather than

seldom or occasionally (S < O < N). The differences are significant on the 10 per cent level as the letters representing the alternatives are not connected, e.g. statistically independent from each other. The distance between a pair of letters indicates the magnitude of the effect, the size of the letter is proportional to the discrete change.
Source: Fachstelle für Statistik (2013), Long and Freese (2006). *Note*: Values are documented in Table 3.

With respect to age, the results show the life cycle of participation (Kleinhenz 1995). The likelihood to always participate rises with age but falls again for the oldest generation. Similarly, the likelihood to participate selectively diminishes with increasing age. Thus, the youngest citizens are most likely to participate selectively. Not being born in Switzerland results in lower frequencies of participation, whereas living in a relationship and the denominations Reformed and Catholic lead to higher frequencies. For the differences of gender and residential stability, mainly the effect for the always participating group is significant. Male voters and citizens with a longer residential stability have a higher likelihood to always participate. These results generally align with the participation research: older people, men, and citizens who have "traditional" characteristics (i.e., the dominant denominations, live in a relationship, live in the same city for a longer time, and were born in Switzerland) participate more frequently. The differences are most distinct between individuals who participate either always or never; however, similar tendencies also are present for selective participants. [5]

Several tests of robustness have been computed based on Long and Freese (2006, 2014), which all confirmed the subdivision of the three groups of selective participating citizens and that the effects are not insignificant over all simultaneous logits.[6] Moreover, the same model has been estimated for the full sample without excluding individuals with missing observations, where the dependent variable was the ratio of participation for each individual (i.e., 2 out of 2 is operationalized as always, which is the same as 15 out of 15). As shown in Table 5 in the Annex, the results largely correspond to the reduced model. With respect to the considerably larger group of never participating citizens (new: 34 per cent), its effects and significance rise, whereas the direction changes only in one case (middle-aged citizens are more likely to seldom participate than young citizens). Thus, the findings of the multinomial logit most importantly show that differences of age impact the different groups of participation frequency, whereas a difference in gender only impacts the always participating citizens. The effects for all other characteristics than age lean in one direction (either to higher or lower frequencies), although these effects are considerably smaller and not always significant.

For women and age, the differences were examined further, since age appears to be the main variable, and gender exhibits a significantly lower probability for women to always participate. First, Figure 3 shows participation frequency by the age category. Obviously, the life cycle effect (Kleinhenz 1995) as suggested by the multinomial logit can be observed: both the frequency and the probability to participate at all are subjected

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[5] In other models not presented, the same model was estimated with the more strict division where a one-time participation and one-time absence is counted as selective participation. The results confirm the main conclusions presented in the present paper.

[6] The tests were conducted based on Long and Freese (2006) with *-mlogtest, iia-* for the assumption of the "independence of irrelevant alternatives," *-mlogtest, combine-* for combining alternatives, and *-mlogtest, lr-* and *-mlogtest, wald-* for testing the effects of the independent variables.

to the life cycle. Until the age of 60 to 75, the low frequencies of never, seldom, and occasionally participating citizens drop, whereas the frequently and always participating groups grow continuously. Afterwards, as citizens get older, participation generally falls.
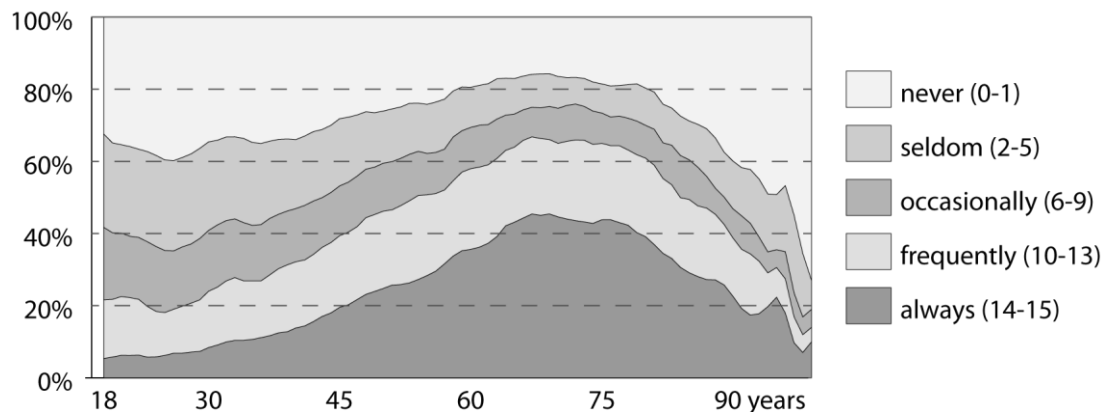
Figure 2
Frequency of participation and age. Distribution over the types of participation for each age.
Source: Fachstelle für Statistik (2013).
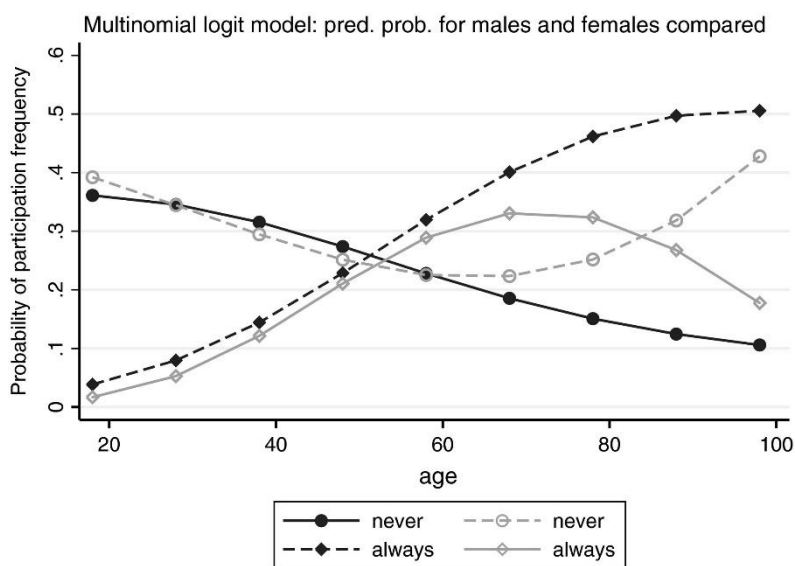
Figure 3
Predicted probabilities for always or never participating compared for males and females.
Source: Fachstelle für Statistik (2013), Long and Freese (2006). *Note*: Values are documented in Table A3.

Furthermore, based on a model in which the age categories are substituted with the continuous variables (see Table 6 in the Annex), Figure 4 presents the predicted probabilities by gender and age. These probabilities to participate are shown only for the groups of always and never participating citizens, since no significant differences were seen for selective participants according to Table 3 (the full picture including all groups is in Figure 6 in the Annex). According to Figure 4, these significant differences are driven by the oldest generation.

While the probabilities to always or never participate are similar for women and men until the age of 60, a considerable gap opens up with old age. The probability to always participate continues to rise for old men, but for women, it starts to decrease after the age of 70. Likewise, women older than 70 are considerably more represented in the group of never participating citizens. Thus, the gap of participation widens for the oldest generation, which still remembers the time when women weren't allowed to participate, since female suffrage at the federal level was only introduced in 1971 in Switzerland. For the younger population, however, the gender gap already has disappeared with respect to the frequency of participation (see also Sciarini et al. 2001; Engeli, Ballmer-Cao and Giugni 2006).

To summarize, selective participation is a relevant phenomenon and best captured by official data, since more than half the population of the city we studied can be assigned to selectively participating citizens. However, the overarching group of selectively participating citizens and the whole electorate exhibit little differences in their socio-demographic characteristics. Only age presents a noteworthy effect, since young citizens are more likely participating selectively, whereas the other characteristics exhibit differences mostly for always and never participating individuals. This finding is an indication that selective participants are a conglomerate of all socio-demographic characteristics, and the two extremes of always and never participating citizens corroborate the expectations and results of the participation research.

Furthermore, the division into three subgroups of selective participation as postulated by Linder et al. (1991) serves as guide for a refinement of the selective participants. Concerning the characteristics, the frequent voters are close to the always participating citizens, whereas the seldom and occasionally participating individuals deviate from the never participating citizens by being slightly younger. To return to the theoretical expectations, it can be concluded that the selectively participating citizens indeed approximately match the whole electorate with the exception of younger citizens who are more prone to participate from time to time. The second expectation, that states that the characteristics of the subgroups align with higher frequency to the always participating citizens, is supported by the results.

Conclusion

According to the present analysis, selective participation is not only an assumption but a vivid reality for the observed community. Although a considerable proportion of the citizens in St Gallen participates either always or never, the results presented are evidence that many citizens participate only from time to time. More than 80 per cent of the population participated at least once in the 3 years considered, a number which distinctly excels the mean turnout at votes and elections. Thus, the contribution of the present study not only confirms Serdülts (2013) findings over a longer period of time, but offers several additional insights into selective participation.

First, the subdivision of the selectively participating citizens in seldom, occasionally, and frequently voters, as argued by Linder et al. (1991), guides the analysis of selective participation and enables a description of the

differences of the selective participants. Second, this paper demonstrates that the selectively participating citizens together in the case at hand have generally no distinct characteristics and correspond closely to the whole electorate, whereas the two extremes of the never and always participating citizens exhibit the well-known patterns of the participation behaviour research. The one notable exception is that younger citizens are more likely to participate seldomly. A further refinement of these different groups of participation should build not only on socio-demographic characteristics, but also take into account the varying contexts of votes and elections in which different groups of citizens are mobilized by various issues, parties, or other circumstances.

The presented new angle on participation points out that the mean turnout is—especially for democracies with frequent direct democratic decisions like Switzerland and more than half of the US States—an inaccurate figure (Riklin 1981; Serdült 2013). This finding should be incorporated into research on participation while also taking into account that the time period covered should enable patterns to form but, at the same time, being careful to not overstate the importance of cumulative participation (e.g., a legislature). Other than estimations based on polls, the analysis of official turnout data provides a higher validity of the conclusions on selective participation. Though seldom collected and used, this data offers an interesting perspective on participation and allows a validation or rejection to be made of the estimations based on the more common polls. Results differ considerably, although very conservative estimates can come close to reality, e.g., the frequency of participation (Mottier 1993; Linder 2012). The present analysis focuses on one city and the results are thus not generalizable for all democracies, however, they offer a first insight into selective participation and a new way of analysing political participation.

Further explorations into a deeper understanding of selective participation are necessary, since they may produce more refined answers regarding the causes of decreasing turnout. First, a decreasing mean turnout can be accounted for by a sinking frequency of participation (i.e., fewer citizens participate always or often) or a growing group of absentees dropping out of conventional political participation. Time series and panel data can provide a perspective on how participation changes. A decrease (or increase) of the mean turnout needs to be analysed based on selective participation, and shouldn't simply be attributed to a growing group of disappointed citizens turning away from politics. The causes behind low turnout are once again linked to the theories of normalisation and crisis (Feist 1992; Roth 1992): While a shift from always to selectively participating citizens can be assumed to be a sign of normalisation, ceasing to participate or participating less often depend in their implication on the reasoning behind it, i.e., terminate to participate at all is normal in old age, but a rather negative sign when a person is only 30 years old. Linking official panel data with polls to capture variables like political interest and trust would considerably enlarge the possibilities for conclusions on the reasonings behind selective participation and changes in individual participation behaviour over time.

The following question and opening research gap is thus *when* individuals participate selectively, at which votes or elections they decide to participate and at which occurrences they desist on using their rights. A multilevel analysis structuring the participation opportunities for each citizen and including more contextual information

would be more extensive in results. Expectable is either evidence for citizens who are mobilized by parties, while others follow issues.

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Annex

Table 4: Variables and Operationalisation.

Operationalisation	
Gender	
0 = male, 1 = female	45% male
Age	
18–30 years	14%
31–45 years	21%
46–60 years	27%
61–75 years	22%
76+ years	15%
Civilian status	
0=single/divorced/widowed, 1=married/living in partnership	46% married/living in partnership
Residential stability	
0 = less than 10 years	81% longer than 10 years
1 = longer than 10 years	
Denomination	
0 = other, 1 = Reformed,	0 = 29%, 1 = 30 %, 2 = 41%

2 = Catholic	
Country of birth	
0 = Switzerland, 1 = other	13% other country of birth

Note: In total 35'523 individuals are considered. *Source*: Fachstelle für Statistik (2010-2013).

Table 5: Multinomial Logit 2. The dependent variable is relative participation frequency for the full panel without a reduction of individuals without all observations.

Base category: never	Seldom		Occasionally		Frequently		Always	
Age (ref. 18–30 years)								
31–45 years	0.11	**	0.19	***	0.39	***	0.40	***
46–60 years	0.03		0.21	***	0.81	***	1.25	***
61–75 years	-0.09		0.29	***	1.12	***	2.01	***
76+ years	-0.51	***	-0.35	***	0.49	***	1.31	***
Female	0.03		0.02		-0.10	***	-0.29	***
+10 years residential stability	0.42	***	0.32	***	0.45	***	0.51	***
not born in Switzerland	-0.21	***	-0.42	***	-0.58	***	-0.71	***
Denomination (ref. other/none)								
Reformed	-0.01		0.21	***	0.32	***	0.43	***
Catholic	0.05		0.25	***	0.29	***	0.38	***
married/in partnership	0.31	***	0.48	***	0.70	***	1.08	***
cons	-1.15	***	-1.59	***	-1.78	***	-2.11	***
N	54709							
Pseudo R2	0.0583							

Note: *** p ≤ 0.05, ** p ≤ 0.01, * p ≤ 0.001. Group shares: 35% never; 16% seldom; 13% occasionally; 17% frequently; 20% always. *Source*: Fachstelle für Statistik (2010-2013).

Table 6: Multinomial Logit 3. Model used for the prediction of probabilities.

Base category: never	Seldom		Occasionally		Frequently		Always	
Age	-0.01		-0.01		0.02	*	0.10	***
Female	-0.19		-.71	*	-1.45	***	-2.32	***
Age * Age	0.00		0.00		0.00		-0.0004	***
Female * Age	0.01		0.04	***	0.07	***	0.10	***
Female * Age * Age	-0.00		-0.0005	***	-0.0008	***	-0.001	***
+10 years residential stability	0.08		0.05		0.11	*	0.19	***
not born in Switzerland	-0.26	***	-0.46	***	-0.65	***	-0.79	***
Denomination (ref. other/none)								
Reformed	0.06		0.30	***	0.40	***	0.53	***
Catholic	0.07		0.31	***	0.34	***	0.46	***
married/in partnership	0.30	***	0.45	***	0.68	***	1.04	***
cons	-0.31		-0.92	***	-1.88	***	-4.73	***
N	35523							
Pseudo R2	0.0590							

Note: *** p ≤ 0.05, ** p ≤ 0.01, * p ≤ 0.001. *Source*: Fachstelle für Statistik (2010-2013).
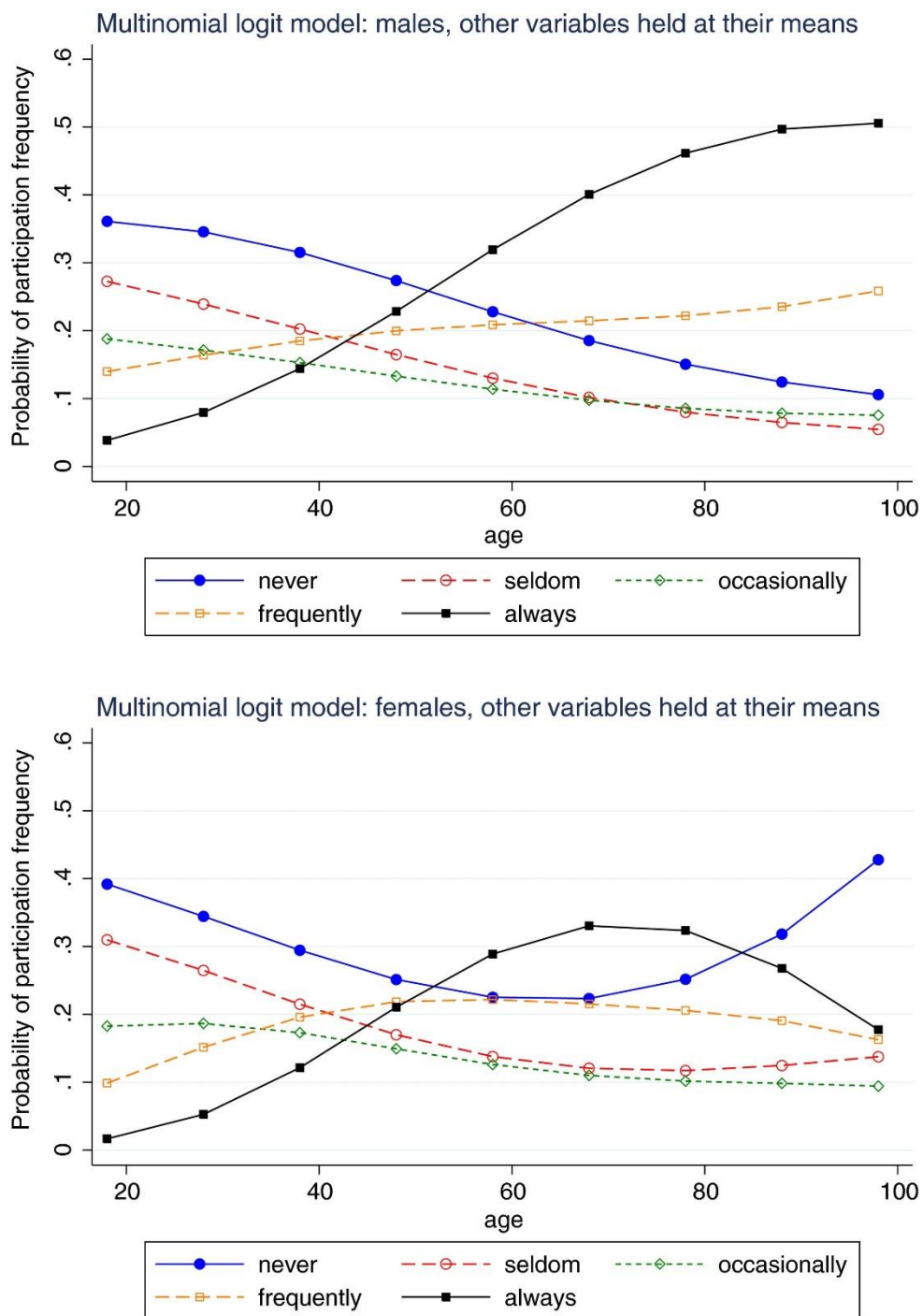
Figure A1
Predicted probabilities for all frequency groups of participation compared for males and females.
Source: Fachstelle für Statistik (2013), Long and Freese (2006). *Note*: Values are documented in Table A3.