



## Transparency in parliamentary voting

Christine Benesch<sup>a</sup>, Monika Büttler<sup>b</sup>, Katharina E. Hofer<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> SIAW-HSG, University of St. Gallen, Bodanstrasse 8, St. Gallen 9000, Switzerland

<sup>b</sup> SEW-HSG, University of St. Gallen, Varnbühlstrasse 14, St. Gallen 9000, Switzerland

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### ABSTRACT

How does transparency affect voting behavior? To answer this question we exploit a switch from a show of hands to electronic voting in the Upper House of the Swiss Parliament. The change, which took place halfway through the 2011–2015 legislative period, also brought about the online publication of individual voting records. Using the Lower House as a control group, we compare individual voting decisions in a set of identical votes in both chambers. This unique framework makes it possible to estimate the causal effect of increased transparency on legislators' choices.

Since the reform, members of the Upper House are less likely to deviate from the majority decision of their party. Legislators representing the same canton are also less likely to cast an aligned vote, suggesting that voters lose influence over their representatives in parliament.

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### 1. Introduction

Transparency defines the degree to which legislators' political decisions are traceable. There are considerable differences in whether and how parliaments around the world disclose individual voting behavior of their members to the public (Hug, 2010; Hug et al., 2015).<sup>1</sup>

We investigate how transparency influences legislators' voting behavior in parliament by exploring their adherence to the party line, defined as the majority decision of their party. In a quasi-experimental setting, we exploit an institutional change in the Swiss parliament's voting procedure. While the Lower House (National Council) has voted electronically since 1994 and has published all individual voting records online since 2007, the Upper House (Council of States) had traditionally voted by a show of hands.

Although parliamentary sessions were video-recorded and accessible online, tracking how individual legislators voted was very costly. In spring 2014, the Upper House finally introduced an electronic voting system, a move that was largely precipitated by extensive media pressure after the discovery of result-critical counting errors during show-of-hand votes. The transparency reform took place roughly halfway through the legislative period; it left all other aspects of parliamentary business unchanged. The switch to electronic voting went hand in hand with the automatic publication of individual voting records for several legally defined vote types.

To identify a causal effect of transparency on deviations from party line, we use the Lower House as a control group. This allows us to account for changes in bill-specific characteristics before and after the reform as well as other time trends. We focus our attention on final passage votes, which constitute the ultimate decision by both parliamentary chambers to accept or reject a bill. Legislative texts are identical for both chambers and final passage votes take place on the same day. In these votes, 95.5% of a party's members vote in the same way on average, which allows for a meaningful definition of the party line.

Data encompass all individual legislator decisions on almost 300 final passage votes for the 2011–2015 legislative period. Video records of the show-of-hand votes allow us to recover individual

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [christine.benesch@unisg.ch](mailto:christine.benesch@unisg.ch) (C. Benesch), [monika.buetler@unisg.ch](mailto:monika.buetler@unisg.ch) (M. Büttler), [katharina.hofer@unisg.ch](mailto:katharina.hofer@unisg.ch) (K.E. Hofer).

<sup>1</sup> Hug (2010) reviews transparency and reports that out of 92 parliaments surveyed, 23 do not publish any votes, 20 publish all votes, 43 publish specific votes, and 28 publish requested roll call votes.

votes cast in the Upper House before 2014.<sup>2</sup> We corroborate our findings with anecdotal evidence from interviews with legislators and party secretaries.

We find that on average legislators in the Upper House are less likely to deviate from their party line when their voting decisions are publicly observable. However, our results show that this holds true almost exclusively for legislators seeking reelection; retiring legislators did not adapt their voting behavior. The main finding proves robust when subjected to various econometric specifications and tests. Neither electoral cycles nor the composition of bills can explain the results.

Final passage votes are typically decided on with large majorities. We show that improved party discipline can be largely attributed to legislators from parties at either end of the political spectrum who throw their support behind their respective party majority in rejecting the proposed bills. Indeed, the increase in party discipline is strongest for the Social Democrats (SP) on the left, and the Swiss People's Party (SVP) on the right; parties that occupy the center ground experience little change. Opposing votes can thus be interpreted as position-taking in order to build a party brand without affecting legislative outcomes (Carey and Shugart, 1995).

We find that electoral pressure acts as an impediment to greater party discipline after the reform: legislators holding marginal seats are less likely to adapt their voting behavior than safe representatives. The reform also led to a decrease in aligned cantonal voting, i.e., a situation in which two legislators from the same canton but different parties cast the same vote. We show that aligned cantonal voting typically means the representation of the median cantonal voter's interests. It would appear therefore that greater transparency does not benefit voters.

The results can be understood within the context of the institutional setting, which is characterized by initially high monitoring costs for both parties and voters. While the parties (and the politically interested public) were aware of "serial deviators", there was no systematic tracking of "occasional deviations", and the routine monitoring of the Upper House was considered a political "no-go" area. We also document that the media were slow to pick up the new information. Consequently, at least in the short term, vote transparency did not considerably increase towards the public. Parties, in contrast, were more aware of the new information.

We contribute to the literature on the effect of transparency on political representation. Additional information about the agent's actions strengthens accountability and increases the benefits of the principal in standard principal-agent models (Holmström, 1979).<sup>3</sup> While transparency has played a considerable role in the theoretical literature, there are few studies that qualitatively or quantitatively assess the causal effect of vote transparency on legislative voting.<sup>4</sup> Most of these studies compare voting in published and unpublished roll call votes. For the Swiss Lower House in 1995–2003, Hug (2010) shows that party cohesion is stronger in automatically published votes than in those which are unpublished or are only published on request. However, in many cases published roll call votes form a specific subsample of all votes (like roll call votes on request), potentially leading to a selection bias between published and unpublished

votes (Carrubba et al., 2006; Yordanova and Mühlböck, 2015; yet see Hix et al., 2014), who find that the selection bias is negligible).<sup>5</sup> In contrast, our research exploits an institutional change which affects transparency on a given vote type and thus does not suffer from the selection bias mentioned above. A comparison of the two chambers of parliament then allows us to identify the causal effect of greater vote transparency on legislative voting.

Transparency is relevant for other political outcomes such as legislators' effort (Grossman and Hanlon, 2014; Hofer, 2016), and decision-making within committees (Levy, 2007; Mattozzi and Nakaguma, 2016). It also plays a role in fields other than politics. A prominent example is decision-making on monetary policy and the communication thereof (Faust and Svensson, 2001; Gersbach and Hahn, 2004, 2008).

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2 we describe the institutional setting and the reform of the Upper House's voting procedures. In Section 3 we explain our empirical approach and identification strategy. We present the main results in Section 4, and extensions that shed light on the mechanisms at play in Section 5. Our results are discussed in Section 6. Section 7 concludes.

## 2. Transparency reform in the Swiss Upper House: the institutional setting

Switzerland has a bicameral parliament composed of the National Council (Lower House) and the Council of States (Upper House). Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of the two chambers. Election to the Lower House is based on proportional representation; its 200 seats are allotted to the 26 cantons (which correspond to voting districts) according to population size. The Upper House has 46 members who represent their respective canton; 20 full cantons delegate two members each while the six half-cantons delegate one each. In contrast to the Lower House, members of the Upper House are typically elected by majority vote. With the exception of candidates in two small cantons which hold proportional elections, candidates in the remaining 24 cantons who do not obtain an absolute majority of votes during the first round have to stand for a second round. Parliament also elects the seven members of the Swiss government executive, the Federal Council, which acts as a collective presidency.

Switzerland's political landscape is dominated by four parties, ideologically ordered from left to right: the Social Democrats (SP), the Christian Democrats (CVP), the Free Democrats (FDP), and the Swiss People's Party (SVP). Together, they hold 93.5% and 79% of all seats in the Upper House and Lower House, respectively. Moreover, typically all seven Federal Councillors, including the largely ceremonial president, are members of these parties. As a consequence, and unlike in many other countries, there is a large overlap between the governing coalition and the opposition. However, the dominance of the "big four" masks considerable ideological and leadership heterogeneity between the parties. All parties are deeply rooted in the country's federal structure. Most of them have their own cantonal branches, which are responsible for putting forward candidates for parliamentary election (Vatter, 2016).

When a new piece of legislation enters the parliamentary deliberation process, legislators vote on detailed amendments and then on the entire piece of legislation at the end of a round of deliberation ("total vote"). When the two chambers accept a proposal in separate deliberations, a final passage vote takes place. The two houses have

<sup>2</sup> Another stream of the literature which makes use of these video records analyzes how well constituencies are represented by their respective councilors (Eichenberger et al., 2012; Stadelmann et al., 2012, 2014). Bütikofer (2014) describes party line deviation and its determinants by using the video records.

<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Prat (2005, 2006), Fox (2007) and Fox and Van Weelden (2012) show that transparency of the agent's decisions can be detrimental to the principal if the former then disregards private information to mimic "good" agents.

<sup>4</sup> Stadelmann et al. (2014) find that the 2006 introduction of video recordings in the Swiss Upper House did not affect the difference in yes shares between legislators and voters in referendums.

<sup>5</sup> Carrubba et al. (2008) provide a theoretical rationale behind requests for roll call votes.

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