The rise of cultural issues as an opportunity for the right? Insights from the 2015 Swiss election

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Reference

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The Rise of Cultural Issues as an Opportunity for the Right? Insights from the 2015 Swiss Election

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Abstract

This article presents an explanation for the success of the right in the 2015 Swiss parliamentary election based on the spatial model of voting. Since there is no party combining economically left with culturally authoritarian policy stances, voters with that preference combination face a difficult electoral choice. We show that they are more likely to abstain, and that those voters who turn out are more likely to cast votes for the right who represents them on cultural issues. We argue that this behavior is due to the fact that voters with this culturally conservative and economically left preferences attach more weight to cultural issues when making an electoral choice. On the aggregate, both findings imply an underrepresentation of economically left interests in the election result, and lead to a disproportional vote share for the right.
Introduction

The 2015 parliamentary election in Switzerland was marked by a significant electoral shift to the right, the so-called Rechtsrutsch. While both the populist right SVP (Swiss People’s Party) and the right-liberal FDP (Liberal Party) increased their seat shares, the other five largest parties lost seats in the National Council, the lower house of the Swiss parliament. Is this electoral outcome the result of a shift in the electorate’s policy preference? Considering the fact that the Swiss party system can be described by a two-dimensional policy space defined by an economic and a cultural dimension (see e.g. Kriesi et al. 2006; Bornschier 2010), the explanation might be more complex. In the case of multidimensional policy spaces, the electoral outcome not only depends on the mean voter’s preferences in one dimension. Rather, the complete pattern of preference combinations of the electorate as well as policy supply of the parties have to be taken into account. One important result of the literature on spatial models of voting and party competition is that no stable equilibrium exists in higher-dimensional policy spaces, and the mean in both directions might not be closer to the political outcome than any other point in the policy space (McKelvey 1976; Schofield 1978). Although more recent empirical work found political equilibria in multidimensional policy spaces (Schofield and Sened 2005; Kurella and Pappi 2015), the conditions for convergence are strict and equilibria might not be unique (Schofield 2007). This leaves much leeway for major shifts in political outcomes. In this article, we argue that the large share of right parties in the Swiss parliament does not reflect the economic preferences of citizens but is at least in part linked to the structural advantage for the right in the two-dimensional Swiss policy space. This case more generally speaks to the thesis that the increase in salience of cultural issues resulting from globalization opens opportunities for economically right parties (see e.g. Kriesi et al. 2012).

A stylized fact about the Swiss party system is that parties can be found in three different poles of the two-dimensional space (see e.g. Bornschier 2010; Oesch and Rennwald 2017). Left parties (Socialists - SP and Greens – GPS) are located in the culturally liberal and economically left corner of that space, while economically center and right parties are spread on the cultural dimension displaying moderate (the so called center-right parties, including Liberals - FDP and Christian Democrats - CVP) or conservative stances (the populist party, SVP). There seems thus to be more variance at the party-level in the cultural stances of economically right parties than among those located at the left of the political

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Workshop on the Swiss 2015 Elections, Neuchâtel, 12-13.10.2017. We would like to thank all the workshop participants and in particular Julian Bernauer, Nathalie Giger, Simon Lanz, Anna Storz and Denise Traber as well as Philipp Kurella and the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments. Rosset acknowledges the support from the European Research Council (Research program Unequal Democracies ; Advanced Grant no 741538).

2 All major Swiss parties, their acronyms and electoral results are listed in table 1.
spectrum\(^3\), resulting in an open area in the economically left and culturally conservative corner of the policy space that is not occupied by a political party. Voters who are located in that area of the policy space thus face a scarce choice set, and the relative salience of the two policy dimensions will determine whether their Euclidean distance toward a left or right-wing party is smaller, and thus which party family they are going to cast their vote for.

Consequently, the specific configuration of the party system has important consequences for the way in which the policy preferences of citizens are translated into electoral outcomes, given the rather restrained choice set economically left voters possess on the cultural dimension of political competition (see e.g. Thomassen 2012; Rosset 2016). The importance of this topic for political representation has fueled a growing but still limited body of research focusing on the vote choice of economically left yet culturally conservative voters (Lefkofridi, Wagner and Willmann 2014), on the correspondence between the preferences of parties and their voters in a two-dimensional space (Thomassen 2012) or the relative weight attached to economic and cultural issues by voters as they are forced into a trade-off when choosing a party (Kurella and Rosset 2017). The effects of policy positioning on cultural and economic issues on political participation have also seldom been explored, though selective participation might have important consequences for electoral outcomes (see Lijphart 1997).

In this article we argue that in the case of the 2015 Swiss election, the right parties benefitted in two ways from the specific configuration of the party system: (1) the scarce choice set in the economically left and culturally conservative corner led to a disproportionally large abstention rate among economically left voters, and (2) the relatively larger salience of the cultural policy dimension resulted in many votes from economically rather distant voters from the left.

The next section of the article discusses the literature on the structure of the party system and the configuration of preferences among voters and their importance for voting behavior, and develops two hypotheses. These are then tested in the empirical section, which also presents our research strategy and discusses the results of our analyses. A more general discussion concludes.

**Party Positions and Voters’ Preferences and Behavior in a Two-Dimensional Space**

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\(^3\) Note, however, that research is not absolutely unanimous on this subject. Studies focusing on press releases document this two-dimensional policy space (see e.g. Kriesi et al. 2006; Kriesi et al. 2012), research that analyses the voting behavior of legislators (Hug and Schulz 2007) or the preferences of candidates (Leimgruber et al. 2010; Rosset et al. 2016) tend to show that both dimensions are closely correlated. Also note that the fact that the two dimensions are to some extent correlated does not preclude the fact that there might be more variance in the positioning of right parties than left parties, which is what is required for our argument to be relevant.
The literature on the dimensions of electoral competition in Europe has focused mainly on two of its aspects. On the supply side of electoral competition, studies have focused on the structure of party systems and the location of political actors within them (see e.g. Bakker et al. 2012; Kriesi et al. 2006; Rovny and Edwards 2012). On the demand side of electoral competition, the influence of policy preferences in relation to different issues on electoral choice has been at the core of current research (see e.g. Lefkofridi, Wagner and Willmann 2014; Kurella and Rosset 2017). There is also a growing body of literature studying both citizens’ and political actors’ location across various policy dimensions. The focus has been on whether the underlying structure of policy positioning of both citizens and elites are similar (Leimgruber et al. 2010; Rosset et al. 2016) on the level of policy congruence between voters and political elites on specific issues and issue dimensions (see e.g. Schmitt and Thomassen 1997; Lefkofridi and Horvath 2012; Freire and Belchior 2013; Dalton 2017; Rosset and Stecker 2018) or on the salience of various policy dimensions for different groups of voters and its consequences for electoral choice and ultimately representation (Lefkofridi, Wagner and Willmann 2014; Kurella and Rosset 2017).

The (sometimes implicit) motivation behind these studies linking citizens and parties’ stances is that there might be a systematic bias in the way voters’ preferences are translated into parliament, and that this has something to do with the dimensionality of political competition. Classical models of political representation rely on the responsible party model which assumes that 1) parties propose clear political programs, 2) voters choose according to their programmatic proximity with the parties, and that 3) once elected, officials of these parties keep their promises. A multi-dimensional policy space poses some challenges in relation to the second of these three steps. Indeed, if voters are to vote in relation to their preferences, the coincidence between the structure of their preferences and the choice set offered to them by party platforms is of prime importance. With a uni-dimensional (left-right) policy space and as long as parties provide different policy stances, electors can easily express their preferences in a vote choice (Thomassen 1994; Pierce 1999) and we expect political parties to converge to the median or mean voter’s position (Downs 1957). This becomes more difficult in a multi-dimensional space (McKelvey 1976, Schofield 1978), even more when parties do not cover the whole spectrum of possibilities. Voters might be found in a situation in which they are cross-pressured, in the sense that one party represents them better on one dimension while another is more proximate to them on another dimension.

Regarding the Swiss context, it has been argued that parties are organized around a tripolar party system whose three poles are represented by the Social Democratic party on the left-libertarian pole, the FDP which display economically right stances combined with culturally moderate positions, and the SVP which combines economically right and culturally conservative preferences (see e.g. Kriesi et
al. 2006; Oesch and Rennwald 2017). Supporting this interpretation is the fact that the main demarcation line between populist and traditional parties on the right relates to cultural issues. While the SVP, the CVP and the FDP often defend the same economic policies (Afonso and Papadopoulos 2015), they happen to disagree on cultural issues (Bornschier 2015). Other interpretations tend to put forward that the economic and cultural dimensions are actually quite closely correlated at the elite-level (Leimgruber et al. 2010, Lachat 2008, Rosset et al. 2016). Both interpretations are not mutually exclusive, and it seems quite plausible that while there is a high degree of correlation between parties’ positions on the economic and cultural dimensions, parties on the right still offer more distinct positions on the cultural dimension. We will examine empirically whether this also holds true for the Swiss party system at the 2015 election.

In relation to voters, the existence of such differences in terms of heterogeneity on the cultural dimension between right and left voters remains an open question. On the one hand, this by now rather stable structure of the party system and the absence of parties combining culturally conservative and economically left stances might indicate that there is little demand on the side of voters for such preference configuration. On the other hand, a number of empirical accounts show that many voters hold preferences that do not conform to the three-polar configuration, and that voters are likely to be located in the culturally conservative and economically left corner of the policy space where there is no party. In a comparative perspective, the conservative stances on cultural issues of sizeable groups of citizens whose economic interests align with the left has been observed since at least the second half of the twentieth century (Lipset 1959), and recent studies confirm that this is an enduring phenomenon (Thomassen 2012; Lefkofridi, Wagner and Willmann 2014). In Switzerland, research has documented that voters with economically left and culturally conservative preferences represented a very large share of the electorate in the 2007 (see e.g. Leimbgruber et al. 2010; Rosset 2016) and 2011 federal elections (Kurella and Rosset 2017). We will investigate whether this is also true for the 2015 election.

If the empirics meet the expectation and we still find a blind spot in the left-authoritarian corner of the policy space, this would potentially have two particularly relevant consequences for the electoral process. First, it could affect the electoral turnout of different groups of voters who feel alienated because there is no party representing their preferred combination of policy preferences. Second, depending on the relative salience of the policy dimensions, we might observe voters to cast votes for parties that are quite distant on one policy dimension.

Regarding turnout, there is evidence that the existence of a party which represents one’s views on a variety of topics is an important factor for the decision to turn out, and that the ability of party systems
to provide for a variety of positions has a positive influence on citizens’ feeling of being represented (Blais et al. 2014). Previous work has established that objective measures of policy representation matter too. For instance, voters whose ideological location (on a left-right scale) is far away from the closest viable party are more likely to abstain (Lefkofridi, Giger and Gallego 2014). There is also evidence, at the aggregate level, for party systems covering a broader range of the political space to produce higher levels of turnout on average (Kittilson and Anderson 2011). These results largely conform to the idea that the perception of the benefits of voting is higher among voters whose policy preferences are reflected in the party system.

Thinking about cross-pressured voters who hold preferences on the economic dimension that correspond to the positions of left parties, but who are best represented by parties of the right on the cultural dimension, it is clear that their electoral choice can only reflect part of their preferences. As a result, the potential benefits of voting will be lower than those of voters who are represented by a party on both dimensions. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the literature on ambivalence, which shows that a mix of positive and negative evaluations of a party or candidate increases the likelihood of abstention (see e.g. Yoo 2010). Based on these arguments, we hypothesize that:

**H1: Voters who combine economically left and culturally right policy preferences are more likely to abstain from voting in the 2015 Swiss election.**

Regarding the vote choice of those cross-pressured voters who decide to turn out, it has been shown that in most European countries they split their vote almost equally between left and right parties (Lefkofridi, Wagner and Willmann 2014). In the case of Switzerland, however, it has been documented that they tend to overwhelmingly support the right (see Rosset 2016). In order to understand this empirical pattern, and to base it on a more general argument, we start with outlining a simple spatial model of voting behavior. According to the model, voters chose parties which advocate policies that are most proximate to their own preferences. This quite intuitive theoretical model has a relatively good predictive power in empirical accounts too. Much of the literature on representation relies precisely on the idea that representatives are selected based on the policy pledges they make. Also, studies considering party-voter congruence show a great deal of correspondence between parties and their voters (Dalton 1985; Bornschier 2015).

When talking about proximity in a multidimensional policy space, we also have to consider the salience voters attach to different political issues. The composed distance toward a party can be described for example by the Euclidean distance $d$, which is the square root of the squared distances $a$ and $b$ on each policy dimension. The relative salience of each policy dimension, $w_a$ and $w_b$, enters into this equation as the weights of the distances:
We argue that the relative salience of the policy dimensions plays the crucial role in explaining the vote choices of cross-pressured voters, and that this is the key to explain the overwhelming support of the right in the 2015 Swiss election. The reason is that for cross-pressured voters, the relative salience of the policy dimensions largely determines which of the two Euclidean distances in the two-dimensional space is shorter. Although the saliences generally enter the calculation of the Euclidean distances for all voters in higher dimensional spaces, cross-pressured voters are much more responsive to even small disproportionalities in issue saliences in terms of vote switching. This is illustrated in Figure 1, in which voter 1 is not cross-pressured and her vote choice is quite clearly independent of the specific salience parameters \( w_1 \) and \( w_2 \). The weighted Euclidean distance will be smaller to party A than to party B for any variation of the salience parameters. If, however, no one party is close on both dimensions, but rather two parties are located at an equally short distance on one respective issue and at an equally large distance on the other dimension, then the Euclidean distance is shorter to the party that is closer on the slightly more salient dimension, as shown by voter 2 in the example. Thus, if policy dimension 1 is only slightly more salient (\( w_1 > w_2 \)), \( d_{22} \) will be smaller than \( d_{21} \), and consequently voter 2 will cast a vote for party B, which is closer on the more salient policy dimension 1. This proposition finds support in the literature on the congruence between parties and their voters in Switzerland. Giger and Lefkofridi (2014) for instance show that voters are more congruent with the party they vote for on the issues that they find most important.

\[ d = \sqrt{w_a a^2 + w_b b^2} \]

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\(^4\) The argument also holds if assuming weighted city block distances, for instance.
We argue that for the 2015 Swiss election, the relative salience of each of the two dimensions largely influenced the electoral outcome. Cultural policy issues played a large role both in the election campaigns as well as in the citizens' concerns, as shown by the increased attention towards topics of immigration and asylum. Since there was no party combining economically left with culturally conservative stances, this led to a situation as illustrated in Figure 1, where for many cross-pressured economically left voters the weighted Euclidean distance was smaller to a party from the right, based on the large salience of the cultural policy dimension. This interpretation is echoed in the literature on class voting, showing that in Switzerland working class voters, who are over-represented in the left-authoritarian corner of the policy space, have progressively moved away from the social democratic party and have come to cast a majority of their votes for the populist right (SVP) (McGann and Kitschelt 2005; Oesch and Rennwald 2010). Our second hypothesis is:

**H2: In the 2015 Swiss election, voters who combine economically left and culturally right policy preferences are more likely to vote for right rather than left parties.**

If either hypothesis 1 or hypothesis 2 (or both) are confirmed, this would mean that there is some systematic bias in the way in which economic preferences of citizens are translated into electoral outcomes. As economically right voters would be more likely to participate in the election and vote

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Note that although we specifically focus on the 2015 election in this contribution, the structural opportunity for the right has likely already existed earlier and has already been documented for the 2007 (Rosset 2016) and 2011 (Kurella and Rosset 2017) elections in Switzerland.
for economically close parties than voters who hold economically left preferences, this bias will produce a representative body that is situated to the right of the preferences of the median citizen on economic issues, a pattern documented in earlier studies of political representation in Switzerland (Rosset 2013).

Empirical Analysis

Locating Voters and Parties in the Policy Space

We use the post-electoral study (Selects 2016a) and the candidate survey (Selects 2016b) of the 2015 Swiss electoral study for our analysis. Both studies provide information on the opinions of both respondents and candidates regarding socio-economic as well as cultural policy issues. We include the seven largest parties in our empirical analysis. Table 1 gives an overview on their political classification and their vote shares in the 2015 parliamentary election. For the classification of parties to the left, center or right camp we rely on parties’ positions on economic issues. Specifically, we use parties’ positions on an economic left-right scale from the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Polk et al. 2017) to determine their political camp.

Table 1. Main Parties in Switzerland and their Electoral Result in the 2015 National Council Election.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Official party name (in German)</th>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Political camp</th>
<th>Vote share in 2015 (change since 2011)</th>
<th>Number of seats in the National Council (change since 2011)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Swiss People’s Party</td>
<td>Schweizerische Volkspartei</td>
<td>SVP</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>29,4 % (+2,8)</td>
<td>65 (+11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Democratic Party</td>
<td>Sozialdemokratische Partei der Schweiz</td>
<td>SP</td>
<td>Left</td>
<td>18,8 % (+0,1)</td>
<td>43 (-3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An R code to replicate all of our results is provided in the online Appendix. The required data (Selects 2016a,b) can be downloaded from www.selects.ch.

7 Parties with scores below 3 on the 0-10 economic left-right scale were coded as “left”. Those positioned between 3 and 7 on the same scale were coded as “center” and those above 7 as “right”. Note that this classification is also consistent with our own measures of party positions based on the candidate survey (see Figure 3, Panel a).
In order to extract voter and party positions in the two dimensional policy space, we draw on a common practice in the study of spatial political competition by conducting a principal component analysis on a series of questions regarding their preferences on different political issues. Since voters

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8 Note that research on party positions has also relied on other sources. Most notably party manifestos as well as expert surveys have been used to infer party positions on different issues. We prefer using data from the candidate survey, which has the advantage of being more directly comparable to the data collected from citizens – also through surveys – than the other two sources (for more detailed discussions on this topic see: Andeweg 2011; Rosset 2016: 58-60).
and candidates have been asked different although similar items, we conduct the analysis separately for each data set.

In order to measure voters’ policy preferences on a socio-economic dimension we rely on three concrete issue questions. The first one asks voters generally whether they prefer an increase or a decrease of social benefits. Since the type of social benefits is not specified any further, and social benefits are not only relevant in economic aspects, but also concern cultural topics such as for instance investments in the educational system, this trade-off question might also indicate to some extent preferences on the cultural policy dimension. The second and third survey questions are less ambiguous. They ask whether respondents are in favor of higher taxes on high incomes, and whether they are in favor of an increase of the retirement age. In order to measure policy positions on the second – cultural – dimension, the survey offers a larger set of issue questions. We choose to include a question that asks for preferences on the provision of child care services, since this addresses the general conflict of traditional versus modern family policy, although it arguably also relates to the economic conditions of women. Again, less ambiguous in that respect is the question on equal opportunities for immigrants, the possibility of citizenship for third generation immigrants, and the reception of refugees.

To measure candidates’ positions on the socio-economic dimension, we rely on survey questions reflecting the opinion on state interventions in the economy, the provision of social security, and the government’s responsibility to reduce income differences. Regarding cultural issues, we rely on survey questions that ask for candidates’ opinions on the integration of immigrants, same-sex marriage, and abortion. Although we formulate clear expectations about the classification of survey questions to measure positions on either the socio-economic or the cultural dimension, the principal component analysis will tell whether the latent structure of the issue batteries meets our expectation.

We first compute a simple Eigen decomposition on the correlation matrix of each item battery to see whether a reduction to two components is reasonable. Figure 2 presents a screeplot which plots the Eigenvalues indicating the explanatory power of each component. One rule of thumb is that the first knick in the plot marks the number of components that adequately describe the data structure (Cattell and Vogelmann 1977). This leaves much leeway for subjective interpretations. Nevertheless, inspecting the graph we feel quite confident to reduce the number of components to two, since the slope steepness decreases notably from the third component onward in both graphs. Another rule of thumb, the Kaiser rule, advises the researcher to reduce the number of components to those with Eigenvalues larger than 1, since this indicates an explanatory power of the component that is larger.
than one single variable (Wolff and Bacher 2010, 341f.). This rule leads to the same conclusion of two components being adequate to describe the latent structure of both data matrices.

*Figure 2: Screeplot of Principal Component Analysis of Item Batteries for (a) Candidates and (b) Voters*

In a next step, we perform a principal component analysis (PCA) with two components and a varimax rotation to ensure maximum correlation of each component with one set of factors each. Tables 2 and 3 show the results for each dataset. As expected, we see that for the voters’ preferences the items on child care services, equal opportunities for immigrants, citizenship and the reception of refugees load high on one dimension, while the items on taxes and retirement age load high on the other dimension. The only outlier is the item on social benefits, which loads high on both dimensions. However, it is reasonable to assume that this issue addresses matters of the economy as well as of the cultural divide. Apart from that, the results of the PCA corroborate our expectation about the two-dimensionality of the policy space and the classification of the separate items. Regarding the candidates’ opinions, we also detect an outlier, namely the item asking for the integration of immigrants. Since we do not expect this issue to address matters of the economy, but to purely reflect cultural opinions, this might indicate that for the political elite both policy dimensions are correlated to some extent. Since this has also been reported in previous empirical studies (Leimgruber et al. 2010; Lachat 2008; Rosset et al. 2016), we accept this as an empirical fact and proceed with the analysis.

Table 2: Loadings of PCA on Survey Respondents’ Preferences, N=4,008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1. Component</th>
<th>2. Component</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social benefits</td>
<td>-0.536</td>
<td>0.520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>0.226</td>
<td>-0.646</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based on the factor loadings, we can now compute individual factor scores to locate each respondent and candidate on each of the two latent dimensions. This will be our measure of voters’ ideal points and candidates’ positions within the two dimensional policy space. Since in the end, we are interested in party positions, and not in the positions of individual candidates, we operationalize the party position as the mean of its candidates’ positions on each dimension. Figure 2 shows the resulting distribution of candidates and voters, and the positions of the main seven parties and the mean voter.
Since the two PCAs rely on different data sets with different items, the scores are not comparable on the same scale. However, since we are confident that the latent dimensions that we extract are comparable on the substantive level, we can compare the overall configurations of both graphs, and what we see is what we expect: The left parties SP and GPS are both located on the left on the economic dimension and in the south of the cultural dimension, indicating liberal policy stances, while the center and right parties vary in their policy offer on the cultural dimension. The center parties CVP, BDP and GLP combine moderate positions on the economic dimension with moderate (BDP), conservative (CVP) or liberal (GLP) stances on the cultural dimension. On the right of the political spectrum, we find the economically right and culturally liberal FDP, as well as the economically right and culturally authoritarian SVP. Thus, we detect the expected pattern in which the parties on the right show much more variation in their policy offer on the cultural dimension than the parties on the left. Notably, there is no party combining economically left with culturally conservative standpoints.

Concerning the right-hand panel of Figure 3, which shows the distribution of voter preferences in the latent two-dimensional policy space, we see a different pattern. Voters occupy all corners of the policy space, as indicated by the nearly circular shape of the density curves. Thus, on the side of the voters, the combination of economically left with culturally conservative or even authoritarian policy preferences seems not to be a rare exception, but rather as common as any other combination of policy preferences. The first conclusion that we can draw at this point of the empirical analysis is that the structure of voter preferences is not ideally reflected in the configuration of the parties’ policy positions in the two-dimensional policy space.
Analysis of Voting Behavior in the 2015 Swiss Election

The misfit between voters’ policy demand and parties’ policy supply in the economically left and culturally conservative corner of the policy space might pose challenges to the voting behavior of those citizens. Since there is no party meeting their policy demand on both dimensions, they face a more difficult vote decision than voters who are located in other corners or the center of the policy space. As outlined above, we hypothesize that the scarcity of their choice set leads to an increased abstention rate among economically left and culturally conservative voters.

To test this claim, we estimate a logistic regression of abstention in the 2015 Swiss election, with the positions on the economic and cultural dimension as independent variables. Table 4 presents the results. We first estimate a model with policy preferences only, and then a second model including control variables that knowingly affect turnout, namely political sophistication⁹ and education¹⁰. In Model 1 without controls, the main effect of the economic position is negative and statistically significant at the 0.1%-level. This indicates that with more positive (i.e. further towards economically right ideal points) values, the probability to abstain decreases. For the position on the cultural dimension, we get a significant positive coefficient, indicating an increase in the probability to abstain from the election, the more positive (i.e. authoritarian) the position on this dimension. The same holds for the model with controls in the second column, although the effect size is smaller. This indicates that the control variables are to some extent correlated with the preferences on either of the two policy dimensions. This comes as no surprise, since the socio-structural position of a voter greatly shapes her policy preferences. A substantive interpretation of the effect is only possible when simultaneously taking into account the coefficient of the interaction effect of both policy dimensions.

### Table 4: Logistic Regression of Abstention from 2015 Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-1.05***</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic position</td>
<td>-0.24***</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural position</td>
<td>0.14***</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Econ. pos. x cult. pos.</td>
<td>-0.08***</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Controls</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political sophistication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education : middle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education : high</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=3,792; Significance codes *** 0.001; **0.01; *0.05.

⁹ We classify as politically sophisticated those respondents who report to know what list combinations are.
¹⁰ We classify education in three categories, where the middle one implies a vocational education, and high indicates higher vocational training or a tertiary education degree.
Figure 4: Predicted probabilities to abstain depending on socio-economic position for Model 1 without controls (a) and Model 2 with controls (b)

Note: Shaded area represents 95% confidence intervals. Each of the panels presents two scenarios, one in which the ideal point on the cultural dimension is fixed at -1 (i.e. one standard deviation more “liberal” than the mean respondent – dotted line) and one in which it is fixed at +1 (i.e. one standard deviation more “conservative” than the mean – solid line).

Since interpreting the significance and size of all three coefficients is neither very intuitive nor instructive, we calculate the predicted probabilities for abstention depending on the socio-economic position based on both models, fixing the policy preference on the cultural dimension once at a conservative position of the scale (value 1), and once at a liberal position (value -1). Figure 4 illustrates the results. The left graph, which is based on Model 1, shows that the probability to abstain is generally larger at the left end of the socio-economic dimension, but that the relation between the socio-economic preference and abstention is significantly stronger for a culturally conservative voter. For instance compare the predicted probability to abstain at the socio-economic position -2: a voter who combines this position with culturally liberal preferences at a scale point of -1 is predicted to abstain with a probability of around 30%, whereas the probability to abstain is more than 10 percentage points larger if the voter holds culturally conservative preferences at a scale point of 1. For voters to the right of the mean voter on the socio-economic dimension, there is no difference in the predicted probability to abstain based on the cultural preferences. Although the inclusion of controls in Model 2 still leads to significant main effects, we cannot observe statistically significant differences on the 5% level in the probability to abstain for differences in the cultural positions. However, the trend is still the same, with
the point estimates reporting larger probabilities to abstain for left and conservative voters, than for left and liberal voters.

These results provide strong support for our first hypothesis stating that voters who hold economically left and culturally right preferences are more likely to abstain than voters with other preference configurations.

We will now consider the voting behavior of those left-authoritarian citizens who decide to take part in the election. Relying on the spatial model of voting, we would ideally conduct a conditional logit model with the distances from the voter to each party on each policy dimension as the independent variable. Since the policy preferences of the electorate and the candidates, which serve us a proxy for the party positions, were measured on different scales, we have to rely on a second best method. More specifically, we conduct a multinomial logistic regression model with the categorical dependent variable of voting for a center, left or right party, where we classify the SP and GPS as left parties, the CVP, BDP and GLP as center parties, and the SVP and FDP as right parties. This allows us to see how the decision to vote for a party of either party family depends on the position in the two-dimensional policy space. The independent variables are therefore the same as above: we estimate main effects for the position on either latent policy dimension, as well as an interaction effect. The resulting coefficients of the main effects describe the strength of the relationship between the position on the respective dimension and the vote choice. Thus, they can be interpreted as a proxy for the relative salience of one dimension to the other, which allows us to draw inferences on whether the underlying assumption of a larger saliency of the cultural dimension is empirically true. The results are displayed in Table 5.

The main effects of the policy positions on each dimension point in the expected direction. Moving to more positive values on the economic dimension decreases the probability to vote for a left party as compared to a center party, while it increases the probability to vote for a right party as compared to a center party. The same effect is found for the cultural dimension, where moving to a more positive, i.e. authoritarian, position decreases the probability to vote for a left party over a center party, and increases the probability to vote for a right party. The interaction effect is positive for voting for a left party, and negative for voting for a right party.

Again, we calculate predicted probabilities to vote for either party family depending on the socio-economic position for fixed values on the cultural dimension (values -1, 0, and 1), in order to present a more intuitive interpretation of the results. The results are shown in figure 5. We see that for culturally liberal or moderate positions, the relation between the socio-economic position and the probability to cast a vote for the left or right is as expected: the probability to vote for a left party is
larger than 50% at the left end of the scale, and continuously decreases the more positive the socio-economic ideal point is. At the opposite scale point of 2, the predicted probability to vote for a right party is larger than 50%. The predicted probability to vote for a center party is surprisingly quite stable at about 20% for any position on the socio-economic scale. The pattern changes notably if fixing the cultural position at a conservative scale point of 1, as illustrated in the third panel of Figure 5. Here, the probability to cast a vote for the left is quite small for any position on the socio-economic dimension. Even at the extreme location of -2, the predicted probability to cast a vote for the left is smaller than 20%. This strongly indicates that cross-pressured voters combining economically left with culturally conservative preferences overwhelmingly supported the right in the 2015 Swiss election.

Taking a closer look at the coefficients in Table 5 furthermore corroborates our arguments. The coefficients of the socio-economic position are of smaller size than those of the cultural position in both columns. This indicates that the vote choice is more responsive to cultural preferences, than to socio-economic preferences. This pattern holds for both the choices of left over center parties, as well as for right over center parties. Considering the baseline mechanism of the spatial model in multidimensional spaces, as outlined above, this indicates that cultural preferences have a larger weight in the calculation of the overall distance in the Euclidean policy space. Thus, we interpret this result as support for our assumption of a larger saliency of cultural matters in the voters’ calculus in the 2015 Swiss election.

Table 5: Multinomial Logistic Regression of Party Vote

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Left party vs. center party</th>
<th>Right party vs. center party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic position</td>
<td>-0.72***</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural position</td>
<td>-1.14***</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Econ. pos. X cult. pos.</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=2,451; Significance codes *** 0.001; **0.01; *0.05.
Figure 5: Stacked Diagram of Probabilities to Vote for Left, Center, and Right Parties Depending on Socio-Economic Position

Note: the three panels present results in three different scenarios with varying ideal points on the cultural dimension. In the left-hand side panel the ideal point on the cultural dimension is fixed at -1 (i.e. one standard deviation more “liberal” than the mean respondent), in the middle panel it is fixed at 0 (mean position) and in the right-hand side panel it is fixed at +1 (i.e. one standard deviation more “conservative” than the mean).

Conclusion

It has been argued that the rise of cultural and identity related issues in electoral politics provides a strategic opportunity for parties from the right (Kriesi et al. 2012; 19). In this article we seek to explain this strategic advantage in the context of the 2015 Swiss election relying on the spatial model of electoral competition. We argue that a key factor in explaining electoral gains by right parties is related to the fact that they offer a greater diversity of positions on cultural issues, while no left party presents authoritarian stances on the cultural dimension. Given that voters do not display highly ideological stances, they are likely to combine any set of positions in a two dimensional policy space (e.g. left-libertarian; left-authoritarian; right-libertarian or right-authoritarian). In that context, it becomes clear that parties from the left might not be able to attract the vote of citizens whom they represent on economic issues but who are conservative on cultural issues, especially if the latter are particularly salient in voters’ electoral decisions. Left parties might not be able to attract the electoral support of this chunk of the electorate either because these voters go with right parties on cultural grounds, or because they do not turn out in the first place.

We test this proposition using data from the Selects survey on the preferences of candidates and of citizens. We first show that there is a mismatch between the pattern of party competition and the structure of preferences among citizens. While right parties display large variance in their positioning
on the cultural dimension of political competition, there remains a blank space in the economically left and culturally conservative corner of the policy space. Voters, on the other hand, are dispersed on the cultural dimension independent of their position on economic issues. Secondly, we document that this mismatch has important electoral consequences. Those voters holding economic preferences close to the left but who are not represented by left parties on the cultural dimension are more likely to abstain than other voters. In addition, when they do vote, they are very likely to vote for parties from the right.

We argue that this phenomenon emerged because the cultural policy dimension was more salient in the 2015 Swiss election than the economic dimension. We know that the weighted Euclidean distance of cross-pressured voters is very sensitive to the relative weights of policy dimensions. It is then a logical consequence of the empirical pattern of Swiss party positions that if voters put more emphasis on the cultural than on the economic dimension, the weighted Euclidean distance of many cross-pressured voters will be shorter to parties from the right than to left parties. Based on the data at hand, we could not ultimately prove this mechanism, but have to base our conclusion on the observable implications. Since the salience of the cultural dimension was relatively larger, and cross-pressured voters in fact overwhelmingly voted for right parties, this supports our notion.

The main electoral consequence of these findings is that despite being close to a relatively high share of the electorate on economic issues, left parties are only able to attract a proportion of this electorate. In contrast, right parties do not only obtain the votes from the overwhelming majority of economically right voters (independent of their preferences on cultural issues), they are also successful in attracting economically left voters on cultural grounds. This has significant consequences for the balance of power within the Federal Assembly and for the representation of citizens’ preferences in the legislature. The Swiss political system allows for correcting some of this imbalance through direct democratic votes. During the 2007 to 2017 period, in almost all instances where citizens and the Federal Assembly held conflicting majority positions, the issues at play were either economic or cultural in nature. Citizens not only generally favored a more distinct intervention of the state in the economy than their representatives, they also held more culturally conservative opinions than the majority of parliament did in all observed instances\(^{11}\). This clear cut pattern illustrates that the configuration of the Swiss party system might not allow Swiss voters to fully express their preferences in parliamentary elections.

\(^{11}\) Based on information from the Swiss Chancellery (www.bk.admin.ch/), there were 7 initiatives that got accepted and 9 referendums that got rejected during the 2007-17 period. In 9 of these cases, citizens favored more generous welfare state or more interventionist economic policy than the Federal Assembly (e.g. vote in favor of the Minder initiative or against the lowering of pensions from the 2nd pillar). In 5 cases, citizens were more conservative than their representatives (e.g. ban on the construction of minarets; stiffer sentences for pedophiles).
Our results also show the difficult situation left parties find themselves in due to their lack of diversification on the cultural dimension. If they emphasize cultural issues they risk alienating their authoritarian-left voters whom they do not represent well on that set of issues. At the same time, not putting forward cultural issues when these have grown to particularly prominence in the current context is also a risky strategy, which might cost the left a number of votes among those voters who display economically right but culturally libertarian preferences. Our results tend to suggest, however, that the risk of either strategy is now limited for the simple reason that the left has already lost most of the authoritarian-left voters to the right, and that the reservoir of votes among libertarian-right voters is not exploited. It thus seems that the 2015 federal elections marked a high point of right parties’ structural advantage in Swiss politics, and that any strategy by the left to either more clearly emphasize its libertarian position or to represent more diverse stances on the cultural dimension could improve their electoral results.

References


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