

# **Electoral competitiveness and issue voting**

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## **Abstract**

This paper suggests that voters rely more strongly on “substantial” criteria, such as issues and ideology, when elections are competitive. In such contexts, voters should attach more importance to their own choice and rely less on “heuristics.” Three aspects of election competitiveness are considered: the fragmentation and polarization of the party system and the proportionality of the electoral system. Elections are more competitive when there are many parties in competition, when they differ strongly from one another in ideological terms, and when the threshold of representation is lower. These hypotheses are tested with data from the 2007 Swiss federal elections. The electoral districts differ markedly from one another as far as electoral competitiveness is concerned while being similar in many other respects. The results show that competitiveness strengthens issue voting and reduces the impact of party identification.

**Keywords:** Issue voting, party identification, polarization, fragmentation, electoral system

## **Introduction**

Issue preferences are an important component in many models of voting choice (e.g., Adams et al. 2005). Relatively little, however, is known about variations in the strength of issue voting across contexts. Do voters rely more strongly on issue preferences in some political contexts than in others? Can electoral institutions incite voters to rely more strongly on substantive criteria, such as issues and ideology, rather than on traditional loyalties? Such comparative questions have become more prominent in recent years (Curtice 2002; Thomassen 2005; Lau and Redlawsk 2006).

Previous research has investigated the effects of party system polarization. A higher level of polarization has been shown to strengthen ideological voting (van der Eijk et al. 2005; Ensley 2007; Lachat 2008a), value voting (Knutsen and Kumlin 2005), and issue voting (Alvarez and Nagler 2004). These findings have been explained by a salience effect. Greater polarization means that parties' issue positions diverge more strongly, which should incite parties to emphasize their issue positions. The increased salience of issues, in turn, should motivate voters to rely on more substantial criteria and make it easier to do so.

This paper extends on this research in two ways. First, it considers the more general concept of electoral competitiveness, which combines several characteristics of the electoral context. Competitive elections are fragmented, polarized, and take place under a proportional electoral system. They are elections where voters are faced with a variety of parties, advocating different political positions, and where the hurdles for entry into parliament are relatively low. The competition among parties is stronger, since the number of players involved is higher. All three aspects of competitiveness are expected to strengthen issue voting. These characteristics should affect both parties' mobilizing strategies and voters' incentives to rely more on issues and less on traditional loyalties.

Second, this paper distinguishes between two forms of issue voting: proximity voting, where citizens systematically compare their preferences to parties' issue positions, and a less elaborate form of "single-issue voting" (Lau and Redlawsk 2006). While both of these decision-making strategies are based on citizens' issue preferences, they differ in the level of cognitive engagement and political sophistication required. This paper also compares the impact of issues with that of party identification. Thus, this study does not simply investigate how the strength of proximity voting is related to context factors; rather, it considers how electoral competitiveness affects the relative importance of several decision-making strategies.

This study's hypotheses are tested using data from the 2007 Swiss election study. The electoral districts (cantons) for Swiss federal elections offer sufficient variations in the relevant context-level characteristics while still being very similar in many respects, avoiding many of the difficulties associated with cross-country comparisons.

The next section discusses the roles of issue preferences and party identification in the voting decision process. The third section presents hypotheses about how electoral competitiveness moderates the impact of issue preferences and party identification. This is followed by a presentation of the data and variables used, as well as by a specification of the statistical model. The corresponding results are presented in the next section, followed by a summary of the main findings and a discussion of their implications.

### **Issue voting and party identification**

Political issues play a central role in normative theories of political representation. Elections are seen as the central linkage between citizens and their representatives. Parties are expected to compete on the basis of their policy preferences, allowing citizens to support the platform that corresponds most closely to their ideals (Thomassen and Schmitt 1997; Adams and Merrill 2005). Ideological congruence between citizens and legislators is thus often perceived as a central criterion for evaluating how well a political system represents the interests of its citizens (Powell 2000, 2004).

This privileged role of issue preferences is reflected in spatial models of electoral competition. These explain voting choices and party strategies by the relative positions of voters and parties in a policy or ideology space (Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984; Adams et al. 2005). Parties are typically assumed to be vote maximizers, while voters are most often expected to support the party or candidate that is closest to them in the political space (proximity voting). While such a model of electoral competition is attractive from a normative standpoint, it makes demanding assumptions for voters. Citizens have limited information about parties' positions and politics in general and invest limited cognitive resources in their electoral choices and other political decisions (Sniderman et al. 1991; Zaller 1992; Bartels 1996). Rather than engage in a rational comparison of parties' policy proposals, many citizens rely instead on simpler decision-making strategies. Their political decisions are often guided by "heuristics," that is, easily available pieces of information that allow them to reach a decision without processing large amounts of information. In the electoral context, for instance, citizens can vote on the basis of candidates' party affiliation, relying on the

stereotypes or images they associate with the parties (Lodge and Hamill 1986; Rahn 1993; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994; Lau and Redlawsk 2006).

Several scholars have suggested extending spatial models in order to integrate non-spatial explanatory factors. An important development in this line of research is to combine spatial factors and party identification (Erikson and Romero 1990; Adams 2001; Adams et al. 2005). Party identification designates a relatively stable psychological attachment to a party and has long been a central explanatory factor in models of voting choice (Campbell et al. 1960). Such “unified” models have proven to be better than traditional spatial models at predicting electoral results and party positions (e.g., Adams et al. 2005).

Proximity voting and voting based on partisan heuristics are not the only possible decision-making strategies. An important alternative is single-issue voting, that is, a simplified form of issue voting, where citizens focus only on the issue they consider most important. This is similar to the “fast and frugal” decision-making strategy identified by Lau and Redlawsk (2006) or to models of voting choice based on perceived party competence or issue ownership (Petrocik 1996; Bellucci 2006; Green 2007). Single-issue voters are citizens who decide to support a given party because they perceive it as the best able to handle what they see as the most pressing political problem. While this decision-making strategy involves issues, it differs from proximity voting. It does not involve a systematic comparison of parties and requires less information and cognitive engagement. It can be seen as intermediate between proximity voting and “party identification voting.”

These three types of explanatory factors—proximity voting, party identification, and single-issue voting—will be at the center of this study’s comparative analyses. I am interested in analyzing how their importance is influenced by political and institutional context. The next section discusses why such context effects are to be expected.

### **Electoral competitiveness**

When making political decisions, citizens tend to act as “cognitive misers” (Fiske and Taylor 1991). Their capacity and motivation to consider large amounts of information are limited and they tend to rely on heuristics rather than on a systematic treatment of the available information (Chaiken 1980; Fiske and Neuberg 1990). Yet, some characteristics of the decision context can incite citizens to process information in a more systematic way.

Individuals will be motivated to process larger amounts of information when they want to be more confident in their decisions (Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991). It has, for example, been shown that voters in intense election campaigns rely more on issues and ideology and less on

party identification (Westlye 1991; Lachat and Sciarini 2002). Issue voting can also be *easier* in some contexts than in others. The more parties refer to issues and ideological positions, for instance, the greater should be the availability of these criteria in voters' minds (Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Knutsen and Kumlin 2005; Lachat 2008a).

These ideas have been applied to party system polarization. Following the ideas developed above, one would expect citizens in polarized party systems to rely more strongly on issues (or other substantive criteria) and less on heuristics. This hypothesis has been confirmed with respect to the impact of issues (Alvarez and Nagler 2004), ideology (van der Eijk et al. 2005; Ensley 2007; Lachat 2008a), and values (Knutsen and Kumlin 2005).

Other contextual characteristics can play a similar role. I suggest focusing here on the more general concept of "electoral competitiveness," which combines three aspects: party system polarization, party system fragmentation, and electoral system proportionality. Elections are more competitive when parties are numerous (fragmentation), when they represent distinct political positions (polarization), and when many of them have a real chance of being represented in parliament (proportionality).

All three characteristics are expected to influence voters' reliance on issues. Polarization should incite parties to emphasize their issue positions more strongly. Fragmentation means that parties are smaller, on average; their electorate is likely to be more homogeneous and to have more in common in terms of ideological preferences. Similarly to the effect of polarization, the impact of ideological preferences on voting propensities should therefore be strengthened. Finally, the proportionality of the electoral system can also influence party strategies. In less proportional elections, a party needs to mobilize a larger share of the electorate, possibly with more diverse issue preferences, which can incite parties to place less of an emphasis on concrete policy positions and focus more strongly on valence issues (Norris 2004). To sum up, more competitive elections should incite voters to rely more strongly on issues. *Proximity voting* should be stronger in polarized, fragmented, and proportional elections. *Single-issue voting* should also be strengthened when parties emphasize their issue positions and priorities more strongly. The effect of *party identification*, in contrast, should decrease with electoral competitiveness, since citizens are encouraged to rely less strongly on heuristics.

## Data and methods

To test these hypotheses, this study relies on data from the 2007 Swiss election study.<sup>1</sup> These data are well suited for comparative analyses, since the cantons offer much variation in competitiveness. The sizes and polarizations of the party system vary strongly. Although all elections are based on a PR system, the district magnitude ranges from 1 (de facto majoritarian election) to 34. Furthermore, the 2007 election study was designed to facilitate multilevel analyses, with a minimum of 100 respondents interviewed in each district.<sup>2</sup> Of the 26 cantons, 22 can be included in this study's analyses.<sup>3</sup>

In line with much research on issue voting, the dependent variable here is a measure of the "voting propensity" for a given party. This type of measure is often preferred over voting choice, since it entails more detailed information on voters' preferences (Tillie 1995; van der Eijk et al. 2006). While voting choice only distinguishes between the party a voter supports and all the others, voting propensities are assessed separately for different parties. They offer a direct measure of the concept of electoral utility or party utility which is implicit in most theories of voting choice (Tillie 1995). Furthermore, the relation between voting propensities and voting choices is almost deterministic (van der Eijk et al. 2006).<sup>4</sup> Thus the same decision process is still being analyzed when substituting voting propensities for voting choice.

Relying on voting propensities implies that the dataset is "stacked," with the observations corresponding to respondent  $\times$  party combinations rather than to respondents.

In the 2007 Swiss election study, voting propensities were measured by asking citizens to indicate how likely it was that they would ever vote for each of a series of parties. Answers were coded on an 11-point scale ranging from a "very low probability" to a "very high probability." These variables are recoded here to the 0–1 range.<sup>5</sup> The analysis includes voting propensities for the five main parties: the Social Democratic Party (SP), the Christian Democratic Party (CVP), the Liberal Party (FDP), the Swiss People's Party (SVP), and the Green Party (GPS).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The dataset is available from the Swiss Foundation for Research in Social Sciences, at <http://nesstar.sidoc.ch>.

<sup>2</sup> Smaller cantons would otherwise be represented by only a handful of voters in a national representative sample.

<sup>3</sup> No election took place in the canton of Nidwalden, since there was only one candidate for the available seat (a so-called "tacit" election). Three other cantons (Uri, Appenzell Outer Rhodes, and Appenzell Inner Rhodes) were excluded because their level of party system polarization was difficult to determine. In these cantons, a single major party was competing against independents or candidates from very small parties. The issue positions of the latter were not measured in the election study and to ignore them altogether would have meant assuming a total absence of polarization, which makes little sense.

<sup>4</sup> Van der Eijk et al. (2006) show that 93% of voters in the 1994 Dutch election study voted for the party for which their utility was highest. I find the same percentage for the respondents of the 2007 Swiss election study.

<sup>5</sup> Descriptive statistics for all variables can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>6</sup> Voting propensities for smaller parties were not asked in all electoral districts.

The individual-level model includes three types of determinants: voter-party issue proximities, party identification, and evaluations of parties' abilities to solve important issues. Voter-party proximities are measured on two issues: the taxation of high incomes and the question of Swiss EU membership.<sup>7</sup> These two issues correspond to the main dimensions that have structured Swiss politics in recent years: a traditional economic dimension and an "integration–demarcation" conflict formed by attitudes toward cultural liberalism, immigration, and the EU (Kriesi et al. 2006; Lachat 2008b). Voters' positions on these issues and their perception of parties' positions were measured on five-point scales. The proximities are calculated as the squared distances between a voter's position and his or her perception of the corresponding party's position. The voter–party distances were normalized into the 0–1 range for the present analyses and then centered.

Party identification was measured by asking respondents whether they "feel close to a political party." While this question distinguishes only between two groups of voters, party identifiers and non-identifiers, it results in three types of respondent × party combinations, a consequence of the dataset's stacked format. The three groups of observations are as follows:

- party identifiers × the party they identify with,
- party identifiers × other parties,
- non-identifiers × any party.

The group of non-identifiers will be the reference category in the regression models and two dummies will be included to capture the effects of party identification.

Finally, single-issue voting is based on a set of two questions. Respondents were first asked to mention what they saw as the most important problem in Switzerland. Those who mentioned a problem were then asked which party was best able to solve that problem. The answers to this second question indicated which party a voter perceived to be most competent.<sup>8</sup> Again, the information is dichotomous but requires two dummy variables to identify the corresponding voter × party relations, given the stacked nature of the dataset (see below for an illustration of these variables' coding).

These three groups of explanatory variables result in the following individual-level model:

$$y_{ij} = \alpha_0 + \sum_1^{J-1} \alpha_j + \beta_1 \text{Taxes}_{ij} + \beta_2 \text{EU}_{ij}$$

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<sup>7</sup> On the first of these issues, respondents were asked if they were for higher or lower taxes on high incomes. For the European issue, they were asked whether or not they supported Swiss EU membership.

<sup>8</sup> A total of 94% of respondents mentioned a most important problem. About 58% of these indicated a (single) party most capable of solving it.

$$\begin{aligned}
& + \beta_3 \text{PID own}_{ij} + \beta_4 \text{PID other}_{ij} \\
& + \beta_5 \text{Best party}_{ij} + \beta_6 \text{Other best}_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij},
\end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where  $y_{ij}$  is the voting propensity of respondent  $i$  for party  $j$ ,  $\alpha_0$  is a constant, and the  $\alpha_j$  coefficients are party-specific constants. These terms allow one to capture variation in the average voting propensity across parties that is not due to the model's covariates. The variables  $Taxes_{ij}$  and  $EU_{ij}$  are the squared voter–party distances on the issues of high-income taxation and EU membership, respectively. The variables  $PID\ own_{ij}$  and  $PID\ other_{ij}$  are two dummies coding for party identification. When voter  $i$  identifies with party  $j$ ,  $PID\ own_{ij}$  takes on the value of 1 for the corresponding respondent  $\times$  party combination and  $PID\ other_{ij}$  takes on the value of 1 for the combinations of voter  $i$  and parties other than party  $j$ . The dummies  $Best\ party_{ij}$  and  $Other\ best_{ij}$  are coded similarly, identifying the respondent  $\times$  party combinations where voter  $i$  thinks party  $j$  is best at solving the most important problem (*Best party<sub>ij</sub>*) or where another party is best able to do so (*Other best<sub>ij</sub>*). The coding of these two pairs of dummy variables is illustrated in Table 1.

<Table 1 about here>

Most important to this study's hypotheses is the variation across electoral districts in these individual-level relations. The coefficients  $\beta_1$  to  $\beta_6$  are expected to be a function of context-level factors. With  $k$  designating the cantons and  $z$  the first to sixth  $\beta$  coefficients, the context-level model can be specified as

$$\beta_{zk} = \gamma_{0zk} + \gamma_{1zk} \text{Polarization}_k + \gamma_{2zk} \text{Fragmentation}_k + \gamma_{3zk} \text{Proportionality}_k + u_{zk}. \tag{2}$$

The degree of *polarization* of the party system is defined as the standard deviation of the parties' ideological positions weighted for party size (Taylor and Herman 1971). Calculating this index requires information on party positions and strength. For the latter, this study relies on vote shares in the 2007 election. Party positions are based on the average voters' perceptions of party positions in the corresponding canton. Three dimensions can be used to measure party positions (and thus determine the level of polarization): the two issues of taxation and EU membership, as well as a general left–right dimension. Depending on the  $\beta_z$  coefficient modeled, different dimensions seem to be most relevant: The strength of proximity

voting on the EU issue, for instance, should be mainly influenced by polarization on that same EU dimension. Similarly, the strength of economic proximity voting should be best explained by polarization on the economic dimension. The effects of party identification and of perceived party competence, in contrast, are not issue specific. It probably makes more sense to relate them to general left–right polarization. As a consequence, this study uses different measures of polarization to model different cross-level interactions. The impact of polarization on proximity voting will be estimated by using the measure of polarization on the corresponding issue dimension, while polarization on the general left–right dimension will be used to explain the strength of single-issue voting and party identification voting.

Party system *fragmentation* is calculated as the effective number of parties, based on vote shares in the 2007 election (Laakso and Taagepera 1979). Finally, the *proportionality* of electoral systems depends on both electoral rule and district magnitude. In the case of Switzerland, the main source of variation is the magnitude of the electoral districts, which ranges from 1 to 34. To capture this variation, this study starts with Lijphart’s electoral threshold index (1997), defined as  $75\%/(M+1)$ , where  $M$  is the district magnitude. Since this variable’s distribution is strongly skewed, its natural logarithm is used here instead.

These three aspects of the electoral context are likely to be related to one another. A fragmented party system is more likely to be encountered in less proportional elections, that is, in cantons with a small number of seats. I would also expect these party systems to be less polarized than those of larger cantons. In the data analyzed here, fragmentation and proportionality are particularly strongly related ( $r = -0.69$ ). Given the small number of contexts, this relation makes it difficult to distinguish among their respective effects. Consequently two limited versions of Equation 2 will be estimated by including only proportionality or fragmentation along with party system polarization.

The model specified by Equations 1 and 2 has a hierarchical structure. Voting propensities are influenced by three types of individual-level variables. The strength of these relations is conditional on context-level variables. This model is estimated by following a two-step strategy (Achen 2005; Jusko and Shively 2005; Lewis and Linzer 2005). First, the individual-level model is estimated separately in each canton with ordinary least-squares regressions. Then the resulting coefficients are used as the dependent variables for a context-level model, as specified in Equation 2. This second-stage model is estimated using weighted least-squares regressions, which allow one to account for the differences across contexts in the standard

deviations of the coefficients in the first stage. The weights are calculated following the method proposed by Lewis and Linzer (2005: 351f.).<sup>9</sup>

## Results

As a preliminary step, the individual-level model of Equation 1 is estimated *at the national level*. The results provide a first impression of the impact of issue proximities, party competence, and party identification and serve as a reference when considering how these estimates vary across contexts. All three types of determinants have a significant impact (see Table 2). Regarding proximity voting, the negative coefficients for both dimensions indicate that larger voter–party distances lead to smaller voting propensities. One also sees that this effect is stronger for the integration–demarcation dimension than for the economic one. Voter–party distances on the question of EU membership have a stronger impact on voting propensities than the distances on the taxation issue. These estimated effects are not only significant but also substantially large. Increasing the voter–party distance from the minimum to the maximum on the European issue, for instance, leads to a reduction of the voting propensity of about 0.25 on the scale of 0 to 1.

<Table 2 about here>

Single-issue voting also has a strong impact. To interpret the coefficients correctly, it is important to remember that this study distinguishes between three situations. The reference category is composed of citizens who do not view any single party as most competent to solve their most important problem (or who do not identify any such problem). The two dummy variables allow one to compare the voting propensities of these respondents to those who do identify such a party a) with respect to this most competent party and b) with respect to other parties. As expected, respondents who single out a party as most competent have a higher voting propensity for that party than other respondents. One can also see that at the same time this perception of competence has a negative impact on propensities to support the remaining parties. Here again, the size of the effect is impressive. Identifying a party as most competent produces a gap of 0.28 in voting propensities between that party and its competitors.<sup>10</sup> Finally, party identification also has the expected effect. Traditional attachment increases the propensity to support the corresponding party and decreases the chances of supporting another

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<sup>9</sup> The procedure recommended by Lewis and Linzer can be estimated using the *edvreg* program for Stata, available at <http://svn.cluelessresearch.com/twostep/trunk/edvreg.ado>.

<sup>10</sup> The value of 0.28 is obtained by adding the absolute values of the two party competence dummies.

party. The effect is even larger than that of party competence. Among party identifiers, the propensity to support one's traditionally preferred party is higher than the voting propensities for other parties by a value of 0.36 on the scale of 0 to 1.<sup>11</sup>

Next this study analyzes the variations in the strength of these effects across contexts. The model of Equation 1 is re-estimated, this time separately in each canton, allowing one to determine how the individual-level relations are shaped by the characteristics of the decision context. One can first consider the extent to which the effects of issue distances, perceived party competence, and party identification vary across contexts. Table 3 presents some summary statistics for each of the six series of coefficients. Clearly, the impact of these variables is not the same in all contexts. Voter-party distances on the issue of high-income taxation, for instance, do not have a significant impact on voting propensities in all cantons. While the expected negative estimate is found in most cases, voters are not significantly influenced by their economic preferences in about one-fifth of the cantons (four out of 22). Attitudes toward EU membership have a significant impact in all districts but the strength of this impact also varies across cantons, by a factor of 1 to 3. The same applies to the other estimated effects: They are not significant in some of the cantons or the magnitude of the effect varies substantially.

<Table 3 about here>

Most interesting for the present purposes is determining how this variation is related to the competitiveness of the electoral context, that is, to party system polarization, party system fragmentation, and electoral system proportionality. As mentioned in the previous section, the strong empirical relations between fragmentation and proportionality make it problematic to include both of these independent variables in the same model. Instead, two models are estimated, each including two independent variables: polarization and fragmentation (Model 1) and polarization and proportionality (Model 2). The results in Table 4 show that the strength of proximity voting on the economic issue dimension is affected by fragmentation and proportionality. In Model 1, the effective number of parties has a negative and significant effect on the coefficient of spatial utilities. As party system fragmentation grows, the coefficient becomes increasingly negative, corresponding to a stronger effect of economic issue distances on voting propensities. Proximity voting on the taxation issue is also strengthened when the electoral threshold *decreases*, that is, when the electoral system is

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<sup>11</sup> The value of 0.36 is equal to the sum of the absolute values of the dummies *Party identification, own party* and *Party identification, other party*.

more proportional. Party system polarization, on the other hand, does not have a similar effect, contrary to this study's expectations. As far as the economic issue dimension is concerned, proximity voting does not become significantly stronger as polarization increases.

<Table 4 about here>

This variation in the strength of economic proximity voting across cantons is illustrated in Figure 1, which plots the predicted coefficient of economic proximity voting (and the corresponding confidence interval) against the effective number of electoral parties.<sup>12</sup> The predicted effect is stronger (i.e., the coefficient is more negative) in fragmented party systems than in concentrated ones. Similarly, Figure 2 shows the corresponding results for different levels of proportionality. Here again, one sees that proximity voting on economic issues becomes more pronounced with district magnitude.

<Figures 1 and 2 about here>

This study finds different results for proximity voting on the European dimension. This form of issue voting is affected neither by party system fragmentation nor by the proportionality of the electoral system. The corresponding coefficients have estimates close to 0, with large standard errors. The point estimates for the polarization of the party system, in contrast, are negative and not too far from being significant. The p-values are about 0.13 in both models. Given the very small number of observations at the level of cantons, this may be seen as confirming the hypothesis about the role of polarization. Furthermore, polarization is significant at the 10% level when it is included as the single independent variable ( $\beta = -1.29$ ). The effect of polarization in this simplified model is presented graphically in Figure 3. The effect is less pronounced than what was observed with economic proximity voting and fragmentation, for instance; however, EU proximity voting is significantly reinforced as polarization increases.

<Figure 3 about here>

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<sup>12</sup> The predicted results presented in Figures 1 and 2 were calculated by setting the polarization variable to its average value.

Party system polarization also influences the strength of single-issue voting. This paper discussed earlier how citizens confer a bonus upon the party they deem most competent to solve the most pressing political problem. The corresponding voting propensity is substantially larger than for the parties' competitors. The size of this bonus increases with the polarization of the party system, as shown by the large and positive coefficients of the dummy *Most competent party* in Models 1 and 2 together with the smaller or non-significant effects of the dummy *Other party most competent*. The difference between these two values corresponds to the effect of perceived party competence. Figure 4 shows how the size of this effect increases with party system polarization.

<Figures 4 and 5 about here>

The level of polarization also influences the effect of party identification. In more competitive contexts, party identification has a *smaller* impact. This relation is illustrated in Figure 5, which shows the predicted gap in the voting propensities of party identifiers between their traditionally preferred party and other parties. The predicted effect of party identification is always positive and significant; that is, party identification always leads to a bonus for one's preferred party. The size of this bonus, however, decreases with party system polarization. The other aspects of competitiveness, however, do not seem to impact on single-issue voting or party identification voting. District magnitude and party system fragmentation affect neither the increase in the voting probability associated with perceived competence nor the advantage conferred by party identification.<sup>13</sup>

## Discussion

Voting choices based on issues preferences are a central component of normative models of political representation. An efficient system of political representation is one that guarantees the congruence of citizens' and legislators' issue positions, a demanding requirement given the relatively low level of political information among citizens. This paper investigated whether some political and institutional factors could help approach that ideal by inciting citizens to rely more strongly on issue preferences. Two forms of issue voting were considered: proximity voting, where citizens support the party closest to them in the political

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<sup>13</sup> The significant effect of fragmentation on the dummy *PID, other party* (Table 4, Model 1) points only to a difference in voting probabilities between non-identifiers' and identifiers' evaluations of their *non-preferred* parties. The effect of party identification, however, does not significantly vary with fragmentation. Similarly, electoral system proportionality has no effect on single-issue voting in Model 2, that is, on the difference between the dummies *Most competent party* and *Other party most competent*.

space, and a less elaborate single-issue voting, where voters support the party viewed as best able to handle the most important political problem. This study's hypothesis is that both forms of issue voting would be stronger (and the effect of party identification weaker) in competitive elections, that is, in elections held under a more proportional electoral system and with a fragmented and polarized party system. These aspects of the decision context should lead voters to deem their own decision as more important, incite parties to emphasize their issue positions more clearly, and make issue criteria more easily available and easier to use for voters.

This study's analyses of voters' behavior in the 2007 Swiss election show strong variations across cantons in the strength of issue voting and the effect of party identification. Most important, they reveal that this variation is related to electoral competitiveness. Issue voting is stronger in more competitive elections and the effect of party identification weaker. Not all aspects of competitiveness are relevant, however. Party identification voting and single-issue voting are affected by the polarization of the party system, but not by its fragmentation or the proportionality of the electoral system. The same pattern was observed with respect to proximity voting on the issue of EU integration. Economic proximity voting, in contrast, is not significantly affected by polarization but it is stronger in fragmented party systems and in more proportional elections.

While this paper's findings confirm the expected link between electoral competitiveness and issue voting, they also point to new questions about the role of the electoral context. An interesting line of inquiry for future research is the difference between economic proximity voting and EU proximity voting. One possibility to explore the difference is to look in more detail at the configurations of the parties in competition and their campaign strategies. The expected effects of competitiveness on issue voting are indirect: They should depend, among other things, on parties' issue emphases during the campaign. While economic conflict corresponds to a basic conflict of left versus right, likely to be observed in all cantons, mobilization on the EU dimension is mainly associated with the right-wing populist Swiss People's Party (Kriesi et al. 2005). Since this party takes a relatively extreme position on the European question, it is likely to have a strong influence on the level of polarization. This could explain why the strength of EU proximity voting is mainly related to that aspect of competitiveness. In other words, it may be necessary not only to consider electoral competitiveness per se but also to distinguish among different causes for higher or lower levels of competitiveness.

## Appendix

<Tables 5 and 6 about here>

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Table 1. Coding of the dummy variables for party identification and party competence.

Observation	<i>PID Own<sub>ij</sub></i>	<i>PID Other<sub>ij</sub></i>	<i>Best party<sub>ij</sub></i>	<i>Other best<sub>ij</sub></i>
Respondent 1 × Party A	1	0	1	0
Respondent 1 × Party B	0	1	0	1
Respondent 1 × Party C	0	1	0	1
Respondent 2 × Party A	0	1	0	1
Respondent 2 × Party B	1	0	1	0
Respondent 2 × Party C	0	1	0	1
Respondent 3 × Party A	0	0	0	0
Respondent 3 × Party B	0	0	0	0
Respondent 3 × Party C	0	0	0	0

*This table illustrates the coding of the two dummies measuring party identification and party competence. Respondent 1 identifies with party A and thinks this party is most competent. Respondent 2 identifies with party B and perceives it as the best party to solve his or her most important problem. Respondent 3 has no party identification and thinks that no party is able to solve the most pressing political problem.*

Table 2. Impact of issues and party identification on voting propensities at the national level.

	Coefficient	Robust Std. Error
Taxes on high incomes	-0.201***	0.012
EU membership	-0.248***	0.010
Most competent party	0.252***	0.011
Other party most competent	-0.029***	0.008
Party identification, own party	0.286***	0.009
Party identification, other party	-0.075***	0.007
<i>Party dummies (Ref.: SP)</i>		
CVP	0.005	0.010
FDP	0.048***	0.010
SVP	-0.085***	0.011
GPS	0.039***	0.011
Constant	0.454***	0.009
<i>N</i> (weighted)		3335
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		0.40

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

*Coefficients and standard errors are from an ordinary least-squares regression. The observations are weighted to account for the varying number of respondent × party combinations by respondent and to give each cantonal sample an importance proportional to its size.*

Table 3. Summary statistics for cantonal regression coefficients ( $N=22$ ).

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Taxes on high incomes	-0.179	0.079	-0.315	0.054
EU membership	-0.234	0.067	-0.341	-0.107
Most competent party	0.238	0.080	0.090	0.432
Other party most competent	-0.023	0.035	-0.084	0.041
Party identification, own party	0.283	0.048	0.195	0.387
Party identification, other party	-0.076	0.039	-0.155	0.022

Table 4. Impact of electoral competitiveness on spatial voting, single-issue voting, and party identification voting.

	Model 1				Model 2			
	Polarization <sup>a</sup>	ENEP	Constant	R <sup>2</sup>	Polarization <sup>a</sup>	Log(ET)	Constant	R <sup>2</sup>
Taxes on high incomes	-0.829 (0.675)	-0.029* (0.012)	0.000 (0.057)	0.39	-0.785 (0.821)	0.029* (0.019)	-0.203** (0.070)	0.20
EU membership	-1.221 (0.780)	0.005 (0.013)	-0.159 (0.102)	0.13	-1.217 (0.775)	0.009 (0.018)	-0.152 <sup>†</sup> (0.083)	0.14
Most competent party	2.669* (1.191)	-0.013 (0.014)	0.195* (0.088)	0.24	2.849* (1.235)	0.008 (0.019)	0.108 (0.075)	0.22
Other party most competent	0.482 (0.494)	-0.004 (0.006)	-0.031 (0.038)	0.06	1.062 <sup>†</sup> (0.515)	0.018* (0.008)	-0.107** (0.033)	0.24
PID, own party	-2.321*** (0.584)	0.008 (0.007)	0.344*** (0.046)	0.48	-2.479*** (0.653)	-0.005 (0.011)	0.399*** (0.042)	0.45
PID, other party	-0.067 (0.567)	0.013 <sup>†</sup> (0.007)	-0.133** (0.044)	0.16	-0.475 (0.673)	-0.012 (0.010)	-0.026 (0.041)	0.08

<sup>†</sup>  $p < 0.10$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

<sup>a</sup> The measure of polarization used varies across dependent variables: economic polarization for issue voting on taxation, EU polarization for issue voting on EU membership, and general left–right polarization for the remaining dependent variables.

For all models  $N = 22$ .

Figure 1. Impact of fragmentation on economic proximity voting.

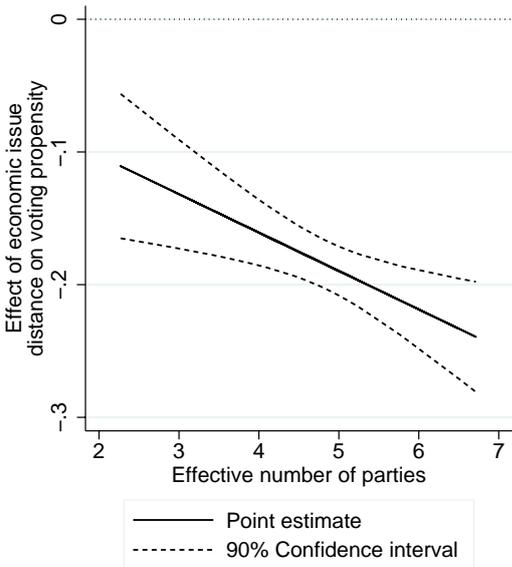


Figure 2. Impact of proportionality on economic proximity voting.

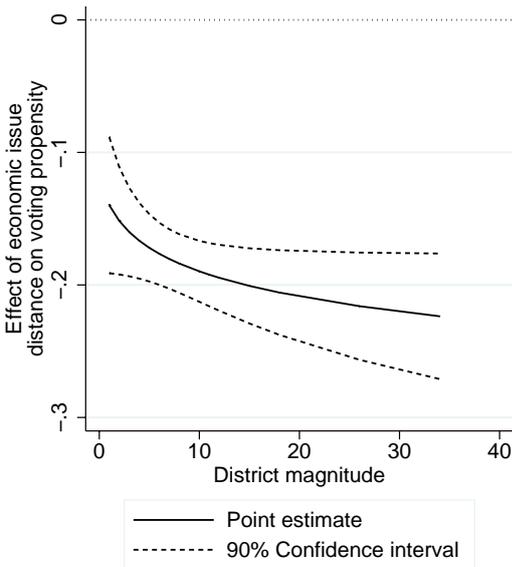


Figure 3. Impact of polarization on EU proximity voting.

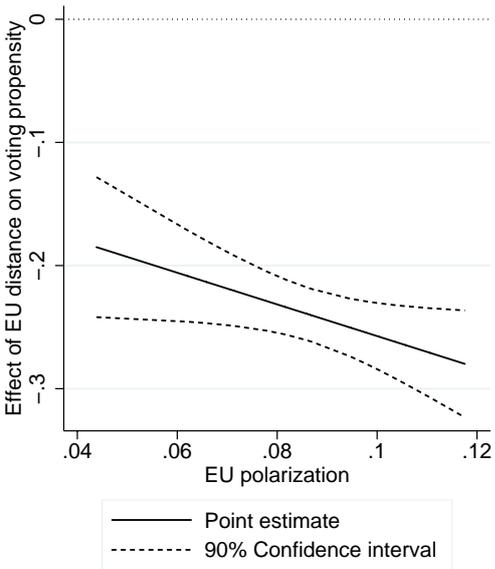


Figure 4. Impact of polarization on single-issue voting.

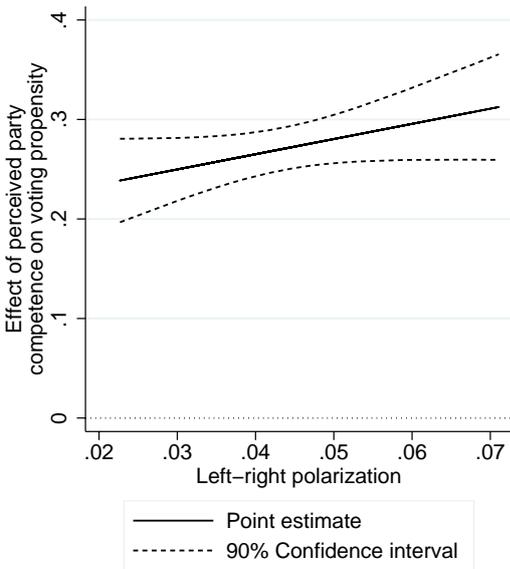


Figure 5. Impact of polarization on party identification voting.

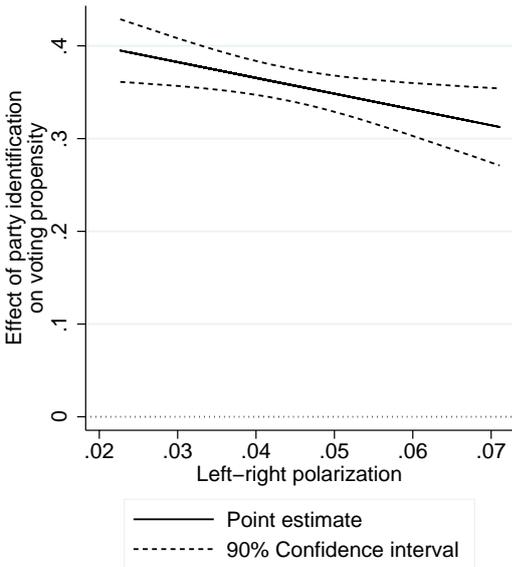


Table 5. Descriptive statistics, individual-level variables.

	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Voting propensity	18752	0.44	.34	0	1
Voter–party distance (squared), taxes on high income	15264	0.00	0.30	–.25	0.75
Voter–party distance (squared), EU membership	15742	0.00	0.33	–.28	.72
<i>Party competence</i>					
Most competent party	20915	0.11	0.31	0	1
Other party most competent	20915	0.46	0.50	0	1
<i>Party identification</i>					
Party identifier × own party	20915	0.08	0.27	0	1
Party identifier × other party	20915	0.35	0.48	0	1

Table 6. Descriptive statistics, context-level variables.

	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Polarization, left–right	22	0.042	0.013	0.023	0.071
Polarization, taxes on high incomes	22	0.054	0.017	0.020	0.085
Polarization, EU membership	22	0.086	0.018	0.044	0.118
Effective number of electoral parties	22	4.547	1.053	2.270	6.713
Log(effective threshold)	22	2.298	0.758	0.762	3.624