



Voting about immigration policy: What does the Swiss experience tell us?

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on Swiss direct democracy to review the Swiss experience with immigration, which has been shaped strongly by regular voting on immigration policies. Relying on two unique post-vote data-sets on how Swiss citizens voted on initiatives directed at containing the proportion of foreigners in the population, we improve on past empirical evidence by bypassing the problem of “hypothetical bias” present in the analysis of conventional survey data. Controlling for the participation bias due to non-mandatory voting, we find evidence that the hypothetical bias hampering pre-vote surveys may be large but that turnout does not have a decisive influence on the outcome of a vote. Confirming political–economy predictions, education matters in the shaping of immigration preferences but non-economic arguments also play an important role.

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, immigration policy has occupied center-stage in the policy-making debate of many high-income countries. Indeed, squeezed between increasing migration pressures, the move towards regional agreements, and the rather negative views citizens have about immigration, the shaping of immigration policy has turned out to be a very “sensitive” subject to manage for the governments of nearly all the host countries.

Given that most high-income countries have institutions of representative democracy, opinion polls have often been considered a way to disentangle the public's preferences from those of the politicians, and have been used widely to better understand the determinants of individual preferences towards immigrants. Associated with labor market effects, concerns about welfare take-up, and social arguments, many household surveys have emphasized that in a majority of developed countries citizens are fearful of the consequences of increased immigration. However, as the outcomes of opinion polls do not directly influence immigration policies, they may be affected by diverse biases and interpreting them as reflecting how people would actually vote if asked to may not be appropriate.

During the 1999, 2003 and 2007 parliamentary elections in Switzerland, immigration was recurrently among the most vehemently debated topics, thus emphasizing the importance to better define citizens concerns about immigration. In the context of the Swiss direct democracy where Swiss citizens vote regularly on immigration policy, it is possible to identify citizens' attitudes

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towards immigration by controlling for the “hypothetical bias” hampering conventional opinion polls data. Two unique post-vote data-sets allow investigation of the probability of participating in a vote and of accepting more restrictions on immigration in terms of individual characteristics. Moreover, as turnout is not mandatory in Switzerland, we can also explicitly take into account the “participation bias”. We find that, while the participation choice seems not to have mattered for the outcome of the vote, this outcome is nevertheless far away from the predictions reported by pre-vote surveys, thus suggesting a large hypothetical bias when using conventional opinion-poll data.

More broadly, the paper contributes to the debate on the political economy of migration policy and expands on [de Melo et al. \(2004\)](#). It recounts the Swiss experience with immigration and emphasizes the interaction of economic interests – mostly favorable to immigration – with the expression of citizens' preferences via the political system – mostly reluctant to having further immigration. The system of direct democracy has forced the Swiss government to conduct its immigration policy so as to avoid restrictive propositions being adopted by popular vote. At the same time – despite the very high share of foreigners – anti-immigration attitudes seem to be less widespread in Switzerland than in other European countries, as reported by international surveys such as the Eurobarometer or the European Social Survey.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 briefly reviews the political–economy dimension of immigration policy in a direct-democracy framework relevant for Switzerland and for interpreting the results from recent post-vote surveys. Section 3 is an overview of the empirical literature based on opinion polls. Section 4 briefly recounts how popular votes on referenda and initiatives shaped Swiss immigration policy over the last fifty years. Section 5 presents the two Swiss post-vote data-sets and the econometric methodology used to estimate jointly the probability of participating in the vote and of accepting more restrictions on immigration in terms of individual characteristics. In Section 6, we analyze the results by taking explicitly into account the possible “selection” bias associated with non-mandatory turnout. Differences or similarities between the outcome of a vote and results from conventional opinion polls are also discussed further. Conclusions follow in Section 7.

2. The political economy of immigration in a direct democracy

When studying the impact of immigration on host countries, it is customary to consider labor market effects, welfare take-up (see [Nannestad, 2007](#), for an overview), and social arguments. Since the Swiss immigration policy has clearly been driven by labor market interests, we shall concentrate on labor market effects, emphasizing the channels through which immigration may affect the incomes of host countries citizens. We also wish to highlight the role of ownership of economic factors in the determination of migration policies, while discussing the political economy of skill requirements, that is, the conditions under which low-skill immigrants are likely to be accepted under politically endogenous immigration policy.

Predictions of the effects of immigration highly depend on the model used (see [Hillman and Weiss, 1999](#), for an overview). For instance, [Benhabib \(1996\)](#) used a median-voter approach in a factor-endowment model (see also [Mayer, 1984](#)) to predict the immigration policy outcome. By supposing that capital – including human capital – is distributed unequally among natives and that a fixed pool of potential immigrants with different capital endowments wishes to enter a country, Benhabib showed that if the median native's capital endowment is smaller than some critical level – which is the case when the distribution of capital is sufficiently skewed to the right – a minimum skill requirement for immigrants will defeat any other policy under majority voting with pairwise alternatives. Based on the observation that attitudes toward immigration are shaped not only by households' characteristics but also by sectors of activity and that individuals consider the distributional issues raised by immigration in a medium-term time-frame,¹ [Grether et al. \(2001\)](#) considered a Ricardo–Viner model with two sectors where capital is perfectly mobile between these sectors but where skilled and unskilled labor are specific to a given sector. Relying on this model, they showed that, if individual attitudes towards immigration are entirely determined by expected income, desired immigration will be determined by (i) the expected size of immigration flows, (ii) the capital distribution among natives, and (iii) the capital endowment of the immigrants. The main testable implication is that, where capital is evenly distributed within the groups of skilled and unskilled citizens and where the immigration surplus is infinitesimal, skilled natives will always adopt a position systematically opposed by unskilled natives.

In a direct democracy in which voting is not compulsory – as in the Swiss case examined here – one also needs to analyze the vote-participation process.² Relying on [Fauvelle-Aymar et al. \(2000\)](#), on [Kirchgässner and Schulz \(2005\)](#), and other literature, the decision to vote can be viewed as a personal cost–benefit analysis. The costs of voting can be, for instance, the time spent to go to the booths or to become informed about the issues of the vote. Even if we suppose that the average time needed to go to the booths is the same for all citizens, we can expect middle-aged and well-educated individuals, for instance, to be able to acquire information at less cost than the rest of the population. However, as emphasized by [Frey \(1971\)](#), since education and age are often positively correlated with income, we can also expect their opportunity cost to get informed and to go to the booths to be larger.

The benefits for a citizen to see his preferred outcome accepted can be viewed from three – not necessarily reinforcing – perspectives. According to an “instrumental” view, benefits are simply implied by the expected (weighted) difference in utility between a citizen's preferred alternative and the other. This benefit is high if the result of the vote has a great influence on the citizen's utility and/or if the citizen's choice is expected to be pivotal. According to an “expressive” view, benefits are associated with the pleasure a citizen gets when supporting his preferred alternative and/or simply with the pleasure induced by participating in the

¹ See [Hillman and Weiss \(1999\)](#).

² [Campbell \(1999\)](#) has shown that “[...] the alternative preferred by more expected zealous voters [...] wins with a high probability [...] even if the expected proportion of the entire electorate that shares that preference is arbitrarily small”.

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