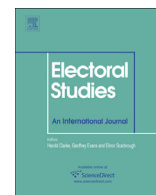




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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Electoral Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/electstud

Who supports minority rights in popular votes? Empirical evidence from Switzerland



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 June 2012

Received in revised form 1 April 2014

Accepted 17 June 2014

Available online 30 June 2014

Keywords:

Popular votes

Minority rights

Ingroups

Outgroups

Educational effects

ABSTRACT

Recent research shows that well-educated citizens are more supportive of minority rights in direct democratic votes than people with less education. This article however suggests that educational effects on minority rights only emerge under certain conditions. A Bayesian multilevel analysis of 39 referendums and initiatives on minority rights in Switzerland (1981–2009) shows that educational effects are particularly strong when the rights of lesser-known cultural minorities are to be extended. They are entirely absent, however, when referenda address the curtailment of rights for well-known minority groups.

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When scholars study direct democracy and minority rights, they generally wish to know whether minority rights fare better in representative or in direct democratic systems¹ (Bochsler and Hug, 2009; Bowler et al., 2006; Bowler and Donovan, 1998; Donovan and Bowler, 1998; Frey and Goette, 1998; Gamble, 1997; Haider-Markel et al., 2007; Haider-Markel and Meier, 1996; Hajnal et al., 2002; Matsusaka, 2007; Nicholson-Crotty, 2006; Schaub, 2012; Tolbert and Hero, 1996). The overall results of these studies suggest that there is not a single answer to this question. One reason for these ambiguous results, we argue, is that direct democracy involves very different mechanisms, some of which may curtail minority rights, while others could be conducive to generous minority

rights. A broad and encompassing assessment of whether minorities find more advantageous conditions in direct or representative democracies may, at this stage in the research, be overly ambitious. We instead argue that it is important to first ask who supports minority rights in popular votes and under which conditions, and this is precisely what we aim to do in this article.

Donovan and Bowler (1998), Haider-Markel et al. (2007) and Vatter (2011) all conclude that education is a key variable in understanding voting behaviour regarding minority rights: The higher an individual's level of education, or the greater the share of highly educated citizens in a district, the greater the likelihood of a pro-minority vote. A similar pattern can be found in research on opinions about minorities. Weldon (2006) and Bobo and Licari (1989) show that political (and social) tolerance increase with higher education.² According to Sniderman and

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¹ This article was written as part of a research project on religious minorities in a direct democracy that was carried out within the Swiss national research programme 58 (Religions, the State, and Society) of the Swiss National Science Foundation (project no. 405840-115712).

² The findings regarding educational effects on political tolerance are somewhat ambiguous. While the literature on the United States quite consistently shows a positive relationship (Bobo and Licari, 1989), the findings for European countries are mixed (Duch and Gibson, 1992: 252; see also Weldon, 2006).

Hagendoorn (2007: 106), highly educated individuals are less likely to perceive minority groups as a cultural threat, and de Figueiredo and Elkins (2003) find that education decreases xenophobia.

What these studies have in common is an assumption that educational effects are constant across different votes and ballot proposals. This assumption, however, does not seem to be plausible. Bolliger (2007), for instance, points out that the historically rooted linguistic minorities in Switzerland (French, Italian, Raeto-Roman) are well integrated and accepted by the vast majority of the German speaking majority. It is therefore difficult to understand why better-educated, tolerant Swiss-Germans should be more supportive of these minorities than others. Bolliger (2007), for example, finds hardly any discriminatory effect on these minorities in direct democratic legislation.

We therefore theoretically and empirically analyze in how far and under which circumstances an individual's educational level influence voting behaviour on minority rights. In particular, we expect the influence of education to vary according to specific characteristics of the proposal to be voted upon. We focus on two such characteristics: the target group (an in-group or an out-group) and the direction of a bill (i.e. whether it aims to extend or limit minority rights).

In sum, this study goes beyond previous research in three aspects. First, the article does not focus on the general question of whether outcomes of direct democratic votes protect minority rights. Instead, we focus on the *input side* of direct democracy in order to understand who favours minority rights on the ballot and under which conditions. Knowing more about the decision-making process and its conditionalities will reveal important insights into understanding its varying outcomes. Second, we add to existing work on the correlation between education and tolerance. While most studies focus on attitudes and values regarding minorities (e.g., Bobo and Licari, 1989; de Figueiredo and Elkins, 2003; Helbling and Kriesi, 2013; Sniderman and Hagendoorn, 2007; Weldon, 2006), we analyze a *behavioural dimension of tolerance*, i.e. whether individuals cast a vote in favour of minority rights. Moreover, we further develop the general relationship between education and tolerant behaviour by theoretically and empirically demonstrating that educational effects vary depending on the characteristics of the ballot initiative. Third, the empirical test of the hypotheses advanced in this paper will be conducted on the basis of data on popular votes in Switzerland and therefore adds to existing work that tends to narrowly focus on the United States. In this respect, the study follows the most important demands of previous studies in that future research should not only continue to explore these issues in the US states but also expand this research to other countries with direct democratic institutions (Haider-Merkel et al., 2007: 313).

The article is structured as follows. The subsequent section presents the theoretical framework and the hypotheses we derive from it. Next, the data and cases as well as the research design and method are introduced. The fourth section presents the empirical test of the hypotheses

and discusses the central findings. The article ends with a summary of the most important results and some concluding remarks.

1. Theoretical framework

Several studies have identified education as a key variable in understanding voting behaviour on minority rights (Anderson and Goodyear-Grant, 2010; Donovan and Bowler, 1998; Haider-Merkel et al., 2007; Vatter, 2011). But what is it about education that leads to pro-minority voting behaviour? And can we expect education to play an identical role across very different ballot contexts?

Based on previous studies we initially suggest two mechanisms through which higher education may increase the propensity to vote in favour of minority rights. Before doing so, however, we first need to characterize what is meant by “pro-minority voting behaviour”. We argue that the distinctiveness of voting on minority rights results from the fact that a pro-minority vote necessitates a certain degree of altruism. More precisely and given the “winner-take-all nature” of direct democratic votes (Hajnal et al., 2002: 155), the majority of voters needs to accept rules that, while advantageous for some, may even have negative consequences for themselves. This description aligns quite well to the conception of tolerant behaviour: According to Sullivan et al. (1999: 784) “one is tolerant to the extent one is prepared to extend freedoms to those whose ideas one rejects, whatever these might be”. The following theoretical discussion thus builds on the assumption that tolerant voters will have a higher propensity to accept ballot proposals in favour of minority rights than less tolerant voters.

Based on previous research we argue that a lack of tolerance, i.e. intolerance towards minorities, has two main sources: intolerance arises from the fear that a minority group (1) will threaten core values in a society or (2) endangers the economic situation (Gibson, 1992: 569; Freitag and Rapp, 2013: 3; Stouffer, 1955; Sullivan et al., 1993: 78–79). Related to these two sources of intolerance, we propose two mechanisms through which an individual's educational background may affect her propensity support ballot measures in favour of minority rights:

- (1) The first mechanism is based on *group-specific value patterns*. It has often been argued that education increases one's awareness of societal problems and empathy, which increases the likelihood of getting involved on the behalf of others (Wilson, 2000: 220). Accordingly and in relation to minorities, these particular value patterns may be conducive to tolerance towards minorities, i.e. reduce the fear of a value-related threat and thus increase the probability of pro-minority voting behaviour. In fact, several studies have shown that political (and social) tolerance increase with higher education (Giugni and Morariu, 2010; Weldon, 2006; Bobo and Licari,

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