Party Unity in the Swiss Parliament The Electoral Connection

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Introduction

In representative democracies voting unity is of central interest.\(^1\) It gives an indication of the extent to which parties are able to realize the policy goals they had promised in their platforms. Parties need to act cohesively in order to win votes and shape policy (Carey 2007), and without a certain degree of organized action, it is difficult for voters to observe the behaviour of their representatives (Muller 2000). In parliamentary systems, where the government does ultimately depend on the support of members of parliament (MPs), voting unity is often seen as an important condition for the existence of responsible party government (Bowler et al. 1999). In systems where the executive does not depend on parliament, party unity is in general lower but parties still have means to maintain a certain degree of coordinated behaviour among their members (Cox and McCubbins 1993).

From the perspective of individual Members of Parliament (MPs) explanations for party unity are slightly different. The literature discusses several reasons why MPs should vote along party lines, such as benefits of office within parliamentary parties (e.g. access to committees, Cox and McCubbins 1993) or to the re-election goal (Mayhew 1974, Aldrich 1995, Cox 1997). The desire for re-election can have, however, very different consequences for party unity, depending on the electoral system, or more broadly on whether "accountability" is individual or collective, to use Carey's (2009) terms.\(^2\) If voters hold MPs individually to account, by voting in favour of a specific MP, party unity is likely to be reduced. On the other hand, if voters hold MPs collectively as parties to account, party unity is likely to be higher. Independent of this, elections are likely to play an important role in the quest for party unity. Several authors have surmised (see Diermeier and Feddersen 1998, Owens 2003) or empirically assessed whether party unity varies across the electoral cycle (see

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\(^1\) We use the term “party unity” or “voting unity” to refer to the degree of homogeneity within parties (or party groups) that is observable via the MP’s voting behaviour. Contrary to voting unity, party discipline (sanctions imposed by the party leadership) and preference homogeneity or “cohesion” cannot be measured directly (see Sieberer 2006).

\(^2\) Carey's (2009, p. 3) definition of “accountability” emphasizes an agent's “responsiveness” to his or her principal's preferences. See Przeworski, Stokes and Manin (1999) and Maskin and Tirole (2004) for more standard definitions.
Levitt 1996, Skjaeveland 1999, Lindstädt et al. 2011) and thus explored a crucial link between the electoral and parliamentary arena.

The aim of the present study is to examine the relationship between electoral and legislative politics in a context that combines elements of both individual and collective "accountability", namely the Swiss parliament. On the one hand, some aspects of the electoral system for the Swiss lower house, in particular its proportional character (only a few seats in small districts are allocated in majoritarian elections) with lists established by the cantonal parties (cantons correspond to the electoral districts), favour collective accountability. On the other hand, another aspect of the electoral system, namely its open ballot structure, and a government not depending on the confidence of a parliamentary majority, clearly favour individual accountability. Consequently, we follow Levitt's (1996), Skjaeveland's (1999) and Lindstädt, Slapin and Wielen's (2011) lead and assess whether in the wake of elections parties become more unified. While Skjaeveland's (1999) study on Denmark deals with a system where collective "accountability" dominates, Lindstädt, Slapin and Wielen's (2011) study on the European parliament focuses on a system having rather similar characteristics as those of our empirical case. Their study is, however, limited as it can only assess the effect of the electoral cycle in roll call votes, which cover approximately a quarter of all votes in the European parliament. In our study, covering all parliamentary votes almost exhaustively over twelve years, we find that party unity does indeed increase for some parties before elections but that this depends on the type of vote both in terms of its substantive importance for the parties and in terms of its institutional type and thus visibility to (in- and) outside observers (Carey 2009).

3 Given data availability, we need to focus on the lower house of the bicameral parliament (see below for more details).
4 Levitt's (1996) study on the US Senate suggests that as elections approach Senators follow more closely the preferences of their constituency, which is not surprising in a system where individual accountability dominates.
In the next section we discuss explanations of party unity presented in the literature. In section 3 we offer some background information on the empirical case we analyze before presenting the hypotheses we wish to evaluate. Section 4 discusses the data and operationalisation of our various explanatory factors. Our empirical tests rely on a dataset of parliamentary votes on legislative acts of the 1996-2007 period (three legislatures, see below for details) in the Swiss lower house. The final section presents a discussion of our results as well as future avenues for research on party unity.

**Determinants of Party Unity**

To understand party unity, one necessarily has to start from assessing what explains the voting behaviour of MPs. Scholars generally acknowledge that voting behaviour is influenced by policy-related factors or the benefits of office, or a mix of both (McElroy 2008). More specifically, legislators may strive for re-election, higher status within the legislature and/or wish to pursue their policy preferences. These goals can be congruent or conflicting. One of the central debates in (American) parliamentary research evolved around the role of parties in the pursuit of these goals. While in Mayhew's (1974) account, MPs are essentially concerned with re-election and parties play only a marginal role, later research has pointed to the role of policy preferences (Krehbiel 1993, 2000), and the important organisational and agenda setting functions of parliamentary parties (Aldrich, 1995, Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2009). Due to this debate, researchers have since proposed various methods to distinguish MPs' personal preferences from party votes (Levitt 1996, Snyder and Groseclose 2000, Ansolabehere et al. 2001, Kam 2001, Cox and Poole 2002, Wright and Schaffner 2002; Bailer et al. 2007, Kam 2008).

The main problem is that voting unity might be caused by homogeneous preferences within the party group, incentives for MPs to vote along the party line, or disciplinary

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5 Some of the chosen approaches are, however, vulnerable to the pointed, and unfortunately often forgotten, critique of Fiorina (1975) and Jackson and Kingdon (1992), warning against simplistic empirical models.
measures imposed by the party leadership (Carey 2007, Hix _et al._ 2005, Krehbiehl 1993). While we cannot observe the true preferences of MPs, we can assume that voting unity is higher in contexts that favour the development of strong parliamentary parties and/or create low incentives to cultivate a personal vote. The institutional context structures the relationship between the party leadership and individual MPs, as well as between representatives and their voters. First, in parliamentary systems parties are powerful and the party leadership has tools at its disposal to discipline the members who deviate from the party line. In presidential systems, on the other hand, parties are weak and party leaders lack the power to punish legislators who take an independent course. This standard explanation does, however, not always hold empirically, and researchers have found variations within systems (Owens 2003, Uslaner and Zittel 2006).

Second, studies point to the electoral system as an important source for variation in party discipline (Denzau and Munger 1986, Carey and Shugart 1995, Bawn and Thies 2003). Electoral rules determine whether it is reasonable for a candidate to pursue individual or collective electoral strategies. As discussed by Hix (2004), in closed-list proportional representation (PR) systems, where parties present a list of candidates, and voters cannot change the order of candidates, it is reasonable for legislators to follow closely the party line. In fully open-list PR systems and single-transferable-vote systems, on the other hand, the candidates' ranking is determined by the number of personal votes she receives. In such systems, there are incentives for legislators to cultivate a personal identification among the constituents, and thus to deviate from the party line. Mixed systems offer opportunities to cultivate a personal vote when constituencies are able to amend the list or vote for single candidates. As Bräuninger _et al._ (2012a) have recently shown, incentives to cultivate a personal vote can even vary within flexible list systems, if there is district-level variation in the constituencies' use of preference votes and in the rules of intra-party seat allocation.
Finally, state structure might have important consequences for party discipline. In federal systems, politicians are accountable to competing principals at the national and sub-national level, or, as it is the case in the European Parliament, to the national party and political groups on the EU level. In such systems, voting unity is more difficult to maintain, especially in situations where the claims of both principals contradict each other (Hix 2002, Carey 2007, 2009, Lindstädt et al. 2011).

Recently, several authors have explored fluctuations in party unity within systems. They argue that the importance of the various goals MPs pursue changes over the electoral cycle. Because the re-election goal becomes more pressing when elections are looming ahead, party unity is expected to be higher or lower in the election year compared to the non-election years, depending on the institutional context. Focusing on the U.S. Senate, Levitt (1996) assesses the impact of the “party link” over time and finds that it decreases for Senators when elections are approaching. Diermeier and Feddersen (1998) present a model linking party unity to the vote of confidence procedure in parliamentary democracies. As party unity is required for the survival of government – and thus in most cases also linked to the survival of parliament – their model suggests that as the date for an election approaches, party unity is much harder to maintain for party leaders in parliament (Diermeier and Feddersen 1998, p. 616). Existing empirical studies do, however, not support this theoretical implication, most likely because other factors play a role as well. Thus, Skjaeveland (1999) shows that parties in the Danish Folketing become more unified in the run-up to an election.6 Lindstädt et al. (2011), on the other hand, argue that both in pre- and post-election periods, party discipline is affected. More precisely, their argument for the European parliament is that before elections the national parties impose a stronger discipline among their members of the European parliament (MEPs), as the parties want to present a unified front in the (still) national election

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6 Interestingly, Owens (2003) refers to Skjaeveland’s (1999) study to argue that parties are typically more unified after an election than at the end of a legislative period, when future benefits that might result from supporting the party positions lose their importance (following in part the logic of Diermeier and Feddersen’s (1998) model).
campaigns. Between the pre- and post-election periods, the party groups in the EP should become more unified and, as Lindstädt *et al.* (2011) demonstrate, they empirically do so.\(^7\) Their argument for why party unity in the national delegations of EP party groups should also be higher after elections is theoretically much less convincing.

Our study builds on this research linking changes in party unity to the electoral cycle. However, we argue that vote- and party specific characteristics are important intervening factors. More specifically, we argue that the *salience* and *visibility* of a vote are especially important before elections, such that voting unity should be highest in these votes that occur shortly ahead of elections. Before we elaborate our argument in more detail, we first present the institutional context of the Swiss parliament.

**Party Unity in the Swiss Parliament**

The Swiss parliament presents an interesting case to study determinants of party unity. Considered as the only “hybrid” case between presidential and parliamentary democracy in Lijphart’s (1999) classification of 36 democracies, and as an “assembly-independent system” by Shugart and Carey (1992, p. 26), Switzerland is often excluded from comparative studies. While the collegial executive is elected by the parliament, it stays in office for a fixed time-period (i.e., until the next parliamentary election), during which it cannot be dismissed by parliament. In addition, given that executive power is shared by a “grand coalition”, the parties forming the government are not dependent on the support of all their MPs to succeed in parliament. Finally, the open-list PR system at work for the election of the National Council (the lower house) – with the exception of a few small electoral districts – also affects party unity: In this system parties propose pre-ordered lists, and voters can either vote for the party list as a whole or for individual politicians, modify the list as they wish or even use an empty list to be filled by themselves, all within a set of rules (Lutz 2009).

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\(^7\) As the European parliament does not have a simple vote of confidence procedure, the implications derived by Diermeier and Feddersen (1998) do not directly apply.
Owing to both its specific government type and the open-list PR system for parliamentary elections, the Swiss government is an “in-between case” as far as party unity is concerned. Despite the independence of parliament and executive, party unity is relatively high in Switzerland (between 70% and 90% as measured by the Rice (1925) index). Studies found that the Social Democrats (SP) and the Green Party display the highest unity, followed by the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) (Lüthi et al. 1991, Bailer et al. 2007, Schwarz 2009, Hug 2010). The Christian Democrats (CVP) and the Liberals (FDP) are slightly less cohesive.

Schwarz (2009) found that voting unity increases significantly with the formal status of a vote: While there are some differences across parties, party unity tends to increase as one moves from the beginning to the end of the legislative process, and it also tends to be higher on automatic roll call votes than on non-automatic (requested) roll call votes (Hug 2010). Schwarz (2009) also tested whether legislators deviate less often from the party line before elections. The results are mixed and partially contradictory. He found limited evidence for more cohesive behaviour among the SP and the SVP. Hug and Sciarini (2009), on the other hand, distinguished votes according to the importance of the legislative project and its degree of internationalisation. They found that voting unity among the FDP and the Evangelical Parties (EVP/EDU) slightly decreases with the importance of a given legislative project and that the degree of internationalisation of the project also matters for voting unity.

Electoral competition has become fiercer in Switzerland in recent years. The CVP and the FDP have suffered major electoral losses during the last fifteen years, partly owing to their weak issue profile (e.g. Kriesi and Sciarini 2004): They are located at the centre-right and tend to adopt mild and/or ambivalent positions with respect to the main dimensions of issue competition. By contrast, the SVP has strongly increased its electoral strength during the last two decades (from 12% in 1991 to 29% in 2007) and has become the first party in the National Council. It is also the most profiled party: It has drifted from a centrist to a far right, conservative party, especially on immigration issues (Varone et al. 2011; see also Table 1 in
Finally, the SP and the Greens – main left-wing parties – also tend to be fairly profiled on social policy and environment (see Table 1 in the Appendix).

Hypotheses

This study investigates the connection between legislative and electoral politics in Switzerland. It is based on two main assumptions. First, politicians in the Swiss parliament are concerned with re-election. Second, electoral politics has become more important in Switzerland in recent years (e.g., Kriesi and Trechsel 2008) and now to a considerable degree influences legislative behaviour.

Following Skjaeveland (1999) and Lindstädt et al. (2011) we postulate that the impact of electoral politics will be most visible in the time before elections. First, voters are most likely to monitor their MPs before elections (Bräuninger et al. 2012b). Second, as elections are approaching, parties have an incentive to close their ranks to send clear signals to voters. Third, MPs, especially those who are struggling for re-election, have an incentive to stick to the party line, as parties control the candidate selection process.

However, unlike earlier studies, we argue that vote-specific characteristics also play a role. Some votes are more “visible” to voters, and some issues are more important for a party’s brand name (Ansolabehere et al. 2001). The effect of election times should therefore be more pronounced in these votes. We assume that election times are likely to influence party unity in interaction with the visibility of the vote, and the salience of the policy domain at stake.

The visibility of a vote is related to the way in which information on the MPs voting decision is made available. Since the introduction of an electronic voting system in the lower house of the Swiss parliament (and until 2007, see below), all final passage and ensemble

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8 We discard Diermeier and Feddersen’s (1998) theoretically derived implication, as it presumes a vote of confidence, which is absent in the Swiss parliament. Similarly, we do not consider Levitt’s (1996) finding showing a decline of the importance of the “party line” as elections approach, since it deals with Senators in a presidential system.
votes, as well as some residual categories, have been automatically published in the minutes of the lower house. For all remaining votes (almost exclusively votes on amendments and individual articles) publication as roll call votes has to be requested by at least 30 MPs. We consider these latter requested roll call votes to be the most visible for voters: The fact that they become published only under request (from 30 MPs) obviously increases their visibility. At least 30 MPs thought it worthwhile to make sure that their colleagues, the press, and citizens may assess who supports and who opposes a particular proposal.

The automatic roll call votes, while still being visible for voters, are published in any case. Even if they are published they may still remain unnoticed, as no actor has demanded for increased visibility and they are therefore less visible than requested roll call votes. Finally, the votes not published in the minutes can be assumed to be the least visible.

Regarding salience, it seems obvious that some policy issues are more important to the party’s brand name than others. These issues figure prominently in the party platform and are at the centre of a party’s election campaign. To underline their competence in these issue areas, parties need a certain degree of voting unity. Voting unity signals to voters that the party has a unified position on these issues and is capable to shape policy outcomes accordingly. MPs have incentives to vote along the party line because they are likely to profit from a strong party brand on election day. Consequently, we assume that parties will vote more cohesively on issues that are important to them. Finally, we assume that visibility and salience reinforce each other, and thus that votes that rank high on both dimensions should display the highest level of party unity at election time.

We will test the three following hypotheses:

\( H1: (\text{Salience}) \) The voting unity of parties is higher before an election than in the remainder of the legislative period in votes on policy issues that are important to them.
H2: *(Visibility)* The increase in parties’ voting unity in the pre-election period is higher in requested roll call votes than in automatic roll call votes, and it is higher in automatic roll call votes than in unpublished votes.

H3: *(Visibility and salience)* The voting unity of parties is highest before an election in requested roll call votes on policy issues that are important to parties.

**Data and Measurement**

The four parties represented in the Swiss coalitional government, the Social Democrats (SP), the Christian Democrats (CVP), the Liberals (FDP) and the Swiss People’s Party (SVP), form the largest party groups in the Swiss parliament. The largest non-governmental party, the Green Party, has formed a party group since 1987. We will analyse the voting unity of these five parties in the lower house of the Swiss parliament between 1996 and 2007 (45th to 47th legislature). To this end, we use a dataset that includes all parliamentary votes on legislative acts introduced by the government since 1996.\(^9\) Voting unity is calculated by the following formula proposed by Stuart Rice (1925):

\[
RICE_{ij} = \frac{(|aye\ votes_{ij} - nay\ votes_{ij}|)}{(aye\ votes_{ij} + nay\ votes_{ij})}
\]

for party group \(i\) on vote \(j\).

\(^9\)Data is also available for the most recent 2007-2011 legislature but the procedure for making voting decisions available has changed as all votes can now be consulted on the parliament’s website. We therefore refrain from including the 48th legislature. Restricting our analyses to votes on legislative acts introduced by government increases the homogeneity and as a consequence the comparability of the parliamentary votes. Thus, we exclude votes on parliamentary initiatives, motions or postulates. Additional tests, not reported here, show that including these votes into the analyses does not affect our results substantially. Further, note that as the electronic voting system was introduced when the 45th legislature had already started, the votes for the first few sessions are missing. Similarly, in the 47th legislature period the parliament held its meetings for one session in a mountain resort where unfortunately the electronic voting system malfunctioned as well. Finally, at the beginning when the electronic voting system was introduced for a short period the voting record of a handful of MPs was not recorded. As these missing votes are a quite small share of total number of votes, we ignore this data limitation.
Using only the aye and nay votes implies that abstentions are not considered. The values of the Rice index can range from zero (equal numbers of aye and nay) to one (those who cast votes vote in unison).

Figure 1 displays the average Rice index per year for the largest party groups in the Swiss lower house between 1996 and 2007. Party unity is overall very high among the two left parties (the SP and the Greens). The SVP also displays a fairly high level of party unity. Party discipline is lower among the two centre-right parties (the CVP and the FDP). However, we see that the FDP has considerably increased its voting unity in recent years. The same holds, to a lesser extent, for the SVP. The Christian Democrats have the lowest unity in parliamentary votes.

[Figure 1 about here.]

While our measure of visibility is based on the accessibility of the voting information (see above), the measure of salience relies on a database with information on newspaper articles covering election campaigns collected by Kriesi et al. (2008) (see also Kriesi et al. 2012).10 This database includes issue–party relations during the election campaigns in 1999, 2003 and 2007. More specifically, the researchers coded newspaper articles dealing with the electoral contest in the time period, starting two months before each election.11 The data contains information on how often a party takes a position on a specific issue. To indicate the salience of an issue for a party, the authors calculated the relative frequency of a party’s position on a specific issue during the pre-election period. Kriesi and his colleagues used 84 issue categories, which we aggregated for our purposes in order to make them comparable to the issue categories in our voting data. The aggregated relative frequency of an issue category (we simply added the percentages of the sub-categories) then serves as the criteria for

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10 We are grateful to Hanspeter Kriesi and his colleagues for providing us with their dataset.
11 The researchers selected articles in one quality newspaper (NZZ) and one tabloid (Blick). Of the selected articles the headlines and the first paragraph were coded sentence by sentence.
substantive importance. All issue categories with a relative frequency of more than 10% were considered as important for a party (see Table 1 in the Appendix). Based on this information, we generated a dummy variable indicating whether a specific vote was substantively important for a party or not.\textsuperscript{12}

To account for the proximity to an election, the legislative term was split in two parts. The variable \textit{before election} is equal to one if the general election (automatically taking place every four years) is less than one year away and zero otherwise.\textsuperscript{13} To assess the effect of elections according to our hypotheses, we created interaction terms between policy and vote-types. As we are interested simultaneously in the voting unity of all (major) parties in the Swiss parliament, and most likely unobservable factors influence simultaneously all parties, we employ a seemingly unrelated regression (SURE) model. While similar to Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models, it accounts for the fact that similar unobservables might affect the level of voting unity across parties. More precisely, we specify for each party an equation linking its respective level of party unity with our explanatory variables. Instead of estimating each equation separately we assume that they are related, namely through correlations in the respective error terms in the various equations as postulated in SURE models. To allow for time trends across legislatures we also include legislature dummies, with the 45th legislature as reference category.

\textbf{Results}

\textsuperscript{12} More specifically, the importance variable equals one if the issue(s) of a specific vote was (were) important for a party during the previous election campaign. Thus, we code the importance of votes in the year before an election as well as the three years following the election year based on the issue salience in a specific election. For example, the importance for votes in the time period autumn 1998 until autumn 2002 was based on the issue salience in the 1999 election (elections take place in October). In the remainder of the paper we use salience and importance as synonymous.

\textsuperscript{13} We have also explored finer-grained measures. As the Swiss lower house meets normally only for four sessions a year and concentrates final passage votes on the last session days, a variable counting the days until elections is not appropriate. Using a counter of regular sessions until elections as independent variable suggests that most of effects appear in the last three to five sessions (and in some sessions after the elections). For simplicity's sake we employ this simple dichotomous indicator equal to one for the sessions taking place in the year before the election.
Before addressing our hypotheses, we first present the results of simple additive models. Table 1 reports the results of SURE models with one equation for each party. The models include dummy variables for salience, the election year, type of vote (reference category: unpublished votes), and the legislature (reference category: 45th legislature). It shows that only one party, the Liberals (FDP), is in general more disciplined before elections. Moreover there are considerable differences in unity between different types of votes: While the centre-right and the right parties (CVP, FDP and SVP) are less unified in requested roll call votes, the Social Democrats (SP) show higher unity in these votes compared to unpublished votes. All parties except the Greens and the right-wing Swiss People’s Party (SVP) are more disciplined in automatic votes, which are essentially final passage and ensemble votes. Further, the FDP, SVP and the Greens apparently have become more unified in the 46th and 47th legislature, while we do not observe such a trend for the SP and the CVP.

Our hypotheses postulate an interaction between election time and visibility of the vote on the one hand and between election time and salience of an issue on the other. The results of the interaction models are presented in Table 2. To facilitate the interpretation of the results, we calculated predicted values and marginal effects on the basis of 1000 draws from the distribution of estimated coefficients (Gelman and Hill 2006). The following figures depict the parties’ average voting unity for particular sets of votes during non-election time. The figures also show how much the unity changes in a pre-election period and the corresponding confidence intervals.15

14 We refrain from adding additional control variables, as these would have to be vote specific, since our unit of observation is a vote per party. It is unlikely, however, that such vote-specific control variables would relate with our explanatory variables. Hence, we do not expect any omitted variable biases.

15 Here we follow Hanmer and Kalkan (2008) and calculate the average effect over all observations in our sample.
Figure 2 presents the differences in party unity between the pre-election period and the remainder of the legislature on salient and unimportant parliamentary votes. Starting with the effect of elections in votes on issues that are important for the party platform (left panel), we see that for three parties (the SVP, the FDP and, to a lesser extent, the Greens) voting unity is overall higher in the year before an election than in the post-election period. Considering unimportant issues (right panel), it appears that the effect of elections is different for two of these three parties (the SVP and the Greens). This is most obvious for the SVP: On salient issues party unity is substantially higher in the year before an election than in the three following years; the reverse holds for unimportant issues, where party unity is significantly lower in the pre-election year. A similar pattern also appears for the Greens, but the results are hardly significant. By contrast, the salience of the issue at stake does not matter much for the FDP, whose voting unity is higher in the run-up to elections on both important and unimportant issues. Finally, the SP and the CVP do not seem to be affected by the electoral cycle, nor by salience: Their level of voting unity is stable across all configurations. The fact that the SP is in all situations highly unified is likely to account for this result. This explanation is, however, not valid for the CVP, which is the least unified party overall. In sum, while our results show election effects for three parties, they support our first hypothesis for only two of them, namely the SVP and the Greens.

The effects of the interaction between election time and the visibility of parliamentary votes are shown in Figure 3. Regarding the overall differences across types of votes, as in
Table 1 we find that party unity is generally higher in automatic roll call votes than in unpublished votes, and higher in the latter than in requested roll calls. However, when considering variations in party unity across parties, we find the most variation in requested votes and the least variation in automatic roll call votes. These results may stem from party strategies but they may also be due to the specific characteristics of the votes: Automatic roll call votes are mostly ensemble and final passage votes, for which MPs no longer have to decide whether they support a specific aspect of a legislative act but whether they are ready to endorse the legislative act as a whole. This presumably accounts for the high share of unanimous votes, i.e. the share of votes that all MPs support, among automatic roll call votes: Between one fifth and almost a half of all ensemble votes and final votes were accepted unanimously during the 1996-2007 period. By contrast, both requested roll call votes and unpublished votes are mostly detailed (article-by-article) votes, which are almost never decided by consensus (less than 3% of detailed votes were unanimous).

While requested roll call votes and unpublished votes both deal with legislative details, they differ in one important respect: requested roll call votes, which must be held if demanded by 30 MPs, are highly publicised and thus visible to voters, whereas unpublished votes remain largely unnoticed. According to our second hypothesis, this difference is likely to produce varying incentives with respect to party unity. More specifically, in election times requested roll call votes are expected to foster party unity, whereas unpublished votes are not. In automatic roll calls variations between election and non-election times are expected to be smaller than in requested roll calls but stronger than in unpublished votes.
Indeed, we find the hypothesized difference between the pre-election period and the rest of the legislative period in requested votes for all parties but one: As shown in the top left panel of Figure 3, the SVP, the FDP, the CVP and the Greens appear to be more united in requested roll call votes in the year before elections. This effect reaches statistical significance for only one party, however, namely the FDP. Among MPs of the SP the election variable does not matter at all, which may again be due to the overall very high voting unity of this party.

Regarding automatic roll call votes, our results do not support our hypothesis. Differences in party unity between the pre-election period and the periods following the elections are only small and not significant (see Figure 3, top right panel). Given the overall very high level of party unity in automatic roll call votes mentioned above, this result should, however, not come as a surprise. Finally, we find only small differences between the two periods in unpublished roll calls, even though party unity is generally much lower in these votes (see Figure 3, lower panel). This result is compatible with our hypothesis 2 that differences in voting unity between the pre- and post-election periods is smallest in unpublished votes.

In sum, our results offer partial support for our second hypothesis. On the one hand, both the positive – albeit not all significant – effects of election times on party unity in requested roll call votes and the lack of effects in unpublished votes are in line with our expectations. On the other hand, the absence of election effects in automatic roll call votes contradicts our hypothesis.

Figures 4, 5 and 6 depict the effects of the electoral cycle on party unity in interaction with both the visibility and salience of the vote. According to our hypothesis 3, election effects should be most pronounced in requested roll call votes that are salient to parties. Our results tell a more complex story, as election effects vary considerably across parties.

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16 Ideally we should take account of who requested the roll call vote. Unfortunately this information is not systematically available, as requests are handed in to the Chamber president on papers that are most often discarded after a session.
In requested roll call votes on salient issues all parties (the SVP, the FDP, the CVP and the Greens) except one (the SP) display a higher voting discipline in the pre-election years compared to the years after elections. For two of them (the FDP and the Greens) the difference is significant. As the right panel of Figure 4 shows, the corresponding effects are on average smaller in requested votes on unimportant issues: Only one party, the FDP, shows significantly higher voting unity before elections.\footnote{For this party the magnitude of the election effect is even higher on unimportant issues than on important issues: In the former cases the party unity is increased by 0.11 in the Rice index, against 0.07 in the latter.}

The results are again less clear-cut for automatic roll call votes (Figure 5), except for the SVP, which shows significant differences in voting unity in automatic roll calls before elections compared to automatic roll calls in the remaining legislative period: In votes on salient issues party discipline is much higher in the pre-election year than in the remainder of the legislative period; conversely, in votes on unimportant issues the SVP is much less unified before elections, than when elections are not looming ahead. For this party, therefore, the interaction between visibility and salience contributes to the explanation of voting unity. While, as we have seen in Figure 3, the SVP’s voting unity in automatic roll call votes is on average not affected by the elections, important effects appear if we take into account the salience of issues. Election effects operate in the opposite direction for important and unimportant issues, which cancel each other out in Figure 3.

Finally, our results in Figure 6 show that in unpublished votes on salient issues party unity increases in the pre-election period for three parties (the SVP, the FDP and the Greens). Again, the difference is substantially higher for the SVP, and nearly reaches statistical
significance for the other two parties. As non-published votes are all intermediary votes on parts of bills, our result suggests that in pre-election periods the three parties close their ranks in intermediary votes on issues important to them, to get the legislation passed in a form that corresponds to their wishes. While this interpretation makes sense, it is not fully consistent with our third hypothesis that postulates a smaller election effect on the unpublished and less important, article-by-article votes. Variations in party unity are again smaller in votes on unimportant issues (right panel in Figure 6). We witness a negative, albeit hardly significant, election effect on the voting unity of the SVP and the Greens, and a positive effect on the FDP’s voting unity.

In sum, the empirical tests provide partial support for our hypothesis 3. First, as expected, we find the strongest election effects in requested roll call votes, but not for all parties. As we have seen above, the CVP’s and the SP’s voting unity does not seem to be affected by the election cycle, which is quite surprising in the case of the CVP, as the unity of this party is considerably low and thus would allow for some variation (contrary to the SP). Regarding automatic roll calls, the effects are weak for all parties except the SVP, notwithstanding the salience of a vote (Figure 5). Because voting unity is exceptionally high in these votes, it is difficult to find large effects. No wonder then that we found some strong and consistent election effects for the party that is overall least unified on automatic roll call votes, namely the SVP. Finally, three parties appear to be more unified before elections in salient, unpublished votes, which is somewhat contrary to our hypothesis, as we expected the effects to be smallest in unpublished votes.

Altogether, our findings show that the right-wing SVP and the liberal FDP are the two parties that are most sensitive to the electoral cycle but the SVP is the only one that also fits our expectations regarding the impact of issue salience. Our findings consistently show that the SVP votes more cohesively in the run-up to elections on issues that are important to the party. By contrast, its voting unity is not affected by the visibility of vote (requested,
automatic or unpublished). The latter result suggests that when elections are looming ahead
the SVP attempts to close its ranks in all parliamentary votes regarding salient issues,
irrespective of their institutional nature. This, presumably, as part of a wider electoral strategy
aiming at strengthening the party profile. Of course, the fact that the SVP is indeed known as
the most profiled party (e.g. Kriesi and Sciarini 2004), and as the party most forcefully
oriented towards vote-seeking and agenda-setting strategies (Varone et al. 2011) can only
reinforce our interpretation. The liberal FDP is also highly sensitive to election times,
especially on requested roll call votes. Contrary to the SVP, the FDP appears, however, to
increase their voting unity independently of the salience of an issue. Apparently, their strategy
aims at presenting an overall more cohesive party group before elections. This might also be
due to the broader policy profile of this party, whereas the SVP focuses its election campaigns
on fewer issues. Further, it is quite surprising that the other centre-right party, the CVP, does
not seem to react to any kind of electoral incentive whatsoever, in spite of the fact that it
displays the overall lowest party unity. Finally, the two left-wing parties are both highly
unified across all votes but they differ from one another with respect to their reaction to the
electoral cycle: While the Greens tend to unify further in the pre-election year, the Social
Democrats do not.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to assess the effect of elections on voting unity in parliament.
Do MPs vote more cohesively with elections looming ahead? We tested our hypotheses on all
votes on legislative acts held in the lower house of the Swiss parliament between 1996 and
2007.

Our hypotheses postulated that the election effect on voting unity would appear in
interaction with the visibility and salience of a vote. We found that the SVP, the FDP and, to a
lesser extent, the Greens, display higher voting unity before elections in votes on issues that
are important to their party platform. Regarding the visibility of votes, we compare the effect of elections for three different types of votes: requested roll calls, automatic roll calls (mostly final passage and ensemble votes) and unpublished votes. We find that the effect of elections is most pronounced in votes with the highest visibility – requested roll calls – and for some parties even more so in requested votes that are also important to parties.

However, we did not find the expected effects for automatic roll calls, which can be explained by the overall very high voting unity in these votes, which leaves less room for variation. Only the right-wing SVP is significantly more unified in automatic roll calls before elections but only on votes that are also important to their party platform. Indeed, if we look at the full set of interactions, we see that the SVP is in fact highly sensitive to the election cycle in automatic roll call votes but that the election effect operates in the opposite direction on important (higher unity) and on unimportant (lower unity) issues.

Our results are most significant for SVP and FDP, and to a lesser extent for the Greens, and do not contribute much to the explanation of voting unity among the MPs of the CVP and the SP. Interestingly, the SVP and the FDP are also the parties with increasing voting unity in recent years, and as our findings show, they attempt to close their ranks even more before elections, while at other times MPs vote more freely. Moreover, as the SVP centres its election campaigns on a few issues only, the voting unity of this party is especially high in votes on those issues. The fact that the SVP is even less united before elections in unimportant issues might be in line with this explanation: The party does not allow deviation from the party line on key issues but leaves room to cultivate a personal vote on issues that are not central to the (national) election campaign, such as policies with differential effects for regions. We did not find such an effect in the voting behaviour of MPs of the FDP; instead, we found that the FDP is more unified before elections notwithstanding the salience of the issue at stake, which is probably due to the broader profile of this party.
Despite the interesting findings of this paper, there is one important caveat. Many sources of variation are quite possibly to be found on the level of individual legislators, which was not taken into account in this analysis, as the units of observation were party votes. This study can be seen, however, as a first step in the assessment of behaviour of party groups in the Swiss parliament between elections. Further research should take into account individual-level factors, such as regional constituencies, and pay more attention to coalition dynamics, which are quite likely to affect voting behaviour in the Swiss parliament, where no single party holds a majority and coalitions are expected to change between votes.
References


### Figures and Tables

Table 1: Effect of Elections on Party Unity (1996-2007): Individual Effects

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Notes: The SURE models were estimated using the Zelig package in R (Imai et al. 2007). P-values: p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01.
Table 2: Effect of Elections on Party Unity (1996-2007): Interaction Effects

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Note: P-values: p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01.
Figure 1: Party Unity Over Time in the Swiss Parliament

Figure 2: Predicted Values of Party Unity (Rice Index): Salience
Figure 3: Predicted Values of Party Unity (Rice Index): Visibility

![Graph showing predicted values of party unity based on visibility.](image)

Figure 4: Predicted Values of Party Unity (Rice Index): Requested Roll Call Votes and Salience

![Graph showing predicted values of party unity based on requested roll call votes and salience.](image)
Figure 5: Predicted Values of Party Unity (Rice Index): Automatic Roll Call Votes and Salience

Figure 6: Predicted Values of Party Unity: Unpublished Votes and Salience